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Time Lost and Time Regained in Contemporary Children's Literature

Abstract: Time and memory can mean very different things when discussed in philosophical and artistic terms. They are associated with the most common and, at the same time, the most intimate aspects of a human being, and they can take many forms: time can be mythic or secular, eternal or portioned in temporalities, while the broad range of memory can be found among different categories. However, both concepts are inevitably linked with artistic representation and with the power of human imagination to capture time and recreate memories via different means of artistic expression. This paper addresses evolving notions of time, particularly drawing upon the archetypal criticism and the distinction that has been utilized in the context of children's literature between *kairos* (καιρός) and *chronos* (χρόνος) (Nikolajeva, 2000). Literature for children very often dwells on the mythic, circular, eternal time of *kairos*. *Chronos*, on the other hand, is linear, often conceived and experienced by humans in terms of suffering, loss, and death.

Keywords: kairos, chronos, picturebook, memory, time

*Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.*

W. B. Yeats, *Sailing to Byzantium*

*Time is a state: the flame in which there lives the salamander
of the human soul.*

Andrey Tarkovsky

LE TEMPS, VITE!

In 2000 the Pompidou Centre in Paris reopened after two years of renovations and held an ambitious exhibition devoted to the notion of Time. Visiting Paris at that time I had the chance to attend *Le Temps, Vite! (Time, Fast!)* – as was the title of the exhibition which addressed the major philosophical question of Time presenting a mixed variety of artworks. The exhibition's accompa-

nying catalogue with its exceptionally distinctive form (a selection of printed ephemera such as a calendar, a magazine and a newspaper in a shiny plastic bag) succeeded in highlighting the opposing discourses that circulate the concept of time as well as demonstrating some of its basic tensions and discrepancies: time can be eternal or short-termed, apocalyptic or cosmic, subjective or measured, universal or local and in general (it) can take myriad attributes as conceived by humans (West-Pavlov 2013).

It is unthinkable to place ourselves outside Time. In Book XI of Homer's *Odyssey* Odysseus makes the *véκνυια*, i.e. a *katabasis*, a descent into the underworld where the dead naturally sinking in the total oblivion of Hades must drink the sacrificial black blood given to them by the hero so that their memories awaken and they are able to converse with him. Bereft of memory, a person becomes a ghostly shadow, the prisoner of an illusory, lethal existence; like the blood-thirsty dead souls in Hades, they are falling out of time unable to seize their own link with others or with the outside world — in other words, they are doomed to an alienating and unknowable situation steeped in a paradoxical state of being.

In a similar vein the following passage (a dialogue between Stavrogin and Kirillov) by Fyodor Dostoyevsky in his novel *The Possessed* (qtd in Andrey Tarkovsky, 1986: 57) deals with the eschatological distinction between time and eternity from within Christian theology:

Stavrogin: in the Apocalypse the angel swears that there'll be no more time.

Kirillov: I know. It's quite true, it's said very clearly and exactly. When the whole of man has achieved happiness, there won't be any time, because it won't be needed. It's perfectly true.

Stavrogin: Where will they put it then?

Kirillov. They won't put it anywhere. Time isn't a thing, it's an idea. It'll die out in the mind.

The dialogue highlights that Time is all-pervasive throughout the human experience and it could only be apprehended within the texture of human life. It is only from the position of our living existence where we address the question of Time, with its ephemeral and everlasting dimensions and the metaphysical aporia it generates.

FROM KAIROS TO CHRONOS

Thus, it is not surprising that Time has been imagined and reworked by literature over centuries as well as inherently associated with a vast array of human experiences. Literature for children, likewise, has not stopped fabricating fictive temporalities and embracing a multiplicity of times within a cosmological

or historical frame of reference. One should possibly start with the distinction between non-linear (cyclic, circular) and linear time, notions which are called *kairos* (καῖρός) and *chronos* (χρόνος) respectively in Greek and it is with these names they have been implemented in the study of children's literature (Nikolajeva, 2000). *Kairos* is the eternal time of myth, ahistorical and reversible while *chronos* is the measurable time marked by chronological order and history. Although *kairos* might be connected to the archaic belief of ritual repetition, it bears a strong Judeo-Christian imprint. According to Eliade (1954), the cyclic infinite time is sacred and it can be transmitted or reenacted in linear time during vernacular seasonal rituals or rites (Eliade 1954). In several rituals central in Orthodox Christianity itself, for example the symbolism of the circular time is prominent, thus, reminiscent of *kairos* and the cyclic progression of life. Circular symbolism occurs several times during the wedding ceremony, for instance when the priest is leading the couple to perform the circular 'dance of Isaiah' around a table set up in the nave of the church. The sacred ceremony of marriage bonds the couple in an eternal union destined to last well beyond their individual existence through their offspring and the general continuation of the life cycle.

It is obvious that echoes of the sacred, ritualistic circularity can be found in literature. However, every time the circular time opens up to linearity an awareness of death occurs. In mythic time which is everlasting death is reversible or perpetually suspended (as in fairy tales). The insight regarding the linearity of time, on the other hand, especially in the context of children's literature invokes the problems of growing up, losing one's innocence, aging, and dying.

Although children's books have always fabricated stories in various genres and kinds of books (concept books, for instance) to help young readers to measure or comprehend the multifaceted concept of time (Sainsbury 2014) through history, heritage and memory (personal and collective), the tendency towards the circular and everlasting *kairos* is a constant preoccupation in children's literature¹. The longing for the ever-becoming temporality is encapsulated in narratives which tend to restore the symbolic order inherent in the eternal *kairos*. It has often been indicated and repeatedly discussed (by Nikolajeva, Beauvais and others) that children's books try to place before their readers "a 'harmonious world, purified' of the inconvenient truths of otherness and time passing" (Beauvais 2015: 206); also, to perpetuate the idea of timeless childhood as the idyllic locus of eternal happiness, safety, and innocence, a "felicitous chronotope" (Nikolajeva 2005: 137–138) which is spatial and simultaneously temporal. In Northrop Frye's elaborate archetypal typology of literature² in the *Anatomy of Criticism* (1971), the circular time correlates with

¹ Pat Pinsent suggests that (1989) the happy ending in many children's books, all those at times unlikely "coincidences" by which a happy outcome is assured, might be interpreted as a reenactment within the narrative of the initial mythic, everlasting time. This kind of ending is of course deeply consolidating and satisfying for the reader.

² Adapted properly for children's literature by Sloan-Davis (2003).

the mode of *romance* and is associated with the symbolic mythos of *spring*. In the realm of romance “the fundamental form of process is cyclical movement, the alternation of success and decline, effort and repose, life and death which is the rhythm of process” (1971: 158). The mode of romance suggests an eternally unchanged and idealized world whereas nature, the green world, is closely analogous to human.

Stories that dwell on the mythic, circular time usually employ idyllic settings and summon chronotopes correlating with a primordial spatiotemporal state which simultaneously alludes to Arcadia and Eden. The idyllic setting in kairos-oriented stories is usually depicted in a luscious manner as *locus amoenus*. *Ann of Green Gambles* (1908) by Lucy Maud Montgomery is a classic example but there are of course many other classic texts for children into which the *locus amoenus* motif is dominant in terms of setting. At the core of this blissful universe exists the perpetuating image of the child as *puer aeternus*, a much-theorized and contested concept (Nikolajeva 2000; Beauvais 2015) referring to a child which is a-temporal, frozen in an eternal condition of innocence. As a construed generalized figure, however, it finds its roots in the generic tradition of pastoral and also in the aesthetics of Romanticism – the poem “Intimations of Immortality” by William Wordsworth might pose as the most classic example of this eternal longing for childhood innocence. Innocence is also the fundamental quality of Frye’s romance. The imagery of romance presents a human counterpart of the apocalyptic divine world which Frye calls the “analogy of innocence” (1971: 158) with prominent children among its human population and old, fatherly individuals with spiritual powers.

While *kairos* is circular, an everlasting time, *chronos* is the linear time toward growing-up, maturity and death when the eternal child ceases to be. Humans have always been struggling to come to terms with *chronos* which is conceived and experienced within the framework of aging, loss and death. *Chronos* sows a sense of dissatisfaction or fear in human beings. It makes them vulnerable and subject to pain. It might graphically be said that trapped in the linear *chronos* humans continue to stride in the footsteps of that incredible and gigantic god Cronus (the paronymic alliteration is not accidental) whom Francisco Goya (*Saturn Devouring His Son*, c. 1819–1823, Museo del Prado) has powerfully envisioned as a devouring ogre. There is indeed an abundance of children’s books that are permeated by the narrative impediments of *chronos* or highlight the very idea of temporal linearity. Every time children’s literature uncurls the spiral of *kairos* (which is very often the case actually) by making a departure from the permanence and the encloseness of circular time, dystopia prevails and the fictive world becomes unhappy; at times desolate or chaotic. It might be plausibly argued that the open, uncertain and unpredictable linearity of time adheres better to the present condition of overwhelming traumatic experiences, social conflict and post-modern skepticism instead of

the idealized circular one. It is then unsurprising that the *puer aeternus* with its associated chronotope has almost completely vanished from contemporary children's literature (Beauvais 2015: 41) which ceaselessly disturbs or challenges the very notion of childhood. *Kairos*-oriented narratives seem not to belong any more to the present world and its fragmented vision of happiness. Taking again into account the archetypal theory of Frye (1971), contemporary narratives tend to be more realistic, more inclined to the mythoi of Autumn and Winter and to the modes of Tragedy, Irony and Satire. This is fair enough. It is undoubtedly true that nowadays fewer children's books are written starring children who fall into the type of *puer aeternus* while books that promote the social pathogenesis and the disturbing aspects of social reality dominate contemporary children's literature.

However, on the deepest level of archetypal fantasy the nostalgia for the circular, everlasting time of *kairos* is persistent since people never ceased to yearn for the undisturbed, reassuring repetition of cyclical time. The circular recurring time which humans desire relates to the authenticity of existence and with the joyous sensation of the repetitive experience of the small joys in life within a full annual cycle. It is a deep, profound longing for a state of harmonious life, inseparably bound with feelings and experiences that bring pleasure and well-being.

It is in this vein whereas the nostalgia for *kairos* forms a recurring tendency in contemporary children's literature. We will now proceed by giving some examples. In books that follow the generic conventions of *A Child's Calendar* (like Updike's classic, 1999/1965), such as the vintage-designed books by Shirley Hughes (2016; 2018), it becomes obvious that the circular, endless time is reenacted as a version of the cosmological time of romance marked by the perennial possession of the seasons.

The perpetuated fantasy of endless time embodied in the version of *kairos* can also be detected in more recent books, such as Loring Fisher's *Taking Time* (2020) in which diverse images of children from all over the world are presented as experiencing the wonders of nature. The book invites children to slow down and take their time to gather up the blossom dancing tree, to listen to a bird's song in the breeze, to watch with awe a spider build her home, etc. The poetic text is inspired by the philosophy of mindfulness, however, a deeper connection with the archetype of *kairos* could also be detected. In all its visual and verbal manifestations the book celebrates the encompassing beauty and the wisdom of life, the harmonious cyclic rhythm of nature. The child figure is closely connected to nature and totally synchronized with its pulses and rhythms (like the rhythmic purr of a cat in the fifth opening). The book conceives and depicts time as a natural phenomenon; the sun rises and sets, seasons change, sunshine and snow, life and death alternating in nature in which there is generic (not individual) rebirth. The imagery of the book is archetypal consisting exclusively by heavenly images referring to the

World of Innocence³ (Frye 1971; Sloan 2003): vegetation, blooming trees, clouds, birds, domestic animals, etc.⁴



Jo Loring Fisher, *Taking Time* (2020).

The *Tin Forest* (2008) by Ward (text) and Anderson (illustrations) is a picturebook endowed with archetypal meaning that lends itself to discourses of the kairos/chronos duality. The oxymoronic collocation that gives the book its title (tin-forest) foregrounds the transmutation of tin to nature as the primordial movement towards the restoration of natural world and its cyclic time. This movement is being existentially projected as a shift from *chronos* to *kairos*, and in the narrative context of the book as a displacement from a dragged and drained linear cosmos to the organic, green world of circular romance.

There was once an old man who lived alone in a wasteland, a scrapyard of trash and garbage. “Every day he tried to clear away the garbage, sifting and sorting, burning and burying. And every night the old man dreamed.” He dreamed that he lived in a colourful jungle full of wild forest animals. Then, one day he had a sudden insight (an idea *planted* itself in his head) to build a forest made of tin. Bit by bit he built tin trees, flowers and even animals using all the garbage and scrap that others had thrown away. Eventually he created this forest of tin; however, he still felt disappointed because his forest was not alive. Until one day a bird visited the forest and sometime later brought another bird with it. Plants and animals began to colonize the forest until it became

³ The archetypal imagery is divided (Frye 1971; Sloan 2003), in two broad categories: heavenly images referring to the World of Innocence and demonic images referring to the World of Experience. World of Innocence/World of Experience: a direct reference to William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1789).

⁴ Cf. the picturebook *All in a Day* (2009) by Cynthia Ryland (text) and Nikki Mc Clure (illustrations).

a beautiful, proper alive forest, colourful and buzzy. The illustration conveys an overall sense of a genuine naïve painting style regarding the depiction of the forest which is clearly reminiscent of Henri Rousseau's jungles.

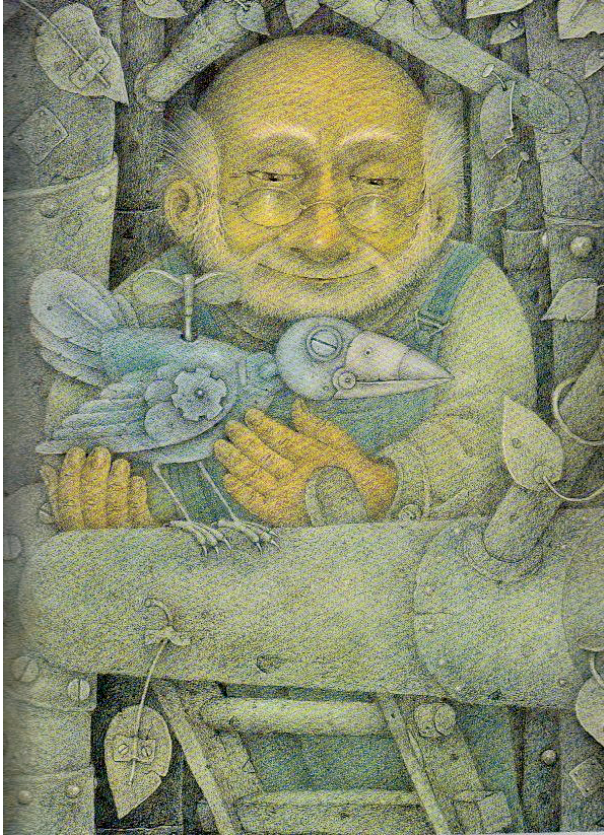
If interpretation is response to the experience of textual complexity, one should start from the most complex figure of the book, the old man who is the creator of the tin forest, the one who dared to dream and to transform the grey, filthy environment he inhabited. With his bald pate, white whiskers, spectacles and work clothes, the old man is obviously a grandfatherly figure, the wise old man of the-analogy-of-innocence imagery who stands as the archetype of the artist. He is the *poeta faber* who crafted with diligence an artwork (he literally bolted it piece by piece) and the *poeta vates* who envisioned an artistic creation to transform the ugliness into beauty. On the level of archetypal imagery, he is the one who managed to succeed in the total substitution of the World of Experience with its demonic images (scrap iron, the waste land) by the World of Innocence with all its associated images of nature. He turned hostile symbols into positive ones, in other words, with the most powerful among them being the tree. Trees are, nevertheless, among the most affirmative symbols (Cirlot 1990: 346–350) because they are associated with life, growth, wisdom, and connection with the universe. They reach down to the ground and up to the sky at the same time, therefore they are endowed with great spiritual power. They belong to the circular chronotope whereas the symbiosis of the species prevails.

Another symbolic quality of the old man is his association with God. He is a divine figure in direct relation with the Almighty God, the creator and preserver of the natural and the human world. He is at the center of the eternal green world he created, thus, reminiscent of Paradise. The reading of the Old Testament has possibly contributed to enrich Anderson's images along with the symbolic repertoire of *kairos* chronotope. "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them" (*Isaiah* 11: 6). The illustration shows the old man and nature containing each other and living peacefully together in a world⁵ where the differences between domesticated and wild species cease to exist.

In the spatiotemporal realm of *kairos* where all species live together in harmony, the little child (a leading figure according to *Isaiah*) has been substituted by the old man, a person of equivalent symbolic significance who is simultaneously a grandfather, an artist, a godly figure and a personification of Time itself. Panofsky's key study on "Father Time" (1972/1939: 69–94) traces the iconological metamorphoses the personified Time has undergone in art since the Renaissance. Aged, bald and bearded, he is unmistakably recognizable by his attributes, the scythe, the hourglass and the wings. An amalgamation of the ancient Greek god Chronos and the titan Cronos with a touch of

⁵ This world is simultaneously a Garden and an Ark.

the Roman god Saturn has been evolved over the centuries to a benevolent figure (Macey, 2010). The bald and bearded old man of the *Tin Forest* looks like a pale descendant of that Father Time attributed, however, by the tools he holds instead of the scythe. He is a builder and a creator, a benevolent father not a destroyer of worlds like his ancestor.



Helen Ward & Wayne Anderson, *The Tin Forest* (2008).

The transmutation of the scrapyards to a forest entails the restoration of *kairos* over *chronos* and the overall purification of the human life. The illustration identifies vegetable and mineral worlds in a form reminiscent of alchemy (Frye 1971: 146). In the apocalyptic imagination though according to Frye (Frye 1971: 146), alchemic gold is a metaphor for the divine. The golden tree with its golden mechanical bird in *Sailing to Byzantium* (1926) by W.B. Yeats is not only a powerful symbol of eternity and aesthetic beauty but also the prototype of this enlivened alchemic process of transmutation. The literal gold (the material of Yeats' bird) equals "the fiery quintessential gold of which the heavenly bodies are made" (Frye 1971:146) and, therefore, could be both material and abstract. In *The Tin Forest* accordingly an intangible, uncreated golden light, a light that

stems from the luminous body of the old man illuminates the gray soulless creatures transforming them into gold, luminous and warm living beings.

CONCLUSION

The Tin Forest is open to multiple interpretations. It is a tale with great ecological significance and a story about environmental responsibility and mindfulness, about artistic creation and the power to imagine without succumbing to ugliness. My reading, however, put it in an allegorical and cosmic frame of reference as a story about time and the restoration of *kairos* over *chronos*. *The Tin Forest* belongs to those stories where narrative time curls to form the spiral of *kairos* and to regain a lost authenticity. Nevertheless, as these stories feature a deepened appreciation of nature they seem very relevant to our environmentally troubled times. As they focus upon the circular rhythm of the seasonal change they make us aware that we are losing day by day the seasonal cycle, the most familiar and predictable phenomenon to which we have learned to adjust our lives in a soothing, rotating rhythm. They also convey an awareness that we all belong to one and the same cosmos which we must cherish and protect, so that it will continue to exist in the endless passage of time.

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