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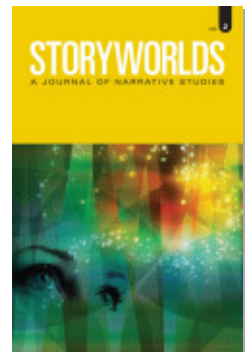
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Impossible Storyworlds— and What to Do with Them

Jan Alber

One of the most interesting things about fictional narratives is that they do not only mimetically reproduce the world as we know it. Many narratives confront us with bizarre storyworlds which are governed by principles that have very little to do with the real world around us. Even though many narrative texts teem with unnatural (i.e., physically or logically impossible) scenarios that take us to the limits of human cognition, narrative theory has not yet done justice to these cases of unnaturalness or the question of how readers can come to terms with them.

In what follows, I define the term *unnatural* and outline a cognitive model that describes ways in which readers can make sense of unnatural scenarios. Second, I use these reading strategies to discuss examples of unnaturalness in postmodernist narratives.¹ Arguing that ideas from cognitive narratology help illuminate

the considerable, sometimes unsettling interpretive difficulties posed by unnatural elements, I use the cognitive-narratological work to clarify how some literary texts not only rely on but also aggressively challenge the mind's fundamental sense-making capabilities.

What Is Unnatural?

The term *unnatural* denotes physically impossible scenarios and events, that is, impossible by the known laws governing the physical world, as well as logically impossible ones, that is, impossible by accepted principles of logic (Doležel 1998: 115–16). These dimensions of unnaturalness can be measured by the degree to which they deviate from real-world frames. Arguably, the logically impossible is even stranger and more disconcerting than the physically impossible, and we have to engage in even more extensive cognitive processing to make sense of it. Even though physically impossible scenarios cannot be actualized in the real world, and even though logically impossible elements are “outside the realm of the possible” (165), it is possible to construct them in the world of fiction. A speaking corkscrew would be an example of the former, while the projection of mutually incompatible events would be an example of the latter.

All instances of the unnatural have an estranging effect (Shklovsky 1965), though not all instances of estrangement involve the unnatural. Most of my examples are impossible scenarios at the level of story and achieve their estranging effect by deliberately impeding the constitution of storyworlds. More specifically, they radically deconstruct the anthropomorphic narrator, the traditional human character, or real-world notions of time and space. Other narratives might estrange readers by deploying atypical discourse modes, such as the exuberant language in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939) or the typographical oddities in John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968). Such stories also transgress real-world frames and urge us to stretch our sense-making strategies to the limit.

How Can We Make Sense of the Unnatural?

Ryan (1991: 51), Fludernik (1996: 43–46), and Herman (2002: 23; 370) argue that narrative comprehension is based on a set of real-world cogni-

tive frames. For instance, Ryan's principle of minimal departure predicts that "we project upon [fictional] worlds everything we know about reality, and [. . .] make only the adjustments dictated by the text" (1991: 51). But what happens if individual oddities are so extreme that they impair the constitution of a storyworld and urge us to stretch, distend, or reconceive our basic procedures for making sense of experience? In contrast to Ryan, Pavel suggests that readers do not consistently apply the principle of minimal departure. He argues that when we are confronted with radical oddities, we follow a different principle by anticipating "a maximal departure" from the real world so that "mimetic principles are supplemented with antimimetic expectations" (1986: 93). But what exactly does that mean, and how does the mind cope with such extreme narratives?

I propose five reading strategies that relate in various ways to the principles of minimal and maximal departure, and that help readers naturalize unnatural scenarios. According to Culler, readers attempt to recuperate inexplicable elements of a text by taking recourse to familiar interpretive patterns (1975: 134). Fludernik extends Culler's notion of naturalization and argues that in the process of narrativization, which is "a reading strategy that naturalizes texts by recourse to narrative schemata" (1996: 34), readers use frames based on both real-world experience and exposure to literature to grasp textual oddities (level IV). The frames in question include pretextual schemata used to parse events as intentional acts (level I); frames of narrative mediation such as "telling" (narratives focusing on a teller figure), "experiencing" (narratives that are focalized through the consciousness of a protagonist), "viewing" (the witnessing of events), and "reflecting" (the projection of a reflecting consciousness in the process of rumination) (level II); and criteria pertaining to genre as well as to narrative as a general mode of discourse (level III) (Fludernik 1996: 43–46).

Like Culler (1975) and Fludernik (1996, 2003), I try to make strange narratives more readable. In contrast to them, however, I deal with extremely radical scenarios that openly defy the process of naturalization. Fludernik argues that when narratives resist naturalization, "we stop short and start to take the non-natural make-up seriously" (2003: 256). As I show, adopting the assumption that real-world possibilities

are being transcended frequently helps us to make sense of unnatural elements. Nevertheless, one basic premise that we use in all of my examples is that no matter how odd the textual structure of a narrative, it is still part of a purposeful communicative act (Pratt 1977: 170). In other words, we assume that certain intentions played a role in the production of the narrative, and we form hypotheses about them. Also, we apply the general schema of human existence to the texts: we assume that even the strangest text is about humans or human concerns.

Here are five strategies by means of which readers can use real-world and literary scripts to naturalize unnatural scenarios.²

1. Some impossible elements can simply be explained as dreams, fantasies, or hallucinations (“reading events as internal states”).
2. Other examples of unnaturalness become more readable when we relate them to our literary knowledge and analyze them from a thematic angle (“foregrounding the thematic”). For instance, the impossible changes in weather and furnishing in Harold Pinter’s *The Basement* (1967/1977) can be recuperated thematically as a pointless yet inescapable struggle for power.
3. In a more specific variant of (2), readers see impossible elements as parts of allegories that say something about the world in general rather than particular individuals (“reading allegorically”). For example, we can deal with the diversification of Anne’s identity in Martin Crimp’s *Attempts on Her Life* (1997) when we read (or view) this play as an allegory about the various ways of subjecting the female self in societal discourse.

Furthermore, a number of impossible scenarios urge us to create new scripts by combining or extending pre-existing schemata.

4. Readers may, for example, generate new frames by blending schemata, in Fauconnier and Turner’s (2002) sense. This strategy (“blending scripts”) is crucial with regard to our attempts to come to terms with scenarios in which the narrator is an animal, a corpse, or an inanimate object.
5. Finally, we can engage in processes of “frame enrichment” and considerably stretch existing frames beyond real-world possibilities until the parameters include the strange phenomena with

which we are confronted. For instance, we cannot explain the logical oddities in Caryl Churchill's *Traps* (1978/1989) on the basis of real-world parameters because this play does not conform to the principle of noncontradiction. However, once we project an impossible scenario in which various characters' fears materialize as entities in the storyworld and begin to interact, we can gain access to the play.

Although the strategies are applicable to texts beyond those discussed in this article, my argument does not depend on the strategies' being broadly deployed by readers. Rather, they constitute options that readers may try out when they are confronted with unnatural scenarios. Also, even though my strategies occasionally overlap, in characterizing them I try to delineate five distinct mental operations. (1) In "reading events as internal states," we explain the impossible as pertaining to interiority. (2) In "foregrounding the thematic," we read unnatural scenarios as exemplars of specific themes rather than mimetically motivated occurrences. (3) "Reading allegorically" is a more specific version of (2) in which we see impossible elements as parts of allegorical structures. (4) In "blending scripts," we try to cope with the unnatural by merging two pre-existing frames to create new ones. (5) Finally, in "frame enrichment," we considerably stretch our frames to make sense of the impossible and rethink the domain of the possible. This strategy differs in degree, not kind, from (4). It involves multiple blends of pre-existing frames, with the result that more cognitive effort is required to come to terms with the storyworld, which accordingly moves closer to Pavel's condition of maximal departure.

Moreover, it is important to make sure that our attempts to naturalize the unnatural do not become "an act of *Gleichschaltung*" in which "the diversity of fictional worlds is reduced to the uniform structure of the complete, Carnapian world" (Doležel 1998: 171). Hence, as an alternative to my own approach, I would like to mention the Zen way of reading, which might be adopted by an attentive reader who repudiates the above-mentioned explanations and simultaneously accepts the strangeness of unnatural scenarios and the feelings of discomfort, fear, or worry that they evoke in her or him. I am not sure that many read-

ers can engage in such a laissez-faire approach, but you may wish to give this a try as you consider the examples discussed in the following pages.

Reading Strategy I: Unnatural Elements as Internal States

My first two examples, Caryl Churchill's *Heart's Desire* (1997b) and Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow* (1991), are only physically impossible at first glance. Upon closer inspection they can be explained as fantasies or as the product of traumatic experiences. In Churchill's play Brian and Alice await the arrival of their daughter Suzy, who lives in Australia. They eagerly anticipate Suzy's visit, while Alice blames Brian for the alienation from their daughter. We soon realize that something unnatural is going on as the play repeatedly returns to its beginning, only to proceed in a slightly different way. At the beginning "*Brian enters putting on a red sweater*"; the second time he enters, he is "*putting on a tweed jacket*"; whereas the third time around, Brian is "*putting on an old cardigan*" (5). In these permutations, the characters typically "*do exactly what they did before*" (5) but it is sometimes also the case that scenes are repeated with double speed (11–13, 29, 31) or abbreviated (17–19, 24–26). Furthermore, during the course of these retakes, the doorbell rings several times, and the most surprising people and creatures turn up. The door admits a group of children (15), two gunmen who "*kill them all*" and "*then leave*" (17), Suzy's female lover from Australia (27), a police officer (29), and a ten-foot-tall bird (32). Then, toward the end, Suzy enters three times (26, 33, 36). The narrative finally returns to its beginning and "ends" with the first image of Brian putting on his cardigan sweater.

In *Heart's Desire*, time does not progress in linear fashion. In contrast to the real world, events can be erased, and the action can be restarted. How is this possible? One way to account for the situation is to hypothesize that some mind is trying to imagine the best of all possible worlds and is so keen on eliminating undesirable elements that he or she destroys the whole scenario. In other words the desperate attempt at perfectionism leads to a rather deficient arrangement, namely, the strangely fragmented play before us. Along these lines one could argue that the action takes place in Brian's mind. Brian might want the reunion with his daughter to be such a perfect moment that he meticulously rehearses

everything, trying to eliminate all potential obstacles. The sped-up and abbreviated sequences could then be read as already familiar scenes in which nothing went wrong. However, Brian's obsessive perfectionism ultimately destroys the reunion with Suzy (and it might even have driven her away from the family in the first place).

In *Time's Arrow*, meanwhile, the first-person narrator, who is some kind of homunculus without agency or volition and lives inside the central protagonist (Tod Friendly/John Young/Hamilton de Souza/Odilo Unverdorben), experiences a reversed version of the events of Odilo's life and the dialogues, as if "the film is running backward" (8). The novel thus presents us with a physically impossible scenario in which time's arrow is reversed. Due to this distorted perspective on Odilo's life, the "I" permanently misinterprets the situations with which he is confronted. For instance, he thinks that prostitutes pay their clients (30); that patients become sick after having been treated by Tod, who works as a doctor in New Jersey (44); and, most drastically, that Odilo, a Nazi doctor, is creating (rather than exterminating) Jews at Auschwitz (120–21).

We presumably all know what it looks like to rewind a movie, and we can reconstruct Odilo's life on the basis of this knowledge. However, the more interesting question is why the narrator experiences a reversed version of Odilo's life. Maybe one can read the "I" as the moral conscience Odilo repressed during his lifetime to be able to cope with his participation in the Nazi genocide. And on his death bed Odilo activates his conscience and, in his mind, travels back with the intention of turning the moral chaos of his life into something beautiful. In other words, the novel can be explained in terms of Odilo's wish to turn back the clock and to undo things he is ashamed of, namely, his participation in the genocidal atrocities in Nazi Germany.³

Reading Strategy II: Foregrounding the Thematic

Not all physically impossible narrative scenarios can be explained as internal states. However, they may become more readable when we see them as exemplifications of themes rather than mimetically motivated occurrences. Harold Pinter's film script *The Basement* (1967/1977) can be interpreted in these terms. It deals with two young men, Stott and

Law, and their struggle for a young girl called Jane. At the beginning of the script, Law is inside a room, which “*is comfortable, relaxed, heavily furnished. Numerous side tables, plants, arm-chairs, book-cabinets, bookshelves, velvet cloths, a desk, paintings, a large double bed*” (91). Oddly, Stott and Jane enter from outside and have sex in Law’s bed. As the two men try to gain dominance over Jane (and she over them), we witness impossibly quick changes in both weather and furnishing. At a later point the room is suddenly “*unrecognizable. The furnishing has changed. There are Scandinavian tables and desks. Large bowls of Swedish glass. Tubular chairs. An Indian rug. Parquet floors, shining. A new hi-fi cabinet, etc*” (101). The room then oscillates between these two furnishings (105–6), only to turn into a palatial interior: “*The room is unrecognizable. The walls are hung with tapestries, an oval Florentine mirror, an oblong Italian Master. The floor is marble tiles. There are marble pillars with hanging plants, carved golden chairs, a rich carpet along the room’s centre*” (107). Toward the end, “*the room is completely bare*” (109), and once Law and Stott have switched roles, the furnishing returns to the initial version (111). Further, the weather permanently oscillates between winter and summer. At the end Law and Jane enter what has become Stott’s room and will presumably have sex in his bed.

Since the question of whether the action takes place in the outside world or in Law’s mind is undecidable (both options are possible), I think it makes more sense to approach this film script and its unnatural scenarios as prompting the reader to engage actively in the process of thematizing or reading events as exemplars of specific themes. The most obvious theme is the three characters’ desire to have power over the others. And the physically impossible changes of the setting and the weather can be seen as manifestations of this battle for domination. Moreover, the room’s transformations, the unnaturally quick alterations in weather, and the random changes of domination among the characters identify chance as the only determining factor in this world. And since everything is represented as following random patterns, the narrative renders the characters’ quest for power and control rather pointless. At the same time, however, the narrative suggests that this battle for domination is inescapable and will go on forever.

Likewise, Jorge Luis Borges’s “The Aleph” (1945/1970) also becomes

more readable when we approach it from a thematic perspective. This short story confronts us with an entity that is physically impossible. When Borges, or rather the first-person narrator, descends to Daneri's cellar, he views "the Aleph" (26) or, more specifically, "the unimaginable universe" (28). He describes this encounter as follows:

How, then, can I translate into words the limitless Aleph, which my floundering mind can scarcely encompass? [...] Really, what I want to do is impossible, for any listing of an endless series is doomed to be infinitesimal. In that single gigantic instant I saw millions of acts both delightful and awful; not one of them amazed me more than the fact that all of them occupied the same point in space, without overlapping or transparency. [...] The Aleph's diameter was probably little more than an inch, but all space was there, actual and undiminished. Each thing (a mirror's face, let us say) was infinite things, since I distinctly saw it from every angle of the universe. (26–27)

One might read this story as accentuating that absolute transcendence and absolute knowledge are both impossible and irrelevant. The narrator immediately realizes that it is impossible to represent the Aleph through verbal art. After the incident he describes the Aleph as "one hell of a—yes one hell of a," while later on he simply refuses "to discuss the Aleph" (28). The "total vision" is only relevant in so far as the narrator recognizes himself and his problems in the Aleph. He notably sees "unbelievable, obscene, detailed letters, which [his beloved] Beatriz had written to Carlos Argentino" (27), and probably due to his feelings of jealousy, he starts to believe that the Aleph "was a false Aleph" (30). The unnatural universe of the Aleph might be seen as highlighting the human desire to think the unthinkable, or to represent the unrepresentable. However, it also illustrates that even the most unnatural scenario ultimately takes us back to ourselves, that is, to the nature of the human mind. And this is also one of the chief claims of this article.

Reading Strategy III: Reading Allegorically

As yet another strategy for sense making, one may try to read unnatural scenarios as parts of allegorical structures. Take, for example, Sarah

Kane's *Cleansed* (1998 in 2001). This play is set at a university that is reminiscent of a concentration camp. Tinker, who is a sadistic torturer, conducts the most brutal experiments with Carl (who is in love with Rod) and Grace (who is in love with Graham). At one point Tinker pushes a pole into Carl's anus until it emerges at his right shoulder (117), and later on he cuts off Carl's tongue (118) as well as his hands (129), his feet (136), and his penis (145). These mutilations are unspeakable and unstageable but presumably still physically possible. This clearly changes when Grace meets her dead brother Graham, has sexual intercourse with him, and, after a penis transplant, metamorphosizes into him. When the stage directions inform us that Grace "looks and sounds exactly like Graham" (149), and we learn that "Grace/Graham" (149) can also be seen by other characters, we have to accept that characters can become somebody else in the world of *Cleansed*. Other unnatural things happen as well. For example, after Graham and Grace have had sexual intercourse, "a sunflower bursts through the floor and grows above their heads. When it is fully grown, Graham pulls it towards him and smells it" (120).

Cleansed becomes readable as an allegory on the universal merits and dangers of love. The final image of Grace, who has become Graham and who stares into the sun, might summarize the play's potential message. On the one hand, Grace, who can be seen as Everyman/Everywoman, finds tenderness and affirmation in the unity with her beloved Graham, but on the other hand, she has also erased her identity. Furthermore, one might see Tinker as an imperfect version of God who tests the love of Grace (and Carl). While the flowers in the play might symbolize the redemptive power of love, the bodily mutilations and transformations may allude to the ways in which lovers destroy themselves in their desperate attempts to become one with their beloved. And it is this paradoxical nature of love that the play seeks to highlight.

Meanwhile, Martin Crimp's play *Attempts on Her Life* (1997) urges us to accept a physically impossible situation in which the same character splits into multiple versions. "Anne," who is sometimes called "Any," "Annie," "Anny," or "Annushka," assumes various identities and lives in several locations (22–23). Among other things, she is an international terrorist (25, 37–40), a car (30–35), a suicide artist (45–52), the lover of a married man (58), the girl next door (61), and a porno actress

(65–73). We gradually realize that these scenarios are merely possible options, and that none of these possibilities can be established as real. More specifically, we are confronted with an assortment of disembodied voices, and for some reason, their discourses fragment Anne into seventeen different versions. *Attempts on Her Life* can be explained as a series of counterfactual scenarios for the life of “Anne.” However, it is worth noting that these possibilities are not presented as liberating options. In each case the voices, which are reminiscent of members of an advertising agency or a film crew and thus represent powerful societal institutions, force “Anne” into a role whose plausibility is determined by the question of whether the result would sell: they always feel that they “need to go for the sexiest scenario” (20). I would thus propose to read the play as an allegory that critiques the subjection and objectification of the self (and in particular the female self) through societal discourse.

Reading Strategy IV: Blending Scripts

Other physically impossible scenarios cannot be explained as internal states or on the basis of our literary knowledge, and urge us to blend existing frames before we can make sense of them. For instance, John Hawkes’s novel *Sweet William: A Memoir of Old Horse* (1993) is narrated by a rebellious horse that resists all types of co-optation (including service as metaphor). As Julie Ann Smith has shown, Hawkes creates a believable horse by suggesting that “Sweet William has an apprehension of the world that is more sensual, immediate, and intense than that of humans.” At the same time, she also stresses Sweet William’s “hyper-humanity”: “linguistically, he can out-human humans and render amusing through parody their ways of understanding the self” (2002: 416–20). We have to combine two frames to picture a physically impossible scenario in which a horse talks to us. The point of animal narrators is typically to critique the thoughtlessness, arrogance, and ignorance with which humans treat animals. For instance, *Sweet William* is directed against “all those who have no love for the horse” (14).⁴

Similar methods can be used to make sense of scenarios in which the narrator is dead. For instance, Alice Sebold’s novel *The Lovely Bones* (2002) opens as follows: “My name was Salmon, like the fish; first name,

Susie. I was fourteen when I was murdered on December 6, 1973” (5). Later on, we learn that the narrator, who was raped and murdered by one Mr. Harvey, has entered heaven and speaks from there: “When I first entered heaven I thought that everyone saw what I saw. That in everyone’s heaven there were soccer goalposts in the distance and lumbering women throwing shot put and javelin. That all the buildings were like suburban northeast high schools built in the 1960s” (16). This scenario departs from our real-world parameters, and we have to adjust our reading frames to come to terms with it. First of all, we have to activate our knowledge about people who are alive (and able to tell stories) and our awareness of the fact that the dead cannot speak. In a second step, we combine these schemata to picture a scenario in which a corpse speaks. What might the potential functions of this unnatural scenario be? *The Lovely Bones* invites us to stretch our cognitive categories to picture a situation in which the dead narrator continues to interact with the world she had to leave. The novel can be explained in terms of our inability to envision death as the definite end of our existence, or in terms of the wishes of the bereaved that the dead somehow continue to exist (56, 83, 209).

A final unnatural narrator scenario is the omniscient first-person narrator, that is, a character-narrator who knows significantly more than he could if he were a “normal” human being. Rick Moody’s short story “The Grid” (1995) presents us with such a narrator. This narrative confronts us with a first-person narrator who possesses the knowledge of an omniscient narrator. The narrator is not only in a position to tell us exactly what happens in a room above his head or what will happen in the future (29); he also knows exactly what other people think and feel. For instance, he tells us what he and his girlfriend Susan (30–31), and Nina, the new tenant (31–32), will do, and he is also familiar with the thoughts and feelings of Joe, who will rob Nina’s apartment (32), and those of another couple, Eleanor and Max (33). The future passages can be explained by assuming that the events happened in the past, while the narrator decides to tell them in the present tense (with occasional prolepses). However, the fact that this narrator gains access to the thoughts and feelings of others constitutes a serious violation of mimetic models. In order to come to terms with this unnatural scenar-

io, readers have to move beyond real-world possibilities and combine their understanding of the real-world limitations of first-person narrators with the knowledge of an omniscient narrator. As Rüdiger Heinze (2008: 293) suggests, one can then explain this impossible scenario in terms of our wish to transcend ourselves, to be in an authorial position and to know more than we can.

Reading Strategy V: Frame Enrichment

Some manifestations of unnaturalness cannot be explained as internal states, or on the basis of our generic knowledge, or by blending existing parameters. Certain physically and logically impossible scenarios urge us to expand our frames until they subsume the unnatural elements with which we are presented, and to accomplish this feat we typically have to go through various cognitive steps. Caryl Churchill's play *Blue Kettle* (1997a), for example, contravenes mimetic models by confronting us with robot-like characters who lose control over their utterances. The play deals with Derek, who fools old ladies into believing that he is the son they had given up for adoption. At some point the dialogues get "infected" by the words "blue" and "kettle," and they function like a computer virus that gradually "eats up" the play as a whole. In the first half of *Blue Kettle*, these words are only used occasionally. For instance, at one point Derek states, "You don't have to blue anything up" (43), or, later on, "So shouldn't we talk to the estate kettle?" (45). When the old ladies begin to realize that Derek tries to fool them, these words occur more and more frequently: "MRS OLIVER: You blue who is this other kettle who's played such a big kettle in my son's kettle" (65). Finally, letters replace the characters' words, and the last two lines of the play are "T b k k k k l" and "B. K." (69).

Here we are urged to project a physically impossible scenario in which characters lose control over their discourse, and the storyworld is then gradually "eaten up" by intruding lexemes—and finally phonemes. One way of explaining these intrusions would be to see them as an unnatural version of the Freudian return of the repressed. More specifically, the communication gradually breaks down because the ladies realize something that Derek can no longer repress, namely, the fact that

he is lying to them. The words “blue” and “kettle” and the narrative’s complete breakdown can then be seen as the unnatural result of this interaction between the characters’ minds. Since Derek’s plan of fooling the ladies ultimately does not work out, the unnatural intrusions might highlight the idea that lies soon catch up with one. The unnatural scenario of intruding lexemes and phonemes might also illustrate that each character has a dark side for which no expressive vocabulary exists. This is obviously true of Derek, who tries to fool the ladies, but it is interestingly also true of the ladies because we never learn why they had given up their sons for adoption in the first place.

Finally, Caryl Churchill’s play *Traps* (1978/1989), which deals with a group of people living communally in a house, is full of logical impossibilities (Richardson 2007: 61). First of all, the door on stage is locked for Reg, while Albert is still able to go right through it (13). Also, a bowl is mended in one scene (10), broken in the following one (36), and unharmed in the scene afterward (38). At the beginning of the play Albert and Syl have a baby (1), while later on the baby is gone, and Syl argues that she is worried about ever becoming pregnant (12). At one point Syl is having an affair with Jack (13–14), while at another point we learn that they are actually married (26), even though Syl had been married to Albert earlier on. Del, who explains his existence in terms of “a *Mobius strip*” (19), enters in exactly the same aggressive manner twice (17, 35), while Reg develops from a violent husband, who beats his wife Christie (40), into a sensitive gardener (43) and back into a violent husband (59). Toward the end of the play we learn that Albert killed himself (49), but for some reason he re-enters a few pages later (60). Also, at this point Albert is again married to Syl. In the final scene of *Traps*, all the characters suddenly gather harmoniously to bathe and eat.

The play transcends traditional notions of time (and space) by playing around with the principle of noncontradiction. How can we make sense of this logically impossible chaos? Following Caryl Churchill’s comments on *Traps*, I suggest that the play can be seen as a scenario in which the characters live out various mutually exclusive options at once. In this play the characters’ thoughts and feelings materialize and begin to interact. Furthermore, it is worth noting that even though the characters live out several possibilities at once, progression does not occur.

This may be so because the materialized scenarios actually represent the characters' fears. For instance, Albert might fear that Syl is having an affair with Jack, while Syl may be worried that the slightly paranoid Albert might commit suicide, and so forth. The characters in *Traps* are trapped by their fears that lead them back to the same scenarios again and again. However, at the end of the play they break out of these loops by abandoning their fears. The characters enact a final possibility, and the earlier confrontations turn into a state of mutual acceptance. And even though this is just one possibility among others, the play seems to favor it. Notably, the final line of *Traps* is "that's good" (67).

Conclusions

As my discussion suggests, postmodernist narratives move beyond real-world possibilities in a wide variety of ways. In this article I sketch out five reading strategies that may give a sense of the ways in which some readers come to terms with such "deviations." Many narratives urge us to develop new frames of reading before we can formulate hypotheses about their potential messages. If this were not the case, it would be difficult (if not impossible) to account for literary change, and the reading of narratives would correlate with the eternal reproduction of the same cognitive frames (which would actually be quite boring). Narratives often widen our mental universe beyond the actual and the familiar, and provide playfields for interesting thought experiments. Jerome Bruner points out that "the innovative storyteller" goes "beyond the conventional scripts, leading people to see human happenings in a fresh way, indeed, in a way they had never before 'noticed' or even dreamed." And such innovations significantly shape "our narrative versions of everyday reality as well as [...] the course of literary history, the two perhaps being not that different" (1991: 12).

All of my examples transgress real-world experiences and expectations. However, it is worth noting that they do not do so entirely. Unnatural narrators, for example, are not completely non-anthropomorphic. They are better understood as hybrid combinations of human and nonhuman features. After all, we are confronted in such contexts with animals or corpses that speak *like* human beings (rather than ani-

mals that speak like animals, in which case we would not understand anything). Similarly, all my other examples of unnaturalness have a human substrate and can be read as saying something about us and the world we live in as well. And this is essential because if it were not the case, nobody would be interested in such narratives (and we would not even consider them to be narratives). Since my examples clearly make statements about human concerns, they can still be read as narratives. They may not be prototypical ones, but they certainly say more about us and our being in the world than David Herman's example of zero narrativity: "Oe splubba fibblo. Sim oe gingy beebie ca yuck, I ca splubba orpia" (2002: 101).

Notes

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1. The insightful analyses of Richardson (2006 and 2007) inform my account, but I build on Richardson's work by developing a cognitive perspective on unnatural scenarios.
2. According to Schank and Abelson, a "script" comprises "specific knowledge to interpret and participate in events we have been through many times" (1977: 37), and can be used to help us master new situations. Whereas scripts typically represent sequences of events, frames and schemata represent points in time. However, since the terms "frame," "script," and "schema" all describe ways in which knowledge is organized and stored in the mind, I use them interchangeably.
3. Interestingly, the ending suggests that Odilo's soul finds itself in a hell-like setting because it appears to be doomed to relive his life for all eternity in an endless temporal loop (165).
4. The speaking animal is an unnatural scenario that has already been naturalized, that is, turned into a cognitive category, presumably because it is frequently used in fables and animated cartoons. Further examples of unnaturalness that have already been naturalized are supernatural entities, omniscient narration, and reflector-mode narratives.

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