

Approaches to Semiotics

70

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A Semiotic Theory of Texts

Floyd Merrell
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(The Circular Ruins.)

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To my parents

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3.7 Dogmatic Slumber or Dream?: Borges' "The Circular Ruins"

3.70 I will attempt to demonstrate in this section that the underlying reality of Borges' "The Circular Ruins" illustrates how textual metaphorical-metonymical relations are, as implied by PROPOSITION VIII and COROLLARY VII, the product not only of a linguistic mechanism but also of an extralinguistic and cognitive mechanism.

3.71 *A Summary of "The Circular Ruins."* Borges' story occurs in an exotic setting where a magician-priest arrives, exhausted after his long journey from the South, at a circular clearing in the center of which lie the charred ruins of an ancient circular temple. The purpose which guided him "was not impossible, though it was supernatural. He wanted to dream a man: he wanted to dream him with minute integrity and insert him into reality" (Borges, 1964, 46). He first dreamt a circular amphitheater filled with silent, expressionless students, but he soon dismissed them all with the exception of one promising subject. While attempting to teach this young man the nature of the real world, insomnia took over and his project failed entirely. Later he embarked on his second effort: to dream one individual starting with the heart and creating outward to the skeleton and finally to each of the innumerable hairs, "the most difficult task." On receiving instructions from a multiple god whose earthly name was Fire, he gradually accustomed the arduously dreamt boy to reality and sent him downstream to the North "to be born," but only after instilling into him a "complete oblivion of his years of apprenticeship." His son was now, for practical purposes, a part of reality: in fact, "all creatures except Fire itself and the dreamer would believe him to be a man of flesh and blood" (Borges, 1964, 48). One night the magician was awakened by two boatmen who told him of another magician to the North who could walk on fire without being burned. As any good father, the dreamer feared for the emotional well-being of his son, for if he meditated on his rare privilege and discovered that he was a mere image it would be humiliating. However, the meditations of the magician were cut short, for a jungle blaze threatened from the South. The old man, cognizant of the imminence of death, walked boldly into the "concentric" blaze only to realize with "relief, with humiliation, with terror," that the flames could not consume him, "that he too was a mere appearance, dreamt by another" (Borges, 1964, 50).

3.72 *Textual indices.* The task at hand is to reveal, as a consequence of SS-system interaction, the text's underlying "world-model" and its potential transmutation into a more complex meta-model wherein the paradoxical base of the text becomes potentially evident.

The magician "came from the South" and he had dwelled in "one of the infinite villages upstream." On the other hand, after sufficiently preparing his "unreal" son, the magician sent him downstream to the North where "the incessant trees had not managed to choke the ruins of another propitious temple, whose gods were also burned and dead" (Borges, 1964, 47). The conditions of the son's environment are identical to those of the magician. Only the incessant, repetitive trees separate one temple from another. Hence, the spatial trajectories of father and son compose two oppositions, up(stream)/down(South) and down(stream)/up(North), which structurally produce a "cancellation effect." As a result, the action of the story terminates simultaneously everywhere and nowhere; that is, the dreamt image is at the charred ruins of a temple where the magician created his dream image. This sameness of space tends to obliterate the possibility of "simple location." The story alludes not to geographic points but to vague and imprecise notions of circular surfaces.

On contrast to the spatial indices, at the outset it appears that time is linear and accumulates with increasing torpidity. For instance, the magician was able to dream his circular amphitheater filled with youth in a relatively brief lapse of time. This experiment failing after nine or ten days, he was required fourteen more days to perfect the heart of his new subject, one year to create the skeleton, a little less than two additional years to complete his project, and two more long years to prepare his son for "birth." This deceleration of time is analogous to human ontogenetic development, which, rapid in the beginning, later takes on an unbearable sluggishness. When the son (dream image) is ready to become a part of reality the magician places a veil over his eyes in order to remove all recollections of the past so that he would consider himself a "real" man. The son's development, then, is first decelerated and finally halted altogether when he is interpolated into the world of reality. However, this effort to annihilate the past is ultimately futile. Temporal recurrence is foretold by the magician's impression that "all this had happened before," and by the opening scene when the magician enters the charred circle which was "a temple, long ago charred by fire."

The obliteration of "simple location" of space coupled with vague images of spatial circularity implies structurally a denial of linear movement. Concomitantly, the attempt to annihilate the past and establish eternal presentness stems from an implicit attempt to deny temporal irreversibility. Of course these assumptions are dangerous, given the ambiguity of Borges' spatio-temporal indices, and must be properly qualified.

3.73 *The "invincible purpose" which drives the magician can be explicated on two levels: concrete and abstract.* On a concrete level, the magician strives to coordinate his activities perfectly with those of his son.

After the magician sends his son away to be "born," he daily prostrates himself at dawn and at twilight "before the stone figure, imagining perhaps that his unreal child was practicing the same rites, in other circular ruins, downstream; at night, he would not dream, or would dream only as all men do" (Borges, 1964, 49). By means of these ritualistic acts he gradually becomes "as all men" and his absent son is nurtured with the progressive diminution of his own soul. Then his life's purpose is finally completed, and he persists in a kind of "ecstasy," assuming that his son's immortality is now projected into the physical world, an event which at once symbolically represents the concretion of the unreal (dream) and the eternal coexistence of the real (physical world).

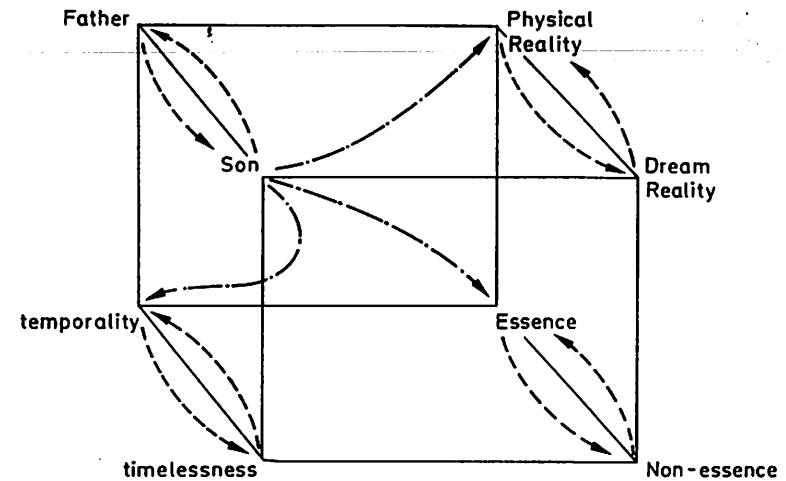
On an abstract level, the coexistence of real father with unreal son coheres with the symbolic coexistence of space and time. Spatial and temporal synchronicity portrayed in Borges' story is a condition quite unlike the linear existence of the physical world. Hence, physical existence, which presupposes human finitude, is opposed to the dream world of spaceless and timeless coexistence. In the material sphere of existence the contradiction between life (not-death) and death (not-life) is presumably irreconcilable. On the other hand, in the nonmaterial order, governed by spatio-temporal synchronicity, this contradiction is nonexistent.

3.74 *The magician's project entails a dogmatic perspective.* Consider the possibility that in "The Circular Ruins" the projection of spatiotemporal synchronicity into linear existence entails a symbolic abolition of the life/death opposition. This assumes an implicit attempt in the story to overcome a temporal existence where spatial hierarchy and temporal linearity predominate. In more concrete terms, the magician's "purpose" stems from a desire to make his unreal son part of tangible reality and vicariously to transcend mortality. For even though all fathers "are interested in the children they have procreated" and "fear for the future" of their children, this interest is at the same time self-interest. Therefore, the constraint at the underlying level of Borges' text which is subject to potential restructuring is mortality, or life/death duality, perhaps the most intransigent of all. It is obviously for this reason that the protagonist is a "magician" and the story is like a "myth."

3.75 *Metaphorical-metonymical interdependency and interaction.* The relations between father and son (reality and dream) in terms of metaphor-metonymy can be illustrated by an abstract schema (see Figure 22). According to this diagram, the desired goal entails actualization of relations of similitude between father-son and reality-dream. By inserting dream image into reality the son could become a "man" and the magician could vicariously transcend the finitude of physical existence. In order to accomplish this

goal, the magician must activate a reconciliation of opposites wherein the son's *timelessness* might predominate over the father's *temporality* and the father's *essence* over the son's *materialessness*. However, the "logical" end must prevail. In actuality the magician becomes an integral part of "dream" existence in simultaneity with the son's supposed entry into "reality," and the "unreal" enjoys synonymity with the "real."

The sequential (metonymical) and the parallel (metaphorical) planes intersect in the narrative where there is potential movement toward more complex levels of organization: a meta-level.



- (1) Horizontal and vertical lines are metonymical or sequential relations.
- (2) Diagonal lines are (negative) metaphorical or parallel relations.
- (3) ——— is the desired goal.
- (4) - - - - - is the "logical" end.

Figure 22

According to the reading I have proposed for "The Circular Ruins," this intersection is found at the end, when the magician becomes aware of his beinglessness. He assumes that his monumental task had been completed and "death was coming to crown his old age and absolve him of his labors." But when the metaphorical and metonymical axes converge the paradox underlying his project potentially becomes apparent. His status as the object of yet another dream had obviously become an embedded proposition in his own mind since his own maker had instilled in him, like he did with his own son, a complete oblivion of his apprenticeship.

3.76 *From the very beginning the magician's grand design is doomed to failure.* In the first place, the magician strives (metaphorically) to force the dreamt image into his own supposedly tangible form of existence. This is tantamount to an attempt to concretize the sequential chain of mental events (dream reality) which are the product of unlimited semiotic activity. In other words, the magician tries to establish lines of similarity where ordinarily there would exist only lines of opposition; he tries to make entities like "dream reality" denote something other than what they would ordinarily denote. In order to accomplish this task the magician progressively accustoms his dreamt image into concrete reality by a trial-and-error method. Once he orders his son "to place a banner on a distant peak. The following day the banner flickered from the mountain top. He tried other analogous experiments, each more daring than the last" (Borges, 1964, 49). However, this progressive integration finally leads to the implication that the dream state is (metonymically) an integral part of a greater reality; that is, of a vast dream state in which the magician himself participates. Consequently, the magician becomes aware in the end that entities such as "physical reality" actually denote something other than what he had assumed that they denoted: His "reality" is in reality only a (metaphorical) fiction.

In the second place, the dreamer desires for his dream image that which he simultaneously desires for himself. Realization of this desire is equivalent to the desiring subject's becoming (metonymically) part of the imagined world he has created and (metaphorically) a prisoner of/in his own desires. For son and father to become coequal implies a rupture of the boundaries established between *timelessness* and *temporality*, *essence* and *non-essence*, "real" and "unreal." The magician's project entails transcendence of what he conceives to be his "physical world" by making that "physical world" correspond to his dream (=thought) world. This project is common to much of Borges' fiction. Wheelock (1969, 46) tells us that for the Argentine writer: "dreaming or thinking is an effort to escape from language, from the idea of the world which language imposes upon us. By 'dreaming' the consciousness hopes to escape its own solidified thought-history, its fixed categories, the dead words that represent memory badly and petrify the world. What the mind finally seeks is a new arrangement of reality." In essence the magician's inability to establish an absolute correspondence between dream (= thought) world and the actual world recapitulates human metaphysical, scientific, and poetic efforts throughout history.

3.77 *Paradox results from a breach of categories.* On a more abstract plane, the magician presupposes at the outset a logical disjunction between the sphere of existence of the dreamer and that of the dreamt, of knower and known. Subject and object (dreamer and dreamt) are considered throughout

the story as members of two classes with distinct boundaries separating them. On the other hand, as was suggested above, the spatial indices in Borges' story manifest an attempt to erase particular geographic location and produce the effect of spatial coexistence. Here and there, or inner and outer, are the linguistic parallels to subject and object, self and world. To obliterate the distinction between dreamer and dreamt, or here and there (the locations of the two circular temples where father and son stand) is to fuse symbolically the spheres of existence of both the "real" and the "unreal." This symbolic fusion cannot become actualized due to the system's built-in paradox. What the magician presumed to accomplish at a *semiotic* level backfires at a *symbolic* level: his effort to retaxonomy the world, like that of Catalina in Fuentes' novel, ultimately fails.

To determine the precise nature of this paradox let us go back to the implicit purpose guiding the protagonist's action. At the outset the magician set about to dream a man and "interpolate him into the world of reality." This implies the insertion of something foreign or spurious into the magician's sphere of existence; that is, two distinct entities are presupposed. After his preliminary effort fails, he realizes that his project will be much more arduous than "weaving a rope of sand or coining the faceless wind." This passage reveals two metaphorical images which on a local level represent the impossible conjunction of distinct classes of things: rope (fibred) out of sand (nonfibred) or coin (malleable) out of wind (nonmalleable). Such local level micro-domains as will be discussed in Part 4, are directly related to underlying textual macro-domains.

The magician now attempts to construct one solitary image; a member which simultaneously constitutes its own class. This time it appears that he will realize his goal. However, to integrate the attributes of his son (the object) into the subject's sphere of existence logically implies a simultaneous rupture of definitive boundaries in which process the attributes of the subject are also projected into the object. In other words, two distinct classes, A and B, are governed by different logical orders, and they cannot be integrated while maintaining intact the logical order of either A or B, but both, on becoming members of the same class, must be subjected to a "higher" logical order. Hence, the magician can never integrate his son's sphere of existence into his own sphere without altering what constituted his perception of both spheres.

If, on the other hand, the magician had conceived of his dream world as does primitive man, as merely another facet of the same "reality", his project would nonetheless have been equally futile. For to make "dream" coexist with "reality" would be nonsensical given the fact that in the primitive's animistic conception of "reality," the two entities could not

represent an intransigent dualism in the first place.

Or, Fire might have been construed as a potential mediator between the "reality" of the magician and the "nonreality" of the boy. This appears to be a logical possibility since fire can convert essence to nonessence (matter to energy). Following this "metaphorical" line of reasoning, the magician would be attempting to reverse the process and convert his unreal son (nonessence) to reality (essence). Moreover, only fire would be able to discern the created being's true lack of essence since it cannot consume that which is the final product of its consummatory process: nonessence. Fire appears as an earthly god in one of the magician's dreams and offers magically to give life to his inert dream image. However, in the end it is revealed that the fire deity is helpless against that over which it presumably exercises dominion: its very sanctuary, as in centuries past, is destroyed by fire. This destruction of the earthly sanctuary of the fire deity by fire recapitulates the logical paradox inherent in the magician's project. That is to say, the god of fire is the "symbolic," or "archetypal," expression of fire and as such rests at a distinct logical level. The symbol can be representative of fire but cannot coexist on the same logical level as fire; it cannot be fire itself. When the magician assumes that he possesses the ability to annihilate the boundaries between logical categories, all distinctions between symbol and referent, dreamer and dreamt, subject and object, become non-existent and he loses his capacity, as *Homo symbolicus*, to create an ideal world which rests in total contradistinction to real reference.

3.78 In Part 3 I have defined informally two important properties of all relatively sophisticated and relatively complex texts, and I have attempted to illustrate these properties by means of an informal analysis of two literary texts. Some observations follow from the analyses.

The interaction of SS-system entities in texts can occur at various levels: linguistic, cognitive, and existential, or syntactic, logico-semantic, and pragmatic. The above analysis of Borges' text elucidates primarily the global aspects of parallel-sequential (metaphorical-metonymical) interaction. Local phenomena are primarily either linguistic or they are derived from individual SS-system entities. But these local phenomena are fed into the global domain to produce a coherent whole in the well-formed text.

Interacting SS-system entities cannot be absolutely separated from the paradoxical or contradictory situation inevitably underlying relatively rich and relatively sophisticated texts. The total set of interacting entities composes a complex system. It is *ipso facto* a way of taxonomizing the reality to which the text refers; and the taxonomy, as is the case of all taxonomies, ultimately entails contradiction from one perspective or another. The important point is that just as taxonomies must be in some form

generated, so also they must invariably be subjected to change. I will address this problem when in Part 4 I attempt to formalize the parallel-sequential interactions in texts.

Before closing Part 3, some additional comments are appropriate concerning the relationship between literary texts and nonliterary texts. First, at broad conceptual levels, the "world model" corresponding to the "para-reality" which underlies the literary text is a fictional construct, a possible or impossible world or a set of possible or impossible worlds. On the other hand, there is ordinarily presumed to be potentially a one-to-one correspondence between most "true" nonliterary texts and the "real" world. However, each and every relatively sophisticated and relatively complex nonliterary text contains an underlying "para-reality" which is implicitly or explicitly a fictional construct (i.e., a basic axiom, a set of presuppositions, a model, a "root metaphor," or underlying assumptions, beliefs, etc.). Consequently, the interdependencies and interactions between the SS-system entities in the nonliterary text's fictional construct are ultimately parallel-sequential (metaphorical-metonymical) also.

Second, the contradictory or paradoxical base of the literary text is generated from equivalences between the textual "para-reality" and *real-life human situations*. On the other hand, in scientific and most other non-literary texts the contradictory or paradoxical base entails inconsistent premises with respect to the *conceptual system* within the text, or between the *conceptual system* and the empirical world. Yet these *conceptual systems* and *real-life situations* cannot be categorically divorced from one another. The *self* is inextricably part of all systems (cf. Part 2). Obviously the linear sequence of statements in nonliterary texts is with less frequency than in the case of literary texts, connected to the underlying "para-reality." Moreover, with increasing embedment of CFs in nonliterary texts constructed/perceived within a given relatively homologous community, these lines of connection tend to become more and more implicit. Moreover, generation of the linear sequence of interconnected statements in most nonliterary texts must follow relatively rigid conventions with respect to content, organization, and style. Hence contradictions are often derived from illogically interconnected statements rather than at the level of the "secondary modelling system." Sequential interconnections in the literary text, on the other hand, are subject to fewer well-defined conventions. Consequently, category mistakes, contradictions, and paradoxes at the surface level of literary texts are ordinarily considered to be no cause for alarm since, the product of artistic imagination, they do not correspond directly to the "real" world. Yet many times they are symptomatic of deeply embedded anomalies at the core of the culture-bound, language-bound, and

Weltanschauung-bound world as it is conceived/perceived.

The above assertions are unavoidably sweeping. This is necessary since they must refer to broad perceptual modes by means of which all texts are read. In light of the approach adopted in Part 3 of this study it is possible to avoid such equally sweeping statements from a more limited perspective such as: "Science is more metonymical than metaphorical and literature is more metaphorical than metonymical" (for example, Lévi-Strauss, 1966). Or: "Realist prose is more metonymical than metaphorical and Romantic prose is more metaphorical than metonymical" (for example, Jakobson, 1956). The truth of the matter is that what is metonymical and what is metaphorical can many times depend upon the mode through which it is perceived. What is one person's metaphor can be another person's metonym.

Notes

1. The notion of paradox at the base of human conceptual systems has been postulated for myth (Lévi-Strauss, 1963), metaphor (Wheelwright, 1968), riddles (Maranda, 1971), folktales (Maranda & Maranda, 1971), primitive and modern religion, ritual, and taboo (Leach, 1976), logical, mathematical and scientific systems (Godel, 1962; Kuhn, 1970) metaphysical and cosmological systems (the long tradition from Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche to Unamuno and Tillich), art (Slaatte, 1968; Goldmann, 1969, 1976; Brooks, 1947; Gombrich, 1960), and jokes and the creative process (Koestler, 1964; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967; Freud, 1963; Fry, 1963). Paradox is also endemic in all forms of human communication (Bateson, 1972; Ruesch & Bateson, 1951; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967; Watzlawick, 1977). And of course paradoxes have aggravated the mathematicians and logicians for centuries.
2. See from the scientific perspective, Popper, 1963, 1972; from the aesthetic, Beardsley, 1958 and Gombrich, 1960; from every-day life, Bruner, 1957, 1962.
3. This is little more than a linguistic version of Locke's theory of association of ideas which hearkens back to Aristotle. The idea is also analogous to Frazer's (1959) theory of magic by similarity (metaphor) and magic by contagion (metonymy). It appears that Jakobson took his cue directly from Freud. Structuralist and linguistic formulations similar to that of Jakobson have recently been employed – albeit with controversial results – by, among others, Lacan (1966) in psychoanalysis, Lévi-Strauss (1966) in anthropology, Pierre and Elli Königas Maranda (1971) in folklore, Genette (1970) and Lodge (1977) in literature, Barthes (1970) in his theory of semiology, and LeGuern (1973), Henry (1971) and the *Groupe μ* (Dubois, et. al., 1970) in semantics.
4. These SS-system restructurations, brought about by the postulated cognitive mechanism, are compatible with hypotheses of radical change put forth in a number of disciplines: scientific (Kuhn, 1970, and the *Weltanschauung* theorists) aesthetic (Mukarovsky, 1970; Shklovsky, 1965), intellectual-epistemological (Goldmann, 1969; Althusser, 1970; Foucault, 1971), psychological (Piaget, 1971), biological (Dobzhansky, 1962; Waddington, 1957), linguistic (Shaumyan, 1977), or mathematical (Thom, 1975b).

5. I must emphasize that the "existential paradoxes" into which some of the characters in Fuentes' novel are caught up involve, properly speaking, a pragmatics of human communication in general. A comparable situation could easily arise in a real-life situation. The following analysis, then, is not stylistic or aesthetic. That is, language, *per se*, is not the focus, but how the language of the text effects the characters' view of their world within the contextual frame established by the text. This focus is extralinguistic and conceptual rather than linguistic and aesthetic. It entails world-building with fictions created from old or new SS-system entities.