

SOBRAL, Adail. *A filosofia primeira de Bakhtin: roteiro de leitura comentado* [Bakhtin's *Prima Philosophia: Reading Guide with Comments*]. Campinas, SP: Mercado das Letras, 2019. 168 pages.

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Toward a Philosophy of the Act (henceforth, *TPA*) was, as we know it, Bakhtin's first text, written in the early 1920s, but only publicized in 1986. It has never been a fluid text; it has been controversial from the beginning, since, as explained by Faraco (2010) in the afterword of its translation, the author of the text seemed to be someone other than Mikhail Bakhtin, the critic and scholar of literature and culture. A work of major importance also for dialogical studies, *TPA* is also very difficult to understand because it involves complex philosophical issues.

In his book, Sobral develops a critical and loving reading of this Bakhtinian work, annotating it, in order to make it a didactic itinerary accessible to the multiple researchers of the Russian language philosopher. Preserving the difficulty of the original text, Sobral presents us with a variety of *TPA* translations, including those published in Portuguese. This is a fundamental question for those like him, who, besides being translators, are also great Bakhtin scholars.

Adail Sobral is a professor at the Federal University of Rio Grande (UFRS), having studied at UFBA, UNICAMP, USP, PUC/SP and Université de Paris 8, in addition to having extensive experience in the art of translation. He has collaborated on numerous books, as well as written and translated so many others.

The book reviewed here is presented by Professor Marília Amorim, Adail's postdoctoral supervisor at the Université de Paris 8, who states that it is not easy to be a Bakhtinian in a post-truth era. It certainly is not. Bakhtin was a humanist philosopher, that is, a certain reason, as well as a communion, has always been present in his work. This review follows the steps of Sobral's book, providing a reading chapter by chapter, as done by his author.

Starting with First words, Sobral provides us with a brief history of his professional and personal trajectory, emphasizing the moments that culminated with the writing of the book. In the Introduction, the author states that, in a previous work, he cited Bakhtin about the consciousness of the world mediated by two planes, namely, the sensitive - of perception and action - and the intelligible - of the elaboration and transformation of impressions into concepts. These are integrated planes, the first of which contemplates multiplicity, while the other, unity, continuity. Such integration considers the creation of a "responsible action of the subject," the result of which - the

philosophy of the act - would be a necessary condition for the “resolution of the crisis of culture, that is, the apartness between the world of culture and the world of life.”¹ (SOBRAL, 2019, p.26), once the young Bakhtin had already claimed that the contemporary crisis of his time was a crisis of the act, whose architectonics of the world recalled that of Dante’s world. The overcoming of this apartness between culture/life is targeted throughout the text.

The main beacon to Sobral’s work, as exposed by himself, is Brait’s work (2016)² regarding the ten essential texts by M. Bakhtin; however, a dialogue with the main commentators of the Russian work is also proposed. As a basis for his study and for his citations, he indicates the French translation of TPA, by G. Bardet (2003),³ for its terminological rigor and for the incorporation of Bakhtin’s notes in the original text. In addition to this French edition, as a translator, Sobral is attentive to the specificities of the other translations consulted, which are: the Italian editions by L. Ponzio (2009),⁴ directly from Russian, and that by M. de Michiel (1998)⁵; the translation of the Italian edition by Ponzio into Portuguese, by V. Miotello and C. A. Faraco (2010); the English edition by Liapunov and Holquist (2010)⁶ and the translation into Spanish by T. Bubnova (1997).⁷ It is important to point out that the thematic index of Ponzio’s version guided this study by Sobral, who followed and referenced it, by referring to the main topics of the Bakhtinian text.

Sobral’s work is divided into five chapters: 1) Act, singularity, responsibility, technicality, theoreticism, life-as-act; 2) Philosophy of life, first philosophy, aesthetics, ethics; 3) Participatory thinking, non-alibi and unicity; 4) Singularity, unicity, non-indifference, representation and imposture; 5) Act, world, architectonics and unity of the

¹ In Portuguese: “resolução da crise da cultura, ou seja, a ruptura entre o mundo da cultura e o mundo da vida.”

² BRAIT, B. *Dialogismo e polifonia em Mikhail Bakhtin e o Círculo (Dez obras fundamentais)*. Available at: <http://fflch.usp.br/sites/fflch.usp.br/files/2017-11/Bakhtin.pdf>.

³ BAKHTINE, M. M. *Pour une philosophie de l’acte*. Trad. de Ghislaine Capogna Bardet. Lausanne: L’Age D’Homme, 2003.

⁴ BAKHTIN, M. M. *Per una filosofia dell’atto responsabile*. Trad. de Luciano Ponzio. Lecce: Pensa, 2009.

⁵ BAKHTIN, M. M. *Per una filosofia dell’azione responsabile*. Trad. de Margherita de Michiel. Lecce: Piero Manni, 1998.

⁶ BAKHTIN, M. M. *Towards a Philosophy of the Act*. Trad. de Vadin Liapunov e Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010.

⁷ BAJTÍN, M. M. *Hacia una filosofía de lacto ético*. De los borradores y otros escritos. Tradução Tatiana Bubnova. Rubí: Anthropos/San Juan: Universidad de Puerto Rico, 2000.

world in the artistic view; and Final Considerations. Each chapter is organized into topics, according to the Italian translation.

In the first chapter, focusing on Unrepeatable singularity and responsible act, the author addresses Bakhtin's *prima philosophia*. Like a two-faced Janus, this philosophy aspired to embrace, through a bilateral plan, the unity of culture (life, art and science), centered on the uniqueness of human acts, which are specific and unrepeatable. To this end, the Russian philosopher had stated that the dynamic elements of the act are at a level of special responsibility, while the being-as-event is at the level of ethical responsibility. Therefore, for the constitution of the architectonics of the being-as-event, according to Sobral, it is necessary to integrate the two categories, the theoretical and the aesthetic, incapable of composing, separately, the unity of being.

Next, in Formal duty and responsibility and in Technicism, theoreticism and life-as-an-act, there is a dialogue between the Russian author and E. Kant about the transformation of judgment into a responsible act in terms of concrete life, the responsibility of the subject. Here, the category of "ought-to-be" is formulated by the German philosopher, as it is observed that his thoughts are articulated only with the theoretical basis, alienating himself from the subject's unity and his performance in life, the opposite of Bakhtinian postulations, which point out, as a fundamental category of its philosophical construction, the concrete unity of life. Therefore, the theoretical, Bakhtin pointed out, was not accomplished separately from the statute of life, but in agreement, as fundamental to the constitution of the architectonics of the act. When discussing Bakhtinian thinking about the relationship between technical and theoretical components and the concrete life of the subjects, Sobral points out that "the center of Bakhtin's first philosophy is life as an act"⁸ (p.43), recognizing the being as an event within an unfinished process. Thus, life as an act would be the succession of actions of our activity, of our life, and not the finished theoretical composition of existence, which separates the components of culture - art, science and life. Theory and practice, in this becoming, must be inalienable processes in the constitution of the architectonics of the Bakhtinian being as an event.

In Philosophy of Life, Aesthetics and Empathy, the first part of the second chapter, Sobral shows what he considers to be the synthesis of the Bakhtinian proposal for a

⁸ In Portuguese: "o centro da filosofia primeira de Bakhtin é a vida como ato."

philosophy of the act: “a unique and unrepeatable happening or event, at a given moment and at a given place”⁹ (p.46). Bakhtin follows Bergson’s philosophy of action, integrating repeatable and unrepeatable elements, concrete life, aesthetics and science. Sobral specifies that both the aesthetic and the theoretical are unable to integrate the repeatable and the unrepeatable of the act and its performance to the responsibility of the one who acts.

The next topic deals with the First philosophy, focusing on the constitution of the foundations of the being-as-event and founding “the unique historical unity of the human condition”¹⁰ (p.50). The philosophical tendencies of the time were unable to address the “The really responsible act as deed”¹¹ (BAKHTIN, 2003, p.43 apud SOBRAL, 2019, p.50). It turns out that philosophy should integrate life, art and theory in a unit of responsibility, correcting the division between lived life and culture, as previously discussed.

Regarding Material ethics and formal ethics, Bakhtin affirmed the total responsibility of the being in life in society. For him, practical reason would be the place of ethical theories and these ethical constructions were truly what mattered to non-indifferent, responsible and alibi-free thinking. Sobral highlights the moral issue in TPA, ensuring duty as “an absolute, categorical singular need” and as “a category of the individual act”¹² (BAKHTIN, 2003, p.49 apud SOBRAL, 2019, pp.55-56). Likewise, there is, according to the author, Bakhtin’s radical critique of the Kantian division of reasons, insofar as the Russian author’s definition of an act defines it “as that which involves a repeatable component (its content-sense) and an unrepeatable component (its process), as well as a unique agent and not a human being in general”(SOBRAL, 2019, p.57). Here is the most relevant point in Sobral’s itinerary, as elucidated below.

In the item First Philosophy as a philosophy of the act, an alternative to a basic philosophy of being is discussed, supported by the previous criticisms of the philosophical currents in vogue at that time. The first philosophy of the act as a singular real *act*, or philosophy of the one and singular being-as-event, preaches the need for a reorientation

⁹ In Portuguese: “um acontecimento ou evento único e irrepitível, inscrito num dado instante e num dado lugar.”

¹⁰ In Portuguese: “a unidade histórica singular da condição humana.”

¹¹ In Portuguese, “ato-feito realmente responsável.”

¹² In Portuguese: “uma necessidade singular absoluta, categórica” e como “uma categoria do ato individual.”

to participatory thinking and responsible action. And, of utmost relevance, that the situated subject is the agent of the responsible act: “The ultimate object of Bakhtin’s first philosophy”¹³ is the individual subject and his existing and acting (SOBRAL, 2019, p.63).

Going forward, in relation to language, Sobral underscores that the focus, pointed out by Bakhtin in TPA, is the human condition itself, which does not dispense with language, the full word, enunciated in its three aspects: the concept word (its content-sense), the word-image (apprehensible-expressive aspect), and the intonation of the word (emotive-volitional character), in its unity. The full word, taken in its entirety, is addressed to the other, changing it and changing the enunciator himself, who is not the owner of the meaning, but who utters a word impregnated with possibilities of meaning. This word establishes the dialogical relations of recognition of each other, as well as their responsible and non-indifferent behavior. At this point, lies another essential contribution by Sobral, since he focuses on one of the main axes of Bakhtin’s philosophy of language: dialogical relations.

The third chapter develops the themes of the philosophy of the act as participant thought, of its uniqueness and of non-alibi, that is, the conscious and responsible, unrepeatable act, performed in the world by practice. The subject, here, is concrete and relational in evaluative contact with the other. In this sense, the Bakhtinian subject contemplates the world through a strategic and empathic distance (exotopy), that is, from a situated point of view. The philosophy of the responsible and participating act is, according to Sobral, another science, called “practical-theoretical reason,” whose basis involves a singular subject also responsible for his being and acting in the world. With his peculiar clarity, the author brings Bakhtin’s first philosophy to certain phenomenological categories of Merleau-Ponty in relation to the concrete subject, who, having language as a possibility, is thrown into the world and obliged to assume his responsible action, as well as to affirm their duty, without any alibi. Sobral also defends the simultaneity of the philosophy of the act, or philosophy of life (*Lebensphilosophie*) with the philosophy of materialistic and dialectic praxis, constituted as an everyday and collective social practice and based on the experience of the relationship between human beings.

¹³ In Portuguese: “O objeto último da filosofia primeira de Bakhtin.”

Continuing with the topic, The non-alibi in the singular being, Adail presents us with a reflection on the Russian philosopher's conception of subject, based on logical truth (*istina*) and moral truth (*pravda*): the first is the domain of the repeatable, or of meaning, while the other has to do with sense, with the responsibility to act, "an act in which the subject recognizes his irrevocable responsibility (his non-alibi in being) and affirms it in a unique way" (SOBRAL, 2019, p.84). It is his identity and his unique action in relationships with others. In a previous work, Sobral (2005, p.118) emphasized that "The subject's action is knowledge on several levels that unites *process* (acting in the world), *product* (theorization) and *valuation* (aesthetics) in terms of its inalienable responsibility of the human subject, their lack of escape" and their condition of being launched into the world and assuming their action in it. This is Bakhtin's imperative, founded on the non-alibi of existing, on the subject's signature in the act and on their recognition and affirmation of the imperative.

When returning to the distinction between *istina* and *pravda*, Sobral values the existing tension in the philosophy of the responsible act of the Russian thinker and argues, "Bakhtin recognizes then that the doubt brought about by the consideration of each subject as a singular center of value, of emotive-volitional understanding, is the basis of the truth-veracity [*pravda*] "one and singular" in the world. " (SOBRAL, 2019, p.92). In the end, the author clarifies that the existence of these several distinct value centers is not opposed to the truth [*istina*]; however, it constitutes the unity of the whole.

In the fourth chapter, Singularity, uniqueness, non-indifference, representation, imposture, Sobral emphasizes each of these elements, but he prioritizes the non-opposition between the general and the particular, when proceeding with the discussion on the ideal approach for a moral philosophy: the theoretical or the phenomenological and dialectical materialist. A set of valid values, explains Bakhtin in TPA, is not just for me or for one or another subject, but it is true for all historical humanity, at any time. The subject's engagement factor is due to this recognition of values. Thus, "imposture" defines the subject's attempt to obtain an alibi. "It is in trying to interpret our whole life as an implicit representation, and each of our acts as a ritual act, that we become impostors." (BAKHTIN, 2003, p.82 *apud* SOBRAL, 2019, p.103) The subject is responsible for their acts, since they leave their singular signature on them.

Sobral ends the chapter addressing the topic Philosophy of life as a moral philosophy, in which he discusses the object of moral philosophy, that is, the subject's unique participation with his emotive-volitional and responsible act in existing. It also highlights the main emotive-volitional components of the philosophy of life: I-for-me, the other-for-me and I-for-the-other, in which "all the values of real life and culture" are concentrated. The task of this philosophy, in Bakhtin's words, would be "to phenomenologically describe this architectonics of the real world of the *act*" (p.107).

This description of the world of the act and the aesthetic view of concrete architectonics are the themes addressed at the beginning of the fifth chapter. Essential are the quotes by young Bakhtin, chosen by Sobral at the beginning of the chapter. Regarding the description of the world of the act, we read that "it is a single and singular world concretely lived: a world seen, heard, touched and thought, entirely penetrated by the emotive-volitional tones of the stated validity of values." (BAKHTIN, 2003, p.87 *apud* SOBRAL, 2019, p.111). On the other hand, it is also the recognition of the irreplaceable participation in the world and the absence of an alibi in it, guaranteeing the uniqueness of this world as real. There is no alibi for the subject's singular participation, who is actively responsible for their actions and who has a position of values, a concrete, singular place, and from where they receive the world *as an architectonic whole*.

Then, when describing the theme - The unity of the world in the artistic vision - the author registers this unity as a concrete architectonics and aesthetics of value, whose center is becoming human and, according to the Russian philosopher, "the love [that] can be aesthetically productive; the fullness of multiplicity [diversity] only possible in correlation with what is loved. " (BAKHTIN, 2003, p.98 *apud* SOBRAL, 2019, p.121). Aesthetic love contemplates and tolerates a multiplicity of factors, since it prioritizes the exotopic and empathic position of the author. For the aesthetic view, a character is not good or bad; however, presented by the author from different points of view. "The aesthetic subject (the author and the contemplator) 'occupies a unique place" (p.100), the individual person is not to be confused with the author-creator nor with the character: "I am not the object of empathy and vision" ¹⁴(p.101).

Returning to the question of theory and practice with a focus on evaluative centers (of human subjects), Sobral highlights the chronotope and the human condition (of

¹⁴ In Portuguese: "não sou eu o objeto da empatia e da visão."

mortality) and, therefore, relates the previous concepts to those of space, time and mortality. Concrete architectonics correlates with the concrete mortal subject. Thus, spatial and temporal relations have to do with it and acquire its meaning through it: “high,” “far,” “above,” “below,” “abyss,” “infinite” - all these expressions reflect the life and intensity [tension] of the mortal human being” (BAKHTIN, 2003, p.98 *apud* SOBRAL, 2019, p.126), as already mentioned above.

The final topic, Exotopy, otherness and moral philosophy, is a synthesis of the “concrete architectonics of the world of aesthetic vision.” According to Bakhtin, essential to his *prime* philosophy, was the fact that the physical world is not directly accessed, in a transparent way, but through an axiological mediation of a singular and participative subject. His evaluative point of view affects the work’s architectonics, turning the author-person into the author-creator, whose presence is in the whole of the work, but not as a participant, but as a contemplator-organizer (p.139).

A last and important mention about the I-other relation, the foundation of the first philosophy, is about the dialogical relations tensioned as a principle of enunciative human action, defended by Sobral, quoting: “Life knows two centers of value, different in principle, but interrelated: the self and the other,” the basis of “all the concrete components of being”¹⁵(BAKHTIN, 2003, p.109 *apud* SOBRAL, 2019, p.142).

Reaffirming the relationship of identity/difference between the self/the other, in Final Considerations, Sobral assures our responsible existence in the world from an enunciative project of subjectivity (identity), which builds an architectonics of life in which one can be the self and/or be in change, in constant becoming.

As it can be seen, in all the work reviewed here, the young Bakhtin’s thought was already multiple and with a coherence that would permeate all his later thought and which was expressed in the connections that supported his theoretical proposal and his research method to his philosophical affiliations. There is no such thing, in Bakhtin’s work, as Faraco (2001, p.118) points out, as “a formalized model in terms which the academy has become accustomed to,” but rather “a system or a philosophical anthropology”¹⁶ of

¹⁵ In Portuguese: “A vida conhece dois centros de valor, diferentes por princípio, mas inter-relacionados: o eu e o outro,” base de “todos os componentes concretos do ser.”

¹⁶ In Portuguese: “um modelo formalizado nos termos com que a academia se acostumou,” mas “um sistema ou uma antropologia filosófica.”

investigation of the human, social and public, in permanent intersubjective relationship – of otherness and responsive and evaluative understanding of his discourse.

To conclude, I can affirm that Adail Sobral's text is a research of excellence, which contributes to the academic dialogue on the philosophical questions raised by the Bakhtinian circle. All the topics covered by the author are relevant; however, I tried to highlight those that I considered to be priorities for a debate about Bakhtin's first philosophy. Thus, when recommending Sobral's book, I highlight its essential value not only for deepening the knowledge of TPA, but also for studying the entire work of the Russian philosopher and his companions.

Mikhail Bakhtin belonged to a strain of thinkers whose worldview was called by Ponzio (2008, p.201) "the humanism of alterity,"¹⁷ which ensures that social actions are guided by representations of subjectivity, based on the perception of the self and the other. In this perspective, the human being is only possible through belonging to a social community. The actions we take, based on social assessments, are committed to the social group. The comprehensive, responsive and ethical character of human existence calls for people to take responsibility. It is in this sense that human beings have no escape: there is no alibi for life.

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¹⁷ In Portuguese: "o humanismo da alteridade."

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