

ANATOMY OF CONFUSION

Jack Ludwig's Evolution

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TO SAY THAT OUR AGE is confused is a truism. Authors have been saying it with depressing frequency since the 1920's. Generally speaking, the consensus of opinion seems to be that civilization is damned and that our guilt-ridden despair will drive us to inevitable destruction — and the sooner the better. Jack Ludwig denies this negative approach and sounds the cry of positivism both in his short stories and in his first novel *Confusions*. He is an unashamedly didactic writer and his problem centres on evolving a vehicle to express his point of view. While most of his work deals with a specific segment of society, the American-Jewish community, his view has been gradually enlarging in scope until in *Confusions* he includes all of North American society. This expansion of view is bound up with the evolution of his style, which is best seen by relating his short stories to his novel.

The evolution of Ludwig's style is closely linked with the development of his leading themes. He asserts that the prime symptom of this century's malaise is confusion. The source of this confusion constitutes the two major themes running through the stories and the novel. The first is the double condition of man, who wishes and pretends to live by a moral code while in reality behaving according to the law of the jungle. This condition leads to the second theme, which is the universal tendency to confusion as to the nature of reality. The North American manifestation of this type of confusion is the pursuit of "success", which is regarded as synonymous with material wealth. Once material success is achieved, the confusion becomes more acute than ever, for then one is brought face to face with the problem of what purpose such materialism serves.

Often it ends only in waste, as is shown in Ludwig's story, "A Woman of Her Age", whose central character, Doba Goffman, is a crusty 75-year-old ex-radical

turned Orthodox Jew. Using the setting of the Montreal Jewish community, Ludwig juxtaposes the immigrant district of St. Lawrence Main and its inhabitants, who cling to the old traditions and customs, with Westmount, the district of successful second-generation tycoons who lack tradition and reject old customs. It is evident that something of basic importance has been lost in the long climb up the mountain. Doba Goffman, set in matriarchal splendour atop Westmount by her devoted sons, is in reality a captive shut away from the teeming life of St. Lawrence. Each week she makes a trip back to the markets of this area, searching for what she has lost. As we follow her movements through the day, we realize that she is haunted by the sense of a continuity in which she has no part, and which is expressed in her frustrated hope for grandchildren. One of her sons is sterile, the other dies childless. It is on Jimmy, the dead son, that Doba's tragedy centres. He was a clever lawyer, personable and virile, but he lived according to the creed of waste, and his mother characterizes his life in these words:

America's imbecility, galloping after success while life runs off right under his feet.

Doba sums up her view of what material success without purpose means by reflecting, "how easy it was in America to buy everything you didn't want". What does she want? She wants to continue the line, to have grandchildren and perhaps even great-grandchildren to mourn her when she dies; she wants to feel part of life, to feel that she has contributed something to humanity. In short, she wants to justify her existence. Yet she shows a touch of heroism, for, fully conscious of the waste of her life, she still exhibits a kind of jaunty tenacity and humour.

As Josef turned into the driveway Mrs. Goffman touched her sulking nose with a powder puff, dried her eyes, made her old face smile. When there was hope it was o.k. to despair, but now hope was gone, what was the point of it? She winked at herself.

The structure of "A Woman of her Age" — with the narrative divided into eleven short and largely self-contained parts — tends to limit the author's mobility. At the same time, the story illustrates his moral values and also exemplifies one of his recurrent devices, the domination of the action by an anti-heroic figure. Paradoxically, in Ludwig's hands such figures in the end reveal a human dignity of heroic proportions. They take positive attitudes, as in Doba Goffman's resolution to live — even beyond despair — her wasted life to its full realization. This kind of positivism is "living" in the full sense, as opposed to "existing". It derives from the attitude of the protagonist to the situation in which he finds himself.

The exploration of such an attitude sends Ludwig in search of a new style and form for his work, and the search takes him back in time. Thus, in another story, "Requiem for Bibul", we observe the emergence of a picaresque hero and of a structure echoing the chivalric conceptions of the middle ages.

"Requiem for Bibul" is a nostalgic short story set in Winnipeg before the Second World War. Bibul, the picaresque central character, is a high-school student who tries to earn money for rabbinical training by selling second-class fruit and vegetables after school hours to the rapacious housewives of the slum district known in Winnipeg as "The Island". Here we encounter again the themes of man's duality and of his confusion as to the nature of reality. Bibul is sincerely religious, yet he is not above disguising his over-ripe and bruised produce in order to make a sale. He will serve Mammon for a time in order to devote his life to Jehovah. His forays into the "Island" to do business with the life-scarred matrons of the slums are described in the terms of mediaeval warfare.

Bibul was a lone guard defending his fortress from desperate pillagers; ubiquitous as Churchill, many-handed as Shiva, he had to be compassionate at Schweitzer.

The battle takes place on two levels. Foremost is the physical level, with Bibul trying to defend his imperilled produce which the housewives try to pocket or to pinch and bruise in the hope of making meagre budgets go farther. But counterpointing this is a spiritual battle in which the housewives pour out their hearts to Bibul, unfolding every type of human failing, eliciting Bibul's compassionate tears while at the same time he "would free an apricot from a fist already stained with cherry." The housewives

prayed God to give Bibul good enough ears to hear out their incriminating bill of particulars against the human race, bad eyes to miss seeing what their energetic hands were doing; and they cursed fate when Bibul's unaffected eyes snapped them from filching.

The theme of the confusion of reality is exemplified in this story by the contrast between Bibul and his fellow students. Bibul is linked with a group known as "the kings" of the school because of their academic prowess. This group, with typical adolescent fervour, feel they can save the world by dealing with abstractions. The opposition between Bibul and "the kings" pivots on the nature of reality. "The kings" see reality as centred in the world of abstraction.

... we sharks, all hot for culture, oozing ideology, long on judgments, short on facts, turned our abstract faces toward Bibul.

Bibul sees reality firmly rooted in "The Island" and the ancient laws of an ancient creed. The difference between them is stated succinctly; "the sharks vaguely yearned for a Higher Life; Bibul alone had a concrete goal." There is an affinity between Doba and the high school "kings", for they both yearn for abstract "success". Doba learns too late what success means. Bibul is never in doubt of it. "Peddling had forced him to see, hear and judge." He represents a middle way between the concrete world of suffering common humanity and the world of intellect and abstraction. He accepts life as he finds it, neither condemning nor praising.

From "Requiem for Bibul" two elements emerge which will be taken up and expanded in *Confusions*. The first is the structural pattern which binds the story together. This echoes the mediaeval chivalric code. The street urchins are described as "knights" carrying on "jousts" with pilfered garbage can lids as "targes". Bibul's goal can be likened to the prize of the tournament.

Every knightly thrust — parry with an unqueenly schnorrer, every cull of orange he sold, every bruised apple brought him that much closer to Yeshiva.

To reinforce the mediaeval parallel, Bibul, his horse and wagon, are described in Quixotic terms. Bibul, of course, is analogous to Quixote, and in the same way as the Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance he represents a vanishing breed.

The mediaeval structure is supported by a deliberately heightened diction. "I write this requiem for Bibul, for his face, for his Cause, his tic, his wave, his 'Aaaa'." "In love and the joy of remembering, I sing you this Bibul and all that's past and passing but not to come." In the same way as the structure is nostalgically mediaeval, so the diction at times assumes a lyrical quality. There is of course an implied humour in the ludicrous contrast between the mediaeval and lyrical elements in the story and the substance of the plot, which is immigrant and Jewish. It is here that the story's weakness lies, for the contrast seems contrived rather than organic, and the analogy is not wholly convincing.

IF "A WOMAN OF HER AGE" introduces the two major themes of Ludwig's work, and "Requiem for Bibul" heralds the emergence of a new structure, it still remains to discuss the third important quality of his work which reappears in *Confusions*; that is the element of mythic dimension. "Orlick Miller and Company" illustrates this quality very well. The setting is vague, but it is

clearly both lower class and Jewish. Ludwig once more tackles a world which claims to live by one creed, but which acts according to another; this time, however, the implications are on a cosmic scale. "The world talks about soul, spirit, but what *means* truth in the world is body and face." Orlick deals in "remnants". His "remnants" are human beings, ungainly women who have been by-passed in the matrimonial scramble. Orlick Miller is a match-maker; his business is creation, and his partner in creation is, of course, God. Ludwig suggests that creation is an evolutionary process which is unending and vital, but that the divine plan needs human assistance. "His Creation isn't finished. It's a foundation; it's four walls, all bare. Finishing is for Orlick Miller." Because man and his world are essentially dualistic, the process of creation requires adjustments and "patching up". Just as Bibul disguised his second-class fruit, Orlick Miller must sometimes resort to lies to patch up his raw material. "But Orlick Miller's lies are full of the highest truth — who sees that?" The highest truth is, as in "A Woman of Her Age", the continuance of the human race as the *raison d'être* of existence.

In this story the plot is less important than the character. Orlick mysteriously appears out of the night to suggest a marriage to Solomon, who has been deserted and divorced by his beautiful wife. Orlick describes himself as "a guardian angel — working at night." The sad truth, he informs us, is that marriages are not made in heaven "except for those who are born rich, tall and beautiful. Orlick Miller & Company looks after the remnant." There is no real climax or solution to the plot; Orlick consumes quantities of Scotch, philosophizes about life and disappears into the night with the promise that he will return with a match for Solomon. The important factor is the character sketch of Orlick. While he is conscious of his divine mission as an agent of God, he is not above maudlin self-pity, telling half-truths, and a little cheating on the side. He is given a mythic quality by his appearance—

Tiny in stature — wall-eyed. Water stained brown derby, wing tip collar, heavy satin paisley tie with a diamond stick pin, suit (inherited from a dead cousin) too large and bulging at every pocket with address books, greying envelopes. . . . Rich brown goatee. . . .

— but even more by the manner in which he lives. "No one has ever seen him eat. He is rumoured to exist on tea and Scotch. Tea by day — Scotch by night." The author does not, however, fully draw out the story's mythical implications. Orlick has feet of clay. He is neither fully whimsical or fully farcical, but a strange hybrid somewhere in between. It remains for *Confusions* to provide a genre where the mythic qualities come to fruition.

In the three stories under discussion we have seen Ludwig experimenting with various attitudes; the tragi-comic based on emphatic characterization, the framework of a past age through which one can say something pointed about our own, and the mythic approach. These directions lead Ludwig quite naturally to a re-appraisal of an old genre, the mock epic. One element of the mock epic which must undoubtedly have appealed to Ludwig is its particular emphasis on the central character. As we have noted, strong characterization has dominated Ludwig's work, and all the characters have one quality in common; they perform the function of a middle man. For example, Doba, the living projection of the malaise of a materialistic society, is half way between the poor immigrant and the second generation tycoon, and in this way she tragically illustrates the cost of success. Bibul stands between the abstract-minded intellectuals of the high school and the realistic world of the slums. Orlick is a middle man in creation. He takes the human remnants and patches them together so that they become part of society. In *Confusions* the protagonist follows the pattern of middle man, but his function is expanded to that of an epic hero, whose fate mirrors to some extent the fate of a nation or race. In the mock epic, however, the protagonist tends to be anti-heroic, and the projection of the anti-hero on the implied image of the epic hero gives the work its satiric flavour. Joseph Gillis/Joe Galsky is not only a middle man but also a kind of Everyman as well. A lecturer at Harvard, he is the epitome of the human race in its academic guise. He states specifically, "My confusions are the culture's schizophrenia." The confusion in Gillis's case is the antithesis of two cultures. They are the Jewish-American culture which stands for individualism, emotion and joy, and the Ivy-League culture which represents an abstraction of individualism in the interests of general conformity to the hierarchical structure of society. In this coupling of the Jewish-American and Anglo-Saxon-Puritan cultures, *Confusions* differs from Ludwig's other works and demonstrates the expansion of his viewpoint to include all society.

A further element of the mock epic which appears in *Confusions* is contained in the ludicrous contrast between the novel's trivial situation as a university lecturer pursues his adventures in the wonderland of Academia, and the grand frame of North American society in the twentieth century. This contrast is particularly suitable to Ludwig's style because it allows him to be didactic, while at the same time giving free rein to a satiric bent which he has not fully unleashed in his short stories. The expansion of viewpoint, mirrored through Gillis-Galsky in the guise of epic hero ready to save mankind, tends to involve the reader and thus bring him face to face with the recurrent twentieth-century problem which we have

seen exemplified in Ludwig's short stories and which in the novel is succinctly described as the credo of "Second Things First". These are such things as "status-establishing, career-making and image projecting." This is the credo that led Doba to her plight; the credo that made the world of abstraction in which the high school "kings" existed at a mediaeval distance from the cold real world of the slums; it is living by the credo of Second Things First that creates confusion and results in the inability to separate the real from the unreal.

The plot of *Confusions* modernizes the Faust myth. Joseph Gillis/Joe Galsky is being tested. At Harvard he meets the Devil, who makes him a proposal. Gillis is to write a satirical exposé of human weakness and viciousness, and in return the Devil will assure him "endless weeks and months on the Best Seller lists." Opposed to the force of evil is the force of good in the person of an old Hasid. The Faustian theme of good versus evil is played out against the background of a California campus, for in true epic tradition, in order to be tested Gillis/Galsky must leave the Parnassian heights of Harvard. In California he meets the dragons of the faculty who incorporate all the twentieth-century failings, and he is drawn into a game of one-up-manship. The ensuing struggle comes to a climax through a student's illness; faced with real tragedy, Gillis-Galsky realizes that man's problems with confusion amount to mere play-acting. This revelation, in turn, leads to another when he realizes that the Devil is really himself at his worst, and that, further, he is "this age's worst self. Paranoid, full of Either/Or." That is, he discovers that the worst part of man is nihilistic, wanting to reduce the world to utter chaos — its state before Creation. The Hasid, on the other hand, symbolizes all that is best on man, focussing on his creativity, through which he is able to impose order on the chaos around him. The hero is thus "saved" by the realization that man's capability for good or evil lies within himself.

WHEN WE RECOLLECT some of the standard characteristics of a mock epic, we realize how suitable they are to Ludwig's style of writing. The mock epic must begin *in medias res*. This beginning in the middle of the action allows Ludwig the mobility for his free-wheeling rhetoric which the short stories tended to cramp; the epic hero suits Ludwig's bent for strong characterization; the epic journey, battle and trip to the underworld present a ready-made framework within which he can use his talent for allusion, pun and satire; and the intercession of supernatural machinery allows him to introduce the mythic dimen-

sion which gives the work universality. The most interesting facet to emerge from this new version of an old genre, however, is the style. The diction mirrors the duality of theme, high and lyric for the abstract vision of our existence, and low and colloquial for the cold reality of everyday life. Ludwig uses a combination of traditional epic diction ("O, ye Brooklyn muses, who inspired the higher theme, abandon me not in Royce unreality! Hail, Urania, and thy daughter, California, sustain this my sad return to second things first!") and colloquial language which often descends to vulgar expletives. This is the culmination of the style which appeared in embryonic form in "Requiem for Bibul". The language now, however, is crisper, surer and often brilliant in the use of allusion and pun; it tends to delight, to titillate and to shock.

Ludwig's highly developed sense of the ludicrous comes into its own in *Confusions*, where it serves a didactic purpose. There is, for example, Tim Jolliffe, a Greek scholar, who is brilliant, handsome and elegant; yet worries about atomic fall-out and insecticides in consumer goods, and propagates the thesis that this is the "worst of all possible worlds". The hero himself has grand pretensions, he wants to be "the prophet of the computer age", the saviour of mankind, but all he can tell us is that our confusions have nothing to do with reality. We should change what we can change and not worry about those things over which we have no control. We should get on with the business of living.

One thing that is clear from *Confusions* is that satire is Ludwig's particular forte. The light humour, with mere overtones of satire, of the short stories now emerges as hard-hitting crisp satire, and it is almost classic in form. Ludwig wants to change us, and he leaves us with hope.

Desire nothing in this world but time to do your work, love, kisses, serious talk, laughter, great works of art, and a white Jaguar so you can get these things more quickly.

Ludwig's novel is the culmination of an experimental technique which looks back in time and which leads him to attempt the re-establishment of a traditional genre, the mock epic. But, however freely one may borrow the characteristic devices of the mock epic, such as the journey, exile and battle, the success or failure of the form depends on the narrative style. We have seen in the short stories foreshadowings of a lyrical expression which in *Confusions* breaks forth in profusion. The language tends to sweep the reader along on a wave of rhetorical bombast reminiscent of Ben Jonson. Jonson, however, could achieve a great variety of effect in the medium of verse, while Ludwig is shackled to the more

pedestrian pace of prose. His problem is how to sustain a heightened prose style without becoming tiresome, how to achieve variety without bathos. But, though he uses all the tricks of the writer's craft — allusion, pun, simile, hyperbole — he does not always succeed in sustaining the necessary tension. It is possible that the novel is too unwieldy a vehicle for mock epic; on the other hand, the short story is not substantial enough. Jack Ludwig, it would seem, is still reaching for an effective and distinctive style.

