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Birds of a Feather: Narrative Development in Nippan and Woolf

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In the translator's "Afterword" to his Japanese rendition of Nippan's *Phisua lae Dokmai* (1977) (*Chouchou to Hana*, 1981) Tatsuo Hoshino mulls over what a critic of the young adult novel might have meant by using the expression "stream of consciousness" to describe Nippan's technique in the story (230). The remark led Hoshino to reread James Joyce's *Ulysses*, arguably (together with Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*) the most representative work associated with "stream of consciousness" technique. The effort led Hoshino to a deeper confusion, for he found little resemblance between what he saw as the (ironic?) negativity of Bloom's world and the simpler, kinder world Hooyan inhabits on the Thai border with Malaysia. The Japanese translator tries to pin down in what way Nippan's style could be associated with the modernist technique and concludes that

The young protagonist's thoughts are given to us in an apparently direct way, but that directness is due to the unknown presence of someone else, someone like the author who feels a great deal of sympathy for Hooyan. (231)

Oberman (2007) describes such techniques of merging the author's sympathy with "the third person rendering of a character's thoughts" as "narrated monologue," (2) a phrase she borrows from Cohn's *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Describing Consciousness in Fiction* (1978). Oberman traces the development of this "fusing [of] a character's subjectivity to the narrator's omniscience," one that results in a "bivocality that expands the reader's perspective" and finds such expansion to be ethical in its nature:

Through this technique, Austen and Eliot construct heroines (and readers) that develop in direction of the narrative voice and learn to emulate narrative skills, most importantly, the narrator's ability to enter another's consciousness. Their use of narrated monologue models the imaginative leap to another's consciousness that teaches readers to become aware of what another's consciousness might sound like, constructing readers who learn to see the world as a narrator would, as a vast arena of monologues to be narrated. (2)

This article focuses on a particular moment in the career of two writers who developed this "narrative monologue" to a high degree, achieving ethical breakthrough by allowing readers to enter into the consciousness of their characters. In the case of Nippan, his ethical and social intentions are made

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clear in the Preface to *Butterflies and Flowers*:

In an isolated village far from civilization there are lives that may not matter to you or to anyone else. Should the worth of a life be measured by its geographic location or by the education a person has received? To probe these questions more deeply, the present author lived with these villagers for a year and got to know them better . . . though much time has passed since then, their lives have not changed. They are still out of sight, and injustice is still everywhere, and sometimes it seems that even God has no mercy on them.

The passage makes it abundantly clear that the writer wants to bring the residents of the ethnically Malay village in Songkla into the public eye with his story. The result is the story of Hooyan, a young Malay-Thai who is forced by his family's poverty to quit school and smuggle rice across the border with Thailand.

The moment this paper focuses on is a year earlier when Nippan was struggling with point of view in the various short stories that would become the collection *Pleng nok yiao* (1976) (*The Song of the Eagle*). This collection features several short stories about Thai villagers of Malay ethnicity, stories replete with irony. In a recent article I examined one such story, "Bod-ka-vi-ko Rohim Mamat" ("The Poem of Rohim Mamat") and suggested that the narrative presence in the story results in an ironic consciousness which obscures the figures of the villagers themselves.

Here I would like to focus on the first story in the same volume, "The White Bird." My argument is that this prose-poem bears a striking resemblance to "Monday or Tuesday," a prose-poem penned by Virginia Woolf in 1920 when the author was recovering from the effort involved in finishing *Night and Day* and experimenting with the narrative point of view that she would begin to incorporate in *Jacob's Room*. Quentin Bell (1989) elucidates the importance of this period in Woolf's career:

Jacob's Room resulted from a crisis and a redirection in the work of Virginia Woolf. It was her third novel; *The Voyage Out*, her first, had, after a very long period of gestation, ended with a horrible mental breakdown and an attempted suicide. The second, *Night and Day*, was begun somehow during her very slow recovery. In her then state of mind it had to be something that would not excite or agitate a personality half torn by madness. (vii)

Woolf too was struggling with the problem of how to extract the troublesome ego from the narrative voice. In her diary entry for Monday, January 20 she writes

I suppose the danger lies in the damned egotistical self; which ruins Joyce and [Dorothy] Richardson, to my mind. Is one pliant and rich enough to provide a wall for the book from oneself without its becoming, as in J&R, narrowing and restricting? Anyhow, there's no doubt the way lies somewhere in that direction; I must grope and still experiment . . . (13-14)

"Monday or Tuesday," a prose-poem of a single page's length, would not appear until more than a year later, in March of 1922, but it is clear that the piece is one of the experiments Woolf carried out in her attempts to escape from the domination of the ego.

After looking at the two stories in question I would like to consider Paul Ricoeur's theory of "narrative identity" in which he sketches out the way in which fiction creates ethical possibilities. Ricoeur sees how fiction "can shape the past in ways that are unconstrained by the archives and thus give expression to the 'what might have been' of the past" (Crowley, 2003: 2). Crowley testifies to Ricoeur's ongoing involvement with the question of overcoming the ego:

His first sole authored book, on Gabriel Marcel and Karl Jaspers, makes clear a position that Ricoeur has held ever since. What he admires in both these philosophers is their argument that the presumed sovereign and self-transparent ego cannot be the source of meaning. Both Jaspers and Marcel see the ego, the *moi*, as something to be transcended in order to attain self-knowledge. (5)

No human ego obstructs the point of view in Woolf's short sketch, which opens with the magnificent indifference of a heron and the sky as central players:

Lazy and indifferent, shaking space easily from his wings, knowing his way, the heron passes over the church beneath the sky. White and distant, absorbed in itself, endlessly the sky covers and uncovers, moves and remains. A lake? Blot the shores of it out! A mountain? Oh, perfect – the sun gold on its slopes. Down that falls. Ferns then, or white feathers, for ever and ever. (12)

There is no anthropocentrism in this passage; the words militate against the arrogance of the human ego. Woolf would use this technique some three years on in 1925, in the second section of her masterpiece, *To the Lighthouse*. "Time Passes" centers on the empty Ramsay house in St. Ives, in which gravity, wind, and other forces of nature play the part of characters.

What ethical end is served by taking the point of view out of the human domain, by tying it to the rapidly ascending heron and the blue ether? The human activities and echoes from below seem bereft of significance as the story continues:

Radiating to a point men's feet and women's feet, black or gold-encrusted – (This foggy weather – sugar? No, thank you – the commonwealth of the future) the firelight darting and making the room red, save for the black figures and the bright eyes, while outside a van discharges, Ms. Thingummy drinks her tea at her desk, and plate-glass preserves fur coats – (12)

From the heron's point of view, high above London, there is a curious equality about the phenomena that appear below. After all, the anthropocentric values that create hierarchies are in question in the very title of the piece: "Monday or Tuesday" suggests the indifference of the heron to human distinctions.

Ms. Thingummy, sipping her tea at her desk, is hardly the upper-class heroine who might sparkle through the pages of a more traditional novel, yet it is precisely *her* consciousness that Woolf attempts to represent in another experimental piece penned at this time, *An Unwritten Novel*. In his biography of his aunt Quentin Bell (1972) enumerates Woolf's concerns at the time:

She has very little, in these early days of 1920, to say about her writing. After finishing *Night and Day* she must have been mainly occupied by those short stories which were to be published

for the first time in *Monday or Tuesday* and by *An Unwritten Novel* which appeared in *The London Mercury* in July. (72)

In the short novella Woolf attempts to represent the character of a “Ms. Thingummy” spinster glimpsed on the train. It was an experiment in “passing over” to the point of view of someone outside of her own social class.

“Monday or Tuesday” then turns philosophical; with the myriad fragments visible from the sky, is there such a thing as “truth”? Could it be that the object of Western philosophy and its sister, theology, have missed the very thing they sought by confining themselves to the earth? Would their reluctance to embrace the heathen and the Moor have diminished with the equalizing vision from on high?

Now to recollect by the fireside on the white square of marble. From ivory depths words rising shed their blackness, blossom and penetrate. Fallen the book; in the flame, in the smoke, in the momentary sparks – or now voyaging, the marble square pendant, minarets beneath and the Indian seas, while space rushes blue and stars glint – truth? Content with closeness? Lazy and indifferent the heron returns; the sky veils her stars; then bares them. (12–13)

In *To the Lighthouse* Woolf would create a substantial world round the issues she only hints at here. Mr. Ramsay, the egotistical philosopher who torments himself with doubts as to what degree of fame he has reached in his philosophical career will represent the pathos of the anthropocentric. The empty winter beach house at St. Ives, silent and subject to time and the elements, will represent the same truth that the bird embodies here; nature’s vast reality and indifference to human perceptions of “truth.”

The novelist facilitates the reader’s gradual shedding of onion-like layers of blindness to the reality of the Other by fusing the narrative voice with the Other’s point of view. In the years leading up to the production of his most famous work (cited above under both the Thai title and that of the Japanese translation) Nippan belonged to

. . . the idealistic group of student reformers who were graduating from university in the early seventies and looking for ways to heal the splintered social reality of Thailand. Looking back at this passion from a vantage point thirty-five years on, no one can escape the poignancy of the social concern displayed by the new graduates caught up in a social storm that urged them to “know your neighbor” and led people like Nippan to move in with local villagers. (McGrath, 2009, 13)

Nippan’s neighbors were ethnic Malays living in the southern Thai province of Songkla who hardly spoke Thai; Hoshino tells us that the Thai writer spent some time teaching the villagers Thai. What has not been documented is his struggle to find the right narrative voice to represent the villagers.

In Nippan’s collection of short stories *Pleng nok yiao* (1976) (*The Song of the Eagle*) the narrator is a well-educated, urbane observer who describes bits of Thai life with a good deal of irony. Some of the stories center on the Muslim villagers in Songkla; here the narrator is an outside observer, reporting on disparate events in the lives of the believers. The rationality of the narrator creates an ironic distance in stories like “Spotted Sacred Cow.” In this short piece a cow with an unusual pattern

of spots is the object of conflicting beliefs among the villagers: some believe that the cow is sacred, others that it is an ill omen. One of the latter group comes in the night to whack the cow in the head and put an end to it.

After this, the poor villager who was the owner prospers, as if the sacred cow had the power to help him from another world. The pious man is now able to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. His own comment on the debacle of the cow's appearance and slaughter is simple: "Allah helped us to go to his place."

Modernity and pre-modernity mingle in the story, creating an ironic distance between the educated narrator and the pious villager. This tension comes to a head in the short story "Bod-ka vi-ko Rohim Mamat" (The Poem of Rohim Mamat). The protagonist of this story, an educated young man similar to the narrator in his mainstream Buddhist background and middle-class education, takes up a job in the village elementary school, where most or all of the pupils are Muslim.

He attempts to give them a multicultural understanding of the Thai nation-state, citing various ethnic groups that subsist within the country, but the brightest boy, a child named Rohim Mamat, isn't having any of it. He insists on the only reality he recognizes, his Muslim identity, and pens a poem in which he imagines his response should the Buddhist teacher strike him: he will stab him. Again, a pre-modern faith and identity are contrasted with a modern understanding of the world. The resulting irony is substantial and at the expense of the sophisticated narrator.

By the time Nippan pens his masterpiece, *Phisua lae dokmai*, two years later, he will have overcome the problem of ironic distance between educated narrator and pious villagers by merging the narrative point of view with that of the villagers using the technique described above in the opening sections of this paper. The protagonist of the 1978 novel is a young Muslim boy similar to Rohim except for the deeper degree of poverty that marks him and for the fact of his mother's death. But now the narrator fuses himself into Rohim's existence and in place of the irony that marks the earlier stories we feel the "simple kindness" Hoshino refers to in his afterword.

The first story in the 1976 collection, "A White Bird," shows Nippan experimenting with narrative point of view, taking it to the skies as Woolf does in "Monday or Tuesday:"

In the sky there is a white bird. I'm not sure what name it should be. What I know is that its feathers are glittering when touched by the morning sunshine. It is circling as if it is looking for something, maybe food or enemies it has to fight with.

Unlike Woolf's story, which probes the meaning of "truth" as the bird circles over London, Nippan's piece emphasizes compassion for the dry earth and the creatures who dwell on it:

In the sky there are no clouds but the golden rays (in the sky) makes it seem like the distance between the land and the sky is not that far. I might be able to stretch my arms to the sky while my feet are still on the dry ground cracking from sunburn and without water to heal those cracks. The grass that used to be green has become dark brown. It is really sad. The death of the green

grass might be so painful, but I have no knowledge about that since I have never heard its cry nor seen its tears.

The narrator suggests the impossibility of egocentrism by using some subtle Buddhist tools, focusing on the balance of life and death and the impossibility of any real knowledge about this world:

The sunlight gets stronger as the sun rises higher in the sky. It moves slowly in its arc. Although sometimes it seems to be motionless, in actuality it is moving, on a destinationless path, the same path I have known since I was born. It moves from east to west. Tomorrow it will begin again.

If the sun has life, I think it lives in order to travel and waits for others to die while it still lives on and looks at those deaths

I'm not sure between birth and death which one is deliberate.

The narrator emphasizes the sameness of his existence with that of the white bird. As the prose-poem continues, he tells us "The white bird is still flying in the sky./ I'm still walking on the dry cracked ground." The piece finishes with a declaration of the aimlessness of life and the ignorance that binds creatures into commonality: "I don't know myself/ Just like that white bird."

The two novelists, writing in different languages at vastly different times and in very different circumstances, took their point of view to the sky in experimental pieces aimed at overcoming the barrier between Self and Other. Seen from the sky the differences between Buddhists and Malays, upper-class aristocrats and the unenviable Mrs. Thingummy, were quite negligible.

When Nippan wrote *Butterflies and Flowers* two years later, he enchanted the nation with his picture of innocent Malay children trying to make a living by selling ice cream or smuggling rice across the border. He fused the narrative point of view in a sympathetic bond with the protagonist, the boy Hooyan. In 1985 the award-winning book was turned into an immensely popular film by director Euthana Mukdasanit. It was a pioneering film in an era before Thai films gained international attention. As I write this, Thai television station TBS has redone the story, broadcasting it as a television series.

The breakthrough in point of view which Woolf achieved needs no documentation. After *Jacob's Room* came Woolf's masterpiece, *To the Lighthouse*, in which the central section, "Time Passes" again takes up the challenge of eliminating ego from the point of view. Woolf successfully implemented the technique she learned in her experiment, "Monday or Tuesday."

NOTES

As noted above, I have relied on a variety of translations in researching this paper: unpublished English translations by Chanavee Chaong; two Japanese translations by Tatsuo Hoshino; detailed translations of key passages by Dr. Suphatcharee Morrow and Ek Ekasingh.

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