

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, 1965 : 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 master of which was Charles Dickens, is almost nonexistent in Lowry's fiction. Several characters in *Under the volcano* could be termed — ridiculous — such as Mr. Quincey, Cervantes or A Few Fleas for example, yet none of them is comic. Neither is situational humour evoked by Lowry too frequently; there are, however, several scenes in *Under the volcano* which deserve our attention. First of all, there is the garden scene in chapter V and the episode of Geoffrey's ride on the *Magnum infernal* in chapter VII. In both cases the humour arises out of the incongruity between the appearances and the reality. In the garden scene the Consul tries very hard to appear sober and nonchalant to Mr. Quincey, all in vain, since the more he tries, the more he betrays himself:

"On a tiger", the Consul repeated.

The other gazed at him a moment... "I expect so", he said sourly, "Plenty tigers. Plenty elephants too... Might I ask you if the next time you inspect your jungle you'd mind being sick on your own side of the fence?"

"Hicket", answered the Consul simply... "Sorry I gave that impression it was merely this damned hickups!" (Lowry 1968 : 136)

Hangnag upside down in a little cage of a Ferris Wheel in chapter VII Geoffrey himself realizes that "it was scarcely a dignified position for an ex-representative of His Majesty's government to find himself in" (Lowry 1968 : 225). Important as these scenes are in the composition of the novel, one has to admit that Lowry's sense of humour is primarily reflected in the language itself. From the very beginning of his literary career Lowry has been concerned with perfecting the mastery of the English language. The concern with style, the proper use of words and the use of irony can be even observed in his writings for "Leys Fortnightly", a high school magazine which printed several of his short stories and his reports on grass hockey (cf. Kim 1965 : 383 ff.)

His achievement in this field in *Under the volcano* can be only compared (and, as a matter of fact, very often was), to Joyce's *Ulysses*: "No book since *Ulysses* can match Lowry's inspired punning" (Costa 1967 : 350). Also D. Edmonds observes that one of the most obvious similarities between Joyce and Lowry is the obsession with language: "to them no word is constant and fixed, but is in a never-ending state of flux, with each twist and turn extending and deepening the range of meanings. Lowry's puns, like Joyce's, are funny in their own right, but also, like Joyce's, have contextual relevance" (Edmonds 1968 : 317).

Actually punning or word-play is one of the most common devices employed by Lowry to saturate his fiction with wit and humour. This kind of humour extends from the use of simple puns — words with double meaning — like the name of the cigarettes the Consul smokes ("Alas" means "wings" in Spanish and a sorrowful exclamation in English) to a very complicated pattern of

intentional misspellings and mistranslations. The Spanish-English associations, apart from providing the basis for the most powerful message of the novel, (Le Gusta este jardín?, Que es suyo?, Erite que sus hijos lo destruyan", is mistranslated by the Consul to: "You like this garden?, Why is it yours?, We evict those who destroy", thus making an allusion to the theme of destruction and the eviction of Adam from Paradise), give rise to a whole series of half bawdy, half comic mistranslations: for example, in Cervantes' tavern the Consul is offered a menu with "onans in garlic soup on egg", "divorced eggs", "poxy eggs in toast" and "a spectral chicken of the house" (Lowry 1968 : 392); or "Un obsequio, — she handed him the tequila, — Where do you laugh now? — I still laugh in the Calle Nicaragua..." (Lowry 1968 : 230); or still, "What's the time? — Sick, — answered the man, — No, it er ah half past sick by the cock" (Lowry 1968 : 353).

In *Hear us o Lord*, Lowry uses the same method of associations in altering the words of a popular song: "Frère Jacques, Frère Jacques/Dormez vous, Dormez vous/Sonnez tamentine, Sonnez tamentine/Ding, Dang, Dong/Doom, doom, doom" (Lowry 1969 : 75). In one place of *Under the volcano* the constellation "Urta Maior" becomes "ursa horribilis of the night" (Lowry 1968 : 75). Sometimes Lowry includes a well-known saying or quotation twisting it humorously or ironically, e.g.: "Nel mezzo del bloody cammin di nostra vita mi ritrovai in..."; or, "The Consul stood up and suddenly declaimed to the dog: Yet this day, pichicho, shalt thou be with me in —" (Lowry 1968 : 232).

In the garden scene in chapter V Lowry includes a series of Joycean puns, when the Consul addresses Mr. Quincey's cat in the following manner: "hello-pussy-my-little-Priapusspuss-my-little-Oedipusspusspuss... My little Xico-tanecat" (Lowry 1968 : 138). Quite often the play on words becomes trans-formed into a kind of conceit the Metaphysical poets were fond of — that is, a kind of expanded play with some idea or allusion. For instance, there is a scene in *Under the Volcano*, in which the Consul passes a public scribe "crashing away on a giant typewriter": "I am taking the only way out, semicolon, — the Consul offered cheerfully and soberly in passing, — Good bye, full stop. Change of paragraph, change of chapter, change of worlds" (Lowry 1968 : 58); or, elsewhere: "Mr. Quincey's words knocked on his consciousness — or some-one actually was knocking on a door... Old De Quincey; the knocking on the gate in Macbeth. Knock, knock, knock; who's there? Cat. Cat who? Catas-trophy. Catastrophy who? Catastrophysicist. What, is it you, my little pococati? Just wait an eternity till Jaque and I have finished murdering sleep! Katobasis to cat abyssys. Cat hartes atratus..." (Lowry 1968 : 140). The humour in *Under the volcano* consists not only in puns, misspellings (e.g., the advertisement of SHRIL Co. with the S missing, the names of squatters' shacks in *Hear us o Lord* like "Wywurk" or "Doo-Drop-Inn", mistransla-

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 mirador 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 Donnely! 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 Despedida: "She [Yvonne] longed to heal the cleft 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 Oedipuss and Pria-

puss 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, its role is similar to that in any other serious piece of literature — the famous analysis of the "knocking scene" in *Macbeth* 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 emotion¹, 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-quotation "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 "Alladamnbama farmers" are, in a way, functional in the novel. Funny, and often absurd fragments of conversations (e.g., "You got 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-ludicrous 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 exclamations: "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 irremediable 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"², 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*, Sigbjørn 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 Heilman, 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 Heilman 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 aggrandizement" (Heilman: 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

² Compare, for instance, Yossarian in *Catch 22*, or Sebastian Dangerfield in *The ginger man*.

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 is usually a kind of a vehicle for various universal qualities of mankind. The humour of *Under the volcano*, and in a lesser degree in *Through the Panama*, as well as the unexpected "common sense" remarks³ 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 sentimentality, 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.

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³ 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).