

MALCOLM LOWRY'S UNDER THE VOLCANO: AN INTERPRETATION

by

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ABSTRACT

Since its publication in 1947, Malcolm Lowry's novel Under the Volcano has been gaining in reputation until it has come to be regarded as one of the masterworks of this century. The aim of this thesis is to consider Under the Volcano in the light of the Romantic and Symbolist tradition in which it belongs, and to provide an interpretation of the novel through an exploration of its structure, symbolism and theme.

Chapter I attempts to demonstrate that an understanding of the world view which Lowry adopts in Under the Volcano - the doctrine of universal analogy, which had such a profound influence on the nineteenth-century Romantic and Symbolist writers - is essential to an appreciation of the formal design and the theme of the novel.

Chapters II and III examine the implications of two of the major symbols of Under the Volcano - the wheel and the abyss - and attempt to show how these symbols function on several levels to support both the narrative sequence and the mythic framework of the novel. Some attention is paid to the metaphorical identification of the protagonist with the archetypal 'suffering hero,' especially in relation to the Promethean and Orphic imagery employed in the novel.

Chapter IV is concerned with the tragic stature of the hero, particularly as it is revealed in the culminating scenes of the novel, and with an examination of the paradoxical resolution of the central conflict - the struggle between love and death.

The Conclusion contains a brief review of some critical comments on the novel and modern literature in general, which may contribute to an appreciation and understanding of Lowry's achievement in writing Under the Volcano.

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INTRODUCTION

In this analysis of Malcolm Lowry's novel Under the Volcano certain primary assumptions have been made. The first of these is that the novel stands as an autonomous work of art, which can be understood without reference to the personal biography of the author. A comment by Northrop Frye is worth quoting in this connection. He says:

The readiness of even sympathetic readers to confuse a poet's life and his imagination seems to be based on the assumption that the life is real and the poetry a by-product, so that to search for biography in poetry is, from this point of view, searching for the reality under a disguise. The result, in the criticism of English literature, is that the process of interpreting an unchangeable and deliberately created body of poetry has come to be regarded as fanciful, and the process of reconstructing a vanished life out of a chaos of documents, legends, allusions, gossip and guesswork a matter of exact research. But this is an inversion of the poet's own attitude to his life. The linear sequence of events is imaginative material, just as the data of sense experience are, and are there to be cast into the forming crucible of the mind. In the resulting novel or drama we may, if we know the poet personally, recognize things that remind us of past events in his life, but to read the work of art as something to be interpreted by past events is the most arrant Philistinism. To dissolve art back into the artist's experience is like scraping the paint off a canvas in order to see what the "real" canvas looked like before it assumed its painted disguise. ¹

It is not the purpose of this thesis, then, to determine how far the Consul can be identified with Malcolm Lowry, although such identification will inevitably be made. It was Lowry's own

1. Northrop Frye, Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake, Beacon Press, 1962, p. 326.

tortuous struggle with alcoholism which enabled him to render in exact detail the Consul's state of mind through various stages of drunkenness, and his personal preoccupation with 'correspondences' which led him to conceive the novel in terms of a complex interweaving of symbolic elements. But the distinction between experience and art, between the life of the author and the achieved content of the novel is demonstrated in every page (one might say, every line) of Under the Volcano. Lowry can communicate with the highest degree of verisimilitude the physical sensations, the disconnected thought processes, the devious rationalizations of his central character. But he can also order and control his material with critical detachment. The shifts in point of view employed in the novel make it possible for Lowry to regard the Consul at times with full objectivity, to mix irony with compassion, to introduce elements of wit and bawdy humour, and to render the landscape of Mexico on three levels simultaneously: with the clarity of detailed physical reality; on the symbolic level of universal vision; and finally, but not merely, in terms of the Consul's private vision.

In an early version of the novel, Lowry has Laruelle suggest that the Consul's self-destruction might have been averted had he been able to project his intense and horrified vision of the world in the form of a work of art.² This passage is cut from the final version of Under the Volcano, perhaps because Lowry

2. The Malcolm Lowry Papers, UBC Special Collections IAb1 Box 4. Second draft of Under the Volcano, p. 4. Further references to the Malcolm Lowry Papers will appear in the footnotes as MLP, followed by the catalogue number and page reference, where possible.

realized that it was a comment more applicable to himself than to his protagonist. During his life Lowry seems to have alternated between two states of being. In the alcoholic phases he felt himself to be a visionary, communicating only with demons, angels and spirits, alienated from the world of men. Doubtless this accounts for much of the intensity with which he invested the whole of the natural world in his writing. In the alternate, the sober phases, Lowry sought, through the exercise of craftsmanship, to impose order on the discontinuous elements of experience. "The Forest Path to the Spring" in particular, but also the other stories in Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place, record the continuing efforts of Lowry the man to free himself through artistic expression from the bondage of the dark and destructive forces by which he felt himself invaded and surrounded, and to arrive at a sense of wholeness. The stories, viewed as a record of Lowry's personal struggle, provide a remarkable demonstration of what Jung designates the 'individuation process.'

But the concern here is not with the therapeutic value, to Lowry, of his writing, but with the fact that Lowry as artist was able to see steadily and whole what for Lowry the hypochondriac, the dipsomaniac, the compulsive personality, was only an unsteady, flickering, and fragmentary continuum of events. Had it been otherwise, Under the Volcano would be little more than another Lost Weekend, set in Mexico, and the Consul a pathetic drunk rather than a hero of tragic stature.

Details of Lowry's personal life, then, will not be introduced into this study, except where they seem to confirm insights derived from the novel itself. A clear distinction must

be made, however, between the biography of an author and the intention which underlies a given work. In the words of John Senior,

Beauty in a work of art, as in mathematics, is precisely the natural result of the work's adequacy to its intentions.³

And further,

when we speak of the artist's intentions we mean the "idea" or "form" which he attempts to give his material.⁴

The underlying intention of Under the Volcano is inseparably linked to a particular world view, a knowledge of which is essential to a full understanding of the novel. The nature of that view - which was by no means peculiar to Lowry - will be explored in the first chapter of this thesis.

A second basic assumption of this thesis, which again concerns the exclusion of certain materials from consideration, is that Lowry cannot be regarded as a 'Canadian' novelist, except in the most superficial understanding of the term. George Woodcock, in making the claim that Lowry did not write about Canada as a 'transient outsider,' says:

he lived himself into the environment that centered upon his fragile home where the Pacific tides lapped and sucked under the floorboards, and...identified himself with that environment - despite trials of flesh and spirit - as passionately as those other strangers who have rendered so well the essence of their particular corners of Canada, Grove and Haig-Brown.

3. John Senior, The Way Down and Out: The Occult in Symbolist Literature, Cornell University Press, New York, 1959, p. 47.

4. Senior, p. 48.

...Canada...stirred him through a sympathy that led towards total involvement.⁵

But it must be added that for Lowry, Canada, like Mexico in Under the Volcano, undergoes a symbolic transformation, and becomes identified with the sacred centre, the universal 'place where you know.' Thus the 'sense of redemption' which, as Woodcock suggests, pervades "The Forest Path to the Spring"⁶ is a measure of Lowry's inner development, which might or might not have taken place in another environment, even the initially ambivalent one of Mexico. Lowry's landscapes, whatever their geographical location, are always primarily landscapes of the soul. That Lowry conveyed the physical essence of Mexico and of the Pacific Northwest with a superbly accurate ear and eye is beyond dispute. One publisher's reader, in fact, felt that the chief merit of Under the Volcano lay in its precise evocation of the Mexican scene, causing Lowry to comment with some ruefulness, tempered by glee, on the irony of such a response to a novel which was concerned entirely with portraying the inner mind of the central character:

that the book is praised for its observation of Mexico on the part of one who never observed anything whatsoever but the workings of his own mind would make me cry into my tequila if I had, as I haven't not yet, progressed beyond habanero con aqua.⁷

5. George Woodcock, "Under Seymour Mountain," in Canadian Literature No. 8, Spring 1961, p. 4.

6. Woodcock, p. 4.

7. MLP, IBb. Letter to Jonathan Cape, 1946.

What makes Under the Volcano an important and moving novel is not its rhapsodic identification with place. Nor is it the originality of theme or technique. Lowry certainly had

the ambitiousness essential to greatness, a mastery of structure, an absolute command of prose diction, an awareness of both the lineal and spatial possibilities of fiction, and a consciousness of history and politics.⁸

But, as George Woodcock has pointed out, he

belonged in the early twentieth century cosmopolitan tradition that seemed to reach an end about the time of his death - the tradition of Proust and Gide...⁹

The success of Under the Volcano stems rather from Lowry's ability to go beyond what Mark Schorer has described as the 'prevailing and tiresome realism of modern fiction.' Schorer continues:

When we feel that we are no longer in a position to say what life means, we must content ourselves with telling how it looks. Those of our novelists who have transcended realism have done so by a boot-strap miracle, by supplying the myth themselves.... In a disintegrating society such as this, before it can proceed with other business, literature must become the explicit agent of coherence.¹⁰

This is precisely what Under the Volcano attempts to do - to say what life means, not merely how it looks. It may seem paradoxical to describe as an 'agent of coherence' a novel whose ex-

8. John McCormick, Catastrophe and Imagination: An Interpretation of The Recent English and American Novel, Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1957, p. 66.

9. Woodcock, p. 5.

10. Mark Schorer, "The Necessity of Myth," in Appendix to Myth and Mythmaking, Henry A. Murray, ed., George Braziller, New York, 1960, p. 357.

explicit theme is the alienation and total disintegration of an individual and, by implication, a whole era. But in its grasp of the individual, temporal and universal implications of situation, in the fusion of sensibility and idea, Under the Volcano succeeds in making an aesthetically coherent representation of incoherence, fragmentation, and disintegration.

McCormick has adopted the term 'cognitive' to describe novels like Under the Volcano in which 'ideas, characters, and situation become meaningless if we attempt the operation of removing from their total dimension the objective framework of idea in which the characters live and have being,'¹¹ and it is certainly true that the threads of imagery and symbol, action and idea, are so closely woven together in Under the Volcano as to make their separate exegesis almost impossible. This thesis will attempt to explore some of the major elements in the design of the novel, and to suggest an interpretation which may clarify some of the ambiguities of theme.

11. McCormick, p. 85.

CHAPTER I
THE PATH THROUGH HELL

George Woodcock has placed Under the Volcano in the tradition of Proust and Gide,¹ and indeed the form of the novel suggests a 'search for lost time,' or a regressive view of fictional time such as one encounters in Gide and James Joyce. An analysis of the techniques which Lowry employs, and of the formal structure of the novel, may help to clarify his position in that tradition.

It is in Proust's Remembrance of Things Past that the first concerted attempt is made to employ the concept of association, not in the Lockian sense of Sterne's Tristram Shandy, but in terms of psychological processes, the evocation and reflection of internal states which operate outside the logic of objective time and space. In Tom Jones and Tristram Shandy can be seen the beginnings of an exuberant recognition of the novel's possibilities - in the shifting of the scene and plane of action, the manipulation of time sequences. The flashback enabled the novelist to move away from a purely linear and objective view of time, and to achieve in fictional time a kind of equivalent to Bergson's durée, in which fragments of time can be transposed, rearranged, repeated, compressed or stopped altogether. The contemporary novel has achieved the same kind

1. Woodcock, supra.

of freedom in the handling of spatial elements through the application of a technique which is generally associated with the cinema rather than the novel. This is, of course, montage.

The chief exponent of the theory of montage in the cinema was the Russian cinematographer Sergei Eisenstein. Eisenstein defines montage as the juxtaposition and superimposition of fragments of reality in such a way that they 'collide' to produce, dialectically, a heightened expressiveness. He cites as an example of montage a scene from Madame Bovary, where the cross-cutting of the intimate dialogue between Emma and Rodolphe and the oratory in the square leads to an ironic intensification of meaning. In James Joyce's Ulysses, montage becomes the chief, indeed, the only, technique. The effect of the novel depends entirely on the juxtaposition and superimposition of fragments of reality; on a 'contrapuntal method of combining visual and aural images,'² on cross-cutting, simultaneity and transfer. The same technique is used extensively by Lowry in Under the Volcano.

Lowry's brief experience as a scenario writer and his intense interest in filmic art, particularly the German expressionist films of the 1920's and 30's, with their Grand Guignol accumulation of horrors, may have led him to adopt certain film techniques in the writing of Under the Volcano. At any rate, the style of the novel certainly lends itself to description in filmic terms, from the laconic compression

2. Sergei Eisenstein, Film Form: Essays in Film Theory, London, 1951, p. 24.

of the opening scene, the alternation of 'still' shots with a confused but tightly integrated mosaic pattern, constantly moving, and the cross-cutting of dialogue, to the progressive fragmentation of scene, which mirrors the inner disintegration of the central character at the end of the novel. The effect of Chapters Ten and Twelve of the novel, where the Consul, under the effect of mescal, makes his final, irrevocable choice between Yvonne and the Farolito - between Heaven and Hell, life and death - is rather like that of a film which has been speeded up to the point where it is impossible to see the links between each frame, and where it has become difficult even to recognise the objective content of the images. The rapid cross-cutting, the superimposition of scene on scene and the proliferation of apparently unconnected detail place the reader in the Consul's position; he is both spectator and actor in this frantic, surreal scenario. Chapter Eleven affords a certain necessary relief by placing the reader, like Yvonne and Hugh, in a more sober relationship to the rapid unwinding of events, so that he can see, without altogether comprehending, the connection between scene and scene.

Eisenstein's theory of the nature of the work of art is interesting in this connection. He writes:

art is nothing else but an artificial retrogression in the field of psychology towards the forms of earlier thought-processes, i.e., a phenomenon identical with any given form of drug, alcohol, shamanism, religion, etc.

The dialectic of works of art is built upon a most curious "dual-unity." The affectiveness of a work of art is built upon the fact that there takes place in its dual process: an impetuous progressive rise along the lines of the highest explicit steps

of consciousness and a simultaneous penetration by means of the structure of the form into the layers of profoundest sensual thinking. The polar separation of these two lines of flow creates that remarkable tension of unity of form and content characteristic of true art-works.³

Under the Volcano exhibits exactly this polarity, this duality. Lowry was striving to achieve through montage and the fullest possible exploration of tonal and spatial variation an effect of total synecdoche, where every fragment of reality, every bird, beast, stone, image, sign or action could stand for the whole, by implication, the whole in this instance being not merely the rendering of an individual tragedy, but an archetypal view of the tragic struggle of universal man in the fallen world. Early reviewers who complained about the bewildering profusion of sensual detail, the overburdened style of the novel, simply failed to recognise the world view which provides the novel with its underlying unity of form and meaning. Their failure is understandable, for Lowry adopts the view which prevailed in English literature and science until the end of the seventeenth century, but which survives today chiefly as an aspect of occultism, in its various and rather questionable manifestations.

According to this view, which can be traced in its essentials at least back to the mysteries of Eleusis,

man was the elements; he was minerals and metals;
he was fruit and trees, vegetables and flowers.
He was also winds and storms and tempests.⁴

3. Eisenstein, pp. 144, 145.

4. Marjorie Nicolson, The Breaking of the Circle: Studies in the Effect of the "New Science" Upon Seventeenth-Century Poetry, Columbia University Press, New York, 1960, p. 23.

Correlative with this concept was the idea of a universe of "harmony," "symmetry," and "proportion,"⁵ in which 'man's body and the body of the world,...man's soul and the soul of the universe'⁶ were regarded as perfectly analogous elements in the great circle of being which symbolized, in turn, the perfection of God. Man's organs, faculties and virtues could thus be understood as an 'imitative hierarchic structure.'⁷

In spite of the 'breaking of the circle,' the view of pars pro toto was preserved in English poetry against 'single vision and Newton's sleep' by William Blake, whose readings in Boehme, Paracelsus and Swedenborg, among others, have been thoroughly documented by recent critics, and in French literature by the symbolist poets and novelists. Gwendolyn Bays, in her study of Rimbaud,⁸ traces the course of the Hermetic doctrine from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. She writes:

In the literature of French and German Romanticism, the poet is again a seer, but in a very different sense. The mystic has become a magician, an explorer of dreams and the night, an adept of Mesmer's "animal magnetism," making his way as intrepidly through the gates of horn as through the ivory gates of dream. The long-abandoned Homeric theory of the poetic process as a lowering of consciousness or the Virgilian descent into Avernus was rediscovered.⁹

5. Nicolson, p. 33

6. Nicolson, p. 3.

7. William York Tindall, The Literary Symbol, Columbia University Press, New York, 1955, p. 34.

8. Gwendolyn Bays, The Orphic Vision: Seer Poets from Novalis to Rimbaud, University of Nebraska Press, 1964.

9. Bays, pp. 12-13.

And Further,

Beneath all Symbolist Weltanschauung lay Baudelaire's Hermetic doctrine of correspondences, whereby objects of the material world are magically charged with life and meaning which the poet must decipher and communicate by the Mallarméan principle of suggestion. To evoke an object is to create it....¹⁰

Speaking of a series of lectures on "The Nocturnal Aspects of the Natural Sciences" delivered by G.H. von Schubert in 1806, she says:

In these lectures, Schubert outlined an idea which was destined to become a mere banality as Romanticism progressed: primitive man lived in a golden age of perfect harmony with Nature; he was a living Word, expressing the universal Rhythm, and his very language indicated this harmony. The sciences too, which were one and complete rather than fragmentary, included man in their total account. After the fall, provoked by the willfulness of man, the harmony between himself and Nature was broken. The ransom which he must pay for his independence is death, or the loss of immediate consciousness. Only love and death are able to put an end to man's separation from the universe and from other individuals. By means of death the superior forces which sleep in us are restored so that death becomes in fact a resurrection. Within life itself man often has supreme moments when he experiences the joy of "dying" to be born to a higher life. Poetry, religion, and the passion for knowledge all tend to prepare man for his final detachment from life. ¹¹

The resemblance between the theme and metaphors of Under the Volcano and this concise description of the Hermetic doctrine in its Romantic guise is immediately apparent.

It may seem strange that contemporary writers should concern themselves with such an obviously unscientific world view. The reasons are many. To begin with, the doctrines of

10. Bays, p. 15.

11. Bays, p. 57.

Hermes, alchemy and the Cabala have always lent themselves to symbolic interpretation, and contemporary psychology is able to see in the 'marriage of Sol and Luna' (the transformation of base metals into gold) or the concept of Adam Kadmon, the original androgynous man, a curious paradigm of the workings of the human mind. In Jung, for example, Sol and Luna are interpreted as animus and anima, the male and female halves of the psyche, and their marriage as the achievement of psychic wholeness or equilibrium. And Freud, in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, refers to the Platonic story of androgynous man in support of his concept of the struggle between conflicting elements within the ego: Eros, or object-directed libido, which expresses the desire of the organism for reproduction and continuance; and ego-directed libido, which is the desire of the organism to return, in a repetitive cycle, to its original inorganic state.¹² If all bi-sexual organisms were originally androgynous, the conflict can be resolved by the union of the two sexes, through which organisms can reproduce themselves while at the same time proceeding towards the proper end of life - death. Lowry was familiar with Beyond the Pleasure Principle, and the struggle between love and death - the desire of the Consul for reunion with Yvonne against which is pitted his impulse to self-destruction - provides the dominant theme of Under the Volcano.

William York Tindall has pointed out, in The Literary Symbol, that the Hermetic doctrine 'as above, so below' tends

12. Sigmund Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, James Strachey, tr., Liverwright, New York, 1950, pp. 79ff.

increasingly to become 'as in, so out,' 'as here, so there,'¹³ or 'as then, so now.'¹⁴ He describes writers like Joyce and Baudelaire as 'denatured Hermeticists,'¹⁵ pointing out that while Joyce, for example, tends to interpret the doctrine of Hermes-~~Thoth~~ in horizontal rather than vertical terms, he employs it extensively in support of his Viconian view of history as a great wheel of simultaneity. For, like the Consul's 'work in progress,' in which he tries to answer 'such questions as: Is there any ultimate reality, external, conscious and ever-present etc. etc. that can be realized by any such means that may be acceptable to all creeds and religions and suitable to all climes and countries?',¹⁶ Joyce's Ulysses and Finnegans Wake try to achieve a syncretic world view, using the method of universal analogy.

Analogy is not only the method of Ulysses but its substance. Out of a maze of correspondences Joyce created a world, complete and self-subsistent, but not without reference to external things nor without power to organize our feelings about them.¹⁷

Joyce, like Blake, was aware that to be able to read the 'signatures' of the universe was to have at his disposal an unlimited

13. Tindall, p. 54.

14. Tindall, p. 56.

15. Tindall, p. 51.

16. Malcolm Lowry, Under the Volcano, Reynal and Hitchcock, New York, 1947, p. 39. All further references to this edition will appear in the text as UV, followed by the page number.

17. Tindall, p. 60.

source of infinitely expandable symbols.

A demonstration of how the method of universal analogy functioned for William Blake is given by Hazard Adams in his comparative study of Blake and Yeats:

The view of space-time expressed [in Blake's vortex] ...quite naturally leads to certain controlling metaphors, which themselves beget new metaphors. For instance, the cyclic idea of time most certainly suggests a wheel or some other circular object. Space suggests some kind of physical object. Combining space and time we get a globe. And since our globe symbolizes not only the creation of error but also the vehicle of eventual apocalypse, perhaps it is an egg waiting to be hatched, acting both as a prison and incubator of new life. In space human beings are obviously bodies; and since all human beings are in reality one being, the fallen humanity can easily be thought of as a primordial giant, hints of whom appear in the Bible. He is also the Adam Kadmon of the Cabala, and Ymir of the Edda. In Blake he is Albion, the universal man. The symbol proliferates, and he becomes...patriarch of the Atlantic. Legend has it that the Atlantic ocean at one time rolled over a golden continent called Atlantis. This is, of course, the flood of Biblical myth too, symbolizing the fall of all things into opacity, down into materiality. But...water is a traditional symbol of rebirth, purification. So the great flood which wiped out the eternal golden age is also the vehicle of a cleansing ritual by means of which apocalypse may reappear.¹⁸

Every one of the controlling metaphors which Adams assigns to Blake appears, in one form or another, in Under the Volcano, not because Lowry derived them directly from Blake - this seems most improbable, although Lowry was familiar with Blake ('... right through hell there is a path, as Blake well knew...') (UV36) - but because Lowry is operating within the same mythic

18. Hazard Adams, Blake and Yeats: The Contrary Vision, Cornell University Press, New York, 1955, p. 62.

framework. Unlike Blake, however, Lowry attempts to provide his work with a naturalistic surface, a simple narrative level which may be understood by itself, without reference to the mythic background against which it is played out. But the reader who is unconscious of the underlying design of the novel is inevitably affected by the tension between the explicit narrative and the centrifugal force of the symbolic relationships. As Tindall says,

When we read a symbolist novel for the first time, or even the second or third, we may find it slight or even naturalistic. When we read it again, however, we find that the concrete particulars and arrangement which gave us that impression are there to carry meanings beyond immediate significance; and as we proceed, a greater meaning gradually emerges. Each rereading adds fresh discoveries, changing our idea of the whole until we despair of reaching the end of that suggestive complexity.¹⁹

Lowry himself wrote of the novel:

if you really want to understand the Volcano it would perhaps be better to say that it is something like, though in reverse, those pictures of the insane where a meticulous foreground attempts to conceal the utter disorder of the background...²⁰

A dramatic demonstration of this method is provided by Jean Cocteau's The Infernal Machine, about which Francis Fergusson says:

The scenic strategy which Cocteau uses to bring the myth into relation with contemporary life is similar to that which Joyce used in Ulysses. Modern life, with its disabused clarity,

19. Tindall, p. 71.

20. MLP, Ibl, 1946, Letter to Jonathon Cape.

its small shrewdnesses, occupies the foreground, while the different reality of the mythic pattern is in the surrounding darkness. The visible arrangement of the stage itself presents this scene-within-a-scene: all that goes on upon the lighted platform in the centre feels as contemporary as the newspaper, while the infernal machine slowly unrolls behind the "nocturnal curtains."²¹

In Under the Volcano, the lighted platform is the 'real' landscape of Mexico - the contemporary world of the cinema, the cantina, the telegraph and the radio. But each element has its place also in the mythic pattern, the great wheel of time and being, imaged in the Ferris wheel of the fiesta. The wheel, in turn, has its origin in the Hermetic symbol of the serpent devouring its own tail, emblem of the eternal resolution of antinomies. And, as Hazard Adams says,

As long as the contraries maintain the chase, and as long...as the serpent who forms the wheel consumes himself, the contraries do create progression toward some finality, where the opposites are married, all things joined.²²

The world of the French symbolists, and of Joyce and Lowry, is almost entirely desacralized; this point is emphasized time and again in Under the Volcano. The upper or invisible half has lost its value, as Tindall points out.²³ The symbolist writer has, therefore, two courses open to him: he can use the method of analogy as Joyce did,

to show the connection between man and man, man and society, man and nature, and, as if to prove himself a romantic, between past and present.²⁴

21. Francis Fergusson, The Idea of a Theater: The Art of Drama in Changing Perspective, Anchor Books, 1953, p. 210.

22. Adams, p. 63.

23. Tindall, p. 58

24. Tindall, p. 59.

The correspondences, in this case, are horizontal rather than vertical. Or he can, as it were, reverse the vertical pole, turning the mystical ascent to God into a descent into the abyss. In this event the poet (or hero) is crucified, like Blake's Christ, head downward; he plunges, or is flung, like Lucifer, into the 'gouffre.' Gwendolyn Bays employs the term Orphic to distinguish the nocturnal, the occult vision from the genuine mystical experience, and asks;

But what did such a probing of the occult and an increasing awareness of the unconscious signify if not...the myth of Narcissus, the poet who discovered his own image in the none-too-clear waters of the unconscious.²⁵

The same point is made by John Senior, who traces the occult sources of symbolist literature to their origins in Egyptian, Orphic and Tantric concepts:

The profound symbolism of the mysteries appears in all...occult systems. The soul is a grain, and unless it die, it cannot flower. The way down - into Hell, into mortification, into the abyss of the unconscious - is the way up. The descent into Hell is the way to Heaven.²⁶

The Orphic path, then, represents an attempt to achieve divinization through a descent into the lowest reaches of the self, and may involve, as it did for Rimbaud and Baudelaire, the 'déréglement de tous les sens.' The object of the descent is the achievement of equilibrium, of salvation, through Divine Love.

25. Bays, pp. 16-17.

26. Senior, p. 13.

"Divine Love alone plays upon the keys of knowledge. I am a musician who has found something like the keyboard of love."²⁷

So Rimbaud, before the end of the Season, in Hell. The danger in the process lies in the fact that the nocturnal experience, unlike the mystical, often results in the fragmentation rather than the unification of the personality - in madness, as with Nerval and Baudelaire, or disgust and alienation, as with Rimbaud. The abyss between Chesed and Binah, between Mercy and Understanding, (UV 39) may prove unbridgeable. To quote again from Senior,

The magus invites the infinite into the finite glass of his soul, and unless he is of super-human stature, he is likely to be destroyed by the experience.²⁸

This imagery is particularly appropriate to describe Lowry's Consul, as is a further image drawn from Plato:

The unconscious soul has a white and a black horse, and when we overthrow the charioteer - our reason - either horse is likely to get the bit in his teeth.²⁹

The forces unleashed by drugs, by ceremonial magic, even by yoga exercises when performed without regard to the actual life one lives - these forces are most often merely destructive of the mental and moral faculties as the ego grows stronger.³⁰

27. Rimbaud, quoted in Bays, p. 51.

28. Senior, p. 63.

29. Senior, p. 155.

30. Senior, p. 156.

Malcolm Lowry, the novelist, understood the dangers of the path through hell, and it is this understanding, with all its implication of ambiguity and conflict, that he communicates in Under the Volcano.

CHAPTER II

THE WHEEL

A major symbol of Finnegans Wake may be the wheel, as Tindall suggests,¹ but another image, that of the labyrinth, provides a better metaphor for the structure of Joyce's world of horizontal correspondences. In analysing Joyce's works it is possible to explore many passages by a Theseus-like unwinding of the thread of imagery, through which the reflexive relationship of each part to the symbolic centre can be discovered. The direction is outward, from the centre to the periphery, in an infinite series of radial movements. Through this process, the underlying shape of the wheel is revealed, as a figure in a child's puzzle is discovered by the joining together of a series of numbers. Under the Volcano does not lend itself so readily to this method of analysis, for it is only when the wheel is turning that the pattern becomes clear, and the direction is inward, from the rim of the wheel in to the centre, by analogy with the Consul's attempt to arrive at the centre of his own soul, to penetrate the abyss of the self.

Joseph Frank has said of Joyce that he

cannot be read - he can only be re-read.
A knowledge of the whole is essential to
an understanding of any part; and ...

1. Tindall, p. 59.

such knowledge can be obtained only after the book [Ulysses] has been read, when all the references are fitted into their proper place and grasped as a unity.²

This is equally true of Under the Volcano. In its structure, the novel imitates the concept of the eternal return, the endless cyclical repetition of life itself, and a full understanding of the theme requires that the reader pursue the circular form of the work from its conclusion back to its starting point. Lowry himself wrote concerning the motto which concludes the novel (Le Gusta Este Jardin....!) that it should be

at the end of Chapter XII on a separate page.... That is like those old swing tunes called Aunt Hagar Blues...of Ted Lewis when the record ends and you are just about to take the record off when it ends again, and you then proceed (one hopes - as in this case) to put it on again.

He says also that

Chapter XII as a whole constitutes a kind of answer to I as a whole....Moreover there are very good reasons...for having 12 chapters without any break in them, twelve solid blocks, or perhaps one should say spokes, for the form of the book is as it were trochal - as I see it, like a wheel, the image of which keeps recurring.³

In the same letter Lowry compares his protagonist to Gogol's Tchichikov, and it is interesting to note that one critic has described Dead Souls as

a closed circle whirling on its axle and blurring the spokes, with the theme of the wheel cropping up at each new revolution....⁴

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2. Joseph Frank, "Spatial form in the Modern Novel," in John W. Aldridge, Critiques and Essays on Modern Fiction 1920-1951 Ronald Press, New York, 1952, p. 46.
 3. MLP IBI, Letter to John Erskine, June 22, 1946.
 4. Vladimir Nabakov, Nikolai Gogol, New Directions, Norfolk Conn., 1944, p. 76.

The image of the wheel is established early in Under the Volcano in the shape of the 'slowly revolving Ferris wheel' (UV 10) which broods over the fiesta, the very name of which, by one of those curious coincidences of which Lowry was so much aware, suggests the iron wheel of fate, the inexorable forward movement of time and destiny. The wheel, or circle, is also suggested by M. Laruelle's walk, which carries him in an 'eccentric orbit' (UV 23) around the town, in imitation of the procession of the planets. During this walk Laruelle describes a temporal as well as a spatial circle, returning in memory, in a series of recessive spirals, to the immediate past (the day of the Consul's death), to his own childhood memories of the Consul, and further back into the historical past of Maximilian and Carlotta, whose crumbling palace suggests at once the unrealized personal hopes of Yvonne and the Consul, and the equally unrealized universal hope for peace.

In the words of Mircea Eliade,

the life of modern man is swarming with half-forgotten myths, decaying hierophanies and secularised symbols. The progressive de-sacralisation of modern man has altered the content of his spiritual life without breaking the matrices of his imagination; a quantity of mythological litter still lingers in the ill-controlled zones of the mind.⁵

What Lowry is attempting in Under the Volcano is a re-sacralization of the universe. Through the archetype of the suffering hero, and using the unifying device of the Hermetic vision,

5. Mircea Eliade, Images and Symbols, Harvill Press, London, 1952, p. 18.

he imposes a meaningful pattern on the 'mythological litter,' making every detail of the novel express some aspect of man's individual and social predicament. The circular structure of the novel, which precludes a final reading in any sense of the word, holds out some hope for the future; but Lowry's vision of man in Under the Volcano is fundamentally tragic. He is concerned primarily with the failure of love, of brotherhood, of understanding, and with man's seemingly unchanging capacity for turning the earthly paradise into a hell of guilt and sorrow and separation.

It is this burden which M. Laruelle feels 'pressing upon him from outside' with 'the weight of many things, but mostly that of sorrow.' (UV 13) The car with its wheel blocked 'against involuntary departure'; (UV 13) the station with its vacant tracks and raised signals; (UV 7) the vultures - 'Cathartes atratus' (UV 136) - which, like the eagle, can rise so near to heaven, but which are also emblematic of death: all these images are reminders that man is free to choose his direction, but also of the fact that, like the Consul, he generally chooses wrong.

At the beginning of Under the Volcano, the choice has, in a sense, already been made for Laruelle. The blitzkrieg has begun; Hitler's lightning is 'peeling the poles,' providing a suggestive analogy for the Consul's cryptic recollection at the beginning of Chapter Ten. (UV 283) The time has passed in which 'an individual life held some value and was not a mere misprint in a communique.' (UV 5) The only choice that remains

is between one collective 'side' and the other. In another sense, however, M. Laruelle makes an individual and positive choice when he decides to return to the sleepy French village, where

he had seen, rising slowly and wonderfully and with boundless beauty above the stubble fields blowing with wildflowers, slowly rising into the sunlight, as centuries before the pilgrims straying over those same fields had watched them rise, the twin spires of Chartres Cathedral. (UV 12)

The spires of Chartres, like the Spire of St. Marks in Proust's Remembrance of Things Past, have an eternal validity. For M. Laruelle - in spite of the burden of remorse he carries - they signify a hopeful return to the feeling of peace he had experienced years before under their spell, 'the spell not even the fact he was scandalously in debt there could break.' (UV 12-13) But even here there is a hint of ambiguity, for Laruelle's action is coloured by the 'three sleepless nights' in which 'an eternity had been lived through,' when 'grief and bewilderment at an unassimilable catastrophe had drawn them together,' (UV 8) and this, in turn, is a reminder of Hugh's exclamation, "Good God, if our civilization were to sober up for a couple of days it'd die of remorse on the third-" (UV 117)

Laruelle's point of departure, like Hugh's, is Vera Cruz, the site where Cortez landed in Mexico in 1519. C.G. Vaillant writes:

The years before the Spanish Conquest had to the Aztecs been full of portents suggestive of future evil. There seems to have been in the

air that same sense of paralysis that the French knew to their cost in 1939 and 1940.⁶

He says further that the Spaniards seemed to the Indians to be invincible in battle,

operating in a manner completely foreign to the Indian principles of war....
The problem that beset Montezuma was not that the invaders were themselves gods, but that they were the symbols, the vicars on earth, as it were, of vast unearthly forces bent on establishing a new social order.⁷

The analogy between Cortez' and Hitler's armies is clear. It is only hindsight - the knowledge that Hitler died in a bunker, a fact which Lowry himself, of course, did not know when he first composed the novel - that enables us to accept a positive resolution of the inherent ambiguity.

It becomes clear during the course of Laruelle's walk that Mexico itself, or rather that particular part of Mexico which was the centre of Aztec civilization, is intended to function as a symbolic circle, standing for the whole universe of time and space. Lowry's choice of setting, or perhaps his use of it, is particularly effective, for in Quauhnahuac

you...find every sort of landscape at once, the Cotswolds, Windermere, New Hampshire, the meadows of the Eure-et-Loire, even the grey dunes of Cheshire, even the Sahara...(UV 10)

The landscape has the 'beauty of the Earthly Paradise itself,' (UV 10) but for Laruelle, as for the Consul, it is a 'Doré

6. G.C. Vaillant, The Aztecs of Mexico, Pelican, 1950, p. 230.

7. Vaillant, pp. 232-233.

Paradise' - Paradise lost. (UV 6) And every element in this landscape is a 'signature,' a reminder of the correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm, between past and present, between the body-politic and the body of the earth itself. The Hotel Casino de la Selva, with its 'air of desolate splendour,' (UV 3) its abandoned swimming pool and deserted jai-alai courts, is an ironic counter-part of the disintegrating world soul. The ruined pyramid at Cholula, which the Consul 'had proudly insisted was the original Tower of Babel,' (UV 11) recalls the vanished splendour of the original Aztec civilization, and points also to the legend which links that culture with the lost continent of Atlantis, supposed to have been destroyed in the flood of biblical tradition. But the 'three hundred and six churches' at Cholula, (UV 11) each of which would once have been an Aztec temple, are a reminder of the Conquest, as are the 'Two ragged Indians.. [whose]...carriage suggested the majesty of Aztec princes' (UV 11) - a conquest made easier for the Spaniards by the treacherous behaviour of Montezuma's allies. There is an implied parallel between the meeting of Cortez and Montezuma, which is pictured on the calendar in the Cervecería XX, and the meeting between Hitler and Chamberlain at Munich, where, in the light of the Spanish Civil War, the cumulative process of the "exploitation of everybody by everybody else-" (UV 300) would seem to have come full circle.

The natural world, as Laruelle perceives it during his stroll, reflects the dissolution and decay of the human community. There are frequent echoes of the imagery used to describe another universal landscape - the waste land of T.S. Eliot's

early poems:

Now the fields were full of stones:
there was a row of dead trees. An
abandoned plough, silhouetted against
the sky, raised its arms to heaven in
mute supplication....(UV 9-10)

he thought he could distinguish...that
faint intoxication of voices singing,
diminishing, dying in the wind, unaudible
finally. (UV 10-11)

And Laruelle's walk, like The Waste Land, comes to an end as
the voice of the thunder speaks over the mountains, and the
rain begins to fall.

With his arrival at the Cervecería XX, Laruelle has reached
the centre of the wheel. The cantina is Dr. Vigil's "place
where you know," (UV 25) the symbolic point at which past and
present intersect, and time is momentarily suspended. It is
seven o'clock - the hour at which the Consul died, on the same
day of the previous year. The traditional magical symbols of
bell, book, and candle - the bell which rings its sombre message,
'dolente, dolore,' over the town, the Consul's book of Eliza-
bethan plays which, as the Consul predicted, has "become an
emblem of what...it is impossible to return"(UV 27) and the
candle which lights the cantina because of the failure of the
electric power - are invoked to suggest escape from clock time.
Because of the storm, the "wires have decomposed", and in the
cinema "the function must be suspended."(UV 25) The patrons
inside the theatre appear to Laruelle like a 'solid dark frieze
carved into the wall,' (UV 28) and the interior of the cinema
resembles a scene from the Inferno:

It was difficult to believe so many had left
their seats. Dark shapes of pariah dogs

prowled in and out of the stalls. The lights were not entirely dead: they glimmered, a dim reddish orange flickering. On the screen, over which clambered an endless procession of torch-lit shadows, hung magically projected upside down, a faint apology for the "suspended function..." (UV 26)

Or, the scene might be intended to evoke Plato's image of the cave: life itself is merely the reflection on a 'dark screen suddenly illumined, swept by silent grotesque shadows of giants and spears and birds, then dark again,' (UV 28) of some transcendent reality beyond man's conception.

Even the film Las Manos de Orlac, a rerun of a remake of an early German film, which is supposed to be showing at the cinema, suggests not so much a circular, forward movement as a marking of time, the static repetition of an action untransformed in or by time. Like the newsreels from the Spanish war, it has not "revived," it has only "returned." The symbolic significance of the film is related not to the image of the wheel, but to the abyss, the polar separation of opposites. It is another 'hieroglyphic of the times,' the story of 'An artist with a murderer's hands,' 'by some uncomfortable stretch of the imagination, M. Laruelle himself,' (UV 25) but also Germany, and insofar as he is identified with both, the Consul as well.

Laruelle is drinking anis 'because it remind[s] him of absinthe.' (UV 4) Absinthe, which for Rimbaud was the 'green inn,' the means of ingress into the world of secret knowledge, is a compound of anis oils and wormwood, and in the label on the bottle 'Anis del Mono' there is perhaps intended a cryptogram. With the help of this 'greenly chilling then rather nauseating' drink, (UV 26) and also through the invocation of

Hermes, the 'golden faceless figurine' intaglied in the cover of the Consul's book of Elizabethan plays (UV 34) Laruelle is able to call up first the letter, and, ultimately, the spirit of the Consul. The reading of the letter is like an absolution for Laruelle. The cantina takes on for him 'a beauty and a sort of piety,' (UV 41) and the 'fresh coolness of rain-washed air' (UV 41) suggests purification, rebirth, the possibility of a new beginning. But time does not at once begin to move forward again. As he holds the letter to the candle flame, Laruelle sees the figures in the bar 'for an instant, frozen, a mural;' (UV 42) and in burning the letter he seems to release from their 'dead husk' the 'tiny red worms,' the sparks of the Consul's surviving soul, and to bring about a reversal in time:

Suddenly from outside, a bell spoke out,
then ceased abruptly: dolente...dolore!
Over the town, in the dark tempestuous
night, backwards revolved the luminous wheel. _____ (UV 42)

The Consul is introduced in Chapter One of Under the Volcano through a series of images which suggest, directly or indirectly, the theme of the novel: separation, disunion, and disintegration; the struggle between love and death. The wheel, like the Oroboros - the serpent devouring its own tail - is a symbol of the union of opposites and the progression towards a future goal which arises out of the marriage of contraries. In polar opposition to the positive image of the wheel, at its symbolic 'antipodes,' is the negative image of the abyss, which stands for the unbridgeable gulf between Mercy and Understanding, between the fallen world (the Q'lipoth, or world of shells of the Cabala (UV 39)) and the divine world of love and union. In his

unposted letter to Yvonne, the Consul implores her to help him across the abyss in his life. But love, which might have provided a safe bridge across the abyss, comes, like Yvonne's postcard, too late. 'A black storm breaking out of season! That was what love was like, Laruelle thought; love which came too late. ...And let such love strike you dumb, blind, mad, dead - your fate would not be altered by your simile.' (UV 10) The only alternative route is the path through hell, the 'way down and out.'

Lowry conceived his protagonist as the embodiment of the world soul. In an early draft of Under the Volcano he wrote:

"supposing...that all the suffering and chaos and conflict of the present were suddenly to take human form, and to become conscious of itself! In ...a man to whom too, like Jesus, the betrayal of the human spirit would appear in the guise of a private, anguishing betrayal." "Supposing that all these horrors of today before they became part of our lives had suddenly convulsed upon themselves to create a soul, and that that soul had sought a body... the Consul's. ...If I could only convey the effect of a man who was the very shape and motion of the world's doom...but at the same time the living prophecy of its hope!" 8

In the following pages an attempt will be made to explore the universal implications of the Consul's 'descent,' and to suggest how, in spite of the apparent finality of the tragedy, it is nevertheless a prophecy of hope.

8. MLP IAb1, Second draft of Under the Volcano, Chapter One, p. 4.

CHAPTER III

THE ABYSS

The chief symbol in Under the Volcano for the spirit of division and conflict which the Consul embodies is the barranca:

Quauhnahuac was like the times in this respect, wherever you turned the abyss was waiting for you round the corner. (UV 15)

The ravine which runs right through the town, even cutting a corner off the Consul's garden, is supposed to have opened up at the hour of Christ's death.

When Christ was being crucified, so ran the sea-borne, hieratic legend, the earth had opened all through this country....(UV 15)

In this light it can be seen as part of a potential circle, for Christ, through his crucifixion, took upon himself all the sins of the world, and in the Harrowing of Hell he triumphed over death and the devil before ascending once more to heaven. The Consul, like St. John of the Cross, or like Dante, is metaphorically identified with Christ through his descent into the inner, the spiritual "Malebolge," (UV 100) by means of which he tries to expiate the world's guilt: "Firmin innocent, but bears guilt of world on shoulders." (UV 137) Mircea Eliade writes

Against...suffering, the primitive struggles with all the magico-religious means available to him - but he tolerates it morally because it is not absurd. ...suffering is perturbing only insofar as its cause remains undiscovered.¹

The Consul's struggle is accompanied by a sustained de profundis clamavi, an appeal from the depths for something that will give meaning to his seemingly senseless suffering.

"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." (UV 289)

Like Dante, the Consul is in a dark wood, imaged in the cantina El Bosque, in the name Quauhnahuac itself, which means 'near the wood', and in the actual forest that surrounds the Farolito in Parian. As Dorothy Sayers expresses it,

Once lost in the Dark Wood, a man can only escape by so descending into himself that he sees his sin, not as an external obstacle, but as the will to chaos and death within him (Hell).²

The Consul prays further, "Give me back my purity, the knowledge of the mysteries that I have betrayed and lost." (UV 289) The idea of a descent into hell is found in the myth of Orpheus, and in the Eleusinian mysteries, the initiation rites are believed to have included a descent into a pit or cave, symbolic of the grave, or the abode of the chthonic dieties, as a necessary prelude to purification and rebirth in union with the

1. Mircea Eliade, The Myth of the Eternal Return, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1955, p. 98.

2. Dorothy Sayers, The Comedy of Dante Alighieri The Florentine, Cantica I, Hell, Penguin, 1949, p. 75n.

divine. Lowry suggests, in a letter to John Erskine, that 'the "search" for the Consul in Chapter 1 is not unrelated to the Eleusinian mysteries,'³ although here it is Hugh, with his newly purchased guitar in its key-shaped case, who is identified with Orpheus. As he and Yvonne fight their way through the dark wood in search of the Consul, Hugh sings, in what seems like pure irony, a song of the Spanish Civil War, the gist of which is that it is better to die fighting against the imperialists for justice, for a new world ('un nuevo mundo') than to live a slave. (UV 332f) Lowry's intention here was perhaps to establish an identification between Hugh and the 'catechumen' in the mysteries, who 'needed a hierophant or expounder to guide him aright.'⁴ Yvonne, and, by extension, the Consul, are the hierophants, functioning as Hugh's guides through the dark wood, the realm of the dead. The initiation rites had also the object of protecting the living from being haunted by the spirits of the dead. As Jane Harrison remarks,

It is not the guilty conscience of the murderer, but a sort of onset of the consciousness of the murdered⁵

that leads to a sense of guilt, and sometimes to madness, as with Orestes, and with the Consul, who is haunted by the spirit of the German officers murdered aboard the Samaritan. Hugh's

3. MLPIB1, July 15, 1946.

4. Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Mystery," Cambridge, 1911, Vol. XIX, p. 118.

5. Jane Ellen Harrison, Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion, Cambridge U.P., 1908, p. 218.

initiation, therefore, is intended to provide him with a kind of immunity against the Consul's and Yvonne's spirits, since he is in part guilty of their deaths. For, as the Consul realizes,

What you did impulsively and tried to forget in the cruel abstraction of youth will begin to strike you in a new and darker light. I am sadly afraid that you may indeed, precisely because you are a good and simple person at bottom and genuinely respect more than most the principles and decencies that might have prevented it, fall heir, as you grow older and your conscience less robust, to a suffering on account of it more abominable than any you have caused me. How may I help you? How ward it off? How shall the murdered man convince his assassin he will not haunt him. (UV 79)

The question remains unanswered at the end of the novel, although Hugh's encounter in the bull ring at Tomalin, his song, which suggests a revival of spirit, and his final departure from Vera Cruz (on an errand of rescue, of salvation) leave the reader with a feeling that Hugh will learn from the Consul's spiritual journey what he failed to understand after his own actual 'Journey to the Orient.'

There are other hints which link Hugh's and Yvonne's progress through the wood with the Eleusinian rites. At the beginning of their search they see 'cattle...on the sloping fields among gold cornstalks and striped mysterious tents,' (UV 317) and as they emerge from the restaurant El Popo Yvonne sees, beside the road, 'a ruined Grecian temple, dim, with two tall slender pillars, approached by two broad steps,' (UV 331) which, though it turns out to be only an illusion, suggests the temple to Demeter at Eleusis. The clearest connection, however, is made at the end of Chapter Ten:

And leaving the burning dream, Yvonne felt herself suddenly gathered upwards and borne towards the stars, through eddies of stars scattering aloft with ever wider circlings like rings on water, among which now appeared, like a flock of diamond birds flying softly and steadily towards Orion, the Pleiades... (UV 336)

A part of the Orphic doctrine was that the souls of the initiated returned in death to the stars, or perhaps even became stars, and although there is a certain grotesque humour in the fact that Yvonne, after failing twice to become a Hollywood 'star' should achieve her goal in death, the intention is primarily positive. It is meant to convey the idea that Yvonne has been released from the fallen world, from the 'burning dream' of suffering and desire; and perhaps also that in the stars she will be united with the Consul, whose soul is implicitly identified with the Eagle, that 'dark furious shape, a little world of fierce despairs and dreams, and memories' (UV 320) which she frees from 'the damp and dark of its prison'. (UV 319)

...she was right, it knew it was free - up soaring, with a sudden cleaving of pinions into the deep dark blue pure sky above, in which at that moment appeared one star. No compunction touched Yvonne. She felt only an inexplicable secret triumph and relief: no one would ever know she had done this; and then, stealing over her, the sense of utter heartbreak and loss. (UV 320)

It is through such images of release from suffering and guilt that the 'prophecy of hope' which Lowry intended to express is carried. The Orphic doctrine, however, was in direct opposition to the Homeric view of man in relation to the gods.

W.K.C. Guthrie asks,

Which idea, then, are we to take as the more truly representative of the Greek religious mind: that there was a great gulf between mortal and immortal, between man and god, and that for man to attempt to bridge it was hybris and could only end in disaster, or that there was a kinship between human and divine, and that it was the duty of man to live a life which would emphasize this kinship and make it as close as possible? ⁶

Lowry alternates between the two ideas in Under the Volcano, but the very title of the novel suggests that the Consul is more pharmakos than saviour, more Prometheus than Christ.

Under the volcano! It was not for nothing the ancients had placed Tartarus under Mt. Aetna, nor within it, the monster Typhoeus, with his hundred heads and - relatively - fearful eyes and voices. (UV 339)

The Consul is identified, at various points in the novel, with another denizen of Tartarus, Prometheus, 'that poor fool who was bringing light to the world!'. (UV 222) Prometheus, like that other light bearer, Lucifer, acted out of hybris. In defiance he sought to rob God, to steal the sacred fire of Zeus, which was presumably a symbol for knowledge of the secrets of the universe. The Consul, 'peeping, tequila-unafraid,' (UV 130) into the barranca, sees it as a kind of 'general Tartarus and gigantic jakes,' inhabited by a 'cloacal Prometheus'. (UV 131)

6. W.K.C. Guthrie, The Greeks and Their Gods, Beacon Press Boston, 1954, p. 114.

For the nineteenth-century Romantics, according to Gwendolyn Bays,

Prometheus....represented not only the suffering hero, but also primordial man in all his innocence, and was so godlike that he did not fear to enter heaven.⁷

Nor, in the Shelleian version of the myth, did he fear to remain in hell, in defiance of what he felt was the injustice of the gods. The poet is conceived by Shelley, as by the nineteenth-century German Romantics and the French symbolists, as a kind of Promethean explorer of the 'unknown spiritual depths of man'.⁸ This is also the Consul, as Lowry portrays him:

And this is how I sometimes think of myself,
as a great explorer who has discovered some
extraordinary land from which he can never
return to give his knowledge to the world:
but the name of this land is hell

It is not Mexico of course but in the
heart. (UV 36)

The problem in Under the Volcano is that for the Consul, as Laruelle says (or perhaps it is really the Consul himself who realizes it)

"Je crois que le vautour est doux à
Prometheus et que les Ixion se plaisent
en Enfers."

"Facilis est descensus Averno..." (UV 219)

The Consul's spiritual battle⁹ is carried on 'in a bottle,' (UV 78) and although alcohol provides a way of 'seeing' what

7. Bays, p. 69.

8. Bays, p. 63, (quoting E.T.A. Hoffman).

is otherwise veiled, it is also a means, often, for escaping from the problems of existence. Like Yvonne's horse, the Consul does not want to drink; he wishes only to look at his reflection - to peer into the depths of his soul. But this painful descent must be made in humility: the true road leads through the gate of horn, that is, through the death of the self-seeking ego. And alcohol has the effect of insulating the soul "from the responsibility of genuine suffering." (UV 219) It becomes one of the "instruments of the disaster" (UV 217) which it is intended to avert. The narcotic experience may result in a penetration of the abyss, but the explorer finds himself often in a hell like the Consul's from which there is no escape.

for those who, for whatever reason,
are appalled, heaven turns into hell,
bliss into horror, the Clear Light into
the hateful glare of the land of lit-upness.⁹

De Quincey, that 'mere drug fiend' (UV 136) who was no doubt a progenitor of the Consul's disapproving neighbour, Mr. Quincey, a 'retired walnut grower', (UV 132) had just this kind of experience under the influence of his particular nux vomica, laudanum:

9. Aldous Huxley, Heaven and Hell, Chatto and Windus, London, 1956. pp. 52-53.

I seemed every night to descend - not metaphorically, but literally to descend - into chasms and sunless abysses, depths below depths, from which it seemed hopeless that I could ever re-ascend. Nor did I, by waking, feel that I had re-ascended. ...the state of gloom which attended these gorgeous spectacles, amounting at least to utter darkness, as of some suicidal despondency, cannot be approached by words.¹⁰

For Baudelaire and Rimbaud, hashish and absinthe produced similar experiences. Both regarded the poet as a seer, 'une phare'. The poet, they felt could become 'one of "Les Phares" - the beacons, the illumined and the illuminating.'¹¹ He could become like

Prometheus [who] by his ascent into heaven, and Orpheus, [who] by his descent into hell, attempted to wrest for mankind the secrets of existence; the one braved the blinding light of heaven, the other the impenetrable darkness and uncanny terrors of the underworld.¹²

But, as Senior remarks,

the beacons are reflected in the mirror of the sea, that is, they chiefly light the dark regions of the souls of the poets themselves.¹³

The Farolito (which means lighthouse) also suggests a beacon, but it is the kind of lighthouse which, in Lowry's own words, 'invites the storm and lights it.'¹⁴ (UV 200) For those who are

10. Thomas De Quincey, The Opium Eater, Ward, Lock and Co., London, 1910, pp. 105-106.

11. Senior, p. 98.

12. Bays, p. 189.

13. Senior, p. 98.

14. See also Malcolm Lowry, "The Lighthouse Invites the Storm," in Selected Poems of Malcolm Lowry, City Lights Books, San Francisco, 1962, p. 18.

appalled, as the Consul is appalled by his inability to accept salvation, by the senselessness of his life and his isolation in suffering, the beacon serves only to make the darkness more visible, to reveal the 'eternal horror of opposites' (UV 130) which lies at the centre of his own being.

At the symbolic midpoint of the novel (seven minutes past two o'clock, the seventh hour) there is an implied choice for the Consul of a genuine Promethean role. The Rivera frescoes on the fairground, which recall the imagery of Chapter One of the novel, seem to Laruelle and the Consul, in their "slow darkening...from right to left" to "symbolise the gradual imposition of the Spaniard's conquering will upon The Indians," (UV 212) and, further, the 'exploitation of everybody by everybody else'. But the painted panels on the carrousel, with its suggestion of wheels within wheel, reminiscent of the Chariot of Ezekiel, convey an opposite impression. They seem to signify the possibility of a return to the Garden of Eden, to a time before Adam became a "property owner" and was "cut off from God." (UV 133) The panels present what might be interpreted as a capsule history of the world. The last one portrays

lovers, a man and a woman reclining by a river. Though childish and crude it had about it a somnambulistic quality and something too of truth, of the pathos of love. The lovers were depicted awkwardly askance. Yet one felt that really they were wrapped in each other's arms by this river at dusk among gold stars. (UV 214)

Looking at it, the Consul experiences a momentary upsurge of tenderness and joy.

Yvonne, he thought, with sudden tenderness, where are you, my darling?.... A desire to find her immediately and take her home.... seized him, and a desire too, to lead immediately again a normal happy life with her, a life, for instance, in which such innocent happiness as all these good people around him were enjoying, was possible. (UV 214)

But the fall from innocence into experience, from eternity to the condition of being in time, is irreversible. The Consul feels this as 'a great hand...pressing his head down,' (UV 215) and immediately calls for a drink. With his tequila he is served 'red shrimps in a saucer' - "cabrones" (UV 217) - a reminder of Yvonne's infidelity: "Venus is a horned star." But he recognizes too that his suffering is "largely unnecessary. Actually spurious," (UV 219) and that it may be possible, in spite of his still potent desire for destruction, to 'reverse their doom.' (UV 214) By-passing the Ferris wheel, which, as has been pointed out, symbolizes the steady, immutable forward movement of time, 'the wheel of the law rolling', (UV 218) the Consul wanders to the 'final frontiers of the fair.'

Here the tent booths and galleries seemed not so much asleep as lifeless, beyond hope of revival. Yet there were faint signs of life after all, he saw. (UV 220)

And here he encounters, is swallowed up in, the Maquina Infernal. The machine recalls the quotation from Cocteau's La Machine Infernale:

"Oui, mon enfant, mon petit enfant... les choses qui paraissent abominable aux humains, si tu savais, de l'endroit ou j'habite, elles ont peu d'importance." (UV 209)

The passage implies that the 'loathsome reality' (UV 207) of life is unimportant; and that there is a transcendent reality

which can be discovered by going beyond, or beneath, the conventional surface of being. And in the machine, which is like a 'little confession box,' (UV 221) the Consul is 'hung upside down' over the world, and he is 'emptied out.' (UV 222)

Everything was falling out of his pockets, was being wrested from him, torn away, a fresh article at each whirling, sickening plunging, retreating, unspeakable circuit, his notecase, pipe, keys, his dark glasses... What did it matter? Let it go! There was a kind of fierce delight in this final acceptance. Let everything go! Everything particularly that provided means of ingress or egress, went bond for, gave meaning or character, or purpose or identity to that frightful bloody nightmare he was forced to carry around with him everywhere upon his back....(UV 222-223)

The Infernal Machine is a climactic symbol for the 'horror of eternal opposites.' It stands at the midpoint of the novel in the dramatic as well as the temporal sense. The conflict has been imaged in a variety of ways in the early chapters of the novel. The Consul's letter, in Chapter One, with its handwriting 'half crabbed, half generous, and wholly drunken... the words themselves slanting steeply downhill, though the individual characters seemed as if resisting the descent,' (UV 35) and the horseman Laruelle encounters on the bridge, 'this maniacal vision of senseless frenzy, but controlled, not quite uncontrolled, somehow almost admirable,' (UV 23) reflect the conflict between soul and spirit. The same conflict is mirrored in the sundered rock, La Despedida, which Yvonne and the Consul see in the printer's window, ironically juxtaposed with a display of wedding invitations, a reminder to Yvonne of the meaning of the word 'Divorce': 'divorced meant: sundered, severed.' (UV 49) The tragic consequence of their separation is conveyed

through the description of the ruined garden, with its 'exotic plants...perishing on every hand of unnecessary thirst,...yet struggling like dying voluptuaries in a vision to maintain some final attitude of potency,' in the 'agony of the roses,' and the 'plantains with their queer familiar blooms, once emblematic of life, now of an evil phallic death.' (UV 65) Every element of the landscape corresponds, or hints suggestively, at the struggle between soul and spirit: the poster advertising the boxing match - 'The Ballon vs. the Bouncing Ball;' (UV 188) the image of the butterfly escaping from the jaws of the cat, which is a half-ironic, half-hopeful portent of the outcome of the contest; the scorpion on the wall, which will "only sting himself to death anyway;" (UV 188) all these are signatures which, rightly understood point to the analogy between microcosm and macrocosm.

In Laruelle's zacuali, with its 'angels and...cannonballs,' its bedroom windows 'which, as if degenerate machicolations, were built askew, like the separated halves of a chevron,' (UV 195) recalling the swinging doors of the pulqueria La Sepultura, (UV 109) the grave, the Consul is confronted by a painting, presumably of the Last Judgement. Although he describes it as 'something between a primitive and a prohibitionist poster,' (UV 199) the painting, Los Borrachones, gives rise to a feeling 'never felt before with such shocking certainty. It was that he was in hell himself.' (UV 199) In the 'curious calm' that follows this realization, the Consul is possessed by a longing for the Farolito, with its

numerous little rooms...where diabolical plots must be hatched, atrocious murders planned....(UV 200)

Against this longing, which 'was so great his soul was locked with the essence of the place,' (UV 201) is pitted his love for Yvonne, and his memories of their past life together.

'Could one be faithful to Yvonne and the Farolito both?' (UV 201) Gazing over the country through Jacque's binoculars, the Consul searches for 'some figment of himself, who had once enjoyed such a simple healthy stupid good thing as golf.' (UV 203) He is seeking, in fact, a return to his own 'age of innocence'. But now, even more than on the occasion of his first fall from innocence into experience, 'The Case is Altered.' The Hell Bunker of Chapter One has been replaced by the 'Golgotha Hole'... Golf = gouffre = gulf.' (UV 202)

And...far away, like youth, like life itself, the course... extends through the jungle, to the Farolito, the nineteenth hole....(UV 202)

The Consul resists, for a time, the demons who are 'in possession,' resists the desire to drink. But the sight of Laruelle's naked body under the shower is a horrifying reminder of the 'anguishing betrayal' he has suffered. After a frantic and unsuccessful effort to telephone Dr. Guzman, the Consul succumbs to the demons who are 'inside him as well as outside.' (UV 207) It is impossible without a drink (as with one) to face the truth, to recover the lost identity hidden behind the dark glasses, the pipe, the consular dignity. His frenzied attack on the spiral staircase in search of a drink prefigures the motion of the Infernal Machine, which in turn operates as an ironic deus ex machina, strip-

ping him of everything that goes to make up 'that frightful nightmare...that went by the name of Geoffrey Firmin.' (UV 223) The irony lies in the fact that he wakes from one nightmare only to be confronted by another: "Geoffrey Firmin, this is what it is like to die,...an awakening from a dream in a dark place, in which, as you see, are present the means of escape from yet another nightmare." (UV 226)

The Consul, like Marlow in Conrad's Heart of Darkness, has only a choice of nightmares: between the inner darkness, which projects itself on the external world in the form of "wheels within wheels," (UV 174) "Quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus," (UV 233) and the outer darkness of a world of "Mass reflexes, but only the erections of guns, disseminating death," (UV 207) which penetrates the Consul's soul in a way which is equally "Inhumaciones." (UV 232) His choice, then, is not the simple choice of Scrooge, whose inner darkness was entirely dispersed by the prayer which Hugh, in his own simplicity, echoes: "God bless us." (UV 237) For in the Consul's world, "The gods exist, they are the devil." (UV 209) They are the same gods who bind Ixion to his wheel, or Sisyphus to his endless labour, like the madman with his tire which he 'flung...far ahead again, repeating the process, to the irreducible logic of which he appeared eternally committed...' (UV 224)

The Consul, wrestling with the Infernal Machine in an attempt to transcend the human condition, loses his passport, which might have provided egress from the nightmare world of the Farolito. But Hugh's telegram, which ultimately confirms

the suspicion that he is a "spider," and not a "wrrider," (UV 371) is restored to him. The suspicion is symbolically justified, for the Consul is like a spider caught in a web of circumstance partly of his own making, and not, as he wished to be, a 'rider in the chariot.' In the cantina El Bosque, the Consul, like Hugh at the beginning of Chapter Six, recalls the first lines of Dante's Inferno. (UV 225) From this point on he is irretrievably lost in the dark wood, the 'bosca oscura' not 'selva' (UV 225) - in the place where

the soul's cherished sins have become,
as it were, externalized, and appear to it
like demons, or "beasts" with a will and
power of their own, blocking all progress.¹⁵

The headlines from the morning paper, El Universal, which, ironically, had set the Consul's mind at rest on the occasion of Dr. Vigil's visit, because they 'seemed entirely concerned with the Pope's illness and the Battle of the Ebro,' (UV 138) and not with his own fate, establish the correspondence between the Consul's struggle and the struggle for good in the world, and foreshadow the outcome of that battle:

Es inevitable la muerte del Papa. (UV 230)

15. Sayers, p. 75n.

CHAPTER IV

THE CONSUL AS TRAGIC HERO

According to Northrop Frye,

Tragedy seems to move up to an Augenblick or crucial moment from which point the road to what might have been and the road to what will be can be simultaneously seen. Seen by the audience that is: it cannot be seen by the hero if he is in a state of hybris, for in that case the crucial moment is for him a moment of dizziness, when the wheel of fortune begins its inevitable cyclical movement downward. ¹

Chapter Seven of Under the Volcano, and the single word, 'Down-hill...', at the beginning of Chapter Eight, provide an explicit demonstration of Frye's statement. It seems appropriate at this point to ask: What is it that raises Lowry's protagonist to the level of genuine tragedy?

There is a large admixture of irony in Lowry's treatment of the Consul. Again according to Frye,

irony looks at tragedy from below.... It stresses the humanity of its heroes, minimizes the sense of ritual inevitability in tragedy, supplies social and psychological explanations for catastrophe, and makes as much as possible of human misery seem, in Thoreau's phrase, "superfluous and evitable." ²

Hence the 'unnecessary suffering,' which is obliquely commented on, as the irony is further developed, by the Consul's own

1. Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays, Princeton University Press, 1957, p. 213.

2. Frye, Anatomy, p. 237.

quotation from Tolstoi:

"The act of a madman or a drunkard, ... or of a man labouring under violent excitement seems less free and more inevitable to the one who knows the mental condition of the man who performed the action, and more free and less inevitable to the one who does not know it." (UV 308)

But the Consul is not merely a dipsomaniac who cannot make up his mind to stop drinking, any more than Hamlet is a weakling who cannot make up his mind to murder his uncle. A plot structure conceived in these terms would be insufficient to the form of the novel as it is developed. Mark Schorer has remarked that

Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises and Wescott's The Pilgrim Hawk are works of art not because they may be measured by some external, neo-classic notion of form, but because their forms are so exactly equivalent with their subjects, and because the evaluation of their subjects exists in their styles.³

The obverse of this statement is, of course, that the subject of a work must be the 'equivalent' of its form and style. The story of the unsuccessful effort to rehabilitate a confirmed drunkard would not offer an adequate correlative for the extraordinary complexity of form and style of Under the Volcano. Nor does the novel ever leave the impression of redundancy or triviality which would inevitably result if this were the substance of the plot. On the contrary, the effect is of a subject which exhausts every possibility of the form which contains it, as, to extend Lowry's own metaphor, the intersecting spokes fill

3. Mark Schorer, "Technique as Discovery," in Aldridge, Critiques, p. 80.

up all the space enclosed within the rim of a whirling wheel. Lowry achieves this balance of form and subject by placing the dramatic narrative - the linear progression of events from innocence to catastrophe - within the context of an encyclopaedic, cyclical vision of life, which includes not only the larger world of historical time, but also a world beyond time. Within this framework, the Consul's spiritual disintegration is identified with the disintegration of the political society in which he exists, and this, in turn, is viewed as a paradigm of the human condition. The reader is led to the realization that the Consul's fall results not merely from his personal weakness, but that, rather, he carries within him the contagion, the taint of evil, of the world in which he lives; he is led, in fact, to a recognition of the inevitability of the tragedy. To quote again from Frye,

The tragic hero is very great as compared with us, but there is something else, something on the side of him opposite the audience, compared to which he is small, This something else may be called God, gods, fate, accident, fortune, necessity, circumstance, or any combination of these, but whatever it is the tragic hero is our mediator with it. ⁴

And further,

With his fall, a greater world beyond which his gigantic spirit has blocked out becomes for an instant visible, but there is also a sense of the mystery and remoteness of that world. ⁵

4. Frye, Anatomy, p. 207.

5. Frye, Anatomy, p. 215.

In the final chapter of Under the Volcano the Consul is imaged in terms which again provide a precise demonstration of Frye's point. From the window of the Farolito, the Consul looks down into the abyss.

The sheer height was terrifying, he thought, leaning outwards, looking sideways at the split rock and attempting to recall the passage in The Cenci that described the huge stack clinging to the mass of earth, as if resting on life, not afraid to fall, but darkening, just the same, where it would go if it went. ...But it struck him he was not afraid to fall either. (UV 339)

The passage marks the beginning of the Consul's recognition of his own condition, as the physical blindness of Oedipus is preceded by a growing insight into his own nature. Later the Consul wishes Yvonne would come, 'if only as a daughter, who would understand and comfort him, ...even if but to lead him by the hand, drunkenly homeward through the stone fields, the forests - ...as he had seen the Indian children lead their fathers home on Sundays.' (UV 360) The implied parallel between Oedipus and the Consul affords one of those shifts in perspective which enable the reader to arrive at a new perception of the nature of the tragedy. Both Oedipus and the Consul are guilty of murder, but the nature and extent of their suffering is entirely out of proportion with the degree of their moral responsibility viewed in rational and human terms. It is intelligible only if they are viewed as surrogate figures, who act out and ultimately expiate the sins of the whole human community. Both bear not the mark of Cain upon the brow, but rather the mark of the serpent - the swollen foot, lameness - which identifies them with man in the totality of his condition

as fallen being. In the case of Sophocles' hero, however, the agony results in a gradual widening of Oedipus' vision of his objective nature, and his heroic stature is increased by his acceptance of the final revelation. The action of Under the Volcano consists of the gradual narrowing of the Consul's vision, his withdrawal, in a series of ever-narrowing circles, like the circles of Dante's Hell, into the subjective self, and the simultaneous separation from him of his 'persistent objective self,' (UV 183) as he is invaded and possessed by the unconscious forces of the 'world soul'. The process, for the Consul, is also one of self-revelation, of course, for as Jung has pointed out,

The Ego...is...a relatively constant personification of the unconscious itself, or...the Schopenhauerian mirror in which the unconscious becomes aware of its own face. ⁶

But as Lowry imagines it, the conflict is between the unconscious collective forces which seek to overwhelm it and the divine spark of the Consul's individual spirit; and these forces must be confronted before they can be understood and overcome. Hugh is right in regarding the Consul's actions as a form of "Thalavethiparothiam, ...Or strength obtained by decapitation,"⁷ (UV 178) for the Consul is the sacrificial

6. C.G. Jung, Mysterium Coniunctionis: An Inquiry Into the Separation and Synthesis of Psychic Opposites in Alchemy, R.F.C. Hull, tr., Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1963, p. 107.

7. In Frazer the word is given Thalevettiparothiam.

victim through whose death the whole community is revived.

The Consul, peering into the barranca as it runs past his garden, describes it as a 'gigantic jakes,' and thinks that 'one might even climb down, if one wished, by easy stage of course, and taking the occasional swig of tequila on the way....' (UV 131) Each of the bathroom scenes in the novel represents a stage in this imagined descent, and each marks also a further degree of alienation within the Consul's psyche, culminating, in Chapter Ten, in a grotesque parody of the Prometheus metaphor. The Consul had remarked earlier to Laruelle, "if I ever start to drink mescal again, I'm afraid, yes, that would be the end." (UV 216) Seated at the dinner table in the Salón Ofélia with Hugh and Yvonne, he realizes that

the mescal had succeeded in a manner somewhat outside his calculations. ...There was something in fact almost beautiful about the frightful extremity of that condition the Consul now found himself in. It was a hangover like a great dark ocean swell finally rolled up against a foundering steamer, by countless gales to windward that have long since blown themselves out. (UV 293)

The image bears a remarkable resemblance to that used by Jung to describe the feeling produced when 'the unconscious contents break through into consciousness, filling it with their uncanny power of conviction':

A collapse of the conscious attitude is no small matter. It always feels like the end of the world, as though everything had tumbled back into original chaos. One feels delivered up, disoriented, like a rudderless ship that is abandoned to the moods of the elements.⁸

In the Consul's case, his consciousness is overwhelmed by the collective 'world soul', invaded by all the elements. (UV 304)

Escaping from the dinner table - 'the supper at Emmaeus' (UV 290) - he finds himself, in imitation of his 'cloacal Prometheus', sitting in the jakes outside the Salón Ofélia. The outhouse is at once a 'tomb', a prison ('this Franklin Island of the soul') and a Hell 'of the Svidrigailov variety.' (UV 294) A Hell, that is, for those who, like Dostoievski's hero, are possessed by evil, by hyperconscience dans le mal. A comparison with Orestes, pursued and possessed by the Erinyes, is suggested by Cervantes' "A stone...clean yourself on a stone, señor." (UV 294) But for the Consul there is no Laconian stone which will relieve him of his guilt. There is no defense against the 'all but irresistible, senseless onrush of wild rage' (UV 303) which accompanies the collapse of the final frontiers of the Consul's consciousness. In the argument with Hugh which follows his return to the dinner table, the Consul becomes, as it were, Devil's advocate.

"It seems to me that almost everywhere in the world these days there has long since ceased to be anything fundamental to man at issue at all". (UV 309) "Countries, civilizations, empires, great hordes, perish for no reason at all, and their soul and meaning with them, that one old man...sitting boiling in Timbuctoo, proving the existence of the mathematical correlative of ignoratio elenchi with obsolete instruments, may survive." (UV 310)

8. C.G. Jung, Two Essays on Analytical Psychology, R.F.C. Hull, tr., Meridian Books, New York, 1956, p. 173.

The image points ironically back to the Consul himself, sitting in the 'stone monastic cell' of the toilet, (UV 295) and this in turn is a reminder of the bathroom scene in Chapter Five, on the occasion of Dr. Vigil's visit, when the Consul found himself 'gazing at the bathroom wall in an attitude like a grotesque parody of an old attitude in meditation.' (UV 145) Here the Consul's own 'battle for the survival of the human consciousness' (UV 217) is still going on, although he feels himself 'being shattered by the very forces of the universe,' (UV 145) author of the world's doom, but at the same time innocent, 'a child, a little child, innocent as that other Geoffrey had been....' (UV 146)

Dr. Vigil and the Consul have been discussing the "decomposition of the eclectic systemë," comparing the nervous system to an electric circuit. As Dr. Vigil says,

"...after much tequila the eclectic systemë is perhaps un poco decompuesto, comprendez, as sometimes in the cine: claro?" (UV 144)

The image recalls Laruelle's experience in Chapter One, when the lights of the actual cinema have failed, because the "wires have decomposed." (UV 25) Sitting alone in the bathroom, the Consul sees his soul as a town, 'ravaged and stricken in the black path of his excess,' (UV 145) and the reader is reminded of the newsreels of the Spanish Civil War which are still being shown at the cinema a year later, of Guernica, or perhaps Madrid, which was destroyed by an invasion from within (the fifth column). The image of the soul as a town has been introduced by the Consul earlier, in conversation with Yvonne:

"But look here, suppose for the sake of argument you abandon a beseiged town to the enemy and then - there's something about my analogy I don't like, but never mind, suppose you do it - then you can't very well expect to invite your soul into quite the same green graces...can you, eh?" (UV 74)

The error in the Consul's analogy is that it is not Yvonne who has abandoned the town(his soul) but he himself who has given in to 'the enemy.' Dr. Vigil's comment, which he repeats to Laruelle in Chapter One, makes this clear:

"I think, mi amigo, sickness is not only in body, but in that part used to be call: soul." (UV 144)

The sickness is within the Consul's soul, and he sees it, at this point, as "a sort of eclampsia." (UV 144) Webster defines eclampsia as 'Gr. eclampsis a shining forth, deriv. of ek out - lampein to shine...a sudden attack of convulsions, esp. during pregnancy or parturition.' The word, which in the context of the conversation seems entirely inappropriate, is significant in the larger framework of the novel, where it is related to the image of the 'lighthouse which lights the storm,' and to the 'curious familiar glare in [the Consul's] eyes...a glare turned inward...like one of those sombrely brilliant cluster-lamps down the hatches of the Pennsylvania on the work of unloading, only this was a work of spoliation...' (UV 49) The coal bunker of the ship is a further metaphor for Hell: Hell-bunker = golf = gulf. The word eclampsia is also a foreshadowing of the scene of the Consul's 'final stupid unprophylactic rejection,' (UV 348) when, in Maria's room in the Farolito, which in itself symbolizes the nadir of the Consul's descent, and at the same time contains reminders of his lost innocence

('it closely resembled his old rooms at college....In one corner...stood a gigantic sabre. Kashmir!') UV 348) he experiences the convulsions of birth:

God is it possible to suffer more than this, out of this suffering something must be born, and what would be born was his own death....(UV 349)

The scene marks the culmination of the calamity which has been drawing nearer at each stage of the novel, the final collision of the forces of love and death: 'how alike are the groans of love to those of the dying, how alike those of love to those of the dying!' (UV 351) Yet in spite of the grotesque irony with which it is pervaded, the 'crisis' which the Consul reaches in this act of love is a moment of epiphany. It represents for him an escape from 'the weight of suffering and conscience greater (it seemed) than that borne by any man who had survived'. (UV 350) The paradox which is central to the theme of the novel lies in the fact that the act of love leads to death - in this case the personal death of the Consul - but it leads also to the self knowledge which makes possible an acceptance of life: 'it was calamity, the calamity of his own life, the very essence of it he now penetrated, was penetrating, penetrated.' (UV 350) The Consul feels afterwards a 'strange release,' (UV 354) for his soul which was before 'locked with the essence' (UV 201) of the Farolito, of Hell itself, is now freed from that convulsive embrace. 'It was as if out of an ultimate contamination he had derived strength.' (UV 354) It is only after this experience that the Consul is able to recognize that the demons and "beasts" of the dark wood 'cor-

respond in a way he couldn't understand yet obscurely recognized, to some faction of his own being,' (UV 362) and to regard his own 'Hellish fall' with a degree of objectivity.

he saw...how all the events of the day indeed had been as indifferent tufts of grass he had half-heartedly clutched at or stones loosed on his downward flight, which were still showering on him from above. (UV 362)

The analogy with the final canto of the Inferno is clear. To borrow again from Northrop Frye,

At the bottom of Dante's hell, which is also the center of the spherical earth, Dante sees Satan standing upright in the circle of ice, and as he cautiously follows Virgil over the hip and thigh of the evil giant, letting himself down by the tufts of hair on his skin, he passes the center and finds himself climbing out on the other side of the world to see the stars again. ...Tragedy and tragic irony take us into a hell of narrowing circles and culminate in some such vision of the source of all evil in personal form. Tragedy can take us no farther....⁹

The descent into Avernus - easy only in the sense that to fall is always easier than to climb - has been completed. There is an echo of Hugh's humorous story in the final grim pages of the tragedy: "Climbed the Parson's Nose...in twenty minutes. Found the rocks very easy." "Came down the Parson's Nose...in twenty seconds. Found the rocks very hard." (UV 182) The Consul does not survive to repeat the climb. Unlike the 'actor in the Passion Play' he cannot 'get off his cross and go home,' (UV 182-3) The sacrifice must be played out to its conclusion. But from the bottom of the abyss he is able, finally, to read the Mene Tekel Pares: "No se puede vivir sin amar," (UV 375) which explains everything.

9. Frye, Anatomy, p. 239.

CONCLUSION

Part of the difficulty in analysing Under the Volcano lies in the fact that

Each rereading adds fresh discoveries, changing our idea of the whole until we despair of reaching the end of that suggestive complexity.¹

Tindall remarks at a later point in The Literary Symbol that

If wholes are more important than their parts, that is a great disadvantage, greater in the case of symbolist novels than of a simpler kind; for whereas the common novel depends largely upon narrative to carry its meaning and narrative is suitably temporal, the symbolist novel depends less upon sequence of events than upon reflexive relationships among its elements.²

His conclusion seems perverse, for it is just the complexity of the reflexive relationships, the continuous collision of images and symbols which rebound to produce new insights into the significance of the work as a whole that makes it so difficult to break the symbolist novel into its separate parts. In fact, two of the major images in Under the Volcano - Las Manos de Orlac and the Samaritan - have scarcely been touched on in this thesis, partly because their moral and political implications seem comparatively easy to grasp, but partly also because to explore the two images in detail would lead to a recapitulation, although

1. Tindall, The Literary Symbol, p. 71.

2. Tindall, p. 263.

with a slightly different emphasis, of much that has already been said concerning the central theme of the novel: the conflict between love and death, between the urge to create life and the impulse which leads to self-destruction.

Another difficulty arises when an attempt is made to classify a novel which, like Under the Volcano, goes beyond the 'suitably temporal', and includes within the boundaries of a dramatic narrative a whole universe of time and space. McCormick has called Under the Volcano a 'cognitive' novel. Forster uses the term 'prophetic' in much the same way in his discussion of Dostoievski and Lawrence, and of Melville, who, he says,

reaches straight back into the universal, to a blackness and sadness so transcending our own that they are undistinguishable from glory.³

Frye adopts the term 'romance' to distinguish works like Wuthering Heights from the conventional novel, for the romance, he says,

radiates a glow of subjective intensity that the novel lacks, and...a suggestion of allegory is constantly creeping in around the fringes.⁴

Yet after carefully separating specific continuous forms of prose fiction into four classes - the novel, romance, confession and anatomy - Frye concludes by describing Joyce's Ulysses as

3. E.M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel, Harcourt, Brace and Co., New York, 1927, p. 206.

4. Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 304.

a complete prose epic with all four forms employed in it, all of practically equal importance, and all essential to one another, so that the book is a unity and not an aggregate. ⁵

He goes on to say that

This unity is built up from an intricate scheme of parallel contrasts. ⁶

His phrase recalls Tindall's 'reflexive relationships', and the term 'symbolist' which Tindall applies to Ulysses and Under the Volcano has the advantage of suggesting the method which both novels employ. The suspicion begins to arise, however, that all the critical terminology is directed simply towards finding some categorical way of telling good novels from great ones. If this is so, it may be useful to look outside the realm of literary criticism for the distinguishing factor.

5. Frye, Anatomy, p. 314.

6. Frye, Anatomy, p. 314.

In Modern Man in Search of a Soul, C.G. Jung speaks of two modes of literary expression:

The psychological mode deals with materials drawn from the realms of human consciousness - for instance, with the lessons of life, with emotional shocks, the experience of passion and the crises of human destiny in general... This material is psychically assimilated by the poet, raised from the commonplace to the level of poetic experience, and given an expression which forces the reader to greater clarity and depth of human insight by bringing fully into his consciousness what he ordinarily evades and overlooks or senses only with a feeling of dull discomfort. The visionary mode, however...is foreign and cold, many-sided, demonic and grotesque...the primordial experiences rend from top to bottom the curtain upon which is painted the picture of an ordered world...⁷

Whatever the word used to describe them, great novels seem always to arouse in the reader this sense of a mythic order which lies behind or beyond ordinary experience, and which can only be expressed on an epic scale, in the light of a unified, cyclical view of human life. Julian Hartt has remarked that

The epic hero always drinks deep of the cup of solitariness; but Melville's heroes, and Conrad's, and here Lowry's hero might be included, seem... solitary figures who pit themselves in ultimate gestures of defiance against overpowering evil - the blackness of the world.

He goes on to say that

7. C.G. Jung, Modern Man in Search of a Soul, Harcourt, Brace and Co., New York, 1933, p. 179.

Men may be profoundly affected by their efforts...; but the community is not by so much, or by so much alone, given new life. But perhaps the community does not exist for them and in them. Perhaps...the community which alone creates the epic and can be instructed by it has vanished.⁸

Mr. Hartt's comment introduces a problem which must confront every writer who attempts to create a modern epic. For the epic, by its very nature, supposes a language and a mythos consecrated to and understood by the whole community. Joyce recognized this fact when, in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, he suggested that the epic writer stands in a medial relation to his subject and his audience. But in a world characterized by the breakdown of traditional values, and even of language itself, to which both logical positivism and the world of electronic advertising testify, how can the epic writer speak to the community? Nathan J. Scott Jr., in an essay entitled "The Broken Centre" remarks that

all the great literature of the modern period might be said to be a literature of metaphysical isolation, for the modern artist...has experienced a great loneliness, the kind of loneliness that is known by the soul when it has to undertake, unaided by the ministries either of church or of culture, the adventure of discovering the fundamental principles of meaning. Unquestionably, this accounts for the obscurity of so many great modern texts - of Rimbaud's Une Saison en Enfer, of Rilke's Duino Elegies, Joyce's Finnegans Wake, or Malcolm Lowry's Under the Volcano. Amidst the confusion in values of his age, the artist is attempting to invent for himself a system of attitudes and beliefs that will give meaning to his world.⁹

8. Julian N. Hartt, The Lost Image of Man, Louisiana State University Press, 1963, p. 16.

9. Nathan J. Scott Jr., "The Broken Centre," in Rollo May, ed., Symbolism in Religion and Literature, George Braziller, New York, 1961, pp. 185-86.

This thesis has attempted to demonstrate that rather than inventing a system of attitudes and beliefs, Lowry tried to revitalize a tradition which belongs in the mainstream of European thought, and which is now acquiring a new vitality in the light of the insights of contemporary psychology. In the works of the French Symbolists, the psychological implications of the Hermetic doctrine produce a fitful glow which is 'foreign and cold, many-sided, demonic and grotesque'. In Nerval and Baudelaire, for example, the descent into the self is imaged as a 'Voyage en Orient', a terrible journey into the unknown, where the poet himself suffers the agony of chaos in conflict with being, of dying and being reborn. Lowry has succeeded in assimilating the desdichado aspects of the descent into the abyss of the unconscious within the framework of his dramatic narrative. He writes in a letter to Jonathan Cape:

I went to incredible trouble to make this story adequate on the more superficial plane on which this book can be read.¹⁰

He achieved a masterful control of the realistic surface of his setting and characters, so that even a superficial reading of Under the Volcano arouses pity and terror in the reader. But the surface is supported by what Tindall, speaking of Madame Bovary, describes as

Dissonant unions of inner and outer, past and present... which Flaubert called "bottomless, infinite, multiple."

10. MLP LB1, 1946.

Tindall continues

Under its simple appearance, said Flaubert,
his novel is a complicated machine. To read
such books...you need "initiation." 11

Like all initiations, this thesis is only a beginning, a
hesitant first step towards achieving understanding of a novel
which offers an infinite number of planes and surfaces to the
perception. It seems appropriate to conclude, therefore, on a
tentative note - a note of paradox - with Lowry's own words.

...See the wound the upturned stone has left
In the earth! How doubly tragic is the hollowed
Shape - It is a miracle that I may use such words
As shape. But the analogy has escaped.
Crawling on hands and sinews to the grave
I found certain pamphlets on the way.
Said they were mine. For they explained a pilgrimage
That otherwise was meaningless as day
But twice as difficult, to explain away....12

11. Tindall, p. 73.

12. Malcolm Lowry, "The Plagiarist (fragment)" in Selected Poems, p. 76.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY

This bibliography lists only those works which provided essential insights or information in the preparation of this thesis. For a complete bibliography of primary and secondary sources, including review articles, the reader is referred to "Malcolm Lowry (1909-1957) A Bibliography," prepared by Earle Birney, with the assistance of Margerie Lowry, beginning with Part 1 in Canadian Literature No. 8, Spring, 1961, and continuing in subsequent issues of that quarterly.

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