

Narrative Order and the Ordering of Experience: Structural Prolepsis in Jorge Luis Borges's *The Garden of Forking Paths*

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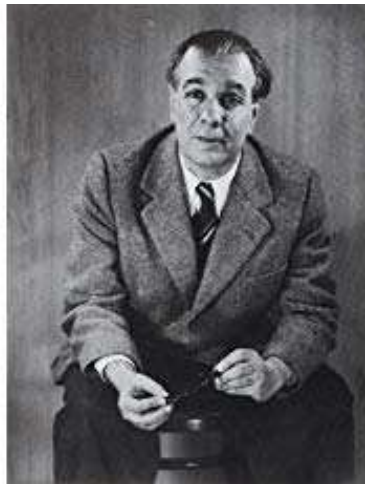


Courtesy: https://www.amazon.com/Garden-Forking-Paths-Jorge-Borges/dp/0241339057/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=The+Garden+of+Forking+Paths&qid=1563052151&s=books&sr=1-1

Abstract

For Paul Ricoeur the distinctive attribute of all narrative activity consists in its unique capacity to synthesize into a temporal unity, discrete and identifiable units of action that constitute any given story. In this way, narrative activity provides a poetic resolution to the theoretical aporia of the experience of time, which refers to the Augustinian paradox of the “being or the nonbeing of time.” The underlying assumption of this line of reasoning is that the human dependence on narratives is an evolutionary necessity and not merely a superfluous cultural elaboration. Following the work of Ricoeur, and also Victor Turner, we treat narratives as “cultural processes that articulate experience.” This paper will be an attempt to apply the critical model of analysis developed in Ricoeur’s work, to highlight instances of ‘prolepsis’ or ‘anticipation’ embodied in a short story by Jorge Luis Borges. The paper also attempts to illustrate through a series of textual examples how the selected story embodies a nonlinear model of temporal ordering in which time is experienced as a “structure of protentions and retentions.”

Keywords: J. L. Borges, *The Garden of Forking Paths*, Narrative and Experience, Narrative Order, Prolepsis, P. Ricoeur.



Jorge Francisco Isidoro Luis Borges (24 August 1899 - 14 June 1986)

Courtesy: https://www.amazon.com/Jorge-Luis-Borges/e/B000APW7C4/ref=ntt_dp_epwbk_0

The following paper is an attempt to apply a general conceptual framework derived from the field of narratology for the limited analysis of one postmodernist short fiction. The choice of the text under scrutiny is neither purely arbitrary nor entirely by design. The story by Borges that we have selected for analysis foregrounds and to a certain extent problematizes the idea of time, but it succeeds in achieving this effect on a thematic as well as the level of narrative and therefore provides a sufficiently fruitful instance for analysis.

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The text, as a limited sample of literary data, affords us an opportunity to examine some of the fundamental inadequacies that haunt all literary attempts to represent the idea of time. It furnishes us with reasonably good examples that appear to be capable of facilitating an extended discussion on the narrative technique covered by the term ‘prolepsis,’ which for the purpose of this paper, is to be understood in its more general sense as a literary analogue to the idea of time experienced as ‘anticipation.’ This conceptual setup that we have just indicated, has its philosophical moorings in the Augustinian characterization of the present as possessing an internally dynamic and distended, threefold structure that breaks down into attention, anticipation and memory (Ricoeur: 18). Once we have sufficiently elaborated our theoretical points of reference, the basic exercise of this paper will be to illustrate through the token of a few textual examples how the story we are analyzing embodies a nonlinear model of time in which the movement of time is experienced as a “structure of protentions and retentions” (Currie: 13).

A fuller understanding of this argument requires a provisional rejection of the commonsensical and uncritical model of time perceived as an irreversible “sequence of nows” or as a “sheer succession of epochal durations” capable of being represented by the metaphor of a “straight coordinate line stretching from an infinite past to an infinite future” (Leach: 126). The present of the story therefore becomes the site of a dynamic and bidirectional negotiation between expectation and retrospection. The examples offered here may seem to privilege anticipation over memory, but this is merely a matter of methodological preference and we do not wish to endorse any conceptual primacy of the faculty of anticipation over memory.

One of the significant ways in which postmodernist fiction sets itself apart from previously cherished and more conventional techniques of narrative composition is the complex manner in which it represents the idea of time. The sudden and swarming proliferation of fictions that challenge and seek to subvert the start to finish linearity of traditional narrative types is a tendency that can be associated with developments that have taken place on the Western literary landscape over the past 100 or so years, a tendency that was foreshadowed by modernism and further intensified with the arrival of postmodernist poetics.

This has led to the emergence and ascendancy of some internally complex narrative forms which experiment heavily with the conception of time embodied in them and engender new experiences of temporality on the level of narrative.

Mark Currie argues that the widespread prevalence of anachronistic devices such as prolepsis and analepsis in contemporary fictional forms (film and the novel are his typical examples) can be explained by reference to certain fundamental socio-cultural changes that mark the modern experience of time. The contemporary consciousness of the present has become

increasingly permeated by elements that were once considered spatiotemporally remote, producing an awareness of 'there' and 'then' that continuously encroaches on the awareness of 'here' and 'now.'

If 'presence' is divided between spatial and temporal properties, between the spatiality of 'here' and the temporality of 'now,' these supposedly new experiences of the present seem to offer an account of its contamination by the 'there' and 'then,' or the spatiotemporally absent. (Currie: 9-10)

It goes without saying that technological advancements in the field of telecommunications and transport have played a vital role in bringing about this changed and somewhat warped experience of time. The relationship between past, present and future which was once conceived through the logic of succession has now acquired the semblance of simultaneity. This is not to say that anachronistic techniques of narration such as prolepsis and analepsis are postmodern inventions but merely to suggest that postmodern poetics has placed the representation of time at the forefront of our narrative consciousness through increased and frequent experimentation on the level of temporal ordering of actions in the form of a story (Genette: 36).

It is one of the underlying assumptions of this paper that some temporal innovations that characterize a significant trend within the larger body of postmodernist literature are in part attempts of the contemporary consciousness to come to grips with these fundamental and unprecedented changes in the socio-cultural experience of the lived present. This idea of present resembles a mode of consciousness in which "the sense of orderly significance in which meanings are spread out in time has yielded to a chaotic co-presence of meanings" (Currie: 9).

If we class narratives under the more general and encompassing category of "symbolic forms" and follow Ricoeur's suggestion that symbolic forms are essentially "cultural processes that articulate experience,"¹ it becomes very easy to see why a changed experience of present would have led to the emergence of experimental narrative forms which purport to embody new models of temporal ordering (Ricoeur: 57).

There are anthropological accounts of time and temporality which posit that the perception of time is to a very significant extent a subjective phenomenon and the manner in which a Balinese person experiences time is manifestly different from the manner in which a subjective consciousness shaped under the influence of the Georgian Calendar will experience the passage of time (Geertz: 360). Correspondingly, the symbolic forms that are likely to be used by a Balinese person in an attempt to apprehend and articulate his experience of time will be patently different from those used by a European.

This underlying assumption is also of a piece with a speculative guideline acknowledged by Ricoeur as a continuous thesis of his work, that:

Speculation on time is an inconclusive rumination to which narrative activity alone can respond. Not that this activity solves aporias through substitution. If it does resolve them, it is in a poetical and not a theoretical sense of the word. (Ricoeur: 6)

One of the ways in which the human mind orients itself towards the lived experience of time is through the symbolic medium of narrative activity. The human dependence on narratives then can be characterized as an evolutionary and biological necessity. From this position, ordering of human experience is one of the primary functions all narrative forms.

Both Ricoeur and Currie speak of a “hermeneutic circle” between life and narrative (Currie: 41). This hermeneutic circle is mediated through a poetic logic that is derived from the model of emplotment which Ricoeur appropriates from Aristotle and modifies considerably in the light of the Augustinian reflections on time and eternity. A significant part of his analytical effort in *Time and Narrative* is directed towards a reorientation of the Aristotelian idea of emplotment and its conceptual emancipation from the generic limitations implied in the paradigm of Greek tragedy. A model of emplotment thus emancipated, Ricoeur hopes, can be extended to the consideration of all classes of narrative from fiction to history (Ricoeur: 64).

We would also like to stress at this point that for Ricoeur the central problematic of narrative consists not in its referential fidelity to external conditions of truth but its capacity to accommodate the effect of “concordant discordance,” which is also posited in his presentation of things as the distinguishing feature of emplotment. Narrative achieves this effect of “mixed intelligibility,” and we will hope to illustrate this point by reference to the short story by Borges, by taking a heterogeneous mass of contingent phenomena such as actors, actions, motives, goals, outcomes, situational uncertainties, shifts and reversals of circumstances, and configuring them within the field of narrative’s world of action by grafting on them the logic of a unified temporal whole.

In this way emplotment, for Ricoeur, refers to the entire ‘arc of operations’ whereby temporal, structural and symbolic elements are drawn from a world of action that *prefigures* the act of narration and are *configured* within the world of action and temporal structure of the story, leaving it for the reader to *reconfigure* these elements in the act of reading (Ricoeur: 54). This is the theory of threefold mimesis that constitutes the fulcrum of Ricoeur’s hermeneutical enterprise and allows us sufficient basis to advance the claim that one of the primary functions of narrative

in our lives is that it provides us with models of temporal subjectivity that are both drawn from the lived experience of time and also in some sense transform this lived experience.

The start to finish linearity of traditional narrative types provides one such model of temporal subjectivity, which the postmodernist narrative poetics seeks to replace with a consciousness of time that is non-linear and resembles a crisscrossing of ‘protections and retentions,’ a back and forth movement in which the significance of the present event or action emerges through a continuous play between anticipation and memory.

One significant implication of this would be that no understanding or evaluation of human action, whether fictional or real, is ever possible unless this action is restored to a determinate temporal dimension. We will try to illustrate this point by reference to the example of the ‘novel’ that is characterized in Borges’ short story as a “labyrinth of symbols” but before we get to that, the idea of prolepsis needs to be given some further definitional outline.

We would like to indicate at this point that our use of prolepsis is somewhat different from what is generally understood by this term in the established idiom of narratology. In its very specific sense, which is widespread in narrative studies, it commonly means a flagrant disruption in the chronological ordering of the story, a flash forward that allows the reader a privileged access into the state of affairs of the future (Currie: 29).

For the purpose of the present discussion however, the meaning of the term can be extended to cover a more generalized aspect of the experience of reading and narrating in which anticipation plays as much a part in shaping our experience and understanding of the story’s present as is played by memory.

Mark Currie’s threefold typology of prolepsis provides the basis for our subsequent use of the term. The acceptance that is relevant here corresponds with what he identifies as ‘structural prolepsis’ or a general “anticipation of retrospect” which is a “property of all fictional narrative” and not merely a dramatic device that conducts a flagrant excursion into the future of the story (Currie: 32). The structure of present implied in this idea is that of a present “lived as the object of future memory” or a mode of consciousness that experiences the present in the anticipation of retrospect, from a projected vantage point in future that retrospectively assigns significance to the present of the story.

We have already indicated in the introduction of this paper that this idea of a present that is experienced as a negotiation between anticipation and memory has its philosophical roots in the Augustinian theory of the threefold present. This general sense of anticipation that continuously

motivates the narrative and guides our understanding of a story's action is the primary object of our analysis to which we will now proceed.

Almost the entire narrative of Borges' *The Garden of Forking Paths* is presented from First Person point of view in the form of a deposition submitted by a captured spy. The narrative is therefore divided between two time loci, the time locus of the narrator after he is seized, processed for information and sentenced to death, which constitutes the vantage point from which the story is narrated in the mode of teleological retrospect, and the time of the sequence of events beginning from his discovery and leading up to his seizure which constitute the main action of the story.

Both Genette and Currie have suggested that structural prolepsis is engendered by the tension constituted between these two time loci that are simultaneously present in the narrative and to certain extent can be seen as even embedded into each other, the "time of the narrator" and the "time of the narrated action" (Genette: 33). In the initial sequence of action, the protagonist of the story, a Chinese spy in the service of the Germans during World War I, realizes that his secret identity has been compromised and he has only a little time left to embark upon a desperate mission that will allow him to communicate to his 'Leader' a secret he has acquired through espionage, namely, strategic intelligence about the enemy's artillery base. "In ten minutes, my plan was ripe. The telephone book gave me the name of the only person able to communicate the information: he lived in a suburb of Fenton, less than half an hour away by train" (Borges: 120).

The particulars of the undertaking are not revealed to the reader, but a hovering sense of anticipation is introduced through two suggestions which indicate that the unfolding of subsequent action is going to take place in a climate of extreme danger and moral ambiguity. First, in the form of a confessional statement, "I am a coward. I can say that, now that I have carried out a plan whose dangerousness and daring no man will deny" which guides us to anticipate not merely a passage through peril and calamity but also the impending success of the plan, even as the details of the plan are withheld. The second suggestion follows on the heels of the first and foreshadows the ominous nature of the action that the protagonist has resolutely undertaken. "He who is to perform a horrendous act should imagine to himself that it is already done, should impose upon himself a future as irrevocable as the past" (Borges: 121).

With these two suggestions which are strategically placed within the initial sequence of action of the story, the reader is invited to project forward a future, in relation to which the present of the story is already relegated to the past. This sense of anticipation is teased to the point of almost breaking before it is finally consummated in the climax of the story. In the climax, the protagonist kills an innocent and amicable Sinologist named Stephen Albert, whose name and address he had acquired from the telephone book, without any provocation of malice, in a highly

contingent but ultimately successful attempt to convey to his leader the information that the new English artillery camp was located in a city which is eponymously named Albert:

I have been sentenced to hang. I have most abhorrently triumphed: I have communicated to Berlin the secret name of the city to be attacked. Yesterday it was bombed—I read about it in the same newspapers that posed to all of England the enigma of the murder of the eminent Sinologist Stephen Albert by a stranger, Yu Tsun. The leader solved the riddle. He knew that my problem was how to report (over the deafening noise of the war) the name of the city named Albert, and that the only way I could find was murdering a person of that name. (Borges: 127)

A resolution of the plot is achieved by fulfilling this receding sense of anticipation that is introduced in the initial action of the story and which motivates the subsequent forward movement of the narrative. This is also one of the ways in which any narrative order achieves the effect of ‘discordant concordance’ that was alluded to earlier. In Ricoeur’s terms:

To follow a story is to move forward in the midst of contingencies and peripeteia under the guidance of an expectation that finds its fulfilment in the conclusion of the story. This conclusion is not logically implied by some previous premises. It gives the story an end point, which, in turn, furnishes the point of view from which the story can be perceived as forming a whole. (Ricoeur: 66)

We can see that the examples of prolepsis we have just discussed are very different from the kind of prolepsis that manifests itself in the form of a direct flash forward. This variety of prolepsis we have been describing is a structural property of all narrative fiction whereas the dramatic variety of prolepsis is a property of some narrative fictions that use the technique of flash forward for organizing the action of the story. We would also like to add that prolepsis may manifest in a narrative on the more subtle level of a clue or an “invited inference,” to borrow a term from Currie’s vocabulary, which may appear to be of no apparent significance at the time of its appearance in the events of the story, but acquires significance retrospectively (Currie: 38).

Two examples from the story should suffice to make this point clear. One such clue can be identified as ‘buried’ within the limited body of the information that is offered about the ‘Leader,’ which doesn’t tell us much about him except that he is a “sick and hateful man” awaiting a word from his spies in his “office in Berlin poring infinitely through the newspapers” (Borges: 120).

This simple detail that is communicated in the most casual manner comes to acquire an augmented significance once we review it in the light of the subsequent chain of events in which

the protagonist uses newspaper reports as the means of sending his final message to the leader, a contingency upon which hinges the entire weight of his desperate undertaking. Whatever motivation this hint, or clue acquires in the overall signifying structure of the story, it acquires in the mode of retrospective anticipation. Similarly, before embarking upon the enterprise of murdering Albert Stephen, of which the reader knows nothing at this point, the protagonist is shown as examining his personal effects which consist of a seemingly random inventory of objects:

the American watch, the nickel-plated chain and quadrangular coin, the key ring with the compromising and useless keys to Runeberg's flat, the notebook, a letter I resolved to destroy at once (and never did), the false passport, one crown, two shillings, and a few odd pence, the red-and-blue pencil, the handkerchief, the revolver with its single bullet. (Borges: 120)

The same revolver is subsequently used in the murder of Stephen Albert and in some sense prefigures the act of murder in the moment of its appearance. The retrospective significance of the single bullet, and the way in which it departs from the continuous expectation that it may be used by the protagonist to kill himself in order to avoid falling into the hands of the enemy, are narrative effects engendered by structural prolepsis which is the narrative anachrony that concerns us here.

The consciousness of time that is articulated through this kind of narration is not a linear consciousness of time but an awareness of the present that is suspended between anticipation and memory. We would now like to conclude this paper with a few passing remarks over how time appears in *The Garden of Forking Paths* on a more direct and thematic level as well, in addition to the structural features we have just described.

By reference to Ricoeur's work we have already suggested that any narrative order achieves the effect of intelligibility because it restores an indefinite succession of actions to a determinate temporal dimension. One implication of this, which has also been suggested, is that no serious understanding or evaluation of human action is possible unless this action is framed within some temporal unity, which is basically speaking the constitutive order that is provided by any act of narration. Hence narrative is a central category also for law and not merely for literature.

In the course of a conversation between Yu Tsun, the protagonist of the story, and Stephen Albert, his victim, we are told that an illustrious ancestor of the former renounced the governorship of an ancient province in order to write a novel, the temporal ordering of which resembles the structure of a labyrinth. The title of the story is in fact taken from the title of this fictional novel. The novel accrues a notorious reputation of inscrutability through the successive generations and is uniformly written off by its author's descendants as a "contradictory jumble of irresolute drafts"

(Borges: 124). Additional information that is provided at this point suggests that the main problematic of the novel is the idea of time. But the events and actions of the novel are perplexing and lack intelligibility because there is no semblance of order in their occurrence. The reason why the actions of the novel preclude the possibility of any coherent interpretation can be assigned to its indeterminate temporal structure.

In all fictions, each time a man meets diverse alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the work of the virtually-impossible-to-disentangle Ts'ui Pen, the character chooses—simultaneously—all of them. He creates, thereby, several futures, several times, which themselves proliferate and fork. (Borges: 125)

By simultaneously projecting several timelines at once, the novel becomes a babel of confused temporalities. In this manner the novel attempts to become a 'plan of chaos' that is thoroughly indecipherable to any reader. "Unlike Newton and Schopenhauer, your ancestor did not believe in a uniform and absolute time, he believed in an infinite series of times, a growing, dizzying web of divergent, convergent and parallel times" (Borges: 127).

In the foregoing passages we have treated anticipation and memory as if they are independent processes but in the mental activity of the reader, these two are mutually imbricated to the point of being inseparable from each other. Though they might seem like opposite processes they are actually two dimensions of the same general structural capacity of narrative that we had outlined in the introduction of this paper, a mode of storytelling in which the present of the story becomes increasingly suffused with traces of the past and the future. A continuous imbrication of the present with the past and the future which lends a meaningful dimension to the events narrated in the story. The examples we have discussed so far can be seen as underscoring the structural condition that the production of prolepsis continuously relies on the mechanism of retrospection.

ⁱ A similar position has been taken in the Anthropological works of Victor Turner. See Turner, 1988 in the bibliography.

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