

Dialogism, Monologism, and Cultural Literacy: Classical Hebrew Literature and Readers' Epistemic Paradigms

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Abstract: This essay explores the question of a genealogy for dialogical thought and literature, as well as for its opposite mode: monological thought and writing. Mikhail Bakhtin argued that dialogical literature existed in antiquity, but did not elaborate much on this question and only briefly mentioned classical Hebrew examples. In fact, Bakhtin often construed the bible as the prime monological texts of European culture. Large parts of biblical Hebrew literature could, however, be seen as fundamentally dialogical. The dominance that monological modes of thought and writing (and reading!) exert today seems to rely to a great extent upon the spread of cultural literacy. If so, the monological bible is hardly more than a few centuries old.

For a good two decades scholars of classical Hebrew literature have engaged with Bakhtin's writings.² As a biblical scholar I often settled for the relatively modest aspiration to employ Bakhtin in order to make sense of biblical texts. Bakhtin, on the other hand, engaged with Dostoevsky's and others' texts in order to make sense of reality as he knew it. Running the risk of sounding too pretentious, this time I take a lead from Bakhtin and ask whether a study of biblical literature could help grasp the genealogy of dialogical thought and the apparent dominance of monological modes of writing and thinking. Trying to uncover the genealogies of monologism and dialogism is of course an impossibly broad aspiration. This *essai* can be no more than an attempt at questioning conventional truth and starting to point to alternative insights. If it succeeds in convincing readers that the impossibly broad question is nevertheless worth asking, it has accomplished all I could hope for.

¹ I would like to thank my colleagues in Biblical Studies at the Faculty of Theology, University of Oslo for performing an intellectual formation in which this kind of reflection is welcome and indeed inspired: this text started its journey as a presentation in that group's series "Re-Imagining Biblical Studies" in October 2012. Special thanks go to Birgit Meyer, Utrecht, and Kåre Berge, Bergen for reading and discussing earlier versions of this essay (and on many earlier occasions: single points now surfacing in this essay). Thanks also to Roland Boer for challenging me to publish the text in *The Bible and Critical Theory*.

² This is not the place for a full history of research, but I must mention a few important early studies Polzin 1980; Polzin 1985; Hobart 1991; Levine 1992; McCracken 1993; Craig 1995; van Wolde 1997. I must also recognise attempts at more comprehensive overviews such as Reed 1993; Green 2000 and Boer 2007—several entries from which also occurred here in *The Bible and Critical Theory* in Vol. 3 No. 2 (2007). For a student of Bakhtinian perspectives on the Book of Job (cf. below), the work of Carol Newsom is of outstanding importance. See Newsom 1996, 2002, 2003a, 2003b; 2007. The most recent attempt at a more comprehensive bibliography is found in Green 2005. The latest publications on Bakhtin and classical Hebrew literature include: Joseph 2013; Hand 2011; Mitchell 2011; Aschkenasy 2010; Evans 2009; Gillmayr-Bucher 2009; Pfenniger 2009.

Speech and Dialogism in Bakhtin

Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) started as a literary scholar, and his entire scholarship was coloured by literary perspectives. His 1929 book on Fyodor Dostoevsky (Bakhtin 1984) contains concepts and views that became important to his philosophy of the dialogic. Two elements in the Dostoevsky book are particularly salient for the current essay.

a) First, there is the problem of individuality. According to Bakhtin, individuals in Dostoevsky's literary universe are not clearly bounded off from other characters. In particular their speech is permeated by the speech of others: in the utterance of one character, there is often the echo of an earlier speech of another agent, or an anticipation of a perceivable speech by a third proponent. As a consequence, individual characters could not be defined once and for all. Once a character starts engaging in the speech of others, the sense of the words previously used for that character's self-definition also start changing. In the words of Holquist, the self and the other exist not as separate entities, but as relations between coordinates serving to differentiate each other (Holquist 2002: 26).

It is tempting to say that Bakhtin here formulated—and elaborated on—an insight quite similar to what was developed—but left aside—in the broadly contemporary work of Ferdinand de Saussure. In the introduction to his *Course générale* de Saussure stressed the view that a synchronic linguistic universe is always the product of an on-going diachronic process. The sense of a lexeme or a speech act in relation to its synchronically defined universe lasts only for a moment, until the next change in the system alters the previous sense into something different: “Language at any given time involves an established system and an evolution [...] At first sight, it looks very easy to distinguish between the system and its history, between what it is and what it was. In reality, the connexion between the two is so close that it is hard to separate them” (de Saussure 1983: 9 etc.). In his summary, de Saussure stated that everything diachronic in language occurs as *speech* (de Saussure 1983: 96f).³

This recognition of an inter-relatedness between the synchronic and the diachronic dimensions of language, and the recognition of the transformative power of speech, is often neglected in later reception of de Saussure's work. This is not least due to the fact that de Saussure declared that such complexity of language could not be properly studied, even though it is undeniably there. He therefore defined linguistic structures as primary *object of study*, leaving aside diachronic change and actual speech. So, while in principle holding that language changes through speech performance, de Saussure ended up founding a disciplinary discourse that disregarded speech and linguistic change.

Bakhtin's intellectual environment engaged with this difference (and implicitly with the similarities) between Bakhtin and de Saussure. Valentin Voloshinov was a core member of the “Bakhtin circle,” and it has been claimed that Bakhtin either wrote or co-authored texts published under his name (Clark and Holquist 1984, 166, cf. 146–170; cf. Coates 1993: 57–83; Brandist 2002: 4, 8f, etc.). In its argument to see de Saussure and the Russian formalists as examples of “abstract

³ The relevant page numbers in de Saussure's French original are especially 23–25; 138–140.

objectivism,” Voloshinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* marginalises whatever little de Saussure had to say about the importance of speech (Voloshinov 1973: 58–61). The book records (some of) de Saussure's deliberation around speech, but displays this as insignificant. The common sensitivity for the role of speech in Voloshinov and de Saussure confirms that this question was on the radar in the philosophy out of which the Bakhtin circle grew. For the present purpose, however, Voloshinov's profiling of the deficiencies of de Saussure is going to be more interesting, and we return to that below.

b) A second major point in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* was the notion of polyphony. From a literary critical point of view, this concept names how Dostoevsky had individual characters embody conflicting moral positions—profiled in relation to their respective life situations—without the narrator or the author passing moral evaluation upon the characters. The most important literary device to generate such narration was the *perspective* of the narrational voice, usually seeing the world and the plot through the eyes of a given protagonist rather than from the elevated perspective of an omniscient narrator. The effect was a literary universe of conflicting voices where there is no clear preference between alternative moralities (Bakhtin 1984: 99f). Building on this position, the 1963 version of the 1929 chapter on the literary production of the hero contrasts dialogical literature with its counterpart of monological thought and literature (Bakhtin 1984: 47–77). This contrast is enhanced in essays written between 1934 and 1941 (Bakhtin 1981; cf. Morison and Emerson 1990: 234–46).

Bakhtin's Genealogy of Dialogical Thought

When the study of Bakhtin intensified in France and North America from the late 1970's onwards, his ideas were associated to intertextuality and other postmodern phenomena. As a consequence, dialogism was often seen as part of a very recent strategy to oppose the monology of modernism and everything that went before. And indeed, a view of the dialogical as a protest against modernism as well as classicism could find support in Bakhtin. There is for instance his characterisation of monological consciousness as a “structural characteristic of the creative ideological activity of modern times” (Bakhtin 1984: 82). There is Voloshinov's negative characterisation of de Saussure as a modernist (see more below). And there is the claim that the novel—the only genre including heteroglossia and contemporary reality, the only genre continuously in the process of “becoming”—is a postclassical and non-conformist genre (Bakhtin 1981: 3–7; 13–15, etc.).

This kind of language in Bakhtin is flawed by a romantic view of Europe as the *telos* of history, a myth that permeated the continental philosophical soil from which the Bakhtin circle emerged. Pressing beyond this layer in Bakhtin, it is evident that he did *not* see dialogical literature and thought simply as a hyper modern reaction to classical ways of thinking. Like de Saussure's *Course générale*, Bakhtin's book on Dostoevsky was primarily synchronically oriented: it examined the literary anatomy in Dostoevsky rather than the genealogy of that anatomy (Bakhtin 1984: 275). Unlike de Saussure, however, Bakhtin did provide a sketch for a genealogy of dialogical literature and reason. When Morison and Emerson reviewed the totality of Bakhtin's production to this point, they found that in

Bakhtin's view dialogical genres existed in classical Greek and Latin literature and the Middle Ages, it had a peak in renaissance carnivalesque literature, and then it slept until it was reactivated and redeveloped by Dostoevsky and by writers like Günter Grass, Mark Twain, and others (Morson and Emerson 1990: 460–65, etc.). We might add that Bakhtin thought ancient Christian literature like gospels and acts, and lives of martyrs had been influenced by Menippean literature, and so included these elements in the genealogy (Bakhtin 1984: 135). Classical Hebrew and other Ancient Near Eastern literature only occasionally made it into this genealogy (see below).

To Bakhtin the important distinction was not between past and present, but between “high” and “low” genres and their association to writing and orality respectively. In his essay “Epic and Novel” he says: “In the high genres all authority and privilege, all lofty significance and grandeur, abandon the zone of familiar contact [...] Contemporaneity [...] was a subject of representation only in the low genres [...] in [...] the common people's creative culture of laughter. In [the Rabelais book] I tried to indicate the enormous influence exercised by this realm—in the ancient world as well as the Middle Ages—on the birth and formation of novelistic language” (Bakhtin 1981: 20).

The novel is such an important genre because it opens to “contemporaneity” in a way that is unique. This openness had also characterised the “low” genres of everyday oral performance (Bakhtin 1968; cf. Bakhtin 1984: 122–137). This links the novel to folklore and provides an awareness of *the present* which “in its [...] openendedness, taken as a starting point and center for artistic and ideological orientation, is an enormous revolution in the creative consciousness of man” (Bakhtin 1981: 38). I return to this programmatic quote below: it has one paradoxical dimension. For now the point is that the (authentic) novel, like popular oral discourse and other “low” genres, refuses to see life through the lenses of classical (authoritative) literature. It opens to the complex *present*. Bakhtin did not claim that Dostoevsky composed authentic novels intentionally referring to the carnivalesque or ancient Menippean satire. Rather, Dostoevsky had “linked up with the chain of a given generic tradition at that point where it passed through his own time,” thereby connecting to “the objective memory of the very genre in which he worked” (Bakhtin 1984: 121, cf. 136).

My purpose in the following is to elaborate upon this genealogy of the dialogical in two directions. First I would argue that it would be sensible to expand the view of dialogical modes in early literature to include classical Hebrew and other ancient Near Eastern literature. Secondly, based on the salient point in Bakhtin's apprehension of novelistic discourse, I shall reflect on the apparent dominance of monological thinking in European (late) modernity.

Dialogue and Dialogism in the Book of Job

As a point of entry to biblical literature, let me start with the Book of Job. In a previous study (Stordalen 2006) I attempted to identify specific elements of Dostoyevsky's poetics (as described by Bakhtin) in this classical Hebrew composition. I found, first, certain *prima facie* similarities. Secondly I explored three elements in Bakhtin's poetics as they appear also in the Book of Job: (i) a non-hierarchical representation of characters (ideas); (ii) the nature of voices in

Job, and the author's way of interrelating them; (iii) a non-narrative dimension of the book. The essay argues that certain characters (viz. Job) represent internally incommensurable voices (ideas). Following the lead of Carol Newsom the paper also took the frame tale of the story to have a "double voiced quality" and could be read as parody. To flesh out these results, I here offer a few examples of dialogical modes in the Book of Job taken from this earlier publication. Readers requiring further argumentation might have to look into that work, which also holds references to earlier research on applying Bakhtin to the Book of Job—notably the works of Newsom mentioned in note 2 above. The point here is not to analyse the Book of Job, but to use it as a first illustration for the presence and significance of dialogical thought in ancient Near Eastern literature.

Formally spoken, the Book of Job is a series of dialogues mounted in a thin narrative framework. The book's literary anatomy opens towards that contemporaneity and present which Bakhtin saw as the nexus of dialogical language. On a general level, there is first the compositional technique to let characters speak without the narrator or author leaving hints as to whether or not their speech is reliable. All reports on external artefacts, events, relations, etc. are offered through the eyes of the speaking characters (or the narrator, who in this book clearly is one of the characters). In Dostoevsky this helps the author avoid sanctioning any single view of the external world, thereby bringing the discretion of the reader into play. In Job the interpretation of the external world, and in particular the incidents in heaven (Chs. 1–2) as well as in Job's earlier life, are at the interpretive centre. As opposed for instance to the editorial remark in verse 1 of the thematically similar story in Genesis 22, the narrator of Job 1–2 gives no clue concerning how to evaluate these incidents. Instead, the rest of the book contains a number of suggestions precisely to that question. And in this ensuing dialogue no one single voice seems to offer statements that are either entirely salient or completely unacceptable. The narrator, God, the Adversary, Job, the friends: they all say things that should be dismissed (either according to common sense or according to other indications in the book). But then they also say things that might well have to be retained as valuable in one way or another. Even Mrs Job, in her single statement, turns out to be either mean or wise—*or both at the same time.*

One important resemblance between the poetics of Dostoevsky and the Book of Job lies in the awareness that every voice in the book has of the presence of other voices. Rather than answering each other's statements plainly, the dialoguing voices in Job seem to anticipate and sometimes develop each other's themes and implications. Characteristically, the one voice that is most imposingly present in all voices in the book is that of *tradition*—a voice that is not represented with any specific character in the plot. For instance, many speeches in the book allude to biblical passages and several utterances claim insight derived from "old age," i.e. from oral tradition, or similar. These traditional insights are dialogued through the unfolding discourse, usually with Job on the critical side. But in the current version of the book the character Job ends up giving an apparently sincere and most eloquent formulation of traditional insights, in chapter 28. This is a splendid example of how one character's speech is permeated by the words already used by others. In these ways the Book of Job corresponds to novelistic discourse "at the point when epic distance was disintegrating [...], when the object of artistic

representation was being degraded to the level of a contemporary reality that was inconclusive and fluid” (Bakhtin 1981: 39).

Adding to my previous argument, I would now point to the many references to non-verbal convention and folklore in the book (cf. Stordalen 2012a). The presence of such extensive traces of popular culture in this obviously elitist work serve precisely the role that Bakhtin ascribes to folklore in his essay *Epic and Novel*. They deconstruct the epic distance coded into the canonical tradition and make the humanness and contemporaneity of the hero urgently present.

So, in the Book of Job, which could be dated perhaps in the Persian period, there is a compositional anatomy and a mode of literary communication that is strikingly similar to what Bakhtin found in Dostoevsky (and in other literature he classified as “authentic novels”). This begs the question: What about other ancient Near Eastern literature?

Ancient Near Eastern (and Later) Dialogism

Biblical scholars have successfully applied dialogical perspectives to a large number of biblical books, such as (sections of) the so-called Primary History (for instance Polzin 1980; Bergen 1999; Davidson 2003; Green 2003; Buss 2007; Evans 2009; Gillmayr-Bucher 2009); the Twelve Prophets (Sykes 2002; Sung 2008); Psalms (Levine 1992; Mandolfo 2002a, b; Tull 2005); Ruth (van Wolde 1997; Aschkenasy 2007; Aschkenasy 2010); the Song of Songs (Pfenniger 2009); Lamentations (Miller 2001; Tull 2005); Esther (Craig 1995); Daniel (Valeta 2007); Ezra–Nehemiah (Hays 2008; Joseph 2013); or Chronicles (Mitchell 2011). This should alert us to the possibility that dialogical modes of writing were indeed fairly widely practiced in the ANE. It is perhaps not unreasonable to say that many of these scholarly works are more oriented either towards productive ways of *reading* biblical literature (often in translation), or towards theoretical literary or philosophical issues, and less towards the question of historical genre reflection—thus explicitly Reed (1993: viif). Still, in this literature there are also claims (explicit or implicit) that classical Hebrew literature was authored according to dialogical conventions for instance in Green (2000), Newsom (2002), Newsom (2003b), Buss (2007), Mandolfo (2007), Valeta (2007). And even in a more synchronic or contemporary perspective, it has been argued that the kind of literary anatomy found in Job is not unique in the bible (Reed 1993: 135–138).

I wish again to flesh out the picture with a few pointed examples, and having made my entry to the universe of ancient Near Eastern literature through the Book of Job, the first set of examples comes easily. There is a presence of literary dialogue in Egyptian and Mesopotamian literature. Some of these are often discussed as reference texts for the Book of Job, and it seems clear that some of them do take part in the production of contemporaneity as described by Bakhtin.⁴ One of these texts, the Akkadian *Dialogue of Pessimism* is thought to reflect a

⁴ See for instance the Egyptian text, *A Dispute over Suicide* (Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Bible 405–407); *The Protest of the Eloquent Peasant* (ANET 407–410; Context of Scripture 1: 90–104); *The Report of Wenamun* (CoS 1: 89–93); the Sumerian *Man and his God* (ANET 598–592); the Akkadian *Fable between the Date Palm and the Tamarisk* (ANET 410f, 592f); *Dialogue of Pessimism* (ANET 600f; CoS 1: 495f), *The Babylonian Theodicy* (ANET 601–604; CoS 1: 492–495); *Dialogue between a Man and His God* (CoS 1: 385).

servant's satire of his master, and perhaps even an annual reversal of social roles (Lambert 1963: 139–149). These ANE texts are commonly classified as wisdom literature, which means they were the products of a class of literate specialists (van der Toorn 2007, Chs. 3 and 4) whose professional desire apparently was to come to grips with the world based on experience and reflection. Biblical wisdom, for instance, lacks references to the sacred history and those sacred institutions that are so important in other classical Hebrew texts (Murphy 1990, and see still von Rad 1970). This “sapiential humanism” seems in many ways to come close to the desire for contemporaneity in Bakhtin.

If, indeed, dialogue was a literary device promoting a dialogical questioning of social *doxa*, it seems significant that there are a number of additional dialogues in classical Hebrew literature. It is also significant to my later argument that these dialogues are often camouflaged in modern biblical translations.⁵ The obvious case in point is the Song of Songs, which in the Hebrew is constantly floating between her voice and his. This shifting of perspectives, along with the speakers' reporting on their shifting desires for and experience with love, clearly contributes to a dialogical mode in this book (Pfenniger 2009).

But the traits of dialogue go much deeper into ancient Near Eastern and classical Hebrew wisdom literature. In his wonderful book on Qohelet, T. A. Perry discusses the kind of dialogue inherent in a proverb. Perry cites Hasan–Rokem: “The proverb reveals the continuous dialogue between the different discourses that are brought into contact within its framework. Similar to its next of kin, the quotation, the proverb refers constantly to a discourse external to its own occurrence” (Perry 1993: 186; cf. Hasan–Rokem 1990). A single proverb would be seen as monological, a kind of “no–man’s–speech” professing to express truth without historical anchorage. The proverb that Perry and Hasan–Rokem have in mind, however, is one that was collected in order to be applied in a new setting “like a quotation.” Such a proverb could hardly be heard as eternal truth: it is a piece of learning from another situation to be considered for its usefulness to the situation in which the writer or reader find himself. It represents a second voice. The very procedure of sampling proverbs into continuous collections forces potentially monological utterances to meet and wrestle as “words of others.” Bakhtin himself considered precisely this feature of half–hidden quotation in Hellenistic literature, comparing it to the genre of *cento* in the Middle Ages and taking it to indicate the appropriation of another's language, style, and words (Bakhtin 1981: 68f).

Take an example from Proverbs 11. In this collection of fairly brave sayings, issues of property and wealth bear different implications depending upon the situation in which they occur and upon the purpose of contemplating that situation (cf. vv. 4.10.11.16.18.24.28.29.31). Applied to the biblical collection of Proverbs, Perry's insight implies that the student becomes familiar with a body of discourse that provides a stock of interpretive options. The student would need to consider and select what seems relevant in a specific situation. The collecting of

⁵ Indeed, all of what Bakhtin could have called the heteroglossia of biblical literature is camouflaged in most English (and other) bibles: even where the linguistic and literary registers of biblical source texts are manifestly diverse, the English (and other) official rendition is consistently using formal written language.

proverbs was the hallmark of classical Hebrew sages—and indeed of their colleagues outside of Yehud. Their propensity for quotation is reflected in other sapiential genres (Gordis 1939). Taken together this reflects, I would claim, an intellectual mode rather similar to what Bakhtin described as polyphony. This applies to all sapiential books contained in the Hebrew Bible: Job, Qohelet, Proverbs and the Song of Songs (if one admits it into this collection). The picture now slowly emerging is that of classical Hebrew and other ancient sapiential literature as fundamentally dialogical and with an orientation towards contemporaneity—we might also have ventured to call it experience, reflection, emotion, desire, or similar.

The reader will have to excuse me for moving to more of a “big picture” perspective when tracing this orientation towards the dialogical in other parts of classical Hebrew literature. For instance, there are a number of apparent dialogues between different I- and We-voices throughout the Psalms. After having been collected into the Book of Psalms these voices seem to talk with each other—much in the manner of the proverbs analysed above. The conceptual units in the Psalms are larger, but the interplay seems to be much the same. Something similar occurs across prophetic literature, for instance when oracles against “the nations” are gathered into continuous sections in the process of redaction. This generates again a logically disparate collection that must be accessed with sideward glance—not least when such collections become cohesive in the joint prophetic corpus.

Turning to the narrative corpus of classical Hebrew literature, it is evident that the Chronistic history is in dialogue with the Deuteronomic history, quoting but also rephrasing, adding to and deleting from the earlier text. As a result readers have to read both versions in light of each other. Some readers, of course, follow the modern impulse to level the dialogue by deciding what is historically true and what is false, thus in effect reducing the voices of the respective books to one joint story. But these readers are only very recent and very few. The rest of the audience was left with the need for a sideward glance to the other when reading the one.

The laws of Deuteronomy are clearly in dialogue with those of Exodus and Leviticus. Old laws are quoted, mended, deleted, rearranged, etc.—all while preserving the earlier collections, which in the perspective of Bakhtin is nothing but remarkable. The laws, whichever way you construe their literary genesis, should be socially allocated with the forces striving to preserve society. They would therefore be expected to align with the “hopelessly ready-made” high genre literature (Bakhtin 1981: 34), and conform to genres where “[c]ontemporary reality as such does not figure in as an available object of representation” (p. 18). But biblical laws do not at all fit this format. In the large corpus of casuistic laws, “contemporary reality” is overwhelmingly present precisely in the detailed cases. Rather than being hopelessly ready-made the biblical laws are ever changing. They are in fact also hopelessly insufficient: as in all other ancient Near Eastern cultures, the written law codes do not cover all legal needs for a functional society. The corpus of textually recorded law presupposes and requires an oral legal practice. To a Bakhtinian reader this

should make the flag go up: it reflects an intersection between writing and speech, and with the oral as the apparently foundational part.

The culture in which biblical literature took form was of course predominantly oral: probably less than five per cent were functionally literate (Hezser 2001). Walter Ong showed that written texts in functionally oral societies remain coloured by the oral life-world (Ong 1988). Bakhtin said much the same: “in each epoch certain speech genres set the tone for the development of literary language” (Bakhtin 1986: 65). Speech genres are generally more geared towards contemporaneity than the genres Bakhtin called secondary literary genres: novels, dramas, commentary, scientific research, etc. (62). Classical Hebrew and other ancient Near Eastern literature shows discernible influence from oral speech forms, either in their genre (like proverbs), in their literary convention, or in their mnemonic substructure (see classically Niditch 1996, and more recently Carr 2005). So, for theoretical as well as for material reasons, it seems reasonable to assume that classical Hebrew and other ANE authors and readers had a fundamentally dialogical approach to much of their writings and thought.

As is becoming clear, much the same continued throughout European Middle Ages, with popular illiteracy as a fundamental factor (Cf. Reichl 2012). I would ask if this state of orality was perhaps what made the carnivalesque socially possible in the first place. Relying on Bakhtin's scheme one would imagine that in these functionally orally stages of civilisation, some sense of dialogism must have been present, and often dominantly so. Indeed, what actually needs a genealogy is not the dialogical, but the *monological* modes of writing and thinking—and especially the apparent current dominance of these modes. I turn to this question below, but first let me finish the question of a genealogy of the dialogical in Dostoevsky.

The Dialogical and the Bible in Dostoevsky

Bakhtin's idea of a sleeping genre memory passing through Dostoevsky's time (above) does seem a bit strange. How could genres pass from one generation to another without actual writings to represent them? If Dostoevsky did not know Socratic dialogue, Menippean satire, or Rabelais, where did the genre memory come from? In a passing comment found only in the 1929 edition of the Dostoevsky book Bakhtin says that a juxtaposition of Dostoevsky's dialogue with Plato's dialogue seems unproductive. “More to the point would be its juxtaposition to Biblical and evangelical dialogue. The influence on Dostoevsky of Job's dialogue and several evangelical dialogues is indisputable [...] In its structure Job's dialogue is internally endless, for the opposition of the soul to God—whether the opposition be hostile or humble—is conceived in it as something irrevocable and eternal” (Bakhtin 1984: 280). It is, indeed, clear that Dostoevsky was a passionate reader of the bible, and that he appears to have been intrigued by the Book of Job, which he read already in his formative years (Frank 2009: 24, 30; Cassedy 2005: 61f, 100f).

One can only speculate why Bakhtin would choose to leave this fairly obvious biblical genealogy mostly in the dark—and take it out in the otherwise expanded 1963 version of the book. Alongside the obvious political reasons (cf. Coates 1998: 6–9), an additional reason could be that Bakhtin had construed the bible as the major European monological text. The bible (perceived as an icon for the

received Christian tradition) was that “classical text” which was being dialogised by satire and carnival plays (Bakhtin 1981: 69f, 178f). In view of this configuration of the bible, the quote on the Book of Job in the 1929 edition is interesting. It considers a potentially “hostile opposition” between Job and God. As I have documented elsewhere, the traditional Christian interpretation of Job was always that in the end Job was pious and patient (Stordalen [forthcoming], cf. Gordis 1965: 219, 222–227; Vicchio 2006: 113, 131, 152, 190, 192f, 209f). The quote seems to imply that Bakhtin could imagine Dostoevsky having appropriated the Book of Job in a non-canonical fashion (cf. Clark and Holquist 1984: 120–122, etc.). Such a reading could already be a “carnivalising” of the sacred text, and perhaps Bakhtin thought this released the dialogical power enshrined in the book? Perhaps this is why Ruth Coates came to write her book on “Christian motifs” rather than on biblical texts or Christian theology in the Christianity of Bakhtin (Coates 1993: 1, cf. 23f and 14 n. 4)? Be that as it may, I do believe that Bakhtin's overarching argument, seeing the Bible as a European classical text of “high” genres, programmed him away from recognising and exploring any deep dialogical potential in biblical literature.

If, however, the Middle Ages did in fact feature intellectuals that were influenced by (popular) dialogical thought and writing, then surely biblical literature would have been among their most important resources (Goff 1993: 89–92). So, if one were to ask for texts in European culture that had accumulated the kind of genre memory and reception practices that Bakhtin hinted at, it seems to me that the books of Job, Qohelet, Proverbs, and the Song of Songs would in fact be good candidates

Another Genealogy: Monological Hegemony

I now turn to two issues. First there is the peculiar fact that most contemporary critics (including Bakhtin) seem to presume that a monological mode of writing and thought is the natural state (whereas the dialogical needs a genealogy). Secondly, I focus the genealogy of this hegemony of the monological, first its philosophical background and then through one of its most important preconditions: the emergence of cultural literacy in Europe.

a) Bakhtin's “revolution”: The stir that Bakhtin's writings made in the West since the 1980's confirms that dialogism and dialogicity are conceived of as something that challenges conventional ways of thinking and writing. Bakhtin too perceived of his discovery of the dialogical as an important novelty: “The present, in its [...] openendedness, taken as a starting point and center for artistic and ideological orientation, is an enormous revolution in the creative consciousness of man” (Bakhtin 1981: 38). But if indeed this sense of the present is based on oral practices, why should it be “revolutionary” to take it as a starting point for ideological orientation? After all, humans are by default oral. And in daily life from antiquity and later, writing and thought may have fluctuated between monological and dialogical modes,⁶ but with the dialogical as a fairly noticeable

⁶ This is not to deny Bakhtin's fundamental insight that language and human existence are in the last instance irredeemably dialogical. I am thinking here at a more pragmatic level, on which it is possible for humans to write and think either more dialogically (like Dostoevsky, in Bakhtin's view) or more monologically (as Bakhtin perceived of Tolstoy's stories).

impulse (see on ANE literature above). The dialogical should always have been there (cf. Voloshinov 1973: 72, 95, etc.). So, why “revolutionary”?

The answer can only be that Bakhtin was caught off-guard while reflecting, like the rest of us, from a position where the monological has reached a status of cultural hegemony. The “revolution” he named did not take place in Menippean literature or in the medieval carnivalesque. It was a revolution in Bakhtin's own time, one that corresponded to the criticism against Ferdinand de Saussure in Voloshinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (below). It was a protest against the marginalisation of specific speech as an object of intellectual reflection. How and when did this marginalisation occur? Or, to put it in the terms of Bakhtin: what happened between Rabelais and Dostoevsky? To a biblical scholar, this is simultaneously the question of when and how the apparent dialogical nature of much classical Hebrew literature was muted by canonical readings of this collection, i.e. by readings negotiated in a discourse between church leaders, pastors, the emerging class of critical scholars, and other interested parties in the ever on-going canonical process.⁷

b) Between Rabelais and Dostoevsky: *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* locates de Saussure's disciplinary construct, which was undeniably synchronic, within the stream of European philosophy (Voloshinov 1973: 45–63). First, Voloshinov critiques the view of “language as a stable, immutable system of normatively identical linguistic forms [...]” and the accompanying devaluation of individual speech acts (57). This philosophy ends up seeing language as a social entity only, and neglects creative and other impulses of the individual (54). The roots of this view of language are ascribed to “the rationalism of the 17th and 18th centuries. These roots go back to Cartesian grounds” (57). So, de Saussure's disregard for actual speech—the single move that most gears him towards the monological—was a product of his philosophical inheritance: rationalism and enlightenment.

At this point, reading Bakhtin in light of Derrida is revealing. The two meet in dismay for speech professing to be disembodied. Bakhtin saw “no man's speech” as “a brand of idealism that insists on the unity of a single consciousness” (Morson and Emerson 1989: 151). Derrida described the challenge for Levinas in this way: “rejecting idealism and the philosophies of subjectivity, he must also denounce the neutrality of a ‘Logos which is the verb of no one’” (Derrida 1978: 121). This citation captures a dramatic moment in European philosophy. Levinas had argued that the fundamental problem for European philosophy had been its epistemic foundation. Gradually, from the *cogito* of Descartes, via Kant's *reine Vernunft*, to Heidegger's *Sein* and Husserl's phenomenology, European thinkers had carved out what they conceived of as a theoretical superiority, independent of the reflecting individual—disembodied, if you like. This construct—which was in reality nothing like disembodied—was awarded the privilege of speaking from a

⁷ In a forthcoming publication I argue that “canonical commentary” is a vital part of any canonical ecology, an element that in reality determines the sense and significance of the canon, and often makes it into what I would call the actual (as distinct from the formal) canon, see Stordalen [forthcoming], and cf. further Stordalen 2012b. As long as a canon remains in use for canonical purpose, the canonical process must go on. This process involves all parties with interests in practices, institutions, or social formations related to the use of the canon.

“neutral” position. That is what Derrida refers to as the violence of light (104–14), the “blindness of theoretism, its inability to depart from itself towards [...] the totally–other, the infinitely–other” (108, citing Levinas).

It seems to me that Derrida and Levinas were struggling to establish an epistemic position rather close to that described by Bakhtin as dialogical, and which *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* dubs “verbal interaction.”⁸ Both Bakhtin’s “dialogical” and Voloshinov’s “verbal interaction” presuppose the notion of linguistically fluent individuality described above. This, which lies also at the core of the critique against de Saussure, is the basis for their attempt at bridging the gulf between the Self and the Other. Neither Levinas nor Derrida reflected on this solution, but they both thought the major challenge was to unmask the epistemology of European philosophy subsequent to Descartes. So, if we were to ask Derrida what happened between Rabelais and Dostoevsky, he would agree with Voloshinov: it was modernist European philosophy.

c) Cultural literacy: Taking a clue from *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, any analysis of modernist European speech would be incomplete without exploring the specific *contexts* in which such monological speech occurred: the book consistently emphasises the *contextuality*, *specificity* and *totality* of verbal exchange as significant. The following sketch of a genealogy of the *dominance* of monological thought applies a *material* approach.⁹ The task is to consider the media, social arenas, and literate cultures that helped promoting monological thought to a level of being “natural.” My sketch is first and foremost inspired by Jan Assmann’s exposition concerning the significance of writing and literature for a similar process of mental change among the literati of ancient antiquity (Assmann forthcoming). My sketch also relies in general on theories of how so-called cognitive artefacts contribute to changing the way that people perform cognitive operations (Norman 1991; Hutchins 1995). Finally, it is informed by Joseph Jurt’s analysis of the rise of the social field of European literature (Jurt 1995). Jurt built extensively on the sociological theory of Pierre Bourdieu, which also is important to me.

The rise of cultural literacy in Europe entailed fundamental changes to how people interacted intellectually and especially how they would learn (Houston 2002). Learning used to be transmitted and appropriated in formal or informal learning groups. When items of learning started becoming available in print, the scope of learning changed. The institutions jointly taking charge of the processes of writing books, selecting books for printing, publishing them, marketing them, and discussing, using, dismissing or canonising them created a new *social field* (Bourdieu). This field developed a discourse with authorities and power relations,

⁸ This is the theme of the most programmatically linguistic-philosophical chapter of the book (Ch. 3, Part II), which ends up declaring verbal interaction as “the basic reality of language” (94). While scarcely considered among contemporary philosophers, this chapter achieves an equilibrium between the “I,” the “Other,” and the social (or the commonly performed standards for communication) which would be something to consider for current philosophy in the context of states challenged to encounter the Other.

⁹ I am involved in establishing such a material approach through my research project at the Centre for Advanced Study in Oslo 2014–15 (see www.stordalen.info/LDG/Home.html). The one scholar in the group who has most advanced this perspective is Birgit Meyer, see for instance Meyer and Houtman 2012.

with rules for acquiring the *capital* (monetary, social, and symbolic) of that field. The field gradually involved a number of individuals who would not have had access to this kind of learning before. There occurred a slow process of intellectual standardisation and homogenisation, and simultaneously a growing imparity between authorities and commoners in the social field of learning.

In this process the scope of common people's appropriating the word of another must have changed. Re-framing fragments of others' work in one's own "contemporaneity" (Bakhtin) no longer sufficed. It became possible, and therefore necessary for those who aspired for erudition, to give a more sustained account of the other's ideas. Citation became less an art of re-framing and more an art of repeating *in extenso* what some authority had said. Only the sharpest authorities were able—and socially authorised—to evaluate what had been quoted. Such an emphasis on understanding rendered less room for that "contemporaneity" which was so dear to Bakhtin.¹⁰ It seems reasonable to think that in this process the space for common readers' *appropriation* of the ideas of others was reduced. In fact, it seems likely that the commoners became the ones who were appropriated through becoming consumers, and who therefore had to resort to different *tactics* in order to retain space for themselves (de Certeau 1984: 29–39, etc.).

Such changes did of course not occur instantly with Gutenberg. In addition to requiring more effective mass-printing technology, this also presupposed the development of an economy allowing for the production and distribution of literature. It also required huge efforts in the education of a reading population, and in the accordant reconfiguring of public life. By good reason, it took time to develop new cultural habits of writing and reading. The entire process coincided with European philosophers developing the *episteme* of disembodied reflection discussed above. It is tempting to see this development as the result of, rather than the cause for, the broader process. It could be taken as an adjustment strategy on the part of the intellectual elite to conquer the developing economy of the social field. In any event one must expect that just as orality influenced intellectual literature in antiquity (above), the growth of cultural literacy in Europe will have promoted more monological modes of writing. Eventually Europe would be in a state where written products cast in what Bakhtin called secondary genres gained sufficient momentum to establish a relative cultural independence (a social field—Bourdieu). Products and practices of secondary literacy became influential elements of their own context; philosophies and novels started talking to each other instead of to specific audiences (much like Hollywood films do in our time).

¹⁰ Michael Holquist illustrates how Bakhtin himself re-framed fragments of other's work. In Bakhtin's book on Rabelais there are chunks of text taken *verbatim* from Ernst Cassirer or deeply influenced by Max Scheler—none of which is explicitly recognised. In his other work there are examples that references to other scholars found in the manuscripts were not rendered in the printed versions (Holquist 2002: 187–189, with further references). It would seem that Bakhtin generated a sense of contemporaneity in which the word and text of the other was seamlessly integrated in his own reflection.

These very times also saw the bible become a powerful popular “cognitive artefact,”¹¹ for instance in the communally programmed bible reading in Pietistic Christian religion, or in the massive programs of biblical translation launched by western missionary and bible societies in the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, we do not have much empirically secured knowledge about how common people in Europe actually used biblical literature over the centuries, and how such use may have changed over time. That is: we do not know much about the status of the bible in those popular environments that Bakhtin was concerned with. I should, however, not be very surprised if future research should indicate that during the nineteenth century popular perceptions of the bible became more involved in the discourse of official bible reading—which again was markedly influenced by the growing body of biblical scholarship. These kinds of integrating dynamics across previously convoluted societies seem to be typical for European modernism. In any event, it seems likely that these were the times when the bible became that monological text, which to Bakhtin it was “revolutionary” to carnivalise. Evidently, this had not been “revolutionary” in the days of Rabelais.

The reality was of course much more complex than sketched above. For instance, the emergence of European nation states must likely have contributed to the monologisation of European cultures—as must the decision of nation builders to use Christian ideologies for their purposes. I would not doubt that there were also contrary trajectories (cf. de Certeau, above), so that the shift towards monology must have been a shift in tendency only, and probably more in some social fields than in others. It is hard to believe that dialogical speech (and writing) ever really vanished.

Synthesis

To the extent that monological epistemology, thought, and writing did ascend to hegemony in Europe after the Renaissance, this would have to be understood as a process engulfed in and promoted by intellectual and material aspects of the modernisation of Europe. Through territorial, economic, cultural and other colonisation this modernity became a global phenomenon—much according to the logic of the disembodied *episteme* discussed above.

Biblical scholars are the curators of a body of texts that mirrors this entire process, texts that are still recognised by many as cultural capital, and which undeniably still are—or are (again) becoming—influential at many junctures in the web of European and other cultures. Being in charge of curating these texts for the benefit of the public, biblical scholars should challenge the historicist paradigm that has been so dominant in the discipline. This paradigm was a tool for and a product of European modernisation. Contemporary scholarship should better explore biblical texts as the complex cultural phenomena they were and became. Evidently, this should not mean that biblical scholars start disregarding historical questions. As seen above, the kind of reflection that I am calling for is critically dependent upon minute historical reasoning. The point would be to regain a position where scholarly *appropriation* of biblical texts legitimately

¹¹ My apprehension of a cognitive artefact is taken from Norman 1991. It names a device that humans use in order to enhance some cognitive functionality that is already in place. To Norman, the cognitive artefact in question is the checklist that an airplane captain uses before takeoff.

brings them—and their complexity—in dialogue with conversations going on in the scholar's world. And for this purpose it still seems productive to engage in the intellectual world of Mikhail Bakhtin and the Bakhtin circle.

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