Response to Brian Richardson's Target Essay "Unnatural Narrative Theory"

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Never afraid of self-promotion, the founding fathers of unnatural narratology (Alber et al., "Unnatural Narratives") wrote in a 2010 manifesto: "In recent years the study of unnatural narratology has developed into one of the most exciting new paradigms in narrative theory" (113). What exactly should one understand by paradigm? Is unnatural narratology (henceforth UN) a field of investigation—a field constituted by the most experimental, innovative narrative forms—or is it a thorough rethinking of narrative theory? From Richardson's article, one can conclude that it has ambitions to be both; the question then becomes: why do experimental forms of narrative call for a revision of narratology, and more precisely, what is it about them that, as Richardson claims, cannot be accounted for by standard narratology?

If UN is simply a field of investigation, it could be justified by a scalar conception of narrativity. As I suggested in "Toward a Definition of Narrative," the set of all narratives can be conceived as a fuzzy set that encompasses both prototypical forms, in which the conditions of narrativity are fully realized, and marginal forms, in which some of these conditions are not fulfilled, or where the telling of a story is subordinated to another purpose rather than constituting a focus of attention. UN could then be conceived as the study of the marginal forms, though I doubt that its advocates would subscribe to this view: Richardson makes it clear that for him experimental forms, such as Beckett's novels, are just as narrative as the genre that UN regards as the embodiment of naturalness in narrative, and that serves, consequently, as an implicit standard. Rather than relying on a scalar conception of narrativity, UN rests on a dichotomy between natural and unnatural narratives,[1] and it designates the unnatural as its territory. But in contrast to Monika Fludernik, who has given deep thought to what it means to call a type of narrative natural, and who associates this type with spontaneous, conversational narratives (*Towards*), UN proponents do not take the time to define, much less to scrutinize, their implicit standard. References to linguistic/discourse analytical approaches to conversational narrative are glaringly absent from their

work. Through a process of inference from what our authors label unnatural, I construct this standard as "x telling y that p happened in the real world, in the hope that y will believe that p." This excludes, *a priori*, all forms of fiction from the domain of the natural, even though the creation of fictional worlds and stories is a universally attested and cognitively fundamental human activity. I infer, furthermore, that in order to optimize believability, the telling of p should be governed by H. Paul Grice's famous maxims of conversation: maxims such as quality (do not say what you do not believe to be true), quantity (avoid prolixity), relevance (your contribution should be related to the current topic of the conversation), and manner (make your contribution orderly). These maxims not only fail to account for literary texts, but they are also often deliberately flouted (as Grice recognizes) in conversational storytelling. Tellability often gets in the way of believability, and it is to the extent that they play freely with the maxims that conversational narrators manage to capture the interest of their audience. If there is a form of narrative that strictly follows Grice's maxims, it would be courtroom testimony, or maybe history writing, but these genres are hardly a natural, spontaneous form of narration. If UN advocates took the time to study the forms of storytelling that they regard as natural, they would discover that these forms are much richer and more sophisticated in their narrative techniques than merely informing an audience that something happened. One could admittedly argue that written forms of narrative, compared to oral ones, present medium-specific narrative devices, while fictional narratives, compared to factual ones, present genre-specific devices. UN could then be conceived as the study of the forms of expression that have been developed in written literary fiction; but narratology has done this kind of study all along (at the cost, critics will say, of attention to nonverbal and nonliterary forms of storytelling). What, then, is new and distinctive about UN?

Let's now look at the claim that UN is a new theory, made necessary by the fact that the texts it examines cannot be accounted for by standard narratology. This failure is attributed by Richardson to the realistic bias of narratology, a bias rooted in the concept of mimesis. It is therefore important to take a closer look at this concept. Following Plato and Aristotle, mimesis is widely associated with imitation. But language, in contrast to image, sound, and acting bodies, does not really imitate anything, except for language itself in quotations: it signifies, refers, and in so doing it represents, which means it evokes something to the imagination. Let's then assume that mimetic texts are those texts that incite the imagination to create mental images of

concrete objects and processes, such as characters, settings, and events. Yet the scope of mimesis can be understood in different ways:

(1) In a Platonic sense, as the representation of something that exists in the actual world. By this definition, all fiction is (at least partly) non-mimetic.

(2) In an Aristotelian sense, as the representation of either what is (as in history) or what could be (as in poetry). To adopt a possible worlds framework, "what could be" can be interpreted in two ways: (a) as what could happen in the real world, which means that the mimeticism of narrative is limited to realistic texts; or (b) as including the whole range of possible but non-actual worlds, from the closest to the actual world to the most remote. In this second interpretation, mimeticism extends to the fantastic and to science fiction, but it excludes impossible worlds.

In a response to Fludernik's article "How 'Natural' Is Natural Narratology," UN proponents endorse a Platonic interpretation of mimeticism: "When we speak of 'anti-mimetic' or 'anti-realist' components of narrative, we refer to Plato's sense of mimesis (rather than mimesis in the Aristotelian sense)" (Alber et al., "What Is Unnatural" 378); this places once again the entire field of fiction within the domain of the non-mimetic—an imperialistic takeover of the favorite (though not exclusive) territory of traditional narratology. Richardson, by contrast, seems to endorse 2, but he makes a three-way distinction between mimetic texts, which encompass 1 and 2a; non-mimetic texts (2b), which extend the boundaries of the mimetic; and radically unnatural, one could say anti-mimetic texts, which "do not attempt to extend the boundaries of the mimetic, but rather play with the very conventions of mimesis" (386). Within Richardson's category of anti-mimetic texts are those that break the logical principles of excluded middle and noncontradiction, those that make it impossible, because of unfillable gaps, to reconstitute a reasonably coherent fabula, those that prevent the application of what I have called the principle of minimal departure, and more generally those that frustrate the reader's reliance on real-world experience in interpreting the text. Such texts violate a conception of mimesis that has been proposed by Paul Ricoeur. According to this conception, mimesis is a logic of narrative emplotment that "mirrors the implicit inferential logic of action guiding our real-world experience" (Schaeffer and Vultur 310). In other words, according

to Ricoeur, a mimetic text is one whose characters have roughly the same reasons for acting as we have in the real world, no matter how different their world is from ours, while a non-mimetic text is one that prevents the interpretation of the characters' behavior as actions directed toward the fulfillment of desirable goals. According to this criterion, non-mimeticism can be attributed to the texts of the Theater of the Absurd, on which Richardson frequently relies, or to those novels by Beckett in which action in an external world is entirely replaced by a mind's (I dare not say narrator's) cogitations. On the other hand, Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is mimetic, despite the unexplainable character of Gregor Samsa's transformation, because his reasons for acting are understandable adaptations to his new situation (*pace* Iversen's analysis, qtd. in Richardson, "Unnatural" 13–14). Similarly, a storyworld where time moves backward, though impossible (at least as far as our experience of time is concerned), can be regarded as mimetic when the behavior of characters is interpretable, and the mental frame constitutive of narrativity remains applicable: it is, for instance, easy to summarize *Time's Arrow* by Martin Amis. Thus, many of the texts that Richardson regards as anti-mimetic satisfy Ricoeur's conception of mimesis.

But what about those texts that are so riddled by contradictions that they do not project a world or a story, or that cannot be interpreted in terms of the logic of human action? Richardson asks readers to imagine "how different narratology would have been had Genette used Beckett's trilogy rather than Proust's *Recherche* as his tutor text" ("Unnatural" 392). Is Richardson suggesting a recentering of narratology around Beckett's novels and plays, which means, around non-mimetic/nonrealistic texts? This would amount to asking narratology to use texts of the lowest narrativity as its prototypes. Or is Richardson suggesting that the definition of narrativity should give equal status to Beckett or Robbe-Grillet as to Proust, to *Star Wars*, and to "Little Red Riding Hood"? I defy Richardson or his UN colleagues to provide a useful, intuitive definition that encompasses both mimetic and anti-mimetic texts, yet excludes obviously nonnarrative types such as purely descriptive, argumentative, or instructional texts. But defining concepts is not the strength of the school: its major method of persuasion is to overwhelm the reader with examples of unnatural narratives.

In a fuzzy set conception of narrativity, the texts that Richardson describes as anti-mimetic occupy the margins. They remain narrative to the extent that readers try to submit them to the fundamentally mimetic mental frame that defines narrativity. Since the real world is the only world that readers know,

they cannot try to understand these texts without drawing on their real-world experience. Such attempts may fail to give a complete, coherent image of the text; for instance, when a text presents contradictions, readers may have to form several partial images, each of which will account for segments of the text. This relative failure of mimetic interpretive patterns means that the texts are low in narrativity, though it certainly does not mean that they are low in aesthetic value, since the set of all narrative texts is not coextensive with the set of all literary or artistic texts. If the object of narratology is narrative texts, rather than artistic ones, narratology does not have to place the strangest creations of the postmodern imagination on the same footing as realistic novels, genre fiction, or fairy tales. When mimesis is lost, so is narrativity.

In summary, UN is doing useful work by focusing on experimental texts that subvert narrativity or develop new narrative techniques (I truly admire the width of Richardson's knowledge of postmodern texts), but the label under which it operates is not theoretically viable. Not only is the border between the natural and the unnatural hopelessly fuzzy ("fluid," writes Richardson, using a more positive term), but the proliferation and disparity of examples of unnaturalness on the levels of both discourse and story thin out the concept so much that it becomes useless. Why, for instance, should fictional narratives be considered less natural than factual ones? Most of the techniques specific to fiction are easily understood by readers because they are extensions, variations, or systematizations of familiar discourse strategies. For instance, when readers encounter an omniscient narrator, their reaction is not "How strange! This does not occur in the real world"; they rather accept it naturally, if I may use this term, because narratorial omniscience is the generalization of our innate tendency to exercise our theory of mind in order to report about other people's thoughts and emotions when telling stories about them. Look at conversational narratives: they are full of representations of what characters other than the narrator think. While these representations do not reach the complexity found in fiction, the difference is quantitative rather than qualitative, and it is our familiarity with them that allows us to understand the descriptions of inner life typical of novels, such as free indirect report of thought. Rather than insisting on a questionable distinction between natural and unnatural narratives, and rather than multiplying examples of unnaturalness *ad nauseam*, UN would be well advised to take a cognitive turn, in order to explain how readers adapt to narratively marginal texts, inconsistent storyworlds, and innovative narrative strategies.[2]

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NOTES

1. This dichotomy can be regarded as scalar, but it leads from natural to unnatural narratives, while the scalar conception of narrativity leads from highly narrative to nonnarrative texts.

2. If they adapt at all: not all experiments are successful.