

From Theoretical Revelation to Theoretical Innovation: An Interview with SHEN Dan

Ning Yizhong & SHEN Dan

Abstract: As we can see from Jiang Hong's introduction in the Guest Editor's Column, SHEN Dan or Dan Shen in English is an internationally famous scholar and one of the most influential and respected scholars in the humanities in China. Her research spans several fields, including narrative studies, stylistics, and translation studies. This interview singles out some important issues to discuss. Shen first shares her insights into the following issues: the essential relation between classical narratology and post classical narratologies, the contextual potential of the second and third generations of the Chicago School (rhetorical narrative theory), the complementary relation between narratology and stylistics, and Derrida's misrepresentation of Saussure's theory of the language system. Then Shen goes on to explicate why she created "covert progression" and "dual narrative dynamics" and how these original theoretical concepts and models can extend and transform narrative studies, stylistics, and translation studies.

Keywords: theoretical revelation; theoretical innovation; essential relationship; true meaning; dual narrative dynamics

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标题: 从理论揭示到理论创新：申丹访谈

内容摘要: 从本栏目特邀主编姜红的介绍可以看到，申丹教授是国际著名学者，也是中国人文学科领域学术地位最高和最有影响力的学者之一。她的研究兴趣广泛，包括叙事研究、文体学、翻译学等。本次采访选择了一些重要问题进行讨论。申丹首先分享了自己对相关理论的真正内涵和流派之间本质关系的揭示，包括经典叙事学与后经典叙事学之间的本质关系、芝加哥学派第二代和第三代（即修辞性叙事）理论中的语境化潜能、叙事学与文体学之

间的互补性, 以及德里达如何误解了索绪尔关于语言系统的理论。然后她阐述了为何会首创“隐性进程”和“双重叙事进程”的理论, 以及她的原创理论能如何拓展和革新叙事研究、文体学和翻译学。

关键词: 理论揭示; 理论创新; 本质关系; 实质内涵; 双重叙事进程

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Ning Yizhong (hereafter Ning for short): Professor SHEN Dan, we know that your research covers a wide range, including narrative theory and criticism, literary theory, stylistics, and translation studies. But your main interest for the past two or three decades is narrative theory and criticism. Would you please say something about your studies in general?

SHEN Dan: When I was doing my research degrees at Edinburgh University, I was mainly engaged in studying linguistics, stylistics, and translation studies. In writing my PhD dissertation, I found that stylistics and narratology were very much complementary to each other, and I began to take interest in narratology, and by extension, in literary studies. No matter in what field and whether in theory or in practice, we need to “penetrate the phenomenon to grasp the essence.” As you say, I’ve been mainly doing narratology since the 1990s, and so we can start with this field.

Revealing the Essential Relation Between Classical and Postclassical Narratologies

Ning: In the field of narratology, you have revealed various kinds of true meaning and essential relationship, such as the nature of unnatural narratives,¹ the relation among narrative, reality and narrator as construct,² the fact that transgressions of modes of focalization are a matter of breaking conventional barriers,³ the essential relationship between story and discourse,⁴ and that between rhetorical and cognitive

1 See Dan Shen, “What are Unnatural Narratives? What are Unnatural Elements?” *Style* 4 (2016): 483-489.

2 See Dan Shen, “What are Unnatural Narratives? What are Unnatural Elements?” *Style* 4 (2016): 483-489.

3 See Dan Shen, “Breaking Conventional Barriers: Transgressions of Modes of Focalization,” *New Perspectives on Narrative Perspective*, edited by Willie van Peer and Seymour Chatman, New York: SUNY Press, 2001, 159-172.

4 See Dan Shen, “Defense and Challenge: Reflections on the Relation Between Story and Discourse,” *Narrative* 3 (2002): 222-243.

approaches to unreliability,¹ among other things. You've also paid much attention to the relation between classical and post-classical narratologies. Would you like to comment on this issue?

SHEN Dan: At the turn of the century, there emerged many stories of narratological evolution, either from structuralist narratology to poststructuralist narratology, or from structuralist narratology to cultural and historical narratology, or from a strictly formalist poetics to a contextualist narratology, or from traditional narratology to postmodern narrative theory, with the term “narratology” itself seen as obsolete. Such stories vary but one idea remains constant: the decontextualized formal investigation of generic structures and techniques had been and should be abandoned, and narratologists should always take contexts into consideration.

But I found that in examining respectively narratological theorizing and narratological criticism—often occurring since the late 1980s in the same narratological study—a different picture emerges. In terms of narratological criticism, the picture is indeed one of evolution from a decontextualized investigation subject to formalist limitations to a more valid and fuller investigation that takes into account contexts and readers. As regards narratological theorizing, however, the picture is quite different. Postclassical or contextual narratologies have greatly enriched narratological theorizing in various ways, but I found that when the investigation is concerned with the classification of generic structures and generic functions, there is actually neither room nor need for the consideration of varied specific contexts. But of course, when investigating the function of a given structure used in a particular text, we need to take into account the socio-historical context in which the text was created and interpreted. In light of this, the criticism of structuralist narratology for decontextualization is unjustified insofar as narrative grammar or narrative poetics is concerned.

I published an essay “Why Contextual and Formal Narratologies Need Each Other” (2005) to argue that the relation between classical and postclassical narratologies is not one of replacement, but one of mutual nourishment. The essay reveals that within and beyond contextualists' investigations marked by dual emphasis on poetics and criticism, there exists an unacknowledged triple dialogical relationship: first, the mutually-benefiting relationship between their new formal theorizing and their contextual criticism; in other words, they develop new formal tools that enable new kinds of contextualized interpretations even as those interpretations sharpen those tools; secondly, the mutually-benefiting relationship between their new contributions to formal narrative poetics and classical narratology; in other words, their theoretical

¹ See Dan Shen, “Unreliability,” *Handbook of Narratology*, 2nd edition, edited by Peter Huhn et. al, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014, 896-909.

contributions both depend upon and expand classical narrative poetics; and thirdly, the mutually-benefiting relationship between classical narrative poetics and contextualized narratological criticism, the former providing technical tools for the latter, which in turn helps the former to gain current relevance.

Ning: I quite agree with you about the respective functions of structuralist narratology and contextual narratologies and about their actually complementary relationship, rather than the latter replacing the former. Your judgement was made at the turn of the century, and it proves to be correct. Models and concepts of classical narratology remain very useful tools, and postclassical narratologists have often come up with new structural classifications in contextualized critical practices, which helps enrich and extend decontextualized narrative “grammar” or “poetics.”

SHEN Dan: Yes, my view about the relation between classical and post-classical narratologies seems to have a role to play even today. In the autumn of 2017, De Gruyter published *Emerging Vectors of Narratology*, and my essay “‘Contextualized Poetics’ and Contextualized Rhetoric: Consolidation or Subversion?” is positioned right after the preface of the volume. The essay centers around the idea that contextualized post-classical narratologies actually have consolidated rather than subverted classical narrative poetics.

Interestingly, a comparison between the situation in the West and in China may shed light on the issue. Classical narrative poetics started thriving in China from the late 1980s when it was claimed by some to be “dead” in the West. The contrastive rise and fall of classical narrative poetics during the same period are closely associated with the divergent academic milieus in different countries. While formalist approaches more or less dominated the Western academic field for decades until deconstructive, sociocultural, and political criticism gained increasing momentum from the 1980s, China witnessed several decades of sociological and political criticism until the late 1970s. In the 1980s and 1990s, classical narratology and stylistics presented great appeal to Chinese scholars, who, after decades of socio-political criticism, shifted attention to formal and aesthetic studies. The beginning of the 21st century has witnessed the harmonious coexistence and mutual promotion between classical exploration of narrative poetics and postclassical contextualized narrative criticism in China.

Revealing the Contextual Potential of Contemporary American Rhetorical Narrative Theory

Ning: In the field of narrative studies, you have paid much attention to contempo-

rary rhetorical narrative theory pertaining to the American Chicago School. Would you talk about that?

SHEN Dan: Surely, contemporary American rhetorical narrative theory has been constructed and developed by the second and third generations of the Chicago School. The first generation, as represented by Ronald Crane, inherited Aristotle's idea that literature was a matter of imitation and advocated focusing on the work itself, to the neglect of historical context. In the field of narrative studies, it is widely believed that the rhetorical theories of the second and third generations of the Chicago School, like the poetic theories of the first generation, ignore historical context. However, I found that there is actually an essential difference between them: Unlike the poetic theories of the first generation, the rhetorical theories of the second and third generations have the potential for contextualization or historicization, a potential that has remained unseen for various reasons. If we look beyond the surface and come to see this potential, we'll find that contemporary rhetorical narrative theory has achieved a certain balance between form and history. I published the article "Implicit Author, Authorial Audience, and Context: Form and History in Neo-Aristotelian Rhetorical Theory" in the American journal *Narrative* (summer, 2013) to reveal this essential feature of contemporary American rhetorical narrative theory.

Ning: Indeed, that contextualizing potential is generally ignored and it is important for you to reveal it. A core concept of contemporary rhetorical narrative theory is "implied author." The academic circles of both China and other countries regard it as one that is text-oriented and de-contextualized. You, however, hold that this concept essentially contains historical potential. Would you please expound it in more details?

SHEN Dan: As for the concept of the "implied author," it has been misunderstood by many scholars both in the West and in China, and so, first of all, we need to get at what the concept really means. Booth proposed this concept in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) at the height of formalist criticism that very much excluded the consideration of the author. Under enormous pressure, Booth has used a metaphorical expression that the real author "creates" the implied author. What he means is that a person, in the process of writing a literary work, would break away from the usual state of natural relaxation and enter a certain ideal, literary state of writing, a state of what he calls "role playing" (Booth, "Resurrection" 75-78). This metaphor has formed an almost unavoidable pitfall for many narrative theorists. They take it that the so-called "real author" is the writer of the text who, when writing, literally creates the "implied author" as an ontologically distinct entity and that the "implied

author” forms a textual authorial image superior to that of the “real author” who has written the text.¹ Now, everyone will agree that the textual authorial image *is and can only be* the image of the person who has written the text. Then, how is it possible that the textual image of the writer is superior to the writer? The logical way of thinking is consistently offered by Booth sometimes behind his metaphorical language of “creation”: A person can behave differently on different occasions, and can become better in the process of writing a text so that the textual image of the writer will be superior to the image of the person in everyday life.²

With the clarification of the “implied author,” we can now go ahead to discuss its contextual potential. A comparison between two statements respectively made by Crane and Booth may shed light on the issue. In his famous essay “The Concept of Plot and the Plot of Tom Jones,” Crane describes the poetic method of the first generation of the Chicago School as “one which depends on the analytical isolation of works of art, as finished products, from the circumstances and processes of their origin. It is better fitted to explain those effects which would be specifically the same in any other work, of whatever date, that was constructed in accordance with the same combination of artistic principles than those effects which must be attributed to the fact that the work was produced by a given artist” (92). Compare the following observation by Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, “Just as one’s personal letters imply different versions of oneself, depending on the differing relationships with each correspondent and the purpose of each letter, so the writer sets himself out with a different air [the implied author in the process of writing a given text] depending on the needs of particular works” (71). While in Crane’s poetic theory, we lose sight of the writer and only have in view a timeless and autonomous text, in Booth’s rhetorical theory, it is the role-playing writer who forms the focus of attention—the implied author of *a given work* makes his or her textual choices *in a particular manner* according to his or her specific rhetorical purposes and overall textual design.

Since Booth’s distinction between the implied author (whose image is text-based) and the so-called real author (whose image is biography-based) is only a matter of the same person in the writing process versus in daily life, we can consider both the difference and the connection between them. If the implied author’s literary writing is influenced by his experiences in daily life, we need to consider biographical information in order to understand the implied author’s textual choices better. For instance, in the case of Stephan Crane, the implied author’s explicit satire

1 See Dan Shen, “What is the implied author?” *Style* 1 (2011): 80-94.

2 See Dan Shen, “What is the implied author?” *Style* 1 (2011): 81-87.

against romanticized heroics in “War is Kind” and the implied author’s implicit satire against war in “An Episode of War” have much to do with Crane’s going to the front to report on the Greco-Turkish War and the Spanish-American War.¹ In such cases, getting to know the relevant experiences of the “real author” enables us to understand better the implied author’s creation of the textual norms.

Ning: It needs a sharp eye to see Booth’s deep-delved contextual idea in this concept. A further question is, if “implied author” has historicizing potential, can concepts like “implied reader” or “authorial audience” also have such potential?

SHEN Dan: It is widely believed that Booth’s “implied reader” and its synonymous “authorial audience” proposed by Peter J. Rabinowitz (a representative of the third generation of the Chicago School) are concepts marked by decontextualization. But I’ve found that this is not the case. In the poetic theory of the first generation of the neo-Aristotelians as represented by Crane and Sheldon Sacks, “a twentieth-century reader, taking *Tom Jones* from a drugstore rack, could find himself in immediate contact with its moving aesthetic force, that is to say, with the essential meaning and value of the novel” (Rader, “Tom Jones” 49). The case is fundamentally different with the rhetorical theory of the second and third generations of the Chicago School. As I just quoted, in Booth’s view, the implied author of a given text “sets himself out with a different air” “depending on” the relationship with the particular type of reader he has in mind, and Booth designates this particular type of reader as the “implied reader.” Booth quotes Montgomery Belgion’s words to support his rhetorical position: “Only when the moral beliefs of the reader tally exactly with those on which a story is based will the reader have the whole of the emotion which it is potentially able to produce in him” (Booth, *Rhetoric* 118). In the afterword to the second edition of *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (422-424), Booth subscribes to Rabinowitz’s distinction among “authorial audience” (the implied author’s ideal or hypothetical audience, corresponding to Booth’s “implied reader”), “narrative audience,” and “actual audience”—individual readers with different experiences and social-positioning that influence interpretation (Rabinowitz, “Truth” 126-128). Rabinowitz defines the “authorial audience” as unequivocally contextualized: “[T]he author of a novel designs his work rhetorically for a specific hypothetical audience. Like a philosopher, historian, or journalist, he cannot write without making certain assumptions about his readers’ beliefs, knowledge, and familiarity with conventions” (“Truth” 126). The implied author creates the text in history and his or her textu-

¹ See Dan Shen, *Style and Rhetoric of Short Narrative Fiction: Covert Progressions Behind Overt Plots*, New York: Routledge, 2016, 51-69.

al choices are often based on contextual information accessible to readers in that particular sociohistorical period. In such cases, the “authorial audience” (“implied reader”) the implied author writes to is essentially a contextualized or historicized audience. When the implied Fielding was writing *Tom Jones* in eighteenth-century England, he intended the novel for an authorial audience/implied reader with the knowledge of “the latitudinarians and eighteenth-century thought” (Rader, “Tom Jones” 49). When reading *Tom Jones* in twenty-first-century China, we need to take into account the relevant historical information in order to enter the position of Fielding’s authorial audience or implied reader in that socio-cultural context. This is a prerequisite for a successful communication between the implied author and us readers. Seen in this light, the consideration of the historical context in which a text was produced is not only allowed but also required by rhetorical narrative theory. However, this contextual requirement in rhetorical theory has been backgrounded, undeveloped, and very much unacknowledged by many scholars both outside and inside the rhetorical camp.

Revealing the Complementary Relation between Narratology and Stylistics

Ning: Though narrative studies is your principal interest, you started your career doing stylistics, and you have always been attaching importance to interdisciplinary studies between narratology and stylistics. How have you made it?

SHEN Dan: On the surface, the narratological distinction between story and discourse seems to match the stylistic distinction between content and style. “Discourse” refers to how the story is told and “style” to how the content is presented.¹ That is to say, “discourse” and “style” appear to be very much interchangeable, both referring to the level of presentation in contrast with that of content. But a careful examination can lead to the discovery that the superficial similarity conceals an essential difference—“discourse” in narratology and “style” in stylistics, in effect, differ to a great extent from each other, with only a limited amount of overlap between them. Recognizing that difference and the respective limited coverage of “discourse” and “style” leads to the perception of the necessity and the value of synthesizing narratological and stylistic approaches to how literary narratives are presented. Since the 1990s, I’ve devoted much effort to promoting the interface between narratology and stylistics both in China and in the West.

In China, my book *Narratology and Fictional Stylistics: An Interdisciplinary*

¹ See Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978, 9; Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short, *Style in Fiction*, 2nd edition, Harlow: Pearson Education, 2007, 38.

Study (1998) has made considerable impact on the field—it has been cited by more than two-thousand journal essays. Its fourth edition published in 2019 is now being translated into English, though with significant adaptation and updating (Routledge, forthcoming). Internationally, I was invited by James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz to contribute a chapter “What Narratology and Stylistics Can Do for Each Other” to *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, by Michael Burke to contribute a chapter “Stylistics and Narratology” to *The Routledge Handbook of Stylistics*. Besides, Dan McIntyre and Beatrix Busse, the editors of *Language and Style*, invited me to write a chapter for this volume in honor of Mick Short, a chapter that is also marked by an interdisciplinary stylistic-narratological approach.

Ning: Would you specify your work in this respect?

SHEN Dan: I’ve revealed the essential difference between narratology’s “discourse” and stylistics’ “style” behind their superficial similarity, and pointed out the reasons for the actual divergence. A comparison between two discussions respectively of “style” and “discourse” by Michael Toolan may shed light on the issue. In *Language in Literature: An Introduction to Stylistics*, Toolan says, “Stylistics is the study of the language in literature. [...] Stylistics is crucially concerned with excellence of technique” (viii-ix); and in his *Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction*, Toolan observes that “[narratology’s] *discours* roughly denotes all the techniques that authors bring to bear in their varying manner of presentation of the basic story” (11). From the two definitions, we may derive the approximate equation: “Style \approx Language \approx Technique \approx [narratology’s] Discourse.” This equation, however, only shows the surface similarity between “style” and “discourse,” an equation that will turn out to be untenable if we examine what “style” and “discourse” actually refer to. When investigating style, stylisticians, as pointed out by Toolan, focus on why the author has chosen “these word-choices, clause-patterns, rhythms, and intonations, contextual implications [of conversation], cohesive links [among sentences], choices of voice and perspective and transitivity [of clause structure], etc.” (*Language* ix). By contrast, in exploring “discourse” composed of the levels of text and narration, the focus shifts to very different elements: “At the level of text, the teller [author] decides upon and creates a particular sequencing of events, the time/space spent presenting them, the sense of (changing) rhythm and pace in the discourse. Additionally, choices are made as to just how (in what detail, and in what order) the particularity of the various characters is to be presented. [...] At the level of narration, the [structural] relations between the posited narrator and the narrative she tells are probed” (Toolan, *Narrative* 11-12).

Significantly, although both narratology and stylistics are characterized by the interface of literature and linguistics, the former only uses linguistics in a metaphorical way, while the latter applies linguistics literally, rather than metaphorically, to the analysis of literary texts. Thus, narratology's "discourse" mainly covers supra-linguistic structural techniques and stylistics' "style," by contrast, refers to linguistic techniques. Although the same term "rhythm" appears in both observations by Toolan just quoted, it means entirely different things in the two disciplinary contexts. In the stylistic context, "rhythm" is a matter of verbal movement resulting from the features of words (e.g., monosyllabic versus polysyllabic) and their combination (e.g., different meter, different sentence length, or different use of punctuation). By contrast, in the narratological context, "rhythm" refers to narrative movement resulting from the different relations between textual duration and event duration (such as the alternation between, say, detailed scenic presentation and brief summary or ellipsis of events). To investigate fully the art of narrative, it is necessary to take both kinds of techniques—linguistic choices and supra-linguistic—into consideration.

Apart from the contrast between literal and metaphorical usage of linguistics, I've also revealed that the boundary between style and discourse is in part a result of the different ways in which narratology and stylistics relate to poetic analysis. The stylistic analysis of prose fiction is not much different from the stylistic analysis of poetry. Both focus on the use of language, a use manifested in different forms. By contrast, narratological analysis of prose fiction has departed from the poetic analytical tradition, focusing attention on the relation between story events and their rearrangement. In investigating prose fiction, stylisticians have adopted the Prague school's concept of "foregrounding," a concept initially based on the investigation of poetry. Not surprisingly, the concept of "foregrounding," as a matter of psychological prominence due to deviations from ordinary or conventional use of *language*, has not entered the realm of narratology. What figures prominently in narratology is the concept of "anachrony" (Genette 35-36), which takes the form of various kinds of deviation from the causal, chronological sequence of events.¹

Ning: How to further advance the interdisciplinary studies of narratology and stylistics, then?

SHEN Dan: First of all, it is necessary to give more specific definitions of stylistics' "style" and narratology's "discourse." As regards narratives in the verbal medium, it

¹ See Dan Shen, "What Narratology and Stylistics Can Do for Each Other," *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, edited by James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, 139-140.

needs to be pointed out that narrative presentation or “how the story is told” consists of two aspects: one organizational and the other verbal, with a certain amount of overlap in between. Thus, “style” may be defined as “the language aspect of how the story is presented” and accordingly, “stylistic features” will be understood as choices of *verbal* form or *verbal* techniques. On the narratological side, while “discourse” can still be defined as “how the story is presented,” it is necessary to point out that in narratological investigations of “discourse,” attention is focused on the structural organization of story events, leaving aside style or language choices. Accordingly, “narratological features” will be understood as narrative strategies or organizational techniques.

Moreover, in a stylistic book, it would be helpful to draw attention to narratology’s concern with structural strategies and techniques. Similarly, in a narratological book, it would be beneficial to delineate the scope of inquiry for readers, and point out that in order to gain a fuller view of “how the story is presented,” more attention needs to be paid to the writer’s style.

I myself have benefited immensely from combining narratological and stylistic methods in the investigation of narrative fiction. John Pier published a review essay on my work entitled “At the Crossroads of Narratology and Stylistics: A Contribution to the Study of Fictional Narrative,” in which he says, “An accomplished stylistician, [...] Shen approaches narrative analysis through a perceptive and productive synthesis of narratology and stylistics” (112). Pier observes that in contrast with narratologists who preclude questions of style, my interest is to see how narratological features and stylistic features interact and reinforce each other because “a full picture of narrative presentation combines the textual/organizational dimension and the linguistic/stylistic level” (112).

Ning: You have made very clear distinctions between stylistics and narratology, and your suggestion about drawing on both disciplines in literary research is valuable. I want to post a related question: Saussure’s structuralism is the common source for the birth of both narratology and stylistics. You not only concern yourself with structuralism but also with deconstruction. Could you comment on the relationship between the two?

SHEN Dan: In terms of philosophical positions, it is commonly held that Saussure’s emphasis on the relational nature of language in *Course in General Linguistics* lent much force to Derrida’s theory of deconstruction. But I found that Derrida’s drawing on Saussure is marked by misinterpretation. Saussure says, “Although both the signified and the signifier are purely differential and negative when considered

separately, their combination is a positive fact; it is even the sole type of facts that language has, for maintaining the parallelism between the two classes of differences is the distinctive function of the linguistic institution” (1960: 120-121). Saussure unequivocally defines language (not just the signifier separately) as “a system of signs in which the only essential thing is the union of meanings and sound-images” although both the sound-images (signifiers) and the signified concepts are purely differential and “psychological” (15). Regrettably, Derrida and his numerous followers have only paid attention to Saussure’s view when seeing the signifier “separately” and have completely overlooked the “positive fact” of the “combination” or “union” between the signifier and the signified, a combination based on convention. In effect, Saussure has set much store by the conventional nature of the connection between the signifier and the signified: “The arbitrary nature of the sign explains in turn why the social fact alone can create a linguistic system. The community is necessary if values that owe their existence solely to usage and general acceptance are to be set up; by himself the individual is incapable of fixing a single value” (113). A Western language consists of signs that are in general totally arbitrary, hence by no means positive terms. But we have to be aware that *differences alone cannot generate signification*. In English, “sun” (/sʌn/) can function as a sign not only because of its difference from other signs in sound or “sound-image,” but also because of the conventional union or combination between the sound-image “sun” and the signified concept. Given, for instance, the following sound-images “lun” (/lʌn/), “sul” (/sʌl/) and “qun” (/kwʌn/), although each can be identified by its difference from the others, none of them can function as a sign, because there is no established conventional connection between sound-images and signified concepts.

Saussure in *Course in General Linguistics* has distinguished three arbitrary relations in the formation of language: (1) the arbitrary system of differences among signifiers; (2) the arbitrary system of differences among signifieds (the way that languages cut up meaning into individual signifieds is arbitrary and varies from language to language), and (3) the conventional connection of a given signifier to a given signified. Whether purposefully or unwittingly, when commenting on Saussure’s theory of language in *Positions* and other works, Derrida does not pay any attention to (3), and consequently the connection between (1) and (2) cannot be established for the simple reason that (3) functions as the only and the indispensable link between (1) and (2). Without (3), language becomes a play of signifiers themselves, which cannot be connected to any signifieds or signified, and meaning naturally becomes forever indeterminable.

Derrida’s theory of the sign is a most important premise of deconstruction, a

premise that is in effect ill-grounded. This, however, does not mean that narratologists are not positively influenced by deconstruction. In the post-structuralist era, narratologists have become more realistic and have modified the original tone of objectivity, certainty, or finality.¹ There is no denial that literary meaning is often hard to determine especially in modernist and postmodernist texts. Moreover, readers' interpretations are more or less influenced by personal experiences and sociohistorical positioning among other things. Nevertheless, we still need to acknowledge the union between signifiers and signified concepts, and the fact that not only can authors make structural and verbal choices to convey meaning but also the communication among author, narrator, and reader are usually more or less successful. Indeed, if language were merely a play of signifiers, communication through language would become impossible, and both narratological and stylistics investigations would lose their foundation and become meaningless.

Creating the Theory of Covert Progression and Dual Narrative Dynamics

Ning: Over and above theoretical revelation, in recent years, you've put in much effort in theoretical innovation. You have originated concepts and analytic models like "context-determined irony,"² Overall-Extended Close Reading³. But your most significant innovation lies in putting forward the theory of "covert progression" and "dual narrative dynamics." In China, more than one hundred journal essays have applied this theory of yours to the analysis of novels, short stories, drama, film, and television series. And in the West, your "covert progression" has been included in the glossary of RéNaF as one of the widely-circulated narratological concepts.⁴ At the fifth biennial conference of the European Narratology Network held in Prague in 2017, you were invited to give a keynote speech "How Dual Narrative Movements Can Transform and Extend Narratology," a keynote that was very well received. Most impressively, the American journal *Style* devoted its spring, 2021 issue to the discussion of your target essay "Covert Progression and Dual Narrative Dynamics." The special issue carries sixteen responses to your target essay by scholars—most of them leading or famous figures—from different parts of the world, followed by your rejoinder "Debating and Extending a 'Covert Progression' and Dual Dynamics."

1 See Dan Shen, "Why Contextual and Formal Narratologies Need Each Other," *JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory* 2 (2005): 144-146.

2 See Dan Shen, "Non-ironic Turning Ironic Contextually: Multiple Context-Determined Irony in 'The Story of an Hour'," *JLS: Journal of Literary Semantics* 2 (2009): 115-130.

3 See Dan Shen, "'Overall-Extended Close Reading' and Subtexts of Short Stories," *English Studies* 2 (2010): 150-169.

4 See <https://wp.unil.ch/narratologie/glossaire/>. Accessed 10 Sept. 2023.

Would you like to comment on this new theory?

SHEN Dan: Whether in China or in the West, the critical field has always taken for granted that narrative dynamics of mimetic fiction reside in the plot development. Since the turn of the century, numerous publications on narrative progression have appeared, shedding significant light from various angles on the nature and functioning of narrative dynamics and on the complicated relations among the author, narrator, character, and readers.¹ Because of the long-established critical tradition, they are only concerned with the plot-based overt progression. But I've found that, in many fictional narratives, there is what I designate "covert progression"—a powerful hidden dynamic that exists in different degrees of tension with the plot-based overt progression and that runs, at a deeper level, throughout the text. The covert and overt progressions constitute "dual narrative dynamics," a phenomenon that has been neglected in the long narrative critical tradition. Since the creation of dual dynamics often involves elaborative skills and designs, it is a phenomenon typically found in modernist narratives, although it is by no means confined to this genre. No matter in what genre or media, if there are double dynamics, focusing on the plot-based overt progression to the neglect of the covert one will unavoidably result in a partial or misleading picture.

Significantly, covert progression is different from all other types of deeper-level meaning as previously investigated. Generations of critics have tried to unearth the deeper-level meanings of plot development (which possibly contains different branches or subplots, with various ambiguities and complexities), but they have not paid attention to "covert progression" as a separate narrative movement. No matter to what extent the sequences of events in the two narrative movements overlap each other, covert and overt dynamics always progress along two contrastive or even opposed thematic trajectories, portray different character images and generate distinct aesthetic values, arousing or having the potential to arouse complex response from the same reader. When the double dynamics come into view, textual details that appear odd, puzzling, trivial or digressive in relation to the overt progression may fall into place in the undercurrent and newly take on thematic and aesthetic significance. Although following clearly distinctive trajectories that never cross each other, the two parallel narrative movements ultimately function as parts of a larger authorial design. That is to say, to gain a fuller and more balanced understanding of the text, we need to perceive both narrative movements.

The relationship between overt and covert progressions varies from text to

¹ See, for instance, James Phelan, *Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative*, Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2007.

text, ranging from harmonious complementation to complementation with different degrees of tension, to drastic subversion (Shen, *Dual* 23-28).

Ning: Routledge has successively published your two books on this issue. Could you comment on their relationship?

SHEN Dan: In 2014, Routledge published my book *Style and Rhetoric of Short Narrative Fiction: Covert Progressions Behind Overt Plots*, with the paperback edition appearing in 2016. And in January, 2023, Routledge published my *Dual Narrative Dynamics*. The latter book seeks to break new ground in significant ways. It is the first book that offers a systematic theoretical discussion of covert progression and dual narrative dynamics. My earlier Routledge book consists of six chapters, all of which are concerned with practical analyses of covert progressions. By contrast, the latter book devotes its five chapters of Part I to a full-fledged theoretical construction, respectively dealing with “Uniqueness of ‘Covert Progression’ and its Different Relations with Overt Plot,” “Why Have Covert Progressions Been Neglected and How to Uncover them?” “How Can Dual Dynamics Extend Stylistics?” “How Can Dual Dynamics Extend Narrative Theory?” “How Can Dual Dynamics Extend Translation Studies?” The theoretical discussion is followed by practical criticism in Part II, which brings to light the dual dynamics of various narratives. The best way to read the two books in question will be to start with the theoretical discussion in the latter book, and then proceed to the analytical chapters of both books.

It’s worth mentioning that apart from differing from the earlier book in terms of theoretical construction, the latter book focuses more closely on the joint functioning of the covert and overt narrative movements. In the earlier book, I tended to dismiss the overt plot as a false appearance, but later I came to see that, in many literary narratives, plot development is as important as, or sometimes even more important than, covert progression. That is to say, it is necessary to explore carefully how the overt and covert narrative movements, although often conflicting and incompatible, join forces in contributing to the rich thematic significance, complex character images, and complicated aesthetic values of the narrative.

Ning: Could you comment on the innovation of specific narratological models your new theory has brought about?

Shen Dan: Dual narrative dynamics calls for the dualization of various narratological models. When a narrative contains dual dynamics, the author may adopt a particular stance in the plot-based overt progression and a different stance in the covert progression; the event structure may belong to the “revelation” type in the overt

progression but to the contrastive “resolution” type in the covert progression, the narrator may be unreliable in one way in the overt progression and in another way in the covert progression; the same mode of focalization may play one role in the overt progression and a contradictory role in the covert progression, among other kinds of duality. To account for and encourage the search for such duality, I have offered various dual narratological models, such as a dual model of authorial communication, a dual model of event structure, a dual model of unreliability, a dual model of focalization, and on a higher and more general level, a dual model of story and discourse.¹

Ning: You are engaged not only in narratology but also in stylistics as we have touched upon just now. The new theory, though mainly of narratological dimensions, can also incorporate stylistic elements. How does your new theory bear on stylistics?

SHEN Dan: When a narrative contains a covert progression behind the overt one, the same words tend to take on dual or even triple literal, implied, or symbolic meanings along parallel thematic trajectories. The contrastive or even incompatible meanings of the same words account for, to a great extent, the tension and semantic density of the relevant literary texts. Moreover, some words crucial or important to the covert progression may be peripheral or digressive to the overt progression, or vice versa. This means that in a narrative with dual dynamics, the linguistic choices may at once be pulled toward divergent thematic orientations and made to play contrastive characterizing functions in parallel narrative movements. Seen in this light, what determines meaning production is a particular narrative movement as a trajectory of signification, which may be contradicted by another trajectory in the same text. Existing stylistic analyses, no matter what approach is adopted, invariably only pay attention to the meaning words generate in the co-text of a narrative and are only concerned with one kind of thematic significance. To account for the different kinds of meaning the same words simultaneously generate in the parallel narrative movements, we need to double (or even triple) analytic procedures and carry out stylistic analyses along different thematic trajectories in the same text.²

Ning: One of your research interests is translation studies. I think all fields of your

1 See Dan Shen, *Dual Narrative Dynamics*, London: Routledge, 2023, 41-50; Dan Shen, “Covert Progression, Language and Context,” *Rethinking Language, Text and Context*, edited by Ruth Page, Beatrix Busse and Nina Nørgaard, London: Routledge, 2019, 19-23.

2 See Dan Shen, *Dual Narrative Dynamics*, London: Routledge, 2023, 51-62.

studies are somehow connected by your overall thinking of them, not as separate fields. Then how does your new theory have to do with the field of translation?

SHEN Dan: Without being aware of the existence of dual dynamics in the original, a translator may unwittingly undermine it because his certain choices that are commendable in terms of transference of the plot development may turn out to be detrimental or even fatal to the covert progression. Thus, the existence of dual dynamics in some fictional narratives presents a hitherto unknown challenge for translators and for translation criticism. In translation criticism, one is faced with the task of revealing what choices made by a translator are at once adequate as regards plot development but injurious to covert progression. In terms of theory, the criteria of translation need to be transformed in order to ensure that both narrative movements can be effectively preserved in the target language. Strategies and methods for satisfactorily rendering both dynamics must be developed.¹

Ning: It is very important to discover covert progression and dual narrative dynamics if this phenomenon exists in a narrative, but it is not easy to do so. Could you provide some guidelines as how to facilitate the discovery?

SHEN Dan: I've unraveled various factors underlying previous neglect of covert progression and dual narrative dynamics, and I've put forward the following theses to facilitate the discovery of this phenomenon²: *Thesis One*, in order to discover covert progression, it is a prerequisite that we break free of the bondage of the narrative critical tradition that only pays attention to the plot-based overt progression. *Thesis Two*, it is necessary to free ourselves of the bondage of a fixed authorial image. We need to be aware that the same person, in writing different narratives, may adopt different or even opposed stances, or may adopt a stance contrastive to that of the person in daily life. *Thesis Three*, a consideration of the historical context may shed light on covert progression. *Thesis Four*, intertextual comparison may also be conducive to the uncovering of covert progression. *Thesis Five*, we often need to discern the author's purposeful camouflage in order to discover covert progression. *Thesis Six*, the author in his letters, journal, interview and so on may only describe the overt progression without touching on the covert one in a text, and so we cannot take on trust the biographical information and need to examine the text itself carefully. *Thesis Seven*, a covert progression may reside to a significant extent in textual choices that appear peripheral or digressive to the plot development. When

1 See Dan Shen, *Dual Narrative Dynamics*, London: Routledge, 2023, 63-74.

2 See Dan Shen, *Dual Narrative Dynamics*, London: Routledge, 2023, 30-40; Dan Shen, "Covert Progression, Language and Context," *Rethinking Language, Text and Context*, edited by Ruth Page, Beatrix Busse and Nina Nørgaard, London: Routledge, 2019, 9-19.

encountering such choices, instead of skipping over them or trying to fit them in the interpretation of the plot, we need find out whether these elements interact with other textual elements in different parts of the text to constitute another narrative movement that goes in a contrastive or even opposite thematic direction. *Thesis Eight*, the overt and covert progressions can be contrastive to each other in terms of being ironic or non-ironic, and can take on contrastive kinds of irony. We need therefore open our eyes to the possible existence of different levels of irony/non-irony in two or three parallel narrative movements of the same text. *Thesis Nine*, the same short fragment of a text may be crucial to both dynamics but with a division of labor: one part being pivotal to the overt progression and the other to the covert progression. In order to discover the dual dynamics, we need to examine carefully the different functions the same short fragment of the text plays in the two parallel narrative movements. *Thesis Ten*, we need to be perceptive of the author's subtle stylistic techniques. Indeed, in some narratives, the fulcrum of the covert progression is constituted by some very subtle stylistic devices, and we need therefore be very careful in examining the author's stylistic choices, otherwise the covert progression can easily elude attention. *Thesis Eleven*, because the fulcrum of the covert progression may appear in the middle or the end of the text, to discover the undercurrent, we need to read the text more than once, to see whether stylistic and structural choices in different parts of the text implicitly interact with each other to form an undercurrent throughout the narrative. *Thesis Twelve*, as distinct from the complementary relations where the overt plot always has a more or less substantial role to play, when the overt and covert dynamics subvert each other, the function of the overt plot varies drastically: It is sometimes only a deceptive cloak, sometimes a functional foil to set off the covert, and sometimes as important as the covert. In order to discover the dual dynamics as such, we need to open our eyes to the different functions of the plot development. *Thesis Thirteen*, in some narratives, there are two covert progressions behind the plot development, and so we need to open our eyes to the possible existence of two undercurrents paralleling the plot development. *Thesis Fourteen*, covert progression and dual dynamics may occur in other media, where we also need to search consciously for the possible existence of an undercurrent behind the plot development.

Ning: As you mentioned, dual narrative dynamics is by no means omnipresent and only exists in some narratives. In those narratives without a covert progression, is this theory of yours still relevant?

SHEN Dan: In narratives with only the plot-based overt progression, my theory of

dual dynamics may still have a role to play. Susan S. Lanser has applied the theory to the analysis of Assaf Gavron's novel *The Hilltop*, a novel containing a complex plot development open at least to two contrastive kinds of reading. The distinctive feature of Lanser's analysis is that, while other critics only opt for one kind of reading and take that kind to be "the" correct kind, she finds the plot development accommodating both kinds of reading, which mitigate each other. In conclusion, Lanser says, "But what I take to be Dan Shen's approach has certainly encouraged a fuller, deeper, and bolder scrutiny of narrative dynamics than I would have undertaken otherwise" (98). Her analysis points to an additional kind of utility of my theory of dual dynamics: directing attention to the joint functioning of two contrastive thematic trajectories of the *overt* plot development itself. I myself, in investigating Kate Chopin's "A Pair of Silk Stockings," has directed attention to the complementarity between two incompatible thematic trajectories of the overt plot development, while revealing a covert progression in this narrative.¹

Interestingly, I find an ambiguous case in H. Porter Abbott's application of my theory to unearth an undercurrent in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. This narrative has what Chatman defines as a "plot of revelation" versus a "plot of resolution" (47-48). With his critical acumen, Abbott finds that Clarissa's childhood trauma of seeing "her sister Sylvia crushed to death by a falling tree" underlies "much of what we see riding on the surface of the novel." In other words, he insightfully perceives Clarissa's "skittishness, her deliberate meandering, the jerkiness of her mind" as "effects derived from a cause" (Abbott 66). Here, we can treat the undercurrent either as a covert dimension of the plot development (only giving a deeper account of Clarissa's behavior without changing thematic orientation) or as a covert progression marked by causality versus a plot development characterized by contingency. Whatever way we take it, one thing is for sure: Paying attention to dual narrative dynamics can broaden and deepen our understanding of the narrative.

Ning: When talking with you, I feel deeply touched by your erudition, profound thinking, and sharp insight. You can always delve into the essential qualities of things instead of staying on the surface level. Consequently, your research is marked by penetrating insight and innovation, which helps promote academic development in the relevant fields. Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity for this interview.

1 See Dan Shen, "Naturalistic Covert Progression behind Complicated Plot: Kate Chopin's 'A Pair of Silk Stockings'," *JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory* 1 (2022): 1-24.

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