

Psychonarratology

*Foundations for the Empirical Study
of Literary Response*

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Introduction

“fear is a failure of the imagination”

T. Findlay, *Not Wanted on the Voyage*

The Study of Narrative

Narratives in one form or another permeate virtually all aspects of our society and social experience. Narrative forms are found not only in the context of literature but also in the recollection of life events, in historical documents and textbooks, in scientific explanations of data, in political speeches, and in day-to-day conversation (Nash, 1994: xi). In fact, narrative discourse seems to be intrinsic to our ability to use language to explain and interpret the world around us, and there is an abundance of evidence suggesting that the manner in which we process narrative affects our cognitive and linguistic behavior in general. Therefore, understanding the dynamics of narrative can be instrumental in gaining knowledge about how the mind works (Chafe, 1990); how individuals behave in social and personal relationships (Tannen, 1982, 1984); how they acquire and organize knowledge and analyze themselves, the world, and others around them (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Lamarque, 1990); how they shape their experience of reality (White, 1981; Ricoeur, 1983); and how they are affected by cultural codes and norms.

Because of narrative’s ubiquitous nature and its perceived importance in all aspects of social life, it is not surprising that narrative

“is no longer the private province of specialists in literature (as if it ever should have been)” (Nash, 1994:xi), and that it is now studied across a wide range of disciplines, such as literary studies, cultural studies, linguistics, discourse processing, cognitive psychology, social psychology, psycholinguistics, cognitive linguistics, artificial intelligence, and, as Nash points out, ethno-methodology and critical legal studies (Wieder, 1974). Now generally subsumed under the broader cross-disciplinary category of “discourse,” narrative is studied from a variety of theoretical perspectives that focus on its pragmatic functions and effects on individuals. It is not surprising that so many disciplines are engaged in the study of narrative comprehension, for, as Emmott explains, “reading a story is an astonishing feat of information processing requiring the reader to perform complex operations at a number of levels” (Emmott, 1997:v). In all these disciplines, this emphasis on the recipient of narratives can be seen as the result of a paradigm shift that exposed and transcended the limitations of purely formalist models. In literary theory, it is marked by the transition to reader-reception and -response theory. In linguistics, it is witnessed by the transition from the focus on *langue*, or language as a system, to *parole*, or individual speech utterances. In discourse processing, it is illustrated by the passage from research on story grammar to the investigation of the reader’s “search after meaning” (Bartlett, 1932; Graesser, Singer & Trabasso, 1994). What all these developments clearly indicate is that the forms of narrative discourse are only meaningful when understood in the context of their reception.

Although there has been extensive research on narrative in a wide range of fields, the flow of research findings across disciplinary boundaries is still minimal. Important advances in different scholarly traditions do not always inform each other, and research findings often remain isolated and largely unintegrated. For the most part, cross-fertilization is still limited to fields that have been traditionally perceived as complementary. For literary scholars, “interdisciplinary” is still generally understood as comprising the same “human science” fields with which literary scholars are more familiar: philosophy, history, sociology, film studies, anthropology, and ethnography. By the same token, scientific interdisciplinarity is typically limited to fields within the sciences. This bias has given rise to some curious situations. For example, although linguistics and literary studies are considered

complementary, as are linguistics and cognitive psychology, the association between literary studies and cognitive psychology has not been developed until recently (see Duchan, Bruder & Hewitt, 1995; Gross, 1997; Spolsky, 1993; Turner, 1991). As late as 1990, John Knapp called for the association between literary studies and cognitive psychology, but shyly concluded that “no one would ever assume an unproblematic affair, much less a marriage, between literary critics and mainstream psychology” (Knapp, 1990:359). An unfortunate consequence of this lingering closed-door policy is the loss of fundamental insights. As Catherine Emmott pointed out, psychologists are generally uninformed about “the significance of discourse structure in their text-processing models” (1997:x) developed in literary studies, particularly narratology, and literary scholars are unaware of important research on text memory, coherence, and inference. However, given the common interest in and research on reading and narrative, it stands to reason that a sustained dialogue among the disciplines of literary theory, narratology, cognitive psychology, discourse processing, and linguistics is a prerequisite for a more rigorous inquiry into how narrative functions.

Objectives

One of our goals in this book was precisely to bridge the gap between at least some of the disciplines in which the most promising and outstanding advances have been made and to put the methods of cognitive psychology at the service of understanding what we argue is the least understood dimension of narrative: its cognitive processing. To date, there exists no exhaustive exploration of the ways in which research in cognitive psychology can serve to advance our understanding of the reading of literature. On one hand, a review of literary scholarship reveals that none of its theories (phenomenological, hermeneutic, structuralist, semiotic, reader-reception or reader-response, narratological, or cultural-studies-based approaches) are well informed by research on reading in discourse processing and cognitive psychology. Although narratology in particular has contributed a very sophisticated body of knowledge on the forms and features of literary narrative, this scholarship has been developed independently of detailed theories of the reader. More broadly, critical

interpretations of literary works frequently become the resource pool from which scholars draw to make general inferences about the cognitive processes involved during the act of reading. We believe that this is an inadequate heuristic approach to the study of cognitive processing. On the other hand, research on narrative in discourse processing has often proceeded independently of the knowledge and insights garnered in literary theory. Even though cognitive psychology has made outstanding contributions to our understanding of the cognitive processes involved in reading, its understanding of narrative *per se* is limited relative to the advances made in literary studies. Drawing from the range of our joint expertise, we set out to establish vital links between literary studies (in particular, reader-response theory and narratology), cognitive psychology (in particular, discourse processing), and branches of linguistics.

This book is the result of a nine-year collaboration during which we developed an interdisciplinary framework for the empirical study of the reception of narrative. We refer to this approach as *psychonarratology*. Psychonarratology combines the experimental methods of cognitive psychology with the analysis and insights available from a range of literary studies. The fruits of this collaboration provide not only evidence on a variety of specific mechanisms of narrative processing but also a demonstration of the promise of the general approach. In this book, we elucidate that framework and describe a variety of new evidence and concepts relevant to the processing of narrative. We believe that this work provides a substantial contribution to a variety of fields. By putting the methods of cognitive psychology at the service of literary processing, we hope to advance our understanding of the cognitive processes involved in the reading of narratives. And by bringing to cognitive psychology the rich comprehension of narrative achieved by literary scholars, we hope that researchers of that discipline will be inspired to extend their experimental approach to more complex narrative issues.

As background for this anticipated multidisciplinary contribution, we provide in the following section a brief sketch of the research related to narrative processing that has been done within several fields. We point out the epistemological and methodological limitations of these approaches and preview some of the ways in which

they can be transcended. We first discuss reader-oriented literary studies, including reception theory; second, the formal study of narratology; third, discourse processing in cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics; fourth, some related work in the field of linguistics; and finally, some previous empirical approaches to literature. Following this review, we present the elements of our new approach, psychonarratology.

Reader-Oriented Literary Studies

Recognition of the reader's productive role in the construction of meaning has led to the emergence of one of the most interesting and fundamental challenges to literary scholarship. Indeed, as Rabinowitz explained, "the turn toward the reader may well be the single most profound shift in critical perspective of the post-war years" (Rabinowitz, 1995:403). Antecedents of reception theory can be found early in this century in the work of the Russian Formalists and the Czech Structuralists. The principal impetus for this focus on the reader began in the sixties with the work of the Constance School scholars Jauss and Iser, followed by a veritable boom in reader-oriented criticism that ensued during the seventies and eighties. So much has been written on the general topic of reader response that it has become almost impossible to count the number of published titles. However, as Rabinowitz pointed out, this vast but scattered body of scholarship "is neither united by a common methodology nor directed toward a common goal" (quoted in Selden, 1995:375), which led Rabinowitz to conclude that it had not achieved an "advance in knowledge according to traditional paradigms" (401).

Without discounting the insights and contributions of research on reader response, we agree that for several reasons it has not led to a significant advance in our understanding of readers and the reading process. Perhaps the most obvious reason is the exclusive reliance of these models on purely intuitive speculation formulated in the absence of an objective method of validation. Scholars turning to this body of work in the hopes of gaining knowledge about readers and their reading encounter a vast body of contradictory, divergent theories that have never been tested. Moreover, the approaches are

often mired in a vicious circularity: “Readers” are constructed in accordance with the logic of a given theoretical framework, be it sociological, formalist, psychoanalytical, or hermeneutic, so that the characteristics of the theory provide evidence for various narrative competencies, while the existence of a particular competence provides the evidence for a particular characteristic of a theory. Another difficulty with this area of study has been the propensity to adopt vague, almost idiosyncratic, terminology that is not ratified by any form of consensus. Still another problem is the failure to resolve the relationship between individual and collective reading experience, leading to an exclusive reliance on a single, unitary conception of the reader. This indulgence in circular logic, speculative hypothesis, capricious use of terminology, and monolithic views of reading experience runs throughout all the reader-oriented approaches in literary studies, from the earliest to the most recent trends.

Early Conceptions of the Reader

As early as 1917, the Russian Formalists stressed the role of the reader’s perception in the definition of literariness (reprinted in Shklovsky, 1965). Later, the Czech Structuralists emphasized the role of a public’s changing norms and tastes on our perception of aesthetic and literary value. However, neither the Russian Formalists nor the Czech Structuralists (Mukarovsky, 1970) succeeded in describing specific interactions between particular populations of readers and particular texts. “Readers” in these approaches are understood as universal, aggregate, hypothetical entities responding in unison.

The Aesthetics of Reception

The same is true of Jauss’s concept of the “horizon of expectations.” This concept was central to a new branch of literary studies known as the aesthetics of reception (Jauss, 1970). In the hopes of revitalizing the sense of history that was missing from Formalism and Marxism, Jauss argued that literary studies should include in literary history the process of production and reception (quoted in Holub, 1989:57). He believed that the connection between past and present could be achieved by reconstructing the “horizon of expectation” of a work’s

readers. Holub is but one of many scholars who has aptly critiqued the vagueness of this term; it appears to refer to “an intersubjective system or structure of expectations, a ‘system of references’ or a mindset that a hypothetical individual might bring to any text” (Holub, 1989:59). Laudable as the appeal to consider history may be, Jauss’s lack of a workable methodology and his reliance on a purely intuitive and hypothetical notion rendered his ambition of a history of aesthetic experience more of an unattainable dream than a realistic goal.

Reception Theory

Less concerned with the history of aesthetic response, Wolfgang Iser’s reception theory focused on the interaction between the text and the reader. Drawing from phenomenological sources, he attempted to describe the reading process in terms of the reader’s “concretization” of textual features, in particular, gap-filling activities activated by the text’s indeterminacies, or “schematized aspects.” In describing these concretization activities and responses, Iser coined the term “the implied reader” (1974). The extensive discussion that ensued as to what precisely Iser might have intended by this term has generated the consensus that it refers to a text-based concept of the reader, implying that the reading process entails the generation of the meanings already inscribed in the text. The circularity of his theory is evident: From his theory of the text he extrapolates a concept of the reader, and the reader’s presumed activities confirm his hypothesis regarding the text. Although Iser’s intuitive descriptions of the reading process provide some interesting insights, they remain purely speculative because his text-based approach offers no method of validating the hypotheses. Consequently, his theory sheds little light on what actually transpires in the mind of readers during the reading process. In his defense, it must be pointed out that Iser did acknowledge the limits of purely speculative approaches and argued that empirical modes of inquiry were needed. In his preface to *The Act of Reading*, he explained that his concern was “to devise a framework for mapping out and guiding empirical studies of reader reaction” (Iser, 1978:x). His point that empirical research needs to be guided by a framework of issues and questions is well taken, but such a framework conceived independently of the research itself is unlikely to be helpful.

Reader-Response Theory

Prominent among the American reader-response theories are the works of Stanley Fish (1980) and Norman Holland (1975). Both critics have attempted to validate their hypothesis by means of empirical observation of real readers, but in both cases the methods used are flawed, rendering the conclusions drawn from them unconvincing. For example, to prove that meaning is less in the text than in the reader, Fish merely observed students in one of his own literature classes, and Holland informally assessed the reactions of five of his students. In neither case was there any attempt to compare the behavior of the students to that which might be obtained under other circumstances, making it difficult to say for certain what might have caused the responses that these authors reported. For example, it is quite possible that in both cases the subjects were led (or misled) to produce precisely the results expected by the researchers, and it is unclear whether comparable findings would obtain under more representative reading conditions.

Reader-response theory is often framed in terms of the hypothetical response of ideal or universal readers. This has led to a plethora of elusive terms, each with its idiosyncratic orientation and bias. Some of these terms include, for example, the "ideal reader" (Culler, 1975b), the "implied reader" (Booth, 1961; Iser, 1974), the "informed reader" (Fish, 1970; Wolff, 1971), the "super reader" (Riffaterre, 1966), "communities of readers" (Fish, 1980), and gendered or sexed readers, such as the "resisting reader" (Fetterley, 1977). Some form of generalization is important if one wishes to do more than catalogue the behavior and responses of particular individuals. However, a missing methodological component of the generalized readers often discussed in reader-response theory is the relationship between the theoretical concept of the reader and the actual readers of real texts. We have more to say about how this problem may be solved in Chapter 2.

Hermeneutics

Within the field of hermeneutics, a myriad of contradictory theories and insights has been developed to account for the reader's interpretive activity. Some claim that texts encode determinate meaning that

can be decoded by using reliable methods (Hirsch, 1976). Some argue that only the readings of qualified critics are reliable and enlightening (Krieger, 1981). Others defend the view that all interpretations are to be considered on equal footing (Bauer, 1972). Others still proclaim that all interpretations are either subjective and idiosyncratic (Bleich, 1978; Holland, 1975; Slatoff, 1970) or erroneous (de Man, 1983). And still others remain uncommitted by simply asserting ambiguously that some interpretations are more appealing than others (Iser, 1980). In short, this body of research has left us with much confusion and no consensus as to the nature of the text, the reader, or the reading experience.

Sociological, Historical, and Cultural Approaches

The belief that reading is “essentially a collective phenomenon” and that therefore “the individual reader” should be regarded “as part of a reading public” (Suleiman & Crosman, 1980:32) has led many scholars to attempt in different ways to define the cultural codes and conventions that intervene in the reception of literature. Sociological, historical, and cultural approaches to readers’ responses to narrative are so numerous and diverse that it is impossible, and indeed unnecessary, to review them all here. Nevertheless, to the extent that it is possible to generalize the characteristics of these divergent trends, the general object of inquiry, as Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman have concluded, is “the relationship between specific reading publics (varying with time, place, and circumstances), and either specific works or genres, or else whole bodies of works that make up the literary and artistic tradition of a given society” (32).

A central limitation of this branch of reader-oriented approaches is their propensity to reduce the reader to a predetermined set of over-generalized laws and models. This in turn springs from the failure to recognize the element of difference, divergence, and contradiction due to individual variation. For example, it is often presupposed that individuals belong to a single homogenous and autonomous group or social class at any given point in time. As has been only too well recognized, this view oversimplifies a highly complex reality because, in fact, no one member belongs to just one social group at any given time, but rather to several, and not all members of the same class belong to

all the same subgroups. Further, individual readers do not react solely as members of a given reading public. Even if a collectivity could be identified on the basis of obvious, common characteristics, it would never be the case that all members comprising it would share exactly the same values, aspirations, ideas, opinions, or, in short, the same life experience. After we reject monolithic notions of reading publics, we can no longer justifiably believe that the reading experience of all members of any given group will be identical and reducible to intuitive hypotheses about collective responses.

The ethnographic studies within feminist, post-colonial, and cultural studies propagate the flaws of earlier sociological and historical reader reception approaches. Beach (1993) pointed out that one of the major limitations of cultural studies approaches to reading publics is that “the theorists make questionable claims about the ways in which *groups* of readers or viewers are socialized to accept the ideological reading formations of texts. . . . Such sweeping generalizations are often insensitive to the variation of individual responses” (Beach, 1993:150). Other critical analyses of some of these approaches include Ebert (1988), Hartley (1987), and McRobbie (1990). However, missing from these and other similar critiques are concrete suggestions for improving the methodology and incorporating compelling empirical evidence. The importance of the ethnographic approach to reading and reception makes it clear that this is necessary and overdue.

Our conceptual approach to this tension between individual and collective response is outlined in Chapter 2. In any event, we believe, like Fludernik, that “paradoxically, we still know much too little about narrative to indulge in any easy generalizations about its commitments to, and ensnarements by, its political, societal and ideological embedding” (1996:2). Thus, an understanding of narrative processing is a prerequisite to further research on the effects of cultural factors on narrative reception.

Narratology

Narratology is fundamentally concerned with the identification and theoretical description of formal characteristics of narrative texts. Its “classical” period, influenced by the work of the Russian Formalists and Saussurean linguistics, spanned the sixties through the eighties.

One of the most influential concepts reinforced during this period was the Aristotelian distinction between story (mimesis) and discourse (diegesis), that is, between the told and its narration, or telling. Much of the scholarship of this period concentrated on the definition and description of plot (Barthes, 1966; Bremond, 1966, translated 1980; Greimas, 1971). Genette set the narratological agenda for posterity in 1973 with the publication of his book *Figures III*, which detailed topics such as the representation of temporality (e.g., narrative time and story time), narration (who speaks and the relationship between the speaking voice and elements of the story world), and focalization (who sees) (see also Genette, 1980, 1983). Although different narratologists organize the object of study into different classification frameworks, they all incorporate these main categories. A summary of the research on each of these categories would exceed the scope of this introductory chapter but will be provided in subsequent chapters, each one of which is devoted exclusively to one of these problems. More recently, this narratological project has been extended by drawing on the findings of other fields, such as deconstruction, feminism (Lanser, 1995), psychoanalysis, cognitive psychology, and philosophy. Traditional concepts such as the story–discourse distinction have been challenged, and the object of inquiry has been extended beyond the literary to include all narrative discourse. This fostered the move toward the study of narrative pragmatics and speech act theory.

Many narratologists have recognized that a more solid understanding of narrative requires an analysis of how it functions for readers. For example, Booth (1961) suggested that readers construct an image of the implied author in the course of understanding a literary work. According to Gerald Prince's own definition, narratology also considers the "functioning of narrative," which implies a reader, and attempts to both "characterize narrative competence" and "account for the ability to produce and understand" narrative (Prince, 1987:65). More recently, Prince (1990:3) noted that modern narratology "can account for certain responses to texts," thus expanding the field of inquiry of narratology to include narrative pragmatics. Lanser (1981) has claimed that narratives need to be considered in terms of speech act theory, in which readers construct some representation of authors and their intentions. Rimmon-Kenan (1983) argued that the story of narratives must be constructed by readers. O'Neil's (1994)

entire book illustrated the importance of the reader's role in the construction of narrative features. Margolin reminded us that characters are constructed by readers who draw inferences about them based on textual cues (1989), and that the determination of textual properties, which can vary across individuals and contexts, "belongs probably to pragmatics" (1992:54). Monica Fludernik attempted to "redefine narrativity in terms of cognitive ('natural') parameters, moving beyond formal narratology into the realm of pragmatics, reception theory and constructivism" (Fludernik, 1996:xi). Espousing the belief that "spontaneous conversational storytelling" (13) sheds light on the production, forms, and reception of "the study of all types of narrative" (15), her goal was to provide an account for "organic frames of reading" (xi). Even a cursory review of narratological articles appearing in a variety of scholarly journals reveals a plethora of attempts to characterize the reader's cognitive activities. However, as Jahn remarked, "despite the fact that recourse to readers, readers' intuitions, and reading plays an important role in narratological argument, the contribution of mainstream narratology to a dedicated cognitive approach is meager and often counterproductive" (1997:465).

Fludernik's (1996) attempt to ground the study of narrative in a sophisticated description of cognitive experience constitutes a step in the right direction. Nevertheless, her descriptions of readers and the reading process remain entrenched in vague generalities, as demonstrated by her following claim:

When readers are confronted with potentially unreadable narratives, texts that are radically inconsistent, they cast about for ways and means of recuperating these texts as narratives – motivated by the generic markers that go with the book. They therefore attempt to recognize what they find in the text in terms of the natural telling or experiencing or viewing parameters, or they try to recuperate the inconsistencies in terms of actions and event structures at the most minimal level. This process of narrativization, of making something a narrative by the sheer act of imposing narrativity on it, needs to be located in the dynamic reading process where such interpretative recuperations hold sway. (34)

It may well be that by default readers "actively construct meanings and impose frames on their interpretations of texts just as people have to interpret real-life experience in terms of available schemata" (12). But intuitive as the insight may be, it remains only a plausible

hypothesis. Fludernik's correlation between storytelling and natural modes of human experience may be a powerful way of explaining the production and forms of narrative, but it is too vague and general to explain narrative processing and reception. How readers process narrative is essentially an empirical question that can only be answered by systematic observation of actual readers reading actual texts; it cannot be answered solely on the basis of intuition, anecdotal evidence, or even sophisticated models of human experience. Moreover, the answer to this question inevitably will be complex: Readers' mental processes will vary with the characteristics of the individual reader, the nature of the text, and the context in which the reading takes place. This means that what is required is a large body of empirical evidence on how these variables operate, how they interact, and how they combine to determine readers' processing.

That is not to say that empirical research should not be driven by theoretical intuitions about how narrative works. In fact, the remaining chapters in this book provide empirical validation for an intuition about narrative processing that intersects Fludernik's theory in several ways. Our view is that approaches such as ours and Fludernik's need to be twofold. First, a theoretical treatment of the reading process must be developed with sufficient precision and rigor that unambiguous and testable predictions are made. Second, those predictions must be evaluated empirically by observing the response of actual readers. This is the line of attack that we have taken here.

Discourse Processing

Historically, the main focus of research on discourse processing has been the nature of the processes used to construct mental representations of the text, and it has generated a substantial body of evidence and theorizing on the mental processes readers use. For example, an abundance of evidence on the nature of inferences drawn during reading suggests that inferences are drawn in the service of what is termed a "search for meaning" (Graesser et al., 1994); there is a body of compelling and insightful evidence on how people construct mental representations of the spatial and configural relationships in the story world (e.g., Morrow, Greenspan & Bower, 1987); a considerable amount of work exists on the role of causal and relational