Russell Hoban: The Heir to Bakhtinian Vertical

The literary criticism of Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin has been of interest to theologians for many decades. His theory of dialogism, which I shall outline below, is the key to understanding much of his work. Its emphasis on mutually-illuminating dialogue makes it significant for any theologian concerned with inter-disciplinary work. In this paper I will briefly describe several of Bakhtin’s central concerns, before focussing on his interest in the vertical and how it relates to his theory of dialogism. I wish to apply a theological interpretation to this and compare it to the novels of the twentieth-century author Russell Hoban. I intend to demonstrate that, despite Bakhtin’s conviction that only Dostoevsky had produced work true to his novelistic ideals, other authors can be seen to present dialogic novels which dynamically interact with other disciplines.

Chronotope

Bakhtin first published his theory of *dialogism* in his 1929 *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. He understood dialogue as the event which occurs when two sovereign egos tied to a specific spatio-temporal context respond to each other. Bakhtin grounds this theory in the concept of *разноречивость* [*heteroglossia* – literally, ‘other tongues’], which asserts that language understood as an inherent construct of dialogic communication must be seen as continually becoming in the communion of spatio-temporal moments. Dialogism is therefore the eternally becoming and thus openended meeting of different consciousnesses within spatial and temporal particularity. This implies that dialogue cannot be understood as divorced from spatio-temporal context. Throughout his works, Bakhtin uses the term *chronotope* to refer to this spatio-temporal context; the chronotope is described by him as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.”1 The chronotope is the mode of expressing meaning in the narrative of the novel; it is, in other words, the organizing centre for the events of the novel. Bakhtin pictures it thus:

“The chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied.”2

In keeping with the themes of Bakhtin’s thought, the chronotope is understood as inherently dialogical:

“Chronotopes are mutually inclusive, they co-exist, they may be interwoven with, replace or oppose one another, contradict one another or find themselves in ever more complex interrelationships… The general characteristic of these interactions is that they are *dialogical*.”3

Within the chronotopic moment, that is, within the completely real-life time-space where the work resonates, Bakhtin locates “a real person – one who originates spoken speech as well as the inscription and the book – and real people who are hearing and

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2 Ibid 250
3 Ibid 252
reading the text.” The authors and the listeners or readers, may be (and often are) located in differing time-spaces, sometimes separated by centuries and by great spatial distances, but nevertheless “they are all located in a real, unitary and as yet incomplete historical world …” The extent to which these three interact is essential to an understanding of Bakhtin’s concept of the novel:

“The work and the world represented in it enter into the real world and enrich it. Similarly, the real world enters into the work and into the world represented therein as a part of the process of its creation, just as in the process of its subsequent life, the work is continually revitalized by the creative perception of the listener-reader.”

The significance of this dialogue is therefore central not only to Bakhtin’s understanding of the novel, but also his understanding of human nature:

“To be means to communicate dialogically.”

**Unity of Event**

We understand from this that “…the novelistic hybrid is an artistically organized system for bringing different languages in contact with one another, a system having at its goal the illumination of one language by means of another, the carving-out of a living image [живой образ] of another language.”

If one substitutes consciousnesses for ‘language’ in the above quotation, one understands better Bakhtin’s approach to dialogism and the novel: characters are respected as full subjects, full consciousnesses alongside the author and the reader in a way that can never be fully achieved by a monologic system:

“What unfolds in [Dostoevsky’s] works is… a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, [which] combine but are not merged in the unity of the event [событие].”

This unity of event is characterised by its absorption of heteroglossia into a simultaneity through which the diversity can be experienced as a unity. Central to this is the dialogic structure of event in the novel - the event that is narrated in the work and the event of the narration itself, in which we, as listeners or readers, participate:

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4 Ibid 253  
5 Ibid 253  
6 «Произведение и изображенный в нем мир входят в реальный мир и обогащают его, и реальный мир входит в произведение и в изображенный в нем мир как в процессе его создания, так и в процессе его последующей жизни в постоянном обновлении произведения в творческом восприятии слушателей-читателей.»
Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *Voprosi Literaturi I Estetiki* (Moskva: Khudozhestvenaya Literatura, 1975) 402  
8 Ibid 361  
9 It is important to note that dialogic relationships can be understood as extralinguistic.  
10 The translator notes that событие, which comes from the verb root быть, ‘to be’, could literally be translated as со-бытие, ‘co-being’, or ‘coexistence’. It could therefore be suggested that the event (событие) only occurs by the coexistence (со-бытие) of consciousnesses.  
11 Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, op. cit. 6
“By the very construction of the novel, the author speaks not about a character, but with him.”

These events take place in different times of varying durations and in different places, as mentioned above, but at the same time the two events are “indissolubly united in a single but complex event that we might call the work in the totality of all its events.”

This totality or unity of events includes what Bakhtin terms “the external material givenness of the work”, as well as the text itself, the world represented in the text, and the author and the listener or reader; thus “we perceive the fullness of the work in all its wholeness and indivisibility, but at the same time we understand the diversity of the elements that constitute it.”

One of the most theologically interesting aspects of this description is the notion that there is, in some sense, a givenness [данность] to the novel. Bakhtin was heavily influenced by neo-Kantianism, and applied its understanding of das Ding an Sich to his theory of the novel. The данность of the novel can thus be understood as its innate essence and this in turn is identifiable with the “living image” of the novel. A novelistic or artistic image is experienced in Bakhtin’s terms as a unified stasis, but is in fact a moment of diverse and dynamic heteroglossia relating dialogically. This living image is therefore understood as heteroglossic influences experienced as a simultaneous moment. Comparisons can therefore be drawn between the данность, or living image, of the novel and the unity of event through which it is experienced.

Unity in Diversity

It is clear that Bakhtin understands the novelistic event to be that which requires more than one participant; it therefore necessarily implies dialogic relationship. It is also evident that this dialogic nature of the novel represents “one unitary dialogical moment”. This development can be understood as the dialogic influence of other disciplines on Bakhtin’s theory – here the “unitary dialogical moment” may be seen as a reflection of the scientific paradigm shift which occurred during Bakhtin’s lifetime, in which the Newtonian monologic unity was replaced by the complex unity of Einsteinian physics. Bakhtin points out that such a combining of dialogic contributors, of languages and styles, into a higher unity is previously unknown to traditional stylistics – yet this understanding of genuine dialogue is wholly appreciated by the theologian. It is also something recognised by many twentieth-century novelists. The novels of Russell Hoban display a remarkable talent for successfully balancing heteroglossia. He incorporates many different disciplines into his work, from scientific writing to analyses of painting and sculpture, from musical melodies to the intricacies of academic disciplines. In his novel Fremder, he mentions a planet and its moon in orbit with each other: Badr al-Badur and Qamar al-Zaman. A legend surrounds them, describing them as royal lovers. These names are drawn from other sources: both appear in the Arabian Nights’ Entertainments as royals whose

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11 Ibid 63
12 Bakhtin, Dialogic Imagination, op. cit. 255
13 Ibid 255
14 Ibid 49
15 Ibid 263
names mean ‘the full moon of full moons’ (Badroulbadour) and ‘the moon of the age’ (Camaralzaman). Badroulbadour also figures in a Wallace Stevens poem:

“‘Out of the tomb, we bring Badroulbadour, Within our bellies, we her chariot.’”

This particular poem has significance because Hoban’s novel deals with the notion of life being carried through by death. In order to present this theme, Hoban also draws on the heteroglossic influences of multifaith theology and philosophy. For example, one of the central characters senses the thinness of reality and searches for a mode of controlled access to states of non-being as a means of relieving this stress. He notes in his diary:

“In the beginning was the Black… The black is all there is. That’s why if you build your house on the black it’ll last forever.”

These are clearly references to John 1:1 and Lk. 6:46-9. Hoban is also concerned with the importance of dialogism to the search for true meaning. In his later novel, *The Bat Tattoo*, he takes as his theme Ps. 137:4 (“How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?”). The novel centres around three characters who all try to find themselves by interacting with other people. Their preoccupation is maintaining their personal identity whilst maintaining dialogue with and being affected by the other.

In theological terms, it is precisely the combination of different voices, different approaches to understanding, which leads most effectively to God. Doctrinally, this concept of diversity contributing to true unity is clearly evident in theological notions of Trinity and Incarnation; the understanding of the novel as “one unitary dialogical moment” could even be a description of the Chalcedonian definition of the Incarnation. In his notes, Bakhtin writes, “‘Unity, not as innate one-and-only, but as a dialogic concordance [согласие] of unmerged [неслияных] twos or multiples.’” This definition can certainly be understood as a paradigm for the dialogical notion of two voices in the hypostasis of one word. The latter term is the same Russian word used in the Russian translation of the Chalcedonian definition.

Bakhtin’s elucidation of his understanding of this unity echoes theological structure:

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18 Ibid 20, 64
20 The Chalcedonian definition asserts that the Person (*hypostasis*) of Christ is made up of two distinct Natures (*ousia*), “‘without confusion, without change, without division, without separation’”. Charles Lock, “Bakhtin and the Tropes of Orthodoxy” in Felch and Contino, op. cit. 98
In his notes, Bakhtin writes, “‘Unity, not as inate one-and-only, but as a dialogic concordance [согласие] of unmerged [неслияных] twos or multiples.’”
21 Alexander Mihailovich, “Bakhtin’s Dialogue with Russian Orthodoxy and Critique of Linguistic Universalism” in ibid 122
22 ‘Without confusion or separation’ is translated as «неслиянно и нераздельно». 
“The word is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it; the word is shaped in a dialogic interaction with an alien word that is already in the object. A word forms a concept of its own object in a dialogic way.”

Besides the Johannine language of this quotation and its emphasis on the active nature of the word, its methodological structure is clearly Trinitarian. Indeed, it only requires changing, “[t]he word is born in a dialogue” to, “[t]he word is born as a dialogue” to make this statement explicitly theological.

*Sub Specie Aeternitatis*

Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism is clearly bound up with an understanding of the novel as a unity in diversity. How, then, does this relate to his understanding of the vertical chronotope? In referring to the ‘finished form’ of the epic, Bakhtin comments that the moment is experienced, “not relative to the present or the future; it contains within itself, as it were, the entire fullness of time.” By contrast, the novel is understood as being extraordinarily aware of the movement of time:

“The literary-linguistic consciousness of the novel is a new experience of time… It exceptionally acutely senses time in language, the shifting, aging and revitalization of language, the sense of the past and the future in language.”

It is seen as being immersed entirely in the present. However, the manner in which Bakhtin describes this present moment is remarkably close to a more theological understanding of time and creativity. The moment of the novel is understood as eternally present and consequently appears *sub specie aeternitatis*:

“The present – it is not something transient; it is fluidity, a kind of perpetual continuation without beginning or end.”

In his essay on the chronotope in *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin establishes a theory of novelistic time which rests on the vertical axis. He traces the origin of this theory back to the Menippean satires, which relied on a three-fold structure stretching vertically from Olympus down to earth, and from there down to Hades. This consequently influenced the medieval mystery plays which in turn influenced the development of the medieval novel. He states that such medieval novels (the most important example of which is Dante’s *Divine Comedy*) created an understanding of the novelistic chronotope as a somehow unworldly/timeless vertical. Time in the novel, then, whether representable, represented or representing, is a new, ‘other-ly’ [потусторонний], experience totally unlike our horizontal experience of the

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23 Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, op. cit. 279

24 «Слово рождается в диалоге, как его живая реплика, формируется в диалогическом взаимодействии с чужим словом в предмете. Конципирование словом своего предмета – диалогично.» Bakhtin, *Voprosi Literaturi I Estetiki*, op. cit. 93

25 Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, op. cit. 19

26 «[Л]итературно-языковое сознание романа нового времени… исключительно остро опушает время в языке, его смену, устарение и обновление языка, прошлое и будущее в языке.»

26 «Настоящее – нечто преходящее, это текучесть, какое-то вечное продолжение без начала и без конца.»

Bakhtin, *Voprosi Literaturi I Estetiki*, op. cit. 463
progression of past, present and future. Bakhtin is therefore keen to emphasise that as the chronotopic place of the novel should be understood as vertical, it must be seen as outside the moment of horizontal time. The temporal logic of this vertical differs from the progression of the horizontal in so far as it is understood as the «чистая одновременность всего («или сосуществование всего в вечности»).» [“pure simultaneity of everything (or ‘the coexistence of everything in eternity’).”] 27 He claims that horizontal temporal divisions introduce non-essential categorisations such as ‘earlier’ and ‘later’ which should be abandoned in order to fully understand the world, emphasising that any attempt to truly comprehend reality must compare everything within the context of a single moment, which he calls «вневременность» [‘timelessness’]. Only in this moment of pure simultaneity, the “still-point of the turning world” in Eliot’s words, can we truly understand what it means to describe ‘what was, what is and what will be’. For the theologian, the vertical can thus be understood as the divine chronotope, where the horizontal chronotope is recognisably human. The place at which the two intersect is therefore the chronotopic moment of incarnation. The placement of the novel on the vertical therefore takes on theological significance. Gadamer echoes Bakhtin’s sentiments in a quotation which is worth presenting at length:

“‘The mode of being of literature has something unique and incomparable about it… There is nothing so strange and at the same time so demanding as the written word…In its deciphering and interpretation a miracle takes place: the transformation of something strange and dead into a total simultaneity and familiarity… That is why the capacity to read, to understand what is written, is like a secret art, even a magic that looses and binds us. In it time and space seem to be suspended.”’ [my italics] 29

It is theologically interesting that Gadamer partners simultaneity with familiarity. This could be understood as a description of the chronotope of incarnation, in which the divine simultaneity of the vertical meets the human familiarity of the horizontal. Such an understanding of the novelistic chronotope is shared by the novelist Russell Hoban, who presents the literary moment as a palimpsest of all potential moments layered together in a contrapuntal weave. 30 He describes this moment as the place in which “[t]ime ceased to be an automatic progression: the present moment exploded into millions of sharp-edged fragments and nothing followed.” 31 I would suggest that read in a theological context, ‘nothing’ should be identified with the timelessness Bakhtin so often speaks about in conjunction with the novelistic chronotope. In other words, the ‘nothing’ which follows the fragmentation of the horizontal moment is the appearance of the vertical, that is, the divine. In The Medusa Frequency, the head of Orpheus laments becoming a story, but insists that a true story does not rest on horizontal movement:

“‘My story is not a sequence of events like knots on a string… all of it happens at once and it goes on happening; all of it is happening now and any part of it contains the whole of it, the pictures needn’t be looked at in any particular order.”’ 32

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27 Bakhtin, Voprosi Literaturi I Estetiki, op. cit. 307
29 Louth, op. cit. 34
30 Cf. Hoban, Amaryllis Night and Day, op. cit. 4
31 Hoban, The Medusa Frequency, op. cit. 91
32 Ibid 39
The story, and with it, the novel, are therefore best represented by the simultaneity located on the vertical axis. Bakhtin identifies Dostoevsky as one of the few authors to succeed in representing such a simultaneous moment. He believes that Dostoevsky considered that the world could only be truly represented in a manner in which all its reality was contained in a simultaneous moment, but where the cross-section of this single moment revealed a complex web of horizontally-progressing interrelationships. To put it another way, Bakhtin understood Dostoevsky’s novels as depicting the horizontal of represented reality through the mind of the simultaneous vertical. This tension between vertical and horizontal, eternal and historical, represents what Hoban calls “the moment under the moment”, that which filters through all reality. This ‘moment under the moment’ is characterised by the unity of event discussed above, which is now to be understood as the vertical chronotope displaying its precedence over the horizontal. In Bakhtin’s words, the vertical “as it were, ‘compresses’ in itself the powerful forward thrust of the horizontal.”\(^\text{33}\) The events of the novel mentioned earlier - the event narrated in the work and the event of the narration itself – are clearly horizontal, but both are united in this unity of event. It is through this understanding of the vertical containing the horizontal within itself and taking precedence over it that Bakhtin can state that the novel exists as a unity in diversity:

“By this we perceive the completeness in its wholeness and indivisibility, but at the same time also understand all the diversity of the forms of its [chronotopic] moments.”\(^\text{34}\)

Hoban deals with the notions of verticality and horizontality in his novel *Kleinzeit*. In the novel recognisable features of reality are described in unfamiliar terms – the represented reality of the novel is parallel to the representing reality of the author and readers. For example, a doctor tells a patient:

“‘As we get on, you see, the fugal system has a little more trouble spacing out subject and answer, and if entries come too fast it’s rather like Sunday traffic on the M4. And there you jolly well are with a blocked stretto.’”\(^\text{35}\)

He later comments that another patient has got a history of partial eclipse and requires another refraction. The central character is suffering from an illness which hinders his horizontality and therefore his ability to take part in normal life:

“‘It’s probably nothing, eh?’ said Kleinzeit. ‘Just this little twinge from A to B…’ There it went again, this time like a red-hot iron bar jammed crosswise in him.”\(^\text{36}\)

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\(^{33}\) Bakhtin, *Voprosi Literaturi I Estetiki*, op. cit. 308

\(^{34}\) “При этом мы воспринимаем эту полноту в её целостности и нераздельности, но одновременно понимаем и всю разность составляющих её моментов.”

\(^{35}\) Ibid

\(^{36}\) Hoban, *Kleinzeit*, op. cit. 78

**Ibid 12**

It is interesting to note that Hoban often uses images of the perpendicular, particularly in *The Bat Tattoo*, in which an artist is commissioned to produce a sculpture of the crucifixion.
However, one of the side-effects of this condition is an ability to experience the world through the vertical moment. It is by doing this that Kleinzeit is able to truly come to know himself and his place in the world. Again and again Hoban presents images of the horizontal and the vertical. For example, he describes a life support machine as “[l]ittle blips of light appeared successively from left to right on the screen… continuously they came on at the left, marched off at the right”37 and he later titles one of his chapters ‘Up and Down’. Interestingly Bakhtin identifies the novelistic author as the key figure in controlling this tension between the vertical and the horizontal:

“Every image is full of historical potential and according to its essence it gravitates towards participation in historical coexistence in the temporal-historical [i.e. horizontal] chronotope. But the powerful will of the artist condemns it to an eternal and immobile place on the timeless vertical.”38

Booth notes that Bakhtin is not primarily concerned with the linear sequence of the novel, but with the “touch of the author at each moment”.39 The author in Bakhtin’s thought is therefore poised tangentially between the vertical and the horizontal, between the unity and timelessness of the vertical and the fullness of the represented and representing horizontals, but is identified primarily with the vertical as an association with the novelistic chronotope. It is important to underline the significance of the horizontal to the novelistic chronotope: it rests against the vertical and at all points appears as a part of the reality of the vertical. Indeed, Bakhtin states that without it, the abstract thought associated with the vertical would not be possible. The theological implications of this again point to incarnational theory: whilst the vertical is understood as the foundation of the horizontal, the horizontal remains essentially necessary to the establishment of a true novelistic chronotope. It is evident, then, that Bakhtin understands the novel to be intimately bound up with the unity of the vertical and the diversity of the horizontal. Hoban’s novels demonstrate the practical application of this essentially dialogical theory.

A theological approach to Bakhtin’s dialogism admits that the language of theology is recontextualized in every age. Its ambiguity is therefore a reflection of the density and richness of such contextualization. As an academic discipline, theology must be understood as the product of a community whose life is lived in a specific spatio-temporal, and cultural-linguistic context. Clearly a tradition which is based on an incarnational understanding of God must take the horizontal particularities (the heteroglossia) of human reality very seriously. However it must also remain constantly aware of the influence of the vertical on the unified event of this reality. The theories of Bakhtin and their practical demonstration in the novels of Russell Hoban interact dialogically with theology in order to illuminate precisely this fact and it is for this reason that it is so important for theology to remain in conversation with them.

Gillian C. Price, University of Durham

37 Hoban, Kleinzeit, op. cit. 16
38 “Каждый образ полон исторической потенцией и потому всем существо своим тяготеет к участию в историческом событии во временно-историческом хронотопе. Но могучая воля художника обрекает его на вечное и неподвижное место во вневременной вертикали.” Bakhtin, Voprosi Literaturi I Estetiki, op. cit. 307
39 Booth in Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, op. cit. xxv