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HERMAN MELVILLE'S AND ROBERT LOWELL'S "BENITO CERENO"
TALE INTO DRAMA

Robert Lowell's *The Old Glory*¹ is a collection of three plays. Two of them: *Endecott and the Red Cross* and *My Kinsman, Major Molineux* are based on Hawthorne's stories, the third one is a dramatic version of Melville's long tale *Benito Cereno*.

Some of the changes introduced by Lowell are purely technical and required by the change of one literary kind into another. One of them is the introduction of Captain Delano's bosun, Perkins, who accompanies him all the time as the captain must share his thoughts with someone on the stage in order to share them with the audience. Therefore the dangerous situation at the end of the play is observed by Perkins and the final conflict on board the mutineered ship starts with Perkin's attempt to uncover the skeleton at the bows of the ship. The scene begins and ends on board the "San Dominick" while in Melville's tale the events at the moment of the highest tension take place in the boat between the two ships (again a change required by the exigencies of the stage).

Moreover Lowell introduces other details not so blatantly necessary, e.g. Benito Cereno offers Captain Delano a bottle of old Spanish wine, and in the middle of the play Babu entertains the guest by an allegorical show symbolizing the ship's misfortunes (which ought to have suggested to the still ignorant Delano that the Negroes rule the ship). The final conflict is not caused by Don Benito's escape from his own ship into Delano's boat as in Melville, but by the American captains refusal to honour the skull and walk on the Spanish flag. This last detail connects Lowell's play with two others: each of them has one scene centred round a flag.

There are, however, other changes introduced by Lowell which go

¹ R. Lowell, *The Old Glory*, New York 1965.

deeper and are, perhaps, more significant. Most of them concern Captain Delano's character. Melville describes him at the beginning of his tale as "a person of a singularly undistrustful good nature, not liable, except on extraordinary and repeated excitement, and hardly then to indulge in personal alarms, any way involving the imputation of malign evil in man. Whether, in view of what humanity is capable, such a trait implies, along with a benevolent heart, more than ordinary quickness and accuracy of intellectual perception, may be left to the wise to determine" ². Delano is certainly very much determined by the ideas and attitudes of his time. When he begins to suspect a mutiny on board the "San Dominick" he imagines Don Benito as its leader but wonders:

"The whites, too, by nature were the shrewder race... But if the whites had dark secrets concerning Don Benito, could then Don Benito be any way in complicity with the blacks? But they were too stupid. Besides, who ever heard of a white so far a renegade as to apostatize from his very species almost, by leaguering in against it with negroes?" ³

On the other hand, Delano can be sentimental in a Rousseauistic vein about the primitive naturalness of some negresses with small children on board the "San Dominick". Also, when the ship is finally captured, Delano prevents acts of cruelty against the shackled Negroes by the now free Spaniards seeking revenge. When the truth is discovered Delano is not "wholly undeceived" as an American critic R. H. Fogle has put it. The "implications of the situation are permanently closed to him". And yet he has "struggled to comprehend the action" and has learned something ⁴. If Don Benito will always remain a mystery to him, he has at least discovered that mysteries exist.

Lowell, on the other hand, delineates the character of the American captain stressing all the time his efficient smugness. The ship's name is changed from "Bachelor's Delight" in Melville to "President Adams". This allows to introduce the following conversation in the very first scene of Lowell's play:

DELANO

Come to think of it, he rather let us down
By losing the election just after we named this ship,
the President Adams. Adams is a nervous dry fellow.
When you have travelled as much as I have,

² H. Melville, *Shorter Novels of ...*, New York, Universal Library, pp. 3—4.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 45.

⁴ R. Harter Fogle, *Benito Cereno*, [in:] *Melville. A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by R. Chase, Englewood Cliffs, N. Y., 1962, pp. 118 and 119.

you'll learn that that sort doesn't export, Perkins.
Adams didn't get a vote outside New England!

He is all for Jefferson who has "the popular touch":

Of course he's read too many books,
But I always said an idea or two won't sink
our Republic.
I'll tell you this, Perkins,
Mr. Jefferson is a gentleman and an American.

PERKINS

They say he has two illegitimate Negro children.

DELANO

The more the better! That's the quickest way
to raise the blacks to our level [...]

[...] when a man's in office, Sir, we all pull behind him!

Delano opposes the local New England patriotism of Perkins and voices an all-American superiority towards other nations:

DELANO

Oh, the French! They're like the rest of the Latins,
they're hardly white people,
they start with a paper republic
and end with a toy soldier, like Bonaparte⁵.

Against the background of this conversation some similes put by Lowell into Delano's mouth seem too highbrow or too poetic, e.g. when observing the mysterious ship through the telescope he compares the new sun to a silver dollar hanging to her stern. He is ready to help the unfortunate ship with supplies and fresh water, but demands an almost automatic gratitude. When faced with the lack of manners on the part of the Spanish captain he is therefore doubly hurt. Lowell gives him credit for courage: he refuses to honour the skull and crossbones and tread on the Spanish flag. His statement: "You'll find I am made of tougher stuff than your Spaniards"⁶ shows both his courage and his pride while Perkins is ready to obey and actually does so in order to save his life. On the other hand, Delano can be also given to senseless revenge: at the very end of the play he does not only shoot the Negro leader, Babu, but empties all the barrels of his pistol into the body though Babu was ready to surrender. (He is taken alive in Melville.) Perkins is willing to accept the Negro's surrender in order "to save someone". Benito's comment on the scene is:

⁵ *The Old Glory*, pp. 121—122.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 187.

My God how little these people understand!⁷

Lowell's play exposes the shallowness and lack of imagination of the efficient and active type of an American. Yet something has been lost in the process of changing the tale into the play. Melville's story has a tragic dimension. Like a tragic protagonist Benito Cereno has gone through a terrifying experience for which there could be no remedy. He has learned something about the horrors latent in human beings (both white and black), and is unable to survive the knowledge. Delano has learned little but perhaps vaguely realizes that insoluble problems exist. As Lowell used his play to criticize the American character, the tragic aspect of Melville's tale has been lost. Cereno has the painful knowledge and Delano has not. There is no effort on his part to understand anything outside the scheme of things to which he is used. He can deal with a dangerous situation but is unable to understand its background and its mechanism.

Perhaps Lowell's play proves again what has been repeatedly stated by American and non-American literary critics, i.e. that contemporary literature has lost the tragic sense of life. An American sociologist, Orrin E. Klapp, thinks that it is a specially American fallacy. "It has sometimes been remarked", he says in an article entitled *Tragedy and the American Climate of Opinion*, "that Americans have a kind of armour against tragic experience. Courage, optimism, realism, the Pollyanna spirit — what should it be called?" "Somehow missing from this land of plenty", says another critic, Robert Wiener, is an awareness that "the world is not a pleasant little nest made for our protection, but a vast and largely hostile environment, in which we can achieve great things only by defying the gods; and that this defiance inevitably brings its own punishment. We have our share of troubles, to be sure but without the conviction that trouble is permanent and necessary; rather it is an exceptional phenomenon that we must be good sports to face when it comes and work hard to eliminate as soon as possible. A poll would easily show that most Americans think of tragedy simply as fortuitous"⁸.

Lowell observed and presented in his play the qualities of the American character which lead to this. But the reader of his *Benito Cereno* begins to wonder if, by making his play a polemic, he himself does not show a similar defect when compared with the older writer.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 194.

⁸ Included in: J.D. Hurrell, *Two Modern American Tragedies. Reviews and Criticism of "Death of a Salesman" and "A Streetcar Named Desire"*, New York 1961, p. 28 ff.

„BENITO CERENO” HERMANA MELVILLE'A i ROBERTA LOWELLA
CZYLI OPOWIEŚĆ PRZEMIENIONA W DRAMAT

STRESZCZENIE

The Old Glory (Dawna chwała) Roberta Lowella zawiera trzy dramaty, dwa z nich oparte są na opowiadaniach Hawthorne'a, trzeci, pt. *Benito Cereno*, jest dramatyczną wersją długiej opowieści Hermana Melville'a. Pisząc tę sztukę, Lowell wprowadził pewne zmiany miejsca i osób podyktowane przez odmienną strukturę dramatu. Ponadto zasadniczą zmianą, już nie podyktowaną wymaganiami sceny, jest posłużenie się postacią kpt. Delano dla krytyki niektórych typowych cech amerykańskich, zwłaszcza niemożności głębszej oceny danej sytuacji przy równoczesnej sprawności w działaniu. Wydaje się, że przez tę zmianę Lowell zubożył opowieść Melville'a, który wyposażył zarówno postać tytułową, jak i kpt. Delano w pewne cechy bohaterów tragicznych dochodzących do głębszego zrozumienia otaczającego ich świata.

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