

The "Retreat" of the Author and the "Advance" of the Reader: Revisiting *The Craft of Fiction* by Percy Lubbock

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ABSTRACT

Percy Lubbock discusses the relationship among author, works and readers in *The Craft of Fiction*. He advocates that the author should not intervene in the work, and can adopt the first-person narrative and the third-person narrative to avoid the direct exposure of the author in the text. However, readers need more exposure to the works, selectively mobilize their own experience and imagination, and carry out creative reading. The paper holds that the way that readers and authors advance and retreat fully explains Lubbock's fiction aesthetics.

Keywords: author, work, reader, drama, picture

I. INTRODUCTION

Percy Lubbock, a famous British literary critic, established his position in the field of novel theory research with the publication of the book *The Craft of Fiction* in 1921. Scholars tend to believe that Lubbock is a loyal follower of Henry James, who is widely accepted as the founder of western novel theories, hence some scholars treated *The Craft of Fiction* as a summary and extension of James's *The Art of Fiction*. Famous critics Rene Wellek and Austin Warren once said, "Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction* is a Poetics of the novel based on the practice and theory of Henry James."^[1] Lubbock himself confessed to this as well. James discussed the four-dimensional relationship among the work, author, reality and readers in *The Art of Fiction*, with particular emphasis on the "authenticity" of the novel. In *The Craft of Fiction*, however, Lubbock pointed his finger at the paradigm and rules of the reasons why novels become a work of art, especially the interaction among the work, author and readers. Yin Qiping, a well-known scholar in China, believes that Lubbock's novel theory is mainly composed of three parts, namely theme determinism, alternation of pictures and plays and reader completion.^[2] Here this paper agrees with this. However, on this basis, this paper further believes that Lubbock's novel theory focuses on the work and discusses the relationship between the author and readers. In Lubbock's view, the author needs to hide behind the characters in the novel and keep a proper distance from the work to ensure the integrity of the work. At the same time, the work need to be read creatively by readers.

II. THE "RETREAT" OF THE AUTHOR

In 1967, Roland Barthes put forward that "the birth of readers must be based on the death of the author".^[3] Foucault also agreed that "In the game of writing, the author must play the role of death".^[4] Nearly half a century ago, Lubbock also believed that the author should hide his voice and figure in his works in the process of novel creation. In this way, we can say Percy Lubbock could be regarded as one of the precursors of Reader Response Criticism.

When talking about the relationship between readers and the author, Lubbock quoted James's concepts of picture and drama, which refer to two different narrative ways: telling and showing. According to him, picture is "the reflection of events in the mirror of somebody's receptive consciousness".^[5] The author is like a storyteller, facing up to the audience and telling stories. Drama dispels the author's presence by placing "him there accordingly, in front of the visible and audible facts of the case, and leaves it to these to tell the story".^{[5]p.71} As mentioned in the book, "the art of fiction does not begin until the novelist thinks of his story as a matter to be shown, to be so exhibited that it will tell itself"^{[5]p.62} Lubbock explained that, "in one case the reader faces towards the story-teller and listens to him, in the other he turns towards the story and watches it"^{[5]p.111} The former is a picture narrative, while the latter is a dramatic narrative. However, Lubbock himself is more inclined to agree with dramatic narrative style. He praised Flaubert and called him a true writer as he did not reveal his personal feelings. Flaubert "keeps in the background and desires us to remain unaware of his presence; he places the

story before us and suppresses any comment of his own".^{[5]p. 67} Once the work is born, reading is the communication just between readers and the work. The author needs to erase his own evaluation and moral tendency in his works, and deliberately keeps a distance from the characters in the book, so as not to arouse readers' dislike even disgust. Or, the author deliberately uses specific and sophisticated creative skills to hide himself behind the characters, so as to avoid rough and blunt evaluation of stories and characters, and make readers empathize with them unconsciously, which depends on author's narrative skills.

According to Lubbock, "The whole intricate question of method, in the craft of fiction, I take to be governed by the question of the point of view—the question of the relation in which the narrator stands to the story."^{[5]p.251}, so he discussed "panoramic narrative", "first-person narrative" and "third-person narrative". First of all, he believes that "If it is to have that unity which it needs to produce its right effect there can be no uncertainty here, no arbitrary shifting of the place from which an onlooker faces it"^{[5]p.85}, which is also known as the "center of vision". The consistency of viewpoints needs to consider readers' reading feelings, viewpoints need to be unified and harmonious, and the transfer of viewpoints cannot be arbitrary and rude. In a novel, the most annoying thing is to see the author change his identity and perspective at will and rush to another narrative position far away from the core of the story. William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* is such a failure example. He talks about the characters in his works at will, and he intrudes into the story as the role of the author at will, which seems abrupt and like a sudden attack, which suddenly pulls the readers out of the characters' stories and return to reality, weakening the authenticity of the novel. Thackeray is best at panoramic painting style, and often use foreshortening, one of the pictorial art, well in his works. "From his height he looks forth, takes in the effect with his sweeping vision, possesses himself of the gradation of its tone; then, stooping nearer, he seizes the detail that renders it."^{[5]p.99} In his story, every character wants to stand up and show his attitude, and the scene becomes quite chaotic. Therefore, Thackeray can only achieve "continuity as he always recurs to his pictorial summary".^{[5]p.108} However, Thackeray still missed a lot of dramatic scenes to make his novel more vivid.

Among the techniques to enhance drama, the simplest method is to use the first-person narrative, that is, "telling the story in the person of somebody in the book".^{[5]p.127} In this way, "The characterized 'I' is substituted for the loose and general 'I' of the author"^{[5]p.127}, but can deliberately sneak into the back of a character, see what he sees, think what he thinks, and express himself, and borrow his mouth to express himself. He has personality, tone, thoughts and evaluation criteria. Therefore, due to the use of the first-

person narrative technique, Lubbock believes that Thackeray's *The History of Henry Esmond* is better than *Vanity Fair*. Then he took Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* and George Meredith's *The Adventure of Harry Richmond* as examples to further prove the reasons of the first person in picture narrative novels. Logically speaking, living in a story, telling one's life experience by one person, makes every part belong to the same person and makes the novel an integrity. Assuming that the author outside the play suddenly broke into the story, it would certainly distract readers' attention, arouse the audience's abrupt feeling and destroy the original integrity and authenticity of the story. However, even in painting works, dramatization is necessary. The first-person hero should avoid chattering alone, and he needs to return to the position of bystander in time. At this time, the author needs to borrow his eyes to see what is happening around him, what others think of him and how others treat him. As for the inner world of the story-telling hero, he can't rely solely on self-report. He needs the description of dramatic scenes to realize it.

When the first-person narrative shows its deficiency, some writers turn to the third-person narrative. Lubbock thinks that the story of the novel needs a pair of eyes to watch. Admittedly, these eyes are not the eyes that the author hides behind the first person, but the eyes of readers. The author presupposes a pair of eyes for readers in the third person to see how this scene unfolds like a drama. In this way, the author gave up his ownership of the work, claiming: "This is not my story; you know nothing of me; it is the story of this man or woman in whose words you have it, and he or she is a person whom you can know; and you may see for yourselves how the matter arose, the man and woman being such as they are."^{[5]p.147} When the author is "preoccupied with the theme and thinks nothing of it, he will take the best approach under the guidance of double consideration". This "double consideration" means that the author wants the story to be told by itself as much as possible, and the characters and plots are also performed independently, rather than being narrated and explained; And "care for economy", because "A story is damaged by too much treatment as by too little, and the severely practical need of true economy in all that concerns a novel is demonstrated once more".^{[5]p.151}, and this skill is almost perfectly reflected in James's *The Ambassadors*. Even for the inner world of the protagonist Strether, James adopted a dramatic description. He only describes dialogues, scenes, appearances, thoughts, etc., and avoids describing the inner world directly. He wants us to see and listen by ourselves, but our eyes of "seeing" and ears of "listening" are borrowed from Strether, because all the scenes are dramatized.

Therefore, it can be seen that in Lubbock's novel theory, the author needs to keep a proper distance from

his works, avoiding intervening in the works, and keeps the consistency and authenticity of the work itself. In order to achieve the dramatic picture expected by Lubbock, he suggested using the "first person" narrative. The author hides behind the character in the story and tells the story through the character's mouth. However, he also admits that the weakness of the first person narrative lies in that the description of his inner world will be straightforward and boring, so the viewpoint should be returned to the position of bystander in due course. Furthermore, Lubbock insists on the dramatic treatment of the third-person narrative, because he can provide readers with a pair of bystander eyes, just watching the story unfold like a drama in front of his eyes, while the author pretends to be an outsider.

III. THE "ADVANCE" OF THE READER

In 1960s, the hermeneutics reception criticism led by Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser began to rise, and the academic field began to blow a heat wave of "the author is dead" and "the reader should be reborn". The focus of literary studies began to shift to the study of readers' reception process. 30 years ago, Lubbock also advocated readers to play their own initiative in the process of text reading. From this point of view, Lubbock can be regarded as the simple source of reader response criticism which became hot in 1970s. Yin Qiping also believes that Lubbock has the every reason to be listed as one of the pioneers of reader response criticism. In the last chapter, we found that Lubbock removed or hidden the author from the work, so the next question is, how do readers interact with the work after the author is hidden? In Lubbock's eyes, readers are "ideal readers" who are creative and able to understand the forms of novels.

First of all, Lubbock began by emphasizing the importance of "impression" in readers' reading behaviors. In his opinion, readers selectively read the contents of the works, without totally accepting. Readers can't recall the whole content of a work, but can shape the scenes and characters in the work according to their own life experiences, and choose to leave the deepest impression in brains. This impression is the best gift given to readers by works, but it is also the result of readers' own choice and self-integration. Lubbock said:

"we seek to construct an image of the book, page by page, while its form is gradually exposed to us. We are much more inclined to forget, if we can, that the book is an object of art, and to treat it as a piece of the life around us; we fashion for ourselves, we objectify, the elements in it that happen to strike us most keenly, such as an effective scene or a brilliant character. These things take shape in the mind of the reader; they are recreated and set up where the mind's eye can rest on them. They become works of art, no doubt, in their way,

but they are not the book which the author offers us." ^{[5]p. 6}

Here, Lubbock describes the reader (or critic) as a craftsman who reprocesses works of art, who consciously selects some fragments from the novel, and remoulds them with his own experience. The scenes and characters in the novel become figurative and shaped in the reader's mind, with the shadow of the reader's life experience, and even become a fragment of the reader's life. In Lubbock's words, "we proceed to create what is in effect a novel within the novel which the author wrote" ^{[5](p.7)} Even when Lubbock recalled *Clarissa*, which book he had read many years ago, he was amazed at his selectivity of specific plots. He "picked a little here and picked a little there, forming an impression that will not disappear." Impression is something formed by readers' selective selection of fragments in novels and then it's recombined by the reader.

Secondly, in the process of reading, readers need to use imagination. Henry James believes that the author's imagination plays an significant role in the process of novel creation. ^[6] Here, Lubbock shifted the importance of imagination to readers' reading process. When talking about *Clarissa's* image, Lubbock said: "As soon as he begins to hear of *Clarissa*, therefore, the shaping, objectifying mind of the reader is at work on familiar material" ^{[5](p. 8)} Readers should be imaginative. In the process of reading, they should not be an indifferent spectator, nor a puppet led by the character of the story. Imagination can help readers to get a three dimensional scene by reading abstract words. Readers shape the characters and scenes in their brains, to make it "real", or at least let readers really believe its authenticity. According to Lubbock, the talent of imagination is just like our daily senses, and everyone is born with it. It is readers' "common gift, used as instinctively as the power of breathing, by which we turn the flat impressions of our senses into solid shapes". ^{[5](p. 9)} In the reading process, only by giving full play to the imagination possessed by the readers can the readers turn words into images, abstracts into pictures, and give shapes to fictional flowers with "real smells", thus making them real and realistic.

Finally, in the process of reading, readers need to be creative. Lubbock compared reading to "stream of impressions", where characters and scenes alternately appeared and disappeared endlessly, without specific clear rules or sequences. Therefore, he prefers to call his work an experience and process rather than a real thing. We sat there and saw different characters and scenes alternately staged, and many fragments were in it. Finally, the readers capture some fragments and "welded" them together to make an object. The quality of this item depends on the creativity of the welder (reader). Readers need to recreate the original works to

make them a work of art. Therefore, Lubbock called the readers of novels as novelists as well. He thought that "The reader must therefore become, for his part, a novelist, never permitting himself to suppose that the creation of the book is solely the affair of the author" ^{[5]p.17} However, although Lubbock admitted that both of them are creating novels, he also realized that the author and the reader are naturally different in the creation level. By virtue of his genius insight, the author digs out many fragmented fragments from life, selects them, creates artistically, disperses his artistic skills into creative ideas, and dispatches and deploys these fragments. In this way, readers began their own creative processing. In other words, "the critic creates out of life that is already subject to art" ^{[5]p.19} The reader produces a series of impressions in the reading process. Subsequently, the readers deal with these impressions in a structured and reasonable way. This requires readers to have a good knowledge of the form of the novel and understand the narrative style of the story.

In a word, Lubbock believes that the author's disappearance brings the readers to prominence. This requires the reader to interact with the text in the reading process, and the interaction has a foundation. Readers need to combine their own life experience, and selectively negotiate with the scenes and characters in the works, so as to create an "impression". At the same time, readers need to mobilize their imagination, give shapes to the stories in their works, and make them three-dimensional and real. Finally, good readers must be novelists with high-level creativity. He needs to carry out creative processing again according to the artistic materials provided by the author. In the process of processing, he needs to know well about the author's narrative style and novel form.

IV. CONCLUSION

From the above chapter, we really see the reader's participation in the meaning production of the text, but still vaguely feel that there are a pair of invisible hands that control everything behind them. At this point, I can't help but ask a question: Is the author really absent? No. The author's absence is a skillful and brilliant "retreat". He threw out a well-thought-out theme, secretly hid himself behind the text with clever creative skills, and kept a proper distance from the works and readers. It can be said that he was clever when he entered in the text. He is invisible not because he is absent but because he is sophisticated and brilliant enough to hide himself in the text and makes readers unknowing.

Text reading is influenced by the author's intention, the reader's expectation and the work itself. On the stage with the work at center, the author and the reader started a game-like seesaw. In Lubbock's novel theory, the author deliberately gives way to the readers, so that

they can read creatively. At the same time, the author never leaves, and he has an absolute pre-existence, that is, his control over the theme of the novel. In Lubbock's view, the choice of theme needs careful consideration, because a clear, vivid and stable theme is the premise for the novel to develop smoothly. He criticized Tolstoy's *The War and the Peace*, and the main reason lies in that the theme of the book is chaotic and the author's creative intention is uncertain, which affects readers' reading experience. Lubbock's appreciation of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is due to its unswerving and clear theme. What we need to pay attention to is that the theme is controlled by the author, while the form is decided by the theme. Therefore, although the author hides his figure and voice in his works, he moves the reader's viewpoint by controlling the theme. As we mentioned in the first section, Lubbock opposes the author's intrusion in his works, which refers to the intervention in method and form, while Lubbock adopts a circuitous and cunning way: the author does not show himself in shapes. He hid behind the text to determine a theme, and the theme then determine the form. Or, he simply hides behind the first-person character and combines himself with the character as one in the story, or he only provides third-person bystanders' senses for the readers to see, listen and taste. In this way, the reader internalizes himself as the person who watches the drama. Novels are just like a drama, unfolding before our eyes, without the host's incessant explanation on the stage and the annoying talk of the story tellers in our ears. We just sit quietly in a large theater and watch the drama. Then we are surprised to find that the telling way of this drama comes from the theme, and the theme comes from the author.

Let's talk about the reader's "advance", is it necessary to advance? Yes. The reader is the home of the works, the author gives the works a new life, and the readers continue their life. Then in order to keep a balance in this game between readers and authors, when the author retreated, the reader is bound to enter. The author no longer intervenes in the work to express his views and evaluations, and the reader needs to fill it according to his own experience and imagination; If the author hides behind the eyes of the first-person narrative, or hides behind the eyes of the third person, the reader needs to use their eyes to discover and select materials and pictures, so as to form his own impression and reprocess it creatively in the correct form.

It can be seen that the author has retreated himself from the narrative level of the work by not intervening in the narrative of the work and using the first-person and third-person narrative angles, which ensures the integrity and authenticity of the work. By choosing the scenes and pictures of the works consciously, the readers can make an impression, give the abstract text a three-dimensional sense by using imagination, and at

the same time recreate the novel, thus ensuring the vitality of the novel. In addition, jumping out of the category of novel forms, we also find that the author's retreat is actually an advance, which ensures the richness and artistry of the novel.

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