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Doubt and the novel

Abstract:

Binary oppositions can be used to set up conflict in a novel. The four-term homology is a rhetorical system used by Barthes to emphasise the narrative delights of contradiction. Character types can be viewed conceptually within this system, allowing a practitioner to define voice in terms of paradigmatic options. The doubts that arise by restricting characters to four rhetorical poses can be alleviated by giving them tools to deal with hierarchical situations. The order in which the terms are arranged in the homology makes a fundamental difference in that the initial formulation will imply dominant and subordinate roles. This is unavoidable because the homology is not symmetrical but temporal. The position of the antagonist is a complex one driven by suspicion. Four practice-based positions have been defined that deal with the affect generated by conflict. Structuralism arose as an antagonistic response to the classic realist text. Barthes' work on the neutral term, the fourth pose in the homology, defines the role of the provocateur who occupies a place of paradoxical emergence. Barthes was a provocateur whose research laid the groundwork for a practice-based approach to characterisation.

Biographical notes:

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The four-term homology is a system that can be used to create an internal logic for a novel. It sets up a binary opposition between protagonist and antagonist so they can be viewed as conceptual positions equivalent to thesis and antithesis. The mediator or helper represents the synthesis of the two polar terms while the provocateur or saboteur is in the fourth position. Characters can be defined according to their positions within the system not according to external referents. They are types who adopt poses in relation to each other. Thus the voice of the work can be defined in terms of the pose taken by the narrator.

If the work is narrated from the position of the protagonist it might look like a romance in which the antagonist is merely an obstacle between the protagonist and his or her goal. If the work is narrated from the position of antagonist, his or her practice will be deflationary and critical. A mediator will prefer a closely focalised anecdotal account in which characters are drawn together by proximity. The only character immune to the colonising discourse of the original romantic impulse will be the provocateur who defines himself or herself against genres that are mediated too literally by the self.

A provocateur, by virtue of his or her position, registers the forces within the paradigm then transforms them. He or she, alone, of the main characters created out of a four-term homology can develop a practice that is able to fictionalise discourse. The character who occupies the fourth position in the homology uses the self metaphorically rather than literally. From a practice-based point of view, the protagonist is too busy with the desire to expand territory, the antagonist with reductive naming strategies, the mediator with a synthesising narrative, to establish a position and defend it.

In a series of lectures Barthes (2005, 6) gave at the Collège de France in 1977 he called the fourth position in the homology the Neutral. 'I define the Neutral as that which outplays the paradigm, or rather I call Neutral everything that baffles the paradigm.' The paradigm he defined as the opposition of two virtual terms. Two polarised terms (A and B) refer to this or that, the mixed term to this and that (AB), the neutral term to neither this nor that (O). The Neutral does not refer to impressions of greyness or to adopting neutralist or indifferent positions. 'To outplay the paradigm is an ardent burning activity.' (Barthes 1977, 7)

In 2001 the *Yale Journal of Criticism* devoted an issue to assessing the legacy of Barthes. Amid criticism of his inconsistency and failure to develop an analytical method was a sweet, light-hearted piece that examined his use of hostility as a narrative tool. Contradiction, according to Saint-Armand (2001, 520), was the beginning of meaning for Barthes, of writing as deporting. He used paradoxes, positions at odds with *doxa* or common sense, to free up language and affect. His approach was actually quite consistent. When everyone else was industriously adopting his ideas, for example, he was making a plea for laziness. While plumbing a neglected mode of existence he was able indulge in a paradoxical encounter with time. In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* he confessed his passion for dialectical play.

One method Barthes advocated in his controversial book *S/Z* was to downgrade the character function. 'When identical semes traverse the same proper name several times and appear to settle upon it, a character is formed,' he wrote (Barthes 1974, 67). Peggy Rosenthal (1975, 132) deciphered *S/Z* for American audiences. At first a sober analysis of the new set of terms introduced by Barthes, particularly the refinements in his hermeneutical code for dealing with plot, the article then moved into lively astonishment at his cheek for taking the hallowed individual – author and character – out of the equation. Rosenthal selected choice phrases from Barthes's discourse to demonstrate his assault. She wrote about lines of speech forming networks, codes taking over the text, semes migrating and people passing through systems of thought that pre-exist them. Language was on the move and characters were being dropped in favour of units of meaning that settled around proper names. The only hero was the discourse.

The binary between language and character was addressed by EM Forster (1996, 36) who made a distinction in 1927 between flat characters or types who are constructed around one idea or quality and round characters that evolve over time. Virginia Woolf (1996, 28) compared English, French and Russian approaches to character as respectively emphasising oddities and mannerisms, sacrificing the individual to a more general view of human nature and piercing through the flesh to reveal the soul. A practitioner who emphasises the structural forces of language over representation might view characters as assemblages of moving parts. His or her aim will be to turn awkward, inward-looking mammals into aesthetically pleasing characters with enough purpose and drive to last the distance in a work constructed out of tiny black marks. Where Fourier, a French thinker admired by Barthes (1976, 4) identified 1620 fixed passions to help him understand human nature, a structuralist practitioner in 2012 might go for something more dynamic. He or she might use a clock to coordinate the movement of affect, perhaps creating eight narrative poses to parody the eight-hour working day.

In the twelve o'clock position, at the highest point, is admiration. This is a buffing and polishing function that spruces up characters for special displays. At three o'clock is love. This might be the default setting on a character's emotional clock, one that readily drops to suspicion at six o'clock when it turns out to be unreciprocated. At nine o'clock is empathy. The normal response to a show of empathy is a backstory of pain and suffering. Since backstories hold up production, other means will have to be used for dealing with the affect. This could be a defining feature of a structuralist practitioner's approach to narrative, the invention of a method to alleviate pain and suffering without recourse to lengthy excuses.

In between these major positions on the clock face is a set of minor empirical poses – respect at 1.30, front at 4.30, irony at 7.30 and competence at 10.30. These are all practical tools that can be used for creating a degree of self-sufficiency in characters. The finer points will only become apparent through practice. Theories of affect inhibit a narrator who is forced to make quick on-the-job assessments. A narrator who is establishing his or her practice might be tempted to work in a clockwise direction. If he or she is suspicious of a character then it may be necessary to travel through irony, empathy and competence to arrive at admiration. If the narrator respects a character,

the formality of that position might slowly drop to love. Front can be used for self-promotion and stirring up trouble. It is just below love on the dial. The fine distinctions between these settings will only emerge over time.

Barthes defined his practice against the realist novel that employs empirical poses to control rhetorical forces. An action is a sequence that is never more than an artifice of reading, he argued. Generic titles for actions such as stroll, murder and rendezvous come to embody a sequence. 'The sequence exists when and because it can be given a name; it unfolds as this process of naming takes place, as a title is sought or confirmed; its basis is therefore more empirical than rational.' (Barthes 1974, 19) Its only status is of the already-done or already-read. It has an irreversible relationship with time.

He urged writers to create works that were like musical scores and outlined the methods for achieving this aim through a series of enigmas, their suspended disclosure and delayed resolution (Barthes 1974, 29). He invented a code to assist practitioners visualise the mechanics involved. The hermeneutic code is defined as all of the units of a text whose function it is to articulate in various ways a question, its response, and the variety of chance events which can either formulate the question or delay its answer: or even, constitute an enigma and lead to its solution (Barthes 1974, 17). The hermeneutic code can be used to stretch a narrative out of the reach of the proairetic code that denotes that an action has been completed. In the classic realist text, signification is the path of truth. Instead, in the hermeneutic system that governs suspense, the connotative signified occupies a special place: it brings into being an insufficient half truth, powerless to name itself.

> It is the incompleteness, the insufficiency, the powerlessness of truth, and this partial deficiency has a qualifying factor: this birth defect is a coded factor, a hermeneutic morpheme whose function is to thicken the enigma by outlining it. (Barthes 1974, 62)

The words 'thickening' and 'outlining' are useful hints for practitioners. The idea that a mystery can be suggested by a range of semiotic manoeuvres is a useful one. Convincing evidence is being mounted by Barthes for the idea that a narrative is structural and that the 'system' of signification precedes any consideration of the actions and characters within the work. The means of achieving this end is provided by Barthes's semic, cultural and symbolic codes, all of which establish mutable, reversible connections outside the constraint of time. The symbolic code shows how meanings are derived from the differential play of signifiers, the cultural code taps into systems of science and intertextuality and the semes, the codes of the person, migrate in a free-form kind of way. Barthes defined a seme as a unit of a signifier that sets up connotations in a reader's mind. It is a shifting element that can combine with other shifting elements to create characters, ambiences, shapes and symbols (Barthes 1974, 17).

Impressionistic-style works such as Gail Jones's *Five bells* and Brian Castro's *Bath fugues* break through chronologies using these codes, allow for a convergence of personality and metafictional commentaries. They make extensive use of the ellipse, the only temporal device that does not relate to elapsed time. Castro uses it in a stream-of-consciousness narrative while Jones uses time jumps between fragments.

These novels have been constructed against the codes that have an immutable relationship with time. The result of this manoeuvre is minimal use of scenes. A scene is defined as showing a temporal equivalence between the narrative segment and the event that is being portrayed (Prince 1982, 56).

If the four-term homology is used to interrogate the clock face of narrative poses, their sequential movement is disrupted so that binaries are accentuated. In marches the protagonist, setting the beat, obsessed with his or her own performance. An antagonist soon appears on the scene, determined to cause disruptions, to slow down the rhythm, to create some space for reflection. Suspicion is the acid that eats into the protagonist's resolve. Barthes (1974, 26) examined a special form of opposition known as an antithesis, one of the most stable figures propounded by the art of rhetoric. The function of an antithesis is to consecrate the division between opposites. It is more profound than zero degree, which is marked by the presence or lack of a simple relationship. 'The antithesis is the battle between two plenitudes set ritually face to face like two fully armed warriors: the Antithesis is the figure of the given opposition, eternal, eternally recurrent.'

At least ten conceptual positions can be created out of one binary opposition (Greimas, 1987, 108). A novel can be viewed as a virtual map of conceptual closure in which a rich variety of combinations are conceptualised in terms of contradictions. A semiotic square can reduce a narrative to a series of cognitive positions, rewrite a cognitive text into a narrative movement and coordinate and transcode systems of characters and cognitive complexes or contradictions (Jameson 1987, xvii). The order in which the terms are arranged makes a fundamental difference in that the initial formulation will imply something like dominant/subordinate, suggesting a value judgment. This is unavoidable because the square is not symmetrical but temporal or positional (Jameson 1987, xv).

Jameson (1987, xviii) used the semiotic square to examine a cycle of four tropes: metaphor, metonym, synecdoche and irony. He theorised that a romantic impulse is reduced through tragedy then reclaimed to a larger totalising function in a new unity of comedy and finally, in satire, expressing a self-consciousness of its own linguistic procedures that signals a new crisis. Irony is the great magical term on which the text turns in that its combinatorial mechanisms produce a position from across a wide range of meanings (Jameson 1987, xx). A new belief, a romantic moment emerges in which the cycle begins again at a heightened level.

Irony destroys the multivalence we might expect from quoted discourse, Barthes argues (1974, 44). An ironic narrator parodies the voices of others in free indirect speech instead of letting characters speak for themselves. The wall of voices must be passed through to reach the writing, Barthes argues. A narrator who comments constantly on the foibles of others allows little space for a poetic logic to establish itself. Irony is the neutral term in the cycle of empirical positions. It denotes experience with conflict.

The next setting after irony is empathy. It is at nine o'clock. It is the synthesising position favoured by a mediator. Empathy is a graceful manoeuvre in which the self is made vulnerable through wide exposure instead of being protected by various safety

devices. Empathy creates the space for doubts to be aired rather than used in the service of a narrative. The inner frame is allowed to dominate the text. An aporia is a place described by Derrida and defined by Pont (2009, 3), as that which cannot be thought through. 'It is a kind of node, perhaps, that refuses a linear and orderly crossing.'

A form suited to mediation is the lyric, defined as a direct presentation in which a single actor, the poet or his surrogate, sings, or muses, or speaks for us to hear or overhear (Scholes 1966, 4). Artists talk about following a material rather than bending it to their wishes. They call this attribute materiality. It's a way of looking at work according to formal features. Post-structuralist writers who privilege writing over dialogue focus on the way non-signifying aspects of language such as repetition, allusion, rhyme and intonation can permeate a work. Derrida (2002, 369) foregrounds this beautifully in his essay *The animal that therefore I am* building the work out of the seemingly chance congruence of sounds in French of '*je suis*' – I am – and '*je suivre*' – I follow. He follows this line of thinking on a great arc like a sculptor might make a coil out of a rubber tube, beginning with an intimate encounter with his cat and ending in a Greek myth. There is a repressed materiality at work in writing which is not in speech, a kind of textual unconscious, says Elizabeth Grosz (1989, 27). She cites evidence from Freud that the unconscious is graphic rather than phonic, i.e. it is structured like writing.

Some mediators use pathos as a marinade. It softens the meat without altering its integrity. A mediator will takes on a little of the protagonist's pain and suffering but he or she will use it figuratively to boost lexical inventiveness by creating new names for downplaying suffering. Pathos is defined as a situation that arouses pity between friends. It can refer to an action or to what happens to speech after pain and suffering (Rees 1972, 4). A mediator who draws on working-class consciousness might resolve conflict through a quiet order of comprehension (Rosenberg 1949, 597). This strategy protects the protagonist from two extreme tropes of the classic tragic plot – anagnorisis and peripeteia. Anagnorisis is a moment of truth and peripeteia obliges a protagonist to restructure his or her vision of the world. A change of fortunes may pass unremarked instead of being used in the service of drama.

Barthes was opposed to such synthesising narratives. In *Sarrasine*, the narrator opts for a *moral macédoine, half pleasant, half funereal*. Macédoine, literally a fruit salad, connotes a composite, a mixture without combination of elements. In *S/Z* he gave instructions for the creation of a fugue out of antagonisms rather than their resolution. Its development will be embodied in the retards, ambiguities and diversions by which a series of enigmas prolongs a mystery. Next comes a *stretto*, a tightened section where scraps of answers come and go, then a conclusion. The sequence of actions, the cadence of familiar gestures brings everything together like the strings. The readerly text is a tonal text, Barthes writes, and its unity is dependent on the two sequential codes: the revelation of truth and the co-ordination of the actions represented (Barthes 1974, 30).

The fourth term in the paradigm, the negation of the negation, arises in opposition to the opposite of the first term. It is the place of novelty and paradoxical emergence.

The first three terms are relatively given but the fourth one is the place of the great leap. It is, by definition, opposed to compromise. One does not resolve a contradiction; rather, by praxis, one alters the situation in such a way that the old contradiction, now dead and irrelevant, moves without solution into the past, its place taken by a fresh and unexpected contradiction (Jameson 1987, xvii). The opposition of the fourth to the second term is converse rather than contrary. A converse opposition arises out of a complementary, dialectal movement (empty as opposed to full).

A protagonist who holds his or her ground has no need of mediation. Love denotes an openness to the other. It is the default pose of the provocateur. Barthes (1974, 52) urged writers to invent methods for resisting the need to set forth the end of every action (conclusion, interruption, closure, denouement) for in participating in this process, the readerly text declares itself to be historical. Dialectical play enables characters to resist being used as subjects in the metaphoric systems of others. Love is in opposition to empathy in that it favours fictional responses over ones mediated too closely by the self. It is the neutral term in the rhetorical cycle in that it refuses to compromise. Instead of reconciling differences it turns them into drama. Mimetic literature owes its allegiance to truth of sensation and environment whereas narrative literature is historically drawn from myth, an ideal world in which poetic justice prevails and the adornments of language are used to embellish the narrative (Scholes 1966, 14). The novel is a literary form that brings the two impulses together in a system Barthes likened to a fugue.

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