

Fondamenta degli incurabili: (On Great Time) / Fondamenta degli incurabili: (sobre o grande tempo) / Fondamenta degli incurabili: (sobre el gran tiempo)

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ABSTRACT: This article aims to understand and to carefully study the notion of *great time*, which is a relational anthropological concept, just as most of Bakhtin's concepts. According to M. Bakhtin's oeuvre, our precarious immortality is assured by the semiotic nature of memory, which can register virtual or material marks of otherness through conventional signs. In this sense, the soul is also language. By collecting "odd coincidences," the article places in dialogue authors from different chronotopes, such as Francisco Delicado, Cervantes, Sterne, Pushkin, and Joseph Brodsky, and highlights that, as this dialogue is established, the researcher's perspective allows the scientific investigation to enter Bakhtin's great time.

KEYWORDS: Great Time; Memory; Francisco Delicado; *Fondamenta degli incurabili*

RESUMO

Este artigo busca compreender e aprofundar a noção de grande tempo, um conceito antropológico relacional, como grande parte dos conceitos bakhtinianos. Segundo a obra de M. Bakhtin, aquilo que garante a nossa precária imortalidade é o caráter semiótico da memória, capaz de registrar marcas da alteridade, tanto virtuais como materiais, por meio de signos convencionais. Nesse sentido, a alma é também linguagem. Reunindo "estranhas coincidências", o texto coloca em diálogo autores de diferentes cronotopos, de Francisco Delicado a Cervantes, Sterne, Pushkin e Joseph Brodsky, destacando como, ao produzir esse encontro, o olhar do pesquisador pode conduzir a investigação científica no grande tempo bakhtiniano.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Grande tempo; Memória; Francisco Delicado; *Fondamenta degli incurabili*

RESUMEN

Este artículo busca comprender y profundizar la noción de gran tiempo, un concepto antropológico relacional, como gran parte de los conceptos bakhtinianos. Según la obra de M. Bakhtin, lo que garantiza nuestra precaria inmortalidad es el carácter semiótico de la memoria, capaz de registrar marcas de la alteridad, tanto virtuales como materiales, por medio de signos convencionales. De esa manera, el alma es también lenguaje. Reuniendo "extrañas coincidencias", el texto coloca en diálogo autores de diferentes cronotopos, desde Francisco Delicado, hasta Cervantes, Sterne, Pushkin y Joseph Brodsky, destacando como, cuando se produce ese encuentro, la mirada del estudioso puede conducir a la investigación científica en el gran tiempo bakhtiniano.

PALABRAS-CLAVE: Gran tiempo; Memoria; Francisco Delicado; *Fondamenta degli incurabili*

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“There is a strange coincidence, Sancho, in the little events of this world, as well in the great [...]” (L. Sterne, Letter to Ignatius Sancho, July 27, 1766).¹ When the author of *La vida y opiniones de Tristram Shandy, Hidalgo* [*The Life and opinions of Tristram Shandy, Hidalgo*], and of *Viaje sentimental por Francia e Italia* [*Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*] wrote this phrase, Cervantes’ shadow seemed to have been by his side. Byron, in 1816, and Pushkin, in 1831, noted this passage, corroborating its inexplicable certainty. Pushkin read Sterne’s letter in French translation, and put the quote in his notes, thus: “There is a strange proximity [...]”, omitting, Sancho, the actual name of the correspondent, unnecessary in this case, which would have seemed to Sterne to provide a more sententious cadence for the phrase. It acquired, in Russian, this same proverbial tone shared by those who read the classics, attributing it, then, to Pushkin. I tease it out here from the tangle of time and languages, arriving at a comparative crossroads, a gesture that, in this case, has no other objective than to show the random character, but at the same time inevitability of, comparing. Many paths cross in a dimension Bakhtin called “great time,” when configuring an encounter that is only possible thanks to the intervention of reading beyond the chronotopes, and linguistic and cultural transformations.

How is this meeting possible and even “intelligible”?

The Bakhtinian idea of “great time” distills the concomitance of the sacred and profane, of the body, soul and spirit, understood as concepts of philosophical anthropology, which intertwine here, cancelling the traditional counter points between materialism and idealism, rationalism and creative imagination, through the awareness that everything expressed does so through material signs.

Body, soul and spirit are interpreted by Bakhtin as categories of philosophical anthropology that are integrated into his literary perspective. Immortality and transcendence meet dangerously close to all the vocabulary from which any respectable materialist wants to disassociate. Remember that J. Kristeva, in 1970 (p.21) warned about the work: “hesitating between humanistic language, or secretly Christian, and technical terminology; sliding

¹ STERNE, L. Letter LXXXV. From Mr. Sterne, to Ignatius Sancho. In: *Complete Works of Laurence Sterne*. Hastings, UK: Delphi Classics, 2013. (Ebook).

between the careful documentation of a historian of literature, and a penetrating intuition in the reading of texts [...]” etc.²

Bakhtin constructs a system of categories to describe the conditions that make this dialogue on “great time” possible, and in which Sterne, Byron, Pushkin and even Cervantes are able to participate.

Omitting the innumerable literary references to the “soul” and the “spirit,” I diverge for a moment on a passage by the 20th century Russian poet, Marina Tsvetaeva, who, from the time of her exile in France, attempts, poetically, a meeting with the poet Pasternak, residing in Moscow, “at the Inn, *Meeting of the souls*” (“Гостиница *Свиданье души*”).³ What type of mysticism is this?

The soul is the category of the inner life that generates and acquires its force from the inner life of the other person: it is another relational anthropological concept, as are most Bakhtinian concepts⁴. The soul is a concrete concept, determined by individual forms of existence and relying on some body, real or illusory – a union of bodies. As to the immortality of the soul, the only thing that can be said of it, in this sense, is that once it leaves the concrete body, it continues existing in people as past experience, as the concretization of what was once lived by someone, and delimited by the mortality of those who remember it. What guarantees our precarious immortality is the semiotic character of memory, able to record the traces of otherness, both virtual and material, of those who came before. According to scientists, the transmission of knowledge that is not genetically coded is the only guarantee of our existence as a species. For this, we rely on conventional signs. In other words, the soul is also language.

This leads us to the notion of memory as a semiotic condition of culture, and the thirdness, which is an instance of valuation in the ontological dialogue. This thirdness can best be described through a case study, which is often a more didactic move than purely

² Source-text: “hésitant entre un langage humaniste, voire sourdement chrétien, et une terminologie technique; se glissant entre une documentation soignée d’historien de la littérature et une intuition perçante dans la lecture des textes.”

³ Cf. Попытка комнаты, 1926.

⁴ I refer here to his “architectonics of everyday life,” which is formed in a prism of: I-for-myself, I-for-the-other, and the other-for-me. According to her, all possible human acts are seen through this triple perspective on which Bakhtinian ethics is based.

mental constructs. I refer here to an actual “approximation” that took place in January of 2014, a consequence of an unexpected slip of the future – for the party concerned–History, as a point in “great time,” to which the research idol of my entire academic life, Francisco Delicado, would hardly have aspired, arriving so close to the one mentioned. But all instances together form a chronotope in which the perspective and the presence of the researcher place themselves on a border, which also enacts a “third party” in this unexpected dialogue. Among Bakhtin’s epistemological metaphors, “great time” is an implied premise for his enthymeme on existence or, better yet, Being, which marks the simultaneousness and concomitance of the concrete occurrence with the ontological levels. To be, we remember, is to communicate dialogically.

Culture is border. Culture does not have an inner territory nor a cultural zone, because it is found entirely on the borders, traversing all its parts, crossing each one of its aspects, and each cultural act inhabits the borders between distinct zones of human action. And, therefore, the simultaneity of the different eras in History is only possible within the sphere of culture. Thirdness –the third party in the dialogue, capable of understanding it and appreciating it from the outside, as an ethical act, as a communicational bridge, semiosis --, thirdness both axiological and exotopic, is a condition of possibilities from the border, and its true place. This place is an exotopia.

Reminding the possible reader of this text that exotopy indicates an outside position, of one who witnesses a dialogue between two subjects, or the way these two subjects interact, an instance in which they can be understood and judged from a different position than the immediate speakers’. The axiologies are born from a concrete relationship, in which the chronotope of the dialogical encounter between an I and its other, who summon, perhaps without knowing it, this third party. This Bahktinian gesture, thinking more clearly, results of which are disturbingly iconoclastic: ethics is not the source of values, but the way to relate to values. This is because there is the “third party in the dialogue”: future reader, generations to come, society, “folks”, language, God? ... It depends on the coordinates of the semiotic system in which the dialogue is read.

“Great time” is the semiotic manifestation of the culture which makes simultaneity of historical meanings possible, the dialogue between them. It behooves us to remember what

‘sense’ means: sense is the answer to questions. That which does not have any question, does not have any sense, Bakhtin *dixit*. Dialogue understood this way is not visible in its inception nor observable at its conclusion. Texts do not remain equal to themselves through history, because they transform and grow semantically, on interacting with the new contexts and other texts, they answer new questions. We are dealing with heteroscientific semiotics, which personalizes codes (another Bakhtinian heresy, this time with respect to the premises of structuralism) and proposes the simultaneity of the “great time,” which results in the increase of producing texts in history⁵ thanks to the new contexts in which these texts can be read, and the new questions that can be related to them.

Text: live utterance, the result of a cultural dialogue between subjects, fixed in time through a variety of semiotic resources, generated by the culture.

From this point of view, intuition (see Kristeva!), is perceived as an instrument of knowledge and causality, and can lead to almost mystical coincidences, and the relationship between ideas, subjects, eras, and works, in irreconcilable appearances. Even if, in fact, intuition can be thought of as causality prepared by experience, and its origin as dialogic, the culture can be as well, and too, in this case, literature.

We go now to the pedestrian case study.

The fact is that the arbitrariness of luck and investigative obstinacy lead me, in January 2014, to the library of a French museum, to consult a copy, still unknown to specialists in the field, of the *Amadís de Gaula*, the edition which contains a contribution by Francisco Delicado (ca. 1480 – ca. 1535) in 1533, in Venice.

This strange, and, until now, insufficiently known⁶ Spanish writer is famous for his *Retrato de La Lozana andaluza em lengua española muy claríssima* [*Portrait of the Andalusian Lady Lozana in very clear Spanish*], written in Rome, the first version in 1524. It is a dialogic work that describes, in a colorful hybrid language, the daily social life of courtesans and their clients in renaissance Rome, seen from the lowest angles of the city

⁵ It is important to remember “The Task of the Translator” (*Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, 1921) by Walter Benjamin. [BENJAMIN, W. The Task of the Translator. In: _____. *Selected Writings, Volume 1*: 1913-1926. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996, pp.253-263.]

⁶ Its consecration can be considered definitive, through a rigorous philological treatment, based on a recent edition by the Royal Spanish Academy (2011), and completed by Jacques Joset and Folke Gernert, in 2007.

appreciated by its own residents as “Slutty Rome.” The only copy of this book that we know of, however, is registered as anonymous, in Venice, around 1530. Its author, Delicado or Delgado, was self-exiled from Spain for unknown reasons, however, hypothetically for being religious. He had to flee for a second time in Venice because of the Massacre of Rome by the Imperial Army of Carlos V, in 1527-28.

Venice, at that time, had a promising industry in typographic books and book commerce, based on local and international intellectual production, consequently there was a network of bookstores managed by professional distributors. It was one of the best known in all of Europe. One only had to mention the famous Aldus Manutius’ humanist company, producer of the cherished ‘aldin’ editions, with the stamp of a dolphin wrapped around an anchor on the title page. Delicado, involved in book publishing, it seems, from Rome –now his link to the Antonio Maritínez de Salamanca Press⁷ is evident –, according to some hypotheses (Perugini)⁸ took refuge precisely in Venice (according to him, to avoid the vindictive impetus of the “native” Romans) in order to publish his works. The only option was to travel with the Imperial Army to Naples, under Spanish domain. In Venice, sworn enemy of the Emperor, where, by Delicado’s own testimony, not one single compatriot could be found, he should find shelter. Priest by profession, preacher without a parish,⁹ he dedicated himself to the work of revising Spanish books, which were widely distributed in Italy and all over Europe. “Mayor and guardian of these letters,” the idiosyncratic definition of his job, he worked on the edition of *Cárcel de Amor*, *Questión de amor de dos enamorados*, *La Celestina* (1531) [*Prisoner of love*, *Questions of love between two lovers*, *Celestina*], and two books of chivalry: our *Amadís* (1533) and *Primaleón* (1534). At the same time, he managed to publish two of his own texts, previously mentioned, *Lozana* and *El modo de adoperare el legno de Indiaoccidentale, salutíssimo remedio a ogni male & piaga incurabile* [The Method for

⁷ See GERNERT, Folke. “Antonio Martínez de Salamanca, impresor, y Francisco Delicado, corrector. Libros españoles en la imprenta italiana a través de sus ilustraciones” [Antonio Martínez de Salamanca, impresor, e Francisco Delicado, corrector. Livros espanhóis na imprensa italiana por meio de suas ilustrações], in: GÓMEZ-MONTERO, J. Y GERNERT, F. (ed.). *Nápoles – Roma 1504. Cultura y literatura española y portuguesa en Italia en el quinto centenario de la muerte de Isabel la Católica*. Salamanca: SEMYR, 2005, pp.205-242.

⁸ Cf. Carla Perugini, “Nuevos datos en torno a Francisco Delicado” [New data on Francisco Delicado], handwritten.

⁹ In all justice, he obtained a virtual one, in Extremadura, though I am not sure about the exact moment, but in *curia*, not infrequently, managed to take advantage of its benefits. Judging by his situation in Venice, no.

Applying the Wood from West India: The Most Salutory Medicine for all Illness and Incurable Plague], this last being a type of manual to introduce a remedy for syphilis, an illness (it seems) that had recently been imported from America. In his self-published books, he documents his existence and ambitions. He also worked on texts of chivalry with the mastery and care of what we would currently call, editing, altering the original texts and creating revised texts. From 1535 on, traces of his presence are lost. There are two main hypotheses in relation to his later destiny. One suggests he returned to Spain, to the parish on the outskirts of *Cabezuela del Valle*, whose Vicariate, as I mentioned, he earned in Italy. The other hypothesis stages his end in Venice: having suffered from syphilis for twenty years, by his own confession, he supposedly cured himself with infusions and baths of Holywood Lignum Vitae, a process he describes in his book on medical treatments. Based on current medicine, however, there is some doubt about having found a cure: it deals with a degenerative illness, which has phases that have been scientifically described, and, as we know, can lead to deformations in the body –rhinoplasty, for example – and even dementia. Holywood Lignum Vitae, moreover, does not have the antibiotic properties compared to present remedies, for this reason the definitive cure is called into question, even by specialists currently addressing this field. In any case, we know nothing, concretely, about the end of his life.

And now we turn to another agent in history. Joseph Brodsky (1940-1996), the Russian poet, who won the Nobel prize for literature in 1979, and was deported in 1972, from his country, which was the Soviet Union at the time. In 1972, he wrote *Watermark* (1990), a work of prose in English, and in Italian, a work that apparently was commissioned by the Mayor of Venice, *Fondamenta degli Incurabili*. In intense prose, he describes his life in the city during winter, an experience that would repeat itself over a period of twelve years. He also has a series of poems in Russian, on the same theme.

After visiting the library of the Dobrée Museum in Nantes, the *Amadís de Gaula*, published by the Spanish priest in 1533 in Venice, I trapse through the city to verify the truth of the magic Brodsky spoke of in his *Fondamenta degli Incurabili*, which means *Dock of the incurable*, or perhaps, *Wharf of the terminally ill*. Previous to this gesture, indulging an old obsession for the poetry and the circumstances of Brodsky's life, my compatriot, who had

abandoned the Soviet Union the same year as I, and even the same month, I was prompted to try my hand at rendering some of his poetry into Spanish.

This apparently gratuitous and leisurely proposal led me to discover, in practically the same instant I stepped on Venetian ground, though quite by luck, on the docks called *Zattere agli Incurabili*, which displayed a plaque dedicated to Brodsky, on a wall that spans the entire dock. And in that moment, I realized the dock was named after a hospital for the terminally ill – incurables –, which had been founded by a religious group in the 16th and 17th centuries on that very spot. By chance, the *zattere* was, during that period, a set of ferry boats or stalls providing fuel –wood and coal—for Venice in the 16th century. In other words, it was the outskirts of town, on the margins. Undoubtedly, the adequate place for the “incurables”, the syphilitics. With its primitive architecture, at the end of a straight road, a little town square was preserved, which even had the name, Death Court. On the walls of the decaying houses, however well renovated, there still appeared some reliefs related to, it seems, hospital activities.

Brodsky knew the historical connotation of the “incurables,” and even so believed that it was necessary to reaffirm the meaning of the word, attributing the sense of “marginal,” “exiled,” or even, “ill of life,” “bad living.”

With regard to Delicado, he reports that much time had passed before he arrived in Venice, and before he began applying the Holwood remedy in the Roman hospital, called *Santiago de las Caretas*, or *Arciospedale degli Incurabili San Giacomo in Augusta*. The morbid theme of the hospital, transparently called *taberna meritória*, (Laudable Tavern) as the final stop of so many high-class courtesans, as well as the “common” whores, permeates the entire *Retrato de la Lozana andaluza* (Portrait of Lozana: The Lusty Andalusian Woman)

Could it be that Brodsky had taken me, in some way, to the place where Francisco Delicado had ended his days?

Personalized semiotic space that has the capacity of reflecting meanings in all types of otherness, with its constant transformations in “bodies of meaning”, evokes the memory of “souls,” and in some virtual way, however, codified by signs, relying on the “spirits” capable of dialoguing in “great time.” Clearly this dialogue is mediated through “thirdness” from the point of view established by a researcher.

My work on Delicado has always been driven by a methodology inspired by the work of Bakhtin. As a historical figure, like Brodsky, M. M. Bakhtin (1895-1975) cannot be certified with the same stamp as the happy Spanish priest, who was punished by destiny due to his extremely Rabelaisian excesses, characteristic of the Renaissance. As a writer, Delicado is someone who practiced, very early on, dialogism, heteroglossia and polyglossia, metafiction and free experimentation with literary and discursive genres. The figure of the “author” participates in the work together with the characters, representing the very process of writing the book, and, as if that were not enough, this author-character describes the process of researching the daily life of Lozana as if some type of spy (other characters complain about him), with a notepad in hand and ears attuned to the solitary monologues of the Andalusian entrepreneur. In a certain way, he prefigures some qualities of Cervantes.¹⁰

Sarcastic genius, even with his passion for life, Brodsky has, as one of his professional signatures, the combination of a metaphysical orientation in poetry and of a language in which he overcomes, with great care, the Puritan restrictions of traditional Russia, as their legitimate heir. The sophisticated rhythms and the elaborate syntax of his writing embrace an updated version of classic poetics. Expelled from the environment of his mother tongue, his desperate attempts to recuperate the gold of his poetry in Russian, through his adopted language, English, loved but not maternal, these premises constitute the counter points to the efforts of Delicado to disseminate his “very clear Spanish” among the Italian readers, if not all Italians, through explicit texts that visibly manifest his spontaneous philological gifts. The condition of the exiled and marginalized that they share allows, perhaps, the license to transform the “incurable” into an almost ontological quality, despite the ambivalence of the vocabulary, its ítalo-hispanic origin and historical connotation does not allow it to be undermined. The two are Jews who are “assimilated,” even integrating to the culture that received them by their own right, Delicado and Brodsky. On this point the analogy ceases forever: “Don’t compare. What lives is incomparable” (Mandelstam).¹¹

¹⁰ See, for example, BUBNOVA, T. “Cervantes y Delicado”, *NRFH*, 38 (2), 1990, 567-590, y “Don Quijote y Delicado”. In: IFFLAND, J. y ILLADES, G. (ed.). *El “Quijote” desde América*. Ciudad del México: Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla – El Colegio de México, Puebla, 2006, pp.43-56.

¹¹ Osip Mandelstam, Russian poet (1891-1938).

The “great time” is, above all, this possibility of “strange coincidences,” as if destiny is what leads us by the hand with some inexplicable design. There are various “coincidences,” however they do not relate to the theme, and space does not permit presenting them here. The fact is that the meeting of /with the ‘incurables’ in a complex chronotope puts me at the threshold of a new research.

I do not aspire to vainly portray myself on the set of some Venetian landscape, to randomly leave a mark for posterity through this indiscreet gesture. No, I am not for “great time.” I am merely a library rat, common and consistent, and the only thing that I can presume is that the books want me and open by themselves, with hospitality, on the exact page, and allow themselves to be parted open, asking to be opened, from their dusty shelves, when their content is relevant to the subject, and hiding when it is not necessary. After this extemporaneous *captatio benevolentiae*, which, by the way, I situate in an improper place, remembering Sterne, the only thing left is to reaffirm the following. I am the gaze of the “third party” in this involuntary dispute of time and, that being so, *I* am a border through which many threads and lines pass, happenstances and coincidences, languages and books joined in a magisterial memory, generated through me as through any one of us.

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