

Forms of Space and of the Chronotope in Pynchon

Inger H. Dalsgaard

The Poetics of Chronotope in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon, by Zofia Kolbuszewska. Lublin: Learned Society of the Catholic U of Lublin, 2000. 245 pp. 13 Zl.

Any new monograph which takes on all of Pynchon's novels has my immediate interest and goodwill, especially one starting out, as does *The Poetics of Chronotope* (in the introduction), with a reference to Pynchon's novel venture into journalism, "A Journey into the Mind of Watts" (1966). Moreover, many of us—as closet-modernist readers, according to Brian McHale (cf. Kolbuszewska 126)—may also be tempted by the grace and closure promised by a book which seems to have lit upon a single concept with which to work through and explain an author's complete, complicated oeuvre. In this case, the ordering principle is suggested in Zofia Kolbuszewska's title—Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotope theory, about the changing relation between time and space in literature.¹ Kolbuszewska describes her study as "based in principle on Mikhail Bakhtin's approach" (30), but her introduction suggests three ways her use of Bakhtin could in principle be questioned.

First of all, and niggling to anyone who reads this book to learn specifically how the theory of chronotopes applies to Pynchon's novels, Kolbuszewska asserts rather than justifies the usefulness of Bakhtin, without, in fact, outlining either how and why she intends to apply his work to Pynchon or the benefits of doing so. While the introduction discusses and quotes from other theories as well, the reader who lacks the patience to read through the rest of the book to find out in which directions Kolbuszewska's intentions with respect to Pynchon actually lie will be happy to find a clear summary, and selling point, on the back cover (quoted, indeed, from pages 217–18 of the conclusion):

In the first novel, *V.*, time is reflected in the mirror of a character's consciousness and thus reversed, which creates a kind of tension between the past and the present. This tension grows in *The Crying of Lot 49*, where time seems to approach the moment of revelation or apocalypse. Although time is nearing zero point, it never reaches it. The apocalyptic moment, an arrested Brennschluss, is reached in *Gravity's Rainbow*. In this

novel Pynchon investigates the moment of time's freezing that coincides with the rocket reaching the peak of its parabolic trajectory, while the post-apocalyptic simultaneity of all historical events in frozen, or spatialized time is an inherent feature of the chronotope of *Vineland*.

The vector of time in *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow* is directed toward zero. The chronotopes of these novels draw closer and closer towards apocalypse, which is simultaneously a moment of revelation, only to defer it infinitely in *Mason & Dixon*.

Here Kolbuszewska emphasizes the temporal aspect of the chronotope, suggesting a clear progression, or perhaps rather a time, specific to each novel, and sounding more loyal to Bakhtin's method than does her introduction. This leads to my second reason for questioning Kolbuszewska's use of Bakhtin and her intentions in this book. The tempocentricity of Bakhtin's "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope" clashes with the spatial bias of Kolbuszewska's interpretation of the chronotope. Her introduction focuses on descriptions of theorists' changing perceptions of space—especially space in the American imagination—deftly incorporated into her overview of how space has developed in theory. To "take SPACE to be the central fact to [literature] born in America"—as did Charles Olson in reading another great American novelist, Herman Melville, in *Call Me Ishmael* (1947)—is not a problem at all. To do so aligns Kolbuszewska with a viable and fertile strain of readings of U.S. literature, and thus the direction she sets in her introduction is a promising one. The problem may lie only in asserting that "Bakhtin's notion of the 'chronotope' turns out to be a more convenient tool for the investigation of spatio-temporal relationships in literary works" (16) if the emphasis of her reading is in fact spatial whereas his is temporal. Not surprisingly, Kolbuszewska finds that, for her purposes, Bakhtin's method needs occasional updating via Yuri Lotman, Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard concerning three kinds of space: in art, politics and mass media, respectively (30). She seems to have inherited Bakhtin's own unbalanced valorization, but chiasmatically, in spite of the implied equality of the "spatio-temporal complex" or "spatio-temporal unity" (7-8), which neither Kolbuszewska's nor Bakhtin's original textual analyses, fortunately, bear out.

In focusing on the poetics of space in the chronotope, Kolbuszewska appears, in fact, despite her protestations, merely to take her departure from Bakhtin, having determined that "the time component of the chronotope seems to be arrested, frozen, fragmented, and thus spatialized in Pynchon's novels" (8). Thus my third concern has more to do with a critical view of a Bakhtinian

method/paradigm, which Kolbuszewska might have foregrounded, than with the work she ends up doing. Bakhtin is less useful, today, as a theorist whose “view is both comprehensive and systematic” (20) than as a nonsystematic, nonformalist thinker whose ideas are adaptable to postmodern and postcolonial theories. The weakness of the essay on which Kolbuszewska relies is Bakhtin’s tendency to generalize toward universal (or master) chronotopes or to cling to a belief in a “relative typological stability of the novelistic chronotopes,” that is, to an ossified poetics untouched by the changing circumstances of history and reception (Bakhtin 85). Reading Pynchon with only the modernistic, systematic Bakhtinian method, one risks the same kinds of problems Bakhtin himself had when he sought the satisfaction of using the chronotope to catalogue and categorize novels into neat genres. In his chapter on the Rabelaisian chronotope, Bakhtin mentions that all his “basic analytical positions are derived from the first four books [of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*], since the fifth book too sharply departs in its artistic method from the unity of the whole” (167). Rather than shake my head at Bakhtin’s attempt to make *Gargantua and Pantagruel* fit a proper “unity of the whole” by lopping off an offending part, I delight in Rabelais’s novel’s refusal to cooperate: exactly the quality in Pynchon’s writing which keeps it alive and which makes Kolbuszewska’s project such a fascinating one.

The reason Bakhtin’s chronotope theory is alive today, and relevant to a new generation of theorists, is probably the 1973 addition to “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope: Notes toward a Historical Poetics” of his “Concluding Remarks”—coinciding, appropriately, with the publication of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. This section (and the “Historical” included in his subtitle) allows an escape from the trap of “typological stability” and “unity of the whole.” Instead, the chronotope appears essentially immune to closure: contingent on numerous other chronotopes in complex and multilayered ways, and entering into dialogic interactions with other chronotopes. Moreover, by admitting the influence of external categories of reader and author chronotopes, and thereby introducing historical reality into the chronotope concept, Bakhtin’s work becomes useful to communications and reception theory, opens up a new historicizing poetics, and offers critics an alternative to an ahistorical, unconnectable barrenness threatened by deconstruction.

Implicitly, judging by which parts of “Forms of Time” she quotes; by her references to reception theorists—Lotman, Iser, Ingarden; and by the way she lays out an (historical) evolution of chronotopes in Pynchon (internal textual, rather than reader or author chronotopes, however), Kolbuszewska relies on Bakhtin’s 1973 chronotope concept.

She is scarcely guilty of using the 1930s core of Bakhtin's essay, although, ironically, using it might have given her some ideas for reading Plechazunga or Slothrop's last appearance against the deep folk roots of "the fool," a mask which, according to the early categorizations of the essay, aids the novelist (Bakhtin 161–65). Bakhtin's "Concluding Remarks" does suggest further chronotope categories, such as "the road" (243), where nationalities, social classes, religions and ages meet irrespective of conventions: a chronotope which might have brought to mind Pynchon's Displaced Persons, the (perhaps) random encounters of his characters, and the colliding and interweaving of fates in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

The chronotope is not, however, at the forefront of Kolbuszewska's (brief) chapter on that expansive novel, nor of her (longer) chapter on *The Crying of Lot 49*, except for a couple of references to "the chronotope of Oedipa's quest" (105) and to the fact that detective fiction "emerged [as a genre] from the Gothic" (94). The Gothic chronotope, one discovers, is the hidden protagonist and key to time in Kolbuszewska's reading of Pynchonian chronotopes. In the majority of her chapters, Kolbuszewska has expanded significantly on Bakhtin's half page on the Gothic chronotope (Bakhtin 245–46) to chart a progression in Pynchon's writing. Her reading of *V.* revolves around Baedeker land and the functions of history explained through the Gothic tradition and chronotope. As promised, she posits an inversion of time in *V.* insofar as "[d]ecadent, colonial Europe is America's retroactive reflection," which also constitutes an inversion of "Henry James's idea of decadent Europe corrupting innocent America" (69). One can find this idea crisply reiterated in Blicero's soliloquy on the historical progress of Europe's empire of "'Analysis and Death': "'Now we are in the last phase. American Death has come to occupy Europe'" (GR 722). *Vineland*, meanwhile, contains "the parodic, the 1980s version of the Gothic chronotope" (164); and Kolbuszewska charts in *Mason & Dixon* yet another evolutionary stage of Pynchon's reworking of the Gothic chronotope, through the subjunctive. Because Kolbuszewska does not force the Gothic chronotope into her readings of all Pynchon's novels, and because she shows its progression and changes of focus within Pynchon's work, she defuses the suspicion that a universal Gothic chronotope threatens to become a master poetics here—just as the Rabelaisian chronotope failed to be universal to *Gargantua and Pantagruel*.

Kolbuszewska shows us the absences, presences, changes and inversions of the Gothic chronotope in Pynchon's works, allowing us to marvel yet again at the almost organic life of his texts, both as historically situated (in abstract time-space as well as in concrete time-

place) and as sites “where the knots of narrative are tied and untied” via one interrelated chronotope or another (Bakhtin 250). In pursuing her objective, Kolbuszewska plays to one of her strengths by providing her readers with a well-orchestrated selection of observations from an extensive network of other scholars, and allows her own chronotope or theoretical stance to disappear from the foreground. Her modesty should encourage readers to look for her own unique and observant voice among the Berressems and Caviolas she quotes, or perhaps to suspect that she has refrained from directing us too obviously toward her own idea of the Gothic chronotope, but has instead allowed it to unfold as we become involved in the flow of her readings of Pynchon. Given her citation of McHale on the deconditioning of the modernist reader, Kolbuszewska may be requiring paranoid or modernist readers of her book to “find their way out by some other path than the one they came in by” (McHale qtd. in Kolbuszewska 126).

—*University of Aarhus*

Note

¹Bakhtin’s chronotope is most familiar through the essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; ed. Michael Holquist [Austin: U of Texas P, 1981]), 84–258. Dating originally from 1937–1938, the essay has “Concluding Remarks” written in 1973. Kolbuszewska refers also to two Polish translations of Bakhtin texts.