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Saying And Silence

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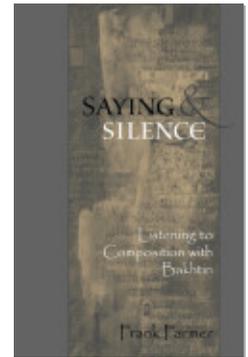
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3 VOICE REPRISED

Three Etudes for a Dialogic Understanding

When I look back on my exchange with Devlyn, what occurs to me now are the many Bakhtinian ways that our dialogue could have been understood. As readers of the previous chapter know, I originally tried to explain Devlyn's writings through the frame of Aesopianism, through strategies for writing that managed to say something but, at the same time, evaded teacherly and institutional sanctions. After I received his closing response, however, I began to see that Devlyn's struggles with Freire—and my teaching of Freire—had much to do with Devlyn's attempt to negotiate what Bakhtin calls “internally persuasive” and “authoritative discourses.” The latter, for Devlyn at least, was constituted of the words of his teacher, classmates, and Paulo Freire—words whose authority Devlyn was inspired to challenge. Thus, when Devlyn somewhat begrudgingly admits that he “did not simply take the information, learn it, accept it, and regurgitate it” but that rather he “absorbed it, twisted it, turned it, cursed it, and tried my hardest to use it against the one who had shown it to me,” it would be hard to imagine a more concrete description of the process by which Bakhtin says one takes the alien word “and makes it one's own” (*DI* 294).

Yet there is another way to interpret Devlyn's struggle, one that highlights a key term in the Bakhtinian lexicon: *voice*. Now, it would be difficult for this reader of his work to characterize Devlyn as a writer who has no voice and is in search of one. No, Devlyn's voice is distinctive, self-assured, provocative to classmates and teacher alike. In our traditional ways of thinking about voice, we might be tempted to say that Devlyn's voice is a complete and sincere expression of his truest self—his values, beliefs, opinions, thoughts, and feelings, the

tone of his very being. But to interpret Devlyn's voice this way is to ignore a number of questions to which Bakhtin would direct our attention: How can we think of Devlyn's voice as situated within a concert of voices? Whose voice (or voices) is Devlyn's in response to? Is Devlyn's voice in the process of becoming, changing? Can other voices be heard within the single voice we ascribe to Devlyn?

To ask these questions is to hint that our received understandings of voice may be inadequate, that something may, indeed, be happening to our traditional understandings of voice.

If I am right, voice is undergoing a kind of belated tent meeting, a high-spirited revival marked not by adulation for the featured soloist, but by appreciation for the chorus that makes the soloist possible, that which enables the soloist to sing and to be heard at all. This renewed interest in voice thus emerges out of the efforts of those scholars intent on rethinking voice from social and cultural perspectives. And such efforts, in all their variety, betoken an important departure from our received understandings of what we mean by voice in relation to the written word.¹

Anne M. Greenhalgh, for example, explores the importance of voice in the context of teacher response to student drafts. Calling for a postmodern understanding of voice, Greenhalgh asks that we think of "voices in response" as indices not of personal but of social identities (304). This same call is heard from Linda Brodkey and James Henry, who, like Greenhalgh, find much promise in the ability to recognize how poststructural voice analysis is able to reveal the "subtle shifts in social identities that writers make in their texts" (155). As in Greenhalgh, Brodkey and Henry make use of the distinction between interruptive and interpretive voices, a distinction introduced by the British language analysts David Silverman and Brian Torode, to chart the ways that voices, in utterance and response, articulate social positionings. Important for teachers, Brodkey and Henry note, is that the modulation of any single voice "in the cycle of drafting, responding, and revising" can lead to generative shifts in all those other voices that express the many subject positions located "on either side of the desk" (155). More recently, two notable anthologies confirm our enduring interest in voice as a pedagogical concern. Peter Elbow's *Landmark*

Essays on Voice and Writing chronicles a number of important statements on the relationship of voice to writing, including some noteworthy contributions by the editor himself. Kathleen Blake Yancey's *Voices on Voice: Perspectives, Definitions, Inquiry* includes several new looks at problems related to voice, especially as these have recently been formulated along gender, ethnic, and cultural lines.

Closer to my purposes, though, are recent attempts to understand voice from a specifically dialogic perspective. Nancy Welch uses Bakhtin's notion of multivoicedness to expose the false dichotomies of form and content, of public and personal discourses, in student writing. In particular, Welch is interested in the kinds of responses to student writing that "promote conversation rather than allegiance," that listen for and engage those submerged voices between which an ongoing, creative dialogue might be sustained in future revisions (500-501).

Similarly, Joy Ritchie explores the writing workshop as an important locus for the intersection and struggle of competing voices, many of which require a degree of creative negotiation on the part of the individual student writer. The pedagogical benefits to be had from this struggle are likewise affirmed by Don H. Bialostosky, who sees voice not so much as the expression of a prior self, but rather as a relationship to all those other voices that constitute the self in its long journey toward what Bakhtin calls "ideological becoming" (Bialostosty, "Liberal" 13).

What all of these commentators share, in fact, is an awareness that voice is inescapably bound to the problem of selfhood, regardless of whether we choose to describe the self as a "subject position" or a "social identity" or a "dialogic intersection." All sense correctly, I believe, that what voice is able to express or represent is not a finished entity but an unfinished project, not an essence but a process, whose origins reside in particular social moments, institutions, and dialogues.

Here, I will elaborate what is sometimes only suggested by the authors noted above. That is, by examining voice in its *developmental*, *rhetorical*, and *historical* aspects, I offer three studies for how voice and its relationship to the self can be rethought from a dialogic perspective. To these ends, I draw extensively on the primary works of Mikhail Bakhtin and Lev Vygotsky, elaborating their complementary

views on the problem of voice.² I conclude with some pedagogical strategies for incorporating a dialogic approach to voice in the writing classroom.

VOICE IN A DEVELOPMENTAL SENSE

For Vygotsky, voice is thoroughly implicated in the development of human consciousness. If we allow that the internalization of speech is, more precisely, the internalization of social *dialogue*, then it follows that what is internalized are the many voices encountered in the course of development. Further, if inner speech is the repository for internalized voices and if the central function of inner speech is verbal thought, then voice is necessary to human thinking. In other words, and as noted by many, we think *inside* those voices we have made our own.

The site for the most important voices we encounter is Vygotsky's now familiar zone of proximal development: "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more independent peers" (*Mind* 86). One logical implication of this idea is that the ability to solve problems through dialogue with more experienced adults or peers is a harbinger of competencies that will later become internalized. Vygotsky is thus interested in how the child, when confronted with a problem beyond her present capabilities, seeks help, asks questions, and responds to assistance in order to find a solution to that problem. These social interactions—interactions mediated by dialogue—are internalized and eventually "become part of the child's independent developmental achievement" (90).

Not surprisingly, then, Vygotsky holds that "the acquisition of language can serve as a paradigm for the entire problem of the relationship between learning and development" (89). Speech is capable of being learned only in and through social interactions, which is to say, within the ever-advancing borders of the zone of proximal development. In the long, slow process of acquiring the speech of others for her own purposes, the child transforms language's social, communicative function into an internal function that serves "to organize

the child's thought" (89). That function, of course, is inner speech, a phenomenon resonating with the voices of all the heard others negotiated in social experience. Though Vygotsky himself made only passing allusions to the quality of voice, it is clear that his ideas regarding the nature of inner speech have been interpreted largely in vocal terms (see Kozulin 179; Ritchie 154; Trimbur 217; Wertsch' *Voices*). The writerly task of finding a voice, then, is inextricably linked to the developmental task of making a self, since the latter is ultimately an orchestration of the voices that inhabit itself. Yet common as such an expression may be, it is somewhat misleading to speak of "finding" a voice. To "find one's voice" is to suggest that voice is something uniform and static, a quality awaiting to be discovered by the one—the only one—to whom it properly belongs.

Vygotsky accurately surmises that this idealistic conception of selfhood—what he calls "the metaphysical theory of personality"—poses a considerable threat to his own "genetic" (developmental) conception of selfhood (*Thought* 67). There are several reasons for this, but primary among them is that, in essentialist conceptions of self, language is rendered superfluous, unnecessary to the development of the child. The "metaphysical personality," in other words, might use language to express the permanent features of its essential nature, but language *per se* has little to do with the developmental formation of that personality. Extrapolating from this observation, we would have to allow that voice likewise would be a thoroughly asocial phenomenon, having no need of other voices for its genesis. "True self" conceptions of voice, in other words, would discount, if not altogether exclude, the role language plays in the intellectual development of the human being. For all their praise of voice, those who champion a rhetoric of expression tend to overlook the crucial roles that *other voices* play in constructing that self presumably in quest of its own voice.³

Bakhtin shares with Vygotsky the basic idea that voices are originally social and thus necessarily appropriated from those around us. Bakhtin also holds that this appropriation is essential to the development of consciousness, noting that "everything that pertains to me enters my consciousness . . . from the external world through the mouths of others" (SG 138). Yet Bakhtin chooses a different word—

assimilation—to describe what is apparently the same process that Vygotsky refers to as internalization. The question occurs whether Vygotsky and Bakhtin do indeed refer to the same process—or more importantly, if they understand the same process in the same way. In response to the latter question at least, the answer is no.⁴

What Bakhtin contributes to the Vygotskian notion of internalization is the idea of a requisite *struggle*—the challenge that ensues in the difficult process of appropriating someone else's words for one's own purposes and the corresponding struggle among the interior voices that vie for ascendancy in consciousness. Apart from whatever other differences there may be between these terms, when Bakhtin uses *assimilation*, he does so believing that *struggle* is a basic feature of the process to which he refers. But why must the appropriation of other words, other voices, entail a struggle at all?

Bakhtin's answer to this question hinges upon his understanding of the nature of language itself. Bakhtin points out that "language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intention" (*DI* 294). Instead, language exists in "a dialogically and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments, and accents" (276). Language, therefore, must be wrested from its previous "owners," so to speak. Thus, Bakhtin explains that "the word . . . exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own" (294). The ensuing struggle is one of prying the word free from its myriad and erstwhile contexts. And yet, Bakhtin understands this process to be absolutely essential to the full realization of an individual consciousness.

Bakhtin's distinction between "authoritative discourse" and "internally persuasive discourse" illustrates something of the nature of this process. Authoritative discourse is "located in a distanced zone, organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher. It is, so to speak, the word of the fathers. Its authority was already *acknowledged* in the past. It is a *prior discourse*" (342). Authoritative discourse, it may be said, is the received word, the word that does not allow any dialogizing challenge. By contrast, what Bakhtin calls internally persuasive discourse is discourse that ranges

freely among other discourses, that may be creatively recontextualized, and that is capable of engaging other discourses in dialogue. Its importance to development, Bakhtin emphasizes, should not be underestimated, since negotiating a consciousness of oneself, for oneself, is a long and complicated process of “distinguishing between one’s own and another’s discourse, between one’s own and another’s thought” (345).

Internally persuasive discourse, then, is “tightly interwoven with ‘one’s own word.’” It is “half-ours and half someone else’s.” Because the internally persuasive word presupposes a measure of dialogue with one’s “own” words, along with other internally persuasive words, it “does not remain in an isolated and static condition. It is not so much interpreted by us,” says Bakhtin, “as it is further, that is, freely developed, applied to new material, new conditions; it enters into interanimating relationships with new contexts” (345-46). What accounts for the development of individual consciousness at all is precisely the struggle that occurs between discourses, whether authoritative or internally persuasive, a struggle that ultimately enables us to reject those “discourses that do not matter to us, that do not touch us” (345). As Bakhtin explains,

The importance of struggling with another’s discourse, its influence in the history of an individual’s coming to ideological consciousness, is enormous. One’s own discourse and one’s own voice, although born of another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of another’s discourse. This process is made more complex by the fact that a variety of alien voices enter into the struggle for influence within an individual’s consciousness (just as they struggle with one another in surrounding social reality). (348)

Yes, Bakhtin might say, we *are* the voices that inhabit us, that resound in our inner speech. But we are much more, since these other voices do not merely coexist, indifferent to and estranged from one another. Instead, a continuous rivalry takes place, a contest “for hegemony among various available verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions, and values” (346). Gary Saul Morson

and Caryl Emerson observe that, for Bakhtin, “selfhood is not a particular voice within, but a particular way of combining many voices within. Consciousness takes shape and never stops taking shape, as a process of interaction among authoritative and innerly persuasive discourses” (221).

What Bakhtin brings to the notion of internalized voices, then, is the idea of a necessary striving with the voices we have internalized or assimilated from others—many of which we find compatible with our situated purposes, many of which we do not. The important point is that at any given moment, the voice we choose to call our own is made possible by all those other voices which vie for hegemony in our consciousness, which form the chorus of voices against which our own may eventually be heard. It follows, then, that what we call consciousness is dialogic through and through, that the self is an event of language experience, and that neither consciousness nor emergent selfhood is able to attain the kind of crowning moment after which it may be said that this or that person is developmentally *finished*. Nothing could be further from the ideas of either Bakhtin or Vygotsky than to posit a developmental end-point, a coronation ritual to honor those who have, at long last, arrived.

VOICE IN A RHETORICAL SENSE

Apart from the many voices internalized or assimilated in inner speech, what of the many voices *encountered* in external, social speech? In other words, to what extent is voice a rhetorical construct, as well as a linguistic, psychological, or—as in the case of essentialist theories—a metaphysical one? Voice, in the understanding offered here, is rhetorical by virtue of its function of addressing or answering other voices—not only those voices encountered in our interpersonal relationships, but those that define the communities and cultures to which we belong.

From a Vygotskian perspective, voice is rhetorical because its manifestations in the zone of proximal development mark it as necessary to the meeting of desires and intentions within situations always involving others. Can there be any doubt that the voices that inhabit zones of proximal development are decidedly, and originally, rhetorical ones:

voices that ask for something *from* another, voices that ask something *of* another; voices that beseech and inquire, voices that guide and explore; voices that intend certain effects, voices that effect certain intentions? One feature of Vygotsky's theory seldom mentioned is that social speech, especially as it occurs within the zone of proximal development, is *rhetorical* speech. It is not supplanted by the development of inner or written speech, nor does it vanish on its own once other speech forms develop. To state the obvious, social speech remains a constant and necessary staple of human existence. For that reason, voice, in a rhetorical sense, is realized only in its relationship to, and difference from, other voices that it must address and answer. The quality of voice, in some measure, always presupposes other voices.

Bakhtin provides a fuller understanding of this point. Though he grants the reality of single-voiced discourse, Bakhtin is repelled by the desire for a single voice, equating such with a wish to take refuge from the demands of life itself: "A single voice ends nothing and resolves nothing. Two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence" (*PDP* 252). Ultimately, one might say that single-voiced discourse *is* voiceless, since it is impossible to recognize a voice in isolation, that is, without the dialogizing background of those other voices against which it may be heard. The discernment of any particular voice, in fact, is accomplished by hearing it situated among all those *other* voices which it may mimic, ignore, or reject, with which it may agree or quarrel, from which it may borrow, and so on. This happens not merely because of the aural contrast provided by other voices. It happens because the voices against which any particular voice may be heard are voices that exist in *relationship* to that voice. Single-voiced discourse, in effect, precludes such relationship, refuses dialogue, since it neither answers nor addresses any other voice—nor does it feel any apparent need to. It is decidedly *arhetorical* in its orientation, imagining itself to be wholly sufficient to whatever task is at hand—a tale, a problem, a character, a truth, and so on. It needs no *other*.

Of course, such discourse holds little interest for Bakhtin, who prefers instead to conceive voice as something of a doubled phenomenon, both answering and anticipating an answer in every utterance. Because the voice that speaks the word is thoroughly implicated in

the exigencies of *answering* and *addressing* the word of another, it can never be purely self-expressive, unaware or indifferent to another's word. It may aspire to this condition, as evidenced in Romantic aesthetics, but apart from "the mythical Adam" (SG 93), no one has since voiced an utterance wholly independent of the utterances of others.

Bakhtin understands that all our efforts to persuade, convince, move, inform, affect, contend, agree—all our *rhetorical* efforts to influence one another are dialogically situated. The intentions we "author" in everyday discourse are simultaneously active and responsive, original and derivative, initiated and received. All our efforts to influence someone through *address* are simultaneously attempts to *answer someone else*—at the very least, that same someone whose answer we anticipate and build into our addressing utterance. No one speaks in a vacuum; no voice is heard apart from those voices it answers and addresses. Dialogue, in other words, needs its "other words."

Like Vygotsky, Bakhtin posits an essentially rhetorical dimension to the quality of voice, and also like Vygotsky, he understands this dimension to be contingent on the process of dialogue, in particular, on the basic features of answerability and addressivity. Unlike his contemporary, though, Bakhtin understands these features to be simultaneously present in the structure of each and every utterance, which is why voice is always *voices*. A voice in isolation has no reason to speak, no motive to be heard, and thus is meaningless.

VOICE IN A HISTORICAL SENSE

There remains, however, a final sense in which voice may be said to be social, and that sense we could call the *historical*. As one committed to a Marxist psychology, Vygotsky was interested in questions regarding how sociocultural knowledge is transmitted within the contexts of historical milieus and constraints—how, in other words, a given culture in a given historical moment becomes a part of the consciousness of its individual members. Vygotsky thus posits "the internalization of socially rooted and historically developed activities [as] the distinguishing feature of human psychology" (*Mind* 57). And, of course, that internalization is accomplished through the mediating and transformative power of signs, the most profound of which is

speech, or as I argue here, the dialogue of voices occurring in the developmental history of the individual.

Now the voices that become internalized are not abstractions. They carry with them all “the musical, expressive, intonational qualities” that oral speech is capable of manifesting (*Thought* 181). Indeed, it is precisely these qualities that account for some measure of the “shared apperception” that occurs between interlocutors in social dialogue, the understanding that results from the fact that “each person can see his partners, their facial expressions and gestures, and *hear the tone of their voices*” (my emphasis, 240). Vygotsky borrows a passage from Dostoevsky to illustrate the kind of extreme abbreviation possible when such nonverbal clues lend meaning to a specific utterance—or, as in Dostoevsky’s excerpt, a specific word.⁵ Referring to that passage, Vygotsky notes how a change of voice signifies a change in meaning:

Here we see one more source of the abbreviation of oral speech, i.e., the modulation of voice that reveals psychological context within which a word is to be understood. In Dostoevsky’s story it was contemptuous negation in one case, doubt in another, anger in the third. We have discovered so far two factors of abbreviation. One is connected with shared apperception by the persons involved in dialogue; the other occurs *when the idea can be rendered by inflection*. (emphasis added, 242)

In dialogue, understanding is often a function of the contexts revealed through, or invoked by, the uttering voice. Misunderstanding, then, often results from the fact that words have potential meanings, a multitude of contexts in which they may be spoken and heard (and thus misspoken and misheard). Vygotsky refers to this context-dependency of signification as a word’s *sense*, which he contrasts with a word’s *meaning*:

the sense of a word . . . is the sum of all the psychological events aroused in our consciousness by the word. It is a dynamic, fluid, complex whole, which has several zones of unequal stability. Meaning is only one of the zones of sense, the most stable and precise zone. A word acquires its sense from the context in which it appears; in different contexts, it changes its sense. The dictionary meaning of a word is no more than a stone in the

edifice of sense, no more than a potentiality that finds diversified realization in speech. (244-45)

Vygotsky observes that, in inner speech, sense predominates over meaning and is, in great measure, the very content of inner speech. Because a word's sense is dependent on the contexts in which it is voiced and because sense constitutes the larger portion of inner speech, it is reasonable to infer that *the various contexts of oral speech are amenable to internalization*. Stated a bit differently, we do not internalize words removed from the situated voices that speak them. Rather, when we receive words through the utterances of others, we internalize a repertoire of potential contexts in which those same words may be heard and understood. Though Vygotsky does not elaborate the specific role of voice in sociocultural understanding, his writings clearly imply that voice is one important conduit for the historical formation of mind.

Bakhtin more pointedly argues that voices possess the ability to suggest, echo, resonate the varied and prior contexts in which they have been heard. For Bakhtin, voice is historical because it is able to recall those places where it has been spoken. It carries with it the accumulated tones and overtones, accents and traces, sounds and shadings of all its journeys. As Bakhtin puts it, "each word tastes of the context or contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life." (*DI* 293).

Bakhtin and Vygotsky share a recognition that meaning is dependent on social and historical contexts. From Bakhtin's point of view, context is why the utterance is an unrepeatable phenomenon, why we hear not signs but tones, why utterances assume those sociohistorical forms known as speech genres. Every dictionary "meaning" thus is inadequate to the task that it undertakes since no word is "uninhabited by others' voices. . . . The word enters his [the speaker's] context from another context, permeated with the interpretations of others" (*PDP* 202).

Bakhtin often chooses to make this point in less personal, more cultural terms. "All words," according to Bakhtin, "have the 'taste' of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work" (*DI* 293).

In fact, this tension between the personal and the sociohistorical is something of a constant in Bakhtin's thought. Two things that Bakhtin mentions in this regard—tonality and genre—speak directly to that tension, since tonality implies the personal, individual qualities of expression, while genre more readily suggests those historical forms that surpass personality, uniqueness. Indeed, Bakhtin adds considerable sophistication to our present understanding of voice by demonstrating how genres “lend” expressive tonality to the individual, situationally-bound voice.

When we make an utterance, Bakhtin notes, we take words “from other utterances, and mainly from utterances that are kindred to ours in genre” (SG 87). The words we “borrow” are not gleaned from dictionaries, but from those social forms of utterances known as speech genres, received forms of concrete, practical usage. Our speech, then, is largely, and necessarily, generic. This is not to say that any particular speaker's utterance is devoid of individual accents, overtones, or peculiarities. But such qualities are, in some measure, bequeathed to us. Genres, that is, are a *copia* of tonalities; “their structure,” Bakhtin adds, “includes a certain expressive intonation” (79). In fact, Bakhtin holds that our ability to express our personal individuality *within* genres proceeds from the degree of mastery we have *of* genres, of their range and diversity. The more accomplished our command of the genres of everyday speech, “the more freely we employ them, the more fully and clearly we reveal our own individuality in them” (80).

Obviously, we are in the midst of paradox here. Bakhtin claims that what best allows individualized expression is a mastery of speech genres, that what accounts for the “unrepeatable situation of communication” is our command of the generic forms into which any given utterance may be cast. Even a quality so obviously personal as “tone of voice” can be understood as social if, first, we recognize that the speaking person is constituted of the many voices (and genres that organize those voices) negotiated throughout social experience and, second, that the desirable quality of “having a voice” may be a function of having a wide familiarity with the abundant, highly-differentiated speech genres into which our individual utterances are cast. Morson and Emerson thus hold that “as our psychic life grows more and more

complex, we develop new ways to reaccentuate the discourse of others. In this respect, too, the self, as an assimilator of discourses, resembles a novel" (220).

Indeed, we are forever representing other discourses, other genres, other voices within our own speech. As this happens, we reaccentuate those other voices by virtue of the fact that we locate ourselves in relation to them. We cannot escape the necessity of having to evaluate the words of others for the very reason that our own speech is "full of other people's words." But, Bakhtin argues, "with some of them we completely merge our own voice, forgetting whose they are; others, which we take as authoritative, we use to reinforce our own words; still others, finally, we populate with our own aspirations, alien or hostile to them" (*PDP* 195). One might say, then, we novelize our speech to the extent that we incorporate other people's words into those we typically regard to be our own. But exactly how can we tell the difference between our words and someone else's?

The answer to this question, again, hinges on how we conceive ourselves. Should we come to understand the self as more a process than an entity, as an orchestration of the many voices inhabiting our consciousness, we cannot escape the conclusion that at any given moment we have incomplete access to who we are or who we claim to be. Thus, what we call our own voice is not likely to be identical to our prior and future assessments of that "same" voice. To get a sense of how this is so, Morson and Emerson suggest that each of us need only peruse our own collected writings. Who has not discovered that

it is painful to encounter . . . an old letter, old notes, a diary entry, something that brings to mind an intense inner argument—of how one used to orchestrate inner dialogues, because we recognize how large a role was played by voices and perspectives that we have since rejected or outgrown in ourselves and criticize in others. Writers may reject old works that are in fact quite successful because the inner voices informing them now seem alien, threatening, or in danger of reasserting themselves. (*Prosaics*, 222)

They go on to add that one could "understand a great deal about the development of a writer" if one could study "the complex process

of assimilation and reaccentuation of inner voices” (222-23). What they conclude is that our intellectual growth in general and our growth as writers in particular are both shaped through the relationships with the voices we engage in dialogue.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WRITING CLASSROOM

At the outset, I suggested that a dialogic understanding of voice required a dialogic understanding of selfhood. Don H. Bialostosky has observed that the dialogic self is “created in the course of . . . assimilating, responding to, and anticipating the voices of others” (“Liberal,” 13). Thus, and as I have tried to show here, voice is always a *relationship* to other voices, including (and especially) those that go into the formation of our uttering selves. Any dialogic approach to voice, then, will emphasize the relational, plural quality that voice entails. Given this starting point, what can we infer from the theories of Vygotsky and Bakhtin that might have practical applications for the writing classroom? How might a uniquely dialogic approach to voice manifest itself in the pedagogies we devise for our students?

First, and from a developmental perspective, I would argue that we need to broaden our understanding of the zone of proximal development to include a textual, or intertextual, dimension. Vygotsky’s research, of course, was designed to understand the process of concept formation in early childhood development, and subsequent research along these lines, especially on the acquisition of voice, has likewise focused on subjects of a very young age.⁶ Yet if development is, in fact, ongoing and unceasing, then we must allow that the zone of proximal development has a place in advanced writing instruction as well. Obviously, the teacher-student conference most closely approximates the dyadic exchanges that characterize the methods of Vygotsky and later researchers. But, as writing teachers, we are obliged to affirm that when our students confront written voices different from their own, the opportunity exists for students to learn from those other voices, even when such voices are textually inscribed.

Texts, of course, instruct in explicit, often didactic ways, but that is not at all what I have in mind. A dialogic understanding of textuality, rather, would hear texts as utterances able to “smuggle in” the implied

argument of competing perspectives and to convey these perspectives through the many voices which texts are able to orchestrate. Our students' encounter with unfamiliar voices, then, carries with it the possibility for engaging such voices in ways analogous to the dialogues that occur between parent and child, teacher and student, peer and advanced peer—all the forms usually associated with the zone of proximal development. In this way, the uttering text becomes something of a vicarious interlocutor, challenging the student with a different worldview or a previously unheard voice and, quite possibly, the rhetorical occasion for a needed response.

The recent trend in composition textbooks to include voices traditionally excluded or marginalized is laudable in this respect, but only so long as such unfamiliar voices are not merely appreciated but engaged, not merely heard but answered. Here, Bakhtin's anticipation of a requisite struggle comes into play, for the simple juxtaposition of multiple voices is relatively unimportant to development. What's crucial to the nurturance of a dialogic consciousness, rather, is the interanimation of voices in dialogue and the formidable difficulties involved in making those voices our own, of making them internally persuasive and thus able to be "freely developed, applied to new material, new conditions . . . new contexts" (*DI* 345).

Two activities, then, are suggested by these ideas. First is the need to *answer* the myriad and (initially) alien voices we might choose to introduce to our students. Dialogue journals can be (and have been) used successfully for this purpose; but the same benefits can be found in the need to respond to the voices that inhabit quoted sources and thus demarcate the rich territory between reporting and reported discourses. The authorial need to frame reported discourses cannot help but to situate the author in a *responsive* position to whatever sources he or she calls upon. Constructing assignments that ask students to deploy, and stake a position in relation to, other voices from their readings (especially those other voices that embody competing perspectives) is asking students to become participants in a dialogue, to give voice to their own perspectives on the question at hand.

But the second activity suggested by a dialogic understanding is the need to *revoice* those other voices, to recontextualize those voices

for purposes distinct from the ones for which they might have been originally intended. Much like the novelist, students should also possess the opportunity to ventriloquize those other voices in ways that necessitate, as Bakhtin says, “having to choose a language” (*DI* 295). Elsewhere, I have tried to demonstrate how this might occur in a writing unit that explores the neurological condition known as prosopagnosia. Leading students through definitions gleaned from medical dictionaries, followed by Oliver Sacks’s “The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat,” followed, in turn, by “Review of Research on Prosopagnosia” by Antonio Damasio, I intentionally confront students with myriad perspectives—thus myriad voices—on the same condition. Students learn much about a rare pathology, of course, but they also learn that the same condition can be known in different ways, in different languages, through different voices.

The final assignment for this unit, in fact, asks students to explain prosopagnosia to next year’s class who, likewise, will know nothing about this unusual disease. Thus, not only do students acquire a sense of themselves as developing knowers, but their sense of audience awareness depends precisely on the ability to remember their prior concerns and apprehensions when the unit began. More important, students are confronted with the problem of how best to explain their newly acquired knowledge to uninformed peers. Faced with the rhetorical exigency of “having to choose a language” for the purpose of explaining *this subject, given this situation*, students not only must appropriate the voices of experts on this topic, but must choose an expert voice of their own by which to orchestrate all those *other voices* to establish an authorial position among them. Conditions for the kind of generative struggle to which Bakhtin refers are thus cultivated by design, and the novice-expert relationships that typify Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development are shown to be transitional: novices can and do become experts, and such newly-acquired expertise can be textually voiced.

In teaching voice from a *rhetorical* perspective, we might do well to stress the many ways that texts *answer* one another and (correspondingly) anticipate how they themselves will be answered. Despite the convention of thematic groupings, our anthologies do not always

encourage tracing the lineage of intertextual conversations, often preferring instead a “great essays” approach, which offers monuments of fine writing whose self-evident virtues apparently transcend dialogue. In any event, such a weakness can be turned to our advantage, particularly if we ask students to fill in the missing links, as Bakhtin would say, “in the chain of speech communion” (SG 84).

A frequently anthologized piece, for example, like Martin Luther King’s “Letter From a Birmingham Jail,” can be the occasion for having students reconstruct what those Birmingham clergymen must have said in order to provoke King’s eloquent rejoinder. In keeping with the corporate authorship of the original utterance, students are placed in small groups and asked to draft a version of the document to which King responded. To accomplish this task, students must pay close attention not only to what King says, but also to what he implies that his interlocutors have said. Moreover, students are asked to consider if King’s chosen “tone of voice” could have any rhetorical significance for his audience and, in fact, whether King might not be speaking to an audience larger than a group of local clergy.

Of course, students express a great deal of curiosity regarding how closely each group’s response “matched up” with the original; but there is abundant interest, as well, in how each group approached this task and the reasons each group gave as to why *these* arguments are presented in *this* order and in *that* voice. Further discussion centers upon how and where King anticipated what might be said in response to his letter and what, if anything, he did to preempt unwanted responses. Additionally, students are asked to identify where King moves to keep open this dialogue, to identify passages composed to keep this dialogue open, to steer it in directions [that] King thinks might be more productive.

A useful follow-up assignment is to have students write another group response to King’s letter—this time in their own voices, as students writing some thirty years after King wrote his famous letter. Does King have anything to say to address the racial problems America faces today? Are his solutions relevant, his ideas enduring? Does he speak to the pertinent issues? Or more tellingly perhaps, does he speak in voices that resonates among young Americans, especially

young African-Americans? Explorations of this sort go far in reinforcing the notion that texts are situated instances of address and rejoinder, utterances that seek to be heard, understood, answered—even across years, decades, centuries, within the expanse of what Bakhtin calls “great time” (SG 4).

Such explorations also go far in revealing how voices emerge in *historical* and social contexts, how one voice is capable of recontextualizing a number of historical voices for contemporary purposes. King’s appropriation of Old Testament phrasing and cadence, when reaccentuated in African-American idioms, spoke powerfully to a generation ready to hear a voice of moral authority, a voice able to speak compellingly to a plurality of distinct traditions. Less urgently perhaps, but no less powerfully, the appropriation of historical voices by writers working in different genres has likewise been put to good effect. Though his understanding of voice is different from the one I offer here, Peter Elbow has argued that a characteristic quality of Richard Selzer’s voice is his sonorous orchestration of Shakespearean and biblical languages—both appropriated for contexts that neither could foresee, yet both echoing occasions where they had once been declaimed, namely, “the stage and the pulpit” (“Pleasures,” 213).

Such examples, along with Bakhtin’s explication of double-voicing in a brief passage from *Little Dorrit*, suggest that there may be considerable value in teaching our students to listen for the diverse voices at large in the texts we ask them to read. For without the ability to hear *other* voices, our students’ faith in the possibility for writing in and through those voices, of making such voices their own, will be a diminished one. Importantly, though, the analysis of textual voices I advocate here must not separate voices from the contexts in which they are heard and which they themselves are able to suggest or recall. The tempting alternative—to study voices in isolation, with an eye toward identifying the empirical features of a single voice—is contrary to the understanding of voice offered by Vygotsky and Bakhtin. Voice lessons are necessarily history lessons, too.

Finally, then, what do we tell that student earnestly seeking her true voice? Obviously, from what’s been said here, the notion of one “true voice” is more than a little suspect. We might do well by this student if

we encourage her, instead, to consider finding her true voices. In challenging her received ideas of voice as a permanent feature of an essential self, we also challenge the limitations, rhetorical and otherwise, that a single voice entails. We might point out to her that when we say of ourselves or a peer or a favorite author that he or she has a *voice*, we have done little more than remove that voice from all those other voices it seeks to answer and address. We might point out that every writer has a chorus of voices—some advancing, some receding; some appropriate, some misplaced; some preferred, some resisted. Our task—a difficult one, to be sure—is to deliver voice from its long romance with the true self and return it to the arena of living dialogue from whence it derives its only meaning: the colloquy of other voices.

If we do this, we might even relieve our imaginary student of the burden of thinking she must possess a single, unchanging voice that is hers alone—and the silence that eventually occurs when she, and her classmates, realize this burden is impossible to meet.