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## A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative

Jan Alber, Henrik Skov Nielsen, Brian Richardson

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# Implausibilities, Crossovers, and Impossibilities



## A Rhetorical Approach to Breaks in the Code of Mimetic Character Narration

JAMES PHELAN

CHARACTER NARRATION is a fertile spawning ground for unnatural or antimimetic narration, especially for sporadic outbreaks of the antimimetic within narration whose dominant code is mimetic—that is, one that respects the normal human limitations of knowledge, temporal and spatial mobility, and so on.<sup>1</sup> Character narration generates these breaks from the mimetic code because, as an art of indirection, it places significant constraints on the (implied) author’s<sup>2</sup> freedom to communicate with her audience—and sometimes the author feels the need to operate outside those constraints. In employing either mimetic or antimimetic character narration, an author must use one text to communicate the different purposes of (at least) two different

1. The dominant mimetic code is similar but not identical to what Monika Fludernik, borrowing from work in linguistics, terms “natural” narration, that is, telling that is “regulated or motivated by cognitive parameters based on man’s [*sic*] experience of embodiedness in a real-world context” (17). The reason that the concepts are not identical is that the dominant mimetic code includes some conventions that authorize the teller to exceed the cognitive parameters Fludernik refers to.

2. Although I am among those who find the concept of the implied author to be efficacious, for the purposes of this essay the distinction between the implied and the flesh-and-blood author is less important than the idea that narratives are shaped by an authorial agent. For simplicity’s sake, then, I will, for the most part, use the term “author” and will refer to authors just by their last names rather than by “the implied X.”

tellers (author and narrator) to at least three different audiences (the narratee, the authorial audience, and the actual audience; for more on these audiences, see Rabinowitz, *Before Reading* and “Truth in Fiction”). The author who employs mimetic character narration accepts the more specific constraints of the character’s human limitations. Given these constraints, an author contemplating character narration as a possible technique can go one of three ways: (1) she can accept all the constraints and work scrupulously within them; (2) she can reject the mimetic code from the outset and endow the character narrator with whatever powers the author thinks will serve her larger purposes; or (3) she can accept the constraints for the most part but exercise the right to depart from them under the appropriate conditions.

In this essay I will use a rhetorical approach to narrative to analyze cases in which authors take this third route, because I believe the resulting juxtaposition of mimetic and antimimetic narration can shed light on each and especially on the nature of readerly engagements with each, light that will help us recognize “appropriate conditions.” In previous work, I have discussed various kinds of departures from the mimetic code, including *paralepsis*, Gérard Genette’s term for a narrator telling more than the character could know (*Narrative as Rhetoric*, chapter 5); *paralipsis*, Genette’s term for a narrator unaccountably withholding what he knows (*Narrative as Rhetoric*, chapters 3 and 4); *redundant telling*, my term for a narrator telling a narratee something they both know the narratee already knows (*Living to Tell About It*); and *simultaneous present-tense narration*, in which the narrator lives and tells at the same time (“Present Tense Narration”). In all those discussions I have emphasized the ways in which these departures from the dominant code are often not noticed and have therefore argued for a broader conception of the mimetic. In addition, in *Living to Tell About It*, I have distinguished between *disclosure functions* (the way the narration serves the implied author’s needs to communicate to the authorial audience) and *narrator functions* (the way that same narration, with its particular set of restrictions, serves the narrator’s needs to communicate to the narratee), and I have argued that when the two kinds of functions conflict, the disclosure functions ultimately trump the narrator functions.

In this essay, I return to *paralepsis*, which I will call *implausibly knowledgeable narration*, and *simultaneous present-tense character narration* in order to extend—and to some extent revise—my previous work, and I will analyze a kind of narration that to my knowledge has not been noticed before, what I will call *crossover narration*. In this departure from the mimetic code, an author links the narration of two independent sets of events by *transferring the effects* of the narration of one to the narration of the other so that, for

example, the affective responses evoked by the narration of one set of events will influence not just the audience's perception of the other set of events but the motivation of characters involved in those events. The three breaks form a useful cluster, because implausibly knowledgeable and crossover narration are typically temporary breaks, whereas simultaneous present-tense character narration is often a global, and thus more radical, break. Although the dynamics of each kind of break are different, I shall seek to identify some underlying conventions of reading that help to explain why readers often do not notice the breaks. More specifically, I shall propose two Meta-Rules of Readerly Engagement with Breaks in the Mimetic Code: the Value-Added Meta-Rule, which underlies the principle that disclosure functions trump narrator functions and stipulates that readers overlook breaks in the code when those breaks enhance their reading experience; and the Story-over-Discourse Meta-Rule, which stipulates that once a narrative foregrounds its mimetic component, readers will privilege story elements over discourse elements, and, thus, be inclined to overlook breaks in the code. Both Meta-Rules point to a broader principle of rhetorical theory that is connected to the theory's interest in accounting for the experience of reading: the logic of readerly response should trump the logic of narratological distinctions developed without reference to that response.

## **1. Rhetorical Theory, Conventions, and Readerly Interests**

Before I turn to cases, I want to say more about the rhetorical approach, and especially the role it assigns to readerly response. The model views the dynamics of narrative communication as a feedback loop among authorial agency, textual phenomena, and readerly response. In other words, the model assumes that texts are designed by authors in order to affect audiences in certain ways, that those designs are communicated through the author's deployment of the resources of textuality—everything from style and technique to structure and genre—and that readers' responses are a function, guide, and test of those authorial designs and their realization in the textual phenomena. One methodological consequence of this view is that the rhetorical critic can begin an inquiry at any of the three points in the loop confident in the knowledge that the inquiry will lead to the other two points. In this essay it may look as if I'm starting with the textual phenomena—the breaks in the mimetic code—but I am actually starting with readerly response: I select breaks that either do not at all undercut most readers' mimetic engagement or do not under-

cut that engagement as much as attention to their unnaturalness would lead us to expect. From this starting point, I seek to uncover the causes of the readerly response in both the surface details of the text and in narrative conventions—including previously unacknowledged ones—governing author–audience communications. I base my claims about “most readers” on my own responses, on those of my students, and on the Sherlock Holmes “Silver Blaze” principle, that is, the absence of any barks about these breaks from other watchdog critics. Consequently, when I speak of readerly response I am referring to that of both the authorial audience and a substantial contingent of the actual audience.

At first glance, the task of distinguishing between natural and unnatural ways of disclosing information seems straightforward: in natural—or mimetic—narrative, the disclosure operates within the constraints of the known world, its laws of physics, and the powers and limitations of its human inhabitants, whereas in unnatural or antimimetic narrative, disclosure operates either without regard for such constraints or in deliberate violation of them. Thus, for example, we would regard Edgar Allan Poe as employing natural narration in “The Cask of Amontillado” with its consistent restriction to Montresor’s perspective but then—if we follow Henrik Skov Nielsen’s reading—as employing unnatural narration in “The Tell-Tale Heart” in that section of the narrative in which the heart speaks.

But a little further reflection shows that once again we must make room in our theory for that often annoying intruder, Fit-with-Known-Facts. Some conventions of mimetic narrative authorize what looks suspiciously like what our initial formulation would label unnatural or antimimetic narration. The somebodies who are not themselves characters and who disclose the something that happened in Western novels in the realistic tradition (*Emma*, *Madame Bovary*, *Middlemarch*, *Mrs. Dalloway*—the list goes on and on) have the power to access the consciousnesses of different characters in their storyworlds and to move—without the need for real-world modes of transportation and without the passage of storytime—from one location to another. In addition, character narrators often have implausible capacities that we take for granted. In “The Cask of Amontillado,” Montresor gives verbatim accounts of dialogue uttered fifty years before his act of narration. Rather than questioning the plausibility of Montresor’s prodigious memory, we accept the convention that the retrospective character narrator can reliably report these conversations—and thus do not regard the dialogue as breaking the mimetic code.<sup>3</sup> At the very least, then, we need to recognize that any account of breaks

3. In conversational, nonfictional storytelling, the default convention operates in a slightly

in the mimetic code needs to account for the power of conventions. More specifically, such an account needs to attend to the way that this power breaks the equivalence between the natural and the mimetic and the unnatural and the antimimetic, because mimesis depends on relationships that go in two directions: toward the world outside the text and its physical laws and toward accepted practices that are much more part of literary history than scientific and cultural history. Furthermore, conventions arise and endure, among other reasons, because authors and audiences both find benefits in what they enable.

This point about mimesis and conventions brings me to another important component of the rhetorical model, its identification of three kinds of readerly interest in narrative: the mimetic, the thematic, and the synthetic. Mimetic interests arise when the narrative represents characters, places, and events as like those we encounter in the extratextual world. Thematic interests arise from the way that the narrative highlights the ideational/political/ethical components of those characters, places, and events—or its ways of representing them. Synthetic interests arise when the narrative calls attention to its various elements as building blocks in its larger construction. Although all elements of narrative fiction are inescapably synthetic, particular narratives may foreground or background their synthetic component. Attending to the relationships among these components helps capture the difference in readerly engagement between mimetic and antimimetic fiction. Fiction that foregrounds the mimetic, as Ralph W. Rader puts it, “offers the reader a focal illusion of characters acting autonomously as if in the world of real experience within a subsidiary awareness of an underlying constructive authorial purpose” (206) designed to give the story a thematic, ethical, and affective significance and force which real-world experience does not have. Fiction that foregrounds the synthetic offers the reader either a focal illusion of characters acting autonomously in a world clearly marked as different from that of real experience or an exposure of the illusion of the autonomy for the characters and events. In either case, the purpose is to give the reader a thematic, ethical, and affective significance different from but no less powerful than that of mimetic fiction. Sometimes the foregrounding of the synthetic results in the backgrounding of the mimetic, but sometimes narratives can put both interests in the foreground.

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different way. Listeners accept the storyteller’s account of the dialogue as a plausible reconstruction rather than as a literal quotation of what was said.

## 2. Implausibly Knowledgeable Narration (a.k.a. Paralepsis)

In the beginning of chapter 2 of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck reports two events that occur on a nighttime excursion he has with Tom Sawyer. Tom helps himself to some candles from the Widow Douglas's kitchen, leaving a five-cent piece for them on the kitchen table, and then plays a practical joke on Jim, who has fallen asleep in the yard. Tom slips Jim's hat off and hangs it on a nearby tree. Before continuing with his account of the night's adventures, Huck's narration flashes forward to recount Jim's response to these events:

Afterwards Jim said the witches bewitched him and put him in a trance, and rode him all over the State, and then set him under the trees again and hung his hat on a limb to show him who done it. And next time Jim told it he said that they rode him down to New Orleans: and after that, every time he told it he spread it more and more, till by-and-by he said they rode him all over the world, and tired him most to death and his back was all over saddle-boils. . . . Niggers is always talking about witches in the dark by the kitchen fire; but whenever one was talking and letting on to know all about such things, Jim would happen in and say, "Hm, what you know bout witches?" and that nigger was corked up and had to take a back seat. Jim always kept that five-center piece around his neck with a string and said it was a charm the devil give to him with his own hands and told him he could cure anybody with it and fetch witches whenever he wanted to, just by saying something to it; but he never told what it was he said to it. Niggers would come from all around there and give Jim anything they had, just for a sight of that five-center piece; but they wouldn't touch it, because the devil had had his hands on it. Jim was most ruined, for a servant, because he got stuck up on account of having seen the devil and been rode by witches.<sup>4</sup> (36)

Huck's digressive prolepsis is highly amusing, so much so that it is easy to overlook the implausibilities of his knowing all that he reports here, implausibilities related to access and to temporality. If, as Huck's narration implies, he heard directly or heard from a third party about Jim's successive embellishments of the story, then his life at the Widow's has a significant dimension that does not otherwise appear in his narrative. Either he hangs out with the slaves even when they gather to tell stories in their own space ("in the dark by the

4. I am grateful to Henrik Skov Nielsen for directing my attention to this passage.

kitchen fire”) or he has a very close friend among the slaves who reports all this information to him. But each of these hypotheses preserves the mimetic in one way only to disrupt it in another. Each generates a different kind of implausibility, a withholding of information from the narratee—about how Huck spends days or about his friend among the slaves—that does not fit with his generally naïve openness.

As for temporality, the issue involves the relation of the time span of Jim’s exploits as storyteller to the time span of Huck’s stay at the Widow Douglas’s. We soon learn that Huck is on the scene only another five or six months—it was “about a month” (41) that Tom’s band of robbers goes about its business, “another three or four months” that took them well into winter (43) before Pap turns up, and then another six weeks or so until Pap takes him away from the Widow “one day in the spring” (49). Could Jim have perfected his stories and become a regional legend in such a short time? Or is Huck reporting a sequence of events that could not have occurred within the time frame of the dominant action? The vagueness of the reach of the flash forward makes it impossible to answer for certain, but that very vagueness in combination with Huck’s unlikely knowledge indicates that in this passage Twain has departed from the mimetic code of Huck’s narration. Furthermore, Twain’s vagueness about the time span of Jim’s suggests both that he does not want to call attention to this departure and that he is more concerned with disclosing certain information to his audience than with conforming to the restrictions of the mimetic code.

Twain wants, first, to entertain his audience, and he effectively draws on the combination of Jim’s flight of fancy, the credulity of the other slaves, and Huck’s own naïveté (notice that Huck never questions Jim’s silence about the devil’s magic words) to accomplish that goal. But Twain also uses the passage for his initial characterization of Jim, and, indeed, that goal guides the rest of his choices in the narration. The digression stands out not only because of the flash forward but also because it represents the first time in the novel that Huck is not himself an actor in the events. Twain designs Huck’s narration so that Jim is front and center, and the passage highlights many of his traits: he has an active imagination; he stands out among the other slaves; and he is an extremely proud man. In addition, Jim is remarkably and intuitively resourceful: he takes the events of falling asleep and waking up to find his hat hung on a tree limb and a five-cent piece on the kitchen table and parlays them into the means to elevate his status among his fellow slaves. Finally, Twain shows that Jim believes in a supernatural realm that is different from, although somewhat related to, the supernatural realm of the Christianity that the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson have been trying to teach Huck. By breaking the mimetic



code of Huck's narration, Twain establishes Jim as a remarkable and arresting man, one whom Huck is then very fortunate to meet up with on Jackson's Island.

This analysis leads me to propose six reasons why readers are not likely to notice Twain's departure from the mimetic code until some close-reading narratologist points it out. The first four involve details about Twain's specific execution of the break from which we can extrapolate some Rules of Thumb (that is, conventions rather than laws) about Readerly Engagement with Departures from the Mimetic Code, and the last two articulate Meta-Rules that underlie those first four.

1. The passage is relatively brief, and thus suggests the Rule of Duration: the briefer the break, the less likely it is to be noticed; the more extended the break, the more likely it is to be noticed.<sup>5</sup>
2. The voice in the passage remains recognizably Huck's and thus creates continuity with the dominant code. Here we have the Rule of Partial Continuity: when the break is restricted to one aspect of the narration, it is less likely to be noticed.
3. The transitions into and out of the break are smooth and matter-of-fact: it begins in mid-paragraph with the adverb "Afterwards" and ends where the quotation above ends. The next paragraph accomplishes the transition back to the present time of the action with a simple "Well," followed by "when Tom and me got to the edge of the hilltop" (36). Similarly, the passage does not call attention to the signs of its break in perceptual field (or vision). Huck's knowledge of what Jim said to the other slaves is simply presumed by his act of narration—nothing is done to explain or justify it. In these ways Twain follows the Rule of Self-Assurance: if the character narrator does not call attention to the break, it is less likely to be noticed. To put it another way, when breaking the code, it is better to ask for forgiveness than permission—and, if your break is relatively unobtrusive, chances are you won't need to ask for forgiveness.
4. When we first come upon this passage, the issue of temporality is not a concern because we do not know the length of the temporal interval between this night and Pap's taking Huck from the Widow's. Even in retrospect, the vagueness of the temporality will hide the unnaturalness from most readers. Here we have the Rule of Temporal Decoding:
5. One important qualification here: sometimes a break can extend for such a long duration and be so compelling that readers (a) accept it as the new normal and (b) focus their attention on what is being disclosed rather than on the break that makes the disclosure possible.

if the break in the code is detectable right away, it is more likely to be noticed than if it is not detectable until later in the narrative progression.<sup>6</sup>

5. The Value-Added Meta-Rule: Readers overlook breaks in the mimetic code when those breaks enhance the reading experience by allowing access to relevant information that would not be available without those breaks. This is the Meta-Rule that underwrites the principle that disclosure functions trump narrator functions.
6. The Story-over-Discourse Meta-Rule: Once fictional narratives establish their commitment to providing readers that “focal illusion of characters acting autonomously as if in the world of real experience,” readers privilege—and seek to preserve—their mimetic interests in those characters and that storyworld. Furthermore, since the traditions of realistic fiction include conventions about narrative discourse that, on the surface of it, look antimimetic, readers will overlook breaks in the mimetic code of the discourse as long as they enhance their mimetic engagements with the story. This Meta-Rule combines with the Rule of Partial Continuity to explain why breaks in the perceptual field (or vision) of the narration are less likely to be noticed when they are not accompanied by a shift in voice. In character narration, voice is often a means to reinforce the reader’s sense that the narrating-I and the experiencing-I are parts of the same person.

Let’s now consider a more egregious example of implausibly knowledgeable narration in which most readers either don’t notice or don’t mind the break in the mimetic code. In chapter 8 of *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald has Nick Carraway report in considerable detail how George Wilson spent the night after his wife Myrtle’s death.<sup>7</sup> The Rules of Duration and Temporal Decoding guide the judgment of this break as more egregious: Nick’s report goes for more than four pages and every aspect of the break is immediately apparent—if one is looking for such a break. Furthermore, Fitzgerald’s break is

6. This generalization also applies to my discussion of what I call “paradoxical paralipsis” in chapters 3 and 4 of *Narrative as Rhetoric*.

7. I discuss this same stretch of narration in chapter 5 of *Narrative as Rhetoric*, but I return to it because I believe I now have a more adequate explanation of why readers are not likely to notice the break in the mimetic code. Earlier I emphasized that our judgments of mimesis depended in part on conventions and that “those conventions are somewhat elastic and the criterion ‘what is possible or probable in life’ can sometimes give way . . . to the criterion ‘what is needed by the narrative at this point’” (110). The Rules and especially the Meta-Rules about departures from the mimetic code add considerable precision and nuance to the previous account, even as they replace the idea of a broader standard of mimesis with the more accurate description of breaks in the dominant code of the mimetic.

more radical than Twain's because Fitzgerald gives Nick the privilege not only of reporting events he did not witness but also of focalizing the scene through other characters—primarily Michaelis, Wilson's neighbor who kept an eye on him that night, and, secondarily, Wilson himself. Consider, for example, this excerpt, which begins with Michaelis asking Wilson a question, continues with Michaelis's vision, and then shifts to Wilson's.

“Maybe you got some friend that I could telephone for, George?”

This was a forlorn hope—he was almost sure that Wilson had no friend: there was not enough of him for his wife. He was glad a little later when he noticed a change in the room, a blue quickening by the window, and realized that dawn wasn't far off. About five o'clock it was blue enough outside to snap off the light.

Wilson's glazed eyes turned out to the ashheaps, where small grey clouds took on fantastic shape and scurried here and there in the faint dawn wind. (167)

Given that the implausible knowing in Nick's narration is so much more pronounced, why do most readers either not notice the break from the mimetic code or not find it troubling if they do? The Rules of Partial Continuity and Self-Assurance provide part of the answer: although we have a shift in perceptual field, we still have Nick's voice. And although Nick does explicitly call attention to a shift in his narration, he focuses on a shift in temporality rather than perception: “Now I want to go back a little and tell what happened at the garage after we left there the night before” (163–64). In line with the Rule of Self-Assurance, Nick just plunges right into his reporting.<sup>8</sup>

But with two rules pointing toward notice of the break and two pointing against such notice, the more compelling explanation can be found in the Meta-Rules of Added Value and Story over Discourse. Nick's implausibly knowledgeable narration adds considerable value to the narrative. It fulfills a significant gap in the audience's knowledge of events, even as it heightens our mimetic engagement with Wilson. The focalization through Michaelis means that we still see Wilson from the outside, while the dialogue and the occasional focalization through Wilson give us some sharper sense of his psychological state (notice that he sees the clouds as having “fantastic” shapes), even as it stops short of revealing all that he is thinking. This mimetic engage-

8. In chapter 7 Nick notes that Michaelis was the principal witness at the inquest, and the narration that immediately follows is clearly built on Michaelis's testimony. But it is implausible to conclude that Michaelis's testimony would be as detailed and as focused on the blow-by-blow of cognition as the account Nick gives in chapter 8.

ment becomes all the more important as chapter 8 continues to its climactic revelation of Gatsby glimpsing an “ashen, fantastic figure gliding toward him” (169)—Wilson. Nick’s implausibly knowledgeable narration foregrounds issues of character and motive as they apply to Wilson. Since the novel as a whole also foregrounds those issues (who is Gatsby, and why does he throw his parties?), this enhancement of the reader’s mimetic engagement in the elements of story either occludes or renders insignificant the reader’s perception of the break in the mimetic code of the discourse.

### 3. Crossover Narration

Shortly after this stretch of implausibly knowledgeable narration, Fitzgerald employs a different kind of break from the mimetic code, one that I call crossover narration. This break occurs right after Nick narrates his interpretation of Gatsby’s last minutes of life (narration that I will return to below). Nick’s next paragraph begins this way:

The chauffeur—he was one of Wolfsheim’s protégés—heard the shots—afterward he could only say that he hadn’t thought anything much about them. I drove from the station directly to Gatsby’s house and my rushing anxiously up the front steps was the first thing that alarmed anyone. (169)

It’s Nick’s report about “rushing anxiously up the front steps” that constitutes the break, as a review of the context will make clear.<sup>9</sup> Seven pages previously—just before Nick says that he wants to “go back a little and tell what happened at the garage” (163–64)—he has reported the following information about his actions earlier that day. In the morning he went to work in Manhattan. He fell asleep over some paperwork, only to wake up in a sweat when his phone rang. The caller was Jordan Baker, with whom he had a frustrating conversation that ended with one of them hanging up on the other. He tried to call Gatsby’s house but kept getting a busy signal until he was told by an operator that the line was being kept open for a call from Detroit. At noon he decided to take the three-fifty train back to West Egg, and he then “leaned back in [his] chair and tried to think” (163).

Nick clearly is preoccupied with Gatsby, and Nick’s waking up in a sweat, his repeated phone calls to the house, and his decision to leave work early

9. The chauffeur’s claim opens the door to various interpretive consequences (see Lockridge) beyond the scope of this essay, but Nick’s narration of it fits with the mimetic code.

suggest that his preoccupation includes some level of anxiety about Gatsby. Thus, Nick's going directly to Gatsby's house is well motivated. But Nick's anxiety level is not so high that it keeps him from going to work or keeps him awake once there. The level is also not so high that it leads him to decide to take the very next train. Thus, when Fitzgerald has Nick report that he rushed anxiously to Gatsby's door—with no explanation of why at the time of the action Nick's anxiety level should have changed so much—Fitzgerald takes a significant shortcut. Indeed, that lack of explanation—nothing about what Nick had been thinking, nothing about why, if he were so anxious, he still waited until the 3:50 train—makes it look to the narratologically trained eye that Fitzgerald suddenly stops respecting the need to sustain the “focal illusion” that Nick is acting autonomously. Rather than motivating Nick's high anxiety, Fitzgerald seems to assign it to him because Fitzgerald needs an efficient way to move the action along.

Now it would be possible to interpret the sentence as adhering to the mimetic code by inferring that Fitzgerald is signaling that Nick is an unreliable narrator here, retrospectively claiming greater concern for Gatsby than he actually felt. But this hypothesis runs into the recalcitrance that Nick's anxiety prods Gatsby's employees into action—and their investigation leads them to the corpses of both Gatsby and Wilson. Thus, the more elegant and more persuasive explanation is that Nick's reporting of his anxiety is reliable but that Fitzgerald has chosen not to have Nick explain why he is so much more anxious at 4:30 than he was at noon. In order to assess Fitzgerald's choice, we need to take a closer look at Nick's intervening narration.

After reporting the events at Wilson's garage the previous night, Nick moves on to report Wilson's activities earlier that day and then Gatsby's movements and likely thoughts that afternoon. This narration remains within the mimetic code: in Wilson's case Nick either indicates that he has a source for what he knows (Wilson's movements “were afterward traced”) or admits what he doesn't know (“for three hours he disappeared from view” [168]); in Gatsby's case Nick implies that his sources are Gatsby's butler and chauffeur, and Nick clearly marks his report about Gatsby's thoughts as speculation. Nick's tracing of the movements of Wilson and Gatsby culminates in Nick's hypothetical account of Gatsby's last thoughts and perceptions. Gatsby must have been thinking, Nick writes, about “A new world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about . . . like that ashen, fantastic figure, gliding toward him through the amorphous trees” (169). Then Fitzgerald inserts a paragraph break and has Nick deliver the two sentences I quoted at the beginning of this section.

Now if Fitzgerald had Nick report that he had a high level of anxiety at the office, the effect of this intervening narration would be different: at the

very least our readerly anxiety about what will happen next in the developing narrative present would increase significantly, as we wondered whether Nick's anxiety would prove to be well-founded. As it is now, however, the major effect of Nick's flashback is to shift our attention from Nick the character first to Wilson and then to Gatsby, and the major effect of the narrating-I's retracings of Wilson's and Gatsby's activities is to heighten the sense of shock and loss we feel once their paths converge. And these effects prepare the way for the crossover. Having just experienced them in Nick's narration, most readers will not stop to question the experiencing-Nick's anxious rush to the door—even though the experiencing-Nick does not know anything about Wilson's movements. To put the claim more strongly, Fitzgerald's crossover works because *it is virtually impossible to read Nick's report of his anxiety as character without connecting it to his just-concluded narration about Wilson and Gatsby.*

In terms of the Rules of Readerly Engagement, Fitzgerald's crossover works because it ingeniously combines the Rules of Duration and Self-Assurance with the Value-Added and Story-over-Discourse Meta-Rules. The break is brief and done with confidence. It adds the value of emphasizing Nick's psychic investment in Gatsby and his fate without displacing what happens to Gatsby from the center of the audience's interest at this climactic point in the narrative. But most impressively, the crossover takes advantage of our greater readerly engagement with elements of story than with elements of discourse. Within the logic of a formal narratology, we can describe Fitzgerald's crossover as the metaleptic interpenetration of the normally distinct roles of character and narrator: the narrating-Nick's reporting of what he came to know—and to imagine—later on substitutes for the time-of-the-action motivation of the experiencing-Nick's behavior. But within the logic of rhetorical theory, we can describe the crossover narration as a brilliant application of the Story-over-Discourse Meta-Rule: Fitzgerald has found a way to use our affective responses to the convergence of Wilson and Gatsby as grounds for our finding the experiencing-Nick's high anxiety plausible. The difference in these two accounts points to a corollary of the Story-over-Discourse Meta-Rule: most readers of character narration are less fastidious about the distinct roles of character and narrator than formal narratologists are.

#### **4. Simultaneous Present-Tense Narration**

This technique is such a radical break from the mimetic code that I want to acknowledge up front that the main question it raises is not “why don't most readers notice the break?” but rather “in what ways, if any, does the technique still conform to aspects of the mimetic code?” Applying the Rules of Duration

and of Temporal Disclosure, we see that the antimimetic features of the technique are in the foreground, especially when the technique extends across a whole narrative. Furthermore, as I and others (see especially Cohn; DelConte; Nielsen) argue, the impossibility of living and telling at the same time means that there is no plausible occasion for the narration. But how much does that impossibility affect the other standard features of character narration, including its basic condition of being a telling from someone to someone else?

Henrik Skov Nielsen makes a rigorous argument, using the following passage from Bret Easton Ellis's *Glamorama*, that the impossibility goes all the way down.

"See you, baby." I hand her a French tulip I just happen to be holding and start pulling away from the curb.

"Oh Victor," she calls out, handing Scooter the French tulip. "I got the job! I got the contract."

"Great, baby. I gotta run. What job you crazy chick?"

"Guess?"

"Matsuda? Gap?" I grin, limousines honking behind me. "Baby, listen, see you tomorrow night."

"No. *Guess?*"

"Baby, I already did. You're mind-tripping me." (19)

Nielsen comments as follows:

[T]here is in fact a clear difference between two levels of words and the ways in which they can and cannot be ascribed to a character narrator. There is clearly a character who starts out by saying "See you, baby." These words are situated in a communicative situation and uttered by the character (Victor) to a female acquaintance. But at no point is there a narrator situated anywhere before, during or after the events, who says: "I hand her a French tulip." No communicative situation seems imaginable in which a narrator will narrate these words to a narratee. And never will Victor say, think, or mumble to himself or anyone else "I hand her a French tulip." There is no context and no occasion for telling them. The techniques used in the quote dissociate the words from the narrator's account. (59)

In short, Nielsen argues that there is no narration taking place to or from anyone at the level of the storyworld. Instead, Nielsen suggests, we're left with an author communicating to his or her audience through a technique that is a variation of reflector narration.

I admire the rigor of Nielsen's argument, but I am struck by how it depends on an appeal to the logic of the natural world: no occasion entails no narrator and no narratee. From my rhetorical perspective, Nielsen's tight chain of entailment can—and should—be broken at the link between occasion and narrator. To put it another way, once we remember that even some narration that stays within the mimetic code is governed by conventions that break the logic of the natural world, once we recognize how conventions operate to minimize the unnaturalness of breaks such as the ones I've examined above, and once we remember that most readers do regard passages of simultaneous present-tense character narration as having a narrator, we have good grounds to seek another explanation of the technique. Here's mine, which proposes the technique's enabling convention: character narrators in fiction are able to perform both of their roles (experiencing and telling) at the same time.

This proposal seeks to capture the paradoxical relation between the mimetic and the antimimetic in the technique: it is a genuine telling for some purpose(s) from a character to someone else on the impossible occasion of the time of the action. Just as we have a convention that permits a noncharacter narrator to violate real-world rules about knowing other people's minds and constraints on moving through time and space, we have a convention, developed in response to authors' practice, that authorizes a narrator's telling to a narratee while simultaneously acting in ways that would in the real world preclude such narration.

This view, I suggest, also offers a more persuasive account of the passage from *Glamorama*. The conclusion that there is no narrator or narratee encounters considerable recalcitrance from the textual phenomena, a recalcitrance that disappears when we posit the enabling convention. The narration, after all, has so many features of standard character narration. In the sentence "I hand her a French tulip I happen to be holding," a character narrator, Victor, assumes that his narratee knows what a French tulip is but does not know that Victor is holding one and does not know what Victor is doing with it. In this regard, the discourse is far more similar to than different from its natural narration past-tense counterpart, "I handed her a French tulip I happened to be holding." Furthermore, there is no reason why this character narrator could not directly address the narratee—although the impossible occasion means that the narratee would be present only in the teller's mind: "I hand her a French tulip, Jack."

The view based on the logic of readerly engagement also offers a more elegant explanation of the relation between the reporting of the dialogue and the narration itself. Without a narrator, we must assign both the reporting of the dialogue and the variant of reflector narration to someone other than



Victor: either Ellis or his impersonal stand-in in the storyworld. And we would want a good explanation for why Ellis did not just use figural narration, an explanation that would need to emphasize its difference from both standard figural narration and character narration. I do not mean that such an explanation would itself be impossible, but I do mean that it would necessarily be far more elaborate and therefore less persuasive than the straightforward account offered by the rhetorical view: Victor as character narrator, like Huck Finn and Nick Carraway, reports both the dialogue and the narration to his absent narratee.

Since the issue of the narratee looms large for Nielsen (and DelConte), let me turn to a different example, this one from Scott Turow's *Innocent*.

**Rusty, September 2, 2008**

The inside line in my chambers rings, and when I hear her voice, just the first word, it is nearly enough to bring me to my knees. It has been a good six months since the last time I saw her, when she came by to have lunch with my assistant, and well more than a year since we brought things to a close. (111)

How should we explain the narration in the second sentence? Without the context provided by the simultaneous narration of the first sentence, the question would not even arise, since it has all the marks of standard character narration: Rusty reports relevant backstory to his narratee, and through that reporting the implied Turow communicates to his audience not only those details but some additional information about Rusty as both character and narrator (e.g., he is vividly aware of how long it has been since he has seen "her"). But on Nielsen's account, the presence of the first sentence means that analysis of the second's rhetorical dynamics is at best misguided because both sentences are a variant of figural narration. Although it is relatively easy to regard the first sentence that way—all one has to do is substitute third-person references for first-person ones ("my" becomes "his," "I" becomes "Rusty"), it is much harder to regard the second sentence as such a variant. Once we posit the chain of communication as going from Turow to his reader, then the narration seems to escape from the orbit of Rusty's perceptions. It is at least as plausible to read the narration as Turow telling us directly that it has been a good six months as it is to read the narration as Rusty's thinking it has been that long. Again, my point is not that the case for a variant of figural narration becomes impossible to make but rather that the case is less persuasive than the more elegant explanation that the passage gives us what its rhetorical dynamics makes it seem like it gives us: a character narrator addressing a narratee.

Finally, the Value-Added and Story over Discourse Rules also support the rhetorical view. The added value comes in the technique's capacity to immerse the audience in the character narrator's continually moving present, an immersion that takes away any sense of the character narrator's own teleological progression—though this absence of storyworld teleology can be contained within a sense of the author's teleology. In addition, in narratives with a significant interest in the mimetic component of story, this effect of the technique can enhance that interest, as it does in *Innocent*, which tells the story of a man on trial.

In conclusion, I acknowledge the limits of my investigation here: rather than taking on unnatural narration in general, I have focused on just three kinds of departures from the mimetic code of character narration. Developing a full account of unnatural narration remains a task that is at once daunting and exciting. What this essay contributes to that task is both its small survey of some types of character narration and its proposal that the larger project attend not just to the relation between the natural and the unnatural but also to conventions and the influence of readerly response on our understanding of textual phenomena and authorial agency.

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