

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 acceptance — 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 “*referential 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

