

Marxism and the Philosophy of Language

Paul Magee

University of Canberra

PART ONE

Experience is nothing

if not a relation
between the thing out there it aspires to name
and a word.

And the same for
our revolution
Bakhtin's discussion of being starving

implies.

(Whatever the word is to the mind
the thinking performs that role
to think it, from outside.)

Hunger, Bakhtin wrote in 1929
—he was sentenced that year—
will be felt
as an insistence on my rights
a plea for mercy

in a style flowery or plain
confidently, hesitantly
apologetically, irritably, outraged;

any of those ways
at cruel Nature, at myself
or at society,
in short in thoroughly
public form,
the starvation inside
takes thought.

PART TWO

To say I don't believe in the
bourgeois paradise and its great future
is to splice in five words
and a change of tone. To say it's glorious
ironically is equally a mime. We sing out
phrases we don't own
all the time. It's indirect speech.

The speaker's distance
from the words great and glorious above
does not require quotation
marks to be gauged eye-wise. An ear
which we all have
will suffice.

Osteomyelitis plagued Bakhtin in Vitebsk.
His cigarettes were often rolled from the earliest philosophy left.
The manuscript of *Towards a Philosophy of the Act* starts
ten pages into the throat
of Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin,
and Sigmund Freud had twenty cigars a day but no jaw
for the last four thousand and four.
If you're good at addiction you can hold a thought.

PART THREE

Even a sentence
with only the unity of an utterance
and no main verb can stand as itself.

A line as a poem.

Nothing other than units
of exchange in dialogue.

The paragraph, the stanza
have no other grammar than this.

When thinking to myself the units of inner speech,
they resemble the multiple
lines of a dialogue.

*

But what's the world?

Charles Saunders Peirce was a 19th Century conservative, unopposed to slavery
and domestically violent;
he died in poverty writing all the while
something like the following:

Between the nights that I perceive
an even number of shooting stars
and the letters I receive that day on my table
there is no connection nor would I expect one,
most laws simply are not there
and no science requires such order
of our worlds. So

Peirce jams the Divine
Watchmaker's all-eyeing natural law, argues
order doesn't join up many things at all.
(How many words in this sentence
bears no relation to how many hairs on your head.)

Science's precipitating causes are confined to those times
when two things are predictably regular
and neither's rules allow for the other
and can't
in any word we know yet, only here they are blindingly
together (e.g. meaning and internal theatre)
till sealed over inductively by a law, because we can't stand
the crack, shift and rub of their dialogue.

PROSE TRANSLATION

1. UP TO THE ASTERISK IN PART THREE

The poem's title is taken from the 1929 book *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, which was written, but not signed, by the Soviet philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975). The text was publicly attributed to Bakhtin's colleague Valentin Voloshinov; the fact that Bakhtin was sentenced for his Orthodox Christianity later that year explains the need for the pseudonymity, and perhaps even for the Marxism (Clarke and Holquist 146-170).

Part One of the poem explores the idea in Part 2.3 of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* that experience only exists within signs (83-98). It traces Bakhtin's key example of this—his demonstration of the discursive nature of experiences of extreme hunger (86-89). The poem suggests a likely implication of those necessarily guarded arguments: that the recent, shattering 1917 revolution was no more foundational than any other semiotic experience. Its meaning was and remains in how we represent it performatively to ourselves, including in our heads while reading this paragraph.

I am referring to Bakhtin's theory of thinking, which he terms 'inner speech' (*Marxism* 29). Now it is certainly true that Bakhtin, as many have noted (for example, Godzich 9) anticipates a certain postmodernity and even post-structuralism in his various writings. It is nonetheless worth underlining the distance of his characterisation of thinking to yourself as a form of imagined speaking from the Derridean diagnosis of thought as ultimately writing (Derrida), and with that, Bakhtin's distance from the contemporary elevation of the word 'text' to cover the whole of social experience. The difference is important because when Bakhtin writes that one's 'inner world and thought has its stabilised *social audience*' (*Marxism* 86), he means not merely that our thoughts are necessarily composed in trans-individual and indeed historically mutable signs, but further that when we 'say' them, in our heads, we have an imagined auditor in mind (even if not distinctly so). For in thought, as in conversation, 'I give myself verbal shape from another's point of view' (86),

anticipating in advance the addressee's likely response to my words and contouring my communications accordingly. I perform for another's imputed understanding even when simply acknowledging to myself ('apologetically, irritably, angrily, indignantly, etc.' (87)) my current state of starvation.

Part Two of the poem treats another major contribution of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, and indeed of Bakhtin's oeuvre more generally (most celebratedly, *Dialogic Imagination* 41-83). For not only does Bakhtin suggest that our thinking anticipates an internal auditor. Any such individual speech act, whether it be 'inner speech' or out loud, is already shot through with other voices. Bakhtin's idea is that indirect speech is far more common than the standard grammatical analyses will allow (*Marxism* 109-59 *passim*). 'He said he is going to the shop' is of course the indirect version of what in direct speech would be 'He said "I am going to the shop".' But what of sentences like 'She's a great one for the free market and the level playing field'? Note the implicit distance the putative speaker of this sentence demonstrates towards a phrase ('level playing field') he or she nonetheless utters, and our capacity as hearers / readers to imagine a broader context providing all sorts of reasons for this. Bakhtin's point is that one's speech regularly conveys alien phrases and marks them as such, as the property of a particular social group (a class, a generation, a social set, an occupational group...), marking one's own belongings in the process. In fact our conversations are replete with such received speakings, regularly admixed with implicit authorial judgement on the world-views they and we presuppose.

One might even, to push Bakhtin's thinking a little here, describe speech as proceeding from a sort of mixing desk and suggest, further, that poetic metaphor—for example, Elizabeth Bishop's 'The armored cars of dreams' (30)—is itself a form of indirect speaking, a conveying of a word or phrase from a different way of speaking into this current one.

This sort of theorising raises a question, one that Bakhtin himself fails either to articulate or answer. If our speech, and so our very thinking, is shot through with other people's words in this fashion, what gives any one of us the illusion of being the same as him or herself? However, the poem does not so much raise this question as rather re-purpose one of Walter Benjamin's enigmas on the topic ('Not to mention that most terrible of drugs – ourselves – which we take in silence'); his analogy between 'the hashish trance' one experiences from smoking that substance, and the trance effected by 'thinking (which is eminently narcotic)' (190).

Part Three of the poem draws similarly from Bakhtin's writings, again with attention to his conceptualisation of the polyphonic subject. In this case, the focus is on the philosopher's further illumination, in Part 1.3 of *Marxism*, as to the nature of 'inner speech' (37-39). Thinking appears, Bakhtin writes, to be composed of 'whole entities somewhat resembling a passage of monologic

speech or whole utterances.’ But when we look closer (as if through the trance) what we discover is that the cut and thrust of our own thoughts are much more akin to ‘the alternating lines of a dialogue’ (38).

That is to say, when any individual ponders an issue to him or herself, their cogitation is not in the form of a monologue, but rather a sequence of voices that propose and rejoin, dialogically. A voice comes up with an idea, another emerges to nuance or reject it, a third comes in, and so forth.

In terms of my discussion above, this would suggest that part of the reason we direct our thoughts (again, our ‘inner speech’) toward an inner addressee is that that addressee will offer the very next thought.

This part of the poem includes close paraphrase of the quote three paragraphs above, and in the process addresses what it suggests is a public manifestation of thought’s inner dialogism. I am referring to Bakhtin’s argument (*Marxism* 110-112) that the ‘higher’ grammatical forms (paragraph, stanza, even sentence) do not have determinate rules, but rather stand or fall on their ability to act as utterances in a putative dialogue. An essay, that is to say, is not a monologue, but a series of distinct voices within the one that propose and rejoin, dialogically, by paragraph, and often even (‘on the other hand...’) by sentence (111).

Sometimes this occurs even within the same word. As *Finnegans Wake*—whose author Bakhtin so curiously failed to comment upon (Kershner 15-21)—has it, ‘We cannot say aye to aye. We cannot smile noes from noes’ (114). Such for James Joyce is speech, and such is ‘the writer complexus’ as well: for ‘if the hand was one, the minds of active and agitated were more than so’ (114). And this is true ‘everywhair’ (108), even in the ‘Vivle’ (110).

All of which is why Bakhtin holds that novelists, who split their utterance into multiple dramatic characters, and weave a continual polyphony of indirect speech through their narrators’ speech as well, are representative of the human subject’s plurivocal relation to discourse more generally.

But why then do we pretend otherwise?

2. AFTER THE ASTERISK IN PART THREE

Why might the Bakhtinian theories entertained above, if in fact true, nonetheless strike us as so counter-intuitive? Should they not simply be common knowledge? Whence the drive, in any of us, to imagine that we are whole?

Let me pose a response to these questions. This will sound at first like a digression, for it involves a polemic stance on creative art’s status as research. The relevance will hopefully emerge as I proceed. My stance is as follows: I do not believe that artists wishing to contribute to knowledge should attempt to satisfy all of the various stages of scholarly investigation, however one

formalises its elements.ⁱ I assert that an artist who attempts to do anything more scholarly or scientific than pose a question to an audience through the medium of his or her artwork will be harming that work's capacity to function *as artwork*; and I additionally assert that the harm will extend to that work's potential contribution to knowledge as well.

I have a target in my sights: the recent emergence of practice-led research, a genre that allows artists to be assessed for PhD awards, and other indices of researcher status, by way of a package comprising artwork *plus* essay on that work's contribution to knowledge. The essay typically contains a literature review, the outline of a method and the statement of a research question, in something like that order of priority; in proposing that such an 'exegesis' represents a dethroning of the traditional critic in favour of artists themselves 'claiming ownership and taking responsibility' for communicating the meanings of their work (8), Carole Gray implies that such a document might provide the artwork with an answer in the form of a thesis as well. Now Michael Biggs and Daniela Büchler do not directly criticise such ideas in offering the following formulation, but I think it indicates quite concisely what is wrong with practice-led research all the same. Having asserted that 'the academic research model attempts to hone in on a single answer to a question,'ⁱⁱ Biggs and Büchler proceed to argue that the arts community has a contrary aim for the questions its work raises:

the creative community values "the event" which promotes the direct encounter with the artifact. The direct encounter in turn precipitates a plurality of experiences and, because these experiences are all different, a single unified answer does not emerge. (91)

What this suggests, *pace* Gray, is that for an artist to be 'claiming ownership and taking responsibility' for the meanings their work unleashes is tantamount to their obstructing it from actually functioning as art.

Now not all theorists in the Creative Arts will, I admit, be as blithe as Gray about the desirability of artists claiming rights over the meaning of their work through the medium of an attached 'exegesis.' But the moment you argue in such a document that your work's contribution to knowledge is X, or can be best understood through a consideration of context Y, are you not effectively asserting the value of a 'single unified' perspective (the academically 'legitimate' one) on the work all the same? For it is precisely an author's refusal to offer any canonical, authoritative position *in* his or her artwork that opens the space for plural interpretations of it to emerge—and not just (one might draw on Bakhtin to add) to emerge within communities, but even within one and the same audience member. And if the translation of my poem above has done anything much more than carry the verses' conundrums over into something having approximately similar effects in prose, then it has failed by dint of the argument just rehearsed.

My argument is not, however, that art can never bear a relation to knowledge. Rather, its tenor is to imply that if artists wish their work to be chalked up against any of the variously named and theorised stages in any statement of scholarly method, they had better aim no further than the initial stage, the one that sparks off inquiry in the first place. I am referring to that which in scholarly and scientific work ‘precipitates a plurality of experiences’ by dint of the fact that it poses a problem for knowledge, and leaves the reader hanging. I am referring, that is, to the compelling research question, and I will add that the best of post-structuralist writing represents so many entries into just this methodological category. University-based artists should offer us a problem, without solution. Audiences will themselves be compelled—if the work is any good—to find some other, new way of making sense of it.

For that is how science itself works. You can even go some way towards formalising this. In a little-studied 1901 essay entitled ‘On the Logic of Drawing History from Ancient Documents’ (see the brief comments in Misak 18), the American philosopher of science Charles Saunders Peirce (1839-1914) explains the root causes of scientific inquiry. His assertion that ‘it has always been agreed that the tendency of the understanding was towards synthesis, or unification’ (‘On the Logic’ 92) is central to this explanation (and will help bring this seeming digression back to the lacuna I noted in Bakhtin as well). Peirce thus takes issue with logician John Venn’s claim that ‘it is the isolation of a fact that creates the need of an explanation’ (91). Venn would seem to mean that once we have observed or isolated a rule-bound phenomenon within the world, and accordingly labelled it a fact, we then feel driven to ask what causes it to be or behave thus. Peirce disagrees. For him, everything around us presents itself—well before any formal investigation—as factual (for instance, the facts that this is a chair, that a table, up there the roof, that I am sitting in solitude, it is dusk); for the tendency of our understanding (‘towards synthesis, or unification’) is automatically to grasp the world as comprised of already arrived facts. Further, nothing in this implies a drive to inquiry: ‘I have never’ Peirce adds ‘heard it suggested that intelligence *per se* demands complexity and multiplicity’ (92). Rather, inquiry arises from the frustration of this automatic drive towards unity.

This is even more apparent when we reflect upon the text that Peirce is clearly invoking in the sentences above, when mentioning ‘synthesis’ and ‘unification.’ Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* discusses our tendency (he calls it the ‘synthetic unity of apperception’ (248)) spontaneously to grasp the world as so many unified entities, along the lines I have just rehearsed. But the *Critique* offers a further version of this drive to unification: our automatic (‘*a priori*’ in his terms) sense that the universe in which we find such unities is one and the same as itself as well. That everything I see seems to hang together in the same reality only underlines why our isolating the fact *that this particular thing is the case* creates no real hackles—for our tendency is to assume that any such fact belongs to the broader scheme of things, along with

everything else. Even more strikingly, Kant asserts a direct link (in his terms, ‘the transcendental unity of self-consciousness’ (247)) between all such tendencies to synthesis in our perception of things, and each individual’s sense of his or her own consistency as subject. My deep sense that ‘there is only one space and time, in which all forms of appearance and all relations of being or non-being take place’ (234) is part and parcel, for Kant, with my deep sense that my nose, which is now itching, is actually the same nose as the one belonging to the me who sits here writing. Mind, Kant will not allow that any of these unities are ultimately ‘true’ (for him, we have no such ultimate knowledge (255), not even of our consistency as selves (259-60)); but simply that we are so constituted as to want spontaneously to grasp things thus: as so many ones, and in the context of an overall One (that ‘One’ being at once reality, but also the consistent ‘One’ I feel myself to be in observing it—again, these are for Kant the same thing).

And really, what would drive me to complicate my view of the world, so as to ponder whether that table over there, which is clearly a table, might for instance obey a different law of gravity than all the things around it; or that this itch, though I feel it, might actually be occurring on another’s nose?

Peirce is clear as to what might: a fact to the contrary of our familiar syntheses, one suggesting that the thing presenting itself to me as a clear instance of such and such a thing (a swan) does not necessarily amount to what I take it to be at all (for how can swans be black?). Peirce suggests that this sort of instantly unsynthesizable but also impossible-to-ignore experience is what Venn really had in mind, or at least should have had in mind, when theorising the root causes of inquiry.

I suspect that when Mr Venn speaks of *isolation*, he is thinking of there being other facts from which the given fact is separated; and that it is not *isolation* he means but *separation*. Now separation is itself a kind of connection; so that if this be his meaning, the state of things which calls for explanation is a connection which is not satisfactory to the mind. In that case, it is incumbent upon Mr Venn to explain himself more precisely, and to say in what respect it is unsatisfactory. If he were to say, “unsatisfactory in being contrary to what ought to be expected,” he would come to my position, precisely. (92)

Kant helps us to see that it is not just our world-view, but our sense of our own bodies which feels somehow at stake in such moments; which threat has the further effect of driving us to remedy the matter by putting in place the whole panoply of scientific method, from the formulation of a hypothesis as to what might actually be the case, the devising of an experimental apparatus to test it, the observation of statistically significant results from such and so forth. There are of course much more colloquial versions of this same urge to repair through knowledge (and other strategies altogether, including blocking one’s ears (Peirce ‘The Fixation’ 11-14)). Kant helps us to see that we do all of this so to make ourselves ‘whole’ again.

My position is that artists engaging with the university should leave all those later, reparatory stages of inquiry to others, and hold to what causes knowledge consternation. Their training is all about making others scramble for knowledge (or whatever other synthesis—including the synthesis that any response through affect effectively amounts to (Peirce ‘Some Consequences’ 237-242)) in their artwork’s wake. For you can indeed think with another’s face. You do it by presenting them with lines such as ‘Narcissus disbelieves in the unknown; / He cannot join his image in the lake / So long as he assumes he is alone.’ (Auden 312), or phrases like ‘The armoured cars of dreams’ (Bishop 30).

Yet the reader would misunderstand Peirce’s argument if he or she interpreted it to mean that irregularity in itself perturbs us, and spurs us to inquiry: ‘Why should it, when irregularity is the overwhelmingly preponderant rule of experience, and regularity only the strange exception?’ (88). Our tendency to grasp the world as a unified whole, comprised of wholes, from the perspective of one who would feel him or herself whole, does not imply that we require all its parts to be related in any more rule-bound way than that. To the contrary. ‘Nobody is surprised that the trees in a forest do not form a regular pattern, or asks for any explanation of such a fact’ (88). Nor are we surprised that the amount of words in this paragraph has an irregular relation to the number of traffic lights in my suburb of Canberra. These are isolated facts, and again, our need for the world to cohere is far from disconcerted at the irregularity of their relation. Peirce puts his assault upon the divine watchmaker argument thus:

In what state of amazement should I pass my life, if I were to wonder why there was no regularity connecting days on which I receive an even number of letters by mail and nights on which I notice an even number of shooting stars! But who would seek explanations for irregularities like that? (88)

Peirce proceeds to coin a phrase for what really stirs us to want to know: ‘whereas if it were an equally unexpected *regularity* we had met with, we should certainly ask for an explanation’ (88). This is clearly another way of saying ‘separation,’ as it has been defined above: a mode of connection that is dissatisfactory to us, because contrary to expectation *and yet* convincingly real all the same. Auden does it by the line. Bergman by the scene, ditto Goddard. They disturb us into thought through the sense that *yes, this is real—but something in my grasp of the world must then not be.*

I hold that a doctorate of creative arts should be precisely the place in which such riskyⁱⁱⁱ contributions, whatever the discipline, be made, the place for the anti-discipline from which knowledge floods. To those who hold that judging such works would be very difficult I would suggest to the contrary that it would be an infinitely less random matter than judging the current, impossibly compromised form (see further Candlin; Magee). That is because what I am suggesting would be so much closer to the criteria whereby art is already criticised and judged. On the other hand, I would claim that the

problem with what I am suggesting is that those criteria are so extremely hard to satisfy.

For thinking is the drug that will make good, and whole.

‘The armored cars of dreams’ (Bishop 30). So they get through our defences.

Bakhtin’s writing repeatedly calls forth, precisely by disturbing it, a drive to the unified subject in his readers. That is why it is so terrifically powerful.

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Paul Magee is author of *Cube Root of Book* (John Leonard Press: 2006), which was shortlisted in the Innovation category of the 2008 Adelaide Festival Awards for literature. Paul also wrote the surrealist ethnography *From Here to Tierra del Fuego* (University of Illinois Press: 2000), an intervention into the field of cultural studies. A second book of poetry, *Chapter Twelve* has been accepted for publication by John Leonard Press and is forthcoming 2013. Paul is also working on a monograph entitled *Poetry and Knowledge*.

Paul studied in Melbourne, Moscow, San Salvador and Sydney. He is a past President of the Cultural Studies Association of Australasia, and active across a number of scholarly fields, foremost among them poetics. This work in poetics is currently most focussed on his role as Chief Investigator on the ARC-funded project *Understanding Creative Excellence: A Case Study in Poetry* (2013-5), which will see him specialising on the compositional practices and broader sociological milieu of major contemporary North American poets. His broader CV includes extensive research publications on Marxian thought, psychoanalysis, stagnation, boredom and revolution.

Paul teaches poetry at the University of Canberra, where he is an Associate Professor.

NOTES

ⁱ See, for a pertinent example of such formalisation, Rocco, Biggs and Büchler, who propose four ‘generic requirements’ for investigative work, whether scientific, scholarly or even creative, that would bear the label ‘research’: 1) it must put forward both ‘question and answer’, 2) it must work through an articulated ‘method’, 3) the answer it produces must come in a form that will be regarded as new ‘knowledge’ and 4) there must be a specific ‘audience’ who so regards its products (376-8).

ii To those who object that not all academic work tends this way, I heartily concur, and point to the post-structuralist canon as the very thing Creative Research should approach for its stylistic models, or rather inspirations. Indeed, the very existence of that canon provides a rhetorical platform for the established legitimacy of just what I am proposing here: *refuse to provide a method, and most of all refuse to answer the questions you raise*. But that is not, by and large, the model the newly emergent Creative Arts has drawn upon to establish its legitimacy. Nor is it, statistically speaking, all that wide-spread in practice, even in academic Philosophy, where the ‘attempt to hone in on a single answer to a question’ rules the roost.

iii Risky because, as Peirce elsewhere makes clear, there are manifold ways to respond to ‘unexpected regularity’ and ‘the’ scientific method is just one of them (‘The Fixation’). Belief in instituted authority can, for instance, do almost as good a service in repairing one’s sense that this world’s totality (here contracted to a narrow realm of human relations; as in neoliberalism, which makes your well-being utterly dependent upon your boss) remains intact (see Peirce *The Fixation* 12-14 on authority as a means of ‘fixing belief’; see Davies, Gottsche and Bansel on the neoliberal boss’s role in this regard, in the academic context).

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