



THE FUTURE PERFECT OF TESTIMONY: BIBLIOGRAPHIC PROLEPSIS IN VIKTOR FRANKL'S *MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING*

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Abstract

*Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* is among the most widely read books of the last century. It is among the least read as literature. This essay argues that its persuasive power is grammatical rather than doctrinal. Frankl seldom asserts that suffering has meaning. He places it in the future perfect, the tense in which a present is inhabited as the object of a retrospection that has not yet occurred. Extending Mark Currie's taxonomy of prolepsis, the essay follows that tense through the lecture-hall reverie, the logotherapeutic imperative to live as though already living a second time, and the archival figures of the granary and the filed calendar leaf. It then isolates a semantic relation that paratext theory, the sociology of texts and genetic criticism each approach without naming: an anticipation whose truth-conditions are met by the later material strata of the book that prints it. Frankl's reverie of lecturing on the camp is answered four decades later by a lecture bound into the same covers. The answer is fulfilled in form and displaced in content. That displacement, not Frankl's sincerity, is where the book's ethical difficulty lies.*

Keywords

Viktor Frankl; Prolepsis; Holocaust Testimony; Narrative Temporality; Book History, etc.

Full Article

Reading the Wrong Tense:

For four decades, criticism of *Man's Search for Meaning* has been organised around a single question asked in a single mood. Does the book claim that the camps held meaning, and is that claim permissible? Devotional readings answer yes to both. They convert the memoir into a manual. Anti-redemptive readings answer no to the second. Lawrence Langer identified Frankl as the progenitor of a redemptive memory that consoles the reader at the expense of the event, and Timothy Pytell's biography has since supplied the archival ballast for that suspicion. The opposition is less tidy than this summary suggests. Eaglestone describes a mode of post-Holocaust kitsch that separates the event from the present in the very act of representing it, and that offers instant meaning in place of reflection (Eaglestone, 141, 143). Yet the disagreement remains organised around a shared method. Both parties treat the text as a machine for generating propositions, then argue about the propositions.

The difficulty is that the propositions are hard to locate. Frankl's most quoted sentence is not his own. It is Nietzsche's, and it reaches most readers only as Frankl quotes it (qtd. in Frankl, *Man's Search*, 1). His central assertions are hedged, conditional, or addressed to a hypothetical



patient rather than to history. What the book supplies in abundance is not a doctrine of meaning. It is a position in time from which a doctrine could later be uttered. Its operative unit is a tense.

That tense is the future perfect. It is the mood in which a present is occupied as the anticipated object of a retrospection that has not yet taken place. Frankl does not tell the reader that the camp is meaningful. He installs, inside the camp, the position of a person for whom it *will have been* something, and then he lives there. Criticism has occasionally reached for metamodern vocabulary to describe such effects, reading them as an oscillation between irony and sincerity after Vermeulen and van den Akker. Oscillation is the wrong figure. It implies a wavering between two settled states. Frankl's stance is single and unwavering. What is deferred is not his commitment but its content. Nor can oscillation explain the property of this book that most demands explanation, which is that it, feels finished.

What follows reads Frankl's grammar rather than his creed. Sections 2 to 4 track the future perfect through the memoir: the lecture-hall reverie, the categorical imperative of logotherapy, and the archival figures that guarantee any retrospect. Section 5 makes the principal claim. The book's successive editions stand in a verifying relation to an anticipation printed in its first, and that relation, though approached from three directions by existing scholarship, has not been named. Section 6 shows that the anticipation was met in form and displaced in content. One editorial caution applies throughout. The contents of this book vary across its editions and not merely its pagination. The argument requires an edition containing the 1984 postscript, and references are given by part, since pagination differs across the reprints in which the book circulates.

Prolepsis I: The Well-Lit Room:

The best-known scene in Part One is not an atrocity. It is an act of composition. Frankl describes wrenching his thoughts away from immediate misery. He then sees himself on the platform of what the English translation calls a 'well-lit, warm and pleasant lecture room', before an attentive audience, delivering a lecture on the psychology of the concentration camp (Frankl, *Man's Search*, 1). The scene is routinely cited as evidence of inner freedom. Formally it does something more specific. In one movement it converts both the suffering and the sufferer into material. The present is not escaped. It is reclassified as the content of a future exposition. Frankl says as much. He records that everything oppressing him became objective when seen from what he calls the remote viewpoint of science, and that he observed his sufferings 'as if they were already of the past'. The tense is not the critic's imposition. It is in the sentence.

Currie distinguishes three senses of prolepsis: the narratological flash forward inherited from Genette, a structural prolepsis operating between narrated and narrating time, and the rhetorical prolepsis of the orator who answers an objection before it is raised (Currie, 29, 31). Frankl's reverie is nominally the first. It is a leap forward within narrated time. But it inverts the convention it uses. Genette's flash forward is disclosed by a narrator who already knows (Genette, *Narrative Discourse*). Here it is manufactured by a character who cannot know, and manufactured for use. The anticipation is not information. It is equipment. Meretoja's narrative hermeneutics supplies the general form: narratives are practices of sense-making that enlarge or contract a sense of the possible. Frankl's reverie enlarges it by one minimal move. It makes a future speaker possible under conditions engineered to abolish futurity.

Note what the imagined future contains. Not liberation, not reunion, not restitution, not revenge. A genre. What holds Frankl to life is the prospect of a lectern, an audience and a title. It is the prospect of exposition. The technique is literary before it is existential. The camp becomes survivable at the moment it becomes narratable to a listener who does not yet exist.

The book supplies its own control case. Frankl recounts a fellow prisoner who dreamt, early in 1945, that the war would end for him on a named day in March. The day came and the



front did not. He was feverish on the twenty-ninth of March, delirious on the thirtieth and dead on the thirty-first (Frankl, *Man's Search*, 1). The episode is invariably read as a parable about hope. Read formally it is a parable about tense. A future pinned to a calendar can be refuted by a calendar. The future perfect cannot, because it specifies neither date nor content, only the bare fact of an eventual retrospect. Frankl's prolepsis endures because nothing can disconfirm it. That is its power as a technology of endurance. It is also the source of its vulnerability as a claim about history.

Prolepses II and III: The Imperative and the Pre-empted Reader:

Currie's second prolepsis inhabits the interval between the time narrated and the time of narrating. In Frankl's case that interval was engineered rather than merely occupied. The German original of 1946 was written in nine days and issued in a documentary series on recent Austrian history. Frankl records in the 1992 preface that he had meant it to appear without his name, and that he yielded only at the last moment to friends who wanted it on the title page (Frankl, *Man's Search*, 'Preface to the 1992 Edition'). Read biographically this is modesty. Read formally it is a temporal device. Anonymity stages the narrating voice not as a man remembering but as the position from which the camp will have been remembered.

The same grammar governs what Part Two calls the categorical imperative of logotherapy. Live as though already living for the second time, and as though the first time you had acted as wrongly as you are about to act now (Frankl, *Man's Search*, 2). The Kantian costume misleads. This is not a test of universalisability. Nothing is generalised and no maxim is examined. Its work is conjugation. The addressee is instructed to occupy a completed life and to act from inside it, so that the moral present is generated by borrowing a retrospect that has not happened. Frankl's ethics, at their most compressed, are a tense.

Currie's third prolepsis, the rhetorical, is everywhere in the memoir and has gone almost unremarked. Frankl disclaims heroism. He insists that he reports small daily choices rather than great ones. He concedes that those who survived were not, on the whole, the best of them, and states plainly that the best of them did not return (Frankl, *Man's Search*, 1). Each is a pre-emption. The consequence for the critical literature is decisive once seen. The anti-redemptive case is already inside the book as a forestalled objection. Langer's indictment is not external to Frankl's text. It is one of the positions the text has half-conceded in advance in order to keep speaking. This is why fifty years of argument at the level of propositions have not moved. Whichever proposition an objector selects, the book has already agreed with part of it.

The Granary: What Guarantees a Retrospect:

A future perfect requires a guarantor. Something must be there to do the remembering, or the tense is empty. Frankl supplies the guarantee with a small metaphysics of the past. Against the pessimist who watches a wall calendar grow thinner, he sets the man who tears off each leaf, jots a few words on the reverse and files it with its predecessors. What has been, he insists, is the securest mode of being, stored in full granaries that no later misfortune can empty (Frankl, *Man's Search*, 2).

The figure repays a literal reading. Dated leaves, inscribed on the verso, kept in order: Frankl's image for a completed life is a manuscript. The image had an exact biographical correlate, which the memoir reports without noticing its own symmetry. The manuscript of *Ärztliche Seelsorge* was confiscated on arrival. Frankl set about reconstructing it in shorthand on scraps of paper, including during a bout of typhus (Frankl, *Man's Search*, 1). The future perfect was not merely imagined in the camp. It was being physically deposited there. To write under those conditions is to install the archive from which the retrospect will one day be conducted.



Much of what Frankl calls the will to meaning turns out, on inspection, to be a will to a surviving document.

When the Book Verifies the Text:

The volume that carries these arguments is not a book but a stratigraphy. *Ein Psychologerlebt das Konzentrationslager* appeared in Vienna in 1946 at 130 pages. An English translation followed in 1959 as *From Death-Camp to Existentialism*. The retitled *Man's Search for Meaning* arrived in the early 1960s with a systematic account of logotherapy appended. A postscript was added in 1984. Prefaces accumulated in 1962 and 1992, and current editions come wrapped in a foreword and an afterword by other hands. A separate 1946 book, three Vienna lectures, reached English readers only in 2020 as *Yes to Life*. Every addition is made at the back. The work grows forwards in time and has not stopped.

One feature of that growth has never been made to signify. The 1984 postscript is a lecture. It was delivered on 19 June 1983 at the Third World Congress of Logotherapy, at Regensburg University, from a lectern, to an assembled audience, in Germany. It is bound inside the covers of the memoir which, four decades earlier, had recorded a starving prisoner imagining just such a scene in order to remain alive. Prophecy and fulfilment share a spine, though not a subject.

The qualification is not a concession but the finding. The imagined lecture had a title: the psychology of the concentration camp. That is a descriptive genre, the camp taken as an object of study. The lecture actually delivered and bound in is 'The Case for a Tragic Optimism', which is not a psychology of the camp at all. It is a general apologia for meaning in the face of pain, guilt and death. The anticipation was met in its form, and met with precision: lectern, hall, audience, German university, and the same covers. It was substituted in its content, description giving way to prescription. The reader who reaches the postscript is not holding proof that the reverie came true. The reader is holding the reverie and its replacement, bound together and undated by the reading eye.

Frankl came close to describing the arrangement himself. In the 1992 preface he observes that the theoretical second part distils the lesson of the autobiographical first, while the first part serves as the existential validation of his theories, so that the two support each other's credibility (Frankl, *Man's Search*, 'Preface to the 1992 Edition'). That is a description of strata verifying one another. He offers it as a remark about persuasion. It can be read as a remark about structure.

What should this relation be called? Three vocabularies come close and each stops short. Genette's paratext describes how thresholds condition reading, but treats the frame as a spatial surround rather than as the delayed answer to a question the text has asked (Genette, *Paratexts*). McKenzie's sociology of texts establishes that bibliographical forms make meaning, but as a general principle rather than as a determinate relation between one utterance and one later stratum. Van Hulle's genetic criticism reconstructs the making of a work; post-publication revision included, but asks how the text came to be rather than what the object subsequently does to the text's claims. Testimony studies reads Levi's appendices and Wiesel's retranslations as evidence of changing reception rather than as the satisfaction of conditions set within the earlier text.

The remainder these approaches leave is narrow and worth naming, because it is semantic rather than hermeneutic. A prolepsis is a proposition with truth-conditions. The prisoner asserts that he will one day speak of this from a lectern. Those conditions are met, partially, as shown. They are met neither within the narrative nor by the reader's inference, but by the physical existence of a later stratum of the same object. The book does not merely frame the claim or record its making. It occupies the position of its verifier. For that relation I propose the term *bibliographic prolepsis*: an anticipation whose truth-conditions are satisfied, refused or deferred by the subsequent material accretion of the volume in which it is printed.



A term earns its keep by discriminating cases rather than by fitting one, and testimony supplies the range. Frankl's is the satisfied case, with the substitution of content just described. Levi's is the refused case. *If This Is a Man* records a recurring camp dream of telling the story to listeners who lapse into indifference, and Levi names it the ever-repeated scene of the unlistened-to story (Levi, *If This Is a Man*, 5). The book's afterlife refutes that anticipation materially. Levi's own postscript, added in 1976 and carried in editions from 1979, records his having been asked to comment on the book hundreds of times before the most diverse audiences (Levi, 'Postscript'). The dreamt indifference was answered by a stratum of questions. Frankl and Levi each grew a postscript, and the two postscripts do opposite work. That refusal is part of why *The Drowned and the Saved* had in 1986 to lodge a darker anticipation about the deniers still to come. Wiesel's *Night* is the deferred case, its anticipated readership re-addressed by a fresh translation in 2006 so that the retrospect is never permitted to settle. Consolation supplied, consolation withheld, consolation postponed. The category sorts them and the older vocabularies do not.

Two consequences follow for Frankl. The first concerns the paratext. 'Tragic optimism' is a phrase of 1983, and since 1984 no reader has met the 1946 memoir except through it. The terminal apparatus instructs the reading of a text it postdates by thirty-seven years. The successive retitlings do comparable work, as Batchelor's account of translation and paratexts would predict. The second consequence explains an effect that thematic criticism has not produced. Readers do not report being persuaded by Frankl. They report being held. The sensation is not generated by argument. It is generated by handling an object that visibly outlived the events it narrates, and that has kept in its own binding something very like the promise made in its opening pages. The book is its own principal evidence, and the evidence is tactile.

Three Strata, Three Persons:

The future perfect is not an innocent grammar. It is the tense of sacrifice, and therefore the tense in which every ideology has asked for patience. Bear this now, because it will have been worth it. The camps were themselves administered on a debased version of the same promise. What distinguishes Frankl's use of it is not content but person. In the first person the future perfect is a wager a sufferer makes on their own behalf: private, revisable, costly and binding on nobody. In the second person it becomes an instruction. In the third it becomes an alibi. Meretoja's distinction between subsumptive and non-subsumptive storytelling gives the point its edge. To narrate another's suffering under a general meaning subsumes that person. To occupy one's own anticipated retrospect does not. Frankl knew this and said so. The postscript insists that optimism is not anything that can be commanded or ordered (Frankl, *Man's Search*, 'Postscript 1984'). Knowing it did not protect the book from its own bibliography.

The transposition can be shown rather than asserted, because each stratum announces its person in its opening move. Part One narrates in the first person singular and in the first person plural of the prisoners: a man among men, reporting what was done to us. The logotherapy appended for the English editions speaks in the clinical third. It speaks of the patient, the sufferer, man as such, illustrated by vignettes in which the person appears as an instance of a principle. The postscript opens by inviting an assembled audience to ask itself what is to be understood by a tragic optimism. That is the hortatory first person plural of the lecture hall, which is the second person wearing a courtesy.

The title pages record the same drift with even less ambiguity. In 1946 the book was called a psychologist experiences the concentration camp. The article is indefinite, the observer particular, the place particular. Since the early 1960s it has been called *Man's Search for Meaning*: definite, generic, unlocated, and no longer about a camp at all. Between those two title pages a witness has become a species. This is the displacement identified in Section 5, visible now



at the level of the wrapper rather than the postscript. It is the mechanism by which a first-person wager was converted into a second-person imperative without anyone having to argue for the conversion.

The market completed what the binding began. Frankl himself diagnosed his book's success not as an accomplishment of his own but as an expression of the misery of the age (Frankl, *Man's Search*, 'Preface to the 1992 Edition'). Phillips documents an aphoristic circulation almost wholly detached from the Holocaust the book reports. Eaglestone's account of kitsch and the critique of the storytelling boom developed by Mäkelä and Meretoja name the resulting condition, in which testimony travels as instruction and the aphorism outlives the archive (Eaglestone, 139–58). The old deadlock can now be dissolved rather than adjudicated. Devotional readers have been responding to a real formal achievement. Anti-redemptive readers have been objecting to a real formal hazard. Both are present in the volume because the volume grew. They are not two interpretations of one book. They are two strata of one binding. Langer's charge, that redemptive meaning was imported into the camps, is best restated not as an accusation against Frankl's sincerity, which is unfalsifiable and largely beside the point, but as an observation about manufacture. The importation did occur. It occurred in the bindery.

Coda:

The claim advanced here is deliberately narrow. Frankl's testimony works by a tense rather than a thesis. That tense is describable in the vocabulary of prolepsis. That vocabulary requires one addition, because in testimony the anticipation is answered by the book and not by the narrative. The addition is not offered as a discovery of unnoticed material. The Frankl postscript, the Levi appendix and the successive *Nights* are all well known. It is offered as a description of the relation between them, which has been left unformulated because it falls between the disciplines that would each have had half of it. Testimonies do not simply age. They accrete, and the accretion argues.

Frankl's prisoner imagined a lit room with someone listening in it. The book in the reader's hands is that room and the reader is that audience. The promise is kept, materially and without comment, every time the volume is opened. What the volume does not say, and what criticism should, is that the lecture eventually given was not the lecture then imagined.

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Article Received:27/07/2026

Article Accepted:04/08/2026

Published Online:30/09/2026

To Cite the Article: *Das, Souk and Sharma, Yash. "The Future Perfect of Testimony: Bibliographic Prolepsis in Viktor Frankl's Man's Search for Meaning." Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed/Peer Reviewed e-Journal of English Language, Literature and Criticism, Vol.-VII, Issue-2, September, 2026, 39-45. www.literarycognizance.com*

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