

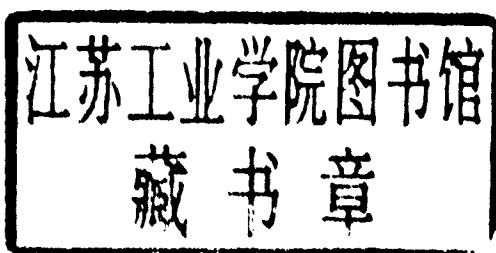
# **Towards a 'Natural' Narratology**

Monika Fludernik



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# Preface

This book began its life during my stay at the National Humanities Center (Research Triangle Park, North Carolina), where I was completing a book on speech and thought representation. *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* grew from material that was too unwieldy to be included in *The Fictions of Language and the Languages of Fiction* since I found that the larger narratological issues that I was broaching required nothing short of a radical reconceptualization of narratology, indeed required the creation of a new narrative paradigm. In the meantime I had also started on a project examining narrative structure in late medieval and early modern English narrative on which I continued work during a sojourn at Freiburg on a Humboldt fellowship. In this way my earlier (pre)occupation with the representation of consciousness, my long-time narratological interests and training, and this new project dealing with early English texts all came together to produce what for some people may remain a very diversified bill of fare, featuring conversational storytelling and Literature (with a capital L), linguistics and narratology, postmodernist issues and questions of literary theory.

*Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* proposes to redefine narrativity in terms of cognitive ('natural') parameters, moving beyond formal narratology into the realm of pragmatics, reception theory and constructivism. Unlike traditional narratology, this new model attempts to institute organic frames of reading rather than formal concepts or categories that are defined in terms of binary oppositions. Unlike most other narrative theories, moreover, the new paradigm is explicitly and deliberately *historical*. The *towards* in the title reflects not merely the preliminary nature of the proposed cognitive and organicist model; it also refers to the chronological path which individual chapters trace from storytelling in the oral language to medieval, early modern, realist, Modernist and postmodernist types of writing. It is only by means of this diachronic journey through English literature that the conceptual tools which are requisite for a 'natural' narratology could be developed.

In contrast to the 'classic' narratologies of Bal, Chatman, Genette, Prince or Stanzel, this model sets out to discuss narrativity, *not* from the

vantage point of the realist and Modernist novel or short story, but from the perspective of those discourse types which have hitherto attracted comparatively little sustained analysis: oral and pseudo-oral types of storytelling, including conversational narrative and oral history; historical writing; early forms of written narrative (the medieval verse epic, medieval histories and saints' lives, storytelling in early letters from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, narratives of the Elizabethan age up to Aphra Behn); and, at the other end of the spectrum, postmodernist literature. The latter field includes fairly well-known modes of writing such as neutral narrative and the present-tense novel, but additionally embraces fiction in the second person and in the *we* form, or texts employing *it*, *one* as well as the German *man* or French *on*; *skaz*-type narratives; and experimental writing from Beckett to Maurice Roche, by Clarice Lispector, Kazuo Ishiguro or Christa Wolf. Such an emphasis on what I am tempted to call the non-canonical forms of narrative (non-canonical, that is, within present-day theoretical discussions of the novel) triggers a number of modifications of current narratological paradigms as well as raising some serious methodological issues about the basic presuppositions of the classic typologies. An analysis of non-canonical narrative therefore prepares the way for fresh reconceptualizations of the storytelling mode, resulting in the proposal of a new narratological paradigm that is based on cognitive parameters and a reader-response framework, and it also accommodates fictional and non-fictional types of narrative. From this perspective, the realist underpinnings of classical narratology can be transcended in the direction of an analysis that posits realism as the special case of the model, namely as that context which allows the fullest application of mimetic interpretative reading strategies.

As explained more fully in Chapter 1, the term '*natural*' in the title feeds from three separate disciplines and areas of knowledge. It acknowledges a fundamental inspiration from natural narrative, i.e. unelicited conversational storytelling, and relies on the results of much research in discourse analysis in the Labovian tradition. Second, there is an allusion to natural linguistics which in one manifestation (the Austrian school linked with the name of Wolfgang Dressler) deals with cognitive parameters that relate to a theory of naturalness. Finally, the reception-oriented approach in which I engage enlists Jonathan Culler's concept of naturalization and redeploys it for the purpose of narrative *re-cognition* during the reading process. My proposal renames and redefines Culler's concept and introduces the term *narrativization*.

Fed from these three sources (natural narrative, the linguistics of naturalness, Culler's naturalization), the new model centrally incorporates findings about natural narrative, situating conversational storytelling at the very heart of '*natural*' narratology. By attempting to cover as many different kinds of narrative as possible, the methodology followed in this book parallels my approach in *The Fictions of Language and the Languages*

*of Fiction*, where I deliberately concentrated on non-canonical examples of free indirect discourse. Thus, readers will find novels from the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries underrepresented in comparison with earlier and later writing, which receives much more extensive coverage. Moreover, texts discussed in this book are almost exclusively drawn from literatures in the English language because my training and expertise are in English studies, and because I rely on much language-specific linguistic groundwork relating to discourse markers, tense usage and syntactic structures which would make a cross-linguistic comparison difficult to handle. Nevertheless, in the later chapters dealing with experimental writing there are some excursions into German, French and Spanish territory in an attempt to complete the general picture. For easy reference translations have been provided for the medieval material and for the French and German quotations.

This book is primarily conceived as a contribution to narratology, yet I hope that its historical aspects will also make it accessible to a wider audience of scholars in the field of English literature. With this double interest group in mind, I may perhaps suggest that narratologists concentrate on the framing theoretical Chapters 1 and 8, with forays into Chapters 5, 6 and 7, which (especially Chapter 5) deal with specifically narratological issues. Literary critics with more general interests may perhaps want to browse through Chapter 1 and concentrate on the historical presentation in Chapters 3, 4 and 7. Chapter 2 provides an introduction to various kinds of oral storytelling and will be of interest mainly to the non-linguist trying to get her bearings in unknown territory.

The structure which I have chosen for this study is circular. After a playful reflection on the liminality of the 'natural' I start with an introduction to the theory of Natural Narratology and close the circle at the end by trying to integrate this new model with the traditional typologies. In the central chapters (Chapters 2 to 7) I proceed chronologically, starting with oral types of narrative (Chapter 2), and continue with a chapter on medieval and early modern texts (Chapter 3). Chapter 4 argues that from a perspective of narrative structure the fiction of Aphra Behn was crucial to the invention of the novel. The second half of Chapter 4 provides a rough outline of the relevant stages in the development of the novel from realist to Modernist fiction. The chapter closes with a discussion of neutral narrative which serves as an example of fiction that begins to move away from the automatic institution of natural parameters. Chapter 5 concerns itself with late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century texts that employ unexpected perspectival combinations and require a reshuffling of cognitive resources. With Chapters 6 and 7 the book moves into its postmodernist phase. Chapter 6 deals with superficially formal aspects of narrative: the use of pronouns and tense. These topics in turn have quite serious implications for several central areas in narrative theory. Chapter 7 examines the narrativization of various kinds of recalcitrant material,

mostly radical linguistic experiments. The chapter tests the applicability of the concept of narrativization and documents the limits of this reading strategy. Chapter 8, finally, closes the circle and returns to theoretical and narratological subjects, rounding off the model as projected in Chapter 1. Among other issues, Chapter 8 considers at length how the boundaries between the different genres might be redrawn in the wake of my redefinition of narrativity. It also provides a discussion of the status of ideology within a narratological model.

## **TYPOGRAPHICAL CONVENTIONS**

The following quotational and typographical conventions are observed in this book.

In all quotations from both literary and non-literary sources, emphasis in the original text is rendered in italics, and my own emphases are given in bold italics. Documentation in quotations from literary sources includes: the title of the work cited; the volume, part or book number in capital roman numerals; the relevant chapter in small roman numerals; author's name and publication date of edition quoted; page and/or line numbers. Volume and chapter information has been provided to facilitate the tracing of passages in different editions.

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As a consequence of its rather involved history, this book has in the past four years significantly affected my life and that of people around me. Many friends and colleagues have given me invaluable feedback on earlier versions of individual chapters. I would particularly like to thank Dorrit Cohn, Marcel Cornis-Pope, Hilary Dannenberg, Andrew Gibson, Paul Goetsch, Manfred Jahn, Brian McHale, Ansgar Nünning, Brian Richardson and Gudrun Rogge-Wiest, all of whose perceptive remarks and patience with the imperfections of early drafts I greatly appreciated.

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## Prologue in the wilderness

*Let us consider, for example, not the President's Hollywood career but a far more innocent California pastime, a trip to Yosemite National Park. One of the most popular walks at Yosemite is the Nevada Falls Trail. So popular, indeed, is this walk that the Park Service has had to pave the first miles of the trail in order to keep them from being dug into trenches by the heavy traffic. At a certain point the asphalt stops, and you encounter a sign that tells you that you are entering the wilderness. You have passed then from the National Forests that surround the park – forests that serve principally as state-subsidized nurseries for large timber companies and hence are not visibly distinguishable from the tracts of privately owned forest with which they are contiguous – to the park itself, marked by the payment of admission to the uniformed ranger at the entrance kiosk, and finally to a third and privileged zone of publicly demarcated Nature. This zone, called the wilderness, is marked by the abrupt termination of the asphalt and by a sign that lists the rules of behaviour that you must now observe: no dogs, no littering, no fires, no camping without a permit, and so forth. The wilderness then is signalled by an intensification of the rules, an intensification that serves as the condition of an escape from the asphalt.*

*You can continue on this trail then until you reach a steep cliff on to which the guardians of the wilderness have thoughtfully bolted a cast-iron stairway. The stairway leads to a bridge that spans a rushing torrent, and from the middle of the bridge you are rewarded with a splendid view of Nevada Falls. On the railing that keeps you from falling to your death as you enjoy your vision of the wilderness, there are signs – information about the dimensions of the falls, warnings against attempting to climb the treacherous, mist-slickened rocks, trail markers for those who wish to walk further – and an anodized aluminium plaque on which are inscribed inspirational, vaguely Wordsworthian sentiments by the California environmentalist John Muir. The passage, as best I can recall, assures you that in years to come you will treasure the image you have before you. And next to these words, also etched into the aluminium, is precisely an image: a photograph of Nevada Falls taken from the very spot on which you stand.*

## 2 Prologue in the wilderness

*The pleasure of this moment – beyond the pleasure of the mountain air and the waterfall and the great boulders and the deep forest of Lodgepole and Jeffrey pine – arises from the unusually candid glimpse of the process of circulation that shapes the whole experience of the park. The wilderness is at once secured and obliterated by the official gestures that establish its boundaries; the natural is set over against the artificial through means that render such an opposition meaningless. The eye passes from the ‘natural’ image of the waterfall to the aluminium image, as if to secure a difference (for why else bother to go to the park at all? Why not simply look at a book of pictures?), even as that difference is effaced. The effacement is by no means complete – on the contrary, parks like Yosemite are one of the ways in which the distinction between nature and artifice is constituted in our society – and yet the Park Service’s plaque on the Nevada Falls bridge conveniently calls attention to the interpenetration of nature and artifice that makes the distinction possible.*

*What is missing from this exemplary fable of capitalist aesthetics is the question of property relations, since the National Parks exist precisely to suspend or marginalize that question through the ideology of protected public space. Everyone owns the parks. That ideology is somewhat bruised by the actual development of a park like Yosemite, with its expensive hotel, a restaurant that has a dress code, fancy gift shops and the like, but it is not entirely emptied out; even the administration of the right-wing Secretary of the Interior James Watt stopped short of permitting a private golf course to be constructed on parkgrounds, and there was public outrage when a television production company that had contracted to film a series in Yosemite decided to paint the rocks to make them look more realistic. What we need is an example that combines recreation or entertainment, aesthetics, the public sphere, and private property. The example most compelling to a literary critic like myself is not a political career or a national park but a novel.*

(Greenblatt 1989: 8–10)

Stephen Greenblatt’s humorous anecdote about a trip to Yosemite National Park provides a perfect illustration of some of the issues with which I will be dealing in this book, while at the same time marking a limit to my own enquiry into fiction and the novel. Where Greenblatt’s story serves as an exemplum of the ideology of representation and opens up into an analysis of the capitalist underpinnings of the supposedly ‘natural’, my own enquiry will be directed towards narration, narrativity and fictionality, with the question of ideological underpinnings relegated to the horizons of the analysis. It is my contention that, paradoxically, we still know much too little about narrative to indulge in any easy generalizations about its commitments to, and ensnarements by, its political, societal and ideological embedding. At the same time, I maintain, it is only in the light of recent deconstructivist, Lacanian and New Historicist

insights into the workings of the symbolic that one could dare tackle the concept of the natural in both its complexity and intrinsic paradoxicality. No immediate access to the natural nor a naïve reduction of the natural to pure undiluted Otherness can any longer claim legitimacy so that a theoretical approach that exploits the concept of the natural needs to clarify its own position from the very start.

Like Baudrillard's America, Greenblatt's Yosemite Park appears to the eyes of the beholder as a structure of signs that traces a significant trajectory and culminates in a paradoxical deconstruction of these signs' canvassed meaning. The hypothetical nature enthusiast follows the officially designed trail of signifiers to their ever denser and allegedly epiphanic source only to find, with the reader, that the promised reward, on reaching the destination of the visitor's semiotic quest, deconstructs itself by symbolic overkill. The natural quite brazenly displays itself as a mere representation of the real thing which, across the abyss, continues to haunt the quester's imagination and eludes the grasp of the explorer. In this tale of frustrated mastery over the symbolic 'other' the natural thus operates both as the prime signifier and the elusive signified. Its function can be compared to that of the textual 'real' in the realist novel with its paradoxical relation to the 'Real' of human cognition. Greenblatt's anecdote not only illustrates the short-circuit of signification in the symbolic code which keeps projecting an imaginary other but fails to grasp the Real; it additionally mirrors the perplexities of fictional writing, of trying to constitute an imaginary world, which is the 'real' world in yet a different shape. Greenblatt's 'exemplary fable', like the fictional detail in Barthes's arguments about the *effet de réel*, attests to the trustworthiness of its own discourse. Not only is this an anecdote *about* the effects of the real in the guise of the natural; the story of this trip, generalized and ahistorical as it may be, additionally invites the reader's active collusion so that she comes to share the various facets of the experience apostrophized in the fable. This applies no doubt most forcefully to those numerous readers who can compare Greenblatt's narrative description with their own personal experience of visiting the Nevada Falls Trail.

Greenblatt's utilization of the anecdote as a marker of the real within his own critical discourse moreover instantiates the late Joel Fineman's characterization of the function of the anecdote in historical writing (Fineman 1989). According to Fineman, in historical discourse anecdotes serve as the prime signifiers of the historical real. At the same time anecdotes paradoxically tend to flaunt their literacy. As Fineman emphasizes, most anecdotes consist of an entirely fictional dialogue that is said to have taken place between the historical protagonists. The very constructedness of fictional dialogue which I noted in connection with my thesis of schematic language representation in *The Fictions of Language and the Languages of Fiction* can therefore be found to obtain also in the realm of the historical anecdote and to perform a crucial function within the



#### 4 *Prologue in the wilderness*

semiotic economy of the historiographical discourse. Just as all language representation is sheer invention but projects an illusion of veracity in accordance with familiar schemas of utterance and expression, the historical anecdote serves to attest to historical truth by inventing a fictional scene that is meant to highlight the specificity of the historical *in actu*. Greenblatt's anecdote, fittingly in the second-person present-tense mode of imaginary projection, ascribes to the real of the story an at best fictional (i.e. verisimilar) status: it is an 'exemplary fable', part of an instructional discourse whose moral advertises itself in the appealing form of a post-structuralist exemplum.

Let us consider the narrative shape of this exemplary tale. Unlike the historical anecdote and unlike the typically anecdotal form of jokes, Greenblatt's story exceeds the familiar structure of the anecdote in both functional and formal respects. On the formal side, this story of an imaginary trip through Yosemite National Park lacks the typically anecdotal climax of a dialogue with a punch line or a similarly climactic focus. Functionally, the hypothetical setup of this purely fictive 'fable' marks the experience as repeatable (on the lines of Derrida's *iterable*)<sup>1</sup> so that, through its very ability of being reiterated, i.e. re-experienced, the fictive comes to acquire the connotations of the real. (Barthes's *effet de réel*, on the other hand, has no truck with iterability.) Greenblatt is here able to combine two very disparate modes of discourse, the oral tale (the anecdote) and the decidedly experimental technique of second-person fiction with its realist substratum of the guidebook text (a prototypically iterative genre describing acts of sightseeing to be repeated by each reader-tourist). It is on account of this combination that the passage so admirably lends itself to the purposes of the present study, informing my conception of the 'natural' of storytelling in its most mundane as well as most artificial, i.e. experimental, incarnations. The natural, as Greenblatt implies, is that which requires the most insistent signification by means of (artificial) signifiers – just as the supposedly mimetic representation of direct discourse is constituted by a maximum of artificial markers of alterity.<sup>2</sup> Man's 'natural' environment is the asphalt; the domain of the natural, which through symbolic or ideological intervention has acquired the connotation of originarity, therefore only gradually moves towards and develops into the 'real' natural as that area which requires additional marking and where the asphalt abruptly ceases. On similar lines the textual real, although supposedly accessible through a naturalistic reading of the discourse, in fact requires a sophisticated deployment of rhetoric (the rhetoric of the verisimilar) to mark its realism, and in historical discourse: its historicity.

Greenblatt's excursion into the officially demarcated realm of the wilderness defines nature in opposition to culture and then deconstructs this dichotomy by exposing the cultural embeddedness of the very notion of the wilderness: the wilderness needs to be delimited by means of cultural