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NARRATIVE MODE IN "UNDER THE VOLCANO"

Malcolm Lowry /1909-1957/, one of the major novelists of the 20th century, is a very unique and interesting literary figure whose literary art was his only vocation and aim. It is reflected both in his life and his works. His whole life was one of a continuous struggle and effort to write, since he was troubled with poverty, the world's indifference and alcoholism. Through reading his works, one immediately recognizes a great artist who knows exactly what he is up to in his work and takes every effort to fulfill his literary plans. His method of writing testifies to this<sup>1</sup> showing a very conscientious writer working on several books at once and changing and correcting a single sentence, paragraph, or chapter up to twenty times. This perfectionist trend seen in his reworking everything, nearly finished him as a writer since apart from an apprentice novel Ultramarine published in 1933 by Jonathan Cape, he only published one more book in his lifetime, Under the Volcano /1947/, on which his reputation as a writer rests.

Under the Volcano was to be the Inferno part of a trilogy never completed - The Voyage That Never Ends. Lunar Caustic /1963/, which survives as a novella about a derelict seaman committed to Bellevue Hospital in New York, was to be expanded into the Purgatorio. The Paradiso was called In Ballast to the White Sea, a manuscript destroyed in a fire in 1944. A novella, A Forest Path to the Spring, published posthumously in Lowry's story collection Hear His O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place

/1961/ takes its place as a Paradise Lost.

This original plan was enlarged later on by Lowry to comprise eight interrelated novels in the projected The Voyage That Never Ends, of which Under the Volcano was to function:

"as a sort of battery in the middle but only as a work of the imagination by the protagonist"<sup>2</sup>

In an important Work in Progress statement<sup>3</sup> Lowry outlined his plan:

WORK IN PROGRESS

The Ordeal of Sigbjorn Wilderness

Untitled Sea Novel

I

Lunar Caustic

Under the Volcano

the centre

Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid

Eridanus

trilogy

La Mordida

The Ordeal of Sigbjorn Wilderness

II

Apart from the novels already mentioned, two others Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid and October Ferry to Gabriola were edited from Lowry's scattered manuscripts and published in 1968 and 1970 respectively, whereas the manuscript and typescript pages and notes for two unfinished novels, The Ordeal of Sigbjorn Wilderness and La Mordida still await a possible publication in the University of British Columbia Special Collections. Lowry's two other posthumous works are also worth mentioning, that is, Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry /1965/ and Poems and Songs /1975/.

Malcolm Lowry experimented with narrative forms and techniques in order to achieve the best effect and to render the consciousness of his protagonists in the most efficient way, but at the same time he wanted to make the form of his works as

simple as possible. From the very beginnings he knew what he wanted: that is, to find

"a competent and thoroughly understandable narrative technique, however complex it might be in form /.../ and a sound dramaturgy of classical origin"<sup>4</sup>

insisting though, that his works should be able to carry meaning on many different levels.

Under the Volcano, his only masterpiece, is the perfect example of such a novel, according to the writer himself:

"... the book is written on numerous planes with provisions made, it was my fond hope, for almost every kind of reader, my approach with all humility being opposite, I felt, to that of Mr Joyce, i.e., a simplifying, as far as possible, of what originally suggested itself in far more baffling, complex and esoteric terms, rather than the other way round"<sup>5</sup>.

In order to achieve this aim a variety of narrative techniques proved to be necessary, out of which the narrative mode is of special interest. It constitutes the main means of conveying the realistic level of the novel, that is, "sujet", setting, mood and the final moral judgement. One can distinguish three different categories of narrative mode in Under the Volcano: the "implied author"<sup>6</sup>, the third person undramatized narrator, and the characters themselves during their interior monologues.

The "implied author", who is responsible for the choice of the story and the way in which it is told, can be seen in the novel mainly through the title, three opening quotations, and the epigraph. His role is defined clearly in chapter 11<sup>7</sup> :

"There is, sometimes in thunder, another person who thinks for you, takes in one's mental porch furniture, shuts and bolts the mind's window against what seems less appalling as a threat than as some distortion of celestial privacy, a shattering insanity in heaven, a form of disgrace forbidden mortals to observe too closely..."

The title turns the reader's attention to the nature of experience presented in the novel. It refers to the physical volcano, Popocatepetl, which is one of the major symbols of the novel and represents the Consul. Its presence, not only in the setting, but in the minds of characters as well, is menacing, overpowering, and terrifying. Apart from this, it has another meaning as it is associated with the mysterious and terrifying forces of Tartarus under Mt Aetna. The Consul is aware of this meaning, as exemplified by his thoughts in chapter 12<sup>8</sup>:

"Popocatepetl towered through the window, its immense flanks partly hidden by rolling thunderheads; its peak blocking the sky, it appeared almost right overhead; the barranca, the Farolito, directly beneath it. Under the Volcano! It was not for nothing the ancients had placed Tartarus under Mt Aetna, nor within it, the monster Typhoeus, with his hundred heads and - relatively - fearful eyes and voices!

The very title then implies the tragic destiny of the Consul and his spiritual state, that is, his passivity, his inability to love, and his deep conviction about his failure and approaching end, which leads him to damnation. The title also implies the main ideas and foreshadows the tragic mood of the novel.

Three opening quotations are another manifestation of the "implied author". The quotation from Sophocle's Oedipus Rex on the wonderfullness of man and his helplessness before death /Wonders are many, and none is more wonderful than man.../, together with that from Runyan's Grace Abounding for the Chief of Sinners/ section 104/ on spiritual hopelessness, and that from Goethe's Faust on spiritual ascent /Whosoever unceasingly strives upward.... him can we save/ state the main themes of the novel.

The novel shows the Consul giving up his fight and thinking about hell as his only destination, which he gradually approaches. In the author's words<sup>9</sup>:

"This novel is concerned principally.... with the forces in man which cause him to be terrified of himself. It is also concerned with the guilt of man, with his remorse, with his ceaseless struggling toward the light under the weight of the past, and with his doom."

Each of these opening passages emphasizes the importance of hope while at the same time they are the tragic counterpart of the Consul's spiritual condition and his tragic fate. They function as a kind of commentary to the work that not only reveals the mood, context, and the spiritual dilemmas but at the same time offers the "implied author's" moral judgement. The epigraph is the most powerful indication of the "implied author" as it denotes the main allegorical dimension of the novel. It appears first in chapter 5 when the Consul mistranslates it: but the words "You like this garden? Why is it yours? We evict those who destroy!" are a very powerful allegory of the Garden of Eden - the Garden representing the world, from which we are in danger of being ejected. The sign appears again in chapter 8, this time properly translated, and as a kind of epilogue at the end of the novel expressing "authorial" conclusion. It once again emphasizes the allegory of the Garden as the world and destructiveness of people that can destroy it as the children can destroy the garden. It is even more horrifying than when it appears in the Consul's mistranslation.

The question of the narrator seems to have been very important for Lowry, as his four different versions of Under the Volcano show a distinctive change from traditional omniscient narration to an undramatized third person narrator who is barely perceivable. The latter type plays an important function as controlling the materials of the story in a very subtle way allowing the characters to speak for themselves in their interior monologues. This constitutes another narrative category, that is, "dramatized" narrators. The division of point of view between four main characters /Laruelle is given one chapter, Yvonne and Hugh three chapters each, and the Consul the remaining

chapters / together with the use of interior monologues, lead to an atmosphere of moral relativity. A continually changing point of view or the centre of consciousness is, then a characteristic feature of the work.

It is worth showing how it works on the example of the first chapter which plays an introductory function in the structure of the whole book, as it defines the place and unfolds the story and at the same time states the main themes and counterthemes of the novel. It is written from M.Laruelle's point of view but the opening paragraphs are the impersonal description of the landscape and the main characters. The very description of the town of Ouahnahuac with the references to the volcanoes, Hawaii, India, British Honduras strike many themes that will be developed in the book. From the description of the empty swimming pools and tennis courts emanates the atmosphere of sadness and desolation. It is the Day of the Dead in November 1939, exactly a year after the tragedy happened. The two men sitting on the terrace of the Casino cannot forget it. After a short exchange of Dr Arturo Diaz's and M.Jacques Laruelle's memories of the Consul we follow M.Laruelle's thoughts, his behaviour being described by the impersonal narrator. His mind works chaotically remembering Hugh, then the Consul and his desperate struggle against death, their first meeting in Normandy, the Consul's passionate argument with Yvonne at Maximilian and Carlotta's Palace. All this is shown against the background of the falling darkness and the mysterious terrifying landscape with the important symbols present already there, e.g., the Ferris Wheel silently burning high on the hill, the barranca, the drunk on a horse that seemed wild and rebellious, even the final bus to Tomalin. The cinema also reminds M.Laruelle about the Consul, as the same film Manos de Orlac is showing there. The manager of the cinema brings him the Consul's volume of Elizabethan plays which reminds him of their war experience. /the narrator's comments are given here in Brackets, e.g.,

/M.Laruelle had been in the artillery during the last war, survived by him in spite of Guillaume Apollinaire's being for a time his

commanding officer/<sup>10</sup>

Finally the Consul's letter falls from the book, the letter to Yvonne that was not supposed to be posted, as it was an examination of his feelings, doubts, fears., an expression of his desperate but silent cry for help. The final description of the cinema that follows the quotation of the letter, with the bell speaking out "dolente... dolore! ends the chapter. The words:

Over the town, in the dark tempestuous night,  
backwards revolved the luminous wheel<sup>11</sup>.

take us back to the Consul's tragedy.

As one can see on the basis of this short review of the first chapter the narrative technique varies, as there is a constant shift of the narrators. The impersonal third person narrator who starts with the general introduction of the place and the conversation between Dr Diaz and M.Laruelle, gives way to M.Laruelle's thoughts which are narrated, with occasional direct sentences e.g., "Vigil would not come for half an hour yet". They are controlled and presented by the undramatized narrator who stops from time to time to describe the scenery or the action. This interplay allows for the objective presentation of the setting and the more subjective presentation of the Consul's drama, mainly through images, flashbacks, and memories of M.Laruelle.

As we have seen in this short description of Lowry's use of narrative mode, he created the frames of the story through the "implied author": but the creation of the undramatized narrator who controls the story, at times allowing the characters to speak for themselves, allowed Lowry to expand the scope of meaning and create moral relativity. His masterly use of the narrative mode puts him together with other great 20 th century writers.

NOTES

- 1 the manuscripts in the University of British Columbia Special Collection
- 2 Harvey Breit and Margerie B.Lowry, ed.: Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry, J.B.Lippincott Co., Philadelphia and New York 1965, op.cit.,p.267
- 3 the University of British Columbia Special Collection, Work in Progress 1951
- 4 Tony Kilgallin: Lowry, Press Porcepic, Canada 1973, op.cit., p.113
- 5 Selected Letters....., op.cit.,p.66
- 6 the term used by Wayne C.Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction, the University of Chicago Press 1961
- 7 M.Lowry: Under the Volcano, Penguin Modern Classics 1979, op.cit.,pp.334-5
- 8 Ibid.,op.cit.,p.340
- 9 Selected Letters...., op.cit.p.66
- 10 Under the Volcano ....., op.cit.,p.37
- 11 Ibid., op.cit.,p.46

NARRACJA W "POD WULKANEM"

Streszczenie

Artykuł zajmuje się analizą narracji w powieści M.Lowry'ego "Pod Wulkanem". Dyskutowane są trzy kategorie narracyjne : "autor implikowany", narrator oraz bohaterzy występujący w roli narratorów poprzez użycie techniki "strumienia świadomości". "Autor implikowany" manifestuje swoją obecność w utworze przez tytuł, trzy cytaty oraz epigraf. Narrator pełni funkcję kontrolującą, często oddając głos samym bohaterom. Jest to szczególnie ważne przy przedstawianiu halucynacji Koneula. Nowatorskie zastosowanie powyższych kategorii świadczy o artyzmie Lowry'ego.