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Caught Between Two Worlds: Bakhtin's Dialogism in the Exile Experience

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Locked in a Classical paradigm, monological thinking found in most contemporary research denies the possibility of contradicting ideas existing simultaneously. Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogical ontology, however, supplies a new polylogical perspective with which to view language. When Bakhtin's dialogism is used to revisit the discourse of international exiles who have come to the United States of America, a more complex and sophisticated understanding of their lives and experiences emerges. Their contradictions, simultaneities, and conflicts are recognized, not as psychological flaws or illogical thinking, but as manifestations of the centripetal/centrifugal forces at work in their lives. Furthermore, a dialogical analysis of exile discourse has engendered the identification of four recurring dialectical motifs previously unrecognized by monological analysis.

*The Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden
Genesis 3 (on the first exile)*

'Our era,' argues Edward Said, is the 'age of the refugee, the displaced person, the exile' (Christopher 1995: 31). Of these three, one finds refugees and displaced persons pulled from their homeland by 'natural disaster or a general, *impersonal* threat such as war or famine' (Tabori 1972: 23). Exiles, however, who are pushed from their homeland on *personal* grounds, are 'compelled to leave their country on account of well-founded fears of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, or political opinion.'¹ Moreover, exiles cannot return to their homeland as long as the causes persist that drove them away. Herein lies the difference, assert Grinberg and Grinberg, between exiles and migrants or expatriates: 'for the exile, departure is imposed and return impossible' (1989: 157). Finally, although their banishment may last a lifetime, exiles must always consider their plight temporary, 'hoping to return to their fatherland when circumstances permit—but unable or unwilling to do so as long as the factors that made them exiles persist' (Tabori 1972: 27). Lenin has aptly described such individuals as 'people who vote with their feet' (Tabori 1972: 23).

In the second half of the twentieth century, the United States served as a port of solace for many such voters. German, Nigerian, South Vietnamese, Cuban,

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Russian, Salvadorean, Iranian, South African, Chinese, and Chilean exiles, to name only a few, have all been compelled to flee from totalitarian persecution to the shores of the United States of America.

Given exiles' international ubiquity, rhetorical/literary research on their writings is surprisingly limited. In the past decade, however, there has been a growing number of social-scientific researchers devoting increased time and attention to their emotional and cognitive state. Much of this work focuses on the exiles' experience as they attempt to forge a new life in their new home (Broe and Ingram 1989; Brooke-Rose 1996; Dash 1992; Davaran 1996; Glad 1993; Grinberg and Grinberg 1989; Israel 1997; Moeller 1983; Morris 1996; Naficy 1993; Oriiz 1997; Partnoy 1988), and to a lesser extent, on the exiles' conception of their 'homeland,' 'identity,' and 'return' (Warner 1994; Kibreab 1999; Zetter 1999). While these works serve a valuable role in illuminating the emotional struggles of displaced persons, they also share two common problems. First, these works rely on traditional, monological thinking to interpret the discourse produced by exiles. And second, these works have either ignored or have been unable to supply a satisfactory interpretation of the prevalence of contradictions, simultaneities, and dialectic tensions found in the writings of exiles.

This project, therefore, revisits the writings of exiles through a different, *dialogical*, lens and offers an alternative explanation for the dualisms and contradictions found in their discourse. From the analysis of the writings (letters, poems, prose, fiction, diaries, etc.) of international exiles who have come to the United States in the second half of the twentieth century, I will argue that such discourse can best be understood through Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogical theory. Bakhtin's polylogical philosophy of language and human action supplies language scholars with an alternative perspective that accounts for the simultaneous and contradicting presence of the centrifugal and centripetal forces inherent in the communication experience.

In what follows, I will define monological limitations, highlight key elements in Bakhtin's dialogical theory, explain how his dialogical philosophy of language serves as an alternative to traditional, monological discourse analysis, and reinterpret the discourse of exiles as they struggle to answer four recurring questions that appear in the majority of their writings: 1) What is their emotional and psychological state? 2) How do they socially identify themselves? 3) What are their sentiments towards their countries? 4) How do they conceive of their future?

Monological Thinking

'Monological thinking' is a Bakhtinian term for Classical logic and its bivalent foundation. By bivalence I am referring to the law of 'traditional (or Classical) logic that every proposition is either true or false; that is, there are just two values a proposition may take—and only one proposition that can be right' (Blackburn 1994: 45). While this law has been challenged by a select group of

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logicians (deviant, fussy, intuitionistic, antirealism, many-valued-system, and modal-system philosophers³) during the twentieth century, most scholars outside the field of logic, 'including almost all of science,' have been guided by this classical paradigm with its either/or dualistic assumptions (Morgan 1998: 822).

According to Baxter, monologism, also referred to by Bakhtinian thinkers as 'non-dialogical thinking,' is characterized by 'a bias toward unitariness,' unidimensional theorizing, and a lack of dialogical consideration. It leads the interpreter to think in either/or propositions, leaving no logically viable way to consider simultaneities, contradictions, or the 'middle ground.' Such thinking, asserts Baxter, creates 'false unities' in research, and ignores the inherent dialogical tension found in the human experience (1994: 25-26).⁴

In the corpus of exile research, monological thinking is most problematically manifested in the analysis of exile discourse. Exile researchers, from linguistics and philosophy to literary critics and sociology, have been unable to supply a satisfactory explanation for the overwhelming presence of contradictions, simultaneities, and dialectical tensions found in exile writings as they struggle for social identification.

Traditional Analysis of Exile Literature

Hewitt reminds us, 'To have a social identity is to identify with some set of people with whom one feels an affinity, in whose company one feels comfortable, and whose ideas and beliefs are similar to one's own.' One feels, Hewitt continues, 'real and whole as a person in relation to this community' (1991: 126-127). Kibreab, more specifically, sees 'the identity people gain from their association with a particular place is an indispensable instrument to a fulfilling life' (1999: 385). Consequently, when exiles are forced from the people and places that have previously given them definition, they struggle for their 'wholeness' and 'fulfilment.' They are located between two worlds, precariously balanced between feeling both loyal and unfaithful, love and hate, and fear and security. Because of this disjunctiveness, exile discourse has a schizophrenic quality, unable to commit to any firm conclusion about their lives, identity, or future.

It is quite common, for example, to find exiles like the Central-American professor now living in the US, who writes that he has 'both resisted and accepted the new culture, idealized the old one and its objects as much as [he] idealized what [he] hoped the new objects could give [him].' He continues to say that, over time, 'the changeable combination of internal and external factors has produced contradictions' in his sense of self (Grinberg and Grinberg 1989: 162).

Such 'bifurcated' statements have been traditionally analysed from one of four flawed, monological perspectives. The *psychoanalytic perspective* views exiles who produce such statements as 'unstable' or 'unbalanced' (Grinberg and Grinberg 1989: 161-165). Monologically, one cannot break the rule of

non-contradiction or think dualistically about self-identity without being viewed as either illogical, abnormal, or both. The *pro-centripetal* perspective discounts the centrifugal forces (the drive for uniqueness) while privileging the centripetal aspects (the drive for stability) of the discourse. Antithetically, the *pro-centrifugal* perspective discounts the centripetal forces (the drive for stability) while privileging the centrifugal aspects (the drive for uniqueness) of the discourse. Finally, the *pendulum-model* perspective recognizes the dualisms in the discourse, but conceives of it in either/or propositions. Like a swinging pendulum, the exile is seen as vacillating from position 'A' to position 'B' back to position 'A.'⁵

The obvious shortcomings of these four perspectives stem from their monological/nondialogic approach to the analysis of discourse. They are unable to address what W. E. B. DuBois has called the 'two-ness' of the individual in a strange land—being of 'two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals' (Early 1993: xvii–xviii). In the end, each approach creates 'false unities' at the expense of the exile's true experience and wholeness.

As an alternative theoretical lens, the Russian philosopher of language Bakhtin developed a polylogical system of thought that allows the two voices of the exile to be heard and understood on its own terms.

Bakhtin and Dialogism

Many argue that being exiled forever changes one's thinking and perception; the experience permeates the human soul so deeply that everything becomes imbued by its shadow (Glad 1993; Tabori 1972; Spalek and Bell 1982). This transformation can be seen in the writings of James Baldwin, Albert Camus, Joseph Conrad, Fyodor Dostoevsky, W. E. B. DuBois, Eldridge Cleaver, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and the Dalai Lama. This claim is also true of the work of Bakhtin, who was exiled to Kazakhstan in 1929 by Stalin for 'connections with intellectual groups and the underground church' (Holquist 1990: 9).

After Bakhtin's return from exile in 1934, he began asking fundamental questions of existence. He concluded that the very foundation of reality is created through the binary opposition of push–pull forces found in our natural and social worlds—an idea whose impetus, one may speculate, can be traced to the dialogical pressures of his Kazakhstan exile. The clash between Bakhtin's push–pull powers is enacted at many different levels, 'as in the interplay between electromagnetic, chemical, and thermodynamic forces in the physical cosmos, the human body, and the universe of subatomic particles.' But these forces, asserted Bakhtin, are most importantly at work in the world of social relations, between individuals or cultures (Bakhtin 1981: 272). Such a relationship may be constituted as essentially a 'dialogue,' a metaphor which Bakhtin used to describe all life, as well as his theory—*dialogism* (1981: 271–274).

