

Marco Caracciolo, *The Experientiality of Narrative. An Enactivist Approach*

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Abstract

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The book under review is a bold and timely attempt to revisit some outstanding issues in the study of narrative in the context of the constantly expanding understanding of human cognition in the cognitive sciences and in the philosophy of mind. The author argues specifically that we do not understand literary narratives by simply representing their various givens, such as the actions, the characters, the motivations, and the story worlds described, but by simulating the experiences they provide in a way that is largely consistent with how we make sense of the world at large too. Stories therefore offer themselves as experiences to be undergone, and it is the readers themselves who provide their own experiential background for this process to take place. The main theoretical framework chosen by the author for this book is that of enactive cognition (enactivism), helped here in particular by a generous amount of philosophy of mind consideration about how we understand consciousness. While enactivism, in the book author's view, provides an integrative theoretical model for thinking about human experience, it has mainly been concerned, the author argues, with lower-level, basic processes of sense-making, such as pre-verbal human interactions. The author, on his own admission, attempts to extend these enactive accounts to non-basic and culturally rich forms of cognition, as best exemplified in the activity of reading literature. This is a somewhat problematic move, as I will show, not because it is a move not worth making, but because of some inherent contradictions that we can observe in the author's attempts at making it. Still, the move is a spirited one and there is much in this book that warrants serious discussion. Its main and significant contribution, as I see it, is the idea that experience and experientiality can provide a valid framework capable of describing people's interactions with literary texts and thus lift the study of literature away from the older representationalist commitments of classical narratology and various semiotic theories of meaning. As Caracciolo himself explains, the book is not an empirical exploration of literary meanings either, because at this moment of potential paradigm shift a good theoretical model is as necessary as its empirical validation. He suggests that many of the speculative claims about narrative interpretation that he puts forward should be seen as paving the way for future empirical studies. I agree with the author on this point, particularly given

the fact that enactivism emphasizes experience as both part of the phenomena under consideration and the set of tools needed to study them. Before I come back to some of these issues, I will provide a very brief synopsis of the book itself.

Most of the discussion is theoretical, although regularly interspersed by forays into literature, the latter being, however, quite brief and devoted to specific points in the theoretical discussion. The only complete reading of a literary work is that of Nabokov's *The Luzhin Defense*, which constitutes the last chapter of the book. The gist of the theoretical argument is presented in Part I of the book. Chapter 1 argues, in accordance with the enactive understanding of human cognition, that stories do not represent experience in the classical cognitivist sense of "mentally representing something"; rather, readers undergo experiences which are driven by the story, but equally constituted by the readers' very own experiential background. Chapter 2 proposes that the experientiality of narrative (i.e. how experience is created and understood by the reader) is constituted by the tension between an individual reader's experiential background and the textual features of the given story. The background itself is seen as comprised of bodily experience, perception, emotion, higher-order cognitive functions, and socio-cultural practices. It is not clear why the three lower levels are isolated in the proposed way (surely, bodily experience is the very basis for perception and emotion, hence a constitutive part of both); nor why there is a rigid distinction between the higher levels and the lower ones. What is of particular value is the reciprocity found between a text and an interpreter's experiential background. Just as the latter is necessary for the text to be experienced/understood, so is the text believed to be able to affect the reader both emotionally and cognitively in the long term. Chapter 3 seeks to prove that there are "structural resemblances" between everyday and story-driven experiences and finds confirmation of that in an analysis of *Hopscotch* by Cortazar.

Part II of the book develops more fully the idea how readers enact various aspects of the narrative world: characters' minds, situations, spaces, and various phenomenal qualities of experience described in stories. Chapter 4 deals with the reader's construal of space and various bodily-perceptual experiences, including intrinsic subjective qualities such as "qualia". Chapter 5, in particular, proposes a typology of engagement with fictional characters themselves, spanning a range of possibilities from what the author calls "attribution" to "enactment". This chapter will be of particular interest to narratologists, providing some new insights into long-going debates and controversies about focalization and modes of thought presentation. Chapter 6 deals with an issue that I think proves problematic for the proposed model for reasons that will become clear in my comments below. It is the case that there are narratives, where the access to a character's mind is filtered through an ironic, or otherwise distinct, point of view, i.e. that of the narrator/author, as is indeed the case with the analyzed text: McEwan's *On Chesil Beach*. This issue complicates the model that Caracciolo has built so far because it introduces the possibility that the reader does not just enact a character's consciousness, but also that of the teller.

Part III centres on embodiment, as an aspect of the enactive paradigm, and seeks to explore the ways in which readers' experiential knowledge of perceptual experience can be used in fiction to anchor a reader's understanding of a text. This is achieved, the author claims, through a process that he curiously terms "fictionalization of the reader's virtual body". This stands for a process where readers are encouraged to tie their perceptual and otherwise embodied abilities ("their virtual body") to a particular character ("a fictionally real body"). Chapter 7 thus explores such a proposed scale of fictionalization

with four specific cases being discussed on the basis of literary examples. Finally, Chapter 8 provides a reading of Nabokov's novel which seeks to prove its strategies for consciousness-enactment, a process complicated in the second part of the novel by the main character's deteriorating state of mind, leading to obsession and "experiential blindness".

One of the criticisms that can be levelled at the book is prefigured by the author himself in the short conclusion: the book feels quite abstract and removed from the natural and relatively easy process of reading stories, even during the brief forays into literary analysis it provides. This need not be a real criticism, however. The book has serious theoretical issues to unravel and can never be a light read. I have already stated that as a viable alternative to classical approaches to text meaning in narratology and elsewhere, the book is an important step forward. My reservations concern certain issues of methodology and theoretical framing, which I will touch upon now.

Firstly, the author uses the word tension in his exposition to describe the reciprocal exchange characteristic of the reading experience, and he is right in the choice of that word. More than once in the course of the book, however, I detected a tension of a different kind. This is the tension resulting from an alleged commitment to enactivism and its premises on the one hand, and a simultaneous rejection of some of those, on the other. The author is aware of this hesitant position, when he says that his insistence that language and therefore also narrative are both inherently representational, is likely to "raise a few eyebrows" (9). It is fair to say that it does, indeed, for this particular reader. It has been perhaps the case that, given the relative youth of the enactive paradigm, the main preoccupations of the approach have been harnessed toward non-linguistic interactive experience, although linguistic activities are listed among other forms of participatory sense-making as far back as 2007 (De Jaegher and Di Paolo). At the same time, work in cognitive linguistics based on embodiment, which represents a platform for arguing the premise of experientiality for the book under review, has been criticised for reducing the operative notion of experience to the functional role played by impersonal sensory processing, neural activations, and motor schemas (Jensen and Cuffari). Similarly, in linguistic circles there have been views that reject the accepted understanding of language as a system of abstract symbols and rules that get transmitted and decoded among individuals, and argue that it falls short of accounting for the interactive nature of language use, or "linguaging" (Linell). The operative notion of representation that Caracciolo hangs on to is therefore difficult to situate alongside the interactional, reader-dependent process of experiencing that he also advocates for narrative understanding. While he maintains that in language-based cognition, representation and experience typically co-exist, a more recent enactivist description of language states that, "linguaging is a way of living" for social creatures like ourselves (Cuffari, Di Paolo, De Jaegher). I take this to mean a largely non-representational, embodied, interpretive interacting, a form of "doing", not decoding, which mental representations inevitably entail.

My second reservation follows up from the first. There is in the book another detectable tension between aspects of the analytic philosophy used for explanatory purposes and the main framework of enactivism. The book makes extensive use of folk psychology and simulation theory in relation to narrative. Limited by space here, I will say only that the general stance in folk psychology mistakenly treats people as externally perceived objects (things), and subsequently infers hidden intentions from observed behaviour. Folk psychology provides therefore a spectatorial account of how we understand other people, and by implication fictional characters. By emphasizing the simulation of charac-

ters that the reader supposedly undertakes, the author thus plays down the dialogic nature of interacting in his account of experientiality. Degrees of simulating a character's experiences are dependent on the text's ability to maintain explicit textual and cognitive traces of the inner life, and not just the perceptual experience, of a given character. This brings me to my final point of reservation in this review.

It concerns the issue of whose experience and knowledge (perceptual and otherwise) the reader ultimately enacts when reading a fictional story. As already mentioned, when discussing *On Chesil Beach*, Caracciolo is faced with an apparent difficulty to reconcile the two very different accounts of what happens on the wedding night of the two main characters. While right in his judgement that the novel stages the tragic failure of the two protagonists to understand each other, the reader's understanding of that very fact is shaped by enacting the position of the narrator, who takes turns in rendering the experience of both characters. Caracciolo describes the teller's role as that of a "puppeteer", but my point here is that there is a place for this particular role in every narrative: this is the place of the narrator. As I have argued along similar lines, stories can be understood as processes of patterned interaction in a participatory sense-making between essentially two participants: a reader and a teller (Popova). Every narrative has a narrator, whether explicitly named or not as part of the described world. This to some extent imaginary participant is not just a linguistic effect, but a manifestation of the irreducibly intersubjective nature of human minds. It is also a necessary condition of what defines narrative. As Caracciolo's own example shows, the experiential position only, the view from inside of each one of the characters, is not sufficient for making sense of this particular story, as well as many others. The irreplaceable role of narrative is to see, to feel, to enact different perspectives, to experience how things may feel from one point of view, and how they may change when experienced from another. I think the author is aware of this problem, when he states in his conclusion that looking outside of contexts of internal focalization, which are mainly the literary texts he uses in the book, can complicate the picture that he presents. Despite these reservations, the present book remains an extremely valuable, knowledgeable, and interesting contribution to a new field of research that represents the transdisciplinary synthesis of the work of the future.

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