

The
Kristeva Reader

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Word, Dialogue and Novel

Written in 1966, shortly after Kristeva's arrival in France, this presentation and development of Mikhail Bakhtin's central ideas was published in *Séméiotiké* (1969) and translated in *Desire in Language* (1980). With her compatriot, Tzvetan Todorov, Kristeva was among the first to introduce Bakhtin's work to a Western audience. I have chosen to reprint the essay here both because of its intrinsic interest as a presentation of the great Russian theorist, and because it demonstrates how Kristeva's own linguistic and psycho-linguistic work in the late 1960s and early 1970s can be said to be produced as a result of her active dialogue with Bakhtin's texts.

'Word, Dialogue and Novel' is in many ways a divided text, uneasily poised on an unstable borderline between traditional 'high' structuralism with its yearnings for 'scientific' objectivity (as revealed by Kristeva's use of mathematics and set theory to illustrate her points) and a remarkably early form of 'post-structuralism' or the desire to show how the pristine structuralist categories always break down under the pressure of the *other* side of language: the irreverent, mocking and subversive tradition of carnival and Menippean satire as described by Bakhtin. In this context Kristeva's insistence on the importance of the speaking subject as the principal object for linguistic analysis would seem to have its roots in her own reading of Bakhtinian 'dialogism' as an open-ended play between the text of the subject and the text of the addressee, an analysis which also gives rise to the Kristevan concept of 'intertextuality'.

This fundamental essay also demonstrates how Bakhtin provides the starting-point for Kristeva's own work on modernist discourse in *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Working from Bakhtinian terms such as 'dialogism' and 'carnivalism', Kristeva turns them into allusions to the kind of textual play she was later to analyse through concepts such as 'the semiotic', 'the symbolic' and the 'chora' (see the excerpts from *Revolution* in this book). It is therefore not surprising to discover that her reading of carnivalism as a space where texts meet, contradict and relativize each other through extensive use of repetition, illogical constructions and non-exclusive opposition is illustrated not only with references to Rabelais or Swift (as in Bakhtin's own work), but also with

allusions to authors such as Lautréamont, Joyce, Kafka, Bataille and Sollers, which were all to provide important examples of the practice of writing analysed not only in the *Revolution*, but also, from a different perspective, in *Powers of Horror* (1982). Testifying to her early interest in the aspects of language and the psyche which escape the dominant tradition of Aristotelian monologism, 'Word, Dialogue and Novel' follows Bakhtin in insisting on the subversive political effects of such language, and thus also comes to prefigure Kristeva's later analysis of the politics of marginality.

Word, Dialogue and Novel

If the efficacy of scientific approach in 'human' sciences has always been challenged, it is all the more striking that such a challenge should for the first time be issued on the very level of the structures being studied – structures supposedly answerable to a logic *other* than scientific.¹ What would be involved is the logic of language (and all the more so, of poetic language) that 'writing' has had the virtue of bringing to light. I have in mind that particular literary practice in which the elaboration of poetic meaning emerges as tangible, *dynamic gram*.² Confronted with this situation, then, literary semiotics can either abstain and remain silent, or persist in its efforts to elaborate a model that would be isomorphic to this other logic; that is, isomorphic to the elaboration of poetic meaning, a concern of primary importance to contemporary semiotics.

Russian Formalism, in which contemporary structural analysis claims to have its source, was itself faced with identical alternatives when reasons beyond literature and science halted its endeavors. Research was none the less carried on, recently coming to light in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. His work represents one of that movement's most remarkable accomplishments, as well as one of the most powerful attempts to transcend its limitation. Bakhtin shuns the linguist's technical rigour, wielding an impulsive and at times even prophetic pen, while he takes on the fundamental problems presently confronting a structural analysis of narrative; this alone would give currency to essays written over forty years ago. Writer as well as 'scholar', Bakhtin was one of the first to replace the static hewing out of texts with a model where literary structure does not simply *exist* but is generated in relation

to another structure. What allows a dynamic dimension to structuralism is his conception of the 'literary word' as an *intersection of textual surfaces* rather than a *point* (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings: that of the writer, the addressee (or the character) and the contemporary or earlier cultural context.

By introducing the *status of the word* as a minimal structural unit, Bakhtin situates the text within history and society, which are then seen as texts read by the writer, and into which he inserts himself by rewriting them. Diachrony is transformed into synchrony, and in light of this transformation, *linear* history appears as abstraction. The only way a writer can participate in history is by transgressing this abstraction through a process of reading-writing; that is, through the practice of a signifying structure in relation or opposition to another structure. History and morality are written and read within the infrastructure of texts. The poetic word, polyvalent and multi-determined, adheres to a logic exceeding that of codified discourse and fully comes into being only in the margins of recognized culture. Bakhtin was the first to study this logic, and he looked for its roots in *carnival*. Carnavalesque discourse breaks through the laws of a language censored by grammar and semantics and, at the same time, is a social and political protest. There is no equivalence, but rather, identity between challenging official linguistic codes and challenging official law.

The word within the space of texts

Defining the specific status of the word as signifier for different modes of (literary) intellection within different genres or texts put poetic analysis at the sensitive centre of contemporary 'human' sciences – at the intersection of *language* (the true practice of thought)³ with *space* (the volume within which signification, through a joining of differences, articulates itself). To investigate the status of the word is to study its articulations (as semic complex) with other words in the sentence, and then to look for the same functions or relationships at the articulatory level of larger sequences. Confronted with this spatial conception of language's poetic operation, we must first define the three dimensions of textual space where various semic sets and poetic sequences function. These three dimensions or coordinates of dialogue are writing subject, addressee and exterior texts. The word's status is thus defined *horizontally* (the word in the text belongs to both writing subject and addressee) as well as *vertically* (the word in the text is oriented

towards an anterior or synchronic literary corpus).⁴

The addressee, however, is included within a book's discursive universe only as discourse itself. He thus fuses with this other discourse, this other book, in relation to which the writer has written his own text. Hence horizontal axis (subject-addressee) and vertical axis (text-context) coincide, bringing to light an important fact: each word (text) is an intersection of word (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read. In Bakhtin's work, these two axes, which he calls *dialogue* and *ambivalence*, are not clearly distinguished. Yet, what appears as a lack of rigour is in fact an insight first introduced into literary theory by Bakhtin: any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *inter-textuality*⁵ replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least *double*.

The word as minimal textual unit thus turns out to occupy the status of *mediator*, linking structural models to cultural (historical) environment, as well as that of *regulator*, controlling mutations from diachrony to synchrony, i.e., to literary structure. The word is spatialized: through the very notion of status, it functions in three dimensions (subject-addressee-context) as a set of *dialogical*, semic elements or as a set of *ambivalent* elements. Consequently the task of literary semiotics is to discover other formalisms corresponding to different modalities of word-joining (sequences) within the dialogical space of texts.

Any description of a word's specific operation within different literary genres or texts thus requires a *translinguistic* procedure. First, we must think of literary genres as imperfect semiological systems 'signifying beneath the surface of language but never without it': and secondly, discover relations among larger narrative units such as sentences, questions-and-answers, dialogues, etc., not necessarily on the basis of linguistic models – justified by the principle of semantic expansion. We could thus posit and demonstrate the hypothesis that *any evolution of literary genres is an unconscious exteriorization of linguistic structures at their different levels*. The novel in particular exteriorizes linguistic dialogue.⁶

Word and dialogue

Russian Formalists were engrossed with the idea of 'linguistic dialogue'. They insisted on the dialogical character of linguistic communication⁷