CONSTRUCTING “WE, YOU, AND THE OTHERS”
THROUGH NON-POLEMICAL DISCOURSE

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One of the notable characteristics of the human species is its proclivity for group formation. At the experiential level, the member of a group has a sense of what Bruce Lincoln calls “affinity and estrangement.” These are the dispositions that construct social boundaries and create a sense of belonging, the affective states that constitute a “we” that is somehow separate from “others.” The most fundamental social group, of course, is the kinship group, and evidence exists that human beings have a biologically based inclination to favor those to whom they are most closely linked genetically. In complex societies, however, this same tendency toward group formation also expresses itself in numerous associations that unite an assortment of persons who are not closely linked by kinship. In those cases forms of symbolic construction substitute for the biological foundation in creating the necessary dispositions of affinity and estrangement. The range of these symbolic constructions is virtually infinite, involving both verbal and nonverbal practices. Sometimes these constructions are subtle; in other cases they may be explicit and emphatic.

For a sectarian community, such as the Yahad of Qumran, the task of group formation was a highly self-conscious enterprise. Intentional differentiation between “we” and “others” is most clearly marked in polemical formulations that distinguish between “children of light” and “children of darkness” or the “habitation of the wicked” and the “council of holiness.” Although this polemical language has a crucial role to play in the construction of the identity of “us” and “them” in the Yahad’s worldview, I want to direct attention here to the important but often overlooked role of non-polemical discourse in creating the dispositions of affinity and estrangement.

To understand the crucial role of non-polemical discourse it is helpful to consider the social nature of language itself, a topic central to the work of the Bakhtin circle. One of their claims is that language is always socially stratified and socially stratifying. By listening to subtle differences in language, one can map the sub-communities within a society. This mapping of sub-communities can be traced along any number of different lines—economic class, region, relative urbanization, religion, occupation, gender, age cohort, and so forth. These social dialect groups will talk about a different range of topics, use a different but overlapping stock of words, and often give slightly different nuances of meaning to the same words. Also, the stylistic features of their speech, their speech genres, and even some of their grammatical forms will be different.

Some of the social dialect groups one can identify by this kind of analysis may be loose and transient speech communities. But the cultivation of social dialects plays an important role in the identity formation of more stable and long-lived groups. “Speaking the same language” creates deep affective bonds. Anyone who has ever left a linguistic community knows how satisfying it is to talk again with someone from that community. By speaking in one’s distinctive social dialect, one reinforces his or her identity and group consciousness, no matter the subject of the conversation.

The situation is more complex than this analogy suggests, however, because people always speak a variety of social dialects. Bakhtin provides an instructive illustration when he describes the “illiterate peasant…[who] nevertheless lived in several language systems: he prayed to God in one language…, sang songs in another, spoke to his family in a third and, when he began to dictate petitions to the local authorities…, he tried speaking yet a fourth language (the official-literate language, ‘paper’ language).” These different dialects are correlated with different identities and different social groups. Bakhtin’s peasant was a worshiper in a religious community, a comrade at the tavern, the paterfamilias in his family, and a citizen of a nation. For the most

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