

# The Nature of Fiction: A Return to Phenomenology

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“[Books] deposit us in a space beyond literature and discourse, in our real habitat, which cannot be more obvious or more unformulable.”  
Félix Martínez-Bonati (163)

## Abstract:

As postclassical narratological studies have expanded themselves beyond the study of literary texts to other narrative-bearing cultural products and phenomena, the “unnatural” narratological turn has, more than anything else, returned the focus of narratological discussion to literary fiction. But an approach which claims to be focused on anti-mimetic and non-realist narratives elides the fact that all fictional narratives challenge mimetic understandings because there exists no single mimetic standard.

This paper – which is developed in parallel to my research on the way that narrational infractions disrupt a narrative's self-set structural principles – reviews narratological assumptions from an expanded phenomenological perspective. My exploration into the ethics of narrative form has led me to develop a conceptual framework which considers fiction on its own terms. It places literary narrative fiction within the context of the world and takes into account its generative (authorial) and receptive (readerly) potentialities. In doing so, I have found it necessary to re-articulate basic notions – narrative, author, text, reader – while attempting to set out some discourse for the discussion of the author-reader dialectic and the indirect nature of literary communication.

## Structure:

“Unnatural” by Nature

The Intending Author

The Imminent Text

The Intending Reader

The Narrative Person

Literary Communication

The Author-Reader Dialectic

## “Unnatural” by Nature

The terminological and conceptual framework of an intellectual discourse is no less important than the theory or methodology that is employed. The structural orientation narratology allows for an identification of narrative phenomena in the context of literary analysis, but largely leaves out aspects related either to its genesis or its reception. Hence narratology has been in many cases augmented by at least two additional approaches: reader-response theory following Wolfgang Iser, which originates largely but not exclusively in the phenomenology of Roman Ingarden, and is a kind of predecessor to Ansgar Nünning's cognitive narratological theory; and a rhetorical approach as originally developed by Wayne Booth and later developed by James Phelan, David Herman, Peter Rabinowich, and others.

Narratological studies have themselves expanded beyond the study of literary texts to other narrative-bearing cultural products and phenomena – including film, history, feminism, postcolonial studies, etc. – a “context-oriented” approach that falls under the umbrella term of “postclassical” narratology (Pier 10). Monika Fludernik's work on “natural” narratology, which deals with oral storytelling and conversational discourse, can be seen as part of this expansion of narratological discourse. It also served as a kind of occasion for Brian Richardson to introduce the concept of “unnatural voices” (2006), which more than introducing a new term, returned the focus of narratological discussion to literary fiction. A group of narratologists – including Jan Alber, Stefan Iversen, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Brian Richardson – then developed an approach which, as stated in their online *Dictionary of Unnatural Narratology*, “analyzes and theorizes the aspects of fictional narratives that transcend or violate the boundaries of conventional realism” (Alber et al. 2010a). Their main definition of “unnatural narrative” is given as “anti-mimetic texts that violate the parameters of traditional realism [. . .] or move beyond the conventions of natural narrative, i.e., forms of spontaneous oral storytelling” (Alber et al. 2010b: 115). But such a formulation seems to elide the fact that all fictional narratives challenge mimetic understandings because there exists no single mimetic standard.

And that “realism” is not a discrete narrative yardstick but rather a genre with conventions and boundaries that can indeed be violated – a construct that cannot serve as a gauge for a narrative's nature.

What this seemingly new theory essentially says is that “unnatural” narratology theorizes and analyzes *fictional* and *literary* rather than oral or conversational aspects of narrative, with a special interest in narratives which problematize verisimilitude. Moreover, “unnatural” narratology does this without exploring *how* fiction is what it is. And while it is interested in so-called “unnatural” texts – which in the last analysis are fictive rather than “real” (i.e. oral or conversational) – this approach does not refrain from *naturalizing* what it considers to be narrative “violations,” propagating the same the interpretive conceptualization that has dominated since Jonathan Culler (1975) and developed by Tamar Yacobi (1981), Ansgar Nünning (1999), and Greta Olson (2001), among others.

My own research research – which focuses on the way that narrational infractions disrupt a narrative's self-set structural principles and generates doubt, first about the narrator's stance and by extension about the significance of the narrative – has led me to review narratological assumptions from an expanded phenomenological perspective, and develop a reading strategy that resists interpretive naturalization, instead shifting the interpretive emphasis to the structure of the narrative. Pulling in particular on the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and invoking such notions as intersubjectivity and bracketing, I attempt in my other work to set out a morally neutral analytic stage in the inquiry into the ethics of narrative form.

This exploration has led me to develop a conceptual framework which considers fiction as fiction – that is, what is currently termed “unnatural” to narrative as being precisely part of literary fiction's very nature – while placing that literary narrative fiction within the context of the world and taking into account its generative (authorial) and receptive (readerly) potentialities. In doing so, I have found it necessary to re-articulate basic notions – narrative, author, text, reader – while attempting to set out some course for a discussion of the author-reader dialectic and the indirect nature of literary

communication.

## **Narrative in the World**

Narrative – whether or not it is based on fact – tells, describes, reports, suggests, comments on, refers to, or otherwise (re)arranges a sequence of events in the world. An “unjustifiable certitude of a sensible world common to us [which] is the seat of truth within us” is what Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls *perceptual faith* (1968: 11). This “world common to us” is called *intersubjective* because it is “given to all human beings” and “contains objects accessible to all” (Husserl 1964: 34). Through such objects our perceiving consciousness reconnects with other perceiving consciousnesses. Fictional narrative refers to the shared experience of such phenomena in the world and portrays details from that world – objects, locations, events, practices, emotions, etc. – or invokes related possible or impossible worlds (cf. also Ryan 1992): derivations or variations which are measured by their deviation from that same world.

Fictional narrative simulates “events” and “facts” that may never have occurred, making them ontologically *imaginary*; yet it relates them as if they had actually happened, making their reference point experience in *reality*. This is part of fiction's antinomic nature. Whereas the pure imaginary involves the “intent to not apply and even forget the criteria of verification” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 29), fiction is (perhaps counterintuitively) considered in relation reality: “[when] the text is a fictional one, the comparison with the 'real' world is indispensable in order to acknowledge the 'verisimilitude' of the *fabula*” (Eco 37). Hence Iser can claim that “fiction is a means of telling us something about reality” (1980: 53). For him, the fictionalizing act – selection, recombination, and the implied but unstated “as if” construction – is what connects the imaginary with the real (or vice versa).<sup>1</sup> Despite the concrete events’ not having occurred, they retain their generative bond to experienced phenomena.

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of this see Iser's *The Fictive and the Imaginary* (1993).

## The Intending Author

The agent that generates the fictional narrative – the author – grounds its existence in the world by dint of his or her own existence in that world. Inasmuch as the text is an effort of the author's consciousness it is *intended*. “[T]he word intentionality signifies nothing else than this universal fundamental property of consciousness: to be consciousness of something” (Husserl 1960: 33). An *intended narrative*, therefore, is not a narrative with a predetermined meaning – since it is not the meaning that is intended but the narrative – it is rather the narrative *toward which* the consciousness is directed.

When Wimsatt and Beardsley, in *The Intentional Fallacy*, defined intention as “what [the poet] intended” (469) the response should have been: the poem. Instead, they described it as “the author’s attitude toward his work, the way he felt, what made him write” (ibidem) - extending the idea of conscious intention into the predetermination of meaning (from ontology to teleology). Their main point - that the author’s attitude should not guide the judgment of a literary work - of course holds. But “[t]he category of intention is as inescapable . . . in speaking of objects of art as in speaking of what human beings say and do: without it, we would not understand what they are” (Cavell 1976: 198). Hence, while a work’s teleological function may be subverted by ignoring “the author’s attitude toward his work,” as a phenomenon of consciousness it is more difficult to deny its ontological intention.

The intending consciousness is that of an originating author who temporarily endows some version of this consciousness to a fictional narrator for the duration of producing a text. Embedded in this text is a narrative – the story and its details as uttered by a narrator. Though the narrator is always dependent on the author's consciousness – and therefore existence – for the narrating performance, the narrating voice is not reducible to that of its generator. The author *composes* the utterance – not only

inventing and arranging the *fabula* but also fashioning and revising the *sjuzhet* to form the final utterance – while the narrator merely *utters* the narrative as if the amalgam of *fabula* and *sjuzhet* pre-existed in their final form.

### **The Imminent Text**

When the performance is finished the product is a fixed text – a written trace of the narrator's utterance. We say the text itself is *immanent* inasmuch as its “*ultimate* dimension . . . cannot be semantic” (Iser, quoted in Toker 1994: xxix). Though this immanent text now stands separate from its author, its presence presupposes and refers back to his or her existence – at least for the individual who comes upon it in the world. The text becomes relevant to this other individual – a reader – if he or she draws some meaning from reading this text.<sup>2</sup> Notwithstanding the interpretive divergence inherent in reading, each reader is bound by his or her reference back to a single shared text. The degree of a text's dynamism – its potential for a spectrum of meaning – depends on its ability to activate a variety of interrelated meanings in numerous readers. While we can grant that “the meaning of the literary text . . . does not exist independently” of the reading subject (Iser 1980: 150), it remains the case that the *potential* for this meaning depends on a previous constitutive and generative act - the act of writing - which is independent of the reader. The reader, then, presumes that the text results from an effort made by another individual in the world – even when there is no way of knowing who or what the “author” might have been.

### **The Intending Reader**

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<sup>2</sup> Eco maintains that “the author has to assume that the ensemble of codes he relies upon is the same as that shared by his possible reader” (7)

Just as we said that *writing* (constituting, generating, producing) a text is the result of an intentional act of consciousness, so *reading* – reconstituting, regenerating, (re)producing, “concretizing” – is the result of an intentional act of consciousness which uses cognitive processes to activate that preexisting text. This deliberate act of consciousness means that the read narrative is also *intended* – its intentionality directed to engagement with the already-traced text in order to concretize the narrative utterance. This involves processing textual signals, deliberate or otherwise, whose source is the author, whose recognizing agent is the reader, and whose conveying medium is the narrator. While some aspect of the originally-conjuring author's consciousness is endowed to the narrator for the duration of the narrative utterance, the reader's cognizing consciousness is needed in order to (re)conjure the narrator and turn the inert yet immanent text into an intended narrative.<sup>3</sup>

The *intended narrative* – i.e. the narrative as it is “beheld” by the mind – may then be interpreted and granted one or another significance.<sup>4</sup> Like Iser's “aesthetic objects” (1980: 95), a version of this narrative exists in the consciousness of each reader.<sup>5</sup> These intended narratives or “aesthetic objects” – which may or may not result from the same reader-perceived or reader-generated “gaps” and “signals” – are not necessarily identical; but neither are they mutually exclusive, since their referent is the same codified text. “[E]very subjective realization remains accessible to intersubjectivity precisely because it shares [the] same intersubjective structure as its base” (Iser 1980: 151). Two readers may form varying but not unrelated aesthetic objects by reading the same text, and despite their differences they will have a basis on which to compare their interpretations – making literary discussion possible.

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<sup>3</sup> Iser invokes Poulet, who describes the reading process as “summon[ing the work] back into existence by placing my consciousness at its disposal” (1972: 297).

<sup>4</sup> See Iser for a separation of “meaning” and “significance” of literary works, a difference that he explains this way: “Significance is the reader's absorption of the meaning into his own existence” (1980: 151).

<sup>5</sup> The author, after the creation process is complete, also retains some mental notion of the narrative. In this sense, the author joins the ranks of the readers, at least inasmuch as he or she is no longer the person “creating” that specific text. The obvious difference is that the author's relationship to the “beheld narrative” includes the memory of fashioning it, while the reader's includes only the experience of mentally (re)constituting and beholding the finished product; each of these experiences has its own kind of agency and authority. And so the author and the reader nonetheless share two interconnected aesthetic objects formulated in relation to the same text.

## The Narrative Persona

As naïve readers, we “tend to treat the narrator as a real person” and then extend our judgment of this “personality” to the narrative.<sup>6</sup> Whether or not a narrator is a personage in the fictional world, this narrating entity still does not exist without some (albeit complex) connection to an authorial consciousness. Even the most detached “utterances presuppose, or constitute, a stance from which they are conducted . . . a voice emanating from a self” (Rimmon-Kenan 13), and the most disembodied consciousness with no particular identity still harks back to its source in something resembling a person.

The narrative strategy traditionally considered most authoritative and transparent is the so-called omniscient narrator. Its extradiegetic position, one narrative level above the story, is supposed to facilitate the trust necessary to accept the narrated details without doubt. This mode invokes a “convention” according to which the reader is “ready to take the omniscient narrator's word for the truth of his narrative” (Daleski 12) – in other words, we do not consider such a narrator as potentially generating narrative doubt. Yet the very reference to a “convention” already suggests a kind of boundary that can in theory be crossed. So we may start to suspect that ingrained in even the most omniscient narrative mode is already a potential “person” – even if not fully realized or revealed – a possibility that we see materialized in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* when the narrator, whose cognitive privilege has been hetrodiegetic “omniscience,” steps onto the arena on which the plot is played out.

And while a narrator – even one who takes on the author's name – is still not the author, the possibility of shifting between omniscience and first-person narrative is emphasized by the kind of “illicit border crossings” (Daleski 11) that is, arguably, one of the *Vanity Fair's* prominent points of interest: “in this novel we are anyway preoccupied with the narrator's own transformations” (6).

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<sup>6</sup> See Olson's discussion of Nünning (2001).

Daleski discusses Thackeray's technique as “a particularly flexible kind of omniscience, modulating freely from the impersonal to the personal . . . from the detached to the self-conscious” but eventually concludes that “omniscience turns out to be only one of the major narrative stances the novelist adopts” (5). What he praises is the novelist's ability to incorporate “successfully encompassed contradictions” (17), along with “shifts [from] one order of reality to the other” – i.e. from imaginative reality to historical reality – which “are smoothly supportive of the imaginative reality by repeatedly offering a validation of it in other terms” (15). These shifts demonstrate for us the bond between the impersonal and the personal narrator: they are points in the spectrum of narrative modes, and a single narrative agency can pass through these points between the covers of the same work.

What emerges is a sense that inherent in the so-called omniscient narrator is a narrative consciousness that can in principle become a first-person narrator. And when such a “transformation” does take place, it can generate doubt in the reader; it can then also remind us that “omniscient” narration is, in the last analysis, a kind of conceit – a claim to having total access to the fictional characters and events narrated.<sup>7</sup> The results of this transformation can vary from personal first person narrator (as in Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*) to a prominently impersonal first-person narrator, as in Camus' *The Plague*, and back to the omniscient narrator that who shares the author's identity to some extent.<sup>8</sup> As readers, we can distinguish between ourselves and the narrative voice that is activated in our consciousness; and we can, by the same token, accept the distance between this voice and the consciousness of the historical author. The *narrative persona* conjured up in all such cases can be *authorial* without necessarily sharing all its traits with the actual historical author.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Camus plays precisely with this possibility in *The Plague*, where the personal-yet-omniscient-seeming narrator eventually reveals himself to be one of the characters whom he has been describing in the third person.

<sup>8</sup> Again, Thackeray in *Vanity Fair*.

<sup>9</sup> Specifically in the case of omniscient narrators that are assumed to represent the voice of the author, the notion of “narrative persona” comes very close to Booth's “implied author.” Except that the term “narrative persona” already allows us to discuss this narrative phenomenon without projecting that narrator's problematics onto the author or the other way round.

## Literary Communication

This discussion of readers, authors, texts, and narrative personas depends on an understanding of communication as an *exchange between consciousnesses* – and in the case of fiction, as a kind of dialogue between author and reader, with the literary text as the medium. For even when we know nothing about the text's author, we do not read the text as autogenous (self-generated), as Roland Barthes was inclined to do; by the same token, neither do we read a work of fiction as (re)presenting that (possibly unknown) author's words. Rather, the exchange, while transmitted through language, occurs on the level of consciousness – in the act of (re)constituting an already-invented narrative (i.e. the narrator's utterance of the story). This way, the reader is not only “reading” a text, but in some way actually (re)connects with the seat of the narrator's origination: the author's consciousness.

Readers cannot directly access the author's consciousness; they can only constitute a sense of it through inference from the text or, less consciously, through the text's multiple effects. The author also cannot directly access the reader's consciousness except by creating conditions for a certain reading experience – conditions that may be based on assumed cultural codes. And while the reader may not initially be aware of this, it is through the common constitution of the narrator's utterance – an act of consciousness – that the story and its details are reconstituted as a narrative and endowed with interpretive potential.

The narrator imagined by the author and the one (re)constituted by the reader can certainly not be identical. But neither are those narrators independent – bound up as they are in a singular yet shared written utterance (or textual trace). And while in a naïve reading we focus on constructing the story and its details, upon closer inspection we find that we cannot do this without (re)constituting within our consciousness the voice of the narrator. This *intersubjective narrator* – called so for being iteratively constituted in multiple consciousnesses – becomes a sometimes-unnoticed point of intersection between the author and reader.

This meeting of consciousnesses – which occurs *through* but sometimes also *despite* the narrator – engenders a kind of communication between author and reader which we may call *literary communication*. This communication, which is not identical to the narrator's utterance, is a suggestion of significance put forth by the author via that same narrative performance. The language of literary communication is *literary language*, a specific case of creative, expressive, or signifying language. “[L]anguage is literary” when we let “all that is written veer toward a second value” (Merleau-Ponty 2007: 277). It is not a rhetorical stance but a spectrum of significance that is suggested through this second value.

Literary communication corresponds not necessarily to the literal recorded propositions but rather to that “halo of meaning” (Merleau-Ponty 2007: 277) which arises from the literary work’s “quasipositional assertions” (Martinez-Bonati 152). Literary communication and literary language are *indirect* insofar as the interaction between author and reader (as consciousnesses) is comprised by their *separate but coincident performances* of the same narrative utterance – providing access to the *fabula* and / or other aspects of a literary work which are open to interpretation.

### **The Author-Reader Dialectic (Human Parity)**

Literary language reaches the world because it reaches *us* in the world.<sup>10</sup> But beyond the reader-text dynamic, amenable to study with the help of reader response theory, a discussion of literary communication should take into consideration the existence, even if inaccessible, of a producer of the text, a consciousness beyond the narrative – the author – who calls out to the reader with the potential

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<sup>10</sup> “[L]iterature's world [is] the world within which literature itself operates, which is the same world as for any other type of text: the real world” (Sell 44).

for an indirect communication. Hence “readers’ relation with writers is one of human parity” (Sell 175). One aspect of the connection between the author and reader is their individual performances of an intersubjective narrator, through which they access the narrative (the story and its details as they are uttered). In the non-time/space-specific realm of such communication, the author's and reader's shared focus on the totality of the aesthetic object – the narrator's utterance of the narrative – means that their constituting consciousnesses “cross paths” in an intentional and interpretable narrative-oriented activity.

A real-world author has a certain set of meanings in mind in relation to a literary text, some of which can be indirectly communicated through that text to a set of real-world readers. This is not to deny that “the author’s attitude toward his work, the way he felt, what made him write” (Wimsatt and Beardsley 469) remains largely out of the reader's reach and can hardly be used as “a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art” (468). Nor is it to deny, on the other hand, that the author's effort was *consciously intended*. Contrary to the New Critical self-discipline, and despite the ineluctable mysteriousness of other minds, we may well be justified in reinstating the author's consciousness (and perhaps even life) into our potential discourse on literary narrative – provided we bear in mind “the complexity of the relationship between an individual . . . and his work” (Martínez-Bonati 1992: 143). For our awareness of the author behind the narrative always runs the danger of extending itself into a semi-fictive act of “imagining” what the historical author might have “meant” or even been like.<sup>11</sup> We should retain a hesitancy about such imagining (which may well be part of the naïve aesthetic response to a work), and while we recognize the author as real, we must also keep in mind how little we know about that historical person, and how our ideas about him or her can easily turn into overcompensation for pragmatic aspects that are ultimately unknowable.

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<sup>11</sup> “As I read, I infer a sense of the author who could have produced this text, and through accretion and revision I attach to that image certain (moral, political, social, aesthetic, and/or personal) values, norms, perspectives, concerns. Any knowledge I may possess about the historical author and the cultural context operates in tandem or in tension with my reading, colluding, and colliding to produce my sense of the text's producer” (Lanser: 155).

This reading model involves an interactional approach where “the gesture of expression . . . retrieves the world and remakes it in order to know it so much the more” (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 78). Notions such as “implied author” and “implied reader” (or “authorial audience”) are derived out of a system that is closed and separated from the world<sup>12</sup> - but in a new reunified context they can be rethought as referring to overlapping aspects of a shared participation. In the case of both the author and reader, beholding, perceiving, conceiving of the intended narrative (in order to interpret its significance) means embarking upon a constituting activity which involves both a physical engagement and a mental conjuration. In the process of literary communication, the author and reader are no longer in separate spheres, forever cut off from each other in time and by the linear text - through its imminence they communicate across boundaries.

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<sup>12</sup> "[T]he formalist tried to use [the implied author and the implied reader] as a way of sealing off an aesthetic world from the real world, so that works of literature would not really count as communication between real writers and real readers" (Sell 158).

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