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Reconciliation To One's Fate: Irony, Humour and Stoicism as Coping Mechanisms in Erich

Maria Remarque's *The Black Obelisk*

Abstract

Reading the literature on Erich Maria Remarque's works, it is noticeable that there is little scholarship on *The Black Obelisk* written in 1956. By close-reading the novel, the thesis analyses how in spite of the traumatic experience of the Great War, hyperinflation, high death tolls, and the rise of nationalism, the main character and his friends maintain a well-refined sense of humour and irony. Besides, it inspects the role of stoicism and argues that all three help the characters to deal with the aftermath of WWI. As results suggest, in addition to distance established by irony, humour, and stoicism, all three elements work as tools of symbolic resistance against the rise of fascism. A sense of criticism of fascism is found within the usage of the three key elements.

Introduction

Reading the literature on Erich Maria Remarque's works, it is noticeable that there is little scholarship on *The Black Obelisk* written in 1956 (post-WWII, when the atrocities of the Holocaust and decolonisation had shattered Europe's self-image as progressive and great). The chronologically arranged and not fragmented plot is set in the early 1920's Weimar Republic. It tells the story of Ludwig Bodmer, the first-person narrator and the protagonist, a World War I veteran living in Werdenbrück, who belongs to the 'lost generation'¹, sells tombstones in the face of the hyper-inflation of the 1920's, occasionally plays the organ in the town chapel, somewhat erratically seeks for a female companion, and is looking for the meaning of life whilst dealing with the consequences of the Great War. The main themes of the novel pivot around the ways in which Bodmer and his friends deal with the aftermaths of the First World War: through irony, humour, and stoicism. In spite of the traumatic experience of the Great War, hyper-inflation, high death tolls, and the rise of nationalism, the main character of the novel and his friends maintain a well refined sense of humour and an ironic distance.

One of the most interesting aspects of this novel in the context of its use of humour and irony is the author's choice of a retrospective setting, looking back at the 1920s from the vantage point of the 1950s. In how far are the periods of the Cold War and the Weimar Republic connected? Did Remarque, a First World War veteran himself, see similar patterns between them? In search of answers, Brian Murdoch offers useful insights. He writes:

Remarque notes in his prefatory statement [to the novel] that the world of the 1950s is one of destruction again, of death and of tears, and of maintaining peace by inventing

¹ A term used to describe the generation of disillusioned, devastated and disappointed young people who grew up seeing vast amounts of deaths and tragic events during the Great War. See Fussell, 19-39 for more insightful commentary.

weapons that could destroy everyone. He proposes, however, to return to . . . (to the fabulous years, when hope still fluttered like a flag above us all, and we believed in such suspicious-sounding things as humanity, justice, and tolerance — and also in the notion that one world war might surely be a sufficient lesson for a generation. —) (68-69).

What Murdoch suggests here is that Remarque's choice of setting might have been affected by anxiety about the conflict between the two superpowers of the USA and the Soviet Union turning into another war. By ironically revisiting the times of the Weimar Republic and pointing at the rise of fascism, Remarque critically explores the failure of WWI to teach the next generation a lesson. The insight on the rise of fascism also lays the foundation for the relevance of the novel to our world. Although (neo-)fascism is not as extreme as it was in the 20th century, today, the extreme right seems to be flourishing again. For instance, in his overview of (neo-)fascist examples in the 21st century, William I. Robinson lists “the Israeli invasion of Gaza and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians, to the scapegoating and criminalisation of immigrant workers and the Tea Party movement in the United States, genocide in the Congo, the US/United Nations occupation of Haiti, the spread of neo-Nazis and skinheads in Europe, and the intensified Indian repression in occupied Kashmir” (6). Remarque critically explores the failure of WWI to teach the next generation a lesson. Reading the novel in our current time, then, also means to reflect on the failure of WWI, WWII, and the wars that followed since to teach us a lesson and on whether we can learn something from how the characters cope with their situation.

As already mentioned, scholarship on *The Black Obelisk* is rather rare, and it has so far not considered the topic of stoicism. For instance, in her article ““A witches’ dance of numbers”: Fictional portrayals of business and accounting transactions at a time of crisis”,

Lisa Evans uses it in order “to show how literary texts can be used as a source for gaining insights into social practices, including accounting” (169), thus situating it in the realm of economics and not sufficing the research. In his chapter titled “Rootless in Weimar: *Der schwarze Obelisk* and *Drei Kameraden*”, Brian Murdoch presents useful insights on Remarque’s biography and work, as well as contextual information. He brilliantly analyses the plot and the role of irony within the novel. The topic of ironic distance, if from a slightly different perspective, has also been touched upon in German scholarship. Mariana Parvanova discusses various motives in Remarque’s writings and argues that the characteristic of the main character in *The Black Obelisk* appear to be an intense sense of humorous provocation and irony. Finally, in the afterword of *The Black Obelisk* titled “Unser Golgatha,” Tilman Westphalen contextualises the novel in terms of its autobiographical motives and gives multiple explanations on the symbolism of various objects. Nevertheless, none of these texts discuss irony, humour, or stoicism specifically as coping mechanisms when it comes to the protagonist Bodmer and his friends dealing with the aftermaths of World War I. My contribution to the existing scholarship will thus focus on this issue. The main research question of the thesis is as follows: How do irony, humour, and stoicism work as coping mechanisms and how do they contribute towards reconciliation to one’s fate in Erich Maria Remarque’s *The Black Obelisk*?

The thesis is divided into three parts which focus on how irony, humour and stoicism function within the novel. Throughout, by close reading and interpreting the novel, I examine how each key concept operates within the realm of characters and how they are related to each other. All of them, the thesis argues, can be seen as coping mechanisms in the post WWI

setting. Focusing on the characters of Bodmer, his friend Georg Kroll² and others, I will show how regardless of the consequences stemming from the Great War, the characters in the novel are able to distance themselves from their complex fates by employing humour, irony, and stoicism. The connection between the three concepts is not straightforward, but they are linked through the notion of distance. That is, on the one hand, stoics manifest a rational and calm attitude which seems to suggest that there is no space for any laughter and fun. On the other, stoicism pertains to a certain distance created in order to maintain the previously mentioned rational and calm attitudes in any given situation. Similarly, irony and humour generate distance between the subject and the indirectly, ironically or humorously implied object.

In terms of irony itself, Claire Colebrook argues that “reading literature ironically requires that we think beyond the traditional philosophical commitment to propositional, translatable and non-contradictory thinking, recognising that truth is not simply there to be referred to by an innocent language” (173). In other words, one has to transgress conventional and ordinary ways of reading in order to understand the actual meaning of words. Interestingly enough, Paul Fussell notes that irony can also add a significant meaning to a certain memory. In his discussion of the connection between irony and memory, thus the past, in the discourse on the First World War, he writes: “By applying to the past a paradigm of ironic action, a rememberer is enabled to locate, draw forth, and finally shape into significance an event or a moment which otherwise would merge without meaning into the general undifferentiated stream” (41). This is extremely present in the novel as Bodmer’s and

² In the thesis all the characters are called by their last names. However, Georg and Heinrich Kroll are brothers. For that reason, in order to avoid confusion throughout the thesis Georg is mentioned only by his first name.

his friends' language as well as their actions are very often indirect and ironic and, as this thesis argues, help them to reconcile with their fates.

Humour, Marta Dynel argues, "can be simply defined as something that has the *potential for inviting amusement in an individual, its producer and/or receiver*" (27). However, Dynel writes, when thinking about humour one has to make a distinction between "humorousness and funniness" (26). According to her, "funniness and non-funniness are two opposite poles of a continuum which depends on an individual's sense of humour and idiosyncratic perceptions at a given time and in a given situation . . . On the other hand, humorousness vs non-humorousness is considered an objectively verifiable dichotomy: a stimulus either is or is not humorous" (26-27). Thus humour (or humorousness) is considered to be somewhat objective when opposed to funniness which relies on an individual's sense of humour. *The Black Obelisk*, the thesis argues, presents characters who use humour as a coping mechanism in order to deal with the aftermath of the Great War. In fact, their connection with humour echoes Viktor Frankl's words. In *Man's Search For Meaning*, when describing and analysing experiences of a concentration camp through the framework of psychotherapy, Frankl states that "humor was another of the soul's weapons in the fight for self-preservation. It is well known that humor, more than anything else in the human make-up, can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds" (63). In *The Black Obelisk*, humour is vital for characters belonging to the 'lost generation' as it allows them "to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds".

In relation to stoicism, John Sellars argues that "the ultimate message of Stoic ethics is that our own happiness is fully within our own power here and now, if only we are prepared to see the world aright, and that once achieved this happiness can never be taken away from us" (133). Despite some moments in the novel when he questions the meaning of

life, Bodmer does exactly that: Writes poetry, speculates on the foreign exchange market, lies to customers in order to earn more money, together with a colleague George mocks a greedy restaurant owner for their own good and eat for free, thus constantly attempts to create his own happiness. Another crucial point is addressed by Lawrence C. Becker. He argues that stoics “reject anthropocentric views of the cosmos” (11). According to him, it has to do with the fact that the “universe is unimaginably large and old, and in constant, tumultuous, evolutionary change” (11). In other words, humans are not central in this constantly changing universe, thus they have no control of any consequences. Instead of trying to be in charge of them, stoics propose, people should accept their fate and perpetuate happiness from within. Becker notes that “stoic training aims to make it possible for us to salvage some form of a good life under adversity, and to be able to handle sudden, massive changes in our circumstances” (20-21). Although this argument seems to clash with the anti-fascist motives in the novel in the sense of acceptance of fate, one should look at it from a different perspective. According to stoics, humans are only in charge of their judgments, but “this is no bad thing, for this is the means by which we are able to secure the only thing that has any real value, namely virtue, and this virtue is the only thing that can bring us genuine happiness” (Sellars 114). Instead of resigning to his fate, Bodmer accepts it and strives for happiness in his own ways. That also includes symbolic resistance against the rise of fascism. Therefore, this research shows, one can be stoic whilst doing both: accepting fate the way it is yet maintaining happiness regardless of consequences and challenges posed by the rise of fascism and the Great War.

Irony

In the first section of the thesis I look at *The Black Obelisk* through the lens of irony. There are many points of reference when it comes to analysing the role of irony in literature. One can look at irony as either a literary device exploited by an author or a narrator in ways that the characters themselves are not aware of. Alternatively, certain characters can use verbal irony within the narrative whereby what is said is contrasted with the actual meaning (Singh 67). The thesis focuses on the latter and inspects irony as it is used by characters. That is, the thesis argues, the characters in *The Black Obelisk* use ironic distance in order to deal with their fates.

Before delving into the analysis, however, it is important to draw attention to the connection between humour and irony. In his article, Raj Kishor Singh claims that irony is a “means to humour” (67), suggesting that irony belongs to an umbrella category of humour. Besides, Singh argues, irony “can be an effective way to not only approach such topics [in the context of his article for instance hypocrisy in religion, government] but do so in way that is humorous or entertaining” (67), implying that irony is often necessary when addressing controversial or problematic topics. A similar correlation, although not political, is identified by Dynel who argues that one of the objectives an ironic speaker has to achieve is to evoke humorous reactions in those who are listening (420). She even goes further than this and introduces the notion of humorous irony which mostly has to do with its sarcastic nature. According to her, “humorous irony must implicate (truthful) evaluative meaning, with the humour being an additional effect” (421). As these two critical insights show, humour and irony are indeed intertwined. However, Dynel warns, it “is important to remember . . . that only some irony qualifies as humour” and “not all humour which exhibits overt untruthfulness or which communicates negatively evaluative speaker meaning can be

technically dubbed ‘irony’” (421). Thus, in order to avoid confusion and discuss both concepts sufficiently, throughout the thesis irony is examined in the broad sense. The sections on irony and humour are divided into two equally important parts while also keeping in mind their inevitable connection.

In the novel, readers are constantly confronted with the juxtaposition of the complicated lives of the characters and their well-maintained overtly ironic distance. In other words, irony is extremely frequent and functions as a mechanism for people to deal with their terrible living conditions, trauma, and the unforeseeable future. One of the most accurate descriptions of trauma is told by Bodmer:

Five years ago, when I was a soldier in the trenches, I never thought I would be so well off again. At that time we were in Flanders; it was the big attack on Kemmelberg, and we lost three-quarters of our company. On the second day, Georg Kroll was taken to the hospital with a stomach wound, but almost three weeks passed before I was knocked out by a shot in the knee. Then came the collapse, and I finally became a schoolmaster as my sick mother had wished and as I had promised her before she died. She was sick so often that she thought if I had an official position with life tenure nothing bad could happen to me any more. She died in the last months of the war, but I took my examinations just the same and was sent to a village on the heath, where I stayed till I grew sick of dinning into children things I did not believe myself and being buried alive amid memories I wanted to forget. (29)

In relation to irony, when comparing the current state of Werdenbrück with before the Great War, Bodmer thinks about the fact that his generation is confused and restless. Memories of the war keep “bobbing back disconcertingly, and then you are confronted by irreconcilable contrast: the skies of childhood and the science of killing, lost youth and the cynicism of

knowledge gained too young” (51). If irony “is a statement in which the meaning that a speaker implies differs sharply from the meaning that is ostensibly expressed” (Abrams & Harpham 165), then one can interpret Bodmer’s words, especially the reference to “knowledge” as carrying an ironic implication. That is, in truth, the Great War had brought anything but broader or at least sufficient knowledge. It can be deemed ironic that people from the ‘lost generation’ who have faced death and got their youth stolen believe that the knowledge they have gained throughout the war is somewhat superior to the one people who did not take part in the war have. In fact, it is the opposite as it is not only their youth, but any possibility of gaining any other knowledge ‘lost generation’ has learnt was the science of war and everything that contributes to the realm of war. However, it turned out that after the Great War such knowledge was not only useless, but also that the heroism associated with it eventually appeared to be a sham. That is, after the war, soldiers who took part in it were left traumatised, empty-handed, and ignored. In such a way, Bodmer’s words indeed can be seen as carrying a bitterly ironic meaning. A similar attitude towards the experience from the Great War is expressed by Georg, a close friend of Bodmer and one of his employers. When talking to Bodmer about life at the workplace, Georg says: “The war was four and a half years ago At that time infinite misery made us human”. Bodmer, passing Georg another cigar, replies: “You know everything! Intelligence, experience, and age seem to be good for something after all” (7). This dialogue can be read as ironic in the sense that it plays with conceptions of what makes one ‘human’ and the fact that if anything makes someone human, it is definitely not wars. On the contrary, wars are one of the most cynical and inhumane matters humankind has ever faced. Both Georg’s and Bodmer’s words carry the same implied message which suggests that their youths were stolen. They became humans, thus adults, too early, and experience they got from the war is worthless after all.

Another way in which irony is at work has to do with Bodmer's relationships with people who surround him. Mariana Parvanova argues that Bodmer's humorous provocation and irony differ within different social interactions. According to her, Bodmer, as war veteran and a home returner, flees into an ironic distance whereby both humorous provocation and irony help him face the complexity of life (45). For example, he mocks Heinrich Kroll since he finds him obnoxious (45). Kroll is "the problem child of the family, the other owner of the firm" (10) who disrespects Bodmer and treats him unfairly. He believes he is extremely smart and clever when in fact he is the one who leads the company to a bankruptcy due to his lack of professionalism. However, Kroll always blames Bodmer and constantly in a derogatory way calls him a schoolteacher. A sense of mocking irony can be found in one of the conversations between the two. Kroll informs Bodmer that he might soon get fired to which Bodmer ironically answers: "How far?" (180). This irritates Kroll. He replies by saying that he will go "too far" and that he should know that he is only an employee here. However, Bodmer remains ironic and says: "I forget it all the time. Otherwise you'd have to give me a triple salary—as draftsman, office manager, and advertising manager" (180). From this quote we can understand that Bodmer, in fact, thinks that he deserves a higher salary, as he is doing considerably more work than he is supposed to. Instead of saying it directly, Bodmer maintains ironic distance and mocks Kroll by playing on the double meaning of forgetting here: while Kroll supposes that Bodmer forgets about the fact that he is "only" an employee at the company, Bodmer, on the contrary, "forgets" about it, since he is actually much more than only an employee, and he is almost always working, even on Sundays.

A comparable sense of mocking irony can also be seen in the relation between Bodmer and Sergeant Knopf – who is his next-door neighbour. By the end of the novel, Knopf is on the verge of death due to alcoholism. Even though the doctors state that Knopf

will be dead within the time span of several days, he remains alive for much longer and continues drinking. For that reason, Bodmer ironically sees him as “a creature compound of physical and chemical marvels, with a circulatory system that is a work of genius, a heart mechanism one can only regard with awe, a liver and two kidneys by contrast with which the I. G. [Interessengemeinschaft] Farben factories are ridiculous journeyman workshops” (375). Almost every single night, Sergeant Knopf, a war veteran, gets drunk and comes to urinate on the black obelisk - the “trade-mark” of their company (71). After several times of Knopf doing so, Bodmer ironically reflects on the fact “that it has taken nature millions of years, from the amoeba up through fish, frog, vertebrates, and monkeys, to achieve old Knopf, a creature compound of physical and chemical marvels” (375). By epitomising Knopf as this perfect creature, Bodmer mocks the entire evolution of humankind suggesting that the last step of it appears to be urinating on the tombstones. In Bodmer’s eyes, Knopf, a perfect miracle was “called . . . simply for the purpose of making life miserable for young recruits and afterward, on a moderate pension from the state, of giving itself up to drink! Truly God sometimes takes a great deal of trouble for nothing!” (375). By describing the evolution of the human species with Knopf as the final result, Bodmer critically comments on his deplorable situation. Such bitterly ironic juxtaposition of Knopf’s actions with the evolution of humans portrays the complete failure of WWI.³ Knopf, who used to terrorise recruits during the war, is now an alcoholic, he is even worse off after the war than the recruits he terrorised.

Following Parvanova’s insight on different functions of irony in relation to different people, I would now also like to introduce a different type of irony: friendly and not provocative irony. The first time Knopf cannot get home by himself and other people help

³ On the bitter irony and the irony associated with memories of the Great War, see Fussell.

him, the widow Konersmann, the neighborhood snoop (332), begins shouting at all the passers-by that she will inform the police. In response, Heinrich Brüggemann, the plumber, shouts back: “Shut your trap, you disgusting old hag! . . . Herr Knopf is seriously ill. I wish it was you” (332). Although it is dark and faces cannot be recognised, she understands that it is Brüggemann who says that and begins waiting for him to be going home. In the meantime, Brüggemann is having a conversation with Bodmer, Georg, and Lisa Watzek, the wife of Watzek, the butcher. Being disappointed by the fact that even though earlier he won a bet but received nothing, Brüggemann says: “Fate is what I’d call it” (335). Bodmer ironically twists the conversation and advises him: “If you want to avoid your fate, Herr Brüggemann, then don’t go back by way of Hackenstrasse. The widow Konersmann is checking the passers-by; she has borrowed a strong flashlight and she has that in one hand and a beer bottle in the other” (335). What Bodmer actually means by these words is that Konersmann is waiting for Brüggemann to go home in order to perhaps potentially hurt him. However, Bodmer makes it ironic and parallels Brüggemann’s fate with a foreseeable trouble. The essence of one’s fate is that one does not have any control of it, thus it is inevitable. However, Bodmer deconstructs the notion and attributes an ironic meaning to it, therefore allowing Brüggemann to change his fate. Thus, the scene shows, Bodmer’s ironic distance depends on his relationships with people. Unlike Heinrich and Knopf, Brüggemann is a friend of Bodmer, and so his irony is rather helpful. We see here that with his friends Bodmer uses tolerant and passive irony which helps him connect with his surroundings (Parvanova 45) and comment critically on the notion of ‘fate’.

Finally, both ironic and symbolic resistance against the rise of fascism is also visible in one of the passages where Riesenfeld ironically blames “the bicyclists” for the fact that Germany lost the war. When Heinrich Kroll arrives at the workplace, he insists Bodmer talk

respectfully while at work, to which Bodmer responds that it is Sunday and he is not working after all. Heinrich looks at Riesenfeld and says: “There you see . . . That’s why we lost the war. Because of the slackness of the intellectuals and because of the Jews” (251). Riesenfeld ironically answers to him that it is also the fault of the bicyclists (251). Heinrich gets confused and asks for a clarification: “What do you mean the bicyclists?” Riesenfeld responds with a similar question and asks what does Kroll mean with the Jews? (251). It is obvious that neither the Jews nor the bicyclists were responsible for the fact that Germany lost the war. However, instead of explaining that directly, Riesenfeld uses irony in order to make Kroll realise that his comment is absurd. His actual message differs from the implied one in the sense of indirect mockery of fascism as it can be argued that Riesenfeld actually suggests that it does not make sense to blame a particular group for losing the war. He addresses Kroll’s fascist remark by making fun of him and by revealing it as nonsensical. By confronting Kroll, Riesenfeld can be seen to be critical of the rise of fascism.

Humour

Besides irony, when it comes to coping with the atrocities of the Great War, humour plays a crucial role in the novel, as it helps the characters in *The Black Obelisk* to make their daily lives more bearable and less grim. In relation to the term itself, in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Abrams and Harpham distinguish between wit and humour. The first one, they claim, only covers spoken or written word whereas humour is much broader range of reference which includes appearance, actions, etc. According to them, “the term ‘humor’ refers to what is purely comic: it evokes . . . sympathetic laughter, or else laughter which is an end in itself” (382). Nevertheless, it is important to not forget Dynel’s distinction between humorousness and funniness. According to Dynel, the former is objective whilst the latter relies on an individual’s sense of humour.

In *The Black Obelisk*, the most striking humorous scenes are those in which Bodmer and Georg outwit and humorously mock Eduard Knobloch, an extremely greedy owner of the Walhalla restaurant. The first time readers get to know Knobloch and his restaurant, the narrator Bodmer explains their strategy to eat there much more cheaply. According to him, some time ago Knobloch introduced a system which made his customers pay with coupons. The idea behind it was simple: “One bought a book with ten tickets and thereby got the single meals somewhat cheaper” (21). It was supposed to help his business to evade inflation yet eventually did not prove itself and became unprofitable making Knobloch lose money. Reacting to that, Knobloch terminated payments with coupons and “expected that in ten days they would all be used up” (22), but Bodmer and Georg repurchase coupons from friends and colleagues making it to over 30 coupons in each’s possession, which allows them to benefit at the expense of Knobloch’s failure. Every single time Bodmer and Georg come to the restaurant, Knobloch invents an excuse or a trick in order to make them leave. However, they

always outwit him and get in which is humorous in itself as well. In one of the scenes they are refused to be given a table. Yet together with Renée de la Tour (real name Lotte), a local singer, they manage to get seats as their friend Willy, who is already there, offers them to join since he “knows about our [Bodmer’s and Georg’s] war with Eduard and follows it with the interest of a born gambler” (24). They want to order but the waiter ignores them. After some time, “suddenly the dining room resounds to the thunder of a first-class Prussian barrack-room roar: “*Ober!* You there, can’t you hear?” (24). Everyone is in shock, even Bodmer himself is confused. “Eduard arrives. He can’t make out what is happening. He glances under the table” (24). It turns out that it is Renée de la Tour’s trick. As readers learn later, she sings in both soprano and bass voice and thus used the latter to get the waiter to pay attention. Knobloch cannot figure out where the voice has come from. Bodmer and Georg suggest that Knobloch is imagining it all and that he is clearly overworked: “Take a vacation. We have no wish to sell your relatives a cheap headstone of imitation Italian marble, and that’s certainly all you’re worth” (25). As we can see, in this excerpt humour is at work not only in the verbal realm, but also through actions, repetition, and voice. Besides Bodmer’s and Georg’s witty comments, Renée de la Tour alters her voice from one to another in order to confuse Knobloch and succeeds. Later in the novel, the trick is actually repeated multiple times, each time in a humorous way. It suits the definition of humour as coined by Abrams and Harpham who differentiate between wit and humour and argue that the latter one includes a variety of elements including actions.

The second example in which we can see humour has to do with the coffin-maker Wilke’s “ghost hour” (293). As Bodmer explains it, “between twelve and one at night, the coffin-maker usually grows melancholy, sleepy, and rather scared. It is his weak hour. One wouldn’t believe it, but at that time he is afraid of ghosts, and the canary that hangs over his

workbench in a parrot cage is not company enough for him” (293). In order to comfort him, Bodmer, Georg and Kurt Bach, another colleague of theirs, stay with Wilke during such nights. However, even though they work together and get along well, they still make fun of his fear. For example, in one of the scenes when they are waiting the hour out, “the night wind slams a door in the house opposite. Bells ring from the steeples. It is midnight. Wilke gulps down a schnaps” (297). Even though Wilke is already afraid, Kurt Bach uses his chance to ask everyone a question: “How about a stroll to the cemetery?” (297). Wilke becomes uneasy, his “mustache quivers with horror in the wind blowing in through the window” and he shouts at everyone: “And you call yourselves friends!” (297). Right after his words they hear a noise in the cemetery. Bodmer takes advantage of Wilke’s anxiety and mocks him. He says: “A pair of lovers out there. Stop working for a while, Alfred. Eat! Ghosts stay away from people while they’re eating. Haven’t you any sprats?”. Wilke feels offended and asks Bodmer why he is reminding him of his “unhappy love life and the loneliness of a man in his best years?” to which Bodmer mockingly replies that Wilke is a victim of his profession (297). This scene portrays how Kurt Bach’s and Bodmer’s wit creates a somewhat comic atmosphere regardless of the ghastly setting. At this point it is also useful to come back to Parvanova’s point and apply her insights to this case, yet in relation to humour. Parvanova suggests that Bodmer’s ironic distance alters depending on his relations with different people. It can be argued that it is also Bodmer’s humour that varies within different social interactions and in this example it is of friendly roots. In other words, in contrast to greedy Eduard and the way Bodmer and Georg mock him, humour in this scene pivots around friendly pranks.

Stoicism

The final part of the thesis covers the notion of stoicism and inspects its role in the novel. Within the context of the thesis, stoicism should be understood as one's capability of accepting one's fate regardless of any circumstances. As it was touched upon in the introduction, stoics are "able to handle sudden, massive changes" in their lives (Becker 20-21). In order to grasp the essence of the term, one also has to understand the foundation of such thinking. According to stoics, humans are not by any means in charge of the universe and therefore cannot change anything that happens to them. However, stoics argue, they can learn to accept it and in such a way manifest happiness, as the only thing that humans are in charge of is their attitude.⁴ The most prominent example of stoicism in *The Black Obelisk* is Bodmer's questioning of the authority of Wernicke, the doctor at the psychiatric hospital. Bodmer himself is not a patient at the hospital - his role is to track Isabelle's progress and communicate it with Wernicke. In one of his monologues one can detect a pattern of stoic thinking.

In his book, Murdoch argues that "Bodmer's most significant lessons in life come not in the supposedly normal world, which is normal neither in the political nor in the economic sense, but in the confines of the psychiatric hospital, in his relationship with Bodendiek, the priest, Wernicke, the doctor, and especially with Geneviève Terboven⁵, who calls herself Isabelle while she calls him Rudolf or Ralph" (76). In other words, the most fundamental knowledge that Bodmer gains is primarily through his relationships with people who, figuratively speaking, in one way or another deal with alternate realities or worlds. These are

⁴ For a detailed analysis of stoic system, logics, physics, ethics and the legacy of stoics see Sellars 1-159.

⁵ In the English translation she is named Fräulein Terhoven.

spiritual, religious, or the ones that the characters in the psychiatric hospital themselves create. In relation to the latter, one could argue that such worlds exemplify traumas and aftermaths stemming from the Great War. For instance, one of the patients there thinks he is “made entirely of glass and begs everyone not to jostle him because he is already cracked” (43). Another example is Pope Gregory Vü, who “does not need to persuade anyone that he is pope. He is, and that's the end of it” (43). However, one of the most prominent connections that Bodmer makes is with Isabelle. She approaches Bodmer spontaneously at the park and starts talking to him as if they already know each other (43). Although in the end of the novel she is partially cured from schizophrenia, throughout the narrative she catalyses the formation of Bodmer’s worldview. As Murdoch notes, Bodmer falls in love with her “and there is a nice irony in his process of learning from a woman who is herself the illusory projection of a disturbed mind” (76). She is ‘othered’ by the society yet makes Bodmer question the reality he lives in. Even though Bodmer’s identity does not fully suit the notion of stoicism, in one of the monologues one can find a pattern which applies to it. When Wernicke tells him to stop seeing Fräulein Terhoven for some time as part of her treatment, Bodmer gets confronted by the fact that he loves her, yet has to hide it from the doctor due to his personal insecurities. After he leaves the Wernicke’s cabinet, he begins contemplating:

What does this butterfly collector, this scientist, know of flying, of the wind, or the dangers and ecstasies of the days and nights outside space and time? Does he know the future? Has he drunk the moon? Does he know that plants scream? He laughs at that. For him it is all just a retreat reaction caused by a brutal experience. But is he a prophet who can see in advance what is going to happen? Is he God to know what must happen? (349)

On the one hand, this quote resonates strongly with the essence of stoicism. He wonders how Wernicke presumes to know everything. By questioning Wernicke's authority, Bodmer implies that he is just as human as everyone else and does not actually know anything. By indicating Wernicke's limits of knowledge, Bodmer diminishes his superiority and therefore contests his anthropocentrism that being one of the most essential points in stoicism. On the other, it is interesting to see how Wernicke's attitude reflects the general mindset of WWI and especially of fascists who believe that they are not only superior to certain groups of people, but also to nature and therefore deem themselves godlike. Interestingly, by the end of the monologue when talking about his affection towards Isabelle, Bodmer adds: "But what do I myself know about that? It bursts forth and streams and has no end" (349). Here we can see how Bodmer also identifies his own limits since humans barely know of anything, not even their own feelings as they are not in control of the universe. They cannot predict the future, they barely understand the nature and, finally, do not even fully control themselves, just as he is not in control of his unstable feelings for Isabelle. Thus, the quote suggests, there are two dominant attitudes towards nature in the novel. One of them suggests complete humans's superiority over nature and the other one which implies the opposite.

Conclusion

In the thesis, I have explored the notions of irony, humour and stoicism in *The Black Obelisk* and looked at ways in which they work as coping mechanisms for the characters dealing with the aftermaths of the Great War. In the first part, I have shown how the characters use irony when comparing their current states of living with their experiences from the war. By ironically looking back on the past, the characters mock the war and the knowledge they have gained there. Secondly, irony used by Ludwig Bodmer differs when it comes to different social interactions. The protagonist uses bitter irony in order to mock people he finds obnoxious and somewhat friendly irony with people he likes. Finally, the role of irony in the novel also has to do with symbolic resistance against the rise of fascism. As it was exemplified, the characters in *The Black Obelisk* mock fascists and do that within the frame of irony, for example, by confronting their lack of intellect. In general, in *The Black Obelisk* irony creates an ironic distance which helps the characters to deal with both their past and their presence.

In the second part, I have looked at humour which overlaps with irony and its role in the novel. Interestingly, humour's role in *The Black Obelisk* is not only to make the characters' day-to-day life less grim and bearable. The way in which Bodmer exploits humour also has a clear correlation with irony. Humorous remarks or actions that he addresses towards his friends are amiable whereas those addressed at people he dislikes, such as authority figures or people who sympathise with fascism, are of mocking, critical, almost inimical nature. In such a way, closeness and distance are created: closeness when it comes to friends, and great distance and detachment with people who in one way or another are disliked by the main characters.

Finally, in the last part I have analysed the presence of stoicism. As it was shown, the findings suggest that even though Bodmer is not a complete stoic, there are some patterns in his perception which can be attributed to stoicism. One of those patterns appears in his critique of Wernicke. Bodmer questions Wernicke's authority as well as his own knowledge whereby the position of superiority that humans assume as compared to nature is critiqued and deconstructed, thus conforming to stoic ideas. While irony or humour establish closeness or distance in Bodmer's relationship with different people, stoicism can be seen as his philosophical or spiritual distancing from a particular attitude towards the world. An example of such attitude pivots around the notion of anthropocentrism which suggests that humans are the centre of the universe. Interestingly, such thinking correlates with horrible events like WWI which essentially were consequences of certain group's self-determined superiority over nature and others.

Due to the lack of scholarship on *The Black Obelisk*, there are many potential directions for future research. One of the possible directions could be comparative in nature and look at *The Black Obelisk* in relation to Erich Maria Remarque's other works and explore the use of irony, humor, and stoicism in his entire oeuvre, and in how far they can be read as a symbolic resistance against the rise of fascism. It would be also interesting to compare the novel to other novels from countries that deal with the aftermath of the war. For example, Lithuania or Latvia which were less directly involved in WWI yet faced extreme consequences due to other dominant powers.

In light of the rise of the extreme right in the 21st century, a lesson which one can learn from Bodmer and his friends is that even if there are no other ways to oppose, a symbolic resistance remains powerful nevertheless. Besides, by maintaining ironic,

humorous, or stoic attitudes towards one's own fate, one will be able to handle any situation significantly easier.

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