

Consolidation out of Diversification in Narratology

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Abstract

Although the field of narratology is increasingly diversified with the appearance of various new approaches and new models, it has more elements of consolidation than the picture appears to be. I will discuss three aspects of consolidation: (1) how postclassical narratologies consolidate classical narrative poetics; (2) how the cognitive approach to unreliability consolidates the rhetorical criterion of unreliability and, moreover, how the rhetorical approach consolidates the cognitive concern with individual readers; and (3) how the Chinese classification of modes of discourse presentation consolidates its Western counterpart.

Keywords

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In the field of narratology, we have increasing diversification, with one new approach or model appearing after another. We now have the contrast between classical narratology and various postclassical narratologies, that between the rhetorical approach to unreliability and the cognitive approach to unreliability, or that between western model of discourse presentation and Chinese model of discourse presentation, among many other contrasts. In such binary contrasts, the latter presents a challenge or even some degree of subversion to the former. But behind the challenge or subversion, there may be found the consolidation by the latter of some of the former's fundamental principles, and, in some cases, vice versa.

1. Consolidating Classical Narrative Poetics

Since the 1980s, classical narratology has been criticized for decontextualization and various contextualized postclassical narratologies have emerged. Many critics take the contextualized approaches to be superior replacements of the classical. This is undoubtedly true in terms of narratological criticism which requires contextualization. But classical poetic distinctions, such as that among heterodiegetic, homodiegetic and hypodiegetic narration, or that among direct discourse, indirect discourse and free indirect discourse, or that among various modes of focalization, have often been used in postclassical narratologies. Moreover, the latter continuously comes up with fundamentally decontextualized narratological distinctions in what appear to be or what are claimed to be 'contextualized' theoretical models. Let's take feminist narratology as an example. Feminist narratologists criticize structuralist narratology for being gender-blind and decontextualized. They try to build up a feminist poetics, but the narratological distinctions they make are likewise decontextualized, even in the case of 'sex'. In "Sexing the Narrative", Susan Lanser writes:

Written on the body leads me to recognize that sex is a common if not constant element of narrative *so long as we include its absence as a narratological variable*. Such an inclusion allows us to make some very simple formal observations about any narrative: that the sex of its narrator is or is not marked and, if marked, is marked male or female, or shifts between the two. [...] One might well classify heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narratives according to their marking or non-marking of sex and according to the ways in which sex gets marked: overtly, through explicit designation, or covertly, through conventional aspects of gender that suggest but do not prove sex. (87)

This theoretical distinction of ‘sex’ is as formal and decontextualized as classical structural distinctions. In the case that the narrator’s sex is unmarked or marked only covertly, the readers’ inference of the narrator’s sex may vary from individual to individual or from context to context, but the theoretical distinction between ‘marked’ and ‘unmarked’ or between ‘covertness’ and ‘overtness’ has to be made in an abstract and decontextualized way. This case well shows that the classification of narratological structures defies, by nature, contextualization or requires, by nature, leaving aside the consideration of sociohistorical contexts (Shen, “Why Contextual”). Behind the contrast between classical narratology and postclassical narratologies, we have the consolidation of classical narrative poetics by postclassical narratologies in the following two ways: (1) applying classical poetic distinctions in contextualized narratological criticism, which helps classical poetics to gain current relevance; and (2) developing narrative poetics by continuing to come up with decontextualized narratological distinctions.

2. Cognitive and Rhetorical Approaches to Unreliability: Mutual Consolidation

The cognitive approach to unreliability arose as a reaction to the rhetorical approach. Many narratologists take the two approaches to be in conflict with each other and they think that the cognitive should replace the rhetorical. Bruno Zerweck, for example, says: «Within the theory of unreliable narration such a cognitive turn represents a first paradigm shift. It allows a radical rethinking of the whole notion of narrative unreliability. Instead of relying on the device of the implied author and a text-centered analysis of unreliable narration, narrative unreliability can be reconceptualized in the context of frame theory and of readers’ cognitive strategies» (151).

Significantly, when cognitive critics make their own analysis of narratorial unreliability, they themselves often have recourse to the methods of the rhetorical approach. In Yacobi’s foundational essay for the reader-oriented approach (“Fictional Reliability”), for instance, we see an implicit shift from the cognitive to the rhetorical stance. After expounding the five reader-oriented mechanisms of integration, Yacobi narrows down to the issue of unreliability. She says:

To construct a hypothesis as to the unreliability of the narrator is then necessarily to assume the existence of an implied (and by definition reliable) author who manipulates his creature for his own purposes. However, the invariability of this rule must not blind us to the wide variations, from work to work and from passage to passage within the same work, in all that concerns the modalities of the unreliable source(s) of narration vis-à-vis authorial communication. (123)

Although context is taken into account, it is only textual context, and the implied author still functions as the criterion for measuring narratorial unreliability («vis-à-vis authorial communication»), just like in the rhetorical approach.

On the whole, when cognitive narratologists are concerned with actual readers' different interpretations of narratorial unreliability, they tend to give up the authorial yardstick and claim that all interpretations are equally valid, but when they are discussing unreliability from their own point of view, they often explicitly or implicitly shift to the rhetorical stance. Ansgar Nünning, another representative of the cognitive branch, has more recently adopted a synthetic «cognitive-rhetorical» approach, and he asks the following questions: «What textual and contextual signals suggest to the reader that the narrator's reliability may be suspect? How does an implied author (as redefined by Phelan) manage to *furnish* the narrator's discourse and the text *with clues* that *allow* the critic to recognize an unreliable narrator when he or she sees one?» (101, italics added). These questions consolidate the rhetorical concern with unreliability as encoded by the implied author for the implied reader (or readers who try to enter that position) to perceive.

On the rhetorical side, influenced by Peter J. Rabinowitz's distinction among different types of audience ("Truth in Fiction"), many rhetorical critics have paid attention to the different interpretations of actual readers. Although the rhetorical critics have a different purpose in mind, that is, to show how the personal experiences and social positioning of actual readers stand in the way of their entering the position of the authorial audience/implied reader, their concern with actual readers' divergent interpretations implicitly function to consolidate the cognitive concern with the pragmatic effects of textual phenomena.

In Yacobi's more recent essay "Authorial Rhetoric, Narratorial (Un)reliability, Divergent Readings" we see the consolidation both of the rhetorical criterion of unreliability and of the cognitive concern with actual readers. Yacobi's analysis shows that, in order to grasp the «authorial rhetoric», we must try to enter the position of the authorial audience/implied reader so as to arrive at the authorial reading. By contrast, «divergent readings» are attributable to the differences among actual readers and various contexts. So long as a literary narrative is regarded, in Yacobi's words, as «an act of communication» that cannot be defined without reference to «an implied (and by definition reliable) author who manipulates his creature for his own purposes», cognitive critics, like rhetorical critics, still stick to the author rather than shift to actual readers as the yardstick of narratorial unreliability. But the two approaches do complement each other in terms of focus of attention: the rhetorical approach focuses on the communication between the implied author and the authorial audience (readers who try to enter that position) and the cognitive tends to focus on the difference in reading strategy, conceptual framework or cultural/historical context that underlies the divergent readings of actual readers. The point is that there is no real conflict but only essential complementarity between the two approaches.

3. Consolidating Western Modes of Discourse Presentation

The presentation of character's speech and thought has attracted a lot of attention in the field of narratology over the past few decades. Numerous classifications of modes of discourse presentation have appeared. Although the classifications made by Western scholars differ in various aspects, insofar as the distinction between (free) direct and

(free) indirect modes are concerned, the criteria of differentiation invariably include tense, personal pronoun, and subordination.

In Chinese narrative fiction, not only there exist all the modes appearing in Western narrative fiction, but also there are found various modes lying between or outside Western classifications. Chinese is free from tense markers, and so there is no 'backshift' in tense when the mode changes from a direct to an indirect one, nor is the subordinating conjunction *that* or capitalization used. Moreover, Chinese is characterized by frequent subject and determiner omission, and the personal pronoun is sometimes left out in a character's discourse. As a result, there may be no perceivable linguistic difference between (free) direct discourse and (free) indirect discourse or even narratorial statement. I have designated such peculiarly Chinese modes as «blends» ("Language Peculiarities"). In the finite clauses of a Chinese character's discourse, at least three types of blend can be found: the blend of free indirect discourse and free direct discourse, the blend of indirect discourse and free direct discourse (with the reporting clause but without inverted commas), and the blend of narrative report/free indirect discourse/free direct discourse.

The peculiarities of Chinese finite blends can be clearly seen in the process of translation. In Chinese narrative fiction, in the case of a finite blend, the reported speech is integrated into the narration while being free from positive features of the narrator's interference (i.e., can be quoted) since it can be taken to be both in the direct and the indirect mode. In translating into a Western language, however, the absent tense indicators have to be supplied by the translator. Moreover, the omitted personal pronouns in the positions of grammatical subject, object or determiner have to be spelled out in the Western language either as the first/second person (hence away from the narrator's reporting voice) or the third-person (possibly away from the character's voice). That is to say, while both voices are potentially contained in the Chinese original by virtue of being indistinguishable in terms of formal linguistic criteria, one voice has to be favored at the expense of the other in the translation into a Western language.

The existence of the peculiarly Chinese blends presents a challenge to Western narrative poetics. But the classification of Chinese blends is based on the Western distinction between the (free) direct mode and the (free) indirect mode, and so it essentially functions to consolidate the Western way of classification. After all, the Western discourse presentation framework can account for most cases of discourse presentation in Chinese narratives, and Chinese blends emerge only when quotation marks, personal pronouns etc. are absent. Of course, it is not always helpful to view Chinese narrative structures in terms of Western theoretical frameworks. While treating the peculiarly Chinese discourse modes as blends of existing modes in the Western classification seems right and proper, in some other cases, such as plot organization in classical Chinese narratives, we need to see Chinese structures more in their own right (Yang), since such structures may be deeply rooted in Chinese philosophy, Chinese culture and the Chinese narrative tradition and may be fundamentally different from their Western counterparts.

As the above discussion indicates, although the field of narratology is increasingly diversified with the emergence of new approaches, new theoretical models, and stronger national consciousness, there is increasing consolidation behind the diversification. In the future, we will surely have continuous narratological branching, but we will also undoubtedly have more consolidation out of diversification in this field.

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