

malcolm lowry

# UNDER THE VOLCANO

*with an introduction by*  
STEPHEN SPENDER

ALSO BY MALCOLM LOWRY

*Dark As the Grave Wherein My Friend Is Laid,*  
eds. Douglas Day and Margerie Lowry

*Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*

*Lunar Caustic,*  
eds. Earle Birney and Margerie Lowry

*October Ferry to Gabriola,*  
ed. Margerie Lowry

*Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry,*  
eds. Harvey Breit and Margerie Bonner Lowry

*Selected Poems*

*Ultramarine*

P E R E N N I A L  C L A S S I C S

## INTRODUCTION

*by Stephen Spender*

*In 1936 MALCOLM LOWRY wrote a short story called "Under the Volcano." It is the account of the excursion to the Fiesta at Chapultepec of a man called only the Consul, accompanied by his daughter, Yvonne, and her fiancé, Hugh. The outing is brutally interrupted by a scene of murder. The body of an Indian—his hat pulled over his eyes to conceal a wound, from which blood flows over his face—is discovered lying under a hedge on the roadside. The bus in which the three are travelling is stopped, the passengers get out, and, owing to the Mexican laws which can make those who go to the assistance of the victim of violence accessories after the fact, they are unable to do anything to help the Indian. Before the disaster, the Consul, who is a drunkard, has noticed, conspiratorially, a fellow passenger, a pelado ("pelados," he thought, "the peeled ones, were those who did not have to be rich to prey on the really poor"). The pelado was "very drunk indeed, and he felt a queer envy of him, albeit it was perhaps a stir of fellowship." After the encounter with the corpse, the Consul is the one to notice that the pelado has stolen the dying man's money, with which, indeed, he basely and impertinently pays his fare. The bus arrives at the Fiesta, and the Consul and Hugh notice the pelado swagger into a pulquería, "stepping high and with a fatuous smile of triumph on his face."*

The plot of the novel published more than ten years later under the same name is complete in this story. It integrates the tragic fatalism of Mexico (the dying Indian unaided, the despoiler of the corpse triumphant) with the Consul's own situation, his mind guiltily preoccupied with the question of where he is going to get his next drink, his companions involved in their relationship which excludes him. Like Joyce's sketch of the morning walk of a travelling salesman through Dublin, which was the seed of *Ulysses*, Lowry's rather sketchy story grew into a masterpiece.

In the book, two essential and revealing changes have been made. Yvonne is no longer the Consul's daughter. She is his wife, who, having left him on account of his dipsomania, has come back. Her fiancé, Hugh, has become the Consul's half-brother. Putting the two fictions side by side, the ambivalence of the father-daughter relationship, and that of the rival who is also half-brother, throws light on the Consul. The novel explores the Consul's past and present, relates his private doom to the tragic fatalism of the Mexican scene: what was an episode extends into a calvary.

At the outset here, I should dispose of what may seem to some readers a serious objection to this novel: the Consul's dipsomania. A book in which for three quarters of the time the hero is drunk may seem too special, too much a case history. It is not, they may protest, about normal life, and therefore it does not concern them. The objection has some weight. In fact, in the last scenes of the book I think that the disintegration of the Consul does—perhaps inevitably—tend to “take over” too much—the Consul becomes an object, the tragic ending seems too fragmented. But it is only at the very end that the Consul seems his own special case. The fragmentariness of this last section rather serves to underline the control and lucidity of all that happens until the Consul's death. For this is a most lucid novel.

*Under the Volcano* is, it is true, perhaps the best account of a “drunk” in fiction. The Consul's addiction is treated as a kind of tragic game, in which there are as many moves as moods, played by the Consul to deceive the others, but still more to deceive himself. The

root cause of his drinking is loneliness. The early pages of the book in which M. Laruelle meditates on his boyhood friendship with the Consul indicate this clearly enough. For those who seek it out, the clinical history of the Consul's longing for companionship, fear of sex, deeply idealistic puritanism, rejection of the world, and suppressed homosexual tendency, is embedded in the narrative. By the time we have finished this novel we know how a drunk thinks and feels, walks and lies down, and we experience not only the befuddledness of drinking but also its moments of translucent clairvoyance, perfected expression.

All the same, that Lowry elaborates the distinction between beer and wine and Bols and the Black Mass experience of mescal is only incidental to the Consul's real tragedy, which concerns this world in these times. Fundamentally *Under the Volcano* is no more *about* drinking than *King Lear* is *about* senility. It is about the Consul, which is another matter, for what we feel about him is that he is great and shattered. We also feel that he could have written the novel which describes his downfall, and this means that, considered as an art of consciousness attained, this is no downfall, but his triumph.

Most of all, *Under the Volcano* is one of a number of works about the breakdown of values in the twentieth century. Just as the collapse of power in *King Lear* is envisioned through the shattered mind of the king, so in *Under the Volcano* is the tragic despair of Mexico, and, beyond Mexico, the hopelessness of Europe torn by the Spanish Civil War, seen magnified and distorted in the minds of the Consul and of Hugh.

The Consul, then, is a modern hero—or anti-hero—reflecting an extreme external situation within his own extremity. His neurosis becomes diagnosis, not just of himself but of a phase of history. It is artistically justified because neurosis, seen not just as one man's case history, but within the context of a wider light, is the dial of the instrument that records the effects of a particular stage of civilisation upon a civilised individual: for the Consul is essentially a man of cultivation. The most sensitive individual, although not the most normal,

may provide the most representative expression of a breakdown which affects other people on levels of which they may be scarcely conscious. Yet seeing the needle on the disc of the recording instrument, they know that what it registers is also in some sense their own case.

So *Under the Volcano* has to be considered in the context of the Europe of the 1920s and 1930s which produced *Ulysses*, *The Waste Land*, *The Orators*, and other works about the modern "breakdown of values."

At the same time it is utterly different from these works, for the reason that Lowry was—to an extent disconcerting even to himself—different as a man and in his approach to writing from Joyce and Eliot—most of all from those 1930s writers whom he considered the "schoolmasters of poetry."

The difference was that Lowry's approach to writing was autobiographic, personal, subjective even, whereas the aim of writers like Joyce and Eliot, whom he adored, dreaded, imitated, misunderstood, was to invent a modern "objective" literature which was purged of autobiographic, subjective elements. Joyce, Eliot, and Pound aimed at writing which was "an escape from," not "an expression of," personality. Their devices of symbolism and mythology, their attitude towards tradition, their detachment and irony, were all directed towards an ever greater objectivisation. In the consciousness of these poets and novelists there seems the map of an immense landscape with, on one side of a central divide, the order of the past, on the other, the chaos of the present. According to their aesthetic, the poet is an instrument of sensibility acted upon by the situation in which he lives, relating past order to present chaos, exercising judgment, but not communicating his personality. His aim is to create a work of classical objectivity in which the order of the past is re-created, in a form which reflects the fragmentation of the present. The poet himself wears an impersonal ironic mask.

The remoteness of Malcolm Lowry from such intellectualised aims becomes apparent if one compares his use of myths and symbols

in *Under the Volcano* with Joyce's and Eliot's. Several critics have pointed out that *Under the Volcano* is crammed with references to myths. An example occurs early on in the book. M. Laruelle, the French film producer, who was a boyhood friend of Geoffrey Firmin, the Consul, and who later falls in love with Yvonne, thinks over the events of the Consul's death, several years later, as he walks along the plateau on which lies Quauhnahuac:

Halfway across the bridge he stopped; he lit a new cigarette from the one he'd been smoking, and leaned over the parapet, looking down. It was too dark to see the bottom, but: here was finality indeed, and cleavage! Quauhnahuac was like the times in this respect, wherever you turned the abyss was waiting for you around the corner. Dormitory for vultures and city Moloch! When Christ was being crucified, so ran the sea-borne, hieratic legend, the earth had opened all through this country, though the coincidence could hardly have impressed anyone then! It was on this bridge the Consul had once suggested to him he make a film about Atlantis. Yes, leaning over just like this, drunk but collected, coherent, a little mad, a little impatient—it was one of those occasions when the Consul had drunk himself sober—he had spoken to him about the spirit of the abyss, the god of storm, "huracán," that "testified so suggestively to intercourse between opposite sides of the Atlantic." Whatever he had meant.

This passage contains a good deal of symbolic myth. But it is used as metaphor, as analogy. It is not as in Eliot and Pound, mythology with which the contemporary situation is identified, and thus, as it were, within the past, transcended. The abyss cleaving the Mexican plateau under the volcano, is *like* the times—the 1930s and 1940s. There is a suggestion of Christ descending into the abyss for the harrowing of Hell. But it is the Consul whom we think of here, rather

than of Christ. The Consul is hurled into this abyss at the end of the novel.

A critic—Mr. David Markson—points out that the “all-embracing mythic evocation” in *Under the Volcano* is “Joycean,” and he cites Homeric parallels in the novel, to match those of Joyce in *Ulysses*. To cap Joyce, as it were, with Eliot, he adds that this novel embodies “concepts from Jung, Spengler, Freud, Frazer, Spinoza, Jessie L. Weston, Oriental metaphysics—” and, for good measure, “the philosophical idealism of George Berkeley.”

This is all very well, but it is misleading if it makes one think that the mind and life revealed in *Under the Volcano* at all resemble those in *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake* or *The Waste Land*.

The fact is that, though all three writers may use myths and symbolism and be concerned with the crisis of the modern world, the aims and methods of Lowry are the opposite of those of Joyce and Eliot. Joyce and Eliot use particular instances of modern people in order to move towards, enter into, the greater universality of a tradition of which modern life is only a fragmentary part. They use myths and symbols to get outside “the times” into the past of the tradition. Lowry uses them to exemplify “the times,” to describe the Consul as illustration almost. Symbol and myth are used in *Ulysses* in order to absorb the characters at certain moments into a kind of cosmic consciousness. Lowry uses them with opposite effect in order to create the interior world of the Consul. Stephen Dedalus and Bloom tend to disappear into the cosmos. We finish *Under the Volcano* feeling that the Consul with all his defects is the cosmos—and that he is also Malcolm Lowry. This is perhaps a way of saying that Malcolm Lowry and his hero are romantics.

It has been said that the hero of *Ulysses* is the language in which the book is written, and one would not imagine Joyce quarrelling much with this, providing one adds that language is the history of the race. The hero of *Under the Volcano* is the autobiographic consciousness of the Consul, who is a mask for Malcolm Lowry. Lowry is concerned with the ability of the Consul conditioned by circum-

stances which are partly those of his own psychology, partly imposed by “the times,” to wrest a triumph from himself, to create an order out of the material which is his own fragmented consciousness. *Under the Volcano* is not a statement about civilisation so much as an account of one man’s soul within the circumstances of a historic phase. In this sense it belongs not to the literature of the “picture of the West” of the 1920s but to the more restricted literature related to that time and more especially to the 1930s.

In Lowry’s novel, the myths and symbols are not mysterious centres of a tradition which lies outside this time so much as usable devices, guides, signposts indicative of the times. They are what the Consul knows and is—a frustrated great man. Joyce permits his characters to know more than they are likely to have known. However we scarcely marvel at Leopold Bloom’s knowledge, still less at Stephen’s; nor do we think of the mind that permeates *Ulysses* as that of James Joyce: we recognize in it a historic consciousness which exemplifies a civilization. In *Under the Volcano* we take the mythology to demonstrate the greatness of understanding of the Consul. It is a part of his ruinous triumph and demonstrates the tragedy of the “scholar’s mind o’erthrown.” The effect of our reading about ships with the names *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Philoctetes* is of throbbing drums accompanying his funeral procession. The Ferris wheel, the barranca—the deep ravine called the Malebolge—the riderless horse, and so on, are the machinery of his tragedy, itself a machine. They are the Consul, that late romantic, almost Byronic, self-dramatising figure.

Lowry has borrowed from Joyce, turned his symbolic devices upside down and used them for his own purposes either with audacious intelligence, or else from a kind of inspired misunderstanding. . . . But the most direct influence on this extraordinary book is not, I would suggest, from other novelists, but from films, most of all perhaps those of Eisenstein. The movies—that is, the old, silent, caption-accompanied movies—are felt throughout the novel. Jacques Laruelle is a film director, disillusioned with Hollywood. The Consul suggests to him a subject for a film. Yvonne has been a movie actress—though

apparently a failed one. Hugh is a character who could easily appear in a film about the Spanish Civil War or a revolutionary film about Mexico. The technique of *Under the Volcano* is essentially cinematic. The action starts off as an extended flash-back in the mind of M. Laruelle, who, reminded on his walk of the Consul's death, re-enacts in his thoughts the sequences which led to this catastrophe. He then thinks back still further to the boyhood scenes when Jacques Laruelle and Geoffrey Firmin were the guests of the family of an English poet, Abraham Taskerson. There are flash-backs within flash-backs and abrupt shifts from extended scenes to close-ups. The technique employed often resembles cutting. The phrase *Las Manos de Orlac* occurs repetitively. It is on a poster advertising a film in which the chief actor is Peter Lorre. We are told a good deal about this film. Hugh explains to Yvonne, shortly after his arrival: "I think I've seen the Peter Lorre movie somewhere. He's a great actor but it's a lousy picture. . . . It's all about a pianist who has a sense of guilt because he thinks his hands are a murderer's or something and keeps washing the blood off them. Perhaps they really are a murderer's but I forget."

This is an example of Lowry's theme-illustrating symbolism, but it also underlines the preoccupation of all the characters with the cinema. Earlier on, Yvonne has described the little cinema in the village: "It's a strange little place—you might find it fun. The newsreels used to be about two years old and I shouldn't think it's changed any. And the same features come back over and over again. *Cimarron* and *The Gold Diggers of 1930* and oh—last year we saw a travelogue, *Come to Sunny Andalusia*, by way of news from Spain—"

"'Blimey,' Hugh said."

The words *Las Manos de Orlac* arise naturally enough—whenever one of the characters catches sight of them: a movement of the camera eye glancing at a printed notice. (One thinks of *I Am a Camera*. Someone should write a thesis perhaps on the influence of the cinema on the novel—I mean the *serious* novel.) The cinemagoers' familiarity with this technique is most ingeniously converted into a literary device. Phrases with deeper meanings, *No se puede vivir sin amar* and

¿LE GUSTA ESTE JARDÍN QUE ES SUYO? ¡EVITE QUE SUS HIJOS LO DESTRUYAN!, are interpolated into the action like subtitles in a foreign language. And of course the technique of divided attention is used to wonderful effect to convey a characteristic of the Consul's drunkenness, his diffused attention.

The cinema is kinetic. Lowry, creating a moving landscape—or a still landscape against people moving—borrows from it for his own kinetic writing. He seems to write with every faculty which is active, or observes action: the calf muscles, the throat swallowing, the frank outward-looking eye observing, the memory re-enacting. In the flash-back of M. Laruelle's recollections of the seaside holidays with the Taskerson family, this fusion of muscular mental energies of body and intellect is seen in its raw state as altogether joyous and outgoing, though accompanied by darker undertones. They are memories which the reader falls in love with, envies, regrets:

These boys were unprecedented, portentous walkers. They thought nothing of walking twenty-five or thirty miles in a day. But what seemed stranger still, considering none was above school age, they were also unprecedented, portentous drinkers. In a mere five-mile walk they would stop at as many "pubs" and drink a pint or two of powerful beer in each. Even the youngest, who had not turned fifteen, would get through his six pints in an afternoon. And if anyone was sick, so much the better for him. That made room for more. Neither Jacques, who had a weak stomach—though he was used to a certain amount of wine at home—nor Geoffrey, who disliked the taste of beer, and besides attended a strict Wesleyan school, could stand this mediaeval pace. But indeed the whole family drank inordinately. Old Taskerson, a kindly sharp man, had lost the only one of his sons who'd inherited any degree of literary talent; every night he sat brooding in his study with the door open, drinking hour after hour, his cats on his lap, his evening newspaper crack-

ling distant disapproval of the other sons, who for their part sat drinking hour after hour in the dining room.

A passage of this kind has the energy of the life it describes. One sees it all; one could cast the plot which is so innocent and yet so undermined. Singing their exhilarating song "Oh we alllll WALK ze wibberlee wobberlee WALK," the lovable Taskersons, with Jacques Laruelle and Geoffrey Firmin conscripted into their doomed army, walk to Hell's Bunker "in the middle of the long sloping eighth fairway. It guarded the green in a sense, though at a great distance, being far below it and slightly to the left. The abyss yawned in such a position as to engulf the third shot of a golfer like Geoffrey."

Hell Bunker is also a place where the Taskerson boys took their girls, though "there was, in general about the whole business of 'picking up' an air of innocence." So there is an underground connection between the Hell of the seaside golf course, and that gulf—the barranca of Malebolge—at Quauhnahuac. Jacques Laruelle one day accidentally surprises Geoffrey Firmin scrambling out of Hell Bunker with a girl. Embarrassed, they go to a bar where Geoffrey, for the first time, orders a round of whiskies, which the waiter refuses to serve them, because they are minors. "Alas their friendship did not for some reason survive these two sad, though doubtless providential, little frustrations."

This passage about the golf course contains the elements which are to be found on most pages of *Under the Volcano*. Symbolism is used *symptomatically* to analyse a complex which is part individual, part a consequence of the times. To use psychoanalytical language, the same material of individual and social neurosis is sifted through a great variety of situations.

Malcolm Lowry's view of life is individualistic in a way in which the views of Joyce and Faulkner and Eliot are not. Joyce's characters are—as I have pointed out—instruments through which a consciousness, ultimately historic, collective even, speaks. How they act is relevant in revealing what they are and beyond them what life is. With

Lowry one is never far away from the thought that although there is an illness there may also be a cure. If the Consul would act, a great deal, besides himself, might be saved, one feels. Thus his failure to act becomes itself a kind of action. His refusal to be heroic makes him a hero, but a hero of consciousness rather than indulging in the Spanish Civil War heroics of Hugh. What seems to him his deepest truth is his isolation. He rejects love to protect this isolation. One cannot imagine Stephen Dedalus or Leopold Bloom doing anything that would alter the whole situation of *Ulysses*. But if the Consul acted, *Under the Volcano* would be a changed world.

Consciousness is for Lowry the effect of individual action. Through the Consul's thoughts there runs the argument that if he can attain the fullest consciousness only through drinking mescal, then he must drink it. Dipsomania is justified, or to be endured. He also feels profoundly that in these times the price to be paid for being fully aware is isolation. His dilemma is to decide whether the isolation involves the rejection of love. The dilemma is both real and false: real, because intellectually Yvonne does not enter into the kind of considerations which are the Consul's consciousness of *terribilità*, and therefore his need to protect his insight into Hell, in other words his isolation, is real. False, because his addiction takes too much a part in this argument, and because (*no se puede vivir sin amar*) there is never excuse for not loving. The Consul's failure to love is therefore real: but perhaps the dilemma itself is real. He has to reject love in order to be alone; he has to be killed because he rejects love.

The desperate isolation of consciousness is absolute. For this reason perhaps the pervasive autobiographical element in the novel is inevitable. The author is creating a character who is his own predicament: and this is scarcely distinguishable from projecting an image of himself.

The isolation of the autobiographical theme involves also Lowry in isolation as a writer. However, much he was influenced by Joyce, Lowry thought himself alone among the writers who were his contemporaries. In the pretendedly fictitious journal "Through the Pan-

ama" the writer of which, Wilderness, is one of Malcolm Lowry's many masks) Wilderness bursts into a lament:

I am capable of conceiving of a writer today, even intrinsically a first-rate writer, who *simply cannot understand*, and never has been able to understand, what his fellow writers are driving at, and have been driving at, and who has always been too shy to ask. This writer feels this deficiency in himself to the point of anguish. Essentially a humble fellow, he has tried his hardest all his life to understand (though maybe still not hard enough) so that his room is full of *Partisan Reviews*, *Kenyon Reviews*, *Minotaurs*, *Poetry* mags, *Horizons*, even old *Dials*, of whose contents he is able to make out precisely nothing, . . .

The more one reads his work and about Lowry, the more one has the impression that he did write about almost nothing which he had not himself seen or experienced. But that is not what is profoundly autobiographical in him. What I mean by calling him an autobiographer is that in his writing he constructs a picture of the world by piecing together situations which are self-identifications. *Under the Volcano* is his best book because it seems to contain the whole sum of these identifications. The agonies he endured in Mexico provided a catalyst which enabled him to express his deepest feelings about his life, his vision of "the times."

Lowry's work is not, as I have pointed out, "an escape from personality." It is the putting together of a great many situations which he had himself experienced. By comparison with *Under the Volcano* most of his other work suffers from the limitation that the central character is Lowry himself and that the other characters are two-dimensional. In *Under the Volcano* this defect is avoided, or compensated for by the fact that he has distributed his own personality among several characters. It is clear that Hugh, the Consul's half-brother, is the Consul in his youth, and that both are aspects of Malcolm Lowry. M. Laruelle is a mirror of the Consul, as his meditations

at the beginning of the novel, which are entirely about Geoffrey Firmin, show. On his evening walk, taken a year after the Consul's death, M. Laruelle sees a horse with a rider on it: "so drunk he was sprawling all over his mount, his stirrups lost. . . . The horse reared wildly, . . . the man, who seemed to be falling straight backwards at first, miraculously saved himself only to slip to one side like a trick rider, regained the saddle, slid, slipped, fell backwards—just saving himself each time. . . ." M. Laruelle "thought suddenly, this maniacal vision of senseless frenzy, but controlled, not quite uncontrolled, somehow almost admirable, this too, obscurely, was the Consul . . ."

And to close the circle of himself-become-his-world of the Consul, in his dying moment, when he is shot, he realizes that he is the "pelado" who robbed the Indian lying by the wayside, stole his money, was drunk. And the old fiddler standing by the roadside addressed to him the word which had been the Indian's dying speech. "Compañero." Somehow he was the pelado and the compañero too. *No se puede vivir sin amar.*

The writers whom Lowry had always been able to understand were these with whom he has a psychological affinity: Conrad, Kipling, Melville, Nordahl Grieg, Conrad Aiken. He travelled long distances to meet Grieg and Aiken. Soon after he had met Aiken, he, by what I suppose to be an inevitable procedure, became for Lowry his "father." Inevitably also, Lowry insisted that the son has to destroy the father. One suspects that, if Joseph Conrad or Herman Melville had been alive, Lowry would have projected the same kind of transference on either or both of them followed by the same revolt.

Lowry's work is the pursuit of his own identity through the labyrinth of his experiences. His own biography is not, of course, identical with that of his fictitious heroes, but it has a legendary quality which mingles inextricably with theirs. Learning, for example, that between the ages of nine and thirteen Lowry suffered from ulceration of the corneas which caused him nearly to be blind—though later, when he was cured of this illness, he developed exceptionally good sight—we can feel that we are adding something to our knowledge of the lonely



childhood of Geoffrey Firmin, which merely has been left out of the novel. It would be altogether pardonable to confuse many facts about Lowry's own life with the fiction of Geoffrey Firmin's.

Malcolm Lowry was born "within sight and sound of the sea" (as Conrad Knickerbocker informs us) at Merseyside, Cheshire, on July 28, 1909. There were romantic adventurous strains on both sides of his family. His father was a cotton broker and owner of cotton fields in Egypt, Peru, and Texas. Malcolm was sent to boarding school at the age of seven and was thus separated from his parents, who spent their time travelling. At his public school, The Leys, near Cambridge, he discovered his vocation as a writer, and he determined not to go into the family cotton business. After leaving The Leys, he persuaded his father to let him go for a year to sea before going up to Cambridge. The adventures during this year of the rich man's son who proved to be as much a misfit among the working class crew as at public school, Cambridge, or, later, in English literary life is recorded in his first novel, *Ultramarine*.

Writers about Lowry tend to treat this academic interlude as unimportant to him; but in fact he became a legend among his fellow undergraduates, formed one or two lifelong friendships (notably with John Davenport) at Cambridge, and was recognized as one of the outstanding undergraduate writers of the particularly brilliant Oxford and Cambridge generation of the early thirties. Like Hugh in *Under the Volcano*, Malcolm Lowry was an instrumentalist, a guitarist, or taropatch player, enthusiastic for jazz.

After Cambridge, Lowry had a London phase, during which his novel *Ultramarine* was published. He then went to Spain, where he met his first wife, Jan, an American. Soon after the marriage, Jan returned to the States, and Malcolm Lowry lived in Paris, sharing an apartment with James Stern, the novelist and story writer. After Paris, he spent about two years in New York with Jan before going briefly to Hollywood to see John Davenport. He was deeply interested in the cinema, less so in Hollywood, and after rejoining his wife he went to Mexico, to Cuernavaca, which provides the scene of *Under the*

*Volcano*. In 1938, he returned to Hollywood, where he met Margerie Bonner, who became his second wife, and on whose "Biographical Note on Malcolm Lowry" the facts here sketched are based.

In 1940 the Lowrys moved to Vancouver, and later to Dollarton across Burrard Inlet from the city. Malcolm Lowry spent the happiest years of his life in Canada rewriting *Under the Volcano* many times. Throughout the novel the recollection of British Columbia provides an almost paradisaical contrast to the Hell of Mexico. The Lowrys lived in beach huts, built with their own hands and subject to the burnings and other mishaps endemic to Malcolm Lowry's adventurousness. The Lowrys left Dollarton in August, 1954, going first to Italy and then to England. Malcolm Lowry died on June 27, 1957, in the village of Ripe in Sussex, where they had taken a cottage.

These bare facts are filled out with many adventures. Conrad Knickerbocker writes that the sea voyage before Lowry went to Cambridge "took him to Singapore, Shanghai, Kowloon, Penang [where there was] a gun battle in which he was wounded in the leg, glorious young drinking in Yokohama bars, a storm with a dock cargo of snakes, a wild boar, panthers and an elephant." In Margerie Lowry's account we learn that the manuscript of *Ultramarine* was lost before publication and Lowry had to rewrite the novel from notes, while that of *Under the Volcano* was only just saved from a fire in which Lowry was burned while rescuing it, and that the Italian translation of the novel was lost and never recovered.

The reader of *Under the Volcano* will notice, though, that his loneliness and isolation from public events did not mean that he was indifferent to the events of the 1930s. One could, indeed, argue that *Under the Volcano*, difficult to "place" as it is, has a great relevance to the politically conscious literature of that decade. The Spanish Civil War moves disturbingly through it like a conscience, and there are pages haunted by the shadow of the evil of fascism. Hugh is to some extent a caricature of young English writers like the Cambridge undergraduate poet John Cornford, who was killed in the Spanish Civil War, and whom Lowry must have thought about with anguish. The Mexican

police correspond in the balance of good and evil to the Spanish fascist police—the hated Guardia Civil. They are fascist and involved in the murder of the Indian, whose dying exclamation “Compañero,” comrade, was the word of address used by the Reds in the Spanish Civil War. The Consul himself has a bad conscience about politics and was suspected in Mexico of being a “spider,” a spy. We learn that in general in Latin America consuls are suspected of being spiders. There are also indications that the Consul is haunted with feelings of guilt about whatever took place during the First World War on the S.S. *Samaritan* (a warship disguised as a merchantship which attacked piratical German U-boats out to sink merchantships) when the Consul so distinguished himself, but was (before receiving a decoration) court-martialled. Hugh, with his simplicist pro-Spanish-Republican attitudes, is there to remind the Consul that there are such things as action and commitment—but perhaps it is precisely because of Hugh (one side of himself) that the Consul cannot commit himself. There is a drunken conversation between them in which Hugh says that the Nazi system, “even though dead, continues to go on swallowing live struggling men and women!” To which the Consul replies, “It would do just as well for any other system . . . Including the communist system.”

There is a side of Malcolm Lowry which has affinities with George Orwell. Although with his conscience Lowry/the Consul supports the Spanish Republicans, he distrusts propaganda and he dislikes the attitudinizing of Hugh, just as Orwell disliked the communist intellectuals. In his first novel, *Ultramarine*, his flat reporting of the conversations of the sailors, absorbed in the world of their own interests, ill-informed and unimaginative perhaps, but fundamentally saner than the upper classes and the political leftists, reveals an attitude not unlike that of Orwell towards the “proles” in *1984*. Like Orwell’s, and unlike those of the writers of both the twenties and thirties, Lowry’s values are fundamentally derived from action. Like Orwell, Lowry was not a communist, and yet in his youth he took the step which the bourgeois communist intellectuals demanded:

he “joined the workers” by becoming a seaman and going on the voyage described in *Ultramarine*.

The central paradox of *Under the Volcano* is that it is a novel about action, that is, about action negated. At the centre, there is an impassioned cry that men should attain simplicity of being, love and live and act in a world of simple choices. Conrad Knickerbocker quotes Lowry: “The real cause of alcoholism is the complete baffling sterility of existence as *sold* to you.” This implies a spiritual isolation greater than that of Orwell, who, although he was opposed to existing political groups, nevertheless belongs to a party of anarcho-socialist-conservative eccentrics which the reader easily recognizes in his own heart. Lowry had isolation which condemned him to perpetual self-searching, in which the mind creating is inextricably involved in the work created. Because there is no solution in the contemporary world of bogus solutions, art itself becomes a form of defiant action, and here Lowry anticipates later artists—Jackson Pollock, for example—self-involved yet selfless, intoxicated yet wholly lucid, drinking themselves into sobriety, who in their very excesses seem to acquire some quality of saintliness, as though undergoing what in others might appear to be vices, for the sake of the rest of us. Conrad Knickerbocker writes “Speaking ventriloquently through Wilderness [the writer of the semifictitious journal “Through the Panama”] Lowry at first saw *Under the Volcano* not so much a novel as ‘a sort of mighty if preposterous moral deed of some sort,’ testifying to an underlying toughness of fibre or staying power. . . .” One could scarcely imagine a better description of Jackson Pollock’s painting. Knickerbocker goes on: “What Lowry/Wilderness recognized in a moment of terror was the self-consuming quality of the work. The Consul had taken more than his share; like an insolent familiar, he was never too far away. Lowry could not perform the vital surgery of separating himself from his characters. He suspected at times that he was not a writer so much as being *written*, and with panic he realized that self-identity was as elusive as ever.”

He could not separate himself from his own characters because

they were expressions of his own isolation, his search for his identity. The exception to this is of course the portrait of Yvonne. She does indeed represent the alternative to the Consul's isolation—relationship with someone other than the self trapped in his situation. She represents indeed several choices rejected by the Consul (though here not altogether rejected by Lowry himself, as the story *The Forest Path to the Spring*, which is the *Paradiso* of his *Commedia*, shows). One of these choices is a Northern landscape different from Mexico ("Mexico"—Lowry wrote in a letter to a friend—"the most Christ-awful place in the world in which to be in any form of distress, a sort of Moloch that feasts on suffering souls").

The Consul's despair is really acedia, the spiritual apathy of the religious who have become, as it were, hermetically sealed off from the source of their religion. His errors are theological: refusal to love or be loved. Ultimately his fault is pride. There is a very moving passage, recalling, oddly, Henry James' *The Altar of the Dead*, in which the Consul is seen being led by Dr. Vigil into "a church he did not know," "with sombre tapestries, and strange votive pictures, a compassionate Virgin floating in the gloom, to whom he prayed, with muddily beating heart, he might have Yvonne again." "She is the Virgin for those who have nobody with," the doctor told him, inclining his head toward the image, 'and for mariners on the sea.' "This is when Yvonne is away, and when she comes back, and he rejects her, he finds himself praying before another image of the Virgin: "Please let me make her happy, deliver me from this dreadful tyranny of self. I have sunk low. Let me sink lower still, that I may know the truth. Teach me to love again, to love life.' That wouldn't do either. . . . 'Where is love' Let me truly suffer. Give me back my purity, the knowledge of the Mysteries, that I have betrayed and lost.—Let me be truly lonely, that I may honestly pray. Let us be happy again somewhere, if it's only together, if it's only out of this terrible world. Destroy the world!' he cried in his heart."

The Consul inhabits a Hell of Christian damnation, and his downfall is accompanied by a bell that speaks words of Dante:

*Dolente . . . dolore!* He is profoundly ambivalent, as his prayers show, for when he prays to be reconciled with Yvonne he also prays to be alone, and when he wants to rise he asks that he may sink still lower. The ambivalence goes deeper than the portrayal of the Consul: it is a cleavage in life of the book itself, as also in the heart of the writer, who is doomed to almost the same death as his hero.

The question which remains unanswered is whether the Consul's addiction is really planted in him—like Hamlet's madness—by the times, or whether he is not simply a failure. The circle of Purgatory in which the addict moves is one of unreality, in which there is an illusion of choices being made (the Consul can refuse the next drink, even does do so sometimes for a few moments) but no real choice exists, for he has decided to be chosen by his addiction. Not only his addiction, also his mode of consciousness: Lowry thought that he did not write, but was written. But being chosen by one's addictions means also that there is a postponed choice, not in one's own hands, but in one's heart, though unknown to oneself, the choice which decides whether one is damned in Hell or whether—without one knowing it oneself—one is seeking redemption: whether one is in Purgatory. This is the choice which becomes real in the ultimate moment of death, when the Consul hears a voice which calls him "pelado," and, at the same time, "compañero." The Consul is not in Hell but in Purgatory, surely. Here too the writer—Lowry—becomes inseparable from his creation—the Consul—for the existence of the novel itself is the proof that after all Lowry/the Consul did achieve a triumph of consciousness expressed with the utmost lucidity. Being chosen and accepting the condition of illusionary choices finally was justified in the choice implicit in the lucidity achieved—*Under the Volcano*.

As I have pointed out, the theme of the Consul's fatality is to be found on almost every page of this novel, however great the variations of his mood—themselves distorted and exaggerated by drink. The life of the Consul resembles variations on a theme of music by some composer such as Beethoven where the greatest possible variety of

moods and rhythms are gone through without the elements of the theme being fundamentally altered. Yet perhaps this is to emphasize too much the side of the novel which embraces the Consul's will to self-destruction. One also remembers this book for marvellous scenes of affirmation. The alternate life, although rejected, does appear. There is the wonderful scene in which Hugh and Yvonne—physically healthy, beautifully attractive, conscious of the world and their responsibilities public and private—walk through the valley and then ride the horses which they hire, with the foals running beside them. This is the open air life of physical well-being and frank communication, yet it is subtly meretricious; they (Hugh, especially) too consciously act out their roles. Later in the novel, parallel with the scene between Hugh and Yvonne, there is the moment when drunk to the point of sobriety the Consul suddenly speaks to her openly, not concealing his true feelings. And contrasted with almost all the book there is the sun overhead, and across half the world there are people fighting for their freedom, first in Spain and later against Hitler. *Under the Volcano* is an authentic modern tragedy because somehow the murder of the Consul by the fascist police transforms his life into a convincing affirmation of values which he deeply knew, and which in his own consciousness he did not destroy. The conclusion must be that it is religious: the contradictions of a hero who does not act and who fails to be a hero, the insistence implicit that the Consul is the writer, and living and dying for all of us, the concern for values which are outside the time in a world entirely contemporary, are resolved in the theme of the Divine Comedy, the progress of the soul.

# UNDER THE VOLCANO