Intersections between Paul Ricœur's Conception of Narrative Identity and Mikhail Bakhtin's Notion of the Polyphony of Speech

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ABSTRACT   Proposing his conception of narrative identity in *Oneself as Another*, Paul Ricœur holds that human life is comprehensible, once the story of a man's life has actually been told, and it is the narrative of one's life which constructs one's identity. Developing his theory of heteroglossia and the polyphony of human speech, explicated chiefly in *Speech Genres* and *The Dialogic Imagination*, Mikhail Bakhtin recognizes the intrinsically intertwining character of utterance and response. According to him, utterance is always addressed to someone and antedates an answer. Bakhtin's "addressivity," as well as his view of discourse as fundamentally dialogic, are convergent with Ricœur's elucidation both of man's answerability to the Other and of narrative identity. The dynamic character of narrative identity, as construed by Ricœur, converges with the dynamic nature of language as viewed by Bakhtin. The aim of this article is to study the intersections of Ricœur's narrative theory and Bakhtin's recognition of the polyphonic nature of speech. I view these as inherently interrelated, and as testifying, respectively, to the philosophical and linguistic aspects of one and the same phenomenological vision. That vision accounts for selfhood, understood as vulnerable and contextualized, while also recognizing that it is conveyed by means of language with its essentially dialogic openness.

KEYWORDS   Bakhtin, Mikhail; narrative identity; polyphony of speech; Ricœur, Paul

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Introduction

The aim of this article is to display the importance of the intersections between Paul Ricœur's philosophical hermeneutics of the self and Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the polyphonic nature of speech. Ricœur's concept of narrative identity—the dialectics of the self, and the dialogic dimension of his understanding of the narrative of a life as being constitutive of one's selfhood—are the main aspects of his hermeneutics which I propose to see as being related to Bakhtin's theory of the polyphony of speech. In particular, I indicate four areas of commonality between the theories of the two thinkers. I tackle fictivity as a tool used by both of them to uncover the primordial nature of human existence, expand on the affinities in their renditions of ethics and consciousness, and elaborate on the dynamic nature of the narrative of a life (Ricœur) and the dynamic character of speech (Bakhtin). Finally, I explicate the common interest of the two theorists in narrative and narrativization, and the enormous impact of their findings on literary studies and criticism.

Ricœur's hermeneutics of the self is preoccupied with the quest for an answer to the question "Who am I?" The predominant subject matter of his philosophical hermeneutics, which ensues from his anthropology, concerns the human who is capable of self-understanding. The process of self-understanding spans the narrative of a life. For Ricœur, understanding derives from the relationship of the self both to the Other and to the world. Ricœur claims that as an agent who takes responsibility for one's life, a human being is a capable being but also a vulnerable human being. He delves into the profoundest aspects of what makes up selfhood. The crux of his hermeneutics of selfhood is the discovery of otherness: otherness constitutes the core of selfhood. In his seminal work *Oneself as Another* (1992), which is where he chiefly explicates his notion of selfhood, he declares:

> *Oneself as Another* suggests from the outset that the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other, as we might say in Hegelian terms. To "as" I should like to attach a strong meaning, not only that of comparison (oneself similar to the other) but indeed that of implication (oneself inasmuch as being the other).[1]

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1. Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 3 (hereafter cited in the text as *OA*).

Most significantly, Ricœur proposes his conceptualization of the "self," founding it on the narrative coherence of life. He views the self as a character / narrator of his / her life-narrative. Crucially, that narrative is essentially intertwined with the narratives of others.

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, a Russian philosopher of language and linguist, is regarded as one of the most important theorists of discourse and the novel in the twentieth century. His major works, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929), *Rabelais and His World* (1965), and *The Dialogic Imagination* (1975), have exerted an enormous impact on the development of literary studies, philosophy and linguistics. The originality of Bakhtin's linguistic theory lies in the fact that he roots language and meaning in the social. In contrast to two prevalent conceptions of language—namely, the humanist one, according to which the source of meaning is the individual, and the deconstructionist one, for which meaning is situated in the underlying structure of difference[2]—Bakhtin's theory draws attention to its dialogic nature, generated in the course of social interchange. In 1918, he established a group of intellectuals that came later to be known as the Bakhtin Circle. The group concerned itself with problems pertaining to the Russian Revolution and its impact on the culture and social life of Soviet citizens, as well as the connections between social reality and art.

In this article, I argue that for both Ricœur and Bakhtin human experience in its versatile aspects is of a fundamentally dialogic nature. Both base their theories on extensive interrogations of language, and their intellectual paths crisscross in respect of the linguistic precepts underlying their philosophical reflections. Embedded in the linguistic plane, the theories of both deploy notions of fictivity—as mediating, respectively, human subjectivity (Ricœur) and cultural discourse (Bakhtin). Ricœur refers to language, metaphor and symbols in order to explicate human subjectivity. He uses textual hermeneutics and the hermeneutics of suspicion, since language and discourse presuppose both the revelation and concealment of meaning. Crucially, he sees the hermeneutic interpretation of the story of one's life as a means of self-understanding. The inherently intermingling nature of the narrative of one's life and the narratives of the lives of others points to the fundamentally dialogic character of the narrative of the self, as well as that of the Other.

Thus it is fair to say that in spite of their strongly divergent social and political backgrounds, the works of these two thinkers exhibit significant

2. Michael Holquist and Katerina Clark, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 11–12.

parallels. It is the task of the present study to bring more fully to light the points of similarity in virtue of which this is so, as they relate to the implications of their respective intellectual discoveries.

1. Ricœur and Bakhtin: Fictivity as a Tool to Uncover the Primordial Nature of Human Existence

I first would like to point to the similarities between Ricœur and Bakhtin in respect of their applications of various aspects of fictivity, where these engender their discovering of some fundamental principles pertaining to human subjecthood (Ricœur) and the workings of interpersonal linguistic exchanges (Bakhtin). In the case of Ricœur, his detour into the function of narrative serves to actually found his conceptualization of personal identity. As for Bakhtin, it is the internal structure of speech, and the relation between one's speech and that of the Other as studied on the basis of works of fiction, that affords the context through which he makes manifest the dialogic nature of speech itself. According to Bakhtin, the word is shaped in a dialogic interactive process between oneself and the Other. The word is not an isolated entity: it is anticipatory in respect of its relation to the word uttered by the speaker's interlocutor, and embedded in discourse, thus being contextualized.

Developing his theory of the polyphony of human speech, as set out for the most part in *Speech Genres* and *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin recognizes the intrinsically interlocking character of utterance and response. He says:

> Any understanding of live speech, a live utterance, is inherently responsive. . . . Any understanding is imbued with response and necessarily elicits it in one form or another: the listener becomes the speaker.[3]

Elsewhere he writes: "I live in a world of others' words."[4] As he sees it, utterance is always addressed to someone and forestalls an answer. It is the speaker's relation to the Other which creates an utterance. Mark Currie puts it in a nutshell when he states that Bakhtin's conception of language is intrinsically dialogic, stating that for him "the word is not, as in Saus-

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3. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986), 68 (hereafter cited in the text as *SG*).

4. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 143.

sure, a two-sided sign—signifier and signified—but a two sided *act*. Bakhtin's linguistics is a linguistics of parole."[5] The word *act* best conveys the crux of the philosopher's theory—an utterance which is predetermined by an answer. The utterance not only antedates an answer, but is oriented towards an answer. As Bakhtin himself puts it, "The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word."[6]

Bakhtin interrogates works of fiction to discover and proclaim the intrinsic nature of speech. He researches the mixing of many voices, speech merging with the Other's speech, and the polyvalence of voices. Michael Gardiner, in his most informative *The Dialogics of Critique: M.M. Bakhtin and the Theory of Ideology*, observes that, for Bakhtin, "language in the novel is not unitary, but rather 'contested, contestable, and contesting,' riven with a multitude of voices and opposing points of view."[7] Tracing the history of the development of the inclusions of the speech of another, the infiltrations, the vacillating border lines, the ambiguous, and possibly disrespectful, or even parodic, travestying elements, Bakhtin allocates a special place to the exploration of speech in the Middle Ages. He stresses the enormity of the role of the word of the Other:

> there were quotations that were openly and reverently emphasized as such, or that were distorted, unintentionally distorted, deliberately reinterpreted and so forth. The boundary lines between someone else's speech and one's own speech were flexible, ambiguous, often deliberately distorted and confused.[8]

Language, for Bakhtin, is a non-neutral, univocal entity, but it is characterized by constant and profound appropriation and expropriation.[9] In the context of his extensive interrogations of literary discourse—especially the discourse of the novel, the genre that he is mainly preoccupied with—Bakhtin explains heteroglossia, one of his major concepts, in the following way:

5. Mark Currie, *Metafiction* (London; New York: Longman, 1995), 156.

6. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 280 (hereafter cited in the text as *DI*).

7. Michael Gardiner, *The Dialogics of Critique: M.M. Bakhtin and the Theory of Ideology* (London; New York: Routledge, 1992), 41 (hereafter cited in the text as *DC*).

8. Mikhail Bakhtin, "From the Prehistory of the Novelistic Discourse," in David Lodge and Nigel Wood, eds, *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* (London: Longman, 2000), 125.

9. Ibid., 124–5.

> speech diversity achieves its full creative consciousness only under condi-
> tions of an active polyglossia. Two myths perish simultaneously; the myth
> of a language that presumes to be the only language, and the myth of a
> language that presumes to be completely unified.[10]

Bakhtin's thorough investigations of the manifold aspects of fictivity also
carry implications for his study of other forms of discourse.

Importantly, Bakhtin's literary investigation is interrelated with, and
consequential for, his social analysis. Gardiner is very clear on this point:
"For Bakhtin the novel is a repository of critical social knowledge, which
most closely approximates his cherished ideal of dialogism" (*DC*, 37). He
rightly addresses the social aspect of Bakhtin's dialogism as the core of
the theory. It is in the social interaction, in the living speech, but also,
much more profoundly, in the entirety of the social milieu, that the phe-
nomenon of dialogism inheres. The critic in question stresses that, for the
Russian philosopher, "Dialogism is not simply a textual or even an inter-
textual phenomenon; it reaches beyond the text as such to embrace the
social world as a whole" (*DC*, 31). According to Bakhtin, human existence
is wholly submerged in a dialogue which is always something open-ended.
Crucially, Gardiner elsewhere articulates Bakhtin's idea of the inconclu-
siveness of dialogism, explicating this in the following terms: "The internal
dialogism is never subject to ultimate resolution or closure; nor can it be
reduced to mere conversation or extant dialogue" (*DC*, 41). In Bakhtin's
theory there can be no fixed positions, and there is a pervasive sense of in-
conclusiveness and open-endedness, on which the dialogic texture of life
itself rests. The constant weaving and reweaving of the strands of the di-
alogic exchange, and the new and unexpected insights, bespeak the very
nature of the dialogic enterprise. The power of dialogue lies in its capacity
to bring about an effective change in respect of the parties involved. The
response of the Other to a question can decisively change the perspective,
vision, horizon of one's thoughts: it can change one's very consciousness.
Bakhtin refuses to accept the existence of anything like a pre-defined or
pre-determined context: the self is always subject to the influence of ex-
ternal determinations of his / her thoughts and actions.

Dialogism is a characteristic feature of the totality of our social and cul-
tural interchanges: "The overall sense of the Bakhtinian project is to see
'dialogism [as] a general uniformitarian principle of cultural evolution.' "[11]
The world of the self is always meaningfully enmeshed in a plurality of

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10. Ibid., 124.

voices. It is merged into a dialogical whole, which is expressive of many worlds, many conceptualizations: "Dialogism is the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia. Everything means, is understood as a part of a greater whole" (*DI*, 426). Bakhtin stresses the social dimension of language and the transformative power of a dialogue to influence the Other's discourse. He insists that dialogism involves the area of "alien words." For him, speech is directed towards the alien, it incorporates the perspectives of the Other, crosses its own frame, generates new meanings, new ingredients. For the Russian philosopher, to exist means to be engaged in dialogue.[12] The aspect of Bakhtin's dialogism pertaining to the entirety of human existence is succinctly expressed by Gardiner in the following way: "Dialogism figures as an essential component of humanity's 'species being,' or philosophical anthropology" (*DC*, 37).

In a similar vein to Bakhtin's proposal of an open-ended, incorporative, non-chromatic, dialogic nature of human existence, in Ricœur's philosophy, identity, whose very core rests on language, is not a uniform entity, but undergoes changes in time, and thus needs to be elucidated in terms which account for such changes. The perspective Ricœur resorts to is a narrative, as the narrative in its essential structure begets the possibility of moving in time. He attempts to demonstrate the viability of making sense of one's life through narrative. Significantly, narrative, which belongs to literary discourse, becomes for Ricœur a philosophical device. Narrative involves intrigue (Ricœur draws extensively on Aristotle here), variations in dramatic tension such as are typical and distinctive for human experience, and the weaving of a plot in which characters become agents.[13] In narration the French thinker uncovers an ontological objective, hidden beneath the referential aspect of the utterance.

In *Oneself as Another*, Ricœur develops a hermeneutics of the self, explaining it by means of a turn to linguistics. Based upon the study of European languages, he points to two constituents of personal identity: "same," which means identical (*idem*), and its other "one and the same" (*ipse*), selfhood (*OA*, 2–3). While explicating Ricœur's notion of narrative identity and demonstrating the import of his theory of interlocution with

11. Clive Thomson, *Mikhail Bakhtin and the Epistemology of Discourse*, vol. 2 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990), 8.

12. Andrew Robinson, "Bakhtin: Dialogism, Polyphony and Heteroglossia," Part I, *In Theory* (blog), *Ceasefire*, 29 July 2011, accessed 1 August 2016, https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-bakhtin-1/.

13. Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, 3 vols (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 3:50–56.

its basis in *ipseity*, Brian Treanor stresses the appeal of narrative identity as Ricœur's grand theme in the following way:

> His theory of interlocution, based on *ipseity*, is able to overcome the problem of identity in the philosophy of language because he maintains the uniqueness of subjectivity while simultaneously affirming the continuity of identity as narrative identity.[14]

The affirmation of narrative identity, with the self being in dialogue with itself over time, brings Ricœur's theory close to Bakhtin's dialogic model of speech. The dialectics of sameness and selfhood corresponds to Bakhtin's articulation of the dialogic character of speech, in that Ricœur takes cognizance of the non-monolithic, interactive, intersubjective character of personhood. Bakhtin's linguistic disavowal of the monologic nature of speech runs parallel to Ricœur's philosophical conceptualization of the "self," which puts its speaking to the Other at the very heart of identity. Ricœur's hermeneutics evidently proposes a model that is not only dialectical, but also dialogic.

Man's answerability to the Other—his / her responsiveness—amounts to a primordial and irreplaceable existential dimension of human life. Ricœur expresses his conviction regarding the primacy of being-in-speaking over speaking itself. Vitally, in narration, he traces an ontological meaning and intent. Acting becomes the seed of what, in philosophy after Heidegger, is called an act of being-in-the-world. Ricœur's textual hermeneutics involves a new perspective on Heidegger's being-in-the-world. This ingredient of Ricœur's theory is highlighted, for instance, by Kevin J. Vanhoozer, who stresses the interlocking character of Heidegger's notion of being-in-the-world and Ricœur's theory of interpretation focused on the world of the text:

> Ricœur has thus recreated on the narrative level the whole process of Heideggerian interpretation. The world of the text is a way of being-in-the-world which fictionally works out various possibilities projected in a fictional situation.[15]

14. Brian Treanor and Henry Isaac Venema, "Introduction: How Much More Than the Possible?," in *A Passion for the Possible: Thinking with Paul Ricœur*, ed. Brian Treanor and Henry Isaac Venema (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 21.

15. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Philosophical Antecedents to Ricœur's *Time And Narrative*," in *On Paul Ricœur: Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. David Wood (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 51.

The linking together of Ricœur's and Heidegger's hermeneutics is of seminal import, in that it locates on an ontological level the affinities between Ricœur's textual hermeneutics and Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, with the latter theory extending from speech to text and, indeed, to all of socially conceived human experience.

Ricœur's putting forward of the narrative aspect, which is constitutive of one's identity, along with its dialogic aspect—the horizontal (in relation to the narratives of others) and vertical (in time) interplay of multitudinous facets—attests to Bakhtinian insistence on our participation in an ongoing existential dialogue. Meanwhile, the pinnacle of Bakhtin's own dialogism finds its expression in his writings thus:

> Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue the person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium. (*DI*, 293)

The narrative of one's life is dialogically interconnected to the narrative of the Other. The voices of others interweave with ours in bespeaking events experienced in common, and so the dialogic function is displayed in terms of narratives concomitantly affecting one another. Equally importantly, the narratives participate in a dialogue in terms of time. The stories of our antecedents have an impact on our present stories, and also forestall and take part in a dialogue with the stories yet to come. The heuristic perspective of a dialogue amounts to living experience over time.

Mario J. Valdés stresses that according to Ricœur, the act of telling the story of one's life embraces two ingredients: revealing and transforming.[16] These two elements imply a moment of both revelation and transformation of the self. One's participation in the process of metamorphosis, together with one's self-understanding, may remind one of Bakhtin's proposition to the effect that we are all engaged in a dialogue involving incommensurable voices. The discoveries of the new, contesting nuances of the "self" take part in an existential dialogue of the self with itself. Propounding his conception of narrative identity in *Oneself as Another*, Ricœur claims

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16. Paul Ricœur, "Life: A Story in the Search of a Narrator," trans. John N. Kray and J. Scholten, in *A Ricœur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. Mario J. Valdés (Toronto, Toronto University Press, 1991), 429.

that human life becomes comprehensible, once our life events have been rendered in the form of a narrative. It is the narrative of a life which actually begets one's identity. As he proclaims, "It is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character" (*OA*, 147).

2. Ricœur and Bakhtin: The Ethical Dimension

Significantly, for Ricœur it is the ethical factor that is, above all, constitutive of identity. One's responsiveness to others causes the narrative of one's life to become a coherent unity. Ricœur stresses that our responsiveness to others—whether it is a faithful response, or unfaithful one—is what decides about the ethicality of our lives (see *OA*, 171–173). My failure to hear the voice of the Other amounts to a rupturing of dialogue, yet this is not just a reluctance to be linguistically forthcoming: it is a disruption of dialogue at an existential level. Propounding responsiveness to the Other as the fundamental constituent, the very core, of one's identity, Ricœur situates the human self outside of the unsteady grounds of the postmodern ethical void, and thus reconstructs an axiomatic sense of belonging. It is this meaning-laden aspect of one's responsivity to the Other, imbued with an ethical dimension, that links Ricœur's philosophy to Bakhtin's theory of speech, with its focus on addressivity, responsiveness and polyphony.

In insisting on the dialogic nature of human existence, Bakhtin also accounts for the Other in its own right. In favoring the dialogic model, he registers the presence of the Other in discourse: the Other has a voice and is recognized as a subject (see *DI*, 290–293). One cannot be deaf to his / her voice, one cannot deaden it, or pretend not to hear it. One's responsiveness to the Other, for Ricœur and for Bakhtin, has a similar ethically significant import. The ethical dimension of a response to the Other as highlighted by Ricœur, and the polyphonic character of human speech presupposing a response to the Other as espoused by Bakhtin, are not empty statements. They recognize an intrinsic feature of any dialogue, involving social factors and, ultimately, a political outcome. Bakhtin's concept of "answerability," as well as his view of discourse as being fundamentally dialogic, are convergent with Ricœur's elucidation of man's response to the demand of the Other and the concept of narrative identity, which rests on the dialectics of the self and the dialogic nature of life experience. In this context it is worth turning to Treanor's brief yet telling comment on the close linkage between Ricœur's narrative theory and the theory of interlocution: "When narrative theory is written into a theory of interlocution,

it becomes 'fraught with ethical obligation.' "[17] This critic underlines the ethical dimension of Ricœur's hermeneutics of the self as the pivot of his search for an answer to the question "Who am I?" Ethics plays an important role in Ricœur's philosophy; likewise, Bakhtin's theory of speech is ethically oriented. Invoking the polyvalence of human speech at a linguistic level, Bakhtin attempts to contest the univocal character of discourse, as well as the singularity of thought—the controlling power of language over human thought. In doing so, he strongly underlines the ethical dimension of dialogue.

As developed in *Oneself as Another* and already addressed in *Time and Narrative*, Ricœur's notion of narrative identity is in no way a monochromatic model of the human self. Rather, it is the self wholly relying on its inner capacity to respond to the demand of the Other. The ethics of the relation between the self and the Other has been discussed by such key figures in the philosophy of dialogue as Emmanuel Lévinas, Martin Buber, Ferdinand Ebner, and Franz Rosenzweig. The viability of openness to the claim of the Other, as theorized by Ricœur, can be meaningfully compared to Emmanuel Lévinas' philosophy of dialogue and the notion of the epiphany of the face.[18] According to Lévinas, the call of the Other precipitates one's deepest capacity to uncover the ethics of the presence of the Other and obligations to the Other. Ricœur talks both of a faithful answer to the call of the Other and of a failure. I would like here to expand on the idea of a failure of response. The failure to respond is also a failure to endure. Once the effort to comprehend the incomprehensible ceases, a genuine redeeming force gets enfeebled and recuperation is unattainable. And, equally, it is persistence, the enduring aspect of love, which strengthens the hermeneutic effort to reveal and reconcile the incommensurable.

Recurring to Lévinas' philosophy in the context of the intersections between Ricœur's and Bakhtin's theories is of seminal import, as it brings forth the very gist of the dialogic interchange pervasive in the writings of both Ricœur and Bakhtin. Significantly, it is the utterly active constituent of the relation of the self to the Other in Ricœur's reflections that links it to Bakhtin's insistence on the wholly dynamic character of openness to the speech of the Other. In this regard, the similarities between Ricœur's ontological stance with respect to the dialogic nature of human existence, and Bakhtin's linguistic and hermeneutic approach, are also no-

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17. Treanor and Venema, "Introduction," 21.

18. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht; Boston; London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 194–197.

ticeably reflected in a similar intersection regarding Bakhtin's hermeneutics and Lévinas' ethics. The latter affinity is picked up on by Michael Eskin: "While Bakhtin elaborates on the internal and external approach to utterances in so far as they are permeated by traces of intersubjectivity and, simultaneously, constitute and inform it, Lévinas investigates dialogue on a pre-existential, pre-ontological level, that is in Lévinas' terms on ethical level."[19] The two thinkers investigate the ethical dimension on differing but converging planes. The abovementioned critic expresses concisely the interconnection between the two, in the following terms: "It is clear that both Lévinas and Bakhtin endeavor to give a cogent account of the same, complex unitary phenomenon, namely human sociality, in so far as it is fundamentally dialogic."[20] Ricœur's and Bakhtin's perspectives on one's responsivity to the Other, in a similar vein to Bakhtin's and Lévinas' standpoints, bespeak its ethical aspect.

In upholding the mystical, transcendent dimension of the self, Ricœur addresses the frailty of the human soul, its defenselessness, and the quest for a meaningful life, which presupposes the immediacy of an answer to the Other and triggers off a dynamics of the call, as well as a response to it. The demand of the Other necessitates a response, but also the response is already impregnated with the call. One can bestow a gesture of hospitality, or, on the other hand, one can miss an opportunity to articulate a form of living care and responsibility for the Other. The gesture towards the Other is evocative of the reciprocity imbued in the relation of the self to the Other. The reciprocity ingrained in the self is, moreover, always prior to acting. Ricœur emphasizes the link between acting and suffering, and the spontaneity of expressing care and love, using the term "benevolent spontaneity" (*OA*, 190). The relation of the self and the Other is of a primordial nature, and makes the spontaneous gesture expressive of a kindly disposition possible.

Ricœur's philosophical construal of the response to the Other reflects Bakhtin's linguistic one pertaining to effective communication. Michael A. McCord highlights the intersecting paths of Ricœur and Bakhtin in this regard in the following terms:

> According to Bakhtin, dialogue is necessary for any act of communication to occur—in fact dialogue is one of the constitutive elements which comprise

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19. Michael Eskin, *Ethics and Dialogue: In the Works of Levinas, Bakhtin, Mandel′shtam, and Celan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 7.
20. Ibid.

Bakhtin's definition of communication. This holds true as much for inner speech as it does for speech with the other, or for written discourse. Like Ricœur, Bakhtin reacts strongly against the Saussurean division between langue and parole.[21]

Clearly, hermeneutic effort is affirmed at a deep level in the context of both Ricœur's and Bakhtin's theories. Both are concerned with how we understand and how we communicate. Bakhtin's hermeneutic orientation towards a discovery of meaning inscribed in dialogue is stressed by Gardiner as follows:

The crux of an "active and engaged understanding" is the act of incorporating the word of the other into one's own conceptual system, thereby imbuing the word with an entirely new range of inflections and evaluative nuances; it is this feature of linguistic that makes genuine dialogue possible, and it facilitates the introduction of new meanings into language.

(*DC*, 39)

The ethical dimension espoused by the two thinkers is inextricably connected to their hermeneutic sensibility. It is hermeneutic effort that makes possible a deeper understanding of oneself and the Other, with all the subtleties of the ethical bond that joins these two. To understand is to understand ethically. Human life is immersed in ethics; to live means to conduct one's life ethically. The incorporation of the word of the Other into one's own horizon entails an ethical movement. It involves a transition from myself to the Other, not on the surface of the uttered words but in the depth of the implied, instilled, and, most significantly, interpreted meaning. Although some research has been pursued in this area,[22] Bakhtin's contribution to hermeneutics is still underestimated. The following quotation expresses rather well Bakhtin's combined interest in anthropology and hermeneutics: "In Bakhtin's philosophical anthropology, to be human is *to mean*. Human being is the production of meaning, where meaning is further

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21. Michael A. McCord, "Distanciation, Appropriation, and Assimilation as Hermeneutical Making of Meaning in the Work of Paul Ricœur and Mikhail Bakhtin" (unpublished manuscript, 2000, ERIC digital library, ED438544), accessed 3 August 2016, 8, https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED438544.

22. Cf., e.g., Gardiner, *The Dialogics of Critique*; Michael F. Bernard-Donals, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Between Phenomenology and Marxism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

understood to come about as the articulation of value."[23] Bakhtin's
search for meaning, his identification of the human being as both the
locus and origin of hermeneutic interrogation, forms a clear parallel to
Ricœur's life-long enterprise—his hermeneutics of the self which aims
to answer the question "Who am I?"

3. Ricœur and Bakhtin: Consciousness

The intersections between Ricœur's textual hermeneutics and Bakh-
tin's theory of speech involve an aspect that concerns consciousness.
A closer look at Bakhtin's theory of the polyphony of human speech,
mostly described in *Speech Genres* and *The Dialogic Imagination*, yields
significant results as regards its proximity not only to Ricœur's stress-
ing of the self's vulnerability to the Other, but also to the very texture
of consciousness itself. The dialectics of sameness and selfhood leads
Ricœur to view the self as an agent responsible for his/her actions.
He recognizes the close interrelation of the two questions "Who is
speaking?" and "Who is acting?" (*OA*, 120–21). There is an important
point of commonality here between Ricœur's emphasis on our vulner-
ability and indebtedness to the Other—our primordial openness—and
Bakhtin's understanding of consciousness. For Bakhtin, in much the
same vein as with Ricœur's dialectics of the self, human consciousness
is not something unified or fixed. It is neither separate nor isolated, but
open to other consciousnesses, and even possibly capable of unlock-
ing the potential associated with conflicting consciousnesses. Bakhtin
claims that human consciousness always assumes the existence of
other consciousness, as if being in the presence of other conscious-
nesses and answering back (see *DI*, 345). Andrew Robinson, meanwhile,
stresses that in Bakhtin's theory human consciousness is not something
univocal, but—much more than this—it is "'conflict-ridden between dif-
ferent consciousnesses.' Indeed, a single consciousness separate from
interaction with other consciousnesses is impossible."[24] Crucially, con-
sciousness is a result of responsive interactions. Even left entirely to
itself, it is in dialogue with an inner voice, the voice of conscience,
its nature. Most meaningfully, there is no cause to view dialogism as
a phenomenon confined exclusively to interactions between humans.[25]

23. Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* (London: Routledge, 2003), 158.
24. Robinson, "Bakhtin," section "Polyphony and Dialogism."
25. Ibid.

The transgressive nature of consciousness advocated by Ricœur is well conveyed in Venema's criticism of the philosopher's works:

> Consciousness of individuality calls for an analogous transference from "my place" to "every place." To understand oneself as "the narrowness of the 'whole soul,' whose humanity as openness" requires that I put myself in the place of another, that I share in not his or her point of orientation, but the universal aim "for whose sake everything else is done." To be conscious of myself requires that I transgress or transcend my point of orientation by means of the "total aim of all facets of transgression."[26]

Venema stresses that along with Ricœur's claim that the individuated consciousness can be discovered there comes a need for a model of consciousness "to serve as a neutral and universal means for making possible genuine philosophical inquiry into the disproportion that constitutes human existence" (*IS*, 66). The way to the very heart of self-consciousness leads through the formal model. He highlights that for Ricœur: "Transcendental consciousness is the duality of the finitude of passive reception and the infinite quest for active determination of all reception" (ibid.).

Bakhtin's dialogically oriented model of speech is characterized by a focus on the listener. The absolute openness to the listener's voice clearly bespeaks the assertion bestowed on the spoken word in each case of dialogic interchange. According to Bakhtin, one needs to appropriate a word, to assimilate it, to make it one's own. Gardiner stresses the import of the process of assimilation and, most significantly, underlines Bakhtin's explication of the role of dialogic interaction in the formation of self-consciousness: "Bakhtin feels that this dialogic interaction between self and other and the incorporation of the latter's conceptual horizon into one's own perspective is a vital stage in the maturation of an individual's self-consciousness" (*DC*, 39). The process of appropriation that rests on interaction between interlocutors at a linguistic level finds its parallel in Ricœur's insistence upon an attestation of oneself at the ontological level. Ricœur argues that each one of us has to attest to one's selfhood as uniquely one's own. This is a voluntary act preceded by a conscious decision. He writes: "To say self is not to say myself . . . the passage from

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26. Henry Isaac Venema, *Identifying Selfhood: Imagination, Narrative, and Hermeneutics in the Thought of Paul Ricœur* (New York: Suny Press, 2002), 66 (hereafter cited in the text as *IS*). Venema's quotations come from Ricœur's *Fallible Man*, Book 1 of Part 2, *Finitude and Guilt*, of *Philosophy of the Will*, trans. Charles Kelbley (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1965), 61 and 64.

selfhood to mineness is marked by the clause 'in each case.' . . . The self . . .
is in each case mine" (*OA*, 180). Thus, our identity rests not just on the
passivity of the claim of an "I." Rather, as Ricœur claims, beginning with
the involuntary, it involves an active movement to ascertain self.

4. The Dynamic Nature of the Narrative of a Life (Ricœur) versus the Dynamic Character of Speech (Bakhtin)

In his conception of narrative identity, Ricœur takes full cognizance of a
story's capacity to establish the transcendent positioning of our conscious
and unconscious, and to convey the fully dynamic nature of the narrative
of one's life. As has been explained earlier, our identity is influenced by
other people's life stories. Now we want to expand on the dynamic na-
ture of the life-narrative constitutive of someone's identity, which also
corresponds to the dynamic nature of Bakhtin's theory of speech on the
linguistic and cultural level. To put it in a nutshell, for Ricœur, relations
with others create our identity. However, what is significant is that there
is no ultimate control over the nature of these relations with others. The
story of one's life participates in the stories of others: it is part of the story
of one's contemporaries, but is also interwoven with stories from the past,
and anticipates the stories of those yet to come. As a result, one's identity
undergoes a dynamic process of alteration. Ellen A. Herda highlights the
dynamic character of narrative identity in the following fashion:

> Narrative identity is not a seamless identity, and it is possible for many plots
> to emerge from the same set of incidents (not appropriately called the same
> *events*). It is always possible to weave different plots about our lives.[27]

Ricœur thus helps to counterbalance the postmodern loss of one's capac-
ity to retain one's past, the constant living in the present. His exegesis of
the workings of human memory and of one's belonging to the personal
and historical zones of the Other is evocative of an insightful attempt to
regain man's capacity to attain a position of responsibility—one which
will withstand the contemporary image of our lives and our time as
fragmented.

The dynamic character of Ricœur's narrative identity coalesces with the
dynamic nature of Bakhtin's view of language. Bakhtin stresses the incon-

27. Ellen A. Herda, "Narrative Matters among the Mlabri: Interpretive Anthropology in
International Development," in Treanor and Venema, *A Passion for the Possible*, 140.

clusiveness of language and discourse in time. Thus, the dialogic context encompasses past and future meanings. The voices retrieved from the past influence the present and the reiterated discourse begets new meanings. The development of the dialogue with the past is boundless, as one can never limit the memories that arise, and the present can never free itself from the obligations of the past—from the stigma, so to speak, of antecedent meanings (see *SG*, 170). In a similar manner, future words impact on the present discourse. This highly intertextual model, which not only refers to speech, but can be extended to culture, opens up a parallel with the immanence of the backwards and forwards movements in discourse that are constitutive of narrative identity in Ricœur's conceptualization of the self. The confessed past always influences the present, but, equally importantly, it is defenseless in the face of future discourse.

5. Remarks on Narrative, Narrativization, and Literary Criticism

Not only has Ricœur's insistence on the import of narrative, which pertains both to his hermeneutics and his works on literature (e.g., *Time and Narrative*), had great resonance in philosophy, but it has also been echoed in much contemporary literary theory, which also prompts one to note the closeness between his theoretical perspective and textual exegesis that reflects Bakhtin's views on discourse—especially literary discourse. A host of critics have sought to pinpoint their commonalities in the literary domain: extensive exploration has been undertaken, for example, of the connections between Ricœur's and Bakhtin's renditions of time and space in novelistic discourse, while Ricœur's conception of threefold mimesis and Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope have been presented alongside one another in Tara Collington's article "Space, Time and Narrative: Bakhtin and Ricœur."[28] The same author, in "Bakhtin's Chronotope and Metaphoric Models in Hermeneutic Discourse,"[29] juxtaposes Ricœur's well recognized and Bakhtin's undervalued contribution to hermeneutics. She draws conclusions about the similarities between Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope and Ricœur's hermeneutic arc, as well as his analysis of metaphor with reference to time. Michael McCord, in "Distanciation, Appropriation, and Assimilation as

28. Tara Collington, "Space, Time and Narrative: Bakhtin and Ricœur," *Space and Culture* 4, no. 7–9 (2001): 221–31, doi:10.1177/120633120000300502.

29. Tara Collington, "Bakhtin's Chronotope and Metaphoric Models in Hermeneutic Discourse," in *Philosophy, Method, and Cultural Criticism*, ed. Charlton McIlwain (New York: Hampton Press, 2013), 115–36.

Hermeneutical Making of Meaning in the Work of Paul Ricœur and Mikhail Bakhtin," compares the works of the two philosophers in terms of writer–versus–reader, hearer–versus–speaker and text–meaning re-lationships.

Literary and cultural critics have sought, on numerous occasions and at length, to do justice to the theory of story-molding as a form and function of comprehension. Ricœur stresses the importance of the role of narrative in making life stories intelligible:

> [T]he constitution of the narrative identity, whether it be of an individual person or a historical community, was the sought-after site of the fusion between narrative and fiction. We have an intuitive precomprehension of this state of affairs: do not human lives become more readily intelligible when they are interpreted in the light of the stories that people tell about them? And do not these "life stories" become more intelligible when what one applies to them are the narrative models—plots—borrowed from fiction or history (a play or a novel?).[30]

I shall refer here to just two examples from a multitude of cases that testify to the use of narrative in literary criticism: Linda Hutcheon, a renowned Canadian postmodern literary and cultural critic, and Wolf-gang Iser, whose works evoke Ricœur's and Bakhtin's ideas. The choice of Hutcheon as exemplary where the importance of narrative is concerned, and as convergent with Ricœur in this regard, is dictated by her espousal of a Bakhtinian view of parody.[31] Wolfgang Iser, meanwhile, is selected on the grounds of his very clear explication of the openness and inclusion of the *alien* in the realm of the known—something we encounter on vari-ous levels in the works of both thinkers. In Ricœur, this is the process of interpretation viewed as a process of "genuinely making one's *own* what was initially *alien*" (*OA*, 159), while Robinson stresses that for Bakhtin,

> Speech is always directed towards or through a field of "alien words" and alien value-judgments. . . . Speakers try to aid this process by making their own statements resonate with the listener's frame. Dialogue thus orients to the perspective of the other, seeking to introduce new elements into it. It is carried out "on alien territory."[32]

30. Paul Ricœur, "Narrative Identity," trans. David Wood, in Wood, *On Paul Ricœur*, 188.
31. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London; New York: Routledge, 2003), 121.
32. Robinson, "Bakhtin," section "Heteroglossia."

Using the term "narrativization," Hutcheon recognizes the import of narrative in constructing meaning: "The process of narrativization has come to be seen as a central form of human comprehension, of imposition of meaning and formal coherence on the chaos of events."[33] The importance of the element of "coherence" brings her near to Ricœur's insistence on the coherence of a life story as constitutive of identity. Meanwhile, Iser's phenomenology of reading encompasses the inherent dynamics of the reading process—the interweaving of retrospective and anticipatory planes.[34] Iser accounts for the fundamental reorientation of our initial assumptions:

> What at first seemed to be an affirmation of our assumptions leads to our own rejection of them, thus tending to prepare us for a re-orientation. And it is only when we have outstripped our preconceptions and left the shelter of the familiar that we are in a position to gather new experiences.
>
> (Ibid., 201)

Both the phenomenological approach to reading and the postmodernist insistence on the *narrativization* of the past share a belief that story-telling elucidates understanding. In much the same manner as with Ricœur, for these two schools the unearthing of subliminal meanings is a matter of re-visiting, re-counting and re-ordering the past. Most importantly, the phenomenology of reading, which provides for its dialectical structure, also exhibits a dialogic character: in the course of disclosing truth, the past speaks to the present and the present to the past.

Focusing on premises of both an ontological (Ricœur) and a linguistic / hermeneutic (Bakhtin) kind, this article omits any comparison with the other vital concepts of these two thinkers that belong to literary studies: e.g., Bakhtin's heteroglossia, carnivalesque, and answerability in relation to art—and Ricœur's threefold mimesis, and his analysis of metaphor and symbol. Any more extensive examination of the similarities between the above notions would far exceed the scope of the present article and call for a separate study.

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33. Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: a Phenomenological Approach," in Lodge and Wood, *Modern Criticism and Theory*, 201.

34. Ibid., 195.

Conclusion

To sum up, it must be stressed that though the socio-cultural dimension of the works of the two thinkers considered here should not pass unnoticed or be underestimated, my attempt has been to heighten the significance of the correspondence between the crux of Ricœur's concept of narrative identity, which encompasses a meaningful polyvalence of overlapping narrative strands in time, and the essence of Bakhtin's model of speech, which is its polyphonically composed character. Indeed, the affinities between Ricœur's hermeneutics and Bakhtin's theory of discourse have by no means been exhaustively articulated by academic research so far. For the most part, research has involved some particular selected elements of the theories of the two philosophers being discussed in scholarly articles, so there is still a space to be filled by book-length studies such as would set out to explore these issues more comprehensively. This article has aimed to focus mainly on the intersections between Ricœur's hermeneutics of the self and narrative identity and Bakhtin's theory of the polyphony of speech, together with some interrelated issues. The major aspects addressed here have included the deployment of fictivity in the theories of the two thinkers, the ethical dimension embedded in both Ricœur's notion of narrative identity and Bakhtin's polyphony of speech and dialogism, the dynamic character of these two important conceptualizations (which have come to be regarded as ground-breaking philosophical accomplishments), consciousness, and the import of narrative in literary criticism.

The first conclusion I wish to offer refers to what has been the major concern of the present article—namely, to demonstrate the parallels between Ricœur's model of narrative identity and Bakhtin's model of the polyphony of speech. In Ricœur's theory, figuration and refiguration, the shaping and reshaping of a narrative constitutive of one's identity, is the counterpart to Bakhtin's elucidation of the incessant interlocutory dynamics of speech, with the temporal aspect being vital here. Narrative identity, like speech itself, is molded in dialogue with the past and with words yet to be uttered. The hermeneutic sensibility demonstrated in the works of these two thinkers makes explicit their concern with the sort of process of generating meaning that is typical of any communicative situation—communication being something which happens in the present but also across different time planes. For Ricœur, it is the meaning generated in the process of self-understanding that owes its feasibility to narrative identity. For Bakhtin, it is the meaning that pervades all forms of communication, be they interpersonal, social, cultural,

or literary: the kind of meaning that has its basis in a foundational and all-encompassing dialogism.

My second conclusion concerns the intrinsic character of the research done by these same two thinkers. The parallels between Ricœur's and Bakhtin's theories make us see the importance of the complementariness of philosophical exegesis on the one hand, and the linguisticality of experience on the other. The ontological "I," and the particularity of articulating it through speech, with its multifarious planes, together make up a phenomenological vision of existence itself as dialogic and meaningful. Ricœur's concept of narrative identity, one might even say, brings us closer to an understanding of the unintelligible. The dynamics of narrative identity—the altering of narrative in time and the inclusion of other's stories about us; in short, its polysemous aspect—allows us to abandon the limitations imposed on our view of our selfhood and, interestingly, connects it to Bakhtin's model of the polyvalence and dynamics of speech. Above all, one cannot underestimate the twofold nature of this intellectual quest: the philosophical and linguistic perspectives simultaneously present in Bakhtin's theory of speech. Prioritizing addressivity, Bakhtin understands being as always being in the presence of the Other. It is this meaningful perspective which accords with Ricœur's hermeneutics of identity. Ricœur's accomplishments, just like Bakhtin's, manifest both a philosophical and a linguistic perspective.

Finally, it must be emphasized that the present article, in its closing section, also sought to make clear that the conceptions of the two philosophers discussed have gained wide recognition in literary theory. Some theoreticians were pointed to who either draw on Bakhtin's and Ricœur's convergent findings regarding the study of literary texts, or open new paths for the as yet not sufficiently analyzed aspects of their ideas, thus bringing them into contact with the vast field that is literary criticism itself.

In aiming to study the affinities between Ricœur's narrative theory and Bakhtin's recognition of the polyphonic nature of speech, my article has viewed these as inherently interrelated, and as testifying to both the philosophical and the linguistic aspects of the phenomenological vision involved. That vision accounts for the intelligibility of selfhood, understood as markedly vulnerable and contextualized, while also recognizing that it is conveyed by means of language with its essentially dialogic and contextually oriented nature.

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