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# The Voice of Comedy in Conrad's *Typhoon* and Primo Levi's *The Monkey's Wrench*

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Primo Levi is perhaps best known for his first-person account of his year spent in Auschwitz.<sup>1</sup> A chemist by training, Levi did not begin writing until after the war, but he continued to write throughout the rest of his life, often dealing in some way with his Holocaust experience. It is less well-known that Levi was a thoughtful and appreciative reader of Joseph Conrad, and that his one comic novel, *The Monkey's Wrench*, is modeled explicitly after Conrad's own comic novella, "Typhoon."<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, I have treated the shared philosophical and psychological convictions of the two writers that enabled them to confront the respective political atrocities of their age (the ivory trade for Conrad, the Holocaust for Levi) and to explore their human implications. But in the pages which follow, I would like to lay the groundwork for another study—the second half, so to speak—by suggesting how these two comic works respond to their authors' darker, one might even say tragic, visions of the world, visions in which destructive elements (at best indifferent, at worst malevolent) crush the very humanity out of individuals. But this very condition of competing forces and of chaotic disjunction, if the consequences are not fatal, is also the condition of comedy, a realm of disjunctions that make us laugh, chaos that is compatible with some form of resolution. And it is in this way that comedy might be philosophic, reflecting and responding to the truths of a disjointed world. While this paper would not deny the therapeutic role of comedy either in the lives of men traumatized by horror or of readers seeking pleasure, my central claim is that, for both writers, comedy—by

connecting us to the concrete, by puncturing the boastfulness of more comprehensive claims, by celebrating the diminutive in a precarious world—allows us to achieve, in Conrad's words, "that glimpse of truth for which [we] have forgotten to ask" (*Nigger* xiv).

*The Monkey's Wrench* is a series of stories told by an Italian construction worker, Libertino Faussone, to the narrator, an Italian chemist and writer who bears a striking resemblance to Levi himself. Set in a remote factory in Russia, and told during mealtimes and walks, the stories are tales of triumph, disaster, and individuals encountered in a life of work. At the end, the narrator, hitherto a consummate listener, reciprocates with his own story about his own work as a chemist. As a postscript, Levi quotes the preface to "Typhoon," likening his own protagonist Faussone to Conrad's Captain MacWhirr, both in avowed authenticity and "in their view of work and the world" (*Monkey's* 173). Despite their seemingly different occupations—MacWhirr, a sea captain, and Faussone, a construction worker—Levi maintains that both men engage in the same type of work, not repetitive labor, but rather work that allows for "an immense margin of error," and that in doing so allows one to "follow an ancient, timeless destiny" and to "measure [one]self against the world" (*Voice* 123). Levi explains: "My prime source for this notion of work are [sic] the writings of Conrad"<sup>3</sup> and *The Monkey's Wrench* itself contains "a polemical charge against those who deny what you might call the redeeming power of work" (*Voice* 123).

But this deeply serious claim seems problematic. For both MacWhirr and Faussone are comic characters. When the ship hoists its new Siamese flag in place of the Union Jack, and the first mate Jukes remarks bitterly, "Queer flag for a man to sail under," MacWhirr looks at the flag itself, and replies literally: "What's the matter with the flag? Seems alright to me" (*Typhoon* 10). When the exasperated Jukes repeats himself, MacWhirr, amazed and uncomprehending, goes to consult the list of flags in his International Signal Code-book. "There's nothing amiss with that flag," he concludes, although he cautions not to hoist it upside-down, lest it be interpreted as a sign of distress (10). Another time, Jukes asks rhetorically, "I wonder where that beastly swell comes from?" MacWhirr answers him literally: "North-east" (22). And again, when Jukes tries to excuse the second mate's bad temper on account of the heat—a heat that makes him feel as if his head were "tied up in a woollen blanket," a heat that "would make a saint swear"—MacWhirr retorts:

What sort of saint would that be that would swear? No more saint than yourself, I expect. And what's a blanket got to do with it—or the weather either . . . The heat does not make me swear—does it? It's filthy bad temper. That's what it is. And what's the good of your talking like this? (25)

His inability to understand the rhetorical exclamations of others makes MacWhirr a comical outsider to the sailors around him, and to the reader encountering him.

Faussone is a similarly comical outsider. The epigram of *The Monkey's Wrench* sets the comic tone: "though this knave came somewhat saucily into the world . . . there was good sport at his making." By thus invoking Gloucester's light-hearted remark about his illegitimate son, Levi suggests both the playfulness of his own activity and the dubious status of his own created "offspring," preparing us for a character who will not quite fit in, who will defy conventional expectation. And indeed, Faussone first appears as the unlikeliest of storytellers:

[Faussone's] face is serious, rather immobile, not very expressive. He's not a great story-teller. On the contrary, he's somewhat monotonous, playing things down, elliptical, as if he were afraid of seeming to exaggerate. But often he lets himself go, and then, unconsciously, he does exaggerate. His vocabulary is limited, and he frequently expresses himself through clichés that to him seem original and clever. If his listener doesn't smile, Faussone repeats the cliché, as if he were talking to a simpleton. (*Monkey's* 8)

Like MacWhirr, Faussone is an outsider both to his own comic effect, and to the joking of others. When explaining to the narrator an adventure he once had befriending a monkey, he describes how the monkey crouched in the rain in a particular position so as to keep dry. He explains, "I tried it myself [ . . . ] and I must say that if you don't have an umbrella that's the best solution" (33). The narrator comments:

I thought he was joking, and I promised him that if I ever found myself naked under a tropical rain, I would assume the monkey's position, but I immediately caught a look of irritation. Faussone never jokes; if he does, his jokes are as ponderous as a tortoise. And he doesn't like jokes from others. (33)

Yet the very inability of both MacWhirr and Faussone to appreciate the jokes of others, their shared, comical disconnectedness from verbal play and irony, stems from a connectedness of a different sort—namely, they are both excessively literal-minded, staying fastidiously close to the concrete realities around them. MacWhirr is the more extreme case; he simply cannot understand figurative language of any sort. Joseph Kolupke calls him “a hero who is explicitly anti-figurative” (71). Nor can MacWhirr celebrate language for its own sake. Confronted with men chatting recreationally, he remarks, “I can’t understand what you can find to talk about [ . . . ] Two solid hours. I am not blaming you. I see people ashore at it all day long [ . . . ] Must be saying the same things over and over again. I can’t understand” (*Typhoon* 17). While Faussone does talk for the pleasure of talking—his stories are the stuff of the book—and he does use figurative language, albeit the clichés of others, he nevertheless stays close to the concrete realities of his life. His stories are about his construction work, and at times get technical. The reader is helped by the narrator who, as a chemist similarly mired in technical logistics, both appreciates these details and draws out their implications. Faussone’s storytelling itself lacks the brightness of imaginative flight; we are told that his “monologue is encumbered by his repetitive tics, and by his language, which tends to be gray. Perhaps it’s the gray of the fogs of our city, or perhaps it’s the gray of steel beams and plates, the actual heroes of his stories” (*Monkey’s* 46).

The comicality of literal-mindedness recalls the classic comic stupidity of Aristophanes’ Strepsiades, who, when instructed in Socrates’ cosmology, first thinks that Zeus is literally overthrown by Vortex, and then that the vortex is literally a jug. Strepsiades’ literal-mindedness is truly ridiculous because it tangles him up with the words themselves, which he starts to imbue with the power of the things they represent—for example, when he thinks that simply changing a map will move Sparta further away. By taking words, the representations of things, so literally, he becomes disconnected from the things themselves, from the real world around him, and from the concrete effects he desires. In this way, so tossed about by word play, Strepsiades is a simply wacky character. MacWhirr and Faussone, however, are not. For their literal-mindedness is of a different sort, moving in the opposite direction: they are grounded in fact.

MacWhirr, “faithful to facts,” is true to the concrete things to which words correspond (*Typhoon* 14). He is close to them in a way that is unmediated, unencumbered by unnecessary levels of imaginative speech or commentary:

With a temperament neither loquacious nor taciturn he found very little occasion to talk. There were matters of duty, of course—directions, orders, and so on; but the past being to his mind done with, and the future not there yet, the more general actualities of the day required no comment—because facts can speak for themselves with overwhelming precision. (*Typhoon* 9)

MacWhirr's facts are the physical objects and actions of his concrete world, "every-day eloquent facts, such as islands, sand-banks, reefs, swift and changeable currents—tangled facts that nevertheless speak to a seaman in clear and definite language" (15). These facts include the function of cabin door locks, the movements of a barometer, the coming of a storm, and the simple actions of his fellow sailors, all of which MacWhirr grasps with literal accuracy. It is from such facts, and not from mere words, that MacWhirr takes his bearings—literally.

So too Faussonne and the chemist-narrator are mired in the facts of their own work, technical details which they exchange, scribbling on napkins and drawing out with questions. When the narrator begins his own anecdote about a difficulty he once had devising a particular enamel, he lists the technical elements comprising the problem, adding, "You follow me?" (*Monkey's* 146). And Faussonne assents in an "almost offended tone" (146). He esteems the details of the concrete world, as well as his own attachment to them. But the narrator continues:

But perhaps the reader isn't following me, here and elsewhere, when it's a question of mandrels, molecules, ball bearings, and lugs. Well, I'm sorry and I apologize, but in some cases there are no synonyms. If, as is likely, in his youth the reader accepted the seafaring tales of the nineteenth century, then he digested bowsprits and fo'c'sles; so he must be brave, use his imagination, or consult a dictionary. It may be useful for him anyway, since we live in a world of molecules and ball bearings. (146)

The implicit reference to Conrad sets up a sort of brotherhood among the three of them, potentially opposed to the peruser of books: they are workers in a world of technical precision, where the language that describes it must be exact.

Both books vindicate the literal-mindedness of their protagonists more emphatically, however, by juxtaposing it against the outlook of more imaginative characters who lose touch with the world. In the midst of the typhoon, MacWhirr himself appears as the solid, stout-

armed bulk that steadies the previously cocky first mate, who is now gripped by panic. Underlying MacWhirr's weighty presence is soundness of mind in the face of great fear, a combination of unreflective fortitude and alert calmness. Jukes, too, is calm, but his is the exhausted numbness of hopeless fear, embellished by his own imagination, an imagination that distracts him as well, and from which MacWhirr keeps physically calling him back:

The spell of the storm had fallen upon Jukes. He was penetrated by it, absorbed by it; he was rooted in it with a rigour of dumb attention. Captain MacWhirr persisted in his cries, but the wind got between them like a solid wedge. He hung round Jukes' neck as heavy as a millstone, and suddenly the sides of their heads knocked together.

"Jukes! Mr. Jukes, I say!" (*Typhoon* 53)

Jukes answers MacWhirr's insistent cry, but we are told that within, "his heart, corrupted by the storm that breeds a craving for peace, rebelled against the tyranny of training and command" (53). Confronted with the gale, Jukes's imaginative thinking turns in upon itself. He has a "momentary hallucination of swift visions (it is said that a drowning man thus reviews all his life" (52). He detaches himself from the concrete particulars of the moment and withdraws into his own thinking. In his imaginative flight, he anticipates the worst. He thinks: "She's done for" (45). Throughout the storm, he is drawn to imagining that all is already lost. When MacWhirr says to him, "There's not much left by this time above deck for the sea to take away—unless you or me," Jukes replies, "Both, sir" (88). Jukes jumps to the conclusion that they will both die. But MacWhirr replies, "You are always meeting trouble half way, Jukes" (88). And indeed, "meeting trouble half way" is a succinct formulation of one of the dangers of abstract thinking in Conrad's world. Thinking which detaches itself from concrete particularities rests in a frozen structure of its own making; it seeks conclusiveness in the face of inconclusive situations whose destructive forces must be engaged. Jukes's thinking constructs a conclusive picture by assuming that "she's done for" before his task is over. MacWhirr pulls him back to that task, a few hours later exhorting him to face the wind: "Keep her facing it. They may say what they like, but the heaviest seas run with the wind. Facing it—always facing it—that's the way to get through. [ . . . ] That's enough for any man" (88). MacWhirr means it literally, but the moral implication is clear, to be repeated by Stein in *Lord Jim*: do not flee, but engage the destructive forces of life.

Levi includes an analogous episode in the chapter entitled “Off-shore,” set in Alaska, where Faussone has been sent on a rather dangerous job rigging an offshore drill. But the danger in the story begins earlier, when Faussone is being driven from the camp back to the hotel by the company salesman, and a snowstorm begins. Faussone has complained earlier about salesmen to the narrator: “No, no, I never met one who understood a thing or even made an effort,” and the narrator made a limp attempt to defend salesmen, more on the basis of politeness than conviction—“I have some friends who are salesmen” (*Monkey’s* 56). But the source of Faussone’s animosity becomes clearer when he describes how this salesman, Compton, had blithely shown him his task without any comprehension of its danger. Then, as the blizzard intensifies, Compton drives the car off the road in a panic. Neither man is prepared, especially Compton who, although he lives there, is dressed in city shoes:

The important thing was not to lose your head, but Compton had lost his right away: he was laughing and crying, he said he felt like he was smothering, and while there was still a ray of light, I ought to hurry to the camp for help. At a certain point he even grabbed me by the neck, so then I gave him a couple of punches in the stomach to calm him down, and he calmed down. (61)

Faussone sets out, terrified but not unhinged:

That ten kilometers was like forty, because at every step I sank in up to my knees. And though I was walking downhill, I began to sweat, my heart was pounding; and partly because of the blizzard, partly because of the effort, I was gasping, and I kept having to stop for breath. The flashlight was practically no use: all you could see was lots of horizontal white lines, and a sparkling powder [. . .] I realized I didn’t know which way to go. I didn’t have any kind of compass: until then my only guide had been the slope, and when this ended, I had no idea what to do. (61–2)

It is at this liminal moment—suspended in an isolating, solipsistic, sensory disorientation reminiscent of the very center of Dante’s *Inferno*, where direction itself disappears—that Faussone somehow manages to pull himself together and to orient himself precisely according to MacWhirr’s maxim, “Facing it—that’s the way to get through”:



I said to myself that the only thing was to use my head. I figured it this way: if the wind had blown the snow against the car, that meant it was coming from the north, from the direction of the camp. In other words, I just had to hope the wind wouldn't shift direction and to keep walking into the wind. Maybe I wouldn't find the camp right off, but I'd get close to it, at least, and I'd avoid the danger of going in circles like a damn cockroach. [ . . . ] After walking for two hours, I didn't find the camp, but I realized I was crossing the rail-road, the service line. The tracks were invisible, of course, but you could see the fences they use [ . . . ] so following the line of the fence, against the wind, I got to the camp. (62)

Faussone's encounter with fear does not end here, for there is still the task of erecting the derrick. But the principle and habit that allow him to succeed later are all contained in this episode, in his ability to look downward and outward, rather than merely inward. In the course of his stories, as we learn more of his triumphs and mistakes, it becomes increasingly clear that the truly ridiculous characters are the boastful ones, whose grand pictures are disconnected from the precarious and unpredictable world of reality. At one point, Faussone calls them "butterfly" theorists (*Monkey's* 118). He says of these butterflies, "[T]hey're the most dangerous type. If you mention money and safety to them, they look at you like you were spit, and all they think about is making something new and beautiful"; and he illustrates his point with a story about an ill-fated bridge in India (118). In *Typhoon*, the butterfly theory is less dangerous, but no less ridiculous: it is a storm strategy manual full of complex arcs and circles *and* the assumption that storms are for running from—despite MacWhirr's reasonable observation that you can't tell "what a gale is made of till you get it," at which point it is too late (*Typhoon* 33). But precisely the unpredictable particulars of the world end up vindicating these grounded comic characters—and indeed invert our expectations of them.

In this way, both works use comedy rhetorically as well as philosophically. And we know that both authors were sensitive to the importance and narrative complexity of rhetoric. Conrad described his concern with "effects achieved" in numerous places, including his famous preface on art<sup>4</sup> and his short essay "A Glance at Two Books," which describes an ideal of art as "produc[ing] certain definite effects upon the emotions of his readers" (*Last* 132). Dalya M. Sachs, however, has made a convincing case for Levi's masterful control of narrative voice which not only distinguishes the stages of his own relation to the events he

tells, but varying degrees of identification with the reader and others. Her analysis focuses upon his nonfiction work, *Se questo è un uomo*: one might imagine how much more freedom fiction would afford, fiction not bound by the constraints of bearing witness to atrocity, fiction free to call upon the muse of comedy. Both authors use this muse not only to draw us in, but to set us up, creating a distance between us and their protagonists by using intermediary readers of character (the other sailors in *Typhoon*, the narrator in *The Monkey's Wrench*) with whom we sympathize—and laugh. But the course of both narratives forces us, in looking down, to see that what seemed low is in fact high, that the concreteness of the world is a path to what is deepest and most human—that comedy might direct our gaze downwards, but that it is not ultimately reductive.

In the middle of *The Monkey's Wrench*, there appears an emblem not only of both protagonists, but of comedy itself. It is a monument—or rather, “a monument in reverse”<sup>5</sup>—recalled by Faussone, and constructed by his father and father's friends, “all of them old geezers, a bit loony, and a bit drunk” (*Monkey's* 73). Faussone explains:

they decided to make a monument and give it to the town, but it was going to be a monument in reverse: iron instead of bronze, and instead of all the eagles and wreaths of glory and the charging soldier with his bayonet, they wanted to make a statue of the Unknown Baker, yes, the man who invented the loaf. And they were going to make it of iron, in heavy black plate, in fact, welded and bolted. They actually made it, and it was good and solid, all right, but as for looks, it didn't come out too well. So the mayor and the priest wouldn't accept it, and instead of standing in the center of the square, it's rusting in the cellar, among the bottles of good wine. (73)

Like MacWhirr and Faussone, and like comedy itself, the monument inverts our expectations of heroism. It is low. It is solid but awkward—however well bolted, the form itself leaves something to be desired. And in its comical earthiness, it is easily susceptible to misunderstanding and dismissal. Yet, it is a tribute to the earthiest of miracles, bread—and, like both characters, it celebrates those critical but unwitnessed and anonymous moments of triumph in craft and life. Even if the monument's purpose is misunderstood by most, its offering rejected, its importance is not lost on Faussone himself. For he thinks of it at a moment of unusual triumph. He has just watched a huge derrick

set into place in the north Pacific, watched his own labor succeed at last in the midst of near tragic danger and comic seasickness, and he says: "Now, don't go telling this to anybody, but at that moment I felt like crying. Not because of the derrick but because of my father" (73). That Faussone's triumph of labor draws him to his father's comic edifice suggests the larger, darker context of all human achievement, but it also points to a deeper success at which work and comedy might both aim.

This success is one of human solidarity; and it brings us back to Levi's earlier claim that *The Monkey's Wrench* contains "a polemical charge against those who deny what you might call the redeeming power of work" (*Voice* 123). For work, like comedy, not only engages the disparate elements of the human condition but also makes possible a certain kinship born of the shared struggle. In Conrad's world, we see this solidarity most elementally, as it were, in the fellowship of the sea. In *Typhoon*, Jukes comes to appreciate MacWhirr, if fleetingly. The narrator of *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* expresses this fellowship more fully when he exclaims: "Haven't we, together and upon the immortal sea, wrung out a meaning from our sinful lives?" (173). And that work's Preface extends the idea to include the artist's craft as well, his palpable "care for the shape and ring of sentences," likened to "the motions of a labourer in a distant field" and aiming ultimately at "the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation" (*Nigger* xiii, xv, xii). The kinship with the laborer is no mere simile. In an anecdote that might call Faussone to mind, Conrad recounted to R. L. Megroz his esteem for the builder of a mill who was proud to hear it was still running after twenty years: "I love to talk to men like that, men with a craftsman's conscience, you know" (Megroz 22). Levi's narrator articulates a strikingly similar conviction during a conversation with Faussone about the shared ideal of work linking their "three professions, my two and his one"—chemist, writer, and construction worker (*Monkey's* 52). Their conversation begins in the doldrums, on a day when it seems to Faussone that "the world is [ . . . ] crooked [ . . . ] and it's always been crooked, and no one is going to straighten it up," but the more the two men talk, the more they appreciate the shared value of their different activities:

We agreed then on the good things we have in common. On the advantage of being able to test yourself, not depending on others in the test, reflecting yourself in your work. On the pleasure of seeing your creature grow [ . . . ] and when it's finished you look at it and you think that perhaps it will live longer than you, and perhaps it will be of use to

someone you don't know, who doesn't know you. Maybe, as an old man, you'll be able to come back and look at it, and it will seem beautiful, and it doesn't really matter so much that it will seem beautiful only to you, and you can say to yourself "maybe another man wouldn't have brought it off." (47, 53)

Thus a chapter on the seeming futility of our human condition culminates with comic poignancy on the limited triumphs of work and the possible solidarity it engenders.<sup>6</sup>

What, then, are the implications of this analysis for our understanding of Conrad in the twenty-first century? First, Levi's reworking of *Typhoon* underscores the human implications of Conrad's story that go beyond a quaintly historical tribute to a vanished race of sailors. Rather, by extending Conrad's concept of "work" across unexpected boundaries, Levi reanimates it as an inclusive ground of human solidarity. Second, the vision of comedy that Conrad and Levi share, one that embraces exceptions and disjunctions, that celebrates the diminutive, offers not only respite from, but a challenge to, the increasingly totalistic, globalizing claims and forces driving us on in our time. Nor is this vision of comedy simply deconstructive or ultimately reductive. For in its hope of community—however limited and fleeting—the glimpse it affords reminds us of another, older tradition of comedy, looking upwards.<sup>7</sup>

## NOTES

1. *Se questo è un uomo*, published in English under the title, *Survival in Auschwitz*.

2. *La chiave a stella*.

3. See Levi's 1979 interview with Giuseppe Grassano (*Voice* 123).

4. See the "Preface" to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* especially xiii, where he stresses that art is not mere expression of solidarity, but an appeal to the temperament of the reader.

5. "*un monumento all'incontrario*" (Levi, *Opere* 1010).

6. Let me add, however, that neither Conrad nor Levi deny that the larger context of particular work—be it in the Congo or in the concentration camp—can render it deeply problematic. As Levi says in *The Drowned and the Saved*, "sabotage of Nazi work [ . . . ] meant overcoming atavistic inner resistances . . . So you see, love for a job well done is a deeply ambiguous virtue" (*Voice* 122). And comedy itself is no less contextual.

7. The notion of comedy as a means of restoring community can be seen in Dante Alighieri and William Shakespeare, for example, authors to whom both Conrad and Levi allude in their writings.

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