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Études de Stylistique Anglaise

THE MEANING OF CONCESSIVE CLAUSES IN JIM HARRISON'S WORK: A GRAMMATICAL READING OF MIND STYLE

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Résumé : A travers une étude de cas (l'emploi des propositions concessives dans l'œuvre de Jim Harrison), cet article aborde sous un angle grammatical le phénomène de « mind style », montrant que la singularité d'une vison du monde peut s'incarner dans des choix grammaticaux aussi bien que dans des préférences sémantiques ou lexicales.

Mots-clés: stylistique, linguistique énonciative, Jim Harrison, mind style.

The notion of "mind style", presented by Geoffrey Leech and Michael Short in *Style in Fiction* (1981) after its introduction by Roger Fowler in *Linguistics and the Novel* (1977), has been explored substantially over the past decades. In her article published in this volume, Linda Pillière observes that the notion was originally "far more comprehensive . . . than recent studies on mind-style might suggest." (p. 69) Indeed, mind style is often approached through the prism of texts which represent "abnormal" worldviews (with linguistic evidence of psychological disorder, impairment of mental faculties etc.), leaving aside less deviant forms of idiosyncrasy, perhaps because their linguistic manifestations are more elusive. In this article, I would like to address a second aspect of the notion of mind style which has been comparatively overlooked, for reasons which may be similar to the first: while the advent of cognitive poetics in recent years has resulted in a particularly stimulating exploration of the lexical / semantic side of mind style, with new conceptual tools such as the study of schemas or frames and the use of Cognitive Metaphor theory (see Semino, 2007), the grammatical component of mind style has elicited less attention.

Leech and Short's definition of the notion does specify that "mind style [can] be observed through formal construction of language in terms of [both] grammar and lexis" (Leech and Short 1981, 151), but the connection between grammar and meaning (as well as between grammar and psychology) is more elusive, more difficult to grasp than the connection between meaning and such linguistic features as lexical choices or the use of metaphors. Nevertheless, grammatical preferences are useful indicators of the singular world view of a given individual, not only in cases of extreme "deviance" from the norm[1], but also in the manifestation of simple, idiosyncratic preferences. To explore the link between Harrisons's narrators' grammatical choices – be they conscious or unconscious – and their mental processes in the present case study, I will borrow tools from a French branch of linguistics whose theoretical framework was set by Antoine Culioli, namely the Theory of Enunciative Operations. Enunciative (or "utterer-centered") linguistics uncovers the mental "operations" of which speech is the surface manifestation; its focus on the enunciator, or speaker, makes it a particularly effective theory for broaching the phenomenon of mind style, as it tries to bring to light the link between grammatical surface and hidden, implicit psychological mechanisms. Here is not the place to present the global theoretical framework of enunciative linguistics as my analysis will bear on a single grammatical trait, namely the use of concessive clauses by the North-American writer Jim Harrison, in order to shed light on the mental processes involved in it and to clarify the pragmatic relationship which it creates with the implied reader[2]. I will focus on Harrison's fictional prose, leaving aside his essays and poems, and for purposes of clarity and comparison, will deal exclusively with clauses which are introduced by the conjunction THOUGH[3]. Since the abundance of concessive clauses is a consistent trait of Harrison's writing, the style I will address is the author's, but the *mind style* I will be exploring is that of his narrators; I will mainly deal with characteristics that are shared by them all, but I will also point out occasional variations between them.

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The use of concessive clauses by Jim Harrison is a salient feature of the author's style, for two reasons at least: because of their frequency in his work,

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1 For remarks on the grammatical expression of neurosis and psychosis by a linguist and psychoanalyst, see Danon-Boileau (1987).

2 For a presentation in English of the Theory of Enunciative Operations following the theoretical framework established by Antoine Culioli, see Bouscaren, Chuquet and Danon-Boileau (1992).

3 For a comparative study of the psychological mechanisms involved in the uses of THOUGH, ALTHOUGH and ALBEIT in *Dalva*, see Mallier (2006), and for remarks on OF COURSE in the same novel, see Mallier (2008).

and because they are in most cases post-posed. This lends them a distinctive quality, for they seem to constitute an afterthought, as can be observed in the following examples:

> Her voice is no longer dry and fatigued, *though I worry a bit that this is a vaguely manic phase that the family is susceptible to*. (*Dalva*, 18)[4]
>
> *
>
> You see less in the natural world with a dog along *though they alert you by their scenting abilities to what you're not going to see*. (*The Road Home*, 399)
>
> I might have been able to let off some steam *though I doubt it*. ("The Man Who Gave Up His Name", *Legends of the Fall*, 123)
>
> *
>
> Everyone on earth had a different texture of voice and appearance and despite the joking comments of his friends all girls seemed to be notably different from one another *though boys seemed less so*. ("Tracking", *The Summer He Didn't Die,* 204)
>
> *
>
> If you go outside in a relatively unpopulated area you are immediately a little less claustrophobic *though, of course, there are no miracles because you carry your civilization in your head*. ("The Beast God Forgot to Invent", *The Beast God Forgot to Invent*, 60)
>
> *
>
> The child's refusal to accept confusion in his parents' lives is a good protective measure. At that age parents are still gods *though growing smaller by the year*. (*True North*, 21)
>
> *

Ante-posed concessive clauses, on the other hand, are much less frequent in Harrison's works, though examples of them can be found as well:

> Nordstrom said her concern was nonsense and *though he found the whole notion appalling* he guessed that it was probably true. ("The Man Who Gave up His Name", *Legends of the Fall*, 148)
>
> *
>
> She lost her taste for heavy drinking and pill pooping and *though she was still a little fragile mentally* she had become pleasantly human rather than one of those upper-class Judy Garlands. (*True North*, 127)
>
> *

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[4] The emphasis is mine in this quotation and those that follow.

> When it was over I had nothing left about which to draw conclusions. My incomprehension was total. She was here and then she wasn't and *though I understood the biological fact of death* the whole ballooned outward from the mute sum of the parts. (*True North*, 117)

The question which needs addressing is whether the difference between ante-posed and post-posed concessive clauses is purely a matter of sentence rhythm, or whether it reflects a difference in meaning as well. The question has elicited different answers from different schools of grammarians. According to Quirk *et al.*, the order of clauses – or more precisely, which clause is made subordinate – generally has no impact on the meaning of the sentence:

> Concessive clauses indicate that the situation in the matrix clause is contrary to expectation in the light of what is said in the concessive clause. In consequence of the mutuality, it is often purely a matter of choice which clause is made subordinate. (Quirk *et al.* 1985, 1097)

Quirk *et al.* posit a "mutuality", or reversibility in the relationship between the two clauses, though the authors leave room for possible exceptions by qualifying their statement with the adverb "often". However, it seems difficult to find examples where "which clause is made subordinate" is really a matter of choice. For instance, the following statement, "I'm quite happy though I may have to move after all these years" (*Dalva*, 3) cannot be reversed into: "Though I'm quite happy, I may have to move after all these years"; the meaning of the sentence would be profoundly altered. If a concessive relationship entails that one clause is "contrary to expectation" in the light of what is said in the other, it does matter which clause is the starting point of the expectation that is thus invalidated. One might think, however, that the *order* in which the two clauses appear is a matter of choice. For instance, the sentence quoted above, "I'm quite happy though I may have to move after all these years" could be rephrased as "Though I may have to move after all these years, I'm quite happy"; the meaning of the sentence would not be radically altered, although there would still be a small difference as the end focus of the sentence would not bear on the duration of the narrator's stay in her home anymore, but on her relative happiness instead. One might conclude that whereas it obviously matters which clause is made subordinate, it does not (apparently) matter so much which clause comes first in the statement. That is indeed how the enunciative linguist Catherine Filippi understands the remark made in Quirk *et al*. (Filippi 1998, 27-28). And yet, in numerous cases, that second assertion can be challenged too. Indeed, the order of clauses often directly affects the meaning of the sentence and it seems that the mechanism described in Quirk ("the situation in the matrix clause is contrary to expectation in the light of what is said in the concessive clause") partly depends on the order in which the clauses appear.

(I) When the concessive clause is ante-posed, the expectation unquestionably stems from it, as is apparent in this example from *Dalva*:

> I intended to call a friend in the athletic department at Stanford who, *though he enters Ironmen contests*, drinks a great deal of beer. (*Dalva*, 129)

It is obvious here that the expectation derives from the subordinate clause (a man who enters Ironmen contests is expected to have a very healthy lifestyle), and is invalidated by the main clause (this particular individual, however, drinks a great deal of beer).

(II) When the concessive clause is post-posed, however, the expectation does not always derive from the subordinate clause. There are indeed two possibilities:

> (i) either the expectation implicit in the concessive clause does start from the subordinate clause, in spite of the latter being post-posed, in which case the mechanism is close to the one we just analyzed: in the sentence "The streets were partly drifted over and no one was around *though it was noon*," (*Dalva*, 47), the inference starts from the subordinate clause even if the latter is post-posed; the paraphrase could be: [it was noon, so one might have expected the streets to be busy, but actually there was no one around].

> (ii) But a second possibility (which is the most common case when a concessive clause is post-posed) is that the expectation can derive from the matrix clause itself. Such is the case in this example from the third-person autobiographical narrative "Tracking": "The novel was immediately accepted so now he was a novelist *though the ego was restrained remembering his father's admonition that the arts weren't an entitlement that separated one from the social contract*." (*The Summer He Didn't Die*, 235) The expectation that is invalidated stems from the consecutive clause embedded in the matrix clause, "so now he was a novelist": [he was a novelist, so he might have had an inflated sense of his own importance, but actually his ego was restrained by his father's words]. The mechanism at work here is different from that described in Quirk *et al.*: it is not that "the situation in the matrix clause is contrary to expectation in the light of what is said in the concessive clause", but conversely that "the situation in the *subordinate* clause is contrary to expectation in the light of what is said in the *matrix* clause."

It appears that there are two different types of concessive clauses, depending on where the expectation starts from. The difference which needs to be emphasized is thus not so much the difference between ante-posed and post-posed concessive clauses as the difference between concessive clauses in which the invalidated expectation is triggered by the subordinate clause (y), and those in which the expectation is triggered by the matrix clause (x). This fundamental distinction was first brought to light by Graham Ranger, an enunciative linguist who named the first type of clauses "Standard concessive clauses" (henceforward called SCCs), and the second type "Rectifying concessive clauses" (RCCs)[5]. SCCs are the most common form of concessive clauses, which is why Ranger

5 See Ranger (1998, 35-36).

calls them "standard", and indeed they correspond to the definition given in Quirk *et al*.; they are in most cases ante-posed, but can occasionally be post-posed as well. Rectifying clauses, on the other hand, are thus named because they seem to bring a correction, a "rectification" to the statement made in the matrix clause. For this reason, they are always post-posed.

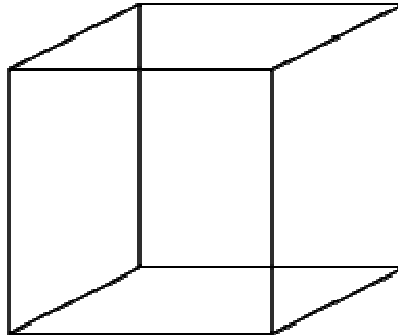
Thus, whereas ante-posed concessive clauses are always standard, post-posed clauses can be either standard or rectifying. Interestingly, **some cases of post-posed clauses are ambiguous** – that is to say, they can be interpreted either as standard or as rectifying. In such cases, the meaning of the sentence will vary according to the interpretation that is made. Here is an example from *True North*:

> He said he didn't like the way my parents looked at him *though they were polite*. (*True North*, 79)

This sentence can be interpreted in two different ways. If the expectation is understood to start from the matrix clause, the subordinate clause comes as a rectification: although the subject "he" (a character called Glenn) dislikes the way the narrator's parents looked at him, he acknowledges their having been polite to him, which somewhat lessens his entitlement to feel offended. If, however, the expectation is understood to start from the subordinate clause, then it is the content of the matrix clause that is asserted more firmly: the narrator's parents may well have been polite, Glenn still resents the way they looked at him (this interpretation would be certain if the subordinator was *even though*). The emphasis is almost the opposite from that found in the first interpretation. The same double reading can be applied to a number of post-posed concessive clauses whose nature remains ambiguous, such as this example from *Dalva*:

> I think the car hastened the death of my grandfather *though he tried to absolve me of this notion on his deathbed*. (*Dalva*, 65)

Again, the sentence can be interpreted in two different ways: either as an SCC [my grandfather tried to absolve me of the notion that my driving a car hastened his death, so one might think I didn't feel guilty, *but I still think the two events were related*]; or as an RCC [I think my driving a car hastened my grandfather's death, so one might think he expressed disapproval / gave me some reason to think so, *but actually he tried to free me of this feeling of guilt on his deathbed*]. Again, the emphasis is placed on two almost opposite points in the two interpretations. The shift in meaning between the two types of clauses evokes the shift in interpretation one can experience when looking at a Necker cube:



In this famous experiment, depending on which of its ends is seen as closer to the viewer, the cube can be construed from two different points of view: either as from right-and-above, or from left-and-below. German narratologist Manfred Jahn, who used the Necker cube as a metaphor to explain cognitive processes involved in reading, remarks that "whichever interpretation is initially chosen – though (i) [i.e. from right-and-above] is the more likely candidate – after a while the mind somehow tires of it and spontaneously presents the other one. Among other things, a Necker cube illustrates that competing interpretations (especially those that involve a change in point of view) tend to get blocked." (Jahn 1997, 458) In other words, the competing interpretations cannot occur simultaneously, but only successively: similarly, one cannot interpret an ambiguous concessive clause simultaneously as a standard and as a rectifying clause; one can only shift from one version to the other, experiencing the correlative change in meaning.

That being said, most post-posed concessive clauses in Harrison's work are not ambiguous but indisputably rectifying. This is sometimes made clear by the presence of the locution "in fact", or "of course" following the conjunction:

> "Your father was only good at war, do you know that? After that he mostly spent money." I nodded *though in fact my father never mentioned World War II and belonged to no veteran's organizations* . . . (*True North*, 61-62)

*

> I had loathed *Catcher in the Rye* thinking the hero to be a wimp *though, of course, it was the insufferable resemblance of my character to his however slight*. (*True North*, 79)

Another unmistakable sign that a post-posed concessive clause is rectifying is the presence of a comma before the conjunction:

> Bay Mills wasn't that far out of the way, *though I was anxious to get to East Lansing to see Polly*. (*True North*, 93)

*

> We want to keep our wounds as lucidly unique as possible, *though sitting there on the beach I began to see it as a vain effort*. (*True North*, 160)

*

> He fashioned himself without superstition or imagination, *though mostly because people always told him he was without either*. ("The Man Who Gave Up His Name", *Legends of the Fall*, 126)

*

> The music seemed to go with the wordless, verbless immensity of the ocean thought B.D., *though not in that specific language*. ("Westward Ho", *The Beast God Forgot to Invent*, 122)

In all these examples, the concessive clause can be interpreted only as rectifying (i.e., the expectation which is invalidated starts from the main clause): there is no ambiguity. The comma indicates a pause in the thinking process; the subordinate clause (*y*) comes as an afterthought which retroactively narrows or restricts the validity of the main clause (*x*). In a post-posed standard clause, on the other hand, the link between the main clause and the subordinate one is made earlier in the enunciator's mind: it is present from the moment when s/he utters the main clause.

The prevalence of post-posed concessive clauses in Harrison's work is thus also a prevalence of rectifying clauses, despite the rare cases when a post-posed clause is standard, or ambiguous[6]. The enunciative distinction established by Graham Ranger can help us understand the meaning of Harrison's use of concessive clauses, and of the predominance of RCCs over SCCs in his work. Indeed, the distinction between SCCs and RCCs reveals that the two types of clauses imply a different relationship between enunciator and co-enunciator, or more simply between the addressor and the (real or virtual) addressee[7]. The pragmatic relationship at work between the addressor and the addressee in an SCC could be paraphrased as follows: [although you/one might infer from *y* that *x* is not the case, I strongly affirm that *x* is the case nonetheless]. The addressor anticipates and contradicts an expectation that the addressee might have, which might seem incompatible with *x*. In other words, he forestalls a possible objection; that is why Catherine Filippi has described the relationship implicit in such statements as "adversative" rather than yielding, adding that the enunciator defines him- or herself as the "indisputable master of

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6 For a statistical count of the different types of concessive clauses in *Dalva*, see Mallier (2006).

7 According to Antoine Culioli, speech builds not only an image of the enunciator, but also an image of the addressee – which is why the latter is often referred to as the "co-enunciator". (Culioli 1985, 62)

interpretations"[8]. He does not so much *grant* something to the addressee as deny the possible implications of *y*, however logical they might seem. The mental operation that underlies rectifying clauses is entirely different; it could be paraphrased thus: [I affirm *x*, but then, to be precise / accurate / honest, I have to add that *y* (which is apparently contradictory with *x*) is also true]. RCCs thus constitute a real "concession". The psychical movement here is one of *restriction* (of the validity of *x*) or *integration* (of *y*), not of rejection: the addressor corrects, qualifies his statement and accommodates what Ranger calls a "deleterious factor" (Ranger 1998, 46), acknowledging the relativity of the opinion expressed in *x*.

This can be related to a general outlook on life, and pragmatic relationship to the implied reader, in Harrison's work. Standard concessive clauses have the effect of reinforcing the enunciator's point of view, of strengthening his assertions by sweeping away potential objections. RCCs are very different: they express a correction, a qualification of the assertion present in the main clause; the enunciator acknowledges that his/her viewpoint was partially incorrect, or incomplete, and amends it. The pragmatic attitude is more humble than that involved in SCCs. Beyond their prosodic quality, the frequency of RCCs thus reveals a readiness to acknowledge one's limitations, a vigilance towards the ego's natural tendency to want to win arguments – a tendency which Harrison mockingly diagnoses in himself in the autobiographical third-person narrative "Tracking", saying that "[h]is willful but subdued arrogance puzzled him and it was impossible not to treat it comically." (*The Summer He Didn't Die*, 248). He often cautions his alter ego against hubris: "Sometimes his sense of his own limits became so glaring, so obvious that the concomitant humility made him mute and the idea of operating a small-town gas station seemed attractive. Of course he realized when he reached sixty that it was far too late not to run out your string. *Thinking you could become something else was another case of hubris*." (*The Summer He Didn't Die*, 262) Such caution is correlated to a feeling of powerlessness at deciphering the puzzle of existence: reporting a moment of introspection during a flight, Harrison describes himself as "in the middle of the mind ground of being as it is *though it was a landscape of question marks*." (*The Summer He Didn't Die*, 234) Here, a rectifying concessive clause is directly associated with the theme of personal humility in the face of metaphysical issues. Harrison also says of himself that "[his] nomadic habits had begun to raise more questions than they resolved" (256), and that "[i]n Brazil it finally struck him very hard that we live and die without a firm clue." (258)

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8 Filippi (1998, 30 and 32).

However, despite its daunting aspect, the unfathomable mystery of life is also attractive: Paul, Dalva's uncle (who is one of the several first-person narrators of the sequel to *Dalva*, *The Road Home*), declares: "There is a mystery underfoot that is largely ignored because it is largely invisible. Ergo, I became a geologist." (*The Road Home*, 334) The distrust towards delusions of personal grandeur is not only a source of anxiety or bafflement; it is also correlated to a feeling of wonder at the majesty of the universe, and a constant relativization of man's importance in the vastness of the cosmos. Dalva expresses it in the following way:

> Now on the porch it was as if there was too much oxygen in the green air of June, and the son had doubtless driven down this road, perhaps glanced through the porch screen to see Naomi sitting here talking to the dead in the evening. *It was too large to be understood, it was not meant to be understood except to sense how large it was as if we were particles of our own universe, each of us a part of a more intimate constellation. The reach from the porch to three crows sleeping in a dead cottonwood down the road was infinite. So were father, mother, son and daughter, lover, horse and dog*. (*Dalva*, 281)

The other first-person narrator of the novel, Michael, constitutes an exception to this rule: he is self-centered, has a strong sense of intellectual superiority, and explicitly comments on the fact that he can't allow others to challenge his perception of the world because his need for stability would be shaken – especially when he deems them to be irrational, as is often the case with Dalva herself:

> For some reason I mentioned the Nez Percé student on the rock pile in my dream. . . .
>
> "That's an interesting dream," she said. "Maybe dreams are in the nature of the landscape? When I was in England and France I dreamt of knights and warhorses and I never do in America. In Arizona I dreamt of melon patches trailing all the way from Oraibi down the Sierra Madre in Mexico, which is where they think the Hopis came from. Here I dream a lot about animals and Indians, and I never did in Santa Monica.
>
> This threatened my scholarly integrity so I made a speech right there in the hot, muggy schoolyard, beginning with Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, with sidetracks into Otto Rank and Karen Horney. In the interest of winning the point I overlooked those irrational mushmouths Carl Jung and his contemporary camp follower, James Hillman. She laughed when I began to pound an imaginary lectern. (*Dalva*, 122)

Revealingly, though rectifying clauses still predominate in Michael's narrative, he uses a significantly higher proportion of standard concessive clauses than Dalva herself, whose personality is the exact opposite of Michael's in many ways. Thus, beyond the abundance of RCCs which is a salient and recognizable

feature of the author's style, there is a variation between the mind styles of the two first-person narrators, which becomes a subtle element of characterization[9].

Far from being only a matter of prosody, the use of rectifying concessive clauses thus reveals a readiness of most of Harrison's narrators to acknowledge the limitations of their thinking and their statements, a humble perception of their position in the universe, an awareness of their being related to the whole of mankind. Dalva thus declares that "of course there is something absurdly nonunique in a sixteen-year-old girl wandering around the fields, windbreaks, and creeks thinking about God, sex, and love, the vacuum of the baby" (*Dalva*, 53) while her mother, Naomi, affirms in the novel which is the sequel to *Dalva*: "as you grow older you tend to slowly recognize that you are less unique than you thought you were earlier in life." (*The Road Home*, 302)

Harrison's use of concessive clauses is a linguistic manifestation of a particular perception of the world, a position of humility in which the individual is always conscious of belonging to something larger than him- or herself. The author cultivates narrators who acknowledge that the universe is much too vast and complex to be comprehended and understood by any given individual. This goes along with a number of other characteristics of his writing, which share the property of steering clear of excessive assertions, of privileging nuance and subtlety, of distrusting the inflation of the ego and its feeling of uniqueness[10]. The author's style is thus consonant with the content of his works, and supports his representation of the fact that men's all too frequent sentiment of self-importance is belittled by the magnitude of the cosmos[11].

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Understanding what is at stake in Harrison's use of concessive clauses at an enunciative level enables us to make a connection between the author's linguistic style and his personal metaphysics, to show how his fundamental *ethos* and his relationship to the world are expressed through his syntactical choices. The singularity of a world view can thus be felt not only through the semantic preferences of a speaker, but also through his/her use of grammar. This can be applied to numerous other grammatical phenomena than the one example analyzed here – indeed, every part of speech is the manifestation of mental operations which can be "unearthed" and correlated to the idiosyncrasy of the mind which created them. Such an approach could certainly be related to semantic and cognitive studies of the phenomenon of mind style, creating a useful synergy of interpretations.

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9 For a statistical approach and interpretation of the differences between the ratio of concessive and rectifying clauses in the narratives of both Dalva and Michael, see Mallier (2006).

10 For an analysis of several such stylistic traits see Mallier (2008).

11 For a study of Harrisons's singular treatment of nouns in relation to this theme, see Mallier (2012).

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