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## Saying And Silence

Frank Farmer

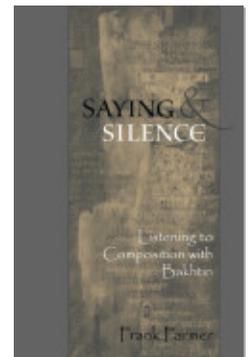
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1 “NOT THEORY . . .  
BUT A SENSE OF THEORY”  
*The Superaddressee and the Contexts of Eden*

[T]he only true reactionaries are those who feel at ease in  
the present.

*Unamuno*

LANGUISHING IN THE POSTFOUNDATIONAL

In the closing chapter to *Rhetoric in an Antifoundational World*, contributor and co-editor Michael Bernard-Donals observes that in our times, “the debate between foundationalism and antifoundationalism is moot; foundational notions of the human and natural sciences have been so discredited as to force us to consider what *kind* of antifoundationalism gives us the most productive and perhaps emancipatory knowledge” (437). In fact, as one reviewer pointed out, this collection seems to be largely devoted to the very project of identifying the sorts of antifoundationalism we are finally free to embrace, now that we have divested ourselves of foundational worldviews (Davis).

If Bernard-Donals is right, if the problem of foundations is indeed settled, passé, moot, then surely we must be very close to inhabiting the sort of antifoundational utopia imagined by Richard Rorty—a utopia where we no longer concern ourselves with truth and truth talk, where we no longer give legitimacy to the vocabularies of the philosophical tradition by contending with them (as rhetoric always has) in debate and dialogue. Surely, we must be very close to inhabiting that longed-for moment when all of us consent to drop the subject of truth, and, following Bernard-Donals’s suggestion, opt instead

to direct our efforts to fine-tuning the sorts of antifoundationalisms that we may yet come to know.

That's one narrative explanation, of course, and a fairly compelling one, to be sure. But perhaps there are other narratives, other accounts that explain why disputes about foundationalism no longer seem to be in the forefront of disciplinary conversations. For example, what if our present reticence about foundationalism happens to ensue from the nagging realization that the question of foundations is not one that is so much decisively resolved as it is futile to pursue, a question that, at the end of the day, *cannot be arbitrated at all*. This realization ought to give pause to those who believe in the efficacy of both rhetoric and dialogue, especially if we are asked to concede that there is no apparent use for either in broaching the problem of foundations. Let me elaborate this point.

Because foundational and antifoundational worldviews constitute opposing and totalizing paradigms toward the question of truth, no mutually acceptable outcome could possibly be negotiated, and therefore no opportunity exists for the exercise of either rhetoric or dialogue. The contemporary philosopher Charles Taylor has perhaps made this point most emphatically by noting that in the disputes arising between advocates of truth-telling and truth-making discourses, "the interlocutors never reach a point where they (a) accept or find they cannot reject some things in common, which (b) sit with one worldview better than another" ("Rorty" 260). But to allow such a profoundly limiting condition of debate is to sanction the idea that these two worldviews are absolute, self-contained, incommensurable—each possessing, as Taylor observes, "the resources to redescribe everything which comes along, to reinterpret everything which might be thrown up by an opponent as contrary evidence, and hence to remain constitutionally immune to refutation" (260).

What Taylor describes is what I have elsewhere called a "rhetoric of subsumption," a rhetoric by which antifoundationalism is able "to insulate itself from any disputing contention, from refutation and challenge, from engagement and dialogue" (Farmer, "Thuggery" 220). Such a rhetoric, I maintain, holds enormous power over any disputing rhetoric that would call it into question and does so for this reason: when your

worldview has within its own logic the resources to explain—or more exactly, to *explain away*—your interlocutor’s worldview and when no adjudication of the question of foundations is even possible, then little remains but to drop the matter altogether, which is precisely what Rorty would have us do, and, indeed, what many of us have already done. Thus, understood this way, the promised land for rhetoric, its much awaited heyday when all foundations have been happily cast aside for good, when philosophy has at last become, in Rorty’s words, “a kind of writing” (*Consequences* 90)—when all this comes to pass, our rhetorical utopia might seem to have been purchased at a very high price. For even while postfoundational culture promises to deliver the conditions needed for a full flowering of rhetoric, the disturbing fact remains that rhetoric seems to have had little, if anything, to do with the emergence of the very milieu in which it will supposedly flourish.

Notwithstanding its immunities, however, there have been those in rhetoric and composition who have sought to interrogate the conclusions of anti- or postfoundationalism. Bernard-Donals himself has called for an antifoundationalism that recognizes the material and extradiscursive, one that retains a place for rigorous scientific inquiry along lines proposed by Roy Bhaskar and his “transcendental realism.” Some time ago, Patricia Bizzell warned that once foundational grounds for rhetorical authority have been critiqued and effectively dismissed, little of value remains in offering a “positive assertion of the good” (669), without risking the sorts of contradictions that could eventually result in “political quietism” (667). The problem, for Bizzell, finds at least a potential remedy in Linda Alcoff’s “positionality” theory. Similarly, Reed Way Dasenbrock has expressed reservations about our casual abandonment of truth, especially when one of our central postfoundational orthodoxies—that all representation is misrepresentation—lands us in some rather thorny predicaments when we complain that reactionary critics of the academy misrepresent what we do. Even more recently, David Smit (after Donald Davidson) and Barbara Couture (after Edmund Husserl) have tried to salvage some usable version of a “truth” that we can live with.

I am not claiming that critics of anti- or postfoundationalism wish to return to a foundational golden age, nor do I subscribe to that wish

myself. But I do think that a few observers of our present moment are very uneasy with the implications for rhetoric in a postfoundational milieu and have sought to find ways to cross the reportedly impassable borders between foundational and antifoundational discourses.

In the following pages, I would like to return to the debates about “theory”—and by implication, foundations—that have occurred in the last fifteen years and try to recontextualize Bakhtin’s concept of the utterance within those debates. Drawing upon a number of Bakhtin’s ideas, but especially his “superaddressee,” I will argue that a sense of theory is present in every utterance, that some notion of truth—however constrained, tenuous, or fragile—accompanies every act of saying; that is, I will try to revise one of our more prized commonplaces and argue that the uttered word is *normative* through and through, top to bottom, “all the way down,” as the saying goes. I then conclude briefly with some thoughts on how Bakhtin’s superaddressee illuminates this point and, moreover, illuminates the writing we receive from our students.

#### PARADISE (RE)VERSED

One of the recurrent metaphors found in the debates between theorists and antitheorists (a.k.a. New Pragmatists) is that of the biblical Fall, the moment when our mythical first ancestors disobeyed their Creator and promptly descended into sin, knowledge, and the burden of self-consciousness. On the last two of these misfortunes, it is not hard to see why such an image is eagerly appropriated for debates about theory. What may be surprising, though, are the realms assigned to each camp in these discussions.

I would offer, for example, that an outsider to these debates would most likely refer the theoretical camp to those otherworldly, paradisiacal realms commonly reserved for Laputans and other innocents who prefer to make their ideal home *elsewhere*. Correspondingly, pragmatists—new and old—would be assigned to the earthly realms of the fallen, the palpable, the mundane, where, happily for all concerned, the real work of the world gets done. Such, at least, would be a conventional, albeit broadly drawn, rendering of how the Edenic image might be deployed in present discussions.

What has occurred, though, is precisely the reverse. *Theoria*, it turns out, is our fallen state, while *Pragma* is the Eden we have fallen from (or, as it is more likely put, forgotten). The ironic fall *into* theory occurred when those first ancestors imagined the pristine wholeness of our original state to be divisible and, in fact, announced that only through such divisions can we know the world at all. The legacy of our Fall, then, is a kind of estrangement: the sundering of things whole and the misguided attempts at epistemology that such divisions require. In their provocative essay, "Against Theory," Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels put the same point this way:

The theoretical impulse . . . always involves the attempt to separate things that should not be separated: on the ontological side, meaning from intention, language from speech acts; on the epistemological side, knowledge from true belief. Our point has been that the separated terms are in fact inseparable. (29)

Much the same way that Adam and Eve willingly chose to escape the delights of the garden, Knapp and Michaels point out that "theory is nothing else but the attempt to escape practice" (30). The difference between the two is that, where our mythical progenitors were fabulously successful in their endeavor, champions of theory are doomed to a project of eternal failure. This is because, as Knapp and Michaels explain, theory "is the name for all the ways people have tried to stand outside practice in order to govern practice from without" (30). Since for Knapp and Michaels (and Stanley Fish, Richard Rorty, and others), no position "outside" of practice exists, the attempt is not merely futile but utterly self-deceiving. Once we dispense with our illusions, though, we are free to return to the paradise we never left in the first place, namely, practice. Here is the place where belief—or rather, true belief—is thoroughgoing, a place where, as Jonathan Crewe points out, "no knowledge can transcend or replace belief, which accordingly constitutes the highest epistemological plane on which the human mind can function (as God in his own way said to Adam)" (63).<sup>1</sup>

Here, I will attempt to reverse the reversal I have described above. Simply put, I hold that there are blessings to be had in restoring theory—or more precisely, *a sense of theory*—to its rightful

locus at a necessary remove from immediate contexts. I will argue, then, that an Edenic otherness necessarily accompanies a sense of theory, and is, in fact, an inevitable function of the very conversation that presumably “stands in” for a thoroughly discredited foundationalism. To elaborate this claim, I will draw extensively on Mikhail Bakhtin’s complex (and somewhat ambiguous) position on the question of theory and conclude by showing how his ordinarily mute superaddressee may have something to say about the debates regarding theory.

By now, few would be surprised that Bakhtin’s ideas, in all their astonishing range, have been tailored to fit this debate. Nor should anyone be surprised that such appropriations are able to encompass the various sides of the debate. Bakhtin, to echo a common observation, has been successfully employed as a kind of belated spokesman for a dazzling array of theoretical projects and agendas. Predictably, he has also been recruited as a latter-day antitheorist, a pragmatist in the strong sense of one who denies foundational arguments for objective knowledge. To the extent, for example, that Stanley Fish casts Bakhtin as a thinker partially responsible for the “twentieth-century resurgence” of rhetoric and does so after claiming rhetoric as a strictly antifoundational concern (500),<sup>2</sup> then clearly Bakhtin (for Fish and many others) is allied to the pragmatist camp. Yet, while a good case can be made for Bakhtin the antitheorist, Bakhtin the theorist is never too far removed from his pragmatic double—an ambivalence succinctly captured in Bakhtin’s own phrase: “not theory . . . but a sense of theory” (*PDP* 293).

#### BAKHTIN AS ANTITHEORIST

Bakhtin’s very early meditation on ethics, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (1919-1921), is an appropriate place to begin establishing his pragmatist credentials. In this essay, Bakhtin refutes Kantian approaches to universal or categorical ethics, a position that he calls “theoretism.” In contrast to the theoretical world, with its inevitable embrace of all that is generalizable and recurrent, Bakhtin speaks for the experiential domain of the act, the world he refers to as “once-occurrent Being as event” (*TPA* 10). For Bakhtin, authentic ethics

resides not in principles, rules, or dogmas abstracted from experience, but in the answerable, unrepeatable *eventness* of lived life. And it is precisely this realm to which the theoretical is necessarily indifferent. As Bakhtin explains, insofar as personal existence is concerned, the theoretical world is not habitable:

In that world I am unnecessary; I am essentially and fundamentally non-existent in it. The theoretical world is obtained through an essential and fundamental abstraction from the fact of my unique being and from the moral sense of that fact—"as if I did not exist" . . . it cannot determine my life as an answerable performing of deeds, it cannot provide any criteria for the life of practice, the life of the deed, for it is *not* the Being *in which I live*, and if it were the only Being, *I* would not exist. (9)

Another way to put this is that the theoretical is wholly alien to that which is particular and unrepeatable in my life as I live it; and, so being, the theoretical must account for my life in ways that are not just ethically untenable, but impossible. My life from a theoretical viewpoint must always be a generalizable entity, a finality. And *that*, Bakhtin points out, is not the life I live.

Bakhtin's animosity toward a theoretical ethics is unmistakable. But, as Bakhtin might add, there should be no great surprise in discovering that such an ethics exists, for the most important—and lamentable—inheritance of Enlightenment rationalism is its exclusion of what cannot be generalized. He thus notes that "it is an unfortunate misunderstanding . . . to think that truth . . . can only be the truth . . . that is composed of universal moments; that the truth of a situation is precisely that which is repeatable and constant in it" (*TPA* 37). *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* inaugurates Bakhtin's search for a version of truth that is neither universal nor repeatable, but rather one able to account for the particular and situational—the "once-occurrent event of Being" (61).

This search leads Bakhtin to formulate what he calls an "architectonics," a way to generalize the particular without compromising its very particularity, its concreteness. Bakhtin thus wants to establish a means to link together the "concrete event-relations" that characterize the nontheoretical world of particularized experience, while avoiding

the systematicity and indifference to lived life that characterize the theoretical world. Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson thus explain that “architectonics is not a matter of general concepts or laws,” but instead a paradoxical attempt to find the “general aspects of particular acts” without surrendering their concrete quality as lived events (*Rethinking* 22). Bakhtin’s project, according to Morson and Emerson, was how to answer the question, “What can we say in general about particular things except that they *are* particular?” (22).

Though his architectonics does not provide a satisfactory answer to that question, Bakhtin’s early conceptualization of the problem leads him to think about it in terms of aesthetic as well as self-other relationships. These concerns about developing an architectonics persist and find more development in other essays of the period, especially “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity.” But it is in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* that Bakhtin first reconsiders the possibility of another kind of truth through what will become the central theme of his mature work, *dialogue*.

From a Bakhtinian perspective, a dialogic truth is obliged to resist all those other versions of truth that, say, locate it *above* us (as in theological certitude), *outside* us (as in empirical “findings”), *inside* us (as in Romantic and psychological constructions of essential selfhood), or *behind* us (as in the received wisdom of authoritative discourses). What these various *topoi* of knowledge share, Bakhtin might point out, are answers that neither require nor invite a response. Each posits a finished version of what the truth is (or how it will be found), and thus each precludes genuine exchange. Finalized conceptions of truth render dialogue unnecessary.

Where, then, does Bakhtin locate truth, and what are the special features of a dialogic truth? Keeping with this spatial metaphor, Bakhtin situates truth in the territory *between* us, thereby making our understanding of truth both a function and a product of social relations. Of course, not all social conceptions of truth are necessarily dialogic, but all dialogic conceptions of truth are social. To put this in the most basic of terms, *one needs an other for truth to be*.

One of the first illustrations of a dialogic truth, Bakhtin observes, can be found in the early Socratic dialogues. In particular, this genre

exemplifies "the dialogic nature of truth and the dialogic nature of thinking about truth. The dialogic means of seeking truth is counterpoised to *official* monologism, which pretends to *possess a ready-made truth*. . . . Truth is not born nor is to be found in the head of an individual person, it is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction" (*PDP* 110).

For those accustomed to regarding Platonic epistemology as perhaps the most extreme foundationalism, Bakhtin's lauding of Socrates will likely come as a surprise. Yet, Bakhtin emphasizes the point that while the "content [of individual dialogues] often assumed a monologic character," Socrates himself did not assume the role of one who had exclusive possession of a "ready-made truth." What accounts for this disparity is that the early dialogues had "not yet been transformed into a simple means for expounding ready-made ideas," but with the increasing monologization of later dialogues, the Socratic genre "entered the service of the established, dogmatic worldviews of various philosophical schools and religious doctrines" (*PDP* 110).

Again we sense Bakhtin's hostility to what he once called theorism, but now refers to as "philosophical monologism," that abstract plane of reasoning that promotes truth as something capable of excluding human beings altogether. In this familiar scheme of things, truth has no need for multiplicities, for concrete variations, for individual consciousness. It follows that "in an environment of philosophical monologism . . . genuine dialogue is impossible as well." What Bakhtin wants instead—and what he finds in the work of Dostoevsky—is a truth "born at the point of contact among various consciousnesses," one that "requires a plurality of consciousnesses, one that cannot be fitted into the bounds of a single consciousness" (*PDP* 81). This is a truth not of objects, abstractions, or subjective empiricism, but a truth created and sustained through dialogue. This is a truth that resists all absolute and monologic formulations. This is a truth with people in it.

For pragmatists and other antitheorists, it is also a truth that refuses the original sin of theory, that is, the temptation to imagine itself able to stand outside practice, or for Bakhtin, outside dialogue. On this matter alone, Bakhtin clearly establishes his worth as a pragmatist of the

first order. But more than that, Bakhtin's lifelong resistance to theoretism or philosophical monologism, his efforts to identify another kind of truth through dialogic relations, and his understanding of truth as a mutual enterprise, an unceasing process rather than a ready-made product would all seem to commend him thoroughly to an antitheoretical position.

What reason, then, to even consider the prospect of Bakhtin as an advocate of theory? Why is a sense of theory necessary to dialogue?

#### BAKHTIN AS (RECALCITRANT) THEORIST

Despite his polemics against abstraction, systematicity, and the theoretical, Bakhtin never dismisses theory as nonexistent or unimportant. Bakhtin acknowledges (implicitly or otherwise) that while theory runs counter to his own projects, theory nevertheless helps to define and clarify those projects. However, Bakhtin's characteristic move is *to acknowledge the reality of theory in order to subsume its claims to the more important exigencies of dialogue*.

This move is apparent early on. Recall that Bakhtin takes care to show how the realm of theory is incapable of explaining the concrete realm of particularity—the once-occurrent event of Being that constitutes lived life—and further, that “all attempts to surmount—from within theoretical cognition—the dualism of cognition [theoretism] and life . . . are utterly hopeless.” Life cannot be lived in theoretical categories, and Bakhtin suggests that all our efforts to do so resemble “trying to pull oneself up by one's own hair” (*TPA* 7).

But does this mean that the theoretical plane should be dismissed altogether or that it can in no wise enter into the event of my life? Bakhtin answers no to both questions. As to the first, Bakhtin claims that theory's “autonomy is justified and inviolable” so long as it “remains within its own bounds.” The problem arises, Bakhtin observes, when the theoretical “seeks to pass itself off as the whole world . . . as a first philosophy (*prima philosophia*)”—what we might be tempted to call a foundational truth (*TPA* 7-8). (Bakhtin seems not merely to acknowledge but to endorse a nonfoundational brand of theory—an option not always granted to combatants in the theory wars, who *demand* an allegiance to one side or the other.) As to the

second question, while Bakhtin argues that “any kind of *practical* orientation of my life within the theoretical world is impossible,” he does believe it possible for the theoretical to be interiorized as a “constituent moment” of life as event (*TPA* 9). Possible, yes, but not easily realized, and certainly not to be confused with pragmatism’s attempts to do the same. Indeed, Bakhtin holds that “pragmatism in all its varieties” tries to turn one theory

into a moment of another theory, and not into a moment of actual Being-as-event. A theory needs to be brought into communion *not* with theoretical constructions and conceived life, but with the actually occurring event of moral being—with practical reason, and this is answerably accomplished by everyone who . . . accepts answerability for every integral act of his cognition. (*TPA* 12)

Bakhtin makes clear that a pragmatist subsumption of theory is, in effect, nothing more than an instance of one theory attempting to contain (preempt? erase?) another—an argument that, not surprisingly, has found expression in the current debate, whether from the viewpoint of a pragmatist subsumption of theory (see, for example, Fish 315-41) or a theoretical subsumption of practice (see Rosmarin). Bakhtin, though, has little truck with either theoretism or pragmatism on this count, since both share a predilection to conceptualize life from without. Still, he argues, it is possible for theory to become a constituent moment in the event of Being, but not exactly in the way a pragmatist might wish.

To fit itself to practice, for example, theory must surrender its claims to an “outside” truth, since practice “denies the autonomy of truth and attempts to turn truth into something relative and conditioned” (*TPA* 9). Paradoxically, when that occurs, truth can no longer be incorporated into concrete existence, for as Bakhtin argues, “it is precisely on the condition that it is pure that truth can participate answerably in Being-as-event; life does not need a truth that is relative from within itself” (*TPA* 10). Thus, truth must keep some quality of absoluteness for it to be gathered into the event of a life, to make it something capable of being answered with my Being. Anything less will require me to hand over my experience to a relativism whose

equivalence of potential truths is just as indifferent to my “living historicity” as a theoretism that offers external, moral guidelines.<sup>3</sup> When Bakhtin later rethinks this problem in terms of dialogue, he arrives at a similar conclusion: “that both relativism and dogmatism equally exclude all . . . authentic dialogue, by making it either unnecessary (relativism) or impossible (dogmatism)” (*PDP* 69).<sup>4</sup>

Make no mistake, there is a place for theory in Bakhtin, but not in the fashionable impulse to redefine it as just another kind of practice. That proviso effectively robs theory of the one quality that makes it theory—its claim to an outside knowledge, perspective, or truth. The place for theory, rather, is found when its very “outsidedness” is delivered into the event of living, when theory is subsumed not merely into practice, but into the unrepeatable event of lived life, into that quality (“surplus”) of existence beyond the conceptions of either theoretism or pragmatism.

It would be convenient—and not entirely mistaken—to explain Bakhtin’s critique of theory as the ruminations of a not yet fully-matured thinker. That, unfortunately, does little justice to the decidedly mature task that Bakhtin poses for himself, namely, how to make theory human, how to make theory a constituent dimension of lived life, while avoiding the trappings of a relativism that trivializes being. The same problem, I believe, informs Bakhtin’s search for a dialogic truth in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* and can be evidenced in other essays of the period as well. To dismiss these early arguments supporting a theoretical quality to lived life as simply immature is to ignore the fact that Bakhtin frequently returns to old problems and themes to elaborate, develop, and recontextualize them and to maintain an ongoing dialogue with them.

The questions, then, are whether Bakhtin returns to the problem of theory as a legitimate intellectual activity, and if so, whether he regards it favorably. My response to both inquiries is a qualified yes, if first we grant Bakhtin his stated preference, “not theory . . . but a sense of theory,”<sup>5</sup> and if second we identify where this sense of theory is subsumed not merely as a constituent moment of lived life, but of *life lived in dialogue*.

First, what does Bakhtin mean by a sense of theory? One clue may be gleaned by drawing an analogy with a related problem Bakhtin

raises in the Dostoevsky book. Shortly after his comment on theory, Bakhtin follows with a parallel statement about Dostoevsky's understanding of faith: to wit, "not faith . . . but a sense of faith." Fortunately, *this* comment is more developed and thus more illuminating. The full excerpt reads: "Not faith (in the sense of a specific faith in orthodoxy, in progress, in man, in revolution, etc.), but *a sense of faith*, that is, an integral attitude (by means of the whole person) toward a higher and ultimate value" (294). Notice that "faith," in its first sense, is a content-laden abstraction, something ready-made and available for immediate use, notwithstanding its existence on a plane utterly removed from the one where life is lived. Notice, as well, that "a sense of faith" is something quite distinct, not a recycling of hand-me-down assurances, but an "attitude" toward "an ultimate value," and thus something fraught with difficulty (if only because the integration of this value requires that my "whole person" be prepared to answer its demands).

By analogy might we not suppose that Bakhtin's distinction between theory and a sense of theory follows suit from his parallel distinction between faith and a sense of faith? May we not reasonably say that theory, in its first sense, is all monologic truth that offers finalized knowledge from without, while a sense of theory is that "integral attitude" toward a truth that posits ultimate values to which our lives are, in some degree, answerable? If this is so, where then may Bakhtin's sense of theory be found, especially after dialogue becomes the overarching motif of his work?

#### AN "INVISIBLY PRESENT THIRD PARTY"

Among the many features of Bakhtin's conception of the utterance, the one that receives least attention is, no doubt, the superaddressee. In a late essay, Bakhtin introduces this concept by observing that within every utterance there is a presumed *third* listener, one beyond the addressee, or second listener, to whom the utterance is immediately addressed:

But in addition to this addressee (the second party), the author of the utterance, with a greater or lesser awareness, always presupposes a higher

*superaddressee* (third), whose absolutely just responsive understanding is presumed, either in some metaphysical distance or in distant historical time (the loophole addressee). In various ages and with various understandings of the world, the superaddressee and his ideally true responsive understanding assume various ideological expressions (God, absolute truth, the court of dispassionate human conscience, the people, the court of history, science, and so forth). (SG 126)

Those few commentators who take the trouble to gloss these passages at all seem to recognize, along with Bakhtin, that the superaddressee negates the prospect that what I utter may be meaningless, which is to say, without meaning for *another*. Michael Holquist, for example, explains that “poets who feel misunderstood in their lifetimes, martyrs for lost political causes, quite ordinary people caught in lives of quiet desperation—all have been correct to hope that outside the tyranny of the present there is a possible addressee who will understand them” (38). Morson and Emerson likewise see the function of this third party as one of hope, or more exactly, the *necessity of hope* (*Prosaics* 135).

But why necessity? Bakhtin points out that the word, more than anything else, “always wants to be heard,” and if that hearing is not to be found in immediate contexts, the word will press on “further and further (indefinitely)” until it locates a point of understanding. The profound importance of this observation is underscored when Bakhtin describes “the Fascist torture chamber or hell in Thomas Mann [as] an absolute *lack of being heard*, as the absolute absence of a *third party* [superaddressee].” One reason that Bakhtin passingly refers to the superaddressee as “the loophole addressee” is that the speaker (or author) can ill afford to “turn over his whole self and his speech work to the complete and *final* will of addressees who are on hand or nearby” (SG 126-27). The risk here for the speaker (or author) is not only that what he or she says will be misunderstood, but rather that what is said will be misunderstood *utterly* and *forever*. The superaddressee thus offers a loophole for a perfect understanding *elsewhere* and a hedge against the dangers of a consummated misunderstanding *here*.

Now, the temptation might be to regard the superaddressee—and the remote contexts in which he or she may be found—as a regrettable

lapse into a naive idealism or transcendentalism, or perhaps even worse, an unapologetic solipsism. But to dismiss Bakhtin's formulation on these counts would be simplistic for a number of reasons. First, Bakhtin attempts, however briefly, to historicize the many forms the superaddressee may assume when invoked by a given speaker. Second, Bakhtin explicitly denies that the superaddressee *must* be a "mystical or metaphysical being," but allows that "given a certain understanding of the world, he can be expressed as such." Finally, Bakhtin's catalogue of possible superaddressees appears, on balance, to be indifferent to the entire issue of foundational truth. While "absolute truth," "God," "science," and "human conscience" all seem to fit easily into a foundational paradigm, other superaddressees, such as "the people" or the "court of history," may just as easily be interpreted as constructionist or antifoundational (SG 126). Indeed, the issue of foundational truth seems to have little to do with the actuality of the superaddressee (though it may have much to do with the form assumed by the superaddressee in any utterance).

For Bakhtin, what is important about the superaddressee is that "he is a constituent aspect of the whole utterance" and thus an inevitability of speaking or authoring (SG 126-27). What is important for my purposes, though, is that *the superaddressee is the incarnation of that sense of theory when it is subsumed into the utterance, into living, dialogic relations*. As such, the superaddressee reveals an "integral attitude (by means of the whole person) toward a higher and ultimate value" and thus constitutes that someone or someplace *else* to which I am answerable—answerable now in at least two important senses.

I am answerable in the sense that my construction of any utterance is determined by how I anticipate being received not only by my second listener, but also by my *third* listener—the superaddressee of my choosing, who, though not capable of an immediate response, is nonetheless manifested in my utterance by virtue of my need to posit an ultimate understanding beyond my present situation.<sup>6</sup> Bakhtin seems especially intrigued by that speaker who "fears the third party and seeks only temporary recognition . . . from immediate addressees," especially when one's immediates can at best offer only "responsive understanding of limited depth" (SG 127). In terms of the present

argument, when subsumed into living dialogue as a sense of theory and incarnated in the utterance as the superaddressee, theory provides what it has always claimed to provide: *other* vistas, *other* horizons, *other* contexts for understanding beyond those that occupy “the tyranny of the present.” Bakhtin seems to find especially odd (if not superficial) those who remain content to be heard within their immediate context alone, who feel no apparent need to appeal to an ultimate listener of any kind.

But another sense of answerability is at stake here, too—one that resurrects Bakhtin’s early concern with responsible action. The positing of a superaddressee, of course, cannot help but to imply a certain ethical orientation toward the ultimate values embodied in the very superaddressee one chooses. Yet, the ethics born of the dialogic relationship with a superaddressee are *not* the ethics of theoretism, the ready-made principles, rules, edicts of a hand-me-down morality. Though any utterance may well subsume aspects of a theoretical ethics as a constituent moment of life in dialogue, whatever truth the superaddressee holds *for me* is as unrepeatable as every utterance I speak. And while Bakhtin hints that superaddressees are historically formed and are therefore susceptible to some degree of continuity, this does not change the fact that no particular superaddressee could possibly exist on the “theoretical plane.” Moreover, because a superaddressee “embodies” my “integral attitude” toward a value (or values) that I regard as ultimate, the superaddressee always *requires* something from me.

A measure of commitment, then, inheres in the very concept of a superaddressee. To be sure, that measure may be quite innocuous, going no further than the tonalities that express a speaker’s attitude toward what he or she regards most highly—keeping in mind, as Kenneth Burke pointed out some time ago, that our attitudes are always *incipient* acts (20). At the other end of the spectrum, though, and as Michael Holquist has shown, the superaddressee may make very dramatic, severe demands on our “whole person.” Holquist, as I noted, refers to “martyrs for lost political causes,” but it is not difficult to imagine other circumstances where, on behalf of a superaddressee who hears our pleas for justice or freedom or God or love, countless

individuals throughout human history have answered with their lives. It would be foolish, of course, to posit the act of giving up one’s life as a requirement for authentic commitment. But I am inclined to think that Bakhtin might point out that it is virtually impossible to conceive surrendering one’s life on behalf of, say, the ontological proof for God or the categorical imperative (theoretism)—just as impossible, in fact, as trying to imagine giving up one’s life for the judgments of an interpretive community or the conversation of mankind (pragmatism).

#### IRONIES OF EDEN

In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Richard Rorty asks us to lay claim to a new Eden, one that exiles the philosopher as “cultural overseer who knows everyone’s common ground . . . who knows what everyone else is really doing whether they know it or not, because he knows about the ultimate context (the Forms, the Mind, Language) in which they are doing it” (317-18). When this insurrection is accomplished, we will be free to return to what is the only ultimate context available: “If we see knowing not as having an essence to be described . . . but rather as a right, by current standards, to believe, then we are well on the way to seeing *conversation as the ultimate context* within which knowledge is to be understood” (my emphasis, 389).

Now, first, what does it mean to equate knowing with a right to believe? Are we not stumbling into the same tautological problems that Jonathan Crewe describes in reference to Knapp and Michaels, namely that “what is truly believed becomes equivalent to truth, while truth becomes equivalent to what is truly believed” (64n)? Crewe observes that in this pragmatist vision of the world, belief has a “kind of fullness and immediacy” that makes it wholly sufficient to all believers. Which is to say (and to say ironically, as Rorty would point out) that pragmatist believers are quite comfortable in their knowledge that what is believed is never anything more than a belief. In other words, they happily assent to the prospect that *in no other context* is it possible for their beliefs—say, in an unpublished poem, in a struggle against oppression, in that *too* controversial or unorthodox idea, etc.—to be in some way *true*. Crewe suggests that this is a rather idealistic formulation of belief, since belief has for us a decidedly “proleptic character.” As Crewe puts

it, “a *lack* . . . of justifying knowledge or ‘groundedness’ is implicit in the conception [of belief]” (64n).

I would argue that the lack alluded to by Crewe is the selfsame lack that Bakhtin mentions when he describes hell as an “absolute *lack of being heard*, as the absolute absence of *a third party*.” It is the very lack that the superaddressee is called upon to fill when we speak to others. It is the very lack that a pragmatist version of believing must ignore or deny, since a belief in contexts where a more perfect understanding is possible smacks too much of epistemological foundations. Crewe, interestingly enough, understands this lack in terms remarkably similar to Bakhtin’s. Prolepsis, after all, is from the Greek rhetorical tradition and refers to the speakerly practice of “foreseeing and forestalling objections in certain ways” (Lanham 120). In couching this lack in terms of prolepsis, Crewe echoes Bakhtin’s favored word, “answerability,” thereby lending force to the notion that justification is always, to some extent, a function of a necessary third party in dialogue and in dialogic relations.<sup>7</sup>

But isn’t Rorty’s “conversation of mankind” an affirmation of dialogue as well? To be sure, Bakhtin is especially close to Rorty when searching for a dialogic truth to oppose philosophical monologism. Here and elsewhere, there are points of intersection that are indeed noteworthy.<sup>8</sup> But, as I have tried to show, one important difference between the two is that, whereas for Rorty “*conversation* [is] the ultimate context,” for Bakhtin, an ultimate context may be found within every utterance, insofar as that utterance invokes a superaddressee, who understands perfectly what one has to say.

Every conversation (or dialogue), Bakhtin might say, is teeming with ultimate contexts; there is no separating the normative from the spoken. Or, as the contemporary philosopher, Hilary Putnam, has pointed out: “We always speak the language of a time and place; but the rightness and wrongness of what we say is not *just* for a time and place” (247). If this were not the case, we would face the curious necessity of having to attach a subtextual rider to every utterance we make, a disclaimer of sorts that might be translated thus: “Of course, you must realize that the words I speak to you have no meaning beyond the here and now in which they are spoken. That is, my words

are thoroughly and irrevocably contingent on the context we occupy together, and to imagine that they have meaning in any future context is to tempt the illusion that my words transcend situation, circumstance, and history."

Now, if it is hard to imagine Rorty attaching such a qualification to his own ideas, this is because the act of uttering becomes vastly more problematic when understood from an antifoundational point of view. Patricia Bizzell, as noted earlier, wonders if undertaking a "positive assertion of the good" is even possible for antifoundational critics and teachers. In the presence of our students, Bizzell observes, "we exercise authority over them by asking them to give up their foundational beliefs, but we give them nothing to put in place of these foundational beliefs because we deny the validity of all authority, including, presumably, our own" (670). Even Rorty himself admits to certain brands of silence peculiar to antifoundationalist speakers. In considering what might possibly be said to those who commit any variety of atrocities, Rorty is all too aware of some rather serious constraints on how we address those whom, for reasons we believe just, we revile: "When the secret police come, when the torturers violate the innocent, there is nothing to be said to them of the form, 'There is something within you which you are betraying. Though you embody the practices of a totalitarian society which will endure forever, there is something beyond those practices which condemns you.'" Indeed, all of our objections, Rorty says, are freighted with a certain irony, an enlightened awareness that we can appeal to nothing transcendent, nothing beyond our historically-situated position, which, of course, we may vigorously defend or promote, but which has no force beyond our present contingencies. Such a position, as morally compromised as it must, Rorty admits, "is hard to live with" (*Consequences* xlii).

Returning to Bakhtin, I want to suggest a very different irony: if, as Bakhtin maintains, the superaddressee is a constituent aspect of the utterance, then Rorty's conversation owes a rather large debt to the ultimate contexts that it has repudiated. Or, to put this a bit differently, a sense of Edenic otherness, a sense of theory, makes possible the very conversation that denies the usefulness of theory and the ultimate contexts that theory (as a sense of theory) is able to offer. A

conversation utterly bereft of superaddressees is not one that has divested itself of all unseemly idealism; it is one that has abandoned history and the temporal sense of experience. For such a conversation has foreclosed on Eden, has denied to its participants *a necessary elsewhere*, and, in so doing, has curtailed the possibility of better understandings, deeper commitments, more promising visions.

Bakhtin's requisite third party, I believe, offers a third way out, a convenient loophole through the impasse that constitutes the theory wars. His move to subsume theory into living, dialogic relations tries to preserve something of theory's historical charge—namely, to challenge the tyranny of the present by offering Edenic contexts within which greater understanding is possible. But this subsumptive move is also intended to challenge one of theory's traditional claims—that is, its putative ability to explain life from a position outside of life's living. The superaddressee may be read as Bakhtin's attempt to demonstrate the monologic tendencies of both theoretism *and* pragmatism, to reveal how it is that, while we may be wise to rid ourselves of theory, life without a sense of theory would be profoundly diminished, if not unsayable.

#### TWO THOUGHTS FOR THE WRITING CLASSROOM

Most of the foregoing discussion will probably seem at a considerable remove from our professional concerns as writing teachers, not to mention the everyday, prosaic concerns of our students. Rarefied, often obscure debates about foundationalism and antifoundationalism, as well as rarefied discussions of certain Bakhtinian texts, would hardly seem, on the face of things, to have any bearing whatsoever on what we do in our writing classrooms. But I would like to suggest otherwise. If one consequence of our antifoundational moment is that we have made assertion more difficult than ever or if we have burdened our students' utterances with the sorts of ironies that diminish their ability to say anything at all, then we should well expect to hear the presence of a superaddressee in their texts. In fact, I wish to argue that the superaddressee is very much an "invisibly present third party" (SG 126) in the texts that students write for us in composition classes—and, given some of the reasons outlined above,

perhaps more so now than ever before. Let me close, then, by illustrating two contrasting ways that the superaddressee is likely to be manifested in our students’ texts.

First, any reluctance to treat student texts as genuine utterances may result in our students writing for superaddressee audiences that do not include us at all. There can, of course, be any number of reasons why we could be perceived by students as having a tin ear toward their texts. We may, for example, be so scrupulously attuned to the formalities of their prose that we simply do not hear what they have to say. Or it may be that we devise assignments whose only seeming purpose is to supply us with school writing, “exercise” texts whose sole meaning resides in our evaluation of their merit. These are admittedly extreme illustrations, but I would caution that the student who becomes convinced of our inability to hear what he or she has to say will be understandably frustrated with, confused by, maybe even contemptuous of our efforts. That particular student, in other words, will likely be searching for a more perfect understanding than one we can provide. The student would likely either turn away from us as potentially responsive addressees of any sort and thus abandon any notion that what they write *for* us could be meaningful *to* us, or they would seek out other contexts for writing wherein some meaningful response might still be possible: letters, diaries, writing for friends or other classes, perhaps writing for other purposes of which we have no knowledge.

On the other hand, a markedly different situation emerges when we, as teachers, are invoked by our students as the superaddressee of their choice. Who has not encountered that student for whom the teacher serves the function of a superaddressee, that student perhaps reluctant to share his or her work with other students in peer workshops, but desperate to share with us some private concern, some intimacy, some aching personal revelation? Often these confidences occur within the context of our classroom purposes—our discussions, readings, assignments, and so on; sometimes they do not. But as experienced teachers know, they inevitably occur, and we will have many occasions as teachers when we find ourselves invoked as a sympathetic third party for those students who, for whatever

reasons, need a listener beyond the one defined by our pedagogical role in the institution.

But what happens when these two alternatives occur simultaneously? What happens, for example, when a student perceives us to be the greatest impediment to a fair hearing and, at the same time, the most likely candidate to provide one? What happens when we are constructed as adversary and ally, encumbrance and friend? In the next chapter, I will try to show how such doubling can occur within the writing of one student, Devlyn, who discovered a creative way to approach his rhetorical predicament.