Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan

The *I* that Tells Itself: A Bakhtinian Perspective on Narrative Identity

The ambiguity of the title, borrowed from Derrida's *The Ear of the Other* (13), is not accidental: the *I* as both the addressee and the subject-object of a performative telling is precisely what is at stake in the question of narrative identity, a literary concept which has attained a near-Kantian magnitude since the 1980s and crept into, or perhaps even, as some have argued, taken over and colonized the discourse of philosophy, psychology, and historiography.[1] The cost of this narrative imperialism is a certain dilution and trivialization of the conception of the human subject as a story-telling being, which calls for a more rigorous probing of the narrative identity thesis, its heuristic value, and its philosophical, psychological and ethical implications. This challenge has been taken up by Galen Strawson in an article entitled "Against Narrativity," premised on a clear-cut distinction between the "Psychological Narrativity thesis"—"a straightforwardly empirical, descriptive thesis about the way ordinary human beings actually experience their lives," and the "Ethical Narrativity thesis," which states that experiencing or conceiving one's life as a narrative is a good thing" (428). Appealing as this neat distinction may be, I believe that we have more to gain by taking on board the essential and productive messiness of the concept, which does not lend itself to waterproof compartmentalization. Indeed, the most interesting feature of what has become a buzzword in those disciplines which deal with human beings is precisely this evident transition, made by so many of its proponents, from a descriptive (psychological) to a prescriptive (ethical) conception of narrative identity.

The difficulty of extricating the psychological from the ethical aspects of the debate is evident in the critique of Narrativity thesis, mounted from two diametri-

Professor Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan (D.Phil. Oxon) teaches at the University of Haifa, Israel. Her publications include *Graham Greene's Childless Fathers* (MacMillan, 1988), *Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper* (Oxford University Press, 1991), and *The Strange Short Fiction of Joseph Conrad* (Oxford University Press, 1999), as well as numerous articles on literary modernism, culture and subjectivity, exile and writing, and contemporary Israeli literature. Her current research interests focus on the intersection of Philosophy and Literature in the work of the Russian Philosopher M. M. Bakhtin.

NARRATIVE, Vol. 16, No. 1 (January 2008)

cally opposing positions, which—for lack of better terms—I would call the "right" and the "left" sides of the field of psychotherapy. On the "right" side, we would find, for instance, ego-psychologists, who argue against a conception of subjectivity which, they argue, postulates a fictitious, fabricated structure of selfhood, those who claim that the "coherence and continuity of the self . . . [is not a provisional construction, but] a fundamental biological value, a homeostat," or those who argue against the overrating of the socially constructed self and emphasize the capacity of the private self to break out of socially or culturally imposed narratives.[2] On the "left" side of the issue, we find those who would argue that the "narratological imperative" operates in the service of an adaptational, regulative, and "identitarian" professional ideology, that it inevitably gets caught up in the need for a recognizable pattern and thus imposes a false sense of coherence on human subjectivity.[3] As we can see, the debate among psychotherapists is not confined to the issue of narrative as a heuristic concept or a therapeutic approach, but boils over into questions of ethics: does the thesis of narrative identity liberate or imprison human subjectivity? Is individual agency enabled or suppressed by a narrative conception of subjectivity? To what extent are we bound by the generic rules of our self-narratives? To what extent can we author ourselves? In the following discussion I would offer a Bakhtinian perspective on this intersection of the descriptive and the prescriptive conceptions of narrative identity.

Working at the edges of several disciplines, Bakhtin describes his own project as a kind of "philosophical anthropology," a default label, as he quite openly says in a retrospective essay: "our analysis must be called philosophical mainly because of what it is not: it is not a linguistic, philological, literary, or any other special kind of analysis. The advantages are these: our study will move in the liminal spheres, that is, on the borders of all the aforementioned disciplines, at their junctures and points of intersection. The text (written and oral) is the primary given of all these disciplines and of all thought in the human sciences and philosophy in general" (*The Problem of the Text* 102). Without a shade of anxiety about this breach of disciplinary boundary-lines, Bakhtin's self-conscious liminality suggests why his work may be particularly productive in addressing messy questions.

A good point of departure for thinking about narrative identity is a moment of *aporia* in *Under Western Eyes*, Conrad's most Dostoevskean novel. The narrator of the novel, known to the reader only as the old teacher of languages, recounts a conversation with Razumov, the young protagonist. The narrator has been trying to draw Razumov out with a reference to the general folly of women, but the younger man (who has his own reasons for reticence), responds with an outburst of anger: "Upon my word he cried at my elbow, 'what is it to me whether women are fools or lunatics? I really don't care what you think of them. I-I am not interested in them. I let them be. I am not a young man in a novel' " (185–86).

What does it mean for a character in a work of fiction to deny that he is a character in a work of fiction? Is it a mere gimmick, a metafictional tongue-in-cheek of the kind favoured by postmodernist authors? Whatever our interpretation of this particular instance, it would depend primarily on our conception of the relationship between literary characters and human subjects or between narrative fictions and lived

realities. Whatever our conception of this relationship, it must, in turn, go back to the fundamental question of subjectivity itself. There is, of course, much to be said of this moment of *aporia*, but what it highlights for the present discussion is an ethical statement to which, as I would argue, Bakhtin would have readily subscribed.

Bakhtin's early essay, "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" reads like an anachronistic *apologia* for authorial omniscience.[4] The thesis is predicated on the author's position outside and above the characters (variously translated as "transgredience," "outsideness," or "exotopy"), which makes for a "surplus of knowledge" in relation to the fictional characters. The "transgredient" author can contain the hero within his own field of vision; he can know what the hero is in principle incapable of knowing; he can see him at the moment of his birth and of his death, against his background, and in the broader context of his environment (which is, for the hero, is a mere limited "horizon"). This "excess of knowledge" enables the author to "consummate" the hero, to see him as "a whole."

Oddly, though, this thesis which seems almost trivial when we bear in mind the different ontological status of author and character (the "real" and the "fictional" are, after all, ontologically distinct on the most common-sensical level), is premised on a blatant disregard of ontological distinctions, conceptual boundary-lines, and fundamental categories of philosophical conceptualization. The point of departure for what is ostensibly an essay on aesthetics is an analogy between "I-for-myself" (the phenomenal, embodied subject) and the fictional "hero"—terms which are used interchangeably throughout the essay, as if there were no distinction to be made between the living subject and a character in a work of fiction. Conversely, the term "author" is often replaced by "other" with the same disregard for ontological or epistemological distinctions. Dispensing with all forms of rhetorical or logical mediation, establishing an odd continuum between the real and the fictional, Bakhtin moves back and forth between these two sets of conceptual categories with alarming ease. There is no recognition of boundaries or seam-lines; no attempt to mediate the shift either logically or rhetorically: the aesthetic theory seems to blend into a philosophical theory of the subject, and vice versa. Bakhtin himself is not unaware of his own engagement in philosophical contraband: "It is true," he blandly admits, "that the boundary between a human being (the condition for aesthetic vision) and the hero (the object of aesthetic vision) often becomes unstable" ("Author" 228).[5]

What enables this slippage is the analogy of relational structures. Bakhtin points to an essential a-symmetry between the perceptual experience of "I-for-myself" and "I-for-the-other."[6] I-for-myself cannot produce an autonomous representation of my self; my own boundaries are inaccessible to my perception and consciousness (I cannot directly perceive the top of my head, or consciously experience the moment of my own birth and my death), Beginning with the perspectival finitude and limitations of the embodied subject, Bakhtin is very close here to the phenomenological project of Merleau-Ponty.[7] But this descriptive thesis regarding the spatial and temporal boundaries the perceiving subject is translated in this early essay—quite problematically, I would argue—into axiological terms: "A human being experiencing life in the category of his own *I*," says Bakhtin, "is incapable of gathering himself by himself into an outward whole that would be even relatively

finished . . . the point . . . is . . . the absence in principle of any unitary axiological approach from within a human being himself to his own outward expressedness in being (35–36; see also 91). Just like the hero in a novel, the human subject's sense of itself is always confined to a partial "inside" perspective, which can only be transcended through an external vantage point. "I myself cannot be the author of my own value, just as I cannot lift myself by my own hair" (55), or, as we might say, by my own bootstraps.

Hence, says Bakhtin, human beings' absolute need for the other, for the other's seeing, remembering, gathering, and unifying self-activity—the only self-activity capable of producing his outwardly finished personality. This outward personality could not exist, if the other did not create it" (35–36). The other, then, is analogous to the author, who is "the living bearer and sustainer of the unity of consummation," who is "transgredient" to the hero and therefore able to "collect the hero and his life and to complete him to the point where he forms a whole by supplying all those moments which are inaccessible to the hero himself from within himself" (14). We are, to put it briefly, "authored," configured by an internalized Other in much the same way as a hero is authored by the writer of fictional narratives.

Bakhtin's extrapolation of the perceptual non-self-sufficiency of the human subject into the arena of ethics enables the translation of his "aesthetics" into a theory of narrative identity and places him comfortably in the ranks of philosophers like Alasdair MacIntyre and Paul Ricoeur. The authorial "consummation," as Bakhtin calls it, the transgredience which enables the framing of the hero/ self beyond and above his own limited perspective, provides the sense of coherence which MacIntyre calls "the narrative unity of a life," and which Ricoeur calls "emplotment" or "configuration." But it is not just a question of proximity. As we shall soon see, the apparent ambivalence of his position enables a more nuanced reading of the differences between these two philosophers and of the issue of narrative identity itself.

To follow Bakhtin's thesis, we should first note the affinity of perceptual boundary-lines and narrative frames. "Form must utilize a moment or constituent feature which is transgredient to the hero's consciousness (transgredient to his possible self-experience and concrete self-valuation) and yet is essentially related to him, determining him from outside as a whole: the moment of the hero's 'advertedness' outward, his boundaries, and his boundaries moreover, as boundaries of the whole that he is. Form is a boundary" (91). No other moment of writing so clearly brings out this question of boundary-lines as the moment of autobiography, when the living subject tries to become both author and character in her own narrative. The project of autobiography aims at a conflation of author, narrator, and protagonist. It is an attempt to delineate the boundary-lines of selfhood, to stake out a territory of subjectivity and trace a line of filiation from the past to the present.

This is a foredoomed task. As early as Augustine's *Confessions*, the genre is marked by a sense of impossibility, and if Augustine, who begins with a sense of his shattered selfhood, can entrust his narrative to the divine Author, as Wordsworth will, centuries later, entrust his own narrative of selfhood to Nature in "The Prelude," these consolations are no longer available to twentieth century authors. For Sartre, to mention the most notable case, autobiographical narratives, whether written or lived,

are invariably written in bad faith, a form of posturing underwritten by the delusion of and desire for a substantial self. Sartre relates to the various imaginary narratives into which he had cast himself as instances of "bad faith," of posturing motivated by the delusion of the substantial self. In one of the most telling passages of *The Words*, he recounts how his vision of himself as a famous author leads him, even as a child, to live "posthumously," as it were, and—more significantly for our discussion—in the third person, observing his own life as a performance which would some day be on record: "I concocted double edged remarks which I let fall in public. Anne Marie would find me at my desk, scribbling away. She would say: 'It's so dark! My little darling is ruining his eyes.' It was an opportunity to reply in all innocence: 'I could write even in the dark'. . . . There was a sharp crack: my great-grand nephew, out there, had shut his book; he was dreaming about the childhood of his great-grand-uncle, and tears were rolling down his cheeks. 'Nevertheless, it's true,' he would sign, 'he wrote in the dark'" (206).

Sartre's apparent ruthless exposure of his own "bad faith" does not invalidate the autobiographical project itself, and if the subject-object of the story does not lend itself to any neat packaging as a substantial cluster of consistent traits and dispositions, it is still ineluctably present as the subject who asks the question "who am I?"

The problematization of the autobiographical project is taken further in the work of Roland Barthes who—significantly for our discussion—does not attempt to emplot their autobiographies and seems to discard the narrative mode which was the hallmark of traditional autobiography in favour of other forms of self-inscription. "What I write about myself," says Barthes, "is never the last word" . . ."What right does my present have to speak of my past? Has my present some advantage over my past? What 'grace' might have enlighted me?" (120–21) As we shall soon see, Barthes' use of the notion of 'grace' to describe the validation of the autobiographical project is uncannily similar to Bakhtin's.[8]

But what is at stake here is not just the spectrum of literary representations of subjectivity. Autobiography, as Eakin writes, "is not merely something we read in a book," but "a discourse of identity, delivered bit by bit in the stories we tell about ourselves day in and day out, autobiography structures our living" ("What are We Reading" 122), and thus offers the best test-case for the study of narrative identity. The reflexive awareness that is integral to consciousness is that "sense we have that we not only participate but witness our experience. . . . We embody this doubleness of our first-person perspective in the I-narrators who tell the stories of our I-character selves" ("Selfhood" 307). To return to Bakhtin, it is precisely the doubleness of the first person perspective which makes it impossible for the self to "tell itself." Within the modality which Bakhtin calls *I-for-myself* the subject can never become a given object for itself, can never coincide with itself, must always reach out beyond itself as "yet-to-be": "I can remember myself, I can to some extent perceive myself through my outer sense, and thus render myself in part an object of my desiring and feeling—that is, I can make myself an object for myself. But in this act of self-objectification I shall never coincide with myself—I-for-myself shall continue to be in the act of this self-objectification, and not in its product. . . . I am incapable of fitting all of myself into an object, for I exceed any object as the active subiectum of it" ("Author" 38).

The "speaking" subject (the agent of the speech-act, to update the terms) and the "spoken" subject (the grammatical subject of the utterance) can never coincide. But it is the axiological dimension, perceived as analogous to the axes of time and space and just as real, which underlies the utter impossibility of autobiography: "No act of reflection upon myself is capable of consummating me fully, for, inasmuch as it is immanent to my sole/ answerable consciousness, it becomes a value-and-meaning factor in my subsequent development of that consciousness. My own word about myself is in principle incapable of being the last word" ("Author and Hero" 142–43). Half a century later, Derrida, too, will recognize the impossibility of autobiography, the lived-experience of subjectivity as "the excess of everything that can be related to it," the inability of consciousness to become for itself a thesis or a theme; he too will replace the "auto" of "autobiography" with "oto," the ear of the other.[9]

This excess of the subject in relation to any and all of its own articulations is precisely why, according to Bakhtin, "there is no clear-cut, essentially necessary dividing line between autobiography and biography, and this is a matter of fundamental importance. . . . Neither in biography nor in autobiography does the I-for-myself (my relationship with myself) represent the organizing, constitutive moment of form ("Author" 151). Becoming a character in one's own narrative, telling oneself to oneself, in a written or unwritten form, is premised on the possibility of narrativization which, as Strawson rightly observes, "clearly involves putting some sort of construction—a unifying or form-finding construction—on the events one's life, or parts of one's life" (440). It is, in other words, an *aesthetic* impulse which generates that narrative coherence we call the self.

The cultural and temporal remoteness of the Bakhtinian vocabulary, compounded by his partiality for idiosyncratic word-formations, should not obscure the relevance of this early essay to the Narrative Identity thesis. Translated into the philosophical terms used by Ricoeur or MacIntyre, for instance, Bakhtin's view of the aesthetic relationship and the concomitant conception of subjectivity are clearly associated with the same human need for emplotment, configuration, and narrativization of life into a coherent whole. It would appear, then, that Bakhtin, in this early phase of his work, is a forerunner of the Narrative Identity thesis: if human subjects are like characters in novels in their perceptual and axiological non-self-sufficiency and their need for an other/ author who would render them whole, our lives are indeed analogous to narratives.

What is most significant about this early essay is its distinction between the first-person perspective (I-for-myself) and the third-person perspective (I-for-another): Bakhtin insists on the productivity of the external perspective as the only way towards the attainment of aesthetic wholeness and coherence. "It is only in a life perceived in the category of the *other* that my body can become aesthetically valid, and not in the context of my own life as lived for myself, that is, not in the context of my self-consciousness" ("Author" 59, original emphasis). "My own axiological relationship to myself is completely unproductive aesthetically: for myself, I am aesthetically unreal" ("Author" 188–89). Being "aesthetically real" or "valid," for Bakhtin, entails a sense of form and clear-cut boundary-lines, which can only be produced through the transgredient perspective of an other, the third-person perspective which

enables the narrative configuration of one's life. At this point, Bakhtin is very close to MacIntyre who not only acknowledges the need for narrative embeddedness, and—moreover—they both seem to conflate the descriptive with the prescriptive thesis.

But when we deal with narrative, we deal with narrators as well. Granted the structuring power of plot-lines and our apparently built-in need for storytelling, it is all the more crucial to consider the potential implications of subjectifying ourselves in and through narratives. Immanent to the very concept of narrative identity, there is, as Eakin suggests, a "teller-effect, a self that emerges and lives its life only within the narrative matrix of consciousness," which gives "a degree of permanence and narrative solidity—or 'body', we might say—to otherwise evanescent states of identity feeling. We get the satisfaction of seeming to see ourselves see, of seeming to see our selves. That is the psychological gratification of autobiography's reflexiveness, of its illusive teller-effect" ("What Are We Reading" 129). But this psychological gratification may be dearly bought, as the "teller effect" or, to get back to the Bakhtinian term, that internalized "other" by whom we are authored may be less than benevolent, and some of our self-narratives, if not all, may well be derived from ideologically motivated "master narratives," which are not necessarily conducive to the good life, however defined. It is at this point that the question of voice, of "who is telling the story," becomes far more important than the narrative itself, and this, as I would presently argue, is where MacIntyre and Ricoeur part company.

Bakhtin's work can be read as a prolonged engagement with this question, which is the key to the Dostoevskean turning point in his convoluted philosophical itinerary. About five years after "Author and Hero" Bakhtin published *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* which proposes an entirely different view of the relationship between Author and Hero, and—more importantly— an apparently different conception of human subjectivity. In "Author and Hero," Dostoevsky was referred to as a maverick, a writer who has regrettably deviated from the prescriptive aesthetics of authorial transgredience. Having abdicated the authorial prerogative of subsuming the characters' voices under his own, he is seen an author who has lost his "valuational point of support outside the hero"; who has let the heroes "takes possession"; who proved himself "unable to find any convincing and stable axiological point of support outside the hero," unable, in other words, to "consummate" the hero (17). This type of aesthetic loss or failure, writes Bakhtin in the early essay, "includes almost all of Dostoevsky's heroes" (20).

In 1929 Dostoevsky becomes the hero of Bakhtin's work. No longer read as an authorial failure, his abdication of authorical jurisdiction is now seen as a bid for freedom, a "small-scale Copernican revolution," carried out "when he took what had been a firm and finalizing authorial definition and turned it into an aspect of the hero's self-definition" (*Dostoevsky's Poetics* 49). Rather than a keeper of boundary-lines Bakhtin reads Dostoevsky as an apostle of liminality: "The threshold, the foyer, the corridor, the landing, the stairway, its steps, doors opening onto the stairway, gates to front and back yards, and beyond these, the city: squares, streets, facades, taverns, dens, bridges, gutters. This is the space of the novel. And in fact absolutely nothing here ever loses touch with the threshold, there is no interior of drawing

rooms, dining rooms, halls, studios, bedrooms" (*Dostoevsky's Poetics* 170). This liminality is not only spatial: more than anything, it is a question of value. The polyphonic voices of Dostoevsky's characters are not subsumed by that of the author, they are not contained within an overarching axiological perspective, or "finalized" through an authorial-authoritative transgredient knowledge. What was perceived as an aesthetic failure in the earlier essay is now seen as a revolutionary step.[10] In his refusal to assume the role of the "consummating" other in relation to his characters, Dostoevsky allows his characters to speak for themselves, as it were.

But if the author does not have the last word, neither do the characters themselves: "A character's self-consciousness in Dostoevsky is thoroughly dialogized: in every aspect it is turned outward, intensely addressing itself, another, a third person. Outside this living addressivity toward itself and toward the other it does not exist, even for itself. In this sense it could be said that the person in Dostoevsky is the "*subject of an address*" (*Dostoevsky's Poetics* 251, original emphasis). This dialogic quality is not confined to the discourse of fictional characters. It applies, as Bakhtin will later write, to human subjectivity as well: "Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire life in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium" ("Reworking" 293).

Here, then, is the "dialogic" Bakhtin, as he is known in the West, coming into his own. Self-consciousness, according to Bakhtin, is "not that which takes place within, but that which takes place on the boundary between one's own and someone else's consciousness, on the threshold. And everything internal gravitates not toward itself but is turned to the outside and dialogized, every internal experience ends up on the boundary, encounters another, and in this tension-filled encounter lies its entire essence" ("Reworking" 287). Intersubjectivity precedes subjectivity; ethics precedes ontology. If these propositions sound uncannily familiar to readers of Levinas, for instance, this is not an accident.

To understand the magnitude of the Dostoevskean turning point in Bakhtin's work, we need to go back for a moment to "Author and Hero" and note the convergence of aesthetics and metaphysics. The odd slippage between "author" and "other" is predicated on a thoroughly metaphysical frame of reference as Bakhtin writes about the need for grounding, for a "powerful *point d'appui* outside myself" ("Author" 31); for "a firm and convincing position (convincing not only outwardly, but also inwardly, with respect to meaning) outside my entire life" (86). The affinity between the metaphysical and the aesthetic relationship is noted by Bakhtin on more than one occasion: "An aesthetic event can take place only when there are two participants present; it presupposes two noncoinciding consciousnesses. . . . When the other consciousness is the encompassing consciousness of God, a religious event takes place (prayer, worship, ritual)" (22); "A whole, integral human being presupposes an aesthetically active subiectum situated outside him (we are abstracting from man's religious experience in the present context)" (82–83). As we have seen, the narrativization of the self is not merely a spatial and temporal enclosure: it is an axiological "consummation," and

authorized justification of one's life. The need for that other who would ratify the contours of the subject is embedded in a metaphysical framework where the ultimate other/author is God. So long as the metaphysical analogy retains its validity, the human act of authorship is a delegation of transcendental authority. Long before Barthes' challenge, Bakhtin already uses the metaphysically-charged concept of "grace" ("Author" 67, 90) in reference to the desire for authorial containment.

Needless to say, the metaphysical analogy which enables the assumption of an essentially benevolent authoring from without is problematic.[11] It takes a profoundly religious attitude to accept that implicit trust in "the highest level of authority that blesses a culture . . . *trust, that is, in the fact that there is another—the highest other—who answers for my own special answerability, and trust in the fact that I do not act in an axiological void*" ("Author" 206, emphasis mine). It is precisely this trust which is no longer available to Dostoevsky, who bears witness to the demise of aesthetic culture. When the metaphysical scaffolding collapses, the aesthetic paradigm no longer holds. Dostoevsky's abdication of authorial jurisdiction anticipates the awakening of the modernist consciousness, the consciousness of an essentially secular world, where neither the fictional nor the historical subject can refer to an authorial Being—outside and above the self—for comfort and confirmation ("Author" 203–4).[12]

As we have seen, the "aesthetic," for Bakhtin, is not confined to the realm of artistic production. It is also a powerful psychic modality, an I-for-the-other mode of being, as relevant to the study of subjectivity as it is to the study of texts, with autobiography—the I that tells itself—as a point of intersection. Bakhtin's references to the impossibility of autobiography are all related to the heteronomy of the subject, who, he says, "has no internal sovereign territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary: looking inside himself, he looks *into the eyes of another* or *with the eyes of another*. . . . I receive my name from others and it exists for others (self-nomination is imposture)" ("Reworking" 287–88, original emphasis).

But this living-on-borderlines, which makes the subject's sense of identity so precarious and calls for the narrativizing perspective of the transgredient other, is not necessarily a weakness. Paradoxically, this non-self-sufficiency is also what constitutes and empowers the ethical subject. Even when he appears to endorse the aesthetic/ metaphysical analogy, Bakhtin positions the subject of ethics beyond the pale of aesthetic containment, beyond the seductions of "consummation" by the authorial other. Muted though they are in this essay, there are several references in "Author and Hero" to the ethical modality as that which actively resists and subverts the narrativization or the aesthetization of the subject.[13]

Against that "whole, integral human being" which is produced aesthetically by the transgredient other, Bakhtin positions the "ethical subiecum" who is "nonunitary in principle" as it lives in the gap between "is" and "ought" ("Author" 83; see also 118), where the only sense of its own wholeness is no more than a "unity yet-to-be" (126). Bakhtin relates to the ethical subject in the very same terms which he uses to describe the "yet-unconsummated" hero who "orients his actions within the open ethical event of his lived life . . . [in] the yet-to-be meaning of the event of a lived life (12); who is "the bearer of the open unity of the event of a lived life—a unity

incapable of being consummated from within itself (14)." But unlike the fictional hero who is eventually aesthetically framed by the author, the ethical subject must always be "unconsummated," must transgress the narratives which frame its life in order to be free to choose and to act. Bakhtin is explicit on this point: "Ethical freedom ('freedom of the will') is not only freedom from cognitive necessity (causal necessity), but also freedom from aesthetic necessity" (119): "If I am consummated and my life is consummated, I am no longer capable of living and acting. For in order to live and act, I need to be unconsummated, I need to be open for myself—at least in all the essential moments constituting my life; I have to be, for myself, someone who is axiologically yet-to-be, someone who does not coincide with his already existing makeup" (14). "The ethical *subiectum* is present to itself as a task, the task of actualizing himself as a value, and is in principle incapable of being given, of being present-on-hand, of being contemplated: it is I-for-myself" (100).

Significantly, Bakhtin uses the concept of "rhythm" as a synonym for the narrative pattern of life. "Rhythm" embodies the "plot-bearing significance" of a life (112) which can be established and ratified only from outside, through the containing, aestheticizing eyes of the authorial other. Rhythm stands for the narrative of I-for-the-other: it is inevitably bound by generic rules, contingent on a certain religious naivete, and leaves no room for change (145). It "presupposes a certain *predeterminedness* of striving, experiencing, action (a certain hopelessness with respect to meaning)" (117). Translated into our own terms, this "predeterminedness" means that there is an inverse relation between the degree of narrative coherence (rhythm) in our self-perception and our freedom of choice and action. In order to live, to make choices and to act, the ethical subject, "I-for-myself," must always slip out through a "loophole," transgress the boundaries of the narrative frame. "I myself as *subiectum* never coincide with me myself; I—the *subiectum* of the act of self-consciousness—exceed the bounds of this act's content. [It is a matter of] an intuitively experienced loophole out of time, out of everything given, everything finitely present-on-hand" (109).[14]

The moment of ethical choice and action—when the subject has to "participate in the unique and unitary event of being"—is a moment which "does not submit to rhythm—it is in principle extrarhythmic, nonadequate to rhythm. Here rhythm becomes a distortion and a lie. It is a moment where… being and obligation meet in conflict within me; where *is* and *ought* mutually exclude each other. . . . Free will and self-activity are incompatible with rhythm. A life (lived experience, striving, performed action, though) that is lived and experienced in the categories of moral freedom and of self-activity cannot be rhythmicized" (118–19). We should note that a similar distinction is made by Bakhtin in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, an earlier fragment of might have been the introduction to the monumental philisophical project Bakhtin had in mind in the 1920s, where Bakhtin already notes the irreducible difference between aesthetic seeing (based on "outsideness"), and the "world that is correlated with me" (I-for-myself) which is "fundamentally and essentially incapable of becoming part of an aesthetic architectonic" (74–75). Significantly, Bakhtin writes of the "temptation of aestheticism," the temptation to act out a conception of oneself through the eyes of the other, which must be resisted by the intensely situated, participative, and answerable subject (18).

Bakhtin's transition from an aesthetic to an ethical perspective, most visible in his work on Dostoevsky's poetics, offers a good vantage point for a juxtaposition of MacIntyre and Ricoeur. As we have seen, Bakhtin's "aesthetic" mode of being, that third-person perspective which enables the emplotment of narrative identity, is close to MacIntyre's thesis of the narrative unity of life. MacIntyre's traditionalism and the communitarian ethos he proposes for the narrativized subject seem to be founded on the same trust which enables Bakhtin's metaphysical framework. The "ethical" mode of being, that first-person perspective which does not lend itself to narrative containment, is much closer to Ricoeur's, who insists on the subject's ability to introduce "innovation" into the "sedimentation" of received traditions, and to be the narrator, if not the author, of his life. "What sedimentation has contracted, narration can redeploy" (*Oneself* 122).[15] My reading of Bakhtin's position would suggest that at least part of the "sedimentation" is due to those framing narratives which, *pace* MacIntyre, are often culturally and ideologically superimposed on rather than autonomously produced by the subject.

For both Bakhtin and Ricoeur, the ethical act is the subject's signature, a commitment of a particular embodied subject situated in a unique matrix of time and space; it is the endorsement of a singular narrative. Bakhtin's conception of the ethical act is similarly predicated on the "actual acknowledgment of one's own participation in unitary Being-as-event," that is, my "non-alibi in Being which underlies the concrete and once-occurrent ought of the answerably performed act" (*Philosophy of the Act* 40, see also 42). I would suggest that this act of endorsement is precisely what Ricoeur would call "attestation," a voluntary act of commitment and response to a summons (*Oneself as Another* 163–68; 297–356, passim). It is "fundamentally attestation of self. This trust will, in turn, be a trust in the power to say, in the power to do, in the power to recognize oneself as a character in a narrative, in the power, finally to respond to accusation in the form of the accusative: 'It's me here' (*me voici*), to borrow an expression dear to Levinas. At this stage, attestation will be that of what is commonly called conscience" (*Oneself* 22).[16]

The *I* that tells itself does not exist, says Derrida. We cannot have the last word, says Bakhtin. Whether it is a written autobiography where we attempt to capture and stake out the boundaries of our life, or a story-shaped life (lived according to generic contracts that are no less powerful for being implicit), our narrative identity is that parameter of subjectivity which is born out of the desire for emplotment, for a sense of coherence and wholeness which can only be granted within a well-framed story. But human subjectivity—psychological and ethical—emerges architectonically in and from the tensile relations of narrative and dialogue, rhythm and loophole, aesthetics and ethics—the "two movements" which meet in the human subject in an oppositional and complementary relationship ("Author" 91; *Philosophy of the Act* 32). Bakhtin's ethical mode of being offers a loophole out of all and any narrative frames and configurations of selfhood: "The *subiectum* of lived life and the *subiectum* of aesthetic activity which gives form to that life are in principle incapable of coinciding with one another" ("Author" 86). To make our lives truly ethical, we can, apparently—we must, indeed—lift ourselves by our own bootstraps: "[The ethical moment] is a moment where that which *is* in me must overcome itself for the sake of

that which *ought* to be; where being and obligation meet in conflict with me; where is and ought mutually exclude each other. It is a moment of fundamental and essential dissonance, inasmuch as what-is and what-ought-to-be, what-is-given and what-is-imposed-as-a-task, are incapable of being rhythmically bound within me myself from within me myself, i.e. they are incapable of being perceived on one and the same plane" ("Author" 118, original emphasis).

Ever true to his suspicion of boundary-lines and narrative frames, Bakhtin does not indulge in any utopian visions—humanistic or carnivalesque—of subjectivity. Having renounced the aesthetic desire for a solid kernel of selfhood, he follows the Dostoevskean "Copernican revolution" with the development of dialogic conception of subjectivity, a view of the human agent as a character in an authorless narrative—fully embodied, situated in time and space, but having no sovereign inner territory, always facing the other, and inescapably ethical.

To get back to our initial moment of *aporia*: the character who protests that he is not a young man in a novel is in fact acting out the Bakhtinian conception of subjectivity, both "real" and literary. To be like a literary character in the Dostoevskean-Bakhtinian sense, is to act *out* of character; to reach out of our given or fabricated frames; to resist our own desire for the safe haven of aesthetic containment. Dostoevsky's abdication of the authorial prerogative is not merely a different mode of writing. What makes his move so revolutionary, Copernican indeed, is the implicit transition from an aesthetic to an ethical mode of authoring and being.

The Bakhtinian-Dostoevkean shift from aesthetics to ethics is more than a poetic revolution: it is a paradigm shift of much wider-reaching philosophical potency. The need to narrativize the self, to contain it within a pattern, a rhythm, a well-wrought tale, may be deeply embedded in human culture and part of our self-perception. But unlike some of our contemporary proponents of the narrative identity thesis, Bakhtin is well aware of the dangers of this desire for "consummation." Even as we recognize the incurable need to aestheticize the self, to secure it within a narrative framework, and to ground it in the authorial Word, we must also be fully aware of the contingency of our narratives in an authorless existence. It is precisely in this absence of the authorial other that we become fully responsive to and responsible for the other. We are, indeed, story-telling beings who desire to be framed and narrativized into coherence, to be characters in a novel, as it were. But it is our inability to remain cocooned within those narrative frames and our recognition of the permeability and the provisional nature of our autobiographies which, in turning us out of our metaphysical-aesthetic home, has turned us into ethical beings.

ENDNOTES

I would like to make grateful acknowledgement to the Israel Science Foundation (ISF) for a generous grant which has enabled my long-term engagement with the work of M. M. Bakhtin.

1. See, for example, James Phelan's Editor's introduction to the dialogue of Paul Eakin and George Butte on narrative identity.

2. For this line of critique, see Arnold H. Modell, *The Private Self* , (183–84).

3. For this line of critique, see Barnaby B. Barratt, *Psychoanalysis and the Postmodern Impulse,* 174.

4. Both "author" and "hero" are referred to as masculine throughout the essay, and the transition to the subject as I-for-myself or I-for-another carries the same gendered bias. For the sake of authenticity, though not without obvious misgivings, I have followed Bakhtin's discursive practice through most of this discussion.

5. For a fuller discussion of this, see my "Borderlines and Contraband: Bakhtin and the Question of the Subject."

6. Strawson, too, insists on the relevance of the distinction between "one's experience of oneself when one is considering oneself principally as a human being taken as a whole," and "one's experience of oneself when one is considering oneself principally as an inner mental entity or 'self' of some sort" (429).

7. A full discussion of the many and striking affinities of Bakhtin and Merleau-Ponty is beyond the immediate concerns and the scope of this essay, but we should note that Ricoeur's version of narrative identity emerges from a similar phenomenological orientation and can also be read in light of Merleau-Ponty's insights on the lived body, on the "ambiguous self," and on the interaction between the perceiving self and the world.

8. For an illuminating discussion of the generic mutation of autobiography (i.e. the discarding of the narrative mode) and its relation to the philosophical crisis of subjectivity, see Paul L. Jay, "Being in the Text."

9. "Qual Quelle," in *Margins of Philosophy* (282); and *The Ear of the Other*, (5–6, 11). For a more detailed treatment of Bakhtin's deconstructive strategies and his ambivalent position in relation to the postmodernist context, see Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan, "Borderlines and Contraband."

10. Symptomatically, Bakhtin uses the same Russian word, *zaviershit*, both in the sense of "consummate," i.e. an operation of loving containment (as translated in "Author and Hero"), and in the sense of "finalize," a violent act of closure (as translated in *Dostoevsky's Poetics*). See *Art and Answerability*, p. 233, translator's note no. 6; and *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, (193–4). It is noteworthy that in *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* the word "finalization" (*zavershenie*) is used in reference to the distinctive quality of aesthetics: "except for art, no sphere of ideological activity knows finalization in the strict sense of the word"; "Every [artistic] genre represents a special way of constructing and finalizing a whole, finalizing it essentially and thematically . . . and not just conditionally or compositionally" (129–30). Even with a strong measure of scepticism regarding the wholesale attribution of this book or the other "disputed texts" to Bakhtin, it is still highly probable that this aesthetic concept was common currency within the Bakhtin circle at the time.

11. In her note on the translation of "*ja i drugoi*," Emerson writes: "Russian distinguishes between *drugoi* (another, other person) and *chuzhoi* (alien, strange; also, the other). The English pair 'I/ other,' with its intonations of alienations and opposition, has specifically been avoided here. The *another* Bakhtin has in mind is not hostile to the *I* but a necessary component of it, a friendly other, a living factor in the attempts of the *I* toward self-definition" (Appendix II, n. 15, p. 302, original italics). In her article "Problems with Baxtin's Poetics," Emerson discusses the problematic role of the other in the constitution of the self.

12. I have dealt with this issue at greater length in "Bakhtin's Homesickness: A late reply to Julia Kristeva", where I refer to the academic debate over Bakhtin's alleged religious affiliation and argue that the fundamental rupture between the early and the late essays, reflected in a shift of attitude towards Dostoevsky's work, results primarily from Bakhtin's ambivalence and anxiety about the process of secularization.

13. In their discussion of "Author and Hero," Morson and Emerson seem to be only intermittently sensitive to the conflict between the aesthetic and the ethical modalities, which they view as different

phases along the "shifting ratio of finalizability to unfinalizability" in Bakhtin's work (*Prosaics* 217). At one point they seem to perceive the aesthetic relationship as an extension of the ethical one (*Prosaics* 178–79), but they later refer—quite rightly, I believe—to "aesthetic escapes from responsibility" (Ibid., 182), to the fact that "selfhood is not a kind of text" (*Prosaics* 216) and to the opposition of "loophole and rhythm" (*Prosaics* 193).

14. Holquist's engagement with the "biologist" inspiration of Bakhtin's work is directly relevant to this point, as living systems, unlike mechanical ones, are unique, constantly responsive to, modifying and modified by their context, and—most importantly—indeterminate. See "Dialogism and Aesthetics," 171–74.

15. For a concise exposition of the dynamics of sedimentation/ innovation, see Ricoeur's "Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator." For Ricoeur's own reservations about MacIntyre's theory, see "Narrative Identity" and *Oneself as Another*, 157–63.

16. Ricoeur's indebtedness to Levinas, fully and graciously acknowledged, is beyond the scope of this discussion, as is the almost uncanny resemblance of Bakhtin and Levinas, both in substance and in rhetoric. I believe that the parallel philosophical itineraries of these three philosophers are due not only to their common philosophical antecedents but also, primarily perhaps, to the predicament of a certain temperamental religiosity in an aggressively secularized world.

WORKS CITED

Bakhtin, M. M. *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (written ca. 1919–1921; first published in the Soviet Union in 1986). Translated and notes by Vadim Liapunov, edited by Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov. Austin, Texas: Univ. of Texas Press, 1993.

———. "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" (written ca.1922–1924; first published in the Soviet Union in 1977–1978); in *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays* by M.M. Bakhtin. Translated and notes by Vadim Liapunov, edited by Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, Supplement translated by Kenneth Brostrom. Austin, Texas: Univ. of Texas Press, 1990.

———. *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929; 2nd edn. 1963). Translated and edited by Caryl Emerson. Introduction by Wayne C. Booth. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984.

———. "The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology, and the Human Sciences" (1959–1961). In *Speech Genres and other Late Essays*. Translated by Vern W. McGee. Edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Hoquist, 103–131. Austin: Texas Univ. Press, Slavonic Series, no. 8, 1986.

———. "Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book" (1961), in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Appendix II, 283–302.

Barratt, Barnaby B. *Psychoanalysis and the Postmodern Impulse.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1993.

Barthes, Roland. *Roland Barthes*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.

Derrida, Jacques. "Qual Quelle." In *Margins of Philosophy.* Translated by Alan Bass, 273–306. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982.

———. *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation.* Translated by Avital Ronell. New York: Schoken Books, 1985.

Eakin, Paul John. (2004) "What Are We Reading When We Read Autobiography?" *Narrative*, 12, no. 2 (May 2004): 121–31.

———. "Selfhood, Autobiography, and Interdisciplinary Inquiry: A Reply to George Butte." *Narrative* 13, no. 3 (October 2005): 307–11.

Emerson, Caryl. "Problems with Baxtin's Poetics." *Slavic and East European Journal*, 32, no. 4 (1988): 503–25.

———. and Gary Saul Morson. *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*. Stanford, California: Stanford Univ. Press, 1990.

Erdinast-Vulcan, Daphna. "Bakhtin's Homesickness: A Late Reply to Julia Kristeva." *Textual Practice* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 223–42.

———. "Borderlines and Contraband: Bakhtin and the Question of the Subject." *Poetics Today* 18, no. 2 (1997): 251–69.

Hirschkop, Ken and David Shepherd, ed. *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*. Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1989.

Holquist, Michael. *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World*. London: Routledge, 1990.

———. "Dialogism and Aesthetics." In *Late Soviet Culture: from Perestroika to Novostroika*. Edited by Kuperman, Gene, Lahusen, Thomas, 155–76. Durham and London: Duke Univ. Press, 1993.

Jay, Paul L. "Being in the Text: Autobiography and the Problem of the Subject." *MLN* 97, 5, *Comparative Literature* (Dec. 1982): 1045–63.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (1981), 2nd edition. London: Duckworth, 1985.

Medvedev, P. N. *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* (1928). With a foreword by Wlad Godzich. Translated by Albert Wehrle. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1985.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945). Translated by Colin Smith. London: Routledge Humanities Press, 1962.

Modell, Arnold H. *The Private Self*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993.

Muldoon, Mark S. "Ricoeur's Ethics: Another Version of Virtue Ethics? Attestation Is Not a Virtue." *Philosophy Today* 42, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 301–9.

Phelan, James. "Who's Here? Thoughts on Narrative Identity and Narrative Imperialism." Editor's Column, *Narrative* 13, no. 3 (October 2005): 205–10.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Time and Narrative*, vol. III (1985), Translated by K. Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988.

———. "Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator." Translated by J.N. Kraay and A.J. Scholten, in *Facts and Values*. Edited by M. C. Doeser and J. N. Kraay, 121–32. Dordrechet: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986.

———. "Narrative Identity." *Philosophy Today* 35 (Spring 1991): 73–81.

———. *Oneself as Another*. Translated by K. Blamey. Chicago: Univ.of Chicago Press, 1992.

Strawson, Galen. "Against Narrativity." *Ratio* 17 (December 2004): 428–52.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *The Words* (1964). Translated by B. Frechtman. New York: Vintage, 1981.