

## “The Same Old Druid Time”: Great War Poetry and the Bakhtinian Chronotope<sup>1</sup>

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Dieser Beitrag nutzt das theoretische Modell des Bachtinschen Chronotopos dazu, die Lyrik des Ersten Weltkriegs auf der Basis ihres atypischen Entstehungscharakters neu zu bewerten. In Anlehnung an das Kernkapitel von Bachtins *The Dialogic Imagination* untersucht der Autor die Schützengrabenlyrik als eine ortsbezogene Kunstform, die durch ihre Nähe zum Tod eine einzigartige Sensibilität für die Natur der Zeit und ihre Vergänglichkeit besitzt. Im ersten Abschnitt wird der „extratemporale“ Charakter kultureller Befindlichkeiten hinsichtlich der Einzigartigkeit von Zeit und Raum an der Westfront des Ersten Weltkriegs ausführlich diskutiert. Als Nächstes werden die zufälligen Kontingenzen dieses Kriegs, ähnlich dem was Bachtin *Sovpadenie* nennt, näher betrachtet und folgt eine Diskussion darüber, wie sich diese in der dadurch produzierten Lyrik manifestieren, insbesondere in Isaac Rosenbergs „Break of Day in the Trenches“. Der dritte Abschnitt setzt sich mit den „Rabelaischen Chronotopos“ im Werk von Siegfried Sassoon auseinander und diskutiert das scheinbar synchrone Zeitempfinden verschiedener Kriegsteilnehmer aus unterschiedlichen Perspektiven. Der Beitrag schließt mit einem Blick auf die Vorstellung der „Endlosigkeit“ des Krieges, wie sie von neueren Kritikern wie Kate McLoughlin diskutiert wird, und einem kurzen Abriss über die heimischen Varietäten des Chronotopos, die sich im Werk von Dichterinnen wie Eleanor Farjeon finden.

### 1. Extratemporal Spaces

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?  
– Only the monstrous anger of the guns.  
Only the stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle  
Can patter out their hasty orisons.  
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;  
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, –  
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;  
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?  
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes  
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.  
The pallor of girls’ brows shall be their pall;  
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,  
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

Wilfred Owen, “Anthem for Doomed Youth”

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In terms of the popular imagination, Owen's 1917 sonnet "Anthem for Doomed Youth" represents something of an inauguration. For many, the poem acts as a curtain-raiser to their perceptions of the Great War, both as historic event and literary moment. Consequently, there is something familiar in the poem's suppressed rage, in its elegiac poignancy draped across the casket of traditional form, and in some of the more famous tropes it bequeaths Great War poetry: betrayed youths dying as "cattle" (l. 1), "the monstrous anger of the guns" (l. 2), "bugles calling for them from sad shires" (l. 8) and the symbolic drawing-down of blinds at "each slow dusk" (l. 14). Had Owen died sooner, leaving behind only this poem as his calling card, "Anthem for Doomed Youth" would still have been a seminal text. But there is something else going on here that he lived to develop and which was similarly embedded with those troops who turned to poetry as a means of encapsulating their wartime experience. For, at the core of the work is an oblique meditation upon time which is both rooted in its literary influences *and* original in the unique character of the stress it is under. There is, too, the palpable sense of a clock ticking away under the poem's central thread of imagery, it is a metrical and imaginative incubus riding upon the "passing-bells" (l. 1), "the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle" (l. 3) and the pattering out of "hasty orisons" (l. 4), it is implied in the quotidian signifiers of bugles, candles and in the "drawing-down of blinds" (l. 14).

Of course, there is more at stake in "Anthem for Doomed Youth" than passing time, but most compelling is the fact that Owen's lament for a lost generation is imbued so deeply with the denotative language of chronology. Adjectives such as "passing", "rapid", and "hasty" necessarily append a sense of duration and change to their nouns. Similarly, the adverb "now" (l. 5) and "bugles" (l. 8) each carry with them connotations of a chronological instant or a specific moment in military life. If we look at the sestet this pattern is maintained: a candle is more than a symbol of prayer, it is an early form of chronometer and "the holy glimmers of goodbyes" (l. 11) are both literal and figurative reminders of spatial *and* temporal departure, consolidated in the final lines by the fact that minds have to be "patient" (l. 13) and dusks are to be "slow" (l. 14). Owen's main concern, of course, is his protest against the conduct of the war and his lament for its human cost. However, within the poem's linguistic warp and weft is a palpably *chronotopic* sense of time and temporality.

In other papers I've suggested that we may profitably avail ourselves of elements present within extant critical perspectives to open up new discussions of the Great War canon. I'd like to extend this approach, here, by appropriating a far broader philosophical discourse that is, likewise, amenable to adaptation for similar purposes. While Bakhtin's core chapter from *The Dialogic Imagination* concerns itself with an exploration of the distinctive development of the novel, the 1938 essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" also offers us abundant means of clearing space for a fresh look at the trench lyric. Bakhtin himself grants implicit permission for such critical seizure on a number of oc-

casions, for example, when discussing the role of "individual motifs" within the wider context of novelistic space, which

[...] enter as constituent elements into plots, not only of novels of various eras and types but also into literary works of other genres: epic, dramatic, even lyric. By their very nature these motifs are chronotopic (although it is true the chronotope is developed in different ways in the various genres). (Bakhtin 2010: 97)

Elsewhere, he observes how, "In other genres these motifs were connected with different, more concrete and condensed chronotopes." (Bakhtin 2010: 103) And Bakhtin throws his net even wider to suggest that in fact, *all* "literature's primary mode of representation is temporal" (Bakhtin 2010: 146) and, therefore, chronotopic. We have, then, some justification in appropriating his theoretical approach for an examination of chronotopic development within the precise context of Great War poetry. This appears to be especially the case when one sees how much of Bakhtin's discussion is resonant with echoes of both participant realities of trench warfare and subsequent cultural analyses of World War One as historical event. The open-ended nature of this theoretical formulation derives from the sheer frankness of his critical gambit: "We do not pretend to completeness or precision" (Bakhtin 2010: 85). Also, in his desire to instigate a fruitful and *creative* line of inquiry, Bakhtin demurs to the discursive catch-all: "In our survey we will not pretend to any completeness of the data, nor to an exhaustive analysis of it. We will select only those details that bear a direct relationship to our subject of inquiry." (Bakhtin 2010: 130) Such critical candour – coupled with the resonant beat of his argument – readily lends itself to adjustment for our own purpose of looking at expressions of time-space relationships within the Great War canon, and for examining how the trench poets developed their own constituent elements of the 'more condensed' chronotope as an articulation of their unique situation. At the heart of Bakhtin's discussion is his view that: "The process of assimilating real historical time and space in literature has a complicated and erratic history, as does the articulation of actual historical persons in such a time and space." (Bakhtin 2010: 84) The Great War, by its very nature, put this process under the microscope in a unique and dramatic manner, yielding, along the way, an utterly distinctive articulation of historical time and space. Correspondingly, Bakhtin offers us a useful critical argot with which to examine the trench poets' sense of "time space" and the subsequent chronotopes they forged to recreate time in a place which seemed beyond it, or at best, upon the brink of it.

We are, again, in need of some definition at this point. What is a 'chronotope'? Bakhtin offers us this full, yet consciously selective, version:

We will give the name *chronotope* (literally "time space") to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. This term (space-time) is employed in mathematics, and was introduced as part of Einstein's Theory of Relativity. The special meaning it has in relativity theory is not important for our purposes; we are borrowing it for literary criticism almost as a metaphor (almost, but not

entirely). What counts for us is the fact that it expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space). We understand the chronotope as a formally constitutive category of literature; we will not deal with the chronotope in other areas of culture. (Bakhtin 2010: 84)

The selective nature of this definition and Bakhtin's inclusion of the notion of metaphor, are helpful to discussions of the chronotope in a particular corpus of poetry: we may reasonably look to chart its distinctive development within the 'genre' of the trench lyric. Such purpose is, indeed, aided by Bakhtin's more specific application of the chronotope to the way in which we might encounter it in a poem:

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. (Bakhtin 2010: 84)

One doesn't have to have read much lyric poetry to see the natural affinities here, between Bakhtin's theoretical formulation and the poetic practice of writers from *any* era. However, the very nature of the Great War's spatial-temporal realities made for a unique artistic expression of the chronotope that represents its own "formally constitutive category". Additionally, the compositional conditions of the trench lyric find such peculiar resonance with the terms of Bakhtin's discussion that its appropriation appears entirely apt. As Kate McLoughlin observes in her study *Authoring War*: "The war zone is easily characterised as a chronotope: particularised space in which time both flies and hangs heavy." (McLoughlin 2011: 104 footnote 99)

In a chapter entitled "The Troglodyte World" in his study *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell describes in detail the spatial actualities of the Great War trench system and, in doing so, flags up the mythic qualities it has assumed in subsequent cultural receptions of the Western Front as *sui generis* time-space:

The idea of "the trenches" has been assimilated so successfully by metaphor and myth ("Georgian complacency died in the trenches") that it is not easy now to recover a feeling for the actualities. *Entrenched*, in an expression like *entrenched power*, has been a dead metaphor so long that we must bestir ourselves to recover its literal sense. (Fussell 2000: 36)

He goes on to delineate the modern folkloric aspects of battlefield features which have, in themselves, assumed the aspect of Great War chronotopes freighted, as they are, with shared indications of time-space and subsequently thickened into poetry, prose, painting, cartoon and song. So, "Wipers", the Salient, the Menin Road, the Basilica at Albert, the thickets of wire and the trench itself all assumed an imaginative valency that intersected the axes of time and space, fusing into indicators characteristic of Bakhtin's artistic chronotope. What emerges from Fussell's discussion is a well-articulated reminder that Great War poetic time-space so often represents various mutations of Romantic and Ruskin-influenced Victorian literary vernacular. What distinguishes it, however, is the fact that we

are witnessing poetry at a moment when metaphor is caught in the act of turning literal. If literature’s primary mode of representation *is* temporal then we might, indeed, expect to find some articulation of the ‘intrinsically connected’ expression of the time-space relationship placed under unprecedented pressure in the context of Great War poetry. This pressure is particularly felt when one bears in mind the defective Georgian kit issued to its authors. It follows, then, that the resulting chronotopes ought to exhibit properties unique to their milieu. Discussion of “Anthem for Doomed Youth” at the start of this piece already flagged up a profound sense of temporality interpolated throughout the poem, so pervasively as to appear intrinsic to its overall schema. This is a trait one might reasonably anticipate to be present in more than one of Owen’s poems and in more than one poet of the Great War, given the nature of their situation. As the poet Glyn Maxwell observes, when discussing Ivor Gurney’s “To His Love”, “Poetry forms in the face of time. The best place to see this happen is when time is at its hottest and most implacable: a time of terror.” (Maxwell 2012: 62) Such “a time of terror” was surely that endured by the trench poets.

We do not need to rely upon Fussell, Maxwell or McLoughlin, however, to bring Bakhtinian theory to bear upon Great War actualities. Bakhtin’s own dialectic provides us with a critical argot apposite to discussions of trench poetry. Let us apply this proximity to an examination of forms and manifestations of the chronotope in the corpus of Great War poetry. As with Bakhtin, we will “select only those details that bear a direct relationship to our subject of inquiry” (Bakhtin 2010: 130), though as he himself anticipated, they’ll be discussed in the context of a chronotopic sensibility adapted to the literary work of another genre. In his attempt to identify the various novelistic chronotopes, Bakhtin starts by focusing upon the early prose genre of the “Greek Romance” (Bakhtin 2010: 86). For anyone looking at Great War poetry with a view to foregrounding notions of a heightened temporal sensibility on the part of the trench poets, it is this part of his discussion that carries most weight. Indeed, Bakhtin’s description of what he terms “adventure-time” makes an interesting companion to Fussell’s own discussion of time and space within the special context of the Western Front. His characterization of this time as “an extra-temporal hiatus between two moments of biographical time” (Bakhtin 2010: 90) is telling in its resemblance to David Jones’s belief that the Great War years represented some form of temporal ‘parenthesis’, inside of which the biographical lives of its soldiers existed for a period that was somehow ‘extratemporal’:

This writing is called ‘In Parenthesis’ because I have written it in a kind of space between – I don’t know between quite what – but as you turn aside to do something; and because for us amateur soldiers [...] the war itself was a parenthesis – how glad we thought we were to step outside its brackets at the end of ‘18 [...] (Jones 2010: xv)

Subsequent cultural histories of the Great War, such as Samuel Hynes’s *A War Imagined. The First World War and English Culture*, also posit the idea that the war constituted “a gap in history” (Hynes 1990: xi) and involved change that was

“so vast and so abrupt as to make the years after the war seem discontinuous from the years before” (ix). Given the romantic-epic slant of his poem, it is likely that Jones would sympathise with the notion that 1914-1918 was itself some form of “adventure-time”. However, the terms of Bakhtin’s discussion at this point go much further than the odd metaphorical coincidence; his refinement of adventure-time starts to resemble precisely the sort of consideration of trench actualities posited by Fussell:

As we see [...], adventure-time lives a rather fraught life in the romance; one day, one hour, even one minute earlier or later have everywhere a decisive and fatal significance. [...] All moments of this infinite adventure-time are controlled by one force – *chance*. [...] Adventuristic “chance time” is the specific time during which irrational forces intervene in human life [...]. (Bakhtin 2010: 94)

## 2. Random Contingencies, *Sovpadenie* and Sharpening Strategies

The idea of “chance time” has abundant parallels in Great War literature itself, both in poetry and prose, though I use a single example, from Frederic Manning’s *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, to demonstrate the point. Just before the book’s final ‘show’, its central consciousness, Bourne, reflects upon his company’s plight: “Chance. They were all balanced, equally, on a dangerous chance. One was not free, and therefore there would be very little merit in anything they might do.” (Manning 2014: 331) Such existential conditions again reflect those of Bakhtin’s emerging chronotope:

Moments of adventuristic time occur at those points when the normal course of events, the normal, intended or purposeful sequence of life’s events is interrupted. These points provide an opening for the intrusion of nonhuman forces – fate, gods, villains – and it is precisely these forces, and not the heroes, who in adventure-time take all the initiative. Of course, the heroes themselves act in adventure-time – they escape, defend themselves, engage in battle, save themselves – but they act, as it were, as merely physical persons, and the initiative does not belong to them. (Bakhtin 2010: 95)

Sure enough, Manning’s seemingly indestructible hero is dead within four pages of his insight on chance:

Another star-shell went up, and they both froze into stillness under its glare. Then they moved again, hurrying for all they were worth. Bourne felt a sense of triumph and escape thrill in him. Anyway, the Hun couldn’t see them now. Something kicked him in the upper part of the chest, rending its way through him, and his agonized cry was scarcely audible in the rush of blood from his mouth, as he collapsed and fell. (Manning 2014: 336)

Manning’s book does, of course, occupy Bakhtin’s own novelistic *métier*. However, the logic of what Bakhtin calls *sovpadenie* [*random contingency*] (92) is omnipresent in Great War literature and not difficult to find in other genres, particularly in trench poetry. Wilfrid Gibson’s short lyric “Breakfast” provides an early-war example of just such ‘random contingency’:

We ate our breakfast lying on our backs,  
Because the shells were screeching overhead.

I bet a rasher to a loaf of bread  
That Hull United would beat Halifax  
When Jimmy Stainthorp played full-back instead  
Of Billy Bradford. Ginger raised his head  
And cursed, and took the bet; and dropt back dead.  
We ate our breakfast lying on our backs,  
Because the shells were screeching overhead.

Here we see clear facets of the space-time relationship already beginning to establish themselves as Great War chronotope: the quotidian details of eating breakfast and bantering with one's pals, the spatially precise safety of the trench contrasted with exposure to lethal gunfire beyond the parapet, and the macabre dual temporality of sudden violent death intimately co-located with ongoing life. If the dominant chronotope of Great War poetry has a basic formulation, then it is surely present here in this 1915 lyric; though, as Ted Hughes points out, its "simple strategy sharpens to something more serious later on" (Hughes 1965: 9) in the hands of better poets than Wilfrid Gibson. Certainly, the spatial and temporal continuums get stretched from this point on in the Great War: to accommodate the ironic patterning of much of its writing and to include the broader contrast of French battlefields with English rural beauty, the temporal incongruities of rapid deployment from London café to frontline trench and – post-Somme – what Hughes describes as "the bitter contrast between the landscape of dead bodies and the English-in-England complacency, which engages more urgent and more national feelings and produces some of Owen's and Sassoon's best work" (Hughes 1965: 9). To an unusual degree, this work is reliant upon "the artistic literary chronotope" for expression and is governed by the nature of trench warfare, in terms of its peculiarity. Picking up from Fussell, Randall Stevenson observes that combatants' spatial realities tended to exist "from horizontal towards the vertical. Looking straight out and over the parapet of a trench invited death by a sniper's bullet" (Stevenson 2013: 140), a fact modelled clearly in Gibson's poem and more 'chronotopically' in Isaac Rosenberg's "Dead Man's Dump":

Timelessly now, some minutes past,  
These dead strode time with vigorous life,  
Till the shrapnel called 'An end!' (ll. 42-44)

Stevenson also points out the significant fact that so many literary references exist to the war's warping effect upon combatants' sensations of time: in Blunden, Jones, Manning, Kreisler, Graves, even Arnold Bennett. Indeed, time itself was altered literally during the war years when, in May 1916, Britain adopted William Willett's proposal for an adjustment to British Summer Time. So, it is not only in the realm of Bakhtinian dialectics that the notion of an intimate relationship between the war poets and time-space is viable, nor that this relationship could beget specific forms of chronotopic idiolect.

There is an important distinction to be made at the heart of my discussion, however: when is the 'chronotope' just a 'trope'? The difference is one of scale and context: tropes can be variously employed for an array of poetic effects in a variety of settings whereas with the *chronotope* "we will devote our entire attention to the problem of time (the dominant principle in the chronotope) and to those things, and only those things" (Bakhtin 2010: 86). So, whilst a common Great War poetic trope – a lark, rat or dead body – may be harnessed to expressions of, say, grief, loss or yearning in a number of contexts, within the chronotope they are specifically employed as determinants of the poet's expression of that intrinsic connectedness of time-and-space. Isaac Rosenberg's "Break of Day in the Trenches" provides us with a good working version of this distinction:

The darkness crumbles away –  
It is the same old druid Time as ever.  
Only a live thing leaps my hand –  
A queer sardonic rat –  
As I pull the parapet's poppy  
To stick behind my ear.  
Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew  
Your cosmopolitan sympathies.  
Now you have touched this English hand  
You will do the same to a German –  
Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure  
To cross the sleeping green between.  
It seems you inwardly grin as you pass  
Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes  
Less chanced than you for life,  
Bonds to the whims of murder,  
Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,  
The torn fields of France.  
What do you see in our eyes  
At the shrieking iron and flame  
Hurled through still heavens?  
What quaver – what heart aghast?  
Poppies whose roots are in man's veins  
Drop, and are ever dropping;  
But mine in my ear is safe,  
Just a little white with the dust.

There have been many fine readings of this poem but, whatever else is going on, we have here a deeply idiosyncratic meditation upon time and mortality fostered by an acute awareness of spatial realities and significance. The poem opens at dawn's moment of 'stand-to', we have a rat, a poppy, the "sleeping green" (l. 12) of No Man's Land, "haughty athletes" (l. 14), "The torn fields of France" (l. 18)

and "shrieking iron and flame" (l. 20). Is it possible to cram *more* Great War staples into such a relatively short lyric? However, Rosenberg invests these tropes with his own objective sensibility, to wrest from them a complex manifestation of his deep sense of time and space. His mythopoeic tendencies are apparent in the poem's memorable opening gambit: "The darkness crumbles away – / It is the same old druid Time as ever" (ll 1-2). Here, temporality is fused in a quite astonishing way. The general context is one of 'deep time' personified in the figure of "Time", arriving with the inexorability innate in the long historical perspectives of both "same old druid" and "as ever" (all l. 2). This painterly long view is preceded, however, by the sheer materiality of the coming dawn represented as darkness 'crumbling' away, as if the short passage of this single day is palpable. Rosenberg has artfully prepared his temporal canvas: the characteristic ability to consider his sentient personal situation within its broader context of human history is profoundly located in the muddy "crumble" of his day's dawn when set against the background of "druid Time". This subtle synthesis of passing time and trench materiality perfectly models Bakhtin's criteria for the artistic literary chronotope, since spatial and temporal indicators are, indeed, fused into one and Time takes on clay to become artistically visible. Having performed this, Rosenberg is freer to contemplate the smaller details emerging from the darkness into his poem's day: he has provided himself with what Bakhtin describes as "the indices for measuring space and time" in his chronotope.

What follows the opening two lines of "Break of Day in the Trenches" is a narrowing down of the temporal focus to the performative here-and-now moment of composition, and a sort of enacted mortality play in which Rosenberg does, indeed, deal in metaphors at their point of turning literal. Having placed his situation into some broader historical context, the poet is suddenly disturbed and led by a rat through a skewed transcendence in which, for twenty-one lines, he contemplates the moral vagaries of a war that allows more freedom to the lowest life-form than it does to mankind itself. The great achievement here is the manner in which Rosenberg so intimately interacts with the system of classic symbols at his disposal. In doing so, he manages to create a distinctive version of the trench pastoral we see elsewhere in the poetry of Blunden and Owen: the poppy is plucked and worn behind the poet's own ear to be symbolically cashed in at the poem's end, the rat becomes his thought guide through the familiar landscape of No Man's Land and back along the trench of healthy but doomed young soldiers and, finally, it functions as the poet's two-way mirror through which the reader sees the horrors of battle. Significant is the fact that Rosenberg's particular rendition of the trench lyric – as a sunken version of the pastoral idyll – finds resonance with Bakhtinian notions of the composite nature of the chronotopic motif:

In other genres these motifs were connected with different, more concrete and condensed chronotopes. In Alexandrine poetry the love motifs (first meeting, sudden love, lovers' melancholy, first kiss and so forth) were developed in large part within a bucolic pastoral-idyllic chronotope. This is a small but very concrete and condensed lyric-epic chronotope

that has played no small role in world literature [...] At its centre we have a pastoral-idyllic chronotope, but a chronotope riddled with decay, its compact isolation and self-imposed limits destroyed, surrounded on all sides by an alien world and itself already half-alien; natural-idyllic time is no longer as dense, it is cut through by shafts of adventure-time. (Bakhtin 2010: 103)

By instigating a colloquy, here, between two modes of discourse – Bakhtinian theory and Great War lyric – we highlight the ease with which one can find mutually illuminating concepts and terms. Applying Bakhtinian discourse to trench lyric, for instance, allows us a vivid glimpse of the Georgian poetic armoury being out-gunned (indeed, “destroyed [...] on all sides”) by the visceral realities of the Great War’s “alien world”: its natural-idyllic time “cut through by shafts of adventure time”, its language rendered “half-alien” to itself and, thereby forced to adapt in order to create new chronotopes more adequate to the expression of the decay at the centre of its pastoral idyll. We witness the struggle for this adaptation most consistently in the work of Blunden and Gurney and more famously in the development of Owen, but nowhere is it more expertly enacted than here. In typically mythopoeic fashion, Rosenberg himself suggests the phenomenon in an earlier poem, “A worm fed on the heart of Corinth”, though in “Break of Day in the Trenches” we see a more material and intimate fusion of his poetics with the front-line realities of his own time-space. The final four lines return us to the remarkable fusions of longer symbolic perspectives with the personal that opened the poem, and which constitute its chronotope: the rat’s eye view of men dying in battle gives way to the elegiac symbolism of poppies rooted in men’s veins, all of whom are “ever dropping” (l. 24) into death. Rosenberg cuts across the larger symbolic abstraction of this notion with the perfunctory “But” (l. 25), to return us to the here-and-now of his own situation. Here the poppy becomes an individuated symbol of the precariousness of his own fate: safe behind his ear, though ominously red like a bullet wound and “Just a little white with the dust” (l. 26).

“Break of Day in the Trenches” illuminates the vital distinction to be drawn between trope and chronotope because, however Rosenberg deploys a variety of classic Great War tropes to achieve local effects (the poppy, the rat, the torn fields of France), their overall purpose is to carry the weight of a general meditation upon mortality and the precariousness of his own life at the Front. Thus, the familiar symbols are ultimately *aggregated* to serve as indices for measuring Rosenberg’s time and space within the artistic literary chronotope at the heart of the poem. Whilst there is an obvious anti-war protest contained within “Break of Day in the Trenches”, his concern is primarily to do with a specific time-space and his individual place in it. It’s a concern heightened and coloured by the very nature of the Western Front, the dangers of which constantly drag the individual to the mortal brink of time, the actualities of which intrude upon the sensibilities of most trench poets and, as a consequence, register chronotopically in their work. Rosenberg, himself, has been famously identified as one of the few trench poets capable of some degree of poetic detachment from the war and one not mastered nor made

by it to the degree that Owen was. (cf. Hill 2008: 461) However, humanity alone dictates that a natural fear of violent death might make incursions into his poetic sensibility and become manifest as an engagement with time, which is, as Bakhtin points out, "literature's primary mode of representation" (Bakhtin 2010: 146). It is significant, therefore, that a chronotopic sensibility can be both traced to Rosenberg and provide a theoretical prism through which one can revisit distinctive facets of his poetry. One might reasonably expect similar revelations to occur, then, when considering his peers from the same critical perspective.

### 3. The Rabelaisian Chronotope and Great War Synchronicity

Siegfried Sassoon's poetic response to the war is not without its own complex engagement with time and, by extension, its own versions of the chronotope. His most famous poem, "Counter-Attack", reveals Sassoon to be appropriately mired in considerations of both time and the site-specific spaces of the Western Front. Spatially, the poem is another chilling example of the lethal choreography taking place within a trench system at the point of engagement with the enemy, where inches either way can determine life or death. Chronologically, "Counter-Attack" displays the temporal segmentation and aggregation also characteristic of Bakhtinian "adventure time":

Within the limits of a given adventure, days, nights, hours, even minutes and seconds add up, as they would in any struggle or any active external undertaking. These time segments are introduced and intersect with specific link-words: "suddenly" and "just at that moment". (Bakhtin 2010: 91 f.)

So, we see a chronological thread running through the poem which delineates its episodic nature while also assembling a discrete chronotopic register of link-words that push the narrative through its time and space: "hours before" (l. 1), "While dawn broke" (l. 2), "at first" (l. 4), "And then" (l. 13), "the morning blear" (l. 15), "And then" (l. 17), "While" (l. 21), "Stand-to" (l. 26) and "Then" (l. 28) and, again, "then" (l. 33). These phrases serve a straightforwardly narrative function but they also root the poem in its time-space and the 'random contingency' of its deadly events; they are temporal markers, inseparable from the spatial markers of the platoon's meeting with the enemy at "our first objective". The grim adventure time of the poem, therefore, cuts its shaft across the pastoral-idyllic time of dawn and deals *anew* with its traditional freight of symbols. Look at the symbolic dislocation inherent in the simile of lines 2-3: "While dawn broke like a face with blinking eyes, / Pallid, unshaved and thirsty, blind with smoke." Here, indeed, is a pastoral-idyllic chronotope on the verge of being destroyed on all sides, itself already half-alien in its new correlation to the exhausted troops. In Sassoon's trench version of the chronotope, natural-idyllic time is no longer than the brief period when:

We held their line,  
With bombers posted, Lewis guns well placed,  
And clink of shovels deepening the shallow trench. (ll. 4-6)

Even then, these moments allow only enough time for the vision of a form of hell that prefigures the poem's penultimate line, but which here marries the lull to its nightmarish space:

The place was rotten with dead; green clumsy legs  
High-booted, sprawled and grovelled along the saps  
And trunks, face downward, in the sucking mud,  
Wallowed like trodden sand-bags loosely filled;  
And naked sodden buttocks, mats of hair;  
Bulged, clotted heads slept in the plastering slime.  
And then the rain began, – the jolly old rain! (ll. 7-13)

The "green" legs of the corpses, the choice of "trunks", "clotted" and "slept" reconstruct an organic register of the idyll, yet at its centre we see a literal embodiment of the "pastoral-idyllic chronotope riddled with decay". At this point, too, Sassoon is displaying traits similar to another Bakhtinian category which commonly finds resonance in the trench lyric: that of the *Rabelaisian chronotope*. His unflinching physical details of the dead foreground the process by which the poet must formulate a new material language for previously abstracted or mythologized aspects of war, such as its battlefield dead. It is a moment where we do, indeed, witness metaphor struggling to confront the literal. Whilst Bakhtin is referring to Rabelais, there is something entirely congruent with the artistic challenge also confronting Sassoon at this point:

In order to describe the human body in its grotesque and fantastic aspect, a mass of the most varied objects and phenomena are drawn into the body series. In this new context they are immersed in an atmosphere of the body and of the life of the body; they enter into a new and unexpected matrix with body organs and processes; in this body series, they are brought down to earth and made more material. (Bakhtin 2010: 173)

In "Counter-Attack", then, we have human trunks face down in the sucking mud, that wallow "like trodden sand-bags" with "naked sodden buttocks, mats of hair" and "clotted heads". Bodies, here, are clearly brought down to earth and made more material. In effect, this was a challenge confronting *all* the combatant poets: how, when armed with the essentially pastoral-idyllic resources of the Georgian lyric, could they capture data from the alien new world of modern mechanised warfare and viably reproduce it as verse? At the heart of this demand, however, lay the very basis of whatever new energy poets like Sassoon were able to muster in response; as Bakhtin might point out: "This unbridled phantasmagoria has a special significance: it permits him to create verbal series of objects that are in themselves reasonable, but become monstrous when linked together" (Bakhtin 2010: 177). Something akin to this is what we see in "Counter-Attack" and in other poems which address the material realities of the conflict: we get a hint of it in Gurney's "To His Love" with its "red wet / Thing" (ll. 19-20), for example. Key to this discussion, however, is another *aspect* of distinctive response on the part of the soldier-poets to the unique position in which they found themselves. Attendant

upon this is the specific nature of spatio-temporal circumstances which could not but impress upon their work a heightened chronotopic sensitivity to the peculiarities of time in the frontline. Given a fundamental agreement with the notion that literature's primary mode of representation is temporal, I would contend that this phenomenon quite naturally inaugurates its own series of Great War chronotopes. However, what we see in the poems of Owen, Rosenberg and Sassoon are idiosyncratic versions of a wider temporal idiom – available to all those poets who served at the Front – which yielded many variations of the chronotope. Edgell Rickword, for example, teases the *Rabelaisian* materiality of the rotting-corpse chronotope into an ironic, almost Keatsian, *ekphrasis* on the states of being and *un-being* in his poem "Trench Poets":

I used to read,  
to rouse him, random things from Donne –  
like 'Get with child a mandrake-root.'  
But you can tell he was far gone,  
for he lay gaping, mackerel-eyed,  
and stiff and senseless as a post  
even when that old poet cried  
'I long to talk with some old lover's ghost.' (ll. 5-12)

The poem reminds us of that macabre co-location of the living and the dead emblematic of the Great War, yet it is also chronotopic in so much as it enacts Bakhtin's "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature". The rotting body is now, indeed, a foster-child of death, with its silence and slow-time, while yet occupying the quicker time-space of the living.

As we have seen, time in 1914-1918 was a problematized and synchronic entity encompassing multiple time frames, spatial dislocation and a host of physical life-or-death imperatives. Rosenberg spent nearly twenty months in the trenches or in areas near to the trenches, with only two brief periods of respite; his work constitutes something of a miracle that it even exists. In such a scenario, it may well be that the modern war lyric was, as John H. Johnston suggests, the medium least capable of dealing with the vast multiple moral and physical confusions of technological warfare. (cf. Johnston 1964: ???) It was, however, the *most* capable medium for recreating that sense of alienation and absolute change in the circumstances of poets suddenly transplanted from their offices, public schools, colleges, villages and streets to the Western Front. More recent critics than Johnston have flagged up the particular demands of representation in a war zone. Kate McLoughlin, for example, reminds us that:

War reconfigures time as well as space. Conflict calls forth an increase in temporal expressions: 'for the duration', 'never again', 'back by Christmas'. If the war zone demands a special topography, wartime demands a bespoke narratology, or even, given the impor-

tance to it of (lack of) endings, a bespoke eschatology or theology. Wartime is twofold: both the duration of a conflict and how time is experienced within it. Defining the former and characterising the latter are both problematic. (McLoughlin 2011: 107)

One encounters in much Great War poetry, therefore, what Bakhtin might term “the mythological sheath of metamorphosis”, reflecting poetic engagement with this very problem. This sense most acutely plays itself out in a chronotopic poetry that reflects Bakhtin’s notion of this mythological sheath, in which “Time breaks down into isolated, self-sufficient temporal segments that mechanically arrange themselves into no more than single sequences.” (Bakhtin 2010: 114) He offers the image of “a line with ‘knots’ in it, one that therefore constitutes a distinctive type of *temporal sequence*.” (Bakhtin 2010: 113) Retaining this notion when considering the time and site-specific artwork that is the trench lyric, we get nearer to understanding the distinctive nature of its particular series of chronotopes.

Were we to view this piece as a means of historicizing Great War writing, one might look no further than Richard Aldington’s 1929 novel *Death of a Hero*. The book wastes no time in adopting a vocabulary akin to the Bakhtinian drift of this discussion. In the “Prologue”, his narrator – an ex-fellow officer of Aldington’s hero George Winterbourne – describes his views on the nature of a life lost among many on the Western Front:

A life, they say, may be considered as a point of light which suddenly appears from nowhere, out of the blue. The point describes a luminous geometrical figure in space-time; and then just as suddenly disappears. (Interesting to have seen the lights disappearing from Space-Time during one of the big battles – Death dowses the glims.) (Aldington 2013: 1)

These descriptions come from brutal personal experience of the trenches but they also come from first-hand or received cultural exposure to the contemporary theories of Bergson and Einstein; in other words, from sources similar to those used by Bakhtin in formulating his theory of the literary artistic chronotope. In Bergsonian terms, for example, it might be said that Great War ‘timelessness’ occurs when the ‘qualitative multiplicity’ of a poet’s sense of inner duration encounters the ‘simultaneity’ of the external world. It follows, then, that the disorientating effect of such encounters becomes a natural preoccupation for a cohort of writers thrown into the front line, where any sense of inner duration must have been difficult to sustain in the face of grim externalities. This is not to be disingenuous merely for the sake of furthering an argument. Nor am I trying to delineate a one-size-fits-all time-space into which all Great War poetry can be placed. Rather, the unique circumstances of its composition led to a literature of conjoined and often interdependent motifs that were inescapably chronotopic; and which connect, at some point, to create “the formally constitutive category of literature” (Bakhtin 2010: 84) we know as trench poetry. Further, the special nature of the Western Front, along with its physical and temporal proximity to home, represented an empirical phenomenology that stamped such abstractions as ‘space’ and ‘time’ with the everyday felt experiences

of both combatants and civilians. The *sui generis* nature of war time is, certainly, on the minds of many writers during this period: Edmund Blunden observes how "Time went by, but no one felt the passage of it, for the shadow of death lay over the dial." (Blunden 2010: 169) Manning speaks of a "perilous instant" or "timeless interval" both of which were somehow "lived instantaneously" (Manning 2014: 3) and the sense of disrupted chronological flow is captured perfectly in Graves's 1930 play *But It Still Goes On*, with the observation that "afterwards always came after before. Now it doesn't, necessarily, at all" (Graves 1930: 295). Intimations of such 'random contingency' and temporal dislocation were common, even from non-combatant perspectives. In Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*, for example, we encounter the far from unusual instance of letters arriving home full of news from a living soldier who'd been subsequently killed in the time taken to deliver it: "the writer since sending them had had time to die over and over again" (Brittain 2004: 121). Phenomena like this are, in fact, consistent with Bakhtin's notion of the adventure chronotope: "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" (Bakhtin 2010: 100). One of the challenges for war representation on the part of its writers is, as Kate McLoughlin points out, "to communicate and even exploit the peculiarities of this extraordinary temporal state" (McLoughlin 2011: 108). Significantly, she goes on to remark that, in such circumstances, "Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope, the fusion of spatial and temporal indicators [...] seems, *prima facie*, relevant." (McLoughlin 2011: 108 footnote 3)

#### 4. Endlessness and Domestic Variation

A final example of Great War chronotope is taken from the more recently-anthologised canon of women's poetry, ending where we began, with a sonnet: in this case Eleanor Farjeon's "Now That You Too Must Shortly Go the Way". What's fascinating about the poem is the degree to which it represents certain domestic variations upon the chronotope found in battlefield poetry. Judith Kazantzis, in her Preface to *Scars Upon My Heart*, discusses the nature of female wartime experience, highlighting in particular, the demands of separation: "Empathy between the sexes had to operate over the divide of land and sea, and over a dividing wasteland of experience." (Kazantzis 2008: xxiii f.) What we encounter in Farjeon's sonnet is, in fact, an *angst vor etwas* enactment of this very situation: the poem is addressed to someone about to go out to France for the first time. As in "Anthem for Doomed Youth", there is more at stake here than just passing time but what this poem shares with Owen's, is an inescapable awareness of it; specifically time under the duress of wartime circumstance:

Now that you too must shortly go the way  
Which in these bloodshot years uncounted men  
Have gone in vanishing armies day by day,  
And in their numbers will not come again:

I must not strain the moments of our meeting  
Striving for each look, each accent, not to miss,  
Or question of our parting and out greeting,  
Is this the last of all? is this – or this?

Last sight of all it may be with these eyes,  
Last touch, last hearing, since eyes, hands and ears,  
Even serving love, are our mortalities,  
And cling to what they own in mortal fears: –  
But oh, let end what will, I hold you fast  
By immortal love, which has no first or last.

As Kazantzis says of much female poetry produced during the Great War, “The centre is elegiac; but much else clusters around it” (Kazantzis 2008: xvii) – not least here, the poem’s biographical details (it is addressed to Edward Thomas) and clear evidence of domestic post-Somme awareness of high casualty rates. However, as with “Anthem for Doomed Youth”, it rides upon a steady current of temporal signifiers that provide the poem with a similar chronotopic pulse, opening with the “Now” (l. 1) of its own performative instant, before thickening into the broader “bloodshot years” (l. 2) of historical context and narrowing again into the deadly quotidian of “vanishing armies day by day” (l. 3), who “in their numbers will not come again” (l. 4). In the first four lines, then, the poem has already encompassed past, present, present continuous and future time in its somewhat layered patterning, where even the first line title implicitly demands an echo of itself on the page. Discussing the *endinglessness* of wartime, Kate McLoughlin points out that in such “superposition of states [...] time is synchronic; diachronic temporal expressions are thrown into confusion” (McLoughlin 2011: 107 f.) and, as we shall see, something of this quality is certainly apparent in Farjeon’s sonnet. In stanza two, she offers us a remarkable meditation upon the circumstantially challenged nature of the poem’s present. Given that this *is* a sonnet, its turn actually comes in line five, rather than line eight; as if wartime demands the speeding up of traditional time-markers, even in verse. It is fair to say that all this takes place at some more remote level, beneath the familiar surface context of parting lovers. However, what gives the poem its distinctive quality is the fact of the Great War itself; the *lived* peril which demanded of its writers some attempt to thicken time and make it ‘artistically visible’. As McLoughlin reminds us, “Philosophers from Augustine to Derrida have noted the elusiveness of ‘now’ but, no longer pre-war and not yet post-war, wartime is a radical, *sui generis* extended present.” (McLoughlin 2011: 108) The representation of such *is*, indeed, what we get here. Farjeon embarks upon a remarkable tango with the emotional import of both the situation and her own poem’s moment. “I must not strain the moments of our meeting” she states in line 4, yet in a metaphorical sense, the straining of moment down to its philosophical and physical quintessence is precisely what the piece is about:

Striving each look, each accent, not to miss  
Or question of our parting and our greeting,  
Is this the last of all? Is this – or this? (ll. 6-8)

Such features serve to remind us that the Great War chronotope, indeed, has its roots upon the brink of mortal time. In the battlefield chronotopes of the trench-poets this sense is understandably occasioned by the imminence of one's own demise, or that of one's comrades. There is a non-combatant variant, however, recognized by Judith Kazantzis when she points out that: "It is possibly easier to know that you yourself will probably be dying at random for nothing very much that you can see than to agree that your loved one has done so" (Kazantzis 2008: xvii). This shrewd psychological reading of a situation encountered by many women during the Great War is the one which informs Farjeon's poem. The heightened sense of a desperately lived *finality*, in turn, gives rise to the predominant home front chronotope of enforced separation. In their plight, the women left behind share with the front-line poets a passivity characteristic of the Bakhtinian 'adventure time' discussed earlier: "It goes without saying that in this type of time, an individual can be nothing other than completely *passive*, completely *unchanging*. As we have said earlier, to such an individual things can merely *happen*." (Bakhtin 2001: 105) In the face of such powerlessness, Farjeon must create her literary artistic chronotope and, as an example of literature being engaged with its primary mode of temporal representation, "Now that you too must shortly go the way" is, indeed, "prima facie, relevant". As with Rickword, then, we witness a speaker's Keatsian attempt to thicken the elusive moment with emotional significance ("Is this the last of all? Is this – or this?", l. 8). By the final stanza, the unanswerable nature of this question sees the speaker resort to basic sensory data so as to encompass *something* of the loved one which may be carried forward into a grimly imagined future without him: "Last sight of all it may be with these eyes, / Last touch, last hearing" (l. 9-10). Here is that empirical phenomenology of the lived moment alluded to earlier, stamping such abstractions as 'space' and 'time' with the real experience of lovers parted by war. Here too are the mortal signifiers of Great War chronotope which, indeed, exists in a "*sui generis* extended present" radicalised by the concurrent imminence of mortal danger. So much is conceded by Farjeon's repetition of the word "Last" (ll. 9 and 10) and her recognition that human senses are nothing if not also registers of our mortality:

since eyes, hands, and ears,  
Even serving love, are our mortalities,  
And cling to what they own in mortal fears: – (ll. 10-12)

It is a penultimate moment of doubt that recalls many a Shakespearian sonnet<sup>2</sup> and demands the sort of consolatory response which duly arrives in the final cou-

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<sup>2</sup> D. H. Lawrence said it might be a good thing if Farjeon never saw another Elizabethan sonnet in her life again, since she could fall so easily into pastiche (source?).

plet, when she reaches for the compromised transcendence of poetic abstraction: "But oh, let end what will, I hold you fast / By immortal love, which has no first or last." (ll. 13-14) This neatly rhymed resolution achieves two things pertinent to our discussion. First, Farjeon is articulating a trait common to women's poetry from the Great War, identified by Kazantzis as the subjective, rather than patriotic, response to separation and loss:

[...] others trust in love, feeling more personally that the loved one cannot die, that he lives on within the woman's heart, and that a personal bargain of remembrance will keep him always, somehow alive; or that in the end, somehow, living or dying are all one. (Kazantzis 2008: xx)

Secondly, the rhetorical thrust of the closing couplet's struggle with separation invokes a form of idealised *extratemporal* space in the woman's heart, where resides her "immortal love" (l. 14). Essentially, her problem is the same one of historical inversion identified by Bakhtin as being inherent to the 'folkloric chronotope':

In order to endow any ideal with authenticity, one need only conceive of its once having existed in its "natural state" in some Golden Age, or perhaps existing in the present but somehow at the other end of the world [...]. There is a greater readiness to build a superstructure for reality (the present) along a vertical axis of upper and lower than to move forward along the horizontal axis of time. Should these vertical structurings turn out as well to be other-worldly, idealistic, eternal, outside time, then this extratemporal and eternal quality is perceived as something simultaneous with a given moment in the present [...]. (Bakhtin 2010: 147 f.)

Certainly, Farjeon's "readiness to build a superstructure for reality (the present) along a vertical axis of upper and lower" whilst resisting forward movement "along a horizontal axis of time" is at the heart of the domestic chronotope as articulated by this poem. We do, indeed, see her attempt to find an eternal space for her relationship; one that is outside of time, has an 'extratemporal and eternal quality' and which she perceives as something simultaneous with the poem's performative moment in the present. Not only is this impulse chronotopic, it's also deeply *natural* in such circumstances, to strive for consolatory effects; as it is for the trench poets to seek similar forms of succour in the face of imminent danger. In this context, Bakhtin's claim for the chronotope being the defining element in a "literary work's artistic unity in relationship to an actual reality" (Bakhtin 2010: 243) appears sound.

Given the 'endingless' nature of wartime and the over-arching claims made for the chronotope on the part of Bakhtin, the very notion of a conclusion to this discussion might seem impertinent. If, as he says, all art and literature are "shot through with *chronotopic values* of varying degree and scope" (Bakhtin 2010: 243), then Bakhtin has left us with a hostage to fortune in terms of producing specific examples of his theory in practice. He says himself, the chronotope is borrowed for literary criticism "almost as metaphor" and, as Kate McLoughlin points out: "the chronotope is ultimately a descriptive, rather than an analytical, category."

(McLoughlin 2011: 104 footnote 99) Yet there *does* appear to be a 'prima facie' case for its relevance: particularly with literature written in the face of mortal danger, such as that which grew out of the Great War. Also, while Bakhtin's own focus is the development of the novel, the open-endedness of his theory permits the evolution of other forms of literary time space: "it is true the chronotope is developed in different ways in the various genres" (Bakhtin 2010: 97); not least among these is the "more concrete and condensed chronotopes" (Bakhtin 2010: 103) of lyric poetry. In a sense, the Bakhtinian chronotope becomes a form of oblique strategy, whereby we gain new critical purchase upon such a familiar body of work as Great War poetry. As Bakhtin himself suggests, literature's primary mode of representation *is* temporal, then each "formally constitutive category" (Bakhtin 2010: 84) of it will work a way towards its own series of chronotopes. It is reasonable, therefore, to suggest that across so broad an artistic canvas, certain movements and moments will lend themselves more easily to chronotopic dissemination. As was suggested earlier, the poetry produced during that historical four-year period of the Great War constitutes a uniquely site-specific artwork of sorts. The trench system itself represented something of a chronotopic space, a suspended time *zone*, wherein sat poets who'd come 'up the line' to compose its very analogue as *poetic* lines that wrestled with what they witnessed in the period they spent there. Such unusually visible indices of time and space in relation to a body of poetry make it, particularly receptive, therefore, to notions of the chronotope.

I end where I began: by suggesting that the unprecedented conditions of the Great War trench system begat a poetry unavoidably engaged in a dialogue with space and time. In Bakhtinian terms, it was inextricably linked to "The problem of assimilating real time, that is, the problem of assimilating historical reality into the poetic image" (Bakhtin 2010: 251). The struggle of the Georgian poets to assimilate those horrendous new historical realities which confronted them on the Western Front is widely documented. The examples offered in this discussion certainly speak to the viability of us regarding this struggle as being intrinsically chronotopic in nature.

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