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Two Decades after the Publication of Monika Fludernik's *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*: Introduction to the Forum

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When she published *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* in 1996, Monika Fludernik surmised that the book would remain under discussion for maybe ten years. Audacious for prioritizing topics and concepts that narratologists for well-nigh three decades had held to be taboo, it was thought that Fludernik's book had the potential of stirring up controversies that would one day fizzle out, only to be supplanted by new trends and developments.

Today we know that this prognosis was not fulfilled. Indeed, the positions staked out in the book, revolutionary for some and contestable for others, have proved over time to have brought about something of a paradigm shift in the field of narratology. Fludernik's book soon came to be recognized as one of the founding documents of cognitive narratology, a name coined a year after the publication date. Chief among the ideas put forth and elaborated in detail, along with an oftentimes prescient look at some of the concept's ramifications, is that narrativity is defined not by plot, as had been the case since the earliest structural theories of narrative, but by experientiality, "the quasi-mimetic evocation of 'real-life experience.'" The model is systematically built up by integrating a series of related concepts and advances in research. Among them are the proposal to connect prototypical narrative to spontaneously occurring "natural" oral storytelling; the switch from structural to cognitive linguistics with its notions of frame and script; positioning consciousness at the heart of narratological study; the process of narrativization by which narratively recalcitrant texts are "naturalized"; conceiving of mimesis not as the imitation of reality but as the projection of a semiotic structure which readers recuperate as a fictional reality; and the necessity of integrating the diachronic dimensions of narrative into narratology.

Now, if *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* lays out a comprehensive narrative theory, it also has the merit of not being a closed system, of remaining open to both criticism and developments by other narrative

theoreticians, and also of being susceptible of evolution in its own right. These are but some of the factors lying behind the sustainability of Fludernik's contribution to narratology and the vital place it continues to occupy in current research. Another reason why this book and the body of research that accompanies it continue to exert influence is that Fludernik has shown a willingness to dialogue openly with others.

It is this openness to dialogue that has culminated in the present collection of essays. On the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*, two events were organized at the International Conference on Narrative held in Amsterdam from June 16 to 18, 2016. One was a panel discussion convened by John Pier and devoted to assessing some of the many aspects of the book; this discussion took place with the participation of Jonathan Culler, Maria Mäkelä, Brian McHale, and Dan Shen, with Monika Fludernik as respondent. The other was a session whose aim was to explore new dimensions of experientiality in recent research; lectures were given by Marco Caracciolo, Eva von Contzen, Jonas Grethlein, and Karin Kukkonen. Both events were attended by receptive audiences that engaged in stimulating debates. In order for these discussions to reach a wider public, it was thus decided to submit the contributions for a forum in *Partial Answers* together with the response by Monika Fludernik.

The topics from *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* that continue to inspire debate today are well represented in this collection. These topics range from the natural to naturalization, from competing conceptions of experientiality to the role of diachronicity in reading, and from experientiality in factual narratives to experientiality in posthuman narratives. The positions adopted by the authors go from extensions and appropriations of Fludernik's narratology to dissenting views. As for the responses provided by Fludernik, they not only clarify her own position on a variety of questions, but they also demonstrate her willingness, if not always to rally to, at least to countenance modifications and alternative perspectives brought to a narratological model that continues to evolve in the face of a changing research environment.

Each of the individual essays demonstrates a coherence of its own. At the same time, they represent a set of arguments that, together, constitute a timely problematic that readers will want to follow up on. I would like to suggest that it is Fludernik herself who fleshes out what may be the most relevant and perceptive paths of reflection by organizing her observations around three themes.

First are the questions of “naturalness” and “natural” narratology and their implications with regard to deconstruction. Closely related to these questions is Fludernik’s appropriation of Culler’s notion of “naturalization” in the form of “narrativization.” In his essay, Culler raises a number of issues having to do with reader processing, but Fludernik specifies how these difficulties can be resolved in terms of her own work on the subject since, as she maintained in *Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology*, her theoretical position seeks to strike a balance between constructivist and deconstructivist principles. McHale expresses reservations as to the status of the natural in narratology which Fludernik, invoking tellability in conversational storytelling, addresses by referring to Old English and Middle English narratives.

Another line of reflection running through the essays is the discussion of the reader in *Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology*. On this matter it is Mäkelä who signals a number of latent positions in Fludernik’s work, notably the centrality of the reader. In particular, she points out the necessity, in reception-oriented theories, of maintaining a distance between the reader and intentionalist author and narrator-based model theories — a position fully ratified by Fludernik.

The final set of issues taken up by Fludernik in her responses is experientiality and narrativity. She comments on a number of misunderstandings that have surrounded experientiality, most notably the tendency to replace it with experience. This can be found in Caracciolo’s essay even though Fludernik does welcome Caracciolo’s as well as Kukkonen’s work on embodied narratology, an important outgrowth of *Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology*. The opposition between experientiality and experience is also developed in Grethlein’s contribution, but this is based on aesthetic considerations, a subject that may herald the way to new domains of narratological research. At another level, Dan Shen argues that Fludernik actually entertains two notions of experientiality — one cognitive, the other textual. Fludernik acknowledges this distinction but maintains that it is in fact narrativity, not experientiality, that breaks down into cognitive and textual forms. In the original formulation of natural narratology, it was claimed that historiographical writing is lacking in experientiality and thus in narrativity, a position that Fludernik has since revised. Kukkonen takes up similar issues by considering the conflict between experientiality and the realist paradigm, doing so within the framework of embodiment or second-generation cognitive science and at the same time introducing the principle of predictive processing. Von Contzen considers the impact of lists in fictional narratives. Such lists

evoke real-life, embodied experience, but at the same time they impede the reading process and thus, through an air of factuality, challenge the place of experientiality in narratives where lists are employed.

These comments are but a few of the subjects that the authors of this collection of essays explore and that Monika Fludernik invites readers to ponder for themselves.