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**Abstract:** Examines how the concept of a journey in time is represented in the works of Australian author Gerald Murnane and Argentinean author Jorge-Luis *Borges*. Murnane's admiration of *Borges'* work; *Borges'* ambivalent dealing with the topic of time in his essay 'New Refutation of Time'; Notion of linearity in the Western understanding of physical journeys; Cause and effect process.

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## **SPATIALISED TIME AND CIRCULAR TIME: A NOTE ON TIME IN THE WORK OF GERALD MURNANE AND JORGE-LUIS *BORGES***

The image of the journey in time characterises much of twentieth-century fiction -- Joyce, Mann, Proust, Svevo and Woolf bear witness -- and finds in Australian writing a fertile ground. In fact, the interplay between past and present appears to be one of the recurrent motifs among Australian poets and writers either by virtue of a preoccupation with the inner and outer landscape (White, Jolly, Wallace-Crabbe, Dessaix to name only a few) or with cultural biography and ethnicity (Castro, Mudrooroo, Lazaroo, Cappello, for instance). The representation of time is not only the object of the story proper, but it also finds expression in the stylistic structuring of a few contemporary texts whose narrativisation of events invites a re-evaluation of temporality, especially in relation to the linearity of 'clock time'.<sup>[1]</sup> To this end one might consider the juxtaposition of different levels of narrative in Mark Henshaw's *Out of the Line of Fire* and in the recent novel *Before I Wake* by John Scott, to confine myself to two obvious examples.

The journey in time is also one of the most powerful metaphors connecting the work of another Australian author, Gerald Murnane, to the fiction of Jorge-Luis *Borges* inasmuch as both *Borges* and Murnane are engaged in questioning the ordinary notion of time and the way in which we perceive and live it. This association is hardly casual. In an interview with Ludmilla Forsyth, Murnane stated that: 'I read and admired *Borges* as long ago as 1962' (42). Considering that *Borges'* fiction was translated and disseminated outside Argentina only at the end of the fifties, Murnane might well have been one of the first Australian readers and followers of the Argentinian author. Yet behind this shared suspicion of calendrical time, and although appearing to tread on similar poetic paths, *Borges* and Murnane construct a rather different representation of time. It is the purpose of this note to discuss time in *Borges'* and Murnane's fiction not only in order to shed some light on attributes of poetic allegiance,<sup>[2]</sup> but also, if not primarily, to highlight one aspect of Murnane's prose which, to my view, contributes to its claim to be situated among the most original and innovative writing of recent times.

*Borges'* ambivalent dealing with the topic at hand is exhibited in his essay 'New Refutation of Time'

in which he attempts first to deny the existence of time by drawing on Berkeley and Hume's negation of matter and space ('having denied matter and spirit,' says *Borges*, 'which are continuities, and having denied space also, I do not know with what right we shall retain the continuity that is time' [183]), and then he refutes his refutation by re-admitting time altogether under the shape of a tiger, a fire and a river which devour, burn and disperse him: 'Time is a river that carries me away, but I am the river; it is a tiger that mangles me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire. The world, alas, is real; I, alas, am *Borges*' (187). 'New Refutation of Time' contains, and not only in the explicit contradiction inscribed in the title, a scarcely subterranean hesitation which marks and characterises most of *Borges*' fiction. My comparative discussion of *Borges*' and Murnane's understanding of time finds in this hesitation its first paradigmatic and theoretical stepping stone.

At the beginning of 'New Refutation of Time' *Borges* justifies his quixotic confrontation with time by emphasising that this battle is carried out by the nocturnal side of himself: 'In the course of a life dedicated to literature and, occasionally, to metaphysical perplexity, I have perceived or sensed a refutation of time, which I myself disbelieve, but which comes to visit me at night and in the weary dawns with the illusory force of an axiom' (172). It appears that *Borges* is interested here in differentiating between his day-self and his night-self, the former qualified by rationality and the latter by idealistic, if not altogether romantic, traits. The fracture of the self witnessed in 'New Refutation of Time' reappears years later in the short narrative '*Borges* and I', where the writer *Borges* is explicitly opposed to the actual *Borges*, and in many of *Borges*' short stories whose protagonists often experience a duplication. In 'The South', for instance, Dahlmann is at one and the same time the person who dies in a hospital bed and the person who travels south just to die in a knife fight; in 'The Secret Miracle' Hladik, the writer, is given a taste of eternity while Hladik the man is gnawed by the ticking of calendrical time separating him from his execution; in 'The Death and the Compass' Lonrot is both the killer and the victim; in 'The Garden of Forking Paths', Yu Tsun is alternatively the killer of the Sinologist named Albert and the murderer of his ancestor Ts'ui Pen. This duplication, a kind of mirroring game is not only the result of *Borges*' predilection for riddles but also, and most importantly, the necessary outcome of an unresolvable hesitation which stems from the deeply rooted contradiction engendered in his experience as a person as opposed to his experience as a writer. Whereas *Borges* the writer, the nocturnal thinker of 'New Refutation of Time', can imagine eternity and the annihilation of linear time, the actual *Borges* is immersed in chronology and mortality. The difference is also that separating a quotidian, prosaic *Borges* and a metaphysical and ultimately fictive *Borges*. This hesitation is apparent in the duplication of the self but also in the narrative discourse characterising *Borges*' fiction in relation to time.

In order to elucidate this point, and also to introduce the discussion of Murnane's writing, I need to make use of my second key analytical passe-partout (the first being 'hesitation'), notably the 'journey'. Many of *Borges*' protagonists, like those of Murnane, travel. Dahlmann boards a train southward, Lonrot takes the train to Triste-le-Roy, Yu Tsun travels, and again by train, to the town of Ashgrove, the director in *The Plains* leaves the coast with the plains as his destination. These travels are moreover distinguished by a further analogy, that of being metaphors. Although Lonrot's and Yu Tsun's journeys, like that of the director in *The Plains*, present many of the features typical of physical journeys in space, their destinations betray traits more akin to mental and metaphysical places than real ones. This is not to mention the journey in 'The South' which is endowed so much with dream-like and mental allusions that it is virtually impossible to mistake it for a 'real' journey in space. Although the function of these journeys is not so much to move the traveller within a physical space as a mental space, they still retain some of the characteristics of a conventional journey, especially in relation to time. It is precisely by studying some of these characteristics that I will be able to illustrate the qualities differentiating *Borges*' journeys from those of Murnane together with their respective understandings of time.

The ordinary understanding of 'journey' implies the movement necessary to cover a distance from a given place to a prearranged destination. This conventional interpretation is legitimated and fixed by

the definitions of journey found in dictionaries: 'Any travel: tour: excursion: movement from end to end of a fixed course' (Chambers 772); '1. A course of travel from one place to another, esp. by land. 2. A distance travelled or suitable for travelling in a specified time' (Macquarie 943). What is striking about these definitions, which, like any definitions to be found in dictionaries, echo the voice and the linguistic values of a whole culture and tradition, is the clear premeditation and purposefulness inherent in the notion of 'journey'. According to the western cultural tradition, a traveller ought to be aware of his or her destination and the time necessary to reach it before embarking on a trip. This also means that by being so focused on the place of arrival, our traveller will not (should not) be distracted or diverted by other routes encountered during the course of the journey. Indeed, western tradition is suspicious of digressions and dispenses all sorts of warnings one of the most powerful of which, emotionally and psychologically speaking, is administered at an early stage with the iconic tale of 'Red-Riding Hood'. The same notion is found in the *Odyssey* and in the perilous and anguished journey of Ulysses who, regardless of the many alluring wonders met along the way, never forgets that Ithaca is his only destination.

Diagonal, zig-zagging, forking and branching paths acquire an eerie, uncanny feeling compared to the bright, familiar, direct linear course. Wandering is thus discouraged not only because it might take the traveller into unwelcoming and threatening territories, but also because it is a waste of time and an indication of indolence. In the western tradition, the wanderer, the gipsy, has often been looked down on as a strange and peculiar type, an outcast who lacks the more basic social skills and ambitions, notably a home, a place and a structured context to which to return.[3] 'Free from every secure dwelling, the unsettled, undomesticated wanderer is always unsettling and uncanny. Having forsaken the straight and narrow and given up all thought of return, the wanderer appears to be a vagrant, a renegade, a pervert -- an outcast who is an irredeemable outlaw' (Taylor 150).

Time is of course as much an issue as space. They are in fact linked inextricably inasmuch as notions such as linearity, circularity and wandering are not only inscribed in space but also in time. Wandering aimlessly, for instance, shows an open disregard for the sacred symbol of home as well as a demystification of chronological and linear time with its attendant tenets of deadlines and irreversible ends. To wander means to subvert the notion of an indivisible and ultimate point of arrival both at the level of time and space.

The deeply rooted notion of linearity has not only informed the western understanding of physical journeys but has also affected other areas, including fiction. If western fiction has been intent on organising and constructing symbolic and metaphorical narratives which warn against the dangers of straying from the path, it has also attempted to imitate and represent the ideal journey through the clear and unmistakable juxtaposition of a beginning, a middle and an end.

In *Borges'* fiction, the journey is away from reality toward an unknown destination. It is a journey which does not contemplate a return to the point of departure, to home, in that by entering the journey the traveller experiences an irredeemable split which separates him/her into two halves. One of these halves will remain at home, grounded in reality, the other will be set free to travel in fiction, in this medium or vehicle headed for an unmapped place lacking spatial and temporal referents. As a result *Borges'* fiction generates a host of doubles.

The many journeys in *Borges'* fiction (Dahlmann's journey to the south, Yu Tsun's journey to Ashgrove, Lonrot's journey to Triste-le-Roy) could be thus interpreted as metaphor for a more metaphysical and hermeneutic journey whose function is to connect the traveller with a truer reality. As journeys toward another realm, they also enact a ritual of initiation, a passage from one life into another which in *Borges'* fiction is usually announced by an eerie and unfamiliar atmosphere marking the transition and transformation affecting the characters. Let us remember, for instance, the fantastic, dream-like, hallucinatory landscape encapsulating Yu Tsun's or Dahlmann's or Lonrot's approach to their destination. The same eerie and uncanny feeling is experienced in the pages of *The Plains* where, as in *Borges*, we are presented with a metaphorical, mental journey delivering the

protagonist from the artificially constructed society of the coast to a purely intellectual construct in which philosophical debates and lucubrations seem to rule unchallenged.

At a first reading the destinations of *Borges'* characters appear to be straightforward. Dahlmann leaves the city heading south, Yu Tsun travels from his hotel to the town of Ashgrove and so does Lonrot, who travels from the centre of the city to its periphery. Their journeys are linear and chronologically plausible. They are all travellers possessed by a sense of purpose, all desperately and anxiously committed to an end which, in their case, coincides with death, the ultimate and non-negotiable, timeless end. Indeed they seem to symbolise the passage of chronological time and the decay which is, almost inevitably, attached to it. By contrast, in Murnane, apart from the metaphorical and Barthesian death of the author by the hand of the reader (see especially *Inland*), it is rare to find death.

Yet, death also decrees the end of time, its disappearance into the void of individual annihilation. The equation of time with humans ('The real presence of Time in the World is called Man [sic]. Time is Man, and Man is Time' [Derrida 85]), the poignant correspondence and apparent interdependence which seem to link the two, as if time were only possible because of life and vice-versa, is one of the most salient characteristics of *Borges'* fiction and reconnects strongly with his introspection into eternity. It is not by accident that the presence of death with its many symbols and omnipresent shadows occurs in *Borges'* writings much more frequently than in Murnane's.

This is another reason which explains why the protagonists of *Borges'* stories appear to have a clearer idea of their destinations, and be endowed with a tension pushing them resolutely toward a point of arrival. If their purposefulness is unquestionable, since it is their aspiration toward a concrete end, it is the nature and identity of this end which remains problematic for it keeps multiplying and accruing a plurality of features and meanings. As a result, the orderly linearity characterised by the beginning and the middle of *Borges'* protagonists' journeys in the end explodes into a myriad of alternative courses which, departing from their matrix, radiate, engendering parallel and forking times. It is on these grounds that Dahlmann's and Lonrot's deaths can acquire double and treble meanings, that Yu Tsun's crime can exponentially multiply itself. In *Borges* the linear movement detonates, pulverising its original linearity and homogeneity.

In Murnane the linearity of the conventional journey is altogether dissolved and replaced with a different set of geometric patterns. This is most evident from *Inland* onward, but even in *The Plains*, where a semblance of linearity is still recognisable on the surface of the page, the orderly movement toward a prearranged destination comes abruptly to a halt. Like *Borges'* protagonists, the director in *The Plains* leaves the coast in order to reach the plains. In line with the traditional understanding of travelling, he has rationally prepared himself and made careful plans which, in theory, will not fail to take him where he wants to go in the time that he has reasonably set aside for the purpose. This happens of course before he leaves, within a narrative the reader of *The Plains* can only imagine by interpreting the many clues and allusions scattered throughout the actual text which, by all accounts, is not about a journey. In fact, *The Plains* is only partially a book about the memories of a journey and mainly about the unsolvable impasse of a journey. And yet, although the preparation for the journey to the plains is not part of the text, it is obvious that the director has a mental image of his destination before he leaves. In his mind the plains exist as a tangible, concrete place, a dot on a map, which, thus, is susceptible of being known and possessed via the journey. As a matter of fact, and *The Plains* is the chronicle of this realisation, the director finds out that the plains are not a site, a location which can be encompassed by the eye and represented accordingly, but rather a landscape which is simultaneously here and everywhere, both in time and space.

The rotating image I have used in relation to *The Plains* becomes the main feature of Murnane's subsequent fictions. But contrary to *The Plains*, Murnane's following journeys are not characterised by a line but by a set of different patterns (circles, diagonal lines etc.) which keep generating other patterns. This is the wandering process of Murnane's fiction in which the sense of a clear destination,

end or centre is irreparably lost. Murnane's travellers continue travelling aimlessly in search of something which resists and defies their search, moving away from a home where they do not belong. This idiosyncratic and haphazard journey is exemplified by the interlocking, digressive, self-referring, wrapping and ultimately unending narratives making up *Landscape with Landscape*, *Inland*, *Velvet Waters* and *Emerald Blue*.

Time is essential in shaping *Borges'* journey into knowledge. Time becomes an example, bearing witness to the actual development of the explorative search. It is on these grounds that parallel, forking, circular times and eternity are introduced to illustrate what may be experienced once the threshold of ultimate reality is trespassed. But as a mere representation and imitation of a set of times to which language cannot entirely do justice they remain endowed with and immersed in their opposite, namely linear time. I am touching here on one of the most relevant differences between *Borges'* and Murnane's writing in relation to time. Whereas in *Borges'* writing is still arranged around a linear chronology whereby the beginning is replaced by a middle and the middle by an end, in Murnane writing is divested of its linear structure. This is to say that if in *Borges'*, parallel, forking, circular times and eternity are described and offered to the reader along the axis of linear time, in Murnane they act on the page not so much as representation but rather as concrete events. This argument is not only based on the content of the actual stories but also on their narrative structure, on the language in which they are spoken to us. In *Borges'* we have complete stories whose endings, although opening a plurality of interpretations, are satisfactory and gratifying. As readers we close *Borges'* books with a feeling of puzzlement but also with a sense of completion which is engendered by the assurance that we have read something to its end. It does not matter so much whether this end is only one among many others, what really matters is that this end is plausible. And this is indeed because it takes the narration to a climax and finally to a close, wrapping it all up nicely. Moreover, the end is reached by following, as we have seen above, a linear path which agrees with our experience as readers engaging with a story. In fact, as readers of a generation used to reading books as if their internal life were ticking at the same pace as our life, we expect the story to proceed forward in a kind of cause and effect fashion whereby one event must ignite another event which in turn nudges the story ahead and so on until we get to a plausible end. The end, as I stressed before, does not necessarily need to be the only possible end, but it must be one of them; it must have the structural capacity and the narrative weight to impede and discourage the chain-reaction effect which started the story in the first place. *Borges'* fiction makes use of such endings as well as the cause-effect mechanism to propel a story. By contrast, Murnane's fiction does not.

In Murnane the cause and effect process is still present, but instead of propelling the story ahead along a linear time it generates a sprawling narrative which disperses itself in all directions. This fragmentation subverts the stable notion of 'centre', be it a narrative's ending, the final destination of a journey or the paradigmatic order inscribed in the linearity of time, and in so doing it re-describes the reader's perception of and relation with the text. What we confront is a set of texts deprived of a central and guiding narrative whose place is occupied instead by a myriad of narratives which constantly keep interlocking and referring to each other:

I have written by now on many pages. Each day I cover a page with writing and then I push the page gently away from me towards the edge of my table. By now the table is strewn with so many pages that each page I push away from me causes other pages to drift ahead of it. Sometimes one of those drifting pages drifts over the edge of the table in the way that a cloud drifts over the edge of a district of level land. Sometimes on my way from this table to the window I pass some of the pages that have drifted over the table-horizon. Sometimes my walking past causes the air to move and a page to drift a little across the floor. (*Inland* 84-85)

It is as if the pages of Murnane's books are free to float and mingle with other pages of the same text or with pages of other texts. In contrast to the closure of the book, the text is radically open ... The intertextuality of scripts displays the codependent origination of texts. Every text arises and passes away through its interplay with other texts. Consequently, no single text can be regarded as either the