

Narrative Technique in Malcolm Lowry's Ultramarine

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Malcolm Lowry (1909-1957), an English novelist of the thirties celebrated for his masterpiece, *Under the Volcano*, also wrote his first novel *Ultramarine*. *Ultramarine* was published in 1933 and the thirties in the sphere of fiction witnessed an abatement of rigorous concern for form discernible in the works of Henry James, Conrad and James Joyce. With the relaxing of immense artistic preoccupations of novelists of the nineties and the first two decades of the twentieth century is observable a reversion to the native tradition of English novel of Defoe and Fielding. Malcolm Bradbury rightly comments: "We often presume, in modern criticism, that in the English line the experimental tradition did shift or lapse, a lapse usually identified with the thirties, when realism and politics came back and a generation less certain of its artistic role _writers with the silver age presumptions of Waugh's *Gilbert Pinfold* or the uneasy antiaestheticism of an Orwell, the guilt of a Virginia Woolf, the self-diminution of an Isherwood, sacrificially offering sensitivity to an overwhelming historical experiences gives us a 'contemporary' rather than a 'modern' fiction"¹. The desire for experimentation in the field of fiction has given way to a desire for informing novel with the social and cultural milieu of the civilization.

It is a shift in emphasis but Lowry's *Ultramarine* is perhaps an exception to the shift in emphasis that has come over English fiction. It is because the power that shapes his craft of fiction resides not in England but across the Atlantic in Conrad Aiken, an American novelist of the thirties. When the wave of innovation and experimentation subsides in England, it creates a ferment in the mind of American novelists. Thus, a discussion of technique in *Ultramarine* has to be correlated with the unremitting search for form in American fiction in the thirties, especially in Conrad Aiken's *Blue Voyage* that becomes a mental wardrobe of Lowry. In author's preface to *Three Novels* Aiken says about himself, "Form was certainly to be *Desideratum*, yes."² Form too becomes a preoccupation with Lowry, when excepting novelists like Samuel Beckett and Lawrence Durrell, all other English novelists of the thirties have gone in for traditional realism.

The preoccupation with form is perhaps in the sense of 'technique' as defined by Mark Schorer in the essay *Technique as Discovery*. Technique in fiction, according to Mark Schorer, is not a supplementary element that adds embellishment to the content. In blunter terms it is not the arrangement of events to create a plot, suspense, climax and the analysis of character motivation. Technique is not something external to the content but it is the only means at the disposal of a novelist "...Of discovering, exploring, developing his subject, of conveying its meaning and finally of evaluating it,"³. It becomes a tool towards the positive definition of the theme.

Its importance is all the more imperative for the writer of *Ultramarine* who is intensely involved in the experience which forms the stuff of the novel. The material out of which the novel is built is purely personal. It is a fictional analogue for his experiences as a deckboy on the *Pyrrhus* bound for Far East, when he leaves the

school, the Leys ,at the age of seventeen. His nautical experiences as a deckboy for six months become the experiences of Dana Hilliot on the Oedipus Tyrannus in Ultramarine.

The novel is thus autobiographical and runs the risk of becoming a riot of emotions and shapeless, unless there is an inbuilt mechanism that assimilates experiences and forms a coherent whole .The inbuilt mechanism is a technique that after a scrutiny of the powerful emotions , suffering and passion of the writer imposes an order on them. Lowry discovers this importance of technique in making an introspection of his feelings and organising them into a pattern in Conrad Aiken's Blue Voyage. To Conrad Aiken the novel becomes a tool of coming to grips with problems plaguing him:" Here was the artist-hero-servant in a new predicament:he could understand his neurosis ,and then proceed to create with it, on the one hand ,while he analysed both the neurosis and himself away with the other."⁴ Lowry's technique in Ultramarine is a tool analysing and giving a shape to neuroses gnawing at his heart.

This mode of talking about the sickness of one's own heart is reminiscent of D.H.Lawrence, especially in his autobiographical novel Sons and Lovers. He tells us about his deep emotional involvement in his fictional representatives: "one sheds one's sickness in books, repeats and presents again one's emotions to be master of them".⁵ As Paul becomes the fictional analogue of D.H.Lawrence in Sons and Lovers, Dana Hilliot, journeying by the Oedipus Tyrannus, becomes the representative of Lowry journeying by the Pyrrhus. In both the novelists we find a tale of their personal predicament; in the former the crippling effect of the mother on his mind and in the latter the painful fact of alienation not only from parents but from the crew of the Oedipus Tyrannus and life in general. It is not a mere record of the neuroses that afflict them but also an attempt at mastering them. The technique here has got a therapeutic value not for the reader but for the writer himself curing him of his sickness.

The technique, Lowry employs for portraying and mastering his personal predicament, works in terms of the stream-of-consciousness and flashback. "The technique of the stream-of-consciousness is a subtle way of recapturing memories, thoughts and feelings that in the words of William James exist outside the primary consciousness."⁶ This technique puts an emphasis on exploration of the inchoate "prespeech level of consciousness for the purpose, primarily, of revealing the psychic being of the characters."⁷ It is plumbing the depth of the psyche beneath the surface of the conscious mind. It is also because in the words of Virginia Woolf. "Life is ... aluminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end."⁸ And the business of the novelist using the technique of consciousness is to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit.

Instead of commenting in his own person, Lowry makes the reader brows through the chamber of consciousness of his protagonist Dana Hilliot in Ultramarine. This technique of the stream-of-consciousness enables the novelist to present Dana Hilliot who is in a constant state of unstable equilibrium and whose mood is never anything static but a fluid pattern mixing memory with desire. In Chapter One at one place Dana Hilliot is gazing at the fireman when three bells ring. He becomes forgetful of his presence in the midst of the crew and becomes

melancholy and descends into the labyrinth of his psyche: “What sorrow was it, stirring in his mind behind the screen of time? A note of memory merely growing fainter, drowning in the yellow sea of his consciousness? Ah, but no, he had it, and following it, he suddenly saw a small boy, himself three years ago, ink stains on his fingers, sitting upon steps of the swimming baths at school, his eyes burning Forlorn: The very word is like a bell. To toll me back from thee to my sad self. What could it have been that reminded him? The engine, possibly, of the steam heater, that pounded there all day to warm the baths. Green Water. It had been like plunging into moss, ... Left out of the swimming team, the important match against Uppinghm. He had stolen out of last period to have a look on the notice board. A smell of peat smoke from the fens. He had got up when he saw two prefects coming down past the Hall, early from the Doctor’s Greek Testament Class: ... how did it go?”⁹

This interior monologue of Hilliot is a recurrent motif from the beginning to the end of the novel. In the soliloquy we find Dana Hilliot in his real self, when he becomes oblivious of the outside world and like Keats in ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ is seized with his sole self. ‘Forlorn’ is the word he adapts from Keats’ Ode for illuminating his solitary state of mind. In the monologue he analyses himself and sees visions. The stream –of-consciousness technique enables the novelist to peel off the veil of external reality concealing the care of the personality of the protagonist Dana Hilliot and to give the visionary he seizes. To Lowry as well as to Conrad Aiken vision is the primary thing. Lowry perhaps is in full rapport with Conrad Aiken who says that without vision “no amount of observation, or cataloguing, or mere naming, or immersion in the thingness of the thing_ that insidiously destructive bequest of William Carlos Williams- can ever add up to any sort of totality of response to the universe with which we are faced, outer and inner.”¹⁰

Lowry also makes use of the technique of expressionism, a variant of the stream-of-consciousness. Expressionism is non-mimetic and therefore in revolt against Realism, Naturalism and Impressionism. In Herbert Read’s words the Expressionist does not wish to reproduce “the objective reality of the world, but the subjective reality of the feeling which objects and events arouse”¹¹ For the Expressionist the truth resides not in the observable world but in the mind of the perceiver and on account of Lowry’s this conception of the universe he has to take recourse to the expressionist technique that works in terms of ‘fantasy thinking’. Fantasy-thinking, as Jung feels, is different from “a thinking that is adapted to reality, by means of which we imitate the successiveness of objectively real things...”¹²

Malcolm Lowry’s technique in *Ultramarine* is not an imitation of the successiveness of objectively real things. But it does not mean that he is a romancer weaving only fanciful tales. Gerald Noxon, one of the Lowry’s closest literary friends at Cambridge, rightly says that Lowry discards the aridity of a purely realistic style¹³ and goes in for dream-thinking. His protagonist in *Ultramarine* speaks through images and dreams.

A typically important feature of Lowry’s technique in *Ultramarine* is his imbedding the text with phrases from the works of authors such as Shakespeare, Keats and T.S.Eliot. We find this technique in T.S. Eliot’s poetry used for the sake of setting up an ironic contrast between two different modes of life. In Malcolm Lowry it is used for a different purpose. It evokes an intense association of feeling and

thought. Keats' lines "Forlorn! The very word is like a bell/ To toll me back from thee to my sole self,"¹⁴ figure in Chapter One in *Ultramarine* with the word 'sole' replaced by 'Sad.' Shakespeare's line "Never, never, never, never, never,"¹⁵ in *King Lear* occurs in Chapter Two of *Ultramarine*. This Shakespearean tag occurs to Dana Hilliot's mind, when he finds that his pledge of fidelity to Janet is under strain and his old relation of purity is going to be snapped for good. T.S.Eliot's lines:

"I should have been a pair of ragged Claws

Scuttling across the floors of silent seas."¹⁶

In *The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock* are adapted by Malcolm Lowry in *Ultramarine* with a variation: "I wish I were. I wish. I were-what? A pair of ragged clauses scuttling between two dark parentheses?"¹⁷ Both Dana Hilliot and Prufrock have a craving for a noble mission. Dana Hilliot wants to whip the sea and Prufrock desires to disturb the universe but something ails them. Instances of this nature can be catalogued but my objective is not to ferret out all such expressions of other authors used by Lowry in *Ultramarine*. The three instances already cited tell us about the typical modern technique of Malcolm Lowry.

Ultramarine has a musical organization. This musical organization Malcolm Lowry assimilates from Conrad Aiken's counter-pointing of syncopated dialogue and interior monologue. The smoking room scenes in Conrad Aiken's *Blue Voyage* with their juxtaposed conversations, that bear on one another only in an oblique manner, find their echo in the fo'c'sle scenes of Lowry's *Ultramarine*. Lowry's experiments with syncopated dialogue in his first novel *Ultramarine* anticipate his deft use of the technique in such crucial scenes of *Under the Volcano* relating to Yvonne's return at the out set of Chapter Two and the final episode in the *Farolito*.

From the very first novel the impression gains ground that Malcolm Lowry feels more at home in the exploration of mental processes than in the depiction of external reality. It is to the credit of Malcolm Lowry that his use of integrated with the complex forces at work in the psyche of his protagonist Dana Hilliot.

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