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Naturalizing the *Loki Principle*

Brian Richardson Explores the Narrative Dynamics of Experimental Fiction

Brian Richardson: *A Poetics of Plot for the Twenty-First Century. Theorizing Unruly Narratives*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press 2019 (= Theory and Interpretation of Narrative Series). 218 pp. USD 69.95. ISBN 978-0-8142-1412-1

Narrative dynamics remains a fuzzy concept in narratology. While many theorists construe it as an exclusively text-internal feature comprising aspects of temporality, plot, and narrative progression, as well as the relation between story and discourse, others think of it rather as the dynamics emerging between a text and its recipients during the act of reading. According to Brian Richardson, "narrative dynamics is a perspective that views narrative as a progressively unfolding, interconnected system of elements" (2008 [2005], 353) that includes the functions of narrative beginnings and endings, the temporality of narration, as well as the structure and progression of a narrative's plot (cf. 2002, 2). In his new thought-provoking monograph, he sets out to explore how this system plays out in the context of experimental literature, especially the genre of narrative fiction.

Structure and Main Arguments

Judging from the book's title – *A Poetics of Plot for the Twenty-First Century. Theorizing Unruly Narratives* – readers will probably expect a study of literary experiments in the twenty-first-century novel. But the fact that Richardson investigates a surprising number of examples from twentieth-century modernist and postmodernist fiction should disabuse them of that impression. This does not mean, however, that the title sets us off on the wrong track. Quite the contrary, it is more an advance signal alerting us to one of the book's central arguments: Richardson construes postmodernism as an important turning point in Western literary history that has allowed narrative fiction to free itself from the shackles of realism dominating nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fiction. Seen from this angle, contemporary writing can be regarded as a continuation of the numerous literary experiments produced by postmodernist writers, who, in turn,

were inspired by the innovative style of modernist fiction and early-twentieth-century avant-garde writing (cf. p. 5).

For Richardson, then, postmodernism marks the moment in which narrative fiction shifted from a predominantly mimetic mode of representation based on the principles of realism to what he designates as antimimetic, or 'unnatural,' narrative (cf. pp. 2–3).[1] Antimimetic works, he argues, "elude, defy, or parody the conventions painstakingly upheld by the mimetic authors" by "develop[ing] new methods and techniques" that "[t]ransform the patterns found in the world" (p. 3). Since these texts often deploy "new kinds of emplotment, sequencing, embedding, ending, and narrative itself," they raise questions about how this "new narrative order" can be theorized (p. 2). Richardson observes that much research has centered on the distinction between story and plot, narrative beginnings or endings, and narrative progression, as well as the politics of plot since the beginnings of narratology in the mid-1960s (cf. pp. 5–7). Nonetheless, he finds fault with the fact that most of these studies adhere to the 'classic' form of narrative progression characterized by both a clearly identifiable beginning and ending of the story as well as the representation of a series of events that are causally related (cf. p. 7). While most conventional narratives conform to this teleological pattern, experimental fiction tends to violate or at least challenge it. Richardson therefore concludes that the 'classic' model is too limited "to fully [take] up the challenges of postmodernism" (p. 2) and makes a case for "a more dialectical approach" (p. 8) to narrative dynamics which integrates both conventional and experimental fiction.

It is important to note that Richardson does not intend to replace the existing narratological paradigm; instead, he seeks to revise and extend existing analytical categories. He focuses on seven aspects of narrative dynamics (outlined below). The seven chapters draw on the same methodology: Richardson first assembles, from various periods, a series of narratives he deems particularly relevant or interesting with regard to the aspect under discussion and then proceeds to "model this material" by "identifying shared features and noting salient differences" (p. 8). Such a bottom-up method, he emphasizes, not only stands in stark contrast to self-limiting works that take a single, paradigmatic text as their basis for theory design, but is also best suited to do justice to the complex and "constantly self-modifying" system of literature (p. 9).

Analyzing the Dynamics of Unruly Narratives: A Descriptive Poetics

Chapter 1 deals with the most basic question of narratology: What is narrative? Richardson first summarizes the most influential definitions – Genettian, cognitive, rhetorical, temporal, and causal, as well as recent attempts to define narrative by means of prototypical instances (cf. pp. 15–21). His critical overview reveals that none of the existing definitions seems to account for literary texts

which "differ radically from ordinary, standard, or otherwise unremarkable narratives" (p. 21). While most proponents of the approaches referenced by Richardson would probably be satisfied with the idea that such literary experiments simply challenge or transgress the boundaries of what can be considered to be narrative, Richardson insists that "we need to have better, more accurate definitions" (p. 8). In light of this, it comes as something of a surprise that he himself advocates a variant of the causal definition as the most appropriate case: "narrative is a representation of a causally related series of events" (p. 28). Richardson justifiably sees many advantages in this formulation: the term *representation* includes verbal and nonverbal narratives, and the qualifying phrase *causally related* suggests "a much looser, more oblique, and more indefinite relation than direct entailment" (p. 28); besides, this definition does not require any human or humanlike characters, nor does it discriminate against works that feature contradictions in the plot. It seems debatable, however, whether this actually pulls off the trick. For the categories Richardson subsequently invokes to construe experimental texts as narrative foreground exactly those features that would probably cause other theorists to question the narrativity of these very texts. These include the non-event (cf. pp. 33–34), the unnarrated, the disnarrated, and the denarrated (cf. pp. 34–36), and particularly the concept of what he terms "quasi narratives" (cf. pp. 21–29) – that is, texts which "[leave] open the question of whether they are on one side or the other of [the] boundary [of narrativity]" (p. 21).

Chapter 2 is dedicated to narrative beginnings. As Richardson maintains, narratology has only recently started to show an interest in this subject, mainly generating theories that highlight the fixed, paradoxical, or arbitrary dimensions of the beginnings of a narrative (cf. pp. 37–42). Drawing on more multifaceted studies by Andrea Del Lungo, James Phelan, and Catherine Romagnolo, Richardson devises a model which distinguishes four kinds of beginnings that can be found in any written narrative (cf. pp. 43–53). The beginning of the *syuzhet*, Richardson contends, is often easy to determine because in most cases it simply is the first page of the narrative proper. The task of determining the beginning of the *fabula*, on the other hand, may pose several difficulties, especially if a narrative text contains references to the past, as is the case in James Joyce's "The Dead" (1914): Does the story begin with the first narrated event (i.e. the guests' arrival at the Christmas party at the Morkans' house) or does the beginning involve one of the past events alluded to in the characters' conversations (and if so, which one)? After pondering several options, Richardson arrives at the conclusion that it must be "the earliest event that significantly impacts later events in the story" (p. 48). Interpretation is the key. When it comes to the analysis of the authorial antetext (i.e. the paratext provided by the author such as the dedication, table of contents, or preface), Richardson identifies two common ways in which experimental works can violate traditional conventions: They either "include all the appropriate introductory units but […] situate them in all the wrong places," as is the case in Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–1767), where the preface occurs in the middle of the third book and the

dedication in the fifth volume; or they "introduce fictional elements into the conventionally nonfictional apparatus such as the author's preface" (p. 51). The beginning of the institutional antetext – i.e. that type of paratext which is provided by agencies other than the author (e.g. the publisher or cover designer) – may be particularly relevant if it provides information that opposes or contradicts its authorial counterpart (cf. pp. 52–53).

The next two chapters are complementary to each other, given that they both address narrative middles. In Chapter 3, Richardson focuses on the concept of plot. He claims that the vast research on this topic generally concurs "that events in a narrative may be either episodically conjoined or be more tightly woven together in a more or less continuous causal chain" (p. 61). Questioning the usefulness of this distinction, he argues that "it seems much more cogent to view the two as opposite poles of the same spectrum," and suggests that one should instead distinguish between "essentially mimetic plots" on the one hand and "unnatural plots" on the other (p. 62). The first include episodic plots, which we encounter, for example, in the picaresque novel; the so-called classic plot, which has long been considered the norm by both ancient and modern literary theorists; fragmentary plots; as well as double and multiple plots (cf. pp. 62–66). Mimetic texts can, moreover, display what Richardson refers to as "pseudoplot," a structure which he again illustrates with the example of Joyce's "The Dead." Turning to James Phelan's model of narrative progression, he shows that Joyce's short story keeps presenting readers with a series of ostensible instabilities between the characters within the story and tensions generated by the discourse, all of which are quickly resolved as the narrative proceeds (cf. pp. 66–68). In this respect, "The Dead" differs from modern texts which display what Brian McHale identifies as "weak narrativity." Since these texts either renounce or mock "traditional, especially Victorian, devices for generating narrative interest" (p. 68), they pave the way for the characteristic of plotlessness in postmodernist texts. Richardson completes the inventory of his narratological toolbox for the analysis of antimimetic plot structures by introducing three new categories to describe what he calls "oneiric plots," "carnivalesque plots," and "contradictory plots" (cf. pp. 70–72). The chapter closes with a concise, yet insightful discussion of the development of the concept of tellability in the history of British fiction (cf. pp. 78–81).

After examining the category of plot, Richardson attends to forms of narrative progression which rely on other principles of event sequencing than those entailed by the spectrum outlined above. Chapter 4 discusses various methods of ordering by which the events of a story can be patterned even if the text circumvents or, yet further, goes directly against standard forms of plotting: intertextual, rhetorical, aesthetic, alphabetical, serial, and random ordering (cf. pp. 84–96). While the names of these six categories are straightforward, the remaining three patterns require further elaboration. A collage composition, Richardson explains, recombines several key elements in a number of different arrangements and contexts, with the collage itself "[constituting] the nexus that connects the different units" (p. 94). He, moreover, speaks of "visual" and

"verbal event generators" if a narrative's structure is mainly brought about through (fictional) pictures evoked by and select words or metaphors occurring in the text, respectively (cf. pp. 89–92). Both of these ordering principles, Richardson argues, "regularly defy conventions of mimesis and supplant plot altogether" (p. 96), whereas some of the other non-plot-based forms of narrative progression, especially rhetorical and aesthetic ordering, frequently serve as a complement to more traditional kinds of emplotment. Based on these findings, Richardson proposes to reconceptualize "plot as a component of narrative sequencing that is independent of and working in varying degrees of complementarity with or opposition to other kinds of progression" (p. 97).

Chapter 5 continues to explore the aspect of narrative temporality in experimental fiction. The greater part of this chapter focuses on what Richardson designates as "antimimetic forms of time in the fabula" (p. 103). He notes that Genette's renowned categories of order, duration, and frequency are adequate to describe these aspects of temporality in nonfictional narrative as well as in realist and most cases of modernist fiction. Late modernist and especially postmodern texts, however, often seek to defy or challenge realist conceptions of narrative temporality, with the result that Genette's model loses its accuracy when it comes to analyzing these texts. Richardson therefore introduces six kinds of temporal reconstruction typically encountered in antimimetic fiction: circular chronology; antinomic or backward narration; the hypothetical mode of narratives written in the imperative mood; the self-contradictory story, which is characterized by the depiction of incompatible and irreconcilable versions of the narrative events; multiple temporalities, which can be found in novels such as Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), or Ian McEwan's *The Child in Time* (1987); and denarrated temporality, which occurs in works that lack any recoverable story from which a chronology of events could be reconstructed (an example would be Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* [1951]) (cf. pp. 104–112). In the remaining part of the chapter, Richardson discusses the postmodernist play with the relation between story time and discourse time as well as recent trends of writing novels in the present or future tenses rather than the traditional past tense (cf. pp. 113–119). He also broaches related topics such as the historical time of a work (cf. pp. 100–101) as well as narrative length and pace (cf. pp. 116–117 and pp. 120–121, respectively), thus inviting readers to think more carefully about the ways in which real-world temporal configurations shape our reading experiences.

Next, Richardson concentrates on the dyad of story and text, or *fabula* and *syuzhet*. He begins Chapter 6 by identifying two approaches that have crystallized since the beginning of narratology: one that gives primacy to the *fabula* over the *syuzhet* and the other that takes the obverse stance. Richardson finds fault with both positions. The first, in postulating that "there is an objective, preexisting order of events that can be either followed or inverted in its narration" (p. 128), is an approach which for Richardson reveals a strong mimetic bias which only holds for nonfiction. The second approach, on the other hand, he takes as applying exclusively to fiction, for "only in *fiction* is the discourse of the text the

only source for the fabula" (p. 128; italics in the original). In view of antimimetic fiction, Richardson argues, one should focus on a different distinction that has largely been neglected so far, namely that "between texts with a single, retrievable fabula and those without one" (p. 129). By revisiting a series of examples discussed in previous chapters, he shows that most experimental texts "extend far beyond the Russian formalists' *fabula* and *syuzhet* and Genette's category of order" (p. 133), hence overriding any attempts to adequately describe the relation between these categories. Richardson, in the rest of the chapter, consequently refrains from introducing any further analytical categories, presenting instead some interesting cases that bring forth new textual arrangements or even play with the materiality of text.

Chapter 7, finally, deals with narrative endings. Richardson first discusses four typical endings of mimetic texts – fixed, loose, covert, and absent (cf. pp. 149–158) – to demonstrate that the fixed conclusions aspired to by nineteenth-century realist writers are far from being the norm (cf. p. 158). He then moves on to investigate endings that are representative of antimimetic fiction. These so-called unnatural endings "may either refuse closure" – for example, if the narrative displays a circular structure or denarrates final events – "or provide a powerful sense of an ending" (p. 158), which is often paired with parodic elements. Other forms of antimimetic endings are forking-path endings and metafictional fusions. The former typically occur in narratives that display several forking paths whose different branches generate incompatible endings (cf. p. 159). The latter can be found in novels such as David Toscana's *El Ultimo lector* [*The Last Reader*] (2009), in which the strands of the frame narrative and all embedded narratives eventually "merge in the pages that readers hold in their hands" (p. 161). Richardson closes the chapter with a brief prospect of the aesthetic, ideological, and ethical functions of narrative endings, which offer readers a range of starting points for further research on the topic.

Conclusion

Readers who are familiar with Richardson's prior work will note that, although the terms *antimimetic* and *unnatural* occasionally pop up, the volume makes a less vigorous claim for what Richardson has previously envisaged as an unnatural narrative theory.[2] Indeed, as the author himself concedes, the book carefully eschews "any larger, metacritical debates over the philosophy of narratology that concepts of the unnatural have provoked" (p. 3 n. 1). Instead, it centers on arguments that are consistently based on what Richardson calls the *Loki Principle* "which states that whenever a literary convention becomes powerful or ubiquitous, someone will come along and violate that convention" (p. 3).[3] It seems to me that this may be a first step towards a more productive and fruitful dialogue between unnatural narrative theory and other narratological approaches. For although Richardson considers it "[a] central axiom of *antimimetic* poetics" (p. 3;

my emphasis), I believe his account of the narrative dynamics of unconventional texts has shown that the *Loki Principle* also holds if we abandon the dispute over the adequacy of the concept of the 'unnatural' and simply take these texts for what they are: literary experiments that challenge our understanding of narrative.

Richardson certainly sets high standards for approaching such texts from the perspective of narrative theory. He extends the narratological toolbox by introducing new analytical categories that help us to come to terms with innovative and experimental forms of narrative ordering and narrative emplotment. In addition to this, he offers his readers an impressive overview of innovative textual experiments in the history of world literature, ranging from Greek antiquity to the present day. The volume will certainly appeal to a wide readership, including narratologists, literary scholars working on (post)modernist and contemporary fiction, informed readers of world literature, and students of literary history. In short: a must-read for anyone interested in experimental fiction.

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[1] This does not mean, however, that experimental narrative is a phenomenon that first occurred only in the twentieth century. Richardson acknowledges that antimimetic representations of events date back to Greek antiquity; indeed, he even discusses quite a few examples from periods before modernism throughout the book.

[2] Cf. e.g. Richardson 2015, especially Part I, and 2016.

[3] Richardson does not elucidate the name of the principle, but it seems reasonable to infer that it derives from the god Loki in Norse mythology, as Richardson clarifies elsewhere that the principle is inspired by Meir Sternberg's Proteus Principle, which, in turn, receives its name from a god in Greek mythology (cf. Richardson 2016, 396).