



***A Passion for Specificity:
Confronting Inner Experience in Literature and Science***

Marco Caracciolo and Russell T. Hurlburt

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Literary scholar Marco Caracciolo engages inner experience expert Russ Hurlburt in a personal, no-holds-barred yet constructive confrontation that advances the understanding of presuppositions, experience, literature, and consciousness.

Overview

Russ Hurlburt is recognized around the world as a pioneer of the exploration of inner experience. He was the first to use “beepers” to probe thoughts, feelings, and sensations and is the author of five books on introspective methods and their results. His work was featured in a *New York Times* article (http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/22/health/22prof.html?_r=2&) and is known for its innovative interdisciplinarity. For example, his book-length debate with philosopher Eric Schwitzgebel (Hurlburt and Schwitzgebel: *Describing Pristine Experience? Proponent Meets Skeptic*, MIT Press, 2007) gathered broad interest, including an entire special issue of *Journal of Consciousness Studies* (2011) devoted to reactions to the book (http://www.imprint.co.uk/jcs_18_1.html). Commentators noted the authors’ creatively confrontational approach and the clarity of their discussion of topics in consciousness science.

A Passion for Specificity: Confronting Inner Experience in Literature and Science is an advance on the Hurlburt and Schwitzgebel cross-disciplinary debate model, this time between Russ and literary scholar Marco Caracciolo. It begins innocently enough: Marco emails Russ, saying that he has read about Russ’s beeper method and is seeking advice about applying it in his own research on literature’s capacity to evoke experiences. Russ responds with a longish list of what he thinks are serious shortcomings in Marco’s proposed method, expecting that to be the end of it. However, Marco responds with comments and concerns of his own, and that spawns an analytical yet increasingly intimate email conversation about issues central to psychology, literature, philosophy, and consciousness science. Grounding their discussion in concrete examples of experience, Marco and Russ examine the differences between experience as conveyed in literature and experience as apprehended through Russ’s scientific method. Can experiences be shared? How much do language and metaphor shape experiential reports? Where is the dividing line between a humanistic and a scientific approach to experience? Russ and Marco demonstrate that those are necessarily personal issues, and they don’t flinch—they relentlessly examine whether Marco’s presuppositions distort his understanding of reading experiences and whether Russ’s attachment to the method he invented causes him to take an overly narrow view of experience. Delving ever more personally, they aim Russ’s beeper at Marco’s own experiences, an exercise that puts Marco’s presuppositions to the test and leads him to discover things about experience (his own and literature’s) that he had thought impossible.

The book, with its personal revelations, unexpected twists, and confrontational style, reads more like an epistolary novel than a scholarly monograph, but it is a serious exploration of ideas at the heart of literature and science. It is a thoughtful attempt at advancing the emerging field of the “cognitive humanities,” clarifying a number of core issues in the cross-pollination of literature, psychology, philosophy, and consciousness science. It is also

methodologically important, demonstrating the value of uncompromising specificity and dialog to interdisciplinary collaboration.

Participating vicariously in the confrontations between Russ and Marco makes this book a page turner, which is unusual for a book aimed at literary scholars, philosophers, psychologists, consciousness scientists, and their students. Readers will emerge with a substantially deepened appreciation for scientific and literary accounts of experience and will discover that Russ's painstaking descriptions of moments of experience can have the same poetic quality as the literary experimentations of Virginia Woolf or James Joyce.

Chapter summaries

First Part: Preliminaries

Front: **Messages to the reader.**

Marco and Russ describe their involvement in this project.

Chapter I: **In which Marco asks Russ about reading, but he responds about presuppositions.**

Marco plans a study of literary reading and wants to use Russ's Descriptive Experience Sampling (DES) method. He emails Russ, asking for advice. Russ points out the shortcomings of Marco's study and discusses the difficulties involved in investigating experience, particularly the importance of bracketing presuppositions.

Chapter II: **Russ performs a small study that surprises Marco.**

To give concreteness to the ideas of the previous chapter, Russ runs a pilot study where two participants (Alex and Lynn) are beeped while reading Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*; then their beeped experiences are examined through Russ's DES. Russ concludes that Alex and Lynn's experiences are strikingly different from one another. Marco is surprised and resists that conclusion—Alex could not possibly have the kind of experiences that Russ claims, so Alex must not have been paying attention when he was supposed to be reading.

Chapter III: **Russ presumes to identify Marco's presuppositions.**

Russ suggests that Marco's surprise at Alex's experiences reflects Marco's presuppositions about what reading narrative "must" be like. Marco counters that, while Russ may be right, not all experiences are necessarily relevant to the scholarly study of literary reading. Only experiences that are directed *at* the narrative—its contents and/or its style—tell us something about our engagement with literature. (Throughout, Alex's and Lynn's experiences serve as concretely specific instances in a more general conversation about presuppositions.)

Chapter IV: **Marco's questionnaire, and a "boot-like" sentence.**

Marco asks Alex and Lynn to fill out a questionnaire on their responses to Kafka's story. The results suggest that Alex *was* paying attention, which deepens Marco's perplexity. In the ensuing exchange, Marco and Russ draw the distinction between "pristine experience" (the conscious experience to

which one has direct, immediate access) and “broad experience” (general characterizations about longstanding patterns of experience).

Chapter V: Contrasting broad experience and pristine experience, with Amsterdam as an example.

Marco and Russ sharpen the distinction between pristine and broad experience. Russ is skeptical of broad-experience phrases such as “experience of Amsterdam” or “reading experience” because—he argues—using them gives the (unwarranted) appearance of shared understanding. Marco thinks that Russ’s view is predicated on a narrow understanding of experience; Marco defends the importance of studying how people reflect on, remember, and generalize about literary narratives.

Chapter VI: In which Marco sends Russ his paper on the experience of reading McCarthy’s *The Road*; Russ hesitates but then critiques it.

To illustrate the importance of broad experience, Marco sends Russ an article Marco has written about McCarthy’s novel *The Road*. That article uses online commentaries on this text as a window onto readers’ experiential responses and judgments. Russ hesitates, but then points out what he sees as major flaws in Marco’s method. The discussion circles back to the question of presuppositions; for Russ, the only experience that can be studied reliably is *pristine* experience.

Second Part: Phenomena

Chapter VII: Phenomena and how to explore them.

Marco and Russ agree that the notion of “phenomenon” is at the heart of their interchanges. For Russ, broad experience is not a phenomenon. For Marco, pristine experience as is depicted by Russ’s method places too much emphasis on experiential details, which results in distortions insofar as experiential differences across people are magnified. Russ defends his method against this and other objections.

Chapter VIII: In which Marco rankles at Russ’s emphasis on delusion, and they discuss the existence of experience.

Russ’s findings suggest that people misunderstand one another all the time, because they operate on an assumption of experiential similarity whereas their experiences can be dramatically different. Marco and Russ explore the implications of this idea.

Chapter IX: *Great Expectations* and geniuses reveal something about knowing others’ experience.

Russ and Marco look into the differences between a scientific and a humanistic approach to experience and whether those differences map onto the distinction between pristine and broad experience. Russ argues against clear-cut dichotomies between science and humanistic inquiry, explaining that a mature science of experience would yield insights that are equally useful (and urgent) in the mind sciences and in literary studies. Russ claims that Charles Dickens misrepresents a child’s consciousness in *Great*

Expectations; readers don't notice because Dickens's account is plausible, even if not true.

Chapter X: Pristine experience, broad experience, presuppositions, and tendencies; Russ challenges James Joyce.

Presuppositions and tendencies, with DES examples. Marco and Russ examine a passage in James Joyce's *The Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, commenting on Joyce's literary technique—and the extent to which that text can be considered an “effective” portrayal of the young protagonist's mind. As with *Great Expectations* in Chapter IX, Russ claims that Joyce misrepresents Stephen Dedalus's consciousness. That discussion deepens the distinction between pristine and broad experience.

Chapter XI: On the adulteration of pristine experience.

Marco and Russ continue to clarify the distinction between pristine and broad experience. Does pristine experience exist independently of language and culture, or is it informed by them? What is the difference between presuppositions and tendencies, and what role do they play in experience?

Chapter XII: Phenomena, adulteration, apples, and turkey.

Russ identifies three conceptual foci in their controversy surrounding pristine experience: the question of phenomena; whether pristine experience is as “unadulterated” as Russ claims it to be; and the extent to which pristine experience is shaped by language.

Chapter XIII: Pristine experience : broad experience :: phenomena : not phenomena.

Marco attempts to extend Russ's categories to broad experience. Russ replies that broad experience is—in B. F. Skinner's term—a “mentalism,” or a reference to a putative internal state that may keep us from understanding what experience really is. They discuss two concrete examples from Russ's DES work.

Chapter XIV: Phenomena, mental states, judgments, and hunger.

Russ uses Marco's own remarks as another example of the distinction between pristine and broad experience. Russ and Marco work towards a definition of broad experience; Russ explains why DES is important, why pristine experience should be taken more seriously in academic debates, why the personal is essential in science. Russ suggests that Marco wear the DES beeper: Marco's own experiences will be the crucible in which the distinction between pristine experience and broad experience might emerge clarified.

Third Part: Personal

Chapter XV: Getting even more personal.

Marco and Russ wrap up the conceptual discussion of phenomena, pristine and broad experience. Marco and Russ agree that it's time to move from the conceptual to the personal: Russ sends Marco a beeper so that he may see for himself how DES works, and what kind of findings it generates.

Chapter XVI: Similarity and familiarity, scams, and the fight to the death.

While waiting for the beeper to arrive at destination, Russ and Marco revisit the question of experiential *differences* across people, and whether this is in itself a presupposition built into the DES method. Russ opposes that idea, arguing that DES interviews start off with a level playing field: they are neither biased towards similarity nor dissimilarity.

Chapter XVII: Marco wears the beeper.

Marco responds to Russ's last comments, partly agreeing with him, but he proposes to bracket the theoretical discussion for the duration of his DES sampling, so that that discussion doesn't interfere with the sampling itself.

Chapter XVIII: Ultimately personal: Twenty-four moments of Marco's pristine experience.

Marco wears the DES beeper for six sampling days. Russ interviews Marco by Skype at the end of each day. This procedure produces descriptions of 24 moments of Marco's pristine experience. The complete audio of these interviews will be made available on the Internet. Marco is very surprised at some of his own samples, which are eerily reminiscent of experiential characteristics he had previously thought impossible.

Chapter XIX: A very small quibble on wording.

Marco proposes a few minor corrections to Russ's descriptions, but on the whole he concurs that they are of very high fidelity. He then sends Russ some notes about his personal reactions to the sampling.

Chapter XX: Salient characteristics of Marco's experience as characterized by Russ.

With Marco's approval, Russ reviews the samples and describes the salient characteristics of Marco's experience. These include the prominence of sensory awareness and the infrequency of verbal thinking, which occurred only when Marco was reading. Marco is surprised by both of these characteristics of himself.

Chapter XXI: Two more quibbles on wording.

Marco comments on Russ's descriptions, objecting to one portion of Russ's description of Marco's unusual experience of a "scanning" rectangle while reading. Russ notes a discrepancy in Marco's account and suggests that Marco's misrepresentation is an unnoticed product of Marco's presuppositions, particularly how people can be trapped by their own words. This is taken as evidence of Sherlock Holmes's dictum that "Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts."

Fourth Part: Clarifications

Chapter XXII: Where Russ transitions back to the general.

Building on Marco's experience samples, Russ transitions back to the general discussion. The DES method is again under scrutiny, but from a

different perspective: Russ responds to Marco's objections about the practical limitations of his method, and about its relationship with previous accounts of experience (for instance, the phenomenological tradition in philosophy).

Chapter XXIII: Feeling hooks inside one's chest; metaphor and experience.

Commenting on a passage from Ian McEwan's novel *Saturday*, Russ and Marco bring into focus Russ's notion of "unsymbolized thinking." They explore the relationship between metaphor and experience. DES participants, including Marco, frequently resort to creative metaphors in trying to describe their experiences. What exactly is the role—and significance—of these metaphors? As the result of his own DES sampling, Marco changes his mind about an important feature of pristine experience.

Chapter XXIV: Metaphor tables.

Marco and Russ try to systematize their insights into metaphor and experience. They discuss a series of distinctions between metaphor as a purely linguistic phenomenon and metaphor as it emerges in pristine experience.

Chapter XXV: Retrospective prospections.

Marco talks about his expectations *before* the sampling and what he discovered through it. Russ notes a discrepancy in Marco's account, suggesting that it's an unconscious product of Marco's presuppositions. They use Marco's lapse to sharpen the understanding of the nature of presuppositions and consider their ramifications for any method that seeks to explore experience.

Chapter XXVI: In lieu of a conclusion.

Russ and Marco decide to turn their conversation into a book. They lay out the principles on which their dialog has been constructed: a commitment to clarity and intersubjective understanding; an emphasis on concrete examples; an acceptance of the inherently personal nature of the conversation.

Brief Authors' Bios

Marco Caracciolo is a postdoctoral researcher at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (Germany). He is mainly interested in phenomenological approaches to literature and cognitive narrative theory. He is the author of *The Experientiality of Narrative: An Enactivist Approach* (2014, De Gruyter) and *Strange Narrators in Contemporary Fiction: Explorations in Readers' Engagement with Characters* (2016, University of Nebraska Press).

Russ Hurlburt is professor of psychology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He is widely regarded as one of the world's leading practitioners of experience sampling; he invented the random beeper and was the first to use beepers in psychological investigations (1974). He has written five books about inner experience, most recently *Investigating Pristine Inner Experience: Moments of Truth* (2011, Cambridge) and *Describing Inner Experience? Proponent Meets Skeptic* (2007, MIT, with Eric Schwitzgebel).