

The Influence of Mikhail Bakhtin
on the Formation and Development
of the Yale School of Deconstruction

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By

Julio Peiró Sempere

**CAMBRIDGE
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P U B L I S H I N G

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This book is for my daughter, who showed me that a hug is a unique act.

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations represent Bakhtin's writings cited in the book.

Titles in parentheses represent the collections in which the essay can be found. Full bibliographical details can be found in the bibliography section.

- AA "Art and Answerability" (*Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*).
- AH "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" (*Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*).
- BSHR "The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel)" (*Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*).
- DN "Discourse in the Novel" (*The Dialogic Imagination*).
- EN "Epic and Novel" (*The Dialogic Imagination*).
- N70-71 "From Notes Made in 1970-71" (*Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*).
- PCMF "The Problem of Content, Material, and Form in Verbal Art" (*Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*).
- PDP *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*.
- PND "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse" (*The Dialogic Imagination*).
- PSG "The Problem of Speech Genres" (*Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*).
- PT "The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology and the Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analysis" (*Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*).
- RQ "Response to a Question from the *Novy Mir* Editorial Staff" (*Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*).
- TMHS "Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences" (*Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*).
- TPA *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*.

INTRODUCTION

“No, Cassius; for the eye sees not itself
But by reflection some other thing.”
—William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* I, ii

Words are all we are made of

May we be influenced by words we have never heard or read before? If so, how does this influence take place? May we actually feel this influence? Can we actually reject it and get rid of it? Perhaps a more important question runs parallel with this ghostly influence: do we need another person to let us know we are being influenced by somebody else's words? Influence, or as Harold Bloom (1930-) accurately names it, “the anxiety of influence,” is at the centre of human creativity. Literature is probably one of the creative realms where this anxiety may be better perceived. Not only does literary influence lie at the heart of every creative act, but also it should be regarded as a fundamental constituent of every act of response. In this sense, both writers and readers are prey to this “anxiety.” But, as I shall try to convey throughout this comparative reading, these two moments of creation and answering, of writing and reading, are to be merged into one single authorial act. It is precisely this merging that constitutes the main challenge of the present study since it represents one of the main links between the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) and deconstructive criticism. Suffice it to say that the present book is about one of the principal questions within twentieth-century literary theory: the role of the other in literary creation. For Bakhtin, others' voices can be felt everywhere and the presence of these voices can exert a great influence on the perceivers. No wonder Bakhtin once wrote about “barbed words” (PDP, 196). But, what kind of voices is Bakhtin writing about? Must they be interpreted solely in religious terms? May these voices be seen as part of a philosophical project where influence remains at the centre? These are questions that eventually lead to establish a connection between Bakhtin's idea of “intersubjectivity” and one of the most controversial critical movements in Western literary theory: deconstruction. In the 1960s and 70s, Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) introduced the term “deconstruction” to refer to an inner feature hidden

away in every single text which may lead to suggest the impossibility of establishing a stable interpretation for a particular text. The word “deconstruction” spread quickly over the literary arena and became rather popular among scholars, critics, and readers of all persuasions. However, Derrida had not invented anything new. This inner textual feature had presumably been there all along according to deconstructionists such as Paul de Man (1919-1983). Derrida was thought to be the first to write about it. But was he?

The following story may well be regarded as the story of a word—a word that for over 30 years would change the agenda of many literary scholars and critics around the world. The story of a word may seem a petty thing to write a book about but if we think of what constitutes us as humans, I believe language deserves our closest attention. Words are what we are made of. We become social and cultural entities by either addressing our words to others or by answering somebody else’s words. This book is intended to be a word addressed to the person who, in my opinion, actually foresaw the existence of an inner state within texts which would later be known under the term “deconstruction.” I mean Mikhail M. Bakhtin.

A detailed account of how the word “deconstruction” spread so quickly within literary theory greatly exceeds the limits of this book. For this reason, I will concentrate on a set of critics who sketched the basic outline of deconstruction by concentrating upon the role played by the influence of the other in the act of reading. However, some historical details may be worth mentioning.

During the 1960s Thomas S. Kuhn spoke of the ways in which scientific revolutions actually happen and how they affect the shared knowledge on a specific area. Kuhn described the nature of scientific revolutions in terms of their impossibility to adopt previous knowledge into a new set of assumptions thus highlighting the disruption of the common assumptions held by a particular scientific community caused by the advent of a scientific revolution. To some extent, the following study aims to describe the origin and development of one of these “revolutions” within the field of the literary theory. I must say beforehand that the object of study of this revolution may not be regarded as scientific since it rather belongs to the area of human perception and interpretation. The field of literary studies has undergone many a radical change both in scope and methodology over the past decades. One of the most striking swerves was the advent of the New Criticism and its supposedly scientific or at least “objective” approach to the study of literature. However, from the 1970s onwards there was a radical displacement of the methods traditionally used

by literary critics to analyse and interpret a wider scope of discourses ranging from architecture, law, economics, and many other areas. The point of departure for this “revolution”—if I may adopt Kuhn’s terminology—is commonly assumed to be Jacques Derrida’s “deconstruction.” Deconstruction quickly became a formidable tool for the so-called post-structuralist era and its conceptual origin was commonly established in the 1960s and 70s with some references back to the work of Martin Heidegger and Friedrich Nietzsche. Although new paradigms are born after a period of crisis, there should always be a doubt about their actual originality. Between the 1960s and the 1980s, after decades of structuralist analysis, close-reading strategies and text-bound hermeneutics, Western literary studies witnessed the outbreak of a critical trend which was presented under the guise of a new radical displacement of traditionally accepted standpoints in the field of literary studies. This was the case of the emergence of post-structuralism. It was conceived of as an all-encompassing paradigm bringing together movements such as Feminist and Marxist literary criticism, New Historicism, Psychoanalytic criticism and, of course, deconstructive literary criticism or deconstruction. My focus is on the too-easily-taken-for-granted history of the emergence of deconstruction in the American literary context. To be more accurate, I will concentrate on the so-called “Yale School of Deconstruction.”

The notion of deconstructive criticism, taken as the event which occurs in the interaction between a reader and a text, has no specific origin. In fact, as I shall argue in chapter two, it is a recurrent feature of every reading process. However, deconstruction was not thoroughly perceived as a theoretical movement until some guiding principles were established. My intention is to trace back the origins of these principles which eventually led up to constitute the basis for deconstructive reading.

Critical historians up to the present day have repeatedly derived those principles from the writings of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida and his American followers, particularly Paul de Man, Joseph Hillis Miller (1928-), Geoffrey Hartman (1929-), and, in a more controversial way, Harold Bloom. When in 1975 Hillis Miller identified Derrida and de Man as “the School of Deconstruction,” and included Hartman and Bloom as “a new group of critics centered at Yale” (1991b, 115), a sense of identification between Yale and deconstruction was born. The Yale School of deconstructive criticism is by no means a unified group of critics. Critics such as Bloom have repeatedly highlighted their methodological differences. As a matter of fact, Bloom’s self-exclusion and the fact that he has treated deconstruction as one of the branches in what he calls “the school of resentment,” has led literary historians such as Jonathan Arac

(1983) or Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer (1985) to remove his writings from the deconstructive enterprise. However, I believe Bloom's work shares a common concern with other deconstructive critics, namely the introduction of temporality in the process of textual interpretation and the role of past influences in the shape of new textual interpretations. As I shall argue in chapters two and five, this concern and the way it is treated throughout Bloom's writings are a clue to reintroduce Bloom into the Yale group of deconstruction.

The present study is concerned primarily with the historical origins of the principles leading to the recognition of deconstruction as an event taking place in every reading process. To do so, I will concentrate on the development of deconstruction in the field of Western literary criticism. I shall try then to prove that treatises about deconstruction which were published during the 1980s and 90s may not be accurate enough in their account of the origins of the deconstructive principles in the writings of the Yale critics and Jacques Derrida.

American criticism welcomed Jacques Derrida's particular philosophy with varying degrees of scepticism. Either totally rejected, as in the case of Frank Lentricchia or M. H. Abrams, or thought of as a new vitalism in an age of crisis in American literary theory, by J. Hillis Miller, Paul de Man or Geoffrey Hartman, deconstruction was regarded almost as a new paradigm designated to replace the ill-fated American Structuralism. And it proved to be so. A turning point for structuralism took place in 1966 with the symposium held at the Johns Hopkins University.¹ But structuralism also had its own detractors in the East. Bakhtin was one among them. He rejected the formalistic approaches to the study of culture. Paradoxically as it may seem, during the 1960s, some thirty years after Bakhtin's first critiques against the structuralist approaches to literature, the main concern in the American literary field was to test the

¹ The conference title was "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man." Curiously enough, this symposium was supposed to be an attempt to introduce continental structuralist ideas into the American scholarly context. However, it became in turn the stage for Jacques Derrida's first paper to explicitly deal with deconstructive practices: "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." Paul de Man and J. Hillis Miller attended this symposium. Finally, it is worth mentioning the fact that Tzvetan Todorov's paper "Language and Literature" presented in this conference stands as one of the first introductory studies on Mikhail Bakhtin's concern for dialogue as a key feature of the Dostoevsky's novels. Todorov would become crucial in the understanding of Bakhtin in the West.

impact of structuralism on the humanities. However, a change in the perception of the literary work took place during the 1960s and 70s.

During these two decades, deconstruction became the leading movement in a new post-structuralist cultural project, thanks mainly to the introduction of a new terminology and a supposedly new methodology for reading. Either as a response to continental structuralism or to the decline of New Criticism, American deconstruction was easily conceived of as a radical methodological displacement in literary studies. Critical historiography marked the decade of the 1960s as the starting point for this “make-it-new” movement. Accordingly, in his introduction to the first work to be fully devoted to the study of the Yale critics’ writings, Wallace Martin pointed out that “a genetic account of the Yale critics and deconstruction would trace both through the conflicts and complications of the 1960s to their problematic convergence in 1970, when Hartman and de Man published books collecting their earlier writings, and Bloom and Miller set out in new directions” (Arac, Godzich and Martin 1983, xviii). Martin describes Hillis Miller’s methodological change as radically new. This first work on the Yale critics and its successor, Robert Con Davis’ and Ronald Schleifer’s *Rhetoric and Form: Deconstruction at Yale* (1985), were published in the first half of the 1980s when the work of Bakhtin in the West had not been translated in full yet. Retrospectively, historians of criticism have treated American deconstruction as an exclusively Yale product, although some other literary critics such as Barbara Johnson, Joseph N. Riddel or Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak can be ascribed to deconstruction. Despite this, my chief focus will be on the widely acknowledged originality of the ideas and theories stated by Paul de Man, Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman and Harold Bloom. My standpoint throughout this study is better understood if we pay attention to two questions. On the one hand, why has Bakhtin been overlooked in the study of philosophical sources for deconstructive criticism? Whereas too much emphasis has been laid on Western philosophical influences, a much more decisive work for establishing the principles to deconstructive reading has been passed over by critical historians. In chapter one, I speak of the hazardous history of the translation and publication of Bakhtin’s works both in the former USSR and in Western countries as a likely reason for this overlooking of Bakhtin’s philosophy. On the other hand, why do I speak of a taken-for-granted originality? In my opinion, the work of Bakhtin may have foreseen some of the basic tenets upon which deconstruction stands. In this sense, historical studies on the emergence and development of American deconstruction have usually fallen prey to a lack of historical continuity in their approach. It is a fact that although

deep philosophical traditions such as Martin Heidegger's ontology or Friedrich Nietzsche's questioning of Western metaphysics have been reported as likely influences for American deconstruction, some Eastern trends, which I consider decisive, have been constantly omitted. It was Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* (I, 3) who highlighted the necessity "to acquire knowledge of the original causes (for we say we know each thing only when we think we recognize its first cause)." Ironically, the present study aims to signal a new origin for the deconstructive mode of reading practiced by the Yale critics, who, in turn, had rejected the idea of a stable origin.

Deconstructive criticism is hard to define or explain since a rejection of ultimate words is in its very nature. Martin McQuillan, a leading scholar on deconstruction, highlights the deconstructive turn towards the figure of the other—the presence of otherness in the text—and suggests that "deconstruction must always be open to the other, which speaks in the text even before an act of reading has begun [...] A definition of deconstruction (if we really must have such a thing) might be that deconstruction is an act of reading which allows the other to speak" (2000, 6). After reading this preliminary proposal about how deconstruction works and what it is about, one cannot help but thinking immediately of Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogical project for literary studies. Although the first English translation of one of Mikhail Bakhtin's works appeared in 1968, it was not until the late 1970s and 1980s that a truly Bakhtinian school was formed within the American scholarly context. In this regard, in 1975, when Miller was writing about the identification of deconstruction with the works of de Man, Derrida, Bloom and Hartman, he also mentioned in that same article the first English translation of Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and stated that "the strength and applicability of Mikhail Bakhtin's criticism is beginning to be felt" (1991b, 112). It is a fact that the impact of Bakhtin's writings was not totally felt in the Anglo-American context until the 1980s, once the historical studies on the work of the Yale critics had been already published.

Ever since the introduction of Bakhtinian theories in America, the ideas of this Russian philosopher suffered multiple appropriations by different and usually conflicting trends. Bakhtinian concepts such as "dialogue," "carnival," "polyphony," "unfinalizability," or "open-endedness," were employed in diverse ways. From Marxist and Feminist criticism to Multiculturalism, the figure of Mikhail Bakhtin was treated as an ideologist, a sociologist, a literary theorist, a thinker, and so forth. None of these terms would account exclusively for the implications of his work in the mapping out of American deconstruction. However, any historical

approach to the Yale critics and their achievements in American deconstruction which ignores the work of Mikhail Bakhtin is, in my opinion, an incomplete approach. Therefore, the present study intends to define Mikhail Bakhtin's philosophical and ethical approach to the act of interpretation as the forerunner of a deconstructive criticism.

Upon discussing the origins of deconstruction, it is worth mentioning Martin McQuillan's *Deconstruction: a Reader* (2000) where a section on what he considers deconstructive readings *avant la lettre* is provided. McQuillan starts from the premise that deconstruction is no methodological enterprise at all but a special event which occurs in every reading process. As I will try to convey in the following chapters, regarding deconstruction as an event which takes place in every reading process clearly links Bakhtin's work with that of the Yale critics. McQuillan provides a compilation of texts which foresaw the principles of how deconstructive reading works without overtly stating any of them. My intention is to reinstate Bakhtin's writings to this *avant la lettre* deconstructive project and to describe his work as that which proclaimed those principles which in the late 1960s and earlier 1970s were thought of as the radical foundations for deconstruction.

The consequences of my stance are both methodological and epistemological. First, the different approaches to literary criticism which will be analysed throughout the present study are not called into question as regards their hermeneutic effectiveness, but are confronted with a previously developed critical project in order to question their place in the origin of deconstruction. And secondly, this project is set against an historical background which tries to clarify the theoretical foundations of the Yale deconstructive criticism. Obviously, the fact that this study is in the tradition of contemporary history of criticism does not diminish the originality of the multiple theories which will be discussed in the following chapters. My aim is to reveal that a similar way to understand the act of interpretation, namely that discussed by Bakhtin, had been proposed earlier.

Accordingly, the present study aims to demonstrate the following hypothesis: contrary to received knowledge, the principles leading to the Yale critics' deconstructive project may not constitute an entirely radical displacement to literary theory during the 1970s and 80s. On the contrary, these theories can be anticipated in the work of Russian philosopher Mikhail M. Bakhtin—chiefly in his early philosophical writings of the 1920s and 30s. Needless to say, the theories about the act of reading developed by the Yale critics stand as great achievements in the field of literary interpretation. They are cornerstones for the teaching of how to

read and appreciate literature. The work of Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman, Paul de Man and Harold Bloom represent great examples of what love for literature should mean. They stand as a group of critics who shaped a new vision for the role of the reader and of the place of the text in the history of literature. However, many of these deconstructive principles and notions may have been heralded in Bakhtin's early works.

My purpose then is to clarify the foundations of one of the leading critical movements in twentieth-century literary criticism: deconstruction. If deconstruction is to be thought of as a new project aimed at debunking the Western traditional assumptions about literary theory and critical response, then some further research beyond the 1960s should be conducted. We should not believe that deconstruction originated in 1971 with the publication of Paul de Man's *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, or in 1966 with Jacques Derrida's paper "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences."² Evidently, Paul de Man's and Jacques Derrida's introduction of temporality in literary interpretation and its further consequences in depicting repetition and error as functions in any literary response proved to be striking standpoints for an audience trained in the tradition of textual close reading. In addition, a new critical terminology contributed to the creation of an erroneous idea of newness. Perhaps owing to a lack of historical continuity, deconstructive theories by the Yale critics were accepted too readily as radically new developments. I believe this sense of newness can be put on hold if we read the Yale critics' deconstructive writings in the light of Mikhail Bakhtin's early articles on philosophical and literary matters.

In order to demonstrate the hypothesis formulated above, I have structured the present work in two parts: the first section—entitled "Historical Backgrounds"—is preparatory and consists of two chapters. Chapter one may be considered as a state-of-the-art essay on Bakhtinian textual history with particular emphasis on its complex diffusion both in the former USSR and in Western countries, mainly in America. A brief outline of Bakhtin's main concepts and theoretical standpoints is also included. Finally, I embark on a brief discussion of the critical bibliography on Mikhail Bakhtin and his writings, laying particular emphasis on the two main American trends in Bakhtinian studies together with the "French connection," which was of remarkable importance for the introduction of some of Bakhtin's ideas in America.

² Other critics such as Vincent B. Leitch (1983) take the publication of Derrida's *De la grammatologie* in 1967 as the starting point for Deconstruction.

In chapter two I deal with the development of American deconstruction mainly thought of as a Yale product. I discuss two main issues here. First, I focus on the foundation and development of the Yale School of deconstructive critics with particular attention to the case of Harold Bloom and why I believe his writings may be reintroduced within the deconstructive enterprise. Although some critics such as Frank Lentricchia, Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer have persistently denied the adherence of Harold Bloom to this group of Yale, I shall explain why Bloom's poetics of influence can be understood as a sort of archaeological deconstruction which resembles Jacques Derrida's decentring and deferring project as well as Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the answerable utterance or "answerability"—according to Michael Holquist's neologism. And secondly, I outline the different contributions to deconstruction made by the writings of Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman and Harold Bloom together with the main philosophical framework which informed the work of these critics. This second chapter also reviews briefly the mainstream of critical bibliography about American deconstruction and the role played by the Yale critics in the American literary context.

The second part—entitled "Mikhail Bakhtin and the Yale Critics: A Comparative Reading"—consists of four independent chapters, respectively committed to demonstrating the central hypothesis of the book.

In chapter three I try to demonstrate this hypothesis by reading Paul de Man's rhetorical practices in the light of Bakhtin's metalinguistics or translanguistics. Basically, I will try to prove that Paul de Man's use of temporality as a function of language to engender discourse out of discourse was not such a radical displacement in literary theory. It might have seemed so had we not turned our attention to the role played by temporality in the theory of the utterance developed by Bakhtin in articles written during the 1930s such as "Discourse in the Novel" (1934-35), and "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" (1937-38). The logical thread of this third chapter stems from a comparative understanding of the concept of time as a recurrent device for any hermeneutical project. Thus "error," "misreading," "superaddressee," or "answerability" are some of Bakhtin's leading ideas examined in this chapter.

In chapter four I try to prove my hypothesis from two additional angles: first, by discussing the multiple common features found in the use of the concept of "otherness" both in Bakhtin's and Hillis Miller's theories of the novel; and secondly, by focusing on the striking similarities between Bakhtinian literary aesthetics particularly as regards author and hero relationships, and the ideas developed by Hillis Miller in the first half of his career as a critic of Victorian literature—a stage which relied on an

intersubjective description of characters and their relationships in the nineteenth century novel. The main line of argument is supported by a comparison between Bakhtinian “translinguistics” and Miller’s “transindividual-mind” theory along with his “ethics of reading.” If we pay attention to Miller’s assumptions in the first half of his career, it can be assumed that some of his standpoints may stand as a reworking of Bakhtin’s theory of the novel. In fact, when Miller writes in *The Form of Victorian Fiction* (1968) about the interplay of voices and temporal frames within the novel, we are hearing clearly Bakhtin’s polyphonic stance as regards novelistic discourse. Concerning this idea, I will describe how Bakhtin had foreseen this idea some thirty years before in his paramount essay “Discourse in the Novel.”

In short, Bakhtin had already stated the implications of dialogical relations for the nature of the literary work and the process of its interpretation. Although one may argue that Miller’s first writings have nothing to do with his later deconstructive turn, I believe there is a certain degree of continuity between Miller’s former phenomenological criticism and his later deconstructive period, chiefly in his main assumptions on the nature of the literary response as being constantly influenced by the concept of otherness. This is why chapter four starts from Miller’s first writings on the Victorian period and then moves to his later and more explicit deconstructive writings which are grounded on his “ethics of reading.” Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer (1985) described Miller’s deconstructive criticism as somehow contradictory. Whereas he posits the problem of the text as a unique source for meaning, he also discusses the reader’s free will to decipher or interpret it. However contradictory these two stances may seem, both of them fall under Bakhtin’s description of the text as a sort of utterance which has neither a beginning nor an end, but keeps on leaving traces for its further reinterpretation or temporal reinscription.

This temporal reinscription is the link to establish a comparative reading between Bakhtin’s notion of “superaddressee” and Harold Bloom’s poetics of influence. Accordingly, in chapter five I discuss the controversial figure of Harold Bloom, his theory of poetic influence, and his polemic adscription to the Yale school of deconstruction. I therefore examine the implications of Bloom’s poetics for deconstruction and its formal similarities with Bakhtin’s dialogical enterprise. Bloom’s presence in the Yale group is polemical in at least two ways. First of all, Harold Bloom himself has repeatedly rejected his belonging to this group; and secondly, it has been traditionally accepted that his work does not fall under any deconstructive mode of reading. In response to these objections,

the first half of chapter five tries to demonstrate that Harold Bloom's poetics can stand closely related to a Derridean deconstructive understanding of time and its consequences for the process of literary interpretation. Furthermore, a concern for a new understanding of time as a recurrent function in poetic imagination and its further implications both in the creative and in the process of interpretation mark a firm connection between Bloom's poetics and Bakhtin's theory of the utterance. To demonstrate the hypothesis which underpins the present work, I will point out the echoes of Bakhtin's early philosophical treatises throughout Bloom's development of his poetics of influence. Traditionally, the main argument upon studying deconstructive criticism has been the rhetorical and elusive nature of language itself. However, a new understanding of the concept of time and its consequences for the process of intertextuality must be introduced as main issues for deconstructive criticism as well. Bloom and Bakhtin shared a concern for a theory of time in order to produce a suitable theoretical framework to develop a poetics of influence and a theory of human knowledge, respectively.

Finally, in chapter six I read Geoffrey Hartman's concern for mediation and memory in literature in the light of Bakhtin's ethical project. Together with Paul de Man, Hartman was also inclined to think of temporality as an evolving feature of literary discourse, which resulted in the acceptance of reinscription as the main quality of literary meaning. Hartman's criticism is concerned primarily with the existence of a whole set of entangled voices in the literary text—a labyrinth readers must address their critical questions to. In this sense, I will compare his concern for mediation with Bakhtin's description of the multiple accentuality in the literary word especially as he suggests that "the trajectory of the poetic word toward its own object and toward the unity of language is a path along which the poetic word is continually encountering someone else's word, and each takes new bearings from the other" (DN, 331). As I have already stated, Bakhtin's ethical description of the act of interpretation is thoroughly based on a new and deeper understanding of what the concept of reaccentuating the literary word means. Taking this premise as point of departure, in chapter six I also discuss Bakhtin's and Hartman's common standpoint regarding the task of the reader-critic in the process of deciphering the multilayered nature of the text. From all this, several conclusions about the ignored role of Mikhail Bakhtin's work in the shaping of American deconstruction can be drawn. On the one hand, deconstruction was commonly thought of as a post-structuralist Western phenomenon which did not exist in any form prior to the 1960s. On the other hand, the introduction within the field of literary theory of a new

understanding of temporality along with a renewed importance for the figure of the other were taken as original achievements granted by the advent of post-structuralism with no actual reference to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin.

If deconstruction was thought of as a new radical enterprise, then we should pay attention to Jacques Derrida's words in "The Ends of Man" where he suggests that "a radical trembling can only come from the outside" (1982, 134). Deconstruction was thoroughly perceived as this new radical displacement. However, if displacement comes from the outside, then some more importance should have been bestowed upon one of the leading theorists of the "outside": Mikhail M. Bakhtin. The present study attempts to restore a sense of newness to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin.

PART I

HISTORICAL BACKGROUNDS

CHAPTER ONE

BAKHTIN'S WORKS: SOME INITIAL REMARKS

"I am not only witty in myself, but the cause that wit is in other men."
—William Shakespeare, *Henry IV* (Part II), I, ii

The "Disputed Texts"

One of the main issues to be faced by any scholar devoted to the study of Bakhtin's writings is that of the authorship of the so-called "disputed texts." Even today, the controversy is still alive since no philological conclusion seems to suit any of the different standpoints taken by Bakhtin scholars. The life and transmission of Bakhtin's works could be described as hazardous and, although the present study has no philological purpose and, consequently, does not try to shed light on this topic, some general remarks on the reception of Bakhtin's works in the West along with the use of these "disputed texts" throughout this book should be made.

The present chapter has two purposes. First, it presents an introduction to the main issues at stake in Bakhtinian textology and a timeline of the English translations of Bakhtin's writings. Therefore, I try to convey a clearer picture for the understanding and reception of Bakhtin in the American context during the post-structuralist era. Secondly, it provides some introductory remarks on Bakhtin's main theoretical concerns like the concept of "dialogism," the ethical tenet of "addressivity," and the epistemological consequence of "unfinalizability." My purpose is to present these as the seeds for an *avant la lettre* deconstructive criticism and thus demonstrate the hypothesis of the present research.

The question of the disputed authorship was raised by Vyacheslav Vs. Ivanov in an endnote to a 1970 article where he clearly stated that Mikhail Bakhtin was the author of the main "disputed texts": *Freudianism: A Critical Sketch* (1927), and *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929), which had been published under the name of Valentin Voloshinov; and *The Formal Method* (1928), published under the name of Pavel Medvedev. According to Ivanov (1976, 366; endnote 101),

Voloshinov and Medvedev “made only small insertions and changes in particular parts.” Additionally, other texts apart from these books are of dubious authorship as well. Other disputed texts published under the name of Voloshinov are “Discourse in Life and Discourse in Poetry” (1926), and “The Latest Trends in Linguistic Thought in the West” (1928). Under the name of Pavel Medvedev there are doubts about “The Immediate Tasks Facing Literary-historical Science” (1928), and “The Formal Morphological Method or Scholarly Salierism” (1925). Finally, a much less controversial article published under the name of I. I. Kanaev is “Contemporary Vitalism” (1926), which has been claimed to be written by Bakhtin himself although, according to Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan (2013), the help of biologist I. I. Kanaev seemed necessary. Although the major debates are around the three books mentioned earlier, Nikolai Nikolaev has proved that these articles are the key to unfolding clues that will eventually lead to the end of this controversy. For instance, Nikolaev presupposes that the writing of “Discourse in Life” “represents the first articulation of a new substantive theory that Bakhtin developed more systematically in his books of the 1920s” (2000, 91). Nikolaev is therefore assessing a methodology of mutual influence among Bakhtin’s texts themselves so as to conclude that the writing of a particular text may have influenced the development of similar ideas in later compositions. Besides, Nikolaev uses the same method in reverse. Thus, he credits Bakhtin as the author of “Scholarly Salierism” for instance on the basis of an analysis of a previously written article “The Problem of Content, Material and Form in Verbal Creation” (1924). Nikolaev (2000, 89) concludes that “‘Scholarly Salierism’ reproduces, *mutatis mutandis*, the fundamental problematic and concepts of ‘The Problem of Content,’ as well as some of its stylistic peculiarities. All this constitutes evidence only of Bakhtin’s authorship.” This is just a small sample of how slippery this controversy has become. In the West, the debate around this issue has increased up to a point where two groups of scholars can be distinguished. On the one hand, scholars who credit Bakhtin to be the author of the “disputed texts” are led by Michael Holquist’s and Katerina Clark’s pioneering biography of Mikhail Bakhtin (1984). This was the first biography to be published in the West and did open ground for a unified vision of Bakhtin’s work. However, later research has claimed that some of the biographical facts given along the book may be misleading, especially those concerned with Bakhtin’s academic career.¹ Holquist’s and Clark’s standpoint for

¹ In 1998 Peter Hitchcock edited *Bakhtin/Bakhtin: Studies in the Archive and beyond*—a special issue on new material from the Bakhtin archives. In this issue, Ken Hirschkop (1998) and Brian Poole (1998) argued against some of the “myths”

claiming Bakhtin's authorship rests upon some alleged declarations by Bakhtin himself to Thomas Winner about him being the author of the disputed texts. Besides, Holquist and Clark indirectly mention that Bakhtin's wife had once recalled how Bakhtin had dictated the book on Freud to her. Despite these evidences, neither Morson and Emerson nor Ken Hirschkop believe there is solid ground for trusting Bakhtin's confession since he had already hinted at the opposite possibility. Hirschkop (1998, 581) wonders about this impasse and concludes by saying that "when Bakhtin confessed to his friend (and later, his literary executor) Sergei Bocharov that he had written the disputed texts, was he again going along with a myth he had no interest in rebutting?"

Some scholars like Ken Hirschkop or David Shepherd believe this debate is pointless today since no direct proof of Bakhtin's authorship can be tested to be completely accurate. However, as Gary Saul Morson (1986b) has pointed out, there is a whole economic enterprise behind the figure of Bakhtin: the so-called "Bakhtin Industry." To some extent, Bakhtin has become one of the leading thinkers in Western culture. His writings have been claimed by theoretical movements of all persuasions. Among these movements there is Marxist literary theory. Crediting Bakhtin for being the author of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* may be a useful strategy to gain *momentum* and authority. Ironically, it is precisely the Marxist character of the book that Morson and Emerson (1990) use to discard Bakhtin's authorship. Although Bakhtin presumably exerted an influence on Voloshinov and Medvedev, his writings are not as thoroughly Marxist as those by Voloshinov and Medvedev.

As a result of this debate, Bakhtin's controversial Marxism has been used by both sides of the debate. But the problem does not end here. A more intriguing consequence of this dispute over Bakhtin's presumed authorship is the distortion generated among American scholars in the reception of Bakhtin's ideas. We find an example of this in Hillis Miller's *The Ethics of Reading* (1987). In this book, Miller discusses Bakhtin's encompassing nature of the word in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* but the endnote refers to Voloshinov as the author (Miller 1987,

built around the figure of Bakhtin. Along with accusations of plagiarism, Bakhtin was proved to have borrowed some biographical facts from his brother Nikolai. For example, Hirschkop reveals that Bakhtin might have actually attended the University of Petrograd but he did so without registering formally. Even with this new biographical material, Hirschkop concludes that we cannot answer the question of the "disputed texts" seriously since Bakhtin seemed to play around this issue by both confessing and rejecting his authorship at the same time.

6-7; see also endnote 3 on page 129). This accounts for the prevalence of the Holquist-Clark hypothesis at that time.

Today, the disputed texts have become part of a more encompassing canon known as *The Bakhtin Circle Writings*. Although it was Bakhtin himself who first spoke of a "Bakhtin Circle," this idea has grown up around *The Bakhtin Centre*, located at the University of Sheffield. Nowadays, Bakhtin's ideas are discussed in the light of his friends' ideas and are thus analysed within a deeper philosophical context which includes other members of the "Bakhtin Circle" such as Voloshinov, Medvedev and Lev Pumpianskii, though Matvei Kagan and Mariia Iudina are mentioned as well as essential members of the group. Examples of this encompassing approach are Craig Brandist's *The Bakhtin Circle* (2002) where he foremost discusses philosophical influences such as Ernst Cassirer or Georg Simmel's *Lebensphilosophie* that led Bakhtin to adopt some of his ideas, especially in the earlier writings about the "I-other" relationship; and Craig Brandist's collective volume *The Bakhtin Circle: In the Master's Absence* (2004) whose main concern was to shed light upon the less known members of the Bakhtin Circle, and to grant access to some new archival material of works by Voloshinov. The acceptance of the "Bakhtin Circle" terminology means that, though the dispute may not be over yet, it has come to a dead end until new evidence is unearthed. In fact, a very significant example of the current state of knowledge is the compilation of a complete Russian edition of Bakhtin's works under the supervision of Sergei Bocharov and L. A. Gogotishvili. In a 1998 review article, professor Craig Brandist outlined the general plan of this monumental work and highlighted the publication of the disputed texts in volume VII to be entitled: "Works of the 'Bakhtin Circle'" (1998, 108 for the plan of the work).

But what is the thematic emphasis of the disputed texts? A thorough discussion of the whole canon would exceed by far the limits of this initial chapter. However, I believe some remarks should be made regarding *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929) and *The Formal Method* (1928). The book on Marxism is a treatise on the nature of ideology and its implications for human communication. Voloshinov discusses the capacity of the word to undergo ideological changes and to become the means to recreate ideological purposes. Voloshinov is putting a strong emphasis on the role of the word, as Bakhtin did when he wrote "Discourse in the Novel" in 1934-35. From this period on, the intersubjective nature of the word would become a leading preoccupation in Bakhtin's writings. Evaluative accentuation or intonation in the word is an idea developed in *Marxism* and in "Discourse in the Novel" as well. In fact, Voloshinov

(1986, 22) wrote that “an item must acquire first of all interindividual significance.” It is curious how Bakhtin modelled this same idea some five years later when he wrote that “the trajectory of the poetic word toward its own object and toward the unity of language is a path along which the poetic word is continually encountering someone else’s words, and each takes new bearings from the other” (DN, 331). It seems clear enough that Bakhtin and Voloshinov had continual debates over similar philosophical issues and this is reflected in striking similarities between the “disputed texts” and Bakhtin’s writings. In addition, this work can be said to prepare the ground for a new methodology for the study of the utterance. Bakhtin would develop this idea later as the “heteroglossia” theory, which will be discussed later on this chapter.

On the other hand, *The Formal Method* stands as a critique of the materialist poetics defended by Formalists. Neither Medvedev nor Bakhtin were interested in the means to create a work of art but in the way a work of art is perceived or aestheticised. Perception of wholeness is the root for Bakhtin’s later genre theory. Against the technical view held by the Russian formalists, Bakhtin regarded genre as a particular vision of a milieu, as a compendium of social interactions and voices that can shape a social consciousness. *The Formal Method* is thus a critique of a mechanical vision of literature on behalf of the formalists. Whether Bakhtin wrote it or not, *The Formal Method* is clearly a foundation for Bakhtin’s later writings, especially those devoted to the chronotope theory.

At the beginning of this initial chapter, I stated that none of the disputed texts would be used throughout this research since no final evidence to account for Bakhtin’s undisputed authorship has been reported. The present study has a very specific purpose and, though some of the ideas discussed in the disputed texts could help to support the hypothesis that Bakhtin formulated an *avant la lettre* deconstructive literary theory, I finally decided to discard these texts as evidence in order to be as accurate as possible with the currently undisputed Bakhtinian canon.

The reception of Bakhtin’s texts in the West

The following section deals with Bakhtin’s canonical texts and deliberately disregards the disputed texts as aforementioned. To trace the history of the translations of Bakhtin’s texts in the West is a rather complex task. My intention is to briefly outline the late emergence of the figure of Bakhtin in Western culture, mainly in the USA, England and France, and how this delay helps to explain why Bakhtin has been

erroneously omitted in the historical tracing of the conceptual origins for deconstructive criticism.

The first translation of one of Bakhtin's works in America took place in 1968 when a special issue of *Yale French Studies* published an excerpt of Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*.² Scholars such as Gary Saul Morson have pointed to this first translation of the Rabelais book as the main source for the distortion which Bakhtin's ideas have suffered in the West. Since this book is a thorough study of the function of laughter and carnival in medieval societies, Morson asserts that a stereotype of anarchist and free-thinker has been created around the figure of Bakhtin. In fact, Morson is right since the outlined ideas about deconstructing hierarchies have found theoretical continuity in movements such as Cultural Materialism or Renaissance Studies.³ As we can see, either in the linguistic context with

² *Yale French Studies* 41 (September, 1968), 124-132. It was an extract entitled "The role of games in Rabelais" from *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Hélène Iswolsky (The MIT Press, 1968).

³ The current literary appreciation of Bakhtin is so widespread that it would require a complete volume to deal with it. First of all, I must cite the rich and valuable annotated bibliography compiled by Carol Adlam and David Shepherd (2000). Far from exhausting the subject, I would like to mention some studies which I believe necessary to understand the current appropriation of Bakhtin undertaken by so-called Cultural Studies. See for example David Shepherd and Ken Hirschkop (eds.), *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002); Thomas J. Farrell, *Bakhtin and Medieval Voices* (Miami: University Press of Florida, 1996). The use of Bakhtin's philosophy has been depicted in two main ways. First, it was exploited from an ethical and religious perspective. Some remarkable works are Susan Felch and Paul J. Contino (eds.), *Bakhtin and Religion: A Feeling for Faith* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001); Hilary B. P. Bagshaw, *Religion in the Thought of Mikhail Bakhtin: Reason and Faith* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013); Ruth Coates, *Christianity in Bakhtin: God and the Exiled Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and Valerie Z. Nollan (ed.), *Bakhtin: Ethics and Mechanics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2004). Chief among them is the idea that aesthetic vision can only come out from a loving desire for the object experienced. Secondly, Bakhtin's sociolinguistic ground-breaking ideas are analysed in relation to Shakespeare's plays in James R. Siemon's *Word against Word: Shakespearean Utterances* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002). Siemon's challenge is to draw a comparison between the socially entangled view of language defended by Bakhtin and the vision held in England during the sixteenth century. To push the question of Bakhtin and the English Renaissance literature further, we find Bakhtin's theory of carnival applied in Ronald Knowles (ed.), *Shakespeare and Carnival: After Bakhtin* (London: Macmillan, 1998) and in Rocco Coronato, *Jonson Versus Bakhtin: Carnival and the Grotesque* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003).

his idea of what metalinguistics may be, or in the field of literary studies with his premises on the ethical and interactive relationship between subject-readers, texts and time, the work of Bakhtin has turned into an inexhaustible resource for theoretical tenets and ideas later to be applied in manifold cultural fields. This idea accounts for the number of multidisciplinary studies on Bakhtin which are growing at a fast pace and leading to the creation of a heterogeneous image of Bakhtin.

Although I have quoted the Rabelais book as one of the first works by Bakhtin to be introduced in the West, this is not the first occurrence of the figure of Bakhtin in the American academic context. In 1966, Tzvetan Todorov gave a lecture entitled “Language and Literature” at the Johns Hopkins International Symposium *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*. Todorov introduced one of Bakhtin’s leading ethical concepts—dialogue—in consonance with the study of Dostoevsky’s characters. The importance of Tzvetan Todorov for the broad reach of Bakhtin is even more evident in the American context since his work *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle* (originally published in 1981) was one of the first studies which tried to provide a comprehensive vision of Bakhtin’s work. It is worth mentioning that Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man and Joseph Hillis Miller attended this symposium at the Johns Hopkins University. Although it is likely to think that by this date neither de Man nor Miller had read Bakhtin, the introduction of Bakhtinian philosophy into the American literary context was about to happen. Indeed, the Rabelais book was published in English in 1968 and it was followed by *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, which was translated and published in 1973.⁴ The Dostoevsky book is of crucial importance since it conveys a new sense of semantic unfinalizability or “multiple ambiguity of every phenomenon.” Bakhtin is here underpinning the basis for a theory of knowledge which would be grounded in his early philosophical assertions of the 1920s. This theory of knowledge is based on the role of the utterance and the novelistic word and it encompasses in an embryonic manner the fundamental features of deconstructive criticism: first, the text is thought of as a battleground of traces and semantic layers which can only take shape in a temporal axis by means of a reading process; and second, Bakhtin presents in greater detail his theory of dialogue—

where the widely known idea of the grotesque in the history of literature is analysed in the light of Bakhtin and Ben Jonson.

⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, translated by R. W. Rotsel (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1973). This English edition of the Dostoevsky book is a translation of the 1963 Russian expanded edition of the first version of the work entitled *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Creative Art* (1929).

dialogism as Michael Holquist would call it—and further develops the idea of “unfinalizability” which will play a decisive role in what I will report as “dialogical hermeneutics” or Bakhtin’s *avant la lettre* deconstructive criticism.

In the meantime, literary theorists were witnessing the outbreak of deconstruction in America. The publication of Paul de Man’s *Blindness and Insight* (1971; 1983 2nd ed.) together with the English translations of Jacques Derrida’s *De la grammatologie*, and *L’écriture et la différence* (both originally published in French in 1967) were clear evidence that literary theory was about to face a radically different methodology. However, no matter how different this methodology may be regarded, it was not the radical displacement that it was claimed to be. To the extent that Bakhtin’s works were not yet totally available in America, historians of literary criticism would not take into consideration Bakhtin’s writings in relation to the development of American deconstruction. This lack stems from the fact that the bulk of Bakhtin’s writings, including his early philosophical treatises, were translated and published in America during the 1980s. In this regard, Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson published in 1981 *The Dialogic Imagination*, an indispensable collection of articles on Bakhtin’s understanding of the novelistic word and the concept of “chronotope.” This collection brings to the forum the fundamental article “Discourse in the Novel,” which was written in 1934-35. “Discourse in the Novel” is a cornerstone in the understanding of the Bakhtinian word and its relation to the process of semantic openness. Here, Bakhtin develops the idea that the word is the carrier of the semantic shifts to be deciphered and changed by readers. In speaking of semantic openness, Bakhtin already advances the concept of trace as an inner feature of every word, utterance and text. The trace allows for multiple changes in meaning which are performed along a temporal axis. In addition, time and space mingle in the text to create a particular view of the world—an idea Bakhtin would later use to classify literary genres. Every milieu develops its own chronotope and its own literary genres, and this development is performed through the interindividual character of the word. In chapter four, I will discuss this idea in relation to Joseph Hillis Miller’s hermeneutics of the otherness.

The notion of “chronotope” also establishes the groundwork for Bakhtin’s “theory of the act.” Correspondingly, every act is essentially directed towards the other and it represents an act of creative response. According to Morson and Emerson, the chronotope provides the perfect context for the performance of every act (thought, dialogue, gesture, interpretation, and so on) since “a chronotope is a way of understanding

experience; it is a specific form-shaping ideology for understanding the nature of events and actions” (1990, 367). Reading is conceived of as an act of creative response and as such it must then be contextualised in time and space—in a particular chronotope or worldview. Despite the importance of the publication of *The Dialogic Imagination*, the understanding of Bakhtinian philosophy within the American literary context was still fragmentary since none of his early philosophical texts had been translated yet. In 1986, Holquist and Emerson published *M.M. Bakhtin: Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. In the introduction, Holquist gives some information about the reception of Bakhtin in America and poses, though not overtly, the problem of the marketplace, the rise of Bakhtin, and the controversy of the authorship of the “disputed texts.” For the purpose of my investigation, this volume grants access to two significant texts: “The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology, and the Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analysis,” written in 1959-61, and “From Notes Made in 1970-71.” The text as the interplay of thoughts, words, and utterances was an idea that Bakhtin had been discussing since the early 1930s. It is now in “The Problem of the Text” that he responds to some of the questions posited in “Discourse in the Novel.” Is there a relation between texts? If so, of what sort? Bakhtin concludes that texts behave like utterances, that is, they respond to each other in dialogic relationships whose chief consequence is their mutual influence. Bakhtin explains that utterances cannot be regarded as mere “units of the text” but are part of a higher structure which involves a “contextual meaning” which “requires a responsive understanding, one that includes evaluation” (PT, 125). A text, like an utterance, is a “reactive” entity, is an act of “creative response.” Only in interaction can a text become meaningful and only after the reading process may a text come to life since according to Bakhtin, “the possibilities and perspectives embedded in the word; they are essentially infinite” (PT, 120). As it will be analysed in chapter three, Paul de Man would convey in *Blindness and Insight* (1971; 1983 2nd ed.) his theory on the critical insight and the impossibility of gaining definitive access to a textual truth on very similar philosophical grounds as those developed by Bakhtin some three decades before. Although Bakhtin does not speak of insight but rather of “depth of understanding,” I will try to equate the implications of both interpretative tenets in chapter three. Paul de Man grounded his defence of the impossibility of achieving an ultimate interpretation on the infinite nature of the reading act—an act of creation which in turn means a response to a previous act. For Bakhtin too, every word, utterance and text is a response to previous acts. This similar understanding of the interpretative act is developed in “From Notes Made