AN ANALYSIS OF HUMOUR IN THE WORKS OF MALCOLM LOWRY

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The existence of the elements of humour and irony in the works by Malcolm Lowry has been duly observed by the majority of critics, yet so far, no detailed discussion of this aspect of Lowry's art has been completed. Apart from Douglas Day's article Of tragic joy, which is half critical and half biographical, the question has been raised only in some marginal remarks concerning Lowry's style, without any attempts at defining its significance and structural function. Thus, for example, Dale Edmonds speaks about Lowry's "robust sense of humour and an eye for the ridiculous" (Edmonds 1968: 352), Richard Costa observes that "humour arises naturally out of a scrupulous observation of life" (Costa 1969: 178) and Hilda Thomas mentions that Lowry managed to mix successfully irony with compassion as well as to introduce the elements of wit and bawdy humour (cf. Thomas, 1963: 2). Yet none of those critics tried to analyse Lowry's sense of humour more thoroughly, nor to discuss its role in the novels in a more detailed way. In the overwhelming richness and the density of structure of Under the volcano, its symbols, images, associations and allusions, Lowry's humour is being dismissed as merely one more element of the novel's complexity.

The present paper aims at proving that humour and irony represent one of the most essential factors in the composition of Under the volcano and are of equal significance in the other works of Lowry, first of all, in the collection of short stories: Hear us o Lord from Heaven Thy dwelling place.

Under the volcano, the most morbid and "terrifying" work of Lowry, abounds in humorous remarks, allusions, and even episodes, although the sense of humour displayed there renders the novel anything but comic. Before trying to define the character and type of Lowry's humour, it seems appropriate to discuss it in terms of a more traditional classification. According to it, comism may arise out of three, more or less separate, kinds of humour: the humour of characters, the humour of situation and the language humour respectively.
The first kind of humour, the most characteristic of which was Charles Dickens's. It is almost
unnecessary to mention the names of his characters in Under the Volcano, could be termed
"humour with a difference" - as Mr. Quinney says in "Mr. Quinney's Letters to a Few Days for
which there is no substitute. Neither is it the kind of humour that is often found in
serious comedy, in which the actor is the only one to appear and the audience to laugh.
In both cases the humour arises from the incongruity between the assertions of the
actor and the reality. To the audience it seems the actor tries very hard to appear
sincere and convincing, while the audience, all in vain, since the more they try, the
more he denies himself.

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tions and more elaborate conceits, there is also quite a lot of the so-called English humour, that is, a kind of abstract and absurd one, like e.g., "Percy Bysshe Shelley, — the Consul leaned against the mirror beside Hugh, — Another fellow with ideas... The story I like about Shelley is the one where he just let himself sink to the bottom of the sea — taking several books with him of course — and just stayed there, rather than admit he couldn't swim" (Lowry 1968: 207).

There is also a good deal of black humour, especially if a remark or allusion concerns Geoffrey's own situation, e.g.: "Yes: I can see the reviews now. Mr. Firmin's sensational new data on Atlantis! The most extraordinary thing of its kind since Donnelly! Interrupted by his untimely death...", or the imaginary headlines in the newspapers: "Old Samaritan case be to reopened; Commander Firmin believed in Mexico. Firmin found guilty, acquitted, cries in box. Firmin innocent, but bears guilt of world on shoulders" (Lowry 1968: 140/141).

Finally, there may be found a kind of subtle humour, difficult to define, bitter and at the same time highly lyrical, especially when viewed within the context. Such is the image of the rock La Dasperdida: "She [Yvonne] longed to heal the cliff rock. She was one of the rocks and she yearned to save the other... the other rock stood unmoved: 'That's all very well — it said — but it happens to be your fault, and as for myself, I propose to disintegrate as I please!" (Lowry 1968: 60); such is the Consul's response to Yvonne's remark: "we can cope with it in a day or two, when you're sober" — "But good Lord! The Consul sat perfectly still staring at the floor, while the enormity of the insult passed into his soul. As if, as if, he were not sober now! (...) No, he was not, not at this very moment he wasn't! But... what right had Yvonne to assume it, assume either that he was not sober now, or that, far worse, in a day or two he would be sober" (Lowry 1968: 89).

One could go on quoting the humorous references, comic allusions and witty remarks almost endlessly, but it is doubtful it would be much help in the appreciation of Lowry's fiction. It seems to be much more relevant to discuss the specific character of his humour and the role it plays in the novels, or short stories. Despite all the amount of humorous passages, none of Lowry's works could be termed — comic. Certainly, the subject itself excludes such a proposition — man's fall into sin, his symbolic eviction from the paradise and the impossibility of living without love are not the themes that induce joy or amusement. But besides, Lowry's puns and conceits differ essentially from, let's say, Oscar Wilde's witty epigrams. First, they were not meant to be amusing for their own sake, and second, they never provoke a wild, hilarious laughter but rather a wise, though somewhat sad, smile. Lowry's sense of humour can be best qualified as intellectual, in the meaning, that it appeals to the reader's mind. Punning the word "pussy cat" with Oedipus and Priapuss was not aimed at producing a good joke, but at bringing to the reader's attention the theme of guilt, which is ever-present in Under the volcano.

Discussing the role of humour in Lowry's works, and first of all in Under the volcano, one has to note that it functions on more than one level. On the story level, it is similar to that in any other serious piece of literature — the famous analysis of the "knocking scene" in Madambo by De Quincey may serve as an example here. After all, Under the volcano, is a genuinely tragic novel and the epithets like: "sordid", "full of despair", "a picture of human agony", or "hell", may be found in any review of the book. Four hundred pages full of despair and agony would not only be unbearable for the reader but would also lose much of the intensity of feeling. The humorous passages interrupt the strain of emotion, and, by means of contrast, intensify the sense of anguish and mental suffering.

On the thematic level of the novel, the Consul's ironic comments and subtly amusing allusions, focus, as I have mentioned before, the reader's attention on the main issues of Under the volcano. The humorous reference to the "change of worlds" or the ironic mis-quotations "Yet this day, pichicho, shalt thou be with me in" , bring to the mind the theme of death and its inevitability. The bawdy mistranslations performed by Cervantes or the pimp ("half past sick by the cock") comment on Yvonne's adultery and Geoffrey's infidelity. The imaginary newspaper headlines referring to the Samaritan case stress once more the recurring motif of guilt and expiation. Even the apparently purely jocular puns like "Alladamnabamas farmers" are, in a way, functional in the novel. Funny, and often absurd fragments of conversations (e.g., "You go to study deep down to know that Mozart writ the Bible" — Lowry 1968: 365) reflect, in a very realistic way, the true atmosphere of a bar full of drunkards. They also become an ironic comment on the state of the Consul's mind who is claiming that he can comprehend everything much more clearly when he is drunk.

Douglas Day has discussed in his article still another aspect of Lowry's humour: "We do not understand this novel until we realize that Geoffrey and his alter ego, his half-brother Hugh... are presented to us not only as tragic victims, but also as the objects of our compassionate laughter" (Day 1963: 358). I would not go as far as Day did, and say that the real subject of Under the volcano is "the figure, dignified-Judicious of Geoffrey Firmin, drunk, failed consul, failed husband, failed poet and a happy man" (Day 1963: 358 — italics mine). The Consul was not a happy man and was not meant

1 A similar role is played by chapter IV within the whole novel. It presents a picture of an earthly paradise and thus, on the one hand it functions as a kind of a serene interlude between two, fairly morbid chapters III and V, and, on the other hand, the apparent accessibility of "Heaven" intensifies the drama of the Consul.
to be — despite the exclamation: “I love hell. I can’t wait to get back there. In fact I’m running. I’m almost back there already” (Lowry 1968: 316) which are openly ironic. But the fact that he induces our “compassionate laughter” is of utmost significance for his character-drawing and for the proper approach of the reader toward him and the whole novel. If the reader is supposed to feel sympathetic toward the Consul, and without it the intensity of his tragedy would be considerably diminished, Lowry had to render him likeable. Otherwise, if Geoffrey were only an irredeemable drunkard, having no consideration for his wife and friends, the reader’s response to his plight would be that of rejoicing. Of course, the Consul’s sense of humour is not the only factor that makes the reader like him and hence care for him, but as it is the case of many modern “rogue novels”; the humour displayed there is of no small importance.

Lowry has been very often criticized for the self-consciousness about his writing, for the too autobiographical character of his fiction. Nearly all the characters in his novels, and certainly all the protagonists, are in larger or lesser degree the reflections of himself. Now, if we take into consideration the constant self-mocking humour of the Consul in Under the volcano, Sibghter Wilderness in Through the Panama and Dark as the grave wherein my friend is laid, or Ethan Llewelyn in October ferry to Gabriola, we can finally acquire a proper perspective in our attitude toward the “self-conscious” heroes. Douglas Day has also noticed this quality of Lowry’s fiction: “the saving grace of humour, the refusal to take too seriously the annihilation of the transparently autobiographical personae who serve as his heroes” (Day 1963: 357).

Robert Hellman, in a brilliant article on Under the volcano, offered some instructive parallels with Mann’s Doctor Faustus. Both works belong to 1947, recount the spiritual illness of man and of our era and they both utilize the Faustian theme. Yet Hellman finds one basic difference in the novelists’ approach to the subject: “... Mann’s style is heroic, whereas Lowry’s stage is domestic. Geoffrey Firmin... is more of a private figure than Adrian Leverkühn; his life has less amplitude in itself; in the concrete elements of it there is not the constant pressure toward epical-allegorical agonadizement” (Hellman: 1963, 11). This is certainly true and the “domestication” of the Consul’s tragedy, with no apparent decrease in its symbolic, or mythic, significance may be considered a major success of Malcolm Lowry. The readers’ identification with the protagonist is much more effective in this way. In spite of the fact that on one plane Geoffrey represents the state of humanity in the modern world and symbolizes man’s universal guilt, his punishment and aspirations, he is also one of us: sinful but not totally corrupted, infirm yet striving unceasingly upward. He is to some extent, an ordinary man and not a mythic hero out of Greek tragedies who usually is a kind of a vehicle for various universal qualities of mankind. The humour of Under the volcano, and in lesser degree in Through the Panama, as well as the unexpected “common sense” remarks which are scattered throughout the novel, provide a necessary touch of naturalness. It reminds us that the Consul is a man and not only a symbol.

Finally, there has to be added one more thing, which is closely connected with the problem discussed above. Any writer dealing with tragic and highly emotional themes runs a risk of falling into excessive sentimentalities, of overdoing pathos and ending in bathos instead. By suffusing his fiction with what D. Day called, “tragic joy” Lowry has successfully avoided this danger and produced a work of literature which is both profoundly moving and sparkling with unexpected joy.

REFERENCES


* For instance the one the Consul said just before his death: “No, I wouldn’t do that [shoot him] — said the Consul quietly. — That’s a Colt ‘17, isn’t it? It throws a lot of steel shavings” (Lowry 1968: 373).

"Compare, for instance, Yossarian in Catch 22, or Sebastian Dangerfield in The ginger man."