

DESCENT INTO HELL: *UNDER THE VOLCANO*

Malcolm Lowry saw his work as part of a vast continuum to be called *The Voyage That Never Ends*, the central novel of which was to have been *Under the Volcano*. It was written between 1941 and 1944 and published in 1947. Since the time of its publication it has been considered one of the best novels of the century. *Under the Volcano* is an autobiographical novel set in Mexico and describes the last two days of a former British Consul whose desperate lucidity is dependent on his alcoholic delirium.

The story is simple enough: a day that brings together Geoffrey Firmin, the Consul, and Yvonne his wife, in hopes of renewed love. Hugh, Geoffrey's brother and Jacques Laruelle, a French friend from childhood, are the other two main characters. The Consul is also a writer, Yvonne a film actress, Hugh a journalist, and Jacques a film producer. In the festivals of the Day of the Death, they go together from Quauhanahuac to Tomalín, two towns among dark mountains threatened by two omnipresent volcanoes and separated by the menacing barranca or ravine.

The variety of moods and techniques and the astonishing erudition of Malcolm Lowry have frustrated most attempts to grasp the work as a unified whole. The difficulty lays in the fact that is patterned as a mythical quest. Lowry did not expect the audience to understand it at once and sceptically he wrote, «The novel can be read simply as a story which you can skip if you want... it is hot music, a poem, a song, a tragedy, a comedy, a farce and so forth. It is a prophecy, a political warning, a cryptogram, a preposterous movie, and a writing on the wall»¹.

The book is more consciously a mythical structure than has been realized. It implies a pattern of quest, that involves a descent into the abyss. It is a journey towards a desperate purification and an example of the hero who goes through hell trial and death trial necessary for a symbolic rebirth. It is a contemporary descend into Hell whose tradition is well rooted in ancient literatures². Lowry is conscious of belonging to the literary line which starts in the ancient Greeks and goes to Virgil's *Aeneids* or Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and like Dante in the Inferno, Lowry is not only the narrator, he is at the same time the suffering hero.

The aim of the novel is clearly revealed in the very first chapter: «I like to take my sorrow into the shadow of old monasteries, my guilt into cloisters and under tapestries and into the misericordes of unimaginable cantinas, where sad-faced potters and legless beggars drink at

¹ *Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry* (Harvey Breit and Margerie Bonner Lowry eds., 1965) Capricorn: NY, 1969, p. 66. Further citation from Lowry's correspondence is drawn from this volume with parenthetical page reference.

² In attempting to define myth, literary critics usually make no distinction between pre-literary myth and myth as it is interpreted, allegorized or transformed in ancient literatures: See Leslie Feder, *Ancient Myth in Modern Poetry*. Princeton University Press, Princeton 1971.

dawn whose cold jonquil beauty one rediscovers in death»³. And further ahead «I sometimes think of myself as a great explorer who had discovered some extraordinary land from which he can never return»⁴. It is also seen in the landscape which is described as a metaphor, «wherever you turned the abyss was waiting for you». It is not a physical hell that could be symbolized by Mexico, «It is in the heart».

The very title is expressive of the purpose of the novel: «volcano» in ancient mythology is associated with the primal force of nature and it is symbolic of the descent of elements which inside it are related and transformed. It is assimilated to the process of creation and destruction. Thus we have from the very beginning clues of what the work is going to be.

The novel has a circular structure according to the principle known as «Ringkomposition» in which, «enclosure by identical or very similar elements produce a circular effect»⁵. The circle had the value of the supreme symbol of wholeness and unity. A circular organization is the only way for a literary work to share in that value. In the first chapter we learn through Laruelle's stream of consciousness that it is the first anniversary of the Consul's death. The date is the Day of the Dead and «upon this one day in the year the dead come to life»⁶. It is November 1939, when the second World War has just started in Europe. Lowry planned the book's movement not towards an end, but towards a continuation, «for every end is only a new beginning... the book should be seen as essentially trochal... the form of it as a wheel so that when you get to the end, if you have read carefully, you should want to turn back to the beginning again»⁷. Chapter I ends with this sentence: «Over the town, in the dark tempestous night backwards revolve the luminous wheel». The wheel or the circle is, as Lowry reminds us, «the instrument of eternal recurrence, and the form of the book itself»⁸.

All the novel's ferris wheels and merry-go-rounds are set up only because it is the Day of the Dead, a fiesta of return. The pattern of return is present everywhere. At the end of chapter six a postcard written by Yvonne arrives or return a year later, precisely on the day in which the Consul, Hugh, and Yvonne are on their way to the fair. The postcard is a picture of the «Carlsbad Cavern Highway leading over a whitefenced bridge» while the road along which the four characters went «turned a little corner in the distance and vanished»⁹.

The poetic vein of the book appears in many images allusive of the circle or the wheel, which reminds the reader of T. S. Eliot's first poetry to which the book has some debts. As Geoffrey, Yvonne, and Hugh left the bullring, «their shadows crawled before them in the dust... and were caught violently for a moment in an elliptical shade, the turning wrenched wheel of a boy's bicycle... the spoken shadow of the wheel, enormous, insolent swept away»¹⁰.

To the same category belong architectural images: the tower and the winding stairs, the ascending spiral¹¹. Spirals and whirling movements have a main role in the book mainly in chapter seven. Laurelle's house is of utmost importance in the structure of the novel; it is two-towered and it has an odd location and distribution. It is like a castle whose symbolism in ancient times was of the threshold, the gate to the other world. There is great emphasis on the spiral staircase which the Consul climbs after some hesitation: «the Consul took two or three

³ *Under the Volcano*, Penguin Modern Classics, Harmondsworth 1977, ch. I, p. 41. Further citation of the novel drawn from this volume with chapter and page references.

⁴ Ch. 1, p. 42.

⁵ Cedrick H. Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (1958), New York, Norton, 1965, p. 257.

⁶ *Under the Volcano*, ch. 4, p. 111.

⁷ *Letters*, p. 88.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 71.

⁹ *Under the Volcano*, ch. 6, p. 197.

¹⁰ Ch. 9, p. 281.

¹¹ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton University Press, 1957, pp. 144-45.

steps after him, a movement apparently without meaning but it almost constituted a threat: his gaze shifted vaguely up the spiral staircase which continued from the room to the mirador above»¹².

The intense whirling movement of the fair and the festivals that take place in the chapter is premonitory of complete chaos, «the clubs of flying machines wave silently over the roofs, their motions like gesticulation of pain»¹³, «whirling artefacts... whirling higher and higher... finally whizzed round with a tense whipping and whinnings»¹⁴; or the ferry wheel, «the wheel of the law, rolling»¹⁵.

The wild attraction exercised by La Máquina Infernal, which suggests some huge evil spirit screaming in its lonely hell, its links, «writhing, smiting the air like flail of paddle wheels»¹⁶. The Consul has to enter it to avoid children begging money. There he is «hurled up... hung for a moment, upside down at the top» deprived of his belongings and identity «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, pipes, passport. There was a kind of fierce delight in this formal acceptance...»¹⁷. For whirling has again, especially here, a clear meaning of destruction, of catharsis; of suppression of peaceful order. Mircea Eliade offers the explanation as he says that regression to chaos is necessary to prepare rebirth¹⁸.

II

The idea of return is present even in the very organization of the chapters of the book. The key to this interpretation is mentioned in chapter two where we learn what sort of books the Consul has in his studio. Titles such as *Dogma et Rituel de la Haute Magie* and numerous cabalistic and alchemic books are a clue to the symbolism of numbers. The structure is built up taking into account what Leo Spitzer has called «The pattern making force of the number four»¹⁹. The world of the novel, its microcosmos is seen through four stream of consciousness: Laurelle's, the Consul's, Yvonne's, and Hugh's.

The book has twelve chapters and this number is by no means accidental, but carefully planned and here is the proof: Chapter six starts «*Nel mezzo del bloody cammin di nostra vita mi ritrovai in...*» a paraphrase of Dante's *Inferno*. Pythagoreans believed the cosmos to be based upon numbers and twelve was believed to be a perfect number, the number of cosmic order, the number of salvation. For them the centre and the limits are regarded as having special importance²⁰. Lowry wrote of chapter twelve, «this chapter is the easterly tower, chapter I being the westerly, at each end of my churrigueresque Mexican cathedral, and all the gargoyles of the latter are repeated with interest in this»²¹. The number twelve is also linked to the idea of time and space, that is to say, to the wheel or the circle.

Lowry's personal quest for order and ritual is shown in the repetition of number seven which is mentioned everywhere. Seven being a perfect number, it is the superimposition of four, that

¹² *Under the Volcano*, ch. 6, p. 177.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 200.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 220.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 221.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 224.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 225-26.

¹⁸ «La mort initiatique réitère ce retour exemplaire au Chaos, pour rendre possible la répétition de la cosmo-

gonic, c'est-à-dire préparer la nouvelle naissance. La régression au chaos se vérifie parfois à la lettre», *Mythes, rêves et mystères*, Paris, Gallimard, 1957, p. 257.

¹⁹ *Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony*. Baltimore, John Hopkins Press, 1963, p. 67.

²⁰ Christopher Butler, *Number Symbolism*, London, Routledge, 1970.

²¹ *Letters*, p. 85.

represents earth, and three that is a symbol of divinity. Seven stands for soul and earth united. That explains paragraphs in the Consul's alcoholic lucidity «for in less than four years, passing so swiftly... one would be thirty three, in seven more, forty, in forty years eighty. Sixty seven years seemed a comfortably long time»²². Also this «of the two days and one night's continuous drinkind before that of the seven hundred and seventy five and a half...»²³. There are strange meetings which are premonitory as an Indian on horseback, whose horse has number seven branded on. Later on, the Indian is found almost dead and at the end of the journey would kill Ivonne in chapter eleven.

The world of dream liberated through the Consul's stream of consciousness is sometimes shown with poetic devices, alliteration, and onomatopoetic sounds in sequences of seven; the following paragraph is an example of Lowry's mastery of the language:

And how to get back across the tracks-here was a train now coming in the wrong direction again, *clipperty one* clipperty one, the lines unreal, not thee, walking on air, or rails that lead somewhere, the unreal life... Fool he was trying to walk along a single line, alike a boy in the kerb: *clipperty two* clipperty two: *clipperty-three* clipperty three: *clipperty-four* *clipperty four*: *clipperty-five* *clipperty-five*: *clipperty six*: *clipperty-seven* *clipperty seven*-trains, trains, trains, trains, converging upon him from all sides of the horizon each wailing for this demon lover²⁴.

Chapter seven seem to have been carefully planned as it is a sort of allegory of the whole novel, the book within the book. It is itself a pilgrimage, a quest, and a journey full of signs. Finally in the novel the Consul is murdered in chapter twelve at seven.

III

The hero in myth must be alone in his trial, and loneliness is present in Geoffrey's quest. He avoids every-one's help and every sort of communication and company. It is solitude on purpose. Unposted letters to his wife and unread ones from her appear at the beginning and at the end of the novel. He avoids meeting her as we learn in this suggestive paragraph in which the role of the quester is explicitly played. He relates, «I went into all the restaurants of the Via Dolorosa looking for you and not finding you I had a drink in each one thinking all the while I could prevent you from going the next mornings»²⁵.

Sexual intercourse seems impossible, for Eros, the creative energy of all life, is absent or avoided in Lowry's main character. Only the instinct of death is present; or better said, aggressiveness turned upon the self. A proper conversation never takes place between the Consul and any of the other characters: only dialogues impossible to know whether or not they have been uttered, «How do I look?'she seemed to have said... 'Didn't I say?... Had he said that'». The telephone is obviously a nuisance, as seen here with «afraid of the furious thing, he started to speak into the receiver, then sweating, into the mouthpiece, talking rapidly... not knowing what he was saying, hearing Tom's muted voice quite plainly but turning his questions into his own answers»²⁶.

Only a pariah dog seems to accompany him everywhere; the dog that accompanies the dead in their dark journey and appears in ancient mythology associated with resurrection. A dead dog half corrupted at the bottom of the barranca is described with this metaphysical image, «white bones showed through the carcass»²⁷. Other animals symbolic of death and resurrection are pre-

²² *Under the Volcano*, ch. 6, p. 154,

²³ Ch. 3, p. 82.

²⁴ Ch. 10, p. 284.

²⁵ Ch. 3, p. 92.

²⁶ Ch. 3, p. 81.

²⁷ Ch. 8, p. 236.

sent very often; either in dreams or as part of the landscape; for example we read «enormously high too, he noted some vultures waiting, more gracefull than eagles as they hovered there like burnt papers floating from a fire which suddenly are seen to be blowing swiftly upwards, rockings»²⁸. Chapter eight ends with this «in the blue sky above them floated the vultures, xopilotes, who wait only for the ratification of death»²⁹. Ancient Egyptians believed that as vultures fed on corpses they are related to mother earth and to death; some peoples used to lay their dead on high towers for the vultures to eat them so rebirth could be easier.

Other mythical elements of quest are present. The Consul bathing before the journey starts acquires a ritual value. It is in here that we come across some of the best descriptions of delirium tremens in literature. Continuous references to the garden, which is in some cases the Consul's own garden that «used to be a Paradise». Also the Wood and the Forest which in ancient myths have been assimilated to darkness and insecurity: the starting point of the journey is Quauhanahuac whose meaning is «near the wood» and where blood ritual sacrifices had taken place during the revolution and «that is where they crucified the women in the bullrings during the revolution and set the bulls at them. And that is nice to say: the blood ran down the gutters»³⁰.

There are also strange meetings: old women sat at the tables of many cantinas; a cripple Indian coming out of one of them carrying on his back another Indian older and more decrepit than himself, «he carries the old man and his crutches trembling in every limb under the weight of the past, he carried both their burdens»³¹.

The pilgrimage takes Geoffrey into an empty chappel, a deserted convent, and into innumerable cantinas of suggestive names, «El amor de los amores», «Todos contentos y yo también», «El Bosque», whose owner, Sra. Gregorio tells him «I have no house only a shadow, but wherever you are in need of a shadow, my shadow is yours»³²; «El Farolito», the lighthouse «that invites the storm and lights it», which is Hell itself. It is a place of the late night, but being the holiday for the dead it would not close. The place is described minutely and clearly as composed of numerous little rooms, each smaller and darker than the least, opening into one another, the last and darkest of all being no larger than a cell. In the meanwhile, the Consul proceeds along a terrible path through the jungle in dark night, with lightning and thundering, «disappearing round every corner and going out of every door»³³, to arrive at last at an empty restaurant, half in darkness, lightning and flickering, «...a hot void in which the trees thrashed chaotically»³⁴ where he will be murdered.

IV

Ernst Cassirer, the German philosopher, states that mythical thinking makes no clear distinction between sleeping and waking. The two are related not as being and not being but as two similar, homogeneous parts of the same being³⁵. In *Under the Volcano* it is difficult to establish frontiers between dream and reality, past and present, we read «do you remember tomorrow?»³⁶; there are paragraphs in the book in which dreams become possible in Yvonne's

²⁸ Ch. 3, p. 97.

²⁹ Ch. 8, p. 255.

³⁰ Ch. 8, p. 103.

³¹ Ch. 8, p. 228.

³² Ch. 8, p. 233.

³³ Ch. 11, p. 325.

³⁴ Ch. 12, p. 345.

³⁵ *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. II, *Mythical Thought*, New Haven 1955, p. 26.

³⁶ *Under the Volcano*, ch. 12, p. 344.

mind. A dream resumed in this image, «Then he saw the water... unfortunately it turned out to be sunlight blazing on myriads of broken bottles»³⁷.

Dream and reality become interwoven everywhere. When the Consul got off La Máquina Infernal «the world continued to spin madly round, houses, whirlings, hotels, cathedrals, cantinas, volcanoes...»³⁸, and it is explicitly stated in these lines «The poor Consul had already lost almost all capacity for telling the truth and his life had become a quixotic oral fiction»³⁹.

The outer world is seen through a mist that makes it unreal, «perhaps it was just the soul, he thought, slowly emerging out of the strychnine into a form of detachment, here was a child but it was not completely real; and the child... she had had by the ghost». The alcoholic liberation of the Consul's stream of consciousness comes to its summit at the final chapter after he has drunk mescal. The world of dream is suggested by clocks that strike impossible hours somewhere in the distance. The limits of things are blurred as appear blurred also the frontiers of the language which jump from one word to another as in «Cat. Cat. Catastrophe. Catastrophysicist. Katabasis to cat abysses»⁴⁰. The language goes from English to Spanish to French; sometimes not only the words are mixed, but the phonetics and the syntax are interchanged, like the English spoken by Dr. Vigil which has a Spanish syntax, or the pronunciation of Sra. Gregorio which gives double meaning to utterances like, «where do you laugh now? 'I still laugh in the Calle Nicaragua... you mean live Sra. Gregorio, not laugh', *con permiso*»⁴¹. The interference of the language of news, advertisements, newspapers, telegrams, all abolish the idea of an ordered sequence of historical events to offer that of the simultaneous and chaotic disorder of events.

Humour is part of the dream or the nightmarish reality. It underlays even the darkest passages of the novel. Jonathan Arac calls it «reduced laughter»⁴² but I would call it black humour, very often irony that enfolds skepticism. The examples are abundant, many of them in this line, «Diosdado, the owner of 'El Farolito' is reputed to have murdered his wife to cure her neurasthenia»⁴³. Lowry's fondness of Shelley, whom he quotes here and there, is shown in this way, «the story I like about Shelley is one where he just let himself sink to the bottom of the sea-taking several books with him of course —and just stayed there, rather than admit he could not swim»⁴⁴. Obviously the Consul's drunkenness is one of his favourite targets of mockery. In chapter two, the Consul's fall on the street is communicated to the reader in this way, «the calle Nicaragua rose to meet him», as is the irony employed to describe the efforts of a drunkard to keep himself standing on his feet.

V

The reader may ask the reasons for this mythical journey, this paraphrase of Dante's *Inferno*, this hell and death trial to reach purification. The four main characters' concern with love, guilt, forgiveness, and responsibility occupy much of our attention in the book. They are shown to be matters of life and death importance, both in the individual fates of the book and through their relation to the political issues of the times. There is a longing for the usual order of things. In a world of horror, the continuous allusion to the Spanish Civil War and the just erupted Second World War are a framework in which to inscribe the novel.

³⁷ Ch. 9, p. 281.

³⁸ Ch. 7, p. 266.

³⁹ Ch. 1, p. 39.

⁴⁰ Ch. 5, p. 140.

⁴¹ Ch. 8, p. 230.

⁴² «The Form of Carnival in *Under the Volcano*», *PMLA* 29, 3 May 1977, pp. 481-489.

⁴³ Ch. 7, p. 206.

⁴⁴ Ch. 7, p. 207.

Mircea Eliade, in his already mentioned work says of ritual death that it constitutes the only possible way of abolishing temporal *durée*, that is to say historical existence, and going back to a primordial situation⁴⁵. It is the whole world that return in a symbolic way with the victim⁴⁶. In Lowry's novel we behold the complete desintegration of the Consul's personality, and that the protagonist of this quest is outspokenly aware of his being a part of the general guilt, that we know when the Consul imagines his destiny on the newspapers «Firmin innocent but bears guilt of world on shoulders»⁴⁷. And in his choice of an unglorious life the Consul acts out of a mythical pattern: if he cannot control his life he would still exert control over his death, in the manner of the classical heroes. His last act is a ritual one.

In the same way the obscurity of the book is explained by the metaphysical premise that reality is ultimately unknowable; a mystery permanently veiled from rational scrutiny. So a mimetic literature will justify its existence by trying to be as enigmatic as the Universe itself. Malcolm Lowry is very much influenced by the Hebrew tradition that the Bible is darkly sublime and hints at truths which must be kept from profane eyes. Thus it is worth cultivating obscurity as the prelude to spiritual illumination. Although man is in Lowry's definition, «A little soul holding up a corpse»⁴⁸ desperation is not the subject matter, on the contrary, there is one door to optimism. The final sentence of the book belongs to an advertisement nailed on a tree, written in Spanish:

¿Le gusta este jardín?
¿Que es suyo?
¡Evite que sus hijos lo destruyan!

This is an allusion, the last one, to a Paradise which can still be regained. If we turn back to the beginning, following Lowry's instructions, we shall have to read three quotations drawn out of Sophocles' *Antigone*, Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*, and a third one by Goethe: «*Wer immer strebend sich bemüht den können wir erlösen*»: Whosoever unceasingly strives upwards he can we save.

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⁴⁵ «Il s'agit d'un mystère qui comporte la plus terrible épreuve initiatique, celle de la mort, mais qui constitue également la seule voie possible pour abolir la durée temporelle —en d'autres termes, l'existence historique— et de réintégrer la situation primordiale», *op. cit.*, p. 256.

⁴⁶ «C'est le monde entier qui symboliquement retourne avec le néophite dans la Nuit Cosmique...», *ibidem*, p. 257.

⁴⁷ Ch. 4, p. 120.

⁴⁸ Which is a paraphrase of St. Augustine's «Thou art a little soul bearing about a corpse».