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The Narrator's Functions and Narrative Communication in *Tom Jones*

Masafumi Takeda

Since Wayne C. Booth underscored the presence of the narrator in fiction, the criticism of Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* has tended to focus on the functions of its narrator. Booth suggests that the digressive parts of the novel are not "ornamental" but "functional,"¹⁾ and in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, argues that the narrator establishes the intimate relationship with the reader as if it were a "sub-plot." Yet he does not refer to the relationship of the digressions with the story proper.²⁾ While John Preston and Wolfgang Iser analyze the activity on the part of the reader in the novel, other critics examine the connections of the introductory chapters with the narrative themes.³⁾ Michael Bliss argues that the point of the novel lurks in the interpenetration of two thematic strains: mutuality which is carried by the narrative and perception which is the subject of the introductory chapters⁴⁾. Truly the story represents sympathy and love and the initial essays and the authorial commentary generally explain the way of seeing and judging things, and the two strains present themselves as thematic unity.

Here I would like to consider the unity of the novel in terms of the functions of the narrator, examining how Fielding achieves the unity of story and discourse for the purpose of leading the reader to appreciate his moral aims on different levels. If we reflect on his grave concerns with the problem of truth and appearance, and the problem of moral judgment, we can become aware that such impulses are largely reflected in the narrative structure. Fielding relates the problem of deceiving appearance with his authorial doctrine, namely, the avoidance of hasty condemnation, keeping his eye on the responses of his readers.

Fielding's preoccupation with the problem of truth and appearance clearly traces back to his two former works. Feeling a strong objection to

Richardson's *Pamela*, Fielding tried to reveal the evil design of Pamela in the same epistolary style work, *Shamela*. His purpose was to demonstrate that Shamela, whose false name is Pamela, conspires with those around her to seduce her master to make a proposal to her. Pamela, seeming an admirable heroine, was to Fielding a cunning hypocrite. Then, in his first novel, *Joseph Andrews*, he began with the satirical parody of *Pamela* again, but the theme of the novel, as the author suggests in the Preface, is the revelation of affectation of people, which derives from their vanity and hypocrisy. In what he calls "a Comic-Epic in Prose," he intends to create laughter by demonstrating the gap between what one seems and what he is, the appearance and the inner true motive of people high and low. It is clear, from these two works, that Fielding describes satirically and comically the difference between the outward behaviors of people and their true inclinations of vanity and hypocrisy. *Shamela* is thoroughly a satirical attack on Richardson's work; but in *Joseph Andrews* he evidently puts forward the problem of morality to the reader.

Then in his next novel, *Tom Jones*, he still treats the problem of the gap between inwardness and outwardness, yet in a more comprehensive, developed way. It is true that, as in *Joseph Andrews*, many characters performing vanity and hypocrisy are presented as the object of satire in the way of comedy of manners. But the total design of the novel is intended as more consistent and less episodic than the first novel.

The central moral theme of the novel is the necessity of "Prudence," a virtue which Tom Jones must acquire through his experiences. This virtue is a practical wisdom about how one shows his inner goodness to others and avoids unjust misunderstanding. Making it the core of the story, the novel provides many examples of ridiculous or grave misunderstandings among the characters, and such incidents lead to the development of the ever-praised, well-organized plot mechanism of the novel.

But it must be noted that in this novel Fielding develops the problem of appearance and truth not only on the story level, but also on the discourse level. On the stylistic plane, it is well-known that he parodies the traditional literature such as epic and romance. We find them easily, for example, in the battle in the churchyard between Molly Segrain and

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villagers (IV, viii), in the introduction of the heroine, Sophia Western (IV, ii), and in the description of Tom who are in agony with his love for Sophia (V, x). The narrator comments that the reason why he inserts "sundry Similes, Descriptions, and other kind of poetical Embellishments" is that without them the reader will get sleepy and bored with the "Narrative of plain Matter of Fact" (IV, i, 151.)⁵ This comment is a comical self-depreciation; and the poetic descriptions are designed for the comic purpose—for the entertainment of the reader who can taste classic literature. But if we focus on such ornamental passages, we find a certain problem which Fielding is highly conscious of: that a certain state or thing can be described in different ways through words. This is also one of the elements in the system of appearance and truth in *Tom Jones*: language makes "appearance" which can generate different meanings and can be variably conveyed to the receiver.

More important is, however, that Fielding subtly makes use of the aspect of language in the discourse, that is, in the narration of the story itself. I shall argue that the narrator of *Tom Jones* creates a text as appearance by representing the story through the device of the shift of point of view and the technique of irony. Conscious of the fact that truth and appearance are quite often incongruous, Fielding puts forth the warning against hasty judgment, and the narrator's role is to make the reader practice the doctrine not only on the story level, but also on the discourse level, where lies the thematic integration of the content and expression of the novel.

In the novel the narrator claims his position as "a Historian," whose main business is "to guide our Pen throughout by the Directions of Truth" (III, ii, 118), or "to relate Matters of Fact with Veracity" (IV, v, 510). This manner of telling "Truth" or "Fact" involves the fatal problem in the narration of the novel: What is truth and by whom is the truth grasped? While insisting on the confident authority as a "Historian", the narrator takes a very questionable position to relate the facts. The first point is his point of view, the problem by whose eyes the events are seen and reported.

The narrator of *Tom Jones* is classified as a classical omniscient

narrator, who knows everything about the situation and event recorded. The advantage of such a narrator is that he can tell more than any and all the characters know. But the omniscience enables him to select what he wants to reveal, and change the viewpoints from which he relates a story, as he thinks proper. Switch of point of view is a common feature in many narratives⁶⁾, but in the case of *Tom Jones*, we can see how skillfully the omniscient narrator chooses his narrative point of view to demonstrate how judgments are formed.

On the whole the texture of the novel consists of descriptions and comments by the narrator, and his basic attitude is to make objective descriptions through a limited point of view, and adds his commentary to them. In many cases, the narrator assimilates his point of view to that of an objective, disinterested witness, making truthful reports, and gives his interpretations. For example,

The usual Compliments having past between Mr. *Allworthy* and Miss *Bridget*, and the Tea being poured out, he summoned Mrs. *Wilkins*, and told his Sister he had a Present for her; for which she thanked him, imagining, I suppose, it had been a Gown or some Ornament for her Person. Indeed, he very often made her such Presents, and she in Complacence to him spent much time in adorning herself. I say, in Complacence to him, because she always exprest the greatest Contempt for Dress, and for those Ladies who made it their Study.

But if such was her Expectation, how was she disappointed, when Mrs. *Wilkins*, according to the Order she had receiv'd from her Master, produced the little Infant. Great Surprises, as hath been observed, are apt to be silent, and so was Miss *Bridget*, till her Brother began and told her the whole Story, which as the Reader knows it already, we shall not repeat. (I, iv, 44.)

Here the narrator's interpretations reinforces or determines the meanings of the objective descriptions. The first three lines are no doubt truthful descriptions. But "for which she thanked him" is both true and misleading. The narrator guesses that Bridget's thought and justifies his speculation by telling the background knowledge: the usual custom of the brother's giving gifts to his sister. And the narrator shortly digresses to tell Bridget's character of disliking dressing herself luxuriously and

expressing a contempt for other ladies. It can be supposed, therefore, that although she is not glad about his present, she feels obliged to thank for it, only as a matter of form, as a seeming gratitude for her brother. Yet, by the formerly given ironic characterization of her as a prudish woman, we read a different meaning in "for which she thanked him": Bridget is pleased at heart with the offer of a present from her brother, but for the fear of showing her greed for dress, she pretends to give thanks to her brother modestly.

The next paragraph shows that Bridget fell silent to discover that the gift was unexpectedly a little infant. The narrator illustrates her attitude by the proverbial observation "Great Surprise . . ."; and the last two lines has the effect of making the reader take a superior position, satisfied with the knowledge of the reasons for her surprise and reticence.

The narrator's reports of Bridget's gratitude for her brother and her falling silent is objectively true, as Allowrthy and Deborah saw them at the situation. But in fact they are seen from only an external point of view. The descriptions, seen from the limited perspective, provided with the narrator's comments, work to exclude the possibility of the reader's other interpretations. But when we finish reading the novel and acquire the knowledge that Bridget was Tom's real mother, we come to know that this part of the text we were reading was only appearances. The same passages, the same phrases provide a quite different meaning. As to the passage, Bridget, who had got Jenny Jones to put her baby in Allworthy's bed on the previous night, completely knew that her brother was going to show her it next morning. It is now evident that her gratitude for the offer and her silence were her skillful performances, whose design was to lead her brother to adopt her illegitimate child and raise it in their Paradise Hall.

Here the narrator, by reporting truthfully Bridget's performance as it was, gets the reader to take the same position as Allworthy and Deborah and makes him deceived by her in the same way as the two. But the reader is led to misunderstanding to a greater degree than the characters because of the narrator's plausible commentary. The narrator in fact relates the facts with veracity, but the facts which are seen from a limited

point of view themselves are irrelevant to the truth. And his interpretative commentary doubly diverts them from it.

It is notable that the novel presents the things about the perception and judgment of many characters. At the beginning of the main action, the different attitudes of Allworthy and Deborah toward the baby is highly contrasted, and after the bird episode the discussion among five adult characters upon the behaviors of very young Blifil and Tom is reported in detail. And in the initial chapter of Book VII, where the narrator compares the world to the stage, he assumes a variety of responses from audience toward Black George's theft which has been narrated in the preceding chapter. What Fielding stresses by adopting various restricted points of view other than his own is the difference and diversity in judgments made by people on the same matter.

Finally, the narrator makes a very significant comment on the structure of narrative communication, connecting the characters in the story and the reader on the same level. The comment is made against the reader's suspicion of Allworthy's tolerance for Thwackum, the tutor of the boys, in spite of his apparent defects.

the Reader is greatly mistaken, if he conceives that *Thwackum* appeared to Mr. *Allworthy* in the same Light as he doth to him in this History; and he is as much deceived, if he imagines, that the most intimate Acquaintance which he himself could have had with that Divine, would have informed him of those Things which we, from our Inspiration, are enabled to open and discover. Of Readers who from such Conceits as these, condemn the Wisdom or Penetration of Mr. *Allworthy*, I shall not scruple to say, that they make a very bad and ungrateful Use of that Knowledge which we have communicated to them. (III, v, 135.)

This passage shows what Stevenson calls "a hierarchy of 'penetration' "7). But the most important is that the narrator insists that the reader should not blame Allworthy because he appears blind to Thwackum. In fact, Allworthy sees more than the reader: besides admitting Thwackum's several faults, he admires his virtue of strict Christian eagerness as well. He does not commit the error of dangerous oversimplification in judging a person. The narrator, at the risk of openly breaking the realistic illusion,

tries to prevent the reader from committing the same error as is frequently made by the characters on the story level.

What the narrator of the novel suggests by the shift of his points of view is that one tends to make a judgment only on a given material which may assume a deceptive appearance, and whose truth may lie somewhere else. Making use of the omniscient standpoint, the narrator, while juxtaposing diverse judgments of the characters on the one hand, sometimes reveals and imparts to us the true facts or thoughts of the characters concerned, and shows the reader how misleading situations can take place.

But as in Bridget's case mentioned above, the narrator himself often misrepresents the true motive of a character. We can say that he is, in fact, quite subjective and sometimes betrays the reader. This, however, is the strategy that Fielding imposes on the narrator. Fielding's hidden intention is to lead the reader to apply the stressed need for the avoidance of hasty judgment to his reading of the text. It is also significant that the narrator, who points out and warns us of the superficial and one-sided view, takes it in producing the text.

The diversity of judgment and, especially, the process in which false judgment is formed are presented in the text in a comparatively straight manner, but irony is Fielding's another device which pays more direct attentions to the reader's presence. The aspect of irony in *Tom Jones* has been closely discussed by Eleanor N. Hutchens and Glenn W. Hatfield⁸⁾, but William Empson earlier pointed out an aspect of irony as a stylistic device of the novel. Empson, though not making a large claim for the notion but narrowing it down to apply only to this novel, formulates the situation of double irony: whereas in single irony, "the ironist (A) is fooling a tyrant (B) while appealing to the judgment of a person addressed (C)," in double irony, "A shows both B and C that he understands both their positions."⁹⁾

This principle of double irony, I think, permeates through the discourse into the text of *Tom Jones*. The narrator always pays attention both to the characters and to the reader, holding a "wise balanced position" between them. Telling the History, he induces the reader to have

a sense of superiority over the characters by means of the commentary which is not available to them, but at the same time, in secret, he ridicules the reader's self-satisfaction.

The most obvious example is the descriptions of Allworthy, a truly benevolent magistrate in the parish, in making his statements on several occasions public and private. When Jenny Jones is summoned to his presence on the charge of desertion of child, he preaches her a long sermon on the necessity of female chastity (I, vii). He claims to Doctor Blifil that the foundation of marriage should be love, without knowing the marriage between Bridget and Captain Blifil, the Doctor's brother, is for money, his large estate (I, xi). Calling Tom to his deathbed, he puts forth his profound preparation for death and admonishes Tom of the necessity of prudence and religion as his last wish, though his serious illness is an erroneous diagnosis by a careless doctor and he soon recovers (V, vii).

In these cases, Allworthy always makes precious judgments on the misidentified grounds. He is what Sheldon Sacks calls a "fallible paragon," who has the discrepancy between ethical competence and human fallibility.¹⁰⁾ The narrator lets the reader notice and laugh at Allworthy's mistake and lack of care, but at the same time, allures him to commit the error of hasty judgment, to judge Allworthy from his apparent defect. In the same manner, the reason the narrator repeatedly describes Tom badly is that he tests the reader for the ability to tolerate him who has not only many faults but also goodness and sympathy to help actively the distressed. In any case, the reader who laughs at or condemns the characters departs from the norms of the novel, and falls victim to Fielding's irony.

It is quite important that the narrator deliberately commits misjudgments on false basis as Allworthy does, in the course of telling the History. One of the shortest chapter, I, iv is, it seems to me, the best example to examine the typical mode of discourse of the novel. Its title, "Containing a few common Matters, with a very uncommon Observation upon them," is also suggestive. This scene shows Bridget and Deborah after Allworthy put the infant into their hands. The narrator

speculates Deborah's inner thought of Bridget; she expects that Bridget is sure to complain of the baby and her brother, as "she had often known the Sentiments of the Lady in her Brother's Absence to differ greatly from those which she had expressed in his Presence" (45). But Bridget looks at the child earnestly and gives it a hearty kiss. Because we have been given her most convincing character which Deborah has known well personally, our expectation, as well as Deborah's, is discouraged. Then, Deborah as usual flatters her and praises the infant against her will. Her exaggerated, comic behaviors serve to divert our attention away from our suspicion of Bridget.

Bridget's next external deed is to order Deborah to prepare all the necessities for the baby. Then comes the crucial remark of the narrator: "Her Orders were indeed so liberal, that had it been a Child of her own, she could not have exceeded them" (46). Here Fielding is walking on a tightrope; but immediately after that, the narrator warns "the virtuous reader" not to condemn her for seeming to permit an illegitimate action of deserting a child. Here again, he in no time averts the reader's attention from Bridget's unnatural affection to the founding. And in justification for her attitude, he quotes her statement to Deborah: although she admits that it is an encouragement of vice, yet she cannot but obey her brother's order. Then the narrator makes a digression and illustrates Bridget's remark.

she usually, as hath been hinted, accompany'd every Act of Compliance with his Brother's Inclinations; and surely nothing could more contribute to heighten the Merit of this Compliance, than a Declaration that she knew at the same time the Folly and Unreasonableness of those Inclinations to which she submitted. Tacit Obedience implies no Force upon the Will, and consequently may be easily, and without any Pains, preserved; but when a Wife, a Child, a Relation, or Friend, performs what we desire, with Grumbling, and Reluctance, with Expressions of Dislike and Dissatisfaction, the manifest Difficulty which they undergo, must greatly enhance the Obligation. (I, v, 46)

This generalizing passage seems to be a penetrating observation on human nature, which the reader of Fielding will most appreciate, but it is a

statement built on a complete misjudgment. However relevant it may seem to the present context, it is far away from the truth. Quite similar to Allworthy, the narrator makes a seemingly lofty judgment on a false ground. What is more, he adds to the reader in a patronizing manner to justify the observation: "As this is one of those deep Observations which very few Readers can be supposed capable of making themselves, I have thought proper to lend them my Assistance" (47). The narrator's seeming reliability, in fact, serves to betray the reader.

As I have discussed above, the narrator's production of the text gives warnings against false judgment. He shifts his narrating points of view, which makes it clear that we see things only partially; his double irony teaches us that even if we are quite satisfied with knowing all, we are likely to miss something serious. But it is on our second reading or our readings of latter parts in the course of the narrative where the narrator reveals the truths concerned that we understand the real intention of Fielding. At first sight, the narrator is omniscient, reliable figure who has vast knowledge of human nature and guides us into the story world. Since he pronouns that he relates only the matter of facts and avoids what is unknown and uncertain, we wholly accept his authority and sincerity. But then a crucial moment comes when we notice our misreading of the text, become suspicious of him, and learn to judge him by utilizing the same knowledge we have been taught by him. This is, so to speak, a meta-narrative dialogue between the implied author and the reader, through which the reader develops from the state of passive obedience to that of active criticism. Once he notices that the text reveals itself as appearance, the reader's activity of finding out the spot where the narrator performs deception becomes a kind of intellectual game.

When the form of the novel as a genre had not established, the creation of a new kind of literature was an experiment for Fielding. As other eighteenth-century novelists, he produced the work with the presence of the reader in his mind. In Fielding's case, for his didactic purpose, he made effective use of artifices to organize the narrative structure and to make the reader grasp and exercise his moral doctrine both on story and discourse levels. *Tom Jones* can be taken as a good model of narrative

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communication of a novel which is strongly conscious of the activity of the reader.

NOTES

- 1) Wayne C. Booth, "The Self-Conscious Narrator in Comic Fiction before *Tristram Shandy*," *PMLA* 67 (1952), p. 179.
 - 2) Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago & London: The university of Chicago Press, 1961, Revised, 1983), pp. 216-7.
 - 3) John Preston, "Plot as Irony: The Reader's Role in *Tom Jones*," *ELH* 35 (1968), pp. 365-80. Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), pp. 29-56. Michael Bliss, "Fielding's Bill of Fare in *Tom Jones*," *ELH* 30 (1963), pp. 236-43. Fred Kaplan, "Fielding's Novel about Novels: The 'Prefaces' and the 'Plot' of *Tom Jones*," *Studies in English Literature* 13 (1973), pp. 535-49. James J. Lynch, "Moral Sense and the Narrator of *Tom Jones*," *Studies in English Literature* 25 (1985), pp. 598-614.
 - 4) Bliss, p. 243.
 - 5) Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones: A Foundling*, ed. Fredson Bowers (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1975). All further references will be to this edition and will be cited in the text, by book, chapter, and page numbers.
 - 6) See Roger Fowler, *Linguistic Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 134-146. Michael J. Toolan briefly summarizes the four basic types of narration in Fowler's argument:
 - A: intrusive, limited, character-based and hence mimetic
 - B: intrusive, unlimited, omniscient
 - C: detached, limited, impersonal, 'Hemingwayan'
 - D: detached, limited, estranged
- (*Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction* [London and New York: Routledge, 1988], p. 83).
- 7) John Allen Stevenson, *The British Novel: Defoe to Austen* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), p. 61.
 - 8) Eleanor Newman Hutchens, *Irony in Tom Jones* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1965). Glenn W. Hatfield, *Henry Fielding and the Language of Irony* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1968).
 - 9) William Empson, "Tom Jones," *Henry Fielding: Tom Jones* ("A Case Book"; London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1970), p. 141.
 - 10) Sheldon Sacks, *Fiction and the Shape of Belief: A Study of Henry Fielding with Glances at Swift, Johnson, and Richardson* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1964), pp. 110-111.