LUDWIG'S "CONFUSIONS"

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An author's theme is both defined and limited by the viewpoint through which it is expressed. Jack Ludwig in *Confusions* presents us with a view of twentieth-century North American society as seen through the eyes of Joseph Gillis/Joe Galsky, his protagonist-narrator. Underneath the thin veneer of a morality based on our Judaic-Christian heritage to which we pay only lip-service, we find sham, hyprocrisy, weakness, viciousness and stupidity. Naked and exposed, twentieth-century North American society is thus examined and found wanting. But Ludwig, like other satirists before him, cannot ridicule and expose the evils of an age without revealing the didactic purpose of his message. Let us reform, he says; change is possible. How? We are not told and, in any case, that could be another novel. In the meantime, what we are left with is *Confusions*, a novel in which the protagonist-narrator delivers a satirical exposé of society as seen by him but which, he concludes at the end of the novel, is open to the possibility of change.

As a positive sentiment this conclusion is admirable. As an ending to a novel which has poked a satirical and destructive finger into every corner of our twentieth century value system such a conclusion is a positive necessity. Over and above these positive, admirable and necessary qualities, however, such an ending is not valid, I would suggest, in terms of Ludwig's novel as a whole. For the major part of the book we have been shown the world through the jaundiced eye of Gillis/Galsky. A change of persona, however, invalidates the viewpoint through which he has originally presented the world to us. Gillis/Galsky has looked about him one fine day and, lo and behold, things are not really as black as he thought they were. But where has the change occurred? Obviously in him. Now he gives us a glimpse of a different world, a world that contains a

society for whom salvation is possible. The reader, therefore, is left with two pictures of twentieth-century North American society, one black and one hopeful. Gillis/Galsky presented to us first a jungle view of life that was nasty and brutish; then he changes and life becomes full of golden possibilities. But the confusions which, for Gillis/Galsky all through the novel, were so portentous are now left with the reader. What is more, the reader has the feeling that some sleight of hand has been practised. The protagonist-narrator has shifted his position but has steered us towards the belief that, basically, he is still where he was except that now his eyes are more widely opened. It is at this point, however, that we become conscious of the author's presence. *He* has known all along that human weakness and hypocrisy were not here to stay. *He* has known all along that a narrow, limited, self-centred view of society does not tell the whole story. Suddenly Ludwig's persona becomes more than the vehicle for his story; he becomes Ludwig himself, and it is this inconsistency in the novel that I would suggest mars what is, undoubtedly, a necessary conclusion in other respects.

The limitations imposed on an author using persona are great. The protagonist-narrator presents only his own thoughts, feelings and perceptions of the world around him. Thus, he becomes the fixed centre around which everything else revolves, and through which everything else is sieved. The reader receives no picture of the world other than that which touches the protagonist-narrator. Restrictions of this sort are often worth the sacrifice of a more omniscient viewpoint if the author wishes to gain a particular kind of authenticity both for his theme and his point of view. Each, in reinforcing the other, is constant to the same principle. Thus Gillis/Galsky, confused and narrow and limited in his viewpoint as each of us necessarily is, gives us his self-centred view of the society into which he has been born. Because of this subjective approach his involvement in that society is established whilst through allusion, pun, irony and satire he convinces us of his objectivity. Society out there is the thing he examines, and he views it this way:

> My course was Nineteenth-Century Literature, on stage, Cardinal Newman: I, Roxbury Jewish boy, scrupulously differentiated consubstantiation and transubstantiation for these nominal Christians who wouldn't have set foot in church except that chapel at Royce was compulsory, a policy of Royce's logical positivistic dean, who wanted the kids back early from San Francisco on Sundays.
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> For two hours my ebullience battled the students' wariness. *Caritas, caritas,* I calmed my aspiring heart: nine-tenths of these kids don't want to be in college in the first place. They're only fulfilling social necessity which says "College(s) at-

tended" is an essential category in newspaper Engagement and Wedding An-
nouncements. If there had been a shorter path to the Alumni Club, these students
would, of course, have eliminated college altogether. Their parents' conversation
needed the "my son (or daughter) in college" gambit, but other topics for bragging
and bitching might conceivably be found.

One of the interesting aspects about the passage just quoted is that it points
up a clever device by means of which Ludwig has expanded the limitations of
persona. He has made the "I" of his story a "Roxbury Jewish boy", from which
viewpoint he may comment on those Judaic elements which go to make up a part
of North American society. But this is only a part — there is another side. The
persona is a split persona, and almost in the same breath as Joseph Gillis an-
nounces his Jewish origins he tells us that he changed his family name "to prevent
the sacrilege of 'Galsky' appearing on a Harvard degree *in Latin*." As a physical
type, he is unlike his Semitic mother or swarthy, squat father who burns with
"Hasidic joy and fervour". He, Gillis, is "tall, slim, gray-eyed, a typical washed-
out paleface. . . ." So much, therefore, for a persona who serves the double func-
tion of presenting an outlook and a yardstick for our Judaic-Christian culture in
either its combined or separate state. For good measure, and as a counterbalance
to his Galsky side, Gillis gains a Puritan wife. Nevertheless, as a persona figure
Gillis/Galsky remains fixed at centre and, as a consequence, the narrow and
personal angle of vision through which the work is presented remains unaltered.

WITH THIS IN MIND let us examine the plot in *Confusions*.
Writing from a specific point in time, there are two aspects of time which the
protagonist-narrator can deal with: the present . . . and the past. When he deals
with the past, however, he is restricted, again on two counts. To begin with, what
he reveals of the past will, obviously, be limited by its relevancy to the present
situation in the novel. Furthermore, no story which uses persona can begin before
the character reaches what we would consider a reasonable age for conscious
awareness with respect to experience to be retained and recorded. Events which
happened before such an age is reached can only be reported as having happened
by virtue of another party's verification. Birth is an obvious example. Childhood,
however, may be experienced and the experience retained by the narrator —
ready to be written down later as part of his past. Any experience, therefore, of
persona's past must be handled by the author in terms of flashback when he has

chosen as his theme the confusion of the present and he wishes to present this confusion as seen through the viewpoint of a man who lives and works in its midst.

Gillis/Galsky, then, begins his story *in medias res*, since the device of persona demands it. Dramatically speaking, flashback creates a tension in the novel between past and present which can be turned to good account. As I have pointed out, in terms of technique — that is, using the particular protagonist-narrator he did use in *Confusions* — Ludwig had no other choice than to offer the past in flashback. What he wanted to say, therefore, in terms of his theme was limited by the point of view in his novel. He wished to show a breakdown in our culture of those positive values which were once embodied in our Western heritage — values to which we give only a passing thought in the present since more of our lives are spent in jungle tactics and, thus, we expend our energies wastefully. Ludwig, then, has turned a technical necessity to good dramatic effect. By means of flashback he is able to advance the background of his hero to show his boyhood, his adolescence, his young manhood, so that it is interspersed with narrative of the present. In this way, the past becomes a valid comparison with the present. Two scenes illustrate this. Writing as an adult, Gillis/Galsky relates an anecdote concerning a sexual adventure at the age of thirteen with his aunt's maid. His mother, unswerving in her loyalty and totally supportive of her son, denies his guilt in this incident to her sister, Gillis' aunt Bess. Recalling the event in flashback, Gillis/Galsky writes:

> Vindicated by a mother's faith, I ran outside to join the other children play kick-the-can.

The story then continues in the present again and, as the plot unfolds, the high value placed on family faith and loyalty, established and recalled from the past, is contrasted with the values of contemporary society. A second scene illustrates this. The immensely wealthy father of a mentally ill student has left the campus without desiring to see his son, whose enforced withdrawal from university has necessitated the father's visit in the first place. Not believing that any father could be so callous, Gillis/Galsky, the boy's tutor, tells us that he watches the Petersons' limousine pull away and slowly realizes that the father is indeed leaving without seeing his son. We then get an image of "a toppling of walls, a staving-in of abutments", and a comparison is made between the present and the past — a past in which values of love and loyalty have been carefully established — and Gillis/Galsky writes: "Maybe the root of my simple-mindedness

lay here: my father Simon was incapable of abandoning me, no matter what — crime, crack-up, illness." Past and present, therefore, juxtaposed for comparison and interspersed in narrative for reasons of technical necessity, are used effectively as polarities to maintain dramatic tension.

Having left the question of consistency in Ludwig's novel hanging, as it were, I should like to pick it up again at this pont. As I have said, persona presents us with his view of the world and, as a product of the Judaic-Christian world, he both embodies the culture of his society and is the yardstick of it. What he is, so is his society — cynical of its values, wasteful of its energies, and myopic in terms of its future. In terms of the future what function can persona perform other than to present this condition of myopia? Obviously none. A Victorian novel, guided by the hand of an omniscient author, used to end with a chapter summing up the subsequent careers, marriages, deaths, of its main characters. By its very nature persona is prevented from taking even a peep at the future and Ludwig's persona commits no fault in this respect. Gillis/Galsky, however, as I have suggested above, does surrender to his author as he attempts to reveal to us that change is possible; that, in fact, there is no end to the possibilities that are open to all of us in this world, even to those despairing graduate students in English literature who imagine that the last word has already been written about everything that has ever been published. Gillis/Galsky tells us that the world is not as black as he had pictured it for us. However, previous to this in the novel what has happened is that the author had relied on Gillis/Galsky's view of the world to carry his theme.

Standing confused in the midst of twentieth-century moral confusion, Gillis/Galsky became the vehicle which carried Ludwig's novel. Diagrammatically, we can picture him as the fixed centre of a circle. Suddenly, however, Ludwig requires two focal points. He wants another persona who is no longer confused — he wants a persona whose view is clarified, who may still see the world as confused but he, persona, *is no longer confused.* What Ludwig wants, at this point, is not a circle with one fixed point but an ellipse with two foci. The problem here, of course, is how to arrange for an ellipse with two foci. Ludwig's way out, in view of the way his novel has been structured, was difficult. He solved his problem by dropping the second focal point into the circle whose one fixed point was already occupied by his protagonist-narrator, Gillis/Galsky. Technically speaking, Gillis/Galsky had no right to change. His change is a miracle, a deus ex machina, brought about by a hand external to the situation.