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Chance, Complexity and Narrative

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[section 2 (pp. 77-86) of John Pier, Demian Battaglia, Marina Grishakova, Maria Poulaki and Richard Walsh, “Chance and complexity in narrative,” in Anne Duprat and Alison James, eds., *Figures of Chance II: Chance in Theory and Practice*, Routledge 2025, 65-123.]

This contribution assumes that chance can be conceptualised as a phenomenon arising from the epistemological gap between the systemic complexity of temporal relations manifest in our empirical environment and our own limited cognitive capacity to make such relations intelligible through the imposition of narrative form. Narrative cognition has a double role here: it is the inherited means by which we find meaningful form in temporal processes, and at the same time (for that very reason) it is a rather tight constraint upon our ability to do so. Because the former function is so fundamental to cognition, there is little scope for evasion of the latter; literature, nonetheless, has consistently sought ways to negotiate with the limits of narrative, striving to extend those limits by reflexively foregrounding the form of its own narrative practices. The thematics of chance in literature can itself be viewed in this light, as a representational negotiation between the arbitrary and the necessary that is precipitated by the cyclical process of reflexive attention to narrative form. Literary narratives continually incorporate their own form as part of their object, and constantly attend to the ways the implicit qualities of structure transmute into meaning. The crux between narrative and chance is concisely figured in the concept of an “eventuality,” pointing simultaneously as it does towards the notion of an event – the staple achieved form offered by narrative – and towards the narrative anomaly of an unanticipated outcome.

My text for this discussion is an Ambrose Bierce story of the American Civil War, “One of the Missing” (BIERCE [1891] 1982).¹ Its protagonist is a Union army scout, Jerome Searing, who undertakes a reconnaissance mission beyond the front line during the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain (where Bierce himself received a head wound from a Confederate sharpshooter’s bullet). Searing discovers that the enemy are in retreat, but instead of returning immediately to report this key information, he loads his rifle and sets the trigger in order to fire upon the distant withdrawing troops. At the same moment, a bored Confederate captain of artillery fires his

¹ My thanks to John Pier for drawing my attention to this story. Its textual particulars offer much more of interest than can be accommodated here, and I have treated it in greater detail in a companion article, “Eventuality in Fiction: Contingency, Complexity and Narrative,” in volume 30 of *Narrative* (WALSH 2022).

piece at what he thinks is a group of Union officers, misses, and instead demolishes the farm building that Searing is using for cover. When Searing regains consciousness, he finds himself half-buried in the rubble of the building and almost entirely unable to move, with his own hair-triggered rifle before him and pointing directly at his forehead. He fails in his attempts to deflect the rifle and progressively succumbs to terror, which drives him finally to thrust a piece of wood against its trigger, the only action left available to him. He dies, but from heart failure, not a bullet – the rifle had discharged when the building collapsed. Meanwhile, the Union army, having received independent intelligence of the Confederate retreat, begins advancing through the woods and soon passes the collapsed building. Only his brother, Lieutenant Adrian Searing, notices the corpse, but mistakes him for a Confederate soldier because he is covered in grey dust. He concludes from the dead man's gaunt, rigid features that he has been dead for a week. In fact, just twenty-two minutes have passed since the collapse of the building.

As is immediately apparent from this summary, Bierce's story foregrounds some highly improbable contingencies, both in the unfolding of a given situation – the way the farm building's collapse leaves Searing both immobilised and looking down the barrel of his own gun – and in the concatenation of unconnected circumstances – the arbitrary and unintentional demolition of the building itself by the Confederate captain. Bierce motivates these chance events in significantly contrasting ways, which establish a basic tension between the models of causality native to narrative representation and to complex systems modelling respectively, as we shall see. His communicative purposes, of course, are not really to explain the events of the story; he is writing fiction, and the narrative particulars serve as a means to work through the values they embody, not as information in their own right (notwithstanding the story's origins in his own experience, and his concern for representational accuracy). The main thrust of Bierce's communicative intent in this fiction can be perceived in the pervasive irony with which the story reflexively interrogates the values it puts into play; and ultimately, I suggest, Bierce's ironic perspective erodes the very possibility of well-founded values. The story enacts his dissatisfaction with narrative form's inadequacy to the contingencies of experience, even as its own complexity as a semiotic system proliferates implicit connotations beyond his authorial control.

Stories routinely abound in unremarkable contingencies that have no bearing upon their larger communicative purposes; these commonplace circumstances are neither necessary nor implausible, and while they may be intrinsic to the development of the story, they do not attract attention but are simply taken for granted. Obtrusive irruptions of chance into the story, on the other hand, disturb the cohesiveness of its narrative logic – not because they are qualitatively different from ordinary contingencies, but because they are foregrounded; thrown into relief

against representational criteria of plausibility, or against discursive criteria proscribing the arbitrary imposition of formal devices. One rhetorical resource for managing such disturbances is to distract the reader's attention from their egregiousness, and Bierce does this extensively in order to mitigate the improbability of the situation in which Searing finds himself after the building's collapse. By thickening the narrative context of this event, Bierce works to incorporate it within generically acceptable bounds of verisimilitude. In this respect his story conforms to a narrative bias in our attitudes towards apparent chance: the assumption that what is required to make the chance event intelligible is simply more narrative. At the same time, even as he works to incorporate the event's improbability under a veneer of narrative coherence, his efforts to do so in themselves underline the event's extraordinary contingency, its resistance to narrative explanation.

These equivocal efforts to impose narrative coherence reveal just how provisional and fragile narrative sense really is. Similarly mixed connotations lurk within the notion of an eventuality – which might be most simply defined as the outcome of an event, but which can imply either necessary consequence or entirely unforeseen contingency. The concept of an event itself is, of course, fundamental to narrative, and indeed is the basis of most narrative theorists' definitions of their object of study (e.g., PRINCE 1982; GENETTE [1983] 1988; see also SCHMID 2003). The form of an event, as distinct from the seething flux of undifferentiated change, is what narrative cognition may be said to bring to the experience of temporality. The basic sequential form of narrative – one thing leads to another – provides the semblance of a logical cohesion between event and outcome; an eventuality's necessary relation to what preceded it. Yet that sequential connection is only explanatory to the extent that it is taken as self-evident; if you question the connection, the only answer available is a more fine-grained narrative account of intermediate connections. The ever-receding solid ground of explanation here is epitomised by the fact that, etymologically speaking, "event" itself means "outcome"; in just the way this etymology implies, event endlessly collapses into the concept of eventuality that it is supposed to underpin.

The rudimentary sequential form of narrative has deep roots in human cognitive-perceptual architecture, but it clearly did not earn that place under the banner of logic. The most elementary distinguishing features of narrative form do, however, provide the mechanisms for, and indeed the impetus towards, the reflexive consolidation and elaboration of narrative thinking, and these features will be important to my discussion later of the continuity between basic narrative cognition and the sophisticated cultural forms of narrative with which we generally deal, represented in this case by Bierce's story. Those features are the saving virtues of narrative, but my emphasis falls first upon its inherent limitations.

The sense-making capacity of narrative as a mode of cognition, in order to be adaptive, needed only to achieve a “good enough” trade between coping with experience and the cognitive effort required to do so. It follows from these conditions that narrative cognition appropriately has horizons, beyond which it ceases to be advantageous to pursue its formal articulations; at these limits we lapse from the elaboration of achieved meaning into the immanent materiality of embodied experience and the unexamined foundations of knowledge by acquaintance, in an immediate relation to our environment. In the contexts of evolutionary selectivity that obtained during the emergence of our species, it was certainly not necessary or desirable to press narrative thinking beyond the horizons defined by adaptive efficiency, much less to interrogate the limitations inherent in that efficiency. From beyond the immediate imperatives of those circumstances, however, it becomes apparent that narrative cognition does in fact seriously constrain our thinking in multiple respects. Among the limitations of narrative form are its inherent assumptions of agency, intentionality, perspectivalism, evaluative relevance, anthropocentrism, and teleology (WALSH 2018). These are all features prejudicial to an understanding of systemic processes; which, needless to say, are both ubiquitous and – as processes – strongly elicit efforts of narrative cognition, even as their systemic complexity prevents such efforts from gaining more than the most superficial grasp upon them (ABBOTT 2008; WALSH 2018).

In Bierce’s presentation of the circumstances leading up to the collapse of the farm building, he adopts a different rhetorical approach to the problem of implausibility; one that does not minimise the event’s contingency, but instead foregrounds it. In this passage, the confrontation between narrative and chance is transformed into a three-way standoff with complexity. To account for the chance convergence of discrete events at this point in the story, Bierce goes on an extended digression about the long prehistory of the Confederate artillery captain’s progression towards the moment when he fires his field piece. In doing so, he incorporates more and more material into the vast web of circumstance involved in that eventuality, until the outcome itself is dwarfed by the magnitude of the systemic context constituting the set of conditions for its occurrence. In the passage elaborating this contextual information, the lean sequentiality of narrative is subordinated to an evocation of the multiple dimensions of systemic complexity; yet Bierce can only express that totality – with an emphatic tone of ironic disavowal – by resorting to another narrative: one in which this systemic complex is itself an instrument of the intentional agency of a higher power, a deity overseeing the development of events with omniscient care for the design of the whole. The narrative contingency is explained by invoking an elaborate systemic context, but this context is itself only imaginable by appeal to a still more inclusive narrative conceit in which the outcome is

represented as a pre-ordained final cause, teleologically determining the orchestration of everything that comes before.

In elaborating this vision of his story's dependence upon a vast systemic context of circumstance, Bierce notes that the slightest variation anywhere in that context might have produced an entirely different outcome – and in doing so he anticipates the form of Edward Lorenz's famous illustration of the non-linearity of complex systems, the "butterfly effect": a tiny variable, such as whether or not a butterfly flaps its wings, can make the difference between two significantly divergent trajectories in the behaviour of a huge meteorological system – so, for example, a storm may follow in one case, but not the other (LORENZ 1972). To this extent, Bierce's account seems to align with a systems science perspective; but his narrative conceit of a guiding agency also anticipates the way in which Lorenz's example, both prompted and met by our cognitive dependence upon narrative, encourages misunderstanding. The butterfly effect illustrates sensitive dependence upon initial conditions – its point is that there is a potentially radical difference, over time, between the behaviour of the weather system with the butterfly and that of the weather system without the butterfly. It is our narrative bias that translates this systemic idea into the notion that the butterfly "causes" the storm; as if it were possible, even in principle, to trace a series of consequences leading from the butterfly's act to a later state of the entire system. A system's behaviour is systemic, not sequential; the significance of the butterfly does not lie in its positive agency but in the variation it represents between two sets of systemic relations, a vanishingly small difference between two states of the meteorological totality.

Bierce's assimilation of systemic contingency to a narrative model involving agency, intentionality, (omniscient) perspective, and teleology is not really meant to explain the eventuality, of course. It has much more to do with the circumstance that he is writing fiction: the story is less concerned with any directly informative purpose than with its narrative negotiation of values. Criticism has tended to interpret "One of the Missing" as strongly moralistic in tone (see BLUME 2004: 83–98), and indeed the ostentatiously cosmic determinacy of Bierce's conceit in this passage does seem to ground narrative form in a transcendent ethics, the basic formula for which is enshrined in the concept of "poetic justice." The intervention of fate at this point in the story, in other words, is not a device serving narrative representation, but part of Bierce's fictive rhetoric.

However, moralistic readings of the story project upon it an ethical assurance it neither possesses nor asserts. Searing's intention to fire upon the retreating Confederates is pre-empted when he is himself inadvertently fired upon, and the reversal looks like poetic justice; but Bierce emphasises its contingency, and indeed the counterfactual contingency of what might

otherwise have occurred. If anything, his irony is at the expense of the conceit of providential oversight he has just elaborated. The arch tone of his representation of a divine orchestration of events should alert us to the nihilistic quality of Bierce's irony; his appeal to providence does not underwrite a critique of Searing's moral failings, but undercuts the very idea of any such foundation for moral order. Its irony is not directed at certain values embodied in his protagonist, so much as at the possibility of value itself.

Bierce is much more interested in his protagonist's subjective experience than in passing moral judgement upon him. The story of Searing's death remains unknown to any but himself, and this is the emphasis of the title, "One of the Missing." More generally, the experience of death of course always remains untold, except in fiction. But knowledge of our own mortality is one of the more dismaying gifts of the reflexive capacity of narrative; while fiction, in general, is one manifestation of this narrative reflexiveness. Fiction, that is to say, does not offer itself as information, but presents its narrative particulars as the vehicle for a displaced imaginative reflection upon whatever general issues they may be taken to raise. In standard critical language, fiction inherently generates and foregrounds a thematic level of significance; it invites a reflexive attention to its own narrative particulars, so that their status as facts is superseded by their instantiation of values. While any use of narrative of course entails evaluative commitments, the formal and thematic foregrounding of such unreflective commitments is at the core of literary fiction's cultural role.

This perspective upon fiction offers a specific role for chance. Within the narrative paradigm more broadly, chance is the negation of meaning; it is the arbitrary, the random, the causeless, and so the failure of narrative sense. When it appears unreflectively in fiction, too, it is typically a flaw; the unwarranted *deus ex machina* that resolves plot difficulties without satisfying narrative logic, or the arbitrary conjunction disfiguring a story's formal integrity. For the same reason, though, the self-conscious invocation of chance is one of the ways fiction tests and challenges the limits of narrative sense-making. Doing so is integral to fiction's cultural efforts to refine or extend the capacity of narrative, even if such efforts create difficulties, and may sometimes court the breakdown of meaning – risking a mere lapse from narrative coherence, and so from the articulation of value it affords. Accordingly, the reflexive quality of fiction always entails, on some level, a double movement of narrative disruption and recuperation.

A narrative representation of egregiously contingent events can be redeemed by shifting to a systemic perspective, in which those events are situated as effects of a whole network of interactions too reciprocal, simultaneous and recursive to be traced in a narrative line. In this light, apparent randomness (in narrative form) is re-imagined and recuperated as determinate

within a systemic model. However, the recuperation of apparent chance as complexity in itself presents a narrative problem that proves to be equally intractable. While the form of a narrative's events may be motivated as the emergent effect of systemic processes, those systemic processes themselves intrinsically elude narrative intelligibility – and in doing so, they frustrate the cohesive articulation of values that narrative affords. This abstract dilemma is what Bierce quite deliberately confronts, in particular terms; and while it is possible to assert that his radical interrogation of values has value in itself, however negative its findings, that is not the communicative thrust of his story. Far from being a moral tale, it is an expression of nihilism; or – to be more circumspect – a demonstration of the failure of narrative understanding to establish foundational values that will stand against his own excoriating satirical eye.

Bierce's narrative interrogation of the consolations of narrative is conducted both at the communicative level of the authorial discourse and through the represented perspective of the protagonist Searing himself. This is only the most general of the many formal doublings and parallels that structure the story, but it is a conspicuous instance of the reflexive movement by which fiction always turns its attention upon itself, and which – in literary fictions especially – is the first principle of narrative complexification. The central situation of the story, the motif of the gun turned against its owner, is emblematic of Bierce's dark version of this reflexive turn, as well as being a figure for civil war itself. Likewise, the temporal dislocation experienced by Searing – which is, in mimetic terms, a symptom of trauma – is also part of Bierce's interrogation of narrative, and indeed such temporal dislocations are a recurrent feature of his stories. These twin aspects of his concern with temporality are intrinsically linked because psychological trauma, in Bierce's stories, is itself the prime manifestation of narrative's inadequacy to experience, and at the core of his disbelief in the possibility of value secured through narrative form. For Bierce, the problem is simply that we need to make narrative sense of experience, but trauma is both symptomatically intractable to narrative comprehension and further aggravated by the consequent effects of narrative dislocation in themselves (cf. CARUTH 1996).

For Bierce's protagonist the struggle to impose form, to make sense of his situation, testifies to the psychological impact of the trauma involved; but conversely, to the extent that he does make sense of it, he merely confirms the imminent prospect of the only narrative closure left available to him, which is death. The deathward momentum of narrative necessity in Bierce is a particularly bleak mimetic instantiation of the idea that there is a conceptual equivalence between narrative closure and death – an idea that has been theoretically adumbrated by, for example, Frank Kermode and Peter Brooks (KERMODE 1968; BROOKS

1984). In this conception of narrative, every resolution or outcome, the formal closure it brings to every event, is a figurative kind of death. It follows that the best prospects for affirmation of life must lie on the other side of eventuality, with the provisional and plural vistas of contingency. The impetus behind the general literary complexification of narrative is most commonly in this direction, opposing narrative's teleological drive towards resolution by elaborating the scope of connotation within the system of meaning itself; postponing the finality of an outcome in favour of the receding horizon of the implicit in semiosis. As a system of connotation, literary narrative necessarily exceeds any bounded sense of communicative intentionality; its communicative force is less instrumental than gestural, not delivering a message so much as indicating interpretative prospects that ramify without a determinate limit. In this shift of emphasis from the instrumental to the exploratory, literary fiction proposes a renegotiation of the terms upon which we strike the balance between cognitive effort and interpretative reward that drives narrative sensemaking.

Literary narrative confronts narrative's sequential logic with its inadequacy to the systemic complexity of life and attempts to address that inadequacy by complexifying narrative itself, in a move that deploys both the reflexive capacity of semiosis and its unbounded openness to the implicit. By exploiting the disparity between intentionality in narrative communication and the complexity of semiotic systems, literary fiction foregrounds a parallel disparity between narrative representation and the systemic complexity of the empirical world. Literary fiction internalises this fundamental cognitive problem in its own formal features, and so becomes more responsive to it; in doing so it also discovers a means of negotiating between necessity and chance, by evoking an interpretative and representational hinterland, systemic in nature, that accommodates the (narratively) arbitrary and random without conceding its absolute indeterminacy. The domain of "Chaos Theory" (a term coined by mathematician James Yorke) picks out just this feature of the behaviour of complex dynamic systems – their deterministic production of unpredictable, *apparently* chaotic behaviour (LI & YORKE 1975).

Yet there is small comfort for narrative understanding in the idea that systemic behaviour is only apparently chaotic. To identify temporal phenomena as systemic, even to mathematically describe and model the systems involved, does not in itself secure a cognitive grasp upon them in their particularity; it does not amount to making sense, because sense – intelligible form, or pattern – does not inhere in the object itself (the systemic process), but in the subject-object relation. Pattern, to be pattern at all, needs both to be *there*, and to be discerned; it is an interpretative perspective upon phenomena. Pattern occupies the indefinite realm of the implicit; that which is available to cognition, yet only realised by it. In cases where the pattern lies in temporal relations, its narrative articulation, cognitively or discursively, is

the means by which we realise it and cash in the significance it affords. Such articulation, however, also recursively makes available further patterns, implicit within the narrative's own semiotic system of meaning, and in doing so it displaces and extends the implicit rather than exhausting it.

I earlier identified perspectivalism as one of the inherent constraints of narrative sense-making, and Bierce's story very pointedly foregrounds issues of narrative perspective. He treats perspective as first of all a literal question of the subjective relation to environment, and focusses upon the distorted temporality of his protagonist's experience in his final extreme psychological state. The story also resolves upon this point, its closing lines both revealing the divergence of Searing's subjective experience from the actual passage of time and underlining the gross error of his brother's assessment of the outcome, his failure to recognise the corpse. But the story is also punctuated by instances of perspectival evaluation of space and time that run counter to the main thrust of Bierce's rhetoric. These acts are manifestations of the cognitive competence that his protagonist possesses as a scout, presented in order to show how that competence is stripped away from him by his trauma. Searing's own judgements, unlike his brother's, are in these instances notably successful, and characterised by their grounding in situated embodied cognition. Searing's effective negotiation of his cognitive environment in these cases is at odds with Bierce's overriding emphasis upon narrative's necessary, teleological orientation towards death; there is an undercurrent, a counter-pattern, within the proliferated connotations of his story, that actually affirms the provisional value of situated narrative sense-making in process.

Bierce's story therefore enacts something I want to cast in terms of a general claim about the relations between chance, complexity and narrative. If we insist upon rigid criteria of narrative meaning we disallow chance a priori, in which case every manifestation of contingency in a narrative must be, even if only in principle, capable of assimilation to the narrative paradigm by invoking a larger representational context or a higher thematic level of meaning. Apparent chance, if it is not to be a rupture in the fabric of narrative sense, must be understood as only circumstantially contingent, and in fact narratively intelligible with the appropriate perspectival re-framing. Bierce takes such a view and invokes it within his story; but then he presses its logic so hard that it breaks down. He offers to motivate apparent chance by appeal to contextual systemic complexity that quickly exceeds the cognitive grasp of narrative from any perspective except that of omniscience, which is not a perspective at all. His impossible expectation is that narrative meaning, if it is indeed to be meaningful, must be fully resolved and grounded; and this expectation directly aligns with the thematic burden of his story, which is that when all mere contingency is stripped away, the only available resolution

is the closure of death, and so the negation of meaning. His nihilism follows from his strict adherence to an idea of narrative meaning as accountable to an absolute criterion of achieved form; yet at the same time his own story represents ordinary, embodied and situated cognitive acts of sense-making that are successful or unsuccessful against pragmatic criteria in contexts saturated with contingency. Or, at a thematic level, his rhetoric necessarily invokes a network of connotations that exceed the circumscribed locus of his communicative intentions. Taking a less absolute stance, then, narrative meaning can also be conceived as legitimately provisional and open to ragged, under-determined contingencies of all kinds. Many of these are simply beyond the horizons of attention and relevance, arbitrary in ways that do not disturb narrative integrity but simply shade off into the context of the implicit out of which articulate narrative carves a pragmatic, situated and for-the-nonce sense. Sometimes, though, narrative contingencies are foregrounded, as with the ostentatious irruption of chance into Bierce's story, and in such cases the systemic complexity of that implicit context is brought into the light. The point of doing so need not be to re-secure solid foundations for the narrative by appeal to an ever more expansive perspective, and so the effect of doing so need not be a *reductio ad absurdum* of the very possibility of narrative meaning. Instead, the point may be to highlight systemic complexity as an order of dynamic interrelation beyond the compass of narrative, characterising the given environments of both praxis and semiosis; in which case the effect is some combination of an effort to expand narrative's horizons, and a reflexive recognition that limited horizons are indeed necessary and proper to it.