Story/Discourse in Manga/Literature (2)

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Meaning and Referentiality

In the former part of this article,[1] I demonstrated how a character in manga, exemplarily in Tezuka, was created and read depending on cultural codes. Deformation of the figures by Tezuka was a way of expressing their codified inner characters. On the other hand, Otomo's characters, Kanada for example, somewhat deviating from the character code in Tezuka's age, came close to realism, not to deformation. In this part, I will try to look into the realistic description of manga characters.

Whether in language or in an image, we always recognize a meaning of a sign (a word, a shape, a voice, etc.) by perceiving its relation to other juxtaposed signs. If we look at an illustrated face consisting of two short horizontal lines, two tiny points just under them, a short folded vertical line in the center below, a short horizontal line just under the vertical one, and a circle surrounding them all, we recognize the tiny points as eyes because they are situated under the two short horizontal lines which mean two eyebrows. Reversely, we recognize those horizontal lines as eyebrows because they are situated just above the eyes. The points themselves do not have any meaning intrinsically, but they convey the meaning just in relation to other signs. If I draw the face in huge size on a large wall and you stand close to one of the two points, you do not recognize it as an eye, because, in this case, you cannot see the proper distance or spatial relation between those signs. Namely, the distance, or the relation should not be too wide. Nor should it be too close. There is a permissible range of relation that enables the signs to render meanings. This range is defined by a code. We can modulate the distance between the signs or angle and size of them, so that we give a variety of expressions to the face. However, while anybody can say it is a face, it never

accords with any real faces, whether human or animal. The signs mean the face as an

abstract concept, but they are not the perfect analogue of reality. It is a face, but

nobody's face. Referring to this kind of signification, Jonathan Culler introduces

Saussure's remarks on "the 8.25 train."

> By way of illustration he notes that we feel the 8.25 p.m. Geneva-to-Paris Express to
> be the same train each day, though the locomotive, coaches, and personnel may be different.
> This is because the 8.25 train is not a substance but a form, defined by its relation to other
> trains. It remains the 8.25 train even though it leaves twenty minutes late, so long as its
> difference from the 7.25 and the 9.25 is preserved. (Culler 11)

However, supposing we replace each of the time-designating terms on the

timetable with a photograph of the real train leaving at that time and put the digits

showing the departure time just below the photograph, that is to say, we replace "the

8.25 train" with the photograph of that train accompanied by the departure time digits,

and the railroad company never uses another train in place of that train, the whole

signification system changes. The signifier, the photograph, conveys one message: this

train is the train. The other signifier, the digits, conveys another message: this train

leaves at this time. In this case, the photograph does not render meanings in relation

to other photographs. It signifies itself, so there is no need for an observer to adopt a

code enabling the meaning to occur. This meaning or message is what Roland Barthes

calls *"a message without a code"* (*Image-Music-Text* 17). Now, exactly speaking, the

photograph does not mean the message; rather it *refers* to the real object itself. It does

not follow that "8.25" has no referentiality, but it is a matter of degree.

Moreover, supposing we replace the departure time of the photograph with the

time when the train *left,* the signification system changes a lot more. Each day, the

having-started time is recorded. It forms a new timetable, but we cannot call it a

timetable any more. It is a kind of photo album. In this case, referentiality of the

photograph is much stronger. While a normal timetable remains the same whether an

actual train leaves twenty minutes later or not, this timetable (a photo album) never permits that situation to happen. Namely, while the normal timetable has no one-to-one relation with the real trains, the other timetable (the photo album) is their perfect analogue.

If we compare these two timetables with two graphic expressions, the face mentioned above and some photographic representation, we can take a new perspective on the semiotic study of manga characters. Roughly speaking, manga is placed between those two planes: relational signification defined by a code on the one hand (a normal timetable or the face above), and photographic referentiality generating analogues on the other (the other timetable).

When we see Kanada drawn within a square frame, how should we recognize this character? He is much different from the face consisting of lines, points, and a circle, but he is also different from a photographic image. The figure does not mean a human being as an abstract concept. Certainly he gives us an impression like a natural being. However, he is not an analogue of a real human being. To take previous examples, he is not like a normal timetable, nor is he like a photo album. He is not nobody, but he is not somebody. He has strong referentiality, but he does not exist in reality.

Even if we drew Kanada just with simple lines and points, we could make as natural a plot. For we could compensate for the lack of expressions by giving more statements and explanations supporting his features. We could not represent his perfect presence but nevertheless tell the plot of his story. In fact, not only Kanada but also many manga characters, at least in serious manga, are drawn with far more minute lines and far more detailed shapes so that they can approximately look like a real person. What is the difference between the former line-and-point Kanada and the latter, normal Kanada? The former is close to the face I mentioned above and the normal railroad timetable I discussed. Each component renders a meaning in relation to other components, and he does not resemble any specific human figures including Kanada himself. In short, he is what Saussure calls an *arbitrary* sign. According to Saussure,

some signs are *motivated* by their models, some are not (Saussure 98-100). For example, a cock-a-doodle-do resembles the real crow of a rooster, so we can say it is motivated by the sound it signifies. On the other hand, most languages are unmotivated or arbitrary as the shape or sound of the word "tree" do not resemble those of a real tree. However, Saussure says that arbitrariness and motivation are not an absolute distinction, and that every language is basically motivated, though its degree of motivation is relative (182). The line-and-point Kanada does not resemble the *real* Kanada, Otomo's character, but certainly he resembles a human face in an abstract way. That means he is motivated in a way, but, in terms of Otomo's character, he is not. Thus, we can say he is relatively an unmotivated, arbitrary sign. Then, what should we make of the other, normal Kanada? Can we say he is motivated? He has no model in the real world as a cock-a-doodle-do does, but, unlike the line-and-point Kanada, his detailed figure insists on his existence, without which the work becomes extremely boring to the reader. To put it another way, while that signifier, or the arbitrary line-and-point Kanada conveys the signified, or Otomo's Kanada, (it *means* Kanada), this signifier, the normal Kanada has no signified. He seems to be himself as if he referred to the real referent or the real model though there is no such reality in the external world. We never think he exists in the real world, but we none the less consider him as an insubstantial, imaginary being like Santa Claus whose concrete visual image depends on a person imagining his appearance. Though Kanada is also an imaginary being, his image is far more fixed, independent and concrete. This is partly due to what Barthes calls *"the referential illusion."* In *The Rustle of Language*, Barthes calls into question the distinction between fictional discourse and historical discourse.

> Once language intervenes (and when does it not intervene?), a fact can be defined only tautologically: the *noted* issues from the *notable*, but the *notable* is —— since Herodotus, where the word loses its mythic acceptation —— only what is worthy of memory, i.e., worthy to be *noted*. Hence, we arrive at that paradox which governs the entire pertinence of historical discourse (in relation to other types of discourse): fact never has any but a

linguistic existence (as the term of discourse), yet everything happens as if this linguistic existence were merely a pure and simple "copy" of another existence, situated in an extra-structural field, the "real."[2] (*The Rustle of Language* 138)

For example, when we read a history of America and find the statement "Columbus discovered America," within a linguistic world, nothing other than the notion that this statement should be noted endorses it as a fact, and the reason for it being noted is that it is notable (worthy to be noted) in other historical books or some other linguistic worlds. However, we naturally believe in this statement as if it were a copy of the reality. Then, what guarantees this "as if?" Barthes argues that, in typical historical discourse, because "lack of signs of the 'speaker' makes possible objectivity···the referent speak[s] for itself," (*Ibid.* 132) or "the referent is addressed as external to the discourse, though without its being possible to reach it outside the discourse." (*Ibid.* 138) Hence, the signifier does not *mean* the signified, but directly refers to the referent, or, to put it another way, the signified illusorily merges with the referent. This *"refe rential illusion"* is the key to the *"reality effect."* (*Ibid.* 139) I take the following passage for example.

> Herman Melville was born at 11:30 P.M. on Sunday, 1 August 1819, at 6 Pearl Street in New York City. The doctor, Wright Post, attended Maria at the delivery. Although delayed beyond the date the parents had figured on, the birth was without complications. Visiting in the house when Herman was born were the father's sister Mary and her husband, Captain John D'Wolf —— known as "Norwest John," and already immortalized in G. H. von Langsdorff's *Voyages and Travels in Various Parts of the World, during the Year 1803, 1804, 1805, 1806 and 1807* (London, 1813, and Philadelphia, 1817) as the man who had crossed Siberia with Langsdorff in 1807. (Parker 23)

Here, the narrator describes as many attendants on the mother as possible, and even introduces a personal career of one of the attendants. He indicates the date, time, and place of the birth, names of all the attendants, and also the source of D' Wolf's

adventure. The basic assumption is that this is a complete linguistic world. It is not by any meaning a copy of the reality. It is not all about Maria's delivery. There should be some maids around, she should be lying on a bed for sure, she should wear some clothes, and so on. The narrator doesn't know them, so cuts them out from the description. We cannot witness the reality of those surroundings because all is past and we depend on the linguistic data only. However, the description still persuades us to accept it as truth. Of course, one big factor is that the book containing the quotation is entitled *A Biography*, but another big factor is the feature of the discourse. The narrator tries hard to describe the scene in detail. A fiction writer wouldn't need to introduce so many attendants. He is only required to introduce characters who will play a role in a plot later. While the biographical narrator cuts out something he doesn't know, a fictional writer can cut more out to make his own story consisting only of the things he chooses. (Or, he can add some extra value to the characters. What is crucial here is that his priority is not on the referents but on the story, or the work itself.) Namely, the biographical narrator is drawn strongly to the referents, so that he makes a story of the referents. Thus, in a fictional work, a signifier tends to be at a distance from the referent. For example, if, instead of the description above, I said, "there were several persons around Maria when her second son was being born," the reader would imagine what "several persons" are like, or he would not pay any attention to the words. At any rate, "several persons," the signifier would send the signified to the reader, but the signified would not be so concrete as Captain D' Wolf. It would not seem to identify the only one person in the world, so would not be a clear referent. In a fictional work, the story does not require such concrete images of characters. It can include them, but it need not. To use Barthe's terms, in a narrative work, there is "useless detail" or something "the narrative syntagm" does not necessitate (*The Rustle of Language* 143). It is concreteness without which a story can continue. In historical discourse, elements of this kind, minuteness, detail and concreteness are important. If the narrator is drawn to the referents and the signifier sends the referent, namely if the signified is at one

with the referent, the discourse sounds concrete and real, and the biographical narrator esteems concreteness and detail to the extent that a story does not need them for its progression.

Semiotically, the "concrete detail" is constituted by the *direct* collusion of a referent and a signifier; the signified is expelled from the sign, and with it, of course, the possibility of developing a *form of the signified*, i.e., narrative structure itself. . . . This is what we might call the *referential illusion*. The truth of this illusion is this: eliminated from the realist speech-act as a signified of denotation, the "real" returns to it as a signified of connotation; for just when these details are reputed to *denote* the real directly, all that they do —— without saying so —— is *signify* it; Flaubert's barometer, Michelet's little door finally say nothing but this: *we are the real;* it is the category of "the real" (and not its contingent contents) which is then signified; in other words, the very absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent alone, becomes the very signifier of realism: the *reality effect* is produced. . . . (*Ibid.* 147-8)

Here, the boundary between realism and history is blurred. Or, rather, historical discourse has become one version of realism. Moreover, as we have seen, we can say the distinction between fiction and history is made by the degree of referentiality which is itself tautological illusion. Then, what determines the referential degree suitable for each discourse? Culler lists five criteria for "naturalizing" a text or "bring[ing] it within the modes of order which culture makes available" (Culler 137): relation to the real world, relation to the cultural text or "shared knowledge," relation to conventions of a genre, resistance to conventions of a genre, and parodying conventions of a genre. When we read "Herman Melville was born at 11:30 P.M. on Sunday, 1 August 1819, at 6 Pearl Street in New York City," though, basically, it is a linguistic world, we naturalize the birth, the time, and the place in relation to our real world. We naturalize the American situation in relation to our knowledge on culture. We naturalize it as part of a biography in relation to the genre. It does not resist the genre but assimilates with it. Given these naturalizations, we feel the concreteness or the

referential degree suitable for the text of this kind. In short, we feel this passage is concrete and natural as historical discourse, comparing it with our real life, our culture, and the books we have read.

Another big problem about fiction and history, which we have not discussed so far and which will enrich the argument about referentiality, is whether it (illusorily) refers to external entities or just entities within the text. Dorrit Cohn introduces the frequently used theory. "First and foremost [the adjective *nonreferential*] signifies that a work of fiction itself creates the world to which it refers by referring to it. This self-referentiality is particularly striking when a novel plunges us from the outset into the spatial perceptions of a fictional figure, as in *The Castle*." (Cohn 14) However, it does not follow that self-referentiality conflicts with the *referential illusion* and the *reality effects*. As realistic fiction is possible, though referentiality to the external world is relatively weak in fiction like *The Castle*, even then fiction tolerates the *reality effects*. For example, we can consider several historical romances. In a historical romance, or fiction based on history, there appear real figures who exist or existed in this world. Catherine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* focuses on two protagonists, an English girl and her guardian's son, and depicts feuds between the white people and tribes of native Americans on the historical background of colonial America. In the story, John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts colony, plays the role of a perfect father figure. He says what the real Winthrop might not have said, so basically he is fictional. From the viewpoint of the plot structure, he works as a centripetal node that always puts an end to the dramatic disorder. So, he does not need to be John Winthrop, but could be replaced by any other imaginary authorial character. Then, why should he be Winthrop? Because he gives the *reality effects* to the story. His name gives concreteness from the very fact that the story does not need it for its structure and plot progression. It is extra value to the story, and has the higher degree of referentiality than the story needs except for the *reality effects*. Though, in the main, *Hope Leslie* is a complete fiction, it sounds as if the story could have really happened

because of the closeness to the real figure and the real history, or to the external referents, and the work fictionally creates this referentiality. To conclude by altering Cohn's theory, the fictional world coexists with history, or self-referentiality coexists with external referentiality. This conclusion confirms another aspect of the *reality effects* in fictional works. As minute description is always possible even in self-referential fiction, like science fiction, the reality effects in such fictional works do not necessarily come from external referentiality. To put it another way, self-referential fiction does not always have to be unreal or does not always sound as if it could happen in another world. When we read *Neuromancer*, we think that there is no such world NOW, but that it could be possible somehow, or rather it is realistic.

> Opening his eyes, he saw Molly, naked and just out of reach across an expanse of very new pink temperfoam. Overhead, sunlight filtered through the soot-stained grid of a skylight. One half-meter square of glass had been replaced with chipboard, a fat gray cable emerging there to dangle within a few centimeters of the floor. He lay on his side and watched her breathe, her breast, the sweep of a flank defined with the functional elegance of a war plane's fusilage. Her body was spare, neat, the muscle like a dancer's. (Neuromancer 44)

This is a self-referential world, but it is very concrete. As I stated above, we feel it could be possible by consulting our own world, books, and culture. We naturalize this fantastic world and feel it realistic by hearing such objects as "[o]ne half-meter square of glass" and "a fat gray cable emerging there to dangle within a few centimeters of the floor" saying "*we are the real* (though we are not necessary for 'the narrative syntagm')."

Now we have to return to the arguments about manga characters. Unlike the line-and-point Kanada, the normal Kanada looks real. We can say that Kanada's world is basically fictional. It is a self-referential world like K's country and Case's Sprawl. However, the greatest difference is that Kanada's appearance, his motorcycle, his

weapons, etc., his everything is graphically expressed. Namely, his world is as concrete as or more concrete than K's or Case's. As the line-and-point Kanada proved, those elements are not necessary for the plot progression proper, or "the narrative sy ntagm." The plot is possible without them. Though he does not exist in the external world, as he does not mean but refers to himself self-referentially and his graphic lines say *"we are the real"* (so it is also the *referential illusion*), he seems so real. In this meaning, while the line-and-point Kanada was defined as an arbitrary sign, the normal Kanada can be defined as a motivated sign because he is motivated by himself self-referentially. I argued above that the line-and point Kanada was defined by the relation between lines. A code controlled this system of signs. Tezuka's character was also defined by the character code determining the ways of deformation. In contrast, compared with those characters, the *reality effects* make Kanada rather look like a photographic image. Relatively so. I argued above that a photographic message was *"a message without a code."* If a photographic message does not mean but refers to the external objects, and does not need a code, we can say realistic manga characters like Kanada refer to themselves self-referentially, and so need a code more than a photograph but less than deformed characters like Tezuka's. This should be one reason why Otomo's *AKIRA* was accepted by Americans enthusiastically. Free from the Japanese character code, it must have reached Americans' minds smoothly, and built a new international code.

Post-Structuralist Concerns

As for ways of reference in the fictional world, Cohn suggests that it is "by no means entirely independent of the actual world we know." (Cohn 15) As I argued above, we naturalize both historical discourse and the fictional world by consulting our actual world, our cultural experiences, and the literary genres we know. We naturalize the degree of referentiality, according to what kind of discourse it is, and the *reality effects* are possible on the basis of this naturalization. However, from the post-

structuralist viewpoint, both the real in history or fiction and the reality we consult for clues to naturalization change the meaning. Our reality itself is invaded by mediated signification. In consulting the reality, we are consulting images on TV, PC, films, advertisements and so on, and the external real in the *reality effects* is itself another fiction. When we think a novel is realistic, we may be thinking so, comparing it rather with other manga or TV programs than with reality. We are living in what Baudrillard calls hyperreality. Every sign has lost its external referent. The *reality effects* do not work, and, without a referent, a sign itself has become the external existence instead. A photographic image or historical discourse has no intrinsic relation with its model or the historical events it depicts. Norika Fujiwara in a photograph has nothing to do with Norika herself.

This hyper reality does not impair manga characters. Why? Because manga characters are already alive in hyper reality. I argued that they were living in the self-referential world where they none the less lost their reality. By nature, Kanada has no external model to refer to, and so, unlike the photographic Norika, he is far from the situation where he loses relation with the model. Namely, he does not cease to be himself. Like K and Case, he not only lives free from bifurcating effects of hyper reality, but also gets along with it, and what is more, he keeps no less reality than K and Case. Indeed, manga characters are the real existence themselves.

Notes

[1] "Story / Discourse in Manga / Literature (1)" を参照。

[2] Hence, the diachronical force of history is reduced to the paradigmatically structured text, as Levi-Strauss argued in *The Savage Mind.*

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