

***Dialectic and Dialogue*, by Dmitri Nikulin (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2010).**

## **Review Essay**

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**This short book offers** an erudite, creative, and thought-provoking extension of the argument in the author's earlier *On Dialogue*. In that work Professor Dmitri Nikulin developed an internal analysis of oral dialogue and argued for its status as the basic ontological condition of human being. In *Dialectic and Dialogue* he pursues an issue he only touched on in *On Dialogue*: what is "dialectic," and how is it related to dialogue?

Nikulin proceeds in part historically, in part systematically, and in part critically and self-critically. In an orienting remark in his preface, he characterizes the project as telling "a story about the *birth of dialectic out of the spirit of dialogue*" (ix; emphasis in the original), and this is a good gloss on the first three of his six chapters, in which he guides us through Plato's refashioning of Socrates' oral conversations into his own distinctive genre of written dialogue (chapter 1), through Plato's cultivation within his dialogues of the ensemble of negative and positive methods that he was the first to call "dialectic" (chapter 2), and through the various later developments in antiquity (chapter 2) and modernity (chapter 3) by which dialectic was transformed from the formal study of the order of argument (Aristotle) into—to select antithetical high points from Nikulin's wide-ranging survey—the transcendental critique of the misuse of reason (Kant) and the supercession of the limits of understanding in reason's grasp of the unity of opposites in the absolute (Hegel). As he traces and details these and various kindred developments, Nikulin observes how far from its initial implicit presence in oral dialogue dialectic has come, and this makes timely his break from historical discourse to offer, in chapters 4–5, a "systematic" account of oral dialogue, considered in and for itself: here he first

retrieves from *On Dialogue* his identification of the several constitutive “components [that] turn conversation into dialogue” (74) (chapter 4), then extends the anti-dialectical thrust of that account by introducing the notion of “interruption” as the pervasive character of oral dialogue (chapter 5). By this point, what at first appeared as the possibility of a complementarity of oral dialogue and written dialectic has tipped so decidedly into an account of all writing as a “deadening” and “deficient misappropriation” of oral dialogue that “always fails” (125; 128; 130) that the reader cannot help but share the two key questions that Nikulin raises in chapter 6: first, “why write?” (141), and secondly—and turning this against *Dialectic and Dialogue* itself—doesn’t a “writing against writing,” “performatively self-contradictory” (139; 141), “make itself impossible” (140)?

Let me first try to do fuller exegetic justice to the rich content of each of these major phases of Nikulin’s reflection, then respond—as I am sure he hopes his readers will—with some questions.

### 1. The “Story” of “the Birth of Dialectic out of the Spirit of Dialogue”

Nikulin argues that Plato’s dialogues are both “dramatic” and “dialectical,” attempting on the one hand to “reproduce the microcosm of living conversation” (9) and on the other hand to “refine” the discursive reasoning by which philosophy inquires into the “what” of things (23), purifying this reasoning of “accidental features” and “distilling it into . . . obligatory argument” (9). These two purposes are in one way integral, in another at odds. Insofar as “dialectical procedures are always already present”—even if “not always reflected on and recognized as dialectical”—in “oral and spontaneous dialogue” (16), the portrayal of oral dialogue in written dialogues provides Plato a rich occasion for just such reflection and recognition. The figure of Socrates plays a key role here: in his ability, in conversation, “to construct a correct argument and . . . to destroy an incorrect one,” he was at once “*the* ‘dialogician’ [and] equally the dialectician *par excellence*” (13–14; emphasis in the original), and in Plato’s dramatic imitations of his conversations there was, accordingly, a “symbiosis” of “aporetic dialogue” and “dialectic” (16). On the other hand, the project of excavating and objectifying “dialectical procedures” that Plato pursues in his writings also stands in tension with the mode of oral dialogue, and Nikulin makes this a major theme in chapter 2, in which he shifts focus from the “delicate balance” of “the dramatic” and “the dialectical” that Plato maintains (4) to the notion of dialectic, considered in and for itself, that Plato seeks to develop within that balance.

By the term "dialectic" Plato refers sometimes to one or another of the various methods of reasoning he cultivates, sometimes to the thinking itself that these methods enable. The methods, a plurality that he never tries to reduce to a systematic whole, include Socratic elenchus [greek] and, as ways of moving between "the one and the many," the collection and division of kinds and analysis and synthesis as the methods by which thought moves back and forth between complex wholes and their elementary constituents (30–2). All are modes of discursive reasoning (διάνοια) by which thinking, proceeding step by step and in an order determined both by the "logic" of question and answer and by the requirements of "correct analytic definition" (24), aims to understand the "being"—that is, the "essence or 'what'"—of something and, still more deeply, "the good itself" as "what makes being what it is" (29). Strikingly, however, because "discursive thinking . . . can think of a form in only one of its aspects and always only partially," the very understanding it strives for culminates in its being overcome by a "single act" of "non-discursive intellect, or νοῦς, that grasps the being of a thing . . . in its entirety" (27). Just insofar as Plato devotes his writing of the dialogues to the cultivation of dialectic, both of these basic features lead him away from oral dialogue. The logical order of steps that the articulation of discursive argument requires trumps his dramatist's attention to the spontaneous interaction of "different, independent, mutually irreducible . . . voices" in live conversation, moving him to suppress the latter for the sake of the former, and the non-discursive "knowledge of being" that dialectic strives for is itself "universal" and "impersonal" and, accordingly, "non-dialogical"; "precisely because it is dialectical," Nikulin concludes, "Platonic dialogue is *monological*" (38; emphasis in the original).

In the last part of chapter 2 and then in chapter 3, Nikulin turns to Plato's philosophical successors, ancient and modern, respectively. Though he casts a wide net, Nikulin attempts neither an exhaustive nor even a chronologically ordered genetic account; instead, he appears to select for special attention those philosophers whose thought provides paradigm cases of the various ways in which the concept of dialectic was developed after Plato. Of these (and here I must be still more selective, jumping over his always interesting but relatively brief remarks on the Stoics, Plotinus, late scholasticism, Kant's Enlightenment predecessors, neo-Kantianism, Schleiermacher, Gadamer, and Derrida), the major figures are Aristotle, Kant, and (with Cusanus as a thematic prototype) Hegel. *Aristotle's prefiguring of dialectic as formal logic*: in a further step away from oral dialogue, Aristotle takes the Platonic dialogues as his point of departure, treating them as sources of specimens

of dialectical argument; and by distinguishing dialectical from properly philosophical argument by taking dialectic to begin from the merely plausible or probable premises to be found in δόξα, he shifts attention from the goal it serves in Plato, the knowledge of being, to the formal structures of inference by which argument proceeds. In what Nikulin rates as “the most significant rethinking of the role of dialectic in philosophy” (39), dialectic is thus recast as a distinctive “tool for any proper—formally correct—reasoning” (45). *Kant’s “transcendental dialectic”*: though he too regards dialectic as a tool of philosophy and, further, accepts from the scholastic tradition the Aristotelian understanding of dialectic as a kind of formal logic, in his creation of “transcendental dialectic” Kant also revivifies the earlier sense of dialectic as a “negative discipline of . . . critical self-purification and . . . catharsis” (53). Now, however, we are far removed from Socratic ἐλεγχος with its frequently *ad hominem* cast; in Kant’s practice of dialectic it is impersonal reason that itself subjects itself to critique, exposing the varieties of “transcendental illusion” to which it may fall prey through the extension of the pure concepts of understanding beyond the limits of possible experience. *Cusanus’ “absolute maximum” and Hegel’s dialectical reason*: in Hegel’s dialectical logic, by contrast, Nikulin finds the radical reappropriation of the Platonic idea of the movement beyond discursive understanding to non-discursive intellect. He prepares us for this by introducing Cusanus’ extraordinary conception, four centuries earlier, of the “absolute maximum,” the notion of God as that being in which, on account of its absolute infinitude, opposites must coincide (54). Whereas, however, for Cusanus such a conception marks what is incomprehensible to our finite reason and, so, is the “object,” as it were, of “learned ignorance,” for Hegel it is precisely the work of dialectic to comprehend it. The key for Hegel is recognizing the way in which opposites, in the determinateness with which each is the negation of the other, implicate each other and, so, “form a unity” in which they “do actually coincide” (60); dialectic is the thinking that, starting from the standpoint of “understanding” (*Verstand*) that takes the opposites as separate, rises to the standpoint of speculative reason (*Vernunft*) by allowing each opposite to reveal its implication of the other and, so, to disclose the internally differentiated and dynamic unity to which they belong. Thus understood, dialectic becomes both the “driving force” and “the method of philosophy” (62); and in this status, as the “demonstrat[ion of] the necessary and immanent development of notions from within themselves” (65), dialectic “utterly dissociates itself from dialogue” (*ibid.*) and becomes the fully “monological” “enterprise of solitary thinking” (*ibid.*).

## 2. A "Systematic Outlook" on Oral Dialogue

In Nikulin's "story" of the birth and the various consolidations of dialectic in chapters 1–3, oral dialogue is visible only as that "out of" which dialectic is born, not in and for itself. He rectifies this in chapters 4–5, breaking from the narrative voice and offering a "systematic outlook" (72) on oral dialogue: in chapter 4 he retrieves from his earlier *On Dialogue* his neo-Bakhtinian account of the "four components" that are constitutive for oral dialogue, "voice," "one's personal other," "unfinalizability," and "allosensus" (74–9), and in chapter 5 he extends and concretizes this account with the fresh notion of "interruption." It will be impossible to be adequate to the depth and daring of the vision that emerges from these chapters (and, even more, to the still fuller and more provocative vision that is first offered in *On Dialogue* and resonates throughout this part of *Dialectic and Dialogue*): Nikulin offers nothing less than an account of "being in dialogue" as the "*conditio humana*," and by this he appears to mean that human beings fully and concretely are what they are, in a fundamental ontological sense, just and only insofar as they are with one another in dialogue (75; 79). This is so because each of us is 'who' she is—that is, has and relates to her ownmost and unique character (this is, roughly, what Nikulin refers to as "one's personal other")—just and only insofar as, in encountering an independent other person in the latter's own unique self-expression (that is, the other's "voice"), she is moved to express herself in return and, so, communicate with that other. This provocation is reciprocal, and our dialogue is, as a result, "allosensical" and "unfinalizable." By "unfinalizability," Nikulin indicates the inexhaustibility both of "the personal other" as what each of us seeks to express and of the dialogue itself in which each of us seeks to communicate this self-expression to the other. Because your voicing of 'who' you are awakens my sense of 'who' I am anew and afresh, and because my subsequent voicing of 'who' I am does the same for you, there is in principle no terminal limit to our exchange; although for various contingent reasons we will eventually stop conversing, there is always more that each of us can say to the other—the possibilities that we awaken in and for each other's self-expression are inexhaustible. "Allosensus," in turn, is Nikulin's neo-Bakhtinian coinage for the lived middle between "consensus" as that extreme of agreement in which our differences disappear and "dissensus" as that total rupture in which all communication ceases: "allosensus" indicates the way dialogue proceeds by disagreement; each interlocutor parts company with the other and what the other has said in a way that, so to speak, also keeps company with her, differing in a way that makes room for the other to differ in turn.

Though all four “components” are in play, it is allosensus, most of all, that Nikulin fleshes out when he introduces the new concept of “interruption” in chapter 5. In dialogue I am moved by what you say to break in and take the conversation in a fresh direction of my own—but in interrupting you, I also open myself to your breaking in and taking the conversation in a direction of your own. As a process of “mutual interruptions” (102; 118), our exchange is thus “spontaneous and live” (90; 118), not “planned and premeditated” but, rather, “self-organiz[ing]” as it proceeds (90; 92) and, so, always subject to surprising twists and turns. Above all, Nikulin stresses, oral dialogue is “primarily *personal*” (79; emphasis in the original). Though it may take on the work of exploring and validating abstract claims, such a theoretical focus is occasional and secondary and not essentially what drives it; rather, as “the ever-renewable attempt to express one’s personal other with other interlocutors” who are doing the same, it is “practiced for the sake of the unfinalizable realization of oneself with the other” (80; 118).

### **3. The Relation of Dialectic to Oral Dialogue: From Complementarity to the Critique of Writing**

By following his “story” of paradigmatic moments in the development of dialectic in the history of philosophy in chapters 1–3 with his “systematic outlook” on oral dialogue in chapter 4, Nikulin allows us to bring into focus a number of the key points of contrast between the two. At the level of form: whereas oral dialogue involves a plurality of independent voices in a spontaneous exchange of rejoinders, in principle inexhaustible and, so, interminable, dialectic, written in order to secure the logically well-ordered step-by-step sequence that allows discursive reasoning its necessity, is monological and is or serves the articulation of a systematic and universal understanding. At the level of purpose: whereas oral dialogue presupposes the “inalienable presence of the other” (87) and is devoted to the expression of ‘who’ one is (that is, of one’s “personal other”) in communication with that other, dialectic seeks to “avoid all of the accidental features of individuality and context” (91) in order to reach an impersonal theoretical knowledge of “the ‘what’ of a thing” (91; 93). When their relation is brought into focus in these ways, dialectic and oral dialogue appear as complementary modes of discourse, and this is the assessment that Nikulin appears to offer in the final pages of chapter 4. In concluding the next-to-last section of the chapter (“Dialogue versus Dialectic”), he writes that

dialogue clarifies and allows for *being* as pluralistic and as a live being with the other, whereas dialectic studies and orders the meaning of a particular thing or term, including the *meaning* of

being as an abstract notion. Hence dialogue belongs to both anthropology and ontology, whereas dialectic belongs to logic. Dialogue and dialectic, therefore, have different spheres and rules of functioning . . . (89; emphasis in the original)

And he closes chapter 4 by the even-handed declaration that

each works well within its own sphere and is suitable for those who are in it for different purposes: in dialogue, for communicating with others and for the expression of one's personal other, and in dialectic, for attempting to find out what a particular thing is. (94)

But this moment of equipoise is more apparent than real and, in the movement of the argument of the book, transitory. In chapters 2–3, Nikulin argued that at least for two of the major cultivators of dialectic, Plato and Hegel, its work lies in a “knowledge of being” (33f.; 35; 38; 44; 58); their respective ancient and modern counter-voices, however, Aristotle and Kant, deny dialectic this reach, consigning it (as Nikulin puts this in speaking of Aristotle) to the “immanence of argumentation, reasoning, discourse, and speech” (45; 55). Accordingly, when Nikulin rounds out his “systematic outlook” on dialogue in chapter 4 by separating the “spheres” of “being” (or “ontology”) and “meaning” (or “logic”) and locating dialectic in the latter, he in effect sides with Aristotle and Kant. What justifies this position? Nikulin is not explicit, but it appears to have two roots, one that takes us back to the ontology that is more fully presented in *On Dialogue*, the other that carries us forward in *Dialectic and Dialogue* through chapter 5 to chapter 6. The first is the claim that “to be is to be in dialogue,” that is, that being itself takes as the fundamental form of its instantiation that plurality of persons in which each is with others in dialogue. It would lead us beyond Nikulin’s focus in *Dialectic and Dialogue* to pursue this claim here; suffice it to say that if one grants that “to be is to be in dialogue” and, further, if one understands this as a truth not just about human being but more basically about being itself, then one must also grant that to withdraw from dialogue—as, according to Nikulin’s argument in chapters 2–3, the various developments of dialectic require the dialectician to do—is to withdraw from being itself. Why, however, is this to withdraw into the “sphere” of “meaning”? The second root has to do with what is implied by Nikulin’s account of the turn to writing. By turning from oral dialogue to writing, one removes oneself from the possibility of being “interrupted” by an independent other, and by doing this one consigns oneself to the “immanence” of one’s own thought. The objections I make to my own thinking and formulating, I make by my own thinking and formulating. Even if I write about the being of the other person and my being in relation to the other—indeed, even if I write

dialogues portraying these—, I cannot escape the fact that it is by means of my writing that I proceed and, hence, to borrow Nikulin's phrase, that it is my "notion" of "being" that I reach with it. Does this mean that it is *only* my notion, and not being *itself*, that I reach? Nikulin does not claim this explicitly in *Dialectic and Dialogue*, but it is the unspoken implication of his separation of the "sphere" of "being" from the "sphere" of "meaning" and his consignment of dialectic to the latter at the close of chapter 4.

In any case, by the final chapter the appearance of complementarity has dissolved into polemic, and Nikulin writes expressly, to quote the title of chapter 6, "against writing" (119). I make out three main lines of argument in the chapter. First, and with a heavy debt to Socrates' critique of writing at the close of the *Phaedrus*, Nikulin rearticulates in emphatic terms the limitations of writing. Even the "closest possible" imitation of oral dialogue in writing (142), the Platonic dialogue, cannot help but "render mute" and, so, "distort" (137) and "betray" (139) and "misrepresent" (146) "what is primarily and initially oral" (128); because it reduces speech to a fixed text, writing must "always say the same thing" (125; 129) and is "incapable of 'defending itself'" (125; 142); "a deadening of oral, live speech," written speech is "stiff and immovable" (125) and "lifeless and frozen" (139). Second, Nikulin challenges some of the very virtues that he earlier granted dialectic "within its own sphere and . . . for [its own] purposes," now claiming that they can be achieved in a truer form in live conversation. "Oral dialogue is more precise, in its own way, than written dialogue and even dialectic," he argues, because it allows one to "ask for clarification" and "elaboration" and "response to criticism" and because it permits "concise" explanation "when necessary" (132–3); what is more, it supercedes the formal "universality" enabled by "valid arguments" with the concrete universality of an understanding that "belongs to everyone" who actively "participates in . . . discussion" (133). Third, in response to the question these two lines of attack cannot help but raise, namely, "why write?" (141), he damns writing with faint praise in a survey of its possible purposes. We will come back to his first and most interesting reply: in order to "write against writing" itself. He then moves with deflationary asides through a list ranging from our "habit[uation]" to writing as a "duty" to "culture" (142) through—to select the most serious of the purposes he picks out—the "vain hope for immortality" (143), the preventing of past "events or speeches" and "arguments in their complexity from disappearing into oblivion" (*ibid.*), the collecting of the progressive achievements of the sciences in order to pass them on to future generations (144), and the "joy and pleasure of recognition" that we get from literature (144–5). What is most striking about this list is what Nikulin



omits from it: from the beginning he rules out the quest for a knowledge of being that, on his interpretation of Plato in chapters 1–2, first motivated the development of dialectic in written dialogues. “One might say,” he writes,

that writing inevitably abandons and even betrays what is. If being (as both being there and being what one is) is personal and dialogical, and hence becomes apparent through the oral speech of dialogue, then it is constantly renovated and expressed in oral communication, but fails such recurrence in textual retention and written transmission. (141)

#### 4. A “Performative Self-Contradiction”?

How to complete a written argument against the philosophical reach of writing itself? In chapter 6 Nikulin reiterates Socrates’ caution in the *Phaedrus* that “writing should not be taken too seriously, but rather [should be undertaken] as a game and amusement” and — to make explicit what Socrates’ words imply—should be practiced with “an ironic touch” (145). We see Nikulin’s own “ironic touch” in the final section of the book, the provocatively titled “(Dialectical) Conclusion”; this is a precisely structured scholastic *sic et non* that refutes point-for-point a series of objections to the thesis that “dialogue is unfinalizable.” The playfulness of writing a conclusory argument against the possibility of enclosing and completing dialogue by any such conclusory argument is encouragement, I think, to entertain the thought of a more pervasive playfulness in the book as a whole. Nikulin seems to flag this himself in two asides. In concluding chapter 5 he remarks that: “[a] lack of interruption characterizes lengthy and systematic monologue (for instance, the *present uninterrupted discussion* of interruption)” (116; emphasis added). And midway through chapter 6 he writes, “Being written and thus made possible, writing against writing makes itself impossible. This is also the case with *my own present writing* against writing” (140; emphasis added). With these remarks he joins Alcidamas and Plato in acknowledging the “performative self-contradiction” of a “writing against writing” (139; 141). What are we to make of this? Is Nikulin simply inviting the reader who accepts his objections to writing to share his quandary as a philosophical writer? Or is he, in the allosensical spirit of oral dialogue, opening himself to objections to his objections? Or both?

Aware that I risk only compounding the difficulties of the situation by offering these in writing, I want to raise several sets of questions. But first an aside: It is a strength of *Dialectic and Dialogue* that Nikulin considers and comments forcefully on so many of the figures in

our philosophical and literary traditions; this makes it inevitable that there be a number of places where a reader devoted to this or that particular thinker might pick a quarrel with the specifics of his interpretations. To do this here, however, would be to risk losing the forest for the trees. I will focus instead on two sets of issues that arise at the heart of his argument: the linguistic and ontological status of dialogue, and the force of the distinctions between dialogue and dialectic and between the oral and the written.

## 5.

### 5.1 The Linguistic and Ontological Status of Dialogue

(1) May I request, first, a clarification at the level of the classification of linguistic phenomena? “Oral spontaneous dialogue,” Nikulin writes, “is a particular kind of conversation” (119), “not . . . just a conversational exchange of any kind” (80). What are the other “kinds” of conversation and, beyond “conversation,” the other kinds of discourse, and what is the status of oral dialogue as one linguistic type among others within this larger field? To bring this question into a more pointed focus: Nikulin stresses the distinctions between oral and written and between dialogical and monological, and in pursuing the relation between dialogue and dialectic he aligns oral with dialogical and written with monological; should oral dialogue and written monologue be thought of as belonging to two separate and equal “spheres” (Nikulin’s language in chapter 4 [89, 94]), or should oral dialogue be thought of as normative, with written monologue as one among the “deficient” variants of it (his language in chapter 6 [128])?

(2) Getting clarity on these issues would help orient us toward a surprising and critical obscurity created by Nikulin’s epigram, “to be is to be in dialogue.” What is the “being”-status of one who is not “in dialogue”? “Whoever chooses to stop dialogical conversation with others,” he writes in his provocative last sentence, “. . . chooses not to be” (155). What, then, is the “being”-status of one who—like the author himself and, now, the reviewer as well—chooses not to speak but, rather, to write?

(3) Nikulin argues that oral dialogue is the very *conditio humana* (x; 127), is “a universal form of being as being human” (79), and “belongs to both anthropology and ontology” (89). How are we to understand the relation of dialogue’s anthropological status and its ontological status?

At first sight, it is one thing to say that being in dialogue is what human being—or, better, *being human*—requires, and quite another to

say that being in dialogue is what *being itself*, as such, requires. If Nikulin accepts this distinction and intends only the former, then the horizon is open for the possibility of other, no less basic kinds of being that would be instantiated in very different ways and that should, accordingly, be studied by modes of thinking and discourse appropriate to them—and this, in turn, would open the way for holding that whereas (to grant Nikulin's claim for the sake of argument) the understanding of "personal being," of the "who" that one is, requires oral dialogue, the understanding of those other kinds of being, of the "what" that each of those other kinds of things is, requires other kinds of discourse. There would seem to be, to recall Nikulin's language in chapter 4 one more time, a plurality of "spheres," and dialogue and dialectic might have their distinct and irreducible roles in different ones.

Suppose, however, that Nikulin wants to make the stronger claim, making anthropology dependent on ontology, the claim, namely, that *being itself* requires, for its instantiation, being human in the configuration of persons who are for and with each other in dialogue. (That this is Nikulin's intent is, at least, the strong impression I am left with in reading chapter 9 of *On Dialogue*.) If so, this raises the big and difficult perennial questions: on what basis, and by the exercise of what cognitive powers, are we in position to know the requirements of being itself? As we have seen in Nikulin's chapters 2 and 3, these are issues on which thinkers no less eminent than Plato and Aristotle and, again, Kant and Hegel differ. Our own efforts to respond will have important implications not only for the way we position ourselves in these disputes but also—and in a way that is at once both dizzying and surprisingly practical in its implications—for the way we understand the relation of dialogue and dialectic. If Nikulin is right that "writing inevitably abandons and even betrays what is," then understanding being's requirement of being in dialogue will itself require that we turn away from writing and cultivate the practice of dialogue; but if Nikulin's Plato or Hegel is right, the insight we seek will require some form not only of the turn to dialectic but also of the transcending of the discursive practices of dialogue and dialectic alike—and our very ability to do this will call into question the stronger form of the claim that "to be is to be in dialogue."

## 5.2 The Force of the Distinctions between Dialogue and Dialectic, and between Oral and Written

(1) Dialectic within *oral dialogue*? Nikulin deploys his rich neo-Bakhtinian account of oral dialogue in chapter 4 to make a qualitative distinction between oral and written dialogue. Oral dialogue is "primar-

ily *personal*,” he argues, in the sense that in communicating with the independent other, each interlocutor is concerned to express her “personal other”; since the turn to writing is a turn away from the independent other, and since it is the “voice” of that other that quickens within one the presence of one’s own personal other and moves her to seek to express it, the turn to writing is also a turn away from the personal other. This is an important insight. Even as we grant it, however, shouldn’t we also grant that this turn away from one’s personal other is also possible *within* oral dialogue? Isn’t this implied by Nikulin’s concession that “abstract claims . . . *can* be discussed [and] achieved in a dialogue” (ibid.; emphasis added) and, as well, by his claim in behalf of dialogue that it is fully capable, “in its own way,” of those virtues of precision, clarity, elaboration, and universality that we are accustomed to associate with written dialectic (132–3)? These claims imply the possibility of suspending one’s concern with self-expression in order to focus on the “what” of the matter under discussion, whatever it may be, and on identifying and putting to work the discursive procedures that understanding this “what” requires.

(2) *Written dialectic* for *oral dialogue*? Nikulin might well reply—and with the compelling support of his own discerning comments on various moments in the history of philosophy—that the cultivation of such procedures is extremely difficult without, and is greatly aided by, the turn to writing. This too is an important insight. We should ask, however, whether the turn to writing must mark a final break with oral dialogue or, on the contrary, whether it may serve as preparation for a return to it. The history of the genres and contexts of philosophical writing, I suggest, gives us cases of both possibilities. For cases—one near, one distant—of the latter, let me cite two of Nikulin’s own examples. The first is what Nikulin, drawing on Lev Yakubinsky’s work on “interrupted dialogues,” recognizes as a “paradigm” of “communication” and “debate” in modern academic practice, a “scholarly oral presentation followed by a discussion” (96); it is standard for the “oral presentation” to take the form of the reading or selective summary of a written paper. Writing the paper provides the author the occasion, free of interruption, for the technical work of constructing the steps and order of argument, that is, for the work of dialectic; but this work has as its *raison d’être* the live dialogue that the presentation of the paper will occasion in the following discussion. The second example is the Platonic dialogue. There is a great deal that could be said here, both with and beyond the rich array of comments on the dialogues that are scattered throughout *Dialectic and Dialogue*. Here let it suffice to recall three of Nikulin’s remarks: first,

Plato may also have chosen to write dialogues because a dialogue is an open speech, often with an inconclusive outcome. The lack of any clear conclusion might itself entice the reader to think through the problems that are raised in a dialogue *as an invitation for further discussion*; (10; emphasis added)

second, "Plato's dialogues were written not for the stage but for reading, which in antiquity meant being *read aloud with and for others*" (136; emphasis added); and third, Plato's own exposure of the limits of writing in the *Phaedrus* should lead us to take his "written presentation[s] of oral dialogue . . . [as] protreptic and ironic" (138). Don't these remarks fit together to outline the good case that could be made for the view that Plato wrote the dialogues not to secure the last word but rather to provoke, and to provide orienting points of departure for, ongoing oral dialogue?

There is a third possible example as well, one even closer to hand than the first. We have already noted Nikulin's several thought-provoking acknowledgments of the "performative self-contradiction" involved in his own "writing against writing." He brings this provocation to a head when he closes his "(Dialectical) Conclusion" with the declaration that "whoever chooses to stop dialogical conversation with others by an act of voluntary self-suspension chooses not to be, because to be is to be in dialogue." Isn't the whole of *Dialectic and Dialogue*, as a writing, the result of just such a choice and "voluntary self-suspension"? But isn't its intended effect not to "stop" but rather to start conversation? If so, doesn't the book constitute, in its paradoxical mix of "story," "systematic outlook," and critique, an exhibition of written dialectic that is by intent both for the sake of and located within an encompassing oral dialogue?