WHEN BAKHTIN MEETS DESCARTES: MONOLOGISM, DIALOGISM AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE IN THE *DISCOURS DE LA MÉTHODE.*

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In 1765, the Académie Française made Descartes the subject of a competition whose purpose was "to portray Descartes as a national hero" (Harth 109). This event, of course, marks but one specific moment in a long series of instances where writers felt inspired to apply their talents to the works of the famous philosopher. Contemporary critics like Nancy, Romanowski, Lyous, and Judovitz concentrate on Descartes, the writer, who is different from Descartes, the philosopher. They acquaint us with a Descartes who is inherently dialogic while earlier critics stressed the philosophic Descartes, the monologic rationalist. Bakhtin's term "dialogism" here denotes that which pursues a multiplicity of truths whereas "monologism" describes the search for absolute Truth. The purpose of this paper is not to pass judgment on either one of these modes of reception, nor to determine their correctness or falsity. It is, rather, to assert the virtues of both, in order to support my own view, that the *Discours* is an instance of monologism and dialogism. This will permit us to see Descartes as reflecting and projecting the tension between monologic and dialogic intellectual and political tendencies in seventeenth-century France.

With Toulmin, one can see the intellectual revolution, instigated by Galileo and Descartes, as the primary positive event of the century (14). This intellectual revolution, marked by a vested trust in the potential of rationality, is to be seen, particularly, in contrast to the tradition of scholastic philosophy. It is also to be seen as positive and liberating because it finally enables people to make "systematic use of the 'scientific method'" (Toulmin 14). The momentum of liberation was mainly carried by Descartes, who brought "analysis back to primitive elements in experience that were, in principle, available to reflective thinkers in any culture, and at all times" (Toulmin 14). Arguably, the very long scholastic philosophic tradition can be termed monologic. In contrast, the new Cartesian knowing agent, apparently, may be understood as liberated, as dialogic, because the scholastic stance *credo ut intelligam* is now replaced with *cogito ergo sum*. This shift marks a "new" knowing agent who may know by virtue of his/her thinking. My discussion of the monologism in the *Discours* will show that one can see

this "new" knowing agent as bound to specific principles of knowing, as monologic. In this sense, the Cartesian revolution constitutes, in fact, a continuation of a monologic tradition; an old monologism is clad in new terms.

From a different angle, the intellectual revolution may also be seen as a defensive reaction to a crisis if one considers such issues as increasing religious intolerance, enhanced political absolutism, the social upheaval caused by the Thirty Years' War from 1618 to 1648, the Fronde, and the Succession Wars launched later under the auspices of Louis XIV. One could interpret the events of this period, particularly the philosophy of Descartes, not as liberating but instead like a "defensive counter-revolution" (Toulmin 17), a counter-revolution born out of a sense of crisis. More specifically, the person "who is plunged into an epistemological crisis knows something very important: that a schema of interpretation which he has trusted so far has broken down irremediably in certain highly specific ways" (MacIntyre 458). Descartes's determination to find fundamental principles encouraged him to conceive of a new knowledge that would replace the old and invalid "schema of interpretation" with a new and reliable one.

The question which suggests itself here is how one and the same phenomenon, Cartesian philosophy, can be both a progressive revolution and a defensive counter-revolution. I submit that this contradiction in fact accurately reflects the historical situation in that it is an expression of the inherent tension in the history of early seventeenth-century France.

Whether motivated by a sense of intellectual revolution or born from a sense of crisis, the task at hand was to "find something to be "certain" about" (Toulmin 55). The most programmatic expression of this "search for certainty" can be found in the philosophy of the *Discours de la méthode*. Descartes's answer to the dialogism of uncertainty is the proposition of a monologic philosophy which is produced not only by a reflecting mind, but a mind aware of and involved with the questions of the historical period.

Turning now to Descartes's text itself, I shall first read the autobiographical component of the text as being dialogical in that it produces multiple truths. I see the *cogito* as the crowning moment of the autobiography and I will discuss how the *cogito* functions dialogically. In the second part of my discussion of the *Discours*, I will analyze the specific philosophic propositions which I see as monologic. Finally, I will attempt to explain the tensions present in the *Discours*, pointing to

how they may reveal a narrative strategy and how this strategy may be characterized as significant for our understanding of seventeenth-century France.

Several elements reveal the dialogical orientation of the work. It is my contention that the dialogic emerges when knowledge (individnal knowledge claims) and the knowing subject (the "I" of the *Discours*) come into being as non-absolutist in that both knowledge and knower are contextualized and relational. By contextualized, I mean to suggest a knowing agent who is in communication with the outside world; with other knowers, society, etc. Insisting that all men possess *bon sens*, the narrator seems to imply that the source of different opinions, of different truths, is not an unevenly divided native ability (and authority) to form these opinions but rather a difference in approach, that is, divergent starting points or contexts. The narrator presents various stages of his life which should have been, in his judgment, instrumental in achieving "une connaissance claire et assurée" (*Discours* 31), and thus first pursues an education in "lettres." Eventually, he comes to the (disappointing) conclusion that he found, in the course of his studies, "aucune doctrine dans le monde qui fût telle qu'on [lui] avait auparavant fait espérer" (*Discours* 32). This statement is of importance because it implies the narrator's belief in the existence of a doctrine, that is, a means to achieve certain Truth. It also suggests that the disillusioned narrator decides that no appropriate tool (yet) exists which holds the key to unlocking the mysteries of the universe and, last, it suggests that the one thing which drives this individual is the determination to find this key. It is crucial, however, to realize that we have no indication, as of yet, that the narrator intends to talk about more than "just" himself and his experiences. The dialogism here emerges from the narrator's distinction between himself and others. In the context of this distinction, neither his own position nor that of others is given more validity or authority. The narrator evaluates and judges (for himself) that all knowledge quests which produce diverse truths are inferior to those (or the one) which could lead to absolute Truth. Thus, after employing "quelques années à étudier ainsi dans le livre du monde et à tâcher d'acquérir quelque expérience," he resolves one day "d'étudier aussi en [lui]-même . . ." (*Discours* 39).

Only after he finds through direct experience that there are multiple opinions and truths can the narrator decide to accept none and doubt all; only through general doubt can he find that which he cannot doubt, his own thinking. Furthermore, the narrator is a contextualized (that is a

dialogical) individual having one voice in a world of many voices and does not claim that his voice is in any way superior to others. Rather the narrator cannot accept a multitude of truths and is driven to find something which he can consider absolutely true. The narrative account inspires compassion for this individual, who is compelled by the need to find order. John Lyons reads this plot as comparable to a romance which "is the genre most typified by the loss of an object that must be recovered" (512); the object to be recovered, in this particular narrative, is absolute Truth.

One needs to consider the multiplicity of narrating voices which are in dialogue with each other since one may question whether "the 'I' of the *Discours* affirm[ing] its existence, is . . . the same 'I' as the subject of the earlier passages on reading the book of the world. The autobiographical "I" is changing by virtue of its experiences, from student to traveller to solitary meditator; but, in the chronology of the narrative, the experiences are linked in that the "I" uttering "je pense, donc je suis" could not have uttered these words without having gone through the earlier stages. These events are, therefore, to be seen in relation to each other, in a sustained dialogue.

The pivotal event of the autobiographical account is well known. The narrator decides to substitute a new truth for the multiplicity of the truths he has found by assuming that they may all be false. To doubt is to apply the first rule of the *méthode*, which will help him to find that which is undoubtedly true. This absolute Truth is, finally, "je pense, donc je suis" (*Discours* 65).

Although the *cogito* is central to a monologic interpretation of the *Discours*, it may also be understood dialogically. I suggest that its dialogism is the ultimate autobiographic moment in that it provides the narrator with that for which he has searched all along: an absolute Truth. The Truth itself is monologic, but the moment of discovery is dialogic. As Lyons argues: "[a]rriving at the Cogito, the reader of the *Discours de la méthode* must relate to the new, metaphysical 'I' that has resulted from the splitting of the narrative protagonist" (520). While one must do that, one must also consider the question of how the reader relates to the *cogito* as an autobiographical moment.

We may understand the dialogical narrative as a cover for the "Cartesian science," the philosophical layer of the *Discours* which can be read as monological. Dialogically, knowledge is achieved in the context of experiences. Experiences, in turn, suggest the existence of multiple

truths (in spite of this being, of course, the insight which the narrator refuses to accept). The knowing subject knows by virtue of experiencing and does not need any special authorization to make knowledge claims, i.e. valid truths based on the knowers' different situations (cultural, social, etc.).

I will now analyze the philosophic layer of the *Discours* to indicate how it can be termed monologic in the context of knowledge. The systematic doubt, which puts all previously held opinions and knowledge on a level of mere beliefs (and not Truth), leads Descartes to realize clearly and distinctly that he cannot doubt his activity of doubting. He thus arrives at the famous *je pense, donc je suis.* Clearly, the philosophical aspect and importance of the *cogito ergo sum* (as absolute Truth) transcends the autobiographical narrative. One could claim in parallel fashion that the discovery of the method belongs to the sequence of events in the narrative, while the method itself transcends the actual event(s) leading to its discovery. Both relations put a final emphasis on the ultimate product (the *cogito*, the *méthode*); they therefore reveal a monologic foundation to the *Discours*. If we picture a universe in which knowledge is certain Truth, we would have to consider this universe as monological in that individual utterances, if true, would compel agreement. In other words, the philosopher's goal is to establish a means by which "good" knowledge (one possessing Truth value) can be distinguished from "bad" knowledge (one producing multiple truths). One cannot "trust" experience alone to produce Truth. The proposed solution to the problem is the *méthode*, which logically precedes and organizes experience, and which will enable the person who practices it to explain all objects. The scientific principle, the *méthode*, consists of four basic rules. This proposition implies monologism because it is deterministic: there are four rules—no more, and no less.

The concept of the application of the method proposed by Descartes is dialogic and monologic at the same time. It is dialogic to the extent that it is imitable, i.e. can be applied by other individuals. Significantly, however, it is monologic in that the narrator alone is the instance which provides the rules. Thus the method as scientific model (which can be imitated) provides a dialogic element insofar as it is a theoretical construction which can be applied to an indefinite number of objects while, on the other hand, the scientific and objective model is the product of the subjective procedure (Descartes's own thinking) which determined its outlines.

All along, the question which the philosopher does not allow to be asked is: "How do we know that the procedures of science, reason, and common sense are the best methods that we have?" (Chisholm 65). On the contrary, the purpose of the philosophical layer of the *Discours* is to provide a key to certainty and this provision, in turn, constitutes the origin of "the cognitive superiority of modern science" (Hollis 20).

The monologism of the *cogito* emerges in the context of the rational knowing subject as decontextualized and autonomous and in the context of the establishment of a (universal) method which presumes an order, a hierarchy, of the knowables. The hierarchy of knowables derives from the statement *je pense donc je suis* in that it implies that knowledge of the mind precedes knowledge of matter. Similarly, the knowing agent does not depend on particular contexts if s/he employs timelessly valid modes of inquiry in the process of producing knowledge.

In this context, we may consider the *cogito* as monologic because, strictly speaking, while others could utter "cogito ergo sum" they would not, according to Descartes's belief in the universality of reason and his belief in the universality of the Truth of his statement, utter anything different. In other words, others uttering *cogito ergo sum* must be referring to exactly the same experience and they must be engaging in exactly the same thinking. Thus the ideal Cartesian knowledge situation produces universal Truth and involves the pure mind (that is, the mind which is freed from the senses). Knowledge comes into existence not as a communal (and dialogic) effort but is generated by the individual and solitary knower to whom other knowers are not equals but rather "objects" to be studied. In Judovitz's words, "Descartes . . . aims at completely separating the 'I' from external experience: 'I understand, thus my mind is separate from my body'" ("Autobiographical" 92). In the end, the philosophical *cogito* also qualifies its originator, Descartes, as the absolute authority on method, knowledge, and Truth. It gives to the specialist, namely Descartes, the privilege of theorizing about all other members of humanity.

If one acknowledges the two different discourses in the *Discours de la méthode* (the dialogic narrative and the monologic *méthode*/logical procedure), one can observe how they inform each other. It might be argued that the distinction between philosophy and narrative does not seem appropriate because the method is impersonal and objective truth and survives the subjective account of how this method was established. Scholars have recently argued convincingly, however, that one cannot

separate one from the other in order to give one, or the other, more prominence (see Nancy, Lyons, Judovitz). In fact, we find that we cannot explain the narrative without considering the philosophy, and we cannot understand the philosophy without the narrative. I would thus argue that the strategy of the *Discours de la méthode* is to enact the struggle of monologism and dialogism as a tension which cannot (and perhaps should not) be solved and overcome.

I submit that the most important aspect of the maintained struggle is to prevent any final (and absolute) conclusion. In that case, the *Discours de la méthode* itself becomes a marker of the fallacy of the traditional conception of the seventeenth century as the classical, that is stable, century. We need to keep in mind, however, at what cost Descartes's contemporaries used his work. Descartes's peers needed to fit the *Discours de la méthode* into a new Zeitgeist which can be described as increasingly absolutist. They read only the monological philosophy and saw it as a corrective reaction to the dialogical workings of the world. For this reason they emphasized the monologic aspect of the *Discours* and, by the same token, marginalized its dialogic and narrative stance. The neglect of the dialogical, the narrative Descartes, has powerful implications for knowledge and the knower in that it grants validity and virtue to only one (the monologic and rational knowledge quest) and, by the same token, invalidates the other, the dialogic narrative of the *Discours* and all that is narrative in the literary and intellectual context of seventeenth-century France.

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