

### David Glover

The essays in the opening section of this issue are drawn from a one-day symposium held by the Centre for Rhetoric and Cultural Poetics at the University of Southampton.<sup>1</sup> Its purpose was to re-examine the place of dialogue in recent critical theory, including its bearing on our understanding of the past and its promise for the future. This is no simple task. For, despite frequent invocation of the term, dialogue remains the subject of constant dispute. As a regulative social and political ideal premised upon the vision of a fully engaged and wholly lucid mode of communication through which differences and divisions might finally be disarmed and transcended it appears at once to be a site of contestation, a limit case, and a vulgar cliché. And at times it seems as if the more often the invitation to dialogue is issued, the less secure its purchase on the world becomes.

This sense of dialogue's unfinished and perhaps unfinishable business figures as a major preoccupation in the pages that follow in a series of contributions that range from eighteenth-century debates in philosophy and aesthetics (with a backward glance at their - and our - Socratic and Roman antecedents) to postmodern fiction and theory and contemporary African American poetics. Indeed, the difficulties associated with an aesthetically-derived notion of dialogue, particularly as a resource for modern forms of public debate (a question extensively explored in Ken Hirschkop's important new book *Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy*), lie behind essays as different as Simon Jarvis's provocative juxtaposition of Shaftesbury and Marx or Peter Middleton's re-reading of Habermas via E.L. Doctorow and J.M. Coetzee.<sup>2</sup> Dialogue does not always emerge unscathed from these encounters and it may well be, as Lucy Hartley argues here, that dialogue's abiding significance will continue to lie in its insistent perpetuation of the illusion that we could ultimately have access to 'a neutral linguistic space wherein the conflict between voices' can be 'harmonised'. The consequences of such a recognition are not always comfortable or comforting, but one of the common threads arising out of this discussion, namely the need for a wary and vigilant respect for the persuasive force of monologue in all its 'strategic', rhetorical and even downright 'manipulative' dimensions, is surely salutary.<sup>3</sup> Bakhtin then, but Bakhtin tempered by Swift, Coleridge and de Man. Whether dialogue can still be regarded as a necessary fiction or what Habermas once called an 'unavoidable idealization' is today more than ever an open and an urgent question.

1. The Centre promotes research in the history and theory of rhetoric in relation to contemporary poetry and poetics. For further information, please contact Stephen Bygrave, Peter Middleton, or Lucy Hartley at the Department of English, University of Southampton.

2. Ken Hirschkop, *Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999.

3. See especially the essays by Ken Hirschkop, Simon Jarvis, and Lucy Hartley.