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## Response to Dan Shen

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Let me begin by thanking Dan Shen and the editors at *Style* for the invitation to contribute to the special issue and to respond to the target article by Dan Shen. I admire her work and vast knowledge, to which the target article testifies. I am grateful for the opportunity to engage with her ideas and suggestions, which in the current context specifically concerns what she coins “covert progression”.

Dan Shen is aware that “covert progression” sounds like a concept that would come close to several existing ones and that it needs to be distinguished “from other kinds of deeper-level meanings” (Target Essay, 2). It speaks to Shen’s erudition that she carefully compares her suggestion to no less than five other comparable concepts with which she does not want it confused (“covert plot”, “second story”, “submerged plot”, “submerged narrative” and “short story” (TE, 3-7)). In all instances, Shen successfully explains how her suggestion does *not* amount to the same as either of these existing terms. It remains, however, much less clear, what exactly it is, and not only what it is not. Tellingly, Shen never defines the proposed concept but perpetually talks about it in terms of how it “is essentially different from” (1), “complicates reader’s response in a distinct way” (1), “further complicates the picture” (1). The distinctiveness of the “distinct” way remains relatively vague, though, and this is further put into relief by the extremely broad brushes used to paint the theoretical landscape that forms the background of the suggestion. Thus, whereas the comparison with the five mentioned *concepts* is useful and illuminates what Shen is not suggesting, the overall theoretical backdrop for the article is so general that it misses out on the opportunity to describe Wahlverwandschaften in the form of affinities to *some* existing theories and

differences from other. Instead, narrative theory is described several times as one big lump spanning a couple of millennia from Aristotle onwards:

“Since Aristotle, investigations of narrative fiction have focused on the plot development.” (1)

“Ever since Aristotle, the critical field has taken for granted that narrative dynamics of mimetic fiction reside in the plot development, which may have different branches or layers and which may be interpreted from diversified perspectives.” (1)

“Given the Aristotelian tradition [...]” (9)

“[...] the narrative critical tradition since Aristotle [...]” (11)

I find it hard to subscribe to a picture of narrative theory as relatively homogenous and unified from Aristotle until today. It seems to me that referring to plot-oriented approaches to narrative, cognitive narratology, rhetorical narratology, unnatural narratology, and fictionality theory as one big Aristotelian narrative tradition is misleading and unhelpful. Within narrative theory there are diverse and often conflicting interests: in mimetic functions or in mental processes or in narrative as action or in the unnatural or in the purpose and intention. Shen’s suggestion does not manifest itself with any clarity by stating that this alleged Aristotelian tradition is what “we” must “break free” from. (p. 11, 12 et passim). This serves to make it unclear, if the suggestion is supposed to subvert, supplement, complement or replace literary theory, narrative theory, or narratology respectively. The ambivalence towards existing tradition(s) also becomes visible in the call for the need to break free from the “bondage” (1, 11, 12) of the critical tradition and “break free of the shackle of the narrative critical tradition [...]” (11). If narrative, critical tradition is really one whole – and a whole at that, from the bondage and shackles of which we need to break free – then is the

concept of covert progression (self-declaredly in a secondary relation to overt progression) a part of, and extension of said tradition, or an alternative to it?

To put it differently, clearly several theorists over the last century have offered opinions that are equally or more dissimilar to Aristotle's, than Shen's opinion that some narratives contain a covert progression in addition to an overt progression. Some distinctions would be helpful, therefore, to clarify the relation between existing theories and the new suggestion. Peter Brooks and James Phelan are both mentioned as narrative theorists working with plot and progression but hardly anything is done to compare and contrast their ideas and theories with the ones put forward in the target essay. Early on Shen states that:

The pioneering book of this line of inquiry is Peter Brooks' *Reading for the Plot* (1984), which puts emphasis on the forward movement of plot/plotting and of reading [...] (2)

This, however, remains more of a dutiful nod, than a useful reference point for comparison. Moreover, stating simply that Brooks' emphasis in his book is on the forward movement of plotting and of reading is only half true in the literal sense that the core of Brooks' interest is in the back and forth movement of both is captured in his succinct expression of "anticipation of retrospection". Quotes from Brooks and Phelan (in addition maybe to theorists of specifically digressive and non-linear or unnatural plots, like Ross Chambers and Brian Richardson) would help more firmly situate Shen's proposal in relation to existing theories.

Putting together what Shen writes about covert progression it seems that its main differentia specifica compared to similar dynamics is that it has to run throughout the text (as opposed to a hidden clue or a sudden revelation for the attentive reader). On p. 2 it is described as a hidden parallel to the "overt dynamic *throughout* the text", and on p. 3 it is *contrasted* to "covert plot", which in turn is described as "a *local* device". As for the method associated

with investigating covert progression', Shen provides a description in the context of her Kafka-reading of "The Judgment":

Existing criticisms of the son's reflection on his friend invariably try to fit it in the interpretation of the plot, *without touching on social pressure*. By contrast, I searched carefully for another narrative movement and found a covert progression throughout the text concerned with the individual-society conflict (Shen, "Covert Progression, Language" 17-24). (13)

The method is to take a clue or an observation that goes against the grain of the overt progression and then carefully examine the extent to which this pervades the entire text dynamic rather than merely making a local appearance. I like the idea, and I truly admire the ways in which Shen manages to connect theoretical assumptions to analytical practices. Notwithstanding, one difficulty, bordering on paradox that I wish to point out consists in the fact that the more pervasive and global and recurrent throughout the text the covert plot is, the less distinguishable it becomes from an overt plot. This paradox is general as well as particular. In general, if there are (at least) two pervasive plots clearly informing the dynamics of a text, how can you tell which one is overt and which is covert? Unless one takes recourse to previous readings, but in this case, the onus seems to be on you to say that they missed something non-negligible. In particular, these very questions play out also in relation to "The Judgment" specifically. I believe that Shen's claim that there is a "progression throughout the text concerned with the individual-society conflict" is entirely justified. However, this is hardly covert; and to say that there is a critical consensus that the story focuses (only) on the conflict between father and son and not on individual and society is a mischaracterization. A quick search immediately reveals scores of articles from several decades centrally concerned with the narrative's depiction of the relation between individual and society and the ensuing existential crisis. This is not to say that further work on this is not

worthwhile or that the finding is insignificant but that the distinction between overt and covert is not straightforward.

Another opposition that may sometimes be problematic is the one between covert progression, which is global and covert plot, which is local or a branch of the plot development itself (p. 4). When contrasting with Richter's covert plot, Shen states about Dinesen's "Sorrow-Acre":

This storyline depicts the contrast between the liberal-minded nephew and the feudal aristocratic uncle and portrays the tragic fate of the nephew, a storyline either totally overlooked or partly noticed and misread by previous critics. (4)

Richter however, provides very scarce evidence that the nephew will undergo any such tragic fate, and it is not evidenced by any single word or sentence or local instance in the text.

Rather, it has to be a judgment by the reader based on her assessment of (the progression of) the text as a whole and whether it seems likely that the uncle would want to kill off his nephew. My own forthcoming reading of the short story (Nielsen, Henrik Skov, "Author" in *Fictionality and Literature* forthcoming at OSU press) runs in the completely opposite direction and argues that the uncle willingly abdicates and leaves wife as well as estate to the nephew. In addition, male authority is undermined by a more fundamental female authority on the level of the author, the characters as well as of the thematics. Be that as it may, the overriding point is that any judgment about the validity of one reading vs. another would seem to have to take into account the progressions of a text in its entirety and could not rely on only a local observation. Hence the distinction between covert plot and progression appears to be unstable.

A highlight among Shen's readings is her demonstration that in Mansfield's "Revelations" the irony against the female narrator is less essential than the irony directed against patriarchal oppression and discrimination. Here, it seems to me, is an example of how

fundamentally the uncovering of a covert progression running through an entire story, can change the overall understanding of the story.

The final reading, I wish to engage with here, is Shen's discussion of "The Tell-Tale Heart" by Edgar Allan Poe to which she returns several times in the target article. Her key point is that a covert progression points the reader to understand that the narrator is "unconsciously projecting his own dissemblance unto the policemen" (18) and comes to constitute "unwitting self-condemnation" (18). I find Shen's two main reasons for this reading unconvincing. The first one is that "The murderer is the only person who dissembles in the narrative and who constantly takes unethical delight in dissembling" (and that therefore he is not actually characterizing the policemen). From the narrator's perspective, however, the policemen are indeed dissembling, since he claims to believe that they are well able to hear the beating heart but do not admit it. The second reason is the insistence on the "historical context, where a murderer's insistence on his sanity amounts to unwitting self-conviction" (18). This, however, seems to amount to buying into (or at least assuming that the story buys into) vulgar popular belief that the accused comes to confirm his guilt, his insanity or to self-accuse independent of whether his answer affirms or denies the charge of insanity and guilt. I find it hard to see the grounds upon which to assume that Poe's narrative would solicit any such popular non-sense. I wish to extremely briefly point to another possible covert progression, which is constituted by the way in which Poe strategically plays on homophones throughout the text. Homophones are words that *sound* the same when pronounced but *look* differently when seen in writing. The homophones of the text are connected exactly to these two senses; of hearing and seeing. The sound of the tell-tale heartbeat in this possible overt progression is invisible but present throughout the text as a sound. We may hear it like the 'I,' but we cannot find it by looking for it, as the police officers do. The very last words of the text manifest and hide this sound: "Here, here! – it is the beating of his hideous heart!" (Poe 1843, 31). Looking

"here" we see no heart beating, but when we *listen* to it, it seems to shout at us: "Hear, hear!". Similarly for sight, the sustained play on 'I/eye' makes it ambiguous if the reference is to the speaker or his antagonist. Pursuing this progression, it becomes obvious that it is not the old man whom the character narrator really wishes to kill, but rather "his Evil Eye." For it is not only the eye, "the Evil eye," but also "the evil I" that is destroyed by the murder. Would a reading like this amount to uncovering a covert progression, and is that more or less the same, then, as a new reading based on sustained patterns in the text?

At the very end of the essay, p. 23-27, Shen suggests that her proposal should have consequences for a large number of narratological and literary concepts for which dual models are now needed: "A Model of Dual Event Structure", "Dual Character Image Model", "Dual Model of Unreliability", "Dual Model of Authorial Communication", "A Model of Dual IA and Dual Authorial Audience" are all requested. And Shen goes on:

Apart from the above-mentioned dual models, we also need to have a dual model of narrative distance, a dual model of focalization [...], **a dual modal of narrative tone**, among others, and on a more general scale, **a dual model of story and discourse**.

At this point, I find myself asking; would we really like students and scholars to go that way? Moreover, what about narratives with two overt progressions, or three – should we indulge ourselves in some triple and quadruple models of focalization? On a serious note, I would be very hesitant to further multiply narratological concepts. Additionally, I do not see the need, since it seems to me that **one** author can create an overt misogynistic plot and a covert feminist; and **one** narrative tone can account for the possibility to detect a latent racism behind an assumed egalitarianism. Similarly, when a person uses irony, we do not assume that this person becomes two persons, creates a dual story and discourse, or projects two



distinct character images. We assume that one person uses irony, which the listener in turn may or may not discover.

What Shen's essay demonstrates, however, is that beyond and before these redoubled models, her readings and her uncovering of covert progressions and meanings are well able to stand alone. There are several excellent suggestions. I already mentioned the re-interpretation of Mansfield. Another strong reading concerns Kate Chopin, where Shen demonstrates the valuable insight that overt and covert progressions may subvert each other. In each instance, the argument about a covert progression hinges on Shen's own reading and is debatable, but this is a strength and not a weakness. I highly admire how Shen continually focuses on close readings, and on the differences, they make for interpretation. I thank again for the opportunity to engage critically with some of her suggestions and just learn from others.