

Polyphonic Voices - Goldschmidt and Bakhtin

Hermann Levin Goldschmidt Memorial Lecture 2010

Wolfram Eilenberger

I. Truth Be Told

When I heard the name “Hermann Levin Goldschmidt” for the very first time in my life—about nine months ago here in Toronto—I did what I always do in situations of potential academic embarrassment. “Goldschmidt, yes, yes,” I nodded with a glass of wine in my hand, anxiously awaiting further clues that would allow me to meaningfully re-enter dialogue while scrolling down the pages of my mental library. Goldschmidt, G... G... somewhere between Gadamer and Gombrowicz I suppose, hmm, now that I think of it, I might even own a work by him!

Back at home, I blew the dust off a book on one of my upper shelves only to find it actually was written by a certain Lucien Goldmann, a French Marxist whose treatise on the sociology of the novel I must have bought fifteen years ago in Heidelberg—without, apparently, ever having taken the time to open it.

Still no trace of *Mr. Goldschmidt*. My embarrassment quickly rose to Kafkaesque dimensions when godlike Google informed me that Goldschmidt had been teaching philosophy for more than forty years in Zurich—technically speaking, the city of my alma mater. How was that possible?

Well, no surprise, really, for Hermann Levin Goldschmidt, truth be told, belongs to the lesser-known philosophers of the 20th century. His works and teachings are, as things stand, likely to be skipped over even by the most knowledgeable and open minded historians of continental philosophy—even, I am afraid, by some historians of so-called Jewish philosophy.

Although not familiar with the particular case, I certainly was familiar with the problem. Having spent some years of my life writing a book on the Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin, I more than once became the trigger of situations in which my partner in dialogue would suddenly start to mumble, “Bakhtin, yes, yes”... only to find out some hours later, I imagine, that the book on the top shelf of his library was actually written by Mikhail Bakunin.

In retrospect, I realize that it doesn't exactly do wonders for your social life to be considered deeply into Russian anarchism—at least not at the philosophical cocktail parties of the late 20th century.

You are right: I overdo the analogy. The presented cases are hardly comparable. For, at least in literary studies, the name of Mikhail Bakhtin has been, for more than thirty years now, an essential part of the canon of “theory,” especially due to Bakhtin's works on the poetics of Dostoevsky, on the “chronotope”, his essay “Discourse in the Novel” and most importantly his study of the carnivalesque world-view of Francois Rabelais. Yet, the emergence of Bakhtin as a philosopher is a rather recent, and still contested phenomenon.

And so I stand here before you, delivering a “philosophical lecture” on two, at best marginal philosophical figures, marginal not the least because their works would best be described as philosophies of cultures, a sub-discipline at the margins of the field, considered by many, especially here in the new world, to be a continental peculiarity—if not pathology.

But enough. As we know only too well, explicit and tragic self-marginalizing is one of the most effective rhetorical devices to increase the relevance of one's own message, and so I trust to find you, by now, absolutely convinced that what I have to say for the following 40 minutes in this world premiere on “Bakhtin and Goldschmidt” is of utmost systematic, practical and political importance.

II. Things in Common

How, then, to initiate a fruitful dialogue between Goldschmidt and Bakhtin? Why not start with things both thinkers have in common, of which there are indeed many. Both of our heroes started out as young, promising and dynamic thinkers during the most creative and formative philosophical decade of the 20th century. Bakhtin in revolutionary St. Petersburg/Leningrad, Goldschmidt in roaring Berlin, only to find their hopes, careers and indeed, their very lives shattered and threatened by the rising daily terror of their respective totalitarian regimes. Goldschmidt was forced into Swiss exile due to his Jewishness. Bakhtin first sentenced to death and then sent to the Nowherelands of outer Kazakhstan (no offence!) for the regular non-reasons of the Stalinist purges, in his case, being a member of the Christian discussion group called “Resurrection.”

In contrast to many of their best friends and colleagues, they survived the dark times, only to find themselves, after the war, intellectually rather isolated. What furthermore creates a bond between our heroes is their shared fate of impressive academic non-careers. Goldschmidt teaching for the next 40 years in adult education at the Volkshochschule Zurich, Bakhtin up to his retirement at a pedagogical institution in Mordovia. But that is

just biography, rhapsodic, and therefore hardly suited to establishing systematic connections.

It seems more promising to focus on the intellectual field that shaped their thinking, which again, was in relevant parts identical, namely the vibrant, multi-disciplinary scene of German speaking philosophy of culture of the 20s. It is therefore no surprise that we find in both Bakhtin's and Goldschmidt's writings systematically relevant references to the works of leading voices of the time, such as Paul Natorp, Georg Simmel and Max Scheler. Although a time certainly marked by deep differences of "Weltanschauung" or world views, it was also a time of intense and most productive dialogue between different schools and approaches, a time when, to cite just one example, three young philosophers such as Heidegger, Carnap and Levinas could sit together at a table, toying with the idea of what Heisenberg meant to their respective ideas on "language" and life, for it was a time in which philosophers shared a common vocabulary that enabled them to relate to each other and entertain meaningful conversations. A time, I might add, before the fateful parting of the ways, which led—with the tragic help of a world war, and several billion cubic liters of salt water—to the present day tribalism of analytic and continental philosophy.

III. On Dialogue

Bakhtin and Goldschmidt, it is safe to say, are in intellectual terms classical products of their time. But what is really distinctive and remarkable about their intellectual development is that, even though they were philosophically active up to the late 70s, and in Goldschmidt's case well into the 1990s they also remained utterly stuck, or, more positively and adequately put, faithful and loyal to the hay-days and heroes of their youth. In their splendid and sad intellectual isolation both oeuvres can be mistaken in style, approach, and systematic content, for products of the late 20s. Sure, both read and actively engaged the dimensions of post-war continental philosophy, but when it comes to their own systematic aspirations, they preferred, it seems to me, an active argument with their lost world, remaining loyal to the inner auditorium of their past. And it is, of course, tempting to think of this thoroughly uncanny desire to remain in active contact with the destroyed, lost and annihilated world as a way of dealing with the traumatic experience of their own exile and isolation—a, say, productive denial of what happened to them, their friends, families, and ideals.

From this perspective, as from many others, it seems only fitting, even almost "natural" that the central concepts of their respective philosophies came to be conceptual derivatives of "dialogue." For Bakhtin "dialogism" became the trademark of his writings, Goldschmidt gave his own philosophical approach the name "Dialogik" (dialogic).

So here, finally, we stand on firm and shared ground, have reached a common core, for both Bakhtin's and Goldschmidt's thought is based on the claims that: Two human faces, concretely located in time and space, embody the condition of the possibility of making sense, or even more broadly, for there to be "a world" in the first place. Inasmuch as both of them speak out in an almost desperate intensity for the necessity of a concrete addressee, whose active response, with every turn and return, enables me to make sense of my own words and utterances. Furthermore, their works are marked by the firm rejection of consensus as a regulative ideal of a truly dialogic encounter, more specifically, by the firm rejection of the idealistic fiction that such a dialogue could or should ever come to an end in shared knowledge or, in the one and only, unified truth or system of belief. Which for both of them also entails a politically conscious rejection of Hegelian and Marxist notions of (faceless) dialectics, and yes, even a rejection of the very ideal of a Kantian "unity of reason". Finally and most importantly, they share common ground first in their turn from the pure pragmatics of verbal encounter to an ethical understanding of understanding, the turn, in other words, from the pure duty to answer to the unduly concept of answerability, an awesome and indeed uncanny ideal, as it is based on the insight or claim that in understanding as in ethics, there is, in Bakhtin's words, "no alibi in existence," but just the eternally new challenge to take a stand in face of an other and his or her demands. Secondly, in an ethics based on the idea that a truly moral life does without the philosophical fiction of a fixed set of rules for good-doers, that the justificatory sentence "every rational being in my situation would have acted the same way" is not an indication of moral insight and virtue, but rather a sure sign that such a person, as it were, is not yet fit, or not fit any more, for the everyday demands of human existence.

Just imagine such a sentence uttered by a character's in one of Dostoevsky's novels, and you get the idea... or imagine, to bring it even closer to home, one of the more meaningful conversations of your own existence—one of these conversations about death and life, deepest hopes and fears, about love and rejection, shame and necessity—and then imagine yourself, while re-telling it to a friend, saying the words, "you know, every rational being in my situation would have understood her the same way"; a profoundly senseless statement. A human catastrophe, really.

Put in more systematic terms, as philosophical authors both Bakhtin and Goldschmidt reject the very project of modern moral philosophy as such, and both base their complex rejection on a specific dialogic model of what it means to understand one another.

So, dialogue, yes, the obvious, the truly promising starting point for a comparison of Goldschmidt and Bakhtin. Yet, there are many reasons that lead me to shy away from such a task, one being the inflationary use of dialogical concepts in every corner of our existence, essentially reducing the term to an ideological usage with no other purpose than to avoid one another in a systematic, say, "discursive" way, but the most important reason in the present context is that the systematic sources that led Bakhtin and Goldschmidt to their

respective conceptions of dialogue are, to my mind, very different: Goldschmidt placing himself explicitly within the dialogical tradition of the Jewish-German philosophy of Cohen, Buber and Rosenzweig, whereas the sources of Bakhtin's dialogism, I believe, are quite different and more diverse, the history of Russian literature and the European novel certainly playing an important part.

So let me invite you, if I may, to a short conceptual detour, for it is my belief that there is another core concept of Bakhtinian thought, namely **polyphony**, a concept that is suited to avoid the aforementioned dangers and problems and will furthermore enable us to see to what extent Goldschmidt's and Bakhtin's thought shares a similar systematic base; a base that, once uncovered, might prove helpful and productive in the attempt to increase the systematic relevance of our two protagonists for present day philosophy of culture.

I am thinking here of a towering figure among German speaking philosophers of the twenties, a philosopher whom no other than Edmund Husserl called in 1919 "the only truly significant scholar of his entire generation" and who was some years later to become the first Jewish rector of a German university, the University of Hamburg, I am thinking of Ernst Cassirer, particularly his main work "Die Philosophie der symbolischen Formen" — The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms," published between 1923-1929.

IV. Bakhtin and Cassirer

Bakhtin's writings from 1927 on can be best understood as a creative application of Cassirer's symbolic philosophy of culture to literary theory. This is the main argument of my dissertation and book *Das Werden des Menschen im Wort*¹ (*The Becoming of the Human in the Word*). Such an interpretative approach, I argue, enables us to establish an often missed and doubted coherence in Bakhtin's works and permits us to read his works as one oeuvre, based on a broad, stable and productive philosophical foundation. The real upshot of the thesis, though, is that in following such an approach Bakhtin emerges as a most powerful voice within an entirely new philosophical tradition, a tradition normally referred to under the heading of "semiotic transformation of Kantian philosophy," which when linked, as it should be, with the pragmatists movement, includes the works of Charles Sanders Peirce, Ernst Cassirer and Edgar Wind, and, being more inclusive, names such as John Dewey and Alfred North Whitehead, in short, the very tradition that Susanne Langer² once referred to in her seminal work *Philosophy in a New Key*.

¹ Wolfram Eilenberger, *Das Werden des Menschen im Wort - Eine Studie zur Kulturphilosophie Michail M. Bachtins*, Chronos, Zurich, 2009.

² Susanne Langer, *Philosophy in a new key*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1942.

It is my firm conviction that the attempt to entrench Bakhtin in this new context finds itself not only in full accordance with his main sources, but also promises to increase his systematic relevance. Lastly, it should be noted that to “read Bakhtin in a new key” stands in stark contrast to the currents Bakhtin is usually thought to belong to, namely poststructuralism on the one hand, and broadly speaking, neo-Marxism (socialism with two human faces) on the other.

Having said that much, I feel the need to express in the clearest possible terms that such an approach doesn’t claim to have found or unearthed “the real Bakhtin”—for such talk seems rather nonsensical to me. What we are dealing with in the realm of humanities are selective perspectives on selective perspectives. Coherent or unified images of an author and his or her works in this sense are not finally found or discovered, but eternally created and constructed—constructed, I should add, with special interests, aims, and purposes, and usually with all too personal preferences in mind.

V. Cassirer’s Impact on Bakhtin

Due to the philological and philosophical genius of the Berlin based, Canadian scholar Brian Poole³ the formative, indeed constitutive impact of Cassirer’s writings on Bakhtin’s mature and celebrated works of the late 30’s, especially “Rabelais and his world,” is by now a well established fact. Though it should be added that this influence goes far beyond the roughly ten pages of Cassirer that Bakhtin incorporated verbatim in his celebrated work on Rabelais—without ever quoting his source!

Bakhtin’s entire idea of the “chronotope,” just to give you another example, is simply unimaginable without his close readings of the second volume of Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms (on Myth)—and the same counts for the concept of the totalitarian “mythical word” at the heart of Bakhtin’s seminal essay “Discourse in the Novel” of 1932.

But, I argue, Cassirer’s constitutive influence sets in even earlier, in fact as early as the mid twenties, for it is the first volume of Cassirer’s Philosophy of symbolic forms—dedicated to the “fact” of language—that stands behind the breathtaking systematic drive of Valentin Voloshinovs sadly (and strategically) mistitled “Marxism and the Philosophy of Language (1929)”⁴—a work often, controversially (and to my mind, wrongly) attributed to Bakhtin himself.

³ See: Brian Poole, “Bakhtin and Cassirer: The Philosophical Origins of Bakhtin’s Carnival Messianism”, in: Bakhtin/“Bakhtin”: Studies in the Archive and Beyond, *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 97:3/4, Summer/Fall, 1998.

⁴ Valentin N. Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, New York Seminar Press, 1973.

It is, I am afraid, impossible here to lay out the extremely complex, twisted and rich history and systematic influences that shaped the thoughts and works of the group of young Russian scholars that Voloshinov and Bakhtin belonged to in the mid 20s (the so called Leningrad Circle). But what is and should be clear is that they worked together in closest creative contact, and what is also clear is that around the year 1928 (during the summer) there occurred a decisive systematic transformation within Bakhtin's thought, triggered by Voloshinov's creative application of Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms to socio-linguistics, an application that was marked by stressing the importance of, 1) the materiality of the sign for language, indeed all communication, 2) stressing the pragmatic (linguistically speaking) dimensions of semiotic exchange and finally, 3) by transferring Cassirer's idea of an irreducible plurality of symbolic forms to language itself, hence, stressing the living plurality of the sociolects and different "inner forms" of the languages within modern natural languages (a phenomenon Bakhtin would later call heteroglossia). All of these three core-innovations would prove constitutive for Bakhtin's works after 1928, hence, the works for which he is best known. An event sometimes referred to as Bakhtin's "linguistic turn."

On an even more general level, by 1928 the works of Bakhtin and his friends were marked by intensive philosophical activity that circled around the following four systematic challenges:

1) The question of the unity of (their own) culture, marked by the highly dynamic, centrifugal forces of modern civilization and science, which were putting into question, among other things, the very possibility of "philosophical systems."

2) The question of finding a voice, one's own voice, in the midst of the perceived dominance of the masses (the "man") and emerging mass media—for the circle, primarily an ethical question.

3) The crisis of the (transcendental) subject as an anonymous abstraction, and, in consequence, the crisis of practical norms that are based on such allegedly "worldless" abstractions.

4) The problem of the other (culturally, semiotically), and diverging ideals of understanding otherness.

VI. In 1928

In the midst of these philosophical struggles—and an increasing hostile and deadly climate of rising Stalinism—young scholar Mikhail Bakhtin (then 34 years old) came up, in 1929, in his first publication, with the following idea, suggestion, or, intervention:

Dostoevsky, like Goethe's Prometheus, creates not voiceless slaves (as does Zeus), but rather free people who are capable of standing beside their creator, of disagreeing with him, and even rebelling against him. The plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses and the genuine polyphony of the full-valued voices are in fact characteristics of Dostoevsky's novels. It is not a multitude of characters and fates within a unified objective world, illuminated by the author's unified consciousness that unfolds in his works, but precisely the plurality of equal consciousnesses and their worlds, which are combined here into the unity of a given event, while at the same time retaining their unmergedness. ... Dostoevsky is the creator of the polyphonic novel.⁵

The quote is taken from the introduction of Bakhtin's "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics" and stands, to the present day, as the most succinct definition of polyphony in literary theory. And as you will have noticed, a "polyphony" so defined presents itself as nothing less than an architectonic solution to indeed all of the four systematic key problems that Bakhtin (and his friends) were busy with at that time. In other words, if, as Bakhtin claims, this entirely new "artistic world model" would not already have existed in the form of Dostoevsky's novels, Bakhtin himself, so it might seem, would have had to create it for his own philosophical purposes—which indeed I think he did.

Polyphony, as outlined in the Dostoevsky book, is a philosophical model, most fittingly applied to a well-known novelist—rather than being extracted or suggested by a close reading of the works of this novelist. And once one has taken this path of interpretation, it is more than tempting to think that the main inspiration for this new polyphonic model came not from Dostoevsky's novels, but the architectonics of Cassirer's three volume work *The Philosophy of Symbolic Form*, whose very point, of course, was to create a philosophical system that would be able to present a plurality of different symbolic forms (myth, religion, art, language, science), without, however, merging these forms into one master form or reducing their inherently different "logics of creation" to one abstract principle or master logic.

VII. Polyphony and the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms

In his introduction, Cassirer refers to such an ideal meta-form as a "concrete totality" and lays out in clearest possible terms the problems that are involved in the attempt to create such a non-hierarchic, concrete totality, marked by the irreducible plurality of symbolic forms, which, for very different reason and interests are "true" and "valid" forms of world-making. Here is the philosophical quandary as outlined by Cassirer:

⁵ Mikhail M. Bakhtin. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Ardis, Ann Arbor: 1973, 4.

For if we renounce this unity [of the logical form, W.E.], a strict systematic understanding of these forms would seem to be unattainable... then the particular forms simply stand side by side: their scope and specific character can be described, but they no longer express a common ideal content. At this point a strange dilemma arises. If we hold fast to the postulate of logical unity, the universality of logical form threatens ultimately to erase the individuality of each special province and the specificity of its principle - but if we immerse ourselves in this individuality and persevere in our examination of it, we run the risk of losing ourselves and of finding no way back to the universal. An escape from this methodological dilemma is possible only if we can discover a factor which recurs in each basic cultural form but in no two of them takes exactly the same shape.⁶

The recurring factor in each basic cultural form, that enables the establishment of a systematic unity without however, grounding it in a single logical principle, is the *symbol*, the sign, or rather and more to Cassirer's liking, symbolic activity. Cultural forms, in this new key, become symbolic forms, guided by different logics of creation, interests and purposes, but yet united by being based on the fact of our nature as "animal symbolicum," semiotic animal.

The decisive insight for Bakhtin's work on the novel was realizing that the novel, as a literary genre, is nothing other than the very meta-form of the various symbolic forms Cassirer was dreaming of. It is the novelists, Bakhtin will from that day on argue, who withstood the monological pipe dream of modernity, the utopia of the one and only unified system, guided by the one and only unified method or logic—for Bakhtin, paradigmatically embodied by the systems of German idealism. A diagnosis he could build on Cassirer, for according to Cassirer, the traditional systems of metaphysics were indeed plagued and blinded by the false idea of monologism, fatefully destroying an underlying and irreducible plurality of forms—a tendency Cassirer (like Bakhtin) in later years links to the mystical, unified word and discourse of totalitarian systems.

But we are still in 1928, and back then, Cassirer's diagnosis sounded as follows:

For most of them [dogmatic systems of philosophy, W.E.] are nothing other than metaphysical hypostases of a definite logical, or aesthetic, or religious principle. In shutting themselves up in the abstract universality of this principle, they cut themselves off from particular aspects of cultural life and the concrete totality of its form.

*Philosophical thought might avoid this danger of occlusion only if it could find a standpoint situated **above** all these forms and yet **not merely outside** them: a standpoint which would make it possible to encompass the whole of them in one view, which would seek to penetrate*

⁶ Ernst Cassirer. *The philosophy of symbolic forms, V1*. Yale University Press, 1953, 84.

*nothing other than the purely immanent relation of all of these forms to one another, and not the relation to any external, “transcendent” being or principle. Then we could have a systematic philosophy of human culture in which each particular form would take its meaning solely from the place in which it stands, as system in which content and significance of each form would be characterized by the richness and specific quality of the relations and concatenations in which it stands with other spiritual energies and ultimately with totality.*⁷
 (PSF, p. 82)

Let me repeat Cassirer’s suggestion: The solution to the riddle lies, for the one who intends to create such a concrete totality of symbolic forms, in finding a “standpoint” situated *above* all these forms and yet not merely *outside* them: a standpoint which would make it possible to encompass the whole of them in one view, which would seek to penetrate nothing other than the purely immanent relation of all of these forms to one another—“above and yet not merely outside,” somewhere right in the middle between immanence and transcendence, a strange place indeed, and yet not so strange, at least not if you think of the novel as a symbolic meta-form, for isn’t that exactly the standpoint of the author of a novel, more specifically, the standpoint of the ideal author of the polyphonic novel?

Where Cassirer spoke of symbolic forms, and his most creative Russian reader, the linguist Valentin Volosinov, applied this to the active heteroglossia of social life, Volosinov’s best friend, Mikhail Bakhtin personalized the “social languages” into concrete human voices, preferably the voices of ideologues, and well, there you have it, the strained heroes of Dostoevsky’s world, coming to life in a universe which is marked by, I re-quote “*the plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses ...which are combined here into the unity of a given event, while at the same time retaining their unmergedness. ...*”

And without, of course, ever agreeing with each other.

VIII. On A New Level

According to Bakhtin, and this is where his dialogism finally kicks in, in a systematic relevant way, the search for the truly pluralistic standpoint above and yet not beyond—and hence a truly pluralistic concrete totality—can only be successful, if the author of that universe, or rather, pluri-verse, maintains a dialogic relation with his or her heroes, that is if and, according to Bakhtin, only if, the hero is for “the author not a ‘he’ and not an ‘I’, but a full-valued ‘thou,’ that is another full fledged ‘I’ (“Though art’)” (PDP, 51).

⁷ Ibid. 82.

*“Dostoevsky’s authorial activity is evident in his developing each of the contending viewpoints to its maximum strength and depth, to the maximum plausibility. He strives, with exceptional power to reveal and develop every possible meaning contained in a given point of view.... This authorial activity, which intensifies the thoughts of others, is possible only on the basis of a dialogical relationship with the other’s consciousness and point of view. It is hardly necessary to mention that the polyphonic approach has nothing in common with relativism (or dogmatism). It should be noted that both relativism and dogmatism equally exclude all argumentation and all genuine dialogue, either by making them unnecessary (relativism) or impossible (dogmatism). Polyphony as an artistic method lies on a completely different plane.”*⁸

I would not want to suggest that “symbolic form plus socio-linguistics plus dialogic relations” equals polyphony—we are not baking cakes here, nor adding numbers... But it seems clear to me that Bakhtin’s conception goes a decisive step further than Cassirer’s in trying to describe that very place “above and not beyond,” “outside in,” that is the *conditio sine qua non* of a truly pluralistic totality. After all, Cassirer never explicitly addressed, nor solved in practice, the decisive meta-question of how, and in what kind of a language or symbolic form to orchestrate the plurality of his own work, or novel of cultural becoming, that is, his “philosophy of symbolic forms.”

And it also seems clear to me that when Bakhtin speaks of the necessity of finding a **new level of philosophical activity**, guided by pluralistic intuitions or more plainly, the fact of plurality, which is “beyond dogmatism and relativism,” he is addressing one of the central philosophical problems of our times.

Lastly, I would venture to say that the attempt to locate that “demonic” place “outside in,” and to outline the “formal” devices and means of finding that place and staying there, will provide us with productive answers to the ever so vexed question of where philosophy ends and literature starts, will help us discuss the complex relationship between artistic and philosophical semiotic activity in general.

Is a philosophy on its way to polyphony still philosophy, or already, and hopelessly, literature? Does it matter? To whom?

But I have not yet said a word about Goldschmidt and his polyphonic Dialogik, have I? Well, I think I have all along! For the four core problems of Bakhtin’s circle also serve—unsurprisingly, after all, those were the problems of the late 20s—to characterize and interpret Goldschmidt’s own philosophical work. Therefore, I was not overly surprised to find, towards the end of Goldschmidt’s work *Philosophie als Dialogik (Philosophy as Dialogic)*, in a subchapter titled “The New Order” (Die Neue Ordnung), which is part of a longer reflection on architecture, architectonics and philosophy, the following Goldschmidtian outline of a new philosophical order yet to be set to work:

⁸ Bakhtin (1973), 73.

In place of the one that as the one center would sustain everything, reciprocal relatedness sustains its basic spaces, layers, and forms while it preserves the center; the place of uninterrupted continuity on the whole and of the whole in general -- which had excluded any contradiction between the basic spaces, layers, and forms -- is taken by discontinuity which allows continually for contradictions. The place of the Old Philosophy has been taken by the New Philosophy.

This New Philosophy will on the one hand raise every essential particular to consciousness in its independence. On the other hand it will expand the consciousness of the whole whose totality defies order from the point of view of any particular viewpoint.

This New Philosophy will on the one hand concede the contrary negations, exclusions and overlapping of every particular and, on the other, permit them to co-exist together within the totality of their reciprocal relatedness and mutual interaction.⁹

Well, apart from stylistic differences (he is not always an easy read, our Mr. Goldschmidt), this could have been written by Bakhtin, and by Cassirer, for that matter. And I furthermore lay it down to you that in an annotation to this chapter, which, in academic terms, “has not yet received the attention it deserves,” Goldschmidt tells us, in a way so shy and indirect that it would have made Bakhtin proud, that in developing his thoughts he, Goldschmidt, made use of “several works by Ernst Cassirer” (p.276). Aha! So! Interesting, very interesting indeed.

Let me take this *trouvaille* as an invitation to spend some final thoughts on what it might mean, today, to think of philosophy not in terms of a dialogic, but polyphonic activity.

IX. Polyphony Now?

I think to do philosophy in a polyphonic way would mean, in most general terms, to engage in a semiotic activity that is guided by nothing other than the regulative ideal of initiating a dialogue between relevant voices within a given field—voices that are, for one reason or another, deaf to each others claims and insights. More specifically, it would mean creating “concrete totalities” (say texts, or syllabi) whose internal complexity aims at creating relevant contrasts, without striving for, or rather actively and consciously rejecting a unifying consensus. Utterances, in other words, those whose very form, style and content reject the false alternative between dogmatism and relativism, and also the false alternative between the unifying and yet often simply destructive charity of the one

⁹ Hermann Levin Goldschmidt. *Philosophie als Dialogik*. Passagen Verlag, Wien; 1993. 266-267; I am indebted to Willi Goetschel for translating this passage.

and only rationality on the one hand, and the, at core desperate praise of incommensurability and empty otherness on the other.

Such a polyphonic philosophy, to be sure, would be a *descriptive philosophy*¹⁰—in contrast to explanatory or foundational. It would neither be a meta- nor an auxiliary “science,” and not inter-disciplinary either, but rather constantly seeking to find that place outside/in, in-between. To achieve that, my hunch is that it would have to constantly change its own auctorial position, depending on its addressees. It would have no method, for there is no method, as all of us know (at least before we enter university) to find the right distance to understand another person, to answer his or her voice, hence, no quick and easy fix of a recipe to create relevant contrast between voices—the same way that there is no recipe to create relevant literature.

I would agree that such a polyphonic activity will have to operate much closer to the (fictive) border to literature than, for example, phenomenology already does. Polyphony would be an ethical and foremost educative approach to philosophy, as it would, at core, be guided by the conviction—and I quote Stanley Cavell here, whom I take to be the most impressive polyphonic philosopher alive—that the willingness to acknowledge differences concerning the fundamental questions of our existence is, as things stand, nothing other than the condition of the possibility of our, of my personal “happiness.”

I quote, or rather, *invoke* the name of Cavell here because his works, like Cassirer’s, Goldschmidt’s and Bakhtin’s, stand for the living possibility of insisting on the ethical importance of alterity without having to embark, in a manner of speaking, on the eternal pilgrimage through the sad swamps of deconstruction-valley.

That such a “polyphonic approach,” lastly, is an ill fit when it comes to institutions, departments of philosophy and the industrial standards that guide “our” academic publications is obvious—and a fact only a fool would complain about. It has, Socrates be my witness, never been otherwise.

So, instead of trying to academize our chosen heroes of today, to fight for their incorporation into the canons and syllabi of higher philosophical education, I think we should simply take them at their word, read them as we would read the letters of an old friend, and then, with the help of their voices (and the voices within their voices), muster courage and simply do the right thing, that is: Start to speak for ourselves.

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¹⁰ I am following here suggestions made by Michael Hampe. See: Michael Hampe, *Das vollkommene Leben - Vier Meditationen über das Leben*, Hanser, Hamburg, 2009, 249 ff.

Dr. Wolfram Eilenberger is a philosopher and writer. He lives, teaches and writes in Toronto, Canada. Latest publications: *Das Werden des Menschen im Wort - Eine Studie zur Kulturphilosophie Michail M. Bachtins*, Chronos, Zurich, 2009; *Kleine Menschen, grosse Fragen - 20 philosophische Geschichten für die Erwachsenen von morgen - und heute*, Berlin Verlag, Berlin, 2009; *Finnen von Sinnen - Von einem der auszog, eine finnische Frau zu heiraten*, Blanvalet, München, 2010.