

INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT HOMESICKNESS. It offers a portrait of Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895–1975) under Western eyes, as it were, as a thinker grappling with the question of ethics on the ruins of both the Cartesian and the metaphysical traditions; impelled by the movement of his own interrogation into an engagement with literature as another way of knowing; and straddling an unbridgeable divide between ideological secularity and a profound temperamental religiosity. Premised on a nomadic, deterritorialized conception of subjectivity, this reading of Bakhtin’s exilic philosophical sensibility does not end in a “homecoming festival” (TMHS, 170).¹ It leads, at most, to a provisional home away from home, a precarious foothold rather than firm anchorage.

The book is also an attempt to put a Bakhtinian approach to the humanities into practice, to follow the modes of textual engagement explicitly or implicitly suggested by his work, and to take the liberties—risky but unavoidable—required to amplify and flesh out both his philosophical outlook and the method it generates. “Understanding,” Bakhtin writes, is a “correlation [of the given text] with other texts and reinterpretation in a new context (in my own context, in a contemporary context, and in a future one).” The task of commentary is, then, to reach out and enable the work to exceed its own boundaries through interaction with other, remote texts and contexts (TMHS, 161).² I believe

that this conception of the interpreter's work should be taken as a directive for reading Bakhtin's own writings on their borderlines, as it were, in contact with and through other texts, unknown to him, but responsive to the same anxieties addressed by his work.

This study thus aims to reconstruct a coherent Bakhtinian theory of subjectivity by tracing some conceptual strands through the various phases of his work, weaving them into an ongoing philosophical conversation with the contemporary European thinkers Henri Bergson, Emmanuel Lévinas, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. These four thinkers, I suggest, set out from similarly "exilic" points of departure and move along parallel and sometimes intersecting philosophical itineraries, and a reading of their works with and through each other may highlight both their respective insights and their impasses.

If the value of philosophizing lies, as Michael Theunissen writes, in its risking failure by "venturing upon the unthought"; and if it is the hallmark of this kind of venture to be less than whole and sometimes riddled with ambivalence or inconsistency, it may make a virtue out of necessity by "[drawing] the interpreter more deeply into its movement than a complete, unequivocal doctrine ever could" (*The Other*, 363–64). Bakhtin's work, radically unsystematic and often apparently at odds with itself, is truly philosophical in this sense, and its "internal open-endedness," of which he is fully and unapologetically aware (accounting for it in terms of his "love for variations and for a diversity of terms for a single phenomenon. The multiplicity of focuses. Bringing distant things closer without indicating the intermediate links" [N70–71, 155]),³ should thus be seen, not as an obstacle to neat theorizing, but as an open invitation. This very "unreadiness" calls for an answering note, an acknowledgment of a task—philosophical midwifery—to be undertaken on the part of the responsive reader.

But midwifery is a labor fraught with both risk and excitement. On the risk side, it should be said at the outset, Bakhtin does not propose a theory of the subject of ethics, or, for that matter, any other grand theory, and the difficulties of distilling a coherent theory out of his eclectic surviving essays are inherent in his work, inasmuch as a suspicion of system-building is built into his philosophical/anthropological outlook. Bakhtin does not attempt to subsume various projects under broader conceptual frameworks. He rarely cites his own previous writ-

ings, and he is, above all, overtly skeptical about traditional philosophical “theoreticism,” as he called it. This antipathy to system-building may account for the apparent shifts of focus or position between his essays, his tendency to use different terms for ostensibly similar concepts, the looseness, not to say fuzziness, of his neologisms, and the internal inconsistencies that loom large over any attempt to homogenize his work. More frustratingly still, Bakhtin himself is thought to have been singularly cavalier about the physical preservation of his own work: the now-famous vignette about him smoking away the manuscript of the book on the *Bildungsroman*, which may or may not be pure myth, is symptomatic of the kind of lore that developed (and may have also been, at least to some extent, cultivated) around his life and his work.

These temperamental and ideological difficulties are compounded, of course, by Bakhtin’s historical and biographical circumstances; the turbulence of exile, illness, and war; life under brutal state censorship and terror, where any and all articulations—what could be written and what could only be gestured at, what had to be carefully clothed in Aesopean language, and what had to be covered up by other voices—were literally a matter of life and death. Some of his work was probably lost, destroyed, or simply unpublished; some of it may have been published under different names or as a collaborative effort; and some may have been written “under a mask,” overlaid by a protective and inevitable layer of Soviet-style political correctness. It is no wonder, then, that Bakhtin’s work could generate diametrically opposite ideological readings and be happily endorsed by readers who position themselves in fiercely opposing ideological camps. Given these difficulties, it is the task of this Introduction to account for the sense of excitement that has made the risk of midwifery worth taking.

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While a full survey of the history of Bakhtin’s reception in the West would be both cumbersome and redundant, a brief comment may serve to foreground the approach offered in this volume. The 1980s canonization of Bakhtin as an early prototype of the late twentieth-century cultural regime, heralded by Julia Kristeva’s introductory essays in 1969 and 1970, was inspired by texts chiefly written by Bakhtin over a period of approximately twelve years, between 1929 and 1941. Ostensibly con-

cerned with poetics, but ranging far wider into a territory of their own, the thrust of these works, which have yielded the Bakhtinian concepts of dialogue, polyphony, heteroglossia, and the carnivalesque, is, to use his term, “centrifugal”—radically anti-authoritarian, anti-theological, and anti-closural. Read out of context, they appear to anticipate some of the philosophical parameters of the postmodernist pantheon to which they admitted Bakhtin, with its focus on discursivity, militant de-authoring of meaning, and debunking of master narratives.

This wholesale assimilation was dearly purchased. The most obvious loss, unsurprisingly lamented by Russian scholars, was the specificity of Bakhtin’s historical and cultural embeddedness: “critical theory inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin has rapidly outpaced the identification of the historical subject who lived from 1895 to 1975,” Nicholas Rzhevsky writes.⁴ But not only the vexed issues of authorial presence and historical context were at stake in this process of conceptual domestication. Even if one grants the legitimacy of historical decontextualization, which may, after all, yield surprising and suggestive conceptual synergies and is quite in keeping with the Bakhtinian imperative of linking remote texts, it seems that in the case of Bakhtin’s early reception, the appropriative embrace was enabled by a silencing of Bakhtin’s other, “centripetal” voice, which so clearly emerges from the earlier papers, written between 1919 and 1924, but published in the Soviet Union only in the 1970s and 1980s (following Bakhtin’s rehabilitation and the publication of the later works), and translated in the West only in the early 1990s.

The translation of the earlier essays into English and their publication in the West initially met with what can only be described as scholarly silence. And while there may have been a number of reasons for this delayed response—the notorious slowness of academic publication mechanisms, or a certain waning of the Bakhtinian vogue in the academic marketplace—it seems that there was more to the avoidance than these relatively trivial explanations would account for. Indeed, these texts, and particularly “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” appeared to be diametrically opposed to what had been accepted at the time as the Bakhtinian outlook, and much less compatible with the spirit of postmodernity. Readers who had formed their view of Bakhtin in light of his published works on Dostoyevsky and Rabelais may well have found the early works profoundly embarrassing.⁵

The response to these early texts finally came through at the International Bakhtin Conference in Moscow in 1995, which marked a watershed in Bakhtin's reception, since it triggered a shift from a literary to a philosophical engagement with his work, rekindled the issue of the "disputed texts," and opened up a whole new arena for conflicting interpretations and new sets of opposing ideological camp formations. Most of these ideological conflicts seem to have lost momentum and exhausted themselves by now, and I do not attempt to rehearse or resuscitate them here, but it is still worth noting that the elasticity, or apparent fuzziness, of Bakhtin's thinking, his loose use of his own neologisms, and his temperamental aversion to theoretical systems have enabled the endorsement of his work in the name of postmodernist, humanist-liberal, neo-Marxist, and Orthodox Christian thought. Perhaps it is also this very elasticity that accounts for the waning of interest in Bakhtin—at least as far as can be gleaned from counting academic articles and books—since around the turn of the twenty-first century.

What is offered in this study, then, is the work of a latecomer in more than one sense, and it definitely has its own agenda. While the difficulties, both internal and external, of distilling or reconstructing a coherent reading of Bakhtin's oeuvre cannot and should not be swept aside, I believe that he is neither a maverick nor the "broken thinker" to whom Anthony Wall alluded in 1998, and that his approach to the humanities should also be followed in engaging with his own texts. Through the various phases of his work, Bakhtin seems to return to the same persistent and overarching questions in various guises, but there is no apparent sequential evolution or a grand synthesis of these phases. Indeed, he is a thinker who is not interested in plots, and still less so in master plots. Hence, neither the teleological model nor any of the other homogenizing paradigms, whether "structural" or "embryonic," noted by Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson in their study *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (4–9) would serve as an apt description of the organizing principle of this book. We should, indeed, keep in mind that for Bakhtin, the road not taken invariably remains in sight as a viable option. But (as Morson and Emerson's own work suggests) Bakhtin's aversion to system-building does not rule out the search for a different, nonsystemic type of cohesion in his work. Rather than follow the different phases of a journey, this study is concerned with a

profound ambivalence that lies at its very core. I believe that listening to Bakhtin's voice through other voices and relating his interrogation of ethical subjectivity to the quest of his contemporaries in the West may help us take on board both his nostalgia and his invincible drive for freedom and bring us a little closer to our own immanent alterity.

THE SUBJECT IN QUESTION

Engagement with subjectivity, rather than with "the Subject," as announced in the title of this book, may invite the charge of a certain confusion of terms, but it is, I believe, mandated by the issues at stake. The turn from abstract philosophical formulations of the human subject to the concrete dynamics of subjectivity—the actual experience of embodied personhood, in and of this world—is premised on the conception of the subject as a being that questions itself, whose very mode of being is interrogative. If philosophy is "a struggle over pronouns," to borrow Maurice Natanson's wise aphorism ("The Schematism of Moral Agency," 13), it is, I suggest, precisely the struggle in which Bakhtin's work engages by turning from philosophy to literature, where self-interrogation may be best heard and performed. Like similar constructions of the genitive, the "question of the subject" is riddled with ambiguity: is it the subject as an entity that is discussed and questioned, or the subject as s/he who is asking the question? Far from accidental, this ambiguity is precisely what is at stake in Bakhtin's work on the subject of philosophical and literary discourse.

Lest this sound like an opening gambit in a postmodernist project, it must be noted at the outset that the "question of the subject" was on the table long before the mid-twentieth century, certainly as early as or perhaps earlier than Saint Augustine's "I have become a problem for myself" (*Confessions*, 222–23). To understand the philosophical tradition in which Bakhtin's work is embedded, we need to engage for a moment, if only sketchily, with this remote but entirely relevant context.

The Cartesian Subject, resident ghost of so much twentieth-century thinking, is so thoroughly familiar by now that it seems almost redundant to rehearse the standard account of this powerful and ubiquitous presence—almost, but not quite, for Descartes had his own specters to contend with, most notably that of Michel de Montaigne, the last

of the great Renaissance humanists. Rather than repeat the received (and probably mostly justified) view of Descartes as a standard fixture or bouncing board for postmodern thinking, we may do well to look backward for a moment and listen to the irrepressible voice of Montaigne, whose looming presence Descartes had set out to exorcise in his own work. Both Montaigne and Descartes ostensibly embark on projects of introspection and self-narration, but the gap between them is nowhere wider than at the point where they try to offer these accounts of themselves, facing each other from the opposing sides of what I call here the “great divide.”

Montaigne’s point of departure may sound like an echo of Augustine’s interrogation of selfhood, but the subsequent itinerary is very different: the Augustinian homecoming, the resolution or the nullification of the question in the embrace of religion, is no longer available to Montaigne, who insists: “I study myself more than any other subject. That is my metaphysics; that is my physics” (*Essays*, 821). The “question of the subject,” the need for self-grounding is forcefully and persistently reiterated: “It is a thorny undertaking, and more so than it seems, to follow a movement so wandering as that of our mind, to penetrate the opaque depth. . . . There is no description equal in difficulty, or certainly in usefulness, to the description of oneself” (273). Positioned between the metaphysical reassurances of the medieval thinker and the secularized metaphysics of the early—or first—modern philosopher, Montaigne insists on facing the question of the subject as a concrete, singular, internally multiple, and embodied being, and his *Essays* offer a restless exploration of ungrounded subjectivity. But it is a quest that precludes any homecoming. The project does not end on a note of arrival, and there is no option of conversion that would put an end to the erring of the subject in either the literal-physical or the figurative-metaphysical sense. Rather more than an opening gambit, Montaigne’s interrogative stance cannot be resolved into any foundational certainty beyond itself. Ever wandering, ever wondering, it can find no terra firma to offer it a resting place.

Montaigne’s *Essays* thus constitute an autobiographical project that self-consciously revolves on its own “failure”: monumental as it is, the project cannot fully contain, explain, and represent the writing subject, which remains a question to itself. Unable to attain a point of

self-grounding, either metaphysical-theological (as Augustine did when faced with the same question) or metaphysical-rational (as Descartes would do in the following century), Montaigne resigns himself to the contingency of any self-definition, to the protean nature of subjectivity, to its inner diversity and inconsistency, and—to use the Bakhtinian formulation—to the absence of any authoritative external *point d'appui* (AH, 31) that would allow him to see himself as a coherent whole. As Jean Starobinski has beautifully put it, Montaigne's "hunger for being, the ontological hope, had for want of anything better withdrawn into the book once it became clear that the metaphysical quest for essence was doomed to failure." Even the relative stability of the self-portrait that emerges from the book is "still too much compared with the evanescence that it is the author's sole aim to capture, with the flux to which we are allowed to yield. Being proved to be inaccessible" (*Montaigne in Motion*, 220–21). Indeed, Montaigne himself relates to this "failure," which becomes the motor of his work: "If my soul could gain a firm footing," he writes, "I would not essay myself, I would resolve myself." Rather than a portrayal of his "being" in the shape of a stable representation of a coherent and cohesive selfhood, the *Essays* are a portrayal of "passing"; not an attempt to stake out a territorial enclosure of the *I*, but a persistent "essaying," questioning, trying, evaluating an ever-elusive subjectivity, which is "always in apprenticeship and on trial" (611).

But the ontological hunger, the need for the grounding of subjectivity, is hard to dismiss. Grappling with the same question a century later, Descartes would take another route up the same slippery slope, get to the top, and dominate the philosophical scene—in spite of the opposition sounded by thinkers like Pascal and, later, Kierkegaard, to name just two (out of not many more) voices of dissent—well into the twentieth century. Descartes's project of resolving the "question of the subject" offers a different mode of grounding, providing what appears to be a permanent home for the errant and erring subject portrayed by Montaigne. In fact, as has been noted by more than one astute reader, Descartes's entire work reads like a determined attempt to exorcise Montaigne, to rewrite or at least to "re-territorialize" the ungrounded subject that had emerged from the *Essays* and turn it into "its own foundation—its own home, in an absolute sense," as Hassan Melehy puts it (*Writing Cogito*, 103, 122; see also Judovitz, *Subjectivity and Representation*, *passim*).

The difference between the respective autobiographical undertakings of Montaigne and Descartes is accordingly vast. Whereas Montaigne offers an account of himself as an embodied, concrete, singular, and inherently heterogeneous being, firmly positioned in his time and place, Descartes offers a version of subjectivity where the autobiographical subject is conflated with the philosophical construct, setting itself up as pure thought, absolute knowledge, overriding the contingencies of the living, historically situated person called René Descartes. The conflation of these two entities within the quasi-autobiographical text is a rhetorical exercise, blatantly strategic, as Dalia Judovitz demonstrates, allowing Descartes's decontextualized, disembodied, abstracted, and capitalized Subject to become a transcendental stand-in for humankind in general.

What enables this universal representative quality is the homogenization and disembodiment of the autobiographical subject. The ostensible autobiographical subject "exists in the most abstract sense as an axiomatic entity of a discourse that affirms its own power to speak" (Judovitz, *Subjectivity and Representation*, 83–84). The first person narrative is thus tautological in that it is both premised on the universality of the Cartesian subject and designed to induce the readers into an acceptance of this premise. The emerging entity is a formal, self-contained, and schematic being, emptied of "any content other than that of thought" (87). Unlike the protean and contingent subject of Montaigne's essays, the Cartesian subject can become transcendental representation of all human subjects precisely because it has been stripped of context, body, internal multiplicity—everything that has made it human.

If the Cartesian project marks the beginning of secular inwardness, it does so by a subtle drifting apart from, rather than a complete and open breach with, its own metaphysical premises, and the autobiographical account Descartes offers as a counterweight to Montaigne's is, in fact, quite similar to that of Augustine: both are projects of "conversion" that culminate in a metaphysical apotheosis of the subject, and thus relegate the "discourse of the self" to redundancy (Riley, *Character and Conversion*, 73). Their ostensibly antithetical paradigms notwithstanding, the affinity between the Augustinian and the Cartesian resolutions is, as Patrick Riley astutely notes, compelling and profound: Augustine's autobiographical mode of writing ends with a conversion

that delegitimizes the discourse of the self, the realization of the “futility of representing the worldly self, given its lack of autonomous being and its destination in the divine” (75); and Descartes’s personal narrative gives way to “the ascendancy of the *universal* subject, purged of its individual characteristics, a logical consequence of the *cogito*” (74). It is a “silent transformation of the *moi* of self-referential discourse to the *je* of philosophical discourse. Like the enunciation of the Eucharistic formula, the pronouncement of the *cogito* effects an invisible metamorphosis in which the language employed to refer to the *moi* becomes the language of all possible selves” (74). In both Augustine and Descartes, “autobiographical discourse serves as means of arriving at a point beyond which autobiography is no longer necessary” (84).

The logical grounding provided by Descartes for the establishment of this autonomous and sovereign thinking entity, fully knowable and coherent to itself by virtue of its own rationality, still leans on a thoroughly metaphysical scaffolding: “Although the content of God’s creation has been assimilated into the Cartesian project, God is still needed in order to provide the transcendental grounding for the axiomatic, guaranteeing its *a priori* status” (Judovitz, *Subjectivity and Representation*, 94–95). But the status of that metaphysical guarantee, or first axiom, is problematic, as Pascal, for one, realized when he allegedly wrote: “I cannot forgive Descartes. He would have liked to do without God everywhere in his philosophy, but he could not avoid allowing Him a flick of the fingers to set the world in motion. After that, he had no further need of Him” (*Pensées* [1670], 77). Grounded in its own ineluctable and circular logic, the Cartesian Subject has, in fact, assimilated and absorbed the metaphysical foundation within its own structure. It would not take long before the Age of Reason, with its innocent hubris, came into its own, and Laplace, when asked by Napoleon why he had not referred to God in his cosmology, would simply reply: “Your Highness, I did not need that hypothesis.”

For a while—about three hundred years, following the Cartesian formula of subjectivity—it may have looked as though the conundrum had finally been resolved and could be laid to rest. The human subject—disembodied, generalizable, fully coherent and known to itself—had become generic, and the Cartesian apparent resolution of the question of the subject would lay out the foundations of philosophical moder-

nity for the next three centuries. But Pascal, it seems, was amply vindicated after all. The metaphysical scaffolding could not easily be kicked off once the Cartesian edifice was in place. Paradoxically, perhaps, the drive toward self-validating subjectivity, the first step away from metaphysics and toward the creation of the Enlightenment Subject—rational, autonomous, and coherent—ended with the collapse of the subject of humanism in the post-Nietzschean century. It was not only the death of God that was finally announced by the sound of Nietzsche’s philosophical hammer, but the “end of his murderer” as well, to quote Michel Foucault (*The Order of Things*, 385). The ultimate dependence of the Enlightenment conception of the subject on metaphysical premises, recognized and articulated by Heidegger in his “Letter on Humanism,” by Foucault in *The Order of Things*, and by Derrida in “The Ends of Man,” has generated a cultural project—loosely known as postmodernism—driven by the attempt to get away from both metaphysics and humanism; to do, as it were, without either God or “Man.”

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the emancipatory thrust of the anti-Cartesian drive seemed to have reached a dead end. Notwithstanding their diversity and incompatibilities, most anti-humanist versions of subjectivity have turned out to be as abstracted from life and concrete embodiment as the philosophical discourse they were trying to evade; more disturbingly, most of them still leave us with the problem of ethical responsibility, which seems to have been poured down the drain with the murky bathwater of metaphysics and Enlightenment subjectivity. The deposition of the foundational Cartesian Subject, the exposure of its vulnerability to and dependence on ideological, cultural, and discursive systems has, it appears, all but disabled the empowering concepts of moral reflexivity and agential action. I suggest that this dead end is where the Bakhtinian “architectonics of subjectivity” becomes supremely relevant.

THE METHOD IN QUESTION

Substance and method are closely interwoven, and Descartes’s search for certitude about the question of the subject is at the same time “the search for an idea of language, one where truth can be equated with propositional correctness and where language itself ceases to exist

materially as discourse" (Judovitz, *Subjectivity and Representation*, 20). And so, at the risk of belaboring the obvious, it should be stressed that the Cartesian moment laid out the path of Western philosophy from the mid-seventeenth century on, not only in terms of the question of the subject, that is, the object of its inquiry, but also in terms of the tools of its trade, its foundational postulates, and its very discourse. It determined the conception of what philosophy should be.

This is the moment of the great divide between philosophy and literature. Plato did not quite manage to banish the poets from his republic (being something of a poet himself), but the Cartesian line of demarcation has turned out to be much more effective. Henceforth, philosophy would labor under the laws of abstraction, formalization, and logic, to the exclusion of the phenomenal world, sensory experience, and the constitutive diversity of the human subject. Here, as Stephen Toulmin writes, is where "the failure of understanding between Science and the Humanities" is rooted, at the point "when Descartes persuaded his fellow philosophers to renounce fields of study like ethnography, history, or poetry, which are rich in content and context, and to concentrate exclusively on abstract, decontextualized fields like geometry, dynamics, and epistemology" (*Cosmopolis*, x). Following the Cartesian line, modernity has adopted "an intellectual and practical agenda that set aside the tolerant, skeptical attitude of the 16th-century humanists, and focused on the 17th-century pursuit of mathematical exactitude and logical rigor, intellectual certainty and moral purity," which have led Europe "both to its most striking technical successes and to its deepest human failures" (x).

As a theory of knowledge that takes mathematics for its norm, philosophy can be firmly and solidly rooted in logical and formal abstractions, free of the messiness of specific contexts. With the replacement of the Platonic cave by the metaphor of the window, which becomes the foundation for the entire Cartesian philosophical project (see Judovitz, *Subjectivity and Representation*, 106–7), the question and mode of representation—language, discourse, style—become "pure," that is, transparent and irrelevant to substance. None of the hallmarks of Montaigne's *Essays*—concreteness, singularity, embodiment, ambiguity—has any claim to legitimacy in this line of inquiry, which sets itself up as pure thought, absolute knowledge overriding the contingencies of the

living human body. Indeed, for about three centuries, the virtual monopoly of the Cartesian paradigm in philosophy relegated Montaigne to the messy realm of literature, the excluded “other” of philosophy. From Descartes on, the ancient quarrel between philosophy and literature has been resolved through a territorial division, as rational philosophical discourse set itself apart from and beyond the literary, demarcating its proprieties and property rights on the side of abstract theorizing, strict adherence to formal logic, and claims to universal validity. What has remained in the twilight zone, carefully excluded from the discourse of philosophy, is “merely literary”: concrete, singular, embodied, and inherently riddled with ambiguities and contradictions.

The highway of philosophy was thus laid out by Descartes, broad and clear, along parallel tracks: as regards method, it stipulated strict and exclusive adherence to abstract theorizing and laid claims to universal, timeless, and decontextualized validity; as regards style, it mandated formal logic and “noiseless” language; and as regards substance, it concerned itself with the human subject as disembodied, abstracted, and universally standardized. The story is too well known to rehearse here, and, whatever our misgivings about the tendency to suppress nuances, shadings, and sometimes even more major differences in any attempt to draw a panoramic picture, this has been the standard account of the Cartesian moment.

But alongside that highway, there were winding alleyways and side roads that led elsewhere, and these alternative routes converged, starting about 1900, into a challenge to the legitimacy of the Cartesian heritage, which seemed to have come to a dead end. The resurgence of interest in Montaigne since the 1970s is thus not surprising.⁶ Read “proleptically,” as it were, he is often perceived as an early precursor of late twentieth-century attempts to break away from the Cartesian paradigm. Montaigne’s “skepticism about grand theories” and his reliance on “concrete experience rather than abstract, universal, and timeless propositions”; his keen sense of the “kaleidoscopic diversity and contextual dependence of human affairs” (Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*, 26–27); his “almost postmodern awareness of the impossibility of providing an absolute theory of representation” (Judovitz, *Subjectivity and Representation*, 188); and his tolerance of ambiguity, plurality, and lack of certainty—the very qualities of thought and temperament that had

relegated him to the category of literature—turned him into an early beacon for a line of thinkers who were to challenge the proprieties and property rights of Cartesian philosophy centuries later.

STRADDLING THE GREAT DIVIDE

Bakhtin's work seems at times to be thoroughly embedded in this counterphilosophical tradition. His project, like those of various European contemporaries of his, has followed the side roads opened up by late Renaissance humanists, philosophers, and poets—Erasmus and Rabelais, Montaigne and Shakespeare—at the time when these two modes of thinking were still at peace with each other. This is certainly true when he works in the “centrifugal” or the “unfinalized” (to use Morson and Emerson's favored term) mode, as he does, to take the most obvious case, in invoking Montaigne's ghost through the Rabelaisian body through the concept of the carnivalesque.⁷

But Bakhtin cannot be easily read as a latter-day reincarnation of Montaigne (or as a postmodernist *avant la lettre*), and the cultural significance of his work lies not in its neat dovetailing with the “post-modern” line of thinking or with its premodern precursors, but in its unique threshold position, its anxiety, and its inherent ambivalence. His work, I suggest, is uneasily suspended between a critique of the transcendental subject, a position founded on the singularity, concreteness, and embodiment of all human experience, and an equally compelling recognition of metaphysics as a constitutive vector of subjectivity. Side by side with his recognition of the ultimate open-endedness, fluidity, and inner diversity of actual human experience, there is a deep current of nostalgia for the narrative coherence of subjectivity, for some form of authorial grounding, a “centripetal” need, which is just as compelling and real as the “centrifugal” desire.

The anxiety generated by this double awareness and the “question of the subject” as it emerges from Bakhtin's work is, first and foremost, related to ethics, because the “struggle over pronouns” becomes critical when we address the apparent paradox of universal singularity. The core question of ethics concerns the relation between the singular, concrete, embodied human being and the generalized, generic “subject” who features in the scripts of Cartesian and Kantian

philosophy, in political science and in law. From the Kantian vantage point—predicated on a commonality that runs deeper than any individual differences, and on the Cartesian model of rational, abstracted, and generalized subjectivity—the experience of singularity is at best an illusion and at worst an obstacle to a universalist conception of ethics. The need to navigate between the equally untenable alternatives of the kind of universalism that flattens the subject into a mere abstraction and a relativist view of subjectivity that does not offer an axiological horizon beyond that of the individual is the prime challenge facing any version of postmodern ethics. Translated into the tug-of-war between the centripetal and the centrifugal, between a profound temperamental religiosity, which may be diagnosed as a metaphysical homesickness, and a powerful need to break free of any form of external containment, the challenge becomes most acute in the case of Bakhtin.

The underlying thesis of this study is that Bakhtin recognizes the fallacy of extending the presumption of Cartesianism—logic-bound, systemic, abstracted from all particularities and contexts—to ethics. But he also knows that contingency is a double-edged sword and is fully aware of the danger of relativism or nihilism lurking at the other end: like his hero Dostoyevsky, he knows that if God—the authorial other—is dead, everything is allowed. This, I believe, is the most persistent source of anxiety in his work, the need to find the missing link between the universal and the particular; between a set of principles, Kantian or other, and the concrete and singular human act; between our abstract awareness of the “ought” and our commitment to acting it out. This study contends that the recognition of that missing link that emerges—or can be extrapolated—from Bakhtin’s work is predicated on the analogy between the dynamics of *intersubjectivity* and the workings of *intrasubjectivity*.

Part One of this book, titled “Homesickness, Borderlines, and Contraband,” follows Bakhtin’s quest of the “forgotten path” leading toward an alternative, non-Cartesian “first philosophy.” The first chapter, “The Architectonics of Subjectivity,” focuses on the watershed of Bakhtin’s work—the complex relationship between “Author and Hero” and *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. Making a detour through questions of self-representation, narrative identity, and autobiography, this chapter offers a reading of the Bakhtinian subject of ethics as it evolves

out of the tensile relation between a “centripetal” vector—the need for grounding, form, and coherence—and a “centrifugal” drive toward the transgression and transcendence of any and all given boundary lines. The second chapter, “The Poetics of Subjectivity,” shifts the engagement with the Cartesian divide from substance to discourse and method, focusing on the transition from philosophy to literature, which, I would argue, is mandated by and evolves from Bakhtin’s disillusionment with traditional philosophy and formal ethics, as well as his unacknowledged affinity with the formalists. Making a detour through the psychoanalytic work of Wilfred Bion, D. W. Winnicott, and Christopher Bollas, the second part of this chapter seeks to highlight the relation of text and psyche through the “poetics of subjectivity” that underlies the intersection of philosophy, literature, and psychoanalysis. The third chapter, “The Shattered Mirror of Modernity,” sets out from Bakhtin’s apparent transition from an ocular to an auditory structuring metaphor, and offers the trope of “refraction” as a potentially more nuanced and productive alternative to the visual-auditory dichotomy, which is all too often taken as representative of the modern-postmodern divide. Following the discussion of structuring metaphors, the second part of this chapter makes a case against the postmodernist appropriation of Bakhtin’s work and relates it instead to that of the literary modernists, much closer in time, and closer still, I would argue, in spirit.

DOTTED LINES AND CONSTELLATIONS

Part Two of the book, “The Exilic Constellation,” offers a reading of Bakhtin with and through the work of three continental thinkers—Bergson, Merleau-Ponty, and Lévinas—philosophers whose itineraries run parallel to and sometimes intersect with Bakhtin’s. These readings aim to chart the modulations of the philosophical project in which—independently of one another and in very different circumstances—these fellow travelers were all engaged. Working on the boundaries of their respective endeavors, this Bakhtinian reading may offer some resolutions to the still-unanswered questions of these thinkers and open up some of the philosophical impasses of their itineraries. The most cogent articulation of what is attempted here as a

method for delineating this exilic constellation is Bakhtin's own description of Dostoyevsky's work:

As an artist, Dostoevsky uncovered in the image of a given idea not only the historically actual features available in the prototype . . . but also its *potentialities*. . . [He] placed the idea on the borderline of dialogically intersecting consciousnesses. . . He extended, as it were, these distantly separated ideas by means of a dotted line to the point of their dialogic intersection. In so doing, he anticipated future dialogic encounters between ideas which in his time were still dissociated. (*PDP*, 91)

This drawing of dotted lines, as Bakhtin recognizes at a later phase of his work, is not the exclusive prerogative of the artistic project. Distinct Dostoyevskian echoes are heard in the late notes, where Bakhtin extrapolates his conception and turns it into a working principle: like the human subject who has "no sovereign internal territory" (*TRDB*, 287), who lives on its own boundary lines and occasionally transgresses them in the interaction with other subjects, "each word (each sign) of the text exceeds its boundaries. Any understanding is a correlation of a given text with other texts." And the text, he writes, "lives only by coming into contact with another text (with context). Only at the point of this contact between texts does a light flash, illuminating both the posterior and anterior, joining a given text to a dialogue" (*TMHS*, 162).

Having described this project as a labor of midwifery, I would therefore suggest that this maieutic metaphor can be validated by Bakhtin's own view of the human sciences, since it is through the drawing of dotted lines, bringing texts into contact with other texts, and contexts into a relation with other contexts, that the "potentialities" of a philosopher's thought may be delivered, come to light, and take flesh. What is proposed here, following the Bakhtinian imperative, is an attempt to study a cultural phenomenon as an "organic unity: open, becoming, unresolved and unpredetermined, capable of death and renewal, transcending itself, that is, exceeding its own boundaries" (*N70-71*, 135). This self-transcendence can only be attained by the "interrelation and interaction of 'spirits'" (144), in the contact of two or more "meanings that meet and accompany one another" (146), and through the inclusion of future, ever-growing, and "unfinalized context" (*TMHS*, 160),

inasmuch as the “event of the life of the text . . . always develops *on the boundary between two consciousnesses, two subjects*” (PT, 106). Working on these boundaries between the Bakhtinian project and those of his fellow exiles, the study will thus attempt to tune in, not only to the “said,” but also to the “unsaid” in Bakhtin’s work (TMHS, 163); to its “potentialities,” elicited through encounters and intersections with others’ thought; and to its contextual meanings, understood in relation, not only to the past or to immediate contemporary contexts, but also to future, unanticipated conversations.

Not surprisingly, a similar approach to philosophical labor is proposed in Merleau-Ponty’s introduction to an essay on Husserl:

We cannot define a philosopher’s thought solely in terms of what he has achieved. We have to take account of what at the very end still he was struggling to think. Naturally this unthought thought [*impensé*] must be shown to be present through the words which circumscribe and delimit it. But then these words must be understood through their *lateral implications* as much as through their manifest or frontal significance. (“The Philosopher and His Shadow,” 160; emphasis added)

Much of Merleau-Ponty’s own work was left “unthought,” or at least unwritten, at the time of his sudden death in 1961, and the labor of articulating its lateral implications has been taken up by subsequent philosophers and interpreters. But I would suggest that the philosophical task—this particular version of midwifery—of reading the “unthought” can be performed, not only within the works of a single philosopher, but also between several philosophical projects, as in the case of Bakhtin, Bergson, Merleau-Ponty, and Lévinas, who resonate and echo one another’s concerns and are actually synergized by being read through one another.

These affinities, the nuclei of the constellation, call for both a prospective inquiry and a retrospective study of formative influences and vicarious contacts. Reading Bakhtin with and through the work of his continental contemporaries allows, I believe, for extensions, elucidations, and articulations of the “unthought,” or at least the “unsaid” in his unfinished philosophical project, enabling us to move beyond his explicit theses, such as they are, toward what Merleau-Ponty called the

"movement of his thought" ("On the Phenomenology of Language," 84). The labor of philosophical midwifery attempted here is meant to bring out the potential implications of what has remained understated or latent in Bakhtin's writings through a dialogic encounter with his fellow exiles.

Other dotted lines, other relations, could obviously have been drawn, so it is one of the tasks of this volume to bring home to the reader the philosophical productivity of this particular constellation and the reasons why it is, to my mind, so compelling. What justifies the clustering, I would argue, is a common exilic sensibility in more than one sense. These thinkers—a Catholic, an assimilated Jew, a religious Jew, and a Russian Orthodox Christian—were all spiritual exiles, laboring out of a profound temperamental religiosity in a post-metaphysical world, and with a similarly powerful need to resist their own nostalgia, their own metaphysical homesickness. Working from within a profound liminal sensibility, they were all looking for a home away from home. But they were also exiles in another sense, related to the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry. Their common territory is also the state of voluntary vocational exile of thinkers who have taken themselves out of the Platonic-Cartesian regime of traditional philosophy and into the wildness of poetry, and are therefore impelled to look for an alternative mode of philosophizing.

Part Two of this study explores the work of this constellation by drawing dotted lines between Bakhtin and his fellow exiles. The staged encounters that form the nuclei of the discussion are concerned with the particular issues at stake at each of these conceptual intersections. The first chapter, "The Dead End of Omniscience," offers a reading of Bakhtin's work with and through the Bergsonian project of temporalization, and focuses on the ethical and literary significance of the transition from space to time. The second chapter, "In the Beginning Was the Body," follows the parallel itineraries of Bakhtin and Merleau-Ponty, who set out from a study of concrete somatic experience and then move on to what is conceived by both as the analogous realm of the semiotic and the dynamics of transcendence in discourse. The third chapter, "From Dialogics to Trialogics," relates to the convergences and the divergences between Bakhtin and Lévinas, their recognition of the potential danger of relativism entailed in the dyadic or the dialogic

relation of self and other, and their respective gestures of triangulation. The coda to this volume "A Home Away from Home," focuses on the Bakhtinian attempt to restore "new philosophical wonder" and formulate his nontheological or nonmetaphysical religiosity in terms of what I would call "lateral transcendence."

In following the itineraries of these thinkers through the conduit of Bakhtin's work, this second part of the study returns to some of the central passages discussed in Part One. Unavoidably, there is some overlap between the conceptual nuclei around which these chapters are structured and some repetition of key passages that bring out these affinities. But the prospect of the exilic sensibility, I hope, also fans out and gains some enhancement through the conversations staged in the process. The kind of cohesion that may emerge from this reading-through is thus neither teleological nor unequivocal. It may best be described, perhaps, in Gertrude Stein's words, as "beginning again and again."