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Marie Laniel

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Dialogues with/and Great Books
The Dynamics of Canon Formation

David Fishelov

Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2010
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Reviewed by Marie Laniel
Université de Picardie Jules-Verne (Amiens)

Alongside recent critical studies, such as John Guillory's *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (1993), or *The Canonical Debate Today: Crossing Disciplinary and Cultural Boundaries*, edited by Liviu Papadima, David Damrosch and Theo D'haen (2011), *Dialogues with/and Great Books* re-examines the question of canon formation and attempts to reassess the delicate question of "literary greatness" and "eminence" in the light of modern technologies. Far from attempting to establish an authoritative list of great books, or to write a definitive history of literary canon formation, Fishelov looks at the "dynamics" involved in the making of masterpieces. Considering that purely aesthetic criteria or socio-cultural approaches fail to account for the lasting reputation of a literary work, David Fishelov expounds a new, "dialogic" approach to canon formation, closely connecting a book's perceived greatness to its capacity to elicit dialogues with other works, to be constantly revisited in other media, and to remain a lasting source of inspiration for "readers, authors, translators, adaptors, artists and critics" [ix]. As suggested by the title of the book, what began as a course on "Dialogues WITH Great Books", at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, evolved into a complex reflection on "Dialogues AND Great Books", investigating the impact of dialogic interactions on the canonical status of literary works.

David Fishelov's "dialogic model" stems from his desire to provide an alternative to traditional approaches to canon formation, relying either on aesthetic ("The Beauty Party") or ideological criteria ("The Power Party"). In the first part of *Dialogues with/and Great Books*, Fishelov sets his own theory against, and shows the limitations of, these two competing, but complementary models. Whether they draw on Aristotle, New Criticism, Russian Formalism, the writings of Harold Bloom, or Kenneth Clark, the advocates of the aesthetic approach to canon formation all "assum[e] that the status of a great book is a function of certain aesthetic qualities inherent in the work" (30). Reacting against this aesthetic model, proponents of "the power party", "the contemporary dominant tone", tend to foreground the historical forces and power structures at work in canon formation. By defining "literary genius" not as an intrinsic quality but as the product of social hegemonies and mechanisms of power, they show their debt to Marxism (John Guillory's concept of "cultural capital" is clearly indebted to Marx), or to French thinkers, Michel Foucault (who saw the author as an ideological product) and Pierre Bourdieu, whose theory of the "literary field" inspired contemporary thinkers, such as C. J. Van Rees and Richard Ohmann, to investigate the role of institutions, criticism and academia in constantly reshaping the Canon.

Against the aesthetic approach – which relies on subjective value judgements and an a-historical, unchanging view of the accepted Canon –, and the ideological approach – which lays too much emphasis on historical circumstances, and constantly attempts to reshape the existing Canon –, David Fishelov's dialogic approach is indebted to the works of famous proponents of reader-response criticism, such as Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, and Barbara Herrnstein Smith, foregrounding the dialogic interactions of a "source text" with later "responding" texts. Though he pays tribute to the works of foremost thinkers of "intertextuality", such as Julia Kristeva and Gérard Genette, and of "influence", such as Harold Bloom, Fishelov wishes to develop a new dialogic model which would not be incompatible with the notion of literary hierarchy (like Kristeva's "intertextuality"), and which

would not restrict textual interactions to anxiety and strife (like Bloom's concept of "anxiety of influence").

To define the dialogic interactions at the core of his reception theory, David Fishelov first analyses "real-life dialogues", everyday interactions from social life. Drawing on J. L. Austin's concepts of illocutionary and perlocutionary acts, John Searle's theory of speech acts, Roman Jakobson's "multi-functional description of the communicative situation" and Paul Grice's concepts of "conversational demand and implicature" [9-12], Fishelov divides these "real-life interactions" into different categories (see table page 6): genuine monologues, pseudo-monologues, genuine dialogues (in which both parties fully engage in a meaningful exchange of ideas), and pseudo-dialogues, such as echo-dialogues (in which the addressee merely accepts the addressor's point of view or repeats it) or dialogues-of-the-deaf (characterized by misunderstandings and failed attempts at communication).

From the analysis of these real-life interactions, Fishelov derives literary equivalents (see table page 28), dialogues between "the activating, source text" and "the activated, responding text" [15]. In genuine literary dialogues, "an author (or painter, sculptor, etc.), after reading a literary work attentively, responds to it in a dialectical way by writing (or producing in other media) a work that takes issue with some aesthetic or ideological dimensions of the first work" [15], thus fully engaging with it in a creative, dialectical way: this is the case of meaningful allusions and rewritings, creative translations, adaptations and parodies. In "echo-dialogues", the responding text does not fully engage with the source text in a creative way: reading is thus a form of passive "echo-dialogue", while translations, adaptations or even academic reviews are more active forms of "echo-dialogue" [19]. Finally, in "dialogues-of-the-deaf", the responding work only evokes the source work in a superficial way to serve its own purposes [25]: this is the case of epigraphs, borrowed expressions, or only superficial allusions. According to David Fishelov, it is the number and diversity of these dialogic interactions which account for the status of literary works: "a consensually perceived great book is one that evokes many and diverse types of literary, artistic and critical dialogues" [46].

To highlight the impact of these interactions on the "perceived greatness" of a book, David Fishelov studies the "patterns of dissemination" in culture of consensually accepted classics (as they appear in renowned anthologies, such as the *Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces*, or *Masterpieces of World Literature*), by looking at search results on a wide range of search engines and databases: Google, Google Image, IMDb (International Movie Database), which he combines with more academic tools, such as Clio (Columbia University Search Engine), the MLA International Database, Google Scholar (showing the number of academic papers that a work of art elicited), or, in the case of dramatic works, Doollee (The Playwrights Database) or AHDS (Arts and Humanities Data Services), to analyse the number of stage productions generated by plays. The correlation between the number and diversity of results and the consensual status of classics tends to prove the impact of dialogic interactions on canon formation.

While Part I of *Dialogues* ("What Is a Dialogue? What Is a Great Book?") provides the conceptual framework and statistical tools of the dialogic approach, Part II ("Some Genuine Dialogues with Great Books") explores the diversity of literary dialogues elicited by canonical works, from the Old Testament and Greco-Roman literature to *Robinson Crusoe*. Progressing chronologically through a selection of landmarks from the Western Canon, Fishelov offers close readings of canonical texts that still echo in contemporary literature and films, such as the sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22) as it is revisited by Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (1843) and Hanoch Levin's satirical play *The Queen of*

the Bathtub (1970); or the story of Samson (from “The Book of Judges”), as it is retold in Milton’s tragic drama *Samson Agonistes* (1671), Vladimir Jabotinsky’s novel *Samson* (1927), or Cecil B. DeMille’s *Samson and Delilah* (1949). To analyse the notion of parody, chapter 7 looks at Monty Python’s irreverent version of the life of Jesus in *The Life of Brian* (1979) and José Saramago’s serious re-telling in *The Gospel according to Jesus Christ* (1991). Echoes from Horace’s *Odes* in Aleksandr Pushkin’s and Wilfred Owen’s poetry, and from Horace’s *Satires* in *Le Neveu de Rameau* exemplify the use of quotations, while another form of “echo-dialogue” is illustrated by Samuel Johnson’s imitation of Juvenal’s *Satire 10* (the prayer for old age) in *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749) and Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726). Variations on the myth of Pygmalion in Book X of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Molière’s *L’École des femmes* (1663), G. B. Shaw’s *Pygmalion* (1912) and Lerner and Loewe’s musical *My Fair Lady* (1956), as well as echoes of Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) in Bacon’s *New Atlantis* (1627) or Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), illustrate a complex chain of dialoguing texts. Chapter 12 compares “dialogues-of-the-deaf” elicited by *Robinson Crusoe*, in the case of Rousseau’s *L’Émile* (1762) and J. D. Wyss’s *The Swiss Family Robinson* (1812), with genuine dialogues: *Vendredi* by Michel Tournier (1971), and *Foe* by J. M. Coetzee (1987).

Though he offers an original new outlook on the dynamics of canon formation, David Fishelov also devotes one chapter of his study to the limitations of the dialogic approach (“Objections to the Dialogic Approach”). One might indeed wonder if literary greatness can be reduced to the number and diversity of responses elicited by a text. As Fishelov himself suggests, cultural dissemination and textual dialogue can be interpreted not as the root cause of literary greatness but as “symptoms” and effects of the high aesthetic qualities inherent in a work of art. One might also wonder whether the dialogic approach should take into account, not only a great book’s dialogue with later works, but also its capacity to rewrite and interact with previous works of art. While the use of modern databases undoubtedly sets Fishelov’s book apart from other studies on the same topic, by his own admission, the tools used to conduct searches on the Internet are not “sufficiently sophisticated or nuanced”. Though he lays great stress on the qualitative aspects of “cultural dissemination”, the statistics obtained from searches on the Internet are quantitative rather than truly qualitative.

As Fishelov points out, the limitations of the dialogic approach only reflect the complexity of the task. The great interest of his new approach lies precisely in his attempt to present canon formation as a “dynamic” process constantly in the making: “we are invited to perceive these works not as static entities, sitting there on the shelves as revered objects, but to observe how they play an active, influential role in the work of writers, artists and critics” [67]. These intricate dialogues, which affect the status of contemporary works but also of works from the past, imply constant reassessments of the whole hierarchy: “a literary work is in a continual process of *becoming* a great book by virtue of the dialogues it keeps producing or stimulating” [67]. Such an attempt to seize this “dynamics” is therefore difficult but extremely inspiring, as it touches upon something essential to our representation of literary greatness. As well as shedding light on the diversity of these dialogic interactions (translation, version, rendition, imitation, interpretation, appropriation, cinematic adaptation), Fishelov draws significant distinctions between many forms of literary dialogues: a painter representing the characters from a book, translations (repeating the text in a new language with different degrees of creativity), imitations in eighteenth-century England, book readings in a book club meeting, or free adaptations of classics. As Fishelov suggests, these more popular forms of dialogue are part of the rich fabric of textual interactions, and should not be dismissed as useless by-products of

literary history, since these exchanges are first and foremost signs of the vitality of one's culture [24].

Because it propounds a new model to analyse canon formation, Fishelov's study is an ambitious book. But while the "dialogic" model requires good knowledge of the theoretical background on canon formation, it also relies on a distinctly empirical approach ("real-life dialogues" and search results on the Internet), which make it more accessible. Though intellectually ambitious, Fishelov's study was first designed for students and draws on material used in a university course on "Great Books". Always proceeding methodically, Fishelov grounds his developments on close readings and meets the reader half way. *Dialogues with/and Great Books* should be on the reading list of every course on "Great Books" or "Canon Formation", but would also make a very stimulating read for anyone interested in this central topic.