

# The Talmud as a fat Rabbi: A novel approach

DANIEL BOYARIN

## *Abstract*

*In this article it will be argued that the Menippean satire (broadly understood in Bakhtinian terms) provides a most, if not the most, significant formal and perhaps historical context for reading the Babylonian Talmud (ca. sixth century after Christ). Some theoretical considerations on the role of agency in dialogism (intertextuality) are lifted up as well.*

*Keywords:* reading practice; religious community; sacred text; talmudic tradition; Menippean satire; Bakhtin.

—For Chava

## **1. Introduction: The monologic dialogue of the Talmud**

Despite its vaunted polysemy and so-called pluralism, the halakhic (legal) dialectic of the Talmud by itself is as profoundly monologic as Plato's in that it brooks no real challenge to its possession of the Oral Torah, the guaranteed, if admittedly only partly comprehended, definitive God's truth. Also like Plato's Academy, the Rabbis' House of Study is vaunted as the only possible venue for the discovery of truth, as well. But tales of grotesque bodies of Rabbis and the bizarre, fantastic, and even betimes disreputable behavior of some of the greatest heroes and even 'saints' of the Talmud, unique within rabbinic literature to the Babylonian Talmud, resist the closure of Torah and the absolute presentation of the Rabbi and the rabbinic institution, even of the Oral Torah itself, as the locus of life according with the will of God. This stratum within the Babylonian Talmud has, in a very Bakhtinian manner, to do with the body, its nether parts, with elimination, sex, and lust but also with extreme conduct borne of envy and jealousy.

Unless we make the very strong assumption that the Talmud is a virtually aleatory collection of materials that were by and large formed elsewhere and elsewhere and then incorporated into a fairly random anthology—a view that however much it is implied in the assumptions of some talmudic scholars, I find unsupportable—then we can ask why different materials appear together in the Talmud and what the meaning of the work of the anonymous narrator (usually called redactor) was in placing them together there. The kind of authority that such an anonymous voice inhabits is equivalent to what modern theoreticians of the novel call the implied author of the text. The ‘real’ author of the novel has to disappear into this literary function in order for novelistic discourse to exist, and similarly, whoever the Rabbis were who produced the text of the Talmud out of its many and disparate sources had to disappear themselves into the Talmud, now identifiable with precisely their anonymous voice, the traditionally named *Stamma*, ‘the Anonymous’. It is the work of the Anonymous that I read here, an attempt to make sense of the Talmud as a whole work.

Arguing for a holistic reading of the Talmud neither precludes polyvalence and the possibility of multiple modes of interpretation nor does it deny historical layering in the text, a historical layering that is of great value (in other scholarly, hermeneutic contexts) to uncover.

I want to consider the text of the Talmud entire, including even the ‘wildest’ of aggada (anecdote) as incorporated in the Talmud by the very same ‘Author’ and thus integral to the ‘work’ as a whole. Once we have made this shift, we will find the monologic thrust of the halakhic non-dialogue dialogized by the very presence in the same textual context of the aggadic genres that are most alien and even antithetical to it.

An important point of departure for a reading of the whole is the ‘anonymity’ of the Talmud. We literally have no idea who produced the text that we have in front of us (or when, or where, although we can take some—quite contentious—quite educated guesses at these). Rather than a historical problem to be overcome (or not, as the case may be), we can see this strong version of anonymity as the very thing that makes the Talmud, the Talmud.<sup>1</sup> Analogously to the ways that, as Simon Goldhill has shown, figures such as Plato and Lucian hide themselves in their texts anonymously, as it were, so the *Stamma* of the Talmud can be read as such a hidden authoring voice.<sup>2</sup>

Richard Kalmin (2006: 845) has argued against the notion that the halakha and aggada belong to the same editorial stratum since the aggada comprises, as he puts it, ‘many talmudic stories [that] are extremely uncomplimentary toward their rabbinic protagonists’. Kalmin’s solution to this ‘problem’ is to state explicitly that the redactors of the Talmud were

faced with traditional material from other sources hostile to their rabbinic heroes that they were constrained against their will to include simply because it was traditional. This strikes me as a thoroughly implausible account on both historical and literary grounds for how the Talmud came to be so heterogeneous. Arguing against this view is the fact that the aggadic material, including some of the most antithetical in tone and content to the halakhic, is frequently integrally related to it in terms of the flow of the sugya. Secondly, it is impossible to imagine that the redactors of the Babylonian Talmud labored under constraint to include all the traditional materials circulating among the Jews; they obviously exercised choice and agency. Thirdly, there are clearly aggadic cycles that are later than the halakhic materials and refer to them and so are too, palpably, part of the final redactional efforts of the *Stamma*.

At the same time, Kalmin is absolutely right to point to the extreme tensions between ‘the overwhelmingly prosaic, legal preoccupations of these commentators throughout the Talmud’ and the tone of sharp critique frequently articulated in the wildly creative aggada. This is, indeed, precisely the point I make here; the question is rather whether we conclude from this, as he does, that ‘the anonymous editors of the Talmud are very unlikely candidates for authorship of the Talmud’s brilliantly artistic, dramatically gripping, and ethically and theologically ambiguous narratives’ (Kalmin 2006: 846). I think not, anymore than we would conclude from the widely divergent generic tonalities of Rabelais that he could not have written the entire text, or that Melville had to include the chapters on the whale because they were traditional materials that he could not ignore. Or for that matter, that the author of the *Republic* could not possibly have penned the *Symposium*. I would question, moreover, Kalmin’s characterization of the sugya as unartistic; these highly rhetorical, structured compositions manifest, rather, a great deal of literary art, as much, I warrant, as the ‘stories’. Taking the same materials in mind and recognizing that they are all parts of one book, the Talmud, the question is rather: What does it mean to have such deeply antithetical materials in the same book? A literary-critical—as opposed to source-critical—approach will serve best to address this question.

Since the sugya (halakhic dialectic) is not the only aspect of discourse in the Talmud, with the narrative framings incorporating other genres, other languages, a dialogized text results despite the monologism of the halakhic dialectic. This answers well, then, to the description of the novel, as presented by Michael Holquist (Bakhtin 1981: Introduction, xxix), a la Bakhtin: ‘[The novel] is thus best conceived either as a supergenre, whose power consists in its ability to engulf and ingest all other genres (the different and separate languages peculiar to each), or not a genre in any

strict, traditional sense at all. In either case it is obvious that the history of what might be called novels, when they are defined by their proclivity to display different languages interpenetrating each other, will be extremely complicated'. As complicated, perhaps, as the Talmud. Whether or not this or that is quoted from other, 'earlier' sources, the question is about the heterogeneous text that we have before us, almost identical, I think, to the great questions about Plato and his use of literary materials deeply antithetical to his ostensible primary point, the absolute primacy of dialectic (philosophy) over rhetoric (sophism) and poetry (epic and drama) (Nightingale 1995). To put it bluntly, I propose that we shift from source and influence criticism with respect to the Talmud to a literary criticism imbued with the concept of intertextuality. In what follows in this article, I propose to analyze a single sequence of passages of the Talmud as a synecdoche for the Talmud entire. This series of passages is stunningly characterized by its rapid shifts in register from 'Jewish high moral seriousness', to campy grotesquerie.

## 2. The serious

Chapter 7 of the Talmudic Tractate, *Baba Mešia* begins with the following Mishna and attendant discussion:

- (1) One who hires workers and said to them to come at sunrise and depart at sunset: If it is a place where it is not customary to come at sunrise and work until sunset, he may not compel them. Where it is customary for the employees to get food, the employer must comply. In places where it is customary to furnish them with sweetmeats, he must do so, and all according to the custom of that country.

It happened with R. Yoḥanan b. Matia that he said to his son: 'Go and hire laborers for us.' He did so and agreed that they should be given food. And when he came to his father, he said to him: 'My son, even if you should provide them with meals like the banquets of King Solomon at his time, you will not have fulfilled your obligation, as they are children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Rather, before they begin their work go and tell them that they may claim of me only bread and beans.' Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel said: It was not necessary at all [to stipulate], as all must be done according to the custom of the country. [*Baba Mešia* 83b]

According to the Mishna, the principle that a day laborer's conditions cannot be worsened by a contractual agreement is absolute. Whatever

the local custom is, that is determinative, notwithstanding what the employer has stipulated at the time of employment. The anecdote that follows is a seeming contradiction to this principle as the Talmud itself remarks later on. It is placed in the Mishna here in order to communicate Rabban Shimon's dismissal of it and thus emphasize, once more, the inviolability of the principle of the Mishna that one may not contract with day laborers to worsen their conditions vis-à-vis local practice and custom. It does not matter what the employer says, the conditions that apply are the local ones in practice. This, of course, protects day laborers from being coerced to accept inferior conditions out of their (frequently desperate) need for the work.

The Talmud now begins its commentary on this text:

- (2) GEMARA: Is this not self-evident? [i.e., that he may not worsen their conditions beyond the norm!] No, it's a case where he offered to pay more than their [customary] wages. What might you have thought [if the Mishna had not spoken]? That he could say to them that the reason that I increased your wages was with the intent that you would come earlier and leave later. The Mishna teaches us that [this is not the case], as they may answer him, saying: The fact that you added to our wages was in order that we do especially good work for you.

This is a typical initial discussion of a Mishnaic passage by the *Stamma*. The ideology of the *Stamma* is that every word in the Mishna must contribute new information in two ways. First of all, there must be no redundancy in the sense of repetition of the same proposition, or even a proposition that could seemingly be deduced from a proposition uttered elsewhere in the Mishna. The second kind of redundancy is when the Talmud objects that the very point of the Mishna itself is so obvious as not to need articulation at all. If the Talmud deems the statement of the Mishna as obvious in the sense of self-evidently correct, it will also object as it has here. The typical response to that, as we find here, is to elaborate a particular situation in which it is not at all obvious, since there are two potentially different ways of looking at the matter, and the Mishna is then reckoned to be telling us which of these to choose. In his homily on this passage, Emmanuel Levinas (1990: 101) captures precisely the ethical impact of the seeming logic-chopping: 'The quality of my labor I am willing to discuss, but I will not bargain about my human condition, which, in this particular case, expresses itself as my right to get up and go to sleep at the regular hours'.

The Talmud continues now with a comment by a third-century Palestinian *amora*:

- (3) Resh Lakish said: The day laborer goes home from work on his own time, but he goes to work on the employer's time, as it is written, 'When the sun rises, they leave and go hide in their lairs; man goes then to his work, to his labor until evening' (Psalm 104: 22–23). But doesn't everything go according to the custom of the city?

But to what purpose was this statement? Let them observe the custom of that city? He is referring to a new city. But even then let him observe the custom where they come from? He means when the laborers were hired from different cities with different customs. And if you wish, he refers to a case in which he told them that they should work in accordance with the Law of the Torah [and not local custom.]

Resh Lakish derives from the verse of the Psalm a midrashic conclusion. Given that the unit of payment for a day laborer is sunrise to sunset, if the verse says that at sunrise the laborer goes to his work, the indication is that the morning travel time is covered by the employer, but if, as the verse continues, he is to work until sunset, then he travels home after dark, on his own time, as it were. The *Stamma* queries the necessity of this statement since the Mishna already requires that everything be in accordance with the custom of the place, rendering Resh Lakish's statement both otiose and perhaps even wrong, depending on local practice. The Talmud then offers two alternate resolutions of this difficulty. The two answers that are given then both indicate a situation in which the force of custom is vitiated, either because there is no custom in that place, a new city of heterogeneous population, or because the workers and the employer have agreed to follow scripture and not custom in their labor practices. In either of these cases, it becomes necessary to determine the 'law' via midrash, that which gets named 'the Torah'.

Notice, however, how incompatible and politically/ethically at odds these two resolutions are, the first one maintains the Mishna's absolute primacy of local custom over any other legislating authority, remarking that Resh Lakish's midrashic principle comes only into effect when there is absolutely no local custom on which to rely. The second resolution completely undermines the Mishna's principle (and thus its absolute protection of day laborers as vaunted by Levinas) by indicating that the employer can set other parameters ('according to the Torah') as a condition of employment. The first indicates that the force of Resh Lakish's 'Torah'-based determination of the work day only comes into play in a place without established custom, while the last—much more radically—says that an agreement to follow the 'Torah' (rabbinic midrash!) may *replace* the local custom.

It must be seen that the latter approach undermines the very principle of the Mishna that all goes according to custom. If the employer may specify to his employees that he is imposing Torah law on them as a condition for their employment instead of local custom, even where there is a local custom, the Mishna's principle that all goes according to local custom has been displaced. What had begun as a fairly innocent comment by Resh Lakish ends up being in this fashion an undermining of such dialogism that exists at the earlier stages of the rabbinic formation in which their own authority was limited by the authority of custom and its replacement with a higher authority, the authority of the rabbinic institution. In this very late passage—the one in which the objection to Resh Lakish is raised and refuted—we can observe the strong drive toward monologization of the halakha, toward its ultimate subsumption under the category of Torah (= midrash) and thus the full control of the rabbinic authority.

### 3. The comic

Concluding his gloss on the halakhic discussion in the text we are reading, Levinas (1990: 102) writes with a sure homiletic instinct and passion: 'To affirm that the working man is not negotiable, that he cannot be bargained about, is to affirm that which begins a revolution'. Levinas clearly finds a kind of uplift (which he refers to as 'doctrine') in his talmudic homilies, to teach with the Talmud rather than to be challenged by the Talmud. He thus is constrained (like a rabbinic preacher) to refrain from exposing in his readings that which challenges the very sense of ethical uplift which he seeks to communicate. While the Talmud can surely be found to have many moments of such uplift—although, to be sure, always troubled by deeply problematic ethnocentrism and androcentrism—it is very diminished in my view by such a reading for doctrine, much as a figure like Lucian was diminished when being read allegorically as a moralist in the Early Modern period. The Talmud is most abundantly read, I would suggest, in the literary context of the late-ancient genres known as the *spoudogeloion* or, by Bakhtin in particular, Menippean satire, characterized exactly by their indecorous mixing of genres both 'high' and 'low', that which Lucian himself, perhaps the greatest single practitioner of this discursive practice, described as the production of fish-horses and goat-stags.

J. P. Sullivan (1986: 20) has written: 'Certainly a main characteristic of Menippean satire was the union of humour and philosophy (*or whatever political, moral or aesthetic basis an author might substitute for this*)'. The

last qualification is crucial for my argument. I hope to make a case here that the Talmud is Menippean satire (broadly speaking) in its union of ‘humour’ and the halakhic dialectic, which is that ‘political, moral, or aesthetic basis’ that substitutes for philosophy in the rabbinic culture.

William Arrowsmith (1983: ix) has described Petronius’s *Satyricon*, that spectacular late-ancient Menippean text, ‘as a farrago, a potpourri’, arguing that incongruity is its very essence, the mixtures of prose and poetry, high and low language, epic and doggerel are the very point of the text, such that ‘the condition of these ironies is the crisscrossing of crucial perspectives and incongruous styles: if we see how the realistic undercuts the fabulous, we should also see how the fabulous undercuts the realistic’. This movement of a constant undercutting of two voices of each other, with neither defeating the other, is the very stuff of dialogicity, of the Menippean, a kind of unremitting critique of ‘our own’ practice that does not, is not intended to destroy that practice. Or as Gorgias is said to have put it, by none less than Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 1419b): ‘As to jests. These are supposed to be of some service in controversy. Gorgias said—speaking correctly—that you should ruin your opponents’ earnestness with jesting and their jesting with earnestness’. The Greek for ‘jest’ is, of course, *geloïon*, for ‘earnestness’, *spoudos*!

This Menippean motion in which the fabulous undercuts the realistic and the realistic the fabulous is the key to my reading of the Talmud with its doubled presentation of its heroes. It seems highly plausible that if not Petronius himself, his sources and his literary milieu, the sociolect, were well known to the Babylonian Rabbis. Saul Lieberman showed more than half a century ago, arguing for a ‘common oriental source’, that three proverbs known otherwise only from Petronius, as well as the famous Petronian story of the Widow of Ephesos, appear in the Babylonian Talmud.<sup>3</sup> Seeing the close cultural connections of the Talmud with Menippean satire—without asking questions of origin and influence—provides us the Rosetta Stone for a richer, more complete appreciation of the literary character of the Talmud, which will unveil the dialogicity of the Talmud itself and especially as a way for us to consider the serious and comic, the grotesque and the classic, in the Talmud as part and parcel of the same literary phenomenon. But we should not confuse Menippean satire with satire as we usually think of it. As Joel Relihan (1993: 20) alerts us: ‘It is a satire in the sense of a mixture of opposites, of things that do not belong together, not in the sense of a censuring of morally or socially undesirable behavior’. Mixtures of opposites, violations of decorum, yoking of things that do not belong together as in a sausage (at least one etymology of the term), this almost

sounds like a description of late ancient rabbinic literature and especially the Talmuds.

So let us turn to the aggada. After a brief homily growing out of the Mishna to the effect that human beings should not be made to work at night like preying beasts, we continue:

- (4) Rabbi Elazar the son of Rabbi Shimon met up with a certain officer of the king who used to catch thieves. He asked him, ‘How do you prevail over them? Aren’t they compared to animals, as it is written “at night tramp all the animals of the forest”?’ (Ps. 104:20). . . . Said [the Rabbi] to him, ‘Perhaps you are taking the innocent and leaving the guilty.’ [The policeman] said to him, ‘How shall I do it?’ [The Rabbi] said to him, ‘Come; I will teach you how to do it. Go in the first four hours of the morning to the wine-bar. If you see someone drinking wine and falling asleep, ask of him what his profession is. If he is a rabbinical student, he has arisen early for study. If he is a day-laborer, he has arisen early to his labor. If he worked at night, [find out] perhaps it is metal smelting [a silent form of work], and if not, then he is a thief and seize him.’ The rumor reached the king’s house, and he said, ‘Let him who read the proclamation be the one to execute it.’

This passage enters the text owing to an association between the verse cited about the animals tramping at night and Resh Lakish’s very serious argument using that very verse to prove that humans ought not to be made to work at night. It is as such seamlessly incorporated into the associative flow of the talmudic pericope just as is other material of very different tone and theme. In contrast to traditional and post-modern harmonizing and moralizing readings of this passage, I can only make sense of it as deeply parodic in its stance toward rabbinic truth procedures. A representative of that very community (the community of ‘us’) is shown here proposing both ridiculous and palpably pernicious logic in his advice to the policeman. A logical procedure for determining guilt is proposed that would be just as likely to catch new fathers as night raiders in its net. And this is presented as having been so impressive to the local representative of the Empire that our good Rabbi himself is hired as chief of police.

From this point on, the text is thus not an assertion of but rather a critique of its own practices, of its own forms of epistemological certainty. Rabbi Elazar’s logical deduction with its concomitant certainty must be read, I suggest, as parodic of the practices of rabbinic deduction itself. In a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*, the text lets us know that a criterion of truth leads to the deaths of innocents; it is Rabbi Elazar’s search for

absolute righteousness through absolute truth that leads to that gross injustice. As the text explicitly remarks of the clever Rabbi, he is, in his epistemological certainty of who and what is good and evil, not a revolutionary at all but a *moser*, a collaborator with tyranny. He becomes the policeman, and has his own epistemological criteria by which he decides who it is that he will send to his death. When we see it in the Hellenistic context of its own time, it fits beautifully into the world of the *spoudogeloion* and the Menippean satire. This point is neither philological nor historical but literary and interpretative. The text, like Menippean satire itself, is precisely a critique of and not an affirmation of the view that there are those who know what goodness is, a critique of both philosophical and halakhic *epistemai*.

#### 4. Gut feelings—or, epistemology in the operating theater

Our little picaresque continues with the following anecdote raising even sharper rabbinic doubts about rabbinic epistemologies:

- (5) One day a certain laundry man met him [Rabbicop], and called him, ‘Vinegar son of Wine’ [wicked son of righteous father]. He said, ‘Since he is so brazen, one can deduce that he is wicked.’ He said, ‘Seize him.’ They seized him. After he had settled down, he went in to release him, but he could not. He applied to him the verse, ‘One who guards his mouth and his tongue, guards himself from troubles’ (Proverbs 21:23). They hung him. He stood under the hanged man and cried. Someone said to him, ‘Be not troubled; he and his son both had intercourse with an engaged girl on *Yom Kippur*.’ In that minute, he placed his hands on his guts, and said, ‘Be joyful, O my guts, be joyful! If it is thus when you are doubtful, when you are certain even more so. I am confident that rot and worms cannot prevail over you.’ [Baba Metsia 83b]

The Rabbi’s absolute certainties lead here to gross and irreversible injustice on a matter of life and death. True enough the text retrieves the Rabbi’s honor, as it were, by indicting the victim of other capital crimes, but surely this does not vindicate his deduction that the man was a thief. The text has now entered fully into a late antique world of the grotesque and satirical in which the gut instincts of the Rabbi—and we will see that these are prodigious guts indeed—are sufficient to justify sentences of death.

The sequence ends with a brilliant rabbinic self-parody:

- (6) ‘I am confident that rot and worms cannot prevail over you.’ But even so, he was not calmed. They gave him a sleeping potion and

took him into a marble room and ripped open his stomach and were taking out baskets of fat and placing it in the July sun and it did not stink. But no fat stinks. It does if it has red blood vessels in it, and this even though it had red blood vessels in it, did not stink.

After relating this extraordinarily over-the-top story of a scientific experiment by which the Rabbi could actually test and prove the ability of his guts to tell the truth, an objection of pure talmudic form is raised. The fat in the sun test is not a good test, since fat never stinks. Having raised an objection (*qushya*) in the dialectical style, the resolution (*terus*) is classically talmudic as well. A particular circumstance is cited with respect to this particular situation that makes it exceptional and thus a good test case. Note how similar in form the objection and resolution are to the ‘serious’ versions of both at the very beginning of the sugya with respect to the question of what one must feed her day laborers. This all has highly comic effect. As already mentioned, we have slipped in the course of a paragraph from the important and ethical reflections of the early part of the text to a grotesque parody of everything that the Rabbis hold true and holy, their study of Torah with its logical content and form.

The Talmud has not yet exhausted its store of grotesque commentary on these rabbinic guts. Remarking on our good Rabbi and a colleague of his of similar bodily proportion, the Talmud deadpan informs us:

- (7) When Rabbi Ishmael the son of Yose and Rabbi Elazar the son of Rabbi Shimon used to meet each other, an ox team could walk between them [under the arch formed by their bellies] and not touch them.

A certain matron said to them, ‘Your children are not yours.’

They said, ‘Theirs [our wives’ bellies] are bigger than ours.’

‘If that is the case, even more so!’

There are those who say that thus they said to her: ‘As the man, so is his virility.’ And there are those who say that thus did they say to her: ‘Love compresses the flesh.’ [Babylonian Talmud, Baba Mešia 84a]<sup>4</sup>

Although here too later rabbinic voices have sought to reduce the strangeness of this anecdote by providing moralistic explanations, a striking parallel from the second-century Philostratus, a new Sophist who incorporates elements of the Menippean in his work, will, I think, illuminate it and place it within its cultural context. In his *The Lives of the Sophists*, Philostratus relates the following legend about one of his heroes:

- (8) When this Leon came on an embassy to Athens, the city had long been disturbed by factions and was being governed in defiance of established customs. When he came before the assembly he excited universal laughter, since he was fat and had a prominent paunch, but he was not at all embarrassed by the laughter. 'Why,' said he, 'do ye laugh, Athenians? Is it because I am so stout and so big? I have a wife at home who is much stouter than I, and when we agree the bed is large enough for us both, but when we quarrel not even the house is large enough.' Thereupon the citizens of Athens came to a friendly agreement, thus reconciled by Leon, who had so cleverly improvised to meet the occasion.<sup>5</sup>

The narratives are strikingly similar: A sophist/sage is made fun of owing to his obesity. In both cases, the response is that his/their wives are even fatter than they are. In the talmudic version, the sexual slur is made directly while in Philostratus it is only alluded to, but in both cases, the response is that where there is love, there is room in the bed! I find it difficult to escape the conclusion that whatever the precise lines of transmission, and they could be legion, these two narratives are so close as to demonstrate their genetic connection.

Now it is important to note that the sense of the Philostratean text is precisely a critique of any certainty of righteousness. The Athenians are plagued by faction. Faction is the worst evil that a polity can undergo, and it is caused by being sure of one's righteousness and by a commitment to episteme. The ascetic philosophical life, with its search for truth and good, is placed under critique by the Sophist who finds in the very excess of his body a different kind of knowledge, a knowledge in which harmony, not certainty of one's righteousness, makes room in the bed and in the city, as well. In the rabbinic parallel to this narrative of a Fat Sophist, the same kind of critique of epistemological certainty is being mobilized but to different, less genial, ends, I think, than the Philostratean version. The rabbinic 'heroes' of this uncomely narrative with their murderous certainties and disproportionate bodies represent a corrosive view of the Rabbis that were it adopted would dissolve the authority and holiness of the rabbinic community. Later attempts to read morals into and out of the story do not reduce its alienness and alienating quality at all. The serious halakha and its grotesque narrative companion exist together cheek by jowl in the same text, producing (I argue) the satirical effect that we find in Lucian and Petronius.

As an emblem of this satirical dialogicity, we find the immediately following coda to our narrative in what is surely one of the most sensational, if not shocking, passages in the Talmud. In order to demonstrate

the principle that a man's virility is in proportion to the size of his belly, the Talmud offers the following information on a group of notoriously fat Rabbis:

- (9) Said Rabbi Yoḥanan, 'Rabbi Ishmael the son of Yose's member was like a wineskin of nine kav; Rabbi Elazar the son of Rabbi Shimon's member was like a wineskin of seven kav.' Rav Papa said, 'Rabbi Yoḥanan's member was like a wineskin of three kav.' And there are those who say: like a wineskin of five kav. Rav Papa himself had a member which was like the baskets of Hipparenum. [84a]

Note that we have a kind of ladder form here. In each case, the Rabbi who reports on the penis size of his colleagues has his own exposed by the next speaker, and the *Stamma* concludes it all with the extravagance of Rav Papa's own equipment. Every single one of these Rabbis function within halakhic dialectic as the most serious and dedicated of seekers after truth. My argument is, therefore, that the aggada, not only but especially the aggada of the grotesque, when read together with the halakhic dialectic, constitutes the Talmud as a virtual Menippean satire, precisely the kind of mixed bag that we find in such as Lucian and Petronius or in the novel.

Bakhtin (1984: 134) coined the term 'clamping principle', a force that binds all of the heterogeneous elements 'into the organic whole of a genre'. If the Talmud is an 'organic whole', it will look, I think, like a very rotund Rabbi, with various and very large organs sticking out crudely—almost obscenely—sometimes, as organic perhaps as a fish-horse or a goat-stag, to quote Lucian on his own works. I am attempting, in part, to theorize and historicize a persistent intuition I have had in my forty years of reading Talmud, an intuition that it somehow best fits, in world literature, with precisely the satirical dialogues of Lucian, *The Satyricon*, with *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, *Tristram Shandy*, and *Moby Dick*.

## **5. Theoretical coda on authorial agency and dialogue: The novel approach**

“‘Novel’” is the name Bakhtin gives to whatever force is at work within a given literary system to reveal the limits, the artificial constraints of the system’ (Bakhtin 1981: Introduction, xxxi). ‘Novel’—and its earlier cognate form, the Menippean satire—is thus the space within the literary system within which dialogism is introduced, that is dialogue between the literary system and its own limits: ‘When the novel becomes the dominant

genre, epistemology becomes the dominant discipline' (1981: 15), precisely the sort of self-reflectivity on its own knowledge/lack of knowledge that I would claim for the Talmud as produced through the heterogeneous and incongruent concatenation of its diverse incorporated genres and materials. In the sugya, I find, then, everything 'crammed into one abstract consciousness', that of the *Stamma*; in the sugya but *not* in the Talmud, in which the *Stamma* has incorporated both the voice of unquestioning devotion to Torah (his own voice, as it were) and a deeply antithetical, challenging, nearly corrosive second voice, that 'second accent', of which Bakhtin (1984: 82) writes, that it 'would inevitably be perceived as a crude contradiction within the author's world view'. The *Stamma* itself is thus a double-voiced literary phenomenon, a monologism characterized by a drive toward a complete control of meaning under the *aegis* of the rule-based 'Oral Torah', on the one hand, and a massive disruption of that monologue at the same time, on the other hand. This double voicing in which neither voice defeats the other (or even entirely comprehends and grasps the other) is what brings it as a text closest to that which Bakhtin calls the novel.

If as Bakhtin (1981: 361) has put it, 'the novelistic hybrid is *an artificially organized system for bringing different languages in contact with one another*, a system having as its goal the illumination of one language by means of another, the carving out of a living image of another's language',<sup>6</sup> and if the Talmud itself is, as I have proposed, such a system as well, then it would be an error to reduce that system of languages in contact to a single monologic discourse. It is not, accordingly, the polyphony potential in narrative that produces dialogism in the Talmud but the yoking of the narrative with the halakhic dialectic, like an ox with a donkey, in the talmudic field that renders the Talmud a dialogical text. I am suggesting that the languages of the halakhic sugya and of the 'wild' biographical *aggada* are deeply antithetical and thus in dialogue with each other. Bakhtin's (1984: 134) claim is that the *menippea* is characterized by 'a striking combination of what would seem to be absolutely heterogeneous and incompatible elements: philosophical dialogue [the sugya, DB], adventure and fantasticality, slum naturalism, utopia, and so forth.' The positing of such a genre of literature—whether in the end we call it 'novel' or not—in which one could, and I would, read the Talmud seems powerfully compelling.

Coming back then to the question with which I began, namely the sharp incongruity between halakhic discourse in which the Rabbis are virtually indistinguishable and the narratives of their adventures in which they are both sharply defined from each other as well as grotesquely at variance from their positionality as voices in the dialectic, we can

rephrase the quandary of the Talmud in more general form. How can there be dialogue in the text? It cannot be in the dialogues between characters, for as Bakhtin (1984: 82) has reminded us, ‘in the characters, individuality kills the signifying power of their ideas, or, if these ideas retain their power to mean, then they are detached from the individuality of the character and are merged with that of the author. Hence the *single ideational accent of the work*; the appearance of a second accent would inevitably be perceived as a crude contradiction within the author’s world view’. It is precisely for this reading that the halakhic dialectic is so thoroughly monologized. And yet Bakhtin himself certainly posits and celebrates precisely such ‘second accents’, such crude contradictions within the world view of the author (or of the text). How can they, then, be theorized? How is it possible for a ‘word’, an ‘alien’ word or voice to enter the language of the text?

One reading of Bakhtin (or perhaps, one strand of Bakhtin’s writing) would lead us to assume that the author is not in control of her text and the alien words enter, as it were, of their own agency, the agency of the language itself, all the anonymous and unknown usages of the word prior to this text. It is this reading that produces the Kristevan or more broadly deconstructive version of intertextuality. On this reading, the Talmud, like any other text decentered from any authorial consciousness or agency, contains somehow the contradictory registers and dialects, if you will, of the very language itself, the language that speaks the text and its author. We would understand the Talmud as embodying such crude contradictions as part and parcel of its very existence as literature, as discourse, as human language, only perhaps more overtly so than some other forms of western belles lettres. The ‘alien’ word is a product not of anyone’s agency but creeps in or inhabits the text simply by virtue of the text as having been composed in a language with all its cacophony of registers and usages. The second accent appears, as it were, of itself; the language of jarring contradictions speaking the text and thus the author. This position is oddly somehow easier to imagine for the Talmud and has been imagined so by many quite traditional Talmudists (such as the aforementioned Richard Kalmin).

Another reading of Bakhtin—actually another strand in Bakhtin’s writing—seems to imagine authors who are capable of harboring a word and the word that challenges that word at one and the same time without seeking harmonization or closure or decision, and can, moreover, build such dialogue into the text at its deepest structural levels. The first reading does not distinguish between genre and genre, text and text, author and author with respect to intertextuality, by definition, since there are no authors or texts on its lights. The latter does, for instance, notoriously

between Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, and ascribes a degree of agency to the Author in the making of the text that is denied in the first, deconstructive, interpretation of Bakhtin.

On this view which I find deeply attractive, an author has agency (even a multiple author, an Anonymous, even an Implied Author) in the production of the dialogical text. The Talmud, consonant with the accents of its broad literary context, manifests a deep commitment to a set of ideals and perhaps even a search for truth, imagined as God's Will, while at the same time incorporating within its textual world a voice as strident as any Menippean satire, a voice that would corrosively deny any such ideals and any such searches, reducing them to the itches and scratches of a human body. Neither of these two voices is meant to defeat the other, each constantly undercutting and being undercut by the other.

## Notes

1. This was a point made to me by Virginia Burrus nearly a decade ago that has proven very fruitful for me.
2. See also in this regard Conte (1996).
3. Lieberman (1942: 152–154), referring for the Widow to earlier scholars. He noted, moreover, that in several instances of Greco-Roman proverbs appearing in rabbinic texts, it is the Babylonians who are closer to the Hellenistic text than the Palestinians (1942: 154–157). See too Kovelman (1999). On Petronius and the Milesian, see now Jenson (2004).
4. For a longer discussion of this passage in its context, see Boyarin (1993: 200–206).
5. Philostratus and Eunapius (1998: 15). For possible connections between Philostratus and the (Palestinian) Rabbis, see Halevy (1976: 13–20).
6. Burrus (2005: 51) has discussed the relation of Bakhtin's hybridity to that of Homi Bhabha.

## References

- Arrowsmith, W. (trans.) (1983). Introduction. *The Satyricon*, by Petronius Arbiter. New York: New American Library.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, M. Holquist (ed. and trans.). (University of Texas Press Slavic Series.) Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. C. Emerson (ed. and trans.), Theory and History of Literature Series. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Boyarin, D. (1993). *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture*, The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics 25. Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Burrus, V. (2005). Mimicking virgins: Colonial ambivalence and the ancient romance. *Arethusa* 38: 49–88.
- Conte, G. B. (1996). *The Hidden Author: An Interpretation of Petronius' Satyricon*, Sather Classical Lectures. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Halevy, E. E. (1976). *Amoraic Aggadot: The Biographical Aggadah of the Palestinian and Babylonian Amoraim in the Light of Greek and Latin Sources*. Tel Aviv: Devir.
- Jensson, G. (2004). *The Recollections of Encolpius: The Satyrical of Petronius as Milesian Fiction*, Ancient Narrative Series. Eelde/Groningen: Barkhuis Publishing and Groningen University Library.
- Kalmin, R. (2006). The formation and character of the Babylonian Talmud. In *The Cambridge History of Judaism: Vol. IV The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period*, S. T. Katz (ed.), 840–877. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kovelman, A. B. (1999). The Miletian story of Beruria. *Vestnik Evreyskogo Universiteta* 1 (19): 8–23.
- Levinas, E. (1990). *Nine Talmudic Readings*, A. Aronowicz (trans.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Lieberman, S. (1942). *Greek in Jewish Palestine Studies in the Life and Manners of Jewish Palestine in the II–IV Centuries C. E.* New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America.
- Nightingale, A. W. (1995). *Genres in Dialogue: Plato and the Construct of Philosophy*. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Philostratus and Eunapius (1998). *Philostratus: The Lives of the Sophists, Eunapius: Lives of the Philosophers*, W. C. F. Wright (ed. and trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Relihan, J. C. (1993). *Ancient Menippean Satire*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins.
- Sullivan, J. P. (trans.) (1986). Introduction. In *The Satyricon*, by Petronius Arbiter and L. A. Seneca, 11–32. Harmondsworth/New York: Penguin Books.

Daniel Boyarin received his Ph.D. in Talmud from the Jewish Theological Seminary and is currently professor at the University of California, Berkeley. His research interests include dialogue, dialectics, and rhetoric in the Talmud and ancient Greek literature. His most recent book-length publication is *Border Lines* (University of California Press, 2008). Address for correspondence: Department of Near Eastern Studies, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA <boyarin@berkeley.edu>.