

Kairos, Poetry & Time: Immortal Moments of Truth

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The subject of my speech today is time, because time plays an important role in my work, as it does for many other writers. That is no surprise, of course, because those who write mould time by playing with the rhythm and cadence of sentences and with the sequence of events. Sometimes this has to be speeded up, or, as is more often the case, slowed right down in order to set the strange and often erratic beating of the rhythm of life into motion. In this respect, writing often also means poking a little fun at the clock, because, as the poet W.H. Auden wrote, ‘All our intuitions mock / the formal logic of the clock’.

What is time? To whom does it belong? Is there another kind of time apart from clock time? These are the questions that will guide this talk. They are important questions, because time forms the basis of our existence and as such determines the relationship we have with ourselves and with the world around us. When man started to think, he also thought about time, albeit without solving the mystery of it. ‘If no one asks me, I know, but if I have to explain to someone what time is, I no longer know’, wrote St Augustine in his *Confessions*, and many people experience such ‘learned ignorance’ to this day. We shall not solve the mystery of time this afternoon either. However, I would like to try and make you aware that there is not simply one kind of time, the time that is determined by the clock and which so strongly governs our lives, the time that appears over the last century to have become an economic principle, which on the one hand confronts us with its scarcity and lacking, and on the other hand urges us to produce and consume faster, but that time has at least two forms, as the early Greek philosophers believed.

Nowadays, in the western world, we use a fairly unilateral, linear time model, clock time, which can indeed accurately measure the number of humanly determined hours, minutes and seconds in a day,

but which cannot give shape and form to our subjective experience of time, nor can it express the continuous and dynamic character of time. We grow older and not younger, but the clock cannot reflect this change because it is based on a model that measures time regardless of circumstances and events. In his book *Time Reborn*, which was published last year, American physicist Lee Smolin suggests that, for this very reason, what we are talking about is in fact a timeless time model, and that the challenge for science in the 21st century will be to create a time concept with which that dynamic *can* be expressed. As well as being static and homogenous, clock time is also divided up artificially; after all, we have divided time up into separate parts, hours, minutes and seconds, in order to be able to measure it, yet this is not consistent with our perception of it. No-one hops or jumps from one minute into the next, because time is of a continuous nature, as was suggested by the French mathematician and philosopher Henri Bergson, who introduced his concept of ‘time as duration’ at the beginning of the last century. There is therefore an important difference between the measurement and the perception of time.

Bergson wrote that unlike clock time, time as duration ‘passes by indivisibly and constantly. ‘It is a heterogeneous whole of qualitative states and changes, which all differ individually’ because there is ‘no consciousness without memory, no continuation of a state without the addition of the memories of past moments to the current feelings’, as Bergson wrote in his essay *Time and Free Will*, which has recently also been translated into Dutch. It is precisely because the experience of each new moment resounds with an entire past that no single moment is ever the same as the last. ‘Nothing happens twice, and never will’, wrote the Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska in her poem of the same title.

First intermezzo

I thought of this poem when I had to drive from my home town Amsterdam to Brummen and back twice last autumn because I had left the one thing I could not do without in my hotel room in Brummen, my collection of files and papers full of notes about my new book ‘Kairos’, the other face of time, also referred to by Greek philosophers as ‘the God of just the right moment’. On arriving at the

hotel, I had tidied away my things so well and so safely that I forgot all about them when I left. We are not only sometimes too negligent, we are sometimes too careful. Fortunately, a single telephone call to the hotel owner was sufficient to calm my mounting panic; the files and notepads had been found, and I headed right back to Brummen. The second outward journey, however, was so different from the day before, when I had so looked forward to giving a talk in the village where my mother had been born. I had enjoyed that journey, driving through the woods in all their flaming autumn glory. Now I was nervous and impatient, and saw only dark, deserted woods and black, muddy fields. Theoretically, the landscape was the same, as were the weather conditions and the season, but my experience of them was completely different. 'No day copies yesterday', wrote Szymborska, 'no two nights are identical, no kiss is ever the same, every glance is unique.'

It was on that Sunday as I approached Amsterdam for the second time that fate struck in Brummen. A young fellow countryman of Szymborska carelessly emptied an ashtray into the rubbish bin at his cheap rented accommodation in Oeken, Brummen. He and his friends had probably had one too many drinks that evening, perhaps to drown their sorrows about the life they were leading in a country far away from their family and friends. At the very moment that I drove into Amsterdam, a not quite extinguished cigarette brushed against an old newspaper burning a small hole in it. The two men were so fast asleep that they did not notice the smell of fire in the kitchen. By the time the fire had reached the bedroom, they could no longer escape due to the thick clouds of smoke and the scorching heat.

Polish plasterers can drink and smoke like demons. So can Polish poets, as it happens, poets like Szymborska, who to a grand old age was inseparable from her glass of brandy and packet of cigarettes. In 1996, when she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature and was seated next to the Swedish king at the gala dinner, she lit up a cigarette, against all the rules, upon which the king followed suit. And so to whom other than Szymborska could we possibly dedicate this tale, a tale that strives to find a relationship between time, change, death and immortal moments in a mere twenty-five minutes of clock time.

Nothing ever happens twice because every new event arises from all the times before and depends on the experiences, sensations and sentiments associated with that specific moment. You cannot step twice into the same river, to quote Heraclitus, because time itself is a river, in which ‘everything flows’, (panta rhei) and changes. Bergson, Szymborska and Heraclitus all agree: everything changes and nothing returns in its original form; every beginning, every new experience of time, but also every ending is therefore unique. And so we die as ‘inexperienced seniors’, wrote Szymborska, or sometimes, if fate is particularly merciless, as it was for the two Polish workers, as ‘inexperienced juniors’.

However, anyone who for this reason thinks that ‘death is almighty’ and spends his life in fear of death may expect little sympathy from the poet. She thinks that we are ‘living proof of the contrary’, because as long as we live, death has no power over us, a poetic version of that quote from Epicurus: ‘As long as I exist, death is not here, and when death comes, I will not exist’, an idea that could perhaps assuage our fear of death. Because, Szymborska continues, let us in particular not forget ‘how many defeats’ death suffers and ‘how many unsuccessful blows’ he strikes. Sometimes, in fact, death is such a wimp that he lacks the strength ‘to swat a fly’. In this poem, ‘On Death, without Exaggeration’ the poet tries to offset our fear of death somewhat, but elsewhere in her work, particularly in her anthology of poems ‘The Moment’, Szymborska presents the ‘immortal moment’ as the most useful, consoling and vital answer to death. There’s no life that couldn’t be immortal, if only for a moment.

What are those mysterious moments in which we no longer see death as the end of a chronological line of events, but in which we are ourselves immortal, if only for a moment? In my new book, I call this the ‘kairos’ moment. In ancient times, kairos was not only the other, but also the correct and true face of time, and according to Plato was even ‘the best that can happen to a person’, because this young, muscular and winged god provided an interval or intermezzo within the strict and monotonous time regime of his grandfather, Chronos. During that intermezzo, a person no longer experiences time the chronological line, but rather the past, present and future are balled, rolled or knotted together (in *Secular Times*, Charles Taylor talks

about 'kairotic knots') to create a dynamic form of time driven forth by one's own experience and which allows for change and new insights.

From ancient times to the time of Erasmus, who devoted an entire chapter to it in his *Adagia*, *kairos* meant the 'interval' into which we fall if we slow down, take a pause, focus our attention or concentrate particularly well on something. Whereas *Chronos* stands for universal, static and quantitative time, which is necessary in order to place time in a linear relationship, *kairos* means that subjective, dynamic and qualitative moment which takes into account the specific and permanently changed circumstances, and for this reason can result in the birth of something new. Until the late sixteenth century, *kairos* continued to fascinate many a philosopher, statesman, theologian, doctor or poet, because *kairos* was the kind of time that mattered, time that provided opportunities or allowed for breakthroughs. During the Enlightenment, our attention surrounding this non-measurable dimension of time lessened, but after Nietzsche reintroduced it at the end of the 19th century, it started making a slow but steady comeback, and it also represented for various philosophers, writers, artists and scientists all those fleeting moments of beauty, visibility and energy that can make life so very special.

According to Szymborska, *kairos* has 'set its heart on happiness' and also 'on truth and eternity. Just look at him!' It is the time that brings us not only closer to our personal experience of time and everything that we have experienced and gone through, but it is also the timespan that neither *Chronos* nor death have a hold on:

Death always arrives by that very moment too late.

In vain it tugs at the knob of the invisible door.

Second intermezzo

Last year, when I was asked to give a talk in Brummen, I immediately saw in my mind's eye that old black-and-white image of the house where my mother was born. I was back in one of those slow, endlessly long flowing days of my childhood, when I would lie on the floor

turning the pages of my grandparents' old photo albums. It was the photograph of the stately, ivy-clad house where my mother was born that caught my attention, not only because it looked so delightfully magical, but also because my mother said it was the most beautiful house she had ever lived in.

The hall where I gave my talk several months later in Brummen had a raised platform, like many a classroom in the past, with a wooden desk on it, at which I sat down a little awkwardly. I usually stand, at a lectern, so now I felt more like a doctor giving a public consultation than a writer about to give a talk. I rummaged around in my bag while I caught my breath and then turned to face the hall, where about eighty people were looking at me expectantly. For a moment, I had no idea what to say and looked back at them in silence. I even thought I heard a faint yet ominous creaking of the floor as if it were straining to carry the weight of my silent, seated self. Strangely enough, however, at that very moment I started thinking about my grandfather. I suddenly saw that patch of ghostly-white skin between his sock and trouser leg that always appeared when he sat down on the sofa at our house, and which, as well as fascinating me, always scared me a little. And so I started to tell the people about my grandfather, who had been headmaster of the primary school in Brummen before the war, and that it was so special for me to be here so many years later, giving a talk in such a typical classroom situation; the words flowed naturally, and before I knew it, it was time to take a break.

After the talk, we went back to the home of one of the organisers for a glass of wine. We parked the car in a side street and walked in the darkness to the entrance of the house, which was hidden behind some tall trees and illuminated only by a couple of streetlamps. The moment I set foot on the path in the front garden, lights began flashing in my mind, because right in front of me was the house I had seen in my grandparents photograph album, with exactly the same balcony over the door and the same high windows on either side. It was a fleeting moment, but one that also seemed to last for ever; it was as if the past, present and future had magically been knotted together and I was convinced, momentarily, that I was about to be reunited with my late grandparents.

It was one of those moments at which death always 'arrives too late', wrote Szyborska, and everything around you becomes highly

intense and alive, because death ‘tugs in vain at the knob of the invisible door’. Such moments involve neither ‘growling rocks’ nor ‘steep precipices’, as do so many of the moments we experience every day. No, such moments have no ‘nights in flames’, she wrote, nor ‘days in clouds of darkness’, and they will comfort us for all the loss we suffer and curse courage for all the days still to come. Because ‘There’s no life’, neither our own nor those of the two Polish plasterers, ‘that couldn’t be immortal, if only for a moment.’ We cannot experience these moments on demand, but we can remain open to them by sharpening our focus and reflecting upon all that is, has been and is still to come. These are the moments in which Chronos is silent and the ‘true time’ of kairos begins to speak, the time that has many more surprises in store for us:

Everything is in its place, in exemplary harmony.

As far as the eye can see this moment reigns supreme.

One of the moments on earth
that was asked to be enduring.

Focus, rest and careful consideration of arguments and circumstances are the most important conditions for creating a kairotic moment. That means both good timing and taking or making the most of the right opportunity or circumstance, which can present itself as a result of deep concentration. During the kairos interval, we are no longer hounded by a perceived lack of time, nor by any other type of time-related pressure or stress, but we experience a different dimension of time, which, as well as feeling larger, fuller and more pleasant, also conjures up new possibilities.

In the kairos moment, past, present and future are bound together in the ‘fullness of a visionary moment’, as Martin Heidegger wrote in his work, *Being and Time* (1928). He also called it *Anfangliche Zeit*, the time that frees up new possibilities for us, because in the kairos moment, a break or caesura with Chronos time occurs, whereby a new start can be set in motion. In the world of science, kairos is sometimes also linked with the principle of serendipity, in other words ‘the quality that allows a person to discover something good or new while

seeking something else', as Robert Merton wrote in *The Travels and Adventures of Serendipity* (1958). It refers to the fortunate and unexpected discovery of something unknown and, what is more, unsought, and which forms the basis for developing a new theory. A necessary condition, however, is that the researchers are given sufficient time, rest and freedom to explore new byways now and then, diverging from the beaten path of established research and perspectives. Chance and luck play an important part in this respect, but so do intuition, alertness and creativity. What matters is that you remain sufficiently open to unexpected or previously formulated objectives and dare to think beyond prevailing theories, while at the same time being well prepared for that moment should it arise. Or, in the words of Louis Pasteur: 'The ability to be surprised at the "right moment" is the mind's first step towards discovery.' In his essay, 'Serendipity. Anatomy of the unsought finding', Dutch ophthalmologist Pek van Andel argues in favour of developing the intuitive and creative powers of science that are necessary in order to nourish the talent of finding the unexpected and that which is 'new and unpredictable'. He defines serendipity as 'intuition in the making', which researchers should be allowed more freedom and in particular time for to develop.

Although the words 'schooling' and 'school' derive from the Greek word *schole*, which means to rest, await or do nothing, since rest and the courage to wait were regarded as the necessary conditions for thinking, our current system of educations seems to be biased towards, indeed governed by Chronos. Indeed, it is a fact that in recent decades, universities have been increasingly influenced by the neo-liberal spirit, turning time into an economic principal, constantly urging us to make haste (to study faster, publish faster...), even trying to implement a long-study fine, and allowing the power of measurement to prevail over the power of imagination. To think, however, takes time, and creative thinking also demands a broad orientation on other studies and fields of research, as well as the courage to explore what at first may appear to be pointless or unprofitable side roads. It is precisely for this reason that we must allow not only staff but also students this freedom, rather than penalising them with economic sanctions for following a second or third course of study.

The great philosopher and educator Isocrates associated the art of bringing up children, *paideia*, with the kairos moment in virtually all his writings. However many facts and laws pupils learn by heart, it is only when they know how to apply these to the constantly changing reality and through their own insights that an upbringing can be regarded as successful. In his Berkley lectures, Michel Foucault linked Isocrates' kairotic moment with the Greek concept of *parresia*, which means frank, honest and truthful speech. To Foucault, this type of truth-telling, '*le dire vrai*', meant that the speaker was not afraid to speak out critically against established opinions and in doing so take a certain level of risk. Instead of interpreting already accepted opinions in order to secure one's own position within an institution, the speaker must find the courage to interpret his or her 'truth', and do so 'at the right moment'.

In conclusion, a third and last intermezzo.

A few days after my talk in Brummen, I sorted through my recovered notes and began writing the last chapter of my book, which I have called '*De utopie van de verbeelding*' (The Utopia of the Imagination). It was partly inspired by the work of the German Jewish philosopher Ernst Bloch, who in *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* associated the objective of education and upbringing with what he called 'the fulfilled moment'. He found these 'transgressive' moments in philosophy, science, music and art, but also in everyday experiences, such as reflection and daydreaming. According to Bloch, the 'fulfilled moment' is 'time without clock-hands' and 'seizing eternity in the moment', which presents to us 'the shadow of what is yet to come', in other words, that which currently lies hidden within us as a mere possibility.

He felt that education should be aimed precisely on those kairotic moments of exceptional focus, because it is in those moments that 'the boundlessness of the utopian prospect and the depth of perceived proximity' come together as one. According to Bloch, these are the perfect moments of inspiration because they do not only help transcend what already exists, but also motivate man's inner process of existence. It is at such kairotic moments that we are like horsemen riding to meet ourselves in the deep of the night. The old me, seated

firmly in the saddle of established certainties, and the me yet to come, which is merely promise and possibility, gallop towards each other, and out of the subsequent lightning collision comes the new idea or insight that makes the new us. In that ‘fulfilled moment’, we get a glimpse of the new beginning in something that ‘appears but is not yet manifest’, something that lights up as a beacon on the horizon of our thoughts and fills us with the hope of something different and better. Bloch’s way of thinking focusses entirely on making people aware of the importance of that creative process of ‘becoming’. ‘Man simply ‘is’. But that is not enough. That is indeed the very least.’

Education should not so much confirm the status quo or simply measure facts and performance, but rather focus on this process of becoming. In this respect, Bloch also helped renew interest in the concept of *docta spes*, ‘educated hope’. It is precisely at times when materialism and the meritocratic spirit dominate that he considers it essential for us to ‘learn to hope again’, because otherwise we might ignore the most fundamental aspect of humanity, namely that we are not established facts (like objects), but rather beings in the making that are anchored in time. His concept of ‘time as hope’ can be regarded as constantly reaching for the unreachable, which provides wings for our thoughts and our imagination. A better future is not as far away as we sometimes think it is. New possibilities lie in wait for alert and creative spirits that know how to conjure up the right kind of amazement at the right time.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have come to the end of my talk, and you have arrived at the start of a new academic year. I wish you many kairotic moments in this new year, many unexpected findings and moments of inspiration. Finally, if I could combine that wish with a motto, it would be this outstanding quote from Bloch: ‘Be realistic. Think the impossible.’

This speech is based on a chapter from my recent book: *Kairos. A New Engagement*, Arbeiderspers 2014, Joke J. Hermsen. English page on www.jokehermsen.nl