

Analysis of the Narrative Labyrinth in Ge Fei's *The Brown Flock*

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Abstract—The avant-garde writer Ge Fei is renowned in the Chinese literary world for the complexity of his narratives. This essay primarily conducts a close reading of his representative work, *The Brown Flock*, through a structuralist approach. Influenced by Borges, Ge Fei's perception of time exhibits a state of cyclical dissolution within contradictory memories, with the focus of the novel being on the act of narrative itself rather than the narrative content. Therefore, this article concentrates on narrative analysis, revealing the phenomenon of “narrative stratification” in the text and further deducing a nested “meta-fiction” structure. Finally, it explores narrative consciousness and metaphysical reflections on time.

Keywords—Ge Fei, *The Brown Flock*, narrative analysis, time, metaphor

I. INTRODUCTION

Ge Fei's *The Brown Flock* was first published in 1989 and, was acclaimed as one of the most difficult novels to understand in China. After enduring prolonged ideological tyranny during the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese intellectual community finally experienced a modernist enlightenment in mid-1980s, and led to a peak of modernist literary creation in early 1990s. These works later were called as “Avant-garde Literature.”

Specifically, we could analysis this text from two dimensions: time and narrative. First, Ge Fei's perception of time is deeply influenced by Borges. In *The Garden of the Branching Paths*, Borges utilizes the metaphor of constantly branching paths to depict the proliferation of time, “He believed in an infinite series of times, in a growing and dizzying web of diverging and converging and parallel times [1].” Borges denies the traditional linear view of time, presenting parallel worlds where every moment of the present is a repetition of past and future [2]. However, Ge Fei diverges from Borges' philosophical novelistic form and, he presents a cyclical dissolution of time through contradictory memories. Second, all memories are presented through narrative, but his emphasis lies not in the content of narrative but the act of storytelling itself, which means narrative content does not point to a world beyond the narrative and thus lacks explicit meaning. Its existence serves only to enable the narrative act, becoming a game of linguistic self-reference, as Barthes stated, “In narrative works... what happens is solely language, is the adventure of language [3].” After full acknowledgment of the fictitious nature of narrative, the Reflection Theory, which advocates for works should truly reproduce social environment, is bankrupt. Consequently, the linear view of time built upon it no longer remains the sole organizing thread of narrative. The external grand narrative inward

turns to individual experiences, enabling the further contemplation on time.

Therefore, this essay will focus on narrative analysis, consisting of three related parts. First, reveal the phenomenon of narrative stratification, which is the starting point to analysis the complexity of text. Second, deduce its nested “meta-fiction” narrative structure through close reading. Finally, the ultimate goal is attempting to explore the composition of narrative consciousness and the author's metaphysical contemplation on “time.”

II. NARRATIVE STRATIFICATION: COMPLEXITY FROM FIRST-PERSON PERSPECTIVE

Scholars almost categorize narrative acts into two levels: the “pre-narrated text” appears in a natural temporal state before narration and provides countless material to “narrated text [4].” This demonstrates the essence of narrative act is to select and re-arrange the pre-narrated text, allowing it to be aesthetically perceived within limited space of narrated text. It is essential to distinguish three main narrative subjects: author, narrator, and characters. The author is the creator of work, corresponding to reader, i.e., both of whom belong to real world outside to narrative world, maintaining a relative independence from it. The narrator is the direct teller of whole narrated text, corresponding to narrative recipient, i.e., both of whom inside to narrative world. The characters are active subjects who are narrated to participate in plots. In this sense, Corverndez correctly summarizes, “When a person (author) imagines a person (narrator) to tell experiences of somebody or himself (characters) to readers, it is a novel [5].” This indicates that a novel should first create a narrator rather than character, and not only consider the relationships among characters but also the way in which the narrator relates to narration. Therefore, the narrator always exists on a higher narrative layer than characters:

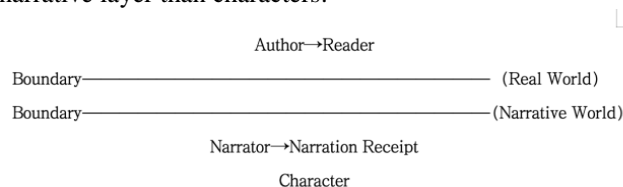


Fig. 1. Narrative elements.

Many novels written in third-person perspective appear only characters throughout text, with narrator remaining invisible. Consequently, the narrated text appears as one single layer, namely the character layer. Moreover, since the narrative act has been simplified to a negligible extent, such works often provide readers with a clear sense and they tend to pay more attention to plots. This exemplifies the

traditional narrative mode of plot-oriented novels.

However, if narrated text simultaneously presents both acts of characters and narrator, then narrative stratification occurs: the narrative act itself—the process of narrator telling story—becomes palpable. *The Brown Flock* is composed of such a combination of two narrative layers: the first layer narrates a girl named Qi visiting “my” dwelling by the water, listening to “my” storytelling; the second layer is this story itself.

In fact, such technique has already employed in *Don Quixote*. Cervantes not only presents the adventures of Don Quixote but also depicts the process of how stories about him are organized and circulated: it begins with an Arab writer composing a biography, then a person (“I”) searches for manuscripts, and finally, a Moorish person translates them into Spanish [6]. Due to the third-person perspective in this novel, readers could easily distinguish between the narrator layer (Arab writer → “I” → Moorish person) and character layer (Don Quixote, *et al.*). However, in *The Brown Flock*, both narrator and character are referred to in first-person perspective as “I,” which significantly increases the complexity of reading. Let us take the beginning of novel as an example:

At present, it seems that the ship of seasons has run aground. Dawn and dusk alternate like the steps of grandfather. I dwell in a place called “by the water,” writing a book akin to “The Prophecies of St. John [7].”

This should be a recollection of the present “me” to the past “me.” Even though both use first-person pronoun, there is a subtle *temporal distinction* between them: the “I” existing in the past is narrated/recalled by the “I” existing in the present. Thus, the past “me” becomes a character, while the present “me” becomes a narrator. Therefore, the “I” presented in the beginning of novel is a character, namely, the past “me,” while the narrator—the present “me”—remains invisible.

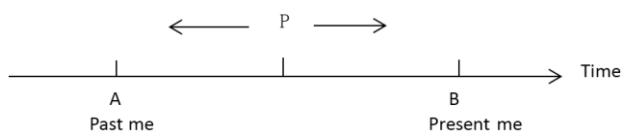


Fig. 2. Narrative temporal plot.

As shown above, P represents the narrative perspective of novel. In the first narrative layer, P overlaps with B, and the story is narrated by a hidden present “me,” situated outside the story. While in the second narrative layer, P overlaps with A, and the story is narrated by past “me,” situated inside the story. The character (past “me”) in first layer becomes the narrator in second layer. As the narrative perspective shifts from present “me” to past “me,” the narrative act completes the stratification from a higher layer to a lower layer. Therefore, due to the use of same first-person pronoun for both narrator and character in *The Brown Flock*, readers would easily overlook the temporal distinction between same pronoun “I” and the narrative stratification.

Genette has correctly analyzed this phenomenon. He uses “extradiegetic” to indicate that narrator is outside the

certain narrative layer, who is invisible; and “intradiegetic” to indicate that narrator appears inside the certain narrative layer, who is visible. Meanwhile, he uses “heterodiegetic” to indicate that narrator does not participate in story process; and “homodiegetic” to indicate that narrator participates in story process [8]. This suggests that the first two terms focus on narrative layer in which the narrator is situated, while the latter two terms focus on relationship between narrator and story. It is generally believed that any narration using the first-person perspective is intradiegetic, because the narrator is inside to story. However, the complexity of *The Brown Flock* lies in the fact that, due to the temporal distinction, the first-person narrator (present “me”) in the first narrative layer could appear outside the story to narrate his own story [9].

Therefore, we could conclude that the first narrative layer in *The Brown Flock* is extradiegetic and homodiegetic narration, while the second layer is intradiegetic and homodiegetic narration. This forms a nostalgic atmosphere and a kind of “interior space” detached from external environment at very beginning, which provides convenience of narration for Ge Fei to further develop his “poetics of time.”

III. NARRATIVE NESTING: INTRADIEGETIC INTRUSION AND META-FICTION

After clarifying the narrative stratification, I will sequentially number each plot unit. According to chronological order of narrated text and classify them into their respective narrative layers via a close reading. (Units with “*” belong to the first narrative layer, while those with square brackets belong to the second.)

1. I reside in a place called “by the water,” writing a book similar to “The Prophecies of St. John.” There, every day, brown migratory flock fly by, and I can infer time order based on direction of their flight.

2. A woman named Qi, dressed in orange-red (or brown-red) clothing, arrives at my dwelling. She claims to know me, but I deny it, “There has never been any visitor to my dwelling.”

3. Qi spends whole evening listening to me narrate the story of my newlywed wife’s death of cerebral hemorrhage.

4.* In April one year, I found myself captivated by a beautiful woman wearing chestnut-colored boots outside the Penguin Hotel, and “unconsciously, I followed her for half the city.” She suddenly stopped and approached me. I was very nervous, but she only picked up a boot stud in front of me and then disappeared into crowd...

5. Qi expresses dissatisfaction with my story and demands me to continue. She casually adds, “After that woman picked up boot stud, she boarded a tram heading to outskirts. You missed that tram, but you hailed a taxi and followed her to her residence in outskirts.”

6.* “The fact is indeed as Qi said, but she got one irrelevant detail wrong.” At that time, I did not have enough money for a taxi, so I rented a bicycle instead.

7.* It was already dark, with the wind and snow howling, and it seemed I had a minor collision with another cyclist.

8.* The woman walked onto a narrow wooden bridge, and I prepared to cross it in the storm. At that moment, I encountered an old man holding a lantern who claimed the bridge keeper. He told me that the bridge had been washed away by flood twenty years ago. I asked him twice whether he had seen a woman crossing bridge, but both times received a negative answer. I had no choice but to turn back.

9.* On the way back, I suddenly felt my bicycle hit something hard, and I discovered it was a bicycle lying askew by roadside.

10. Qi seems to have already guessed the ending: the askew bicycle belonged to that woman, and she had long been knocked down by me and fell to death under the bridge. I remain silent about it. Qi expresses disappointment, and comments, "This is a very cliché ending."

(The first section of novel ends.)

11. Much later, Qi asks me whether I had ever seen her again. Therefore, I begin a new round of narration.

12.* In the spring of 1992, I was invited to outskirts to revise my novel. One day, I saw a man and a woman embracing each other "rolling down the hillside." I rushed over to separate them, and the woman, feeling embarrassed, told me that he was her husband. Then I realized the woman was the same person I had encountered at Penguin Hotel years ago. I felt inexplicable melancholy.

13.* A few days later, I went to the tavern and encountered her once again. She was unable to carry her drunken husband back home and sought my help. Upon arriving home, I recounted to her many details of that night when I followed her on the bicycle, but she denied them all: she claimed she hadn't been to the city since she was ten years old; there was indeed a collapsed wooden bridge leading to city, but it was not washed away by flood; rather, the wood was stolen by someone. She then added that many years ago, her husband went to neighboring village for a drink and, using a lantern for illumination, discovered many disordered footprints on bridge. The next day, people retrieved a bicycle and the corpse of a young man under the bridge.

14. After listening to my story, Qi comments, "Your story is always a circle, unfolding the plot while implying repetition. As long as you are happy, you can keep telling it forever," I continue narrating.

15.* On a rainy night thereafter, the woman came to me, saying her husband had fallen into a cesspit while drunk and drowned. I helped her bury her husband.

16.* After the funeral, I climbed into woman's bed

and proposed to marry her.

17.* On the wedding day, she suddenly had a *cerebral hemorrhage* and died in front of me.

18. After listening to my story, Qi prepares to leave because she knows "there is no room for any further extension in my story."

(The second section of novel ends.)

19. Years later, Qi still dressed in orange-red (or brown-red) clothing, comes to my dwelling, but she has no memory of our previous encounter. She keeps insisting that she is not Qi, just a passerby asking for water.

20. Once again, she departs from me, and the brown flock flutter their wings, soaring across the silver-white and steel-blue sky by the water [7].

We could visually represent the narrative structure of text:

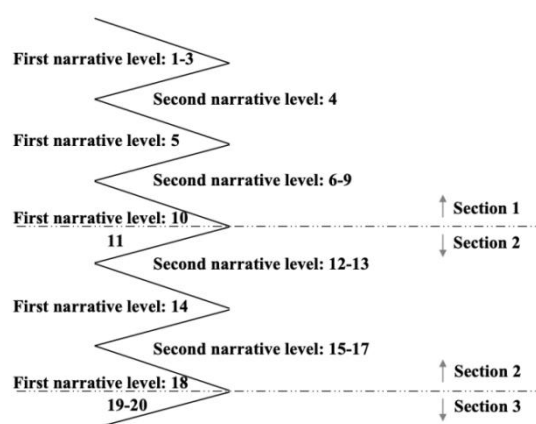


Fig. 3. Narrative nesting.

This structure exhibits a tight nested form, characterized by continuous commentary interventions from the first narrative layer to the second layer (Qi intermittently interrupts "my" narration, offering comments and supplements to story). However, if interventions occur only outside to story, it does not the characteristics of modernist novels. For example, in Romain Rolland's *Jean-Christophe*, there are over ten pages to discuss the "revolutionary ideals" [4]. Although they interspersed within narrative flow, are easily recognizable as not originating from characters but a narrator situated a higher layer than story. Since these passages do not convey any *new* information crucial to narrative progression but merely offer comments on given content, removing them would not impact the development of narrative. Perhaps, drawing on the terminology proposed by Genette in last section, we could label this traditional intervention as "*extradiegetic intrusion*" and, inspired by Lukacs, regard it as a form of static description unrelated to narrative [10], with a narrative speed approaching zero.

However, the narrative intervention of *The Brown Flock* presents the opposite feature of "*intradiegetic intrusion*." This is primarily manifested in the intervenor of the second narrative layer, "Qi," who simultaneously is a character in the first narrative layer. In relation to the story within second layer, Qi is outside the story, but within *The Brown Flock*, Qi is also inside the story. Therefore, her intervention towards the second narrative layer is still an integral part of whole narrated text. This modernist intervention forms a

meta-fiction pattern of “discussing the forming process of story within story itself [4]” which also responds to the characteristics of modernist novels outlined at the beginning of this essay: narrative act gradually replaces narrative content as the core of narrative aesthetic activity. This demonstrates that the narrator exhibits a strong self-awareness, and any narrative act potentially stems from their subjective experiences, thus negating the model of Reflection Theory that the narrator is reporting objective reality. Furthermore, since intradiegetic intrusion itself is part of narrative, it inevitably affects the development of plot: in Units 3, 5, 10, 11, and 14, Qi not only acts as the role of narrative recipient, commenting on stories told by “me”; more importantly, she is also the *driving force* making “me” continue the narration and the guide for unfolding story plots. This phenomenon is most evident in Units 5 and 10: superficially, Qi only comments on the events that have already taken place; in fact, Qi’s comments (she casually added...) deeply influence the future direction of “my” narration.

This demonstrates that without Qi’s additions, or without her to some extent guiding and directing “me,” this story could likely have ended abruptly; or, if continued, it could have turned into a completely different way, which means “my” memories having multiple parallel possibilities. However, the past should ideally be unaffected by the present, since past time has already elapsed, becoming a solid objective existence that cannot be altered; but in narration, the situation is opposite. The “unchangeable” past is precisely because the ongoing process of recollection through narration establishes a close connection with the present, and even changes its original trajectory. This indicates that time gradually becomes a kind of mental experience in narration, thereby losing the definiteness it should have as a physical dimension. Thus, a paradox arises: the present moment could be an ever-passing moment, so the past time only becomes the thing we truly feel; however, the past time is the greatest source of illusion, meaning that what we use to support ourselves is something forever lost and irretrievable [11].

Once time becomes a kind of mental experience, narration inevitably undergoes a trend of “inward turn,” thus becoming a representation of individual inner consciousness. This sets the strategy for next section where we will explore the narrative consciousness of text from a psychological perspective.

IV. NARRATIVE CONSCIOUSNESS: IMPRESSIONS, RECOLLECTIONS AND TIME

In Wu’s analysis of *Remembrance of Things Past*, he divides the narrator’s memory into “unconscious memory” and “conscious memory.” The former is “deeply buried in mind and difficult to be consciously aware of without specific triggers,” thus exhibiting fragmented, contemporaneous, and disorderly characteristics. The latter links these fragments into a coherent entirety with temporal sequence or causal relationships, thus forming the episodic and narrative aspects of memory. This dichotomy is also applicable in *The Brown Flock*. We could regard the narrator’s “unconscious memory” as impressions, which may be clear at certain points, but lack coherent

connections for effective storytelling; while the narrator’s “conscious memory” could be regarded as recollections, characterized by plots. In other words, if the impressions are “pre-narrated text” of memory, then recollections are “narrated text” re-encoding the impressions.

However, impressions are not concerned with faithfully re-encoding the empirical world. The various materials they provide for recollections have already been filtered through subjective experiences, presenting personalized states of mind. Pater vividly describes this process from experience to impression:

At first sight experience seems to bury us under a flood of external objects, pressing upon us with a sharp and importunate reality...If we continue to dwell in thought on this world, not of objects in the solidity with which language invests them, but of impressions unstable, flickering, inconsistent, which burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them...[12]

Here, Pater distinguishes between two states: “Objects in the solidity with language” and “dwell in thought on world,” while Stein also shares a similar view. She passionately points out, “I had always known it and its name but all the same I did discover it.” We could also discern the difference between “know its name” and “discover it [13].” The former points to empirical cognition, that is, let the reader grasp events in a conceptual way, and since the concept is largely derived from the universal empirical system, which is in an abstract form, the function of empirical expression is more to convey information than to express pathos. The latter points to intuitive/feeling cognition, aiming to reconstruct the empirical world through an *individual* way. Consequently, these expressions often focus on unique details and may even evoke a sense of unfamiliarity due to the refusal to use a universal empirical framework. For instance, Tagore’s *The Postmaster* contains the following expression:

He longed for the security of metalled roads, of tall houses which blocked the sight of clouds in the open sky [14].

This sentence clearly offers an impressionistic interpretation of the abstract concept of “security” and associates it with “metalled roads.” Perhaps, to this postmaster who comes from city and feels strange in rural environment, the metalled roads have become his most intuitive impression of city and the primary source of his sense of security. This transforms the external world from being an objective existence independent of individual and could only be passively reflected, to being infinitely connected to individual, forming a bidirectional interaction between the external environment and inner consciousness. This is what Clark refers to as “action loops that criss-cross the organism and its environment [15].”

Through the analysis of impressions, we may perhaps understand why many similar but misplaced details appear in *The Brown Flock*. For example, in the Units 8 and 13, the same detail of “lantern” is mentioned, but the person holding the lantern shifts from the old bridge keeper to the husband of woman wearing chestnut-colored boots. Similarly,

“collapsed wooden bridge” shifts from being washed away by flood to being stolen by someone. This indicates that these details are not reflections of objective reality [4], but rather externalizations of some inner consciousness. Second, from impressions to recollections/narrations, the narrator must be guided by a certain narrative consciousness to organized these unordered impressions to form a story. At this very point, Qi’s comments have a significant influence on “my” consciousness, causing “me” to nearly unconsciously continue narrating according to the story pattern set by Qi. Therefore, “my” two rounds of narration are in different states of mind, which is the fundamental reason for appearance of similar but different details. James has made a precise analysis of such phenomenon:

Consciousness, does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as ‘chain’ or ‘train’ do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A ‘river’ or a ‘stream’ are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described [16].

From the metaphor of river, we could understand the two primary features of consciousness: “Each personal consciousness states are always changing” and “each personal consciousness is sensibly continuous.” Just as a person cannot step into the same river twice, one cannot experience the same mental state twice. However, this does not prevent the self-consciousness from being recognized as an entirety, and the reason for it is this “community of self” characterized by “warmth and intimacy.”

As mentioned above, in Units 10–11, the second round of narration of “me” should have been influenced by Qi’s comment (“This is a very cliché ending”). Although two rounds of narration share similar details, the endings are different (the woman being pushed off the bridge by me VS. the woman dying of cerebral hemorrhage on wedding day). Could this be seen as a narrative adjustment made by “me” under dominance of the consciousness of “Trying to adjust this cliché story better”? When this new narrative consciousness gradually becomes the strongest neural process at present, the original recollections are not completely eliminated but just weakened in intensity, waiting to be re-organized by new consciousness. Their co-existence as depicted below:

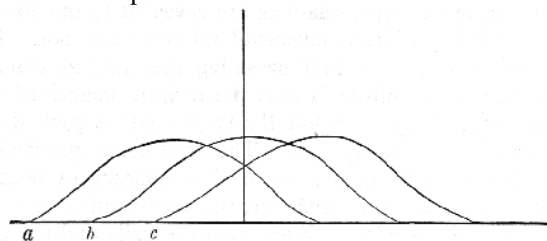


Fig. 4. Different narrative consciousnesses [16].

James uses the analogy of overtones in music to liken the already declined and yet to emerge neural processes (a and c), “They are not separately heard by the ear; they blend with the fundamental note, and suffuse and alter it (Herman, 2011).” Similarly, in *The Brown Flock*, several declined consciousness surround the dominant consciousness in the

form of a halo or fringe, making a unique state of recollection/narration that is both clear and blurry, orderly and disorderly.

Finally, the analysis of narrative consciousness naturally leads to contemplation of time. If the woman dies of cerebral hemorrhage (Unit 17) is a “less clichéd” ending concocted by “me” under the influence of Qi, then why does the narrator explicitly tell the reader at the beginning of novel that Qi is listening to a story about “my wife dying of a cerebral hemorrhage” (Unit 3)? It is a temporal paradox: if this story is purely fabricated and unrelated to reality, why does this fictitious ending appear before the act of storytelling? Conversely, if “my wife dying of a cerebral hemorrhage” is indeed true, why does the first round of narration tell a different ending (Units 9–10)? We could continue to ask such questions, thereby falling into the narrative trap carefully prepared by Ge Fei, namely, a kind of Möbius strip-like infinite loop structure. Furthermore, the most intriguing part is the Unit 19. Why does the returning Qi deny knowing “me” from before? This is very similar to the plot at the beginning of the novel where “I” deny knowing Qi (Unit 2), creating an echoic structure. My argument is that she comes from a narrative layer higher than “me,” which we might call “zeroth narrative layer”: the encounter between the returning Qi and “me” is like Shakespeare meeting Hamlet, entirely impossible but becoming “reality” within narrative. If the appearance of first narrative layer undermines the truthfulness of second layer, making readers know that is just a story, then the appearance of “zeroth layer” would undermine the first layer, and as long as the author wishes, this nested structure could proliferate infinitely.

V. CONCLUSION

Perhaps, this is Ge Fei’s metaphysical contemplation of time: time could destroy facts, while narration recreates them. Is it because time erodes human memory, or because all human existences are entirely constructed by narration?[17] In endless questioning of time, there are no conceptual answers, only the vast metaphor constituted by entire text. Ge Fei is not telling a story, but time and existence.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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