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HUGH MACLENNAN'S COMPLEX NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN  
HIS LAST NOVEL

*As it is with the individual, so it may be with the whole world. When the individual is wanted in his soul he often wishes to die. But time passes and then, for no reason he understands, he wants to live again. Can it be the same with communities?*

(Voices in Time 28)

Hugh MacLennan (1904—1990) played a great role in the deliberate creation of the literature which is undoubtedly and distinctively Canadian in its subject, setting and voice. *Voices in Time* has not received as broad literary criticism as some of his previous novels, neither is it as popular as for instance *The Watch that Ends the Night* or the *Two Solitudes*. His last novel did not continue the thematical tradition that had been established in his previous novels, i.e. the quest for personal and/or national self-conscious motif. Here MacLennan makes an attempt to broaden his scope; to turn towards more general human affairs. A closer examination of this not so well-known novel can illuminate features that would enlarge the readers' appreciation and interest in 'the other sides of Hugh MacLennan'.

There is a tendency in his novels to portray historical patterns (such as the return of autocracies and regimes; wars, suffering and the sequence

of the permissive matrist and the authorian patrist cycles) in/through the lives of the individual characters. Some examples are the colonial mentality versus the search for the Canadian identity in *Barometer Rising*, the French and English conflict in *Two Solitudes*; or the American—Canadian relations in the *Precipice*. In *Each Man's Son* a more universal topic (i.e. human relations, here especially the one between the father and the son) is set in a Greek tragedy form; while *The Watch that Ends the Night*, his most powerful novel moves out to Europe. His last book: *Voices in Time* (1980) extends this line with its settings mostly in Germany. In a sense this novel tends to be a summary of his philosophical ideas touching universal themes and generalizing all his experience absorbed in his former novels. In an interview with Alan Twigg he says: "That book wasn't about Canadian politics. I had a very universal subject there" (Twigg, 86). The theme of the book is related to MacLennan's deepest concern: the misuse of human energy versus the purposeful direction of the same forces and its impact on the survival of mankind. His complex system of thoughts is embedded into a story which is interpreted from different aspects. The framework of the book is a twenty-first century (2039.) setting. The central character, John Wellfleet talks about the past, the world before the so called Second Bureaucracy, about the period of human history that he experienced in the second half of the twentieth century. The occasion for this story-telling is that a young man, André Gervais, had found a box full of documents, 'VOICES IN TIME', voices of people whose lives occurred in our present time and our recent past. Wellfleet is confused about these papers, their value and effect, like MacLennan could have been about the critical acceptance and further impact of all his writings. A proof for this uncertainty could be his personal reaction to the criticism he received after each piece of work that appeared. Both the writer's and the narrator's role is to give a sense, a meaning to these voices.

The narrator's perspective of time is subjective and it creates a sense of relativity of viewpoint. Through these lenses a chance is given to look over and understand our present from past and future distances. The topic, style and atmosphere of the book shows the writer's opinion at a final, mature stage of his career, where MacLennan owned a wider perspective

on life, history and human nature. The same approach appears in his essays that stand for similar political and philosophical ideas (e.g. *A Disquisition on Elmer*, *Scotchman's Return*, *Scotland's Fate: Canada's Lesson* or *Two Solitudes: Thirty-three Years Later*). MacLennan is considered to be an writer of realistic style whose main concern is the Canadian national identity and its existence. His conscious efforts to create something distinctively Canadian in his writings and to call the attention of Canadians to a national self-awareness as well as to call for other peoples' attention and interest lead to an often didactic tone which seemed to control his style. However, he alters his voice and subject matter as well. He shows the example of former times and draws the picture of a far too bad future as a warning for the present. This quest for being accepted as a cosmopolitan writer comes together with a peculiar sense of regionalism. He relates his topics to the spheres of individuals, couples, smaller communities; to nations; and finally draws the conclusion on a global level, (here: 'the World State') too, as a part of his morale, which is so much tied up with his purposes of artistic writing. I would like to focus on the complexity of his philosophical and artistic concept.

### History, Time, Narration and Style

In *Voices in Time* MacLennan created a narrative framework on the basis of a relative time-system to provide a ground for expressing his own concept of human history in a way that seems natural and sufficient for the purpose of being able to shift the personal patterns narrated by the characters. This happens in three basic time-periods: in 2039, after a social explosion; between the two world wars and especially during World War II.; and during the 1970s October Crisis in Montreal, the city which was close to terror and in a state of total social chaos at that time.

Time in the novel has a distinctively important role. Within the structure of the subjective time approaches the author's aim is to underline and express objectively the idea which is described in the life and figure of the characters, namely: people of our ages have lost their way in existence as opposed to the previous generations.

*He [Grandfather] had grown up in a time when most people in our part of the world knew exactly where they stood at any period of their existence. ... All this was gone now and Grandfather knew it. His sadness was not for himself but for his loved ones who would have to live in the chaos left by the war. (VT. 150)*

Although MacLennan's attitude towards time is close to the treatment of time in modern fiction he was not able to abandon the traditional narrative techniques fully. He broke with the linear chronology of story-telling for the sake of finding a new perspective, a new focus, but not one which is overwhelmingly subjective. The mixture of the subjectivized narration and the authorial intention of objectivity lead to two consequences on the readers' side: we can treat *Voices in Time* as successful experiment of MacLennan, where he achieved to present his highbrow morals in an understandable but modern form; and we can also treat the novel as a not really powerful one since it stopped halfway between realism and modernist tendencies.

As for the narrative method, it is more conventional than original for it seems to have common features with the style of Aldous Huxley, Robert Merle and George Orwell in many ways, especially in the descriptive parts of the future vision. While reading the other parts of the book which are set in Germany (Ch.8) we can also think of Jorge Semprun's *Grand Voyage*, or Anne Frank's *Diary*, too. However, MacLennan's intention was different from the pure description of a given period and its people. Moreover, he denied the connection with any futuristic science-fiction where the emphasis is on the detailed description of the New World, while here, in this novel the future is a predicted result of our present and past without any importance in itself. Future has simply a narrative role, an angle to look back from. The whole visionary image and the author's historic awareness come from his Maritime heritage, his deep concern for human survival, as Janice Kuly-Keefe pointed out (218); and his critical consciousness comes out of the age he lived in. History and moral philosophy are closely linked in MacLennan's mind, although he often oversimplifies and trivializes the basic notions in his philosophy. The question of the cyclical or spiral nature of

history is pessimistically treated on the surface. The constant reoccurrence of the dehumanizing elements, pain and suffering would mean that it is difficult to find a sense for human life or a chance to improve human nature. On the other hand MacLennan suggests in all his writings that there must be evolution of some kind in our life. As a writer he feels the responsibility of searching for the creative, beneficial forces in human nature and society. However, he is pessimistic towards most of the intellectuals of Third Reich Germany for being concerned more with self-expression than common interests. This is also true for the post-war historians and scientists in his novel: those who were more interested in what destroyed the civilizations than what created them. The always reoccurring patterns of the past, which create a permanent up-and-down movement of the historical cycle reinforces the imprinted memory-traces of the collective subconscious—as it is explained in his essays (e.g. "Roman History and To-Day"). Patterns of war, for example, strategies, tactics don't change, just weapons do (VT 277), such as in the case of Genghis Kahn and Hitler: the methods to keep the mobs oppressed are similar. 'Great Fears' are folk legends that exist as myths in the common knowledge as well as on the level of the individuals. The revolutions come up always against the dull correctness of a strict social order; the wars come after and with the uprootedness and collapse of these systems and are often followed by the explosion of intellectual energy. The sequence of the extremely authoritarian patrist periods (eg. Hitler's time, or the Bureaucracies), and the excessive libertarianism in the matrist eras (such as modern Quebec) create the course of human history.

Both authoritarian and libertarian forces can mean the previously mentioned notion of the misused human energy which is the 'evil' of history. MacLennan considers bureaucracies, governments and any kind of leadership to be only for controlling the masses, which leads to extremities. He studies the possible ways of revolt against any form of aggression like the one in his book; individuals who more and more grow accustomed to violence and try to escape (like Einstein did when he left Germany for America), they try to accept their determined common fate (like the Jews, eg. Hanna Earlich or the old Polish Jew, who commits suicide after shooting Conrad instead of Heinrich); but most people should pretend to be blind in

order to protect themselves (either like Conrad when joining the Gestapo to save Hanna, or like Dr. Erlich when he pretends to have a nervous breakdown). This ability to survive either physically or mentally is 'the dignity of history' as MacLennan calls it in the book, the only dignity which small everyday heroes can bear and no one else. As a group bearing this dignity he favours the example of the Jewish people who seem to fight against their thousand-year-old fate, who had the collective intellectual power to survive even the concentration camps, who have the sensitivity and common experience imprinted in their soul. Esther, a symbolic female character is the embodiment of this power in the novel. Another example of the ability to accommodate and survive as a group is the German nation. MacLennan is careful about the description of these people here. He rejects that all Germans are blind loyalists to the hostile paternal authority of their leaders, such as Siegfried and Eva Schmidt are; he rejects the 'original sin' of that nation. Searching for a psychological explanation for this mass-madness he creates characters like Conrad Dehmel's father, who serves his country and ship before his family... However, the most vivid and complex character is Conrad, where the personal drives and actions explain each other throughout his life.

The author's criticism is strong also when he examines the society at the end of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the twenty-first century; the world of political corruption, hypocrites, organized crime and the dangerous mass-power of the media particularly emphasized in Timothy Wellfleet's figure; the world, which goes out of control step-by-step, day-by-day in front of our eyes. Looking for the causes which lead up to the present (here: the writer's actual present time) situation MacLennan found the historical analogies to be eternal, everlasting and reoccurring. In his eyes society tends towards chaos. Similar feeling, fear and philosophy is in the focus of the American entropic fiction of the 1960—1970s, the fear of the rising chaos; the annihilation of human life and relations; the growing force of powers like the mass media that can keep individual dreams and desires under control, or the bureaucracy that kills all the possibilities of individual action. MacLennan does not really reach philosophical depths and theories as far as the explanation and presentation of the process of human affairs is

concerned. He concentrates on the emotional effects and transfers them into the lives and interactions of individual characters. The main concern in *Voices in Time* is the misuse of human energy, the tendency which culminates in the limitless rule of organizations and mass media—the owner of information which is another keyword in the entropic fiction. This can add a new feature to the traditional concepts about MacLennan’s writing although the freshness and force of the subject is a bit restrained by the author’s didactic style. In MacLennan’s novel the upper layer of the social order, the bureaucracy, and the intellectuals are morally responsible for the creation of violence, while the masses are victims, blind believers or servants, whose last means is violence, too. On their side the lost religious belief and the loss of the cultural values unites with the fear, the ‘distant fear’ (VT 144) coming from the bureaucracy, which leads to the state of social paranoia described by Dehmel in the following way:

*In the relatively rare periods in the part that we call civilized people understood that a civilization is like a garden cultivated in a jungle. ... In nature, if there are no gardeners, the weeds that need no cultivation take over the garden and destroy it... During my lifetime too many of the men who thought of themselves as civilization gardeners is nearly everything they did from the promotion of superhuman science to superhuman salesmanship, devoted the ambiguous genius of their programmed brains to the cultivation of the weeds. (VT 121)*

Psychologically the frustration leads intellectuals to the feeling that they can improve their self-importance by creating chaos, and by crime committed in the name of freedom (eg. Timothy Wellfleet’s work at the TV), while the same is the result of the vulgarity and aggressivity of power owned by the Red Tape, such as the case of kidnappers hired directly by the Establishment in the 1970 crisis, or the permanent lying of the politicians in the media.

MacLennan’s handling of time in this novel is two dimensional, it drives both back and forth in the course of time. Naturally he applies the

traditional narrative method with the chronological order; the linear time-aspect, especially when the subnarrators (John Wellfleet and Conrad Dehmel) talk about the events and their effects on others' lives and actions. However, there is another dimension of time which is vertical in the sense that it recalls the personal memories and deep reflections of the characters following their free association, a typical element of modern fiction, going back in their subconscious into their past. This step is rather forced, for instance John Wellfleet suffers from shock when André mentions keywords and figures of his by-gone happier life and Conrad Dehmel is also pushed to think about his life when Timothy attacks him with aggressive questions on TV. Perhaps the author projects his own feelings towards the question of searching for the past, going back on the memory traces, looking for the sense of this painful artistic process and finally finding it in his other important artistic concern i.e. the sequence of generations.

Consequently the stream of storytelling is complex. In the framework, the stories narrated by the characters sometimes overlap each other. These voices in time can reinforce or oppose the 'personal truths' of those partaking in the storytelling; the same event can appear different from a new aspect. The narrated parts not only talk about identical events and periods of time in the different characters' lives and human history, but also continue the story by adding a next step to the chain of events in the main line: the story of World War II is an example easy enough to understand because of its closeness to the reader in time. The retrospective shifts also help us understand the characters, especially Conrad Dehmel, whose character developed out of the shadow of John Wellfleet (since he was Wellfleet's step father) to an independent individual character who is driven, by his fate, his instincts and the surrounding world, and whose feelings and actions are convincingly explained in the book.

There is another element in MacLennan's narrative technique which is important in the retrospective narration, namely flashback panorama. Roger Hyman, one of MacLennan's critics, gives a strong criticism of his technique saying that



*The weakness of the technique here, as in the earlier novels, is that MacLennan never fully integrates the action of the present and the action of the past... Instead of one novel, we have seen large documents:... They are, literally, voices in time, but there are too many voices, too many times. (31)*

Unfortunately Hyman's opinion seems to be right. Either John Wellfleet's or André Gervais's narrative role should have been stronger to balance the authorial voice. However, the writer seems to be satisfied with the traditional literary idea of having an old experienced man, a representative of the old world asked by a young, agile but unexperienced man of the future in the course of a lesson on history. On the other hand, Wellfleet is the one who the whole story is organized around, who is a link between the generations, ages, and he is also a medium to transfer the experience accumulated in his mind and in the documents. He is not a 'playback machine' like the one which they could have seen in Timothy's TV show. He has human feelings, especially sadness and nostalgia coming up from his oppressed subconscious. The writer's technique is especially powerful when he describes the old man's dreamy memories because he recalls everything he had lost, and this image is often associated with music. Music is the form of intellectual value that survives even if a power tries to deny its presence because it can express the sense of loss and gives pleasure. In Dehmel's family there were the ones who were able 'to see the music'; in Timothy's life he associated love and sexual feelings with a symphony, and in the others' lives music appears quite often to be equally important.

Searching for the adequate form of his book MacLennan worked a lot on creating a chronology of the events and characters so as to be able to let these figures feel free with their associations and memories. There is an analogy which is presented in the story and in the narrative voice between the writer and the main character, John Wellfleet, too. Both want to arrange their life experience, to transfer it to the following generations, and to give a sense of the voices. Both take the role of the reserved old man, who had already given up the hope for a more mature, happier civilization, but after having the pleasure of meeting a young man who wished to learn, they

regain their intellectual power and want to find a new meaning and purpose of their lives.

One can take the aspect of generations, as a basic drive for MacLennan throughout his works as a common feature, a motif he always applies and goes back to. This notion is central in most of his novels as well as in this particular book, where the title *Voices in Time* can refer not only to the documents found by André, but also the different generations' voices in human history. The characters within this network take their more or less set roles. Such as for instance in *Barometer Rising* or in *Two Solitudes*, John Wellfleet is a narrator, preserver of the past, and moral guide of the present, André's generation, where latter's role is to bring John back to life again and to find the way out of the present blindness. Timothy stands for the so called 'instant generation', commercial society men, who can realize the failure in their lives only after a tragic event. This line leads up to Conrad Dehmel, a figure always in a Catch-22 situation. This ambiguous character is full of love and hate, death and life motifs. Out of his self-hatred and shame he comes to self-revelation; even his death is a trap for he was mixed up with another person.

Having a closer look at the strengths and the weaknesses of character-drawing in his book Hyman's opinion seems worth being considered stating that there are many stereotypes and even some caricature-like figures (Hyman 322). Oversimplification can also be a problem in our age. To put his major characters into the place of the 'innocent victim trapped in history' is not very satisfying from an artistic point of view since today nearly anyone can claim to be one like that. Moreover, there is the question of the 'enemy' as such, if there is one, who is not a victim at the same time. As an example we can take Dehmel. Is it really true that he is driven by pure fate? In general if it was so, the strong pessimistic feeling of being in a trap of circumstances and history would overtake the whole atmosphere of the book. As a consequence of the oversimplifications of the philosophic background, the style of the book seems to be occasionally naive, overpurified or at least ironic. Here we can think of sentences like "What do you call a spaceship?" (VT 14); which seems ridiculous when future characters ask it of past characters. We can

also think of the choice of characters like Canaris, Heinrich, Einstein or Goebbels, obvious figures since they transfer the message for us too directly in their personality. They stand for themselves, for only one basic idea, as well as the other group of characters, namely women (eg. Esther Stahr, Hanna Erlich or Eva Schmidt) who stand for the traditional virtues and vices, the Jewish sensibility, tolerance, etc., or the aggressive woman figure, who blindly follows the Nazist ideas. None of these female characters are powerful enough since they are not so much individuals as representatives of a group of people.

MacLennan's style can also be described as one of symbolic nature. Let me just mention an example, the Icaros-motifs for instance, when he writes about the girls and boys who sailed into the sun and burned to death (VT 15). Here the image may stand for the lost generation, who were outsiders of the bureaucracy, who searched for their ego and place in the world, and ended up in an 'intellectual nowhere'. We could also mention the birds in the Old City (VT 20) as the topos for freedom or another interesting image, when he speaks about Ulm as the heart blasted city (VT 278). Perhaps one can make a parallel between the Dutch city of Rotterdam and MacLennan's Ulm. In the heart of Rotterdam, which was destroyed during World War II, there stands a statue with its heart torn out. Although the writer denied the connection with any futuristic writings when talking about his style, some interesting similarities with Orwell's style seem worth mentioning. First of all, the narrative aspect and the basic standpoint of the protagonist, John Wellfleet, is similar to the one's in Orwell's *1984*. Both see and show the events with the eyes of a survivor after a tragic turningpoint of the civilization. In both cases, another person, an outsider, comes (in Orwell's novel the girl, and here André). They open up the closed personality of the main figure (as MacLennan writes: "It almost makes me feel human again." (VT 15). Their common problem was that they did not fit into the system, and as renegated people they took up the fight against the inhuman forces. As far as narration in the two books is concerned, the time aspects are widened and this broad overview gives a new perspective to explore the present. Moreover, the naturalism of the images about the

future are similar and serve the purpose of being an opposition to all the true, humanistic values in our lives.

One can find the strength of the novel rather in MacLennan's method of pointing out the general human ingenuity, and man's dual nature. I consider Conrad and Timothy to be the most powerful characters, since they are described from many angles in a realistic way through their personal reflections. For example, Conrad Dehmel is not the hero perhaps one could expect to act like a hero. After physical tortures he finally gives up his beloved and her father, which is a rather unheroic action at that moment. Also, Conrad's relationship with Hanna is vivid, touching, as far as emotions are concerned. Here sexuality seems to have a different role and description than in any other novels by the same author. He writes about this love affair in a very honest, passionate way. As for his voice in general, MacLennan is rather resigned, desperate, and often tragic or sarcastic probably due to his philosophical views, too.

In this paper my point was to show the innovation in MacLennan's book, namely that he tried to merge a traditional and a new method of storytelling within the framework of a book which is about the general problems of human history. He does this by talking about wars, especially *within* people, and about the writer's belief in the new generations, the ability of the old one to be reborn, and bring new enthusiasm for the new generations. I feel that the achievement lies in MacLennan's thematical innovation in contrast with his previous novels rather than in the form of narration. His style is emotionally touching and suggestive though in the artistic sense it is not so powerful as for example it was in *Barometer Rising* or *The Watch that Ends the Night*. Nevertheless, the last novel of Hugh MacLennan could deserve more attention among readers and critics of one of Canada's most popular and well-known writers.

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