

Reticular style of narrative structure in David Toscana's *El último lector*.


Estilo reticular de la estructura narrativa
en *El último lector* de David Toscana.

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Abstract:

A dynamic novel is one that is constantly moving; in other words, its story is not linear, and to understand it, you have to follow it from one place to another. This type of narrative requires a specific type of reader, as its fragmented composition makes it more complex for a traditional reader to understand. In *The Last Reader*, there is a narrative mosaic created by the different stories that Lucio mentions; each of these stories is key to reaching the final event and creates *suspense* that keeps the reader entertained. This article will show the narrative strategy of the elements mentioned to highlight the literary style that Toscana uses in this novel.

Keywords: Narrative mosaic. Fragmentation. Fiction. Intertextuality. Dynamism.

Resumen:

Una novela dinámica es aquella que está en constante movimiento, es decir, su historia no es lineal y para entenderla es necesario seguir de un lado a otro junto con ella. Este tipo de narrativa requiere de un lector en específico, pues su composición fragmentada la vuelve más compleja para el entendimiento de un lector tradicional. En *El último lector* está presente un mosaico narrativo dado por las diferentes narraciones que Lucio menciona; cada una de esas historias es clave para llegar al hecho final y permiten que exista un *suspense* que mantiene al lector entretenido. En el presente artículo se mostrará la estrategia narrativa de los elementos mencionados para resaltar el estilo literario que utiliza Toscana en esta novela.

Key words: Palabras clave: Mosaico narrativo. Fragmentación. Ficción. Intertextualidad. Dinamismo.

David Toscana's *El último lector* is a work that challenges traditional narrative conventions by using a reticular structure, understood as a narrative organisation of the text¹ in which characters, events and themes are interconnected in a complex and dynamic way, with a particular non-linearity. This approach allows for a deeper reflection on the constant shift between reality and fiction within the universe of the novel itself. This contrast is marked by a character named Lucio, both in his discourse and in his perception of what is happening around him and in the course of the narrative itself. The aim of this article is to analyse how the reticular structure shapes the narrative and contributes to showing the reader, in a fragmentary way, the central and significant themes of the novel, with the intention of revealing Toscana's narrative style in this work and the aesthetic exploration offered by this composition.²

The Last Reader is a narrative proposal that invites the reader to delve into the meta-literary aspect. Lucio is a librarian who, through books, mixes reality and fiction to explain the events that occur in his environment. The different narrative segments, that is, the different stories alluded to by Lucio, are incomplete narratives that intertwine to create cohesion as a whole and manage to fit into the narrative as a whole, thereby creating what is known as a reticular structure.³ The structure of the work, then, is understood as a narrative mosaic, a style that allows for a panoramic view of what is happening in Icamole, but, at the same time, in a unique way. Below, we will show the fragments that make up these segments of possible interpretations and that are significant for understanding the novel as a whole, as well as for characterising the perception of the fictional reality of the fiction itself through Lucio's eyes.

The plot of *El último lector* unfolds through a network of intertextual relationships and connections between different books regarding the initial event, the discovery of the dead girl in Remigio's well. All the characters and fragmented stories have Lucio and the discovery of

¹ The etymology of the word *text* comes from the Latin *textus*, the participle of the verb *texere*, which means to weave or intertwine. This definition is important to remember for a proper understanding of the article, as the novel fits the definition of the word *text*.

² For quotations from the work, I indicate only the page number in parentheses, as they come from the edition announced in the corresponding section of the bibliography.

³ The stories Lucio mentions come from the books he reads and offer a fictional parallel to his reality.

Anamari in common, on which the narrative focuses. These serve as the common thread linking the other texts that make up the novel. Ezra Pound (2000) mentions that reading is an art of replication, which is why he considers that readers live in a parallel world, but it can also be said that sometimes the reader imagines that this world enters reality, as happens with Lucio. In this novel, David Toscana uses a method similar to that employed by Borges in his stories, which consists of saturating the reader with books, justifying situations through other texts, and recreating scenes of possessions and people.⁴ The books mentioned in this article will be those that have a direct link to the characters' situations. It is worth mentioning that, within the novel, only two of the texts referred to are plausible: *Santa María del Circo*, written by David Toscana himself, and the *Bible*; the other titles that appear belong only to a reality made possible by the fiction created in the same imaginary universe as *El último lector*. Thus, the novel's reticular style allows for an intertextual analysis of it, as it is a defining feature of the text's aesthetic and stylistic nature, conceived as a fabric of texts⁵ that explain or justify an initial narrative and the course of the story with varying degrees of significance, which affect the main story but, at the same time, support its development.

The initial work of the structure is *La muerte de Babette* (*The Death of Babette*) by Pierre Laffitte, the most important work in the novel; the central narrative of the disappearance of a girl revolves around it. This is one of Lucio's favourite books, and it is after the disappearance of Babette that Lucio connects the discovery of the dead girl in Remigio's well. This novel also links another character to the librarian, the mother of the missing girl, who, upon her arrival in the village, reveals the victim's name: Anamari. The mother, a curious and at times enigmatic character, also declares herself an admirer of the novel, which Lucio uses to link the girl's disappearance with fiction. Therefore, when she hears Lucio talk about the novel, she is not surprised to learn that her daughter will not return, as this is what happens to Babette. With the novel serving as a link to what has happened, even as a possible representation of the situation, the mother begins to spend more time with Lucio and gains his trust. The relationship

⁴ As in the stories "The Other," "Utopia of a Tired Man," and "The Aleph," although the latter does not mention many books, it does refer to itself as Toscana sometimes does with Lucio.

⁵ The main text refers to others that are identifiable through allusion, polyphony, and other narrative elements.

between them develops to such an extent that Lucio allows her to condemn books, invent stories, reconstruct stories that have already been written, and assume fictional personalities to pass them off as true in her daily life.⁶

Following the novel chronologically, the work mentioned below is *El manzano* by Alberto Santín, a book that Lucio uses as a guide for Remigio to dispose of Anamari's body. In this text, a man kills a child and tries to hide the body in the roots of an apple tree, but the victim betrays him because the fruit grows with the child's face on it; this causes the murderer to feel guilt and end up confessing his crime. Remigio, who finds Anamari's body, buries her in the roots of his avocado tree and fears that they will grow with her face, even though he is not the culprit. Lucio, for his part, imagines the softness of the avocados and compares them to the skin of his deceased wife. Here we can see how fiction enables a sensory plane that goes beyond simple evocation, as what would seem ineffable is materialised in the recreation that becomes an emotional affect through a memory that arises from the comparison between an imaginary plane and its repercussion in a real one.

Now, it should be noted that the village of Icamole is closed off; the only person who ever comes and goes is Melquisedec, an old man in charge of carrying water to the village. Therefore, he is the first to alert the others to the news of the missing girl. After this, two rural police officers arrive in Icamole to investigate the disappearance, but the only one willing to talk is Lucio. Through the novel *Ciudad sin niños* (*City Without Children*), Lucio points out to the lieutenant a possible cause for the girl's disappearance. In this text, an elderly man was always carrying soil to overflow the Arno River. At that very moment, Melquisedec's cart is heard, and the lieutenant orders his officers to arrest the man after he has delivered his load. After this event, Anamari's mother appears in Icamole, and the main novel, *La muerte de Babette* (*The Death of Babette*), is revisited as a source of explanation for understanding what is happening in reality. Lucio then gathers a group of Icamole residents to inform them of what happened to

⁶ Lucio as Pierre Laffitte, the writer of *Babette's Feast*, and the woman as Porfirio Díaz, personalities with whom she demands that he tell her where her daughter's remains are. Lucio has no choice and takes her to Remigio's avocado tree.

Melquisedec. He explains what happened through a novel called *Las leyes de la sangre* (*The Laws of Blood*) and narrates the events from the character's arrest to his murder.

As can be seen, the relationship between the intratextual fiction formed by the novels that appear serves as an explanation for understanding the textual reality for the characters, or at least that is how Lucio perceives it, for whom it is easier to establish an interaction between the fictional and his reality in order to explain more reliably an event that has actually happened and that can show possible solutions. The levels of intrusion into the fictional dimensions that can be seen in this literary game define Toscana's creative and aesthetic style of telling a story based on fiction, in which the basic fiction branches out and extends into others as a means of understanding a possible reality that lies outside the everyday life of a village where nothing seems to happen.

As Anamari's mother gained Lucio's trust, he fantasised about her and expressed this through the novel *Las nieves azules* (*The Blue Snows*), of which he only reads the ending, about two lovers who say goodbye at a railway station. He thinks of this novel when the girl's mother says goodbye because she has decided to return to Monterrey, but later he will think that the female character in the novel is Herlinda, his deceased wife. He also idealises Anamari's mother with the novel *El paraíso de Yoshikazu*, in which the samurai feels something for a woman named Masumi; however, the age difference is notable, so he must not accept the natural condition of lovers and can only say: 'You don't have to love me, it's enough that you serve me' (p. 118).

The novels Lucio has read are not the only ones mentioned or alluded to in the initial narrative; there are other works that Toscana has used as references, such as Nietzsche's *Antichrist*: 'Now I need to define good and evil, Lucio tells himself' (p. 16), since both margins reflect on good and evil, attempting to define each. The same is true of *The 120 Days of Sodom*, which is important to note, since, like President Curval, Lucio feels obliged to delve deeper into the text when necessary:

Look, to mention the black man's expression of horror and not delve into it; he should have told me how his thick, red lips, broken and covered with a thread of saliva, vibrated, or at least how the moon shone on the whites of his eyes [...] (p. 17).

One can also reflect, for example, on Edgar Allan Poe's short story 'The Tell-Tale Heart', in which the murderer also succumbs to the pressure of guilt. The allusion is not made exclusively in the implication of Remigio's case and that of the apple trees, but also in a statement by Lucio on the matter: "A man tries at all costs to hide the crime he has committed, but he will be surprised when his victim finds a way to denounce him from beyond the grave" (p. 39). In addition to the texts mentioned, there is also an allusion, even from a spatial perspective, to Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*. Now, as far as space is concerned, it should be noted that both Comala and Icamole are towns in northern Mexico,⁷ but also because of Lucio's description: "People were walking away just like in the procession to the cemetery when Don Simón died, only this time, even though there was no coffin, they all looked dead" (p. 54).

This demonstrates a back-and-forth between genres. *The Last Reader* turns out to be a dynamic novel that requires a specific reader capable of following the intertextuality implicit within it. Each of the stories Lucio tells allows the narrative to continue and is presented in a fragmented manner, that is, only small parts of each are told and they come together to form a whole; this narrative style is called fragmentation.

The fragmentation in *The Last Reader* serves as a representation of Lucio's thinking. It should be noted that in a fragmentary text, all its parts reflect a common whole, like the pieces of a broken mirror, even though there is no determining cause-and-effect logic, since in its very composition, the linear progression of the action is not as relevant as the alteration of the time-space unity of the narrative sequence that forms a total entity. In this case, the theme of the missing girl, which drives all the narrative segments that form this creative vertex, that is, this event is seen in the work as a central thought that stimulates and unites the entire narrative. In the novel, each linked story appears to be an isolated narrative, but each of these scenarios

⁷ Due to their desert-like, arid and desolate characteristics, both villages are classified as representative of those found in northern literature, of which Toscana is one of the main representatives (Parra, 2004).

comes together to connect with the initial act and allows it to be understood in a specific way and in its entirety. For example, in the case of Anamari's mother, interpreting her daughter's disappearance through the novel *La muerte de Babette* allowed her to have a more complete view of what happened to the girl.

The combination of fragments from each novel creates an unconventional narrative style that I have decided to call the reticular style. This type of narrative requires an active reader who reflects on the coherence of the reality they are reading and that the narrator or main character is showing them. Another example is when Lucio summons the people of Icamole to tell them what happened to Melquisedec, as mentioned above. Jesús Camarero (2004) mentions that novels with a fragmentary composition tend to be dynamic in nature, and it is no wonder, since they block and unblock narrative genres during the development of the story, allowing them to move back and forth to optimise the continuation of the main act. In the case of *El último lector*, Lucio moves between novels of different genres, such as detective, historical, dramatic, romantic, tragic, etc. These changes allow him to reflect on the composition of the novel itself—the textual reality—and, in turn, create a structure in which the textual fragments interact to compose the story of the missing girl.

Regarding the above, Vicente Luis Mora mentions that: "The fragment functions with a modularity similar to that of the protein combinations that give rise to life" (2024, p. 31); that is, the fragmentary branching, the fragments already joined together create a new form of textual and narrative life with which the novel is no longer just an isolated fragmentary text within the novel itself, but is now also another text emancipated from the first, complemented by other texts. Unlike a linear novel, where narration is one of the most common forms in literature, fragmentary novels seek to have a greater impact on the reader due to their nature, which must be completed by the recipient and establish meaningful bridges to understand the full meaning of the narrative.

With the above said, it can be understood that the fragments of novels within *El último lector* are not just free associations generated by the author, but are now seen as a dialogical perspective adopted so that the narrator can communicate concepts through a series of

intertextual relationships. This is why Carmen Gil mentions that, when faced with a narrative text of this style, the reader must be dynamic, as this dynamism allows them to choose some intertextual links over others according to their own interests or according to the associations that each referenced text suggests. In this sense, Lucio should be considered a character who connects and interacts between realities. Azucena Rodríguez (2016) points out some characteristics of metafictional characters and proposes that a metafictional character is created by a matter of conscience, that is, that this character is the only instance capable of performing actions in fiction. Therefore, she proposes the idea that Lucio, in addition to being the protagonist, is a reader and has the freedom to interpret reality, as it translates from the possibility he has to choose different paths of meaning and significance to create explanations for the events in Icamole. It should not be forgotten that most of the texts and authors referred to are created by Toscana himself, with exceptions such as the *Bible* and some historical texts that served as temporal references.

It is important to note that Lucio's perspective on dialogic discourse provides an explanation and meaning for what was almost incomprehensible to the narrative and communicative structures of traditionally linear texts. In other words, what really happens is that the location of the axis of meaning in each text changes. It is no longer centred on the author, whose intentions had to be known in order to achieve a correct reading, but rather the meaning can be found within the text itself and, therefore, the centre of the narrative structure is determined by the reader as they progress through their reading. In this regard, Estrella Martínez Rodrigo mentions that: "In short, the reader establishes a communicative act with both the text and the author of that hyperlinked text" (2010, p. 265).

The analepses and prolepses within the novel allow for this explanation of meaning that goes against the grain of traditional narrative schemes, since, being explained through the texts themselves, they break with the tradition of being explained or referred to by the author and narrator as if they were a memory or a prediction. In *The Last Reader*, the sequential, personal, and intimate experience that every reader develops in the process of reading becomes evident. A dynamic reader achieves this when they become more involved in the story of the novel. any

author who wants to write a good narrative mosaic must take into account that the destination of each of the links has the possibility of being the first or the last in the trajectory that each reader has chosen, based on the freedom that each reader has to follow one or another of the trajectories offered by the various texts referred to or sequential links.

Therefore, in this type of novel, it is the structure of the text that prompts the reader to choose which links to follow. There are books, such as *Rayuela* by Julio Cortázar, that leave this choice to chance, by leafing through the printed book. This forces the reader to be a dynamic reader, not linear or closed, to move within the text to better understand the narrative of the novel.

Conclusions

Fragmentation in a novel regularly includes analepsis and prolepsis to explain the text itself, and this non-linear nature allows for reflection on the composition of the novel itself, as well as the circumstances that are narrated. To speak of dynamic texts is to speak of dynamic readers; the main text is enhanced by each reader's individual reading, thus creating a new space that requires the intervention of an active reader. This is what the reticular structure in narrative consists of: the creation and comparison of a main narrative that allows the reader and the narrator to better understand and explain the limits of the descriptions made for the representation of other spaces, situations, and temporalities. In this way, the links created during the development of the novel complement, unite and approximate the initial narrative, which ultimately replaces what could be considered an atomisation of events.

Fragmented novels could be considered reconstructions of oral communication processes, since what is narrated tends to give it a different meaning and its composition is not limited to a single specific time and place, but at the same time it provides stability and coherence to what is being conveyed. The reticular structure is formed by these links, since without the dialogue between novels—the fictional ones created by Toscana, those evoked, and the one he himself creates and in which we as readers are immediate participants—this structure would not exist and, therefore, the texts mentioned would be just that, mentions that

come out of nowhere like memories within the exposition of an anecdote in a conversation between individuals.

The Last Reader is a novel that hooks the reader from its very first pages. The atmosphere of mystery and the dynamism of the narrative create an entertaining effect that makes it impossible to put the book down at any point. The visible narrative mosaic, thanks to the novel's reticular structure, is a literary device that helps break with the conventions of the traditional linear novel. It is also important to mention that this reticular structure is the element on which the complexity and aesthetics of the work are based, as few works present a fictional panorama that allows the protagonist and the work itself to be interpreted as part of a whole and in a particular way. The movement between fictions and actions that are part of the textual reality of this novel keeps the reader active throughout the narrative and allows them to speculate on its continuity, generating interest in knowing the outcome of the story, which is essential for keeping the reader engaged from the first page. In this regard, the editorial strategy shown in the book is curious, as the cover of the Alfaguara edition shows a person holding a book, which suggests a reader because it shows a pair of eyes that allude to this and who interprets his reality through books, implying Piglia's phrase: "a book only comes to life when it is read", which is reinterpreted by Lucio when, at the end of the novel, he mentions: "it will be reduced to nothing, a novel worthy of hell and cockroaches, it will be buried in the sands of the sea or the desert every time someone opens the last page of *The Last Reader*" (190), thus observing the appropriation of the reality of the total reader proposed by the materiality of the volume.

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