

# A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative

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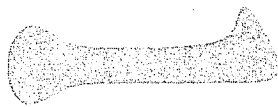
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## Unnatural Stories and Sequences



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A CONVENTIONAL, realistic, or conversational natural narrative typically has a fairly straightforward story of a certain magnitude that follows an easily recognizable trajectory. Unnatural narratives challenge, transgress, or reject many or all of these basic conventions; the more radical the rejection, the more unnatural the resulting story is. For me, the fundamental criterion of the unnatural is its violation of the mimetic conventions that govern conversational natural narratives, nonfictional texts, and realistic works that attempt to mimic the conventions of nonfictional narratives. In what follows, I will focus on works that are decidedly antimimetic, but I will also look at some other extremely unusual sequences whose startling unconventional situations situate them at the edge of the unnatural. Thus, the most striking aspect of Nabokov's *Pale Fire* is not the invention of the fictitious country of Zembla but the narrative that emerges from the unlikely source of a poem and the mad commentary it inspires. These examinations will in turn allow me to explore the larger implications of such texts, examining how they test or defy the concept of narrative itself, of a single self-consistent story, of a fixed presentation (*syuzhet*) of the story (*fabula*), of beginnings and endings, and of the idea of a single story.

### 1. Narrativity

The most fundamental interrogation of traditional story is that of narrative itself: does a given assemblage of words constitute a narrative, does it constitute a different kind of text, or does it hover somewhere at the very border of narrativity? A number of recent works navigate just this boundary. Rick Moody's story "Primary Sources" consists solely of an alphabetical list of titles in the narrator's library and a series of thirty footnotes that comment on each book. This sketchy and selective bibliography is really an autobiography; the narrator avers; as we read and more of the footnotes, we get more information about the narrator's life. Thus, the annotation to the first book, William Parker Abbé's *A Diary of Sketches*, begins: "Art instructor at St. Paul's School when I was there ('75-'79)" (231). The narrative bits accumulate to the point where we can indeed place a number of episodes into a causally related temporal sequence and thereby construct a partial, fragmentary, episodic narrative. Other texts similarly challenge narrative practices and limits. J. G. Ballard's "The Index" is merely an index to a fictional biography that nevertheless divulges the entire, unbelievable life history of a certain Henry Rhodes Hamilton (sample entry: "Churchill, Winston, conversations with HRH, 221; at Chequers with HRH, 235; spinal tap performed by HRH, 247; at Yalta with HRH, 298; 'iron curtain' speech, Fulton Missouri, suggested by HRH, 312; attacks HRH in Commons debate, 367"). Ballard has also written another story that is composed solely of a single sentence, each word of which is annotated ("Notes Towards a Mental Breakdown"). And there are even more extreme examples of such experiments, such as the set of annotations to a text that has been erased in Jenny Boully's "The Body" (2003). As its second footnote states, "It is not the story I know or the story that you tell me that matters; it is what I already know, what I don't want to hear you say. Let it exist this way, concealed" (437).

Other writers play with but may not quite attain narrative status; that is, the assemblages fail to cohere into an identifiable story. This is arguably the case in David Shields's unusual piece "Life Story," a collection of actual American bumper stickers arranged in thematic clusters along a vaguely temporal trajectory. It begins:

First things first.

You're only young once, but you can be immature forever. I may grow old,

but I'll never grow up. Too fast to live, too young to die. Life's a beach.

Not all men are fools; some are single. 100% Single. I'm not playing hard to get; I am hard to get. I love being exactly who I am.

Heaven doesn't want me and Hell's afraid I'll take over. I'm the person your mother warned you about: Ex-girlfriend in trunk. Don't laugh; your girlfriend might be in here.

The text goes on to assemble a number of other clusters concerning activities, personal predilections, and sexual identifiers. The latter include a number of insistently erotic ones: "Girls wanted, all positions, will train. Playgirl on board. Party girl on board. Sexy blonde on board. Not all dumbs are blonde." More philosophical statements about the nature of human existence appear later in the text: "Love sucks and then you die. Gravity's a lie; life sucks. Life's a bitch; you marry one, then you die. Life's a bitch and so am I. Beyond bitch." Culturally coded female voices emerge with greater frequency, some crass, others cynical: "So many men, so little time. Expensive but worth it. If you're rich, I'm single. Richer is better. Shopaholic on board. Born to shop. I'd rather be shopping at Nordstrom. Born to be pampered. A woman's place is the mall. When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping. Consume and die. He who dies with the most toys wins. She who dies with the most jewels wins. Die, yuppie scum." The entire cycle of family life is represented, from "Baby on board" to "My kid beat up your honor student" to references to grandchildren. Bumper stickers involving aging are collected later in the text: "I may be growing old, but I refuse to grow up. Get even: live long enough to become a problem to your kids. We're out spending our children's inheritance." The text ends with references to dementia and death: "Of all the things I've lost, I miss my mind the most. I brake for unicorns. Choose death."

If a narrative is a representation of a causally connected series of events of some magnitude, then it is not clear that this collection qualifies as a narrative. The subject seems too scattered, too contradictory; the narrative too unconnected, often because it is too specific in identifying antithetical predilections and its incompatible target audiences. I see this rather as a pseudonarrative, a collection that mimics but does not comprise a genuine narrative, however minimal.

Samuel Beckett challenges the boundaries of narrative in a different manner. His story "Ping" presents a series of descriptions that are repeated and slightly varied throughout the text. Other oddities of this piece are the absence of any active verbs and the irregular interjection of the syllable "ping." The reader is challenged by a number of interpretative questions, a central one being whether the text is a narrative or not; that is, does it simply display a group of descriptions, or do those images constitute a narrative; that is, can one derive a fabula from these images? The space is a confined, white enclosure: "White walls one yard by two white ceiling one square yard never seen"

(*Prose* 193). The central figure is human or humanoid: "bare white body fixed one yard legs joined like sewn" (193). The body is immobile in a semi-geometrical position: "hands hanging palms front white feet heels together right angle" (193). The only nonwhite entity seems to be the figure's eyes: "Only the eyes only just light blue almost white" (193).

James Knowlson and John Pilling even aver that "it is impossible to read *Ping* in the consecutive manner in which we read a narrative that is ongoing in its syntax (say, *Ulysses*). It resembles rather a piece of sculpture that we contemplate from outside, attuning ourselves to the shape and texture of the materials" (169). Nevertheless, as these descriptions recur, the reader, like the narratologist, looks for signs of life and movement: if there is no change, there can be no narrative. Beckett teasingly offers a few scraps of possible, if minimal, transformation. The light is sometimes described as "light grey almost white" (193); this could mean that the light source changes or merely that the original depiction is being slightly modified. There seems to be a sound: "Murmur only just almost never one second perhaps not alone" (193). This is our first indication of any passage of time; the murmur would presumably be coming from the supine figure. Then there is the irregularly occurring word "Ping," which may be a repeated mechanical sound in the storyworld or simply an aspect of the work's strange discourse. The blue eyes seem to turn black and a possible fleeting memory may appear as the ping syllable recurs with greater frequency: "Ping perhaps not alone one second with image same time a little less dim eye black and white half closed long lashes imploring that much memory almost never" (195). It is not immediately clear what the phrase (if it is a single phrase) "implore that much memory" means (the figure has enough memory to enable him to implore?); the two terms "implore" and "memory" do suggest a temporal passage, if only a brief, painful one. This reading seems confirmed by the text's last sentence: "Head haught eyes white fixed front old ping last murmur one second perhaps not alone eye unlitrous black and white half closed long lashes imploring ping silence ping over" (196). This text plays at the edges of narrative, suggesting the most minimal possible narrative of an immobile figure in pain, with memories, imploring; however, we are never able to say definitively that it does in fact cross over the boundary into narrative.

Robbe-Grillet challenges narrativity from the opposite end of the spectrum. If Beckett's text has too few events, Robbe-Grillet's has far too many contradictory ones. His story "The Secret Room" presents several depictions of what superficially appears to be the same scene at different times. Sometimes they appear to be a series of actions, scrambled in time; at others, the text seems to depict several visual images, presumably paintings, which either

can form a narrative or else are merely variations on a theme. Both interpretations are right and wrong: characters are described as moving, which indicates the presence of a narrative, though other images are depicted as painted. The reader is challenged to actively assemble from the pieces of the text a narrative of a gothic murder and the escape of the killer. However, because of contradictions in the descriptions of the setting, it remains a quasi-story; the fabula will not stay fixed, it does not endure as a representation of a single set of events. In other words, the only way a narrative can emerge is if a reader disregards the contradictions, takes up the events and, forcibly adding the narrativity, turns them into a story. The governing (or generating) figure is the spiral, which is manifested in numerous spatial patterns as well as in the work's temporality. It becomes clear that the text is not a realistic representation of a series of events that could occur in the world, but rather a uniquely fictional creation that can only exist as literature.

## 2. Fabula

One of the most foundational concepts in narrative theory is the dyad of fabula and syuzhet, or the distinction between the story that we infer from a text and presentation of that text itself. This distinction, established by the Russian formalists, has been around for nearly a century and is referred to in a variety of ways, including the French structuralist terms *histoire* and *récit*, and story and text. (In this essay, I will retain the Russian formalist terms for analytical precision.) Meir Sternberg has indicated the importance of this distinction for narrative theory, asserting that "actional discourse, whether literary or historical or cinematic, presupposes temporal extension [which] provides a natural principle of coherence, one that enables the narrator to construct his presentational sequence, [...] according to the logic of progression inherent in the line or chain of events themselves; from earlier to later and from cause to effect" (60–61).

As his metaphors of line and chain indicate, Sternberg here reveals himself to be trapped by mimetic presuppositions. As Monika Fludernik has pointed out, "the story vs discourse opposition seems to repose on a realist understanding of narrative" (334). A noncontradictory fabula can indeed be derived from every correctly formed nonfictional or conversational natural narrative, as well as the mimetic or realist works of fiction that strive to resemble these discourse types.<sup>1</sup> There remain, however, a number of varieties of unnatural

1. It may be objected that an unreliable narrator of a realist novel or an incompetent or

fabulas that elude the mimetic model which narrative theory needs to account for. A narrative can circle back on itself, as the last sentence becomes the first sentence, and thus continues for eternity (Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, 1939; Nabokov's "The Circle," 1936); such a fabula is infinite. In other works, time passes at different speeds for different groups of people. Thus, in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, four days pass for the nobles in the orderly city while—at the same time—two days pass in the enchanted forest (see Richardson "Time"). In Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928), twenty years pass for the protagonist while three and a half centuries pass for those around him (her); similarly, in Caryl Churchill's play *Cloud Nine* (1979), twenty-five years pass for the characters while a full century passes for the rest of the world. These cases result in dual or multiple fabulas.

Other texts have several contradictory sequences of events (Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie*, 1957; Robert Coover's "The Babysitter," 1969). Some of the different, incompatible endings all present in Coover's text include the following: the babysitter accidentally drowns the baby, the husband who hired her comes back early to have sex with her, the babysitter is raped and murdered by neighborhood boys, the family returns to find all is well, and the mother learns from the television that the children are murdered, her husband is gone, there is a corpse in the bathtub, and her house is destroyed. Ursula Heise has observed that such novels "project into the narrative present and past an experience of time which normally is only available for the future: time dividing and subdividing, bifurcating and branching off continuously into multiple possibilities and alternatives" (55). Instead of one event precluding several other possible options, all possibilities can be seen to have been actualized. In none of the examples noted in this section can one easily extract a single, consistent story from a fixed syuzhet the way one might in any natural or realistic narrative.<sup>2</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, referring to the contradictory fabula in *Jalousie*, stated: "It was absurd to propose that in the novel . . . there existed a clear and unambiguous order of events, one which was not that of the sentences of the book, as if I had diverted myself by mixing up a pre-established calendar the way one shuffles a deck of cards" (New 154) and went on to state that for him there existed no possible order outside of that found within the pages themselves. This text does not mimic realistic narratives whose syuzhets

deceptive conversational narrator can have inconsistencies in their stories; this fact does not invalidate the larger principle I am developing. In such cases, the inconsistencies are epistemological, based on faulty narration of a fixed set of events, not ontological, denoting incompatible realities.

2. For additional discussions of many of these forms, see my essay "Beyond Story and Discourse" and Rüdiger Heinz's essay in this volume.

will divulge a single fabula; here one has only an indeterminate, contradictory fabula.

Still other kinds of unnatural fabula also exist. Some of Lorrie Moore's stories mimic the form of the self-help manual and provide hypothetical sequences of possible events: "Begin by meeting him in a class, a bar, at a rummage sale. Maybe he teaches sixth grade. Manages a hardware store. Foreman at a carton factory. He will be a good dancer . . . A week, a month, a year. Feel discovered, comforted, needed, loved, and start sometimes, somehow, to feel bored" (55). Matt DeComte has suggested that texts like this "do not have a story in the traditional sense: the entire action consists of discourse because the prescribed events are hypothetical/conditional; nothing has actually happened" (214). For him, there is no actual fabula. Nevertheless, I argue that there are finite though variable indications of how much time elapses: "a week, a month, a year," is not the same as "after ten seconds" or "after twenty years"; radically different temporal parameters would produce a very different narrative. It is also the case that the story proceeds as if the originally hypothetical events had in fact taken place, as possible future events become transformed into an incontrovertible past.

Two other experimental techniques employ features of the discourse to create or destroy the fabula. These two are textual generators and denarration (see Richardson, "Beyond the Poetics of Plot," and *Unnatural* [87-94]). Both appear prominently at the beginning of Robbe-Grillet's *In the Labyrinth*: first we learn that "outside it is raining [. . .] the wind blows between the bare black branches" (141); in the next sentence this setting is denarrated as we are informed instead that "outside the sun is shining: there is no tree, no bush to cast a shadow" (141). Inside the room there is fine dust that coats every surface; this dust in turn generates what will become the definitive weather beyond the walls of the house: "Outside it is snowing" (142). Similarly, other surface images on the inside generate objects in the storyworld: the impression of a letter opener becomes a soldier's bayonet; a rectangular impression produces the mysterious box that the soldier carries; a desk lamp gives rise to a street lamp outside in the snow, which in turn yields up a soldier leaning against it, clutching a box; and a realistic painting, "The Defeat at Reichentfels," literally brings to life the military events it depicts. The descriptions here bring into being the events they suggest, as the discourse creates the story; in the case of denarration, by contrast, the discourse abolishes both the setting and the fabula.

In other works both the fabula and the syuzhet are variable. In "choose-your-own-story" texts such as Raymond Queneau's 1961 "A Story as You Like It," the reader is offered a series of options to choose from; both fabula

and syuzhet are multilinear and variable, though once a particular event is selected, it becomes fixed; this is the principle around which many hyperfiction are constructed. Ana Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986) operates along similar principles. The book consists of a series of letters sent by one of the characters, but not all are intended to be apprehended by the reader. Instead, the author offers three different reading sequences depending on the reader's sensibility. Thus, the conformist is told to begin with letters 2 and 3 and then to go to number 6, while the cynic is to start with letters 3 and 4 before going on to number 6. The quixotic reader is offered yet another different sequence: 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. It is important to note that each sequence produces a different story. Thus, we have a partially variable syuzhet that, once selected, produces different fabulas.

### 3. Syuzhet

In the last section I examined antimimetic elements of a narrative's fabula; in this section we will discuss some mimetic stories the telling of which defies natural and realist conventions. In virtually every natural, realistic, or mimetic narrative, the syuzhet of a work is always linear. In the words of Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, "the disposition of elements in the text . . . is bound to be one-directional and irreversible, because language prescribes a linear figuration of signs and hence a linear presentation of information about things. We read letter after letter, word after word, sentence after sentence, chapter after chapter, and so on" (45). For the most part, she is correct: the syuzhet of a text is simply the sequence of pages you hold in your hand or the events you experience in performance. But this statement does not apply to all experimental and unnatural stories, whose reception is necessarily different from that of any natural narrative. Joyce Carol Oates, for example, alters the physical layout of the standard printed page to create a "simultaneity effect" by using two parallel columns to disclose the simultaneous thoughts of separate individuals in her story "The Turn of the Screw."

Milorad Pavić's *Landscape Painted with Tea* is a novel that mimics the form of a crossword puzzle. After an opening section, the reader is offered two possible syuzhets, a linear one that corresponds to the "across" pattern of a crossword puzzle, and another that imitates its "down" sequence and leaps across independent sections of the text as the reader follows separate plot lines in isolation from each other. The narrator reflects on both kinds of reading as he asks rhetorically: "Why now introduce a new way of reading a book, instead of one that moves, like life, from beginning to end, from birth

to death?" He continues, "because any new way of reading that goes against the matrix of time, which pulls us toward death, is a futile but honest effort to resist this inexorability of one's fate, in literature at least, if not in reality" (185–86). Hélène Cixous' narrative *Partie* (1976) has yet another kind of syuzhet. The book is physically composed of two parts that are superimposed on one another, as each portion is upside down in relation to the other. The reader may start in either direction; the two texts come together on page 66 (99). Another example of this practice is Carol Shields's *Happennstance: Two Novels in One about a Marriage in Transition* (1991). The book has two covers, two beginnings, two dedications. One must physically flip the book over to get what is literally the other side of this story. The format of this text ensures that the reader processes it very differently from a realist novel or an oral story. Even though the fabulas of Oates and Shields are entirely mimetic, the way they are presented produces an unfixed syuzhet whose reading partially resembles that of a hypertext and thus an unnatural reading experience.

A more extreme example of a variable syuzhet is B. S. Johnson's "novel-in-a-box" *The Unfortunates* (1969), which is composed of individually bound chapters that may be read in any sequence (though one chapter is to be read first and another, last). Readers are informed that the sections appear in a random order; if they don't like the arrangement, they are invited to place the segments in their own random sequence. The text describes the sensations and memories of a sports reporter who revisits the town where a close friend of his had died some time before. Each chapter primarily records one of two sets of events: poignant memories from the past or the meaningless events in the reporter's day. A few sections combine both temporal frameworks, but for the most part they situate themselves in one or the other period, each indicated by a different tense of narration, the past tense for the memories, and the present tense for the current day's account. What is interesting is that nearly all the chapters in the two sets can be situated within the earlier or later chronological sequence—there are no iterative accounts (e.g., "Year after year, we would . . .") and surprisingly little *achrony* or temporally indeterminate events. Like a bound modernist novel, most of these segments can be placed within a normal fabula; the question that arises is, why does Johnson forgo sequencing his syuzhet? The answer lies, I believe, in the irrelevance of any possible sequence to the grieving narrator. It does not matter where he situates the account of his lurch, or where he places his memory of hitchhiking with his friend. The former event is utterly unimportant, and so is its placement; the latter event can appear anywhere, just as it will appear in a different setting when it is remembered again.

The metaphor of the deck of cards is made literal in Robert Coover's story

"Heart Suit" (2005), which is printed on thirteen oversized, glossy playing cards. The author states that the cards may be shuffled and read in any order, though the introductory card is to be read first and the Joker is to be read last. Each card begins with the continuation of a sentence that describes the adventures of an individual, who is never named. Each card ends with a new sentence beginning with the name of an individual. Thus, the Five of Hearts card begins with the words ". . . pent up with self-righteous anger, burst in upon the King of Hearts, who has fallen fast asleep on a kitchen maid, to complain that someone has penned a scurrilous accusation against him in the latrine." The construction of the work (as well as the kingdom) indicates that this statement could be made of any of the male principals. This kind of variability of identities is particularly problematic when one reaches the Three of Hearts card, which begins, ". . . is the thief who actually stole the tarts," a statement that can be predicated of any of the characters but proved of none, since in every possible arrangement of the evidence will be inconclusive and, of course, the deck can always be shuffled again.

#### 4. Beginnings and Endings

In a natural or conventional narrative, beginnings and endings are essential for demarcating the extent of the story itself, for framing it, for introducing and then resolving instabilities. Many unnatural narratives problematize these narrative boundaries. Samuel Beckett is particularly keen on deconstructing such artificial limits, beginning many works with an evocation of the ending: *Endgame* starts with the lines "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be finished" (1), while *Flizle* 8 begins "For to end yet again skull alone in a dark place" (*Prose* 243). The idea of a single, definitive starting point is regularly mocked: Flann O'Brien's narrator brags about having three beginnings to *At Swim-Two-Birds* (as Brian McHale notes, he actually has four [109]), and Raymond Federman's *Double or Nothing* (1971) begins with the statement "THIS IS NOT THE BEGINNING." Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler* is a single text largely composed of the beginning chapters of several different novels. The narrator longs for the pure state of possibility at the beginning of every narrative; he "would like to write a book that is only an incipit, that maintains for its whole duration the potentiality of the beginning" (6). Many hypertexts offer the user several different possible starting points; at the end of the section "Begin" at the start of Michael Joyce's *afternoon: a story* the text asks, "Do you want to hear about it?" and offers two different narrative paths, depending on whether the reader clicks on "yes" or "no."

The ending of a traditional or natural narrative is generally expected to wrap up the plot, reveal all the mysteries, provide some sort of poetic justice, and resolve the major problems that generated the story in the first place. In fact, according to Peter Brooks and a number of other theorists, “only the end can finally determine meaning. . . . The end writes the beginning and shapes the middle” (22). Many modernist novels, by contrast, refuse to provide any definitive closure to the events out of a conviction that life never comes to convenient conclusions; their meanings must be determined differently. Unnatural authors go much further. As already noted, there is the ending that returns, Ouroboros-like, to the beginning of the story as the last sentence merges with the first (*Pinnegans Wake*) and the ending that depends on which textual sequence was selected by the reader (*The Mixquiahuala Letters*). More outrageous is the ending that negates itself and presents another equally possible ending (John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*). Michael Joyce explains his theory and practice in the module “work in progress” in *afternoon*: “closure is, as in any fiction, a suspect quality, although here it is made manifest. When the story no longer progresses, or when it cycles, or when you fire of the paths, the experience of reading ends.”

Then there is the multiple ending that offers several possible conclusions. Malcolm Bradbury’s “Composition” (1976) tells the story of a new teaching assistant at a Midwestern university during the Vietnam War. After completing his course on composition (but before turning in the final grades), he is invited to party with two of his female students. The evening itself is fairly innocent, though some extremely compromising photos are taken. The next morning, the instructor receives a sample Polaroid and a request for a higher grade for another student who has neglected composition in order to more fully engage in political struggles; he has to decide what to do, knowing that if the pictures get circulated he is sure to lose his position. The earlier sections of the work are numbered 1 through 4; the final section offers three different resolutions, designated 5A, 5B, and 5C. In the first option, the instructor quietly raises the grade and saves his job. In the second, he corrects the grammar of the letter, sends it back to the blackmailers, and defiantly turns in the correct grade. In the third, he agrees with the student that grades are crap and all words are inadequate; he destroys the grade sheet and abandons academic drudgery in order to move on and devote himself to life and love. The text offers no indication of which of these possibilities will be (or has been) actualized; each option has a certain plausibility. I don’t see this as a hermeneutic test in which the reader needs to determine which is the most likely decision as much as the demonstration of a series of options from which the reader is implicitly invited to choose. As the instructor is informed by one of the other

characters, “You have to write your own ending” (141). Here we have a fabula that forks into multiple incompatible directions at its end.

## 5. Narrative(s)

Continuing with the Bradbury example even as we circle back to the point where this essay began, we now need to consider how to theorize multiple versions of the same narrative when they are presented together. Here our primary example will be the German film *Lola rennt* (1998), by Tom Tykwer. The film begins with the dilemma: Lola must obtain 100,000 marks in the next twenty minutes or her boyfriend will be killed. Lola starts to run. The film then provides three different versions of the same basic story, though in each case a slight alteration in a minor event, the dodging of a dog in a stairway, produces a radically different final scenario. In the first, Lola can’t get the money; she runs to be with her boyfriend who is trying to rob a bank, and she is unintentionally shot dead by the police. In the next version, she robs a bank, gets the money to her boyfriend, but he is then accidentally hit by an ambulance and dies. In the last variation, Lola wins the money at roulette, and she and her boyfriend stroll contentedly off into the future.

The viewer is challenged to make sense out of this sequence that seems to rewrite the story and then rewrite it again. One possible answer is that, according to the cultural logic that the latest version is the superior one, we may view the last one as the definitive or “real” story, the others being as it were “rough drafts” of the final, successful version. This would also accord with the logic of comedy (it is hard to imagine the versions being sequenced in a different order) and would thus imply a kind of teleological progression of the different scenarios. As the narrator of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* described this situation, “I cannot give both versions at once, yet whichever is the second will seem, so strong is the tyranny of the last chapter, the final, the ‘real’ version” (318). But such a move concerning *Lola* seems a facile way to partially naturalize this radical work, and there is nothing in the film to warrant this assumption. I prefer to see the film as simply three possible versions of a single set of events, unhierarchized and without ontological primacy being given to any one version. In a series of paintings of the same object, we don’t struggle to establish the primacy of one canvas and the consequent subordination of the others to it; all are equally variations of a scene. Perhaps more pertinently, it resembles a video game that is played several times, with no single instance having any priority over the others: each playing is equally real.

## 6. Conclusion

Narrative theory, in order to be comprehensive, needs to be able to account for the distinctive practices of unnatural narratives: To do so, it requires a flexible definition of narrative that will be able both to include unnatural experiments and to provide a limit that allows us to articulate just how a given text challenges or plays with narrativity itself. We also badly need a greatly expanded concept of fabula. Most important is to go beyond the unilinear fabula and to add the concept of a multilinear fabula, a fabula with one or numerous forkings leading to different possible chains of events. As Jukka Tyrkkö explains, such narratives offer "alternative paths of access to events or episodes, leaving the construction of the plot up to the choices of the reader" (286; see also Ryan, esp. 242–70). Each resulting story is internally consistent; what is unnatural is that the reader is allowed to determine the course of events from those possibilities preselected by the author. This practice violates the conventional retrospective nature of narration, in which an event is related after it has occurred, and thus cannot possibly be selected from a list of options. Porter Abbott explains that narrative "is something that always *seems*" to come after the events it depicts; "to be a *re*-presentation" of them (36); it is the violation of this sense of the pastness of the narrative events that is foregrounded by multilinear fabulas. Many of the examples adduced in this essay employ multilinearity in one form or another, whether to determine the ending (Bradbury), the main parameters of the story (Castillo, Tyler), or numerous narrative possibilities throughout the text (Queneau, many hyperfictions).

We also need an expanded framework to account for other kinds of unnatural stories, including infinite fabulas; dual or multiple storylines with inconsistent chronologies; inherently vague and unknowable fabulas; internally contradictory fabulas; denarrated fabulas; and repeated, multiple versions of the same essential story. The notion of *syuzhet* also needs to be enlarged to include partially and entirely variable *syuzhet* patterns. By greatly expanding our concepts of fabula and *syuzhet*, we will be able to do justice to the kinds of texts that seek to transform and extend the traditional practices that are readily embraced by those terms.

Finally, we may use these examples to help better understand the curious nature of unnatural narratives. All works of literature have mimetic and artificial aspects; literary realism attempts to hide its artifices; antimimetic texts flaunt them. We can imagine a kind of spectrum with the most mimetic works such as Richard Ford's photorealistic *Independence Day* on one end and Beckett's *The Unnamable* at the other extreme. Close to Ford would be the charac-

teristic works of canonical realists such as Tolstoy; close to Beckett would be slightly less extreme postmodern works, and beside them, absurdist dramas and the more outrageous plays of Aristophanes. There is obviously a lot of room in the middle, and many ways for a text to lean toward, partake of, or fully instantiate the antimimetic. An unresolved ending can be offered in the name of verisimilitude (Nadine Gordimer's *The Late Bourgeois World*); it can be a minor literary jest at the end of an otherwise largely mimetic text (David Lodge's *Changing Places*); or it may be part of a sustained, postmodern rejection of conventional narrative norms (Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*). An unnatural ending may be closely integrated into other antimimetic practices as in the case of Pynchon, or it may violate the mimetic conventions of the rest of the work and thereby produce a powerful leap into the antimimetic that can generally be expected to upset those more traditional readers who feel that an implicit mimetic contract between author and audience has suddenly been ruptured (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*). In general, we may say that the more repeated, insistent, global, or compelling an antimimetic strategy is, the more unnatural the narrative becomes. Since the time of Aristotle, narrative theory has gravitated almost exclusively toward the mimetic aspect of narrative fiction; it is now time to explore and conceptualize the other half of the history of literature. The ignored antimimetic components of ostensibly mimetic fiction need to be identified and examined, a task begun in the essays by Nielsen, Mäkelä, and Phelan in this volume; and the unnatural poetics of antimimetic narratives needs to continue to be explored, documented, and theorized.

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## The Whirligig of Time

Toward a Poetics  
of Unnatural Temporality



RÜDIGER HEINZE

TIME is a fundamental concept of human experience, and of narrative. Paul Ricoeur begins his monumental *Time and Narrative* with the argument that "time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience" (3). Most narratologists follow suit. For Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, time is "one of the most basic categories of human experience" (43); Porter Abbott bases his introduction to narrative on the assumption that "narrative is the principal way in which our species organizes its understanding of time" (3; emphasis in the original) and that, contrary to "mechanical time" and temporal measuring grids, narrative allows "the events themselves to create the order of time" (3-4; emphasis in the original). Time and narrative, then, appear to be both fundamental and inherently inseparable and interdependent concepts.

And yet time is also a highly enigmatic and complex concept. For one, we do not really know what time is. Most lay definitions are tautological: time is something that passes at a certain speed, but that passing of course would have to be measured in time. Physicists regularly commence their discussion of the physics of time by averring that it is hard, if not impossible, to define (Deutsch; Nahin; Greene). Brian Greene, for example, opens his chapter on "time and experience" by writing: "Time is among the most familiar yet least