

Boris Schnaiderman and Mikhail Bakhtin / *Boris Schnaiderman e Mikahil M. Bakhtin*

Geraldo Tadeu Souza*

Bakhtin is manifold and thus he is contradictory, very rich, and varied.
He has to be assimilated within such richness.
It is in him that polyphony and dialogism exist.
There's always a Bakhtin dialoguing with another Bakhtin.
Boris Schnaiderman

Boris Schnaiderman [17/05/1917-18/05/2016], a professor, translator, essayist, and writer, was undoubtedly one of the most acknowledged Brazilian experts on Mikhail Bakhtin and the Circle. He was born in Uman, Ukraine, in 1917, the year of the Russian Revolution. Until he was eight years old, he lived in Odessa, where in 1925 he witnessed the filming of the classic “Odessa Steps” scene in Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin*. He came to Brazil, where he settled permanently, and despite being graduated in Agronomy, in 1960 he became the first professor of Russian at the Universidade de São Paulo (Sao Paulo University) and a member of the faculty of the Departments of Eastern Languages, Literary Theory and Comparative Literature from the Faculdade de Filosofia Letras e Ciências Humanas [Faculty of Philosophy, Languages and Literature, and Human Sciences].

He fought in World War II as a member of the Brazilian Expeditionary Force, an experience that he narrated in his novel *Guerra em surdina* [*Silent War*]. Initially under the pen name of Boris Solomonov, he translated into Portuguese works of great authors, such as Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Gorky, Babel, Pushkin, and Mayakovsky. In

* Geraldo Tadeu Souza, a professor at UFSCar/Sorocaba, interviewed Boris Schnaiderman on December 18, 2008. The interview was done especially for the book *Bakhtin, dialogismo e polifonia* [*Bakhtin, dialogism and polyphony*] (BRAIT, B. (org.). São Paulo: Contexto, 2009, pp.225-239, whose introduction, edition and notes were done by the book’s editor. Cf. the website for the book: <http://editoracontexto.com.br/bakhtin-dialogismo-e-polifonia.html> Editora Contexto [Contexto Publishing House] has kindly granted us the permission to publish the text, presented here with a few adjustments, so we can pay posthumous tribute to Boris Schnaiderman (17/05/1917-18/05/2016).

2003, he was awarded the Translation Prize from the Academia Brasileira de Letras [Brazilian Academy of Letters].

Among his main works are *Dostoiévski: prosa poesia* [*Dostoevsky: Prose and Poetry*];¹ *Turbilhão e semente: Ensaio sobre Dostoiévski e Bakhtin* [*Swirl and Seeds: Essays on Dostoevsky and Bakhtin*];² *Poesia russa moderna* [*Modern Russian Poetry*] (written with Augusto de Campos and Haroldo de Campos);³ *A poética de Maiakóvski: através de sua prosa* [*Mayakovsky's Poetics: Through his Prose* (originally his doctoral dissertation)];⁴ *Leão Tolstói: antiarte e rebeldia* [*Lion Tolstoy: Anti-art and Rebellion*];⁵ *Os escombros e o mito: a cultura e o fim da União Soviética* [*Rubble and Myth: Culture and the End of the Soviet Union*];⁶ *Projeções: Rússia/Brasil/Itália* [*Projections: Russia/Brazil/Italy*];⁷ *Semiótica russa* [*Russian Semiotics*];⁸ *Maiakóvski: poemas* [*Mayakovsky: Poems*] (written with Augusto de Campos and Haroldo de Campos);⁹ *Guerra em Surdina: histórias do Brasil na Segunda Guerra Mundial* [*Silent War: Histories of Brazil in World War II*];¹⁰ *Tradução, ato desmedido* [*Translation, an Excessive Act*];¹¹ *Guenádi Aigui: silêncio e clamor* [*Gennadiy Aygi: Silence and Clamor*];¹² *Caderno italiano* [*Italian Notebook*],¹³ and *Bakhtin 40 graus (Uma experiência brasileira)* [*40 Degrees Bakhtin: A Brazilian Experience*].¹⁴

With the advantage of reading in Russian and being a great translator, a professor of literary theory and of having met Bakhtin personally, in this interview Boris Schnaiderman talks with another expert on Bakhtin and the Circle: Geraldo Tadeu Souza. The productive ping-pong interview provides the reader with important aspects of this thread of thinking, which is fundamental to current language studies.

¹ 2. ed. revista e ampliada. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2014. [1.ed.1971].

² São Paulo: Duas Cidades, 1983.

³ 6.ed./2. reimp. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2012.

⁴ 2.ed. Revista e ampliada. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2014.

⁵ São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1983.

⁶ São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1997.

⁷ São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1978.

⁸ 2. ed. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2010.

⁹ 6.ed. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2002.

¹⁰ 4. ed. rev. São Paulo: Cosac & Naify, 2004.

¹¹ São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2011.

¹² SCHNAIDERMAN, B.; FERREIRA, Jerusa P. (Orgs.). São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2010

¹³ São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2015.

¹⁴ SCHNAIDERMAN, B. Bakhtin 40 graus (Uma experiência brasileira). In: BRAIT, B. (org.). *Bakhtin, dialogismo e construção de sentido*. 2. ed. rev. Campinas: Editora da UNICAMP, 2013, pp.13-21.

Interview

Professor, how did you come to know Bakhtin's work?

Actually, from the end of 1969 I started to devote myself to Bakhtin's work. Before that, just as it happened in the West, I had only some sparse news on it. Bakhtin came to be known after *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* was published in 1963, which is a reedition of the 1929 *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art*. He entitled the reedited version as *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*.¹⁵

Was it the French translation done by Isabelle Kolitcheff in 1970, which was presented by Julia Kristeva?

No. I first heard about Bakhtin in an Italian version that was given to me by Haroldo de Campos, a deceased friend of mine. He brought it to me from Italy when people started to talk about Bakhtin, whom not many people knew; few of them had read him. He brought me *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* in Italian, and I read Bakhtin for the first time. Only after that did I get his book in Russian and started to read it. I had some sparse news on Bakhtin, mainly due to the 1929 *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art*, but everything was too sparse, too little. Even the Russian publications in the West were sparse and unsatisfying. When I read the book, I was fascinated. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* is undoubtedly a great work; it's really a great work on literary theory.

Isn't it true that in this book Bakhtin works on the concept of polyphony more precisely?

Yes, it is, but several issues remained a little unclear to me. Even today it's difficult to grasp Bakhtin, for he's essentially contradictory. Contradiction is part of him. For example, in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, he discusses a lot about Tolstoy's monologism. He always presents Tolstoy as an example of a monologic writer, and yet later on he starts to write about dialogism in Tolstoy's novels naturally, without giving the reader any excuse. For him, contradiction is absolutely natural. Sometimes he makes us very confused.

¹⁵ BAKHTIN, M. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Translated by Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

In one of his works, Bakhtin states that he loves to work with variations although he does not like to indicate many links, many intermediate links.¹⁶ For this reason, a superficial read of his work is not possible.

In fact, an in-depth reading is needed. There is no doubt he's a difficult writer, but we can read him perfectly. As long as we are used to reading works on Literary Theory, he's perfectly readable. He's an energetic writer, different from Literature theoreticians.

You mentioned *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art*, published in 1929. Some excerpts of the first version of this work on Dostoevsky were published in the Portuguese edition of *Estética da criação verbal* [Aesthetics of Verbal Creation], a direct translation from Russian by Paulo Bezerra. He included fragments of this first edition.¹⁷

And he also included Bakhtin's project for *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*,¹⁸ which is worth noting, is an important text, for it allows us to see many things about Bakhtin that we cannot see in other works. Bakhtin's relationship with Marxism is much clearer. Bakhtin is essentially contradictory. Actually, he developed the theories of dialogism and polyphony because he is evidently always dialoguing with himself. In Bakhtin, there is always more than one voice, which is always in dialogue. He is Marxist, but his adopting Marxism was not something conventional, at his convenience. On the contrary, he is a Marxist. We realize he is a Marxist and, at the same time, he's a deeply religious man. This is in itself a tremendous contradiction because although the liberation theology has taken place, in fact Marxism is against religion. We cannot deny that. And Bakhtin is Marxist and religious at the same time.

¹⁶ "My love for variations and for a diversity of terms for a single phenomenon. The multiplicity of focuses. Bringing distant things closer without indicating the intermediate links" (BAKHTIN, 1986, p.155) [BAKHTIN, M. From Notes Made in 1970-71. In: _____. *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*. Translated by Vern W. McGee. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986, pp.132-158].

¹⁷ These fragments were published as an appendix in the English version of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*: Appendix I. Three Fragments from the 1929 Edition *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art* [BAKHTIN, B. Three Fragments from the 1929 Edition *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art*. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Translated into English by Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, pp.275-282].

¹⁸ TN. This text was published as an appendix in the English version of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*: Appendix II. Toward a Reworking of the Dostoyevsky Book [BAKHTIN, B. Toward a Reworking of the Dostoyevsky Book. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Translated into English by Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, pp.283-302].

This too was a characteristic of the Circle that he ended up creating.

Of the Circle and the society to which he belonged and due to which he was arrested in 1929. He was arrested because he belonged to a Society that was devoted to the study of religion and to the study of social problems – a Society that tried to take into account religion and Marxism, opposing thus Marx himself, for he was against religion.

When Bakhtin is read in Brazil in order to understand his relationship with Marxism, it is very common to compare *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*¹⁹ to *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* instead of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art*, which is contemporary to *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. In different places of the work, his relationship with the sociological method, present in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, is clearer.

He categorically states that he wants to sociologize literature. He has never denied that. He has always declared the need for a social approach. The thing is that in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* he states upfront that “the [...] book is devoted to problems of [...] poetics”²⁰ specifically and further on he starts discussing capitalism, the importance of Dostoevsky's viewpoint on capitalism. It is there, in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*.

When he studies how the discourse of criticism to capitalism enters into Dostoyevsky's work, he discusses this issue in depth. After this first work, which other book did you have access to?

The second book was the one on Rabelais. At that point, I was already reading the original works in Russian. I remember the book on Rabelais was published in Russia in 1965, if I'm not mistaken. I started out with the two works that are the most complete and extensive. And I was fascinated. I brought more material with me when I was in Russia in 1972. When I was there in 1965, I didn't know much about Bakhtin. I had only heard of him; I only knew that he had written *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, but I didn't have the book. I was in Russia in 1965 and was not familiar with Bakhtin. On my second trip to Russia in 1972, I had already read *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and *Rabelais and his World*.²¹ Then I tried to learn more about him by getting

¹⁹ VOLOŠINOV, V.N. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Translated by Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986.

²⁰ Bakhtin (1984, p.3). For reference, see footnote 15.

²¹ BAKHTIN, M. *Rabelais and his World*. Translated by Helene Iswolski. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984.

hold of other texts, which I did. It was really in 1972 that I came to know more of Bakhtin.

This book on Rabelais is the one in which this difference between the *Carnival* of life and carnivalization in a literary work is present. If you could talk a little about that, it would be great. Today, Bakhtin's readers find it very difficult to understand the relationship between carnival and carnivalization, which is proper to the artistic discourse.

It's true. This book on Rabelais, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance provoked a lot of debate, including by historians. The most fundamental criticism that I know of was made by Aaron Gurevich, a Russian historian that was close to the Tartu-Moscow group, to the Tartu semioticians. Aaron Gurevich made many criticisms to the book on Rabelais, to the way Bakhtin sees the Middle Ages, the peasants, the people. Gurevich discusses it a lot. Among other things, he believes that Bakhtin discussed Rabelais's work despite the fact that Rabelais is from the end of the Middle Ages, the beginning of the Renaissance. In fact, in the Middle Ages we cannot make a clear-cut distinction between popular and official culture as Bakhtin does. In the Middle Ages, they were mingled a lot.

Don't you think this has a little to do with the issue of contradiction, which you say is proper to Bakhtin? Maybe his idea was to use a time contradiction as if to shed light in the darkness of the Middle Ages...

I will not say who is right or who is wrong, but Gurevich pointed out that, in the Middle Ages, popular culture and court culture were not clearly differentiated.

This will be clearer during the Renaissance. Anyway, this is a pleasant book.

Bakhtin is a great writer. There is no doubt about that. He stands out from other writers. He really is a writer.

Don't you think that sometimes, even in his text, after reading it several times, we start to understand a little about the world in which he lives? It seems that he hints at some issues in his writing so we can understand his time.

Undoubtedly.

Professor, when did you learn about *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*? Did you first read it in Russian?

I first read it in French and I was very unhappy about several mistakes I found in the version. The Brazilian version is based on the French translation, and the French translation has many mistakes, such as confusing the Russian Natural School with French Naturalism. Naturalism emerged in France in the 1880s, and the Russian Natural School started in 1840. Neither can we say that the Russian school foreboded French naturalism. One had nothing to do with the other. The Russian Natural School was the school of writers who devoted themselves to describe people's lives with an emphasis on social problems. It had more to do with the French physiological sketches, which were very popular at the time and which Russians read. But it has nothing to do with French naturalism. The first time Zola heard about the Russian Natural School he was really happy and said, "Why, good! Then they have foreboded me?" He had not read any text from the Russian Natural School yet and neither did he know what it really was. In the French version of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, there is a lot of confusion between the Russian Natural School and French naturalism.

When I studied the French, Spanish and English versions of the book, I realized that *discourse genres*,²² one of the concepts that are really explored in Bakhtinian studies, appears for the first time, with propriety, in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. However, it basically vanished from the Portuguese translation, which hinders us from thinking *discourse genres* in daily life as well as in constituted ideological systems. Right in the beginning of the book, he states that later on he would discuss the relationship between discourse genres and dialogue.²³ And this disappears from the Portuguese version, and it's only possible to find it if we go to other translations. Maybe someone, such as Paulo Bezerra (or any other translator), could translate it directly from Russian into Portuguese so that many things that have been lost in the present translation may be retrieved. I don't know what you think about that.

An important book that was edited by Bakhtin's disciples was *Estética da criação verbal* [*Aesthetics of Verbal Creation*].²⁴ The translation of the title can be either

²² TN. The translators of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* and of Bakhtin's essay The Problem of Speech Genres have translated "discourse genres" as "speech genres."

²³ "Later on, in connection with the problem of the utterance and dialogue, we shall again touch upon the problem of speech genre" (VOLOŠINOV, 1986, p.20). For reference, see footnote 5.

²⁴ TN. There is no book collection of Bakhtin's essays with this title in English. The essays in the Portuguese version of *Estética da criação verbal* [*Aesthetics of Verbal Creation*] can be found in *Speech Genre and Other Late Essays* [BAKHTIN, M. *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*. Translated by Vern W. McGee. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986], *Art and Answerability* [BAKHTIN, M. *Art and*

Estética da criação verbal [Aesthetics of Verbal Creation] or *Estética da criação literária* [Aesthetics of Literary Creation], but according to the context of the book, *Estética da criação verbal* [Aesthetics of Verbal Creation] is more suitable. What would the title be if it had not been translated again? The translation from French into Portuguese was very bad and omitted very important works that Paulo Bezerra included when he translated it directly from Russian. There was a lot of confusion as Bakhtin was made known in the West. It was natural, for Russia was a very closed world, which gave rise to a lot of confusion. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* had two versions in French, one published in Switzerland and the other in Paris, both in 1970. In the Preface of the French version, Julia Kristeva states that Bakhtin was close to Freud's concepts without reading Freud. This is ridiculous. He had already written – he alone or in collaboration with Voloshinov – the book on Freudianism, which has been translated into Portuguese.

Voloshinov published and signed *Freudianism*;²⁵ Medvedev, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*,²⁶ and Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. These works were published, respectively, in 1927, 1928 e 1929, which makes them somewhat coeval.

That's right. There was a lot of confusion. But it's natural, for everybody confused them. Right now, I believe Bakhtin's notes On Maikovsky,²⁷ which is to be published in this book, is fundamental. I believe it is fundamental. My whole life, ever since I started reading Bakhtin, I've been outraged by Bakhtin's statement that poetry is monological. I don't agree with that at all. I've written about it more than once. I don't agree: poetry is by no means monological. Besides, when Bakhtin stated that, he left aside the notion that emerged in Russia that in poetry the Other is always expected. V. Vinogradov

Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M.M. Bakhtin. Translation and notes by Vadim Liapunov. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1990], and *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (specifically, Three Fragments from the 1929 Edition *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art* and Toward a Reworking of the Dostoyevsky Book).

²⁵ VOLOŠINOV, V. *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*. Translated by I. R. Titunik and edited in collaboration with Neal H. Bruss. New York: Academic Press, 1976.

²⁶ BAKHTIN, M.; MEDVEDEV, P. *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*. Translated by Albert J. Wehrle. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991

²⁷ TN. The Portuguese version of these notes was published in the same collection of this interview [BAKHTIN, M. Sobre Maiakóvski [On Mayakovsky]. Trad. russo Fátima Bianchi. In: BRAIT, B. (Org.). *Bakhtin: dialogismo e polifonia*. São Paulo: Contexto, 2009, pp.191-203].

showed that when he wrote about Anna Akhmatova's poetry. It seems that in Anna Akhmatova's poetry he is always expecting the Other's discourse.

And this was Bakhtin's fundamental issue: the discourse of the other.

Only recently have Bakhtin's notes on Mayakovsky appeared. In fact, it was in the 1990s that it was published in a yearbook of Russian poetry. It has been recently published in a collection of Bakhtin's works [*Collected Works in Seven Volumes*] in Russia. The notes On Mayakovsky were published in full in the collection. In them, Bakhtin leaves aside his statement that poetry is monological and writes about Mayakovsky as the one that provokes words from the crowds, that dialogues with the crowds. It's again an utter contradiction. And Bakhtin doesn't care.

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin proposes a Metalinguistics, whose object of study would be dialogical relations. In this work, he declares that in everything he hears voices and that he looks for the relationships between these voices and time.²⁸ Mayakovsky's time is very close to Bakhtin's time. Do you believe there is any relationship between his analysis of Mayakovsky's work, which he didn't complete, and some categories that he uses when analyzing Rabelais and Dostoevsky? The idea of carnival and carnavalization, for instance?

What happens is that these notes on Mayakovsky are not an essay. They are notes. Then, certain things were not discussed thoroughly. He suggests things. I find it difficult to establish this relationship with Rabelais.

In these notes, he points out that Mayakovsky's exaggeration was an evidence of canivalization.

As hyperboles... No doubts about it... It's a great work. Although they are only notes, it's a great work.

Don't you think that if he had had time, he would have developed such work? If we imagine a timeline, we see that he discussed Rabelais, Goethe (there are some stories that he literally smoked the manuscripts of this more complete work), Dostoevsky, and would possibly work on Mayakovsky in more depth. As a

²⁸ TN. In *Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences*, Bakhtin literally states, "I hear *voices* in everything and dialogic relations among them" (1986, p.169; emphasis in original) [BAKHTIN, M. *Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences*. In: _____. *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*. Translated by Vern W. McGee. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986, pp.159-172].

privileged reader, do you think that choosing these great word artists, as he himself puts it, has anything to do with *contradiction*?

It is really a big contradiction. Apparently he was connected to Russian symbolist poetry, which Mayakovsky attacked and turned against. Then, it looked like a contradiction, a big contradiction. He was really connected to Vyacheslav Ivanov's poetry. And I have a personal observation about that. In 1972, when I was in Moscow, I visited Bakhtin. Vyacheslav Ivanov, born in 1929, is a great language theoretician and the son of the novelist Vsevolod Ivanov. Well, Vyacheslav Ivanov took me to Bakhtin's house. Bakhtin was very sick, had lost his wife, and wouldn't get out of bed. Doctors told him he had to walk, but he didn't want to. He would read and write while lying in bed. That's all he would do. In the room, there were lots of shelves, stacked with notebooks, and I had no idea what they were. In fact, they were the manuscripts that ended up being published. I saw those manuscripts in 1972. I remember Bakhtin was very interested in Vyacheslav Ivanov. He had a book in prose on his lap. It was Vyacheslav Ivanov's book that had just been edited in Brussels. He was reading it and was very engaged in the reading. Vyacheslav Ivanov, a Russian symbolist poet, was his favorite poet. It is really odd that, all of a sudden, Bakhtin writes a work on Mayakovsky. It is the contradiction that is inherent to his personality. It is the polyphony that exists within him. It is in him that polyphony and dialogism exist. There's always a Bakhtin dialoguing with another Bakhtin.

In the book that has just been published in Portuguese *Mikhail Bakhtin em diálogo: conversas de 1973 com Viktor Duvakin* [*Mikhail Bakhtin in dialogue: 1973 Conversations with Viktor Duvakin*],²⁹ Bakhtin also highly praises Velimir Khlebnikov, who is usually associated with the Russian formalists. He highly praises Khlebnikov's poetic language. Professor, do you believe that today Bakhtin's role in Brazil, in Brazilian studies, is expanding?

There was a lot of enthusiasm for Bakhtin in the beginning and a lot of nonsense afterwards both in Brazil and the West, in general. A lot of nonsense was published, either defending or attacking Bakhtin. There is a lot of nonsense out there. Bakhtin has to be discussed and assimilated based on discussion and not on passive acceptance. Many times, in conferences, we hear overly passive comments in works that keep on

²⁹ BAKHTIN, M. *Mikhail Bakhtin em diálogo: conversas de 1973 com Viktor Duvakin*. Trad. de Daniela Miotello Mondardo a partir do italiano. São Carlos, SP: Pedro & João Editores, 2008.

repeating Bakhtin's concepts. His concepts need to be discussed. There are many debatable issues. When criticism is raised, many times it is well-founded and it is generally directed to a specific Bakhtin. But Bakhtin is manifold and thus he is contradictory, very rich, and varied. He has to be assimilated within such richness.

This implies discussing a little today on the Bakhtin Circle and the question of authorship that is related to some works. At specific moments, there are pros and cons, that is, people who are for the idea that everything was written by Bakhtin or that only some works are his and others were written by the other members of the Circle. What is your position on this issue?

I believe it is undeniable that Bakhtin was the brain, the big brain. Out of curiosity, I looked for Voloshinov's and Medvedev's works, works they had written outside the Circle, and concluded that they were not at the same level. They are not at the same level. They are interesting. They are researchers and have their value, but the works that they signed and that are assigned to Bakhtin don't have the same scope. They don't. Voloshinov has nothing that comes close to *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. From what I've read – I haven't read everything, but I've read some works – I haven't seen anything that would come close.

I believe that the four works – *Freudianism*, 1927; *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*, 1928; *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 1929, and *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, 1929, published almost simultaneously, pose another question. How did Bakhtin, Voloshinov and Medvedev discuss the scientific concepts that were popular around that time? How were they involved with them?

Bakhtin was very concerned about natural sciences. He was very concerned with Biology. Even the terminology he uses sometimes has roots in it.

At present, I'm reading a lot of Vygotsky's works. I'd like to ask you if you draw any connection between Bakhtin and Vygotsky.

Oh, yes. Vygotsky is close to Bakhtin in many things.

And also other cultural manifestations of that time period. For example, in a recent conference at USP [The University of Sao Paulo], the *Colóquio Internacional Teatro Russo: Literatura e Espetáculo* [*International Colloquium on Russian Theater: Literature and Performance*], held on Nov. 17 to 19, and in which you participated, we realized that Vsevolod Meyerhold also carried out research in

Biomechanics, Sciences. Therefore, there was a cultural movement of research, a lot of research, at the time.

There was. There was a great interest in science.

And do you believe this interest would have to be rekindled? Or do you think that this discussion is still going on? Does this discussion between human sciences and other sciences take place in Brazil today?

A discussion with the so-called exact science.

Or biological sciences...

I find it important, very important, to resume this discussion. But there is always the danger of scientificism, which, by the way, also existed in Russia. In the 1920s, it was exaggerated: they wanted to fit literature in exact sciences. There was exaggeration, abuse. And in our midst as well. “Oh, I want a scientific language.” I find it outrageous. Literature has to have its own language. Bringing it close to the so-called exact sciences is very fair, very appropriate. Today we cannot ignore what happens in Physics, Chemistry, Biology – we cannot ignore it. It is important, but we must be careful not to centralize everything in science, thus seeing science as the one that was fairly called exact science. What cannot happen is people being concerned about “this is scientific,” “this is not scientific.” I find it outrageous.

As to your own practice of literary analysis, what do you think of Bakhtin? Let me rephrase my question. Based on your theoretical thinking, how was Bakhtin’s relationship with formalism? We know that you also had a strong connection with Roman Jakobson.

Jakobson really admired Bakhtin. When Jakobson was here in 1968, I hadn’t read Bakhtin yet. I only started reading Bakhtin in 1969. Jakobson was amazed at Bakhtin – both Jakobson and Krystyna Pomorska. He talked about dialogism, the Other’s voice, and we didn’t even talk about dialogism here in Brazil.

Did he criticize Bakhtin’s monological conception of poetry?

I didn’t talk to him much about Bakhtin. I didn’t do it because I didn’t know much about Bakhtin. I had vague references, I knew a few things about him, but I hadn’t read him. Therefore, I didn’t discuss Bakhtin with him. But he would now and then talk

about Bakhtin. He was at this point in time when he was amazed by Bakhtin – both he and his wife, Krystyna Pomorska, who is also a great literary scholar.

What about your works on poetry? For example, the text on Murilo Mendes. To what extent did Bakhtin’s perspective help you analyze Murilo Mendes’s poetry?

There is no doubt Bakhtin helps us understand Murilo Mendes. Murilo Mendes is manifold. Murilo Mendes makes sure to say that he wants to hear many voices. This is the kind of poet that is close to Bakhtin. I’m against the narrowness of the critic Vadim Kojinov, who makes a clear-cut distinction between poetry and prose. It’s not possible to make this clear-cut distinction. Boris Pasternak thought that poetry was in everything, in the world, but not in words. Words are expressions, but poetry is in everything, in the world. Then, we have to apprehend the world in order to feel poetry. This makes any distinction between prose and poetry – *this is prose, this is poetry* – nonsensical. Several modern poets are against that. Haroldo de Campos, for example, was really against that. When Boris Pasternak writes in prose, he doesn’t make a clear distinction between poetry and prose. He polishes his prose as if it were poetry.

As to your experience in translating (with other people) Russian poetry, could you talk a little about that? Going back to the idea of a Circle, the Bakhtin Circle, what was the Professor Boris Schnaiderman Circle – the one that translated modern Russian poetry – like?

In fact, it’s not easy for me to translate poetry with rhythm and metrics. I can translate prose alright, but poetry with metrics, with rhyme and metrics, is not easy for me because I don’t have much practice in that. And I’ve already had practice in that. When I was young, I was about 17, 18, 19 years old, I used to scribble my poems. But I don’t have that kind of practice anymore. This kind of practice demands continuity. I abandoned it; I did not become a poet. Then, I had that problem, but with Augusto de Campos and Haroldo de Campos, along with Nelson Ascher, I start here my first translations. I followed a few procedures, read the translated text afterwards, trying to improve it as much as possible. It worked out really well. I’m very happy to have worked with Augusto and Haroldo de Campos. I’m very attached to the translations published in *Maiakóvski: poemas [Mayakovsky: Poems]*³⁰ and in *Poesia russa moderna*

³⁰ For reference, see footnote 9.

[Modern Russian Poetry].³¹ I'm attached to the text in Portuguese as it is in Portuguese. For example, a poem as difficult as *The Twelve*³² by Aleksandr Blok was boldly translated by Augusto de Campos. He used current Brazilian slang, I mean, slang from the 1960s. But we can say it is current, right? He used our slang as Aleksandr Blok used Russian slang of that time period. Those were days I will never forget. We found many solutions to translation problems over the phone. I would be on the phone with Haroldo or Augusto and we found solutions to translation problems. Haroldo would read a line of a poem and would say later, "No. No! It's better this way, this way." And he changed it on the spot.

Professor, would you like to say something else?

There is only one thing I want to say. I want to underline the importance of this book of interviews, *Mikhail Bakhtin em diálogo: conversas de 1973 com Viktor Duvakin* [Mikhail Bakhtin in dialogue: 1973 Conversations with Viktor Duvakin]. Viktor Duvakin taught at the University of Moscow and talked to Bakhtin freely – a one-to-one conversation – with a tape recorder. It is an important work, but, at the same time, unsatisfying. Duvakin left out fundamental issues of Bakhtin's work. As a professor of Russian literature, of Russian poetry, he focused a lot on the poets of the beginning of the 20th century and was not concerned about other issues. As Bakhtin was a contemporary of those poets, he was fascinated by the work of Vyacheslav Ivanov and others, especially the symbolists. Duvakin focused on symbolist poets and made questions especially about them. This is important, but by focusing on that, he ended up not asking questions about fundamental issues, such as the relationship between dialogism and dialectics. This is a fundamental issue. How did Bakhtin understand dialectics? The issue of Hegelian dialectics. It is evident that Bakhtin wanted to polemicize with Hegel. It is evident. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, he attacks some Hegelian interpreters of Dostoevsky, and he does it very specifically so as not to address the general problem, which, by the way, was not the case. But he never elaborated on his own conception. We can see in his work that he was against Hegelian

³¹ For reference, see footnote 3.

³² TN. In some English versions of this poem, the title is translated either as *The Twelve* or only as *Twelve* [BLOK, A. *Selected Poems*. Translated by Jon Stallworthy and Peter France. Manchester, UK: Carcanet Press, 2000].

dialectics. It's evident that he wants to join in the discussion, but he doesn't. He seems to be willing to join in the discussion on Hegelian dialectics, but he never does. And Duvakin leaves this out. This is odd. I found it very odd.

And what if you had the opportunity to have a conversation like that with Bakhtin?

Sure, sure. The first thing I would have asked was about the relationship between dialogism and polyphony and dialectics. How did Bakhtin understand this relationship? He avoids discussing dialectics. Why?

Maybe dialectics is in contradiction per se...

Bakhtin is contradictory. He is openly contradictory, and it doesn't bother him if he has to change his opinion. He moves on. Reading becomes difficult with all those contradictions.

You have to pay close attention to what you're reading and read it several times until you find his line of thinking...

Why is he contradicting himself? He doesn't say why or how and moves on.

The reader is the one who has to make the effort to understand, isn't it? But you also state that we need a discipline of reading in order to read Bakhtin. Many times, there is an issue in a book that has been addressed in a prior book.

Bakhtin is difficult. He is not an easy writer. This is evident. Some of his texts are very difficult. This is the case with *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*.³³ It's very difficult.

The reading exercise we ended up doing today involves basically trying to recreate a line of thinking that emerged in the manuscript *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. When you told me about your visit to Bakhtin, in his house, and saw all those manuscripts stacked on the shelves, I started to imagine that he would probably get one and add things to it. This becomes very explicit in his notes. Maybe this shows that we should be careful and take into account everything that belongs to the *great work*.

Professor, would you like to say something else?

No, no. I believe we've concluded our conversation.

³³ BAKHTIN, M. M. *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. Translation and notes by Vadim Liapunov. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1993.

I would like to thank you for such a pleasant conversation.

Thank you!

Thank you, Professor.

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