

Narration in Memory Applied in Chimera and Production of Cultural Memory

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Abstract

John Barth is one of the most influential innovators in American postmodernism fiction. *Chimera*, has attracted a widespread attention since it was published in 1973, and it also gained the America Book Prize in the following year. Literature is the object as well as the medium of cultural memory. Unlike the memory in literature which is base upon institutionalization and canonization, the literature, which is fictionally featured, demonstrates more vivid and active forms of memorizing. It “allows”the memory to deviate from the facts which makes it possible to demonstrate the past while make comments and amendments to it. Based on Astrid Erll’s three intersections between literature and memory: condensation, narration and genre, this paper studies the narration in memory of person conversion in *Dunyazadiad*, the first novelette in *Chimera* to figure out the function of conversion of narrators in the production of cultural memory.

Keywords

Chimera; Condensation; Narration; Genre; Production.

1. Introduction

John Barth is an American writer who is best known for his postmodernist and metafiction. Barth’s creative heyday was in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Together with John Hawkes, William Gass, Robert Coover, Barth was acclaimed as one of the most important postmodern novelists in America. His creative career covered half a century, and his works became indispensable references for defining, establishing and interpreting post-modernist literature. “Barth is skillful in weaving mythology, folklore and literary classic in modern life, and he often expounds his narrative theory in his works. As a result, his novels feature philosophy and metafiction.” (Wang Jianping 13) *Chimera*, which shared the U.S. National Book Award for Fiction with *Augustus* by John Edward Williams, is composed of three loosely connected novellas. The novellas are *Dunyazadiad*, *Perseid* and *Bellerophoniad*, whose titles refer eponymously to the mythical characters Dunyazad, Perseus and Bellerophon (slayer of the mythical Chimera). *Dunyazadiad* is a retelling of Arabian’s *The Thousand and One nights*, and the latter two novellas are retellings of the stories of Perseus and Bellerophon in ancient Greek mythology. Via narration in memory, Barth gained inspiration in the gap between folk tales and mythology and history and reinterpreted them in a new way.

2. Astrid Erll’s Narration in Memory

For Erll, there are “three central intersections between literature and memory.” (145) The first one is condensation, which is important for the creation and transmission of ideas about the past. The second is narration as a ubiquitous structure for creating meaning. And the third one is the use of genres as culturally available formats to represent past events and experience.

In memory studies, condensation has come to mean “the compression of several complex ideas, feelings or images into a single, fused or composite object.” (145) Many different associations about the past can converge in one condensed mnemonic object. The idea of condensation is clearly present in recent theories of cultural remembrance, from Aby Warburg’s ‘pathos formula’, to Maurice Halbwachs’s ‘idée étoffée’, E.R. Curtius’s ‘topos’, Pierre Nora’s lieu de mémoire, and to Jan Assmann’s Erinnerungsf figur (memory figure). “In German, the term Gedicht (poem) even maintains a linguistic connection to Verdichtung (condensation).” (145) Condensation is arguably the main characteristic of literature. For Jan Assmann, cultural memory focuses on fixed points in the past, but it is unable to preserve the past as it was. This tends to be condensed into symbolic figures to which memory attaches itself—for example, tales of the patriarchs, the Exodus, wandering in the desert, conquest of the Promised Land, exile—and that are celebrated in festivals and are used to explain current situations. “Myths are also figures of memory, and Myth is foundational history that is narrated in order to illuminate the present from the standpoint of its origins.” (38)

Large parts of cultural memory seem to be configured in much the same structure, namely narrative, that we encounter in large parts of literature. Cultural memory rests on narrative processes. “To be more precise, every conscious remembering of past events and experience—individual and collective—is accompanied by strategies which are also fundamental for literary narrative.” (147) Erll points out that literary works are memory-productive and memory-reflexive, and literature can inject new and distinct elements into memory culture. (151) She believes that the choice of narrator has structural significance for memory in literature. Like Erll, Michael Basseler and Dorothee Birke agree that the most typical narrative scene is the first-person narrative. It is worth noting that the narrator / recollector “I” and the narrated / experiencer “I” are in a tension. On the one hand, as they are under different situations, the narrator “I” is more informed than the narrated “I”, so the narrator “I” can comment and evaluate the latter's perception and behavior. At that time, “the past becomes the recalled one, the role becomes the recalled one, and the story has retrospective significance” (Feng Yalin 89). On the other hand, “recollection is a spiritual journey for the recollector to reexperience the past” (Feng Yalin 89). Then, he at least returns to the past emotionally. This means that the narrator and the narrated often overlap. “In this case, the focus shifts from the narrator to the narrated, and at the same time the basic narration shifts to the recollection” (Feng Yalin 89). They use the concept of “double focus” to describe the overlap of narrator and narrated. The overlap refers not only to the perspective of characters, but also time. That is to say, with the overlap of the perspectives of characters, there is also overlap between the present and the past, although one of the temporal aspects is always in the dominant position.

“Genres are conventionalized formats we use to encode events and experience; and repertoires of genre conventions are themselves contents of memory. They belong to the body of cultural knowledge which individuals acquire through socialization and enculturation.” (Erll, 149) Because literature is the site on which genre patterns manifest themselves most visibly (and in a socially sanctioned way), it is of pivotal importance for the circulation of memory genres. Literature takes up existing patterns, shapes and transforms them, and feeds them back into memory culture. The emergence of new genres can also be understood as an answer to mnemonic challenges. At the end of the twentieth century, the postmodern insight into the constructed nature of history and identity found suitable expression in the genre of historiographic metafiction. *Chimera's* three novellas are retelling of the genres of mythology and folktale.

3. Person Conversion in Chimera

As an undergraduate at Johns Hopkins University in the 1940s, Barth developed a penchant for Scheherazade's stories, in which her enthusiasm for numbers, the relationship between the narrator and the audience, the frame structure and the life-related narrative scene all embody the "the instinct for narration". Jorge Louis Borges, the Argentine writer, was a postmodern master greatly admired by Barth, and they both showed great interest in this book. For Borges, the beauty lies in the fact that the word thousand is almost synonymous with infinite. He pointed out that "To say a thousand nights is to say infinite nights, countless nights, endless nights. To say a thousand and one nights is to add one to infinity." (38) Then, he added that "*The Thousand and One Nights* has not died. The infinite time of the thousand and one nights continues its course...It is the work of thousands of authors, and none of them knew that he was helping to construct this illustrious book" (41) At this point, Borges coincide with Barth. Barth attempted to expand the frame structure to the extreme in order to explore the potential value of narration, and continue the story. For Scheherazade, ending the story means the end of life, "so their stories always start in the middle and end in the middle." (Wang Jianping 165) Barth held that postmodern writers are facing the same dilemma as Scheherazade, so they must seek an open ending for their stories.

The first novella *Dunyazadiad* draws its material from Arabian's *The Thousand and One nights*. *The Thousand and One nights* starts as the reason why Scheherazade begins to tell her stories. King Shahryar suspects his queen betrays him so he kills her. Then he becomes cruel and marries a girl every day and kills her and remarries the next day. In order to save the fate of Muslim girls, the vizier 's daughter Scheherazade decides to marry the king, and discusses with his sister Dunyazad the measures to extend their life. Therefore, they figure out a solution: Dunyazad asks her elder sister Scheherazade to tell a story for the king every night, and stops at the most wonderful moment, so her stories last for one thousand and one nights. Finally, the king quits his slaughter and marry to Scheherazade. Here Scheherazade is one memory figure, which shows the past can converge in one condensed mnemonic object and the condensation of memory. In the original version, Scheherazade is erudite and dedicated. But in *Chimera*, she is an "undergraduate arts-and-sciences major at Banu Sasan University. Besides being Homecoming Queen, valedictorian-elect, and a four-letter varsity athlete, she had a private library of a thousand volumes and the highest average in the history of the campus." (Barth 1) She is so appalled at the state of the nation that she drops out of school to do full-time research on a way to stop Shahryar from killing all girls and wrecking the country. Scheherazade is assisted in her exhaustive narrative enterprise by an American genie from the second half of the twentieth century. Genie gets these stories from his copy of the 1001 Nights and retells them to Scheherazade via narration in memory. For her, narration means continuation of life, and the only way of survival is to tell the story so that it can be repeated and multiplied. However, if the narrator has no inspiration and material, the continuation will have to be stopped, and the so-called infinity will no longer exist. (Lin Qun 19)

The whole story is made up of three parts: the first part is narrated in the first-person narration and the narrator is Dunyazad. She narrates the story between Scheherazade and the king through narration in memory. In the second part, the story is narrated in the third person narration, and the narrator is genie. He clarifies that the conversation in the first part happen between Dunyazad and Shah Zaman. Then Shah Zaman narrates his story via narration in memory. In the third part, the story is again narrated in the first-person narration and the narrator is still Genie. He explains the former two parts are narration about the conversation between the two. The whole structure is story-within-story-within-story, in which the three stories are connected in a concentric circle with Scheherazade's narration at the core.

3.1. The First Person Narration in Dunyazadiad

The first part is enclosed in quotation marks and the beginning is "At this point I interrupted my sister as usual to say, 'You have a way with words, Scheherazade. This is the thousandth night I've sat at the foot of your bed". (Barth 1) This is the voice of Scheherazade's sister, Dunyazad, who tells Scheherazade's story to Shah Zaman in the first-person narration. Scheherazade begins her research in political science and psychology but works in vain. Then she focuses on mythology and folklore, and studies all the riddle/puzzle/secret motifs she could dig up. When she finally finds out "the key to the treasure is the treasure", (Barth 4) a genie appeared. He is "a light-skinned fellow of forty or so, smooth-shaven and bald as a roc's egg. His clothes were simple but outlandish; he was tall and healthy and pleasant enough in appearance, except for queer lenses that he wore in a frame over his eyes." (Barth 4) Here, the author Barth is disguised as genie because he is indulging in this way when creating a novel. He also integrates his published novels, interviews, once appeared characters with the exiting novel. (Liu Sen 15) He is a writer of tales and live in "a land on the other side of the world." (Barth 5) But his writing career is in trouble and he aspires to go beyond the past. Therefore, his project is to "learn where to go by discovering where I am by reviewing where I've been -- where we've all been." (Barth 6) He employs the image of spiral as a way to solve his problem and compares a snail in the Maryland marshes to the image of spiral, "It makes his shell as he goes along out of whatever he comes across, cementing it with his own juices, and at the same time makes his path instinctively toward the best available material for his shell; he carries his history on his back, living in it, adding new and larger spirals to it from the present as he grows." (Barth 6)

Spiral was first put forward by the American literary critic Arshen when he evaluated the development of American literature. "He held that the development of literary schools is not the opposing pendulum movement, but a dialectical process of mutual influence and integration among different schools." (Liu Sen 16) The spiral image shows recycling of the past and the present, and it also manifests Barth's concern in literary creation, that is, the writer should not only conform to the literary tradition, but also inject new elements in literature, to surpass the tradition. His solution is to return to the source of narration and rewrite the old story with modern methods, to create a unique one. When genie realizes that "the key to the treasure is the treasure", he appears in the face of the sisters. Although Scheherazade wants to beguile King Shahryar with stories, she is puzzled about the content. Since genie comes from the second half of the twentieth century, he is familiar with the 1001 Nights so he retells them to Scheherazade via narration in memory. Therefore, Scheherazade takes "from her earlobe a gold ring worked in the form of a spiral shell" (Barth 10) by way of a gift to genie's fiancée and the genie put on her finger a gift "from his fiancée to her namesake's mother -- a gold ring patterned with rams'-horns and conches, replicas of which she and the Genie meant to exchange on their wedding day." (Barth 15) Here, the repeated spiral image indicates that the past and the present are constantly intersecting and mingling. After telling 1001 stories, Scheherazade pretends to be in love with the king and makes her plea to stop killing. But in the matter of the fact, she takes the razor from the pocket and cuts his bloody engine off and chokes him on it, and then commits suicide. Meanwhile, through genie's discussion with Scheherazade, he also gets his inspiration, that is, "for entirely present ends, materials received from narrative antiquity and methods older than the alphabet." (Barth 10) The title of his work is Dunyazadiad and its central character was not Scheherazade but Dunyazad, "the image of whose circumstances, on my 'wedding-night-to-come,'" (Barth 18) From then one, genie fades out of their sight and the sisters are implementing their plan.

3.2. The Third Person Narration in Dunyazadiad

The second part is narrated in the third person narration, and the narrator is genie. He clarifies that the conversation in the first part happens between Dunyazad and Shah Zaman. Then Shah

Zaman narrates his story via narration in memory. Six years ago, after he found out his bride has an affair with the chief cook and his sister-in-law cuckolded his brother with the blackamoor Sa'ad al-Din Saood, he and his brother put to death his queen and all his concubines and took a solemn oath to rape and kill a virgin a night, so as never again to be deceived. But he said nothing to his vizier, only told him to fetch me a beautiful virgin for the night. Not knowing that he meant to kill her in the morning, he brought him his own daughter, Samarkand's equivalent of Scheherazade. She loved Shah Zaman and bravely declared the perfect equality between men and women was not attainable and "even to pursue it ardently, against the grain of things as they were, was in all likelihood to spoil one's chances for happiness in love" (Barth 26) The good-natured Shah Zaman ultimately accepted Scheherazade's proposal so he sent all the virgins from Samarkand, in groups of a hundred to organize and populate it in secret rather than actually raping and killing them.

In the third part, the story is again narrated in the first-person narration and the narrator is still genie. He explains the former two parts are the conversation between the Dunyazad and Shah Zaman and points out it is actually his retelling of *The Thousand and One Nights* and emphasizes his principle of writing, that is, to rewrite the story in the treasure-house of literature.

In *Dunyazadiad*, the narrators shifts from Dunyazad to genie. Even though Scheherazade constitutes the core of the first novella, it is genie who takes the dominant position in the discourse. Therefore, its narrative structure is reverse frame story. The general frame structure adopts the structure of "tiny stories within large story", and the large story gives forth to a series of tiny stories. The charm of *The Thousand and One Nights* lies in its successive stories. Barth not only continues to employ this structure, but also creatively develops it. In the novel, he vividly illustrates it by Dunyazad's words:

"Whether a story might imaginably be framed from inside, as it were, so that the usual relation between container and contained would be reversed and paradoxically reversible... Or whether one might go beyond the usual tale-within-a-tale, beyond even the tales-within-tales-within-tales which our Genie had found a few instances of in that literary treasure-house he hoped one day to add to, and conceive a series of, say, seven concentric stories-within-stories, so arranged that the climax of the innermost would precipitate that of the next tale out, and that of the next, etc., like a string of firecrackers or the chains of orgasms." (Barth 13)

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the conversion of narrator generates reverse frame structure, thereby generating infinite text. Just as Barth said, "All these tales your sister has told the King are simply the middle of her own story --hers and yours, I mean, and Shahryar's, and his young brother Shah Zaman's." (17) At the same time, the memory figures of Scheherazade, Dunyazad, Shahryar and Shah Zaman are supplemented, especially Scheherazade who changes from the daughter of a vizier in ancient times to a talented undergraduate, who has a unique view on the relationship between men and women in modern times. Therefore, the traditional figure Scheherazade also finds her place in modern discourse and the condensation of memory is enriched.

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