

Saying and silence :
listening to composition with Bakhtin

Frank Farmer.

SAYING AND SILENCE
Listening to Composition with Bakhtin

FRANK

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*For my parents,
Maggie and Roscoe Farmer*

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The chapters in this book were written over the span of several years and thus represent a chronicle of a sometimes orthodox, sometimes idiosyncratic engagement with the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin. They also represent, I think, a measure of how my particular struggles with Bakhtin are both reflected in, and refracted through, the momentous shifts in our disciplinary conversation over the last decade or so. On a more personal level, these chapters may even serve to chart those occasions when I have seen fit to change my mind about some aspect or consequence of Bakhtin's thought.

Yet more than this, the chapters gathered here represent a record of the people and universities who provided me with encouragement and support. I would first like to thank the English Departments of East Carolina University and the University of Kansas, both of which extended to me the kinds of institutional assistance without which this book would not have been possible. Nor can I begin to do justice here to the editorial advice and encouragement I received from Michael Spooner, whose optimism and patience sustained this project (and its author) through those predictable, but still critical, hurdles in its coming to print. I also wish to thank my anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful suggestions, as well as Red O'Laughlin for his valuable (and remarkably cheerful) help with all the last-minute preparations of this manuscript.

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INTRODUCTION

Note: Unless otherwise cited by keyword or full title, references to Bakhtin's texts use the following abbreviations:

AA = *Art and Answerability*

DI = *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*

PDP = *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*

RW = *Rabelais and His World*

SG = *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*

TPA = *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*

One development in recent scholarship centers upon what is often referred to as a rhetoric of silence. Not that we have just discovered such a rhetoric, for it is clear from even a cursory look at Richard Lanham's *Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* that our predecessors long ago established a whole family of words to describe the power that silence could effect in situations that were clearly rhetorical. Indeed, within this family of ancient terms, we find not only the obvious, *silence*, used in a rather specialized way, but also the far less familiar *obticentia*, *praecisio*, *reticentia*, *interpellatio*—all of which fall under the umbrella term, *aposiopesis*, a rhetorical figure that attempts to capture the persuasive effects of sudden silence. Classical rhetoricians apparently understood the strategic and dramatic purposes for which a refusal either to speak or to cease speaking might be appropriate, as evidenced in their constellation of terms for this one particular genre of silence.

But contemporary investigations of a rhetoric of silence have been largely (though by no means exclusively) tied to the project of recovering women's contributions to the history of rhetoric and rhetorical theory. This ought not to be especially surprising, given the status of women's discourse throughout much of Western history and women's long familiarity with silence as an ascribed quality of patriarchally-defined femininity. But of late, some feminist scholars have sought to reveal the communicative realities of silence, detailing, in particular, the ways silence has been creatively deployed by women rhetors and rhetoricians through the ages.

Cheryl Glenn's investigation of Anne Askew makes exactly this point. Tortured for her radical beliefs, the sixteenth-century Protestant reformist Askew developed a host of ways *not* to answer her brutal and cruel inquisitors. In *Rhetoric Retold*, Glenn argues that

Askew occupied a familiar position in a longstanding tradition of women's rhetorical silence, a lineage that continues today in such contemporary figures as former Texas governor Ann Richards and law professors Anita Hill and Lani Guinier, as well as former Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders—all of whom, Glenn points out, are quite accomplished in exercising silence as “a strategy of resistance” (177). Glenn wants to dispute the conventional reading of women's silence as always (and necessarily) the consequence of oppression, as strictly the muting of voices unheard. “Silence,” Glenn insists, “is more than the negative of not being permitted to speak, of being afraid to speak; it can be a deliberative, positive choice” (176). Largely because “silencing and silence” are “rhetorical sites most often associated with women” (177), we have only begun to understand the historical and potential importance of silence as a rhetorical strategy.

As Glenn knows well, there is a profound difference between silence enforced and silence freely chosen. Yet, what's implied in her study (and others) is the possibility of a relationship that may obtain between these two modes of silence. Indeed, the history of women in rhetoric itself would suggest that *some* relationship must exist between enforced and chosen silences, for surely that special history is characterized again and again by this very tension. And, in fact, other feminist rhetorical studies do much to confirm this relationship. Julie Bokser's examination of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the seventeenth-century Spanish nun and poet, for example, points the way to understanding something of the intricacies of that relationship.

In her reading of Sor Juana's autobiographical letter, *La Respuesta* (*The Answer*), Bokser details the context that prompted an exchange between Sor Juana and the bishop of Puebla, “Sor Filotea,” a feminine pseudonym for Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz y Sahagún. In the verbal guise of a fellow nun, Sor Filotea chastises Sor Juana for her “secular studies and her writing” (2) and urges her to desist from any further critiques of the church hierarchy. As Bokser notes, the bishop essentially tells her to silence herself. Sor Juana's epistolary reply, *La Respuesta*, is (not surprisingly) a text that is regarded as “her most explicitly feminist and polemical” (2). For in her letter, she takes up the issues of who may speak to whom, who may interrupt

whom, who may choose not to respond to whom. By electing to answer the bishop, she has not only interrupted his discourse; she has interrupted the silence that he demands her to assume. In *La Respuesta* she tells the bishop that, not quite knowing how to respond, she has

nearly resolved to leave the matter in silence; yet although silence explains much by the emphasis of leaving all unexplained, because it is a negative thing, one must name the silence, so that what it signifies may be understood. Failing that, silence will say nothing, for that is its proper function: to say nothing. . . . [O]f those things that cannot be spoken, it must be said that they cannot be spoken, so that it may be known that silence is kept not for lack of things to say, but because the many things there are to say cannot be contained in mere words. (41, 43)

In her gloss on these passages, Bokser observes that not only is Sor Juana making a general claim that all silences must be named if they are to have meaning, but Sor Juana is making this claim for herself, that is, for her own biographical silences. As Bokser points out, Sor Juana “interrupts the bishop in order to explain her past reticence and to announce her impending silence so that she herself will be listened to—by those who know how to hear” (5). And, indeed, Sor Juana writes very little after *La Respuesta*, a fact that does nothing to exempt her from charges of heresy leveled by an ecclesiastical tribunal two years later and for which transgressions she makes both public confession and a renewal of vows.

Like Sor Juana, the Russian language philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin understood all too well that the relationship between saying and silence is hardly one of uncomplicated opposition. Bakhtin realized that utterances were not confined to words, that gestures, sighs, yawns, exclamations, laughter—all such forms of wordless utterance were rich in their ability to answer and address others, to communicate meaning. Further, as if to emphasize this point, Bakhtin reminds us that “to a certain degree, one can speak by means of intonations alone.” There are times, Bakhtin observes, when the uttered word itself has no semantic function whatsoever, except perhaps to serve as “a material bearer for some necessary intonation” (SG 166).

Though he did not pursue to any great degree the rhetorical possibilities of silence, he nonetheless understood that silences could speak, that silences could readily assume the position of utterances within what he refers to as the “chain of speech communion” (SG 84). Thus, the relationship between silence and the word, Bakhtin points out, is a qualitatively different relationship from that of the “mechanical and physiological” relationship occurring between quietude and sound. Because of their meaningful relationship, silence and word *together* constitute, for Bakhtin, a “special logosphere, a unified and continuous structure” of significance (SG 134). Bakhtin’s further claim that “active responsive understanding” can simultaneously be a “*silent* responsive understanding” of action postponed only reinforces his viewpoint (however undeveloped) that certain silences can assume the function and status of the utterance (SG 68–69).

For Bakhtin, then, silence and words do not exist apart from one another, nor do the significances that we ascribe to each. That words can disturb silence in “personalistic and intelligible” ways, as Bakhtin claims must imply as well, that silence can disturb words in ways that are likewise meaningful (SG 133). Understood in this way, Sor Juana’s *La Respuesta* is indisputably an eloquent, forceful rejoinder to the bishop’s ecclesiastical cajoling. But it is her announced silence that may have proved in the end to be the more powerful utterance.

In what follows I offer a sampling of explorations into the relationship between the meaningful word and the meaningful pause, between the said and the unsaid, especially as this relationship emerges in our classrooms, our disciplinary conversations, our encounters with publics beyond the academy. Each of the chapters included here addresses some aspect of how it is that we and our students, colleagues, and critics have our say, speak our piece, often under conditions where silence is the institutionally sanctioned and preferred alternative. For my purposes, I have enlisted the potential of a number of Bakhtinian ideas to help in the project of interpreting the silences we hear, of naming the silences we do not hear, and of encouraging all silences to speak in ways that are freely chosen, not enforced.

Chapter one, then, examines the possible muting effects of certain widespread conclusions arrived at in the theoretical milieu of the past

decade. Attempting to situate Bakhtin within the so-called theory wars that drove so much intellectual discussion in recent years, I draw extensively on one of Bakhtin’s very early philosophical texts and later bring to the fore his concept of the superaddressee. I argue that Bakhtin offers us a third way out of the usual “closed loop” arguments that accompany debates about foundations by showing how theory itself is a function of the situated utterance, how every utterance is thoroughly steeped in normative evaluations, and therefore how dialogue is irretrievably joined to some conception of truth, however qualified that conception may be. Reviewing debates about foundationalism in composition (e.g., Bizzell, Smit, and most recently, Bernard-Donals), I try to show how the problem of *speaking truly* is never too far removed from what we ask of our students or what they ask of themselves—whether we realize this or not. In a time of regnant antifoundationalism, I argue, Bakhtin’s commonsense observation that “every utterance makes a claim to justice, sincerity, beauty, and truthfulness” seems hopelessly passé, but this hardly means that our students are well served by dismissing such aspirations as nonsense (SG 123). For this reason, I conclude by showing that often, as writing teachers, we are the most readily available sounding boards for the many students who do embrace such ideals, and thus we often function in the role of superaddressees for our students. By the same token, however, we may discover ourselves to be the cause for students needing to find a superaddressee beyond ourselves and our classrooms.

The second chapter provides a concrete illustration of some of the issues raised in chapter one, especially those that address the silencing power of teacher authority. This chapter examines the difficulties faced by one student, Devlyn, who perceives his social and political views to be at odds with the views of his teacher (and a majority of his classmates). I begin by noting the tradition of “Aesopianism” among Russian artists and intellectuals, a manner of writing that has roots in the nineteenth century. As I explain, Aesopianism refers to a genre of camouflaged, oblique, deflective writing that seeks to say something, but only in an indirect, often coded manner (since doing otherwise could be extremely hazardous to a speaker or writer, especially during the Stalinist purges). Though I hardly mean to suggest any equivalence

between the experience of my student writer and that of Russian thinkers writing under the most dire conditions, I do suggest an analogy. The problem for my student, Devlyn, was to find a way to express his views without tempting the institutional sanctions and penalties that may have befallen to him for doing so. Devlyn chose not to be silenced, but found ways to say what he needed to within circumstances that might not have been very congenial to his views. Drawing extensively upon one of his papers, I attempt to describe how he manages the rhetorical problem he faces and how his predicament complicates the too facile, naive, and supposedly unproblematic value of clarity in writing. The chapter ends with Devlyn's written response to my interpretation of his paper.

Chapter three begins by observing that there are alternative Bakhtinian frames within which we might understand Devlyn's struggles. Not only can we see them as illustrations of Aesopian strategies, but we can also understand them as evidence of Devlyn's process of transforming the "authoritative discourse" of Paulo Freire into his own "internally persuasive discourse." Along these lines, it becomes further possible to see Devlyn as [some]one who—already possessing a distinct voice—must [now] come to terms with the challenge that a new voice poses, a voice that is unfamiliar, difficult, and vexing, to say the least. To see Devlyn's struggles this way, however, demands that we come to understand voice in a specifically dialogic context. This chapter, therefore, explores a social, dialogic understanding of one of composition's venerable concerns—the problem of voice—by examining how Bakhtin and his contemporary, Lev Vygotsky, enable us to think about voice dialogically in three distinct but related aspects: developmental, rhetorical, and historical. After elaborating their respective ideas in each of these three senses, I conclude with a full discussion of how their ideas might be applied to the writing classroom, and, revising a caveat expressed long ago by Richard Lanham, I suggest that exhorting students to discover their one true voice may well result in nothing more than a confused and helpless silence.

Another of composition's long-standing practices is highlighted in chapter four. In the same way that Bakhtin's ideas enable us to understand voice differently, his conceptions of dialogue, I contend, enable

us to reveal imitation as something more than "servile copying" or "mindless aping." Noting that several of Bakhtin's explicators in our discipline—Charles Schuster, Jon Klancher, Mary Minock, and others—have hinted at the possibility of revived forms of imitation from a Bakhtinian perspective, I examine closely what Bakhtin said about imitation in his various works. I then attempt to show how dialogic approaches to imitation differ from our received understandings, outlining the distinguishing characteristics of what I call a dialogic imitation. What I suggest is that any dialogic understanding of imitation requires the student to take a position toward the modeled utterance, to be open to revising that position, and to come to understand the contingent, situational, rhetorical features of staking a position toward another's word, no matter how much that position might later be altered. To practice imitation otherwise is to practice the worst form of silencing.

Chapter five attempts to draw attention to how composition studies is constructed in public discourse and what we might say in response to how we are represented in popular media. Bakhtin's apparent belief that the gaze of the outsider is always kindly, beneficent, gift-bestowing, I argue, does not quite square with my experience that composition's outsiders seldom look upon our practices with a generous or neighborly point of view. After detailing three such perspectives, I note a second problem with Bakhtin's concept. In relying on the spatial metaphor of the "outside," Bakhtin has (perhaps unwittingly) formulated a potentially anti-dialogic concept, since dialogue, and hence meaning, require a temporal dimension as well. To make this latter point, I draw extensively on the work of C. S. Peirce as a way to restore the temporal to Bakhtin's idea of the outside. From there, I attempt to show why spatial metaphors, which govern so much of academic discourse, work against our ability to answer public criticism in any manner that could be regarded as truly dialogic. But, I conclude, our forays into the public sphere, if they are to be truly dialogic, must be not only responsive but also transformative, having the power to critically interrupt discussions about us and likewise the power to begin new lines of conversation. As I note, this will require a commitment to a better public sphere than the one we have now.

The final chapter explores the relationship between dialogue and critique as hinted at in the previous chapter. Arguing that dialogue needs critique as much as critique needs dialogue, I look at two key Bakhtinian concepts, anacrisis and the superaddressee, to show how these ideas accommodate elements of both dialogue and critique—the former, because it refers to the word that is capable of breaking silence and thereby of revealing the conventionality of the truths we embrace; the latter, because such a figure shows how the hopes we entertain of altered social conditions can be discovered within the most ordinary words we utter to one another. I elaborate the importance of both concepts in the context of student responses to a writing assignment involving a cultural studies approach to thematic materials. By closing with yet another examination of the critical and rhetorical significance of Bakhtin's superaddressee, I come full circle, returning to the focus of chapter one.

Here, then, is a sampling of attempts to identify how our many silences can be named and understood, whether those silences and their meanings happen to be about foundations or teacher authority; about whether voice *can* be taught and whether imitation *should* be; about public representations of writing teachers and writing students; about spatial metaphors and timely words; about cultural critique, its relationship to dialogue, and the relationship of both to social hope.

Indeed, if there is a single, guiding assumption that underlies these essays, it is that, within the dialogues we commence with our students, our publics, and ourselves, there is ample warrant for hope—hope that, through the words we share, the world we likewise share can be revised to include more voices, can be reimagined as a meeting place where, in Terry Eagleton's phrase, "people feel less helpless, fearful, and bereft of meaning" (184). It is my hope that these essays contribute to that end.

1 "NOT THEORY . . . BUT A SENSE OF THEORY" *The Superaddressee and the Contexts of Eden*

[T]he only true reactionaries are those who feel at ease in the present.

Unamuno

LANGUISHING IN THE POSTFOUNDATIONAL

In the closing chapter to *Rhetoric in an Antifoundational World*, contributor and co-editor Michael Bernard-Donals observes that in our times, "the debate between foundationalism and antifoundationalism is moot; foundational notions of the human and natural sciences have been so discredited as to force us to consider what *kind* of antifoundationalism gives us the most productive and perhaps emancipatory knowledge" (437). In fact, as one reviewer pointed out, this collection seems to be largely devoted to the very project of identifying the sorts of antifoundationalism we are finally free to embrace, now that we have divested ourselves of foundational worldviews (Davis).

If Bernard-Donals is right, if the problem of foundations is indeed settled, passé, moot, then surely we must be very close to inhabiting the sort of antifoundational utopia imagined by Richard Rorty—a utopia where we no longer concern ourselves with truth and truth talk, where we no longer give legitimacy to the vocabularies of the philosophical tradition by contending with them (as rhetoric always has) in debate and dialogue. Surely, we must be very close to inhabiting that longed for moment when all of us consent to drop the subject of truth, and, following Bernard-Donals's suggestion, opt instead

to direct our efforts to fine-tuning the sorts of antifoundationalisms that we may yet come to know.

That's one narrative explanation, of course, and a fairly compelling one, to be sure. But perhaps there are other narratives, other accounts that explain why disputes about foundationalism no longer seem to be in the forefront of disciplinary conversations. For example, what if our present reticence about foundationalism happens to ensue from the nagging realization that the question of foundations is not one that is so much decisively resolved as it is futile to pursue, a question that, at the end of the day, *cannot be arbitrated at all*. This realization ought to give pause to those who believe in the efficacy of both rhetoric and dialogue, especially if we are asked to concede that there is no apparent use for either in broaching the problem of foundations. Let me elaborate this point.

Because foundational and antifoundational worldviews constitute opposing and totalizing paradigms toward the question of truth, no mutually acceptable outcome could possibly be negotiated, and therefore no opportunity exists for the exercise of either rhetoric or dialogue. The contemporary philosopher Charles Taylor has perhaps made this point most emphatically by noting that in the disputes arising between advocates of truth-telling and truth-making discourses, "the interlocutors never reach a point where they (a) accept or find they cannot reject some things in common, which (b) sit with one worldview better than another" ("Rorty" 260). But to allow such a profoundly limiting condition of debate is to sanction the idea that these two worldviews are absolute, self-contained, incommensurable—each possessing, as Taylor observes, "the resources to redescribe everything which comes along, to reinterpret everything which might be thrown up by an opponent as contrary evidence, and hence to remain constitutionally immune to refutation" (260).

What Taylor describes is what I have elsewhere called a "rhetoric of subsumption," a rhetoric by which antifoundationalism is able "to insulate itself from any disputing contention, from refutation and challenge, from engagement and dialogue" (Farmer, "Thuggery" 220). Such a rhetoric, I maintain, holds enormous power over any disputing rhetoric that would call it into question and does so for this reason: when your

worldview has within its own logic the resources to explain—or more exactly, to *explain away*—your interlocutor's worldview and when no adjudication of the question of foundations is even possible, then little remains but to drop the matter altogether, which is precisely what Rorty would have us do, and, indeed, what many of us have already done. Thus, understood this way, the promised land for rhetoric, its much awaited heyday when all foundations have been happily cast aside for good, when philosophy has at last become, in Rorty's words, "a kind of writing" (*Consequences* 90)—when all this comes to pass, our rhetorical utopia might seem to have been purchased at a very high price. For even while postfoundational culture promises to deliver the conditions needed for a full flowering of rhetoric, the disturbing fact remains that rhetoric seems to have had little, if anything, to do with the emergence of the very milieu in which it will supposedly flourish.

Notwithstanding its immunities, however, there have been those in rhetoric and composition who have sought to interrogate the conclusions of anti- or postfoundationalism. Bernard-Donals himself has called for an antifoundationalism that recognizes the material and extradiscursive, one that retains a place for rigorous scientific inquiry along lines proposed by Roy Bhaskar and his "transcendental realism." Some time ago, Patricia Bizzell warned that once foundational grounds for rhetorical authority have been critiqued and effectively dismissed, little of value remains in offering a "positive assertion of the good" (669), without risking the sorts of contradictions that could eventually result in "political quietism" (667). The problem, for Bizzell, finds at least a potential remedy in Linda Alcoff's "positionality" theory. Similarly, Reed Way Dasenbrock has expressed reservations about our casual abandonment of truth, especially when one of our central postfoundational orthodoxies—that all representation is misrepresentation—lands us in some rather thorny predicaments when we complain that reactionary critics of the academy misrepresent what we do. Even more recently, David Smit (after Donald Davidson) and Barbara Couture (after Edmund Husserl) have tried to salvage some usable version of a "truth" that we can live with.

I am not claiming that critics of anti- or postfoundationalism wish to return to a foundational golden age, nor do I subscribe to that wish

myself. But I do think that a few observers of our present moment are very uneasy with the implications for rhetoric in a postfoundational milieu and have sought to find ways to cross the reportedly impassable borders between foundational and antifoundational discourses.

In the following pages, I would like to return to the debates about "theory"—and by implication, foundations—that have occurred in the last fifteen years and try to recontextualize Bakhtin's concept of the utterance within those debates. Drawing upon a number of Bakhtin's ideas, but especially his "superaddressee," I will argue that a sense of theory is present in every utterance, that some notion of truth—however constrained, tenuous, or fragile—accompanies every act of saying; that is, I will try to revise one of our more prized commonplaces and argue that the uttered word is *normative* through and through, top to bottom, "all the way down," as the saying goes. I then conclude briefly with some thoughts on how Bakhtin's superaddressee illuminates this point and, moreover, illuminates the writing we receive from our students.

PARADISE (RE)VERSED

One of the recurrent metaphors found in the debates between theorists and antitheorists (a.k.a. New Pragmatists) is that of the biblical Fall, the moment when our mythical first ancestors disobeyed their Creator and promptly descended into sin, knowledge, and the burden of self-consciousness. On the last two of these misfortunes, it is not hard to see why such an image is eagerly appropriated for debates about theory. What may be surprising, though, are the realms assigned to each camp in these discussions.

I would offer, for example, that an outsider to these debates would most likely refer the theoretical camp to those otherworldly, paradisiacal realms commonly reserved for Laputans and other innocents who prefer to make their ideal home *elsewhere*. Correspondingly, pragmatists—new and old—would be assigned to the earthly realms of the fallen, the palpable, the mundane, where, happily for all concerned, the real work of the world gets done. Such, at least, would be a conventional, albeit broadly drawn, rendering of how the Edenic image might be deployed in present discussions.

What has occurred, though, is precisely the reverse. *Theoria*, it turns out, is our fallen state, while *Pragma* is the Eden we have fallen from (or, as it is more likely put, forgotten). The ironic fall *into* theory occurred when those first ancestors imagined the pristine wholeness of our original state to be divisible and, in fact, announced that only through such divisions can we know the world at all. The legacy of our Fall, then, is a kind of estrangement: the sundering of things whole and the misguided attempts at epistemology that such divisions require. In their provocative essay, "Against Theory," Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels put the same point this way:

The theoretical impulse . . . always involves the attempt to separate things that should not be separated: on the ontological side, meaning from intention, language from speech acts; on the epistemological side, knowledge from true belief. Our point has been that the separated terms are in fact inseparable. (29)

Much the same way that Adam and Eve willingly chose to escape the delights of the garden, Knapp and Michaels point out that "theory is nothing else but the attempt to escape practice" (30). The difference between the two is that, where our mythical progenitors were fabulously successful in their endeavor, champions of theory are doomed to a project of eternal failure. This is because, as Knapp and Michaels explain, theory "is the name for all the ways people have tried to stand outside practice in order to govern practice from without" (30). Since for Knapp and Michaels (and Stanley Fish, Richard Rorty, and others), no position "outside" of practice exists, the attempt is not merely futile but utterly self-deceiving. Once we dispense with our illusions, though, we are free to return to the paradise we never left in the first place, namely, practice. Here is the place where belief—or rather, true belief—is thoroughgoing, a place where, as Jonathan Crewe points out, "no knowledge can transcend or replace belief, which accordingly constitutes the highest epistemological plane on which the human mind can function (as God in his own way said to Adam)" (63).¹

Here, I will attempt to reverse the reversal I have described above. Simply put, I hold that there are blessings to be had in restoring theory—or more precisely, *a sense of theory*—to its rightful

locus at a necessary remove from immediate contexts. I will argue, then, that an Edenic otherness necessarily accompanies a sense of theory, and is, in fact, an inevitable function of the very conversation that presumably "stands in" for a thoroughly discredited foundationalism. To elaborate this claim, I will draw extensively on Mikhail Bakhtin's complex (and somewhat ambiguous) position on the question of theory and conclude by showing how his ordinarily mute superaddressee may have something to say about the debates regarding theory.

By now, few would be surprised that Bakhtin's ideas, in all their astonishing range, have been tailored to fit this debate. Nor should anyone be surprised that such appropriations are able to encompass the various sides of the debate. Bakhtin, to echo a common observation, has been successfully employed as a kind of belated spokesman for a dazzling array of theoretical projects and agendas. Predictably, he has also been recruited as a latter-day antitheorist, a pragmatist in the strong sense of one who denies foundational arguments for objective knowledge. To the extent, for example, that Stanley Fish casts Bakhtin as a thinker partially responsible for the "twentieth-century resurgence" of rhetoric and does so after claiming rhetoric as a strictly antifoundational concern (500),² then clearly Bakhtin (for Fish and many others) is allied to the pragmatist camp. Yet, while a good case can be made for Bakhtin the antitheorist, Bakhtin the theorist is never too far removed from his pragmatic double—an ambivalence succinctly captured in Bakhtin's own phrase: "not theory . . . but a sense of theory" (*PDP* 293).

BAKHTIN AS ANTITHEORIST

Bakhtin's very early meditation on ethics, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (1919-1921), is an appropriate place to begin establishing his pragmatist credentials. In this essay, Bakhtin refutes Kantian approaches to universal or categorical ethics, a position that he calls "theoretism." In contrast to the theoretical world, with its inevitable embrace of all that is generalizable and recurrent, Bakhtin speaks for the experiential domain of the act, the world he refers to as "once-occurrent Being as event" (*TPA* 10). For Bakhtin, authentic ethics

resides not in principles, rules, or dogmas abstracted from experience, but in the answerable, unrepeatable *eventness* of lived life. And it is precisely this realm to which the theoretical is necessarily indifferent. As Bakhtin explains, insofar as personal existence is concerned, the theoretical world is not habitable:

In that world I am unnecessary; I am essentially and fundamentally non-existent in it. The theoretical world is obtained through an essential and fundamental abstraction from the fact of my unique being and from the moral sense of that fact—"as if I did not exist" . . . it cannot determine my life as an answerable performing of deeds, it cannot provide any criteria for the life of practice, the life of the deed, for it is *not* the Being in which I live, and if it were the only Being, I would not exist. (9)

Another way to put this is that the theoretical is wholly alien to that which is particular and unrepeatable in my life as I live it; and, so being, the theoretical must account for my life in ways that are not just ethically untenable, but impossible. My life from a theoretical viewpoint must always be a generalizable entity, a finality. And *that*, Bakhtin points out, is not the life I live.

Bakhtin's animosity toward a theoretical ethics is unmistakable. But, as Bakhtin might add, there should be no great surprise in discovering that such an ethics exists, for the most important—and lamentable—inheritance of Enlightenment rationalism is its exclusion of what cannot be generalized. He thus notes that "it is an unfortunate misunderstanding . . . to think that truth . . . can only be the truth . . . that is composed of universal moments; that the truth of a situation is precisely that which is repeatable and constant in it" (*TPA* 37). *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* inaugurates Bakhtin's search for a version of truth that is neither universal nor repeatable, but rather one able to account for the particular and situational—the "once-occurrent event of Being" (61).

This search leads Bakhtin to formulate what he calls an "architectonics," a way to generalize the particular without compromising its very particularity, its concreteness. Bakhtin thus wants to establish a means to link together the "concrete event-relations" that characterize the nontheoretical world of particularized experience, while avoiding

the systematicity and indifference to lived life that characterize the theoretical world. Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson thus explain that "architectonics is not a matter of general concepts or laws," but instead a paradoxical attempt to find the "general aspects of particular acts" without surrendering their concrete quality as lived events (*Rethinking* 22). Bakhtin's project, according to Morson and Emerson, was how to answer the question, "What can we say in general about particular things except that they are particular?" (22).

Though his architectonics does not provide a satisfactory answer to that question, Bakhtin's early conceptualization of the problem leads him to think about it in terms of aesthetic as well as self-other relationships. These concerns about developing an architectonics persist and find more development in other essays of the period, especially "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity." But it is in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* that Bakhtin first reconsiders the possibility of another kind of truth through what will become the central theme of his mature work, *dialogue*.

From a Bakhtinian perspective, a dialogic truth is obliged to resist all those other versions of truth that, say, locate it *above* us (as in theological certitude), *outside* us (as in empirical "findings"), *inside* us (as in Romantic and psychological constructions of essential selfhood), or *behind* us (as in the received wisdom of authoritative discourses). What these various *topoi* of knowledge share, Bakhtin might point out, are answers that neither require nor invite a response. Each posits a finished version of what the truth is (or how it will be found), and thus each precludes genuine exchange. Finalized conceptions of truth render dialogue unnecessary.

Where, then, does Bakhtin locate truth, and what are the special features of a dialogic truth? Keeping with this spatial metaphor, Bakhtin situates truth in the territory *between* us, thereby making our understanding of truth both a function and a product of social relations. Of course, not all social conceptions of truth are necessarily dialogic, but all dialogic conceptions of truth are social. To put this in the most basic of terms, *one needs an other for truth to be*.

One of the first illustrations of a dialogic truth, Bakhtin observes, can be found in the early Socratic dialogues. In particular, this genre

exemplifies "the dialogic nature of truth and the dialogic nature of thinking about truth. The dialogic means of seeking truth is counterpoised to *official* monologism, which pretends to *possess a ready-made truth*. . . . Truth is not born nor is to be found in the head of an individual person, it is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction" (PDP 110).

For those accustomed to regarding Platonic epistemology as perhaps the most extreme foundationalism, Bakhtin's lauding of Socrates will likely come as a surprise. Yet, Bakhtin emphasizes the point that while the "content [of individual dialogues] often assumed a monologic character," Socrates himself did not assume the role of one who had exclusive possession of a "ready-made truth." What accounts for this disparity is that the early dialogues had "not yet been transformed into a simple means for expounding ready-made ideas," but with the increasing monologization of later dialogues, the Socratic genre "entered the service of the established, dogmatic worldviews of various philosophical schools and religious doctrines" (PDP 110).

Again we sense Bakhtin's hostility to what he once called *theorism*, but now refers to as "philosophical monologism," that abstract plane of reasoning that promotes truth as something capable of excluding human beings altogether. In this familiar scheme of things, truth has no need for multiplicities, for concrete variations, for individual consciousness. It follows that "in an environment of philosophical monologism . . . genuine dialogue is impossible as well." What Bakhtin wants instead—and what he finds in the work of Dostoevsky—is a truth "born at the point of contact among various consciousnesses," one that "requires a plurality of consciousnesses, one that cannot be fitted into the bounds of a single consciousness" (PDP 81). This is a truth not of objects, abstractions, or subjective empiricism, but a truth created and sustained through dialogue. This is a truth that resists all absolute and monologic formulations. This is a truth with people in it.

For pragmatists and other antitheorists, it is also a truth that refuses the original sin of theory, that is, the temptation to imagine itself able to stand outside practice, or for Bakhtin, outside dialogue. On this matter alone, Bakhtin clearly establishes his worth as a pragmatist of the

first order. But more than that, Bakhtin's lifelong resistance to theoretism or philosophical monologism, his efforts to identify another kind of truth through dialogic relations, and his understanding of truth as a mutual enterprise, an unceasing process rather than a ready-made product would all seem to commend him thoroughly to an antitheoretical position.

What reason, then, to even consider the prospect of Bakhtin as an advocate of theory? Why is a sense of theory necessary to dialogue?

BAKHTIN AS (RECALCITRANT) THEORIST

Despite his polemics against abstraction, systematicity, and the theoretical, Bakhtin never dismisses theory as nonexistent or unimportant. Bakhtin acknowledges (implicitly or otherwise) that while theory runs counter to his own projects, theory nevertheless helps to define and clarify those projects. However, Bakhtin's characteristic move is to *acknowledge the reality of theory in order to subsume its claims to the more important exigencies of dialogue*.

This move is apparent early on. Recall that Bakhtin takes care to show how the realm of theory is incapable of explaining the concrete realm of particularity—the once-occurrent event of Being that constitutes lived life—and further, that “all attempts to surmount—from within theoretical cognition—the dualism of cognition [theoretism] and life . . . are utterly hopeless.” Life cannot be lived in theoretical categories, and Bakhtin suggests that all our efforts to do so resemble “trying to pull oneself up by one's own hair” (TPA 7).

But does this mean that the theoretical plane should be dismissed altogether or that it can in no wise enter into the event of my life? Bakhtin answers no to both questions. As to the first, Bakhtin claims that theory's “autonomy is justified and inviolable” so long as it “remains within its own bounds.” The problem arises, Bakhtin observes, when the theoretical “seeks to pass itself off as the whole world . . . as a first philosophy (*prima philosophia*)”—what we might be tempted to call a foundational truth (TPA 7-8). (Bakhtin seems not merely to acknowledge but to endorse a nonfoundational brand of theory—an option not always granted to combatants in the theory wars, who *demand* an allegiance to one side or the other.) As to the

second question, while Bakhtin argues that “any kind of *practical* orientation of my life within the theoretical world is impossible,” he does believe it possible for the theroretical to be interiorized as a “constituent moment” of life as event (TPA 9). Possible, yes, but not easily realized, and certainly not to be confused with pragmatism's attempts to do the same. Indeed, Bakhtin holds that “pragmatism in all its varieties” tries to turn one theory

into a moment of another theory, and not into a moment of actual Being-as-event. A theory needs to be brought into communion *not* with theoretical constructions and conceived life, but with the actually occurring event of moral being—with practical reason, and this is answerably accomplished by everyone who . . . accepts answerability for every integral act of his cognition. (TPA 12)

Bakhtin makes clear that a pragmatist subsumption of theory is, in effect, nothing more than an instance of one theory attempting to contain (preempt? erase?) another—an argument that, not surprisingly, has found expression in the current debate, whether from the viewpoint of a pragmatist subsumption of theory (see, for example, Fish 315-41) or a theoretical subsumption of practice (see Rosmarin). Bakhtin, though, has little truck with either theoretism or pragmatism on this count, since both share a predilection to conceptualize life from without. Still, he argues, it is possible for theory to become a constituent moment in the event of Being, but not exactly in the way a pragmatist might wish.

To fit itself to practice, for example, theory must surrender its claims to an “outside” truth, since practice “denies the autonomy of truth and attempts to turn truth into something relative and conditioned” (TPA 9). Paradoxically, when that occurs, truth can no longer be incorporated into concrete existence, for as Bakhtin argues, “it is precisely on the condition that it is pure that truth can participate answerably in Being-as-event; life does not need a truth that is relative from within itself” (TPA 10). Thus, truth must keep some quality of absoluteness for it to be gathered into the event of a life, to make it something capable of being answered with my Being. Anything less will require me to hand over my experience to a relativism whose