# Narrative Dynamics and Narrative Theory

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In response to Dan Shen’s thought-provoking and richly illustrated presentation of the case for a concept of “covert progression” and for everything that follows from it, I want to focus upon three kinds of issue that the essay raises for me. The first issue is conceptual: I want to examine the proposed concept of “covert progression” itself and consider the extent to which it gains purchase upon the domain of narrative theory to which Shen aims to contribute, that of narrative dynamics. The second issue is interpretative; Shen’s argument rests upon the interpretative utility of the concept, and so her wide range of examples invite examination both as the performance of a certain practice of interpretation and as instances of the kind of interpretative crux that might best justify such a practice. Finally, the essay raises for me a methodological issue of a much larger and more abstract kind, by virtue of its participation in a kind of theoretical project that has long been characteristic of narratology – that is, the elaboration of typologies – and it therefore exemplifies, I think, certain tendencies inherent in that kind of theoretical activity that are themselves open to question.

## Covert Progression

The concept of covert progression draws together, in each of its terms, some key ideas and assumptions about narrative (fiction) and its interpretation. Shen carefully works through the relationship between her concept and various seemingly similar or adjacent terms already in circulation, which is clarifying; I don’t wish to interrogate any of these distinctions and boundaries, but rather to scrutinise the terms “covert” and “progression” in themselves.

To take “progression” first, Shen notes that the idea of narrative dynamics has tended to be dominated by plot, and she surely has a point; at the same time, it should be acknowledged that the concept of plot never merely addressed the question of how we find out what happens in fiction. This is not Aristotle’s emphasis, nor is it Peter Brooks’s emphasis in *Reading for the Plot*, even though his title ironically evokes a pejorative sense of plot and just such a superficial habit of reading. Further, “progression” in James Phelan’s usage (quite reasonably the main context for Shen’s own), is animated by both story “instabilities” and discourse “tensions,” cutting across the story-discourse distinction (211). My point here is that progression is best understood as the dynamics of a narrative’s rhetorical trajectory, in the round, not just the trajectory of the represented action.[[1]](#footnote-1) There is reason to think that Shen agrees, but there are also aspects of her essay that pull against this view. One is the repeated characterisation of a dual dynamics comprising plot development on the one hand, and a distinct (covert) progression on the other. Here the desire to have two separate progressions seems to result in a reductive idea of what any one progression can be, as if plot development in itself cannot be the vehicle of a dynamics conveying “contrastive or even opposite thematic significance” (target essay, p. 2); or that progression is not inherently a working through – after Phelan – of both mimetic “instabilities” and thematic “tensions.”

If it is true that the concept of narrative dynamics in fiction has often been too narrowly focussed upon the represented action, or focussed upon too narrow a conception of represented action, then it is also true that thematics has often been conceived with insufficient dynamism – less as the unfolding of a thematic argument than as the indexing of a field of significance. An approach to progression that addressed this imbalance would need to be synthetic, and always attentive to the attribute that gives progression its conceptual value, which is its temporal dimension; its qualities as the tracing of a rhetorical process over the course of a story. Shen’s impulse to divide progression, it seems to me, not only entrenches the dissociation of plot and thematics, but also plays into an atemporal notion of thematic significance. There seems to be minimal attention to any actual progression in many of Shen’s examples of “covert progression”: it plays little part in the analysis of Mansfield’s “Revelations” or “The Fly,” or in the discussion of Kafka’s “The Judgement” or Chopin’s “Désirée’s Baby,” all of which treat thematics in a topical, contextual way. I think Shen’s reliance upon the idea of “recalcitrant materials” also has a role in minimising the developmental quality of progression; this seems most explicit in thesis twelve, about cases in which “the fulcrum of the covert progression is constituted by one or a few very subtle stylistic choices” (target essay p. 21), begging the question, it seems, of how the covert progression is sustained, as a progression distinct from that carried by the plot.

The status of “recalcitrant materials” is also at the heart of my reservations about the idea of “covert” progression. Recalcitrant with respect to what? The argument seems to involve projecting an inadequate, superficial or partial interpretation as the foil to its own recuperative gambit, but at the same time it needs to retain this surface reading as one pole of its dualism. The latter consideration favours a general, abstract distinction between the naïve reader and the informed or insightful critic (itself, of course, a critical fiction); yet much of the specific discussion invokes specific partial interpretations of the stories, where the idea of covert progression functions as a critical power play, the tool of a better, or more subtle or original interpretation. But in that case, not only does the idea of dual progression seem to collapse, but it becomes hard to understand what “covert” means. The second progression is covert, Shen claims, in that it is a “hidden dynamic” (target essay p. 2); but how hidden, and from whom? The notion seems to depend upon the assumption of a divided readership of some kind - common readers versus the critical elect, or a benighted critical consensus versus the revelatory new interpretation, or perhaps first versus second reading. But this division itself implies that there is a perspective from which the “hidden” dynamic is apparent, and integral to the rhetoric of the story. In which case, if the hidden dynamic is part of the communicative intent, “hidden” seems the wrong word, especially given Shen’s insistence on it remaining hidden “throughout”; or, if the hidden dynamic is an author’s inadvertent revelation of attitudes or values, or an effect of textual autonomy and significance beyond authorial communicative intent, again “hidden” seems the wrong word.

The problem with “covert” progression is that it requires the critic to enforce a division, in the rhetoric of the story or in its reception, even as it subsumes that division within the integrity of the whole. Shen’s examples make appeal to a range of interpretative moves, yet to the extent that they are persuasive, they also seem straightforwardly part of an integral, rather than dual, narrative dynamics. There doesn’t seem to be any need to treat as covert the use of such intrinsic features of literary communication as irony, dramatic irony, inference, context, figurative meaning, ethical or emotional or ideological ambiguity, or equivocation, or ambivalence, or (with reference to Shen’s discussion of *300*) the affordance, in some media, of two or more semiotic channels.

## Examples

I’ve already touched broadly upon several of Shen’s examples, and expressed my reservation about the general interpretative stance upon which they are predicated. Here I just want to look more closely at a couple of crucial points of interpretation, where it seems to me that the expectation of a covert progression exerts undue force upon Shen’s reading. The points concerned relate to the readings of Mansfield’s “Psychology” and Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart”; the value of these particular examples – which is also the value of Shen’s illustrative method itself – is that they raise especially circumscribed and succinct interpretative issues.

There is a reflexiveness inherent in a story called “Psychology” in which two writers discuss the place of psychology in literature whilst skirting round the question of their feelings for each other; on the face of it, the layered quality of reflexiveness (the meta-levels of signification it generates) might be a plausible basis for identifying two distinct but related progressions within a story. So I certainly don’t want to rule out the possibility of dual progression of some sort in certain stories. The basis upon which Shen’s reading identifies a covert progression, though, seems implausible to me. The argument is that the line “What devil made him say that instead of the other?” is free indirect representation of the woman’s thought and, because it presupposes knowledge of the unspoken “other” in the man’s mind, to which the woman of course does not have access, it is also recalcitrant material indicating a covert progression in which the “sweet words” he wanted to murmur are actually imagined by her, not by him (target essay pp. 20-21). Yet the line in question seems better interpreted as internal focalisation of the man’s thought, the idiom more plausibly his, with its exasperation and its abrupt, irritable gesture of “the other.” The story moves fluidly back and forth between their perspectives, within the same paragraph and even within the same sentence (as in the paragraph in which those murmured words are imagined); and these words follow on from his direct speech. The occasion for recourse to a covert progression, then, does not arise except as a construct of the search for one; it is an artefact of the concept of covert progression itself.

In Shen’s reading of “The Tell-Tale Heart” something similar seems to occur. The presumed anomaly on which the reading turns is the protagonist’s “Villains! Dissemble no more!” – given that we have no good reason for thinking that the policemen concerned are either villains or dissembling (target essay p. 18). But their supposed dissembling consists, fairly explicitly, in his deranged belief that they are pretending not to hear what (he thinks) he hears. There is nothing covert about this; it is a straightforward effect of unreliable narration, and the narrator’s madness has been a premise from the first sentence of the story, an inference itself drawn from the readily accessible contextual assumption that nothing conveys insanity quite like a vehement insistence upon one’s sanity. Here again, the argument for a covert progression (in this case, two covert progressions) seems driven by a critical urge to discover covert progressions, even at the cost of artificially fragmenting the readily intelligible core of the story’s rhetoric.

## Typology in Narrative Theory

My final point is the most far-reaching, but I must be brief. It concerns the extent to which Shen’s argument, whatever its merits as an approach to interpretation, also intimates certain established features of narrative theory as currently practised, themselves in large part a legacy of the structuralist paradigm, though by no means confined to it. An underpinning assumption of this paradigm is that the theoretical task is substantially a typological one; in this respect it consists in the identification, discrimination between, and correlation of concepts describing features of narrative, or of fiction. The capacity to draw distinctions is a fundamental condition for analytical thought, and as the history of the field testifies, there is much clarity and insight to be gained in this manner, yet it is possible for such a mode of thinking to become a runaway engine. It is possible for binary distinctions to proliferate less in pursuit of some theoretical goal than *as* the theoretical goal, or to serve less as a means of explanation than as the occasion for explanation; for each new distinction to require tabulation with existing distinctions, generating yet more typological momentum and an ever more rebarbative terminology; and for those terms themselves to become, by a kind of conceptual hypostasis, in themselves a simulacrum of the object of inquiry. These concerns go beyond the remit of Shen’s essay itself because she, I think, seeks her rationale finally in interpretation, whereas I seek mine in theory – but I raise them as, if nothing else, contextual considerations arising from this discussion.

## Works Cited

Phelan, James. “Narrative Progression.” *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames*, edited by Brian Richardson. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002, pp. 211-28.

Walsh, Richard. *Novel arguments: Reading Innovative American Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

1. I have previously argued for such a view of fiction by invoking a concept of “argument,” which perhaps resists the pull towards a merely representational dynamics more than “progression” does, and was particularly useful to me in discussing innovative forms of fiction in which the mimesis of action is not the main vehicle of progression. See *Novel Arguments* (1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)