Bakhtin, Temporality, and Modern Narrative: Writing "the Whole Triumphant Murderous Unstoppable Chute"

Stacy Burton

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> Time is a mystery precisely in that the observations that are to be made regarding it cannot be unified. (This is exactly what, for me, constitutes an unsurpassable enigma....)
>
> Paul Ricoeur

> Languages of heteroglossia, like mirrors that face each other, each reflecting in its own way a piece, a tiny corner of the world, force us to guess at and grasp for a world behind their mutually reflecting aspects that is broader, more multi-leveled, containing more and varied horizons than would be available to a single language or a single mirror.
>
> Mikhail Bakhtin

Since the late nineteenth century, as Stephen Kern demonstrates in his rich history *The Culture of Time and Space,* how human beings perceive and experience time has changed dramatically. As the twentieth century began, the new public institution of world standardized time was countered by a profound awareness of the diversity of private time, a revolution in thinking about temporality fostered by the development of history and psychology as disciplines and the theories of Henri Bergson, Albert Einstein, and others. For many writers it became a given that whatever "time" was, it was characterized above all by multiplicity. . . . Critical theory stands in need of a theory of narrative temporality grounded in a contemporary understanding of time's complexity and multiplicity. In philosopher Robert Brumbaugh's words, prevailing time-theories tend to assume erroneously that time is "a single substance, or attribute, or essence" (136-37); any new approach must recognize instead that no singular theory can account for time, that—especially in texts shaped by the twentieth century—anachrony is "the normal state of affairs" (Claus Uhlig 249).

A deeper understanding of temporality and narrative must recognize that the experience and perception of time vary from individual to individual and event to event, and within texts as well as between them. It must explore the interrelation of past, present, and future in both textuality and life, must find ways to consider twentieth-century multiplicity without forcing it into neat typologies, and must address the complex relations of time and the languages in which we discuss, understand, and represent them. It must, in practice, combine acknowledgment of literary form with attention to consciousness and experience. As A. A. Mendilow proposed over 40 years ago, a theory of narrative temporality must investigate *how* time-values "condition the whole conception" of narratives (63). It must address Ricoeur's claim about the connections between narrative, temporality, and human experience: "I take temporality to be that structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity and narrativity to be the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate referent. Their relationship is therefore reciprocal" ("Narrative Time" 169).

The temporal heterogeneity so evident in modern narrative finds its theoretical complement in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. Critics have been slow to appreciate this aspect of Bakhtin's work: "chronotope," the key term in his discussion of time and narrative, has remained a hazy item in the critical lexicon. If we develop the theory of temporality suggested *in nuce* in the idea of the chronotope, however, and examine its relation to Bakhtin's theories about discourse, we can discover new, rich concepts for exploring time and narrative. Bakhtin opens ways to discuss how assumptions about time condition narrative forms, how narratives reconstruct experience, how characters' temporality shapes their perceptions, how multiple senses of time can be at play in a single text, and how the process of reading reshapes texts. By working out crucial connections between time, perception, and language, he suggests that questions about time are fundamental for studies of both texts and experience. For Bakhtin, literary genres are not only aesthetic forms, but also *"profound forms of thinking"* about human experience (Morson, "Bakhtin, Genres" 1077). Together, his chronotope and discourse theories propose not another typology of texts, but rather creative ways to understand heterogeneous experiences of temporality and their re-creation in narrative.'

Bakhtin develops his ideas on time in the book-length essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes Toward a Historical Poetics," written in 1937-1938 and amended significantly in 1973 with the addition of a section titled "Concluding Remarks." Conceptions of time and space, or chronotopes, Bakhtin emphasizes, are "constitutive" for literature. . . . In the "Concluding Remarks," Bakhtin finally addresses the question that underlies the entire essay: "What is the significance of all these chronotopes?" Chronotopes, he emphasizes, do not merely characterize representation, but actually make it possible: "The chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied" ("Forms" 250). Experience can only be *represented* chronotopically:

> It is precisely the chronotope that provides the ground essential for the showing-forth, the representability of events. . . All the novel's abstract elements—philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect—gravitate toward the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood, permitting the imagining power of art to do its work. Such is the representational significance of the chronotope. ("Forms" 250)

Our understanding of time (and space) shapes even our language. . . . Within any narrative, he explains in a crucial passage, several chronotopes may be at work:

> Chronotopes are mutually inclusive, they co-exist, they may be interwoven with, replace or oppose one another, contradict one another or find themselves in ever more complex interrelationships . . . The general characteristic of these interactions is that they are *dialogical* (in the broadest use of the word). . . (this dialogue) enters the world of the author, of the performer, and the world of the listeners and readers. And all these worlds are chronotopic as well. ("Forms" 252)

For Bakhtin, both art and life are fundamentally dialogic: this theory permeates his work from earliest essay to last notebook, and is fundamental for his understanding of the novel. A late note emphasizes this point:

> The dialogic nature of consciousness, the dialogic nature of human life itself.
> To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. ("Towards a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book" 293)

This interrelation of voices—found in literature as well as in life— is embodied in words themselves, for once spoken, words enter into "the dialogic fabric of human life," where each word is constantly open to nuance, evaluation, reinterpretation ("Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book" 293). Human beings are shaped in and through the words they use: consciousness and ideology develop in "the process of selectively assimilating the words of others" ("Discourse in the Novel" 341, 345). As Bakhtin notes in the 1970s, human life is a process of orientation in "a world of others' words," a course of transforming "the other's word" into "one's own/other (or other/one's own)" ("Notes" 143, 145). In terms of language, this process conventionally is described as "finding one's voice"; in terms of one's understanding of the world, shaped through language, experience, and concepts about time, it may be read as developing one's chronotope.

The human world exists as an ongoing dialogue in which multiple languages and chronotopes engage and reshape each other perpetually. It is characterized not only by heteroglossia, but equally by multitemporality or heterochrony. In Morson's words, "there are always multiple senses of time that can be applied to the same situation; thinking and experience therefore often involve a dialogue of chronotopes" ("Bakhtin, Genres" 1085). A particular chronotope may typify a certain sociohistorical matrix, as Bakhtin indicates in his history of novelistic chronotopes. But others are always both possible and present, existing on the margins if not contending for the center. It is this juxtaposition and interrelation, not the typology of forms, that matters most. For, Bakhtin writes,

> at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom; it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present . . . [A]ll languages of heteroglossia . . . are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words . . . As such they all may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically. As such they encounter one another and co-exist in the consciousness of real people . . . ("Discourse" 291-92)

This often unpredictable co-existence is enacted in the creation of narrative: heteroglossia and heterochrony occur "first and foremost, in the creative consciousness of people who write novels" ("Discourse" 292).

In Bakhtin's essays the novel stands as the way art most authentically approximates the diverse, contradictory ways language and thought develop in real experience.' As "the only developing genre," the novel "reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding" ("Epic and Novel" 7). Its distinguishing features are its elastic heteroglossia and multiple chronotopes; in the novel even "the plot itself is subordinated to the task of coordinating and exposing languages to each other" ("Discourse" 365) The novel enacts the living process of dialogically shaping and understanding one's chronotope: "What is realized in the novel is the process of coming to know one's own language as it is perceived in someone else's language, coming to know one's own belief system in someone else's system" ("Discourse" 365). For Bakhtin, Robert Seguin observes, "novelistic discourse does not directly take the things and events of reality as its object, but rather *other words,* other languages. From the point of view of the novel, reality is completely mediated by language . ." (46). The active life of a literary text through the responses of readers further perpetuates the dialogic process that generates and is

embodied in the narrative itself (cf. “Discourse” 252-57). . . .

What does modern fiction reveal about the *experience* of temporality, as it represents characters in the process of understanding and shaping their chronotopes? How, for example, do characters’ or narrators’ chronotopes change, and what happens when they do? What part do history, society, arid politics play in producing the chronotopic unconscious? What happens when the various chronotopes of author, narrators, characters, and readers meet, collide, or reshape one another? How, as Bakhtin claims, can the discourses of author and character be fused in a novelistic image as “an open, living, mutual interaction between worlds, points of view, accents” (“Discourse” 409)? How and why do modern narratives reaccentuate earlier chronotopes, particularly mythic ones? If there is no single “chronotope of modern life,” what do modern novels have in common? What assumptions do writers and readers shaped by the “time-obsession” of the twentieth century bring to the novels they write and read? As we ask these questions, moreover, Bakhtin challenges critics to assess our own discourses as well as those of the texts we read; in Morson’s words, “once one recognizes that many different chronotopes have been and will be conceived, then the authority and inevitability of one’s own sense of time and space become problematic” *(Literature and History* 266).

Faulkner critics have emphasized the importance of temporality in *The Sound and the Fury* since Jean-Paul Sartre opened a 1939 essay by asking, “Why has Faulkner broken up the time of his story and disarranged the fragments?” (225) In the 57 years since, much has been written about Faulkner’s use of modernist techniques in revealing the inner lives of the Compson brothers and the limits of their strikingly different perspectives, which they voice in the first three sections of the novel. Though critical vocabularies vary, most analyses also examine the possibility that Faulkner overcomes these limits, that the fragmented, multiple-voiced novel achieves some kind of formal and thematic unity through its fourth and final section. A fairly typical reading argues that Benjy inhabits the pure present of the idiot, Quentin obsesses about the past, and Jason frantically tries to get ahead for the future. In the final section, according to this reading, Faulkner tries to transcend the verbal boundaries that separate Benjy, Quentin, and Jason, to bring past, present, and future together. He does this in various ways (here the critical consensus starts to break down): by celebrating Dilsey’s religious faith, with its images of eternity; by shifting to the distanced, knowing perspectives of a third-person narrator or a reader; or by invoking the absent figure of Caddy Compson, who moves on in life while her brothers waste time. “Time” thus serves Faulkner criticism largely as a device for ordering *The Sound and the Fury,* for ensuring formal clarity despite the text’s apparent affinity with chaos. Whether or not Faulkner attains this order, however, has been the subject of extensive debate.

Reconsidering *The Sound and the Fury* in Bakhtinian terms enables critics to re-view the novel’s heterogeneity, to value its messy representation of discourses and chronotopes in unresolved collision rather than to see the text as a problem to be straightened out. Faulkner critics have said much about Benjy, Quentin, Jason, Dilsey, and Caddy as individual characters, yet comparatively little about their interactions; the four sections of the novel have provided a neat, but sometimes limiting, critical paradigm. Rethinking the text dialogically, however, highlights the ways in which *The Sound and the Fury* is not simply a depiction of discrete selves, but a text that represents how human beings—through their chronotopes and discourses—fashion and animate one another. It is by way of the chronotopic unconscious and language that the Compson brothers understand themselves and try to ventriloquize or resist the discourses of each other, their parents, Caddy, and their niece Quentin. By tracing the contours and failures of their interactions, rather than miming the flow of the Compsons’ minds or piecing the fragments of their tales together, we can gain fundamental new insights into Faulkner’s text.

The Sound and the Fury is replete with exchanges in which one chronotope and its language encounter, reshape, and are contested by others. These passages are of particular interest for how they demonstrate the limits of each effort to define temporality, narrate history, and contain others’ voices. Benjy’s narrative, for example, clearly indicates that he has some temporal consciousness: he recalls detailed episodes (often in sequential fragments) and anticipates change though he doesn’t understand that the past cannot recur. Yet the other characters in the novel repeatedly misread him as a figure of timelessness, as someone existing outside the flow of history. Dilsey, who religiously believes everything will occur in “the Lawd’s own time,” sees him as “de Lawd’s chile”; Quentin, who would like to stop time, renames his brother after the biblical Benjamin, removed from history and “held hostage into Egypt” (28, 367, 195). Though his own silent discourse undercuts these readings, Benjy unwittingly provides an image of extratemporality: he becomes a place in which chronotopes and discourses collide as others use him as a figure in their own efforts to narrate Compson history.

Quentin, in contrast, makes his agonizing self-consciousness about the unrepeatable, unstoppable flow of time quite evident: as Matthews observes, he desires above all “an apotheosis of the temporary” *(The Play of Faulkner’s Language* 85). Trying to achieve this impossibility, Quentin constructs a chronotope like the one that Bakhtin calls “historical inversion,” narrating his desires back into history in order to make them true (cf. “Forms” 147-48). To rewrite experience into something he can bear, Quentin tries to fashion out of heteroglossia a safe, unproblematic narrative in which his chronotope and language are not questioned. In an insistent monologue mixing remembrance

and fabrication, he plays out several dialogues, notably with his sister and his father. His narrative effort fails, however, for Quentin finds he cannot control the conflicting voices of his father and Caddy, even inside his own mind: his father concedes the inevitability of the relentless "clicking of little wheels" that terrifies him, and Caddy responds to his insistent *"Ill tell you how it was"* by refusing to say the words he wants desperately to hear (87, 170). In the end, Quentin commits suicide because he cannot come to terms with heteroglossia and heterochrony.

Notions of time and history also collide in Dilsey, who is mythologized by the novel's final narrator as a powerful figure of the "wholeness" of time because she finds solace in Christian eschatology. After the Reverend Shegog's stirring Easter sermon, Dilsey says "I've seed de first en de last. I seed de beginnin, en now I sees de endin" (344). Many readers of the novel have found this a useful image for uniting the four disparate sections of Faulkner's novel: Dilsey understands time in a way that transcends the limited obsessions of the preceding Compson narrators. Yet the narrative itself certainly undermines this claim. Despite her significant role in the Compson family, as a black woman and servant Dilsey is a marginalized figure in a household where most people (especially those with any power) disparage Christianity and ignore her voice as much as possible. After hearing the deeply affecting Easter sermon, she returns to a Compson household in which nothing has changed; her reassurance about a place in salvation history hardly resolves the entire novel's complicated preoccupation with time.

Reading *The Sound and the Fury* in light of Bakhtin does, however, help explain why Faulkner's narrator and many of his readers turn so readily to Dilsey (or in other readings, to Caddy) to provide closure. Writing about the modernity of the novel as a genre, Bakhtin comments, "The absence of internal conclusiveness and exhaustiveness creates a sharp increase in demands for an *external* and *formal* completedness and exhaustiveness, especially in regard to plot-line. The problems of a beginning, an end, and 'fullness' of plot are posed anew" ("Epic and Novel" 31). Certainly modernist fiction in particular challenges conventional notions about narrative; Bakhtin's analysis suggests that the desires for formal resolution and temporal order that shape many analyses of Faulkner's novel are responses to the genre's profound heteroglossia and heterochrony.

Bakhtin's theories also suggest ways to read Faulkner's authorial voice as it enters into the text and critical history of *The Sound and the Fury.* In 1946 Faulkner added an Appendix which was published with the original novel for nearly 40 years, first at the beginning and later at the end. The Appendix provides "retrospective framing": through its encyclopedic, linear format it proclaims its authoritative status as a source of "fact" for those uncertain how to read Faulkner's heterogeneous, non-chronological text. During the 1950s Faulkner commented on the novel extensively in interviews and lectures, providing myths of origin, original meaning, and failure that to a large degree have determined the bounds of critical analyses ever since. In a Bakhtinian context, Faulkner's retrospective readings of *The Sound and the Fury* appear as efforts to determine a singular chronotope of Compson history, to assume monologic authority over a resistant and—his comments suggest—unsatisfying text. Like Quentin's insistent retelling of his own life, Faulkner's return to this text suggests a discomfort with the multiplicity of chronotopes and discourses. The novelistic author, however, Bakhtin argues, cannot sustain such a privileged, hierarchical position; in the novel, the language and chronotope of the author lie "on the same plane" as those of his or her characters, and "cannot help but enter into" "dialogic relations and hybrid combinations" with them ("Epic and Novel" 27-28).