The Narrator in *Look Homeward, Angel*

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I. Introduction

*Look Homeward, Angel*, the masterpiece of Thomas Wolfe, is universally acknowledged as an autobiographical work which colors with intense flavor of his own life experience, through which he explains the essential isolation of the hero as he grows toward artistic and personal maturity. Except for the exaltation of his characteristic writing style as the abundance of inflated rhetoric and exquisitely lyrical description, many critics object to the autobiographical denotation of his novels, and the increasing intrusion of the authorial voice in the narrative. As to the narrative aspects of *Look Homeward, Angel*, in my view, one thing merits exploitation is the point of view used in this novel; however, so far this aspect of narration has scarcely aroused enough attention among critics. As far as I know, critical opinions on this subject have been divided roughly into two stances. Richard S. Kennedy, in traditional attitude, believes the novel’s point of view is the third
person narrative;[1] C. Hugh. Holman holds that the narrator is “some unidentified person—not Eugene Gant (unless he is telling the story in the third person).”[2] In contrast, Louis D. Rubin observes that readers “comes to identify the authorial personality with that of Eugene when older...recreating the events of his childhood in order to understand them.”[3] Rubin’s opinion resembles the narrating self and experiencing self of Rimmon-Kenan’s notion on the first person retrospective narration.[4] Similarly, Ruppersburg openly asserts in his essay that Look Homeward, Angel “is a first-person novel, narrated retrospectively by a narrator who clearly sympathizes and identifies with the young protagonist”.[5] With all my respect, I totally disapprove what he says on the first-person narration. What I would like to assume is that this novel has provided sufficient evidence to support a specific identification of the narrator as the omniscient third-person narrator in the narrative process.

II. No Confusion Between Author and Narrator

There is no denying the fact that Look Homeward, Angel is a fiction work awash in the autobiographical implication of his life experience, but the fiction is the fiction, as Thomas Wolfe says in “To The Reader” of this novel: “If any reader, therefore, should say, that the book is ‘autobiographical’ the writer has no answer for him: it seems to him that all serious work in fiction is autobiographical.... Fiction is not fact, but fiction is fact selected and understood; fiction is fact arranged and charged with purpose.”[6] So long as it is not a “pure autobiography”, the author and the narrator shall by no means be identified as the one, since these two have their own subjectivity. As to the relation between the author and the narrator, Tan Junqiang, explains in his book that “author is the subject of creating the story, who determines the panorama of the whole work; on the other hand, narrator is the narrative instance, who discourses to the reader in a specific construction of language, and these two should never be confused.”[7] But one thing I want to emphasize here is that I do not agree with him on the ground of “the narrator discourses to the reader”, for, according to my understanding, the narrator’s narrative act directs to the narratee which “is the agent addressed by the narrator”,[8] since only the narratee matches the narrator in the same narrative level, just as Rimmon-Kenan has given in Narrative Fiction: “The narratee is, by definition, situated at the same level as the narrator.”[9] In the narrative process the author totally commits the right of narration to the narrator, and it is the narrator who

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makes selection in the details of pre-narrated story and determines what to present.\textsuperscript{[10]} Although \textit{Look Homeward, Angel} is heavily autobiographical, Wolfe and his narrator do belong to two different worlds of actuality and fiction.

III. The Third-person Omniscient Narrator of \textit{LHA}

A. The Flaws of Assuming the First-person Narration

Ruppersburg claims that the novel is told by the protagonist-narrator\textsuperscript{[11]} Eugene in the first-person,\textsuperscript{[12]} which is seen as untenable for its weak argument. As to the form of this novel, it looks like a memoir of the narrator, beginning his story in a flashback as “This is a moment” (3), and then it comes to the family history of the Gants before Eugene’s born. The information of the family background of Oliver Gant and Eliza Pentland, their acquaintanceship, and the final marriage life, which is too detailedly recorded to ascertain that the narrator is Eugene himself. Someone may argue that this mission can be accomplished by the narrating self which plays by mature Eugene who preserves the right to retrospect the experience of his own past. But the theory of “distance between two I’s”\textsuperscript{[13]} only adapts to the first-person narration; while in this novel most of the “persons” are definitely the third-person pronouns. Is it reasonable to assume a novel the first-person narration where the vast majority of the third-person narration occurs? Even if the novel is supposed to be so as is told in the first-person, the flaw is obviously revealed. Though the narrating self is more mature and knows much more than the experiencing self, as long as it is asserted as the first-person narration, the limitation of the narrator “I” has already been presupposed, for “I” can only master the knowledge which is constricted in “my” perspective, and as to the things happened when “I” was absent, “I” am innocent to them, not to mention other people’s inner thoughts. In other words, the “first person” that is imposed on the observer or retrospective protagonist has made the narrator limited into the comparatively small scope of eyesight (but the third-person omniscient narrator preserves the privilege of observing the development of events even it is not present at that very moment). So, it seems unreasonable for Eugene to record every minute and trivial dialogue of his ancestors. Even he could achieve this “impossible mission”, he was only capable of narrating the family history in the form of reported speech, since he did not act as a participator or an observer of the past times. And among the whole novel other events which happen on the occasion of Eugene’s absence are easy to find out. In Chapter 14, for instance, it is impossible for Eugene to witness the sight of his
brother Ben’s going out for selling newspapers when every one of his family is sleeping at the time of three twenty-five:

Into the April night-and-morning streets goes Ben. The night is brightly pricked with cool and tender stars. The orchard stirs leafily in the short fresh wind. Ben prowls softly out of the sleeping house. His thin bright face is dark within the orchard. There is a smell of nicotine and shoe leather under the young blossoms. His pigeon-toed tan shoes ring musically up the empty streets. Lazily slaps the water fountain on the Square; all the firemen are asleep—but Big Hill Merrick, the brave cop, hog-jowled and red, leans swinishly over mince-pie and coffee in Uneeda Lunch. The warm good ink-smell beats in rich waves into the street: a whistling train howls off into the Springtime South.

By the cool orchards in the dark the paper-carriers go. The copper legs of negroes in their dark dens stir. The creek brawls cleanly. (137-138)

This description is out of Eugene’s perception but can only be accomplished by an omniscient narrator from external focalization. Also, the narrative of the detailed dialogues of paper-carriers is being carried out when Eugene is absent (138).

Moreover, Eugene’s role as a protagonist-narrator does not explain his ability to reveal the innermost thoughts of such individuals as Eliza and W.O. Gant, even of himself in his infancy. There is an interesting episode in the novel, narrating the condition of Eugene’s thoughts and sights as a little baby, whereas an image of an “adult-baby” is presented from a perspective of mature narrator (30). Maybe it is out of the intension of illustrating the inborn loneliness of human being, the baby has been endowed with the awareness of perceiving the world in a pessimistic way. The formulating of complete sentences is obviously beyond the capability of baby Eugene, and beyond the adult Eugene’s control to recall the thing in the third-person, for it is an unlikely procedure if he himself were the narrator of his story.\(^\text{141}\)

B. The Characteristics of the Omniscient Narrator in LHA

*Look Homeward, Angel* reflects many of the typical characteristics of the third-person omniscient narration, in which the narrator is uninvolved in the story itself but as an external god, holding all the details of the Gants and disclosing the events selectively when he feels necessary. Nevertheless, the omniscient narrator of *LHA* is by no means the traditional one who stands highly above the characters and always makes authorial comments on them in order to exert great influence on the
reader and who is often blamed for its insulting of the dramatic effect and verisimilitude of a work; instead, the omniscient narrator in LHA is so smart that it occasionally yields the floor to the characters; in other words, the limited focalization of the characters is taken when necessary. In N. Friedman's category of point of view, the fifth one which is called "Multiple Selective Omniscience"[15] can apply to some parts of the narration in LHA, for it is easy to find out the Free Direct Discourse all through the book, which, according to Geoffrey Leech & Michael Short, is a kind of discourse totally out of the control of narrator.

The use of FD, to a great extent, grants the voice of the characters to articulate their "own" thoughts directly; therefore, the subjective assertion of the omniscient narrator, to some degree, is weakened. In Chapter 14, when Gant wakes up from sleep and lies comfortably in the sitting-room, the following passages about the vision of the yard are all narrated from his perspective. He becomes a focalizer firstly, and the discourse of narration still belongs to the narrator; however, once the FD comes out, the discourse is transposed from the narrator to Gant himself.

All through the night the blossoms dropping. Soon now the White Wax. Green apples end of May. Isaac's' June Apple hangs half on my side. Bacon and fired green apples. (151)
These sentences are apparently not the vocabulary of the narrator, since they are not even grammatically correct and render a sense of casualness which matches the condition of Gant on that fresh spring morning.

There is also an abundance of inner monologues of Eugene, which are always mixed with the discourse of the narrator. The use of FID and FD results in the difficulty to distinguish the discourse of these two subjects. I assume that the most of the inner monologues are told by the omniscient narrator as they comply with his external narration. It is a kind of narrator who is liable to explicate its subjectivity and eager to communicate with the narratee. The narrator’s words which intervened into the narration of story are called “narratorial discourse” by Jakobson in his *Linguistics & Poetics*, and this narratorial discourse has several functions, such as the communication with the narrate, the power of persuasion, the expression of its emotion (to show his/her subjectivity), and so forth. Most of the exclamation, like “O lost”, is not Eugene’s speech as FD but the narratorial discourse. In Chapter 30, there is an exuberance of lyric expression:

[...] Return! O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again, as first I knew you in the timeless valley, where we shall feel ourselves anew, bedded on magic in the mouth of June.[...]Ghost, come back from that marriage that we did not foresee, return not into magic, where we have never died, into the enchanted wood, where we still lie, strewn on the grass. Come up into the hills, O my young love: return. O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again. (380)

Actually, at that time of Eugene and Laura’s passionate love affairs, Eugene is ignorant of the coming marriage of Laura, while the addressee here apparently has known the events which will happen in the future time, thus it can be concluded that these words are addressed by the omniscient narrator as a god holding all the details of the story, and here he chooses to foreshadows the engagement of Laura, the event that should come out in the later time chronologically.

“O lost” is a key phrase in the novel, which appears at least eleven times throughout the book, and this exclamation demonstrates the inner appealing of the narrator who is close to the implied author in the value-scheme. In the omniscient narration, the distance between the narrator and the implied author is comparatively smaller, and when the relation of the implied author and the actual author is also close, the narrator can be regarded as an “authorial narrator” or the spokesman of the author. So, it is not unreasonable for the narrator to express directly the
inner calling as a tool of implicating the theme of this novel.

"The author may intrude, in short, even to work upon our emotions directly, provided he can convince us that his 'intrusion' are at least as carefully wrought and as pertinent as his presented scene."[19] I suspect the accuracy of Wayne Booth's use of "author" here, for it is the narrator who makes the commentary during the narrative process not the actual author himself. But I do find that the omniscient narrator in _LHA_ is highly active in intruding the narrative and makes its unique position throughout the novel. After Helen marries to Hugh Barton, she does not get along well with the old mother of Hugh. When Hugh and his mother visit the Gants, Mrs. Barton's words irritate Helen so furiously to drive her to complain agitationedly towards her sympathetic audience (Luke & Eugene), and in her huge amount of words, the "Do you, you see...", "You see, don't you" are repeated for several times. The following passages go like this:

At this moment Mrs. Barton, kindly but authoritive, called from the veranda:

"Hel-en! Where are you, Hel-en?"

"O gotohell. Gotohell!!" said Helen, in a comic undertone.

"Yes? What is it?" she called out sharply.

You see, don't you? (318)

The words "You see, don't you?" is not addressed by Helen this time, nor is her FD. Here the narrator interrupts again and makes a parody of her specific discourse. For one thing, this parody grants a sense of irony; for another, the sympathy to Helen is expressed, as is narrated in the later part of story, turning out that Helen does not have a happy life after her marriage. And what is more, it also illustrates the narrator's attempt to communicate with the narratee which is usually and easily identified by the reader under the effect of empathy. In addition, the singular and plural first-person pronouns occur throughout the book in literary allusions, stream of consciousness and the narrator's commentary, and the narrator further cements the relationship between the narrator and the reader by habitually addressing as "you", by which compels the reader's identification with the narratee.

The interrogative sentences also occasionally presented, which, in some sense, makes confusion of the FID/FD and the narrator's discourse. In his second year of the university, Eugene goes to the whore with Jim Trivett. He is so nervous and uneasy all the way, since this is his first time to have sex with a woman. In some parts of this episode, the agent of focalizer is shifted onto Eugene temporarily; that
is to say, the perspective is changed to the character's limited focalization. The interrogative sentences, like "Why?" and "Who is it? Who?" can be explained from different aspects. On the one hand, it might be considered as FD of Eugene's consciousness towards the mysterious atmosphere of Lily Jones' House, with the inner excitement, timidity and curiosity. On the other hand, it is also reasonable to regard it as the intrusion of the narrator who, though, knows all the things clearly but deliberately keeps secret and raises questions that should be addressed by the reader, thus it invests the reader with a sense of participation into and commitment to the event he/she is reading about.

IV. Conclusion

_Look Homeward, Angel_ is not the first-person protagonists-narrator narration as is claimed by some critics, like Ruppersburg; however, it is a kind of unique third-person omniscient narration which is out of restraint of the traditional definition of the omniscient narration. Performing actively in the commentary and making the intrusion of exclamation, the narrator of _LHA_ does interfere the narrative process not in a small number of cases, but far from diminishing the verisimilitude, naturalization and vividness of the story, his emotive expression is an effective way of ascertaining its subjectivity. Through identifying with the protagonist Eugene in some degree (it is an inevitable phenomenon, since the novel has been regarded as a story with intense autobiographical denotation), the narrator does not consider himself a higher position above all the characters, and he avoids preaching or criticizing them wantonly. Instead, the abundance of the FD renders the chance for the reader to enter into the inner consciousness of the characters directly without the manipulation of the narrator.

Notes:

[1] H. Hugh Ruppersburg. "The Narrator in _Look Homeward, Angel._" _Southern Humanities Review_. 18.1 (Winter 1984): 1-9. Rpt. _Novels for Students_. ed. David A. Galens. Vol.18. Detroit: Gale, 2003. 1-9. 9 June 2009 <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/start.do?p=LitRG&u= sichuan>. 1.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] S. Rimmon-Kenan. Narrative Fiction. 2nd ed. (London: Methuen) 75.

[5] H. Hugh Ruppersburg. "The Narrator in _Look Homeward, Angel._" _Southern Humanities_
Thomas Wolfe. *Look Homeward, Angel*. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1952).

S. Rimmon-Kenan. *Narrative Fiction*. London: Methuen, 1983. 2nd edition, 2002: 105.

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[3] Leech, Geoffrey & Michael H. Short. *Style in Fiction*. London: Longman, 1981.

[4] Prince, Gerald. *A Dictionary of Narratology*. University of Nebraska Press, 2003.

[5] Rimmon-Kenan, S. *Narrative Fiction*. London: Methuen, 1983. 2nd ed. 2002.

[6] Ruppersburg, Hugh H. “The Narrator in *Look Homeward, Angel.*” *Southern Humanities Review* 18.1 (Winter 1984): 1-9. Rpt. in *Novels for Students*. Ed. David A. Galens. Vol.18. Detroit: Gale, 2003. 9 June 2009. <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/start.do?p=LitRG&u=sichuan>.

[7] Wolfe, Thomas. *Look Homeward, Angel*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1952.

[8] 程锡麟. 献给爱米莉的玫瑰在哪里？——《献给爱米莉的玫瑰》叙事策略分析. 外国文学评论, 2005(3).
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