

What Could the “Great Time” Mean? / *O que poderia significar o “Grande Tempo”?*

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ABSTRACT

The Great Time is present in Bakhtin’s conception of culture and literature and in his philosophical anthropology. Taken as a metaphor, the concept could be understood in a wide range of meanings: tradition, virtual future, history, literary and intellectual history, memory in its broadest sense, an ontological level of existence, transcendence, etc. The Great Time seems to be related to Bakhtin’s central idea about personal responsibility, rooted in the concrete situation of the act (*postupok*). From this point of view, the concept implies the presence of a “third” in communication or in the unfinished existential dialogue. The position of this “third” (a polysemic concept itself: people, the reader, the future, God) in dialogue always occurs from a certain outsideness or exotopy, which allows a value judgement of the act and which goes further than its concrete and social situation. Thus, in a certain way the “third” is a posture from which it is possible to understand the act as transcendence. Through my experience as a scholar and professor of Hispanic Literature and Latin American thinking, I have witnessed the relevance of Bakhtin’s anthropological conception.

KEYWORDS: Great Time; Dialogism; “Third” in communication

RESUMO

O Grande Tempo está presente na concepção de cultura e literatura de Bakhtin e na sua antropologia filosófica. Tomado como uma metáfora, o conceito poderia ser compreendido por meio de uma extensa gama de significados: tradição, futuro virtual, história literária e intelectual, memória em seu sentido mais amplo, um nível ontológico de existência, transcendência, etc. O Grande Tempo parece estar relacionado à ideia central de Bakhtin a respeito da responsabilidade pessoal, radicada na situação concreta do ato (postupok). Desse ponto de vista, o conceito implica a presença de um “terceiro” na comunicação ou no inconcluso diálogo da existência. A posição desse “terceiro” no diálogo (um conceito polissêmico em si mesmo: pessoas, o leitor, o futuro, Deus) ocorre sempre a partir de um distanciamento ou exotopia, que permite um julgamento de valor em relação ao ato, e que vai além de sua situação concreta e social. De certa forma, o “terceiro” é uma postura por meio da qual é possível ponderar o ato como transcendência. Minha experiência de vida, como intelectual e professor de Literatura Hispânica e Pensamento Latinoamericano, tem testemunhado a relevância da concepção antropológica bakhtiniana.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Grande tempo; Dialogismo: “Terceiro” na comunicação

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Yes, we explain first, then we understand: words do the thinking for us.
The tower (Vaginov)¹

If you're expecting me to come up with a definition, or even some kind of proposal for defining "great time," you may be disappointed. I shall be speaking out of my Mexican (and Latin-American) experience of teaching and disseminating Bakhtin's ideas over a period of almost forty years. It is an experience from and for otherness, and it is certainly dialogical.

As many other concepts of Bakhtin's, the idea of "great time" appears as a use-value in his texts; hence, those who find the idea of "great time" useful, exploit it in accordance with their own purposes. Of course, to guide us in its correct interpretation we may have to recourse to the explanations of those who are allegedly the most reliable authorities in Russian, English, and French: "Perspective of centuries"? (MORSON; EMERSON 1990, p.35);² "Dialogue of cultures"? (BIBLER, 1991, p.165).³ Tamarchenko's *Thesaurus*, on the other hand, diplomatically avoids commitment to any attempt at calibrating it; perhaps it seemed to Tamarchenko unnecessary—self-evident? Graham Pechey includes it among the "antitheses of the novel's self-conscious chron(otop)icity" (2007, p.129). Alternatively, here is a more recent interpretation to "great time": "It is a conception of time approaching secular eternity, a kind of *saecula saeculorum* of human communication," or "long historical continuity" (REED, 2014, p.146), reserving above all the word "secular." Just as other concepts, the meaning of this one is to be understood in accordance with the context in which it is used. And perhaps, following Isupov, we could say: "the more you read, the less you understand" (2013, p.1, our translation).⁴ Others simply quote Bakhtin, who is very graphic

¹ RN (Revisor's notes). VAGINOV, K. *The Tower*. Translated into English by Benjamin Sher. New Orleans, LA: Sher Publishers, 1997. [Original title: The goat-song; Original title in Russian: Kozlinaya Pesn']. Also available at: <<http://www.websher.net/srl/twr.html#Ch4>>

² Likewise, "In his fourth period, Bakhtin uses the term *great time* to refer to the sense that past events, as they become congealed in institutions, languages of heteroglossia, and genres, pose specific problems and offer specific resources for each present moment that follows" (*Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*, 1990, p.414).

³ RN. There is no published translation of Bibler's work *Михаил Михайлович Бахтин или поэтика культуры* [Mikhail Mikhailovitch Bakhtin or Cultural Poetic]. In the original: "диалог культур" (БИБЛЕР, 1991, стр.165).

⁴ RN. There is no published translation of Isupov's article *Бахтин академический* [The Scholar Bakhtin]. In the original: "чем больше читаешь, тем меньше понимаешь." (ИСУПОВ, 2013, стр.1).

but also ambivalent and addicted to variants in his explanations. All in all —and despite the fact that the expression “great time” itself appears at a late stage in his writing— it can be assured that the concept itself exists implicitly, under a more philosophical aspect, from his earliest texts onwards. “Great time” is, in fact, a premise implicit in his enthymeme on Being.

The most popular Bakhtinian concepts are still dialogism and its step-sister, intertextuality, followed by polyphony and hybridity. The latter translates very organically in terms of Latin-American cultural notions as “transculturation” (F. Ortiz, A. Rama) and “cultural heterogeneity” (A. Cornejo Polar). All of these are concepts with greater affinity to terms belonging to the theory of discourse; they seem more “scientific” than “great time.” On the other hand, when one starts to speak to colleagues and students about Bakhtin’s ethics and aesthetics, the listeners’ gaze becomes cloudy. No few have a deep prejudice concerning the religious and idealist contamination often inherent in ethics and morality, let alone eternity somehow implied in “great time.” It has cost radically-minded Latin-Americans much effort to free themselves from the preponderant secular ideological dominion of the Catholic Church, and so people tend to mistrust whatever sounds like transcendence, identifiable with “the beyond”—unless it is to be accepted as part of the myth of pre-Hispanic cosmologies, often assumed as part of an official identity. Aesthetics, once brought down from the philosophical heights, serves as an instrument of everyday acts and functions. What is at stake in Bakhtin, on the other hand, are ideas linked to the ethical act and to answerability: both concrete and ontological at the same time. Isn’t it a metaphysics of presence, another sin according to postmodernity?

Everybody will remember the words of Julia Kristeva (1970, p.21) in the preface to *La poétique de Dostoievski*, regarding its antiquated and “humanist,”⁵ if not tacitly Christian, language. Despite the existence of several approaches to Bakhtin from a theological point of view, most of those who avail themselves of the Bakhtinian arsenal prefer to remain proudly materialist, which is no doubt politically correct. As regards that Bakhtin is “antiquated,” or

⁵RN. In the original: “humaniste” (KRISTEVA, 1970, p.21).

gone “out of fashion,” we would do well to recall the words of Averintsev (1976, p.58):⁶ “How could he go out of fashion, if he was never fashionable?”⁷

Let us try to take on Bakhtinian thinking in the context of a “laic theology,” in the style of Walter Benjamin. M. Holquist proposed, for analysing verbal creation, a philo-theology in order to embrace the ambiguous suggestion of an alternance of philology/philosophy.

“Great time” is one of the most enigmatic and potentially idealistic concepts, unless one takes it as just a rhetorical and decorative device. It can also lead us into the false problematic of the canon, with its institutional decisions regarding those who are worthy to participate in the dialogue of “eternity” and those who are not.

V. Bibler (1991, p.104; our translation)⁸ says that the figures that remit to “great time” are, on the one hand, particular options and, on the other, a “catharsis” or illuminations accumulated throughout the centuries, on the basis of our ethical and creative decisions. Characters, such as Hamlet, Oedipus or Don Quixote, and also authors, such as Cervantes, Aristotle, etc., are included. But where is a place to be found for the anonymous voices of “universal communion” (соборность), to participate in the universal Hosanna? Let’s recall this image of polyphony from the *Karamazov Brothers*.

Body, soul and spirit are interpreted in Bakhtin as categories of philosophical anthropology, which are integrated with his thought on literature. Immortality and transcendence come dangerously close to the kind of vocabulary that every self-respecting materialist holds at arms’ length. “Great time” is one of these evanescent concepts as reality itself in the media; and nonetheless, when speaking about it I shall try to leave aside the atheistic arguments of Mikhail Aleksandrovich Berlioz⁹ or Ostap Bender.¹⁰ In practice, I can assure you, I have known a sociologist who, taking his biologist wife as witness, stated

⁶RN. In the original: “Бахтин никогда не был новомодным, так с чего бы ему сделаться старомодным?” (АВЕРИНЦЕВ, 1976, стр.58).

⁷ In reference not so much to Bakhtin’s having gone in and out of fashion with academics as to the fact that the fashionable tendencies of his times were never of the slightest interest to him.

⁸ RN. In the original: “катарсисы” (БИБЛЕР, 1991, стр.104).

⁹ From M. Bulgakov’s *Master and Margarita*.

¹⁰ See *Twelve Chairs* and *The Golden Calf*, by I. Ilf and E. Petrov.

triumphantly that she had never managed to identify anything that could be called soul in her dealings with bodies: the argument came about in connection with the films of Tarkovsky.

The soul is the category of internal life that is generated and acquires its value on the basis of the inner life of another person: it is another relational anthropological concept, as most Bakhtinian concepts. The soul is a concrete concept, determined by individual forms and those of existence, and remits to some actual or illusory body, to the union of bodies. As regards the immortality of the soul, one can only speak of that in the sense that, once a particular body has been abandoned, its soul will continue to exist within people as an experience of the past, as the concretion of what has been lived once by someone, and is circumscribed by the mortality of those who remember: soul, then, as memory, in all the extension of the word. It is the semiotic nature of memory, capable of registering imprints of otherness, both virtual and material, of those persons who existed before that guarantees our precarious immortality. The transmission of knowledge not codified genetically is the only guarantee of our existence, say the scientists.

The immortality of souls is conditioned by the fact that in the souls of others a new hetero-existence is reflected, which would have belonged to the spiritual life of another man. And Bakhtin (1990, p.110) profiles: “I experience the inner life of another as his *soul*; I live in the *spirit*.” Hence it follows that the soul is basically an aesthetic category, and that an aesthetic attitude—conclusive, that is, as regards one’s own inner life—is impossible. The body learns in space, the soul in time, the spirit in dialogue. But if we take up again the attributes of the human from the Bakhtinian philosophy of language (that of “Bakhtin and his circle”), we shall discover that ideas related to the apparently immaterial can only be conceived with the help of signs.

And the spirit, as the manifestation of unfinished dialogue, *is* projected towards “great time.” “The spirit (both one’s own and another’s) is not given as a thing (the direct object of the natural sciences); it can only be present through signification, through realization in texts...” (BAKHTIN, 1986a, p.106). But the possibility of great time is founded on introspection, that is, in the interior dialogue, or *micro-dialogue*. Only the presence of the self as third person, the subject personalized, situated in its historical-geographic chronotope and conditioned by it, makes possible the *macro-dialogue* between cultures, projected

towards “great time.” The change of contexts presupposes a semantic growth. Our knowledge, our interaction with the works (imprints) of the past is only possible taking into account its historical enrichment: “We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise itself; we seek answers to our own questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths” (BAKHTIN, 1986b, p.7). That is to say, we are translating a remote culture into our own cultural context: the transference of meanings implies an interpretation of signs. Walter Benjamin, when speaking of translation, shows facets of dialogue in time presupposing also semiotic aspects, the simultaneity of the sacred and the profane, and the productive growth of the original in the reply-translation. And the semiotic undergoes a transformation as if it were a matter of life, not a code: “For in its afterlife —which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living— the original undergoes a change. Even words with fixed meaning can undergo a maturing process” (BENJAMIN, 2002, p.256).

“Great time” is the semiotic space of culture in which the simultaneity of historical meanings, the dialogue between them, is possible. Recalling the significance of the word “meaning”: meanings are answers to questions. Whatever answers no question has no meaning. Bakhtin *dixit*. Texts do not remain the same throughout history, but grow on interacting with new contexts and other texts; they answer new questions. Let us think in terms of a hetero-scientific semiotics that personifies codes and sets forth the simultaneity of great time.

We are accustomed to making a rigorous separation of the diachronic and the synchronic; hence, according to the inexorable chronotope of our existence and verbal creation (authorship), the conception of great time is perceived as a diachronic and historicist position. However, from the description of polyphony as the interaction of diverse points of view, concomitance and simultaneity point towards the ontological level of the “dialogue on the threshold” or, better still, “in eternity.”

In the philosophy of the act, the introduction of answerability as corollary of existence (being) itself makes manifest its bifrontal character, in the sense of “Janus as metaphor for

the thirdness of dialogue” (HOLQUIST, 2001, pp.55-56).¹¹ With the thirdness of a superior judgment on dialogue and the values set in motion within it, ethics—that is not the source of values but the way to relate to values—acquires a significance that remits to transcendence.¹²

I would like to state clearly that I would prefer it if all these elements were not related outright with a mystical or theological discourse, but rather taken as categories of philosophical anthropology, for in fact that is how they appear in the context of Bakhtinian reflection. The point of view from which he speaks, or if you prefer, his “ideological position” is secular in principle, but the elements of the various discourses tend to migrate from one discursive genre to another. We are speaking, then, of metaphors, but in our case they are epistemic metaphors.

The personalized semiotic space, which possesses the capacity for a refraction of meanings in the most diverse alterities, with the consequent transformation in the “bodies of meaning,” could perhaps be compared with Lotman’s idea of the semiosphere. The genetic relation between the ideas seems obvious to me, although not in terms of influence but, rather, as a contestational response; except that Lotman’s semiotic simultaneity is not projected onto history (it is sufficient to link its origin with the ideas of Vernadsky), but is rather conceived synchronically, with the historical meanings codified structurally by way of systems of cultural languages. In Bakhtin, on the other hand, the personalization of meanings involved in dialogue with all types of cultural and historical alterities is what prevails. For Bakhtin, culture is frontier. Culture possesses neither internal territory nor any cultural zone; rather, all of it is situated on the frontiers, which pass through all parts, crossing each of its aspects, and every cultural act inhabits the boundaries between the different zones of human action. Lotman also takes up this idea of frontier, but elaborates it in a different way.

¹¹ Holquist’s position regarding the problem: “Behind the decline of institutionalized religion, the work of the sacred goes on: it may assume different masks, but it has not disappeared” (2001, p.61).

¹² According to the commentators of Vol. I of the *Collected Works* (2003), this is related to the conception of the acting subject, or the “self” of the philosophy of the act. As explained in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, the “eternal values,” or the eternal meanings, on being constituted as values that act as motors of thought conceived as ethical act, cannot—from within this self that acts ethically—be considered as universal values, but of value for me alone, in accordance with the postulate regarding the evaluative difference of principle between self and other (cf. p.370). According to this design of ethics, what ought to be is only a concern of the self, never of the other.

From this point of view, intuition —as an instrument of knowledge— and chance can lead to almost mystical coincidences and relations between ideas, subjects, times, and works that are apparently irreconcilable. In fact, intuition may be thought of as chance prepared by experience, and its origin is also dialogical. “There is a strange coincidence, Sancho, in the little events, as well in the great ones, of this world...” (L. Sterne, Letter to Ignatius Sancho, July 27, 1766).¹³ Byron and Pushkin had taken note of this passage, vouching for its inexplicable truth. And Cervantes’s shadow accompanies, maybe unintentionally, Sterne’s words.

Now, let me translate it into a casuistry of concrete philological research. I shall try to demonstrate in which way intuition and casualty may guide you to find these “mystical” coincidences between so different chronotopes as works of a Spanish priest in the Renaissance Italy and a particular position of a Russian contemporary poet situated by himself in-between Russian, Italian and Anglo-American cultures could be.

My very presence at XVth *Bakhtin International Conference*, in that precise chronotope (Stockholm, July of 2014), in which I presented the reflections that encouraged me to write this article, was due to “strange coincidences” of this kind. I arrived there on my way from another international conference, that of the Asociación Internacional Siglo de Oro (AISO), which brings together specialists in the Spanish literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, that year held in Venice. Throughout my life I have been studying a particular Spanish writer, Francisco Delicado, who lived and wrote in Rome, but, as seems likely, died in Venice. In this Adriatic republic he devoted himself to publishing books in Spanish. Now, in the sixteenth century, Venice was home to a flourishing publishing industry, one of the most important in Europe.

In January that year I unearthed a previously unrecorded copy of one of those books in France, and I reported it at the AISO conference. This was a copy of that famous novel of chivalry, *Amadís de Gaula* (published by Delicado in Venice in 1533), which I perused in the library of a French museum. Afterwards I took advantage of my transatlantic journey for a winter visit to Venice, a wish that had been inspired in me by a text of the Russian poet

¹³ RN. Available at: <<<http://www.brycchancarey.com/sancho/letter1.htm>>>.

Joseph Brodsky (1940-1996), who, as it happens, is buried in that city. The text has the English title *Watermark* (1990), but it also has a title in Italian, *Fondamenta degli Incurabili*, which means “Mole (in the sense of seafront) of the Incurables.” On arriving in Venice on a foul winter night, I managed to get lost among unknown streets. On pausing to make out the name of the waterfront street along which I was dragging my suitcase, I discovered that its name was *Zattere agli Incurabili*, and also noticed a memorial plaque commemorating Brodsky. On that trip I became aware for the first time that the waterfront promenade had received its name from a hospital for the incurably ill (some of the original sixteenth-century buildings are still preserved a few steps away from that point). Francisco Delicado was himself an “incurable,” and spent a considerable period of his life in Rome in the Archiospedale de San Giacomo for “incurables,” the term being applied to those suffering from syphilis, of recently importation from America. The Russian poet Brodsky was aware of the connotation of “incurables,” but at the same time it attracted his attention as the name of a place close to which many artists of the most diverse origins had lived during the twentieth century. As for Delicado (of whom Brodsky knew nothing), it seems quite likely that he died in that hospital. I had made some poor attempts at translating some of Brodsky’s poems into Spanish. For that reason, and also because I was born in the same city as Brodsky, St. Petersburg-Leningrad, and because we both left our country for good in the same month (June, 1972: he, in exile, and I by my own choice), I came to feel that the work of this great compatriot was somehow indissolubly linked to my own professional life. But the unexpected coincidence with that Andalusian priest—born a Spaniard, exiled in Rome, and then for the second time in Venice—famous for his extraordinary work in dialogue *The Portrait of Lozana, an Exuberant Andalusian Woman* (Venice, ca. 1530), impressed me considerably.

I had not intended to come, after Venice, to *The Fifteenth Bakhtin Conference*, although I have participated in several in the past. But I found myself there, in that very city that has had so much to do with Brodsky (and of course, besides, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1987). Apart from the strange spatio-temporal configurations that happen to have passed through me—who only possess a modest, though unifying point of view—these two

writers have nothing in common, except perhaps the place of their burial, which in any case is not absolutely certain in the case of the Spaniard Jew, and the condition of exiled, of course.

My work on Delicado has always been oriented by a methodology inspired by the work of Bakhtin. As a historical figure, M. M. is scarcely homologable with the figure of the jovial Andalusian priest— punished by destiny for his Rabelaisian excesses, something rather characteristic of the Renaissance. As a writer, however, Delicado was someone who practiced at an early date the qualities of dialogism, heteroglossia and polyglossia, metafiction and free experimentation with literary and discursive genres.

A genius with a sarcastic bent, and one very much in love with life, Brodsky had as one of his professional features the combination of a metaphysical orientation and a language that surpasses the puritan restrictions of the Russian tradition to which he is a legitimate heir. His desperate attempts to reclaim the gold of his poetry in Russian in his adoptive language, English —a dearly beloved though not a mother tongue— are to some degree parallel to the efforts of Delicado to disseminate his “most limpid Spanish language” among Italian and non-Italian readers. Besides, Spaniards were seen by Italians, in sixteenth century, as invaders and conquerors. On this point the analogy ceases forever: “Don’t compare: the living are incomparable” (MANDELSTAM).¹⁴

For me “great time” is also the possibility for “strange coincidences,” as if destiny led one by the hand for some inextricable purpose.

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