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NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN THE EARLY NOVELS OF PIERS PAUL READ

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Abstract: *The paper deals with the narrative methods and the role of the narrator in three novels by P. P. Read:* Game in Heaven with Tussy Marx *(1966),* The Junkers *(1968) and* Monk Dowson *(1969). The general analysis of the texts is meant to illustrate how the changes in narrative method and perspective help to unveil some of the main ideological issues of the twentieth century, as well as the dilemmas of the modern man, caught between the dangers of ideological commitment and moral nihilism.*

The name of Piers Paul Read is not widely known to the reading public even in Britain, although his debut, regarded as both provocative and promising, was very close to that of David Lodge. Since that time — i.e. 1966 — Read has written 14 novels, 3 works of non-fiction, one authorized biography (of the actor Alec Guinness), many TV plays, articles and essays, as a contributor to *The Spectator* and other periodicals. He was also a sub-editor of TLS in the late sixties. The reasons for his limited popularity as a novelist in Britain are a separate and complex issue, not relevant here. Still, it is appropriate to say a few things about him to contextualize the man and his work, before the main topic of the present paper is dealt with.

Born in 1941 as one of the four children of Sir Herbert Read, the poet and critic, Piers was educated in a Catholic boarding school in York, then studied modern history at Cambridge and received a lot of 'practical education', travelling and working during and after his studies in various places in Europe (France, Germany), America and the Far East. Quite early in his writing career he was given several 'labels', which have proved harmful to his reputation as a novelist. The most important of these is that of 'a Catholic writer'. Although it is true that Read himself is a practicing Catholic and discusses the problems of faith and the Church in interviews (e.g., in Rowland 1999: 8) and personal essays (Read 2006: 13-146), and that some of his novels deal with problems related to Catholicism, in his work he has always

tried, successfully in my opinion, to be objective in the treatment of religious faith as such and tolerant of other beliefs. He comes from a family where religious differences were 'daily bread': his mother (who was of German blood) was a Catholic convert, his beloved father was an agnostic. He and his siblings are Catholic, but none of their children, although brought up as Catholic, adhere to the faith of their parents, which is for Read the sign of widespread religious indifference in Britain (in Rowland 1999: 8). Read's novels do not take a 'moralising' or 'didactic' Catholic stance, even though they undoubtedly address problems related to serious moral matters.

Another label that has stuck to Read and has made him not very interesting to critics and publishers, is what is perceived as the traditional form of his books, the lack of experimental literary technique, although it is admitted that he can tell a good story, is "an entertaining storyteller" (Riley 1975: 380). In most of his novels there is a third-person omniscient narrator; although not of an 'intrusive' kind, as was the case in the novels of the great realists of the 19th century, e.g., in Tolstoy's or George Eliot's work, where the omniscient narrator "offered further comments on characters and events, and sometimes reflected more generally upon the significance of the story" (Baldick 1990: 112). It is true that Read's greatest novels are the sagas covering large areas of 20th century history, whose objectivity and stable point of view may seem old-fashioned to contemporary readers with postmodern tastes. Some of his other novels, e.g. *The Married Man* (1979), which look like bitterly satirical novels of manners, are also generally traditional in their narrative technique. Another kind of the novel that Read has practiced is a sort of thriller, often combining morality and politics, for instance, espionage during the Cold War, as in *A Patriot in Berlin* (1995), or Israeli attempts to discredit and destabilize the position of Palestinians and Christians in order to achieve some national goals in *On the Third Day* (1990). Such novels employ the first-person narration, since, obviously, the narrator cannot be omniscient when the secrets of the plot and character are not revealed until the end..

Although he is now seen as a 'traditional' writer, in his first three books he used a conspicuously different narrative technique, perceived as either 'experimental', as was the case with his debut (Halio 1983: 623), or at least as formally interesting. Apart from *Game in Heaven with Tussy Marx* (1966), the next two novels that he wrote before he was 30, i.e., in the 1960s, combine the first and third person narration, introducing an unreliable narrator

who tries to be objective (but he cannot, which is an important point for the theme of the novel).

At this point the inevitable question arises: Was this interest in form to do with the ambition of a young writer who wanted to be seen as an experimental author in the late sixties, the time when structuralism was becoming a fashionable critical method, drawing the attention of both writers and critics to such issues as, for instance, narratology? Although such personal reasons of the author cannot be entirely excluded and should be seen as natural, it seems that there was more to it than the young man's attempt to please the critics and the reading public. The aim of this paper is to find this additional factor; in other words — to address the problem of the narrative technique in Read's first three novels, all published in the 1960s. My claim is that the choice of narrative technique in these novels is used as a means of hiding the author's own position in terms of beliefs and opinions, thus helping him to deal more objectively with difficult, complex or controversial issues which were topical at that time. The three novels deal, respectively, with the problem of Marxism and social revolution (*Game in Heaven with Tussy Marx*, 1966), the problem of post-war Germany and its two radically opposed political systems (*The Junkers,* 1968), and the problem of individual vocation in the light of the changes introduced to Catholicism by the Second Vatican Council (*Monk Dawson*, 1969).

The story of *Game in Heaven with Tussy Mar*x unfolds on two levels: on the earth and in Heaven in the second half of the 20th century. The three 'heavenly' observers of the situation on the earth are a dowager duchess, a young modern Englishman (who is the narrator), and Tussy (Eleanor) Marx (1856-98), the youngest daughter of Karl Marx. They represent three different generations and outlooks upon the world. Tussy is the most serious about social problems and the question of revolution. As she says herself, her early life had been dedicated to two causes: the revolutionary socialism of her father and the emancipation of women. Later she fell in love with Edward Aveling, an English socialist, who drove her to commit suicide by poisoning at the age of 42 with his constant infidelities and unbelievable cruelty. (In the novel it is suggested by the narrator and Tussy herself that she — although an atheist when she was on earth — is allowed to be in Heaven because she had strongly believed in the ideas of revolution and because she died of love.

The young Englishman, “an ordinary bourgeois cad,” as Tussy calls him (1966: 11), is the real narrator of the story which he tells at Tussy’s request. The starting point of his narration is the scene they see on earth: a long procession of people of all walks of life and all ages, somewhat like the ‘fair field of folk’ in Langland’s “Vision of Piers Plowman”. The people in the procession are waiting and calling for a hero who would lead them to a revolution, a hero with a Saxon-sounding name — Hereward (‘historically a leader of the Saxons against William the Conqueror’ [Halio 1983: 623]). The people are:

> [A]ll sorts whose lives have no aim; but they have the capacity to hope for an idea in which to believe…They may not know what they want — their instincts are clogged by customs no longer related to the form of their society — but know that it is time for a change, time to shed one skin and grow another […] they need a revolutionary hero, one appropriate for the time they live in (Read 1966:15).

The hero does not exist yet, people are shouting into thin air. There is no sign of any Hereward, but, as Tussy suggests, “we can pretend that he exists.” She tells the narrator: “You can invent him. It will be a game for us to play. It will be a story for me…” (8).

In this novel Read introduces themes which will mean much to him in later work, too: the emptiness of secular society, the danger of general acceptance of sexual permissiveness, the importance of marital fidelity, as well as a strange connection between Communist and Christian ideals — hence the opinion that the novel is a “Catholic Marxist” one (Woodman 1991: 97). What is characteristic, however, of this narration is its ironic tone, which is made possible by the employment of the unusual narrative technique: the story taking place in Heaven (mostly commentaries and memories of the three characters) and the omniscient narration about Hereward’s life, his corruption by another socialist leader and evil character, George Watkins, the later experiences of this ‘revolutionary’, and an almost comic happy ending: Hereward’s re-union with his wife who, unaware of many marital betrayals which constituted the essence of her husband’s frequent ‘revolutionary’ trips all over the world, is proud to be his wife: “‘Would I have married you, I wonder,’ Miranda asked Hereward, ‘if I had known you were a revolutionary? […] Now that I know, I imagine that I would have done. I cannot remember when I was not the wife of an English revolutionary” (Read 1966: 151).

A lot of space for irony is created just by Read's sophisticated narrative technique in this novel. The nameless English narrator — who had died in a car crash, but is in heaven since he, as he says, "'went to Church on Sundays," (7) — has to explain things to Tussy, who is very serious and idealistic about revolutionary matters and does not understand that there are no parallels between her world and the world of the English 'conventional revolutionaries' of the second half of the 20th century. On the other hand, the narrator has to also enlighten the Duchess, who in her social blindness did not and does not see any need for social changes: "Life seemed all right to me" (15); "We treated our tenants very well" (152). Her remarks, however, are useful as a satirical tool since she is usually quite commonsensical and assertive in her opinions, e.g., "An English revolutionary is an improbability" (151). Both she and Tussy, although for different reasons, disapprove of the way Hereward behaves as a revolutionary — he marries a rich girl, becomes the father of a few children, and, like a typical 'English revolutionary,' is constantly on the run from home, having many affairs with married and unmarried women and using political jargon most of the time: "'Why must he hide his feelings like that?', [the duchess asks the narrator who replies]: 'He has to use the idiom of his time; otherwise no one would understand him; he will seem ridiculous'" (21).

On the other hand, the narrator points out a very important message for the modern age: "If the times reduce Hereward to speaking the truth in tones of irony, cynicism and contempt, he will still be speaking the truth." (21). This remark may be the answer to the question why Read himself speaks of such important matters in an ironic, or even frivolous way. To speak about the issue of revolution and of Marx's daughter in serious tones in the 1960s would be propaganda for some and gospel for others, and the majority would hiss at the author with dissatisfaction. Perhaps this is the reason why in this and in his later novels of the 1960s Read, like Hereward, did adopt the idioms of his times, making his narrators resort to the ways and expressions of cynicism, nihilism, social and biological determinism, thus keeping all his options open and playing games with his readers. In this way — mainly thanks to his narrative techniques — he veils both fiction's truth and his own truth about the matters that were important to him and his generation in the 1960s, the time of the social unrest of the young people in the West..

Read's second novel, *The Junkers* (1968), is an ingenious study of the 20th century's great symbol of evil, i.e., Nazism. Its special quality is that it also "plays upon a paradigm of comedy" (Halio 1983: 624) with the love story and a happy ending after many obstacles that the lovers have to overcome. However, the narrative technique allows the author to make it a very serious story as well, "a complex horror story," as Halio calls it (1983: 624). The narrator, also a nameless Englishman, similar to Read in age (the novel begins in 1963), takes pride in stereotypical English virtues like fair play and open-mindedness, even about the elder generation's concerns with the horrors of World War II, but it is obvious that he is a rootless hedonist, an aesthete and sensualist at the same time, and an unconcerned expert in German finances and history, who works as an advisor to the British commander in Berlin. His job is to investigate the past of Klaus von Rummelsberg, one of the group of Pomeranian Junkers, who, although an ex-Nazi, is becoming a political leader, which worries the Allied authorities. The research into the past of the three Rummelsberg brothers and their friends constitutes a separate, 'historical' level of the narrative dealing with the past before and during the war and has "the format of the intelligence dossier" (Halio 1983: 624). The narrator changes in the course of the novel because of his love for Susi (who first seems to be a mysterious daughter, ward or mistress of Helmuth von Rummelsberg) and the knowledge that the historical research gives him (Susi's father is a wanted war criminal). The Rummelsbers, a decent, if naïve, Pomeranian family, got into the clutches of history with one of the brothers becoming a Nazi, the second, indifferent and apolitical hedonist, trying in a cunning way to steer away from the openly ideological position of his countrymen, and the youngest, Edward, a soldier who had defected to the Russian army and remained a Communist idealist, living now in East Berlin. The possible message of the narrator seems to suggest that even the story of one family is not simple in moral terms. It demonstrates the well-known truth (earlier shown in *Game in Heaven)* that evil is often connected to the best intentions of human beings — e.g., patriotic attempts to save a country by adopting such ideology as Nazism, or to save Europe by adopting communism. On the personal level it can take the form of saving oneself or one's family by cheating and doing things that should not be done, such as help the former SS sadistic murderer (Strepper — Susi's father) escape punishment. The suggestion that can be made is that, perhaps, from a historical perspective, the mod-

ern world is not much better than the world of the Nazis, and war crimes against civilians on both sides bring acute suffering no matter who started it all. On the other hand, the narrator is not entirely reliable: in spite of his belief in British superior honesty and fair-mindedness, he cheats his authorities and hides a part of the truth about the Rummelsbergs, thus helping to save Susi and her relatives. Is the narrator, then, converted to the side of the Junkers who cared more about family and friends than about Hitler's global plans? Or is he still deeply bothered by the presence of his father-in-law, a figure of evil he got to know from the Rummelsberg dossier, at his wedding? The ending of the novel is ambiguous on this point: the young couple on the way to their honeymoon place talk about Strepper and the briefness of Susis's comments and apparent indifference of the narrator leave a question mark at the end of this study of the ex-Nazi world, leave "the readers — if not Read — in a position of doubt" (Halio 1983: 630) about how to treat the past that is still so closely bound to the present and to family loyalties:

> "When we were on the Olympiastrasse I said to her: 'Who was the man in the blue jacket, the one who couldn't speak? Was he your father?'
>
> 'Yes,' she said after a short silence. Then, after another pause, she said: 'I wanted him to be there....'
>
> I tried, with my tongue, to get a piece of chicken out from between my teeth.
>
> 'I'd never seen him before,' Susi said. 'I didn't think he looked very nice, did you?' She screwed up her nose and smiled at me.
>
> 'I don't know,' I said and smiled too but kept my eyes on the road."
>
> (Read 1968: 314)

As in the case of *Game in Heaven*, it seems that the narrative technique in *The Junkers* allowed Read to pose a number of disturbing questions that would not have been possible to raise in the 1960s without the serious risk of committing oneself to a definite political and ethical option.

The third novel, which deals with the subject of Catholicism before and after Vatican II, is the story of Edward Dawson, a Catholic boy educated in a Benedictine school, a great idealist who wants to serve other human beings and who becomes victim of the secularization of the Church's concerns after Vatican II. The story is told by his school friend, an agnostic, who

reconstructs Dawson's life on the basis of what the latter as well as other of his friends and acquaintances have told him. Like in the previous novels, the motif of disillusionment and frustration of one's highest hopes plays a very important part. The fact that the narrator is an agnostic makes it possible for a lot of criticism of the Catholic Church to be included in the book and given to the reader, so that they can decide whether the charges are justified. Irony plays again a crucial role and is, this time, revealed through the structure of the story, particularly towards the end of the novel. Dawson, aspiring to great things and desiring to be a saint, sins through a lack of charity: he who wanted to help other human beings, causes the death of his wife who, unloved and neglected, commits suicide.

The narrator does not comment on this event, he simply relates what has happened, but does not seem to understand the woman's motives. He is also — like Dawson's other friends — puzzled by Edward's decision to go back to what the latter had seen in his youth as his vocation. There is no clear explanation given, but apparently it is the suffering Dawson experiences after his unlucky attempt at a relationship with the woman he loves (Jenny) and the pain and guilt he feels after the death of his wife that bring him back to religious life and to the same Trappist monastery in which he has before lost his faith. His friends, the narrator among them, are confused, angered and doubtful whether Dawson has done the right thing and is happy now that he understands — as he tells his agnostic friend - the confusion the modern world experiences between social and religious morality, "between the exigencies of human life and the deference due to God" (Read 1980: 181). Again, like in the previous novels, the narrator, knowledgeable about facts but ignorant about motives and feelings which he does not share, opens up possibilities of reflection on the life of the title hero and saves the novel from easy didacticism. The final conversation between the narrator and Jenny, on their way back from the Trappist monastery, is again cryptic and ambiguous, although Jenny — in search of great ideas, always in her case somehow mixed up with sex, wants to be assured about Dawson's emotional and intellectual position:

> "She [Jenny] sat back and was quiet for a few more minutes: then she leaned forward again.
>
> 'What do you think, though?'
>
> 'How do you mean?'

'Was he mad or sane?'

'He wasn't mad. Not at all.'

'But broken?'

'I don't know. It depends.'

'On what?'

'I don't know… on whether you believe in God or not.'

'Then he was sick..'

[Jenny] 'You said…you said it was the school that buggered him up.'

…

'I suppose so. But now he seemed…I don't know…so much at ease with himself.'"

(183-4)

Summing up the above discussion on Read's early novels, it should be repeated that the narrative technique used in them helped, in an ingenious way, to introduce the most topical themes of the 1960s avoiding any clear didacticism and providing the author with a comfortable distance from which he could practice his satirical approach to modern reality. However, as is usually the case with Read's fiction, which is never openly moralistic, the political and social issues in the three novels still have a metaphysical dimension, which, paradoxically, is both concealed and enhanced by his narrative technique.

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