The Carnival of Discourse: Baxtin and Simultaneity

Of all the exoticisms associated with the name of Baxtin, none has been more relentlessly domesticated than that of carnival. Since the 1968 translation of *Rabelais and his World*,[1] carnival has been taken up with new enthusiasm by folklorists and anthropologists, but it has as well been used by intellectual historians, and an ever-growing number of literary critics. Such an appropriation of the specifically Baxtinian notion of carnival into so many, and such different, professional languages appears at first glance to be quite satisfyingly polyphonic.

On closer examination, however, most uses of the concept betray what is in fact a powerful monologizing tendency to assume that carnival is a specific social institution which may be used as a systematic template for better perceiving the structure of other, less immediately paradigmatic institutions. A move of this kind is more often than not made in the conviction that such was Baxtin's own procedure in his Rabelais book: the implication being that he reminds us of the extraordinary importance carnival had in late medieval Europe (when up to three months of the year might be given over to such celebrations) in order to highlight certain peculiar features, only to translate these details into his reading of *Gargantua*. Carnival in this view is a means for rationalizing the excesses for which Rabelais has become the eponym. Carnival is seen as a convenient rag-bag of categories, such as ritual inversion, 'gay' (or what is sometimes, more circumspectly, translated as 'merry') relativity, or the celebration of bodily functions that are otherwise unmentionable. In addition, all these can somehow retroactively be used to contextualize events in a quite different order of discourse from that of the literary genre which we have come to call the novel, i.e. in history. It would seem that Baxtin merely extrapolates a set of categories from one area (the historically instanced social institution of carnival)

1 *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1968).

and then applies them in another area, literature, as a jerry-rigged *tertium comparationis* motivated by nothing more principled than his own imagination.

Viewed in this perspective, it is not surprising that the increasingly widespread use of carnival has engendered resistance: historians claim inaccuracies and folklorists question the details in Baxtin's account. Others have been concerned not because carnival may simply be a metaphor, but because it may be a metaphor with only very restricted legitimacy.

I have my own reservations about certain of the uses to which carnival has been put, but in this essay I want to argue that some of the imprecision that has grown up around the notion may perhaps be eliminated if we begin by recognising that carnival, at least as Baxtin himself uses it, is to be understood not only as an event in a historical series (whether it be the history of laughter or the history of the novel) but also as an event in the series of Baxtin's own ideas.

In order to perceive the place of carnival in Baxtin's thought it will be helpful to remember that it is merely one of *several* attempts he made at a number of different levels over his long career to find terms that could overcome the apparent contradiction of *simultaneous differences*: in literature, of course, but as well in social interaction, in nature, and above all in language. At different periods in his life Baxtin invoked various, different sets of terms for what is essentially the same problem: namely, the interaction, indeed the *interdependence* of elements quite different from each other, the complex wholes which result from otherwise non-identical parts. In the 1920s he experimented with conceptual models taken over from classical logic, such as the form of syllogism known as an enthymeme (in which one of the premises is assumed but not expressed), and even from biology (such as Uxtomskij's theory of a cerebral dominanta); in the 1930s he invoked the novel as a means for conceptualizing non-harmonious wholes, with such terms as polyphony and carnival as necessary sub-categories of what is perhaps best characterized as a force called *novelness*. In his later years Baxtin returned again to a more conventionally 'philosophical' concern for simultaneously interacting differences, the same kind of concern which had fuelled his earliest efforts to mediate the mysteries of simultaneity in 1918-20.

I am arguing, then, that carnival is only one, and far from the most important, means by which Baxtin sought to think the otherwise mysterious workings of shared differences, which he always, early and late, treated as a dialogue. To proceed with this argument, I'll very rapidly sketch some of the features Baxtin attributes to carnival, and then ex-

amine the more encompassing conceptual ground which, in the local in-
stance of the Rabelais book, Baxtin used carnival to signify.

Carnival is best conceived dialogically: i.e. as the interaction of dif-
ferences in a simultaneity. Carnival can be understood only in relation to
a set of differences which both oppose it and, *at the same time*, enable it.
A major simultaneity, then, must be the difference between official and
unofficial worlds. The normal state of society is one in which relatively
rigid hierarchies and hard-edged divisions separate social classes: what is
and what is *not* permissible in personal relations and sexual politics. It is
a state intolerant of ambiguities and semantic fluidity; it erects institu-
tions, such as legal canons and dictionary-writing-academies, to stopper
up the leaks in meaning. It is a world of human bodies that are closed to
each other: the appropriate symbol of the state being the uniforms with
which its armies and its churches homogenize the differences between
bodies. Carnival celebrates the opposite of all these values. It promotes
indeterminacy: one encounters the women dressed as men and the men
dressed as women who so struck Goethe in his experience of Roman car-
nival in 1788. If the state's symbol is the uniform that turns the whole
body of its wearer into an unambiguous sign of rank, then carnival's
symbol is the mask and the costume that decertify identity and enable
transformation. Far from seeking to conceal the body, carnival drama-
tizes flesh as the site of becoming, and flaunts the orifices which in their
activity of ingesting and defecating enact connections between the in-
dividual person and the whole world he is *not*, between inner and outer,
the self and non-self. At this level the hierarchies erected by the state fall
away as a *kind* of biologically ordained democracy takes over. This
democracy breaks down not only class and political barriers, but the
borders between generations as well, as in Rome when boys seek to blow
out the candles carried by their fathers during the *mock* warfare of the
Moccoli celebration, shouting all the while, 'Death to the Father,' 'Sia
ammazato il signor padre!'

This list of oppositions far from exhausts the meaning of carnival in
Baxtin. However, even such a short catalogue is sufficient to establish
reasons why some scholars have found the term so suggestive, and others
so maddeningly imprecise. What is important for our present purpose is
the set of categories implicit in Baxtin's use of the concept which can be
associated with key oppositions that dominate his thought early and late.
The carnival vs. non-carnival opposition is another avatar for such
obsessively recurring pairs in his work as unsystematic vs. systematic,
creative vs. merely-given, disunifying vs. unifying, unrepeatable vs.
repeatable and unfinished vs. finished.

All these oppositions are based on another that is more fundamental

than any of them: the opposition of self and other. Alterity for Baxtin is the defining condition of all perception and therefore of all representation. Hence the self/other opposition is not merely one that is operative only at the level of individual persons, but rather one that governs the norms of perception of whole societies as well. As we shall see, one of the fundamental principles of alterity (or to use the word Baxtin invokes more often, of 'dialogue'), is that one can never perceive himself as finished, complete, one can only see *others* as already having become what they are. This principle, when applied to the perception of one culture by another, explains why we are able to gain (or at least persuade *ourselves* that we have gained) a picture of other societies that is infinitely more complete than the picture we have of our own culture. We need only compare Evans-Pritchard's hermetically complete three volumes on the Nuer to see the force of self/other restrictions on even the most unparochial imagination.[2]

Since I am arguing that carnival is one of the local investigations Baxtin made into the workings of self/other relations, I would like briefly to turn to the text in which such relations are treated most directly, the 1918-20 *Architectonics of Answerability*, before returning to the implications this work specifically has for Baxtin's concept of carnival.[3]

The *Architectonics* is the text in which we find Baxtin's most explicit acknowledgement of the deepest roots of his thought. Serious questions have recently been raised about privileged texts. And, of course, Freud has taught us to be most suspicious of that which appears most unambiguous. Nevertheless, *The Architectonics* (and the late, summing-up essays of Baxtin's last years), does seem to constitute a kind of general philosophical bracketing for all the work devoted to more local and specific topics intervening between them. By saying so much, I do not wish to claim that Baxtin did not change over the years, or that *The Architechtonics* can be used as a kind of canonical guide for measuring the 'correctness' of conflicting interpretations of later works. To do so

2 Edward Evans Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1940); *Kinship and Marriage Among the Nuer* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1951); *Nuer Religion* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1956).

3 *The Architectonis of Responsibility* is a title I am assigning to a long, untitled manuscript, a portion of which was published in 1979 under the title 'Author and Hero' (*'Avtor i geroj'*) in *Èstetika slovesnogo tvorčestva*, eds., S.G. Bočarov and S.S. Averincev (Moskva: Isskustvo, 1979) 7-187. This text will appear in English translation by Vadim Liapunov in a forthcoming volume of the Texas Slavic Series (*The Architectonics of Responsibility: The Early Bakhtin*).

would, of course, deny historicity to one of the most powerful modern proponents of Becoming. Rather, *The Architechtonics* is best conceived as an agenda of topics so basal and complex, that only a lifetime (not *even* a lifetime) would suffice to think them through.

Baxtin, then conceives *otherness* to be the ground of all existence, and dialogue as the primal structure of any particular existence, a constant exchange between what is *already* and what is not *yet*. The register and shaper of these transformations is human consciousness, in its activity of translating, that is the constant exchange between 'I' and all that is 'Not-I-in-me.'[4] The self/other distinction becomes the primary subject of Baxtin's thought, the opposition on which all other differences are based: 'The highest structural principle of the actual world of deeds is the concrete architectonic and epistemological opposition between I and the other.'[5]

Since the self/other dichotomy is so central to Baxtin's thought, we should recognize from the outset that it *is* a dichotomy: the emphasis is *not*, as in Romantic philosophy, on the self *alone*, a radical subjectivity always in danger of shading off into solipsistic extremes. The self, as conceived by Baxtin, eludes as well charges brought by Deconstructionists against those who conceive of self as a kind of presence housing the ultimate privilege of the real, the seat for sovereign intention and unified meaning. The Baxtinian self is *never whole*. It exists dialogically: not as a substance or essence in its own right, but only in a tensile relationship with all that is other.

Baxtin uses the term '*drugost*' for alterity, an uncommon term that carries hints of the relationship between the word for 'friend' (*drug*) and the word for 'other' (*drugoi*), where −*oj* is merely the standard adjectival marker added to the root 'drug.' This is an important shading if we are to grasp the *positive* value that the other has in Baxtin's thinking.

The fact that we can never achieve full presence, a unitary identity complete in itself (either in experience of ourselves or in the logical rigours of dialectical thought) is *not to be lamented*. There are clear parallels between Baxtin's ideas about language and such German thinkers of the Romantic period as Wilhelm von Humboldt. But Baxtin is utterly opposed to the Romantic longing for wholeness, the kind of homesickness that produced German visions of an ancient Greek *Gemeinschaft* from which all subsequent history has been a falling away, a second exile from Eden into a world of split-consciousness in the self and

4 *Èstetika*, 351.

5 From a typescript.

alienation in society. By contrast, dialogism celebrates alterity, it is a gay science of the other, that other who is my friend because only from him can I get myself.

Baxtin provides a highly detailed account of how self appropriates itself from the other, the primary aim of which is to understand how we may *see* ourselves. If one begins by assuming with Kant, as Baxtin does, a split between mind and world, then a major problem becomes how to see the world, how to translate from a world that cannot in itself be known to another set of conditions that will *represent* the world at a second remove in a way that *will* let us perceive it. We must constantly use markers we can see in our mind's-eye that stand in for things that are otherwise unknowable. Understanding is simultaneous with perception, and, it follows, with representation. We are, of course, very close here to the ancient assumption that to perceive is to be.

Baxtin begins his analysis with an everyday, garden-variety fact so simple it is often forgotten or overlooked: if, as we would all begin by admitting, no two bodies can occupy the same space at the same time, then my place in existence is unique if only because while *I* occupy it, nothing (or better, no one) else may. While I am here, you must be there: I may be *with* you in this moment, but its appearance will look different from the unique places we both occupy in it. We are both together, somehow simultaneous, yet apart. We may, of course, physically change places, but between the moment you occupy the position I was in, and I the position you were in, time will have elapsed, if only the fraction of a second. The previous situation cannot be *repeated*, thus we never *see* (know) *the same things*: 'When we look at one another, two different worlds are reflected in the pupils of our eyes.'[6] You shape the structure of the setting and our place in it from the unique place you occupy, as I do from mine.

Since it is not transcendental, the self is limited in its architectonic activity by restraints that *physical* space imposes on the biological mechanisms of sight. Some of these restraints are merely contingent, such as the amount of available light at any given moment. But others are absolute.

The first of these absolute restraints is what might be called the law of placement: *what I see is governed by the place from which I see it*, a law that is expressed in physics as Einsteinian relativity at one level, and as Heissenberg's uncertainty principle at another. What I wish to emphasize here is that Baxtin's privileging of the particular *place* from which

6 *Èstetika*, 22.

something is perceived as that which determines the *meaning* of what is observed may be read as an attempt to do for conscious mind what Einstein was seeking to do for the physical universe when he, too, began his career (almost at the same time) by emphasizing the determining role played by the *locus* from which phenomena were observed. Einstein's first paper of 1905 begins with the assertion that every statement about the 'objective' time of an event is, in reality, a statement about the simultaneous occurence of *two* events: namely the simultaneous occurence of the events in question and, say, the superposition of the hands of a clock on the numbers painted on a dial. As Einstein puts it, 'When I say for example, "the train arrives here at seven," that really means that the passage of the little hand of my watch at the place marked at seven and the arrival of the train are simultaneous events.'[7]

Einstein quickly adds that his sentence contains an undefined concept, one he, like Baxtin, was to spend the rest of his life trying to understand, namely the concept of simultaneity. Normally the question does not arise, because in everyday life there is a close fit between the events on the faces of our timexes or rolexes and events in the world. We are, of course, comparing an event that has already *occurred* with our watches. But as a rule we can ignore this ineluctable posteriority of what we take as simultaneity because light travels so fast and the distances are so small that such a delay is irrelevant. However, if we wish to time events on the moon with clocks that are located on earth, the delay *is* significant. This raises the essential question of how we can conceive events as 'simultaneous' on the earth and, say, the moon. This problem led Einstein in his later work to invent a number of 'thought experiments' involving people in elevators, walking on ocean liners, and sitting on top of moving trains. The purpose of all of them being to show that 'there is no such thing as a fixed interval of time independent of the system to which it is referred. There is no such thing as *simultaneity* as a *conceptual unity*. In his *own* work, such a system was Einstein's development of the Lorentz transformations.

For Baxtin, the system of reference which could serve to create the effect of simultaneity was to be found in the mechanics of self/other relations, specifically the law of placement. You can see things behind my back (a painting, certain clouds that pass by) that are closed to my vision, while I see things your placement denies to *your* vision (a different painting on the other wall, or other clouds moving behind your head).

7 'Zur Elektrodynamik bewegter Körper,' *Annalen der Physik*, Heft 5, Band 17 (1905), p. 893.

And this difference will determine that although we are in the same event, it is different for us both.

Otherness is, then, not just a metaphysical *a priori*, since noncoincidence is a constitutive feature of human perception. There is a structural gap in human vision, a blind spot that is dictated by the law of placement. But since the place each of us occupies is unique, both the things I *see* as well as the things I *cannot* see are distinctive to (and in important ways help to *constitute*) myself.

A hoary definition of a pessimist is the man who says 'We have only come half way,' as opposed to the optimist who says in the same situation, 'We have only half way to go now.' Analogously, many moderns have pessimistically decried the very same conditions which Baxtin optimistically celebrates. We have seen how Baxtin chooses to speak of *drugost*,' a condition of non-simultaneity friendly to man, rather than alienation, the same situation, but perceived by most others, from Marx to Sartre, as hostile: the hell from which there is *No Way Out* is not only *les autres*, but the ineluctable condition of otherness which they merely specify in given situations. Invoking Paul de Man's frequently quoted terms for discussing the same dilemma, we might say Baxtin chooses to emphasize not the blindness inevitable in any act of perception, but rather the insight that alterity makes available to us.

Baxtin does not ignore the fact that sight is always partial, never complete. Indeed, his whole concept of otherness depends on recognition of the blindness to *all that* which enables us to see *this*. But in his phenomenology of the senses, what is most important is the dialogue between what I *can* see, and what is denied my vision by the law of placement. From the unique place I occupy in existence there are things only I can see: the distinctive slice of the world only I perceive is an 'excess of seeing,' where excess is defined relative to the *lack* all others have of the world shaped exclusively by me. It must immediately be added, of course, that the others enjoy a similar excess, insofar as each of them sees from *their* unique place a world denied to *me*. This excess is a fundamental building block in the construction of the self, something all men *share* as a condition, but which, in specific persons, is *unique* as an experience: a resulting paradox is that we all share uniqueness.

The self, which Baxtin attempts to clarify, has certain parallels with Kant's 'I think,' the point to which experience relates for its meaning. This is the self Kant defined as an I that is 'in itself completely empty.'[8] The

---

8 *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: MacMillan and Co., Ltd., 1929), B157-9.

parallel with Kant must not be taken too far, but it is useful in suggesting that the self, conceived along these lines, poses radical problems for its perception by itself. As Baxtin says, 'We least of all are able to apprehend the ... whole of our own personality.'[9] Whether in a rigorous, phenomenological attempt to achieve an eidetic intimation of myself, or in the most banal daydreams, it is precisely 'I myself that I cannot see.'[10] Consciousness knows the world by visualizing it. But it can *see* it, as it were, only through the portals of two conceptualizing lenses, the optic of the self and that of the other. Each of these refracts what is perceived in quite different ways, much as do the right and left eyes in the physiology of vision. In my attempts to make sense out of what confronts me, I shape the world in values that are refracted from one or the other lens.

The inadequacy of any system other than the self to model the self is manifested as an endless nay-saying by the self to all definitions of it: when I develop consciousness of myself, it is not as a growing awareness of *something*, but rather it is 'consciousness of the fact that I, in my most fundamental aspect of myself, *still am not.*'[11] My 'I' lives in an 'absolute future,' thus my self is a project never to be completed by me. The word Baxtin uses here for project (*zadanie*) is, of course, another turn on the basic distinction between given (*dan*) and conceived (*zadan*) that serves further to define the nature of consciousness as the necessity constantly to create, to *author* a self. What consciousness is always conscious *of* is the incompleteness of self. In temporal terms what this means is that I answer the *present* by projecting a *future*. My self then *performs* itself as a denial of any given (specific) category's power fully to comprehend it. We can see the influence of Dostoevskij here, especially the underground man's insistence on his right to negate any definition with which society might label him: he will choose to spit even in the Crystal Palace. And of course, Sartre makes much the same point in his argument that when the world says of me, 'He *is* a waiter,' I must hold back, I must insist I have not become a waiter, for I am still in the process of becoming *me*.

But if my deepest self (my I-for-myself) is in essence opposed to all categories, the question arises, where am I to get categories for *fixing* self *itself*? The answer is from other selves. I cannot see the self that is mine, so I must try to perceive it in others' eyes.

I would like to draw attention again to the way in which the self/other duality replicates what increasingly appears to be a pattern found at

9 *Èstetika*, 8.

10 *Èstetika*, 27.

11 *Èstetika*, 112.

other levels of the biology that controls perception. The duality of bifocal vision has been much studied, but it now appears that *hearing* is a dichotic process as well: recent work by a broad spectrum of investigators indicates that each of our two ears hears differently. The right ear (controlled by the left hemisphere of the brain) displays a better aptitude for precise recognition of the sounds peculiar to human speech, while the left ear is more efficient in discriminating among all other kinds of sounds. The brain processes audible signals in two different ways: two physically *similar* sounds, let us say that made by puffing our cheeks and rapidly exhaling when we blow out a candle, and the pre-vocalic *wh* of such words as *when*, are treated in two different ways in auditory perception, where the *right* hemisphere handles the functional act of blowing out the candle and the *left* handles the abstract, semiotic quality of the speech sound. A whole series of differences in how the two ears hear has been revealed: the left side controlling verbs, oriented toward pronouns, toward futurity in aspect and tense, while the right is able to recognize intonational differences and other emotional overtones in the voice, to discriminate whose voice is being heard, is more sensitive to music,[12] etc.

What is important for our purposes is that these great differences work *together* in the consciousness of any individual perceiver to give the appearance of a simultaneous unity, much as do other dualities mandated by the dichotomous working of the bilateral brain. Baxtin, who in the 1920s was influenced by the great Russian physiologist of the brain, Uxtomskiij, suggests that constant mediation between the pole of self and that of other is the mechanism by which we conceptualize and, up to a point, control at the level of *mind* dualities which are present in biology at the level of mere *brain*.

Self and other are the two poles of all perceptual possibilities. This basal difference serves to distinguish two different ways of perceiving space, two different kinds of time and two different sets of values. In each case, the difference is in the gap between a time, space and evaluation that is appropriate to me, and a time, space and evaluation that is appropriate to another. All perception is relative to whether it is of me or the other. Self and other are characterized by a different space and a different time. The self's time is open, unfinished; the other we conceive is, on the other hand, *completed* insofar as we see him as what he *is*. The self's place is not *only* here, insofar as it must be transgradient, not completely immersed in this environment, if it is to have the perspective

12 Cf. Roman Jakobson, *Brain and Language* (Columbus: Slavica, 1982).

needed to constitute a whole out of the other and his environment. The other is *completely* here, insofar as we equate his self, his body and his environment as a unified whole; insofar as we architectonically complete him.

The originality of Baxtin's thought may be obscured for intellectuals in the West, since many of his preoccupations have become familiar to us through the work of other thinkers who, like Baxtin, were working their way out of the same tradition of Neo-Kantianism and Husserlian Phenomenology (and later reactions to them). Baxtin's concept of responsibility has striking similarities to Heidegger's *Sorge* in *Sein und Zeit* (his ideas about self/other, and especially his emphasis on visual metaphors) will remind others of Sartre's *'le regard'* and the last phase of Merleau-Ponty, in which seeing plays so large a role.

The obvious point to make, then, in any comparison of Baxtin with these French and German thinkers (and others who could be named, such as Emmanuel Levinas), is that Baxtin's *Architectonics* precedes them all in composition; only the peculiarities of Soviet censorship (and of Baxtin himself, we should add in all fairness) keeping it from being published until 1979. but it was written sixty years earlier, in 1919, eight years before the appearance of *Being and Time* and decades before *Being and Nothingness* (1943) or Levinas's *Existence and Existents* (written during 1940-45, but published only after the war). There can be no question of influence then: the situation is better conceived as a series of like responses to the same set of philosophical questions that were abroad in the years after the turn of the nineteenth century.

I have argued that carnival is merely one of the several ways Baxtin chose to make his early concern for self/other relations more particularized.[13] As such, carnival becomes an exploration of alterity in social, political and religious mechanisms, a celebration that nurtures the liminality needed to keep such institutions from dying of a structural hardening of the arteries. Carnival is a means by which whole societies can represent to themselves (can collectively *see*) the folly of their own pretensions to unite and make final. Carnival, in other words, is a way cultural systems come to know themselves by playing at being different.

This combination of play and difference will immediately suggest certain parallels and contrasts between the thought of Baxtin and that of Derrida. It is with a brief consideration of these that I would like to conclude.

13 For a more detailed account of the specifically soviet aspects of the Rabelais book, see my 'Theory as Praxis: Bakhtin and Rabelais,' *boundary* 2, 11, Nos. 1-2 (Fall-Winter, 1982-83), 5-19.

Derrida's continuing ability to arouse disquiet (his mastery of what Paul de Man somewhere calls the 'technique of trouble') is in large measure a result of his insistence that we have no alternative to a certain kind of play. As he suggested in the title of one of his earliest, and still most influential papers, the structure and signs of discourse are ultimately contained by the play of difference. We live in language and language is play: it is nothing but play. And insofar as it is play with difference, it is not only nothing but play, but play with nothing: 'To risk nothing is to start to play and first to center the play of difference which prevents any word ... from coming to summarize and to govern from the thelogical presence of a center the movement and spacing of differences.'[14]

At a certain level of abstraction there would seem to be a good deal in common between Dialogism's obsession with the phenomenology of authorship and what is arguably Deconstruction's major recurring concern (both in Derrida's theoretical mediation and in his practice as a reader of others' texts), i.e., the attempt to subvert discourse from within itself. Deconstruction, in this sense, is the *nom de guerre* by which many have recently come to know the unsettling phenomenon Baxtin otherwise (and less notoriously) addresses as double-voicedness, quasi-reported speech, polyphony, heteroglossia and a number of other particularizing terms. Differance itself, as 'neither a word nor a concept,' is an ideal example of what Baxtin calls a 'loophole word.'[15] The master question of traditional philosophy has been, 'why is there something rather than nothing?' But in recent post-metaphysical attempts to solve the Chinese puzzle of how to grasp in words thathich exceeds language, this basic question is increasingly displaced by another: 'who (or what) is talking?'

Difference is, of course, Derrida's term for the force which makes so apparently simple a question almost impossible to answer. As such it is basically a metaphor for the precedence of writing as opposed to speech: voicing the word masks the difference between difference and differance; but when the words are written, the difference becomes clear. Once again, this is meant as a playful demonstration of how the traditional

---

14 *Positions,* trans. Allan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1981). [*Positions* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit 1972), initially in *Lettres Françaises,* 6 December 1967, p. 13: 'Se risquer à ne-rien-vouloir dire, c'est entrer dans le jeu, et d'abord dans le jeu de la différance qui fait qu'aucun mot, aucun concept, aucun énoncé majeur ne viennent résumer et commander, depuis la présence théologique d'un centre, le mouvement et l'espacement textuel des différences.']

15 On the problems of translating Baxtin's vocabulary into English, see Michael Holquist, 'Introduction,' *The Dialogic Imagination: Four essays by M.M. Bakhtin,*

privileging of voice, the all-too-easily assumed superiority of presence over absence in Western philosophy (where written signs are conceived as merely marking the absent voice of the one who uttered them), from at least Plato to Husserl, has blinded us to the freedom of writing. Writing, understood as the primordial activity of differentiation, is always already there, even (as Derrida shows in his wicked reading of Lévi-Strauss) among the patently illiterate Nambikwara tribe of the upper Amazon.[16] Thus the written surd *a* seeks to render visible the difference that characterizes writing as opposed to speaking. Differance makes language possible. Writing permits us to speak.

Not only is the surd a metaphor, but so is what it seeks to convey: the activity of writing is nothing so crude as making marks on a page, but a metaphor for the play of difference, which (before Derrida carnivalized metaphysics) we failed to perceive due to a logocentric emphasis on speaking. Although of a complexity one might expect from the author of 'The White Mythology,' Derrida's appropriation of speaking and writing is metaphoric.

Baxtin's use of dialogue is, of course, no less metaphoric. The play of difference is a tactic for permitting us to think the otherwise unthinkably more diffuse and comprehensive force that enables particular instances of difference in language. Similarly, dialogue in Baxtin is a way to conceptualize the structure of addressivity providing the armature for any actually articulated dialogue.

A first point to keep in mind is that Baxtin, who is no less concerned to rethink Saussure than is Derrida, also resists the over-valorization of speaking versus writing. His strategy for doing so is quite precisely the opposite of that adopted by Derrida: instead of arguing that all speech is a form of writing, Baxtin insists that writing is a form of the radical activity of speech he calls utterance (*vyskazivanie*). Let there be no mistake here: to say this is not to assert the privilege of speaking over writing as in the logocentric tradition crowned by Husserl and Saussure. It is rather to conceive utterance, which has otherwise been thought to have two discrete forms, spoken and written, as a complex whole (not necessarily a unity) comprising *both* these activities, composed of differences that

trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1983), esp. xx–xxi. See also Caryl Emerson's important statement on this topic: 'Translating Bakhtin: Does His Theory of Discourse contain a Theory of Translation?,' *University of Ottawa Quarterly*, 53, No. 1 (January–March, 1983), 23–33.

16 *Èstetika*, p. 237

are significant only because they are *simultaneous*. Language is used in the form of concrete utterances [and he adds with parenthetic understatement] (spoken *and* written).'[17] Utterance is an articulation: both an enunciation and a way in which parts are joined together. What is joined in utterance is my ability to address others and their ability to address me. Another speaker or a written page may do the addressing, but the activity Baxtin calls utterance will be structured as a dialogue in both cases.

What this means, among other things, is that in no case is it ever only I who speaks: just as what I hear or read is changed by the process of my articulation, so what I say or write is modified by my articulation *with others*. Consciousness is a hybrid of the otherness I am for the *other* (the otherness I process as my own, not as a mysterious essence, but a position that is only relatively my own) and the otherness the other is for *me* (which I process as other, once again only relative to the position in the articulation that is mine). Since language always articulates *both* self and other, self can never be coincident with itself: 'psyche is located somewhere between the organism and a world that is exterior to it, on the borderline separating these two spheres ... organism and the world meet here in the sign. Psychic experience is the semiotic expression of the contact between the organism and the outside environment.'[18] Language is not a prison house but an ecosystem.

A fundamental difference between Baxtin and Derrida would seem to be the way each comes at the system governing what they both conceive as the *general text* of the world. Derrida heroically refuses to give a location for *differance* in the face of all the outraged (and sometimes anguished) demands of his critics that he do so. This theoretically necessary refusal has had the practical effect of laying him open to charges of locating the mover of his system outside any known system of representation, which in turn leads to characterizations, justified or not, of his enterprise as a negative theology.

Baxtin, on the other hand, never hesitates to name extra-personal social forces as the locus of alterity. They also are the reason why heterogeneity and change will always be privileged in their contest with unity and sameness. It is only in social life that one can account for the simultaneity of both extremes as they grapple with each other in specific

17 *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 107-140.

18 *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* [V.N. Volosinov], trans. Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik (New York: Seminar Press, 1973), 26.

utterances by particular people. Derrida has said that he invokes 'the word "history" in order to reinscribe its force and in order to produce another concept ... of "history": in effect a "monumental, stratified contradictory" history; a history that ... is not one single history, a general history, but rather histories *different* in their type, rhythm, mode of inscription, ...'[19] But his admirable desire to avoid a premature synthesis that could yet maintain the integrity of different histories in their simultaneity is so militant that it becomes impossible to conceive *any* category capable of framing the heterogeneity of histories so conceived. Baxtin maintains, on the other hand, that we may seek an expressive totality, if not an all-encompassing unity, in discursive practices conceived in all their social diversity and historical randomness; what might, in the context of his Rabelais book, be called the carnival of discourse.

Indiana University

---

19 *Positions*, 57-8. [*Positions* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit 1972), pp. 78-9: '(le) mot "histoire" pour en réinscrire la portée et produire un autre concept ... de l'"histoire": histoire en effet "monumentale, stratifiée, contradictoire;" histoire aussi qui ... (n'est) pas une seule histoire, une histoire générale mais des histoires *différentes* dans leur type, leur rythme, leur mode d'inscription, ...']