DAVID K. DANOW

DIALOGISM: PERSPECTIVES AND DELIMITATIONS

I

Acclaimed by Tzvetan Todorov as "the most important Soviet thinker in the human sciences and the greatest theoretician of literature in the twentieth century,"¹ Mikhail Bakhtin is less hyperbolically but generally credited with evolving a (non-systematic) philosophy which places dialogue squarely in the center. As literary theoretician and philosopher of discourse, Bakhtin is perhaps most consistent in his repeated insistence within several related contexts that meaning is generated through dialogue. Unequivocally stated, for Bakhtin, "Any true understanding is dialogic in nature."² Effected between the self and an other in a potentially endless series of verbal encounters, the Russian theorist's concept of dialogue is in this respect analogous to the American philosopher C. S. Pierce's notion of the unlimited possibilities of semiosis or sign interpretation. But whereas the latter thinker asserts that meaning (or a signified) is to be determined through the auxiliary efforts of an "interpretant," which may be another individual engaged in the process of interpretation (but may also be a machine or another sign), Bakhtin insists upon the role of the other individual in dialogue as requisite to achieving understanding.

In response to this insistence upon dialogic relations as the principal source from which meaning is derived, students of Bakhtin have elevated the entire concept to what is commonly termed "dialogism," or the principle of dialogism. Julia Kristeva, for instance, following a certain intellectual propensity in post-War France, declares that "dialogism may well become

the basis of our time's intellectual structure."3 What this might entail and what underlies the "principle" behind the concept, however, have yet to be clearly defined. Within a necessarily brief framework, this essay intends to outline the scope and dimensions by which such a project might be delimited, suggesting in the process a basic methodology as well.

Appropriating at the outset the most common structuralist ploy (implicitly employed by Bakhtin in the following regard), dialogue may be juxtaposed to monologue, as a convenient—in some sense—logical, oppositional concept. Such seeming methodological simplicity is only apparent, however, for the problem of defining monologue is clearly a corollary of the same question initially posed regarding dialogue. Expressing a commonly held view, the Prague School literary theorist and aesthetcian, Jan Mukařovský, defines the former concept as "an utterance with a single active participant regardless of the presence or absence of other passive participants."4 In short, a single speaker articulates a point of view, while the other (if present) remains passive; that is, silent. But by not addressing the evident dynamics inherent within such discourse, this viewpoint appears simplistic. Silence (itself a possible mode of communication) is, after all, either self-imposed or imposed from without. In either case, the potential for dialogue is greatly reduced. From a somewhat different perspective, Bakhtin would say that, in the presence of a (self-proclaimed) authoritative word, the word of the other is silenced, thereby evoking a new, distinctly negative connotation. For in such a situation, the dialogic word is denied the right to be heard.

Rather than say (as does one reader of Bakhtin) that the final authoritative word in his metaphysics belongs to some Higher Being as ultimate authority, one would do better to note that the monologic word, for Bakhtin, "is indissolubly fused with its authority—with political power, an institution, a person—and it stands and falls together with that authority. . . . If completely deprived of its authority it becomes simply an object, a relic, a