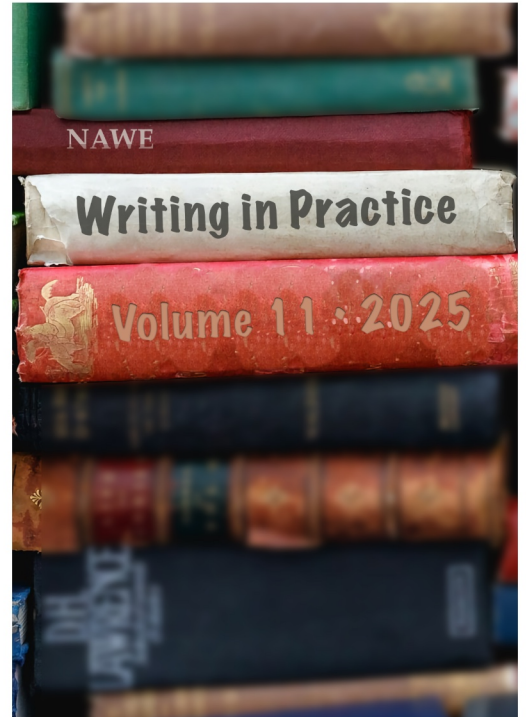




Writing the Chronotope: Critical Analysis and Creative Action

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ABSTRACT

Using Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the literary artistic chronotope, this paper explores the interplay between literary theory and creative writing, and how theories of literary criticism can offer provocation and insight into the creative act. The artistic chronotope is concerned with how time/space is rendered in a work of literature. With specific attention to the 'aircraft chronotope', how time/space is represented in prose fiction set aboard aircraft, the paper draws together acts of analysis, creativity and pedagogy, exploring the question of how writers can use the notion of time/space in their creative work. The paper focuses on the short stories "All the People Were Mean and Bad" by Lucy Caldwell and Miranda July's "Roy Spivey", to identify the creative possibilities of the literary chronotope. The intention is to analyse how student writers can recognize and develop the quality of their own prose writing through engagement with literary theory. By bridging the gap between theory and practice, this paper seeks to support writers and educators to reimagine the role of literary theory in their pedagogy and craft.

KEYWORDS

Chronotope, Bakhtin, Creative Writing, Aircraft, Dialogism in writing, Creative writing pedagogy, Literary theory.

As a writer and academic, I am always engaged with producing work of good quality and of understanding how work of good quality has been produced. So, it has always struck me as interesting that we turn to literary theory to analyse and appreciate the qualities of a piece of writing but, when teaching how to write work of quality, we rarely use literary theory. My interest stems from my own use of literary theory in creative practice.

Last year, I attended an Arvon workshop with the writer Cathy Rentzenbrink who stated the importance of reading for any creative writer. She advised those in attendance to – here I am paraphrasing – “seek out the writers who move you from their page to your own page”. While I have

been compelled by many poets and prose writers to move to my own page (some discussed below), I have also found this impulse when reading, for instance, Kenneth Burke's Language as Symbolic Action (1968) and Barthes' Image Music Text (1977). But it is the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin that have fuelled much of my own creative work in recent years. As I find my teaching is at its most successful when connected to my own writing practice, I have sought to share Bakhtin's theories and concepts with my students, examining how the theory is used for analysis and how we can refocus it for the development of creative writing. One theory I have found particularly successful is the notion of the "artistic literary chronotope" (Bakhtin, 1981, p.84).

The term chronotope means time/space and conveys the construction of these elements in a piece of writing. There is no default representation of time and space in writing, as there is in the real world; for instance, we may talk in seconds or hours, we may describe a place in metres or miles.

In a text, time and space are conceptual. Twenty-four hours may pass in 1,000 pages, as with Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), just as decades pass in four-hundred words, in George Saunders' *Sticks* (1995). For Bakhtin, the chronotope allows the reader to analyse how time and space are represented and depicted in a text.

In the real world, a door allows movement between two distinct spaces. I open the front door to my house which opens always to the path that runs along our terrace of houses, then down the steps beside the front garden and onto the road. If I leave my house at 7am, when I step into the outside world it is 7am there too. But when the children in the Narnia stories step through the door of a specific wardrobe what they find on the other side is often not the inside of a wardrobe, nor is it the same time on both sides. This is the literary artistic chronotope.

Time and space, in reality, are elements of the theory of relativity and we cannot escape their forces. In writing, a character exists in a no space until we define a plane of existence, locate them geographically. They exist in no time, until we define this plane too.

Until Vonnegut writes, "The following is a true story from the Nightmare Ages, falling roughly, give or take a few years, between the Second World War and the Third Great Depression", his novel *The Sirens of Titan* (1959) is untethered from time and space (p.7). When Vonnegut writes, "The town was Newport, Rhode Island, U.S.A., Earth, Solar System, Milky Way" and

now we are located (p. 8). The time frame is shaky, however. When, the reader asks, is the Third Great Depression? Vonnegut doesn't want you to know. He perhaps doesn't know himself. Time, as a concept in this book, is fractured. We will soon find that space is too. The character of Winston Niles Rumfoord is a victim of chrono-synclastic infundibulum, an event that fragments a person's being across time and space. At certain times, Rumfoode exists in Newport, in others, he wanders the surface of Titan.

The literary artistic chronotope holds that time and space are unified in a piece of writing. But they are unfixed, untethered from the laws of reality because writing is not real, even when you are writing the real. If I am writing a piece of memoir and I open the door to my mother she can enter as a child, she can enter after death, she can lead me somewhere entirely new.

In this paper, I will present examples of the literary chronotope in the work of other writers, with the intention of illuminating the creative potential of this theory. When I think about the chronotope, of time thickening and taking on flesh, of space becoming "charged and responsive to the movements of time", I am thinking about representations of time/space in my own prose fiction, and I read the work of other writers to better understand what is possible in prose fiction (Bakhtin, 1981, p.84). This is how I approach what I have come to call the "aircraft chronotope".

When I use the term aircraft chronotope, I am suggesting that when writers set stories onboard aircraft time and space are represented in specific ways. The opening of Rachel Cusk's novel *Outline* articulates what is peculiar to the aircraft chronotope and how, as with all chronotopes, it holds within it chronotope-based elements of other spaces and times:

We were strapped into our seats, a field of strangers, in a silence like the silence of a congregation while the liturgy is read. She showed us the life jacket with its little pipe, the emergency exits, the oxygen mask dangling from a length of clear tubing. She led us through the possibility of death and disaster, as the priest leads the congregation through the details of purgatory and hell; and no one jumped up to escape while there was still time. (p.4-5, 2018)

Bakhtin, the chronotope and air travel are intrinsically linked for me. My fear of flying began years before I ever set foot on a plane. I have read books on overcoming this fear, even used hypnosis to conquer it. But I finally overcame my fear of flying the day I boarded a

plane for the International Mikhail Bakhtin Conference in Shanghai.

In this time/space, untethered from the real world below, from any sense of the present moment, I felt that flying was no longer something to fear but a unique place of possibility, where I could land anywhere, become anyone.

These two fears, the fear of what may never be and the electric fear of the unknown future to come are embedded within the aircraft chronotope.

This chronotope can be seen as an exemplar of what Bakhtin conceives as the intersection of the axes of time and space; within an aircraft, time and space become as one and work upon each other in ways outside the realm of relativity (Bakhtin, 1981, p.84).

Smethurst, in *The Postmodern Chronotope*, explains the chronotope as working along two axes, time as the vertical axis and space the horizontal. We move horizontally through space and time is a "vertical force" (p.68).

Yet, these axes can shift and, thousands of feet above ground, space exists on the vertical axis too, the distance between the world below and our current place above it is keenly felt, and time is evident along the horizontal axis, the crossing of time zones, in one sense, but onboard aircraft, it is time not space that makes palpable the distance travelled.

What defines the aircraft chronotope is the notion that the laws of relativity are suspended. Time while in flight does not unfold in the way it does on land.

Roald Dahl's 1945 short story, "They Shall Not Grow Old" explores the time differential experienced between those on the ground and those above, when a fighter pilot, Fin, returns 48 hours after setting out on a solo mission, but from his perspective he left the air base "' one hour and five minutes ago'" (Dahl, p.255).

This abstraction of relativity is both a feature of fiction set on aircraft and a result of the advent of air travel. Clare Brant argues, in her paper "The Progress of Knowledge in the Regions of Air?" (2011), that flight, starting with hot air balloons, created a "boost of imagination" (p. 73). Flight, Brant explains, opens the possibilities of storytelling, in that writers now have the vertical to consider (p.74).

The solid ground of Earth is, metaphorically and literally, firm territory, and certain

possibilities make themselves available when a story is set beyond the realm of solid ground. As Brant so convincingly states:

Like sea, which is a place of monsters, myths, blankness, and knowledge, air is imaginatively complicated. Patterns of order and disorder in thinking about air give a flow to order and disorder around things in air (2011, p. 81).

In an hour, a plane can fly from Paris to Leipzig, travelling through four countries. But these details are entirely abstract because, as passengers, we cannot engage in the reality of our situation. French airspace is not France; nor is German airspace Germany. We feel, somehow, halted in a no space. Our inability to comprehend our physical position in the world affects our connection to and understanding of time. Therefore, in Stephen King's "The Turbulence Expert" short story, "forty seconds... seemed like four hours" (p.305).

While this distortion of linear time is a feature of the aircraft chronotope, it is a different type of distortion of time and space that has been most valuable to my own writing.

While in transit, both time and space are made strange, but this is more than an external phenomenon. Just as the laws of relativity are suspended, so are the laws that govern how we conceive of ourselves and who we may become. Maggie O'Farrell, in her collection of short nonfiction, *I Am, I Am, I Am*, seeks to identify the forces that affect us when in flight:

Is it the altitude, the unaccustomed inactivity, the physical confinement, the lack of sleep, or a collision of all four? Travelling at speed, thousands of feet above ground, in the cabin of an aircraft, induces an altered state of mind. (2017, p.50)

The aircraft chronotope is one of implicit disorder. Take for example Lucy Caldwell's short story "All the People Were Mean and Bad" (2021). Onboard a flight from Toronto to London, the narrator, an architect and mother to a young child, considers the nature of flight, stating "It seems more than time and distance you're traversing. It is a lifetime ago that you left" (Ibid).

This sense of time and geographical space no longer adhering to our expectations bears out when the narrator finds past time and past place bleeding into the present moment, as if the speed at which she is moving through time and space has caused a form of temporal rift. One moment, the narrator is cradling her sleeping

child during an overnight flight. The next she is looking on:

...blazing sunshine and high blue skies, T-shirt weather, the leaves just turning on the trees, a stupidly perfect day. The cool and calm of the mortuary chapel, old for Toronto, designed and built, you read, by John G Howard in 1842... a fine example of gothic revival architecture in Canada. In the little vestibule, the tinny bluegrass of Hey Duggee from your phone as the Squirrels arrived again and again at the Clubhouse to bake carrot cakes for the stoner bunnies. (Ibid)

Without introduction or transition, space shifts from an airplane somewhere about the Atlantic to the city of Toronto, where the skies sit somewhere off at distant. Time moves from present day to 1842, from the gothic revival to a children's TV programme playing on a mobile phone, where time is not linear but on loop. In the next moment, the narrator is twelve years old, the proximity of her daughter's sleeping body replaced by the "warm taut body" of her still alive cousin (ibid).

This premise, flight allowing a new realm of possibilities, even resurrection of the dead, is central to E. Michael Lewis's "Cargo". In the short story, deceased children of the Jonestown massacre are placed aboard a military aircraft. Once in flight, unbound by the order of the world below – and perhaps reflecting the outright disorder of the events that led to their deaths – the children are no longer in rest. The narrator, Davis, on investigating noise in the cargo hold finds the children "waiting, huddled with me, almost expectant" (p.31).

The distant and recent past, the distant and recently deceased can all be met in the next moment while in flight. For the narrator of Caldwell's story, this loss of order means "it is all gone... [and] being gone makes none of it, nothing, true any more" (2021).

Order is lost because this place, the non-place of a fuselage in flight, is incomprehensible to the narrator – as incomprehensible as the death of her cousin, the responsibility of parenthood and the possible collapse of her marriage, precipitated by her interactions with another passenger. While the narrator and her fellow passenger discuss the alien nature of their surroundings, they question:

How unfeasible it is that this great sleek lumbering mass of metal can rise instead of falling, into the sky, up and up, can traverse the globe along invisible, predetermined tracks, corridors in the air, while its passengers sleep and watch films and flush toilets and request more ice

for their gin and tonic... That there is the world, the ocean, the dark roiling waves, thirty-however many thousand feet beneath, and here you are, suspended above it all, hurtling onwards at hundreds of miles an hour into the dawn of an entirely different day. How time as a measure is, for a while, entirely meaningless, in this time out of time, and how distance is too, and about the distances we travel, between where we come from and where we end up, between who we thought we were and who we turn out to be. (Caldwell, 2021)

In Caldwell's story, the narrator is moving towards some kind of understanding, specifically an understanding about themselves and the life they have temporarily left behind.

She views her life as if through a microscope; life made microscopic from so far above. Indeed, the narrators of Caldwell's story, along with those of Miranda July's "Roy Spivey" and Maggie O'Farrell's "Whole Body", have entered something of a divergent reality, or find the life they had been living on solid land has been placed in stasis, packed away like luggage in the hold.

While Caldwell's narrator can slip into the past, in her story "Whole Body", Maggie O'Farrell, just as easily, shifts, aboard a flight to Hong Kong, into versions of the future. Air travel is akin to time travel.

O'Farrell lives out moments of a future she knows will not play out, the PhD she will never study, the ongoing relationship with a man she has left behind. In this moment, the narrator realizes they are "in the wrong life... off course" (p.50). She believes she has "left behind the life [she] was supposed to be leading", and yet, these revelations exist only for the duration of the flight. She will stay in Hong Kong; she will start a life with another man.

Miranda July's "Roy Spivey" follows a similar plot to Caldwell's "All the People Were Mean and Bad", in that an unnamed female narrator makes a connection with the man seated next to them. The man she is seated next to is a movie star, so famous she only refers to him by "almost an anagram of his name", Roy Spivey (2007). When she first takes her seat, the actor is sleeping. The narrator frets about her lack of self-confidence, how she is a "pushover" (Ibid). Yet, aboard this domestic flight, untethered from her past, the future unknown, she becomes a new self, seeming to, as O'Farrell describes, become an altered version of herself.

She talks constantly, confidently to this movie star for the next two hours of the flight. This is

noted by the other passengers, members of what July refers to as "this tiny flying village" (Ibid).

After returning from an ill-fated trip to the bathroom, where the narrator soaks their shirt and skirt, the story takes on a dream-like quality, what may be described as a flight of fancy. The famous actor, Roy Spivey, sprays Febreze directly onto the narrator's armpits before, without warning, playfully biting her arm. She imagines being Mrs Roy Spivey and whether she would kill her parents for him. Outside the laws of reality, she confirms she would.

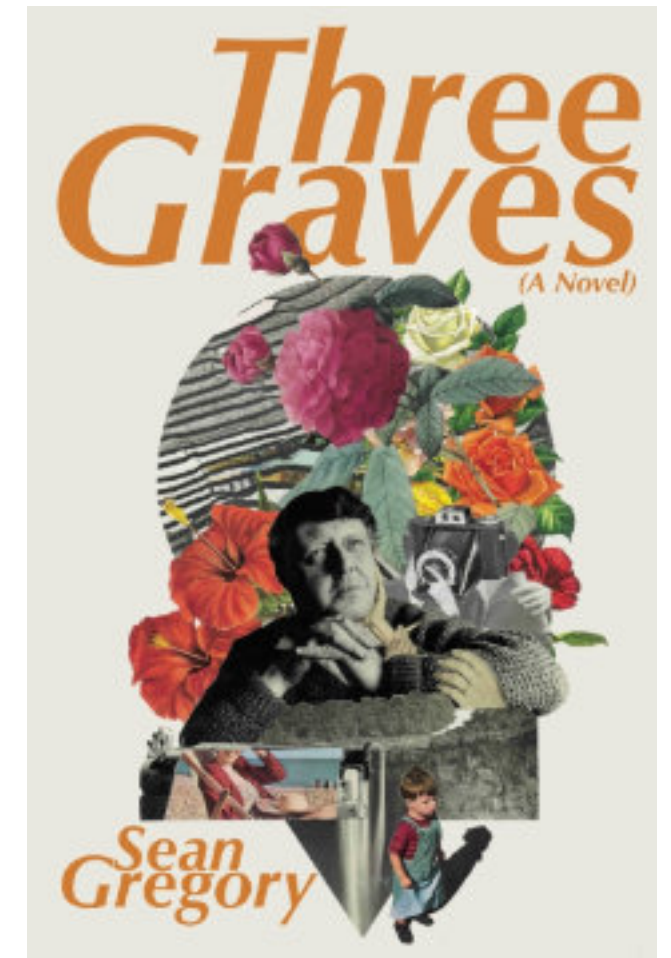
As the plane lands, she is Cinderella leaving the ball, no longer able to play the role of the would-be princess. But when Roy Spivey gives her his number on a piece of paper, save for the last digit, four, which she must memorise, the reader sees an opportunity for the narrator to make an enduring change.

The prince will find her, and she will realize her true potential, revealed while in flight. But a flight is a temporary sojourn from the norms of relativity, which return as soon as wheels hit tarmac, just as the laws that govern us – financial and relational responsibilities, geography, personal history, promises made about the future – come crashing upon these characters.

The insistence of air travel is what next – it is a state that must, by one means or another, come to an end. Passengers will land, back on land, yes, but back into the order of time and place, which accentuates the demand for action, just as the shift from being on an airport travelator to walking on solid ground is one of the few times we must consciously consider our next step. O'Farrell, months into her new life in Hong Kong, begins to write; Caldwell's narrator must care for her child and reconcile her feelings about the impending return of her husband, aboard his own flight home.

For July's narrator, the return to her grounded self comes not a slow transition but as a crashing back to reality. When the movie star passes her carry-on bag it looks "obscenely familiar" (Ibid). From the velocity of movement and the array of possibilities aboard her flight with Roy Spivey, when the narrator returns home she enters absolute inertia:

I found myself standing in the middle of my living-room floor... I had an idea that I might clean the house. But halfway to the broom I stopped on a whim, flirting with the emptiness in the center of the room. I wanted to see if I could start again. But, of course, I knew what the



Cover of "Three Graves" by Sean Gregory

answer would be. The longer I stood there, the longer I had to stand there. It was intricate and exponential. I looked like I was doing nothing, but really I was as busy as a physicist or a politician. I was strategizing my next move. That my next move was always not to move didn't make it any easier. (July, 2007)

The aircraft chronotope is a space and time of dislocation. Even O'Farrell, whose flight suddenly begins to fall from the sky, leading her to another potential future when passengers hitting the ground and "explode like cans of soda", the events onboard the aircraft are siloed from those on the ground (p.58).

When her partner notices some bruises on her arm caused by the near crash, O'Farrell barely registers their existence.

I only recently read O'Farrell's collection, so it is striking to see so many similarities between "Whole Body" and my own short story, "Minnesota Snow", which features a narrator living out moments of their past, before and during a near miss plane crash described through the metaphor of a snow globe. In my short story, the narrator, the lead singer of a

band on the verge of transatlantic success, departs the plane convinced that the ideal self they conjured in the melee of a near crash is out there somewhere, living an idealised version of the life they no longer feel capable of living out.

While writing the story, I asked myself (as I ask my students) several questions. The first, what happens in this time/space in the real world. Aircraft travel across great distances at great heights; aircraft can travel for up to twenty-one hours (Broom). I make a list of everything I can think of, exhausting the idea.

The second question I ask is, how have other writers already used this time/space in writing, which I have set out within this paper. If I were writing a story set on a train, for instance, I would have a different set of possibilities already set down in literature.

In literature, people are murdered on trains, but this is not a feature of the aircraft chronotope. In fact, while trains are under discussion, here are inexhaustive lists of what trains do in the real world and in fiction.

A train:

- Moves forward, along a set path
- Moves quickly through different kinds of landscape
- Could we say that a train stops more regularly as it draws closer to metropolitan centres?
- Could we say it stop less frequently the further it leaves these metropolitan centres?
- Sometimes the same train journey can go very quickly, sometimes very slowly
- Trains (British trains) are delayed
- Trains are divided, often by class
- Trains are a symbol of industrialisation and, therefore, of “progress”
- Trains cut you off from the world beyond; you can only get off at the next station

Now what can we say about trains in fiction?

- People are murdered on trains
- Murders are arranged on trains
- People see things they are unsure they have truly seen
- Trains lead to Dracula
- Trains lead to wizarding schools
- Trains lead to the North Pole
- Ghosts live on trains
- Trains lead to the unknown, the wild, the untamed
- Affairs take place on trains
- People are saved when they get on the right train

Once I have these first two lists, I list everything I am already doing, in terms of time and space, within the story. Surveying these lists, I ask

myself, what can I take from the first two that will develop the quality and rigour of the third? I find this exercise useful because it offers new possibilities for the writing.

For instance, if a story or scene is set in a café, what happens when we reset it on the carriage of a train? We are utilizing literary theory for the production of quality prose narrative. Just as a writer may use a narrative structure template, such as the hero’s journey, to highlight any points of weakness in the plotting of their story, a writer can use the literary chronotope to recognize both how they are utilizing time/space and how their setting supports the aims and themes of their writing.

It has implications for tone and style. The literary artistic chronotope offers a perspective on time/space in writing that conceptions of setting or storyworld only hint at. This theory of analysing a text enables a writer to make coherent the manner in which time unravels and flows in their text, how space is defined.

In the Praxis model, once a writer has acted upon the original theory (the chronotope) and reflected on the writing generated, the theory itself will be evaluated and updated. It may be that, as above, the chronotope acts as a starting point for writing.

The theory will prove just as useful in the revision process. “Minnesota Snow”, through writing and redrafting became interested in the lives we don’t get to live.

The aircraft acts, then, as a kind of purgatory. While O’Farrell’s “Whole Body” uses the aircraft to look back, my story explores possible futures (I could land anywhere, become anyone). I update my theory of the story’s chronotope and the story’s qualities are improved. Setting and space take on yet further thematic and narrative meaning.

Updating my theory of the chronotope – I’ve always liked George Saunders’ notion of the Positive/Negative Meter he engages while revising his work – I better understand not the aircraft chronotope in the general but specific to my story (Saunders, 2017).

The denouement of the story is the plane landing, the change in chronotope.

I read a great deal of student work that is interested in “worldbuilding”. In much of this work, the setting acts as a series of rules, barriers within which the narrative moves forward, like those gutter rails that magically appear at bowling alleys.

The ball (story) rolls along until it bounces off a rail, perhaps ricocheting all the way down, before reaching an end (strike?). I offer this chronotope-based approach as an alternative, where time and setting function as systems and conventions, but also as texture, as motif and theme. Worldbuilding becomes, more than a list of rules and systems, a “fused... concrete whole” (Bakhtin, 1981, p.84). I can think of no better example of this than the writing of Ursula K Le Guin. What is “Those Who Walk Away from Omelas” (1973) besides a description of all that a city can be in both reality and fiction, the city as chronotope? The space/time of the story is the narrative of the story.

Literary theory offers the fiction writer both creative provocation and methodology. I could have, here, discussed Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia – the range of languages and voices in a piece of writing – or transgression – how characters are distinct and separate from each other and their creator.

But the chronotope offers insight to a facet of writing that can often seem ornamental, that of setting, and provide an approach to embed time and space into the very fabric of the narrative itself. The chronotope encompasses structure, theme, texture, and movement at once.

For writers, it offers a way of building worlds and of rendering the very conditions of narrative possibility. As Bakhtin states, it gives us a “particular way of seeing the world” (Bakhtin, 1981, p.366).

BIOGRAPHY

Dr Sean Gregory is course leader of both the undergraduate and the forthcoming postgraduate creative writing programmes at Leeds Arts University. His creative/critical PhD thesis analysed Anthony Burgess’ fictional accounts of the lives of writers, such as Shakespeare, Keats and Joyce, towards the production of a novel on Burgess’s personal and creative life. The resultant novel was published by Bluemoose in 2021. He won the 2020 Aesthetica Prize for Short Fiction and was longlisted for the BBC Short Story Prize the following year.

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