

## The Representation of Consciousness in Third-Person Contexts<sup>1</sup>

### Part I: Psycho-Narration

Psycho-narration is the term Cohn uses for the most indirect technique for the narration of consciousness in the third person. This technique involves the narration of a character's consciousness in the language of the narrator, rather than the mental language of the character, that emanates from the mind of the narrator himself or herself and that makes no attempt to hide the narrator as its origin.

#### *Early Avoidance*

From Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*:

"How Miss Sharp lay awake, thinking, will he come or not to-morrow? need not be told here. To-morrow came, and, as sure as fate, Mr. Joseph Sedley made his appearance before luncheon."

Cohn: "The avoidance of psycho-narration is characteristic for a novel in which a hyperactive narrator deals with a multitude of characters and situations by rapid shifts in time and space. This pattern dominates the third-person novel well into the nineteenth century."

In these "narrator-oriented" novels, or social novels, the emphasis is placed upon manifest behavior. The characters' inner lives are revealed "only indirectly through spoken language and telling gesture."

From Fielding's *Tom Jones*:

A gentle sigh stole from Sophia at these words, which perhaps contributed to form a dream of no very pleasant kind; but as she never revealed this dream to any one, so the reader cannot expect to see it related here.

As to the present situations of her [Sophia's] mind, I shall adhere to a rule of Horace, by not attempting to describe it, from despair of success.

Cohn: "In pronouncedly authorial narration, then, the inner life of an individual character becomes a sounding-board for general truths about human nature." "A typical passage of psycho-narration starts with a brief sentence or two in the past, followed by several longer and more elaborate sentences in the present." The narrator retreats from the inner mind of his or her characters in order to make aphoristic declarations.

From Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*:

Until this dauntless worldling came in and broke the spell, and lifted the latch, we too have foreborne to enter into that sad chamber. How long had that poor girl been on her knees! what hours of speechless prayer and bitter prostration had she passed there! the war-chroniclers who write brilliant stories of fight and triumph scarcely tell us of these. These are too mean parts of the pageant: and you don't hear windows' cries and mothers' sob in the midst of the shouts and jubilation in the great Chorus of

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<sup>1</sup> From Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*

Victory. And yet when was the time, that such have cried out: heart-broken, humble protestants, unheard in the uproar of the triumph.

From Balzac's *Le Père Goriot*:

The next day Rastignac dressed himself very elegantly, and at about three o'clock in the afternoon went to call on Mme de Restaud, indulging on the way in those dizzily foolish dreams which fill the lives of young men with so much excitement: they then take no account of obstacles nor of dangers, they see success in everything, poeticize their existence simply by the play of their imagination, and render themselves unhappy or sad by the collapse of projects that had yet no existence save in their heated fancy; if they were not ignorant and timid, the social world would not be possible. Eugène walked with extreme caution in order not to get muddy . . . .

Cohn: "In these texts, even as the narrator draws the reader's attention away from the individual fictional character, he fixes it on his own articulate self: a discursive intelligence who communicates with the reader about his character – behind his character's back."

Cohn asserts a "relation of inverse proportion between authorial and figurative minds: the more conspicuous and idiosyncratic the narrator, the less apt he is to reveal the depth of his characters' psyches or, for that matter, to create psyches that have depth to reveal."

#### *Dissonance and Consonance*

Cohn: "In psychological novels, where a fictional consciousness holds center stage, there is considerable variation in the manner of narrating this consciousness. These variations range between two principal types: one is dominated by a prominent narrator who, even as he focuses intently on an individual psyche, remains empathetically distanced from the consciousness he narrates; the other is mediated by a narrator who remains effaced and who readily fuses with the consciousness he narrates."

Example I, Thomas Mann's dissonant narrator, from *Death in Venice*:

Too late, he thought at this moment. Too late! But was it too late? This step he had failed to take, it might quite possibly have led to goodness, levity, salutary sobriety. But the fact doubtless was, that the aging man did not want the sobering, that the intoxication was too dear to him. Who can decipher the nature and pattern of artistic creativity? Who can comprehend the fusion of disciplined and dissolute instincts wherein it is so deeply rooted? For not to be capable of wanting sobriety is dissoluteness. Aschenbach was no longer disposed to self-criticism; the tastes, the spiritual dispositions of his later years, self-esteem, maturity, and tardy single-mindedness disinclined him from analyzing his motives, and from deciding whether it was his conscience, or immorality and weakness that had prevented him from carrying out his intention.

What stylistic features establish dissonance or distance between the narrator and Aschenbach?

- Statements set apart from the narrative proper by their gnomic present tense
- A highly abstract analytical vocabulary used to describe the inner world that affirms the narrator's pose of speculative puzzlement
- The absence of an attempt on the part of the narrator to espouse the syntax or images of Aschenbach's own consciousness
- Distancing appellation ("the aging man")

Cohn: "These stylistic features all point in one direction: the narrator's superior knowledge of the character's inner life and his superior ability to present and assess it. To some degree this superiority is implied in all psycho-narration, even where there is greater cohesion between the narrating and the figural consciousness. But the stronger the authorial cast, the more empathetic the cognitive privilege of the narrator."

Narrative dissonance allows the narrator to explore two dimensions of the character, psychic depth and ethical worth.

Example II, James Joyce's consonant narrator, from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

He shook the sound out of his ears by an angry toss of his head and hurried on, stumbling through the mouldering offal, his heart already bitten by an ache of loathing and bitterness. His father's whistle, his mother's mutterings, the screech of an unseen maniac were to him now so many voices offending and threatening to humble the pride of his youth. He drove the echoes even out of his heart with an execration: but, as he walked down the avenue and felt the grey morning light falling about him through the dripping trees and smelt the strange wild smell of the wet leaves and bark, his soul was loosed of her miseries.

The rain-laden trees of the avenue evoked in him, as always, memories of the girls and women in the plays of Gerhardt Hauptmann; and the memory of their pale sorrows and the fragrance falling from the wet branches mingled in a mood of quiet joy.

Note the absence of those stylistic characteristics that set Mann's narrator at a distance from his character:

- no gnomic present statements
- no speculative or explanatory commentary
- no distancing appellations

In addition, the narrator:

- avoids prominent analytical or conceptual terms, reportorial indirection, and subordination of the "he thought (felt, knew)" variety
- intertwines thoughts and feelings with sensations

The narrative voice is still present, but it "yields to . . . figural thoughts and feelings even as it reports them." The narrator's knowledge of Stephen seems to coincide with Stephen's knowledge of himself.

In this passage from *Portrait*, the narrator's voice becomes more like the voice of Stephen:

Towards dawn he awoke. O what sweet music! His soul was all dewy wet. Over his

limbs in sleep pale cool waves of light had passed. He lay still, as if his soul lay amid cool waters, conscious of faint sweet music. His knowledge, a morning inspiration. A spirit filled him, pure as the purest water, sweet as dew, moving as music. But how faintly it was inbreathed, how passionlessly, as if the seraphim themselves were breathing upon him! His soul was waking slowly, fearing to awake wholly.

*The Special Functions of Psycho-Narration: Summary and Expansion*

Cohn: "In quoted and narrated monologues the rendering of consciousness is temporally restricted to the sequential instants of silent locution, the time of narration roughly coinciding with the narrated time. But psycho-narration has almost unlimited temporal flexibility. It can as readily summarize an inner development over a long period of time as it can render the flow of successive thoughts and feelings, or expand and elaborate a mental instant."

From Austen's *Emma*:

Emma continued to entertain no doubt of her being in love. Her ideas only varied as to the how much. At first she thought it was a good deal; and afterwards but little. She had great pleasure in hearing Frank Churchill talked of; and, for his sake, greater pleasure than ever in seeing Mr. and Mrs. Weston; she was very often thinking of him, and quite impatient for a letter, that she might know how he was, how were his spirits, how was his aunt, and what was the chance of his coming to Randalls again this spring. But, on the other hand, she could not admit herself to be unhappy, nor, after the first morning, to be less disposed for employment than usual; she was still busy and cheerful; and, pleasing as he was, she could yet imagine him to have faults; and further, though thinking of him so much, and, as she sat drawing or working, forming a thousand amusing schemes for the progress and close of their attachment, fancying interesting dialogues, and inventing elegant letters; the conclusion of every imaginary declaration on his side was the she *refused him*. Their affection was always to subside into friendship. Everything tender and charming was to mark their parting; but still they were to part. When she became sensible of this, it struck her that she could not be very much in love.

From Proust, *Un Amour de Swann*:

And then, suddenly, *as asked himself whether that was not precisely what was implied by "keeping" a woman* (as if, in fact, that idea of "keeping" could be derived from elements not at all mysterious nor perverse, but belonging to the intimate routine of his daily life, such as that thousand-franc note, a familiar and domestic object, torn in places and mended with gummed paper, which his valet, after paying the household accounts and the rent, had locked up in a drawer in the old writing-desk whence he had extracted it to send it, with four others, to Odette) *and whether it was not possible to apply to Odette, since he had known her* (for he never imagined for a moment that she could ever have taken a penny from anyone else, before), *that term, which he had believed so wholly inapplicable to her, of "kept" woman*. He could not explore the idea further, for an access of that mental lethargy which was, with him, congenital, intermittent and providential, came, at that moment, to extinguish all light in his brain, as instantaneously as, at a later period, when electric lighting had been everywhere installed, it became possible, merely by fingering a switch, to cut off all the supply of light from a house. His mind fumbled, for a moment, in the darkness, he took off his spectacles, wiped his glasses, passed his hands over his eyes, and saw light again only when *he found himself face to face with a wholly different idea, namely that he must endeavour, in the coming month,*

*to send Odette six or seven thousand-franc notes instead of five, simply as a surprise for her and to give her pleasure. (Emphasis Cohn's)*

*The Special Functions of Psycho-Narration: The narration of Sub-Verbal States*

Cohn: “. . . one of the most important advantages of psycho-narration over the other modes of rendering consciousness lies in its verbal independence from self-articulation. Not only can it order and explain a character's conscious thoughts better than the character himself, it can also effectively articulate a psychic life that remains un verbalized, penumbral, or obscure. Accordingly psycho-narration often renders, in a narrator's knowing words, what a character 'knows,' without knowing how to put it into words.”

From James' *What Maisie Knew*:

She had conceived her first passion, and the object of it was her governess. It hadn't been put to her, and she couldn't, or at any rate didn't, put it to herself, that she liked Miss Overmore better than she liked papa; but it would have sustained her under such an imputation to feel herself able to reply that papa too liked Miss Overmore exactly as much. He has particularly told her so. Besides she could easily see it.

From Mann's *Death in Venice*:

he saw, saw a landscape, a tropical marshland beneath a heavy dank sky, . . . saw . . . hairy palm shafts rising up near and far, saw strangely mis-shapen trees drop their roots through the air into the ground, . . . saw between the knotted stems of the bamboo thicket the lights of a crouching tiger gleaming – and felt his heart throb with terror and inexplicable longing.