

The Dynamics of Appellations in 《陆犯焉识》 (Prisoner Lu Yanshi)

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Abstract. This study is an attempt at combining James Phelan’s rhetorical approach to narrative, particularly his theory of narrative progression, and Nie Zhenzhao’s theory of the Sphinx factor. It takes as its subject of study the appellations of the protagonist in 《陆犯焉识》 (*Prisoner Lu Yanshi*, 2011) by Yan Geling, a major overseas Chinese female writer. It delineates how the narrative progression of the novel is governed by the dynamics of Lu Yanshi’s varied appellations which are bound with varied ethical identities and ethical duties. It argues that the varied appellations serve as the instabilities of the narrative. At the story level, the protagonist transforms from a proud saint to a humble human being, as a result of the discovery of his animal factor which comes to the surface under extreme circumstances. At the level of discourse, circuitous narration and double focalizations create tensions between the protagonist’s understanding of and readers’ responses to the ethical implications of the appellations, thus helping the readers to see the ethical message conveyed by the novel – a complete human consists of both the human factor and the animal factor; he is defective when solely controlled by either of them.

Keywords: narrative progression; dynamics; appellations; Sphinx factor; *Prisoner Lu Yanshi*

When James Phelan entitled his chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative* “Rhetoric/ethics”, he unknowingly predicted a handshake between his rhetorical approach to narrative and Nie Zhenzhao’s Ethical Literary Criticism. Combining the two theories, this study is focused on the appellations of the protagonist in 《陆犯焉识》 (*Prisoner Lu Yanshi*, 2011) by Yan Geling, a major overseas Chinese female writer. Lu Yanshi’s varied appellations, which are bound with varied ethical identities and ethical duties, function as the major instabilities that create a textual dynamic, whereas circuitous narration and double focalizations of the narrator create tensions between the protagonist’s understanding of and readers’ responses to the ethical implications of the appellations, thus constituting the readerly dynamics. The interaction between the two kinds of dynamics helps the writer get across her ethical message.

Prisoner Lu Yanshi records Yanshi's life from the 1920s to the early 1990s. During this period of time, he experiences the Anti-Japanese Aggression War, the Cultural Revolution, and imprisonment; and runs away from and returns home. Unlike other scholars who have interpreted the novel as a record of the spiritual ordeal of Chinese intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution or as a touching love story in which a couple of arranged marriage achieves the consummation of true love, the present author, in her other article, argues that the novel traces the ethical transformation of its protagonist Lu Yanshi from a proud saint to a humble human being, and therefore, "is a serious inquiry into the nature of humanity" (Zhu 2015). She does mention the enigmatic nature of Yanshi's name, but has yet to reveal its role in the narrative progression of the novel. In fact, Yan Geling has been a conscious employer of narrative techniques. Her play with narrative time seems to have become the signature of her novels, and naturally has been a focus of critical attention. Many critics have discussed Yan's flexible application of narrative techniques. For example, Zhang Hao comments that Yan breaks the convention of linear narration and weaves the past, present and future together to reveal the characters' hidden, complex inner worlds (Zhang 2014: 127). Other critics believe that the skilful use of narrative techniques can enhance readers' aesthetic experience. Hang Hui, for instance, argues that "the frequent use of prolepsis and analepsis creates a sense of suspense, history and authenticity and arouses readers' interest, thus facilitating their active participation in the construction of the meaning of the text" (Hang 2007: 214). In like manner, Geng Xin asserts that the chronological disorder in Yan's novels presents obstacles in the reading process, heightens textual tension and facilitates active reading (Geng 2011: 29). These critics have revealed the artistic charm of Yan's novels, but disappointingly, they all focus on explaining the narrative techniques themselves, and fail to delineate the process in which the narrative techniques take effect. Also, they are explicit in saying that the narrative techniques invite readers to construct the meaning of the text but are vague in telling what meaning is to be constructed. This is exactly where Phelan's and Nie's theories can intervene.

In his essay "Rhetoric/ethics", Phelan lays out six principles for the rhetorical approach to narrative. In explaining the sixth principle, he states:

The sixth principle involves the importance of narrative progressions. A narrative's movement from its beginning to its end is governed by both a textual and a readerly dynamics, and understanding their interaction provides a good means for recognizing a narrative's purposes. On the textual side narratives proceed by the introduction, complication, and resolution (in whole or in part) of two kinds of unstable situations. The first kind exists on the level of story,

that is, the events and existents, including character and setting, of narrative, and I call them simply *instabilities*: they involve relations within, between, or among characters and their situations. (Phelan 2007: 212)

The most obvious instabilities in *Prisoner Lu Yanshi* are the names of the protagonist. Yanshi has many names, each of which is bound with a different ethical identity. The changes in his name actually represent the changes in his ethical identity. According to Nie, a person's ethical identity is the result of his ethical selection, which distinguishes him from an animal (Nie 2014: 263). At the story level, Yanshi starts out as Young Master of the Lu's. This name does not only reveal his family origin, but more importantly, his ethical identity as master of the family and the family responsibilities that are bound with it¹. Even as a 14-year-old boy, he makes the important decision to let his stepmother stay in the family against his grandmother's will, for he deems it his duty to keep everyone of his family safe and sound. He works hard to be worthy of the title conferred on him. It can be inferred that each time Yanshi is called Young Master, he grows more self-conscious of his ethical duties. A person's self-recognition may cause different kinds of emotions in himself. If he has a negative evaluation of himself, he feels ashamed or upset; by contrast, if his self-evaluation is positive, he feels proud. And the latter must be exactly what happens to Yanshi as Young Master of the Lu's. Conscientiously living up to his ethical duties, Yanshi sees himself as a moral saint and therefore is filled with self-pride, which is evident in his efforts to distant himself from Wanyu, a girl arranged to marry him. This self-pride remains, if not swells, when he grows into Prof. Lu, who now strictly abides by academic ethics and the principle of individual freedom. To put it simply, Yanshi in the first half of his life is a man with clear ethical consciousness. According to Nie, man has the Sphinx factor which comprises two parts: the human factor and the animal factor. The human factor is embodied in man's ethical consciousness, that is, his awareness of his ethical duties, whereas the animal factor includes man's instinctual needs and desires and irrational emotions. When a person is able to control his animal factor and makes correct ethical choices, he becomes a rational human being (Nie 2014: 38–39). However, Nie still acknowledges that the animal factor always lives in man and claims that the combination of the two parts of the Sphinx factor constitutes a complete human being (Nie 2014: 38). Unfortunately, Yanshi in the first half of his life is too much dominated by his human factor to be aware of his animal factor.

¹ For more detailed discussion on the ethical responsibilities bound with the protagonist's names, please refer to Zhu 2015.

Until he is sent to a prison where he is no longer Young Master of the Lu's or Prof. Lu. Here he goes by the number 278 or the name Lao Ji. Lao Ji is an interesting name, for it is often used in a Chinese slang "Ni Suan Lao Ji" ('Who do you think you are?'). Most probably this name has forced Yanshi to take a different look at himself, helping him to realize that he is not that special, but just like everybody else. Bearing the name of Lao Ji, Yanshi is reduced to a man driven by his instinctual needs to survive. In order to survive, he would do anything, even compromise his morality². To put it another way, under the extreme circumstances of the prison in Northwest China Yanshi's animal factor comes to the surface, forcing him to realize that he is not a moral saint.

When he first comes to this realization, he must have felt utterly humiliated and miserable. It actually takes him quite some time in prison to finally come to terms with his animal factor. During this process, two other men, Liang Hulu and Director Deng, also play an important role. Liang Hulu, a juvenile murderer who is apparently evil to the core, shows deep concern for his siblings and great gratitude to people who have helped him and his siblings. In the other way around, Director Deng as the chief leader of the prison should be morally pure, but sometimes takes bribes and neglects his duties. Having witnessed the complexity of human beings, Yanshi achieves the epiphany that the human factor and the animal factor together make humans complete. This epiphany helps him shake off his humiliation and understand his and other people's animal factor. That is why, later in the story, he endures his children's coldness with a forgiving and loving heart.

To sum up, at the story level, the progression of the novel is governed by the textual dynamic of the protagonist's various names. As Yanshi changes from Young Master of the Lu's, to Prof. Lu and to Lao Ji, he transforms from a proud moral saint to a humble human being. In other words, the changes in Yanshi's name push the story forward, causing his ethical transformation and helping him to achieve his ethical revelation.

Phelan defines narrative as "somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened" (Phelan 2007: 203) and claims that "the rhetorical approach [to narrative] attends to both an ethics of the told and an ethics of the telling" (Phelan 2007: 203). In a similar vein, Nie has asserted that moral teaching is the basic function of literature (Nie 2014: 248). In the light of the two theorists' remarks, *Prisoner Lu Yanshi* may not only be about its protagonist's ethical transformation and revelation, but is

² For more detailed discussion on Yanshi's immoral behaviour in the prison, also please refer to Zhu 2015.

also about readers' ethical education. And this is related to what Phelan calls "readerly dynamics". As Phelan postulates,

The second kind [of unstable situations] exists at the level of discourse, that is, the narration and its techniques, and I call them *tensions*: they involve relations among authors, narrators, and audiences, and they include gaps between tellers and audiences of knowledge, beliefs, opinions, and values. [...] On the readerly side narrative progression includes the trajectory of our developing responses to the pattern of instability–complication–resolution. (Phelan 2007: 212)

In *Prisoner Lu Yanshi*, circuitous narration and the double narrative perspectives of the narrator are the tensions which create a readerly dynamic for the narrative progression of the novel.

The storyline of the novel is from the 1920s to the early 1990s. However, the unfolding of the events at the discourse level in the 38 chapters presents a different picture. Narration starts from the end of the 1950s and ends in the early 1990s, which can be marked as the "present". The narration of the events in this period of time is frequently interrupted by flashbacks to the "past", that is, events that took place in the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Instead of linear narration, the writer adopts circuitous narration in the novel. What empowers the circuitous narration is the historical changes in the protagonist's name. The different historical periods are related to Yanshi's different names. For example, in the 1920s he is Young Master of the Lu's; between the 1930s and the late 1950s he is Prof. Lu; and between the late 1960s and the late 1970s he is Lao Ji. If the writer had adopted linear narration, then the readers would have responded to Yanshi's various names in the same way he himself does. When they met the morally untainted Young Master of the Lu's and Prof. Lu, they would admire him just as he admires himself. Then when they met him as the morally degenerated Lao Ji, they would inevitably feel disappointed, and in turn become critical. However, the circuitous narration creates gaps between Yanshi's understanding of himself and the readers' impression of him. At the story level, Yanshi first lives as Young Master of the Lu's, then grows into Prof. Lu, and later is forced to become Lao Ji. At the discourse level, readers first meet Lao Ji, then learn that Lao Ji used to be Young Master of the Lu's and Prof. Lu. This disparity may cause the readers to undergo a different emotional transformation and ethical education.

In "Rhetoric/ethics", Phelan introduces the concept of the "rhetorical triangle" composed of three parts: speaker, text and audience. He believes that "texts are designed by authors in order to affect readers in particular ways; those designs are conveyed through the words, techniques, structures, forms,

and intertextual relations of texts; and reader responses are a function of and, thus, a guide to how authorial designs are created through textual phenomena” (Phelan 2007: 209). In practical analysis, Phelan suggests that the critic begin his interpretation “from any point on the rhetorical triangle, but that task will require considering how each point both influences and is influenced by the other two” (Phelan 2007: 209). Following his advice, the present author chooses the title of the novel as the starting point of her interpretation. Like many classic English novels, the novel is named after its protagonist. However, the protagonist has a strange name, Yanshi, which means “How can we know?”. Rather than tell the readers who the protagonist is, the title raises the question “Who is the protagonist?” with which the writer sends the readers onto their journey of discovery.

In the first stage of this journey, readers meet Yanshi as a bankrupt intellectual bearing the name of Lao Ji. Though he is introduced by the narrator as a man of exceptional abilities, like speaking four languages, playing several fashionable games and doing “blind writing” (that is, writing in the mind rather than on the paper), he does not strike readers as special at all. As Lao Ji, he is like other prisoners – thieves, rapists or murderers, always bent on finding ways to feed his mouth. Totally ignorant of his former noble qualities, the readers may feel resentful toward this man who is dominated by his animal factor, for he is too far away from the normal image of an intellectual. They will not join the character in sharing his humiliation and misery.

The narrator further reinforces this estrangement. The narrator of the story is Yanshi’s granddaughter Feng Xuefeng. Though sometimes she addresses Yanshi as “my grandfather”, this novel is not a first-person retrospective narrative because the narrator is neither the protagonist or a witness in the part of the story related to Yanshi’s life before 1979. She is actually an extra-diegetic narrator situated above the story world. Much of the time she narrates Yanshi’s story from an omniscient point of view (zero focalization, in Genette’s terminology), which is evident in the prologue. The narrator begins the story by describing from a bird’s eye view the desert grassland where horses, goats and wolves ramble freely until automobiles carry thousands of prisoners here. “Among the swarms of people was a fairly tall middle-aged man, whose name in the prison file was Lu Yanshi. His inmate number was 2868 when he was transferred from Prison No. Zhe-Gan 109, sentenced to serve life imprisonment” (Yan 2014: 2)³. The impersonal tone and bird’s eye view lengthen the distance between readers and the story world, thus preventing them from developing empathy for the protagonist.

³ All the quotations from the novel are translated by the author of the article.

In the next stage of the journey, readers are led into Yanshi's past life to meet Young Master of the Lu's and Prof. Lu, with alternate visits back to Lao Ji in the prison. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, in her discussion of "the dynamics of reading", borrows two psychological concepts: primacy effect and recency effect. The primacy effect refers to the situation when "information and attitudes presented at an early stage of the text tend to encourage the reader to interpret everything in their light" (Rimmon-Kenan 2005: 124). In this particular case, when readers meet Young Master of the Lu's, their initial impression of him as Lao Ji is still effective and influences their view of the "new" Yanshi. On the other hand, however, the new information readers acquire about him also exerts tension over their original view, which is the recency effect. As Rimmon-Kenan explains, "The recency effect encourages the reader to assimilate all previous information to the item presented last" (Rimmon-Kenan 2005: 124). Due to the recency effect, readers naturally modify their negative impression of Yanshi with the new favourable information about him. They come to learn that Yanshi was not born as a man dominated by his animal factor and that he used to own many noble qualities. Of course, they will not feel proud of him as he himself does, for they still remember Yanshi in the image of Lao Ji. However, they will not remain as critical as they were, either. They may even develop a certain degree of sympathy when they reflect on how extreme circumstances can reduce a person with clear ethical consciousness to one obedient to survival instincts.

At this time the other narrative perspective of the narrator also takes effect. As aforementioned, in the narration of Yanshi's life before 1979, the narrator often adopts an omniscient point of view. However, the focus of this all-seeing eye is sometimes narrowed so that only Yanshi's mind is laid bare to readers while others' minds are hidden. In other words, in these places the narrator adopts the internal focalization of Yanshi, which is reasonable because this part of the story is allegedly based on Yanshi's notes and memoirs given to his granddaughter at the end of 1989. Take the torture scene for example. Yanshi had an Omega watch, but a while ago he traded it with Headman Xie for five eggs. Knowing the watch means a lot to Yanshi, Liang Hulu steals it from Xie and gives it back to Yanshi. Now Xie is torturing Hulu to find out where the watch is. The narrator first comments as a bystander, "A word from Lao Ji would save Liang Hulu, but he stood among the crowd and, like everybody else, did nothing" (Yan 2014: 49). Then through free indirect discourse, the narrator leads the readers into Yanshi's inner mind. Witnessing Hulu's torture, Yanshi almost faints and falls down. However, he does not want to hand over the watch because "the Omega is going to do big things" (Yan 2014: 49) – Yanshi has planned to bribe Director Deng with the watch to get the permission to go to the prison headquarters to see her daughter in a documentary. The torture scene

focused through Yanshi's eyes enables the readers to see his inner struggle, and may cause them to sympathize with him though they may still resent him for his letting Hulu suffer. Yanshi's internal focalization then shortens the distance between readers and him and arouses their empathy. Going on with their journey of discovery, readers meet Lao Ji and Prof. Lu alternately and are manipulated by the double focalizations. Accordingly, they fluctuate between resentment and sympathy, and between going into the heart of the protagonist and withdrawing from the story world.

Li Liang describes the narrator of the novel as a person "wavering between right and wrong, good and evil, glory and disgrace, and sentimentality and rationality" (Li 2012: 48), and because of that, "the character under her manipulation naturally shows duality in character" (Li 2012: 49). The present author agrees with Li in emphasizing the narrator's importance but disagrees with his argument that narrators determine characters. The narrator is a design by the author and thus is the author's rhetoric to persuade readers. Therefore, the present author asserts that the narrator of the novel who first stays outside the story world and then joins in provides proper observation points for readers to receive the writer's message. In "Rhetoric/ethics", Phelan designates five kinds of audiences, two of which are authorial audience and narrative audience. The authorial audience is "the author's ideal reader" and is invited by the author to "understand the invitations for engagement that the narrative offers" and "assess those invitations and accept or reject them in whole or in part" (Phelan 2007: 210). The narrative audience is "the observer position within the narrative world that the flesh and blood the reader assumes" (Phelan 2007: 210). Phelan points out,

As flesh and blood readers enter the authorial and narrative audiences, they develop interests and responses of three kinds, each related to a particular component of the narrative: mimetic, thematic, and synthetic. Responses to the mimetic component involve an audience's interest in the characters as possible people and in the narrative world as like our own, that is, either our actual world or one that is possible given what we know and assume about the actual world. [...] Responses to the thematic component involve an interest in the characters as representative of classes of people [...]. Responses to the synthetic component involve an audience's interest in, and attention to, the characters and to the larger narrative as a made object. (Phelan 2007: 210–211)

Phelan also points out that audience of realistic narratives usually shows interest in the mimetic and thematic components (Phelan 2007: 211). When readers,

like the narrator who lives in the story world, assume the position of narrative audience in their reading of *Prisoner Lu Yanshi*, they believe in the truthfulness of the story and become emotionally engaged in the story world, and as such they may be sympathetic to Yanshi. When they assume the role of authorial audience, then they become aware of the fictionality of the story, but responding to the thematic components of the novel, they tend to draw a connection between the story world and their own. While they witness Yanshi first appearing as Lao Ji, and then changing into Young Master of the Lu's and Prof. Lu, they do not only make judgments about the character Yanshi, but also relate him to themselves, for they are fully aware that Yanshi is not only an individual in the story world, but also a representative of a group in the actual world. If Yanshi is neither a moral saint or moral pervert, but a humble human being consisting of both the human factor and the animal factor, then readers who are connected with him by human kinship are just like him. This should be the moral judgment they are invited to make not only about the character in the story world, but more importantly about themselves. Which ends their journey of discovery and helps the writer achieve her rhetorical and ethical purposes.

Narratological studies are often criticized for their overemphasis on the form of literature with inadequate consideration of how the form serves the content. Phelan's rhetorical approach to narrative makes it clear that all the rhetorical techniques have an ethical purpose to fulfil, and Nie's Ethical Literary Criticism further explains what ethical purpose is to be achieved. Incorporating the two theories, we are able to reveal that the appellations of the protagonist in *Prisoner Lu Yanshi* and the double narrative perspectives adopted by a special narrator together create the textual and readerly dynamics driving the narrative progression of the novel to an ethical revelation not only for the protagonist, but also for the readers: the human factor and the animal factor together make a human being complete; the overemphasis on either is self-deceptive and may cause one to lose balance.

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