

## ANTHONY BLOOMFIELD'S *LIFE FOR A LIFE*

Luisa Fernanda Rodríguez.  
Universidad de Valladolid

Anthony Bloomfield's work remains unrevealed for a majority of readers. It is not that he has been underrated: Anthony Burgess, Elizabeth Berridge and Kenneth Young have valued his books, their reviews occupying the pages of important periodicals. The truth is that the critical neglect of his work is really extraordinary. His case is another example of a contemporary English novelist, which has not received a very enthusiastic press. I came across his *Life for a Life* (1) in 1973 and since then have read it several times. It is easily read, his subtle humour being one of the attractions of the book. What the reader finds surprising, though, is that «easy» in this novel is not synonymous to simple. One of the author's achievements is precisely that the book offers, underneath an apparent smoothness, complex and obscure levels. It is not that they are independent from the surface levels, they form, on the contrary, a network of interrelations clearly and cleverly solved.

The story is simple enough: Laurence Carpenter, walking by the river at night, saves a man from drowning. The man, a gangster whose name is Ossie, offers to solve Laurence's problems by killing anyone he, Laurence, chooses. He offers *a life for his life*. Laurence, in his late thirties, seems to have a prosperous future at the firm with which he works, if the «opus» that would lead to his promotion, and would leave a few thousand workers unemployed, is finished. He is married to Sarah, elegant and «civilized», and has an affair with a girl, half his age, Jackie, who wants to be an actress, but at the moment is only a starlet. This affair is the cause of innumerable problems in his marriage and job to the point where he considers breaking up the first and spoiling everything to the second. He is, in short, obsessed with the girl.

Few characters feature in the story: Apart from the ones mentioned, one also meets Adrian, a youngster living in the same apartment-house as Jackie, and a friend of hers; Jimmy, an actor who eventually takes Laurence's place in Jackie's life and bed; Harvey, Laurence's assistant in the office, who is seeking promotion; Lydia, the faithful secretary, and Blanco, a mysterious negro who helps Ossie in his macabre job and who appears as a blurred thought in algid moments in the novel. There is also a neighbour who plays a drum, often when Laurence is more worried, and who, being a musician, is protected by the law; Chrissie, Ossie's girl friend, who owns a fruit shop, and Mr M B, the principal in his firm. Jackie,

Harvey, Sarah, and the drum-player all disappear at the end, Ossie having killed them, one imagines. In his turn, Laurence, horrified by his nighmarish experience kills Ossie.

The book contains a story, but although one can read the story as such, the book deals in actual fact with an obsession. It could be a psychoanalytical novel but it is not. The obsession, as a distorted projection of a narcissist mind, is taken here as a starting point to place the book into the realm of dreams (2). And being Jackie the centre of Laurence occupations and preoccupation it seems reasonable to introduce her to the reader: very young no more than twenty, the man-devourer type. She guides all her capability of manoeuvring towards her main aim in life, to become an actress. In the meantime Laurence seems to be her main provider as can be easily inferred from this paragraph in which Laurence tells:

I am thirty nine years old, that is to say, nineteen years older than my spicy, firm-fleshed mistress. Many men might envy me. As the taxi which would take her from my side pulled in, panic, humiliation and devastating sense of loss reduced me to abjection. I pressed a quick peck on her cheek, a banknote in her hand... (3).

Laurence, the protagonist, is at the same time the hero and the narrator who takes the reader into the irrationalities of an obsessed mind. The novel is divided into three parts. This division has its importance. The first part, named «Opening», consists of only 15 pages and is exclusively concerned with the rescue of Ossie from the river by Laurence; the second part, called «A Change of Person», bears the bulk of the story, while the third part, «Closing», contains the climax and is again fairly short, merely 17 pages.

It is difficult to know whether or not everything is the product of a dream. *He is only a sort of thing in his dream* is repeated several times in the book, as we see in this phrase: «I have the impotent, unsubstantial sensation I had experienced... that I had become merely a figment in another's dream world» (4). This notion is taken from Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*. In «Tweedledum and Tweedledee» Alice is told that king Red is dreaming of her; once he had stopped dreaming of her she would disappear as «You are only a sort of thing in his dream» (5). The story about Ossie is told in such a way that it seems fictitious to both the audience and to Laurence; it is in the «Opening» that it is felt as an uncertain fact, «the night's event had by now began to develop the peculiar ambiguity of one of those dreams in which the dreamer flits inconsequentially between the roles of participant and observer» (6). Its ambiguity remains whenever it is mentioned, «strangely enough the previous night's adventure had passed from my mind as though spunged by my recounting it to Jackie» (7). The very Ossie's voice seems to come from an impossible place, «from far away, demoniacally, from out of the pipes and steam» (8). There is a constant uncertainty about Laurence's real self, «I began to feel myself like an actor, or several actors and actresses in one, with a consequent dislocation of the personality, which left me strangely indeterminate» (9); at the beginning, Ossie takes Laurence to his place where he hands him dry clothes. At the end, Ossie comes to Laurence's place and asks him for clothe to change into, as him had «a Cluster of small dark spots on the bright blue cloth», obviously, the remainings of his job.

It is easy to see the relationship between darkness and death, dream and sub-conscious. Violence increases in the central chapters, while Laurence, like a degraded mythical hero, goes from pub to pub in search of Jackie, «I tried a number —naturally taking a quick one each time— without success» (10); the night underworld is metaphorically described in the lines:

There was a sound of breaking glass, and from a greasy alley ran two dark shadows, almost under the wheels of a car. A hundred yards further on, outside the public house, one man was holding another by his lapels and shaking him backwards and forwards. Before we spoke again I had seen a young girl vomiting in the gutter and sprawled by the dustbins in a brilliant shop doorway the body of an old man with what looked like, but of course it couldn't have been, the half of a knife protruding from the rags which swaddled his chest (11).

In the summit of revulsion and relaxation «for only violence purifies» Laurence kills someone. Killing is not described; one *feels* violence, which is everywhere.

Erich Fromm gives an explanation of this taste for violence, which is a reaction whose roots are in fear. Violence either conscious or unconscious is the result of frustration. He has noticed that it is possible to observe this type of taste for killing in individuals in their fantasies or dreams (12). Killing is the great drunkness, the affirmation of the self at the most archaic level; it is the affirmation of life at the level of the deepest regression. Ossie appears usually at night, immediately before going to sleep, or after some sort of frustration in the part of Laurence, as in chapter 3, or in chapter 13.

The novel has a circular structure, according to the principle known as «ring composition» in which enclosure by identical or very similar elements produce a circular effect. Unlike a mythical literature, the circle does not have value of supreme symbol of wholeness and unity; it is only the symbol of hopelessness. The centre is the very protagonist, who sees how the circle encloses him without a possibility of escaping. The hero and narrator is involved in a circular movement which goes from death to dream. There are tensions, released to become tense again, for example in chapter 10 which ends with death and chapter 11 which starts with a «There was nothing about it in the papers», a neutral and indifferent statement.

As we have noticed, Bloomfield assumes the pantheist notion that every man is two men. Laurence faces mirrors various times; mirrors are important devices in the structure of the novel. Early in the narration «he found himself standing before the long mirror» A distant «alter ego», containing «a mystery to whose solution he had not yet found the key». From a reflected reality grows an independent reality. These two men are different, detached parts of the same being, each one ignorant of the other, which is made clear in the following:

I saw a man similar to myself, wearing familiar clothes, lifting his glass to his mouth with a white hand... He lowered his glass at the same time as I did (13).

«I ordered a grimace, and watched it twisting in the mirror» (14).

There is a remoteness visible in these examples:

It was not evasion: It seemed rather, as if, though I was unable to impress myself. In the glass behind the bar a familiar face, white and glistening, is turned solicitously to a face yet whiter with livid shadowings, slack lips, thin hair tousled my eventual recognition of which, arraiving only after point by point consideration, fills me with distaste (15).

This strangeness comprehends things and people, even the very Ossie, his *alter ego*. At a given moment Laurence finds himself contemplating Ossie's face and a «thiver run down his back, as though he were in the presence of a holy mystery, and it seemed as if a crudely delineated message of those features overlaid another communication whose significance he could penetrate only by acquiring the key to some unknown code» (16). Or his wife, «we were facing ourselves in the mirror above the bar... Sarah appeared an elegant exotic stranger». Strangeness ratified in the dialogue between Laurence and Sarah: «I feel in a false position... I'm not at all and you are not you; we are just, if you like, casual acquaintances...». Incidents concerning mirrors multiply as the story progresses. Car mirrors reflecting an outer, remote reality, «Streets and buildings and the other vehicles as blurred images on a black projection screen»; lift mirrors which reflect an almost real image «flacid and woe-begone».

The rhythm of obsession dominates the narrative pattern: it goes from frenzied activity to a near catatonic state. Laurence roams the streets, parks and taverns and collapses into a feverish stupor. Activity, in the novel ends in sexual violence or death, and, in turn, stupor is destroyed by the urgency of sex. Life is difficult to control, only through violence. Laurence has the power to control life, because death is the only security in life. Like many other men in big cities Laurence feels himself «used» as a thing, he feels himself the *homo mechanicus* who is attracted by death and total destruction. His world is cheap and dehumanized, sterile and destructive. He pursues his vulgar obsession in a vulgar world whose image is a faint wasteland to which, he alludes —as Laurence enters the river he feels the world reduced to «an evil tasting liquidity»; a river «whose many poisons burnt his eyes... the pulpy carton floated down stream... some yet nastier piece of refused unwrapped itself round his ear» (17). Sex in this novel is not an agent of life. It is destructive, it is only alive in its power to hurt.

He uses several narrative devices such as confession, dream and reported speech and a fourth one in which the first person of the confessional style is changed into the omniscient author. By means of this change the narrator establishes an ironic distance in such a way that the reader *knows* more than the narrator — narrator and author are not the same—. This again can be explained: the structure of the oniric world can only be analyzed from the conscious reality. By means of the distance the author gives information concerning the narrator and each of the other characters. Furthermore, the ironic distance is a way by means of which we are able to obtain two points of view; the narrator's and the reader's. It is a means of lucidity that paradoxically makes the fiction to acquire a remarkable level of veracity, and the narrator leaves us to peer into his own narcissist mind.

Because of the nature of narcissism, reality is distorted; the narcissist mind over-values the physical and moral qualities of the object of love. This is considered very valuable, mainly because it is «me» or it is «mine». The object of love *has* to correspond to him. He cannot understand other reasonings than his own. Jackie exists only as a shadow of his own narcissist ego. The pathological element of narcissism is the disproportionate emotional reaction to criticism. Laurence reacts strongly when he is criticized. He tends to feel criticism as an attack; in Sarah's eyes the affair with Jackie is «an squalid little affair». It is at moments like these, that he turns very aggressive towards his wife. The intensity of this wrath can only be understood when taking into account that the narcissist individual *is not related to the world*, consequently he is alone, and he is afraid. Laurence is suspicious of everything and everyone: the doorman, the porter, the waiter, his principal, his assistant. Everyone in this story «seems to know». Only Ossie will be able to get rid of those who attack him. Only by killing and destroying can Laurence be rescued from danger. He is aware of his narcissism, but he does not feel any compulsion to overcome it.

Humour is the element provided by the lucidity of the narrator. It is by means of irony that the reader and the narrator are capable of knowing «more» than is explicitly said. Nevertheless very often self-mockery is present, drunkenness being the excuse, «I saw a pair of identical and identically attired twins both take hold of the microphone with a single hand». Irony is the only element of lucidity in moments like these:

In the bar, when she came, Jackie was more than ever impatient, gobbling crisps and nuts and olives with a tense, neurotic rapacity. All had been agreed, arranged, we were now affianced, yet nothing had changed, and crack went another nut. Sarah and I were still cohabiting. Wasn't it time I moved out? Had I seen a solicitor yet? Down slid an olive. One can't rush these things, not after so many years. But how, with her, wasn't I? Not just playing her along? No, of course not. Of course not, but. Well I sometimes wander. Anyway, something had to happen. Soon? (18).

Sometimes this turns sour against urban incommodities, «I read on my knees in the traffic jams about the unemployment figures. They were considered alarming. I knew how to solve the unemployment problem: reinstate the law decreeing that each horseless carriage should be preceded by a man carrying a red flag» (19). His aggressivity increases and turns against humanity, «for that matter if I were a dictator, I'd make everyone over fourteen carry a red flag or a plague bell».

Irony and self-mockery both provide the anti-pathos element. It serves to emphasize rather than to destroy the seriousness of human misery as is depicted in this paragraph:

I can't remember where I lost the button from my jacket but it was missing during the period of both my «reconciliations». You see, I was in no position to ask domestic favours of either. I was on the defensive all around. Sarah, Jackie not only. At the office. At home —my neighbour, the desk— clerk and the porter. Each post brought fresh demands. And waiters, and garage hands and taxi drivers are invariably rude to me now,

aggressive. Strays dogs yap at my heels. I don't know what is happening to the traffic, gets more hellish day by day. Eventually, I cut off the loose ends myself with a pair of nail scissors. A part of the cloth had been torn away with the button, leaving a small irregular white whole, I mean hole. It was diabolical (20).

The main difficulty for the reader of Bloomfield's book is the thin limit between the representation of reality as a sequence of events and the reality as a dream. At the beginning events take place in the darkness of the night and the reader is plunged in an atmosphere of uneasy irreality, «the river, the tow-path, the night sky itself, had the insubstantiality of a cinema auditorium»; the cries of help come from the «black waters», and the presence of a fantasmagorical city stressed a feeling of uneasiness. Bloomfield sees literature as a «guided dream» (21), but the hero within that dream is left alone with his own dream. In the idealist conception, life and dream, death and dream are synonymous. Jung does not make a difference between literary inventions and the literature of dreams. Jacques Lacan has observed that all the material used by the analyst is oral. That which is analyzed in the psychoanalytical interview is not the patient's dream but rather, the patient's oral report of his dreams (22). What Lacan concluded was that as the structure of the unconscious is the structure of the language, linguistic analysis is the most appropriate method by which to study the unconscious. The value of this for us lies in the fact that although the dream is a literary device, it exists only as a linguistic reality. It has been noticed that it is difficult, sometimes impossible, to fix the images of a dream: the dreamer debates himself the fluidity of the image of the dream and its continuous shifting, and the special surrealist rigidity in the isolated moments of its apparition. We are not going to enter into discussion on the capability of language to represent, Bloomfield is well aware of this, «I felt an inexplicable reluctance to continue as though I were tempting to describe a dream and feared its desintegration under the weight of words» he says through Laurence.

Fragmentation prevents the narrative to flow towards an only sense. The author uses this device in chapters 10 and 17. In these chapters the protagonist is guided through an unknown and submerged world of bars and pubs where the sense of dizziness and unreality reaches its summit. The psychology of obsession involves a variety of technical devices which are assumed to have come from the surrealists (23). Laurence wanders through a city landscape, so absorbed in his obsession that he loses consciousness of his environment. He perceives reality as if it were a dream. Fantasy, hallucination and dream are intermingled in a sort of alcoholic delirium. People and things are distorted:

Ossie knew all. The roughed abortionist, a weeper, crone procuress with a children cackle: face with a hole where a nose should have been. Detectible-constable what's it, in plain clothes; Ossie knew them all; child prostitute; travestites; the razor scarred twins... The faces repeated themselves on a frieze...

It was surprising that I saw faces that I knew... the detective, the noseless, twins were dancing together and the child prostitute helped a clumsy fingered sailor to remove her blouse... A little youth with a painted face deta-

ches himself from the pack of dancers and executes a series of graceful kicks. A wall-eyed woman comprehensively licks a cauliflower ear... (24).

The nightmarish surrealistic quality is evident. A total desintegration of the logic discourse by alcoholic delirium or by complete chaos in which Laurence's mind is submerged is described through fragmentation, «A pack of heated and shuffling dancers; frenzied barmen classing ties and glasses; everyone else except for those weeping of sleeping, shout and laugh at once.»

Obsession governs the experience of the hero and the experiencees. When the rhythm of obsession replaces the normal rhythm of time, external scenes and events become tangled and words become confused, «leaving an irregular whole. I mean hole», «In the dark passage, a lean, torn-eared kat, I mean cat, was savanging a snake». Time is distorted, evident in the use of verbs, «We raise our glasses in a green and mitted...» There are sentences in which object and subject become one, «To go quietly insane is one way out would be to go quietly insane» (25). Language plays games «repercussions to the destruction of your neighbour's percussion».

Obsession automatically produces unity of action. By means of the psychology of obsession Bloomfield focuses relentlessly upon his central theme. It is only perceived that which is somehow relevant to the obsession life becomes to the obsessive character. It is a drama in which everything, surroundings, actions and dreams are symbolic expressions of his own compulsion. The unity of action in this novel is comparable to that of a brilliantly staged drama.

Bloomfield does not invite the reader to see Laurence as a sensitive soul in a cruel world, a world made cruel by the stupidity of others. Laurence, on the contrary, is depicted as a clear example of the antihero and his suffering is squalid. He is apparently driven by trivial and mean motivations; but his suffering is evil precisely because it destroys all dignity and not just because it hurts. For Laurence sex is an obsession, but not a cure. His sexual adventures are very often repellent. It does not appeal to the world; neither is the world aware of it. It does not transcend into a pantheist vision because the object of his passion is only a by-product of urban life. The world of Bloomfield's book is deflactionary, and simple mockery collapses as completely as simple self-pity. In spite of everything, though, our protagonist becomes pathetic in his loneliness: at a certain moment of the narration we come across these lines:

To be interrogated —any fool would do, psychiatrist or priest or policeman— would be an exquisite variation. To have my most trivial unconsidered actions given significance, however false, to see the emergence of a pattern, however arbitrary would be less mortiferous than this incoherent irrelevance I inhabit. So, one tries, in lieu, to become, or to invent one's own interrogator: creating omens that aren't ominous, correspondances that don't correspond, hallucinations without delusion (26).

The protagonist shows an ironic detachment from life. An important notion in the viewing of man as an outsider, «man is alone outside the structure inhabited by others, with agonizingly sharp awareness of life going on behind the locked doors» (27).

The reader who wants to take a simple attitude towards his world will therefore

get no help from this book. In his novel the author contrives no ethos of courage, creates no myth of passionate renewal, portrays no great external dramas. It is, therefore, fair to ask what he does. Bloomfield simply places the reader in front of a contemporary hero, more than ever the antihero: urban bureaucracies produce no heroes, said Hegel. He is the man inserted in a society against his own instincts and those violent instincts that flourish in Ossie. The writer places us in front of a doubled-face concept of human behaviour: Ossie is the other side, the need for vengeance of the humiliation and the defeat of forces outside him which he cannot control. Anthony Bloomfield has made his Burgess's statement «I like to regard my books as works of craftsmanship for sale, object as well made as I can make them. The deeper issues —aesthetic or social or metaphysical are not my concern... they are strictly for cimentators» (28). Some of the words we use to describe modern literature such as «violence», «decadence», «dream», «irony», «allusion», «distorsion», «realism», and «experiment» are all applicable to this novel. He is an author that seems to be alien, but at the same time to know popular culture, as we can see in the changes of language and the veracity of the characters through the language they speak.

It may be useful to notice to explain Bloomfield's dream in terms of a conflict between the conscious and the unconscious would be useless. The characters in this novel, Jackie, Sarah and the other might be not even «real». They might have been created as characters in a dream of a psychotic mind, the narrator's, only symbolic of his own dreams and frustations. Death may only be forgetfulness and the killing of Ossie by Laurence, symbolic of the suicide of the psychotic ego.

## NOTES

- (1) The Hogarth Press; London, 1971. Further citation of the book will be dawn from this edition with page reference.
- (2) Because of the nature of narcissism, reality is distorted. As reality is distorted so it is reason. The individual is cut off the world.
- (3) *Life For a Life*, p. 41.
- (4) *Ibid.*, 71.
- (5) Bloomfield has developed this theme in a short story, «The Sleeping Tribe». (See *Atlantis*, April 1980, vol. 1, n. 2; pp. 40-43.)
- (6) *Life*, 42.
- (7) *Ibid.*
- (8) *Ibid.*, 23.
- (9) *Ibid.*, 90.
- (10) This is a parallel to a similar passage in *Under the Volcano*, there we read «I went into all the cantinas in the Via Dolorosa looking for you and not finding you I had a drink in each one».
- (11) *Life*, 146.
- (12) «Different Forms of Violence», *The Heart of Man*, Harper & Row, NY, London, 1964. See also Dollard, *Studies in Frustration and Aggression*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1939.
- (13) *Life*, 136.
- (14) *Ibid.*, 139.
- (15) *Ibid.*
- (16) *Ibid.*, 94.
- (17) *Life*, 13.
- (18) *Life*, 172.
- (19) *Ibid.*, 174.
- (19) *Ibid.*, 174.
- (20) *Ibid.*, 198.
- (21) This notion is taken from Borges' «El informe de Brodie».
- (22) «The insistence of the letter in the Unconscious» (Ehrman, J. ed., *Structuralism*, NY: Routledge, 1970; 101-137.
- (23) Dostoevsky used it in *Crime and Punishment* which is an hallucinatory symbolic novel. It would be useful to remember that the surrealists claimed Dostoevsky to be their spiritual father.
- (24) *Life*, 143.
- (25) *Life*, 192.
- (26) *Life*, 145.
- (27) *Ibid.*, 182.
- (28) Quoted by Bloomfield in his Lecture «The Guided Dream», Perugia, July 1979.