

Constructing a Poetics of the Other Literary “Great Tradition”: A Review of *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History, and Practice*

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Abstract *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History, and Practice* by Professor Richardson elucidates lucidly the theory of unnatural narratives, traces the history of unnatural narratives from antiquity to the present, provides some analyses of unnatural texts, and addresses a number of pressing theoretical questions. This book is the first monograph on the theory of unnatural narrative filling in a major gap in contemporary narrative theory. Unnatural works break through the generic and spatio-temporal narrow limits of largely realistic fictions and includes texts of various types, periods, genres and cultures, etc., and this book argues that this constitutes the material for a poetics of another literary “Great Tradition” which Professor Richardson attempts to construct. His ultimate ambition is to establish a more comprehensive and encompassing narrative theory.

Key words Brian Richardson; *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History, and Practice*; unnatural narratology; the other “Great Tradition”

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Narratology has stridden a long way from Wallace Martin’s judgment — “the theory of narrative has displaced the theory of the novel as a topic of central concern in literary study” (15) to Richardson’s prediction — “it is very likely to become increasingly central to literary studies” (“Recent Concepts of Narrative and the Narratives of Narrative Theory” 174), and from Herman’s observation — “an explosion of interest in narrative” (“Introduction” 4) to Alber’s exclamation — “the unnatural is everywhere” (“Unnatural Narrative, Unnatural Narratology: Beyond

Mimetic Models” 131). Undoubtedly, since narratology attracts great enthusiasm and tremendous research interest from academia, it has become a “prominent subject” by virtue of its own theoretical dynamics and interdisciplinary penetration. In the past twenty years or so, unnatural narratology has already developed into “the most exciting new paradigm in narrative theory” (Alber “Introduction” 1) and “a nonnegligible new strand” (Shang Biwu “On Unnatural Narratology” 96).

However, the fact is that unnatural narratology is a controversial topic as ever and “the picture is still not that clear” (Shen 483). As part of the “Group of International Unnatural Narrative Studies” (founded in 2008), Brian Richardson, Jan Alber, Henrik Skov Nielsen Stefan Iversen, and others have been working on this path and published provocative and theoretically rich papers and books in recent years, pursuing the ambition of constructing “a poetics of unnatural narrative”². In 2015, Richardson, as the founder of unnatural narratology, published the groundbreaking *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History, and Practice*³, the first monograph on unnatural narratology, which was also the milestone in narrative studies.

This article tries to help introduce the main contents of the monograph, illustrate the core concepts and feasibility of this theoretical construction, and interpret its values and influences on narrative theories and literature studies.

Introduction to *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History, and Practice* (henceforth as *Unnatural Narrative*)

Obviously, *Unnatural Narrative* is a monograph Richardson attaches great importance to. In the preface, he writes that “this book extends, complements, and undergirds my earlier work on narrative theory, and also contains my most recent, most accurate definitions, persuasive examples, and compelling arguments” (xix). Judging from these citations, we can safely draw a conclusion that *Unnatural Narrative* is Richardson’s relatively mature thoughts on unnatural narratives, so to speak, and this work is more “comprehensive, encompassing, and persuasive” than his former thoughts.

Unnatural Narrative as a whole establishes four clear goals at its beginning, namely, 1) to provide a full elucidation of the theory of unnatural narratives; 2) to trace the history of unnatural narratives from antiquity to the present; 3) to provide some analyses of unnatural texts; 4) and to address a number of pressing theoretical questions, such as the question of fictionality that authors of unnatural works repeatedly foreground (xiii). Based on the goals, *Unnatural Narrative* systematically distributes its contents and structures, and scientifically unfolds its

analyses and demonstrations.

Specifically, *Unnatural Narrative* is divided into four parts, containing seven chapters and the conclusion. The first part contains two chapters, and it is about the theory per se. The second part includes two chapters, and it is about the application of theory of unnatural narrative. The third part covers two chapters as well, and it is about the history of unnatural narrative and its development. The fourth part encompasses one chapter alone, but it is a very challenging and interesting exploration of ideological and unnatural narratives. In its conclusion, *Unnatural Narrative* restates the core concept of “antimimesis” and its relations to narrative theory as a whole. In this monograph Richardson boldly challenges some distinguished theorists, such as Tzvetan Todorov, Gerald Genette, Vladimir Propp, David Herman, Gerald Prince, and James Phelan, just to name a few; he then creatively reimagines certain core narrative terms or concepts including narration, fabula and syuzhet, narrator, narrativity, character, space, sequence, consistency, fictionality, fictional minds, reader, and narrative beginnings and endings, etcetera from an unnatural perspective.

In *Unnatural Narrative*, Richardson puts a particular emphasis on the necessity to establish “a poetics of unnatural narrative” through the examination of a large number of decidedly antimimetic narratives, which can add “additional concepts to the repertoire of the narratologist” (65). Thus the narratologist is able to elucidate such distinctive practices of antimimetic narratives as infinite fabulas, dual or multiple fabulas for story lines with inconsistent chronologies, internally contradictory fabulas, denarrated fabulas, metalepsis, autofiction, urficion, repeated and multiple versions of the same basic story, authors as characters, creators entering fictional worlds, and autobiographical traces in works of fiction. By greatly expanding the terms or concepts of fabula and syuzhet, Richardson attempts to do justice to the kinds of extreme narratives that are transforming and extending the possibilities of fiction.

Also in *Unnatural Narrative*, Richardson writes “unnatural narratives have a rich, varied, and extensive history, having been in existence for at least two and a half millennia” (91). *Unnatural Narrative* diachronically identifies the unnatural elements of literary works that have been long ignored in literary history across continents ranging from ancient Greek and Roman dramas, Sanskrit and ancient Chinese literature to the experimental works by postmodernists; these include Aristophanes, Petronius, Dante, Rabelais, Cervantes, Ben Jonson, Shakespeare, Swift, Fielding, Diderot, Stern, and Virginia Woolf, etc. Analyses from a historical perspective show the faultiness of positions that suggest that “such narratives are

very rare, don't bother with such texts" (163). Another thing worthy of mentioning is that *Unnatural Narrative* examines narratives not merely before postmodernism but also after it, including such new terms as post-postmodernism, altermodernism, cosmopolitanism, postirony, and digimodernism, which are much more appealing and persuasive.

Through *Unnatural Narrative*, Richardson thoroughly succeeds in his attempt to construct a poetics of unnatural narrative based on antimimetic narratives. As he puts it in the book, "narrative fiction is constructed between two poles: one mimesis, the other artifice. An exclusively mimetic theory can tell only half the story. A comprehensive narratology, by contrast, will embrace both" (172).

The Core Concepts and Feasibility of *Unnatural Narrative*

Unnatural narratives constitute an entire alternative literary history, the other "Great Tradition", though it is one that has been neglected or marginalized by histories, criticism, and theories constrained within the narrow limits of mimetic practice. With the efforts of scholars of unnatural narrative like Richardson, unnatural narratology has become one of the most vigorous and productive schools of narratological thought along with other sub-strands of postclassical narratology, such as feminist narratology, rhetorical narratology, and cognitive narratology. Even some narratologists who doubt or dispute some of the positions of unnatural narratology nevertheless alter their attitudes and conclude that the studies of unnatural narratives are "timely and significant" (Fludernik 364) and "fruitful and interesting" (Tobias Klauk and Tilmann Köppe 78).

If unnatural narratology is considered as a theory of unnatural narrative, the first issue that *Unnatural Narrative* needs to address is the definition and scope of unnatural narrative. In Richardson's opinion, narrative is "the presentation of a causally related series of events" (52). Grounded on this definition of narrative, he defines unnatural narrative as one that "contains significant antimimetic events, characters, settings or frames" (3). In other words, Richardson sets up a contrast between antimimetic narrative and mimetic narrative, where mimetic narrative refers to "those works of fiction that model themselves on or substantially attempt to depict the world of our experience in a recognizable manner" while antimimetic narrative "contravenes the presuppositions of nonfictional narratives, violates mimetic expectations and practices of realism, and defies the conventions of existing, established genres" (3). Therefore, as David Herman points out, "unnatural is used as a synonym for antimimetic" (Herman et al. 21) in Richardson inasmuch as antimimetic is the core concept of unnatural narrative.

Richardson states that mimetic conventions are ubiquitous in most nineteenth-century realist fictions, and it is the traditional goal of mimetic narratives that are similarly “striving for realism or verisimilitude” (3). However, unnatural narratives substantially transgress or violate the traditional conventions and antimimetic narratives often flaunt their unnatural aspects but downplay the natural ones.

Unnatural narrative theorists usually can be divided into two camps, which Richardson terms as intrinsic and extrinsic. No matter which camp one belongs to, no matter how odd the textual structure of an unnatural narrative is, and no matter how strange a text presents, the target of narrating is still “part of a purpose of communicative act” (19) and “about humans or human concerns” (20). These communicative acts can also be ideological. In *Unnatural Narrative* Richardson designates the seventh chapter to the unnatural narratives written by American ethnic, postcolonial, and feminist writers from 1960s to today, showing how the interpretation of unnatural narratives can also serve well for ideological and larger ethical purposes, as demonstrated by the work of such writers as Brecht, Caryl Churchill, Badal Sircar, Beckett, Toni Morrison, Amy Tan, Salman Rushdie, and others (143), which can partially account for the purposes of these unusual communicative acts.

Of course, there is always the question of mimetic narratives. James Phelan once affirmed his well-known definition about narrative as “somebody telling somebody else, on some occasion and for some purposes, that something happened to someone or something” (Phelan and Rabinowitz in Herman et al. 3). Shang Biwu redefines narrative as “the sequence grounded on certain media with significant meanings” (“What Is Narrative?” 66) after reexamining most narrative theories of all schools. Thus, whether we refer to “mimetic narrative” or “antimimetic narrative”, the fundamental purpose is to seek meaning in narrative, sometimes beyond the surface and by making all “strange narratives more readable” (Alber “Impossible Storyworlds — and What to Do with Them” 81).

The Values and Influences of *Unnatural Narrative*

As we all know, F. R. Leavis in *The Great Tradition* highly praises Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad and D. H. Lawrence for “a spirit” in them, by virtue of the spirit these writers can “truly say that what they write must be written from the depth of their religious experience, that makes them, in my opinion, so much more significant in relation to the past and future” (25) and Leavis passionately asserts “the great tradition of the English novel is *there*” (27). Obviously, “the Great Tradition” Leavis claims here is no other than “mimetic

narrative”, from which there are generations of important writers descending in literary history, however, it also causes “the other Great Tradition” to have been long ignored or marginalized. The “tradition of antimimetic narrative” nevertheless exists side by the Great Tradition constitutes another, independent history of narrative. In *Unnatural Narrative*, Richardson repeatedly declares this monograph is not to deny, overthrow or replace existing mimetic narratology but to add, extend or expand the current theories, and ultimately to construct a poetics of unnatural narrative or of the other literary “Great Tradition”.

Admittedly, *Unnatural Narrative* is not perfect or flawless. Compared to its rigorous logic and structure, rich examples of unnatural narrative, and refined diction and lines, one minor problem is that most of its unnatural examples come from Anglophone or European literature. It probably is unfair to criticize Richardson that more Asian or other literature should be involved, for he is one of narratologists who mention the greatest number of Asian literature as a western scholar. It indeed, however, inevitably causes a sense of “hemisphere blindness” (Shang Biwu Book Review 351). In addition, the monograph involves a larger series of new, relevant narrative devices or theoretical terms that require more complex, delicate, and in-depth analyses, as in, for instance, “unnatural elements without breaking the mimetic illusion in Shakespeare” (Shen 484-85). As the first scholarly monograph on unnatural narrative, undoubtedly, *Unnatural Narrative* fills in a gap of the field, urges existing narratology to be more thorough, encompassing, and comprehensive in scope. In light of all above, *Unnatural Narrative* is an essential read for those scholars who have interest in the narrative theory in general and in the theory of unnatural narrative in particular.

Notes

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2. *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative*, the title of the book co-edited by Jan Alber, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Brian Richardson, was published in 2013 by The Ohio State University Press.
3. *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History, and Practice* (2015) is regarded as the first monograph on unnatural narratology in the field of narrative studies. Although *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* is a book in which “unnatural” appears in the title, Professor Richardson indicates that it discusses many aspects of both “unusual” and “unnatural” narration without being entirely a monograph on the unnatural. Therefore, *Unnatural*

Narrative is definitely the first monograph on “unnatural narrative”.

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