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Narrative instabilities

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Abstract: Taking Nabokov's *Pale Fire* as its tutor text, this chapter seeks to demonstrate that narrative functions as a complex or dynamic system. Due to the novel's nonlinear and multiply configured format, a series of dissipative structures is provoked whereby states near equilibrium, on reaching states far from equilibrium under the weight of multiple causality, putting the system "beyond the threshold of stability" and "at the edge of chaos," perpetually self-organize. Taking a cue from nonequilibrium thermodynamics, instabilities, it is argued, are inherent to narrative discourse. This calls into question the pertinence of the logic of linearity ("event A causes event B") as well as the scope of such postulates as the isomorphic relation between sequence and narrative as a whole, a postulate that frames narrative as a closed system following the principle of conservation of energy in classical mechanics. As the poem "Pale Fire" in Nabokov's novel advances linearly, it is constantly disrupted by the "Commentary" which is related to the poem only tangentially, each text fragmenting the other and self-organizing into new meanings. The effect is to render salient in narrative discourse the complexity science principles (in addition to those mentioned above) of irreversibility (the "arrow of time") vs. reversibility, sensitivity to initial conditions, negative vs. positive feedback and the symmetry-breaking effects of bifurcation. The manifestation of these principles in Nabokov's novel raises fundamental questions about the structuring of narrative, but also about the conceptual framework through which narrative at large might be approached.

Keywords: Nabokov, dissipative structures, (non)linearity, (ir)reversibility, bifurcation

As an initial idea of what I mean by narrative instabilities, let me take an example from Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962).[1] This novel consists of a "Foreword," an

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incomplete poem of some thirty pages entitled "Pale Fire" followed by a long "Commentary" on the poem by a certain James Kinbote and an "Index." The first stanza of the poem ends with the words "that crystal land." Without any footnote reference, the "Commentary," located thirty pages later, offers two pages of clarifications on these words, but straight away we see that these clarifications are related only tangentially to the poem being commented on:

> *Line 12:* that crystal land
>
> Perhaps an allusion to Zembla, my dear country. After this, in the disjointed, half-obliterated draft which I am not at all sure I have deciphered properly:
>
> Ah, I must not forget to say something
> That my friend told me of a certain king. (62)

The author of the poem, John Shade, produces a meditative, autobiographical poem in the spirit of Alexander Pope's eighteenth-century work *An Essay on Man*, while Kinbote, author of the "Commentary," paints the portrait of a distant mythological land, Zembla, of which he, Kinbote, is the deposed king, King Charles: commenting on Shade's poem, "Pale Fire," Kinbote writes pseudonymously a sort of autobiography of King Charles. The two diegeses are largely independent of one another, although not without a good number of significant contacts. The title of the novel, *Pale Fire*, is drawn from Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, and one is hard put to know which text is in the shade of the other: the poem or the "Commentary." The novel goes on in this manner, the reader being shunted back and forth between the two texts nearly 130 times without the least assistance from footnote references given in the poem.[2] In Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, the famous "linearity" of the text is brought spectacularly into question.

It is with reference to this example that I wish to speak of *narrative instabilities*, a consequence of the idea that narrative discourses are constituted as *complex* or *dynamic systems*. Key to narratives understood as complex systems is the principle of *dissipative structures*. In the field of nonequilibrium thermodynamics, dissipative structures occur in an entropic process during which a system evolves toward disorder. According to Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, dissipative structures are spatiotemporal structures that appear in far-from-equilibrium conditions. Once a system reaches a point far from equilibrium, a new order emerges: "The interaction of a system with the outside world, its embedding in nonequilibrium conditions, may become [...] the starting point for the formation of new dynamic states of matter – dissipative structures" (1984: 143). Or again: "Nonequilibrium leads to concepts such as self-organization and dissipative structures"

2 For an analysis of *Pale Fire*, see Pier (1992).

(Prigogine 1997: 27). Key to structures of this type is the role of instability, but instability in a sense that does not correspond to the everyday sense of the word. For the specialist of complexity, instability is the result of three factors: *nonlinearity*, *positive feedback* and *bifurcations*. Closely associated with these factors are *near-equilibrium* conditions and *far-from-equilibrium* conditions as understood by thermodynamics. It is along these lines that narrative can be understood as a complex or dynamic system.[3]

Framing narrative in terms of complexity theory will no doubt strike some as pushing the limits of transdisciplinarity beyond the feasible. The complexity sciences, however, do not form a well-defined discipline and are in fact an *ad hoc* federation of disciplines that include not only mathematics and the hard sciences but also the social sciences and domains as varied as immunology, demography, corporate organization, stock market fluctuations and much more, including, more recently, the cultural, social and cognitive domains and the academic study of narrative.[4] It can be argued (though this can be mentioned only in passing here) that literary theory bears traces of the principles of complexity going as far back as the Russian formalists (notably Boris Tynianov) and the Prague Linguistic Circle, whose members were the first, beginning in the late 1920s, to formulate the principles of structuralism. Yuri Lotman's *The Structure of the Artistic Text* (1977 [1970]) is built around the principles of cybernetics with certain overtones of complexity, and his *Culture and Explosion* (2004) is inspired in part by Prigogine and Stengers's *Order out of Chaos: Man's new dialogue with nature* (1984). Notions of complexity can also be found in the reflections of artists. I recently had the occasion to see the video of an interview with Pierre Boulez who described his musical compositions as "explosions" with a sense close to the notion of dissipative structures. On another occasion, an acquaintance of mine, a sculptor, explained to me that his works, made mostly of bronze, are to be regarded as dissipative structures.

Before going further, it should be pointed out that the narrative instabilities in question here are distinct from those spoken of by practitioners of rhetorical narratology. For James Phelan, for example, instabilities, located at the story level, "proceed by the introduction, complication, and resolution (in whole or in part) [of] events and existents, including character and setting," and they involve "the

3 A more ample account can be found in Pier (2017). Two recent edited volumes confirm the growing interest in complex perspectives on narrative: Walsh and Stepney (2018) and Grishakova and Poulaki (2019).

4 For a broad overview of complexity theory and narratology together with a rich bibliography, see the introduction to Grishakova and Poulaki (2019). Important early work can be found in Hayles (1990 and 1991).

relations within, between, or among characters and their situations." Instabilities constitute a "textual dynamics." At the discourse level are found "tensions": "they involve relations among authors, narrators, and audiences, and they include gaps between tellers and audiences of knowledge, beliefs, opinions, and values." Tensions constitute a "readerly dynamics" (Phelan 2007: 212; cf. Phelan 2005). A synthesis of the two dynamics produces "narrative progression": "A narrative's movement from its beginning to its end is governed by both a textual and a readerly dynamics, and understanding their interaction provides a good means for recognizing a narrative's purpose" (Phelan 2007: 212).

Through the lens of complexity, however, narrative instabilities take on another profile. As a complex system, narrative is closely bound to the principle of *irreversibility*, also known as the "arrow of time," coming from the second law of thermodynamics and the principle of entropy. Irreversibility is opposed to reversibility and thus to the atemporality which defines the classical mechanics of Newton. Consider the pendulum that swings back and forth perpetually in a predictable and deterministic fashion as compared to a chemical reaction, which cannot be reversed, or to the trajectory of a deflating balloon, which is unpredictable and aleatory and in no way reversible.

Turning now to narrative theory, we can see that sequence, which is commonly modelled as the passage from a state of equilibrium to disequilibrium back to equilibrium, is a reductive template that follows the pattern of Newtonian mechanics. When narrative, in whatever medium (oral, written, gestural, visual, digital), is framed in terms of complex or dynamic systems, it is preferable to speak of *sequentiality*: sequentiality of the narrated, sequentiality of the narrating. It is out of the very interaction of these sequentialities that narrative is produced and not, as predicated by various narrative models, through the generation of surface structures out of underlying deep structures in which the sequence, with its beginning, middle and end, entertains an isomorphic relation with the narrative as a whole.

The example of Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, as already seen with the introductory example, dramatically illustrates a feature which, I maintain, is latent in narrative generally and occasionally put into stark relief. At one level, narration advances linearly, from the first page to the last, following a more or less determinist pattern, as in the case of the poem "Pale Fire" through the grammaticality of its sentences, its prosody, its division into four cantos evocative of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, etc. – all governed by recognized formal and conventional regularities. This schema is radically altered, however, when, as from the first stanza of the poem, the reader is abruptly propelled to the "Commentary" some 30 pages further on to encounter a narrative that is but obliquely related to the events recounted in the poem: an autodiegetic narrator writing pseudonymously the auto-

biography of someone he is not. Despite the numerous jolts between the poem and the "Commentary," reception of the novel continues to take place as an irreversible process, even though it is no longer possible to speak of the linearity of narration, except for limited portions of the text. Even so, the reversible is not entirely annulled by the irreversible, for at the end of each entry in the "Commentary" the reader returns to the poem only to be projected, after a certain stretch of discourse, back to the Commentary. The point is that the logic of linearity, according to which "Event A causes event B," gives way to an asymmetrical nonlinear logic in which cause is multiple and non-determinist and the results are probabilistic or even random.[5] The disproportionality of cause and effect in the nonlinear composition of Nabokov's work breaks the poem "Pale Fire" down into fragments, as indeed the "Commentary" is fragmented by the poem, transforming the novel as a whole into "a combinational delight," to take a phrase from the poem (line 974).

As already mentioned, narrative sequence is often presented as the passage from equilibrium to disequilibrium back to equilibrium. Such is the model proposed by Tzvetan Todorov (1982: 82), who also considers that this schema applies to the so-called ideal narrative (*récit idéal*), thereby positing an isomorphic relation between sequence and narrative as a whole with its beginning, middle and end: the ideal narrative, by virtue of its symmetricality, reflects the principles of stability, determinism, reversibility and linear causality characteristic of classical mechanics. A schema of this type, by framing narrative as a closed system, reflects the principle of *conservation of energy* as set out in the first law of thermodynamics. According to this law, cinetic energy and potential energy are converted into one another so that total energy remains constant and the system stable, as would be the case of the pendulum were it not for friction.

Sequence understood in this way is a conservative structure that quickly meets its limits in *Pale Fire* under the weight of competing sequentialities that repeatedly provoke disruptions and unanticipated reconfigurations, or dissipative structures, throughout the novel. Consequently, rather than equilibrium, which in thermodynamic terms is inert, atemporal and not subject to evolution – synonymous in biological systems with death – it is preferable to speak of oscillations between conditions that are "near-equilibrium" and those that are "far-from-equilibrium." Characteristic of these phenomena are their lesser or greater degree of *sensitivity to initial conditions* that may give rise to disproportionate amplification. Such is the case of the butterfly effect in which the flapping of a but-

5 According to Nicolis and Prigogine (1992: 2 and passim), a major change in science, starting from the beginning of the twentieth century, has been to re-evaluate the relative importance of four types of phenomena: reversible versus irreversible, deterministic versus stochastic.

terfly's wings in Rio de Janeiro provokes a tornado in Texas. As for narratives, they typically begin within a set of conditions that are close to equilibrium. A well-known exception that confirms the rule is the opening lines of Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*: "Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving. Questions. Hypotheses, call them that. Keep going, going on, call that going, call that on." (Beckett 2012 [1953]: 1). Here, the high degree of semantic indeterminacy points to a state far from equilibrium which is particularly sensitive to initial conditions, a situation that runs throughout the work.

In Nabokov's novel, this principle can be illustrated as follows: not only is Kinbote, author of the "Commentary," the biographer of Shade who is the author of the poem; he is also the biographer of Charles, the last king of Zembla. But whereas in the former instance Kinbote acts as a witness narrator, in the latter he poses as the autobiographer of someone he is in fact not, all the while writing under a pseudonym. The effects of this unstable play of identities reverberate throughout the novel in innumerable ways.

Closely related to the problems of nonlinearity and those of near equilibrium and far from equilibrium is the question of feedback. Feedback comes in two forms. In its negative form, feedback occurs in closed systems such as the steam engine, where a mechanical governor regulates and limits the expenditure of energy thanks to the circular feedback of information. Positive feedback, found in open systems, is characterized by nonlinearity: it aims not to limit fluctuations but rather amplifies the disproportionality between initial conditions and results, pushing the system far from equilibrium toward self-organization and the emergence of new systems. This is a phenomenon well known in molecular biology, where organisms produce multiple chemical transformations that result in new forms of organization.

The principles of feedback are present in the theory of information and thus also pertain to narrative. Negative feedback in narrative texts appears in the form of redundancy so as to ensure microstructural cohesion between sentences through the use of nouns, pronouns, articles, etc. and macrostructural coherence at the level of actants, motifs, story line, semantic structures, etc. However, the economy of communication is such that too great a degree of redundancy will curtail or even eliminate the informativity of messages. In reality, the informativity of a message is dependent upon certain irregularities and inconsistencies between its constituents. Under the influence of positive feedback, such discrepancies may be amplified, creating disparities between the initial conditions of the message and the results subsequently produced while triggering the emergence of new messages and meanings.

Here again, *Pale Fire* offers many instructive examples. The frequent movements between the poem and the "Commentary" generate meanings that are im-

perceptible or even non-existent in the poem itself. For example, the word "gradual" near the beginning of the poem (line 17) is followed up in the "Commentary" with the appearance of the proper names Jakob Gradus, Jack Degree, Jacques de Gray, James de Gray – all of them aliases of the individual who, before the poem is complete (the last line of the 1,000-line text is missing), murders the poet, John Shade, a name which itself connotes the notion of gradualness. It is as though these proper names introduced in the "Commentary" were parasitically grafted onto the word "gradual" in the poem in order to generate a multiplicity of more or less virtual narrative strands born out of the confrontation of the two texts. A quote from Nicolis and Prigogine's *Exploring Complexity* seems to me tailor-made to explain what is occurring here: "In a linear system the ultimate effect of the combined action of two different causes is merely the superposition of the effects of each cause taken individually. But in a nonlinear system adding a small cause to one that is already present can induce dramatic effects that have no common measure with the amplitude of the cause" (1992: 59).

The instabilities provoked in complex systems by the presence of nonlinearity and positive feedback raise the question of knowing the limits of this process: at what point does a system find itself "beyond the threshold of stability" and "at the edge of chaos"? It is here that the third factor of instability comes into the picture: bifurcation, or the choice between order and disorder. Since a complex system is nonlinear and its evolution unpredictable, this choice can be determined neither at the microscopic nor at the macroscopic level. Bifurcations contribute to new forms of self-organization and thus serve as sources of innovation and diversification.

It must be stressed that bifurcations do not correspond to binary structures of the type "Ivan attacks the dragon: he kills the dragon/he does not kill the dragon." Rather than binary choices, bifurcations are symmetry breakers located at the border between the parts of the system and the environment of the system; they are triggered at the meeting point of the threshold of stability and the edge of chaos in conditions far from equilibrium and thus provoke dissipative structures.

Bifurcations are a striking and pervasive feature of *Pale Fire*. They occur with each abrupt leap from the poem (unmarked by any footnote reference) to the "Commentary" and lead one to wonder whether that "Commentary" is indeed a metatext whose purpose is to elucidate the poem, as is normally the case, or whether the poem is to be considered a sort of paratext tacked onto the "Commentary." At one point Kinbote even declares "I have no desire to twist and batter an unambiguous *apparatus criticus* into the monstrous semblance of a novel" (71). Nabokov's novel thus remains teetering on the dividing line between the threshold of stability and the edge of chaos while the signifying status of its constituent

parts wavers precariously between alternatives. Bifurcations are also important in the structuring of the "Index." Here the vast majority of the 86 entries refer to characters and places mentioned in the "Commentary" and bearing on Zembla rather than on the characters and places described in Shade's poem. Moreover, these entries, together with the details they provide, are arranged alphabetically, not chronologically, so that the diegesis of the "Commentary" is extensively reordered and reconfigured into mini-chapters, effectively relating a variant of the story about Zembla and providing Nabokov's novel with yet another set of dissipative structures while injecting into it an additional vector of instability.

The innumerable and varied instabilities of *Pale Fire* growing out of the work's very particular composition can be explained by the presence of nonlinearity, positive feedback and bifurcations made salient by the forces of dissipative structures. The examples given here, though few in number, provide evidence of how the irreversible sequentiality of narration (rather than sequence, which covers only certain local configurations) is subject to conditions ranging from near equilibrium to far from equilibrium and how this sequentiality periodically encounters the symmetry-breaking effects of bifurcation. It is at such points that narrative instabilities, approaching the edge of chaos, provoke dissipative structures that set into motion a process of self-organization of the system. *Pale Fire*, by bringing these features which are latent in all narrative to the surface, highlights narrative as a complex system. Nabokov's novel is several books in one that problematizes stories having a beginning, a middle and an end, revealing disproportionate and dissymetrical relations between causes and effects, between initial conditions and results, between the parts and the whole.

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