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## Workshop on Narrative Empathy - "When the first person becomes secondary: empathy and embedded narrative"

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## Workshop on Narrative Empathy

University of Basel, 20 June 2017

The literary research on narrative often focuses now on the reader, and the effective manner as he is receiving the text. In this perspective, we can work in the way the author develops in turn some narrative strategies to drive the reader's feelings and thoughts ; especially about the character. Actually some characters seems to be the preferred support of empathy, like the hero or main character - but we have to admit that these notions cannot be used to all narratives. More interesting is the fact that some situations – narrative situations, « intradiégétiques » to refer to Genette's vocabulary, but also narrative building, that is to say that the way the story is presented to a reader – are made to lead the reader's empathy. This last point is all the most important that a first reading may not notice the cause, just feeling the effect.

One of these narrative strategies is the embedded narrative, in which the character is telling the story directly to the reader. The first-person narrator becomes secondary, and leaves his place to a more or less trustworthy narrator. This problem of trustworthiness takes the second place behind the empathy ; so the reader is taking another role in the story, unable to judge or to know what axiological system is operating now. At this point, empathy is overwhelming the other instances of reader (the reasonable reader for example), and how, that we want to consider in this paper.

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## Workshop on Narrative Empathy

University of Basel, 20 June 2017

### Introduction :

The literary research on narrative often focuses now on the reader, and the effective manner he is receiving the text. On this frame of research, it can be interesting to work about the poetic strategies that can be developed by an author to influence reader's empathy. As his title says, this workshop is presupposing an esthetical approach ; so the question of reception has to be a central point.

Considering this first frame, we can expose the preliminary reflexions needed to our approach. First of all, the notion of character as reading substitus : the character of fictional text is most of the time a human one, if not in appearance, nevertheless in mind (perhaps can we suppose that the personification is the most current figure of fictional literature ; and that it would be difficult, as said by Florence \*\*\*\*\*, to imagine a literature without living being). So can the reader project himself in the fiction, imagining that, and feeling as he could be the main character. I won't develop this notion, assuming that it will be developed by a lot of contributors. Conversely the main suppose of reader is about a human character ; a novel as the *Monkey Planet* is based on this process. So, we can talk about empathy because of the existence of reader's projection.

In a second time, we can study how the writer is considering this fact, and is developing some narrative strategies to lead the reader's feeling. This word reader is taken in a very general sense now, but we will make some distinctions in the different aspects and the different way of reacting. One of these strategies is building stories around a characteristic kind of narrative, the embedded narrative. I am going to explain what is the issue of the embedded narrative. Right now, a short definition can be given, based on the Genette's categories : the embedded narrative shows a change of narrator ; the character met by the narrator starts a homodiegetic narrative, about his proper life ; a heterodiegetic narrative gives place to a homodiegetic one.

We chose to take as a basis for this work the Stefan Zweig's short stories ; this writer always builds his narratives around a character in crisis, in which the auto-narrative plays an important role. So the question can be : how can the auctorial voice play with the embedded narrative to create empathy ? As a short definition, we can consider that empathy is the ability to feel what someone feels and .be affected by the words he uses to

## Workshop on Narrative Empathy

University of Basel, 20 June 2017

talk of himself. without judging him. It is, in some way, a direct bridge between the character and the reader, that reduces a possible distance, for the better or the worst.

How may the auctorial voice use the embedded narration to arouse empathy ?

### I. How to set up in a text

Until now, we spoke about « the reader » ; but this term has to be precised, because it covers a lot of instances, as said by Vincent Jouve (the « character-effect<sup>1</sup> »). When you are reading, different instances (reading effect) are playing a role, and each one is important to the success of a text. Jouve distinguishes three instances, which are all holding a place in the reading process. Conscious or unconscious, these ways of being a reader are influencing the reception of text. This esthetics theory seems interesting for us to understand the mechanism of empathy.

The character-effect is the way a character comes to a reader ; it is the concrete effect in the mind of reader, and consequently the privileged way of access to the text. It prints as the reverse of the notion of « implicite reader », defined in Iser's works : if we can find in the text the implicit reader, it implies that the character is not the result of a perception, but a representation ; an external stimulus as well as a fruit of the internal activity from reader, we can consider that each given detail on it is meaningful. The text is a process to end, not a well-defined globality.

The interest of this theory, in relation with empathy, is to understand that a text is completed by the posture of reader, that it needs and in the same time implies. Furthermore with the three instances, Jouve is talking about three codes : narrative, affective and cultural. The first and second (based on empathy) are the more efficient to fix a reader to the story. But, as we are going to see later, the embedded-narrative is mixing all this codes, mainly orchestrated by the narrator.

### II. Specificity of character-narrator : homodiegetic, intradiegetic ; point of vocabulary

It is now important to define the embedded narrative. It means that in a narrative,

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<sup>1</sup> The character-effect in the novel

## Workshop on Narrative Empathy

University of Basel, 20 June 2017

the narrator gives place to another, a character, who begins a first-person narrative. By Stefan Zweig, the author I chose to study as an example of building embedded narratives, we find an additional element : the embedded narrative is included in an homodiegetic narrative ; it means that the first narrator is a character, meeting a second character, unknown to him. For a specific reason, the second begins to talk about his own story. In the level of tall, the embedded narrative becomes more important than the first ; sometimes the end of short story has only one or two paragraphs in which the first narrator takes the word anew. So if the first narrator is before all a receptor, the second narrator is an intradiegetic one, builder of, as we can say, an ultra-diegetic narrative. (I try this new word, from the latin prefix « ultra », because to my knowledge, there is no place by Genette to characterise this particular sort of embedded narrative).

This change of reference is a problematical way to build the identity of a character, his image for the reader ; it is made from different mixed points of view : the external point of view from the receptor, the internal one from the second narrator as main character of embedded narrative, and the reader's one during the reactions of n2-c2.

The auto-narrative is tensed between two temporalities too. All these strategies seem built to develop the affective code and to exaggerate the character's ego. The direct link to reader is excluding a relation of superiority. As Gregory Currie remarks<sup>2</sup>, it is natural to consider that the narrator is a look-alike author, and then to trust him more than a simple character ; and to be closer from the instance that has the same place in the text (playing, for example, in the lack or full of information). When the character becomes a narrator, and moreover when the first narrator, the receptor, withdraws from his commentative function, the affective code can function best.

### III. Embedded narrative, crisis, and self-knowing

It is common to say that Zweig is an author who built his narrative, fictional or not, especially his short stories, on a crisis technique, that means that the character in crisis becomes the crucial point of a story. This crisis has constant properties in different narratives : I can quote here, for example, *24 Hour in the life of a woman*, *Amok*, *The royal*

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<sup>2</sup> Gregory Currie, « Interpreting the unreliable », in *Arts and Minds*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004.

## Workshop on Narrative Empathy

University of Basel, 20 June 2017

*game, The fowler snared (Sommernovelette).*

In all these stories, the meeting between receptor and character in personal crisis takes place in a neutral point, a place of travel (a ship, a hotel), and the situation is disposed to permit to the characters not to see each other, like in a psychoanalytical consultation. But this sort of speeches are only between two people, and it is even a condition to be successful ; nevertheless, here, we mustn't forget that the reader is present in the text as a third participant, and a second listener. So we can argue that the particular configuration of embedded narratives by Zweig is a way to place the reader in a position of watcher.

As a second point to close the reader and character through auto-narrative, we have to remark that the reading deal between SZ and his reader excludes the impossible, because takes place in the domain of probable ; it is all the most important that embedded narrative is currently used in fantastical stories, think for example about Maupassant, *La Peur*.

The auto-narrative is well functioning as a hermeneutic circle, through which becomes possible a better self-knowing, and a return on the events that the reader knows only by that way. As by Hegel (master and slave dialectic), the self-knowing of character is mediated by another person ; the character who is the more transparent to himself becomes the more transparent to the reader, and the best support to readers' empathy. The other one is necessary to self-knowing, and building of a character.

#### IV. The axiological problem

Most of the time, the axiological reference for the reader (who can then answer the question : « what are the values in this particular fictional world ? ») is constituted by the narrator. The reader can readjust his opinion in the text, but the problem with Zweig's embedded narratives is that the narrative ends very quickly after the end of c2's story. So we, as readers, have not the time to take into account the new datas about the second character, and the first narrator don't help us well. This particular dispositive is, following my hypothesis, due to the will of author to avoid judgement on the character. The empathy supposed to be felt is in the same time blocking and letting the reader's identification.

## **Workshop on Narrative Empathy**

University of Basel, 20 June 2017

### V. As a conclusion

To conclude, I would emphasize some points : as a reader, the empathy that can be felt is a very important point to be interested by a text, but, moreover, to project inside ; the particular reading pact gives more easily the possibility of being touched ; we are not speaking here about some use to literature (the literature as a way to develop empathy for example), but only about reading pleasure. So empathy seems to be an important part of this pleasure.

Embedded narrative, consequently, is not a neutral building, Narrator as axiological referent is leading empathy, but a dispositive like embedded-narrative can change the reading's feelings. It is probably a conscious way to attract the reader, in the same time as a narrative, and almost existential choice : the choice to place the character and his own words in the center of narrative, as said by SZ in an interview about History : to place the individual in the center of history, and even to prefer individual against history ; an esthetics of freedom.