Tarek Alshikh Kheder

STUDYING PLACE IN LITERATURE:
TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Our comprehension of place has undergone many changes because of technological developments and new scientific discoveries which shaped the modern concept of place. In a literary work the description of where the action takes place has an enormous effect on the reader's perception. This means that we need to study the spatial characteristics of literary works, which requires specific literary tools. In this article I'd like to dwell on some terms in literary studies such as *chronotope*, *topos* and *locus*, which reflect how place can be conceptualized in literature.

Topos (from the Greek word τόπος) is generally understood as "place", "position" or "space". J. Regier cites Aristotle's definition of topos – "the unmoving boundary containing an object" – and differentiates between *topos* and *spatium* (the Latin word for place), the latter being "imaginary", "infinite", "cosmic", "mental" etc. *Locus* in understood as the place where something is situated or occurs. This term is also best explained when contrasted with *spatium*. J. Regier gives the example of the famous philosopher and poet Lucretius who used the term *locus* in its Aristotelian sense – a place determined by corporal borders, and referred to *spatium* as the infinite place without boundaries: "Unless <…> there were definite bodies to fill up the places [*loca*] they held, then the existing universe would be vacant and empty space [*spatium*]" (J. Regier). So we see that locus is a space marked by meaning and significance that comes from human presence and interaction.

Both *topos* and *locus* are used in the study of literary texts to denote units of their spatial structure. As noted by N. Mirzoeva, topos is often used to denote places in literary works that have a cultural significance: "Topos, as a rule, is not an element of the work: it belongs to the historical-literary reality from which the work arises, to the material from which the artist creates". In its turn locus is often understood as "a composite unit of a topos, denoting a specific place in a given continuum" (Н. Ж. Мирзаева). N. Mirzoeva also draws an analogy with the Russian scholar's Yuri Lotman's division of space into open and closed. In this case locus, as a rule, refers to closed spatial images, and topos to open ones. In western literary studies and rhetoric topos is also sometimes understood as a common topic, image or pattern of thought and expression, but in our study we understand topos as "a mental and linguistic unit, organized on the basis of binary oppositions and projecting spatial semantics into a literary work" (А. А. Булгакова).

The Russian scholar M. Bakhtin understood *topos* as the main spatial image of a literary text, but more importantly, he saw topos as one of the sides of an unbreakable space-time unity which he defined using the term *chronotope* composed of the Greek words *cronos* (time) and *topos* (place). Bakhtin believed that the chronotope is the "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expresses in literature." In the chronotope time "thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (M. M. Bakhtin 1981). Bakhtin singles out the generic significance of the chronotope; notes that it shapes the narrative, is colored by emotions and values and determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature, thus emerging "as a force giving body to the entire novel".

Bakhtin studied the novelistic chronotopes beginning with Greek romance up to the Rabelaisian novel and singled out some specific types: the chronotope of the encounter ("in such a chronotope the temporal element predominates, and it is marked by a higher degree of intensity in emotions and values"), the chronotope of the road (when "the spatial and temporal paths of most varies people <…> intersect at one spatial and temporal point"), the chronotope of the castle ("the castle is saturated through and through with <…> the time of the historical past"), the chronotope of the parlor/salon ("where encounters occur, <…> the webs of intrigue are spun, denouements occur and <…> dialogues happen <…> revealing the character, "ideas" and "passions" of the heroes), the chronotope of the provincial town ("with its stagnant life" and "cyclical everyday time"), the chronotope of threshold ("the chronotope of *crisis* and *break* in a life").

It should be mentioned that Bakhtin's way to the understanding of the chronotope was paved by his concepts of polyphony, heteroglossia and dialogism. The word *polyphony* means "several voices at once" and Bakhtin believed that interaction between different perspectives and ideologies in a literary work creates a more believable fictional reality. Heteroglossia refers to the free use of language and the diversity in language that can be employed in a text. Finally, dialogism is connected with Bakhtin's idea that meaning of any text cannot be determined by one subjective intention, but it occurs between the subject using language in some form and his interlocutor (that can be referred to a conversational partner or a reader of the written word). Consequently, it is possible to speak not only about the chronotope of the characters, but also about the chronotopes of the author and the reader who create and recreate the text. The author's chronotope implies his outside position to the chronotopes of the world he represents in his work. This "outsideness" creates a sense of space, time, and the meaning of the story and its value.

Bakhtin's classification of types of chronotopes was expanded by other scholars. For example, E. Vlasov differentiated several levels on which to look for chronotopes: 1) the objective level or one that has a geographical or historical truth to it (*abstract chronotope* – realistic in nature but does not exist in reality and does not represent one particular country or nationality in its geographical, historical and objective reality, *concrete chronotope* – space that corresponds to an actual,

historically existing geographical place); 2) the level of the relationship between the protagonist/the narrator and the spatial forms in the novel (*alien chronotope* – every spatial form in the novel seems strange, unknown, and even dangerous for the protagonist/narrator, *native chronotope* – every spatial form is familiar to the protagonist and he/she knows every place inside out, and in perfect detail since it is his/her world that is described); 3) the level of self-transformation and further development or non-development (*static chronotope* – the represented space cannot be changed, *dynamic chronotope* – space within the novel can undergo a change as the narrative progresses) (E. Vlasov 1995). In another classification N. Bemong and P. Borghart single out chronotopes on 5 levels of abstraction: 1) micro-chronotopes – generated out of units of language smaller than the sentence; 2) minor chronotopes – "local" chronotopes/ "chronotopic motifs" such as the chronotope of the road, the castle, the salon, the provincial town etc.; 3) major or dominant chronotopes – serve as a unifying ground for the competing local chronotopes in one and the same narrative text; 4) generic chronotopes – can be abstracted from the individual works in which they appear and serve as the basis for categorization and comparison for those works; 5) "plotspace-chronotopes" of 2 types: teleological (the entire plot moves towards the final moment "telos", can be of 3 subtypes: the mission chronotope, the regeneration chronotope, the degradation chronotope) and dialogical (the narrative consists of a network of conflicting situations and junctions that communicate with each other, can be of 3 subtypes: the tragic chronotope, the comic chronotope, the tragicomic chronotope) (N. Bemong).

In conclusion, we can say that topos, locus, chronotope represent important tools in the analysis of fictional place and space. These terms can be used together to analyze literary works, however, they may also be used separately. Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope gave us a new way of understanding and studying literary works, and chronotope as a term is wider and more extended than *locus* and *topos* that are more concrete. We can say that studying place and space in every literary work gives us a chance for a better understating of its content.