

Mikhail Bakhtin: Rhetoric, Poetics, Dialogics, Rhetorality, by Don Bialostosky. Parlor P, 2016. 191 pp.

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Mikhail Bakhtin: Rhetoric, Poetics, Dialogics, Rhetorality collects and reorganizes Don Bialostosky's work on rhetoric and the Bakhtin circle in a single, tight volume. It's a valuable book, in no small part because it spurs intertextual connections among four decades of work that, by my estimation, represent the most incisive and consummate corpus of scholarship on Bakhtin as a rhetorician. Variouslly labeled a literary critic, linguist, philosopher, semiotician, ethicist, and anti-Stalinist luminary, Bakhtin is, in Bialostosky's hands, most centrally a theorist of *human discourse*, of language in motion among discrete speakers and auditors. It is this attention to the particulate, communicative detail of speech and text that allows Bialostosky to reconfirm Bakhtin, and his colleagues V.N. Voloshinov and Pavel Medvedev, as theorists of rhetoric. The relationships among formalized persuasive discourses (rhetoric), mimetic literary discourses (poetics), speaker-auditor dynamics (dialogics), and the rhetorical currents underlying organic everyday communication (rhetorality) occupy Bialostosky's commentary in this rich, challenging, and rewarding book.

I should also acknowledge what this book is *not*. To begin, Bialostosky provides no general introduction to Bakhtin's scholarship; many of Bakhtin's most well-traveled concepts (chronotope, carnivalesque, polyphony, etc.) take a back seat to the specific extrapolation of Bakhtinian discourse theory in relationship to critical conversation, writing pedagogy, and everyday rhetorical practice. But neither does Bialostosky's book—unlike, for example, Kay Halasek's *A Pedagogy of Possibility*—position itself as a comprehensive introduction to Bakhtin studies for rhetoricians or compositionists in particular. Rather, Bialostosky's chapters read as vignettes representing conversations among rhetoricians, compositionists, and literary theorists. This is not a bad thing. The result is a series of encounters with the work of figures like Aristotle, Wayne Booth, Michael Billig, Jeanne Fahnestock, Helen Rothschild Ewald, and Peter Elbow, which cumulatively illustrate the reach and power of Bakhtin's insight through case-based induction rather than top-down deduction. Instead of toppling existing rhetorical paradigms, Bialostosky takes a modest but arguably more productive approach; he adjusts the terms of conversation through the forceful but nuanced application of Bakhtinian vocabulary and attention to the intersections of rhetoric and poetics. It's a fittingly dialogic way of doing criticism.

It's also a feat few could perform. While *Mikhail Bakhtin* chiefly comprises revised versions of previously published work, its largely autobiographical

introduction newly illuminates all the book's content. Bialostosky recounts his own unusual academic upbringing as a disciple of Booth who never quite shook the Chicago School's preoccupation with neo-Aristotelian criticism and the arts of the trivium, but who finally internalized Bakhtin as "a new center of intellectual gravity" and followed Bakhtinian revisions to rhetorical theory and pedagogy into the disciplinary conversation of rhetoric and composition (3-9). The self-avowed "peculiarity" (6) of Bialostosky's position as a late-comer to the discipline is apparent in chapters two and three. In chapter two, "Dialogics as an Art of Discourse," the author offers Bakhtinian sensitivity to person-ideas—or "specific persons who voice their ideas in specific texts and contexts" in order to anticipate and answer each other (22)—as an alternative to dialectic, which Bialostosky links with abstract truth, and to rhetoric, which he confines to the competitive discourse of victory and loss. Chapter three riffs on a similar argument, this time in relation to Booth's rhetorical theory of the novel and his subsequent model of critical pluralism. In his old mentor, Bialostosky sees both an American analog to the Soviet rhetorizing of the novel that Bakhtin decried and a hopeful pluralist clambering toward the dialogic heterogeneity Bakhtin envisions and celebrates.

Chapters four, five, and six demonstrate a distinct shift in Bialostosky's thinking toward rhetoric. Like Bakhtin himself, the early Bialostosky denigrates rhetoric's winner-take-all agonism; but these chapters play out the author's transitioning focus from such traditionally disciplined rhetoric—an enemy of dialogics—toward what John Bender and David E. Wellbery term "rhetoricity," or the "pre-disciplinary" currents of persuasion underlying everyday action and communication—which is largely synonymous with dialogics (Bialostosky 74, 82, 146; Bender and Wellbery 22-39). In chapter four, Bialostosky proposes a rhetorical school of literary criticism that couples stylistic figures—his well-chosen guide here is Fahnestock's *Rhetorical Figures in Science*—with Bakhtinian speech genres to parse the texture of poetical discourse. Chapter five, abstracted from a 1992 exchange with Halasek and Michael Bernard-Donals in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* (see Halasek, et al.), sharpens the author's position on Bakhtin in relation to rhetoric; Bialostosky lands somewhere between Halasek's zealous embrace of a dialogic rhetoric and Bernard-Donald's perhaps overcautious segregation of rhetoric from scientific materiality. The model of Bakhtinian rhetoricity that Bialostosky locates between his interlocutors' positions takes further shape in chapter six, which links Bakhtin to Billig's use of the sophist Protagoras to explain thinking itself as a rhetorical negotiation among contrary positions.

Chapters seven and eight focus on the Bakhtin school's early phenomenological and sociological texts, particularly *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, with an eye toward composition, rhetoric, and poetics. Framed as a rejoinder to

Ewald's "Waiting for Answerability: Bakhtin and Composition Studies," chapter seven rereads Bakhtin's early writings not as an "ethical and individualist" statement on human responsibility (Bialostosky 86), but as a formulation of questions about language and action that Bakhtin would answer more fully in his later works on utterance and dialogics. Chapter eight untangles the same thread in more theoretical depth, casting rhetoric and poetry as "evaluative" and "contemplative" discourses that accompany action (114-18). From there, the book progresses toward two especially incisive chapters (nine and ten) that reread Aristotelian rhetoric and poetics (and the relationship between them) in light of Bakhtin's discourse theory, resuscitating the roles of delivery, arrangement, and style in rhetorical utterance and reconfiguring Aristotelian poetics as an artistic imitation of such rhetoric. These Bakhtin-and-Aristotle essays, in particular, ought to circulate widely in upper-level and graduate courses in rhetorical theory.

The final chapter, "Liberal Education, Writing, and the Dialogic Self," speaks most directly to matters of composition pedagogy. Here, Bialostosky invokes Bakhtin to trouble the Elbowian notion of "authentic voice," instead advocating for a classroom wherein "individual ideological development can become not just the accidental outcome of encounters with disciplinary languages," but a space where students reflect critically on their own Bakhtinian assimilation of others' voices (149-51, 153). Many readers of *Composition Studies*, no doubt, have already encountered the final chapter—which astutely mediates the positions of Elbow and David Bartholomae—in the landmark 1991 collection *Contending with Words* (Harkin and Schilb) where it originally appeared. But it is a pleasure to rediscover Bialostosky's statement on student writers, now couched in the full intellectual breadth of his thinking on Bakhtin, rhetoric, and poetics, where it reads as the pedagogical translation of a much larger theoretical project. Twenty-seven years later, the piece resonates anew.

Among Bialostosky's strengths, as I note above, is how thoughtfully he addresses interlocutors like Elbow, Bartholomae, and Ewald. But one also notes the age of such conversations. (Barring two titles from the author himself, the most recent bibliographic entry is from 2006; most are two or three decades old.) This is chiefly because the "Bakhtin bandwagon," as Bialostosky concedes, has slowed drastically since its heyday in the '80s and '90s (4). *Mikhail Bakhtin*, thus, reads with an almost anachronistic charm—an echo of composition's heady, high-theory old days—that some will also count as the book's main weakness. But I would raise the converse argument: That is, why *shouldn't* Bakhtin remain at home in the postmillennial landscape of rhetoric and composition? Rather than dismissing Bialostosky as a relic, I would point to his peculiar strengths as a half-outsider and late-comer to composition. The author joins elite company with three other Bs—Bakhtin himself, Booth and

Kenneth Burke—whose critical acumen derives from the Aristotelian coupling of rhetoric and poetics, which we have, of late, taught ourselves to partition along subdisciplinary lines. If one regards his book as an utterance before the sea of voices and ideas constituting rhet comp scholarship, Bialostosky makes a tacit but compelling case for the reintegration of English studies around common interest in the core rhetoricality of human utterance—both, as Vološinov once put it, “discourse in life” (the rhetorical, evaluative speech that accompanies action) and “discourse in art” (the poetical “aesthetic isolation of rhetorical communication”) (Bialostosky 117; Vološinov 96-102). The logical extension of Bialostosky's argument might go like this: Rhetorical education, in first-year composition and beyond, should equip students to parse a world of complex multi-voiced texts—editorials, Facebook threads, and Pepsi ads, but also the latest Paul Thomas Anderson film or Margaret Atwood novel—as both critics and dialogic respondents. Bakhtin's example, with its core emphasis on rhetorical utterances and person-ideas in both life and art, suggests that teacher-scholars in rhetoric, composition, and literature alike might unite in such a project. If Bialostosky makes no such explicit call in his book, I am glad to raise the matter here.

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