Toward the Non-Natural: Diachronicity and the Trained Reader in Fludernik's Natural Narratology

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If a narratological book such as Monika Fludernik's *Towards a 'Natural'
Narratology* claims to move "beyond formal narratology into the realm of
pragmatics, reception theory and constructivism" (xi), what kind of outcome can we
expect? If the reader is familiar with the narratological *modus operandi*, she will not
be expecting any kind of empirical data about *actual* readers. As Marie-Laure Ryan
notes (474, 476), a cognitive narratologist will willingly undergo a considerable
theoretical and methodological ordeal just to avoid having to deal with real readers.
I find this to be a remarkable confession coming from one of the eminent pioneers
of cognitive narratology. This does not need to be a problem, however. In fact,
narratologists' uneasiness about dealing with the reader in the reading process can
be aggravated to such a pitch as to produce really great theorizing, and this, I think,
is the case with Natural Narratology. Fludernik claims to be in search of the
"organic frames of reading," but the reader position constructed in her theory is
synthetic through and through. In the following, I argue that this methodological
unnaturalness within Natural Narratology is not a shortcoming but a productive
innovation that makes it one of the cornerstones of postclassical narratology.

The Problem with the "Reader" in Cognitive Narratology

After having performed an ingenious reading of Joyce's "Eveline," Seymour Chatman notes, rather self-critically, that "this laborious and unnatural way of reading is not, of course, what the reader actually does but only a suggestion of what his logic of decision must be like" (206; cf. Jahn 464). And yet, it is precisely through this unnatural reader construct that structuralist narratology was able to generate theoretical models that offer a nuanced understanding of the interpretive processes involving the reader and the text. Another example of such wonderfully burdensome reader constructs is the one erected by Menakhem Perry in his analysis of the literary dynamics of Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily": for him, the reader is ultimately a "metonymic characterization of the text" (43) — and the same could be said of Jonathan Culler's "competent reader" (113–30) or of Umberto Eco's (1979) "model reader."

It is this constructed reader of classical narratology, ultimately reducible to a "set of [literary] conventions" (cf. Culler 118), that cognitive narratology seems determined to get rid of. Manfred Jahn, an eminent pioneer of cognitive narratology alongside Fludernik and Ryan, states that classical narratological analyses, with their bottom-up approach to narrative phenomena, do not produce results that would be informative or even compatible with existing theories of cognitive processing (465). But we might just as well turn the question around and ask whether the cognitive sciences have introduced any revolutionary findings that would alter the way we, as literary scholars, understand the process of reading literary narratives. Marie-Laure Ryan's answer is: "No." As Ryan notes, "current techniques of brain imaging have not yet reached the necessary precision to tell narratologists something truly new and interesting concerning the cognitive foundations of

narrative" (472). Furthermore, Ryan demonstrates convincingly how cognitive-narratological reasoning, in order to avoid the interpretive robustness of experimental psychology, erects a constructed "model reader" quite similar to the one posited by Iser's phenomenology of reading (481; see also Mäkelä 2012).

Second-wave cognitive narratologists (e.g., Kukkonen; Caracciolo) acknowledge this legacy of phenomenology while still feeling compelled to state reasons for not doing empirical research on readers. Marco Caracciolo's enactivist study on experientiality includes a whole subchapter titled "Why This Book Is Not an Empirical Study" (11–16): "all my argument needs is that a story *could* impact readers in the way I describe, even if this effect cannot be generalized across all readers" (13). Despite Caracciolo's well-grounded reservations *vis-à-vis* the universality of his own arguments, it is precisely the *general* reader that he is after (see also Jahn 463), not a particularly informed or competent one.[1] Is this reader, although thoroughly embodied, immersion-prone, and affectively responsive, someone who does not care much about literary conventions?

Jan Alber, among others, has effectively transported the familiarity and economy principles of cognitive literary studies to the realm of Unnatural Narratology and the study of literary texts that feature physically or logically impossible scenarios. The result is a jumpy version of the "emotional" cognitivist reader: when brought into contact with the unnatural, such as a postmodernist text with incompatible storylines, she is overcome with "discomfort, fear, or worry"—feelings that she is able to leave behind, however, with the help of appropriate cognitive schemata (Alber 83). Then again, if you asked the "competent" reader, many of the "unnatural" narrative features analyzed by Alber would be postmodernist stock conventions, well established decades ago. So all in all, the

cognitivist reader, unlike her structuralist big sister, is a languid "general reader" who always opts for the primary, the plausible, the coherent, and the unambiguous; and in case of failure, she lapses into catatonia.

Fludernik's Reader: Between Diachronism and Constructivism

This critical, and somewhat caricature-like, sketch of the cognitive-narratological reader construct brings me, finally, to an appraisal of Fludernik's uniquely productive reader construct in Natural Narratology. Admittedly, Natural Narratology also bears traces of the cognitivist reader construct looking for an easy way out. I find it mildly surprising that even though Fludernik does great work in bringing up different potential meanings of the "Natural" (10–19), one connotation she does not mention is "easy, primary, unreflected."[2] Yet one alternative title for the book could have been "Towards an *Easy* Narratology," because the foregrounding of the universalist, embodied everyday frames of sense-making necessarily replaces attentiveness to the specific features of an individual narrative with the reader's unreflective doxa. The theory itself is anything but easy, but the interpretive default settings it attributes to its reader construct are totally accessible.

Nevertheless, there is definitely something more to Fludernik's reader; the exceptionality of her reader construct in the field of cognitive narratology is the result of the diachronic scope and logic of her argument. To be more precise, Fludernik's reader construct emerges from an irresolvable tension between *diachronism* and *constructivism*. There seem to be two temporal dimensions of this reader: first, the allegedly synchronic process of narrativization whereby the reader applies cognitive frames on four different levels of embodied and cultural

knowledge; and second, the diachronic process whereby the reader is posited to be a time-traveler in literary history.

For Fludernik, not only the synchronic process of sense-making but also the diachronic movement toward ever more literary and complicated frames is a process of *narrativization*. The well-known definition of synchronic narrativization in Fludernik's book ("making something a narrative by the sheer act of imposing narrativity on it," 34) is followed by a much less cited note on *diachronization as a process*:

> Besides being a synchronic feature, narrativization can, however, also be extended to the diachronic realm. In the long history of narrative forms and modes one can observe extensions of existing genres, particularly on the basis of familiar cognitive parameters and frames. This applies to the complex process of transcoding oral into written narratives . . . and equally concerns the establishment of more modern types of narration such as second-person fiction. . . . Narrativization can therefore ultimately feed into diachronic change, in the incorporation of new options into the realm of familiar genres or discourse types. These newly available frames are generic and narratological rather than natural categories of a cognitive quality, but they are at least partly based on cognitive parameters, which they utilize to produce new combinations and new insights. Narrativization thus constitutes a processual boundary between the reader and the text, and between the text and its historicization. (34–35)

Frames "familiar" to whom? Frames "newly available" from whose perspective? Like any other cognitive-narratological theory, Natural Narratology purports to shift the narratological emphasis from textual structures to the process of reading, but the theory is not explicit about its methodological relation to the reader. Then again, hardly any narratological theory is. Natural Narratology, however, is such a complex system that perhaps agency within this theory can only be emergent. When reading Fludernik's book, I cannot help but wonder: Whose diachronic process is this, anyway? Who is the agent in Fludernik's theory? The theory itself is so synthetic that it cannot reflect any organic human process. Explicitly, the theory seems to foreground historical authors as the decisive agents who, for example, struggle to reshape the conventions of oral storytelling to accommodate written textual environments (as in "the complex process of transcoding oral into written narratives" in the above quotation). Yet sometimes the agent seems to be the autonomous literary text that the Russian formalists once championed (as in "which they utilize to produce new combinations and new insights"). In any event, a truly cognitive reading of the theory should foreground the *agency of the reader***.** If we do that with Natural Narratology, I think we begin to grasp the ingenious dialectics of synchronicity and diachronicity in Fludernik's theory.

Fludernik's diachronic method implies a conceptual reader-figure *trained* by the texts she encounters while making her way, in diachronic succession, from the oral to the written, or from realism to modernism. Along the way, she acquires the requisite reading strategies and cognitive parameters, consequently being able to make narrative sense of — to *narrativize* — (almost) any representation. Finally, she ends up facing the postmodernist deconstruction of language and narrative, quite as scared and worried as her "unnatural" counterpart, because the tools of

6

narrativization she has gathered in her time-travels do not work on this avant-garde material.

The crucial as well as paradoxical difference between the reader construct of Natural and Unnatural Narratology is that only Fludernik's reader is obviously "unnatural" — anti-mimetic (Alber et al. 2010: 115) or non-natural (Fludernik 11) in the sense of not pertaining to any imaginable actual reading experience or reading history — in its methodically diachronic literary Bildung. Fludernik is thus able to operationalize the cognitive-theoretical notions of constructivist apperception and frame adjustment as the very logic of her argument. What makes this all the more interesting is that the "situation" as implied by the theory is impossible: no actual reading situation or readerly history could ever reflect it.

Learning with Fludernik: The Synthetic Reader Construct as a Method

Allow me to end on a personal note. I was once so inspired by this methodological setup that I decided to build my doctoral dissertation around it. In my thesis (Mäkelä 2011), dealing with consciousness representation in adultery narratives from *La Princesse de Clèves* to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, I wanted to avoid merely building a diachronic history of narrative techniques. From the point of view of narrative theory, doing that would have meant nothing but rehearsing the old formalist story about automatization and estrangement. Instead, I wanted to do what Monika Fludernik did, that is, construe a constructivist reader position, unnatural in its scrupulous diachronicity, beginning with Madame de Clèves and Laclos, then turning to Emma Bovary and Edna Pontellier, and only after that addressing modernist examples and Monica Lewinsky. The point was to show that, quite like the wanton and adulterous heroines of our literary tradition, the reader of fictional

minds is corrupted by previous fictional minds, and instead of having access to any original emotion, both the reader and the fictional character build their experience in the true spirit of constructivism, that is, with the help of literary frames based on previous representations of adulterous experience.

And of course, this is *not* the way any flesh-and-blood reader would ever read (in the words of Chatman, this is a "laborious and unnatural way of reading"). But neither for me nor for Fludernik was this diachronic reader construct ever supposed to pass for true empiricism or even as a schematized reader response. Rather, it is a theoretical construct, a method. It represents the abstract convergence point *between* the necessary *synchrony* of the readerly application of "natural" cognitive parameters and the necessary *diachronicity* in the constructivist accumulation of these frames.

So this is what I wanted to absorb from Fludernik's theory, although my true aim all along was to demonstrate the ultimate unnaturalness of literary mind-construction. One of my colleagues, Samuli Hägg, named this method not diachronic narratology, but *narratological diachrony*, which I think captures the gist of Fludernik's logic of argumentation: namely, the fact that such a constructed reader position may be the only narratological method with which we can actually model the constructivist logic of frame adjustment and frame application in reading. This synthetic reader construct renders possible a diachronic narratology that is not methodologically reducible to formalist automatization and estrangement.

Moreover, it is only through this unnatural reader that we can appreciate the persistence of natural frames of oral storytelling in the synchronic process of narrativization. This is because in the actual diachrony of contemporary natural readers' lives, written textual frames are likely to prevail over oral ones, just as the

8

conventions of viral social media stories may shape our reception of oral and literary narratives. This unnatural, theoretically and methodologically conditioned mimesis of the reading process is what we need to content ourselves with until such time as some narratologist, someday, somewhere, wants to undertake a longitudinal study of the changing frames of narrativization on actual readers.

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[1] Comparing rhetorical narratology with cognitive approaches to narrative, Dan Shen points out that the latter are geared toward the "generic audience": they operate "through sharing the same narrative conventions as typically embodied by stereotypic assumptions, expectations, frames, scripts, plans, schemata or mental models in narrative comprehension" (152 n.8). The former, by contrast, seeks "to enter the position of the implied reader or authorial audience so as to investigate the communication between the implied author and his/her hypothetical addressee" (15).

[2] The Labovian notions of "naturally occurring" and "spontaneous" that Fludernik relies on refer to the context of storytelling rather than to an effortless or automatized processing in narrative communication (cf. Fludernik 13–14).