
Dialogue
&
Critical
Discourse

*Language, Culture,
Critical Theory*

Edited by
Michael Macovski

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Critical Discourse

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Language, Culture, Critical Theory

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Printed in the United States of America
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For my parents,
Addie and Al Macovski

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I want to express my gratitude to the contributors to this volume—for their deep insights into dialogism and for their belief in this collection.

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This book is dedicated to my parents, the two people who first inspired—and have always sustained—my dialogue with literature and my love of language.

Last and first, now and always, I thank my wife, Deborah.

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Dialogue and
Critical Discourse

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Introduction

Textual Voices, Vocative Texts: Dialogue, Linguistics, and Critical Discourse

Some Histories of Critical Discourse

The history of critical discourse during the present century is perhaps best described as a pendent history of praxis and genre. If the New Criticism tended to demonstrate its claims on specifically lyric forms, then structuralist, deconstructionist, and historicist theories can be shown to realize their precepts on narrative texts. The choice of such genres derives, of course, from the particular aims and agendas of the critical discourses themselves—from, say, the desire to disinter the lexical ambiguities of lyric language or to locate the *aporia* that belie narratives of ostensible linearity and sequence. Yet if such agendas suggest a critical movement from lyricism to narratology, it is more difficult to explain what might be called the cross-generic form of the last decade, that is, the dissemination and praxis of dialogue. Since the 1981 translation of Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*, the tendency to reconsider the literary text as a nexus of voices—a matrix of interactions extending beyond earlier notions of dialectic, reception, or speech-act theory—has proliferated within both literary and cultural studies. These vocative interactions can be said to persist not only among such traditional entities as author, reader, and character, but more surprisingly among disparate eras, displaced languages, and, above all, socially extant voices. As such, these interactions are less textual than eventual—mediated constructs emerging from specific addresses to and responses from particular persons. They inaugurate a radical shift not only in the historical

kinds of discourse studied and practiced, but in the very notions of “subject,” “personae,” “rejoinder,” and “intertextuality.”

This volume is accordingly founded on the premise that contemporary critical discourse looks beyond the primacy of the autotelic subject to represent a composite of voices, a convergence that may be simultaneously apostrophic, antiphonal, and agonistic. It represents a cross section of recent dialogic approaches within literary theory, philosophy, and linguistics—and begins to suggest the extension of these approaches within such fields as anthropology, dance, and developmental psychology.¹ It also seeks to develop and refine the critical extensions of Bakhtin’s dialogic theory during the last decade, and to imply a variety of related influences—beginning with Habermas, Buber, and Gadamer, and extending to recent perspectives within discourse analysis, psychoanalytic dialogue, and classical rhetoric.²

What such approaches collectively embody is the sense of dialogue as a social production, as a form that necessarily revises the prevalent postromantic concept of a single, originary writer and a designated, implied reader. For in this schema both the production and the interpretation of ostensibly original meaning become social acts: collaborative constructions derived from manifold viewpoints. In reconceiving the notion of literary voices, we speak not of a circumscribed artifact, but of a socially constituted action, a dynamic whose methods and objects are neither focal nor discrete, but processive, accretive, and multireferential.

Border Crossings: Dialogue in Literary History

It is this social, extratextual dimension of dialogic discourse that most explicitly distinguishes it from formalist notions of textual influence and response. If dialogue necessarily revises these notions, however, it nevertheless continues to engage other seminal approaches to literary interchange—approaches including post-Freudian theories of literary influence, affectivist theories of reception, linguistic theories of conversational analysis, and philosophical elaborations of speech-act theory.³ It is not that dialogue supersedes any of these critical schools, nor that their concerns are parallel or even consonant, but that the aggregate of these previous approaches reveals a critical milieu that is prophetic of dialogic thought. In this sense, we can say that dialogue seeks not to subsume previous theories within a single key concept or code, but to recontextualize them. As Bakhtin himself observes in comparing the two, “A context is potentially unfinalized; a code must be finalized. A code is only a technical means of transmitting information, but it does not have cognitive, creative significance” (1986a, 130).

Such a spirit of recontextualization or “creative” exchange can begin to distinguish dialogue’s alignments with—and departures from—other concepts of linguistic interaction. In the case of Bloomian models of influential “misprision,” for instance, the notion that a given text necessarily alludes to and responds to its precursors anticipates the dialogic concept of “addressivity,” in which all discourse partakes of such invocation.⁴ According to Bloom’s approach, linguistic influence partakes of oedipal rejection, in which a hierarchical text must be continually and

fraternally erased. What the post-Freudian model obscures, though, is that such texts can sustain dialogue outside of this hierarchical framework. In this context, literary influence might best be characterized in terms of a conversation, proceeding in spite of any metonymic patricide. Indeed, if the model of patriarchal influence stresses textual succession, its maternal counterpart represents inclusion—a kind of community of voices that more accurately represents dialogic discourse.⁵ In applying an overly essentialist model to the process of literary influence, moreover, such revisionary theorists artificially restrict dialogue to a single, metaphorical “family” of discourse (a textual father, son, and absent mother). In so doing, they limit potential exchange to a few conflicted voices, an internecine rhetoric from which extrafamilial voices are arbitrarily excluded.

This process of locating dialogue within the constellation of critical discourse applies equally to reception theory, which in its initial stages also tends to prefigure the premises of dialogic theory. The notion that a text not only implicates readers in a particular way, but that textual meaning itself resides within these readers, anticipates the dialogic notion of meaning as both plurally constructed and socially elaborated. At the same time, however, the precepts of dialogue suggest that readers instantiate meaning in response not only to texts, but to a variety of other voices: extratextual and intertextual, oral and written, present and absent. As a result, linguistic meaning accrues not only in relation to a given reader, but in interaction with this polyphony of both literary and nonliterary voices. If reception theory focuses on the exchanges between a given text and its particular reader, dialogue redefines and extrapolates such interactions as necessarily multireferential and multivocal. Moreover, if such affectivist studies demonstrate how a given text necessarily implicates a reader—in, say, postlapsarian sin or misinterpretation—dialogism includes this implicating process among a plethora of readerly interactions: between text and reader, speaker and reader, reader and reader, and even text and text. The result is an image of an ultimately more eclectic reader, influenced by a wide spectrum of voices, whose affective responses are a product not only of the text that is read, but of other utterances as well, both textual and atextual.

Finally, these dialogic concepts further coincide with recent advances in a last field, discourse analysis, and most particularly with those linguistic studies that apply the field of conversational analysis to literary texts.⁶ Such studies hold that many features of oral conversation—including patterned repetition, evocative imagery, and indirect quotation—are elaborated within literary discourse. As a result, these discursal approaches dovetail with a constitutive dialogic premise: the praxis of tracing dialogic interaction to *actual* voices, and thereby demonstrating how literary dialogue necessarily derives from these heteroglossic sources. What is more, such parallels between dialogue and conversational analysis also apply to the crucial feature of context-dependence, since both fields stress the idea that meaning can be defined only in terms of the immediate social context of a given interaction. What this volume adds to such parallels, however, is the sense that dialogic inevitably extends beyond the limits of real-time conversation—to dialogues that persist across time and space. Thus literary dialogue may often represent interchanges that

violate the particular premises of oral conversation, such as constraints on temporality, register, and cohesion within the spoken language.

Revision cum Extension: Recent Formulations and Developments

We have thus far defined what is in itself a “dialogue” between forms of critical discourse—an initially historical comparison that locates dialogic criticism in relation to previous and related modes. Within this schema, the study of dialogue thus serves to recontextualize, extend, and ultimately transmute recent critical notions of misprision, reception, and sociolinguistic interaction. Within the history of critical discourse, then, dialogue is clearly a concept whose time has come, one that also interacts readily with such current concerns as poststructuralist epistemology, feminist critique, and historicized language. It is not surprising, moreover, that several twentieth-century approaches to dialogue would emerge not only from the writings of Bakhtin himself, but in less well-known formulations by Gadamer, Buber, and Habermas.⁷ Though such formulations may come up against one another at times, their areas of respective conflict and overlap still enable us to pinpoint the constitutive features of dialogic form. Indeed, the need for a book like the present one arises not in spite of, but because of, such dissension: our purpose is not to obviate one or another of these conflicting approaches but to ensure their interaction. It is not to render disparate voices silent or mute, but to locate and engage their differences.

Such engagements are, in fact, illuminating in themselves. Considering the study of Bakhtin himself, for instance, we should recall that the first translated discussions of his work come under the heading of “intertextuality,” the specifically textual referencing of influence and cross-fertilization.⁸ Yet while these early formulations of intertextuality have proven crucial, we have also suggested how recent discussions envision dialogic relations as extending well beyond the limits of the text. As Jerome J. McGann (1985) has shown, the textual manifestation of a poem represents only its linguistic dimension; as such, it necessarily omits the poem’s operation within a social system, its overall production and reception—what McGann calls the “experience of the poem.” In this context, “poetry is itself one form of social activity, and no proper understanding of the nature of poetry can be made if the poem is abstracted from the experience of the poem, either at its point of origin or at any subsequent period” (1985, 21). Hence the abstracted, seemingly self-contained “‘text’ is not what we should understand as ‘a poem.’ Rather, what we ought to see is that ‘text’ is the linguistic state of the ‘poem’s’ existence” (1985, 22). In discussing literature in terms of the contextualized “act,” McGann reiterates its ultimately social dynamics, the sense in which the text is an artifactual sign of an ineluctably larger process of social circulation.⁹ This emphasis on the “social act,” the interactional event, is also apparent in recent revaluations of Bakhtin’s early essays. As Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson have demonstrated (1989, 1990), these essays stress the interchange between “acts,” as characterized by their particularity or “eventness”—an approach that actually predates Bakhtin’s thoughts concerning specifically linguistic interaction or dialogue *per se* (1989, 6–7).

Hence early emphases on “intertextuality” tend to obscure the socially eventual nature of dialogue, including its specifically atextual associations with the spoken event. They tend to obfuscate what we have identified as the pervasive orality of dialogic discourse—its tendency to encompass, adapt, and interact with various speech forms from everyday life. In Bakhtin’s terms, such speech forms are “primary genres,” including “certain types of oral dialogue—of the salon, of one’s own circle, and other types as well, such as familiar, family-everyday, sociopolitical, philosophical, and so on.” It is these primary genres, moreover, that give rise to and interact with such “secondary genres” as “literary, commentarial, and scientific” forms (1986a, 65). For Bakhtin, spoken discourse becomes a kind of germinal well-spring for these primarily written, “secondary” forms. Hence in discussing such secondary phenomena as the essay, the drama, and the sonnet, this volume necessarily looks beyond the intertextuality of voices to the interorality of texts—the spoken origins of textual forms. It holds that dialogue is not merely intertextual but interlingual, hypostatizing relations not only between distant texts but also between discrete rhetorics and idioms—including the diverse political, theological, and economic languages within a single text.

Originary Forms: Orality and Literature

This emphasis on the oral dimensions of written discourse is itself embedded within a historical context, part of a relatively recent movement to disinter the “primary” strata that lie beneath literary forms. Indeed, before the advent of such a movement, the drive to distinguish literary language from spoken discourse motivated a series of linguistic revolutions during the twentieth century—including the Russian Formalist movement that Bakhtin himself sought to challenge. Indeed, Russian formalists, Saussurean structuralists, and Prague Circle grammarians all sought to define what Boris Eichenbaum referred to as “poetic language,” that aesthetic discourse which stands apart from more quotidian forms.¹⁰ More recently, scholars as diverse as Roman Jakobson, Richard Ohmann, and David Lodge have pursued this distinction, seeking to differentiate (in the latter’s words) the “writer’s medium” from the “virgin” language of origin.¹¹ Because of this inclination to demarcate the two forms, examining the body of written literature for vestiges of oral form nearly became a lost art, practiced more often by ethnographers and linguists than by literary scholars—and in the latter case limited almost exclusively to studies of epic and ballad.¹² Several literary theorists began, in fact, to resist what they saw as attempts to trace all writing back to its primordially spoken origins. For them, the very *absence* of an individualized “voice” meant that literature could develop and sustain depersonalized connections between written works. Much as previous critical movements had valued metaphysical ambiguity, or the effacement of authorial intention, this one called for the impartiality of the voiceless text.¹³

During the last two decades, however, both literary critics and linguistic historians have shifted the focus away from such divisions between spoken and written language, and turned more often to the features that relate them as mutually reflective, rhetorical modes. Indeed, the critical history of discourse studies during