

Marisa Bortolussi

Pushing the Narratological Envelope

Richardson's Proposal for Accommodating Antimimetic Fictions

Brian Richardson: *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History, and Practice*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press 2015. (= Theory and Interpretation of Narrative Series). 224 pp. USD 64.95. ISBN 978-0-8142-1279-0

Brian Richardson's *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History, and Practice* is a lucidly written monograph that makes a persuasive case for the need to continue the revision of current approaches to narrative in order to accommodate the extensive body of antimimetic fictional texts that exceed the scope and boundaries of traditional theories. Building on work dating back almost two decades – that established Richardson as the first scholar to conduct a systematic and rigorous exploration of unnatural fiction –, this book gathers and elaborates on several earlier strands of his thought, such as his reflections on, and analyses of time, space, frame, and characterization in postmodern and other unnatural fictions, and brings them together in a comprehensive and coherent whole. A plethora of literary examples spanning many centuries lends demonstrative and persuasive power to the author's main arguments.

The basic premises of Richardson's book are: a) that narrative theory, based on mimetic conventions of realist literary fiction, has not kept pace with that brand of narratives that flaunt those very conventions, that he calls unnatural or antimimetic; b) that therefore, a new paradigm is needed; and c) that the new paradigm must account for both mimetic and antimimetic texts. As the subtitle suggests, the monograph is structured around its three principal objectives: to offer a theory of unnatural narratives that builds on current theoretical models, to trace the history of such narratives since antiquity, and to demonstrate how unnatural texts can be analyzed within this new framework. One of the great strengths of the book is the abundant and compelling evidence for the author's claims. Clear and cogent descriptions and analyses of textual strategies employed in antimimetic, or unnatural fictions provide unassailable evidence of the timeless nature of this literature – such narratives have always existed, and therefore cannot be relegated to any literary time period. An equally important point born out by the author's textual analysis is the fact that unnatural elements crop up even in texts where they are least expected – in otherwise predominantly mimetic texts.

Part 1, consisting of the first two chapters, lays out the theoretical foundation of the book. Chapter 1 provides a definition of basic terms that distinguish unnatural narrative from other forms of storytelling. *Mimetic* texts, such as nineteenth-century realist fiction, model themselves on nonfictional forms of representation in that they create coherent, internally consistent story worlds. Under the rubric of the *nonmimetic*, the author includes *antirealist* texts, which include fantasy, fables, and animal stories. Both mimetic and nonmimetic texts “disguise their artificiality” (p. 4) to achieve an illusion of reality. In contradistinction to both mimetic and nonmimetic fiction, *antimimetic* narratives are *unnatural* in that they intentionally flaunt their transgression of mimetic conventions. Although much of this type of literature has been produced since the 1960s in the guise of postmodern fiction, the author provides examples of unnatural narrative techniques in Greek Old Comedy, Rabelaisian texts, Shandean novels, some Romantic texts, the *nouveau roman*, epic theater, theater of the absurd, *écriture féminine*, Menippean satire, and Kabuki plays. Chapter 1 also acknowledges several important literary scholars, such as Monika Fludernik, Dan Shen, and James Phelan, among others, who had already recognized the limitations of current literary theories with respect to this brand of fiction, and made conceptual and theoretical advancements that accommodate unnatural texts.

Building on this earlier work, Chapter 2 elaborates on the need to advance beyond available narratological models. Arguing against the basic, traditional concept of narrative as a communicative structure in which a narrating agent tells someone something for a purpose, the author goes on to show how many fictional narratives challenge assumptions related to each component of the communicative structure. Examples of works that incorporate “impossible, contradictory, or otherwise posthumanist acts of narration” (p. 33) challenge most narratologists’ assumption of human narrators. Works whose characters are fragmented, blend with other characters, or are depicted as non-anthropomorphic defy humanist conceptions of character. That such characters are part of the discourse, rather than separate entities in the story world, blurs the classic *fabula-synuzhet* distinction, as do certain plot transgressions, such as the representation of unreconstructable or contradictory chronologies, the inclusion of multiple beginnings, different possible plot lines (hypertexts), or divergent endings. Furthermore, the author argues that the very notion of meaning is to a large extent irrelevant in unnatural texts. Readers of unnatural fiction must therefore also be unconventional and adopt nonmimetic interpretive strategies. Authors sometimes convey expectations of their readers through the depiction of their narratees.

Part II, consisting of Chapters 3 and 4, is devoted to the application of the concepts and framework developed in Part I. In Chapter 3 the author adds new analytical categories to the narratological toolbox. To demonstrate how unnatural narratives defy traditional notions of narrative, in particular the assumptions of a single, coherent story, of a single *synuzhet*, and of clear beginnings and endings, the author describes strategies such as infinite, dual, multiple, or denarrated *fabulas* (i.e., those in which the discourse abolishes aspects of the *fabula*).

Chapter 4 examines texts that “call into question the very nature of fictionality” (p. 67). These texts paradoxically, at the same time foreground the difference between fiction and nonfiction, and challenge the boundaries that separate them. As in the previous chapters, a wide range of pertinent literary examples is provided. Among the samples of less radical transgression cited are works in which we encounter creators who merge with their characters, characters who cross the fictional divide to encounter their creators, or creators who insert themselves in some form into their fictional worlds. Other examples include non-fictional works that employ fictional techniques, such as mental access, temporal leaps, invented characters, and an invented narrator. More serious transgressions include works in which one author writes another’s autobiography, or “urfiction” (i.e., works that can be presented either as fiction or as nonfiction). All of these examples are playful experiments with the fiction-nonfiction divide, but, as the author admits, that boundary is rarely transgressed entirely; what we have instead are cases of a “dance along the border of the non-fictional” (88).

Part III, consisting of Chapters 5 and 6, highlight interesting examples of unnatural narratives from Antiquity through the nineteenth century. As noted earlier in the book, fictional works do not necessarily fit neatly in either the mimetic or antimimetic categories; rather, mimetic and antimimetic elements can coexist to differing degrees in the same work. Fiction that combines these categories to break the mimetic illusion, at least to some degree, has been with us for about two and a half millennia. How this dynamic is achieved at the level of the *fabula* through techniques such as impossible events, parody, liberalized metaphors, the fusing and exchanging of identities, hyperboles, and denarration is analyzed in Chapter 5. Examples discussed include works by Aristophanes, Lucian, and Sanskrit playwrights, notable Renaissance works by François Rabelais, Miguel de Cervantes, and William Shakespeare, and later fictions of Jonathan Swift, Henry Fielding, Laurence Sterne, Denis Diderot, Ludwig Tieck, Lord Byron, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Thomas Carlyle, and some Romantic authors. The author makes it clear that to qualify as unnatural, the antimimetic must operate at the level of the *fabula*, not the discourse, where the unnatural can be purely metaphoric.

Chapter 6 examines twentieth century postmodern fiction in relation to the unnatural. Central to this chapter is the critique of theories that attempt to define postmodernism as a period. Since almost all postmodern works are antimimetic “insofar as they problematize their own ontological status” (p. 129), and given the numerous early examples of such fiction provided in earlier chapters, it is clear that postmodernism dates back much earlier than previous theorists have acknowledged. Against the grain of period-based theories, the author advises casting postmodernism as a poetics and thinking of it in terms of family resemblances. On this account, postmodern narratives are defined as those that collapse standard dichotomies, such as self / other, fiction / reality, and author / narrator, among others. This approach, he argues, is more productive because it makes the recognition of early instances of the unnatural easy, and

avoids the forced assignment of works into period slots. His unnatural narratives approach leads him to two important conclusions: that “a fully developed post-modern poetics was fully in place at the very latest by the late teens and early twenties, and thrived throughout the 1930s” (p. 135), and that postmodernism and modernism sometimes interact within the same work. By way of practical application, analyses of key passages of *Ulysses* highlight some strategies by which Joyce played with the convention of representing fictional minds, such as allowing his characters the mental access traditionally reserved for omniscient narrators, and giving voice to inanimate objects.

Part IV, consisting of Chapter 7, is concerned with ideological uses of unnatural narratives by American ethnic, postcolonial, and feminist minorities from the 1960s, particularly, the innovative ways in which traditional story and plot, narration, character and frame conventions are deliberately subverted to better capture “the divided nature, experience, and consciousness of the oppressed” (p. 160). Among the long list of authors discussed are Patrick Chamoiseau, Langston Hughes, Caryl Phillips, Ayi Kwei Armah, Brigid Brophy, Toni Morrison, Angela Carter, Hertha D. Sweet Wong, Raja Rao, June Arnold, Paula Vogel, and Katherine Weese.

If the first seven chapters leave readers with lingering doubts about need to push the narratological envelope, the Conclusion should serve to dispel them. Dismayed by some narratologists’ disdain for unnatural narratives and their reluctance to accord these “antinarratives” a place in narrative theory, Richardson recalls Gerald Prince’s unbiased, more objective understanding of theory as a necessarily evolving practice that responds constructively to cases that test its validity. In keeping with Prince’s vision, the author proposes an inductive approach, one derived from a broad array of texts from all periods and cultures. Unlike static, classical narratological models, unnatural narrative theory has the advantage of coping with the “protean nature of creative fiction” (p. 169), which necessarily undergoes continual mutation.

While the book as a whole is very persuasive, there are a few minor details that appear to be less so. One example is the author’s suggested definition for narrative as “a representation of a causally connected series of events of some magnitude” (p. 52). This is hardly a new or insightful definition of narrative, and seems to suggest that unnatural narratives are departures from this basic definition, a perspective the book categorically refutes. One could also question to what extent “posthumanist” narrators really challenge traditional assumptions, since any narrating agent must necessarily be endowed with some degree of anthropomorphism. A third objection one could raise is that the author, while critical of classical narratology, nonetheless continues to endorse its prescriptive, and much critiqued concept of an implied reader. In Chapter 2 he explains how readers of postmodern, or unnatural fiction are intended to respond. Perhaps a more important question is how the textual strategies he outlines are processed by non-narratologist readers. That, of course, is an entirely different issue, and Richardson cannot be faulted for not providing information about real reader

response. In fact, up to now even scholars working in the field of empirical studies of literature have focused mainly on mimetic narratives. It is to be hoped that in the future this book will inspire them to tackle how real readers process the unnatural techniques he identifies and describes. But the point is that the concept of an implied reader is as problematic for unnatural narratives as it is for mimetic ones. And lastly, one could argue that the terminology is confusing: mimetic, nonmimetic, antimimetic, unnatural – these terms are not entirely separate: the nonmimetic (e.g. fantasy) shares properties with the mimetic; the antimimetic, in coexisting with the mimetic, does not entirely replace it. And the term *unnatural* is redundant; is “antimimetic” not sufficient?

These minor observations aside, *Unnatural Narrative* is an important contribution to the field of narratology. Whether it remains an isolated study, or becomes incorporated into new and comprehensive theoretical revisions, remains to be seen. For new students of narratology, assimilating a near half-century’s worth of research is a daunting task. However, a selected bibliography of narrative theories should definitely include this book.

Prof. Dr. Marisa Bortolussi
The Faculty of Arts
6-5 Humanities Centre
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Canada
T6G 2E5
E-mail: mbortolu@ualberta.ca

How to cite this article:

Bortolussi, Marisa: “Pushing the Narratological Envelope. Richardson’s Proposal for Accommodating Antimimetic Fictions [Review of: Brian Richardson: *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History, and Practice*. Columbus 2015]”. In: *DIEGESIS. Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research / Interdisziplinäres E-Journal für Erzählforschung* 7.1 (2018). 89-93.

URN: [urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20180522-173505-7](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20180522-173505-7)

URL: <https://www.diegesis.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/diegesis/article/download/303/482>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).