

THE CHRONOTOPE AND THE SOUTH

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In *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (1990), Caryl Emerson and Gary Saul Morson note that "Bakhtin did not make it easy for anyone to reconstruct the 'labyrinth of linkages' among his own ideas. . . . it is often hard to say when a work was begun, and still harder to know how it evolved in the interim" (3). Such is the case with the idea of the chronotope, which Emerson and Morson believe Bakhtin "hit upon" and developed during the period 1936-1938 (10; 426), when he wrote the key treatise "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" as well as his essay on the Bildungsroman. Consequently, these scholars suggest that at least two separate works constitute Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope (405).

In an essay entitled "The World According to Bakhtin: On the Description of Space and Spatial Forms in Mikhail Bakhtin's Work" (1995), Eduard Vlasov finds a much more complicated "labyrinth of linkages" connected to the idea of the chronotope. Not only does Vlasov consider Bakhtin's chronotope to be "one of the most fundamental pillars for the study of space in current narratology" (37), but he also finds that a theory of the spatial coordinate of the chronotope was introduced already in "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" (written 1920-1923), and was further developed in Bakhtin's studies of Dostoevsky, Rabelais, and Goethe (originally published in 1929, 1965 and 1979, respectively) in addition to the essay on the chronotope. Vlasov's systematic analysis of space in these works reveals that Bakhtin's treatment of the chronotope, regardless of whether he employed that term, evolved continually during his career. While earlier scholarship has documented Bakhtin's contribution to the study of time in fiction,¹ Vlasov reveals how his oeuvre as a whole contains a comprehensive theory of space as well.

In attempting to reconcile the scholarship on both the space and the time of the Bakhtinian chronotope, this essay wishes to take seriously Bakhtin's insistence, in "Forms of Time and of the

¹See especially Gary Saul Morson, "Bakhtin on Time" and Stacy Burton, "Bakhtin, Temporality and Modern Narrative."

Chronotope," on the "inseparability of space and time" in fiction (84),² at the same time as it brings the neglected spatial coordinate of the chronotope into special focus. Bakhtin's own use of the term chronotope does not always convey his idea that "spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole" in literature (ibid.). After initially formulating the inextricable connectedness of space and time, Bakhtin states explicitly that "in literature the primary category in the chronotope is time" (85). Vlasov considers that Bakhtin's treatment of the major chronotopes of the novel in this essay "concentrates on types of time and considers spatial forms as an auxiliary means" (44). In other words, it would seem that Bakhtin's own diagnosis of the neglect of the study of spatial relations—"it has been temporal relationships by and large that have been studied"—is applicable to his own essay (258). Ironically, as Vlasov's study illustrates, some of Bakhtin's most substantial discussions of space are not to be found in the chronotope essay but elsewhere in his work.

While a consideration of space in other works than "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope" can yield a more balanced view of Bakhtin's thought on *chronos* and *topos*, some remarks on the role of space in Bakhtin's major essay are also necessary. When Bakhtin states that the chronotope "expresses the inseparability of time and space (time as the fourth dimension of space)" (84), space is not necessarily considered as *auxiliary* to time, as Vlasov suggests, or even as a mere prerequisite for time. The key to the relationship between space and time in Bakhtin's essay is simultaneity, an aspect of spacetime in which we live our lives—"the world of the author, of the performer, and the world of the listeners and readers. . . . are chronotopic as well"—yet nevertheless have difficulty understanding (252).

Michael Holquist says of Bakhtin's works that "it is this overriding feature of *simultaneity* that seems most difficult to grasp for those just coming to dialogism" (68), and he describes the "chronotope as the ineluctability of simultaneity" (114). Although this postulation has important consequences for the approach to the

²From *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981). All references to Bakhtin in this essay, unless otherwise indicated, are from the essays in this work, and will be subsequently given with page number only.

analysis of literary texts, it does not mean that both coordinates are always equally prominent in any given work, nor does it follow that both coordinates must always be *discussed* simultaneously. In fiction, as in life, one coordinate of the chronotope is never present without the other, even when this is not explicitly stated or we do not immediately perceive this to be the case. This essay foregrounds the importance of place in the making of creative fiction, but for the sake of clarity the term place is intended to imply the ground where the fusing of space *and* time occurs. Emerson and Morson point out that “[A]s critics, we must probe not just representations but also the very ground for representing” (370). Place is one major site where chronotopic activity is involved in the making of fiction.

Because literature is a narrative art and presents us with what Bakhtin terms an “image of man,” time would seem to be the primary category of the literary chronotope. Yet the interdependence of time and space is never abandoned by Bakhtin in his treatment of the various chronotopes in Western literary history. When Bakhtin concludes his essay with the sweeping remark that “[e]very entry into the sphere of meanings is accomplished only through the gates of the chronotope” (258), he is reiterating his concern that time must be linked to space if meanings are to reach us. Emerson and Morson say of this conclusion that Bakhtin does not claim that meaning itself is chronotopic but that, since we live our lives inside the gates of the chronotope, understanding is not possible outside of space and time (432). “Without such temporal-spatial expression,” Bakhtin says, “even abstract thought is impossible” (258).

Vlasov’s systematic treatment of the chronotopes discussed in Bakhtin’s “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope” is paradoxical, but it is a paradox that can be seen as abiding in the concept of chronotope itself: in any given example of a literary chronotope, simultaneity implies neither absolute equality nor hierarchy in the organization of the spatial and temporal. Although Vlasov underlines that Bakhtin pays “major attention to time” and considers “spatial forms as auxiliary means” in the main section of his essay, he nevertheless presents a whole catalogue documenting Bakhtin’s different types of space in this same section (44). In Vlasov’s discussion of the “Concluding Remarks” to Bakhtin’s chronotope essay, the relationship of space to time is turned around. Here, Vlasov says, “Bakhtin establishes a few adjacent chronotopes of different scope

and degree. Those he defines in accordance with their dominant *spatial*, not *temporal*, characteristics" (44). Yet Vlasov then proceeds to illustrate how each of these spaces is inextricable from its own specific time as well.

Two chronotopes from this adjacent list are particularly significant for the study of Southern literature: the road and the threshold. While each of these chronotopes has its own peculiar form of time—duration for the road and the sudden moment for the threshold—they are both employed in the fiction of William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Ernest Gaines and Alice Walker to relate an acute sense of place and concreteness of space. In world literature, the most recurrent feature of the road chronotope through the centuries has been the feature of realizing the metaphor of the path of characters' lives through the employment of their concrete passage through the familiar territory of their own locality. This trait of the road is thoroughly compatible with the Southern passion for expressing universal concerns through a highly concrete local landscape. Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* are two examples of Southern narratives in which characters set out on the path of experience by embarking on a journey through their own region.

The centrality of the threshold chronotope in Southern literature can be established by considering its recurrence as a motif in a host of works by Southern writers. The "most fundamental instance" of the threshold, Bakhtin says, "is as the chronotope of *crisis* and *break* in a life" (248), in which the forced passing of a threshold (or the refusal to pass) is a way of expressing the time of sudden change. The South as a place with a turbulent history of change and violent resistance to change is a phenomenon which is representable in fiction by use of the threshold chronotope. Faulkner's characters in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Walker's Sofia in *The Color Purple*, O'Connor's women in "Revelation" and "Everything that Rises Must Converge" and Gaines' men in *A Gathering of Old Men* are all examples of characters who engage in violent encounters on the threshold which are the result of the tensions which are an inevitable part of a shared space.

On the givenness of space and the place of South

Bakhtin's essay "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" (1929) provides some clarifying remarks on his understanding of space:

Man's outer body is *given*; his outer boundaries and those of his world are *given* (given in the extra-aesthetic givenness of life). This is a necessary and inalienable moment of being as a given. Consequently, they need to be aesthetically received, recreated, fashioned, and justified. . . . Inasmuch as the artist has to do with man's existence and with his world, he has also to do with the givenness of man in space as a necessary constituent of human existence. (*Art and Answerability* 95)

What is absent from, or perhaps taken for granted in "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope," is a discussion of this fundamental givenness of space. Bakhtin's view of aesthetic creation in this early work is one in which space is not only considered necessary to the creative act, but also one in which space originates outside of the artistic imagination. In other words, the artist does not impose just any kind of space on a work of art, but receives and reworks what is already given.

Bakhtin returned to the topic of the necessity of space in his essay on the Bildungsroman, where he explicitly yokes the categories of space and time. According to Bakhtin, Goethe's use of the chronotope represents an important development in the history of the novel. Goethe possessed, Bakhtin says,

[t]he ability to *see time*, to *read time*, in the spatial whole of the world and, on the other hand, to perceive the filling of space not as an immobile background, a given that is completed once and for all, but as an emerging whole, an event. (*Speech Genres* 25)

As Emerson and Morson as well as Vlasov have pointed out, this study on the Bildungsroman was written during the same period as the chronotope essay, and the two were likely intended as different parts of the same work. In these works, Bakhtin synthesizes his lifelong interest in the aesthetic problems of space *and* time, and in his analysis of Goethe's Bildungsroman, the theoretical problem of the

inseparability of the two coordinates of the chronotope is given perhaps its most lucid expression.

Bakhtin examines in detail how the “creative imagination” of Goethe is “restricted and subordinated to the *necessity* of a given locality, the iron-clad logic of its historical and geographical existence” (*Speech Genres* 37). Vlasov suggests that one weakness in this discussion is its connection with “‘scientific’ objectivity” (54): such necessity, Vlasov says, “predictably enforces the transition from fictional narrative to scientific discourse” (52). Yet Bakhtin specifically states that there is no such connection: “[t]his Goethean necessity was very far both from the necessity of fate and mechanical natural necessity (in naturalistic thought)” (*Speech Genres* 39). In other words, necessity as a category of *aesthetics* has its own problems which require special attention: among these are the relationship between the writer and his or her place and the relationship between given (actual) space and created (fictional) space, both of which will be discussed below.

Not all writers, of course, are equally concerned with the phenomenon of necessity. Bakhtin gives examples from Rousseau’s work to highlight a chronotopic approach which does not embrace given space: “creative historical necessity was almost completely foreign to Rousseau,” Bakhtin says of the typical romantic treatment of space and time (*ibid.* 50). Bakhtin is particularly concerned with the fact that the romantic chronotope does not allow for the representation of the links between the actual historical moment of a particular place and the historical future of that place. Romanticism, according to Bakhtin, is characterized by “historical inversion,” a chronotope which portrays the future in images of the past. Goethean necessity, on the other hand, is characterized by “a fullness of time” which takes into account the geographical, biographical, and historical aspects of human life in a particular locality (*ibid.* 42). In Goethe, the present historical moment of a place always grows organically out of the past and stretches itself organically into a future which is open and unfinalized.

Many Southern writers are especially attentive to the demands—and rewards—of the necessity of a given place. Eudora Welty’s essay “Place in Fiction” presents a cogent *aesthetics* of place which not only postulates the centrality of a given geographical and historical locality, but also includes the writer’s relationship to that

locality as a dimension of creative necessity.³ Welty considers that there are three “wide aspects” of place—all vitally connected to each other—in the creation of fiction. The first is the actual place itself which provides the writer with “raw material,” the second is “the achieved world of appearance” in fiction, and the third is “the writer himself: place is where he has his roots, place is where he stands; in his experience out of which he writes, it provides the base of reference; in his work, the point of view” (117). In Welty’s formulation, place is the key link between the chronotopes of the actual world and those of the fictional world: “The truth is,” she says, “fiction depends for its life on place” (118). The rootedness of the writer is an aspect of Welty’s aesthetics which can be seen as particularly Southern, or perhaps as a generic trait of regional literature in general. Whereas any writer (Hemingway, for example) may write from his or her own experience or describe in detail any given locality, the South has a host of writers who are deeply rooted in one specific geographical/historical place.

In her essays and fiction, Flannery O’Connor takes the aesthetic problem of this three-fold necessity of a given locality seriously. “The novelist is required to open his eyes on the world around him and look,” she says, “[t]hen he is required to reproduce, with words, what he sees” (*Mystery and Manners* 177). Although each writer’s personal convictions, ideas and world view are different, O’Connor stresses that fiction nevertheless starts in the concrete:

[Y]ou don’t write fiction with assumptions. The things we see, hear, smell, and touch affect us long before we believe anything at all, and the South impresses its image on us from the moment we are able to distinguish one sound from another. By the time we are able to use our imaginations for fiction, we find that our senses have responded irrevocably to a certain reality. This discovery of being bound through the senses to a particular society and a particular history, to particular sounds and a particular idiom, is for the writer the beginning of a recognition that first puts his work into real human perspective. . . . He discovers that the imagination is not free, but bound. (ibid. 197)

³For a substantial examination of place in Welty’s own fiction see Jan Gretlund, *Eudora Welty’s Aesthetics of Place*.

For O'Connor, fiction does not begin in the realm of abstract ideas, but in the here and now of the concrete world. Writers who have not discovered this essential aspect of the craft of fiction, according to O'Connor, are bound to fail.

It was precisely such a discovery that proved pivotal to the career of William Faulkner. As Faulkner biographer Joseph Blotner has noted, when Faulkner turned to writing stories set in his own county of Oxford, Mississippi,

he found it a process of discovery as well as invention. Long afterward he would say, "I discovered that my own little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about and that I would never live long enough to exhaust it, and that by sublimating the actual into the apocryphal I would have complete liberty to use whatever talent I might have to its absolute top. It opened up a gold mine of other people. . . ." (in Blotner 192)

The artistic liberty that Faulkner discovered in turning to his place is the same paradoxical bond which O'Connor recognizes: artistic freedom for these writers is tied to the acceptance of the necessity of their given place.

For Ernest Gaines and Alice Walker, this acceptance has an added dimension. As African-American writers living in a place which has for generations oppressed their communities, acceptance in their works is sometimes characterized by a powerful tension between the necessity of a given place and a desire to *escape* from that place. In Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, for example, the protagonist spends the first quarter of the book trying to escape to the North, and in Walker's *The Color Purple*, Celie, under the double pressure of white hierarchy and patriarchy, plots to run away with her sister. Yet in both of these books, the main protagonists remain within the deep South all their lives, although their authors did not.

The choice of portraying characters *in their Southern place* has important consequences for these writers. Despite the urge to escape the oppressions of the actual world, Gaines' and Walker's descent into a fictional exploration of their own region has opened up a "gold mine" of material for them, as it did for Faulkner and O'Connor. In her essay entitled "The Black Writer and the Southern Experience" Alice Walker, after enumerating aspects of her native South which she

hates, nevertheless expresses her indebtedness as a writer to this place:

No one could wish for a more advantageous heritage than that bequeathed to the black writer in the South: a compassion for the earth, a trust in humanity beyond our knowledge of evil, and an abiding love of justice. We inherit a great responsibility as well, for we must give voice to centuries not only of silent bitterness and hate but also of neighborly kindness and sustaining love. (*In Search* 21)

For Gaines, the love of his native Louisiana can never be effaced by the racist damage done to his people nor by any number of years spent in the urban "North." As a young aspiring writer, Gaines says that he

wanted to smell that Louisiana earth, feel that Louisiana sun, sit under the shade of one of those Louisiana oaks I wanted to see on paper those Louisiana black children walking to school on cold days I wanted to see on paper those black parents going to work before the sun came up and coming back home to look after their children after the sun went down. I wanted to see on paper the true reason why those black fathers left home. . . . And I wanted to hear that Louisiana dialect—that combination of English, Creole, Cajun, Black. For me there's no more beautiful sound anywhere. (in Babb 3)

Despite his move to California at the age of fifteen, everything Gaines has published while residing outside of the South is informed by his given place of Louisiana.

The artistic freedom that comes from a bond to a given place seems to have different overtones for the African-American Southern writer, whose separation from place in the form of escape or exile may be characterized as an artistic necessity in the form of the need for civil freedom. Although Faulkner moved from the South during a period of his life due to economic necessity, and O'Connor spent some time in her early career studying in the North, the ambivalence to place which characterizes the Anglo-American Southern writer has less to do with the dialectics of escape. O'Connor's fascination with the bad manners of many Southerners is frequently expressed in her fiction as a tension between a character and a mocking, ironic, third-

person narrator. Faulkner's ambivalence to his place is given perhaps its best expression in the closing lines of *Absalom, Absalom!*, in the dialogue between Shreve and Quentin. Quentin's relationship to place is interpreted by Shreve as negative in the question, "Why do you hate the South?", to which Quentin replies, "I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!" (303). For Quentin, the South, even when at its worst, is better than anywhere else if only because it is the place one is from.

A classification of writers along racial lines, however, is a generalization which becomes more and more complex as one reads Southern literature. Alice Walker's works, for example, are as much concerned with gender as they are with race, and Gaines has pointed to Faulkner as one important influence on his work. Despite differences in the race, gender, class, creed and generation of all of these writers, it is the place of the twentieth-century South that is the represented timespace of Ernest Gaines, Flannery O'Connor, Alice Walker and William Faulkner. The South is therefore a shared crossroads which all of them have recognized as a given—for better and for worse—which provides a starting point for their fictional representations.

Bakhtin's ideas, then, on the givenness of space and the necessity of a given locality are particularly relevant to the analysis of Southern fiction. The "Concluding Remarks" to the chronotope essay (added in 1973), provide some additional insights which are important for an understanding of the chronotope. Bakhtin opens this concluding section with the statement that "[a] literary work's artistic unity in relationship to an actual reality is defined by its chronotope" (243). The word "relationship" in this formulation is crucial: Bakhtin's postulation is one which sees the work as the created effort of an author who is firmly grounded in the here and now of his or her own culture. The artistic unity of any given work is a complex admixture of the relationship between the actual chronotopes of the world in which the author lives, the literary chronotopes passed down to the author through history, and the chronotopes created by the author out of these.

Despite differences that Bakhtin underlines between the actual and the created world, these two "are nevertheless indissolubly tied up with each other and find themselves in continual mutual interaction" (Bakhtin 254). The "author-creator" as the link between

the real and the represented, Bakhtin says, is situated inside the chronotopes of his own "unresolved and still evolving contemporaneity, in all its complexity" and positioned in a tangential way to the chronotopes of the created work. Bakhtin postulates a dialogical, give-and-take relationship between the creation of a text and the culture of the author-creator; the author-creator's literary activity is always situated within his or her own time and place, and his or her created texts subsequently become a part of that culture. This means, for example, that the works of Faulkner are part of the givenness of the South for Walker, Gaines, and O'Connor, a fact which these three relate to in different ways in their own fiction. "The realm of literature and more broadly of culture (from which literature cannot be separated)," Bakhtin says, constitute "the indispensable context of a literary work and of the author's position within it, outside of which it is impossible to understand . . . the work" (255-256).

There are three aspects of this give-and-take relationship between the work, the world, and the author which are especially important. First, that there are discrepancies between the actual reality of a place and fictional representations of that place; "we must never confuse" Bakhtin says, "the *represented* world with the world outside the text (naive realism); nor must we confuse the author-creator of a work with the author as a human being (naive biographism)" (253). Second, that there are necessary discrepancies between the respective representations of different writers portraying the same place; Walker and O'Connor, for example, portray almost exactly the same geographical area near the actual Milledgeville, Georgia, but their different relationships to this place become apparent in any comparison of their fiction. One of the many reasons for this is their different literary backgrounds. While Walker identifies with Afro-American predecessors such as Zora Neale Hurston, O'Connor has expressed an affinity with a long line of Christian writers including Augustine, Dante and Milton. In other words, these writers have access to the actual chronotopes of the same place in Georgia, but choose to incorporate very different literary chronotopes in their representations of that place. Finally, each writer's own peculiar vision is the result of his or her chosen artistic organization of the material of the actual and literary worlds into what Faulkner called the "apocryphal," or represented world. The artistic unity of this represented place is found by examining its chronotope, its

fictional time and space. Because artistic creation is always realized in a concrete way through the gates of the chronotope, the acceptance of a given place as the starting point for fiction does not reduce, but rather expands, the Southern writer's chronotopic possibilities.

Bakhtin's understanding of "the mutual interaction between the world represented in the work and the world outside the work" as a complex of cultural dialogues grounded in a real time and place provides a standpoint for situating oneself in relation to the endless debate about what and where the South actually is (255). As Escott and Goldfield have illustrated in their anthology on the South, "[d]efining Southern distinctiveness is a major academic industry" (1). In another study, Cords and Gerster sum up just a few areas of academic interest which seek to define the South in terms of one or another factor such as its "climate, geography, or its seemingly distinctive economic, political, social, or religious patterns" (xiii). Whereas some scholars believe that the South's sub-tropical climate, i.e. the natural world, has formed the attitude, body and language of Southerners (as reflected in their love of the land, slow gait, and slow drawl), others hold that social structures, for example slave society and its aftermath, are the determining features of the South. The view of the South in this essay is one which attempts to reconcile these extremes by way of a dialogic, but not dialectic, mediation between natural, social and fictional worlds.

For the Southern writer, all of these aspects of the place of the South make up the given material out of which they create their works. The Southern writer's timespace, like Goethe's, is a given which is in perpetual emergence; Southern writers do not complete their place, but add to it. This view of place inverses the contemporary scholarly tendency to consider the South primarily as a myth or a state of mind which consists of certain concepts and hazy physical boundaries. The South, David L. Smiley says, "is not a place or a thing; it is not a collection of folkways or cultural distinctives. It is an idea" (20), and Richard Gray states that "the South is primarily a concept, a matter of knowing even more than being" (xii.). Such a view ignores or at least underestimates the importance of what Bakhtin early in his career postulated as "the givenness of man in space as a necessary constituent of human existence" (*Art and Answerability* 95). Embracing both the importance of the concrete and the abstract for the creation of fiction entails thus a consideration of

the ideas, myths, states of mind, and literature of Southerners as a dimension of a real place. This place *contains* many of the forms of space and time which go into the making of fiction, and is the key crossroads between writers from this region.

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