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## Review

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## REVIEW

# Review Essays on Recent Scholarship: Kavadlo on Palahniuk Criticism's Defensiveness; Muždeka on UnPlaisirable Postmodern Translation; Chetwynd on Unnatural Narratology's Postmodern Potential

[a note from the Book Reviews Editor: if you're interested in reviewing a book on any aspect of unconventional post-1945 US literature—especially in the present format of single review essays covering multiple related books—please send an email proposing a review to [reviews@pynchon.net](mailto:reviews@pynchon.net)]

Jesse Kavadlo, Nina Muždeka and Ali Chetwynd

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Three Review Essays:

### **How Do You Solve a Problem Like Palahniuk? Transgressive Fiction Meets Defensive Criticism**

Review of:

Francisco Collado-Rodriguez (ed), *Chuck Palahniuk: Fight Club, Invisible Monsters, Choke*  
Douglas Keeseey, *Understanding Chuck Palahniuk*

David McCracken, *Chuck Palahniuk, Parodist: Postmodern Irony in Six Transgressive Novels*

### **Against the *Plaisir*-ization of Translation**

Review of:

Barciński, *A Study of Postmodern Literature in Translation as Illustrated through the Selected Works of Thomas Pynchon*

Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature*

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## How Do You Solve a Problem like Palahniuk? Transgressive Fiction Meets Defensive Criticism

Review of:

**Francisco Collado-Rodriguez, *Chuck Palahniuk: Fight Club, Invisible Monsters, Choke* (Bloomsbury, 2013): 208pp**

**Douglas Keeseey, *Understanding Chuck Palahniuk* (University of South Carolina Press, 2016): 152pp**

**David McCracken, *Chuck Palahniuk, Parodist: Postmodern Irony in Six Transgressive Novels* (McFarland, 2016): 228pp**

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*Fight Club*, the novel that, with help of its 1999 film adaptation, helped launch Chuck Palahniuk into literary stardom, will turn 25 in 2021. In that time, it has had a significant influence on American writing and culture. On August 23, 2020, the *New York Times Magazine* featured an article called “Bite Club,” about two iconoclastic British orthodontists. A cursory online search turned up Flight Club (a sneaker store in Chicago), Cite Club (a page dedicated to helping feminist academics cite each other as much as possible), dozens of Write Clubs, and possibly hundreds of journalistic ledes involving “rules,” and that which “we do not talk about.”

With the film’s twentieth anniversary in 2019, the online think pieces duly appeared: about why *Fight Club* endures and “still speaks to us 20 years later” (CheatSheet, Collider, FanSided, WTOP News),<sup>1</sup> “how it proved to be eerily prescient

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<sup>1</sup> See “[Why ‘Fight Club’ Still Speaks to Us 20 Years Later](#),” “[‘Fight Club’: 20 Years Later and Bros Are Still Missing the Point of David Fincher’s Satire](#),” “[‘Fight Club’ remains a relevant piece of pop culture even 20 years later](#)” “[Problematic fave? Why ‘Fight Club’ endures, 20 years later](#)”.

about our current moment" (*Rolling Stone*),<sup>2</sup> and, similarly, on "the prescience and power of [director] David Fincher's drama" (*Guardian*),<sup>3</sup> all pondering the ways in which the film and novel upon which it was based had, in the 1990s, already understood the intersections between masculinity, violence, and alienation that had by 2019 become a national crisis, as evidenced by the rise of alt-right protestors, online incels, toxic bro culture, and near-daily school shootings. Everyone now talks about fight club.

But what does the elevation of a cult writer into the mainstream mean for literary criticism of Palahniuk's work? In 2005, *Stirrings Still: The International Journal of Existential Literature* published the first collection of essays devoted entirely to Palahniuk. 2008-9 saw three book-length essay collections.<sup>4</sup> During that time, thanks also to cogent journal articles by scholars Eduardo Mendieta and Kevin Alexander Boon, it seemed as though a strong body of work was emerging, focused mainly but not exclusively on *Fight Club*. I myself contributed an essay to *Stirrings Still* (republished in *You Do Not Talk About Fight Club*) and another to *Reading Chuck Palahniuk*. My sense at the time, along with the editors of these collections, was that Palahniuk was on the path to being one of the most important and exciting new voices in American fiction. Some of it had to do with the label of Palahniuk as a "transgressive" writer, which came early and has managed to stick throughout twenty years. "Transgressive," at the time, seemed just right: Palahniuk's early characters struggled to break from—to transgress—social norms and compartments, just as the fiction itself experimented with unreliable narrators in recursive narratives, transgressed easy genre identification, and featured profane scenes and language. It felt, to me, exciting: a millennial American chance to *épater le bourgeois*. It's no wonder that so

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<sup>2</sup> 'Fight Club' at 20: The Twisted Joys of David Fincher's Toxic-Masculinity Sucker Punch.

<sup>3</sup> 'Fight Club' at 20: the prescience and power of David Fincher's drama.

<sup>4</sup> In 2008, *You Do Not Talk About Fight Club*, edited by Read Mercer Schuchardt, followed in 2009 by *Reading Chuck Palahniuk: American Monsters and Literary Mayhem*, edited by Cynthia Kuhn and Lance Rubin, and *Sacred and Immoral: On the Writings of Chuck Palahniuk*, edited by Jeffrey A. Sartain.

many young men gravitated toward it, but so did the superficially stolid academics for whom words like “subversion” and “transgression” had nevertheless become a rallying cry.

Since that first wave, three more books—the subjects of this essay—have also been published: another collection, *Chuck Palahniuk: Fight Club, Invisible Monsters, Choke*, edited by Francisco Collado-Rodriguez, in 2013, which serves as a kind of bridge between the previous wave of essay collections and the arrival, finally, of the first two single-author monographs in 2016: *Understanding Chuck Palahniuk*, by Douglas Keeseey and *Chuck Palahniuk, Parodist: Postmodern Irony in Six Transgressive Novels*, by David McCracken. The value and number of these books is notable, but is it commensurate with the books’ popular and cultural appeal and impact? And without any additional books of criticism since 2016, can Palahniuk achieve the critical reputation of a Thomas Pynchon, a Don DeLillo: two American writers from a generation earlier who were potential literary outsiders but have instead amassed an enormous quantity and quality of scholarship? Or maybe that’s not the right question for Palahniuk’s academic trajectory. Maybe the question is this: what happens when a formerly cult writer becomes the subject of staid academia? Perhaps taken together, these three books can explain the appeal, and different critical approaches, that Palahniuk’s fiction makes possible, but also some of the challenges of academically analyzing a living, prolific, and proclaimed transgressive author such as Chuck Palahniuk.

Collado-Rodriguez’s collection, unlike previous collections that spanned Palahniuk’s whole career (those edited by Kuhn/Rubin, and Sartain) limits its scope to just the three novels in its subtitle, *Fight Club, Invisible Monsters, and Choke*. As Collado-Rodriguez explains in his introduction, these “belong to Palahniuk’s early career as a creative writer because they played an essential part in establishing his status as a cult figure” (1). In many ways, this constriction makes sense. These three novels are, for many readers and reviewers, including me, Palahniuk’s strongest, most fecund work—a point I will return to—although I would have included *Survivor* as well and find the omission puzzling. Objectively, they are simply his earliest

novels and so possibly less subject to reader revisionism, plus two had been adapted into films, making them appealing subjects for a book in Bloomsbury's Studies in Contemporary North American Fiction series, which aims at a wider audience than just research academics.

Notwithstanding that orientation, the essays (one of which I contributed) are, in keeping with the literature, original, thought-provoking, and challenging. Even as the collection is logically broken into separate sections on each of the three novels it covers, its contributors' approach largely coheres across the works, mostly falling under the larger auspice of psychoanalytic criticism. While the anniversary journalism mentioned above focuses on the novels' parallels to contemporary life, the essays of the collection go deeper, demonstrating how Palahniuk's ideas, language, and novelistic structures intertwine violence and gender with narrative approaches, trauma theory, construction of identity, writing the body, and the very concept of embodiment itself. At the same time, despite Palahniuk's famous transgressiveness, penchant for scatology, and black humor, the overall thesis that emerges from these disparate essays is that the novels together constitute an authorial plea for, of all things, authenticity and sincerity.

Among others, Laurie Vickroy's discussion of *Fight Club* concludes that "violence and wanting revenge represents being stuck in trauma" (89), yet they ultimately do not "alter the sources of trauma in the long run." Similarly but separately, Andrew Slade, combining concepts from Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant with Freudian and Lacanian identity formation, argues persuasively that "in *Invisible Monsters*, Palahniuk presents a perverse sublime" through characters who, while subject to radical change and even mutilation, "plead for an authentic existence" (96). In my own contribution, about *Choke*, I suggest that its "seeming mosaic of immorality still does not quite choke off its sentimental center" (142). In a chapter featuring a wide range of allusion and erudition, David Cowart puts it most plainly: "Palahniuk, in a novel published scarce weeks before the Manhattan towers fell, registers a prophetic impatience with irony" (174), a statement that, concerning a sacrilegious farce about a con artist sex addict, can only register as ironic. Such is the paradox of Palahniuk.

And yet, reading transgressive novels as employing literary irony to espouse their underlying sincerity seems to me a way of subsuming them into acceptable academic discourse. This is not necessarily a bad thing as much as an additional layer of irony.

Despite its relative brevity, Keeseey's *Understanding Chuck Palahniuk* takes on all fourteen novels that Palahniuk published before 2016, from *Fight Club* through *Beautiful You*, missing only the too-recent *Adjustment Day*. Keeseey, the author of many books aimed primarily at students and non-academic readers, takes an approach that served him well in his monograph about Don DeLillo, another seemingly postmodern writer who embodies yet transcends postmodern irony. While the novels are addressed almost entirely chronologically (only *Snuff* and *Beautiful You* are shuffled), Keeseey considers them in groups that tacitly frame their progression through genres as a means of understanding their relationships to each other: *Fight Club*, *Invisible Monsters*, *Survivor*, and *Choke* are together not because, as Collado-Rodriguez grouped them, "they played an essential part in establishing [Palahniuk]'s status" (1), but because, as Keeseey's chapter title states, they together represent "The Struggle for Identity." *Lullaby*, *Diary*, and *Haunted*, are, next, together "The Horror Trilogy." *Rant* and *Pygmy* are "Teen Terrors"; *Snuff*, *Tell-All*, and *Beautiful You* receive the more provocative label of "Porn Bodies and Romantic Myths"; and *Damned* and *Doomed* become "Palahniuk's Divine Comedy," although another trilogy might have made the analogy more apt. (Keeseey's chapter alludes to a—prospective?—third book, *Delivered*, about which I was not able to find any information.)

After providing some background and biography, the introduction lays out the major points that will carry over throughout the chapters. First, that

readers who come to Palahniuk's fiction out of enthusiasm for *Fight Club* will find many features of that great novel carried on in his later work, but in order to appreciate all that this author has to offer, they must get beyond just expecting more of the same. Over the nearly twenty years since the

appearance of that novel, Palahniuk has explored a remarkably diverse range of subjects and styles, challenging readers to grow and change with him. (4)

Working through the list, Keesey suggests that Palahniuk has “ventured into—or been influenced by—a variety of genres”: “the road novel,” “horror,” “science fiction,” “pornography,” “chick lit,” “Hollywood memoir,” “the young adult novel,” and “the religious journey to redemption” (5).

Keesey, as you can surmise, is primarily interested in genre criticism and intertextuality. The chapters that follow primarily offer close readings of the novels that demonstrate their connection to their chapter’s overarching rubric, assigned genre, and other Palahniuk novels. They work remarkably well as critical summaries and as a way—in keeping with the book’s place in University of South Carolina Press’s *Understanding American Literature* series—of understanding the author. Unlike Collado-Rodriguez’s collection, Keesey’s book does not have a larger, overarching psychoanalytic, philosophical, or theoretical framework or thesis beyond book-by-book explication.

So more than literary approach, what most unites the novels on Keesey’s reading is that, for all the variety he claims for them, they each continue to offend critics for the same reasons. Even on the back-cover blurb (“Keesey argues that Palahniuk is much more than a ‘shock jock’ engaged in sensationalism”) and throughout the Introduction (quoting one critic, Palahniuk’s books “traffic on the half-baked nihilism of a stoned high school student” [qtd Keesey 5], and worse), Keesey seems defensive about writing a book-length work of literary criticism about an author who is so frequently accused of being, at heart, a bad thinker and a bad writer.

Yes, a handful of critics, most famously, B.R. Myers in a 2001 issue of the *Atlantic*, made the same claim about Don DeLillo, but Keesey never needed to defend writing a comparable book about him. The gleaming, gem-like prose that characterizes so many—thousands—of DeLillo’s passages challenges potential disparagement. Take nearly any of the over 800 pages of *Underworld*—for example, this early description



of a boy playing hooky to see what the reader knows to be a life-altering 1950s real-life baseball game:

The arc lights come on, catching Cotter by surprise, causing a shift in the way he feels, in the freshness of his escapade, the airy flash of doing it and not getting caught. The day is different now, grave and threatened, rain-hurried, and he watches Mays standing in center field looking banty in all that space, completely kid-size, and he wonders how the guy can make those throws he makes, whirl and sling, with power. (19)

Contrast this rhythmic and aural grace with, say, the first line that *GQ* quoted in a 2011 response compiling “the Seven Worst Sentences From” Palahniuk’s then-latest work, *Damned*: “I watch the surf crest and break in rolling brown waves on Shit Lake.”<sup>5</sup>

Keeseey suggests that Palahniuk has been the target of reviewers and critics who are “unduly derogatory and dismissive,” but he, Keeseey, also proposes another possibility: that Palahniuk “is actually a satirist with specific targets for opprobrium” (9). Like the irony misdirecting sincerity that pervades the essays in *Chuck Palahniuk: Fight Club, Invisible Monsters, Choke*, here, Palahniuk’s gross-out prose becomes another form of indirection and criticism. Even the lines that *GQ* quoted seem satirical in the context of *Damned* itself, which Keeseey rightly (however defensively) characterizes as “a parodic imitation of a serious work—Palahniuk crossed Dante with Judy Blume” (105): a way to puncture the pretensions of both religious poetry and coming of age literature.

Parody is not a line of discussion that Keeseey fully develops or pursues. For that, we can turn to David McCracken’s *Chuck Palahniuk, Parodist: Postmodern Irony in Six Transgressive Novels*. McCracken is even more defensive than Keeseey. He, McCracken, opens the book with an anecdote about a remark he overheard at an academic conference: “that Palahniuk ‘was antithetical to everything academically

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<sup>5</sup> See Sullivan, “F\*\$% Chuck”

moral” (1). “My goal,” he then develops, “in writing this book is to provide a response to people... who question why anyone would study Palahniuk’s fiction” (2). Rather than focusing on Collado-Rodriguez’s early- and influential-career time frame, or casting Keeseey’s wide net, McCracken zeros in on *Haunted*, *Snuff*, *Pygmy*, *Tell-All*, *Damned*, and *Invisible Monsters Remix*, novels that he strives to demonstrate each have clear literary antecedents. Parody, McCracken explains, allows an artist to “call attention to [a] preexisting source and then take advantage of that meaning to create a new meaning” (6).

This attention to these six novels serves as a way to elaborate upon Keeseey’s brief description of Palahniuk as parodist, as well as a different direction for Keeseey’s interest in intertextuality. Rather than, as for Keeseey, primarily speaking to each other, Palahniuk’s novels are in conversation with the great works of the Western canon, philosophy, and film. Thus, *Haunted* is not, as the critics McCracken quotes contend, merely “stomach-churning horror,” but rather a contemporary retelling of Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, whose Black Death setting, representations of sexuality, and reactions against the church and clergy, says McCracken, align it with *Haunted*, as they each “provide exemplary models of transgressive fiction for their times” (27).

Following this model, the chapters elevate and explain Palahniuk through analogy to other works: *Damned*, in keeping with Keeseey, is framed as *Inferno* by way of *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret*, or maybe the other way around. But the parody of the study’s title is not necessarily that Palahniuk is just narrowly responding to and parodying these works themselves. McCracken is as interested in showing what the older texts reveal about Palahniuk, using the *Decameron* as a way of understanding *Haunted*, and Dante as a way of framing *Damned*. Unlike the implied thesis of Collado-Rodriguez’s collection that Palahniuk ultimately, if indirectly, espouses sincerity and authenticity, or Keeseey’s implied thesis that Palahniuk’s novels are best understood in their relation to genre and each other, McCracken says that “Palahniuk takes the packaging of previous ideas from previous sources and repackages them according to his own distinctive transgressive variety” (7). In one spectacular example,

a new segment in *Invisible Monsters Remix* incorporates the real-life John Merrick, a Victorian man with severe deformities whose story had been told, famously and reverently, in the 1980 film *The Elephant Man*, nominated for eight Academy Awards. Palahniuk's Merrick is a male stripper. "This version," McCracken deadpans, "is definitely not the one most people picture in their minds when they see the nomenclature 'Elephant Man'" (111).

And yet though they each make positive cases for Palahniuk's interest, I still find myself interested in the defensiveness, the protectiveness, of each book. Collado-Rodriguez limits the study to the novels that are easiest to justify on their literary merits, and Keesey and McCracken express, of all things, a kind of embarrassment, even squeamishness, mixed with their evident subversive delight in the novels themselves. Palahniuk, more than any other living writer I can think of, challenges not just conventional readers who reflexively recoil at his representations of depravity and blasphemy, but also the journalists and literary critics, myself included, who want the novels to be, to mean, more than they appear. They lay bare the usually unstated defensiveness of all literary criticism.

Those twentieth anniversary reevaluations of *Fight Club*, the film, want to treat it as a kind of secular prophesy. Collado-Rodriguez's collection, like most good and acceptable literary criticism, uses the novels as ways of understanding narrative, philosophical, and psychoanalytic ideas, and narrative, philosophical, and psychoanalytic ideas as deeper forays into what could seem like the superficialities of the novels. Keesey wants readers to understand Chuck Palahniuk, to analyze the larger generic meanings beneath the vulgar and violent surfaces. McCracken hopes that by situating Palahniuk's novels within the perspective of other, acceptable works, he can both elevate novels that are all about sex and death, but also recontextualize classics that contemporary readers may not realize are *also* all about sex and death.

McCracken concludes his preface by suggesting that "Palahniuk is actually more aligned with academia than most academics realize" (3). As it happens, I realize it, and wholeheartedly agree. But even as an academic, I would understand if Palahniuk didn't align with academia after all. *Haunted* is stomach-churning horror.

Transgressive fiction is allowed to, and is *supposed to*, go against *our* beliefs, not just the beliefs of scolds we already don't agree with. We—academics—must keep breaking taboos, even, especially, our own. After twenty years, *Fight Club* has launched a thousand headlines. We have broken the first (and second) rules too many times for it to still be transgressive. So Palahniuk continues to make and break new ones.

Like our journalistic peers, we should of course keep talking about fight club. I will. And yet, I also wish that I could talk about, say, *Pygmy*, *Snuff*, or *Doomed* the way I luxuriate in talking about *Fight Club*, *Invisible Monsters*, *Survivor*, and *Choke*. I can't, and I haven't. When I wrote about Palahniuk's early novels in the early 2000s, transgressive fiction transgressed against the forms and ideas that I wanted to see flouted. Over the past five years, at the same time that academic analysis of Palahniuk's work seems to be slipping—no new book-length studies since these 2016 monographs—Palahniuk's most recent output has mostly consisted of unnecessary graphic novel sequels to *Fight Club* and adult coloring books. These works may still defy imposed boundaries, but not the kinds that particularly lend themselves to literary analysis. Or, at least, not yet.

But maybe that's for the best. At this point, nearly twenty-five years and six books of criticism in, maybe unnecessary graphic novel sequels and adult coloring books are more transgressive than *Fight Club* itself. Even if it hurts our aesthetic sensibility, sometimes we have to watch the surf crest and break in rolling brown waves on Shit Lake.

## **Against the *Plaisir*-ization of Translation**

Review of:

**Łukasz Barciński, *A Study of Postmodern Literature in Translation as Illustrated through the Selected Works of Thomas Pynchon* (Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego, 2016): 258pp**

**Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (Columbia University Press, 2015): 322pp**

**Julia Trubikhina, *The Translator's Doubts: Vladimir Nabokov and the Ambiguity of Translation* (Academic Studies Press, 2015): 247pp**

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While literary translation poses numerous well-theorized problems, a particularly challenging niche is reserved for translation of postmodernist texts. Their idiosyncratic approaches to narrative strategies and structures, their blatant refusal to comply with readers' expectations, as well as the often encyclopedic range of topics and subject areas covered, make the task increasingly complex. On the other hand, being faced, as a translator, with a postmodernist text undoubtedly opens some new avenues of text exploration, some of which might not be obvious to a reader in the original language. Here I have in mind not just basic linguistic and cultural issues, the translation of which sometimes requires a bit of detective work, but also fundamental, structural complexities that, when rendered into the target language, further highlight the postmodernist oddity or peculiarity of the author's choice in the source language. Thomas Pynchon's sentence structure is one fine, troublesome example; his often agrammatical use of punctuation to dictate the rhythm of the narrative is another.

The studies to be reviewed here—by Łukasz Barciński, Rebecca Walkowitz, and Julia Trubikhina—present a valuable addition to translation studies, postmodernist studies and (in one case) Pynchon studies alike, since they cumulatively address questions pertaining to all the distinctive elements of a postmodernist-text translation process: the text to be translated, the process of translating, and (the abilities and capacities of) the figure of translator. This task they tackle through different approaches – through theoretical analysis of the idea(l) of translation applied to case studies of Pynchon-translations; through the analysis of contemporary texts that truly are representatives of their postmodern times since they were created already “translated”; and through using Nabokov's translation work and theory to illuminate

his writing work, and his life as a sort of “applied translation.” What the three studies have in common, though, are their shared explorations of the extent to which a meaningful and “faithful” translation is at all possible, of what strategies might alleviate the burden of postmodern translating and render it more successful, and of what knowledge and skills a translator should possess in order not to oversimplify complex idiosyncracies in translation.

Of the three studies, Barciński’s offers the most thorough and detailed challenge to existing theoretical grounds for practical linguistic translation of postmodernist texts. Postmodernism, for Barciński, is fundamentally defined by consistent defamiliarization of existing convention, and by shifts in “dominant” from previous literature. By “dominant” we can understand the overarching experiential and sense-making framework a text’s reader must keep in mind: Brian McHale’s identification of a shift in dominant between modernism and postmodernism from the epistemological to the ontological is a key case here, but Barciński foregrounds numerous other comparable shifts. He then uses examples from Polish attempts at translating Pynchon to examine how these defining aspects of postmodernist literature require different practical and theoretical approaches to translation.

The study is neatly organized in three chapters. The first provides a survey of conventional issues in translation theory, identifying a number of binaries among which translators usually need to choose in order to ground their subsequent practical choices: word-for-word vs. sense-for-sense translation, linguistic-systematic code switching, illusory vs anti-illusory translation, overt vs covert translation, adequacy vs acceptability, innovation vs preservation, documentary translation vs instrumental translation, indirect vs direct translation. Barciński’s fresh contribution here, though, consists in his claim that framing these choices so dichotomously is inadequate for a theoretical engagement with postmodern texts that often—as Pynchon famously and explicitly does in *The Crying of Lot 49* or *Gravity’s Rainbow*—attack binaristic understandings of the world. Drawing on postmodern or proto-postmodern theorizations of literariness by Bakhtin, Kristeva, Derrida, or Eco, Barciński identifies linguistic, cultural and literary processes that inherently occur in translation work, and

whose spiralling complexities in postmodern work must be dealt with by competent translators. Like Trubikhina and Walkowitz in their own books, he concerns himself with the figure of an ideal translator, and with the practical guidance such a translator could benefit from: he aims to develop a more useful – and a more encompassing – prescription for practice through the theoretical framework of the rhizome. As he describes Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome model in relation to literature, "a book, however multifaceted or multireferential, has to possess a certain interpretative potential, however elusive or polymorphic" (57). Since "a book is itself intertwined into a rhizomaticity with the world"—that is, with various literary, social, cultural, political and other planes of influence—this not only influences its translatability, but affects the whole translation process.

Barciński's second chapter explains this framework's application to his study's central topic: the problems inherent in the daunting, nerve-wrenching, but mesmerizing and rewarding task of translating works by Thomas Pynchon. When analyzing postmodernist features of Pynchon's work (framed here in relation to Lyotard and Jameson) Barciński explores several overlapping, complementary and equally revealing dominants that contribute to the multifacetedness of Pynchon's work and its rhizomaticity. The ontological dominant is followed by the consideration of heteroglossia, entropy, double-coding, satire, parody and pastiche, topped with creative paranoia or connectedness and encyclopaedicness. In addition to these aspects, the author examines multiple thematic dominants, as well as the sacral dominant (which links the attitude towards the translation of Biblical texts to that of translating Pynchon's works) and the Lacanian dominant (which pays considerable attention to the recreation of the underlying signifying chains of meaning). These multiple translation dominants all, in Barciński's account, lead back to and emphasize the rhizomatic structure of Pynchon's texts and the numerous underlying forces operating within them, which in turn highlights "the translation ontological paradox of same/not same" (241).

Chapter 3 finally puts the theory into practice, with a concrete and detailed analysis of Polish translations of Pynchon's novels (mainly *Gravity's Rainbow*, supplemented by examples from *Inherent Vice*, *Mason & Dixon* and *Lot 49*). Here Barciński

offers a meticulous account of how a translation theory derived from postmodernist literature can be applied. The Polish examples Barciński analyzes are indeed illustrative, and of immense help of those of us who attempt to translate Pynchon's work into other languages as well. For my own work translating *Gravity's Rainbow* into Serbian, what I found especially enlightening was Barciński's handling of the translator's duty to retain defamiliarization. His analysis of extant Polish translations of Pynchon reveals that the target text's defamiliarization-level consistently remains lower than in the source text. He attributes this to "the general tendency in the translation of Pynchon's novels into Polish, which might be called *plaisir*-ization of the translated text" (235): making the translated text excessively intelligible and devoid of the original defamiliarization. Barciński claims that this is especially true in the case of translating/recreating instances of heteroglossia, slang, and wordplay, and to a significant extent in the case of neologisms, names and iconicity. The situation is much better when it comes to the (less immediately lexical) rhizomatically entwined dominants of encyclopaedic, narrative, intertextuality, religion, interface and cinema.

Barciński's analyses of problems with lexical categories—like the substitution of a non-pun in the target text for a pun in the source text—are illuminating. For example, the mathematical pun of the names of Constant and Variable Slothrop in *Gravity's Rainbow* has been totally omitted in the Polish translation (Konstanty – Zmienny Slothrop). I myself was considerably luckier with Serbian, since the practice of transliteration of foreign names into Serbian allowed for more similarity with the original and, hence, the mathematical pun was not lost (Konstant – Varijabl). Finding one of the reasons for this *plaisir*-ization of postmodern literature through translation in the differences between literary conventions and practices in the literary environment associated with each language and its root culture, Barciński nevertheless concludes that the solution might finally lie in the choice of appropriate translators, since "only by the erudition of translator, *de-plaisir*-ization of translator's habitus and their truly mindful effort can readers fully appreciate the mindless pleasures of Pynchon's multifaceted fiction" (243). Unfortunately both for translators and, subsequently, readers, no suggestions for *how* to educate translators toward the requisite erudition were offered.



My own experience translating *Gravity's Rainbow* (published in Serbian, for the first time ever, in 2019 as *Duga gravitacije*) concurs with much of what Barciński says about go-to solutions when dealing with his rhizomaticities. The first impulse – the one a translator needs to resist – is always toward simplification and conformance with target-language rules: not actually translating, but merely re-inscribing the original text. This is what Barciński, paraphrasing Barthes's term, identifies as a substitution between "writerly" and "readerly" texts (235). Only by resisting this impulse is a translator able to delve deeper – however painstaking and time-consuming that may be – and find solutions that will recreate the experimental aspect of the original text and not lose the distinctively disrupted interpretative process which is an integral part of reading – and translating – Pynchon. In some cases, unfortunately, the only solution available is to provide footnotes explaining those rhizomatic aspects that cannot be rendered in the target language. One such example is what Steven Weisenburger calls "the most elaborately staged pun in all of *Gravity's Rainbow*" (296): "For De Mille, young fur henchmen can't be rowing!" Though Barciński does not provide a full origin and interpretation of this pun sentence, he does offer a comparative analysis of the original text and the Polish translation. According to him, "the Polish rendition contains only much simpler expression" that does not even cover the full length of the sentence in question (178), but does provide a partial pun, however flawed. Another—possibly even more flawed—solution, the one I opted for, was to translate Pynchon's sentence as is and thus retain the context that has been building up for several pages, within which this sentence makes perfect sense, and then offer an explanation of the intertextual aspect and additional interpretation in a footnote. Undoubtedly, this is a far cry from creating an equally complex pun in the target language; it also hinders the process of undisturbed reading, since readers have to break the flow and revert to the footnote. On the other hand, it is not a simplification, it does—like the original pun—call for the reader to pause for further analysis of both the sentence and the scene, and so it retains the source text's *level* of defamiliarization even if not its exact nature. I was not troubled by the claim that a reader of the target text would have an unfair advantage over a reader of the source text because of this explanation provided in the footnote: many avid readers

of the original text would also revert to an annotated edition, or a companion like Weisenburger's. It's Pynchon. It's supposed to be immediately "unreadable."<sup>6</sup> And precisely from my experience trying to preserve that "unreadability" over the course of 750 pages, I suspect that every thorough translation of Pynchon will simultaneously be an annotated, critical edition as well. Such are the considerations Barciński's study raises, and they will be of interest to general readers interested in Pynchon's innovations, not just to professional translators.

After having been presented in Barciński's study with all the difficulties of the linguistic translation process, even with the question of the very translatability of post-modern literary works, Rebecca Walkowitz's opening sentence comes as somewhat of a shock: "There is nothing easier and nothing more contemporary than translation" (1), claims the author of *Born Translated*. What she has in mind is automated digital translation. Her study, though, concerns a different kind of translational immediacy: the books that "start as world literature" (2), because on their *first* publication they appear simultaneously or nearly simultaneously in multiple languages. Walkowitz discusses the translation of several genres of literature including poetry and digital art but predominantly focuses on the novel, which she sees as the most international genre both due to its worldwide translation and to the fact that "the novel today solicits as well as incorporates translation" (2). Walkowitz thus distinguishes between works written *for* translation—that is, in the hope of being translated—and works written *as* translations, pretending to take place in a language other than the one in which they indeed have been written. Literary art "born translated" has been written for translation from the start. These works "approach translation as medium and origin" since translation is a condition of their production (4). According to the author, world literature today represents a literary system attuned to multiple formats, media and languages that born-translated novels approach opportunistically.

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<sup>6</sup> Pynchon's novels, like many postmodernist texts, achieve defamiliarization by making deferred sense, only on the basis of further information. The distinctive experience of reading Pynchon thus follows from the way that a reader's immersion in the text is always "staccatoed" by the immediate text's relation to "external" information. Whether the reader gets that information from a translator, or a companion, depends both on the language of the text, and on the willingness of a translator to undertake this time-consuming but, in my opinion, necessary task.

Walkowitz thus moves beyond one of the binaries Barciński had left intact: the linear temporal ordering of “original work→translated work.” Instead, like Trubikhina, she discusses the figure of translation *per se*, as it shapes the narrative structure of the contemporary novel, functioning as a thematic, structural, conceptual and sometimes even typographical device.

Through the development and application of this approach, her notion of translation, like Trubikhina’s, transgresses the purely linguistic frame. Literary works that are born translated require a new understanding of many of the categories Barciński updated for the translation of postmodernist literature. Walkowitz utilizes the process of “close reading at a distance” (49), which is the title of her first chapter. This kind of close reading differs from the traditional one in that it demotes the analysis of idiolect in favor of larger narrative units and even units that exceed the narrative, and in that “it adds circulation to the study of production by asking what constitutes the languages, boundaries, and media of the work” (51). The fundamental translation-question here is thus whether it remains useful, or accurate, to associate literary works with original languages. Consequently, Walkowitz asks, what does it mean to refer to *the text* when the work, from the start, exists in several versions? These changed circumstances also affect the way we understand the literary and political culture to which the work belongs. Walkowitz illustrates these complexities with examples from J. M. Coetzee’s works, most notably *Diary of a Bad Year*, *Summertime* and *Elizabeth Costello*. She sees Coetzee’s exploration of the history and politics of translation practices as being associated with “projects of colonialism, nationalism, and transnational solidarity” (53). In the fact that Coetzee “often represents non-English speech or writing” without providing “stylistic marking such as grammatical inversion or broken diction that would remind readers of a specific foreign language” (53), Walkowitz sees the confirmation of the author’s intention to emphasize the inappropriateness of associating his writing (both ethically and historically) with “a distinct national-language tradition that emerges from a coherent national community” (54). In the

words from his *Diary of a Bad Year*: “Perhaps – is this possible? – I have no mother tongue” (qtd Walkowitz 195).

The second chapter, “The Series, the List, and the Clone,” discusses the cultural, social and political implications of born-translated world literature. In Walkowitz’s words, we often assume that translation leads to cultural as well as political homogenization, something like a supra-linguistic version of Barciński’s argument about translators’ tendency to *plaisir*-ization. Claiming that books in translation constitute new kinds of groups, Walkowitz turns to the work of Kazuo Ishiguro, and specifically his novels *The Remains of the Day* and *Never Let Me Go*, to contest the idea of novels as bounded containers analogous to communities as bounded containers. Since many contemporary novels are constructed not as autonomous objects but as copies, grafts, versions, or clones, new paradigms for collectivity in the novel are created. The example of Ishiguro’s novels shows how the way we understand the uniqueness of books relates to the way we understand the uniqueness of communities. In asking to be read across several national and political scenes, Walkowitz argues, Ishiguro’s books, as representatives of born-translated literature, “trump an ignoble ‘untranslatability’ not by resisting translation but by demanding it” (101).

Chapters 3 and 4 consider the relationship between the location of books and the location of audiences. In “Sampling, Collating, and Counting” Walkowitz discusses the world-shaped novels (featuring travelling characters speaking different languages) which are at the same time world-themed. As such, these novels truly are postmodernist, both linguistically and thematically. Due to the fact that the characters engage in transnational activities and cross the national and continental borders, the novels are ripe with both explicit and implicit translation. An awareness of translation and an emphasis on global circulation and audiences/readers makes world-shaped novels multicultural and post-multicultural at the same time: multicultural, in that they present themselves as an accumulation of national or ethnic categories; post-multicultural, in their emphasis on circulation and global audiences. In “This is Not Your Language” Walkowitz then attempts to answer the

question of whether there is such a thing as a native reader (and, thus, by contrast, a foreign reader) of born-translated novels. She sides with scholars who insist that the relationship between birthplace and fluency, and between fluency and social belonging, is not so black and white as we have traditionally been led to believe. One is not born into a language the way one is born into a community, and there is nothing automatic about fluency. Hence, the category of a native reader is highly questionable, as is the idea of a unified audience whom a literary work in the original addresses. The novels Walkowitz analyzes here include those of Jamaica Kincaid and Mohsin Hamid, who, in her reading, approach the concept of native languages not through voice but through the circulation of voice, thus dramatizing the geopolitics of reading.

Chapter 5 focuses on a separate category of born-translated works: digital narratives (digital media and post-digital books) that, often appearing in the form of multiple books, series, or collaborations, are also born collective. Turning to the oeuvre of the collaborative Web artists Young-Hae Chang and Marc Voge, Walkowitz explores the literary and political dimensions of collectivity. The works in question are multilingual and translation is integral to their production. At the same time, the use of digital media allows for emphasis on the complex interaction among different systems: aural, visual, and verbal. Most importantly, in such instances, collaboration is both process and product.

Walkowitz's study opens a new perspective for considering the relationship between literary works and their translation, one in which the translation, in one or several forms, is indeed an integral part of the work itself. As a consequence, the traditional issues related to the process of translation, as well as to the translatability of the literary work, need to be approached from different angles and redefined to include the production, circulation and audience of world literature as we currently know it. Translation as the engine of literary history has, as Walkowitz convincingly argues, brought literature to new frontiers.

While Walkowitz and Barciński both differentiate between the figures of an author and a translator, Julia Trubikhina reaches new insights by addressing one

figure who is both. For Trubikhina like Walkowitz, translation is a way of talking about wider literary history and theory, philosophy, and interpretation. Yet like Barciński she approaches translation through a single test figure: in her case, Vladimir Nabokov. Trubikhina's Nabokov fits within Walkowitz's conception of world literature and born-translated novels, since "it is hard to separate Vladimir Nabokov from the act of translation, in all senses of the word—ranging from 'moving across' geographical borders and cultural and linguistic boundaries to the transposing of the split between 'here' and 'there' and 'then' and 'now' onto a metaphysical plane" (Trubikhina 11). In other words, just as born-translated novels transgress traditional notions of what defines an original work and a translation, the figure of Nabokov-as-translator surpasses linguistic and literary frames. And yet, Nabokov's linguistic polyphony and complex relations between the speaker and speech echo Barciński's exploration of the dominants to be taken into account when attempting translations of postmodernism.

Trubikhina's book is a three-part study in which each chapter discusses a particular conception of translation, with its own purpose and relationship to Nabokov's work and philosophy. The first chapter, titled "Nabokov's Beginnings: 'Ania' in Wonderland or, 'Does Asparagus Grow in a Pile of Manure?'" deals philologically with Nabokov's translation of Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, which contravenes all of Nabokov's later, much publicized, "literalist" theoretical principles. Trubikhina provides a brief comparative overview of Nabokov's translation and the two most popular other translations into Russian (Allegro's and Rozhdestvenskaia's versions), but also two other Russified translations that preceded it (Granstrom's and the first Russian translation), pinpointing Nabokov's "fault lines." Although Nabokov had not yet articulated a theoretical approach to translation when he worked on *Alice*, Trubikhina links this work to the nineteenth-century Romantic tradition and the idea of the translator as co-creator. In addition, she also traces Nabokov's subsequent use of deterritorialization of tradition in his own fiction back to this early translation of *Alice*. Here she takes the concept of deterritorialization – while acknowledging its Lacanian origin – in

a broader sense of any of the (Deleuzian) subversive and deconstructive readings of the text.

Chapter 2, "The Novel on Translation and 'Über-Translation': Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and *Eugene Onegin*," links Nabokov's novel and his translation of *Onegin* not only in the temporal sense (he worked on them simultaneously), but also in terms of structure. "*Pale Fire* bears such a striking structural similarity to Nabokov's *Onegin* that it is easy to suggest self-parody" (87), claims Trubikhina, interpreting the novel's title as an allegory not only of the relationship between writing and commentary, but of translation. While the first chapter found the similarities between Nabokov's literary work and translation work in his deterritorialization of tradition, here Trubikhina identifies the allegorical mode as the link between the two: the mode Nabokov adopted for his *Onegin* translation allows the translator to partake of the same "gesture" as the original by signifying difference, by focusing on other things (commentary, criticism). And this same indirection underpins the less obviously translation-focused *Pale Fire*.

While the first two chapters deal with (in Roman Jakobson's terms) interlingual – or proper – translation (from one language into another), the third chapter ("Cinemizing' as Translation: Nabokov's Screenplay for *Lolita* and Stanley Kubrick's and Adrian Lyne's Cinematic Versions") is concerned with intralingual and intersemiotic translation. Here Trubikhina analyses Nabokov's work on the screenplay of *Lolita* for Kubrick in 1959 and the early 1960s, as well as its subsequent transmutation by means of a different sign system (film) in its two cinematic versions by Kubrick and Lyne. The chapter's first part is devoted to the dynamics between the novel and the screenplay, the second part to the theoretical issue of metaphor, metonymy, and their tension in the novel's and the films' respective symbolic workings and semiotic codes. Invoking Barciński's dichotomies, Trubikhina here interprets the two film versions of *Lolita* applying the critical lens of metonymy and metaphor to consider the issue of fidelity and freedom, which she sees as central to translation theory.

As the works analyzed differ in terms of their genre and philosophy, so do Trubikhina's chapters, ranging from philological analysis, through metaphysical analysis, to an essay in literary and film theory. Through the three studies, she not only traces a particular chronology of Vladimir Nabokov's career, but also of his philosophy of translation. Being "both a 'native user' and a 'foreigner'" (12), Nabokov serves as an example of Walkowitz's complicating discussion of the categories of "native" and "foreign", and his self-translations into French and English and back into Russian illustrate her discussion of authors who act as translators of their own work.

All three studies present striking departures from traditional translation studies – and not only for the reason that they are predominantly focused on the translation of postmodernist texts. The scope of different methodologies that they analyze and the diversity of their theoretical and philosophical starting points guarantee that various types of readers and scholars—not only translators—will find them informative and stimulating. They can serve as a basis for further theoretical scholarship, but also—as I have already found—for practical translators' work. Despite their differences, all three studies – either explicitly or implicitly – discuss dichotomies inherent in the translation definitions that direct the approach to the source text and the identification of dominants in the translation process. Translating postmodernist texts, these studies claim, is not just a matter of linguistic and literary rendering; indeed, this interlingual, philological spectrum is the least problematic of all. More vexing are other forms of translation – postmodernist rhizomaticities that Barciński so aptly identifies, intralingual and intersemiotic translations evident in Nabokov's work, as well as the birth of works that are simultaneously created and translated. Using often radically different works as their case studies, all three authors seem to agree on the essentially "rhizomatic" structure within individual texts and literary systems in general, and thus on its importance for the translatability of literature, whether this translatability applies to what is built into the process of creation, or comes as an afterthought.



## What Can the First Generation of Unnatural Narratology Offer the Study of “Postmodern” Fiction?

Review of:

**Brian Richardson, *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History, and Practice* (The Ohio State University Press, 2015): 224pp**

**Jan Alber, *Unnatural Narrative: Impossible Worlds in Fiction and Drama* (University of Nebraska Press, 2016): 320pp**

**Biwu Shang, *Unnatural Narrative Across Borders: Transnational and Comparative Perspectives* (Routledge, and Shanghai Jiao Tong University Press, 2018): 110pp**

**Jan Alber, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Brian Richardson (eds), *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative* (The Ohio State University Press, 2013): 280pp**

**Jan Alber and Brian Richardson (eds), *Unnatural Narratology: Extensions, Revisions, and Challenges* (The Ohio State University Press, 2020): 232pp**

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For the study of fiction outside the “realist” tradition, not least *Orbit’s* central turf of US “postmodernism,” narratology has long been an under-tapped resource. Permit me a low-nuance frame: scholarship on nonrealist postwar US fiction has never systematically advanced beyond descriptive categories drawn from the 1980s McHale/Hutcheon/Jameson surveys of the field. Putative breakthrough scholarship most often consists in new cultural or contextual explanations for M-H-J-identified features, rather than competing or improved accounts of what the distinguishing features actually are.<sup>7</sup> This adherence to frameworks developed early to identify a

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<sup>7</sup> There are exceptions of course. The most concerted alternative strivings have been down variously “neo-materialist” paths, as in recent books by Christopher Breu and Matthew Mullins (the latter nota-

generation's *common* features and motives stymies the necessary theorization of how variations *within* anti-realism's conspicuous formal variety might have varied implications from text to distinctive text. Narratology—an essentially technical field committed to descriptive precision, to system-building analyses of how literary forms, imagined worlds, modes of presentation, cultural assumptions, and cognitive construal-processes interact—could help ground such distinguishing revisionary readings. But since its inception, narratology has tended to treat “fiction” in terms of classical nineteenth century realism.

Until the 2010s, that is, and the advent of “Unnatural Narratology.” Unnatural Narratology defines itself against the presumption that we process narrative information, fictive or non, by “naturalizing” it into compatibility with the communication-structures and semantic reference-conditions of experience recounted face to face (for example, that all stories have determinate narrators embodied within the same world they recount; that events precede their discursive articulation; that we can presume our own world's laws of physics or morality until stated otherwise; etc). Unnatural Narratology puts these “natural” presumptions in question by addressing the many “postmodern and other antimimetic” fictional narratives that defy them, demanding a “substantial adjustment to narrative theory as it is currently practiced” (Richardson 3, xiii). Indeed, “[u]nnatural narrative theory began as a set of concepts that were necessary to circumscribe the achievements of postmodern fiction” (*Extensions* 1). What practical implications, then, might these revisions to “narrative theory” and its “concepts” have for we who study that fiction?

The five books under review consolidate Unnatural Narratology's first generation, which overlaps each end of the 2010s from early manifesto-articles to a first dedicated collection of *Extensions, Revisions, and Challenges*. Brian Richardson and Jan Alber offer competing visions of the definition, scope, and interest of unnaturalness; contributors to a volume they co-edited with Henrik Skov Nielsen address premises; Biwu Shang widens the canon to expand the theory; and finally Richardson and Alber

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ble for a particularly direct/correct throughline of disagreement with Jameson), reviewed in *Orbit* respectively here – <https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.499> – and here – <https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.2926>.

edit that set of *Revisions*. Against their own narratology-silo-ed grain, I'll assess these books in terms of their distinctive value for extra-narratological criticism on post-modern-generation prose fiction, thereby also flouting narratology's generally trans-medial and transtemporal aspirations. While *Orbit* readers might take non-realism's importance for granted, each book has more to offer than mere demonstration that these texts exist. Unnatural Narratology's main instrumental limitation for scholars of postmodern fiction, however, turns out to be its own under-acknowledged reliance on tenets of postmodern criticism: a situation requiring a distinct second generation of more concerted revisionary collaboration between the fields.

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Richardson's and Alber's monographs each foreground the insufficiency of what Richardson calls the "mimetic paradigm," which "assumes that the figures, settings, and events in fictional narratives can be adequately depicted and comprehended by conceptual models derived directly from nonfictional narratives and real-life experience" (5). The best place to start for the uninitiated might be Richardson's concluding anecdotes of conference presenters proposing universal theories of narrative then dismissing his non-mimetic "unnatural" counter-examples as non-narrative because they didn't fit the theories being proposed (163). Contrast such question-begging with Richardson's own modest contention that "narrative theory, in order to be comprehensive, needs to be able to account for the distinctive practices of unusual and antimimetic narratives" (65), and the justification for the book's conspicuously narrow scope becomes clearer.

For Richardson's monograph is disciplinarily introspective. A narratological audience is presumed (it's not until page 26 that the "natural" he's writing against gets defined), and while he and Alber define "unnatural" differently (for Alber, narration of a strictly impossible world; for Richardson, any text that readers experience as a violation of mimetic presuppositions) they differ most "over whether a narrative theory must have practical interpretive applications (it needn't)" (Richardson 165). Alber's approach is essentially rhetorical: since "all representations somehow represent human motivation, which is part of their very texture" (32), he is "primarily interested in what they

might MEAN" (41). Starting from the acknowledgement that "[r]epresented impossibilities are created by human authors and should therefore be approached from the vantage point of our (human) world" (17), his work is more obviously compatible with wider critical uptake than Richardson's strict deployment of unnatural texts against other narratological paradigms. Unlike Alber, Richardson grants "creative play with the conventions of narrative representation per se" an intrinsic interest, needing no further justification "in the service of any other larger cognitive, functional, or more obviously human concerns" (20). See his modal vocabulary: counter-realist authors "can" do anything they like, while narrative theory "needs to" accommodate their fictions, but "needn't" concern itself with artistic process or motive.

Both books nonetheless cover shared ground. Richardson is often content to pile up counter-examples to existing presumptions: a chapter on fictionality, for example, is by his own account less of an axioms-to-applications theory than a "kind of inventory... of each type of transgression" (68). This essentially cataloguing orientation leads long spans to read less like a conventional argumentative monograph than a literary equivalent of clinical psychology's DSM: a list of putatively deviant symptoms, which through weight of numbers put the very premise of deviance into question. The bulk of Alber's book covers similar taxonomical turf, with separate chapters on fiction's impossible narrators, impossible characters, impossible temporalities, and impossible spaces. For scholars of postmodern fiction, likely uncommitted to the mimetic paradigm, this may sound redundant. But both authors itemize so many examples that any reader will discover something new, and they rarely address the same texts: a breadth that makes them worth reading together, and that itself endorses their shared case for the irrefragable pervasiveness of unnatural narrativity. Together they read as an enthusiastic underdog advocacy project, most enjoyable when most directly confronting the mimetic-natural hegemony.

As such, Richardson's best chapter—required reading for any literary scholar willing to calibrate their axioms—is his surgical undermining of "The Limitations of Conventional Narrative Theory," and of the presumption that the linguistic and worldbuilding techniques of 19<sup>th</sup> century European realism are fictive prose's Nature. The defaults he challenges—that there is a determinate sequence of events behind

any sequence of narration, that fictive worlds follow the rules of our own unless otherwise stated, and so on—underpin not only conventional narratology but most literary criticism: Richardson's lightly technical explanations will help any literary scholar see how much they're likely taking for granted, and how often literature itself suggests that they shouldn't. Given his avowedly narrow(-tological) focus, Richardson doesn't tell interpretive critic-scholars *how* to adapt to these underminings of normal science, but no one should come away without a plan for change.

Both also propose histories of unnatural narrative's 20<sup>th</sup> century, which Richardson supplements with a longer survey. He questions the idea of a clear modern/postmodern break, attributing the continuity to the proto-postmodernism of earlier texts, rather than the more conventional case for postmodernism's vestigial high-modernism. Alber, meanwhile, proposes a Shklovskian postmodernism defined by self-consciously radicalizing earlier techniques, contending also that 20<sup>th</sup> century unnaturalism distinguishes itself by a shift from supernaturally explicable impossibilities toward irresolvable impossibilities of logic (220). Postmodernism, on this account, is just the moment where a long unnatural para-tradition becomes self-consciously self-sufficient. Richardson's longer account of that longer tradition, meanwhile, is less of a causal, explanatory *history* than a chronology and further taxonomy, bringing obscure texts to light, but not arguing much that will be new to readers familiar with, for example, Steven Moore's vast *Alternative History of The Novel*. These histories attack the "mimetic paradigm" in recovering what Richardson calls "the other 'Great Tradition'" (5). But this highlights Unnatural Narratology's own blind-spots: that exact term, uncited here, has been used as a rallying card for experimental novelists and their critics since Ronald Sukenick, Robert Alter, and Albert Guérard in the 1970s, through Robert Coover's 1980s claim that unconventional novels are "the true mainstream fiction, evolving from the very core of the evolving form" (38), to Robert McLaughlin in the 1990s anthologizing "the innovative tradition of prose fiction," to Moore's history in the new millennium. Across the two unnatural monographs only Moore is acknowledged, and he only in passing. Unnatural Narratology's haphazard self-quarantining from existing theorizations of idiosyncratic fiction by its practitioners and critics often

leaves unclear which insights *depend* on the narratological methods, leading not only to occasional redundancy but to more significant gaps in theorization.

Such issues emerge when Richardson looks beyond typology in a chapter on “Oppositional Literature and Unnatural Poetics,” drawing too uncritically on post-modernist criticism. For “ideological” reading he offers a two-option choice between “fragmentation” or “multiplication,” both intrinsically constrained to rejection of dominant politics associated with dominant realist forms: a decentering-against-hegemony model long familiar from Hutcheon or McHale. Richardson takes pains “to affirm that unnatural narrative theory is ideologically neutral” (xvii), but unlike the theory the *fiction* seems here for all its typological variety to be ideologically of a piece. Within the book’s first full page, the verbs attributed to the fiction are “contra-vene,” “violate,” “defy” (1–2): a purely negatory range, set eventually against a conflation of “humanist, mimetic,” where humanist=conservative such that antimimetic fiction, anti-humanism, and “progressive” politics become “analogous” (144/143). While Richardson claims throughout to be developing something “beyond any existing paradigm” (xvi), the further he ventures beyond narratology, the more the book falls in line with some of postmodern interpretive criticism’s paradigmatic limitations. Richardson’s book, then, is an inspiring “oppositional” advocate-ally for scholarship on non-realism, but charts fewer paths for *constructive* interpretive work.

This is where Alber, with his rhetorical focus on how unnatural narratives “MEAN” and how we “make sense” of them, should come in. His key chapter, as essential as Richardson’s on mimetic limitations, typologizes eight ways that Unnatural texts can be made sense of by second-order naturalization (47-8), with the Richardsonian option of simply dwelling in discombobulation being a disfavoured ninth. These are:

- “Frame-blending,” in which the fiction prompts us to combine elements from two usually separate “natural” frameworks.
- Attributing the impossibilities to the requirements of an established genre.
- Taking the unnatural elements to express the incoherent mental state of a natural world-inhabitant.

- “Foregrounding the thematic,” by forcing the reader to cogitate about what the world could stand for or communicate.
- Allegory, such that the world’s unnaturalness is a consequence of its representing real-world relationships at one symbolic remove.
- Satire or parody
- “Positing a transcendental realm,” by attempting to represent some element of reality that exceeds the “naturally” comprehensible.
- Prompting the reader to assemble meaning DIY, the best they can, with material that acknowledges its own semantic incompleteness.

This approach maintains the idea that we’re cognitively predisposed to “naturalize” narratives, but shifts the naturalized object from the world itself to the sense we make of it. This second-order process allows for a less rigid separation of unnatural from natural than Richardson’s, and Alber’s tantalizingly half-developed suggestion is that—since even the most conventionally realist fictions require *some* second-order processing of the gap between textual convention and posited world—unnatural narratives’ working might just be a more overt version of the workings of literariness *per se*. This would grant unnatural narratives (where such second-ordering must be more conspicuous and deliberate) a privileged position in relation to literariness, and so Alber repeatedly and persuasively implies that “literature as such involves the unnatural in one way or another” (12).

Appealing as that is, Alber’s models are not all naturalizing and not all second-order in quite the same ways. Most obviously, some—like focalization or transcendental realms—naturalize *within* the textually posited world while others—most obviously “thematization”—naturalize in the reader’s external understanding. Eliding this distinction leads to subordination-problems: for example, no intra-world naturalizing can count as having Made full Sense, since the naturalized world can always be subject to further thematic sense-making. Some of the distinctions are indistinct (aren’t satire and allegory genres, defined in part by their “thematic” implications?). And some of the categories kick their key can down the theoretical road: for example, impossibilities within a given narrative—say, characters’ immediate recovery from

extreme harm in a Warner-Brothers cartoon—may be generic conventions that don't prompt bafflement, but this doesn't explain *how* the genre came to be constituted in the first place, presumably in part by the kinds of impossibilities it permits, which before they helped establish the genre must have been experienced as unnatural breaks from some other generic expectation. Alber's practical analyses, indeed, tend to involve at least two of his processes interacting, as some "internal" naturalization leads to a separate and cumulative sense-making thematization. I don't think this is just a quirk: it seems to reflect unnatural rhetoric being at least a *three*-stage process, from world-positing to cognitive world-framing (including recognition of what aspects of the worlds' weirdness are foregrounded as salient) to thematic interpretation. Alber's 8-option typology is something of a muddle, then, but its basic insight about the multi-order functioning of anti-realist rhetoric provides a promising groundwork for more precisely examining how particular forms make sense to particular audiences within particular acculturated expectations to constrain particular thematic upshots.

Unfortunately, Alber's own thematizing tends, eventually, to recapitulate Richardson's interpretive vocabulary of opposition and negation. Texts are valuable once they "deliberately frustrate our readerly expectations with regard to closure," while complex formal innovations aim only "to celebrate the absence of a unifying master narrative in the postmodern age" (173/176). Even the naturalization process tends mainly toward "systematic undermining of our 'natural' cognition of the world" (8). And there's the same presumption that convention-breaks should reject realism's "humanistic" preoccupations—as when one text "remains tied to moral questions (which are typical of medieval literature)" (184). Polarizing the innovative away from the humanistic reflects Unnatural Narratology's tendency to constrain nonmimetic texts' implication-range to a rejection of the mimetic's usual turf. It's surely right to say that "any definition of the unnatural must specify its relation to the 'natural'" (26), but this doesn't mean that relationship has to be reactive. Alber notes historical instances where it clearly wasn't, as in "[g]enerally speaking the realist novel was a reaction to the romance" (94), but doesn't extrapolate from this that romance's unnatural elements thus shouldn't be understood as attacks on realism.



Consequently, there's little acknowledgement, let alone theorization, of the possibility that unnatural narratives might cultivate turf that the mimetic hasn't conditioned in advance, or might work mimesis' usual turf better. While Richardson gets at the heart of nonrealist fiction's inexhaustible interest when he notes that "every unnatural work has to be quite different" to strike us as unnatural (17), both books end up theorizing away deeper difference, treating unnaturalness *per se*, rather than differing unnatural forms, as the agent of readerly experience. Thus they recapitulate exactly the presumption Unnatural Narratology might have helped postmodern criticism overcome: that all nonrealism or unnaturalness bears essentially the same negatory notions or discombobulating experiences, regardless of the exact formal innovation. This seems less intrinsic to Alber's theory, which unlike Richardson's doesn't *define* unnaturalness in terms of counter-mimetic shock, but he finally gets little further beyond identifying anti-realism's work as a generalized "violation," "frustrating" or "undermining."

The two monographs, taken together, thus establish unnaturalness' irreducible presence within literary history without fully working out theoretical grounds for handling its variety. A looseness persists about which interpretive insights required an Unnatural Narratology to get to, and which are simply observations about (now at least very clearly identified) unnatural texts. They persuade that, in Richardson's words, "we should not begin with *a priori* categories derived from other disciplines like rhetoric, folklore, linguistics, or cognitive science and then apply them simply and directly to complex fictional narratives..." (171). But they're less helpful with explaining what unnaturalness is *for*: reducing anti-realist fiction's rhetoric to that exclusive repertoire of De-/Dis-/Un-, they recapitulate some of the less illuminating clichés of the postmodern advocacy-criticism that narratology would ideally help to make more precise.

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Postmodern-fiction scholarship's direct theoretical need—grounding for a non-realism that's not existentially or rhetorically parasitic on models of realism, in order to precisely distinguish the rhetorical implications that follow from different

nonrealist innovations—thus outlasts Unnatural Narratology's central double-monograph. Yet their frameworks might still get us there, if supplemented by anti-realist thinking from which the narratology silo cut them off.

For example, while the conflation of anti-realist form and “progressive” antihegemonic politics has its roots in postmodernist criticism, work on nonrealism from the “Rise of the Novel” era shows it unnecessary. Christian Thorne examines how nonrealist satire's capacity for “undermining” was often, in its earliest English guises, put to conservative, even reactionary use, while Srnivas Aravamudan and Sarah Tindal Kareem demonstrate that unnatural works emerge not only as challenges to established hegemony, but also less “oppositionally” among the forms that proliferate in times of disorder before they settle into stable genres and conventions.

Simpler, more fundamental taxonomies might help too. Cristopher Nash distinguishes two strains within *The Tradition of Anti-Realist Revolt*: “Neocosmic” fictions that use accepted realist conventions to present immersive worlds unlike our own, and “Anticosmic” fictions whose forms draw immersion-breaking attention to their own medium-dependent artifice. If any account of how fictive worlds make thematic sense of our own must address the multi-order interaction between our in-world imagination and art-conscious judgment, then Nash's distinction allows us to be more precise about where particular forms, in Richardson's terms, violate *mimesis per se*, rather than just representing other kinds of world.

“Anticosmic” aims at the heart of natural mimesis. Richardson and Alber's otherwise thorough “undermining” leaves almost untouched the core “natural” premise that a state of affairs always precedes its own narration. This has been widely and explicitly challenged by authors of anticosmic fiction. William Gass, for example, distinguishes between “rendering a world” by putting what's already there into verbal form, and “making a world” by bringing to mind, word by word, intentional inexistents that are nothing beyond or behind the language that conjures them (316). This radicalizes some natural presumptions: on Gass' account “she was tall and thin” and “she was thin and tall” generate entirely different worlds, rather than just filtering identical material differently, while a character whose nose is never mentioned cannot be said to “have a nose” in the same way as one whose nose is described.

Sufficiently conspicuous verbal styling can thus call attention to itself and ask to be read unnaturally, not as a window on a world but as a spectacle of language world-making. Reading even the most conventional realism this way repudiates the whole “mimetic paradigm” at its root. Yet both Alber and Richardson explicitly stipulate that style *per se* cannot be unnatural: that “the unnatural refers to the story, not the discourse” (Richardson 21). It’s unclear why. Alber at one point quotes the author Raymond Federman on literary characters for competent postmodern audiences—“they will not appear to be simply what they are; they will be what they are; word-beings” (qtd 144)—without acknowledging that a word-being can’t pre-exist its articulation in words. And Richardson’s excellent reading of one of the “rare cases where the discourse actually affects the storyworld” (12)—the Circe episode of Joyce’s *Ulysses*—shows how it works by the “verbal generation of events” (123): incompatible with the “natural” axiom that events precede their narrative verbalization. The anti-cosmic Gass-Nash model of prose fiction’s generative verbality thus reveals how far Unnatural Narratology has yet to follow authors and critics toward working without fundamental “natural” assumptions.

These vestiges of ontological conservatism lead to more dubious interpretive practice. Richardson, for example, equates “to find a recognizable meaning in the text” with “to latch onto one set of events as the real ones...” (46). But this falsely conflates “recognizable meaning” with “one set” ontology. Surely it’s possible, at the Alber second order, to attribute a particular significance to a particularly framed *set* of incompatible possibilities. The distinction would be something like that between Empsonian treatments of particular linguistic ambiguities as having particular implications and the deconstructionist rush to turn all ambiguities into avatars of a more fundamental (but more rhetorically and experientially uniform) undecidability. The difference seems to hinge on where texts direct our attention: to worlds or to words, to events or to meanings. In Theo D’Haen’s account—a kind of Shklovsky-Grice splice—convention-breaking form serves primarily to draw attention to a work’s communicative constructedness. Rather than directly vivifying experience Shklovsky-style, unconventional forms would point us outward, to the Alber second-order, where we “calculate implicatures” about communicative intent (D’Haen 15). Alber and Richardson’s interpretive efforts tend to address a global question—why did

the author reject realist convention?—whereas D’Haen’s model focuses on details: what’s the communicated significance of breaking this particular convention, at this particular point in the text, for this particular imputed audience? This could help Unnatural Narratology provide more precise interpretive upshots, less bound to the oppositionality that Aravamudan, Kareem, or Thorne put in question.

These authors and critics suggest that we can’t neglect precise linguistic construction in understanding unnaturalness, especially when the conventions being violated are themselves of sentence-level form. On a Gass-Nash-D’Haen model, discourse “constitutes” the objects of unnatural narratives in a very literal way, and texts whose language foregrounds their own linguistic constructedness call most directly of all the unnatural modes for processing at that level of thematic interpretation. Future work on unnatural prose fictions might find sentence-level verbal structures neither an adornment nor an epiphenomenon, but the core of the whole question.

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For Unnatural Narratology’s capacity to handle these concerns, look backward: to *The Poetics of Unnatural Narrative*, which Alber and Richardson edited with Henrik Skov Nielsen and which, its array of voices nicely conveying a paradigm’s axiom-wrangling birth-pangs, may actually be a better place to start than either subsequent monograph. Four of its ten chapters (like all in the even earlier *Unnatural Narratives – Unnatural Narratology* (2011), which Alber edited with Rüdiger Heinze) address basic categories of unnaturalness—Time, Space, Sequencing, Minds—covered by the monographs. Two more cover non-prose media, as Alice Bell investigates hypertext and Brian McHale narrative poetry (useful on how linguistic features contribute to unnaturalness). The rest, though, serve our purposes directly.

Skov Nielsen on focalization is broadly compatible with Alber’s “representing mental experience” naturalization-model, but Skov Nielsen argues importantly that “unnatural” might best describe an orientation from readers to texts rather than a quality of texts themselves. This could extend Alber’s occasional contention that the unnatural reveals something about the basis of the literary, as it holds out the promise that whatever we get out of the unnatural can also, per Gass, be got from conventionally realist texts, if we choose to approach them without “natural” assumptions.

James Phelan develops Skov Nielsen toward the D'Haen-ian notion that the *way* texts break with convention determines how naturally or unnaturally they ask to be read. Stipulating that “the logic of readerly response should trump the logic of narratological distinctions developed without reference to that response” (169), he addresses a key question elsewhere deferred: how to determine whether readers are likely to be *aware* of local unnaturalness. Building his theory up from a neat unnatural reading of moments of mimetic breakdown in *Huckleberry Finn*, he directly scrutinizes and taxonomizes “reasons why readers are not likely to notice Twain’s departure from the mimetic code until some close-reading narratologist points it out” (174). Furthermore, he’s explicit throughout about what aspects of his reading would and wouldn’t be possible without his narratological tools: an approach that the whole field could profitably adopt.

Werner Wolf takes on the key category of *immersion*. “Natural” conventions and assumptions aim to ensure that we posit and *experience* coherent worlds, without the anticosmic rupture of awareness of their fictionality. Wolf, though, shows how the apparent rule-violation of metaleptic world-crossings *within* fictions can be naturalized along Alber-ian lines, and hence, in the absence of explicitly anticosmic cues, generate a kind of neocosmic immersion, so that unnaturalness doesn’t necessarily force readerly consciousness out to our own ontological level. His distinction between immersion-cultivating and immersion-breaking metalepses helps bridge the gap between Alber and Nash, while his light-touch use of psychological research on imaginative immersion points usefully to ways in which Unnatural Narratology can draw on other disciplines for a fuller account of the deep, different cognitive processes by which we engage with different degrees of fictive convention, realism, immersion.

The collection’s key essay, though, is Maria Mäkelä’s interrogation of whether the conventions that define “realist” texts are actually as “natural” to quotidian cognition as even unnatural critics imply. Through a tight reading of moments where *Madame Bovary*’s basic style becomes stylized, she aims “to recover the unnatural essence of the *conventional*” *per se* (142), showing how conventionalized “realist” techniques like post-Austen free indirect discourse are “peculiarly balanced between

the cognitively familiar and the cognitively estranging—and, as such, question the reader's loyalty to naturalization" (145). That "natural" immersion comes from conformity with expected linguistic conventions leaves it always subject to disruption by opaque reminders of their conventionality. This of course has its roots in Barthes' "reality effect," or Ortega y Gasset on "poetic reality" (30), and traditional narratology has long acknowledged realism's conventionality: Mäkelä's unique value is less in illuminating realism than in making the unnatural's putatively intrinsic negations contingent. Grant the non-default conventionality of what we think of as the "natural," and unnatural narratives are instantly liberated from the constraints of an oppositional orientation. Rather than unnatural texts being Violations or Underminings of essential practice, they're better understood as Foregrounding and Radicalizing dominant tools. Mäkelä demonstrates how willing Flaubert or Tolstoy are to lay their own conventionality bare, without much further interpretation of what they might hope to achieve by doing so. But to take her insight further than she herself goes, it lets us see unnatural narratives, Coover-style, as the basic "mainstream" from which "natural" narratives—through the extra immersion-soliciting work required to false-moustache their linguistic essence and constructed conventionality—have to depart. As y Gasset knew, "the realistic tendency is the one that needs more justification" (26). Pursuing this possibility with all the rhetorical freedom that it grants unnatural narratives—and grants us in our understanding of them—might be the central work of a second generation of Unnatural Narratology. Mäkelä's chapter is consequently, along with Richardson's on mimetic limitations and Alber's on options for naturalization, one of the absolutely essential early texts of Unnatural Narratology.

Unnatural Narratology, then, already contains resources for transcending the limitations it shares with normal-science criticism of postmodern fiction. Most work in the immediate aftermath of the two monographs self-consciously responds to a consolidated first generation. Significant contributions include special issues of *Style* (Knapp, ed., 2016), based around short responses to Richardson's work; of *Frontiers of Narrative Studies* (Richardson, ed., 2018), with a loose emphasis on unnatural forms of narration; and of *Poetics Today* (Alber, Carraciolo et al, eds., 2018), cultivating a less polarized relationship between Unnatural Narratology and cognitive

narratological studies (whose founding assumptions were strictly “natural”). Among separate articles, McHale usefully draws out of Mäkelä—out of the acknowledgment that literature is “conventional at every level, all the way down” (McHale 251)—the explicit, fundamental question of “what [then] becomes of the unnatural narratives whose un-naturalness depends upon the naturalness of their other?” (260). As we’ll see, the two books to emerge after this immediately Responsive era develop down many promising avenues, but don’t yet constitute a theoretical generation-break.

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Drawing on Chinese and Iraqi fiction, Biwu Shang “calls for a translational and comparative turn” (19), that might “force [western unnaturalists] to modify and revise the toolkits and conceptual systems” beyond what a mainly “England and America” canon has previously provided (27, 19). This ignores globe-spanning non-narratological surveys of nonrealism like Moore’s, or Nash’s *World Postmodern Fiction* (1993), but it does ground a real expansion of the toolkit, as Shang aims to make narratology more “comparative,” to better reconcile it with narrative ethics, and to introduce new categories of “unnatural discourse” and “unnatural emotion.” These novelties are often tersely underdeveloped: the short book is substantially based on a series of previously published articles, whose repeated framing introductions have not been cut for redundancy, and on a strict definition there may be less than 50 pages of Shang’s own argument and analysis here. Yet what there is is worthwhile and provocative. For example, Shang draws heavily on Skov Nielsen’s reader-centric categorization of unnaturalness, suggesting that “readers might judge a given narrative text” differently “owing to differences in literary cognition” (6). This raises fundamental questions: how much of our experience of unnaturalness depends on deliberate “judge”ment and how much on less voluntary “cognition”? What kinds of “differences in literary cognition” affect our perception of unnaturalness: trained competence, perceptual and imaginative creativity, linguistic proficiency, acculturated assumptions...? This concise evocation of such complicated questions, and their sporadic, suggestive pursuit, conveys the book’s merits and limitations.

Most of Shang’s distinctively “comparative” theory emerges in chapters on traditional Chinese ghost stories and recent Chinese time-travel tales. As the claim

that “Chinese narratology can be defined as ‘a study of Chinese narratives’” epitomizes (30), Shang is loose about how nation-comparative analyses expand general theory, and there’s a tendency to simply pile up cases of non-Western unnaturalness, whose existence should be uncontroversial. This can cramp out the space for developing new ideas, as when one chapter leaves only two pages for its promised central theorization of an “ethical interpretive option.” In practice, China doesn’t seem so unfamiliar: *Zhiguai* ghost stories “endorse the idea of ‘virtue rewarded, and vice punished’” (64), while time travelers are “placed in ethical dilemmas because of their new identities and their posthistorical knowledge, hesitating to make proper choices” (41). The transnational distinctions Shang does note (like the greater reticence of time-travellers in Chinese fiction to *admit* that their actions have changed history) expand our sense of Unnatural Narratology’s local permutations without upsetting theoretical underpinnings. But this is itself the crux of his useful adaptation from another scholar: “departures from social norms may be singled out as stranger than supernatural occurrences” (qtd Shang 34). For certain readerships, *cultural* assumption-violations might activate unnatural responses just as strongly as world-object impossibilities do for those of us raised on Austen. This framework makes some of Shang’s details less baffling: frequent claims like “[i]t is natural and normal for a man to be afraid of a wolf; while it is unusual and unnatural for him to be fascinated with this fearful species” may seem arbitrary if you’ve met a zoologist (86), but embody the “comparativist” premise that a general theory of narrative or unnaturalness needs to accommodate cultural variations in how these are defined and hence experienced.

Shang’s proposed concept of “unnatural discourse” in a chapter on Hassan Blasim focuses on the unnaturalness of narrators’ situations (dead, transcendent, animal, etc) rather than their actual language, ending up slightly redundant to work on unnatural narrators elsewhere. Yet the basic idea could be well developed in relation to the Chinese texts. His conclusion’s suggestion that we study “the question of translating unnatural narrative from the source language to the target language while maintaining its unnatural emotions” shows how comparativist and discursive approaches might interact (94), as translation would isolate how unnaturalness inheres distinctly in (translation-shifting) discourse elements or (stable) storyworld



elements.<sup>8</sup> Key “discourse” questions are more directly engaged in Shang’s analysis of traditional Chinese ghost-fiction’s tendency to incorporate moralizing commentaries, which not only make “an ethical interpretive option” non-optional (suggesting unnaturalness’ intrinsic normativity), but also raise questions like when paratextual and intratextual commentary count as narrative, and hence as potentially natural or unnatural (consider the intrinsic frame-breaking of commentaries whose generalizations span storyworld and readerworld specifics). This digressive self-interpretive discourse, para-narrative but embedded within narrative, points to the mutually defining intersection of metafiction and unnatural fiction, and suggests that the unnatural might be *especially* suitable for a propositional version of literary ethics, by contrast to Western models that tend to rest more heavily on empathy-frameworks, and so presume a “natural” immersion in represented worlds.

Shang does more to raise these implications than to investigate them, and the same is true of his work on “unnatural emotion.” His work on Blasim is good interpretive criticism of an author under-served in English-language scholarship (my Iraqi students approve this chapter), whose unnatural innovations serve mainly, on Shang’s account, to expand our understanding of the practical variety and conceptual range of Death. Interpretively, “the signifying metaphor of the corporeal violation and dismemberment launches a sharp attack on the violation of the most basic human rights of people in Iraq” (77): Blasim’s morbid experimental reconceptualizing of “human” has narratological upshots for cognition and emotion, revealing how often the unnatural stems from radicalizing or literalizing some perplexity within the “basic” conceptual vocabulary with which we process the world.

Blasim’s cultivation of horror by “human”-refiguring extremity leads to a transnational chapter on cases where “the emotions of the narrator and characters have become physically, logically, or humanly impossible” (86), aiming to revise the mimetic bias of prior affective narratology (84–5). In practice, Shang focuses more on how emotions arise from unnatural situations than the more fundamental question

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<sup>8</sup> It would be intriguing to know, too, how Chinese’s character-not-letter orthography affects the nature of narrative and opportunities for its unnatural development: however, Shang doesn’t address this and indeed only reproduces English translations, not Chinese or Arabic originals.

of whether unnatural narratives can create or at least synthesize genuinely new emotional states beyond what the mimetic can give us. Thus “physically impossible emotions” here concern not how imaginatively inconceivable world-states might differently activate the physical roots of our emotional states, but just the fact that, say, *Twilight* describes love between humans and (mythical, hence impossible) vampires. This seems easily naturalized by Alber’s “genre” option. Shang explains the interest of such texts by concluding that normal emotions in unnatural scenarios get vivified by Shklovskian defamiliarization (93). But if Shklovsky will suffice, do we really need the Unnatural Narratology infrastructure? This at least suggests the importance of further, experimental research on the actual cognitive processes by which we hold the unnatural and natural simultaneously in mind, and how *this* affects the pathways between imagination and bodily affective response.

In line with its strengths throughout, Shang’s book ends with its most densely useful section: a 2-page set of questions projecting directions for future study. Translation studies; the prospects of disidentifying the unnatural from the postmodern; the Nielsen-Phelan-Mäkelä-McHale issue of “whether unnatural narrative contains the elements of natural narrative, and on what conditions a text can be seen as an unnatural narrative or a natural narrative” (95)... Shang has perhaps the best eye of any Unnatural Narratologist for what the really fundamental issues are. If we might wish he had flipped the ratio between his 22-page recapitulatory introduction and his 2-page future-questions ending to actually address the latter in depth, then we can at least be excited for whatever he does next.

Alber and Richardson’s edited collection of *Extensions, Revisions, and Challenges* has much in common with Shang: conscious of the problem of “who is to determine what is possible and impossible, since these terms change over time and across cultures” (9), they seek “to complement and extend” earlier work toward a newly “expansive theoretical perspective” by “put[ting] unnatural narratology into dialogue with” not only other national traditions but other ideological frameworks and non-prose media (10/11). Like Shang, the collection slides between expanding the existing theory’s territory and expanding the theory itself. And though Shang isn’t cited, his category of “unnatural emotion” is a major cross-chapter focus. The editors’ introduction

also accommodates some recent objections: they grant that *neocosmic* unnaturalness is not inconsistent with immersive realism—"the unnatural is quite obviously mimetic in the sense of Aristotle because impossibilities can be represented in the world of fiction" (8)—while their discussion of their own persisting differences—"For Richardson, a narrative is a representation of a causally related series of events. For Alber, it is a cultural phenomenon that evokes a world that is populated by characters who undergo certain experiences" (4)—reflects the Gassian render/make distinction, here in the contrast between "represent" and "evoke." These distinctions are not brought into active theoretical service, but a number of the contributors raise questions whose resolution would depend ever more directly on them. This is a uniformly high-quality collection: I'll skip over expansions into new canons or media, and focus on theoretical novelties from which the study of postmodern prose fiction might directly benefit.

One shared strength of the Expansive chapters—Paul Wake on interactive game-books, Raphaël Boroni on graphic narratives, Dorothee Klein on Australian aboriginal literature, and Catherine Romagnolo on feminist approaches—is explicitness about why their readings are unreachable without the tools of Unnatural Narratology. Richardson's own contribution—a new typology of unnatural character-types—meanwhile concludes that "[a]ny plausible theory of character must include two very different components—one for characters and aspects of characters that resemble or imitate human beings, and another for aspects of characters who resist, defy, transgress, or reconstruct identities in ways that move far beyond realist or humanist models" (159), developing the introduction's insistence that "[t]o comprehend unnatural narratives, we need a second, additional poetics" (6). With Mäkelä, McHale and Shang in mind, though, I'd propose a third: not a "natural" narratology that elides the unnatural, not a two-theory theory with separate texts for each, but a theory of fictional narrative as *essentially* unnatural, with the "natural" a subset that varies from culture to culture depending on what conventions make artifice and medium-dependence most elidably "transparent" there.

Richardson's five subcategorized character-types are a useful descriptive tool, with the section on "metafictional characters" especially illuminating for

postmodernists (146). He touches intriguingly on medium-specificity, as categories derived from other media, like the “first cubist child” in Maya Sonenberg’s “Nature Morte,” posit weird modes of existence in time and space—“before he’s started... he’s back”—that ironically would be nigh-unrepresentable in painting but make sense in words (qtd 141). Romagnolo’s chapter makes the verbal medium the *crux* of the unnatural’s political potential: linguistic ambiguities in Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* render its narratorial perspective genuinely “indistinguishable and genderless” (25), leading to a fundamental undermining of “the masculine power of narrativizing”: not just “seized” by female characters but radically “reconfigured, disrupting a conventional notion of authority, subjectivity, and authorship, and replacing it with a contingent communal construction” (26). As the language of the ending “reveals itself to be impossible to untangle... definitively unnatural, embodying the paradox of being both true and untrue” (27), Romagnolo highlights how often unnaturalness hinges on artworks radicalizing their own media. Though she doesn’t explain it in these terms, a “natural” reading, in “representing,” must refer back to a prelinguistic world, and so can’t handle true indeterminacy in that world except by reducing it to a consequence of imperfect focalization. But literature’s verbliness—capable of unresolvable ambiguity—gives it the capacity to “evoke” worlds in which poles of a contradiction simultaneously co-exist. Romagnolo’s tight “ideological” reading thus develops Shang’s concern with how much of prose-fiction unnaturalness takes place at the “discourse” level. Christopher Kilgore on the affective consequences of autobiography/fiction perplexities in graphic memoirs, meanwhile, deals less elegantly with double-existence than Romagnolo, but makes an equally good case for the *necessity* of unnaturalness. Though he’s not writing about prose, he demonstrates how his graphic memoirs’ manipulations of “natural” convention “allow readers to empathize with identity formations and subject positions sometimes understood as ‘unnatural’ in a pejorative sense” (70). Most importantly, like Shang on Blasim, he shows how “the establishment of an empathetic connection” to real-world extremities of experience can sometimes be impossible *without* excursions into unnatural technique (93). Unnaturalness might thus foster *greater* emotional

relations with readers, by contrast to the persistent cliché of nonrealism's cerebral affectlessness (or merely alienating shock).

Daniel Punday addresses that cliché in relation to postmodern fiction. "If ontological metalepsis is generally understood to be estranging for the reader... then the postmodernist fiction that makes heavy use of it should be characterized by emotional disengagement" (103), but Punday finds metaleptic fictions by John Barth, Walter Abish, and Mark Danielewski suffering no loss of "emotional engagement." By contrast, they show how "ontological metalepsis... can work to deepen our emotional attachment to the story, despite its seemingly estranging effects" (100). Like Shang, Punday only shows that the texts "evoke emotional situations directly," rather than explaining the more fundamental issue of how unnaturalness itself might generate emotion. When he does approach this issue, he seems right to suggest that our distinctively "deepen"ed responses to unnatural fiction stem from intensified consciousness of a "bifurcation between emotional and more rational responses to the work," co-present in all our experience with narrative, natural or unnatural (113). Perhaps unnatural narratives, as they radicalize so many other basic conditions, might also distinctly radicalize the rational and affective components of narrative response, rendering them more discrete and hence more precisely recombinable into new formations. But how, once brought to consciousness, this then directly causes and channels emotion is something Punday leaves for future study, resting content that bringing rational cognition into the reading process at least doesn't *override* the basic prompted emotions (109). This "nonetheless" approach leaves unresolved whether we simply get normal emotions prompted in new ways, synthesize existing emotions into new combinations, or generate distinctive new emotions. He repeatedly suggests that unnatural metalepsis "*makes possible* the emotional context," implying emotional states that can't be accessed by mimetic routes (110); we'll have to wait for follow-up work to find out what and how.

Roy Sommer, recalling us to Richardson's conference antagonists, separates the unnatural from narrativity. Examining the implications of linguistic self-consciousness in Abish's *Alphabetical Africa* (first chapter composed only of words beginning with A, second drawing on A and B, and so on, up to A-Z then back again in 52

chapters), he grants that it's a novel (untrue creative prose of a certain length) but won't call it a narrative because of its foregrounding of linguistic organization over an unstable and inconsistent reference-world. Here again things hinge on the unacknowledged distinction between evoking and representing: Sommer's definition of narrative seems to require recounting of stable, plausible, developing, prose-preceding worlds, such that any coherent unnatural theory is less "a theory of *narrative* than a theory of non-narrative and anti-narrative elements in the novel" (116). Rather than some unnatural expansion of our experience and conceptualization of narrativity, readers get what they get out of such fiction by recalibrating their expectations: "Unnatural narratives do not elicit unnatural responses: What they do is cue readers, naturally, to choose a different frame of reference" (131). "Frame" here refers to *genres*, and for Sommer, Abish is easily read as "postmodern novel" (negatory, "abstract," french-deconstructive): among the on/off expectation-switches that define generic frames, Sommer locates the unnatural only where narrative assumptions come pre-cancelled, making Unnatural and Narrative mutually exclusive. Sommer's is the best-developed argument for the non-narrativity of the unnatural, but finally rules too much of unnatural effect out as mere error.

He takes himself to be *salvaging* Abish's interest: to seek for narrative where it's been cancelled "encourages a reductionist approach to the weird, the wonderful, and the wonderfully weird" (132). Yet much of postmodern fiction's weird wonder depends on its radicalization of basic Narrative conditions. Take fictionality: fictional worlds differ from possible worlds in being necessarily "gappy," with areas where questioning about unnarrated background must eventually end up indeterminate (see Doležel). Natural narratives ask us to forget this as we read; an unnatural approach like Gass' foregrounds the gappiness and makes of it something other than a flaw. Yet for Sommer, such foregrounded manipulation of fictive-narrative conditions makes a text unnatural, hence non-narrative, and surely if it's not narrative it can't be properly fictional (rather than just truthless): by Sommer's terms there could be no sound metafiction. His analogy with non-representative abstract painting, meanwhile, founders on the fact that literature's verbal micro-units are intrinsically conceptual such that any arrangement will be semantically suggestive:

thus it can never be as purely non-representational as arts whose media are more directly sensory. And I'd argue that Gassian approaches retain a core narrativity in their intensified temporal interest in the *process* of word-by-word world-creation: set against Sommer, this asks whether the heart of narrative is its handling of change and development, or its conjuring of implicitly complete universes. That Sommer's chapter opens up so quickly to such fundamental issues is a merit: every scholar of postmodern fiction should read it.

Sylvie Patron, meanwhile, radicalizes the Skov-Nielsen model of reader-determined unnaturalness: she rejects a novel's *own* cue. The final section of Majdi Mouawad's *Anima* seems to naturalize the preceding bulk of the book as its protagonist's delusion. But Patron proposes refusing, since the naturalization would make the character—a sympathetic attitude to whom is one of the book's initial pleasures—more obnoxious (46). She thus preserves “the possibility and perhaps even the necessity of an unnaturalizing second reading” (45). This “necessity” isn't justified as much as insisted upon: Patron repeatedly tells us what “the reader can and perhaps must” do without explaining what takes us from one modal verb to the other (48). She thus manages what I'd thought impossible, and veers *too far for me* into partisan Unnaturalism. But the animating insight that the unnatural can be a better guarantor of what we usually want to get out of fiction than the natural, *even for natural-cue texts*, seems important, and Patron's rebellion raises again the core question of how we establish that a text “prescribes” the appropriate natural/unnatural way to approach it (let alone what could warrant overriding the prescription). With Sommer in mind, we might wonder whether it's *more* of a violation to read an unnatural fiction naturally than to read an insistent natural fiction unnaturally: the latter is at least justified by the objective difference of nature between fictional and historical worlds. Patron's is, then, yet another argument whose ramifications call for explicit grounding in the Mäkelä-McHale proposition: prose fiction is intrinsically unnatural, it's just that some of it (a subgenre, however dominant and pervasive) asks us not to treat it that way. Unnatural fictions don't violate a default “natural” mode, but foreground and work with fiction's actual nature.

Unnatural Narratology has already made a comprehensive case for expanding mimetic assumptions, over such a range that we might abandon quests for a single natural/unnatural distinction. Why not, then, prefer a system of three switches: earthly/fantastic/impossible world; conventional/unconventional form; cosmic/anticosmic reader-cues? The dominant realist then turns out to be just one of 12 possibilities (e/c/c): standard neocosmic sci-fi and fantasy one other (f/c/c). The other 5/6 are either potentially or necessarily Unnatural.

The young field, itself having only explored an incomplete subset of those categories, has already usefully illuminated issues and premises fundamental to postmodern fiction: what defines unnaturalness and how unnatural elements can interact with more conventional surrounding narratives; the relationship between fictionality and narrativity; unnatural fiction's "great tradition" and its cultural variations; its relation to generic expectations; its interactions with normal cognition and affect; our sense-making options; the distinct impacts of convention-breaking at the world and discourse levels. Less sustainedly, it's raised questions about fiction's, imagination's, or realism's relationship to the literary as such; about whether non-mimetic fictions can create *distinctive* experiences, ideas, and feelings, or just reactivate/reorganize existing ones; about how audiences are cued to activate expectations; about the medium-specificity of such cues and responses; about nonrealism's potential freedom from oppositionality; and about responding to different unnatural forms, rather than to their unnaturalness *per se*.

Consensus remains elusive on all these issues, while even the deepest premise-level questioners of the Revision generation stop short of comprehensive revisionary theories. Along with the special issues, they're still essentially responses: generation 1.5 rather than a distinctive Unnatural Narratology 2.0.

This ongoing first generation succeeds unreservedly in its central case that fiction incompatible with "natural" presumptions is pervasive enough to demand theoretical accommodation. But the typical reader of *Orbit* won't need persuading of that. My toolkit-seeking approach above might have seemed sceptical, but I've found these books cumulatively inspiring and pedagogically useful: the introduction to the *Poetics* book, for example, helped my second-language, non-major students in



a general-education “Prose Fiction” course build medium-specific readings of “The Turn of the Screw” or *Flatland* or “The Green Zone Rabbit” that, unconstrained by a “mimetic paradigm,” extended into areas that the published scholarship on those texts has yet to illuminate. This ease of uptake as much as the research itself persuades me that Unnatural Narratology can ground distinctive new understanding as well as it undermines “natural” complacencies. Its institutionalization of work on nonrealist fiction’s deep premises is potentially the best thing to happen to the study of postmodern fiction since McHale’s and Hutcheon’s surveys gave us such viable early frameworks. Yet as *their* canonization eventually held criticism back from developing further premises that could cultivate distinctions as well as commonalities, Unnatural Narratology’s most complex, significant, revisionary work is yet to come.

The best bet for a generational break might involve more conscious grounding on what postmodern novelists have long insisted are the basics: fiction evokes but only pretends to represent, so the unnatural is basic and the “natural” is contingent. This raises a dilemma: whether to treat prose fictions—inherently unnatural as they are—neocosmically as worlds incompletely rendered through language, or anticosmically as language-structures made coherent by posited imagination. This, as Gass and Sommer concur from very different routes, is a matter of readerly orientation: treating natural or unnatural reading as informed options for handling identical texts,<sup>9</sup> we’d not only be able to bring the unnatural approach to the newly shared heart of literary training, but be equipped to pay more attention to how different texts *ask* to be read, and to better decide when and when not to comply. This could acknowledge a greater range of effects and implications *within* the unnatural, unconstrained by its negatory prefix. Thus might Unnatural Narratology help cultivate a criticism adequate to postmodern fiction’s variousness.

Our two fields do have properly differing concerns, but descriptive and axiomatic refinements in one *could* hold the other to higher standards of precise distinguishing

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<sup>9</sup> Though they differ in that the “natural” must struggle to handle born-unnatural texts while the unnatural can make its own sense of anything intended as “natural.”

interpretation, and vice versa in a virtuous circle. In the absence of conscious collaboration, they have tended instead to snag like misaligned gears on the same “oppositional” self-conception, reifying “nonrealism” and “postmodernism” as rhetorical objects in themselves rather than as categories covering infinitely varied forms with equally varied implications. Where the circle has virtuously spun it’s been thanks to scholars like McHale, Punday, Sue J Kim, Richard Walsh, and Luc Herman, whose work in each field has benefitted from the foot they kept in the other, since before the Unnatural label existed. Now that the labelling has created an institution, I hope more of us in both fields will put our shoulders to the mutual wheel.

### Competing Interests

Ali Chetwynd, author of one of the review-essays here, is Book Reviews Editor at Orbit. His review-essay was separately reviewed and approved by two other members of Orbit’s editorial board.

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