

M.M. Bakhtin. "Epic and Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Austin: UTP, 1981. 3-40.

Bakhtin writes "the novel is the sole genre that continues to develop, that is as yet uncompleted" (3). The epic, on the other hand, is a completed and antiquated genre. Bakhtin notes that "Of all the major genres only the novel is younger than writing and the book: it alone is organically receptive to new forms of mute perception, that is, to reading" (3). Bakhtin believes that "This ability of the novel to criticize itself is a remarkable feature of this ever-developing genre" (6).

The novelization of other genres is important to Bakhtin:

They become more free and flexible, their language renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and the 'novelistic' layers of literary language, they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally—this is the most important thing—the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the opened present) (7).

Furthermore, "In the process of becoming the dominant genre, the novel sparks the renovation of all other genres, it infects them with its spirit of process and inconclusiveness" (7).

Bakhtin suggests four aspects of the general characteristics of the novel: "the novel should not be 'poetic,' as the word 'poetic' is used in other genres of imaginative literature;" the hero should not be heroic like in an epic; the hero should not be portrayed as unchanging or already completed but instead should be shown as in a state of becoming; "the novel should become for the contemporary world what the epic was for the ancient world" (10).

Bakhtin believes that the epic requires "a national epic past" or the "absolute past;" a "national tradition" as opposed to mere personal experience; and an "absolute epic distance" that separates it from the present (13).

To portray an event on the same time-and-value plane as oneself and one's contemporaries (and an event that is therefore based on personal experience and thought) is to undertake a radical revolution, and to step out of the world of epic into the world of the novel (14).

Bakhtin believed that

The absolute past is a specifically evaluating (hierarchical) category. In the epic world view, 'beginning,' 'first,' 'founder,' 'ancestor,' 'that which occurred earlier' and so forth are not merely temporal categories but *valorized* temporal categories, and valorized to an extreme degree (15).

Moreover, in ancient literature it is memory, and not knowledge, that serves as the source and power for the creative impulse. The novel, by contrast, is determined by experience, knowledge and practice (the future). When the novel becomes the dominant genre, epistemology becomes the dominant discipline (15).

The epic is walled off absolutely from where the singer and listeners are temporally located. “This boundary, consequently, is immanent in the form of the epic itself and is felt and heard in its every word...To destroy this boundary is to destroy the form of the epic as a genre” (16).

Bakhtin distinguishes between two types of temporality:

Contemporaneity for its own sake (that is to say, a contemporaneity that makes no claim on future memory)...[and] contemporaneity for the future (for descendents) (19).

The “valorized emphasis” on the epic, absolute past “does not serve the future,” but instead serves “the future memory of a past” and creates “a world that is always opposed in principle to any *merely transitory* past” (19). In this sense, the epic past is similar to Nietzsche’s conception of the will to power in that it attempts to erect a stable being (indeed, Bakhtin analyzes all things epic as unchanging and already completed) where novels show the world in its contemporaneity, in its becoming (this is probably why Bakhtin calls the epic past the absolute past).

In his book *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* Slavoj Žižek writes, “in modernism we have fragments of common daily life expressing global metaphysical vision, while in postmodernism we have larger-than-life figures treated as fragments of common life” (29).

Similarly, the epic, being laughed at in parodies or travesties, becomes “contemporized” and is “brought low” to the level of contemporary life, as Bakhtin says. In a way, laughter demythifies, and, I suppose, postmodernizes (21).

Furthermore, Bakhtin writes at length:

It is precisely laughter that destroys the epic, and in general destroys any hierarchical (distancing and valorized) distance. As a distanced image a subject cannot be comical; to be made comical, it must be brought close. Everything that makes us laugh is close at hand, all comical creativity works in a zone of maximal proximity. Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it...Familiarization of the world through laughter and popular speech is an extremely important and indispensable step in making possible free, scientifically knowable and artistically realistic creativity in European civilization” (23).

Through laughter, and “the shift of the temporal center of artistic orientation,” the author, his readers, and the world represented or narrated all exist on one plain: inevitably, the novel “permits the author, in all his various masks and faces, to move freely onto the field of his represented world, a field that in the epic had been absolutely inaccessible and closed (27).

Now the author and his work “find themselves...subject to the same temporally valorized measurements, for the ‘depicting’ authorial language now lies on the same plane as the ‘depicted’ language of the hero, and may enter into dialogic relations and hybrid combinations with it” (27-28).

This phenomenon allows for “the appearance of the authorial image on the field of representation;” Bakhtin feels this is one of the most important effects of “surmounting” the epic (28). The novel is a “world where there is no first word (no ideal word), and the final word has not yet been spoken” (30).

Hence, all characters, events, objects, etc. of the novel are unfinished and mutable.

No matter how distant this object is from us in time, it is connected to our incomplete, present-day, continuing temporal transitions, it develops a relationship with our unpreparedness, with our present. But meanwhile our present has been moving into an inconclusive future. And in this inconclusive context all the semantic stability of the object is lost; its sense and significance are renewed and grow as the context continues to unfold (30).

On the other hand, because the events in the absolute, epic past are finished and immutable, plot is arbitrary; in opposition to this, the novel “demands for an *external* and *formal* completedness and exhaustiveness, especially in regard to plotline (31).

Therefore, “This specific ‘impulse to continue’ ...and the ‘impulse to end’ ...are characteristic only for the novel and are possible only in a zone where there is proximity and contact” (32). Brooks’s *Reading for the Plot* comes to mind here, as does the Freudian interpretation of the linear novel driven toward an ending. It is interesting to add that Bakhtin finds the epic structure “circular,” not necessarily needing a clear beginning or end (which explains *in medias res?*).

As opposed to the epic, the novel speculates in the unknown: “The novel devises various forms and methods for employing the surplus knowledge that the author has, that which the hero does not know or does not see” (32).

Another important difference between epic and novel is that we can identify (somewhat) with characters in novels, but not heroes in epics. This is due to the absolute, hierarchized past. Another important facet of the epic is that the hero’s view of himself coincides with that of the author and reader (whereas in the novel, irony can cause us to see the silly vanity of the cuckold, etc.)(34). This also, to some extent, points back to the being/becoming binary.

–Taylor Adkins

Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Form of Time and Chronotope in the Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Austin: UTP, 1981. 84-258.

I apologize ahead of time for the informality of this post, but "Form of Time and Chronotope in the Novel" is an incredible piece of theory, and it's a shame that its size will prevent many readers from engaging with it fully. Thus the need for some hardcore notes.

Bakhtin's chronotope is all about the relations and implications of space-time. For Bakhtin, the chronotope "defines genre and generic distinctions," which may explain his approach throughout the essay as well as Todorov's own interest in Bakhtin (84-85). If we can think Bakhtin with Bergson, the chronotope can be considered a material assemblage of images with a duration that contracts them into a volume. Analyzing the various forms of chronotope leads to producing a problematics of narrative types.

Bakhtin begins by analyzing the Greek romance, which he argues "utilized and fused together in its structure almost all genres of ancient literature" (89).

For Bakhtin, time is specifically significant in this genre because it never effects change for the hero: "in it there is a sharp hiatus between two moments of biographical time, a hiatus that leaves no *trace* in the life of the heroes or in their personalities" (90). Bakhtin labels this "adventure-time," which is "highly intensified but undifferentiated" (90).

In this form, "a logic of random *disjunctions*" seems to be at work: events occurring a moment "earlier" or "later" is what serves to progress the action of the novel. With all of the "suddenlys" that pervade this literature, Bakhtin seizes on the heart of matters when he writes: "Moments of adventuristic time occur when...the normal...sequence of life's events is interrupted. These points provide an opening for the intrusion of nonhuman forces" (95). There are superhuman and subhuman chronotopes that impinge upon and interact with our specifically human durations.

Bakhtin identifies certain themes of the chronotope in "the motif of meeting" and parting, and also the motif of travel on the road (98). He suggests that

The nature of a given place does not figure as a component in the event...All adventures in the Greek romance are thus governed by an interchangeability in space...The adventure chronotope is thus characterized by a *technical, abstract connection between space and time*, by the *reversibility* of moments in a temporal sequence, and by their *interchangeability* in space" (100).

Because of this, the world of the heroes is alien to them, and thus "they can only experience random contingency" (101). Because heroes do not change or evolve during their adventures in this type of narrative, Bakhtin argues that

Greek romance reveals its strong ties with a *folklore that predates class distinctions*, assimilating one of the essential elements in the folkloric concepts of a man, one that survives to the present in various aspects of folklore, especially in folktales (105).

This is an interesting assertion—does Bakhtin here mean that because heroes do not change or evolve during or after the narrative there is a homogeneity of social relations? On the other hand, because space

and time are abstractly connected (reversibility in time + interchangeability in space) there is no sense in which events occur at a local evental site—instead they are surface effects which produce no illogical rupture.

Bakhtin moves next to Apuleius and Petronius. *The Golden Ass*, for Bakhtin, differs from Greek romance because:

the course of Lucius' life [is] given to us sheathed in the context of a 'metamorphosis,' and...the course of his life...somehow correspond[s] to an *actual course of travel, to the wanderings of Lucius throughout the world in the shape of an ass* (111).

The type of transformation that occurs in this genre "unfolds not so much in a straight line as spasmodically, a line with 'knots' in it, one that therefore constitutes a distinctive type of *temporal sequence*" (113). Bakhtin continues,

Metamorphosis serves as the basis for a method of portraying the whole of an individual's life in its more important moments of *crisis*: for showing *how an individual becomes other than what he was* (115).

This time is one that is full of the unusual moments of life and so is not the same as biographical time. The difference in this genre and Greek romance is that, while the events of Greek romance occur by pure chance whose origins are beyond the hero's power, the events that occur to the hero clearly indicate him as the source, and thus the weight is on him to change the present structure of things (116-117).

Bakhtin describes this as a simple cycle: guilt⊗punishment⊗redemption⊗blessedness (118).

Thus,

the temporal sequence is an integrated and *irreversible whole*. And as a consequence, the abstractness so characteristic of Greek adventure-time falls away. Quite the contrary, this new temporal sequence demands precisely concreteness of expression (119).

Space becomes meaningful as time becomes endowed with the power to bring change (120). Prior to this, location had no figuration as a component in temporal events, meaning that the chronotope was still amorphous.

Because of Lucius' transformation into an ass, he has the ability to spy on people, thus turning the private into the public. Bakhtin writes, "The *criminal act* is a moment of private life that becomes, as it were, *involuntarily public*" (122). Also, "A *contradiction developed between the public nature of the literary form and the private nature of its content*. The process of working out *private genres* began" (123). Moreover, the crisis of the individual is always already prefigured publicly by the hierophants and their oracle readings—but, on the other hand, the folly or criminality of the individual has to be handled in moderation in contrast with public virtue. The crisis as a turning point forms a torsion of space-time that breaks with the possibilities of the past.

Bakhtin next moves to the biography and autobiography, most notably Plato's works of which he writes, "This type, involving an individual's autobiographical self-consciousness, is related to the stricter forms of metamorphosis as found in mythology. At its heart lies the chronotope of 'the life course of one seeking true knowledge'" (130). The public square and agora are the prime figures of this genre, and thus Bakhtin writes, "An individual's unity and his self-consciousness were exclusively public. Man was completely *on the surface*, in the most literal sense of the word" (131, 133). Bakhtin later writes, "A man was utterly exteriorized, but within a human element, in the human medium of his own people. Therefore, the *unity* of a man's externalized wholeness was of a *public* nature" (135).

Dialogism functions in the biography as well:

The point of view that 'another' takes toward us—which we take into accounts, and by which we evaluate ourselves—functions as the source of vanity, vain pride, or as the source of offense. It clouds our self-consciousness and our powers of self-evaluation; we must free ourselves from it (145).

In the next section, Bakhtin again fixates on time:

we might say that a thing that could and in fact must only be realized exclusively in the *future* is here portrayed as something out of the *past*, a thing that is in no sense part of the past's reality, but a thing that is in its essence a purpose, an obligation (147).

He continues,

this 'inversion' of time typical of mythological and artistic modes of thought in various eras of human development, is characterized by a special concept of time, and in particular of future time. The present and even more the past are enriched at the expense of the future (147).

Next, with the chivalric romance, Bakhtin writes, "In contrast to the heroes of Greek romance, the heroes of chivalric romance are *individualized*, yet at the same time *symbolic*" (153). Again, "Strictly speaking these are not heroes of individual novels...what we get is heroes of *cycles*" (153).

Speaking of time and the fairy tale, he writes,

hours are dragged out, days are compressed into moments, it becomes possible to bewitch time itself. Time begins to be influenced by dreams; that is, we begin to see the peculiar distortion of temporal perspectives characteristic of dreams (154).

On the contrary, "Antiquity treated time with great respect...and did not permit itself the liberty of any subjective playing around with time" (155).

Bakhtin next highlights the rogue because it "influenced the positioning of the author himself with the novel (and of his image, if he himself is somehow embedded in the novel), as well as the author's point of view" (160). Bakhtin elaborates, "The novelist stands in need of some essential formal and generic mask that could serve to define the position from which he views life, as well as the position from which he makes that life public" (161). Bakhtin also writes, "the clown and the fool represent the

metamorphosis of tsar and god—but the transformed figures are located in the nether world, in death” (161). The rogue is important, moreover, because

They grant the right *not* to understand, the right to confuse, to tease, to hyperbolize life; the right to parody others while talking, the right to not be taken literally, not ‘to be oneself’; the right to live a life in the chronotope of the entr’acte, the chronotope of theatrical space, the right to act life as a comedy and to treat others as actors, the right to rip off masks, the right to rage at others with a primeval (almost cultic) rage—and finally, the right to betray to the public a personal life, down to its most private and prurient little secrets (163).

Finally, “It is characteristic that *internal man*—pure ‘natural’ subjectivity—could be laid bare only with the help of the clown and the fool, since an adequate, direct (that is, from the point of view of practical life, not allegorical) means for expressing his life was not available” (164).

Bakhtin moves to Rabelais, whose works present an interesting form of the chronotope:

This special relationship we will designate as the adequacy, the direct proportionality, of degrees of quality (‘value’) to spatial and temporal quantities (dimension)... This means that everything of value, everything that is valorized positively, must achieve its full potential in temporal and spatial terms; it must spread out as far and as wide as possible, and it is necessary that everything of significant value be provided with the power to expand spatially and temporally (167).

Focusing on the “agricultural labor cycle,” Bakhtin writes,

And here we get, in the oldest motifs and plots, a reflection of such a time consolidated in language for the first time, a reflection of the temporal relationships of growth to the *temporal contiguity* of phenomena having widely differing characteristics (206).

Moreover,

This is the time of *productive growth*. It is a time of growth, blossoming, fruit-bearing, ripening, fruitful increase, issue. The passage of time does not destroy or diminish but rather multiplies and increases the quantity of valuable things (207).

Again, Bakhtin further elucidates this form:

The mark of cyclicity, and consequently of cyclical repetitiveness, is imprinted on all events occurring in this type of time. Time’s forward impulse is limited by the cycle. For this reason even growth does not achieve an authentic ‘becoming’ (210).

Because of this unity of time, Bakhtin writes, “it is inevitable that such phenomena as copulation and death (the seeding of the earth, conception), the grave and the fertile female mons, food and drink (the fruits of the earth) together with death and copulation and so forth turn up in the growth-and-fertility category, in direct contiguity with each other” (210). With the gradual differentiation of the means of production, “there come into being such phenomena as *ritualistic violations* and, later, *ritualistic laughter, ritualistic parody* and *clownishness*” (212).

Later on, Bakhtin writes generally about his present project,

What interests us is the *form of time*, only insofar as it is the basis for possible narratives (and narrative matrices) in subsequent life. The folkloric form of time we have characterized above undergoes essential changes (214).

For example, “As a result of this severance from the producing life of the whole and from the collective struggle with nature, their *real* links with the life of nature are weakened—if not severed altogether” (215).

Again,

The motif of death undergoes a profound transformation in the temporally sealed-off sequence of an individual life. Here this motif takes on the meaning of an ultimate end. And the more sealed-off the individual life-sequence becomes, the more it is severed from the life of the social whole, the loftier and more ultimate becomes its significance (216).

Finally,

metaphors, comparisons and in general tropes in the style of Homer have not yet utterly lost their unmediated meaning, they do not yet serve the purposes of sublimation. Thus an image selected for comparison is worth just as much as the other member of the comparison, it has its own independently viable significance and reality; thus a comparison becomes almost a dual episode, a digression (218).

The Rabelais section that seemed so superfluous for our project can be summarized by the next two quotations:

We should emphasize the extraordinary concision and therefore compactness of this whole series of motifs. The elements of the ancient complex are present in one unmediated and tightly packed matrix; pressed up against one another so that they almost cover each other up—they are not separated by any sideplots or detours in the narrative, nor by any lengthy discourses, nor by lyrical digressions, nor by any metaphorical sublimations that might destroy the unity of the drily realistic surface of the story (222).

And,

The realistic image is structured here as a special type, one that could arise only on a folkloric base. It is difficult to find an adequate terminology for it. We are compelled to speak of something like a *realistic emblematic*. The total makeup of the image itself remains thoroughly realistic, but concentrated and compacted in it are so many essential and major aspects of life that its meaning far outstrips all spatial, temporal and sociohistorical limits—outstrips them without, however, severing itself from the concrete sociohistorical base from which it sprang (223).

Bakhtin moves on to the role of the idyll in the novel: “The unity of the life of generations (in general, the life of men) in an idyll is in most instances primarily defined by the *unity of place*, by the age-old rooting of the life of generations to a single place, from which this life, in all its events, is inseparable. This unity of place in the life of generations weakens and renders less distinct all the temporal boundaries between individual lives and between various phases of one and the same life. The unity of place brings together and even fuses the cradle and the grave (the same little corner, the same earth), and brings together as well childhood and old age (the same grove, stream, the same lime trees, the same house), the life of the various generations who had also lived in that same place, under the same conditions, and who had seen the same things. This blurring of all temporal boundaries made possible by a unity of place also contributes in an essential way to the creation of the cyclic rhythmicalness of time so characteristic of the idyll” (225). I wonder what this implies for our highly mobile society.

Bakhtin goes on to write, “Anything that has the appearance of common everyday life, when compared with the central unrepeatable events of biography and history, here begins to look precisely like the most important things in life” (226). Again, “agricultural labor transforms all the events of everyday life, stripping them of that private petty character obtaining when man is nothing but consumer; what happens rather is that they are turned into essential life *events*” (227).

–Taylor Adkins