

Bakhtin and Lunacharsky: A Dialogue / *Bakhtin e Lunatcharski: um diálogo*

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ABSTRACT

Starting by Lunacharsky's critical review of the book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art*, published in 1929 and Bakhtin's reply, in 1963, in the second version of his book, entitled *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, this essay establishes a confrontation between the two critics. Consistent with Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, which extrapolates the category concrete dialogue, this study shows the dialogical relations between both thinkers and the aesthetic ideologies in circulation in the Soviet Union, as well as convergences and divergences between them. Finally, the essay highlights the influence of their positions in the Soviet society in each text. As the People's Commissar for Education and Culture, Lunacharsky represents the official thought of the Party (although he had never been as dogmatic as the official doctrine that was to be imposed); Bakhtin, in his relative marginality, prior to his recognition, produces his texts from a position discreetly dissonant from the official discourse of the Soviet government.

KEYWORDS: Mikhail Bakhtin; Anatoly Lunacharsky; *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*; Marxism, Russian Formalism

RESUMO

Partindo da resenha crítica de Lunatcharski ao livro Problemas da obra de Dostoievski, publicada em 1929, e da resposta de Bakhtin, em 1963, na segunda versão do seu livro, intitulada Problemas da poética de Dostoievski, este ensaio estabelece um confronto entre os dois críticos. Coerente como o conceito de dialogismo de Bakhtin, que extrapola o diálogo concreto, o texto demonstra as relações dialógicas entre ambos os pensadores e as ideologias estéticas em circulação na União Soviética, bem como as convergências e divergências teóricas entre eles. Por fim, observa a influência da posição de cada um deles na sociedade soviética em seus respectivos textos. Como Comissário do Povo para a Educação e Cultura, Lunatcharski representa o pensamento oficial do Partido (embora jamais tenha sido tão dogmático quanto a doutrina oficial a ser imposta); Bakhtin, em sua relativa marginalidade, anterior a sua consagração, produz seus textos a partir de uma posição discretamente destoante do discurso oficial do governo soviético.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Mikhail Bakhtin; Anatoli Lunatchárski; Problemas da poética de Dostoievski; *Marxismo; Formalismo Russo*

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In 1929, Anatoly Vasilyevich Lunacharsky published in issue 10 of the literary magazine *Novy Mir (New World)*, the review “Dostoevsky’s plurality of voices,”¹ which concerns the book *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Art*, by Mikhail Bakhtin, published in that same year. Even though his critique is favorable, it presents some objections. In the revised and expanded edition of 1963, entitled *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Bakhtin responds to Lunacharsky’s text by maintaining his previous statements, and defending the permanence of the polyphonic novel beyond the social and temporal conditions of its creation.

First, I intend to establish a confrontation between those two texts considering the concept of dialogism by Mikhail Bakhtin. According to Bakhtin, dialogism surpasses dialogue as a compositional form, the concrete exchange between questions and answers, statements and replies. Dialogism implies, above all, a relationship with an ‘other’ which can be real, direct or virtual, such that the uniqueness of an utterance “responds” to previous utterances, even if these utterances are not clear in the author’s consciousness. Every statement is already a reply, even if unconscious. On the other side of the dialogical chain, an utterance both anticipates possible future utterances, and generates several utterances, not always foreseen by the author of the previous utterance. Taking into account these aspects of dialogism, after confronting what is made explicit in Lunacharsky’s and Bakhtin’s texts, I proceed to analyze the relationships between the implicit utterances in these two texts: other texts by both authors and assimilated discourses, such as Marxism and other philosophical movements, in addition to the common controversies of his epoch. It is also important to take into account the sociopolitical situation of each one of the interlocutors. Following Bakhtin’s conception of dialogism, I analyze disagreements and agreements between both authors.

Regarding Bakhtin’s thesis that Dostoevsky is the creator of the polyphonic novel, Lunacharsky questions the autonomy that Bakhtin perceives in Dostoevsky’s characters. For Lunacharsky “what we have here is a clash of intellects, a clash of wills in an

¹ LUNACHARSKY, Anatoly. Dostoevsky’s Plurality of Voices. Translated by Y. Ganuskin. In: LUNACHARSKY, Anatoly (1973). *On Literature and Art*. Moscow: Art Progress Publishers. Transcribed by Harrison Fluss for marxists.org in February, 2008. Source: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lunachar/1929/bakhtin-dostoyevsky.htm> . Accessed on July 15. All the quotations in English are retrieved from that source, followed by an indication of the paragraph. The same title is translated as “On Dostoevsky’s ‘Multivoicedness’” in BAKHTIN, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. Edited and translated by Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

atmosphere of complete *laissez-faire* on the part of the author.”² It is only in such terms that there is polyphony in Dostoyevsky. Criticizing Bakhtin's conception, Lunacharsky states that the principle of the characters’ “absolute independence from the author can only be accepted with certain very important reservations.”³ Nonetheless, Lunacharsky agrees that Dostoevsky's novels present an orchestration of different convictions and worldviews in which ideology is a profound element of the portrait of the characters: ideology motivates their affective conflicts and their actions. That confirms Bakhtin's observation that not only do Dostoevsky’s characters utter ideas, but they live them intensely, to the extreme consequences – which does not exclude the distortion of certain ideas, drawn from ideologies of the Russian social life of Dostoevsky’s time, as part of the portrait of the character. This is what Bakhtin calls “aesthetic coefficient,” which is added to other discourses – either primary or secondary – assimilated by Dostoevsky’s fiction. As Lunacharsky states, “Dostoevsky’s novels are superbly staged dialogues.”⁴

Lunacharsky's objection to the (relative) autonomy of Dostoevsky's characters disregards statements in Bakhtin's book that refer to his theory of the relationship between author-creator and character, developed in the 1920s, in his essay entitled “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity.” In that essay, Bakhtin (2006) states that the author-creator makes use of his external situation (*outsidness*) in relation to the character to have a global view of the character itself and in its relationship with the whole work, giving them a type of complementation that Bakhtin calls “finalizability.”

The book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art* is based on the theoretical reflections of that previous essay, then unpublished, by demonstrating a particular type of finalizability in Dostoevsky's works, whose protagonists are not treated as full, complete beings, ready to be manipulated as objects by the author. Dostoevsky’s finalizability is elaborated in such a way that the character is not portrayed as completely given. Therefore, Dostoevsky includes unfinalizability in his construction of a character’s finalizability. Bakhtin does not respond to all Lunacharsky’s objections in the chapter of the critical review. However, in the chapter “The Hero, and the Position of the Author with Regard to the Hero,” in *Dostoevsky’s Art*,⁵ Bakhtin defends himself in advance of any notion of passivity by the

² See footnote 2. Paragraph 10.

³ See footnote 2. Paragraph 11.

⁴ See footnote 2. Paragraph 16.

⁵ According to Caryl Emerson’s translation mentioned in footnote 2, p.47.

polyphonic novelist, stating that such type of characterization is much more complex and demanding for the author. First Bakhtin observes the role of the character's self-awareness, in which "the subject of the author's visualization and representation turns out to be in fact a function of this self-consciousness."⁶ As Bakhtin explains, "the author retains for himself, that is, for his exclusive field of vision, not a single essential definition, not a single trait, not the smallest feature of the hero: [...] he casts it all into the crucible of the hero's own self-consciousness,"⁷ because "self-consciousness, as the artistic dominant in the structure of a character's image, presupposes a radically *new authorial position* with regard to the represented person."⁸ Further explaining the characters' independence, Bakhtin shows that it is a construction by the author, in which, once conceived, each character

has his own order, his own logic, which enters the realm of the author's artistic intention but it is not infringed upon the author's whim. Once he has chosen a hero and the dominant of his hero's representation, the author is already bound by the inner logic of what he has chosen, and he must reveal it in the representation. The logic of self-consciousness permits only certain artistic means for revealing and representing itself. Self-consciousness can be interrogated and provoked into revealing and representing itself, but not by giving it a predetermined or finalizing image.⁹

Lunacharsky agrees with Bakhtin's interpretation, based on Otto Kaus, that Dostoevsky's fiction is a reflection of capitalism in Russia and that polyphony is the way in which the author captured the rapid approximation of previously cultural worlds that were relatively distant. However, Lunacharsky sees polyphony as a direct reflection of the sociopolitical structure, not as a conscious and elaborate response by an artist. This is what one can see in the following statement:

Life was seething with contradictions. Various individual philosophies of life were coming into collision; various individual moral codes, sometimes consciously worked out as full-fledged theories, at others manifesting their entirely almost subconscious nature through actions

⁶ See footnote 2. Translated by Caryl Emerson, p.48.

⁷ See footnote 2. Translated by Caryl Emerson, p.48.

⁸ See footnote 2. Translated by Caryl Emerson, p.57.

⁹ See footnote 2. Translated by Caryl Emerson, p.65.

and discordant talk, were being brought face to face. In Dostoevsky's novels a similar dialogue is in process, an identical struggle.¹⁰

For Bakhtin, the social, political and economic structures of society impose conditions on the writer, but their achievement is more than a mere reflection of the context: it is a response also conditioned by the talent and ethical and ideological orientation of each author. Bakhtin's view is consistent with his distinction between author-person and author-creator in the essay *Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity*. Citizen Dostoevsky responds in the most diverse ways to his social environment, including the defense and practice of a certain notion of the writer's social role. The author-creator, an element of the literary work, establishes a new type of relationship with the characters (at least the protagonists) structuring the polyphonic novel.

For Lunacharsky, Dostoevsky did not create polyphony. Disagreeing with Bakhtin, for whom polyphony is impossible in drama, Lunacharsky states that Shakespeare is extremely polyphonic, as well as Balzac, because:

Balzac's kinship with Shakespeare lies not only in his extraordinary variety of colours in the world around him, where the capitalist order was establishing itself in its more or less final form after the storms of the Great Revolution, but also in its polyphonism, in freedom and self-sufficiency of his "voices."¹¹

Lunacharsky notices that Bakhtin does not mention Balzac's influence on Dostoevsky. Although Balzac makes more use of the "intruder" third-person narrator to present his own ideas, Lunacharsky considers him "less tendentious than Dostoevsky."¹² This can be explained not only by Balzac's genius, but also by certain aspects of the French society of his time. Lunacharsky states that Dostoevsky's preferences are apparent even when there is no comment from the narrator.¹³

In another essay, *Theater and the Revolution*, Lunacharsky explains what he means by "tendentious" in a way that we could hardly associate this term with Dostoevsky's masterpieces:

¹⁰ See footnote 2. Paragraph. 24.

¹¹ See footnote 2. Paragraph 46.

¹² See footnote 2. Paragraph 46.

¹³ See footnote 2. Paragraph 53.

Usually, in art, one defines the desire to impose violently determined ideas as tendentious, so to speak. A tendentious work wants to instill its own opinions; the idea does not stem, by spontaneous reaction, from a profoundly true spectacle, directed by an inner harmony, and disturbing by its own virtue, but it presents itself with too much obviousness, often going so far as to deviate the course of events and distort the further development of a character.

The more the idea introduced by the author flows into the action itself, the less we notice such a tendency being exposed, because the harmony between idea and action is suggestive to our minds and is instilled in our heart by the commotion caused by the spectacle, so that the that we will have in front of us will not be a tendentious work, but simply a piece with profound ideas.¹⁴

Nevertheless, the fact that Bakhtin affirms that no character created by Dostoevsky is the author's spokesperson does not imply that the architecture of the novel is completely neutral, but rather that the author portrays his characters as subjects in development. Bakhtin even admits that the conclusion of *Crime and Punishment* is relatively monological. In the case of *Crime and Punishment*, polyphony lies in the internal controversy of Raskolnikov's conscience with the speeches of other characters. Furthermore, the protagonist is portrayed not only by the narrator, but also by the other characters' opinions. In fact, the conclusion of the novel favors a Christian view of the world similar to Dostoevsky's own ideology, but that ideology is part of an intense controversial dialogue with Raskolnikov's own ideology (artistic assimilation of certain current ideologies in Russia) and other characters. The architectural form of the polyphonic novel, not being completely neutral, gives place for each character to live and defend their ideology intensely.

In response to Lunacharsky, Bakhtin argues that neither Shakespeare nor Balzac created polyphony. For Bakhtin, Shakespeare could not be polyphonic for the very own limitations of the drama as a genre. As Bakhtin states: "drama may be multi-leveled, but it cannot contain *multiple worlds*; it permits only one, and not several, systems of

¹⁴ Our translation of the following quotation in Portuguese: "Comumente, em arte, define-se como tendencioso o desejo de impor com violência ideias determinadas, digamos assim. Uma obra tendenciosa quer incutir suas próprias opiniões; a ideia não decorre, por reação espontânea, de um espetáculo profundamente verdadeiro, dirigido para uma harmonia interior, e perturbador por sua própria virtude, mas se apresenta com ostensiva evidência, chegando frequentemente a desviar o curso dos acontecimentos e a deformar o desenvolvimento posterior de um personagem.

Quanto mais a ideia inserida pelo autor flui na própria ação, menos notamos essa tendência da peça a vestir a carapuça, pois a harmonia entre ideia e ação sugere à nossa cabeça e se insinua no nosso coração pela comoção suscitada pelo espetáculo, de forma que o que teremos à nossa frente não será uma obra tendenciosa, mas simplesmente uma peça com profundidade de ideias" (LUNATCHÁRSKI, 2018, p.91).

measurement.”¹⁵ Bakhtin admits the multiplicity of plenivalent voices only in Shakespeare’s achievement as a whole, not in each isolated work. Therefore, there would be no specific Shakespearean piece that was, in itself, polyphonic. Bakhtin adds that “the voices in Shakespeare are not points of view about the world to the degree that they are in Dostoevski; Shakespeare’s protagonists are not ideologues in the full sense of the term.”¹⁶

According to Bakhtin (2008, p.39) one may speak of elements of polyphony in Balzac, “but only of elements,”¹⁷ because “Balzac did not transcend the object-ness of his characters, or the monological finalization of his world.”¹⁸ The affinities between Balzac’s works and Dostoevsky’s polyphony derive from the fact that the works by the French novelist are part of the line of the novel precursory of polyphony, which culminated in Dostoevsky’s fiction, according to the section The Two Stylistic lines of the Development of European novel of his essay Discourse in the Novel.

Consistent with his statement in his text “Theses on the Problems of Marxist Criticism”¹⁹ that “a work of literature always reflects, whether consciously or unconsciously, the psychology of the class which the writer represents,”²⁰ Lunacharsky attributes polyphony to Dostoevsky’s own ideological conflicts between revolutionary materialism and Christian faith. For Lunacharsky, Dostoevsky was a victim of ideological pressure and persecution of intellectuals who opposed the official ideology of the Russian Empire. These persecutions and the frustrations of Russian progressive intellectuals generated different reactions, in life and in art, in other great writers, such as Belinsky, Gogol, Chernyshevsky, Nekrasov and Tolstoy, being the latter a “crippled titan,”²¹ as Lunacharsky would put it, because:

His non-resistance to evil is in fact the same old self-defense against conscience advanced by a man who, in his heart of hearts, is perfectly well aware of all the wicked injustice of life, but cannot make up his

¹⁵ See footnote 2. Translated by Caryl Emerson, p.34.

¹⁶ See footnote 2. Translated by Caryl Emerson, p.34.

¹⁷ See footnote 2. Translated by Caryl Emerson, p.34.

¹⁸ See footnote 2. Translated by Caryl Emerson, p.34.

¹⁹ LUNACHARSKY, Anatoly. Dostoevsky’s Plurality of Voices. Translated by Y. Ganuskin. *In: LUNACHARSKY, Anatoly. On Literature and Art. Moscow: Art Progress Publishers, 1073. Transcribed by Harrison Fluss for marxists.org in February, 2008. Source: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lunachar/1928/criticism.htm> . Accessed on July, 15.*

²⁰ See footnote 18. Paragraph 8.

²¹ See footnote 2. Paragraph 71.

mind to commit himself to the direct, total struggle which he knows to be beyond his strength.²²

As far as Dostoevsky is concerned, Lunacharsky mentions his epilepsy crises as psychosomatic reactions to ideological conflicts. Dostoevsky, Lunacharsky argues, is supposed to have participated in the Petrashevsky circle also for his political affinity, in addition to cultural motivations. His death sentence, later replaced by exile in Siberia, would have contributed even more to Dostoevsky's split conscience, which never fully accepted revolutionary materialism, nor the church's orthodoxy, nor the tsar's autocracy.

Bakhtin disagrees with such a reduction of polyphony to the artistic expression of Dostoevsky's ideological irresolution, stating that that kind of conflict, “Dostoevskyism,” “is a reactionary, purely monological extract, of Dostoevsky's polyphony,”²³ which always closes within the limits of an isolated conscience. However, “the important thing in Dostoevsky's polyphony,”²⁴ Bakhtin says, “is precisely what happens *between various consciousnesses*, that is, their interaction and interdependence.”²⁵

In part, Bakhtin agrees with Lunacharsky's statements, but insists on the innovative character of Dostoevsky's polyphony, which he saw as more than just reflections of the contradictions of citizen Dostoevsky and his society. Lunacharsky affirms that the polyphonic novel persists because there are still remains of Capitalism in the Soviet Union – an idea that suggests the overcoming of a given architectural form together with the end of Capitalism. Bakhtin, in his turn, considers the permanence of great works in the “long time,” that “great discoveries of the human genius are made possible by the specific conditions of specific epochs, but they never die or lose their value with the epochs gave them birth.”²⁶

Bakhtin concludes by stating that Lunacharsky limits his reflections to the relationship between Dostoevsky's fiction and his time. For Bakhtin, one should also study the roots and development of polyphony in relation to the long time, the centuries of formation and evolution of the carnivalesque lineage of the novel, which makes the genre more suitable for Dostoevsky's invention of polyphony: a type of approach that he

²² See footnote 2. Paragraph 71.

²³ See footnote 2. Translated by Caryl Emerson, p.36.

²⁴ See footnote 2. Translated by Caryl Emerson, p.36.

²⁵ See footnote 2. Translated by Caryl Emerson, p.36.

²⁶ See footnote 2. Translated by Caryl Emerson, p.35.

calls “historical poetics.” This conclusion ends up being a response not only to Lunacharsky, but also to the first version of his own book, since it justifies the inclusion of chapter “Characteristics of Genre, and Plot Composition in Dostoevsky's Works,” which addresses the influence of Socratic dialogue and Menippean satire on the formation of the novel as a genre. That chapter did not exist in the first edition of the book, entitled *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art*.

So far I have confronted the most direct and explicit aspects of the critical dialogue between Lunacharsky and Bakhtin. Notwithstanding, it is also interesting to analyze the indirect, sometimes implicit, aspects that relate to the relationship of both authors with previous discourses, of which we have already found some evidence and even commented upon, in Bakhtin’s case. It is a dialogue that precedes (and succeeds) the dialogue between the two critical texts analyzed.

Part of that dialogical context is the controversy between Marxists and Formalists – as the members of the Society for the Study of Poetic Language (OPOIAZ) and the Moscow Language Circle were derogatively labeled – who sought a method centered on linguistic elaboration regardless of socioeconomic factors. Lunacharsky quickly returns to that controversy to defend the relationship between the facts of Dostoevsky's life (including his crises of epilepsy) and the polyphonic structure of his novels, as in this excerpt:

Our formalists keep on dining into the reader of today – whom they have not the remotest chance of ever convincing – that writers in general, and even the greatest among them, stand quite aloof from their own works, look on them as an exercise in craftsmanship and are interested in them only from the point of view of form. In respect of Dostoevsky this kind of assertion sounds particularly monstrous. It is evident that Bakhtin has no intention of making any such assertion. Dostoyevsky listens to the great disputes which take place in word and deed in his novels with the most intense excitement, with love and hatred.²⁷

Inaugurated in 1917 by Viktor Shklovsky’s lecture “The resurrection of the word,” the so-called formal method caused controversies with Marxists, who reacted to the emphasis on form over social influences in the construction of a literary work. Such method was attacked by Leon Trotsky in the article “The formal school in poetry,”

²⁷ See footnote 2. Paragraph 54.

published in 1923 in *Literature and Revolution Magazine*, which disqualifies the formal method as insufficient and idealistic. The following year, Lunacharsky attacked formalism in the article entitled Formalism and Art History, published in *Press and Revolution* magazine. In that article, Lunacharsky admits the possibility of an art that is restricted to the formal game, but states that the valuable work of art is “far from fixing itself at this stage.” As Lunacharsky argues:

In its own way of organizing things (of organizing them considering a perception as easy and rich in sensations as possible), it also encompasses the universe of emotions and affective complexes, ideas and the highest intellectual systems. At this level, it belongs entirely to the domain of ideology. It is no longer a part of human work to make things pleasurable, but a true and powerful way of acting on the whole conscience of man, the whole “human psyche” an instrument of education and propaganda of an immense force.²⁸

In defense of his method, one of the so-called formalists, Boris Eikhenbaum maintains that any relationship of cause and effect between different domains of culture is “artificial and, therefore, does not give fruitful results.”²⁹ Lunacharsky replies sarcastically:

If you are an honest scholar, you must recognize that the absence of functional relationships is not just a pure hypothesis, but an evidently absurd hypothesis, since a scholar, or even simply, a man who can read and write, may believe that among different aspects of culture there is a mutual dependence?³⁰

²⁸ My translation of this quotation in French: “l’art est loin de s’en tenir à ce stade. Dans sa manière propre d’organiser les choses (de les organiser en vue d’une perception aussi facile et riche en sensations qu’il est possible), il englobe également l’univers des émotions et des complexes affectifs, des idées et des systèmes intellectuels les plus élevés. A ce niveau, il ressortit entièrement au domaine de l’idéologie. Il n’est plus une partie de l’industrie humaine visant à ce que les choses nous procurent du plaisir, mais un véritable et puissant moyen d’agir sur tout elle conscience de l’homme, tout le ‘psychisme’ humain, un instrument d’éducation et de propagande d’une force immense.” (LUNACHARSKY apud ACOUTURIER, 1994, p.80).

²⁹ My translation of this quotation in French: “est artificielle, et c’est pourquoi elle ne donne pas des résultats féconds” (EICHENBAUM apud ACOUTURIER, p.83).

³⁰ My translation of this quotation in French: “Si vous êtes un savant honnête vous devez reconnaître que l’absence de ces relations fonctionnelles n’est pas seulement une pure hypothèse, mais que c’est une hypothèse manifestement absurde, car quel savant, et même, tout simplement, quel homme sachant lire et écrire pourra croire qu’entre les différents aspects de la culture il n’y ait pas une dépendance réciproque?” (LUNACHARSKY apud ACOUTURIER, 1994, p.83).

Moreover, Nicolay Ivanovich Bukharin, in the article *The Formal Method in Art*,³¹ published in 1928, affirms that art organizes the material aiming above all at affecting the recipient, being, therefore, inseparable from the psychology and social life phenomena.

One may argue that the anti-formalist critics so far commented upon in this article are influenced by Georgi Valentinovich Plekhanov, considered the father of Russian Marxism. In spite of Plekhanov's controversy with Lunacharsky in the essay "Art and Social Life," Lunacharsky's critique of the formal method (as well as those by other Marxist intellectuals) has proximity to Plekhanov's attack (prior to the advent of Formalism) against the so-called "art for art's sake" (including Impressionism and Cubism, in Plekhanov's view). According to Plekhanov, art for art's sake arises "when there is a divorce between artists and the social world that surrounds them."³²

The so-called Bakhtin Circle also participated in that controversy. In 1928 the book *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: critical introduction to a sociological poetics* was published, being signed by a member of the circle, Pavel Nikolaevitch Medvedev, and later attributed to Bakhtin. The first critique concerns the formalist conception of an autonomous development of what they called "literary series." For Medvedev, the study of literature is part of the science of ideologies, understanding ideology not in the strict sense of a misleading view of reality, but in the broader sense of the diverse discursive fields, conditioned by social relations, especially class ones. Another important aspect of Medvedev's book is the critical view of one of the foundations of Formalism: the opposition between poetic and practical language.

In part, Medvedev's book adopts some arguments from Bakhtin's essay entitled "The Problem of Content, Material, and Form in Verbal Art," written in 1924 for *The Russian Messenger* magazine, but never published. However, it is interesting to underscore that the essay signed by Bakhtin does not use the Marxist terminology of Medvedev's book. Nor does it present itself as a contribution to Marxism. Bakhtin's essay focuses on a critique of what he calls "material aesthetics." Bakhtin argues that such aesthetics – in which one can identify Formalism and Structuralism – is limited to the analysis of linguistic material. According to Bakhtin, the organization of language constitutes an important stage of literary analysis, but is not sufficient for a satisfactory

³¹ My translation of this title in French: *La méthode formelle dans l'art*.

³² My translation of this quotation in Portuguese: "quando existe um divórcio entre os artistas e o mundo social que os rodeia" (PLEKHANOV, 1969, p.18).

aesthetic analysis. Bakhtin, in “The Problem of Content, Material, and Form in Verbal Art” criticizes a purely linguistic view of literary work, including the distinction between poetic language and everyday language. Bakhtin also criticizes the concept of strangeness, created by Shklovski, considering it “grossly psychological.”³³ For Bakhtin, one of the flaws in the aesthetics of the material is the lack of an aesthetic theory, replaced by a linguistic one. In his critique, the distinction between architectural and compositional form is extremely relevant, as one cannot understand the aesthetic object through formal analysis. It is necessary to analyze how the form assimilates and re-elaborates cognitive and ethical data, which derive from the relationship between art and society. Nonetheless, it is also necessary to analyze sensorial and compositional elements, in order to reach, through the compositional form, content that is not reduced to information, but that forms the aesthetic object. As Bakhtin explains:

The fact that we see or hear something does not mean that we already perceive its artistic form; it is necessary to make what is seen, heard and pronounced the expression of our active and axiological relationship, it is necessary to enter as a creator in what is seen, heard and pronounced, and in this way overcome the determined, material and extra-aesthetic character of form, its character of thing: it ceases to exist in our interior as a material perceived and organized in a cognitive way, becoming the expression of a valorizing activity that penetrates the content and transforms it.³⁴

In his review of the book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art*, Lunacharsky avoids labeling Bakhtin as a formalist, although he gets close to it at the beginning of his article by stating that Bakhtin “treats only a few of the problems of Dostoyevsky’s writing, specially selecting certain aspects of it and approaching them primarily – indeed, almost exclusively – from the point of view of form.”³⁵ Such “near accusation” is attenuated in another paragraph, when Lunacharsky (2018, p.201) states: “Although Bakhtin’s book centres mainly on the formal analysis of Dostoyevsky’s techniques, the critic is by no

³³ My translation of the expression in Portuguese “grosseiramente psicológico” (BAKHTIN, 1990).

³⁴ My translation of this quotation in Portuguese: “Só porque vemos ou ouvimos algo não quer dizer que já percebemos sua forma artística; é preciso fazer do que é visto, ouvido e pronunciado a expressão da nossa relação ativa e axiológica, é preciso ingressar como criador no que se vê, se ouve e se pronuncia, e desta forma superar o caráter determinado, material e extra-estético da forma, seu caráter de coisa: ela deixa de existir no nosso interior como um material percebido e organizado de modo cognitivo, transformando-se na expressão de uma atividade valorizante que penetra no conteúdo e o transforma. (BAKHTIN, 1990, pp.58-59).

³⁵ See footnote 2. Paragraph 1.

means averse to embarking on an occasional excursion into their sociological interpretation.”³⁶ Lunacharsky’s opinion ignores a fundamental aspect of Bakhtin and his circle’s thought: a kind of sociology of the sign, which overcomes the dichotomy between formal and sociological analysis. The social and ideological dimension is not only present as a social conditioning for the creation of a work of art, neither solely in the information that links the text to its context, but it is part of the very nature of the sign. As Valentin Nikolaevitch Vološinov (2017, pp.91-93), another member of the Bakhtin Circle, argues in the book *Marxism and Philosophy of Language* (also attributed to Bakhtin), every sign is ideological and every ideology is semiotic. In addition, the sign is the arena of ideological struggles in society. On the other hand, in the essay “Speech Genres,” Bakhtin (2016) conceives literary genres as secondary speech genres. The connection between form, style and society comes from the fact that all speech genres derive from specific series of human activities. Therefore, Bakhtin’s method synthesizes formal and sociological analysis based not only on the structure of society as a motivating - or even determinant - circumstance of the text, but on the very social nature of the sign and discourse. In response to Lunacharsky’s criticism, whose analysis he calls “historical-genetics,” Bakhtin affirms: “A poetics cannot, of course, be divorced from social and historical analyses, but neither can it be dissolved in them.”³⁷

Interestingly, not always does such severity with Formalism extend to Futurism, a poetic movement to which the formal method is associated, as acknowledged by Leon Trotsky: “The paradox consists in the fact that Russian Formalism is closely linked to Russian Futurism and, while it capitulated politically to communism, Formalism is opposed to Marxism with all its theoretical force.”³⁸

Lunacharsky, in turn, in the essay “Theater and the Revolution” attacks an “alleged 'left-wing art', usually named as Futurism in Russia.”³⁹ The same type of attack is present in the text “The problem of Socialist Culture,” in which Lunacharsky argues:

³⁶ See footnote 2. Paragraph 18.

³⁷ See footnote 2. Translated by Caryl Emerson, p.36.

³⁸ My translation of this quotation in Portuguese: “O paradoxal consiste no fato de que o formalismo russo está estreitamente ligado ao futurismo russo e, enquanto este capitulou politicamente ante o comunismo, o formalismo se opõe ao marxismo com toda a sua força teórica”. (TROTSKI, 1978, p.71).

³⁹ My translation of this quotation in Portuguese: “um pretensa “arte de esquerda”, normalmente batizada na Rússia como nome de futurismo”. (LUNATCHÁRSKI, 2018, p.79).

The knowledge of art which, although not at all proletarian, is made by masters from whom something can be learned, impresses the proletarians more than the sharp and intrinsically insecure experiences of the “futurists” of all kinds, who did nothing in the field of theater, except for all sorts of rudeness and spices for the decadent bourgeoisie. (LUNACHARSKY, 2018, p.65).⁴⁰

However, such a point of view did not prevent Lunacharsky from publishing a completely complimentary review of the poetry of Mayakovsky, the main representative of Russian Futurism. Lunacharsky expresses great admiration for Mayakovsky in the essay entitled “Vladimir Mayakovsky, Innovator.” After commenting upon Mayakovsky's personality and his relationship with his environment, including the growing adherence to the values of the Revolution, Lunacharsky highlights a series of stylistic innovations which he believes to converge to the values of the construction of the Soviet society (the revolutionary form necessary for the revolutionary art, as Mayakovsky defended). Lunacharsky observes a series of innovations in Mayakovsky's poetic achievement, in which we perceive the praise of a poetics that is contrary to certain aspects of Russian Symbolism. First of all, the demotion of the theme: choosing themes that are considered vulgar. As Lunacharsky (2018, p.190) states, Mayakovsky “chose themes belonging to work, to building, deeply terrestrial themes.”⁴¹ Consistent with that choice, Lunacharsky observes a lowering of vocabulary, including words that did not fit traditional high style. Lunacharsky also observes the construction of sentences in an unexpected way, sometimes contrary to syntax. Another aspect is the lowering of the rhythm, with adaptation of the song rhythm to non-romantic themes, including the rhythms “of discussion, of the speaker, of industrial sounds, the cadences of production, of the march.”⁴² Finally, the lowering of the rhyme, with its surprising manifestations: “For the verses to be imprinted with force, it is necessary to have a new rhyme, not a rhyme that will age us (...) but a verbal echo so enriching, groundbreaking and original

⁴⁰ My translation of this quotation in Portuguese: “O conhecimento da arte que, embora não seja de jeito nenhum proletária, é feita por mestres dos quais se pode aprender alguma coisa, impressiona os proletários mais do que as cortantes e intrinsecamente inseguras experiências dos “futuristas” de todos os tipos, que nada fizeram no campo do teatro, a não ser toda espécie de grosseria e temperos para a burguesia decadente. (LUNATCHARSKI, 2018, p.65).

⁴¹ My translation of this quotation in Portuguese: “escolhia temas pertencentes ao trabalho, à edificação, temas profundamente terrestres” (LUNATCHARSKI, 2018, p.190).

⁴² My translation of this quotation in Portuguese: “da discussão, do orador, dos sons industriais, as cadências da produção, da marcha” (LUNATCHARSKI, 2018, p.192).

that raises the astonishment and is recorded more easily in us.”⁴³ Lunacharsky concludes (2018, p.192) that Mayakovsky “was an authentic worker, not an improviser, but a determined and conscious researcher.”⁴⁴ Published in *Literature and Art* magazine in 1931, such praise seems to contradict the condemnation of the “excess of originality” in Lunacharsky’s “Theses on the Problems of Marxist Criticism,” published in 1928, in *New World (Novy mir)* and *Literary Sentry* literary magazines. That text was the basis for the speech that Lunacharsky delivered at the First Pan-Soviet Congress of the Association of Proletarian Writers, held in the same year, in which Lunacharsky states:

Finally, the third great sin against the aforementioned particular rule of the originality of form is the excessive originality of form, in which the absence of content is disguised by means of formal inventions and ornaments. There are writers, influenced by the formalists - these typical representatives of bourgeois decadence - tried to adorn and embellish its sincere and important content with various tricks, thus ruining the work.⁴⁵

What can be concluded from the confrontation between this programmatic text and the celebration of Mayakovsky is that the poet's formal audacities are not empty verbal games, but they reach correspondence in the wealth of content, this content being distanced from the “bourgeois decadence” of the formalists and in tune with the official ideology of the Communist Party.

Despite the differences from Lunacharsky, Bakhtin also points out special qualities in Mayakovsky's poetic achievement. In his notes on Mayakovsky, Bakhtin observes the creation of a new type of monumentality. According to Bakhtin, Mayakovsky promotes the heroization of contemporaneity, showing History “not in small groups (limited to one room) of historical characters, but in its fundamental massiveness

⁴³ My translation of this quotation in Portuguese: “Para que os versos se imprimam com força é necessária precisamente uma rima nova, não uma rima batida que nos envelheça [...] mas um eco verbal tão enriquecedor, inédito e original que suscite o assombro e se grave mais facilmente em nós” (LUNATCHÁRSKI, 2018, p.192).

⁴⁴ My translation of this quotation in Portuguese: “era um autêntico trabalhador, não um improvisador, mas um pesquisador determinado e consciente” (LUNATCHÁRSKI, 2018, p.193).

⁴⁵ My translation of this quotation in Portuguese: “Por último, o terceiro grande pecado contra a mencionada regra particular da originalidade da forma é a originalidade excessiva da forma, na qual a ausência de conteúdo é disfarçada mediante invenções e ornamentos formais, Existem escritores, influenciados pelos formalistas – esses típicos representantes da decadência burguesa – tentaram adornar e embelezar seu conteúdo sincero e importante com diversos truques, arruinando assim a obra” (LUNATCHÁRSKI, 2018, p.149).

- in the mixed masses of continents, countries, people and things.”⁴⁶ Like Walt Whitman, Mayakovsky speaks “from mass to mass, and not from elected ones to elected ones.”⁴⁷ It is a new form of heroization, as it is not inspired by the heroism of the past, but in the future (not just a future imagined or dreamed of, but a future that begins today, as a project already being carried out). Overcoming the distance between poetry and prose, Mayakovsky “prosifies” poetry. Bakhtin affirms: “from the point of view of elementary poetic lexicology, his verse is abundant of prosaic traits.”⁴⁸ For Bakhtin, Mayakovsky creates novel-like poetry (with heteroglossic features), as he adds stylistic-ideological elements typical of the novel as a genre in the architecture of his poetic achievement. Interestingly, Bakhtin's notes sound at times less formalistic than Lunacharsky's essay...

As we have seen, Bakhtin and his circle, as well as Lunacharsky, differed from Formalism. Even so, despite the contribution of the books attributed to him to Marxism, Bakhtin's method also does not entirely coincide with the prevailing Marxist sociological approach of that epoch. Both divergences are explicit in 1970, in *Novi Mir*, the same magazine in which Lunacharsky had reviewed his book. There, Bakhtin defends:

First of all, literary scholarship should establish closer links with the history of culture. Literature is an inseparable part of culture, it cannot be understood outside the total context of an entire culture of given epoch. It must not be severed from the rest of culture, nor, as is frequently done, can it be correlated with socioeconomic factors as it were, behind culture's back (...) For a fairly long period of time, we have devoted special attention to the specific features of literature. (...) In our enthusiasm for specification, we have ignored questions of the interconnection and interdependence of various areas of culture; we have frequently forgotten that these boundaries of these areas are not absolute, that in various epochs they have been drawn in various ways; and we have not taken into account that the most intense and productive life of culture takes place on the boundaries of its individual areas and not in places where these areas have become enclosed in their own specificity.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ My translation of this quotation in Portuguese: “não em pequenos grupos (limitados a um cômodo) de personagens históricos, mas em sua massividade fundamental – nas massas miscigenadas dos continentes, dos países, das pessoas e das coisas” (BAKHTIN, 2009, p.196).

⁴⁷ My translation of this quotation in Portuguese: “da massa para a massa, e não de eleitos para eleitos”.

⁴⁸ My translation of this quotation in Portuguese: “do ponto de vista da lexicologia poética elementar, seu verso é abundante em ‘prosaísmos’.”

⁴⁹ BAKHTIN, Mikhail. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Translated by Vern. W. McGee. Edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986. p.1.

A confrontation between the works of such important thinkers cannot fail to take into account the political and social situation in which each intellectual builds up their discourses. Twenty years older than Bakhtin, Lunacharsky was already a young political activist before Bakhtin was even born, having developed his training and revolutionary practice amid persecution, imprisonment and exile. Considered, along with Trotsky and Lenin, one of the first rank leaders of the Revolution, Lunacharsky played an important political role as People's Commissar for Education (equivalent to the post of minister), creating and encouraging cultural movements like *Proletkult*, as well as being a playwright, author of about forty plays. That position explains the programmatic tone of part of Lunacharsky's texts aimed at the pragmatism of cultural policies. Bakhtin produces his thoughts from a relatively marginal position, often being unemployed and persecuted. This difference appears in the fact that many of Bakhtin's writings have remained unpublished for decades and in the supposed authorship of certain texts published with the signature of other members of his circle.

In relative terms, one can say that Lunacharsky writes from the point of view of the official culture of the Communist Party, which can be verified in his direct adherence to certain Marxist conceptions that were beginning to become dogmas. On the other hand, Bakhtin is very reticent in relation to Marxism in the texts that he himself signs; although the books of his circle attributed to him announce the intention to contribute by filling certain gaps in Marxism, such as the absence of a Marxist philosophy of language (in the case of the book signed by Vološinov). Still, in spite of what the filiation claimed, such works were dissonant, in certain aspects, from the Party's Marxist doctrine.

Regarding his attacks on formalists, the respectful way Lunacharsky treats Bakhtin should be noted, as he avoids labelling him a “formalist” (a quite derogatory term), even though he affirms that Bakhtin's analysis is predominantly formal. In this case, a simple adjective made a big difference, since Lunacharsky used to be quite aggressive towards formalists in general. In addition, the Soviet government was entering a phase in which certain aesthetic disagreements could be dangerous. For this reason, Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist (1998, p.168), in their Bakhtin's biography, believe that Lunacharsky's prestige may have attenuated the verdict against Bakhtin: accused of anti-Soviet activities, he was deported to Kazakhstan, instead of somewhere else with a more severe winter, which could have led him to death, given his fragile health.

In certain texts, Lunacharsky adopts a relatively open attitude amidst the growing dogmatism of the Party. With the imposition of Socialist Realism, Lunacharsky (2018, p.41) seeks to put the Party's official aesthetics into relative terms, by writing: “Socialist Realism is a broad program, involving many different methods that exist among us, and will also encompass those who we are still going to acquire (...).”⁵⁰ Still, at this point the regime's growing authoritarianism was not in favor of a more open view. This is the possible reason why Anatoly Vasilyevich Lunatcharsky received the dubious award of being appointed to missions abroad – far away from the internal activities he had been developing – until he was finally appointed Soviet ambassador in Spain, where he was travelling to when he died in Menton, France, in 1933.

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⁵⁰ My translation of this quotation in Portuguese: “O realismo socialista é um programa amplo, que engloba muitos métodos diferentes que existem entre nós, e também englobará aqueles que ainda vamos adquirir (...)” (LUNATCHÁRSKI, 2018, p.141).

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