# A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative

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# Realism
## and the Unnatural

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Realism, in this study, [. . .] refers to the illusionistic evocation of a verisimilar fictional reality whose convincing presentation correlates particularly with psychological or motivational verisimilitude.

—Fludernik, *Towards* 131

[. . .] reality is neither the subject nor the object of true art which creates its own special reality having nothing to do with the average "reality" perceived by the communal eye.

—Nabokov, *Pale Fire* 106

## 1. Introduction

How to recover the unnatural essence of the *conventional* in narrative fiction? The emergent trend of unnatural narratology has drawn its impetus mostly from the strikingly transgressive, illogical, or antimimetic elements of narrative construction (Richardson *Unnatural Voices;* Alber; Alber, Iversen, Nielsen, and Richardson). Consequently, texts that have established the firm ground of literary conventions—such as classical realist novels—have been playing the part of default narratives in their representational design as well as

in their experiential parameters. I take this collection of essays to be an opportunity to demonstrate that narratives under the heading of realism may even have *more* narratologically transgressive potential than the manifestly antiexperiential or antinarrative extremes. The approach sketched in this essay may not, however, be as much against the unnatural grain as it might first appear, since the common aim remains the same: to contest—through theory-defying examples—the homogenizing side effects of much contemporary narratology.

VIKTOR SHKLOVSKY, the Russian formalist and the eminent hero of classical narratologists, left us with an ambiguous concept, estrangement (*ostranenie*). Is art supposed to defamiliarize us from our experience of life or from conventional modes of representation? Or even a trickier question: to what extent do the conventions of representation affect our perception of life? At least it seems evident that life *as such*—without art—appeared to him to be an insipid series of repetitions.

> And so life is reckoned as nothing. Habitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. [. . .] And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important.* . . . (18; italics in original)

Shklovsky's classical formulation triggers at least two possible reactions: to consider art (1) as a series of revolutions catalyzed by the avant-garde, or (2), even in its most familiar forms, as a vehicle for prolonging the leap from representation to assimilation (see Striedter 7; Holquist and Kliger 629–31). The former take is supported by the formalist notion of literary evolution, suggesting that an artistic technique, once freshly estranging, wears off quite in the manner of the charms of one's wife (or husband). Yet it seems to me that Shklovsky's above quoted impressionistic definition makes one incline toward the latter notion, to believe that also literary *conventions* "increase the difficulty and length of perception" and are thus intervening in the otherwise sluggish dialogue between our minds and our environment. Were this not the case, we should accept that a work ceases to be art once its technique becomes automatized by successors.

When Shklovsky draws our attention to the "technique of art" and to the "process of perception" at the same time, he is inviting us to the same frontier where most of the cognitive narratologists are presently camped: the fuzzy area where the meeting point of mental and literary representations should be found. This is a realm of study where the question of narrative construction concerns both the text and its reader. But after a closer look at the premises of cognitive narratology, one cannot but notice that the cognitive agenda favors familiarization over defamiliarization: instead of sticking to the materiality of the sign (to the Jakobsonian poetic function), cognitive narratologists are anxious to merge mental representations with literary ones. For instance, Manfred Jahn suggests that reading a narrative "possibly even *requires* 'deictic shifts' to imaginary co-ordinates and places" ("Focalization" 102; my italics, M.M.); or, consider Uri Margolin's stance towards fictional agents:

> [. . .] we are operating within the confines of a make-believe world, *pretending* that narrators and storyworld participants exist independently of the text which *actually* creates them via semiotic means, and that they are *sufficiently* human-like so that concepts developed in cognitive science to model the activities of actual human minds are applicable to them, *even if* only through analogical transfer. (273; my italics, M.M.)

Eager in demonstrating the general applicability of our mental narrative schemata, cognitive narratologists tend to speak of literary narratives in terms of "sense-making" (see, e.g., Alber 79–80); the reader is a navigator, the text is a map, and the target is mental assimilation (or apperception; see Jahn "Focalization"). The much favored approach to allegedly frame-breaking ("new") literary narratives is to celebrate their potential in *enriching* the mental framework of readers, the result of which is that these once transgressive texts become *naturalized;* "fiction as a genre comes to represent precisely those impossible naturalized frames and to create readerly expectations along those lines" (Fludernik, "Natural Narratology" 255; see also Alber; Fludernik "Naturalizing the Unnatural"). It seems evident that from the point of view of cognitive narratology, reading fictional narratives is all about *diminishing* the difficulties and the required time in remodeling verbal presentation into internal representation—and not the other way around as Shklovsky would have it.

The emergent trend of unnatural narratology has been extremely efficient in digging out new, even *sui generis* cases of narrative (de)construction; yet it seems to me that this is innovativeness with regard to one's corpus but not

always theoretically adventurous enough. Still a demand appears to arise for some denaturalization of basic theoretical categories that shape our understanding of the reading process. On the one hand, cognitive narratology is by definition resistant to narrative contingencies since it grounds itself in *prototype* modeling: the cognitive-narratological prototype reader always opts for the most likely, the primary, and the coherent. On the other hand, as far as another dominant narratological branch, the Chicago school of rhetorical narratology, is concerned, their insistence on the situatedness of narrative communication more often than not frustrates any attempt to focus on details that might downplay the communicative situation or even make the story incommunicable.

The recent exposition of unnatural narratology by Alber, Iversen, Nielsen, and Richardson makes headway in challenging the easy analogies that have been drawn either between real-world schemata and constructed storyworlds (116–19), or between actual human agency and verbally constructed voices (119–29). Yet if we wish to challenge the idea of the narrative prototype, we should not only look for deviations but also work *within* the alleged prototype, which includes established literary conventions and narratives that Alber et al. call "ordinary realist texts" (114). Furthermore, we may remember that Fludernik's *Towards a "Natural" Narratology,* the most influential advocate for the universality of narrative frames, is introducing us not to a class of particular texts but instead to frames of reading and interpretation. Consequently, not even for Natural Narratology does there exist such a thing as a "natural novel." In fact, Fludernik herself presents us with many of the peculiarities of novelistic *vraisemblance* or synthetic verisimilitude (*Towards* 129–77). For her, the default narrative is a naturally *occurring* one—even if it is a ghost story and, as such, representing things unnatural.

In what follows I will choose a denaturalizing angle to (1) **perception;** (2) **psychological and motivational verisimilitude,** and (3) **discursive agency** in a few examples from Flaubert, Tolstoy, and Dickens. However, my central assertion is targeted less at particular novelistic modes than the diversity of *readerly frames:* I wish to demonstrate that many realist conventions are peculiarly balanced between the cognitively familiar and the cognitively estranging—and, as such, question the reader's loyalty to naturalization, to "'converting' the non-natural into a basic cognitive category" (Fludernik, "Natural Narratology" 256). Finally, I will try to sketch a fresh approach to unnatural narratology, one that would construe "the reader" not as a mere sense-making machine but as someone who might just as well opt for the improbable and the indeterminate.

## 2. Novelistic Perception: Detail and Disturbance

Let me start with a digression on visual art. In 2009 Jan Alber gave a visiting lecture at the University of Tampere on impossible storyworlds and their cognitive reification that started with a reference to unnatural spaces in perspective drawing. One of the mentioned artists was M. C. Escher, whose *Concave and Convex* (1955) is shown in figure 7.1—a drawing that obviously aims at irking and needling our cognitive capacity. Everything is wrong here, and yet our basic schemata concerning space, as well as perspective drawing, are triggered. Everyone would agree that the world presented is unnatural—in the sense of being physically or architecturally impossible.

For the sake of comparison, in figure 7.2 you find another piece of art, *Young Girls at the Sea* (*Jeunes filles au bord de la mer*) by Puvis de Chavannes, from the late nineteenth century. I am first to admit that there is nothing *strikingly* troubling in this painting, no alarming perspectival tricks, no impossible shapes. Yet one might ask: which one of the works is more disconcerting—*at the end?* The majority of readers would still say Escher, obviously, but we might yet stop for another minute with the Puvis painting, with its clear-cut contours and semiflat appearance. Acclaimed for his masterful exploitation of perspectival conventions, Puvis recovers the flat techniques of the pre-Renaissance period and merges them with stylized, partial perspective to create a pastichelike reference to early-Renaissance Italian art as well as to relief sculpture: the three women presented do not form a single layer as they would in a medieval painting but rather represent three overlapping layers. In the middle, the steep shore bank cuts the picture in two and appears to form a unified layer with the woman lying on the right; this edge or joint may be the most unsettling detail counteracting the naturalization of the scene. The resultant effect is that of oscillation between flatness and perspective; between a sense of surface and a sense of depth. *Young Girls by the Sea* does not merely attempt at a formal pastiche but is a commentary on the contemporary realistic and perspectival aesthetics: Puvis rehabilitates the ornamental and the medium-specific facet of painting.

*Jeunes filles* may lack the alleged cognitive shock effect of Escher, yet the prudence and the scarcity with which the painting demonstrates the deviation in perception and space seems to be enough to reflect the type of not-quite-familiarity we experience with much artistic presentation. Whereas the observer is likely to recognize the architectural impossibility of *Concave and Convex* within seconds, to appreciate Puvis's pseudo-perspectivity is a slower process that, furthermore, never really ceases—it would be impossible to imagine a moment of recognition, assimilation, or reification. The process of
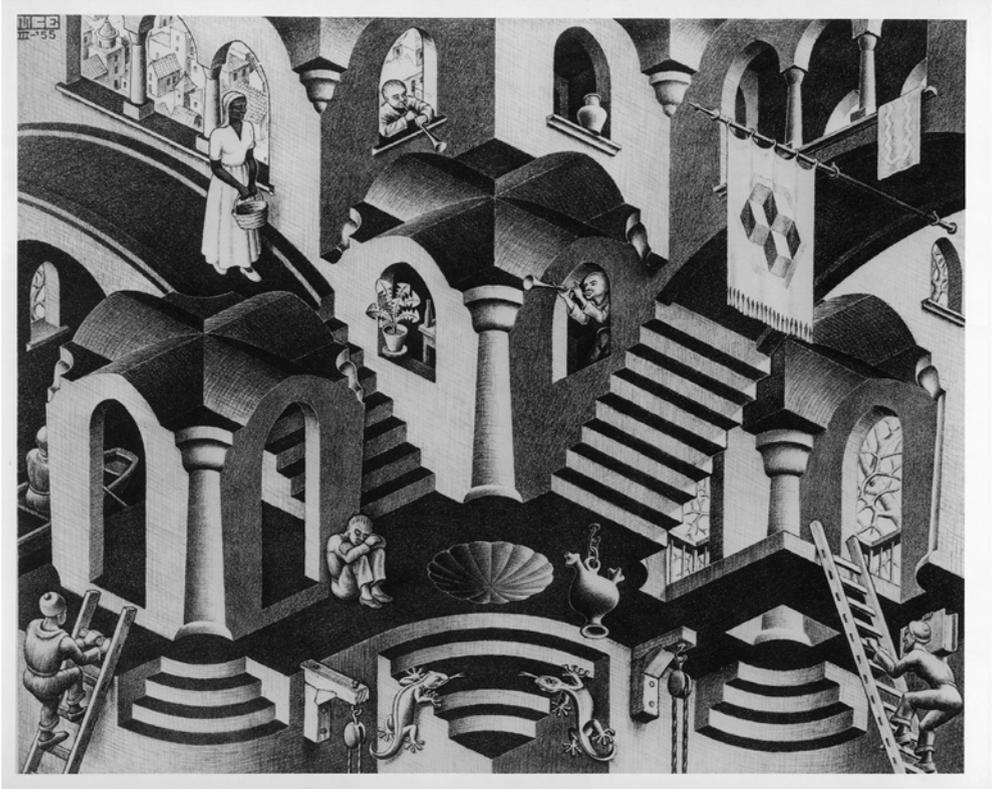
FIGURE 7.1
M. C. ESCHER'S *CONCAVE AND CONVEX* © THE M. C. ESCHER COMPANY—HOLLAND. ALL RIGHTS
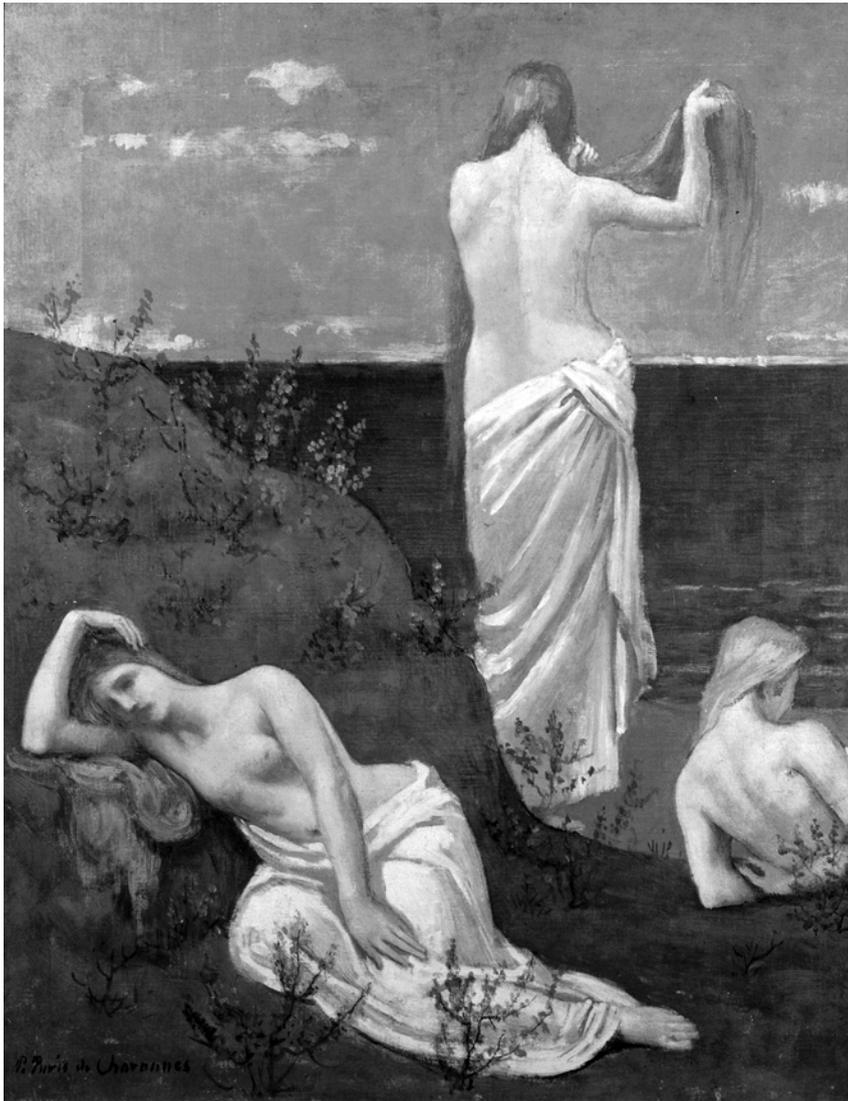RESERVED. www.mcescher.com

FIGURE 7.2
*YOUNG GIRLS BY THE SEA,* BEFORE 1894 (OIL ON CANVAS), PUVIS DE CHAVANNES, PIERRE (1824–98), MUSÉE D'ORSAY, PARIS, FRANCE/GIRAUDON/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

perception itself is defamiliarized and left lingering between the naturalizable and the irremediably strange; Puvis is able to, in Shklovsky's words, "increase the difficulty and length of perception" and to demonstrate that "the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged" (18). Yet it is the same element of two-dimensionality that makes both Escher's impossible spaces and Puvis's semiflat representation possible and restores any attempt at 3D modeling as unnatural.

The reverse and yet complementary relation between Escher's drawing and Puvis's painting has its literary equivalent in the relationship between postmodernist techniques and—say—Gustave Flaubert. Neither Flaubert nor Puvis is a realist proper, but rather their work is a commentary on realism—they usher us into the backstage of artistic verisimilitude and serve as intermediaries between the before and the after of prototypical realism. Quite in the manner of Puvis, *Madame Bovary* also flaunts the uncanny incongruence between the alleged storyworld and its "flat" (textual) construction. The first emblem of this tendency is the much-discussed hat of young Charles Bovary, described at the very beginning of the novel:

> It was one of those hats of the Composite order, in which we find features of the military bear-skin, the Polish chapska, the bowler hat, the beaver and the cotton nightcap, one of those pathetic things, in fact, whose mute ugliness has a profundity of expression like the face of an imbecile. Ovoid and stiffened with whalebone, it began with three big circular sausages; then, separated by a red band, there alternated diamonds of velours and rabbit-fur; after that came a sort of bag terminating in a cardboard polygon, embroidered all over with complicated braid, and, hanging down at the end of a long cord that was too thin, a little cluster of gold threads, like a tassel. (4)

Are we dealing with an "unnatural" hat? Would Escher or Puvis draw this hat? (as Vladimir Nabokov has done; see Nabokov, *Lectures* 131). The hat is not physically or architecturally impossible, yet it seems inconceivable. The farcical accessories and the multilayered structure cannot be assimilated with prior knowledge—despite all the schemata made available by the narrator (chapska, military or bowler hat, and so on).[1] It seems that the ultimate motivation for

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1. In fact, the entire description reminds one of the cognitive challenge that Lisa Zunshine deals with in her cognitive-narratological applications of Theory of Mind studies: the human mind is only capable of tracking down four to five levels of intentionality (Zunshine 28–29)—that is, when trying to figure out embedded mental actions such as "x knows y believes a to be mad at c" and so on. A careful reading of Charles's hat discerns at least five different levels of

this allegedly hyperrealist description is the same as in *Jeunes filles:* to give us a sense of paper, or of writing, as juxtaposed with the illusion of immediate perception. The flat discourse is incapable of representing the multilayered monster of a hat, that is, textuality thwarts mimetic intention.

To top this off, there is "hanging down at the end of a long cord [. . .] a little cluster of gold threads, *like a tassel*" ("[. . .] *en manière de gland*"). The description of Charles and Emma's wedding cake, no less outrageous and incomprehensible than the hat, culminates in an analogous simile: at the very top, there is "a little Cupid, perched on a chocolate swing, its two poles finished off with two real rose-buds, *just like knobs,* on the top" ("[. . .] de rose naturels, *en guise de boules,* au sommet"). These ridiculous minutiae not only are part of a pseudo-description but are themselves *representative of other* artifacts. Flaubert's mock-referentiality seems to suggest that a realist novel in itself is a pathetic—if also flamboyant—simile, just as the gold threads in the hat or the tacky rosebuds on the cake are there only *en manière de* something else.

Yet who perceives, or where is the focus of perception (Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited* 64)? A common take on perception in a realist novel emphasizes either omniscience, omnipresence, and control of the strong narrator-figure (as in Dickens), or the psychologically realistic conveyance of character focalization (as in Tolstoy or Flaubert). Yet the theoretical notion of narrator as focalizer manifests one of the much-discussed breaches between classical and postclassical narratology: whereas Chatman (144–45) and Genette (*Narrative Discourse Revisited* 74–77) insist on treating the narrator as a world-*generating* agency, both cognitive and rhetorical narratologists would rather allocate all fictional agencies—both narrators and character-focalizers—the same cognitive schemata for world *construction* (Jahn "Windows"; Phelan, "Why" and *Living to Tell* 114–19). This debate goes too deep into the epistemological problems of fiction to be reproduced here, but one might still throw on some gasoline by asking whether interpretive confusions in assigning story-internal or story-external cognitive activities to textual agents are, in fact, fundamental to literary fiction. Who is ultimately constructing, perceiving, or reading the storyworld? Consequently, the ambivalent role of the narrator as both the generator and the (re)constructor of the storyworld might

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ornament or material. Zunshine refers to authors such as Woolf and Nabokov to demonstrate how "fiction engages, teases, and pushes to its tentative limits our mind-reading capacity" (4) but at the same time suggests that the process of mind construction is eventually the same, whether we read fiction or our social reality. Yet one would suspect—just as is the case with Charles's hat, as juxtaposed with a real encounter with an extraordinarily ugly headpiece—the act of mind construction to be crucially dependent on the difference between textual and perceptual evidence. In the last section of this article, I will briefly discuss the *leveling down* of intention in realist consciousness representation.

even affect the interpretation of conventionally realist novels. Moreover, as I will demonstrate toward the end of my essay, the roles of the narrator and character are constantly on the verge of collapsing into one another in canonical realist consciousness representation (see also Mäkelä "Possible Minds").

Again, this underlying unnaturalness is *thematized* in Flaubert, notably in the famous discrepancy between the beginning and the overall design of the novel: the story opens with the word "nous," referring to the schoolmates of young Charles Bovary, forming their first unfavorable impression of him and his hat; soon after the opening, first-person references gradually give way to omniscient narration, the narration thus generating what Jonathan Culler calls Flaubert's elusive narrator (*Flaubert*).

Another crucial observation on narrative disturbances in *Madame Bovary* is also made by Culler, albeit over thirty years after his seminal Flaubert study ("The Realism"). Let us look at the passage Culler refers to, which happens to be one of my personal favorites as well. Here Charles pays a visit to père Rouault, yet supposedly to meet Emma, whom he finds alone in the kitchen:

> He arrived there one day about three o'clock; everybody was out in the fields; he went into the kitchen, but at first didn't notice Emma; the shutters were closed. Through the cracks in the wood, the sun cast along narrow stripes of brightness that broke across the angles of furniture and trembled on the ceiling. Flies, on the table, were crawling up the glasses left there, and buzzing about in the bottom, drowning in the cider dregs. The daylight that came down the chimney, turning the soot on the fire-back to velvet, touched the cold cinders with blue. Between the window and the hearth, Emma was sewing; she wore no fichu, on her bare shoulders you could see little drops of sweat. (21)

Several details invite the reader to naturalize the entire description of the stagnant, grotesquely aesthetic setting as perceived by Charles: we are told that first he does not see Emma, so presumably we should get a report on what he did see. Yet, as Culler notes, at the same time we are hard-pressed to imagine such exquisite sense of detail (the prismatic effects of light, the drowning flies, and the drops of sweat) emanating from Charles's dull and indelicate disposition. For Culler, the passage marks one of the cornerstones of Flaubertian aesthetics, his desire to frustrate any readerly attempt to personalize narrative stances ("The Realism" 690–91). Consequently, *Madame Bovary* displays a world that is *realistic:* "Realism, one might say, is based on a sense that there is a world there, independent of any human meaning or desire, as well as on the theme of the world's resistance to human purposes" (692).

How do Culler's observations and the Flaubertian realism pertain to contemporary narratological concerns? First of all, the definition of realism that Culler derives from Flaubert's oeuvre seems somewhat contradictory to the notion of "natural" parameters and cognitive verisimilitude. For cognitive narratology, the storyworld always appears as perceived by *someone* (even if this agent is hypothetical; see Herman "Hypothetical"). As Fludernik's definition of realism has it, from the readerly perspective it is psychological anchoring and "motivation" that guarantee the plausibility of the storyworld (*Towards* 131, 167). Second of all, the predominant definition of narrative as an experiential mode that grounds itself in the human qualia, in the "what is it like" essence of events and worlds (Herman, "Cognition" 256–57), would insinuate that the unanchored and unmotivated worlds of realism are, in fact, essentially nonnarratable. From the vantage point of cognitive narratology, a *narrated* world which merely "is there" is—unnatural. At this point, a cognitive narratologist would be eager to place an anthropomorphized narrator-figure in the scene to anchor the experience. Yet, as in the above-cited example from *Madame Bovary,* it is precisely the frustration of the figural experience as the allegedly firm interpretive footing that creates the experiential void and the sense of displacement.

In fact, one may find an analogous controversy in the archives of classical narratology. Roy Pascal, fixing his critical eye on psychological verisimilitude, *accuses* Flaubert of improbable eloquence, sophistication, and exactitude in the representation of figural perception and labels this alleged shortcoming "narrative usurpation" (107–10); whereas Brian McHale, in his review of Pascal's study, considers this "usurpation" and the resultant indeterminate impressionism as one of the fundaments of Flaubertian poetics (400).

It seems to me that in spite of the fact that Flaubert is an extraordinary writer, the indeterminacy of perceptual agency is not something that only he cultivates; rather, as is the case with Puvis's semiperspectivism, Flaubert only highlights a feature that is always already present in textualized, literary constructions of human perception.[2] At this point we may be reminded of Henry James's "house of fiction," a metaphor that Manfred Jahn revives in his discussion on focalization: narrators are seated outside the house of fiction looking in through their respective windows; focalizing characters inhabit the house of fiction, holding mirrors that reflect the insides of the house, thus providing new coordinates for the narrators' perceptions (Jahn, "Windows"

2. For some apt remarks in the same vein, see Tammi.

251–52). Jahn insists that the Jamesian notion of perceiving narrators admits the *reader* to an imaginary perceptual position in (relation to) the storyworld (258). What Jahn's conceptual metaphor does not account for is the inevitable fact that a representation that entails layered perceptual agency (character/narrator/reader) is not a static setting or scene but involves constant traffic in and out the house of fiction; perception and construction overlap inextricably. The entering Charles Bovary and the drowning flies issue exactly such a challenge to our reading by questioning a naturalized relationship between perception and verbal construction on any level of cognitive mental functioning—diegetic, extradiegetic, or extratextual. A cognitive approach resting uncompromisingly on natural perceptual agency in narrative texts is not able to account for this traffic and disturbance.

The example of Charles and the flies betrays one further characteristic typical of realist textual architecture. A frequent argument in favor of the immersive and illusionist quality of realist fiction arises from the level of detail. Yet one might argue, as does literary critic James Wood from his privileged position outside narratological debates, that the obsession with verisimilar detail in realist fiction is, in fact, rather countercognitive. Wood is affected by Flaubert's devotion to detail, which, according to Wood, manifests as *selection* (not as randomness imitating on-line perception); Flaubert's details are "frozen in their gel of chosenness" (33). The effect is that of both recognition and estrangement. It is as if the flies in the kitchen of Rouault are dipped not only into the cider dregs but into the "gel of chosenness": the traces of selection imply intentional construction, and yet the effect is that of a "world just being there"—all sorts of beautiful banality taking place beyond the mediocre interests of Charles Bovary.

Moreover, the metonymic essence of realist descriptions creates an effect of—not precision but—disproportion. As the famous definition of Barthes goes, the code of *effet de réel* should be invisible to a reader accustomed to novelistic conventions ("The Reality Effect"); in other words, the extrapolation of the storyworld from metonymic evidence should be a naturalized procedure. Yet if we were to follow Wood in recognizing the "gel of chosenness," we might want to conclude that the constructed perception of the Rouault kitchen is more grotesque than natural; the flies obtain an unmerited position, they swell with nonmeaning (see also Mäkelä, "Heavy Flies"). From this perspective, realism would seem to be an art more of distortion than of reproduction. The uncanny construction of storyworlds in realism might even suggest that there are some fundamental narrative elements that disconfirm the Gestalt-psychological assumption of the human mind as coherence-driven.

## 3. Distortions of Psychological and Motivational Verisimilitude

As already mentioned, the notion of narrativity as mediated experientiality lays heavy emphasis on "psychological and motivational verisimilitude" (Fludernik, *Towards* 131), on story-internal elements as being convincingly situated within the parameters of embodied human experience. My earlier discussion centered on distortions of on-line perception on a narrative micro level that manifested as ambivalent perceptual agency and as nonholistic world construction. The tricky subject of motivation should, however, be addressed on a larger narrative scale. In the following, I wish to make a short note on problems having to do with the incongruence between compositional and psychological motivation in literary realism. Typically, the hackneyed conception of realism as faithfully depicting the harsh human condition goes hand in hand with a heavy reliance on psychological motivation. In such a reading, every detail and every narrative choice is interpreted as shedding light on a particular experience in particular circumstances. Yet the most beloved realists are like Tolstoy or Dickens: the ones capable of creating vividness and richness of life which is almost unimaginable and always dislocated.

The following passage from Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* describes the moment when Anna is just about to arrive to comfort her sister-in-law. Dolly has learned that her happy-go-lucky husband, Stepan Arkadyevich, is having an affair with their children's governess:

> When Anna came in, Dolly was sitting in the small drawing room with a plump, tow-headed boy who already resembled his father, listening as he recited a French lesson. The boy was reading, his hand twisting and trying to tear off the barely attached button of his jacket. His mother took his hand away several times, but the plump little hand would take hold of the button again. His mother tore the button off and put it in her pocket. (66)

Read in its immediate context, psychological motivation starts to emanate from this description. First, one would assume that it is Anna who witnesses this comforting domestic scene on her arrival to a home where "all was confusion"; perhaps the "plump little hand" is investigated with an endearing eye that might very well belong to Anna, the sweet aunt of the Oblonsky children. Furthermore, it is noted that Grisha, the little boy, "already resembled his father," an observation that Dolly herself would not be prone or eager to make in her circumstances; whereas the sister of Stepan Arkadyevich, not having seen the family in a long time, obviously would. This evident interpretation is

launched at the outset by pinning down the scene to a moment "when Anna came in." Strangely enough, the perception becomes dislocated in the light of the following events: after the episode with the loose button, Dolly returns to her own knitting and the narrator takes off to describe Dolly's anguish and anxiety that she must bear in the middle of domestic bustle. Then, after one page, another description of Anna's entrance follows:

> Hearing the rustle of a dress and light footsteps already at the door, she turned, and her careworn face involuntarily expressed not joy but surprise. [. . .]
>     "This is Grisha? My God, how he's grown!" said Anna [. . .]
>     She took off her scarf and hat and, catching a strand of her dark, curly hair in it, shook her head, trying to disentangle it.
>     "And you are radiant with happiness and health," said Dolly, almost with envy. (67)

Would the confusion be a mere blunder on the part of the reader, who would now conclude that Anna was entering the house in the beginning of the chapter and only later reaching the small drawing room where Dolly and Grisha are seated? That is unlikely, since the juxtaposition of contradictory "first impressions" proves thematically productive. To whom belongs the eye for small domestic charms—or is the tableau and the little button more a reflection of anxiety than of comforting ordinariness? When Anna and Dolly meet, we also witness an encounter between two "unhappy families" (cf. Dolly's musings on Anna's marriage: "there was something false in the whole shape of their family life," 66). The ambivalent descriptions of Anna's entrance resonate with the transformation that Anna is to experience during her stay in Moscow: after the fateful night at the ball when Anna lets Vronsky enrapture her, the Oblonsky children who were formerly charmed by Anna start to neglect her. This reversal of destinies and positions is foreshadowed in Dolly's thoughts on Anna's arrival: "After all, she's not guilty of anything" (66). The narration evokes a possibility that Anna would be the one to appreciate the "plump little hands"[3] but later thwarts this interpretation to give more emphasis to Anna's own glamorous appearance.

Yet the web of possible motivations does not limit itself here; another psychological motivation, just as plausible, has been there all along. What if the

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3. Peculiarly enough, the impersonal perception of Grisha's hands points toward authorial usurpation: it is Tolstoy the author who seems to be obsessed with children's—and Napoleon's!—plump little hands; they occur at least in *War and Peace, The Cossacks,* and *Childhood, Boyhood, and Youth.*

entire scene with the button and the plump little hands is focalized through Dolly? That said, the composition appears to be completely different: if Grisha's resemblance to his father is Dolly's observation, then the "plump and tow-headed" boy is not that sweet anymore, and the plump little hands that pull the button are more annoying than charming. Why else would Dolly have *torn* the button off? A change of motivational perspective makes little Grisha a potential future adulterer, already as restless and self-indulgent as his father.

A common claim adopted from modernists such as James and Lubbock is that Tolstoy's prose lacks artistic form but, as a compensation, is able to provide us with a sense of uncontrollable flow of life (see Greenwood); yet there are critics who are claiming just the opposite and demonstrating how Tolstoy's narrative choices—and their frequent indiscernibility (why mention the button?)—reflect his grand theme of determinism and freedom of choice, the undecided balancing between predestined form and existential randomness (Alexandrov 290–98). This seeming indecision between significant and insignificant detail is highlighted in the contradictory angles to Anna's arrival: the loose button would, at a first blush, seem to be in the service of *l'effet de réel,* furnishing our impression of Dolly's domestic reality; whereas the charming details of Anna's presence ("light footsteps"), attire ("rustle of a dress"), and coiffure ("dark, curly hair") evidently provide a striking contrast to Dolly's "careworn face." For a moment at least, the loose button seems to imply that realism defies relevance just as domesticity defies romance and tellability. (See also Mäkelä "Heavy Flies.")

Again, as in the Flaubert example with Charles and the flies, the convention of figural perception is *abused:* in lieu of allowing a smooth deictic shift into the fictional reality, the narration searches for an angle to the storyworld in a process of constant, unstable deictic shifting. The narrative does not display itself as relevant but as in search of relevance; the role of detail is under negotiation. What is striking is that this ambivalence grounds itself precisely in the possibility of a fictional world "just being there," independent of any narrative interest. With a realist text full of psychologically or structurally seemingly unanchored elements, we might want to return to Lotman's always fresh observation on the reading experience as a networking of multiple relations: "[w]hat is extra-systemic [or: asystemic, see Alexandrov 291] in life is represented as polysystemic in art" (72). As Lotman explains it, the multiplicity of possible connections and motivations creates an illusion of freedom (and, thus, perhaps, of "life"), whereas a detail that is clearly linked to some holistic framework has a very constricted thematic potential.

All this brings me back to the question of "natural" and "unnatural" narratives. Alber outlines five strategies with which readers make sense of "extreme"

narratives that defy the parameters of human experientiality. According to Alber, the readers either (1) graft the disturbing nonmimetic element onto some other than mimetically motivated structure ("reading events as internal states"; "foregrounding the thematic"; "reading allegorically"), or (2) accept the nonmimetic element as an extension of their own parameters ("blending scripts"; "frame enrichment").[4] These strategies appear to me as most general readerly procedures taken in search of coherence—and as such, they are an apt and welcome addition to the cognitive-narratological toolkit. Yet one is left wondering whether this approach would issue any challenge to prevalent approaches.

One of Alber's examples, Caryl Churchill's postmodernist play *Heart's Desire,* displays mutually exclusive plotlines or "retakes" of a character entering a scene, which Alber naturalizes as manifestations of the characters' fantasies, traumas, and narrative perfectionism. What is the fundamental difference between the contradictory entrances in Churchill's play and the perceptually and motivationally ambivalent entrance scene in *Anna Karenina*—if both of their effects can be enveloped with the same holistic schemata? Just as perspective drawing enables both Escher's and Puvis's distorted visions of space, textual story construction makes it possible for both Tolstoy and the postmodernists to transcend real-life parameters. Conversely, both are also unable to provide a full immersion and a complete congruence with real-life experience—a state of affairs which, I think, is much more foregrounded by novelistic conventions than many a narratologist would ever acknowledge. Alber's analyses seem to suggest that a cognitive apperception through psychological or thematic motivation is *necessary:* that there would be no two ways about it, no balancing between chance randomness and motivated structure.[5] Such a reading seems, paradoxically, to transform physically or logically impossible storyworlds into narratives that are more vulnerable to easy naturalization than any text from mainstream classical realism. In Flaubert or Tolstoy, compositional motivation repeatedly overrides embodied and situated perception and reflection, which creates an imbalance that never really gets restored.

Much of the unnaturalness associated with postmodernism has to do with temporality (see Richardson, "Narrative Poetics" 24–32). However, from the readerly point of view, reading Tolstoy and reading postmodernist fiction is just as unnatural: the relationship between the succession of words and the succession of fictional events is just as incongruent, and the entire temporal

4. In his contribution to this volume, Alber reorders and extends these navigational tools.

5. To be fair, one must mention that Alber indeed recognizes the "other" interpretive stance, the one that enjoys ambiguity and does not encourage naturalization. Alber calls this stance the "Zen way of reading" but is obviously doubtful of its validity and prevalence (83–84).

dimension is a mere metaphor in both cases. The unnaturalness of temporal conventions in fiction is brilliantly revealed by James Wood's analysis of novelistic descriptions that lump together dynamic and habitual detail—a mode perfected by none other than good Flaubert. Wood discusses an example from *Sentimental Education*, where Frédéric strolls idly through the Latin Quarter in Paris and the omniscient narrator both is and is not tracking the perception of the hero: "At the back of the deserted cafés, women behind the bars yawned between their untouched bottles; the newspapers lay unopened on the reading-room tables; in the laundresses' workshops the washing quivered in the warm draughts" (cited in Wood 33). As Wood writes, "the women cannot be yawning for the same length of time as the washing is quivering or the newspapers are lying on the tables" (34). Such illusions of simultaneity acquired through nonnaturalizable, multitemporal perception are veritable commonplaces in post-Flaubertian fiction, and yet, from a cognitive vantage point, they must be unnatural. But, then again, there is nothing really new in contradictory plotlines, either. What unnatural narratology should do is to reach for what is beyond the conventional/unconventional or the legitimate/disruptive divide and pay closer attention to the subtleties in the use of non-naturalizable frames.

One of the most notorious concepts to undervalue the unnatural elements in realist fiction is immersion, as referring to an illusionist transition both into the storyworld and into the experiential plane of characters. Even in Marie-Laure Ryan's otherwise elegant study on immersion and interactivity in literature and electronic media, the novels of "high realism" have been allotted the role of immersive texts that, by rendering their worlds as seemingly independent of language (Ryan 158–59), do not activate the element of "play" in the reading process (175–76, 199). For Ryan, one of the authors creating highly worldlike and immersive narratives is Dickens, a writer who, it seems to me, has a tendency to try out different angles on his storyworld in a fluid manner that, in fact, counteracts easy immersion. Consider the following passage from *Bleak House:*

> What connexion can there be, between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabouts of Jo the outlaw with the broom, who had that distant ray of light upon him when he swept the churchyard step? What connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world, who, from opposite sides of great gulfs, have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together!
>
> Jo sweeps his crossing all day long, unconscious of the link, if any link there be. He sums up his mental condition, when asked a question, by

replying that he 'don't know nothink.' He knows that it's hard to keep the mud off the crossing in dirty weather, and harder still to live by doing it. (256)

Instead of transporting the reader into the muddy and smoggy fictional London, the Dickensian narrator simulates the process of ostensible immersion itself. First, it seems that the narrating presence hovers above the strangely connected fictional universe, contemplating the dynamics of detail and motivation. After that the narration makes a dive into the experiential plane of the proletarian Jo and the realm of diegetic ignorance of the holistic composition, and yet this is a dive that is pronouncedly *simulated:* the spatial sensation of the transition is not that of outside-in but of top-down, a vertical movement down the staircase of narrative hierarchy. The shift proves a mere parody of immersion when Jo is being asked (by the metaleptic narrator who has stepped down to the diegetic level, presumably) about his experience of being-in-the-fictional-world: he "don't know nothink."

What is more, the passage goes on to reveal the mechanisms of discursive simulation behind the representation of fictional consciousness; this is how the narrator of *Bleak House* continues his fake expedition in the figural experiential plane, wondering how illiteracy must affect Jo's perspective on life:

It must be a strange state to be like Jo! [. . .] To see people read, and to see people write, and to see the postmen deliver letters, and not to have the least idea of all that language—to be, to every scrap of it, stone blind and dumb! It must be very puzzling to see the good company going to the churches on Sundays, with their books in their hands, and to think (for perhaps Jo *does* think, at odd times) what does it all mean, and if it means anything to anybody, how comes it that it means nothing to me? To be hustled, and jostled, and moved on; and really to feel that it would appear to be perfectly true that I have no business, here, or there, or anywhere; and yet to be perplexed by the consideration that I *am* here somehow, too, and everybody overlooked me until I became the creature that I am! [. . .] His whole material and immaterial life is wonderfully strange; his death, the strangest thing of all. (257–58)

As Dickens demonstrates, the illusion of immersion concerns figural language as well: his authoritarian narrator's voice smooths out his plunge into Jo's constructed consciousness by setting out in a hypothetical mode ("It must be very puzzling . . ."), which only gradually accumulates into an illusion of figural inner discourse with first-person reference (". . . how comes it that it means

nothing to me"). In here and elsewhere in *Bleak House,* Dickens clearly undermines the authority of the conventional omniscient narrator, the alleged landmark of the literature of his own era, by creating impenetrable minds whose workings can only be guessed at. As Terry Eagleton notes in his preface to the 2003 Penguin edition of *Bleak House,* it is as if the characters were surrounded by the same fog of mystery as the London setting and the notorious Chancery Court (viii). The literary narrator is only capable of constructing a verbal version of the illiterate Jo's confused mind—a construction which, conversely, Jo himself would be unable to read. Although at this point Dickens seems to be rather unconventional, the process of constructing the fictional mind of Jo reveals the essential mechanisms of "realist" consciousness representation at large.[6] Moreover, unlike Flaubert and Tolstoy, Dickens is no master of free indirect discourse, and perhaps that is precisely why he can give such an elaborate demonstration of the mode's boundary conditions, of its strange locus between authorial hypothesis and constructed figural idiom. In the next section we will develop these lines of thoughts further.

## 4. Schematic Consciousnesses and Nonderivable Discursive Agency

As Ryan points out in her discussion of immersive realism, "[t]he 'reality effect' of nineteenth-century fiction is achieved by the least natural, most ostentatiously fictional of narrative techniques—omniscient narration, free indirect discourse, and variable focalization" (159). By reading Ryan or almost any other contemporary narratologist one might conclude that the conventions of omniscience and third-person experientiality have been most painlessly naturalized and have long since ceased to interfere with the reading process (see, e.g., Fludernik, *Towards* 48): "telling can be dispensed with, readers simply orient themselves to a position within the fictional world [. . .] frames naturally available only for one's own experience become accessible for application to a third person." The example from *Bleak House* speaks against this ease and accessibility and reveals the significant thematic import of the ultimate unreadability of minds.

Paradoxically, however, the naturalized unnaturalness of omniscience is replaced by a truly natural method of mind construction: the narrator of *Bleak*

6. In fact, Wilhelm Füger's classical, yet only recently translated, study on the limits of narratorial knowledge ("Limits") suggests that epistemic restrictions in the allegedly omniscient narratorial mode might be more the rule than the exception. Füger's test case is Fielding's *Joseph Andrews,* a novel frequently used as a textbook example of "omniscience."

*House* constructs Jo's mind via schematization and typification; mechanisms that, according to Fludernik, are a common means to reproduce someone else's spoken or inner discourse (*Fictions* 398–433). The narrator seems to reach Jo's inner discourse by applying plausible frames of verbalization: "the good company going to the churches on Sundays, with their books in their hands, [. . .] what does it all mean, and if it means anything to anybody, how comes it that it means nothing to me?" As Fludernik has shown, discourse representation relies on prototypical discourse schemata and results in approximations, not reproductions. All of this has to do with the cognitive scientific notion of sense-making as frame application: our approach to new situations is always based on our constructive knowledge of previous contexts. It is through this evoking of discursive schemata, writes Fludernik, that the ghost ("linguistic hallucination," 453) of the figural voice arises from our interpretation of free indirect discourse. Consequently, one might say that the aura of unnaturalness or pronounced literariness of representing consciousness or omniscient narration has started to fade in the wake of cognitive approaches: just as we are all weaving narratives out of our own experience, we are also constructors of other people's experiences.

Both the narrative and the readerly mechanisms of constructing the characters' interiority have severe consequences for the interpretation of the so-called psychological realism. What is more, realists such as Dickens, Tolstoy, and most notably Flaubert precisely juxtapose narrative and readerly construction: the characters, the narrators, and the readers are ultimately tackling the shared problem posed by the alien mind. Consider, for example, Anna's stiff and dispassionate husband, Karenin, slowly and laboriously adjusting his one-track mind to the fact that his wife is having an affair with Vronsky. For Karenin, the point of irreversible revelation is also a disturbing moment of intermental recognition and involuntary mindreading:

> For the first time [Karenin] vividly pictured to himself [his wife's] personal life, her thoughts, her wishes, and the thought that she could and should have her own particular life seemed so frightening to him that he hastened to drive it away. It was that bottomless deep into which it was frightening to look. To put himself in thought and feeling into another being was a mental act alien to Alexei Alexandrovich. He regarded this mental act as harmful and dangerous fantasizing. (143–44)

One of the most illuminating findings in cognitive narratology has to do with the analogousness of figural, narratorial, and readerly construction processes: as Lisa Zunshine's (*Why We Read*) and Alan Palmer's (*Fictional Minds*) studies

suggest, much of novelistic interpretation relies on our *natural* ability to infer mental states and actions from outward behavior. The approaches underscoring Theory of Mind and intersubjectivity shed a critical light on classical narratology's linguistic interest in speech categories (indirect/direct/free indirect discourse) and thus on the problematic construction called figural *voice* (see, e.g., Palmer 9–12, 57–69). This is all well-deserved, and in the study of fictional minds, cognitive narratology has proved a genuine blessing.

Yet there is one shortcoming that both classical and cognitive narratology share in their approaches to fictional minds, something that could be termed the *easy-access fallacy.* According to the classical theorist Franz K. Stanzel, "[r]ealistic presentation of consciousness seems to require the illusion of immediacy. [. . .] Interior monologue, free indirect style and figural narrative situation [. . .] suggest immediacy, that is, the illusion of direct insight into the character's thoughts" (127). For Zunshine, the main task in reading fiction is "keep[ing] track of who thought, wanted, and felt what and when" (5). Both approaches rather outspokenly suggest that there is an inside to be found if we just dig deep enough. However, if we look at even the most canonized pieces of free indirect discourse in *Madame Bovary,* we may notice how the entire division into inside and outside appears strikingly illusory:

> Charles's conversation was as flat as any pavement. [. . .] He couldn't swim, or fence or shoot, and he wasn't able to explain, one day, a riding term which she had come across in a novel. (38)

> Why could she not be leaning out on the balcony of a Swiss chalet, or hiding her sadness in a cottage in Scotland, with a husband wearing a long-tailed black velvet coat, and soft boots, appointed hat and frills on his shirt! (38)

> Now the bad days of Tostes came back again. This time she thought herself far more unhappy: for she was experienced in sorrow, with the certainty that it would never end. Any woman who had imposed such great sacrifices on herself could well be permitted a few fancies.[7] She bought a Gothic prie-dieu, and in one month she spent fourteen francs on lemons for cleaning her nails. [. . .] (115)

The prominent characteristic of free indirect discourse is its capacity to *level*

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7. In the French original, this reads as follows: "Une femme qui s'était imposé de si grands sacrifices pouvait bien passer des fantaisies" ( 217).

*down* the hierarchy of voices—or the levels of intentionality, as Zunshine would have it—so as to downplay the discursive agency supposedly lurking behind the expression. Sentences such as "Charles's conversation was as flat as any pavement" or "Any woman who had imposed such great sacrifices on herself could well be permitted a few fancies" can and will, obviously, be naturalized as displaying Emma's postures, but the form is not that of immediate impression but of *narrative takeover,* even rhetorical intention. Already Pascal's dual-voice hypothesis suggests that "narrative usurpation" may happen either way around (107–10): (1) The flat, nonderivable essence of fictional utterances permits the character to authorize her own view by appropriating the discursive locus of the narrator (see Mäkelä "Masters"). (2) Conversely, narrators such as the heterodiegetic one in *Bleak House* flaunt this freedom by constructing the apparent inner discourse of characters through discursive schemata that best serve their narrative purposes. Thus an apparently realist rendering of inner figural discourse is also bound to demonstrate its own inherent impossibility: a narrative can only represent the narrative construction of an experience, not the "raw feels" of immediate impression. Thus also the notion of psychological immersion turns out to be highly debatable.

Consequently, the last facets of novelistic conventions that I suggest for further denaturalization are voice or discursive agency and the fictional mind in general. Whether we foreground the narratorial or the figural intentions in consciousness representation, the result is far from displaying clear-cut, derivable cognitive agencies. All we have is narrative usurpers. Flaubert's free indirect discourse is a case in point. Consider the above-cited passage describing the pseudoverbalized tableau of romantic mountain scenes and a husband "wearing a long-tailed black velvet coat, and soft boots, appointed hat and frills on his shirt" evolving in Emma's mind. The sentence is capable of conveying both distance from and association with Emma's emotional state. The exclamatory syntax that accumulates into a disturbingly minute description of the imaginary husband's gallant costume would obviously reflect Emma's ennui and fancies. Yet the entire tableau, in its lovingly rendered detail, reminds the reader more of the same elusive novelistic agency that might be responsible for recording the above-presented drowning flies in cider dregs. In fact, Genette has paid attention to this very same phenomenon, noting that the accuracy in the descriptions of Emma's fantasies counteracts internalization: one would rather expect hazy and nonspecific impressions instead of poetically detailed descriptions of the fantasy milieus (*Figures I* 227–28). Again, it seems that the natural frames of story-internal experientiality are evoked merely with an eye on exploiting them and recovering the flat, nonderivable essence of novelistic discursive agency.

## 5. Conclusion: Unnatural Reading

From the point of view suggested in this essay, the literary tokens of unnaturalness would obviously seem countless. I have only been able to touch upon some specimens: dislocations in perception; ambivalence between motivation and arbitrariness; and finally, the ultimate impossibility of deriving cognitive—and particularly discursive—agencies from novelistic representation. Yet my chief aim has been to shift the focus of unnatural narratology from taxonomy of narratives more toward offering a counterforce to those current narratological trends that are eager to assimilate all types of narrative construction under the same umbrella framework.

   I have also been trying to demonstrate that, as is the case with artists such as Escher and Puvis, the distinction between conventional and deviant narratives is far from clear-cut. Should we embrace Alber's classification of possible strategies with which we approach impossibilities in narratives—something, as I think, we can very well do—we should conclude that the unnaturalness of the storyworlds or plotlines (causing readerly "discomfort, fear, or worry," Alber 83) is only a textual surface under which the reader is tempted to find the psychologically, motivationally, or thematically verisimilar. To me, it seems just as unimaginable to assume a storyworld independent of representation as it would be to base my interpretation of *Concave and Convex* or *Jeunes filles au bord de la mer* on the assumptions about the "real" sceneries preceding the act of representation.

   Consequently, I should think an emphasis on *unnatural reading* to be a more tenable footing for unnatural narratology. The approaches probed in this essay are counterimmersive, and yet I do not believe them to be counterintuitive. The novelistic techniques of Flaubert, Tolstoy, and Dickens seem to be in a constant motion between surface and depth, appealing to both cognitive familiarity and cognitive estrangement. On my reading, it is precisely this unresolvable motion that introduces a Shklovskian delay between text and cognition. A denaturalized approach to allegedly naturalized conventions might even attest that the uncanniness of textual world and mind construction plays a significant role in the "normal"—or "prototypical"—reading experience, since many narrators/authors "trust the reader appreciates the strangeness of this, because if he does not, there is no sense in writing poems, or notes to poems, or anything at all" (*Pale Fire* 164–65). In fact, this hypothesis is my primary reason for *not* replacing the notion of the unnatural with the more established concept of estrangement: the impetus for unnatural narratology springs from a desire to provide some new coordinates for narrative theory at large.

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