Narrative Modes in Lu Xun's Short Stories

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CHAPTER FOUR

The Narrators: Five Case Studies

4.1 “A Madman’s Diary”: The Use of A Narrator and An Unique Distance Control

From the point of view of reception theory, literary works are not self-contained systems; they are interconnected with the reading activity of the reader. In Wolfgang Iser’s view, there are two poles in literary works, art and aesthetics. The former is the text created by the author. A text becomes a literary work only when the reader has come in touch with it. Without reading, a literary work is no more than printed letters, just like an unperformed music score. Booth regards the participation of readers in fiction as a dialogue with the text:

In any reading experience there is an implied dialogue among author, narrator, the other characters, and the reader. Each of the four can range, in relation to each of the others, from identification to complete opposition, on any axis of value, moral, intellectual, aesthetic, and even physical. [...] The elements usually discussed under “aesthetic distance” enter in of course; distance in time and space, differences of social class or convention of speech or dress—these and many others serve to control our sense that we are dealing with an aesthetic object, just as the paper moons and other unrealistic stage effects of some modern drama have had an “alienation” effect (Distance 97).

Booth applies here the concept of “psychical distance” by the Swiss-English psychologist Edward Bullough. In Bullough’s view, aesthetic perception occurs when a person keeps “psychical distance” to the object. He thinks that art appreciation needs psychical distance, and he stresses its moderating effect. If the psychic distance between a person and the object is too little, it will lead to a utilitarian consideration; but aesthetic appreciation is also difficult if the psychic distance to the object is too large (87-118). The primary use of Bullough’s conception of psychical distance is to study the processes and characteristics of aesthetic psychology. Booth’s scope is more complicated; his goal is to explain how different techniques will result in different readings. He delineates a complicated relation between the author, the narrator, the other characters, and the reader.

In the course of literary reading, distance is dynamic. On moral, intellectual, aesthetic and other matters, the distances between the author, the characters and the reader vary, they may even gradually vanish. It often occurs that an author uses different techniques of distant control to achieve effects. Booth lists some distance changes: the narrator may be far from the reader’s own norms at the start, and near at the end; he may start near and end far; start far, move close, but lose the prize and end far; start near, move away but see the light and return close; start far and move farther: “From the author’s viewpoint, a successful reading of his book will reduce to zero the distance between the essential norms of his implied author and the norms of the postulated reader” (Rhetoric 156-57). It seems that the distance between the norms of the implied author and the reader diminishes with the progress of reading: the reader accepts the norms of the implied
author. Booth thinks that the narrator is typically far from the reader at the start and near at the end (*Rhetoric* 157).

Lu Xun uses exactly this kind of distance control model in "A Madman's Diary," which was published in May 1918, exactly one year before the start of May Fourth Movement in China. The feudal system and ethical code, which had dominated for several thousands of years, kept China at that time still like "an iron house having not a single window and virtually indestructible"; but Lu Xun adds that if a few wake up there is hope of destroying the iron house (*LXQJ* 1: 419; *Works* 1: 37). As a representative work of the new literature, "A Madman's Diary" offers an experience to "destroy the iron house," and "to expose the evils of the feudal (clan) system and ethical code" (*LXQJ* 6: 239). It suggests through a madman's image and his relation with the people around him that in the course of four thousand years of Chinese history human beings have been eating each other, and that this should be abolished. But how can this cannibalistic system of four thousand years be terminated? How to hope for the future and "save the children" (*LXQJ* 1: 432; *Works* 1: 51)? Let them not be eaten, and not eat others. Here, the implied author's norms are very clear. But, how does the author transmit his norms of thought to the reader in the story and how does he gradually reduce the distance between the narrator and the postulated reader? And how do the reader's and the author's norms reach unanimity through narration?

There are two narrators in "A Madman's Diary": the first, the so-called visitor, appears only to introduce the second narrator, the madman, who also becomes the central character. The visitor-narrator completes his mission when the madman comes on stage. From then on, it is through the eyes of the "madman" that the reader observes the fictional world. The readers' feelings may coincide or differ from those of the narrator, he may or may not reach the same conclusions as he.

A "madman" is a deviant. The diary of a madman seems no more than ravings. This is how it opens:

Tonight the moon is very bright.
I have not seen it for over thirty years, so today when I saw it I felt in unusually high spirits. I begin to realize that during the past thirty-odd years I have been in the dark; but now I must be extremely careful. Otherwise why should the Zhao's dog have looked at me twice?
I have reason for my fear (*LXQJ* 1: 422; *Works* 1: 40).

The reader has been told previously that somebody's younger brother had suffered from a persecution complex. The two volumes of this person are "most confused and incoherent"; he had made "many wild statements" (*LXQJ* 1: 422; *Works* 1: 39). The beginning of the diary confirms this and the reader will have doubts as to the madness of the central character--narrator. Is a man who says that he has not seen the moonlight for over thirty years, and that during the past thirty-odd years he has been in the dark not mad? The narrator-agent is far from the reader's intellectual and psychological values, and even from his physical existence. The reader probably expects seeing more of madness.

This expectation is partly confirmed, but some scenes disappoint or shock the reader, and they force him to reflect. As the plot develops, a double image presents itself to the reader's eyes in terms of mad and intelligent words by a madman who is also very
intellectual. The latter is contained in the former, and both sides constitute an organic whole. It is exactly this development that gradually reduces the distance between the reader and the narrator-agent, motivating a delicate change in the reader's thoughts and feelings.

The narrator-agent cannot escape the predicament of a madman. He always suspects that other people will murder him. Mr. Zhao's look, the discussion of the people on the way, even how children or a dog look at him -- all of these make the narrator shiver from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet (LXQJ 1: 423; Works 1: 42). He thinks that his murder is already arranged. The heart of the matter that worries him is that human beings eat human beings. He worries that he himself will be eaten and that he himself will eat another human being. This, which is unimaginable in a civilized society, puzzles him. It shows that he is deeply mad. From a normal person's viewpoint, all his ideas and actions are alien, just like strange tales from overseas. If the author used only this kind of great distance from the reader's normal judgment, feeling and thought reader, the narrator would be unable to arouse the readers' sympathy. Readers would consider the story in the end as a vivid description of a mental patient's symptoms.

Generally speaking, it is difficult to deduce an author's intention and norms when he uses as a narrator-agent a madman or an idiot. A pure madman or idiot seldom or never performs a valuable drama on the fictional stage. The first chapter of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* is told by Benjy, who is already thirty-three years old, but intellectually only on the level of a three-year old. This narrator-agent is almost an idiot. Since Quentin and Jason, the narrators in the second and third chapters respectively, are also far from normal, the author introduces in chapter four a servant-maid called Dilsey, who narrates from yet a different angle. Dilsey, who is a normal, healthy, just, and kindhearted person, adds supplementary information about unclear elements in the plot, and partly revises the preceding chapters. The last chapter is added to avoid a one-sided approach, to make the story richer and more colorful.

"A Madman’s Diary" uses another method. The author does not introduce at the end a narrator to rectify the madman's thought and activity, but uses the madman's logic, the logical development of the symptoms of a form of persecution complex (here, Lu Xun's medical knowledge undoubtedly helped him). He uses a satirical tone to bring to light another, better perspective. The reader cannot help asking if the author will make the madman into a carrier of his thought, a pure megaphone, since the madman, whose actions are demented and who speaks incoherently, frequently bursts into criticism that is full of penetrating judgments. Will this not weaken the truth and the charm of the artistic image? No. The madman's main concern is eating human beings and being eaten. All his words and acts encircle this core; his words, which seem mad, shock people and call for reflection. But his thoughts and actions are completely in accord with the logic of his character. His sparks of thought often touch the reader, who is then aroused to sympathy. Thus, the distance between the norms and thoughts of the implied author, the narrator, and the reader will be reduced. In this respect, there is a parallel between the madman and Don Quixote.

Let us see how the narrator of "A Madman’s Diary" approaches his readers. As discussed above, the core of the madman's symptoms is a concern about eating human beings. This could refer to a savage's cannibalism. But it has more practical or immediate significance if this is referring to a feudal system the ethical code of which allowed
murdering human beings. In this sense, the code of the feudal system is hardly milder than that of the savages. The madman cannot sleep at night because people are staring at him and discussing him:

In ancient times, as I recollect, people often ate human beings, but I am rather hazy about it. I tried to look this up, but my history has no chronology and scrawled all over each page are the words: “Confucian Virtue and Morality.” Since I could not sleep anyway, I read intently half the night until I began to see words between the lines. The whole book was filled with the two words—“Eat people” (LXQJ 1: 425; Works 1: 42).¹

The force of this passage is that readers who have suffered under the feudal system and the feudal ethical code, or know something about them, must now reconsider their attitude. They must become vigilant if they learn that the basic ethical code of the feudal system, of “Confucian Virtue and Morality” is nothing else but “Eat people.” This may sound like ravings, but for many Chinese readers, the madman’s sentences start to ring true. They will understand them more clearly if they remember that many Chinese people were killed in the course of history in the name of “Confucian Virtue and Morality.” The distance between the norms of the reader and narrator is suddenly reduced at this turning point in the story.

Following this line of thought, the reader will notice that the madman’s “mad words” about eating human beings and being eaten are penetrating. His comments on old Chinese society is shocking:

Just to think of it sets me shivering from the crown of my head to the soles of my feet. They eat human beings, so they may eat me. [...] The accomplice in eating me is my elder brother! The eater of human flesh is my elder brother! I am the younger brother of an eater of human flesh! [...] Why do they still do it? That’s the way it’s always been, ... (LXQJ 1: 424-28; Works 1: 42-46).

Before this passage, the madman gives an abstract summary of the way feudal society ate human beings; he uses the sharp and keen “ravings” of a mentally deranged person. Readers now become aware the apparently deranged narrator refers to a familiar case in China, namely that the revolutionary Xu Xilin was executed for assassinating a cruel Qing official, and his heart and liver were eaten. The reason for the madman’s derangement will now be understandable. Cannibalism has been endemic to Confucian culture: “Since the creation of heaven and earth by Pan Gu [a mythological figure] men have been eating each other, from the time of Yi Ya’s son to the time of Xu Xilin” (LXQJ 1: 429; Works 1: 48). The author’s conclusion, drawn through the narrator, should become the conclusion of the reader: “You must know that there’ll be no place for man-eaters in future” (LXQJ 1: 431; Works 1: 50). Using the narrator’s story, the author rejects feudal Chinese society, and he calls for a just one. The author, standing behind the narrator and using him as a medium, carries on an implied dialogue with the reader. At this point, the
story reaches its climax. The views of the reader, and those of the initially dismissed, unreasonable, and demented “madman” come together. The basic norms of the reader, the narrator, and the author now coincide. The final call, “Save the children” could come either from the mad narrator or from the author himself.

Readers will notice the madman’s development as an artistic image. Although the madman’s ill condition becomes more and more serious, readers will not pay much attention to it. If they look upon the madman’s mental disorder only as a deviation, then his words will remain only “ravings,” and nobody (except for a psychologist) would be interested in weighing them. In this case, the value of the madman as an artistic image would be reduced greatly. While reading, normal readers will gradually pay more and more attention to the development of the madman’s thoughts. Yet they will not consider him just a container of the author’s thought and ideal, because, as an artistic image, the madman has his integrity. The reduction of distance does not imply that the reader completely identifies with the madman’s thoughts. Instead, the reader’s thoughts fuse with those of the madman in one crucial aspect: in recognizing that “eating human beings” is the key to the feudal system and its ethical code.

The technique that Lu Xun uses here reminds us of techniques used by some famous writers earlier. In Shakespeare and even some older writers, fools often speak the truth. In King Lear, the King is fooled by his first and second daughter because he is authoritarian and conceited, but the fool sees through everything and tells the truth. We do not consider his talk as “foolish” just because he is a fool. In the course of reading or watching, the reader or onlooker gets access to information that will confirm the fool’s “foolish talking.” Thus they can evaluate and judge those words that are both foolish and truthful, gradually reducing the distance from him. Naturally, readers and the audience will not identify fully with the fool’s unusual talking and action, which are in keeping with his character. But his insights may strike a sympathetic chord in the recipient, even if they come from an alien perspective.

Tolstoy uses a similar method. For example, Kholstomer is told by a horse from a horse’s point of view. Readers do not keep a strict distance from the narrator; as Victor Shklovsky writes, it “is the horse’s point of view (rather than a person’s) that makes the contents of the story seem unfamiliar” (14). Shklovsky published his “Art as Technique,” which has had a great influence on the literary theory and artistic practice of the twentieth century, one year before Lu Xun’s “A Madman’s Diary.” He writes there: “By ‘works of art,’ in the narrow sense, we mean works created by special techniques designed to make the works as obviously artistic as possible” (14). By “special techniques” he famously means defamiliarization, which Bertolt Brecht, who had strong sympathy with Shklovsky’s view, later translated as “Verfremdung” or “V-Effekt”:

The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar,” to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an objects; the object is not important (8).

The unique distance control that Lu Xun uses in “A Madman’s Diary” is, in fact, a kin to Shklovsky’s defamiliarizing technique and Brecht’s “V-Effekt.” The words of truth are not spoken by a sober-minded, normal person, but by a “madman.” Lu Xun truly
makes “the content of the story seem unfamiliar.” But it makes the reader reflect; the reader’s aesthetic “process of perception [...] must be prolonged.” The “difficulty and length of perception” will increase and this will strengthen the power of the artistic experience.

4.2 “In the Tavern”: Communication Between Two Narrators

In most cases, fiction has only one narrator, who controls the narration of the whole story. But some narratives have more than one narrator. Even so, there is still a dominant narrator who plays a leading role while the others are less important. Bal calls them respectively primary and secondary narrator. Of course, this differentiation is based on narrative function. If the primary and the secondary narrator both are the characters in a narrative at same time, the primary narrator is not necessarily the primary character, and the secondary narrator need not be a secondary one. The situation may be just opposite.

Lu Xun’s “In the Tavern” is narrated by a person who is recalling the past. When the narrator briefly revisits S-, he meets by chance his old classmate who had been his colleague when he was a teacher. This old friend tells him that he did two things when he came back to his home: he moved the grave of his younger brother, who died many years ago, and he visited his old neighbor’s daughter and bought her two sprays of velvet flowers, which she wanted very much to get, but could not afford. The structure of this story resembles the form of a “frame story” in which a primary narrator hands the narration over to a character he introduces. This character becomes the secondary narrator, who tells a story to the primary narrator; the two narrators and interrelated and supplement each other.

The secondary narrator is Lü Weifu, a character in the primary narrator’s story. The primary narrator introduces the whole story and describes how he made a detour to his home and then went on to S- during his travels from the north to the southeast. In less than two hours his enthusiasm had waned and he reproached himself for coming. In order to escape the boredom of his stay he went to the small tavern called One Barrel House that he had known well in the past. Here he meets Lü Weifu, who tells him his story. Lü Weifu says that he felt ridiculous to come back, for he acted like the bees and flies he observed when he was young, who stuck to one spot: if something frightened them they would buzz off, but after flying in a small circle they would come back to stop in the same place. He did not expect that the primary narrator would also come back: “Couldn’t you have flown a little further?” “That’s difficult to say. Probably I too have simply described a small circle” (LXQJ 2: 27; Works 1: 192). The primary narrator asks him in return: “But why did you fly back?” He introduces these two matters that Lü Weifu will relate, and these take up two thirds of the story, but the primary narrator still controls the whole narrative text until the end. He concludes:

We left the tavern together, parting at the door because our hotels lay in opposite directions. As I walked back alone to my hotel, the cold wind buffeted my face with snowflakes, but I found this thoroughly refreshing. I saw that the sky, already dark, had interwoven with the houses and streets in the white, shifting web of thick snow (LXQJ 2: 34; Works 1: 201).
The story told by the primary narrator is shorter than the one told by Lu Weifu, but he firmly masters the whole narration and obviously has the leading position, even though Lu Weifu is the primary character. This is how he portrays the feelings of Lu Weifu, his old classmate and colleague, whom he has not seen for many years:

A closer look revealed that Lu had still the same unkempt hair and beard, but his pale lantern-jawed face was thin and wasted. He appeared very quiet if not dispirited, and his eyes beneath their thick black brows had also lost their alertness; but while looking slowly around, at the sight of the deserted garden they suddenly flashed with the same piercing light I had seen so often at school (LXQJ2: 26; Works 1: 191, italics added).

This seems only a static portrayal of the character's appearance, but it shows the differences between Lu Weifu's former and present appearance. The differences are evident in the italicizes words. The primary narrator shows that the change of the time is stamped on Lu Weifu's face, and he also shows some of the features that Lu Weifu still retains. This is not a static portrayal, but a dynamic view of a character that had not yet spoken a word. Of course, in a broader sense, any act, gesture, or expression could tell a story. The reader can see that Lu Weifu has already spoken silently to the narrator because his eyes "suddenly flashed with the same piercing light."

The attitude and feeling of the primary narrator become visible when Lu Weifu tells him that on moving his brother's grave he found that the coffin had rotted almost completely away and there was nothing left but a heap of splinters and chips of wood. However, he wrapped up some of the clay where his brother's body had been in cotton, covered it up, put it in the new coffin, moved it to his father's grave, and buried it beside him: "In this way I can count the affair ended, at least enough to deceive my mother and set her mind at rest" (LXQJ2: 29; Works 1: 195). Following this, Lu Weifu responds to the silent reaction of his listener:

Well, well, the look you've giving me shows you are wondering why I've changed so much. Yes, I still remember the time when we went together to the tutelary god's temple to pull off the idols' beards, and how for days on end we used to discuss methods of reforming China until we even came to blows. But this is how I am now, willing to let things slide and to compromise (LXQJ2: 29; Works 1: 195).

The passage shows how the secondary narrator thinks about the primary one. At the same time, it actually provides information about the primary narrator: "the look you've giving me shows you are wondering why I've changed so much." The primary narrator does not understand something. This process of communication between the primary and the secondary narrator is displayed more directly in their dialogue:

"When I have muddled through New Year I shall go back to teaching the Confucian classics."

"Is that what you're teaching?" I asked in astonishment.

"Of course. Did you think I was teaching English? First I had two pupils, one studying the Book of Songs, the other Mencius. Recently I have got another, a girl,
who is studying the Canon for Girls. I don’t even teach mathematics; not that I wouldn’t teach it, but they don’t want it taught.”

“I could really never have guessed that you would be teaching such books.”

“Their father wants them to study these. I’m an outsider, it’s all the same to me. Who cares about such futile affairs anyway? There’s no need to take them seriously....”

(LXQJ 2: 33; Works 1: 200).

Many years ago, as a reformer, Lü Weifu tried to replace Confucian Classics with new knowledge, including English, but now he does not care about what he teaches. And the primary narrator indicates that there are still more things he does not understand. He probably feels that Lü Weifu used to be courageous and upright; he considered reforming China as his duty in those years, but is now willing to let things slide and does not take them seriously.

Evidently, this is a two-way communication process. The messages that the primary and secondary narrator provide about each other make the reader gradually understand that the former anti-feudalist reformer Lü Weifu became a tired and cynical person. The two-way communication between them allows the reader to continuously deepen his comprehension of the characters and make his own aesthetic judgment. The reader may see that Lü Weifu had earlier been in favor of reform, but has now given up on it. Though his speech still reveals resentment, grief, indignation, and pride, he stays aloof from the anti-feudalist reform. He lost his confidence in the future: “I’m not sure of anything now, not even of what tomorrow will bring, not even of the next minute” (LXQJ 2: 34; Works 1: 201). As for the primary narrator, he had once joined the reform movement with Lü Weifu, but now he seems to be surprised and does not agree with Lü Weifu’s new attitude. He remarks with disappointment that he never thought Lü Weifu could teach the books he is now teaching. Lü Weifu is totally different from his former self. He would, no doubt, have preferred modern learning to traditional Chinese Classics, but he has been dragged back into a morass of traditional Chinese words and traditional Chinese morality. Lyell even thinks “Lü Wei-fu belonged to a group that in the early 1920s could have justly called itself ‘a lost generation’” (Reality 80). What is it that crushed him? The primary narrator does not show it directly, but the reader can deduce at least one important reason, namely, that he has to earn a living for himself: he has only twenty dollars a month, “not quite enough to manage on” (LXQJ 2: 34; Works 1: 200).

As mentioned, some of Lu Xun’s first-person stories contain autobiographical experiences. According to Lu Xun’s brother, Zhou Zuoren, two events told by Lü Weifu are autobiographical: moving his younger brother’s grave and visiting an old neighbor’s daughter (Characters 106). The first item is especially similar to life. The fourth younger brother of Lu Xun, named Chunshou, died of pneumonia on December 20, 1898 when he was only five and a half years old. It grieved the whole family, especially his mother. Chunshou was buried beside the public graveyard but the land around his grave was later dug up by the people there. Fearing that the grave could collapse, Lu Xun moved his brother’s grave upon his mother’s request next to that of his father’s when he came back to Shaoxing in 1919. Nobody asked Lu Xun about the actual moving of the grave, but Zhou Zuoren believes that what Lü Weifu had experienced in “In the Tavern” was the actual experience of the author himself (Characters 106). Thus Lu Xun incorporated autobiographical experiences both in the primary and the secondary narrator. Lin Yü
sheng says that the conversation in the story between Lü Weifu and the narrator may be considered a dialogue which takes place in the mind of Lu Xun himself (Crisis 144).

That Lu Xun had some similar experiences as the primary and the secondary narrator is not sufficient for regarding the communication between them as Lu Xun's internal-conversation. However, if we consider Lu Xun's ideas, we may see the internal conversation more clearly. Lu Xun, as we know, was fiercely against the old Chinese tradition, yet he could not completely separate himself from some Chinese traditional views. In delineating the complex consciousness of Lu Xun, Lin Yu sheng distinguishes three levels, of which he discusses mainly the first two: the explicit, conscious level, another level that is also conscious but is unexplicated, and the subconscious level. He thinks that the demand for total rejection of the Chinese tradition was Lu Xun's most prominent explicit polemical concern. On the other hand, however, Lu Xun was intellectually and morally committed to some traditional Chinese values, which can be regarded as an unexplicated level of his consciousness (Crisis 105, 142). Thus, there exists a tension between the former and the latter, between total iconoclasm and an intellectual and moral commitment to some traditional Chinese values. As a writer, Lu Xun dissects himself ideologically, and he is aware of traditional values in his consciousness:

Suffering is integrally linked with life, but sometimes one's suffering departs momentarily, and this is when one sleeps soundly. If one wants to reduce suffering when one wakes up, the traditional way of China is "arrogance" and "be cynical." I think I myself have this fault, and it is not good (LXQJ 11:15).

This is an example of Lu Xun's intellectual and moral attachment to traditional Chinese values. And it is a reflection of a conscious adoption of a traditional Chinese cultural norm. In the image of Lü Weifu we can see some evidences of Lu Xun's commitment to some traditional Chinese values. Lü Weifu may also be characterized as "cynical": after experiencing a number of setbacks, he becomes apathetic, lets things slide, and makes compromises. Lu Xun clearly knows he is "cynical" sometimes, but at the same time he abhors being "cynical," and he tries hard to cast it off. That the narrator-agent shows his surprise and disagreement with Lü Weifu might show Lu Xun's inner contradiction and his struggle with himself. "In the Tavern" shows Lu Xun's self-dissective spirit, and one has the impression of overhearing a man in conversation with himself, a man trying to understand his own motivations: "Through these characters Lu Hsin takes a close look at himself and perhaps exorcises evil spirits lurking just below the surface of his consciousness" (Lyell, Reality 188).

4.3 Description Absorbed into Narration: "In the Tavern" and "Village Opera"

The rhythm of fiction, which we can normally feel intuitively, is based on the speed of the narrative text and is determined by the relationship between the time covered by the story and the time involved in presenting those events. In his The Craft of Fiction, Percy Lubbock made a distinction between a summarizing, accelerating presentation and a broad, scenic one. In the 1940s in Germany, Günther Müller wrote a number of studies on this subject. Genette submitted narrative rhythm to detailed investigations in Narrative
Discourse. He established as a zero reference an isochronous narrative with steady speed, without accelerations or slowdowns. In such a narrative, the relationship between story duration and narrative duration would always remain constant (Discourse 87-88). Obviously, such a narrative speed does not exist in any narrative, just as in music we never hear a song without tempo change. Based on this hypothetical reference, Genette distinguished four basic forms of narrative movement: ellipsis, pause, scene and summary (Discourse 86-95), to which Chatman added a fifth, stretch. Bal calls the latter a “slow down,” “a tempo that stands in direct contrast to the summary” (Narratology 75). We may analyze the speed of narrative movement in Lu Xun by using the above-mentioned five categories.

Pause is a narrative section without story-time: the action remains stationary while attention is paid to a descriptive detail. Pause contains mainly interventions and descriptions by the narrator, i.e. comments and words digressing from the subject of the story. In classical Chinese novels, such interventions were very popular. The story is told by an omniscient narrator who often stops the narration and makes comments concerning the characters or events. In the first chapter of Cao Xueqin’s A Dream of the Red Mansions, for example, the narrator directly addresses the reader: “Do you know, Worthy Reader, where this book comes from? The answer may sound fantastic, yet carefully considered it is of great interest” (1:2). This narrative intervention involves no story-time and is therefore a pause. It occurs frequently in traditional Western fiction as well.

Description is another sort of narrative pause to be found in classical Chinese as well as in traditional western novels. Genette notices that the Balzacian novel established an extratemporal descriptive space in which the narrator, forsaking the course of the story, or before arriving at it, makes it his business to inform the reader, to describe a scene that no fictional figure has, strictly speaking, been looking at (Discourse 100). Eugenie Grandet, for example, begins as follows:

In certain provincial towns there are houses that inspire a feeling of melancholy equal to that aroused by the gloomiest cloister moor, or the most dismal ruins. Perhaps these houses combine the silence of a cloister, the bleakness of moors, and the sepulchral atmosphere of ruins; there is so little life and activity within them that a stranger would think them deserted, did he not notice the wan, cold gaze of a motionless figure whose faintly monastic face appears above a window sill, at the sound of unfamiliar footsteps (5).

In naturalist novels, which aimed at sketching a picture of reality, descriptive pauses were very common. In order to picture reality, a good many object-descriptions were necessary; the flow of the story-time was of secondary importance (Bal, Narratology 76). In classical Chinese novels, descriptions that suspend the course of the story were frequent, even in the novels of the late Qing Dynasty. The first chapter of Liu E’s The Travels of Lao Can, opens, for instance, as follows:

It is said that outside the East Gate of Dengzhou City in Shandong there is a great mountain called Penglai and on the mountain there is a pavilion called Penglai Pavilion. This pavilion stands with painted roofs and pearly screens amidst clouds and rain, surpassingly magnificent. On the west it overlooks the city with its myriad
inhabitants wrapped in mist, and on the east it overlooks the ocean with its tumbling waves stretching for a thousand miles. So in the afternoon the city people often bring wine and food here and spend the night in the pavilion, in order to watch the sun rise over the sea the next day at dawn. This is an old established custom; but of this no more (11).

Although words such as “afternoon” and “the next day” indicate time, the passage describes an enduring situation and does not concern the characters. This static description does not involve time flow.

Dynamic or narrative descriptions differ from static ones by involving time. They were used during all periods in the history of western as well as Chinese literature, and at times they aroused great interest. Narrative descriptions in Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey sing the praise of ancient heroes, who demonstrate brave vitality and strong fighting in war and in the struggle with nature. Homer avoids static descriptions and often replaces the descriptions of objects by retroversions, which slow down the speed of the story by inserting another temporal sequence. For example, the shield of Achilles is described in a retroversion by means of its making. Agamemnon’s armor is described while he is putting it on. The description of Helen’s beauty is not static either. When she passes the Trojan wise old men who sit as elders of the people at the Scaean Gates, gasp with admiration at her beauty: 7

When they saw Helen coming upon the wall, softly they spake winged words one to another: “Small blame that Trojans and well-greaved Achaeans should for such a woman long time suffer woes; wondrously like is she to the immortal goddesses to look upon” (129).

Sometimes, “the general movement of the text is governed by the step or the gaze of one (or several) character(s), and the unfolding of that movement corresponds exactly to the length of the trip [...] or of the motionless contemplation” (Genette, Discourse 101). In A Dream of Red Mansions, for instance, we notice that the Rong Mansion and the Ning Mansion are described through the eyes of the character Lin Daiyu, who comes here for the first time and finds everything new. In other words, Daiyu serves as the focalizer of the objects, and we observe everything through her eyes:

As she was carried into the city she peeped out through the gauze window of chair at the bustle in the streets and the crowds of people, the like of which she had never seen before.

After what seemed a long time they came to a street with two huge stone lions crouching on the north side, flanking a great triple gate with beast-head knockers, in front of which ten or more men in smart livery were sitting. The central gate was shut, but people were passing in and out of the smaller side gates. On a board above the main gate was written in large characters: Ningguo Mansion Built at Imperial Command. [...].

Daiyu entered a gate decorated with flowery patterns carved in wood. Inside, verandahs on both sides led to a three-roomed entrance hall in the middle of which stood a screen of marble in a red sandalwood frame. Turned from it, the hall gave
access to the large court of the main building (1: 35-36, slightly modified, italics added).

The descriptions of Rong Mansion are similar:

Back in the Rong Mansion, Daiyu alighted again. The nurses led her eastwards, round a corner, through an entrance hall into a hall facing south, she then passed through a ceremonial gate into a large courtyard. The northern building had five large apartments and wings on either side. [...] Once inside the hall she looked up and her eyes were caught by a great blue tablet with nine gold dragons on it, on which was written in characters large as peck measures: Hall of Glorious Felicity (1: 42, slightly modified, italics added).

These descriptions obviously differ from those of Balzac’s, which often forsake the course of the story through a pause. The words italicized indicate that the descriptions do not interrupt the time-line and stop the story. In fact, it is very common in A Dream of Red Mansion to describe the objects through the eyes of characters, following the character’s movement.

Lu Xun said that he did his best to avoid wordiness: “If I felt I had made my meaning sufficiently clear, I was glad to dispense with frills. The old Chinese theater has no scenery, and the New Year pictures sold to children show a few main figures only.[...]Convinced that such methods suited my purpose, I did not indulge in irrelevant details and kept the dialogue down to a minimum” (LXQJ 4: 512; Works 3: 263). Indeed there are not many descriptions of scenery in Lu Xun’s stories. He wrote even his brief descriptions in a pithy style, saving space and leaving out superfluous words and sentences. Therefore it became absolutely necessary for him to create an atmosphere or to set off the atmosphere by contrast, and in perfect harmony with the whole story. In some of the descriptions the narrator describes the scenery, forsaking the course of the story or before arriving there. In the latter case, scenery has no direct relevance to any character. “Medicine” begins, for instance, with the following descriptions: “It was autumn, in the small hours of the morning. The moon had gone down, but the sun had not yet risen, and the sky appeared a sheet of darkling blue. Apart from night-prowlers, all was asleep” (LXQJ 1: 440; Works 1: 58). Similarly in “Storm in Teacup”:

On the mud flat by the river, the sun’s bright yellow rays were gradually fading. The parched leaves of the tallow trees beside the river were at last able to take breath, while below them a few striped mosquitoes danced and droned. The smoke from the peasants’ kitchen chimneys along the riverside dwindled, as the women and children sprinkled the ground before their doors with water and set out little tables and low stools. Everyone knew it was time for the evening meal (LXQJ 1: 467; Works 1: 79).

These descriptions sketch the scenes in which the characters of the stories will move; they create a special atmosphere or indicate time. Following the description the characters begin to appear on the stage.

Lu Xun’s stories also contain narrative descriptions that have an extensive narrative function. Let us compare Lu Xun’s descriptions with those of Proust, who is known for
his lavish descriptions. It is conspicuous that in *Remembrance of Things Past* description never brings about a pause in the narrative, never suspends the story when the described object has been met only once, or when the description concerns only a single one of its appearances (generally the first). In other words, the descriptive passage never abandons the temporality of the story. The Proustian narrative never comes to a standstill at an object or a sight unless that halt corresponds to a contemplative pause by the hero himself, and the contemplation is not a moment of passive and restful ecstasy; it is an intense, intellectual, and often physical activity (Genette, *Discourse* 100-05). Therefore, the description is not an objective and static picture, but, part of the general narration. According to Genette, in Proust description becomes absorbed into narration, and descriptive pause does not exist, for with him description is everything except a pause in the narrative (*Discourse* 105-06).

In the case of Proust, "description" is less a description of the object than a narrative analysis of the perceptual activity of the character contemplating: of his impressions, progressive discoveries, shifts in distance and perspective, errors and corrections, enthusiasms or disappointment, etc. This is a highly active contemplation that contains "a whole story" (Genette, *Discourse* 102). Similarly, in Lu Xun's "In the Tavern" a deserted garden is described as the narrator's contemplation of it after entering the tavern:

As I gave this order to the waiter who had come up with me I went and sat down at the table by the back window. The fact that the place was empty enabled me to pick the best seat, one with a view of the deserted garden below. Most likely this did not belong to the tavern. I had looked out at it many times in the past, sometimes too in snowy weather. But now, to eyes accustomed to the north, the sight was sufficiently striking. Several old plum trees in full bloom were braving the snow as if oblivious of the depth of winter; while among the thick dark green foliage of a camellia beside the crumbling pavilion a dozen crimson blossoms blazed bright as flame in the snow, indignant and arrogant, as if despising the wanderer's wanderlust. At this I suddenly remembered the moistness of the heaped snow here, clinging, glistening and shining, quite unlike the dry northern snow which when a high wind blows will fly up to fill the sky like mist.... (*LXQJ*: 25; *Works* 1: 190).

This is not a static objective description, nor a contemplation with a passive moment. Lu Xun's description of the garden is Proustian. The narrator had looked out at the garden many times in the past; but the present description is unusual. He came back to the South after his long wandering in the north, and now he looks out at the garden with "eyes accustomed to the north" and different feelings. The reader becomes aware of some of his perceptual activity, his new impressions and discoveries. when the narrator had looked at the deserted garden in the past, sometimes in snowy weather, it made no deep impression on him. This time, however, the garden scenery is "sufficiently striking." He especially notices that the old plum trees in full bloom are braving the snow as if oblivious to the depth of winter. In Chinese tradition, a plum tree blooming in the winter symbolizes faithfulness and steadfastness. The narrator endows the flowers with human qualities: the old plum trees are "braving" the snow, while the crimson blossoms of the camellia are "indignant and arrogant," as if "despising" the wanderer's wanderlust. He cannot help being filled with deep veneration when he notices them. While being filled with deep
veneration, he is pale before the "despising" of the flowers: the old plum trees and the camellia were braving the snow, he, however, went wandering. The description contains no pause in the narrator's perceptual activity since he is thinking. The passages before and after the description supports this. Before the description, the narrator just went to the tavern and gave the order to the waiter: "A catty of yellow wine. To go with it? Ten pieces of fried beancurd with plenty of paprika sauce." Following the description we find: "'Your wine, Sir...' said the waiter carelessly" *(LXQJ 2: 25; Works 1: 190).* The description was presented between the ordering and the serving of the wine. It is absorbed into narration and has narrative function.

In "Village Opera," Lu Xun's narrative description with extensive narrative function reaches its climax. The narrator goes back to his childhood and recalls that he and his friends once went to watch a village opera by boat. The story tells about an unforgettable childhood episode. The happy recollections of childhood experiences, which are the most essential part of the story, are identical with the emotions of the boy—the narrator's former self—who was eleven or twelve years old at that time. Descriptions of the scenery, rare in Lu Xun's stories, are exceptionally abundant here. The boy's emotions fuse deeply with the scenery, yielding a dynamic description. The boy looked forward to seeing an opera in Zhaozhuang, a slightly larger village five li away, but there was no boat for hire. Finally, with the help of Shuangxi, one of the brightest boys, he could go with a dozen boys in Bayi Granduncle's ferry-boat. The adult narrator, focalizing from the perspective of his former self, describes the scenery from rowing a boat to Zhaozhuang:

The scent of beans, wheat and river-weeds *wafted towards us* through the mist, and the moonlight shone faintly through it. Distant grey hills, undulating like the backs of some *leaping* iron beasts, seemed to be *racing past the stern of our boat*; but *I still felt our progress was slow.* When the oarsmen had changed shifts four times, we *began to make out the faint outline of Zhaozhuang and to catch the sound of singing and music.* There were several lights too, which we guessed must be on the stage unless they were fishermen's lights *(LXQJ 1: 564; Works 1: 161, italics added).*

Returning, they still felt happy, the boat seemed to be going fast:

*Soon* the pine-wood *was behind* us. Our boat *was moving fairly fast,* but there was such thick darkness all around you could tell it was very late. As they discussed the players, laughing and swearing, the rowers *pulled harder* on the oars. Now the splash of water against our bow was even more distinct. The ferry-boat seemed like a great white fish carrying a freight of children *through the foam.* Some old fishermen who fished all night stopped their punts to cheer at the sight *(LXQJ 1: 567; Works 1: 164, italics added).*

With many authors, a field shrouded by the moonlight is a static picture and rich in poetic flavor: watery moonbeams, all is quiet, only sweethearts' talking in whispers. In Lu Xun's writings, however, it appears as a dynamic picture in which the description is absorbed into narration. It looks as if the natural scenery was endowed with life by the narrator; actually, however, he participates in the events at a specific time and space. When the narrator passes through, his feelings, his watching, and his thinking are blended.
He is excited, and this emotional state yields the main action-line. Thus, description does not lead to a suspension of action and the stoppage of time. It continues the narration; as Bal says, a static picture becomes alive in “a mixture of description and narration” due to the narrator’s action (Narratology 130).

As different types of statements, narration and description can show different approaches towards the world. The one is active, the other static, allowing things to take their own course. The latter is considered richer in poetic flavor. Narration occupies a dominant place in narrative fiction, but description has its special significance. Since description usually focuses on characters and things, it often interrupts the passage of time, extending the length of the narration.

4.4 “Kong Yiji”: the Narrator Is Blind While the Reader Is Enlightened

“Kong Yiji” is the story Lu Xun wrote after “A Madman’s Diary.” It is his shortest story, and, according to Sun Fuyuan (16), one of Lu Xun’s friends, his favorite one. In my opinion, its success is related to its use of a narrator, who relates the protagonist’s tragic life from a special angle.

Narrative information has, according to Genette, degrees: the narrative can furnish the readers with more or less detail, in a more or less direct way, and thus keep them at a greater or lesser distance from what it tells. The narrator can also choose to regulate the information it delivers, by means of a screening that is adjusted to the capacities or knowledge of a participant (a character or group of characters). The narrative adopts then, or seems to adopt, what we ordinarily call the participant’s “vision” or “point of view” (Discourse 162). The story of “Kong Yiji” is set in Prosperity Tavern of Luzhen. The protagonist, Kong Yiji, is a customer who often drinks wine there. The first-person narrator participated once in the events. As a pot-boy in the tavern, he not only saw and heard Kong Yiji’s various extraordinary experiences, but he also had direct communication with him. Thus, the narrator can function as an agent through whom the reader views Kong’s tragic life. The reader can also observe the narrator’s own action and norm as a character through his communication with Kong. They can thus judge this narrator-character and his commentary on the events and characters. As the story progresses, the narrator-character’s careless tone alienates the reader. Readers will generally not share his norms. A tension emerges between them, producing special effects in the story.

Like some other Lu Xun stories told in first-person, “Kong Yiji” is told by way of recollection. In such first-person retrospectives, focalization and narration can be distinct, because the narrator’s language is sometimes “colored” by his perceptions at the time of narration and sometimes by those of his younger self. Sometimes it remains ambiguously between the two. The language is that of the narrator, but the focalizer can be either the narrator or the child (Rimmon-Keenan 83-84). In first three paragraphs of Lu Xun’s story, the adult narrator describes the layout of Luzhen’s taverns, the different customers in the tavern, and his experiences and frame of mind as a pot-boy. The focalizer of the above objects is the adult narrator, and the language is “colored” mainly by his perceptions at the time of narrating. Some temporal indicators show that the adult narrator is telling a story that happened many years ago. For example, after saying that “When men come off work at midday and in the evening they spend four coppers on a bowl of wine,” the adult
narrator adds the parenthesis: "--or so they did twenty years ago; now it costs ten --" (LXQJ 1: 434; Works 1: 52, italics added). When narrating his experience, the adult narrator says: "At the age of twelve I started work as a pot-boy in Prosperity Tavern at the edge of the town" (LXQJ 1: 434; Works 1: 52, italics added). When speaking of his boring and monotonous life then he mentions: "The only times when I could have a laugh or two, were when Kong Yiji came to the tavern. That is why I remember him even now" (LXQJ 1: 434-35; Works 1: 52, slightly modified, italics added). The italics indicate that the narrator's story is "colored" by his perceptions at the time of narration, which works in concert with the end of the story: "I never saw him again until now--no doubt Kong Yiji really is dead" (LXQJ 1: 438; Works 1: 57, slightly modified). The opening and the end form a frame: the narration, focalized by the adult narrator, starts and ends in the present. But the internal story of the pot-boy dominates. The adult narrator's frame is in great temporal distance from the pot-boy's experiences. He tells about events experienced by him long time ago; the objects are not focalized from his sophisticated perspective, but from the pot-boy who has little experience.

In general, the moral values of a narrator are considered questionable if they do not tally with those of the implied author. Various factors in the text may indicate the gap, for instance when the facts contradict the narrator's view (Rimmon-Kenan 101). The reader may also sense from the story as a whole that the narrator is unreliable. In this story, the adult narrator remembers his past in a careless and sophisticated tone. He looks down upon the short-coated farm laborers and thinks they "were easier to deal with, it is true, but among them were quite a few pernickety ones" (LXQJ 1: 434; Works 1: 52). He is not at all embarrassed that they were at that time diluting the wine with water in the tavern. He recalls that the only time he could relax a bit, and even have a laugh or two, was when Kong Yiji came around. After introducing Kong Yiji this way, the pot-boy becomes the main focalizer.

The narrator introduces two kinds of customers in the tavern: the short-coated farm laborers who drink wine standing by the bar, and those in long gowns, who go into the inner room to order wine and dishes and sit drinking at their leisure. In the eyes of the pot-boy, "Kong Yiji was the only long-gowned customer who used to drink his wine standing" (LXQJ 1: 435; Works 1: 53). There is no further comment, but the reader can conclude that Kong Yiji does not belong to either of these two kinds of customers. The boy describes how Kong Yiji associates with the customers in the tavern and how these poke fun at him. The boy looks like an outsider in his observation. In many cases, he merely reports what the characters said; sometimes he even seems to misunderstand the meaning of their words. The reader sees that he was influenced by the cold unsympathetic people of the tavern. This is how Kong Yiji's entry into the tavern is described:

[...] Whenever he came in, everyone there would look at him and chuckle. And someone was sure to call out:
"Kong Yiji! What are those fresh scars on your face?"
Ignoring this, he would lay nine coppers on the bar and order two bowls of heated wine with a dish of aniseed-peas. Then someone else would bawl:
"You must have been stealing again!"
"Why sully a man's good name for no reason at all?" Kong Yiji would ask, raising his eyebrows (LXQJ 1: 435; Works 1: 53).
The inexperienced pot-boy cannot understand Kong Yiji’s remark “A gentleman keeps his integrity even in poverty.” But the reader can catch the idea. The reader can observe the boy’s attitude through his calm and objective observation. For example, he summarizes the atmosphere in the tavern by remarking, “The space within and surrounding the tavern swelled with joy,” which shows not only that the people were callous, but also their satisfaction for feeling superior to a wretch. The boy identified with the people.

Kong Yiji has studied the classics and is a good calligrapher, but people take delight in taunting him: “Kong Yiji, can you really read?” (LXQJ 1: 436; Works 1: 54). When they scrutinize his failure to pass even the lowest official examination, “a grey tinge would overspread Kong Yiji’s dejected, discomfited face, and he would mumble more of those unintelligible archaisms” (LXQJ 1: 436; Works 1: 54). The boy still does not understand what Kong Yiji says, but his observation vividly evokes Kong Yiji’s agony. The roots of Kong’s agony are his blind acceptance of the establishment’s norms. He falls into the quagmire of the civil examination and is unable to extricate himself from it. He cannot change his tragic lot through civil examinations, but he still believes in them. As a failed scholar, he lands at the bottom of society, but still refuses to take off his tattered long-gown, which symbolizes his scholar’s status. He cannot compare with the long-gowned customers who have status in the community, and is unable to join the ranks of the short-coated customers standing outside. Discriminated against by the long-gowned people, and rejected by the short-coated people, he becomes a sad and ridiculous person who cannot find his position in the community.

As a witness, the boy merely echoes the mocking and disdaining attitudes of the other people. As a participant in the events, he tells about his contact with Kong Yiji also in a mocking and disdaining tone. When Kong Yiji feels that he is totally isolated in an adult world he turns to children and hopes to get some comforts in their world. Knowing that the boy had schooling, he kindly says he would like to test him how to write the Chinese character hui in aniseed-peas, but the boy responds:

Who did this beggar think he was, testing me! I turned away and ignored him. After waiting for some time he said earnestly:
“You can’t write it, eh? I’ll show you. Mind you remember. You ought to remember such characters, because you’ll need them to write up your accounts when you have a shop of your own.”

[...] Half amused and half exasperated, I drawled, “I don’t need you to show me. Isn’t it the hui written with the element for grass?”

Kong Yiji’s face lit up. Tapping two long-nails on the bar, he nodded. “Quite correct!” he said. “There are four different ways of writing hui. Do you know them?”
But my patience exhausted, I scowled and moved away (LXQJ 1: 436; Works 1: 55).

The boy and Kong Yiji reveal two different attitudes: the former adopts an arrogant attitude, while the latter is kind and earnest, although pedantic. As Bai points out, perception is a psychological process that depends on many factors, for example, one’s position with respect to the perceived object, the distance, previous knowledge, psychological attitude towards the object (Narratology 100). In his attitude towards Kong
Yiji, the boy indicates that he is in an advantageous position, and this attitude is related to his previous knowledge of Kong Yiji. His knowledge obviously comes from the adult world he lives in. As a perceiving subject, the boy already unconsciously prepares for joining the ranks of the adult community that has no sympathy for Kong Yiji, but feels superior to him. The coldness and heartlessness of the community infect this twelve-year-old boy like pestilence. Like people around him, he lacks sympathy for Kong Yiji, who is almost at the end of his tether yet retained a certain self-esteem and kindliness.

The boy does not feel there is anything wrong with his attitude to Kong Yiji, but readers do. Through reporting what the customers say, the boy tells why Kong Yiji has not shown up for a long time. He has been stealing again, but this time he stole from Mr. Ding, the provincial-grade scholar, and his legs were broken. His present whereabouts are unknown, and people guess that he may have died. Finally, one afternoon when winter is near at hand, Kong Yiji reappears. In his last encounter, Kong’s face appeared “thin and grimy—he looked a wreck” (LXQJ 1: 437; Works 1: 56). He has on a ragged old jacket and is squatting cross-legged on a mat that is fastened by ropes to his shoulders. Although he is in a tight spot, people still have no sympathy for him. The boss only says, “Is that Kong Yiji? You still owe nineteen coppers” (LXQJ 1: 437; Works 1: 56). As usual, he chuckles and he derides Kong Yiji for having stolen again. Readers can see from the boy’s account that Kong Yiji is much more miserable now than ever before and they will sympathize more with him. Kong Yiji still tries to stand up with bit of dignity when he is facing his impasse. He asks the boss not to joke with him, but the boss says, “Joke? How did your legs get broken if you hadn’t been stealing?” (LXQJ 1: 438; Works 1: 57). To this he can only whisper: “Broken them in a fall.” The boy notices that his eyes “pleaded with the boss to let the matter drop” (LXQJ 1: 438; Works 1: 57), but Kong Yiji gets only a good laugh. He finishes his wine and laboriously hauls himself away with his muddy hands amid the taunts and laughter of other customers. It is the most miserable scene in the story.

Using this boy as focalizer, the narrator can give the readers close-ups of Kong Yiji on three levels. First, when Kong Yiji is on the scene, the boy vividly observes his appearance, clothing, manner, speech and action, even the slight changes of his facial expressions. Second, when Kong Yiji is not on the scene, the boy conveys important informations about Kong Yiji’s past and present that customers in the tavern provide him. Finally, as a participant in the events, through direct communication with Kong Yiji, the boy gives further descriptions of him and shows his disposition. All these multiple views through different angles give a vivid image of the protagonist. While the boy focalizes and describes Kong Yiji from a short distance, the adult narrator provides information from a great distance about the surroundings, the people around Kong Yiji, and the pot-boy himself. Since the reader knows about the relationship between the boy and the protagonist, no more background information about Kong is needed. Readers can concentrate on the image of Kong Yiji. The adult narrator and the boy join together to offer a stereoscopic image of Kong Yiji’s tragic lot.

Genette remarks that “we should not confuse the information given by a focalized narrative with interpretation the reader is called on to give” (Discourse 197). The boy provides all sorts of information he sees or hears about Kong Yiji. The reader sees not only what the boy sees, but also finds the deeper meaning behind it. “Narrative always
says less than it knows, but it often makes known more than it says” (*Discourse* 198).

4.5 “The True Story of Ah Q”: the Narrator Enters the Soul of the Protagonist

“The True Story of Ah Q,” a story with zero focalization and an omniscient narrator, was, among Lu Xun’s stories, most influenced by traditional Chinese fiction. With nine chapters it is the longest one, written partly in the manner of traditional Chinese “zhang-hui” novels.” Each chapter is headed by a title giving the gist of its content, and each one is relatively independent, but there is a close relationship between the chapters, yielding an integrated story about Ah Q’s life. Unlike Lu Xun’s most stories with zero focalization, the omniscient narrator often appears as “I” and “we,” directly facing his readers, like storytellers that directly address their readers in traditional Chinese fiction. The narrator opens by saying, “For several years now I have meaning to write the true story of Ah Q” (*LXQJ* 1: 487; *Works* 1: 102). Then, in the manner of traditional Chinese fiction, he banteringly introduces the character’s name, surname, and native place. However, the reader still lacks some basic information about him. For example, his surname: when Mr. Zhao’s passes the county examination, Ah Q declares that this reflects credit on him too, since he belongs to Mr. Zhao’s clan. So he also wants to be called Zhao. But the next morning this is no longer clear, because he is summoned to Mr. Zhao who roars at him:

“Ah Q, you miserable wretch! Did you say I belonged to the same clan as you?”
Ah Q made no reply.
The more he looked at him the angrier Mr. Zhao became. Advancing menacingly a few steps he said, “How dare you talk such nonsense! How could I have such a relative as you? Is your surname Zhao?”
Ah Q made no reply and was planning a retreat, when Mr. Zhao darted forward and gave him a slap on the face.
“How could you be named Zhao? Are you worthy of the name Zhao?” (*LXQJ* 1: 488; *Works* 1: 104).

After this, nobody ever mentions his family background again, and the narrator remains confused about his family name. His name and native place are not clear either. In traditional Chinese fiction, the omniscient narrator normally relates basic information on the character in an authoritative tone. Uncertainties like these were rare. Lu Xun adopts the traditional form but gives it a new content and meaning in a bantering way by limiting the omniscient narrator’s view sometimes.8

In the following chapters, the omniscient narrator presents the image of Ah Q.9 First, he is quite explicit about his job: “Ah Q had no family but lived in the Tutelary God’s Temple at Weizhuang. He had no regular work either, being simply an odd-job man for others: when there was wheat to be cut he would cut it, when there was rice to be hulled he would hull it, when there was a boat to be punted he would punt it” (*LXQJ* 1: 490; *Works* 1: 107). This man, without family or regular work, is undoubtedly, a person with the lowest position in the village, but he considers himself no ordinary being. He habitually looks down on all others in the village, and intensely clashes with the villagers of Weizhuang, Mr. Zhao, “Bogus Foreign Devil,” Whiskers Wang, and Young D. We
have seen how Ah Q was severely scolded and given a slap on his face by Mr. Zhao. Later, when he meets Whiskers Wang, who happens to be catching lice, Ah Q sits down next to him and makes a competition of it, but he loses and picks a fight with the man for whom he has the greatest contempt. Ah Q loses again and he considers this as the first humiliation of his life. At this moment, his other enemy, “Bogus Foreign Devil,” approaches from the distance; Ah Q is in a rage and itching for revenge, so he calls him a “Baldhead! Ass” As a result he is struck on the head by “Bogus Foreign Devil.” When he pays court to Amah Wu, who is a widowed female servant in the Zhao’s household, he is beaten by the son of Mr. Zhao, the successful candidate. Ah Q loses his odd jobs and thinks that the low fellow Young D, who is a thin and weakly pauper and worse in Ah Q’s eyes than Whiskers Wang, steals his living from him. So he picks a fight with Young D. Ah Q is always defeated, except for the fight with Young D, which seems to end in neither victory nor defeat. However, Ah Q never thinks he has lost. On the contrary, he considers himself the victor. Of course, it is a kind of “psychological victory.” He lives in extreme poverty, but when quarreling with someone he often says, “We used to be much better off than you! Who do you think you are?” (LXQJ 1:490; Works 1:107). When someone pulls his brownish queue, bumps his head against the wall four or five times, and walks away, satisfied at having won, Ah Q would think and say to himself, “It’s as if I were beaten by my son. What the world is coming to nowadays!...” (LXQJ 1:492; Works 1:109). But then he would walk away, satisfied at having won. Later on Ah Q takes to saying out loud various things he says to himself. From then on, whenever somebody grabs his queue they would say:

“Ah Q, this is not a son beating his father, it is a man beating a beast. Let’s hear you say it: A man beating a beast!”

Then Ah Q, clutching at the root of his queue, his head on one side, would say, “Beating an insect--how about that? I am an insect--now will you let me go?” (LXQJ 1:492; Works 1:109-10).

Though he is beaten again, Ah Q walks away satisfied that he has won. The narrator relates: “he was the ‘Number One self-belittler,’ and that after subtracting ‘self-belittler’ what remained was ‘Number One.’ Was not the highest successful candidate in the official examination also ‘Number One’? ‘And who do you think you are?’” (LXQJ 1:492; Works 1:110). Moreover, in order to get rid of the bitterness of defeat, he can even beat himself. After slapping his own face hard, his heart feels lighter, for it seems as if he slapped some other self: “and soon it was just as if he had beaten someone else--in spite of the fact that his face was still tingling. He lay down satisfied that he had gained the victory” (LXQJ 1:492; Works 1:112). With this psychological victory, Ah Q rationalizes the humiliating results, so that they seem advantageous to him and he has pleasure.

When Ah Q is bullied and humiliated by the strong, he follows the example of the strong and stretches out his hand to the weak. After being beaten by Bogus Foreign Devil, he runs into a little Buddhist nun in front of the tavern. He blames all his bad luck that day on meeting her. He insults, teases, and bullies her with dirty language in front of the customers of the tavern. When the nun is wailing some distance away, Ah Q still roars with delighted laughter.

The narrator presents Ah Q’s extremely weird thought and behavior not only through
his actions but also through his heart. The character has a very special code of conduct: "psychological victory" and cowering before the strong while bullying the weak. This is not an isolated phenomenon, but one that occurs in all sorts of ways at different times and with different people. When "The True Story of Ah Q" was published as a serial, many readers were in fear and trembling, dreading lest an attack on them should follow. Someone thought that the latest installment, published the previous day, had been an attack on him (LXQJ 3: 281). Ah Q's achieves psychological victory because he cannot grasp his destiny amidst historical changes. More importantly, this relates to his country's long history, during which it had been repeatedly bullied by big powers; Ah Q's attitude may psychologically reflect that an oppressed and humiliated nation has no choice. C. T. Hsia writes: "To Chinese readers this trait of character, reminiscent of recent history, gave a fresh satiric perspective to their country's pathetic stance among the bullying and more powerful nations" (37).

Lu Xun said that in "The True Story of Ah Q" he tried to "take the soul of one of our contemporary countrymen and write it down." At the same time, he recognized that "it is really difficult in China to try to depict the soul of such a silent countryman, since I have said, we Chinese are still the people of an uninnovated ancient country" (LXQJ 7: 77-78). Later, he wrote under a pseudonym: "Twelve years ago Lu Xun wrote 'The True Story of Ah Q,' no doubt with the intention of exposing the national failings" (LXQJ 5: 114; Works 3: 286). This intention was realized, in part, through the use of an omniscient narrator, who represents all of Ah Q's folly to the readers. The depiction of a vivid character allowed a sharp dissection of "the national failings" and shocked the readers. The omniscient narrator looks far and wide, talks freely about ancient or modern times, and makes commentaries on the events and characters.

The narrator connects Ah Q to the 1911 Revolution, which disappointed Lu Xun. At the beginning, Ah Q does not understand the revolution. It occurs to him that the revolutionaries are rebels, and they would give him a hard time. Hence he detests them and keeps away from them. But they strike fear in a widely respected and successful provincial candidate. Ah Q is pleased that the revolution had frightened highly prestigious people, and he follows the revolutionaries. Without understanding what the revolution is all about, Ah Q yearns to change his petty and low position in Weizhuang and to gain people's respect: "I shall take what I want! I shall like whom I please!" (LXQJ 1: 513; Works 1: 137). The idea of revolution leads him to indulge in fantasy. The omniscient narrator goes into his mind and reveals his imagination:

"Revolt? It would be fine.... A troop of revolutionaries would come, all in white maces, bombs, foreign guns, sharp-pointed double-edged knives, and spears with hooks. When they passed this temple they would call out, 'Ah Q! Come along with us!' And then I would go with them....
"Then the fun would start. All the villagers, the whole lousy lot, would kneel down and plead, 'Ah Q, spare us!' But who would listen to them! The first to die would be Young D and Mr. Zhao, then the successful county candidate and the Bogus Foreign Devil.... But perhaps I would spare a few. I would once have spared Whiskers Wang, but now I don't even want him....
"Things...I would go straight in and open the cases: silver ingots, foreign coins, foreign calico jackets.... [...]"
Ah Q not only strongly desires the revolution, he wants to bring it about at once. First, he goes to the Convent of Quiet Self-Improvement, but the successful county candidate and the Foreign Devil already made a revolution before him: they smashed into fragments an imperial tablet inscribed "Long live the Empire." Then, he also twists his queue up on his head like people who are going to join the revolution, and he wants to get into touch with the revolutionary party. He wants to talk things over with Bogus Foreign Devil, the only revolutionary he has known. Unfortunately, the latter drives him out and does not allow him to join the revolution. Moreover, when the Zhao family is robbed, Ah Q is wrongly accused of having been the robber, apprehended by the police, and taken finally to the execution ground. Only on the way there does Ah Q recognize that he is going to have his head cut off. At this moment, the omniscient narrator reenters his heart: he is seized by panic and everything turns dark before his eyes, but then he is quite calm, because "in this world probably it was the fate of everybody at some time to have his head cut off" (LXQJ 1: 525; Works 1: 152). When he takes a look at the shouting crowd, Ah Q remembers that four years ago, at the foot of the mountain, he met a hungry wolf which followed him at a distance, wanting to eat him. He nearly died of fright, but luckily he happened to have a knife in his hand which gave him the courage to get back to Weizhuang. He never forgot the wolf’s eyes, fierce yet cowardly, gleaming like two will-o’-the-wisps, as if boring into him from a distance:

Now he saw eyes more terrible even than the wolf’s: dull yet penetrating eyes that having devoured his words still seemed eager to devour something beyond his flesh and blood. And these eyes kept following him at a set distance.
These eyes seemed to have merged into one, biting into his soul.
"Help, help!"
But Ah Q never uttered these words. All had turned black before his eyes, there was a buzzing in his ears, and he felt as if his whole body were being scattered like so much light dust (LXQJ 1: 526; Works 1: 153).

In the last sentence the narrator reveals what goes on in Ah Q’s innermost mind just before his execution. Narrator-characters in internal focalization and narrators in external focalization cannot do this. The former can freely reveal his own thoughts, secret, or feeling, and he can indicate his opinions and comments on other characters, but he cannot enter into the inner world of the other characters. The omniscient narrator can situate himself outside the story far or near, look down at the development of events and the activities of characters, and, as in “The True Story of Ah Q,” he can freely enter into any character’s soul. It is very important that this omniscient narrator relates both Ah Q’s external behavior and his internal thoughts and feelings. The Chinese critic Ouyang Fanhai finds in the treatment of Runtu in “My Old Home” traces of the sympathy that Lu Xun felt for Ah Q. Lyell disagrees. He thinks that the two men are treated radically differently. In the case of Runtu, both Lu Xun and his readers remain on the outside: we see Runtu as a figure in a painting and never move into his psyche to see, feel and experience the world as he does. In the case of Ah Q, Lu Xun invites us inside the
labyrinth of his protagonist’s psyche, showing us around, pointing out this and that in a fashion that occasionally causes us to realize with a flash that some back corridors of our psyches are not totally dissimilar from what we find in Ah Q (Lyell, Reality 239).

The narrator of Ah Q is an intellectual with sharp eyes and a good knowledge of foreign and Chinese history. He gains insight into Ah Q, but remains aloof and calm. He does not get involved with the protagonist’s emotions, he does not criticize his eccentric actions, he does not sympathize with his protagonist for being bullied, nor does he express his indignation for his bullying the weak. However, this is just the surface. The narrator’s meticulous choice of narrative material, and his calm and ironic tone reveals his feeling. Once Ah Q is dead, the narrator turns his eyes on Weizhuang’s villagers and on the people in town who saw how Ah Q was sent under escort to the execution:

As for any discussion of the event, no question was raised in Weizhuang. Naturally all agreed that Ah Q had been a bad man, the proof being that he had been shot; for it he had not been bad, how could he have been shot? But the consensus of opinion in town was unfavourable. Most people were dissatisfied, because a shooting was not such a fine spectacle as a decapitation; and what a ridiculous culprit he had been too, to pass through so many streets without singing a single line from an opera. They had followed him for nothing (LXQJ 1: 527; Works 1: 154).

There are no explicit criticism here of Weizhuang’s villagers, but the lightly ironic narration reveals the narrator’s emotion and his sorrow between the lines. Just because Ah Q is executed, everybody in Weizhuang agrees that he was an evil man. The people in town were interested in watching the desperate struggle of a convict awaiting execution. All of them cruelly enjoy the suffering and destruction of life, all are cold, detached, stupid, and ignorant, similar to those people who often gather to gape, with evident enjoyment, at the skinning of the sheep before the mutton shops in Beijing (LXQJ 1: 163). As “spectators at a drama,” they want to amuse themselves while a man lays down his life.

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1 The cannibalistic theme repeatedly appears in Lu Xun’s writings. He wrote in 1925, “Our vaunted Chinese civilization is only a feast of human flesh prepared for the rich and mighty. And China is only the kitchen where these feasts are prepared.” “Thus since the dawn of civilization countless feasts--large and small--of human flesh have been spread, and those at these feasts eat others and are eaten themselves” (LXQJ 1: 216-17; Works 2: 156-57).
2 Lu Xun adds in a note: “Yi Ya, a favorite of Duke of Huan of Qi in the seventh century B.C., was a good cook and sycophant. When the duke remarked that he had never tasted the flesh of children, Yi Ya cooked his own son for him to eat” (Works 1: 48).
3 Canon for Girls, A book describing the feudal standard of behaviour for girls and the virtues they should cultivate (Works 1: 200).
4 In Chapter Six of The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness, Lin Yu-sheng analyses Lu Xun’s complex consciousness, using many examples from Lu Xun’s experiences (Crisis 104-51). As for Lu Xun’s attitude to Chinese tradition itself, Leo Ou-fan distinguishes “tradition and counter-tradition.” He notices that Lu Xun openly acknowledged that his mind had been “poisoned” by thoughts of the ancient philosopher Zhuang Zi: “sometimes carefree and capricious, other times petulant and anxious.” On the other hand, Lu
Xu also confessed that “books of the Confucian and Mencian school, which I had read earliest and known best, seemed to have nothing to do with me.” Leo Ou-fan thinks that the general range of Lu Xun’s tastes in traditional Chinese culture tended to fall beyond what has been known as the “great tradition” [Confucian and Mencian school]: “All these intellectual preferences tend to lean toward what may be called the ‘counter-traditions’ in Chinese culture—strains of thought and sensibility that were opposed to, or at considerable remove from, the orthodox line of Confucian philosophers, from Confucius and Mencius to Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming. These ‘counter’ interests which grew out of his scholarly research in traditional literature and culture served also as the kernel of his iconoclastic stance as a leader of the May Fourth intellectual movement” (Voice 25-46).

5 If ST designates story time and NT narrative time then:

pause: NT = n, ST = 0. NT \rightarrow ST; scene: NT = ST; summary: NT < ST; ellipsis: NT = 0. Thus: NT < \infty ST.

6 According to Chatman, the five movements are as follows. Summary: the discourse is briefer than the events depicted; Ellipsis: the discourse halts, though time continues to pass in the story. Scene: the scene is the incorporation of the dramatic principle into narrative. Story and discourse here are of relatively equal duration. Stretch: discourse-time is longer than story-time. Pause: story-time stops though the discourse continues, as in descriptive passages (Story 68-74).

7 Noting Homer’s special description of Helen’s beauty, Lessing wrote: “Even Homer, who so carefully abstains from all detailed description of corporeal beauty, from whom we barely learn, even parenthetically, that Helen has white arms and beautiful hair, even this poet knows nevertheless how to give us an idea of her beauty, which far surpasses all that art is capable of representing to us” (165).

8 Lu Xun was very careful in writing this story. He avoided to give specific names to his characters and places, so that readers could not misinterpret them as referring to any particular person or particular place: “I take these afore-mentioned precautions not because I am afraid of giving offence but to avoid ridiculous complications so that the impact of the work may be more concentrated and powerful. [...] My method is to make the reader unable to tell who this character can be apart from himself, so that he cannot back away to become a bystander but is bound to suspect that this may be a portrait of himself if not of every man, and that may start him thinking” (LXQJ 6: 113-14; Works 4: 141).

9 To the editor who adapted “The True Story of Ah Q” for the stage and published it in his magazine The Theatre in 1934, Lu Xun described the appearance of Ah Q as follows: “To my mind, Ah Q should be about thirty, quite ordinary-looking, with a peasant’s simplicity and stupidity, but also a touch of rougish cunning. You can probably find shades of him among Shanghai rickshaw men and carters, but he is no tough, no scavenger” (LXQJ 6: 117; Works 4: 143).