

**Bakhtin and Benjamin: On Goethe and Other Matters / *Bakhtin e Benjamin: sobre Goethe e outros assuntos*<sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article re-examines the affinities and differences between the thought of Bakhtin and Benjamin. Both are important to that branch of contemporary philosophy which analyzes the destinies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and belong to the present-day *post-secular* epoch. Both understand our world by reviewing our lived experiences, to find elements that help us evaluate it and provide an orientation for our present situation. There are similarities in the reception of their ideas. In Latin America, Bakhtin and Benjamin are frequently interpreted in a political sense and serve as a basis for thinking about historical events and the facts of contemporary culture. The works of Benjamin are more frequently published, disseminated, and commented upon than those of Bakhtin. The main focus of this article is to study how Goethe served as a catalyst or pivot for the particular illuminations of both thinkers. In this perspective, Bakhtin and Benjamin are seen as two communicating vessels, despite their differences on questions of language, the role that Kant plays in their thinking, or the texts that interested them. Bakhtin's materialistic conception of language is quite opposed to the messianic mysticism of Benjamin.

**KEYWORDS:** Experience; Destiny; Language; Mysticism; Materialism

**RESUMO**

*Este artigo reexamina as afinidades e as diferenças entre o pensamento de Bakhtin e Benjamin. Ambos são importantes para aquele ramo da filosofia contemporânea que analisa os destinos do século XX e pertencem à época atual pós-secular. Ambos compreendem nosso mundo por meio do procedimento de revisão de nossas experiências de vida, a fim de encontrar elementos que nos ajudem a avaliá-la e fornecer uma orientação para nossa situação atual. Há semelhanças na recepção de suas ideias. Na América Latina, Bakhtin e Benjamin são frequentemente interpretados num sentido político e servem como base para se refletir sobre acontecimentos históricos e fatos da cultura contemporânea. Os trabalhos de Benjamin são mais frequentemente publicados, disseminados e comentados do que aqueles de Bakhtin. O foco principal deste artigo é estudar como Goethe serviu de catalizador ou pivô para as iluminações particulares desses dois pensadores. Nessa perspectiva, Bakhtin e Benjamin são vistos como vasos comunicantes, a despeito de suas diferenças em questões de linguagem, do papel que Kant desempenha em seus pensamentos ou dos textos que interessaram a ambos. A concepção materialista de linguagem de Bakhtin opõe-se bastante ao misticismo messiânico de Benjamin.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Experiência; Destino; Linguagem; Misticismo; Materialismo*

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Уносит ветер золотое семя,  
Оно пропало, больше не вернется.  
Мандельштам<sup>2</sup>

Нет ничего абсолютно мертвого,  
у каждого смысла будет свой праздник возрождения.  
Бахтин<sup>3</sup>

These epigraphs contradict each other. Yet if we take into account the fact that Bakhtin's ideas on verbal communication are also self-referential,<sup>4</sup> we may find a particular sense in the contradiction. In the first place, according to Mandelstam, it turns out that, in fact, what is lost *is* lost forever; it is impossible to recover the past in its fullness. On the other hand, we prefer to believe that "manuscripts do not burn" - as Woland (that is, Satan) in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* would have it - no word dies completely. The word always survives. The question is: in what form? This is what all of us who pride ourselves on having finally "understood" Bakhtin ought to ask ourselves, both in a positive and a negative sense. For what is often neglected is the application of the Bakhtinian conception of the internal dialogicity of the word to the process of the reception of his own ideas, from the beginning (around 1966, when Kristeva presented her report, later published in *Critique*, in Barthes' seminar), to the present day. As I see it, doing so might allow us to discover the "dialogue in great time" which the word establishes with its past and future interlocutors, on the one hand, and, on the other, the historical existence of the utterance well rooted in the present - concepts that appear as two poles of his thinking which condition each other mutually. This is because a historically concrete utterance can be received, in "great time," in a way that was unsuspected even by its author, due not only to the context, but also to the semantic potential of an "ideologically neutral" word. (As Vološinov explains, the word itself does not belong to anybody; thus, as different social groups "appropriate" it, they give it ideologically opposed connotations.) This is pure common sense.

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<sup>2</sup> "The wind carries away the golden seed; it was lost, never to return" (Author's translation). "Its golden seed is borne away by the wind and lost, and will never come back," Mandelstam, O., 1920; <http://silver-age.tumblr.com/post/994390824/feodosia-in-the-ring-of-high-hills-you-stampede>

<sup>3</sup> "Nothing is absolutely dead; every sense will celebrate its rebirth" (Author's translation). "Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming festival," in *Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences* by Bakhtin, 1986, p.170 (last paragraph).

<sup>4</sup> "Bakhtin's texts analyze themselves; they evidence a *philosophy of language that illustrates itself* and is oriented to indirect speech" (GOGOTISHVILI, 1992, p.144; our translation).

But, strange as it may seem, some features can be found that do not square well with his apparently “rational” and up-to-date interpretation of language, an interpretation that is more comfortable for us when we situate Bakhtin’s thought in the sphere of the “prosaic.” For example, when Bakhtin mentions the “expressive and speaking Being,” or when he mentions the “Being who reveals himself by himself” (1996, p.8), his posture enters into counterpoint with the ideas of Benjamin, for whom the world and its objects have ethical attitudes and a language, of their being, that man came to know by the names that man assigned them in accordance with the task given him by God. But language as knowledge was precisely the manifestation of the Fall; for Benjamin, the communicative function of language thus revealed itself to be a “bourgeois function.”<sup>5</sup> According to Bakhtin, nature observes human actions as “a witness and a judge” (1986, p.137). The very idea of the “fall of language” may, in my opinion, be compared to the final reflections of Vološinov, in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, regarding the “ideological” or “authorial word” which becomes irresponsible by relying too much on the “alien word” (“other person’s word”) in order to justify its own position (VOLOŠINOV, 1973, p.159). Meanwhile, Benjamin speaks about a utopian “pure language” (1996),<sup>6</sup> for which “false consciousness” is impossible.

There are, however, other themes that invite one to place both thinkers on parallel planes. Thus Benjamin’s “Gothic Marxism,”<sup>7</sup> in which perspective, surrealism, though observed from a critical distance, is no less a source of “profane illumination” of thought (“Surrealism,” 1929), and reminds us of the “Gothic realism”<sup>8</sup> that Bakhtin describes in his *Rabelais* in an ecstatic and inspired register that presupposes, not

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<sup>5</sup> First published in 1923. See Benjamin, 1996, pp.62-74.

<sup>6</sup> “A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original the more fully. [...] It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is exiled among alien tongues, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work” (Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” pp.260–1).

<sup>7</sup> This is how Löwy describes it. We should not lose sight of the fact that Benjamin’s Marxism is also characterized by his active and productive pessimism, “‘organized’, practical, fully oriented to the purpose of preventing, by all possible means, the arrival of the worst” (2007, p.86); as can be seen, Löwy attributes this to Benjamin’s prophetic quality, which was at that time about to arrive, as against the irresponsible and naïve faith in the linear and optimistic schema of progress that was professed by the bourgeois and social-democratic parties. It is worth adding that Soviet Marxism-Leninism shared this simplistic idea of progress.

<sup>8</sup> A term used in the dissertation phase of *Rabelais*; See Pan'kov, 1997.

merely a style, but a “cosmic” conception of the collective body.<sup>9</sup> The utopian and messianic motif that accompanies the conception of history in Benjamin can be traced, according to certain current interpretations of Bakhtin<sup>10</sup> throughout the representation of carnival as one of the mechanisms of history, including the specific notion of language (of the market place in particular).<sup>11</sup> Of course, we find ourselves obliged to trace, between “pure language” and that of the market place (in the sense V. Turbin attributed to it) - an analogy that is not to everyone’s liking, from Russian philosopher A. F. Losev to contemporary analyst B. Groys (see BUBNOVA, 2000, p.150). For the moment, let us limit ourselves to this analogy.

One of Bakhtin’s most important discoveries is the growth of meaning in “great time.”<sup>12</sup> This means that each generation of readers pours its own understanding into well-known texts (not necessary literary). I wonder if it would not be worth completing the concept of “great time” with that of space, in order to get closer to the chronotope in “great time.” It is well known that, as one generation of researchers succeeds another, the reading of Bakhtin has changed in accordance with changes in the conditions of reception. Simultaneously, new meanings have begun to emerge related also to the diffusion of his ideas in space; thus, for a long time, the study of Bakhtin has been putting down roots in Latin America. The same can be said of Walter Benjamin, whom I now place beside Bakhtin, converting this operation into a kind of reading in time-space: both have become part of a universal intellectual stock, in which Latin America legitimately claims its part on reading both writers in a new perspective, but against the background of its own cultural and political contexts and a new phase of thought. This situation fits organically into the Bakhtinian theory of dialogism:

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<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note that the “collective body” appears also in Benjamin (cf. the article “Surrealism”). This is possibly one of the points where the illuminations of the two thinkers correspond with modern culture. This collective body can be found in Gogol (whom Benjamin read) in the description of the tumult of a village fair: “Are you not instantly overcome by the same feelings in the turmoil of the village fair, when all the people become one huge monster that moves its massive body through the square and narrow streets, with shouting, laughing, and clatter?” (Gogol 1985, p.12).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Gardiner (1992) and Poole (1998).

<sup>11</sup> Regarding the language of the market place, see Turbin (1990). Turbin considers that the language of the market place corresponds to the jubilation with which the “Word made flesh,” or Christ, celebrates the body with its functions and manifestations, for Him alien, to the same degree that earthly language is opposed to the language of “other worlds,” from whence comes the Son of God (BUBNOVA, 2000, pp.157-8).

<sup>12</sup> See Bocharov, 2002, p.280. Bakhtin’s idea about the increase of meaning in time seems to me absolutely fundamental. In this text, Bocharov proposes it in quotation marks, thinking perhaps of the critique of M. L. Gasparov (1978, 2004). Meanwhile, in Benjamin, a similar idea can be found in “The Task of the Translator,” 1996, pp.253-263.

The text lives only by coming into contact with another text (with context). Only at the point of this contact between texts does a light flash, illuminating both later and earlier texts, joining a given text to a dialogue. We emphasize that this contact is a dialogic contact between texts (utterances) and not a mechanical contact of “oppositions”... Behind this contact is a contact of personalities and not of things (at the extreme). (BAKHTIN, 1986, p.162).

Of course, we must also face the problem of truth status, of justifying all our interpretations. Nevertheless, we must not lose sight of the fact that even a mistake or an imprecise reading generates in a particular situation a displacement of meaning and even a new meaning, as can be seen from numerous “Bakhtinizing” constructs in diverse languages.<sup>13</sup> We might recall the theory of “total translation,” the state which predominates in the contemporary world,<sup>14</sup> the mode of communication which implies a transformation of communications through a multiplicity of sign systems, which, in turn, represent different levels of dialogue. New meanings coexist and influence contemporary thought. The truth, according to Bakhtin, also has a dialogic - or what he called “congregational” (*соборный*) - character. Thus, in Voloshinov (1973, p.158), “truth is eternal only as eternally generated truth...” Bakhtin speaks of a

truth that requires a plurality of consciousnesses, one that cannot in principle be fitted into the bounds of a single consciousness, one that is, so to speak, by its very nature *full of event potential* and is born at a point of contact among various consciousnesses (1984, p.81).

In Benjamin, the contents of truth are manifested by means of allegory conceived as an instantaneous illumination of meaning similar to a lightning flash, as well as by means of the plural language of things (see JOBIM e SOUZA, 1997, p.341).

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<sup>13</sup> I share the opinion of Caryl Emerson that “translation, broadly conceived, was for him the essence of all human communication” (BAKHTIN, 1984, editor’s preface, p.xxxi). See also Beasley-Murray, who wrote: “Benjamin, like Bakhtin and Voloshinov, raises a secondary activity, translation, to the status of primary activity. Translation becomes the foundation for all language” (2007, p.101). Of course, the meanings both thinkers attribute to translation do not entirely coincide: for Benjamin, in translation the word of God has to manifest itself, while Bakhtin suggests the increase of meaning by means of translation conceived as dialogue.

<sup>14</sup> Топор, 1995.

Likewise, Walter Benjamin invites us to examine more closely the transformation that translation operates in the original, on the one hand *traduttore*, *traditore* and on the other:

Translations that are more than transmissions of subject matter come into being when a work, in the course of its survival, has reached the age of its fame. Contrary, therefore, to the claims of bad translators, such translations do not so much serve the work as owe their existence to it. In them the life of the originals attains its latest continually renewed, and most complete unfolding (BENJAMIN, 1996, p.255).

That is to say, we are seeing the emergence of a new meaning, or, if one prefers, the manifestation of a so far hidden meaning.

This is why I shall speak of Bakhtin and Benjamin in these circumstances, which are certainly new for them; although, in many ways, this situation fits the perspective of the intuitions or illuminations of both thinkers, namely, from the point of view of the contemporary chronotope, which presupposes a universal reception crossing boundaries of languages, territories, and social and intellectual conditions of a world in a state of permanent change. The refraction of meanings turns out to be inevitable, necessary, and must be analyzed not only from the point of view of abstract truth or theoretical adequacy, but from that of the social life of the word.

Both thinkers are essential to that branch of contemporary philosophical thought which concentrates on the analysis of the destinies of the twentieth century and belongs to the context of the *post-secular* epoch in which we are now living. We try to understand our world by reviewing the experience we have lived through, in order to find elements that help us evaluate it, and thus provide an orientation for our present situation. We are, of course, embarked on a new stage in the *search for truth*, since the “great narratives” of the past century have lost their prestige. Is it not for this reason that we have recourse both to Bakhtin and to Benjamin? In truth, ours is no less an era of transition than that in which our “heroes” - who have recently become the target of intrinsically contradictory (and counterpointed) interpretations - began to write. I shall not pause to discuss the stages in the reception of Bakhtin’s thought, already well enough known: the Soviet semiotic school, Kristeva, Todorov, Holquist, Morson-Emerson, the English-speaking post-Marxists, the Western theological tendency - I have

only recalled a few moments in the history of reception over the last forty years.<sup>15</sup> The peculiarities of readings of Bakhtin in the Latin American world, and their divergences from Spanish readings are also worth mentioning.<sup>16</sup> Thus the trajectory of Bakhtinian thought in its different interpretations runs from semiotics and Marxism to theology: the exegesis of the thinker's ideas generates ideological responses, beginning with the search for revolutionary solutions and ending in solemn declarations about the "abandonment of the Revolution," which, in translation, sound ironically almost in the style of the Bolshevik formulas themselves.<sup>17</sup>

Walter Benjamin, for his part, offers a synthesis of Jewish theology with historical materialism conceived as a political analysis of culture (see "Surrealism," 1999, pp.207-21).<sup>18</sup> To exemplify a non-synthetic vision of the ideas of Benjamin, we can compare the contrasting interpretations of the theologian Gershom Scholem and the Marxist Theodor Adorno. In Latin America, it is for instance the philosopher Bolívar Echeverría who develops the Marxist tendency. We thus have a Kabbalistic mysticism and a Jewish theology set against Marxism, understood as two distinct ideologies. Michael Löwy, nevertheless, sets out to synthesize these contrasting tendencies in the work of the German thinker. In Latin America, the "illuminations" of both Bakhtin and

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<sup>15</sup> Mirroring the Western theological approach is the "enchurchment" of Bakhtin (*votserkovlenie*: i.e., drawing him into the ecclesiastical sphere), which is a known feature of certain Russian interpretations.

<sup>16</sup> While in Spain the most substantial reception has been in the field of literary theory and history, in Latin America a broader circle of disciplines and ideological projects, in which the contribution of Bakhtin has been essential can clearly be discerned; one has only to review the Proceedings of the Bakhtin Conference held in Brazil in 2003. In Mexico, Bakhtin's ideas have been especially fruitful for anthropology, marked by a certain ideology regarding the historical mission of saving indigenous cultures. There is a particular interest in the area of art history, literary and linguistic studies, disciplines less ideologically committed. In the United States, an analogous situation can be observed in anthropology, where "dialogical anthropology," based on the awareness of the traditional political role of this discipline, and infused with the ideology of colonialism, has arisen under the catalyzing influence of Bakhtin. See Tedlock and Mannheim, 1995.

<sup>17</sup> See Махлин, 1997. Actually, Makhlin's formula refers to a work by Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy.

<sup>18</sup> The three main sources of Benjamin's thought are Jewish messianism, German Romanticism, and historical materialism. What is taken for a romantic vision of the world can be defined as a cultural critique of contemporary (capitalist) civilization in the name of pre-capitalist values, a critique or protest that concentrates on the most odious aspects of capitalism, namely: quantification and mechanization of life, reification of social relations, decomposition of the community, and the consequent disillusionment with Enlightenment ideals. Benjamin takes up the tradition of revolutionary romanticism and its complex of aesthetic, theological, and historiographic ideas. By means of the romantic tradition, understood in terms of cognition, art, and praxis, Benjamin attacks the ideology of progress in the name of revolution. This characteristic, as formulated by Löwy, must be modified in the light of the manifest divergences of Benjamin with respect to the romantics in a whole series of questions of theory and *Weltanschauung*, a fact which converts his attitude to romanticism into something clearly dialogical, reminding us again of the attitudes of Bakhtin towards a whole series of his predecessors. While Brandist, in his excellently documented article, insists on the Romantic origins of Bakhtin's thought, it could be worth to remember the dialogical aspect of Bakhtin's attitude.

Benjamin are frequently interpreted in a clearly political sense, and serve as a basis for thinking about the events of history and facts of contemporary culture, even for working out the methodology of various disciplines, as well as the strategy of political position-taking or orientation in literature and literary studies.<sup>19</sup> Productive models of interpretation exist in the most contemporary forms of art—for example, new forms of theater and performance conceived as political praxis—whose realizations and interpretations are based on particular readings of Bakhtin’s philosophical anthropology.<sup>20</sup>

Comparison is a powerful instrument of cognition. This is, of course, not the first attempt to set Bakhtin and Benjamin in the same context.<sup>21</sup> According to Beasley-Murray,<sup>22</sup> the very incommensurability of both thinkers enables us to see each better in the light of the other, allowing us to distinguish in each of them aspects otherwise invisible, which only come to light as a result of this confrontation. This reminds us of Bakhtin’s idea about the reciprocal “outsideness” of cultures in the process of contact, thanks to which the position of the observer of either one enables him to distinguish in the other aspects inaccessible to its own self-analysis.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, it is worth recalling the observation of S. G. Bocharov on this matter:

Due to the biographical and chronological circumstances, to compare the philosophical creation of M. M. Bakhtin with that of any contemporary philosopher of the West, of pre-revolutionary Russia, or of the Russian emigration, is the same as comparing some lost tragedy of classical antiquity, of which we have information thanks to a few fragments, some contemporary account, or its reflections in later literature, with a dramatic work of the Modern period, which we

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<sup>19</sup> See Cruz Ortúzar, 2007. This is an example of how Benjamin’s thinking has helped to organize the collective experience of overcoming of dictatorship in the context of contemporary art. Research has been done that finds support in analogous material and with the same purposes as Bakhtin’s philosophical anthropology. See also Thorn, 1996.

<sup>20</sup> See Diéguez, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, Jobim e Souza (1997), Hirschkop (1999 and 2003), Tihanov (2000), Beasley-Murray (2008) and, Gardiner (1992) and others.

<sup>22</sup> On comparing Bakhtin’s philosophy of the act with the analogous ideas of Benjamin regarding the concept of experience (*Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*), Beasley-Murray finds interesting parallels and describes the original position of the two thinkers in aesthetics, ethics, and “philosophy of life,” the latter being understood in a non-specific sense. See the lucid observations of Stephen Lofts about the experience in Cassirer and Bakhtin in this volume.

<sup>23</sup> “We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise itself; we seek answers to our own questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths” (Bakhtin, “Response to a Question from the *Novy Mir* Staff,” 1986, p.7).



analyze together with the author's stage-directions (BOCHAROV, quoted in MAKHLIN, 2005).

We should not forget, however, that Aristotle himself - before the Greek originals were rediscovered - was known in the West through the distorting glass of Arabic translations. We can only work with what has come down to us - note again the epigraphs to the present essay - but it is worth doing so with the reserve suggested by Bocharov's observation cited above: Benjamin, despite his marginality, is much more published, disseminated, and commented upon than Bakhtin, though I am not sure that he is necessarily better understood. Perhaps understanding is only possible in relation to our own era, and only makes sense in the light of our own experience: "With meaning I give *answers* to questions. Anything that does not answer a question is devoid of sense for us."<sup>24</sup> This is one of Bakhtin's thoughts that continue to inspire us and, rightly or wrongly, makes disciples of us. Sometimes Bakhtin's thinking or legend produces a certain inconformity. Sometimes rejection is expressed through a disdainful condescendence disguised as skepticism. Sometimes unthoughtful ethic judgment is hidden by academic discourse. But it is important to remember how, since the beginning, all of us have been fascinated by the idea of Being as dialogue, and that Bakhtin's word has left a profound imprint on ours, whether we want it or not.

For a long time it has been recognized that when Bakhtin and Benjamin write on literary themes, the resulting texts are filled with philosophical tension. Bakhtin worked out a conception of the *Bildungsroman* based on the idea of the chronotope as a universal model which gives form to a vision of the world. He took Goethe as his example, despite the fact that his perspective spans literary works from with classical antiquity to the literature of our own time, with Rabelais in the middle. Bakhtin takes up the Kantian parameters of time and space and inscribes them in history, relating them with the different stages of development of society. For him, time and space are conditions of possibility for human perception of the world in history, in other words of a *Weltanschauung*. This enables him, on the one hand, to develop a theoretical tool-kit for analyzing literary works and, on the other, to show how the historicized concepts of time and space condition the personalized position of the cognizant subject (see "The *Bildungsroman*," 1986, pp.26-29). In this way he introduces this theory in a kind of

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<sup>24</sup> Bakhtin, "From Notes Made in 1970-71," 1986, p.145.

“historical poetics,” correlating his own philosophical anthropology, by reviewing the subject-object relations in Goethe’s *Weltanschauung*.<sup>25</sup>

Bakhtin’s idea about the “surplus,” or “complementary” capacity provided by the other’s vision of oneself, is a productive enough tool for comparing - taking as the nucleus of our comparison the incontestably dominant figure of Goethe - the points of view of both thinkers and two cultural cross-sections that are situated on two planes, spatially contiguous, but which until a short time ago were separated by an iron curtain of ideological prejudice and mutual incomprehension. For both thinkers, Goethe served as a catalyst for their particular illuminations.

In Benjamin’s inquiries into literature and culture, Goethe is present in a constant and active way. Moreover, Benjamin is obsessed with the genius of Goethe, who is present in his dreams as if he were alive.<sup>26</sup> As for Bakhtin, Goethe is one of the three principal “heroes” of his “authorship,” although from the texts that have come down to us from the Russian thinker, it is difficult to judge the degree of his self-identification with the German classic writer (as evidently was the case as regards Dostoevsky). It is well known that the author of *Faust* thought of himself personally as existing in “great time”: “I live in the millennia,” he used to say (ECKERMANN, 2003, 5.07.1827).

It is hard to deny that the two thinkers, with all their incommensurability and contraposition, are, despite everything, two communicating vessels. Since Goethe is the pivot of this reflection, it is worth remembering, beyond all the formula of “elective affinities”, that they are at the center of the famous 1923 study by Benjamin and reappear in the later essays. Although Bakhtin, in his extant papers on Goethe never even mentions the novel *Elective Affinities*, concentrating on the *Bildungsroman*, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, and the *Italian Journey*, the novel in question is extremely “chronotopic” - as much as his other works, or more so - and is thus subject to an analysis in this theoretical perspective. I shall allow myself the metaphorical use of the concept of “elective affinities” in order to penetrate more deeply into the parallel between Benjamin and Bakhtin.<sup>27</sup> The metaphor “elective affinities” has already been

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<sup>25</sup> See Bakhtin, “The *Bildungsroman* and its Significance in the History of Realism,” 1986, pp.10–59.

<sup>26</sup> See Benjamin Einbahnstrasse [*One-Way Street*](“No. 113”), 1996, pp.445-446.

<sup>27</sup> I recall that Goethe, as a naturalist, developed the figure “elective affinities” on the basis of a concept taken from the work of the Swedish chemist Thorbern Olof Bergmann (1735-84). Max Weber appears to have borrowed the idea equally from the eighteenth-century natural sciences and from Goethe.

used by the Benjamin specialist, M. Löwy (1988), who determined the correlation between Judaic theology and Marxism; Benjamin himself uses it amply in his studies on Baudelaire, for instance (BENJAMIN, 2008, pp.183, 185). Löwy, for his part, also finds supports in the analogous use of this concept in Max Weber (1905). While it is impossible to reduce the dialectical relations between theology and historical materialism to a direct causality or to influence in the traditional sense, Löwy contends that one can appreciate their structural analogy, convergence, or reciprocal attraction. The “elective affinities” between Bakhtin and Benjamin are nothing more than dialogical relations accessible only to the gaze of an interested researcher. It is precisely *elective* affinities that are involved: their destinies are to a certain point analogous, without actually coinciding; their intellectual starting points, the circle of their interests, and their sources partly coincide, but at times are opposed. Now we observe both thinkers from a vantage point in our own time, having recourse to them for analogous reasons. Thus, when Bakhtin describes the trajectory of the word directed, “in the form of a ray of light” towards its object, diffracted by and recalling the many “voices” that accompany and question each of their meanings<sup>28</sup> and which the word is capable of adopting, we might do well to remember the following words of Benjamin:

What is at stake is not to portray literary works in the context of their age, but to represent the age that perceives them—our age—in the age during which they arose. It is this that makes literature into an organon of history; and to achieve this, and not to reduce literature to the material of history, is the task of the literary historian. (BENJAMIN, 1999, p.464.)

This vision of literature as an “organon of history” is much closer to the dialogical and chronological perspective of Bakhtin than to the strict “immanentism” that characterizes Benjamin’s essay on *The Elective Affinities*, published in 1924-1925.

Benjamin wrote this work in the tradition of romantic philosophy, in accordance with the German romantics’ concept of literary criticism as an autonomous art form.<sup>29</sup> In *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism* (1996), he shows the differences

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<sup>28</sup> See “Discourse in the Novel” (1986, p.277), for the way in which “the word conceptualizes its object.”

<sup>29</sup> “La méthodologie utilisée dans l’étude sur le *Trauerspiel* trouve sa première expression dans le premier chapitre de l’essai sur *Les affinités électives*, où l’on voit aussi se déployer la position critique que Benjamin adoptera toujours à l’égard du mythe” (PALMIER, 2006, p.380).

between the aesthetic views of Goethe and those of the early German romantics.<sup>30</sup> What is at stake is the recovery of a tradition in which the critical text strives to equal in value the object at which it is directed. In this sense, we can appreciate the ambition of the young Benjamin, who attempted to measure his strength with Goethe himself: a clearly and fully romantic impulse.

Returning to the subject of Bakhtin, I should like to recall that, since Todorov's study of 1980, many have seen the work of Bakhtin as falling within the romantic tradition. Recently Bénédicte Vauthier (2010) has set forth this complex problem, showing how the sense of Bakhtin's writings is refracted in the critical discourse of Todorov.<sup>31</sup> Benjamin also, both in *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism* and in *Goethe's Elective Affinities*, seems to put to the test the philosophical density and stylistic possibilities of romantic criticism.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, his conception maintains a distance from the aesthetics of the sublime, which goes back to the romantics, setting art on the pedestal of a new religion of the secularized age,<sup>33</sup> and relating more to his linguistic theory dating from as early as around 1916, in which he criticized the idea of the arbitrary nature of the sign which predominated in the linguistics of the period, and appealed instead to the magic of the divine word. On the basis of this conception of language he articulated the critique of the above-mentioned work of Goethe (WEIGEL, 2003, p.200). His vision of art presupposes an ethical posture based on theological notions, notably different from romanticism - for instance, the critique of the role of genius - despite a certain coincidence in formal orientation.

In Bakhtin's case, if we set off from the analysis of sources, it is possible to speak of a dialogical attitude towards the romantic theory of art, which still resonated at

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<sup>30</sup> "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism," (BENJAMIN, 1996, p.178): "The theory of art propounded by the early Romantics and that formulated by Goethe are opposed to each other in their principles."

<sup>31</sup> What for the moment seems clear is that the presence or absence of the romantic concepts or, let us say, of the Kantian categories, both in Bakhtin and in Benjamin, must be appreciated above all from dialogic positions, fruitful, but often subversive, and not as a direct tradition or the result of an "influence." Therefore, it seems to me that Craig Brandist's claims about Bakhtin's "romanticism" should be clarified.

<sup>32</sup> On this topic, see Gasché (2002, p.52) and Ferris (2002, p.180).

<sup>33</sup> According to Benjamin, the romantics transformed the purposes of criticism to such a degree that a work of critical thinking became undistinguishable from a work of art. But by eliminating the difference between the critical text and its object, they also dispensed with the aspiration to a rationalized understanding. Thus, the romantics abandoned the attempt to conceive criticism as the formation of thought, as a form by means of which thinking and understanding can be represented (see FERRIS 2004, 11). But in his work on the *Elective Affinities*, Benjamin, without rejecting the tasks of critical thinking (of the search for the "contents of truth") comes close to the aesthetic ideal of the romantics in the sense of the intrinsic valor of the critical text.

the time when Benjamin was writing - for instance in the work of Gundolf, whose name is, of course, equally present in the context of Bakhtinian research regarding Goethe. According to Benjamin, art theory conceived on the basis of a dialectic between the divine and human orders is set against the contemporary art theory that can be found in Stefan George and Gundolf (WEIGEL, 2007, pp.187-8).<sup>34</sup> Bakhtin, on the other hand, analyzes the work and ideas of Goethe, taking into account the great German poet's own self-appreciation, in other words from a position that is usually defined as "classical" and on principle opposed to the individualist aesthetics of the romantics:

People are always talking about originality; but what do they mean? As soon as we are born, the world begins to work upon us, and this goes on to the end. What can we call our own except energy, strength, and will? If I could give an account of all that I owe to great predecessors and contemporaries, there would be but a small balance in my favor (BAKHTIN, 1934, 12.05.1825.)

As regards this type of opinion about Goethe, Bénédicte Vauthier (2010, p.552) trenchantly comments: "It is pointless to insist at length on the fact that we can not only oppose such ideas to the romantic aesthetic, but that likewise—and above all—we find them in the first plane in Bakhtin!"<sup>35</sup>

In the 1920s, as is well known, Benjamin devoted to Goethe another essay,<sup>36</sup> destined for publication in the Soviet Encyclopedia. This text was written with an orientation to historical materialism, a subject which was not only of interest to the German critic at that period, but one which was actually to become one of the cornerstones of his vision of the world—in combination, as I have already mentioned, with theology. Naturally, his historical materialism is quite distinct from the Soviet

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<sup>34</sup> Bakhtin approached the works of Goethe from a "realism" conceived as an intrinsic value, which is affirmed in the idea of an unceasing generation: the human being in the process of generation in the permanently evolving frame of the historical world. This conception is rather far from the post-romantic exaltation of the genius of Goethe as a representative of the "German spirit" that can be found in Gundolf, who, as is well known, was close to Stefan George's circle. "F. Gundolf turns Goethe into the spokesman for his own 'ego', a 'genius outside of time,' he examines him as an autonomous image, enclosed in himself and devoid of external relations and purposes. Goethe, in his opinion, possessed a congenitally antisocial nature, and before the human being begins to have experiences, he must *be*, and this being is an irresolvable proto-phenomenon. Gundolf is not in the least interested in the historical Goethe; for him Goethe only exists as myth, personification of the *German spirit*." See [www.magister.msk.ru/library/personal/shilf001.htm](http://www.magister.msk.ru/library/personal/shilf001.htm) (signed "F. Schiller").

<sup>35</sup> "Inutile d'insister longuement sur le fait que nous pouvons non seulement opposer ces idées à l'esthétique romantique, mais aussi - et surtout - les retrouver au premier plan chez Bakhtine!" (VAUTHIER, 2010, p.552).

<sup>36</sup> Entitled "Goethe" in 1999, pp.161-93.

version. In this article some paragraphs are dedicated to *Elective Affinities*. Here, Benjamin analyzes primarily ethical problems and family relations among the characters in the context of a feudalism in the process of extinction. This vision of the novel contrasts with the symbolic and mythological interpretation of the same conflict in the 1923 work on *Elective Affinities*. It would seem that Benjamin, in the encyclopedia article, puts to the test more than a style, but a point of view. Does this exercise not recall the Bakhtinian definitions of stylization and partly that of parody, but at a very deep level: that is to say, with a certain dose of conviction or of self-suggestion and, perhaps, of irony?

If we analyze the texts of Goethe from the point of view of the Bakhtinian chronotope, precisely in *Elective Affinities*, the novelist is seen to be particularly “chronotopic,” but one must recognize the presence of more than one chronotope in the novel. A materialist vision of nature and the landscape predominates in the initial part of the novel, where the marks left by human action and man the maker are at the center of the author’s attention;<sup>37</sup> but then the chronotope in which *homo faber* acts is transformed, as the argument develops, into a “romantic” landscape, tending towards eternity. Nature is animized, acquiring anthropomorphic qualities corresponding to the state of mind of the heroes. The symbolic character of these elements has been invariably pointed out by the critics, although, according to Benjamin, their nature is, rather, to be described as allegorical. As for the heroes, at least two of them, Ottilie and Eduard, gradually turn into the mythical star-crossed lovers who are eternally doomed never to be together in this world, and, who, one supposes, will meet up again in the afterlife. The attraction based on the “elective affinities” presents itself in the midst of an ethical conflict and no longer corresponds to the scientific paradigm out of which the author began to develop this motif. It is possible that for this reason Benjamin develops his essay on the novel in a stylistic key in harmony with the romantic tradition, to which Goethe the theorist was opposed. Benjamin himself analyzes this tradition critically in his doctoral dissertation. The critic is aware that the “theory of art of the early Romantics and that formulated by Goethe are opposed to each other in their principles” (Benjamin, *The Concept of Criticism*, 1996, p.178). According to Goethe, a methodical criticism - that is to say one concentrated on its object - is not justified. On the contrary,

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<sup>37</sup> Although in the encyclopedia article Benjamin points out the unproductive and decorative nature of this activity.

paradoxical as it may seem from the point of view of the romantic conception of art, a critical text can be equivalent to, or even exceed, the aesthetic value of its object. At the same time, Benjamin sought to find, by means of his criticism, a “truth content,” in other words a philosophical or even theological truth, leaving the work of commentary (the “objective content”) for the philologists, “technicians” of literary analysis.

Now let us go back to the “aesthetics of the eye,” which, for Bakhtin, was the foundation stone for his study of the texts of Goethe: Benjamin proved himself to be a fine analyst of the visual in a later period of his creative trajectory,<sup>38</sup> yet in his essay on the *Elective Affinities*, he still does not give to the aesthetics of the eye the same attention it was to receive in his analysis of Second Empire Paris.<sup>39</sup> In the 1938 work, dedicated to a historical moment belonging to another social formation totally alien to Goethe’s experience - Benjamin points out in the encyclopedia article that Goethe spent almost his entire life in Weimar and avoided visiting large cities - the German critic shows that confidence in the sight as an instrument of cognition is of course subverted. Besides, the city landscape in the light of which the vision of Baudelaire is analyzed does not favor a naturalist study in the context of which Goethe’s thought moved (see TIHANOV, 2000, p.237). An analogous situation can be found in Gogol, whose material vision Benjamin appreciated, especially in “Sorochintsy Fair.” But when Gogol’s gaze moves to the streets of St. Petersburg, as in “Nevsky Prospekt,” it immediately loses the clarity and definition of perception, laying bare the deceptive nature of appearances. Let us recall that “Nevsky Avenue lies at all hours, but never more than when the night oppresses with its heavy mass ..., when the devil himself lights the lamps only to show everything not as it really looks.” (GOGOL, 1985, p.238). This picture is indeed comparable to those of the Paris of Baudelaire, although we do not know whether Benjamin accompanied Gogol on his literary excursions around St. Petersburg, as he did with the texts of the bard of the French capital in the times of Napoleon III.

As for the Bakhtinian conception of language, this, as is well known, is quite opposed to the messianic mysticism of Benjamin. Bakhtin shares the philosophical-linguistic principles of his circle. They are materialistic and opposed to all mysticism. I

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<sup>38</sup> See his essays of the 1930s under the general name *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*.

<sup>39</sup> “The Paris of the Second Empire of Baudelaire,” in Benjamin, 2003, pp.3-92.

shall not enter here into the controversy of the authorship of the well-known works which are in dispute and signed by Voloshinov, Medvedev, and Kanaev. Nonetheless, I should like to point out that the works signed by Bakhtin himself make patently clear the simultaneity of the immediate social context of the utterance with the ontological level of communication, and this takes us back permanently to the concept of “great time.” In particular, this can be detected in the very conception of the “superaddressee” or “third person,” who can take the form of the people, or future generations, or God himself. It is necessary to underline the co-presence of the day-to-day and the ontological levels, in the conception of a “unique and unitary being,”<sup>40</sup> in such a way that the “event” of the act and communication situated within this being is not only rooted in concrete time and space, but is determined by a responsibility both concrete and ontological—supra-existential. This is precisely the point that distinguishes Bakhtin’s philosophical-linguistic thought from the “deutero-canonic” texts. In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, the same conception of dialogue in eternity marks a counterpoint with an analogous concept of linguistic communication in Benjamin. His thesis about the “weak Messianic power” may be seen as analogous with Bakhtin’s “great time”: “There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim” (BENJAMIN, 2004, p.390).<sup>41</sup>

What really differentiates both thinkers is the omnipresent ideological discursiveness in the very structure of consciousness and the role it played in the Russian thinker’s philosophical anthropology.<sup>42</sup> For Benjamin, the “language of truth”

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<sup>40</sup> See also Bonetskaia (1995, p.255): “Bakhtin’s prosaism is totally apparent.” By prosaism we are to understand the overall interpretation of Bakhtin’s work as *prosaics* (as opposed to *poetics*), namely: on the plane of a philosophy of the every-day, as Morson and Emerson (1990) propose. Meanwhile, this simultaneity of the day-to-day level and the ontological was also pointed out by Holquist (2001 and 2002, p.24). See the discussion of the same problem by L. A. Gogotishvili (1992, pp.396-98).

<sup>41</sup> See Benjamin, “On the Philosophy of History,” thesis no. 2, SW, 2004. I would like to thank Sergei Sandler for this observation.

<sup>42</sup> Some interesting coincidences between the two thinkers can be discovered by comparing Benjamin’s 1916 essay on language with Bakhtin’s jottings of the 1940s. Benjamin speaks of the foundational act of naming effected by mankind under the inspiration of God, the act by means of which the language of the world and its objects is set to function. Bakhtin, as we already know, speaks of the “expressive and speaking being.” His reflections regarding the transcendent nature of the name and the surname, as well as his evocation of A. F. Losev’s mystical doctrinal of the “glorification of the name,” or *onomatodoxy* (*имяславие*), close in spirit and on account of its sources to the linguistic conception of Benjamin, go in an analogous direction.



is not that of everyday and social communication, but the full self-expressiveness of being. Benjamin brings back to memory the language of things, the language of a world before the Fall, that is, a language that transmits the spiritual content. This language expresses the spiritual being that cannot be transmitted *by means of* language, but only *in* language. The spiritual being is identical to the being of language only *to the degree that it can be transmitted. The linguistic being of man consists in the fact that man gives names to things.*<sup>43</sup> By means of the name, the spiritual being of man communicates with God.

The two-faced Janus - an image that appears also in Benjamin - personifies the co-presence of the ontological and vital planes that characterize the thought of Bakhtin. This break with abstract and “fatal theoreticism” (BAKHTIN, 1986, p.102) manifests itself on many levels. We can speak here of a “dialogic relationship,” but also of a “carnavalesque inversion.”

The question of the “sources” of both thinkers must, from my point of view, be restated radically in a dialogical key. In Bakhtin, for example, we find an irreverent attitude to the concepts of Kant. Bakhtin transforms the systematic architectonics of the Prussian philosopher into that of interpersonal relations proper to moral philosophy conceived even as a *first philosophy*. His description of the ethical reality of the act - which goes back supposedly, as its terminology would suggest, to neo-Kantianism - is also, in fact, dialogically transformed, “surpassing the limits of Cohen’s system.”<sup>44</sup> Indeed, it is none other than the transformation of alien thought, so that it may remain alive: the most normal mode of survival of concepts in the history of philosophical thought, although in Bakhtin, this procedure results in the elaboration of the aesthetically finished form of a dialogical philosophy.

As for Benjamin, he also elaborates his conception of experience from a starting point in the categories of Kant, transforming *Erfahrung* into a universal category that guarantees the responsible discursive transmission of the content of experience (“The narrator”), neutralizing the fleetingness and singular and particular character of *Erlebnis*. In this way he stands aside from the “philosophy of life” but also from Kant

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<sup>43</sup> See “On Language as Such and the Language of Man,” in Benjamin, 1996, pp.62-74.

<sup>44</sup> See Nikolaev, 1991, p.33.

(BENJAMIN, 2007, p.172),<sup>45</sup> on relating cognition with language and, via language, with experience. Benjamin “as an acute reader of the means through which the past is known to us,” and his emphasis on “the significance he attached to the means by which knowledge, history, and even their interpretation are all given to us” (FERRIS, 2004, pp.2–3), makes us comprehend him as a thinker of great (elective) affinities with Bakhtin. The alien word, the refraction of meaning, the dialogue, etc., are all concepts generated by the same kind of epistemological problems.

The deep motive of my thesis is perhaps not sufficiently evident against this general background of comparison between two leading thinkers who have held sway over the thoughts of a whole generation of university teachers throughout the world, but who are now, unfortunately, coming to seem a little old-fashioned. The motive consists in a call for a particular self-criticism, that should, finally, encourage an analysis of the role of our university critique in this history of greatness, and the near dethroning of our idol of yesterday, who has now even been made to figure as a “slave”—a “slave” (although Hegelian), a “Cain” (not so directly, but mentioned), or even comparable to Boccaccio’s antihero, Ser Cepparello (who dies transformed into San Ciappelletto in *Decameron*, I, 1). In effect, the story of that great sinner who became a saint on his deathbed, only in order to save from dishonour those who had taken him in, is quite reminiscent of the reception of Bakhtin’s thought, and not only in the West. In the process of his confession, Ser Cepparello allows the monk to interpret his words in the sense that is convenient to their purpose, and the “virtuous” merchants who took him in listen to him and accept the joke that has an unexpected effect after the sinner’s death: his remains become holy relics, and make miracles. A long time ago, it was pointed out that, for the researcher, the ideas of Bakhtin have a heuristic character, fulfilling the role of catalyst of one’s own thought, and that it is not up to us to make judgments around the circumstances that generated them: “we weren’t there,” to paraphrase the expression of Akhmatova (“нас там не стояло”).

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<sup>45</sup> Benjamin shows that cognition, despite its *a priori* and invariable character, comparable to mathematics, does not express itself by means of formulas or numbers, but through language, and that this was the reason why Kant did not succeed in integrating certain aspects of cognition, such as religion - its supreme form - into his system. See his 1918 essay “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy,” 1996, pp.100-10.

We must finish with a call - a quite radical one - launched by Benjamin to the critics: “He who cannot take sides, must keep silent!”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> From *Einbahnstraße* [One-Way Street] in Benjamin, 1996, p.460.

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