Notes toward an Ecological Conception of Bakhtin's 'Chronotope'

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The emergence of ecological literary studies has widened our understanding of spatial configurations in literature. Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the 'chronotope' is one classic account of such configurations. Bakhtin envisages the chronotope, or time-space configuration, as a nodal concept for literary studies: starting from a careful, comparative reading of a corpus of texts, he suggests, we can identify a set of space-time relations that defines either a genre or a motif (and its discursive implications) current in the period from which the corpus dates (Bakhtin 84-85; 243-44). My current research interest is in the uses of this concept for ecological literary studies. Though the chronotope is probably not an inherently ecological category, I would argue that it has both structural and thematic affinities with the ecological approach to literature. Structurally, both approaches can be grounded in Bakhtin's notion of dialogicity (Müller 505-7). Explicitly or implicitly, they regard the literary text as an integral discursive unit that accommodates and perpetuates culturally regenerative principles such as openness and complexity. Whether we call these principles dialogic, as Bakhtin does, or ecological, as most ecocritics would, the underlying assumption seems to be the same: by means of these and other principles, literary texts help sustain the vitality of their discursive, social, or even their natural environment.

Thematically, both approaches direct our focus onto this environment, and in particular onto the concrete, physical spaces in which the action is situated. They are concerned with the relation between the human and non-human dimensions of the fictive world, and with the implications this relation has for the socio-cultural function of the literary text. It seems to me that chronotopic motifs in particular can be shown to reflect, negotiate, and emphasize the status of the environment in contemporary discourse. This is true not only for motifs or images taken from the realm of nature: recent European models of 'cultural ecology' have convincingly argued that culture functions analogously to natural ecosystems, that literary texts spearhead this ecosystemic principle in culture, and that their very negotiation of cultural phenomena potentially fulfills an ecological function (Finke; Zapf). Against this theoretical background, chronotopic motifs that partake of both the natural and the cultural spheres emerge as a particularly instructive object for ecological literary studies. In the following, I will focus on one of these motifs – the road – to illustrate the rivaling time-

space configurations it accommodates and the ways these configurations play out in literature. Since chronotopes in Bakhtin's view are specific to a certain culture and time period, I will limit my analysis to English-language texts from the twentieth century, the century that saw roads emerge in unprecedented numbers and that saw unprecedented numbers use the road on a routine basis.

In the twentieth-century cultural imaginary, the road was a means of obliterating space and time. It was constructed to enable people to overcome long distances in a short time. The road was linear: a straight line that cut through whatever obstacles there were (forests, valleys, mountains), that was clearly demarcated from the environment (by signposts, fences, walls) and from the underground (by stones and tar). The road was a site of individualism: much more than the railway, for instance, it left to the individual user the choice where to get on and off, and how fast to go. (Speed limit regulations were often vague and contested, and few countries held on to them continually.) The concept of time underlying the road was strictly linear as well, and it was oriented toward the future. The time of the road was the time one spent getting from start to finish, and the less time one spent the better. Roads were made ever more linear, cars were made ever faster: ideally, "we got there in no time." This ideal of the road had its Other, its perversion, in the phenomenon of the traffic jam, which forced people to spend time in a space where neither time nor space were supposed to exist.

Poetry, that indefatigable ecological corrective to our cultural imaginary, reminds us that there are roads of another kind, with a different chronotope. "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood," begins the most famous road poem in the English language. The roads that Robert Frost's speaker sees before him are covered by grass and leaves, not tar; they are made for people and animals, not cars; they are not linear but bend in the undergrowth. They are made for travel, not in the scientific-technological sense of leaving space behind (or even time, as in "time travel") but in the traditional sense of experiencing the land. Frost's lyrical I is not on the road in order to get from one place to the other in no time: when he sees the roads diverge, he stops to look at them. "Long I stood," he says, "And looked down one as far as I could" (lines 3-4). Not knowing which way to go would be an unfortunate obstacle on the ideal twentieth-century road. For Frost's speaker, it is an occasion for pausing and reflecting, for reconnecting with his inner voice and with his environment. It is not necessarily a harmonious occasion: the speaker does not go about blissfully hugging the trees next to the road. He confronts the emblematic situation in which he finds himself, knowing that we cannot take all roads that open themselves up to us. But as the poem concludes, what makes

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"all the difference" for him is not that he has taken this particular road but that he has always paused to look at himself and his environment before going on.

Bakhtin developed the chronotope as a concept for analyzing novels, not poetry, and if we compare the two genres with regard to their road chronotopes we find a curious difference. Unlike Frost's poem, for instance, the classic road novels of the twentieth century—Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Kerouac's *On the Road*, Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Swift's *Last Orders*—rarely reflect on the concrete environment in which so much of their plot is set. This is not to say that they subscribe to or perpetuate the "no time, no space" ideal I have outlined: the temporal component in particular is radically reaccentuated by Faulkner and Swift, who subvert the future-oriented road trip by focusing on the past-oriented inner life of the characters who take the trip. Steinbeck offsets the Joads' journey to California with the minute portraits of life on and around the road that make up the intermediate chapters of his novel. Such aspects certainly deserve ecological analysis, but there is in these novels surprisingly little reflection, on the part of either the narrator or the characters, about the roads that form such a decisive part of the setting. Kerouac's novel is particularly striking in this respect: it takes its title from the road, most of its scenes are either set on or involve the road, but there is no concrete description of any road in the entire novel. The closest the narrator, Sal Paradise, gets to such a description is the scene where he crouches on the floor of the car because is afraid that the driver, his friend Dean, will cause an accident. In this scene, he briefly imagines the tar and the white strip whizzing by a mere twenty inches underneath him. Other than that, the only information we get about the roads is, occasionally, whether they are in good condition or whether there are other cars on the road. When the narrator and his friends pass through cities on their trips, their interest is often limited to slowing down their car and discussing the girls on the sidewalks. Their trips are usually concluded by Sal's somewhat braggy calculation of how fast they were going and how quickly they made it to their destination.

When we look at road *poems* from this period, we get a very different picture. In Frost's "The Road Not Taken," which is also set on a road for the most part, we get both detailed description ("leaves no step had trodden black") and deep reflection, both in the narrative ("knowing how way leads on to way") and in its retrospective reflection ("that has made all the difference"). Frost's sonnet "On a Tree Fallen Across the Road" similarly combines small, concrete aspects of the road setting with far-reaching questions about human nature. In a conspicuous break with the dominant ideal, the chronotope of the road in these poems is marked by slowness. Far from being negated, time is here experienced in its full

range: pausing in the road, observing it as an environmental structure, the speakers experience their own existence as continuous in time and space. They become aware of interconnections between their own past, present, and future, between themselves and their environment as it presents itself in the road—the leaves, the divergence, the obstacle placed there by "the tempest with a crash of wood" ("On a Tree," line 1). This chronotope is not specific to Frost's road poems. We find it in such different texts as William Carlos Williams' bleak "By the road to the contagious hospital" and Edna St. Vincent Millay's playful "The Wood Road," Siegfried Sassoon's pandemonic description of "The Road" during a wartime retreat and Patrick Kavanagh's introspective "Inniskeen Road: July Evening." What all these texts have in common is a chronotopic structure that is engendered by the combination of detailed description and comprehensive reflection, and that relies on the ecological principles of continuity, flexibility, and interconnection.

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