

- AN INTRODUCTION TO THE READING OF **UNDER THE VOLCANO** BY MALCOLM
LOWRY -

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This article is part of the introduction of my M.A. dissertation entitled "**Under the Volcano** and Malcolm Lowry's the Consul: A Hero Manqué", submitted to the University of Exeter, England, in 1980.

It seems appropriate to me that this article, to be published in this journal, is on such a book, since the first time I read **Under the Volcano** was while doing my M.A. credits at the U.F.S.C.

I was "introduced" to Lowry by John Derrick and read **Under the Volcano** as an assignment of the English Literature course. The book made a great impression on me and when I had to choose the subject of my dissertation in England, it seemed an obvious choice.¹

What follows then, is an excerpt of this dissertation.

"What I hope to do in this dissertation is to try to elucidate some of the meanings and something of the dramatic and poetic quality in **Under the Volcano**. One of the reasons why this is a great novel is precisely because each re-reading, far from reducing its meaning to repetitive banalities, in fact provides yet another viewpoint which brings with it something new that adds to our understanding of the novel. Of course there are difficulties in this kind of work and one of them is the labyrinthine aspect of the book, with its multiple layers of meanings, literary allusions, mythical suggestions, Cabbalistic terms and motifs from different sources such as Christianity, alchemy, astrology and Greek tradition.

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¹Note: Under the Volcano is being filmed by John Huston now, with Jacqueline Bisset as Yvonne.

The first point I would like to make concerns the literary problem of biography - and the problem, with Lowry as with any writer of stature, of the relationship between his life and his work - which is the source of much controversy among Lowry's critics. A common negative criticism of **Under the Volcano** is that Lowry was writing about himself and his life only and his work is often categorised as 'merely autobiographical'. It is true that Lowry's life was full of coincidences which obsessed him and that these appear very often in his work. However, as I hope to show, in **Under the Volcano**, in "The Forest Path to the Spring" (short story) and in certain parts of **October Ferry to Gabriola**; he transcended the reality of everyday life transforming biographical data, and his works achieved artistic status. It is true that **Under the Volcano** could only have been written by a man like Lowry, with his neuroses, his addiction to alcohol and all his psychological problems. But it is also true that only somebody whose mind knew and had mastered its own tortuous labyrinth would have been able to evoke that kind of agony we have in **Under the Volcano** and present it as an artistic creation. However, Lowry failed as a writer in almost all of his works other than UTV², exactly because in these other works he was not able to achieve that transcendence I have talked of. UTV's success can be measured precisely by his failure as a writer in other works, in which the author's life interfered too much in the artistic creation.

A mere exploration of one's neuroses cannot be art. I turn to Jung on this matter, who says that the personal facts which appear in a work of art are not essential. If the artist does not transcend the realm of personal life his art should be treated as if it were only the expression of a neurosis; a true artist is objective and impersonal even with regard to himself. This objectivity that is being discussed here implies a critical attitude towards the material the artist uses in his works; it is not that the artist cannot be subjective; he can, but what is necessary in a work of art is impartiality about events in real life and a critical attitude that transforms the author's life

²Under the Volcano will be referred to from now on as UTV.

into art. Jung points out that the lives of artists are as a rule unsatisfactory:

There are hardly any exceptions to the rule that a person must pay dearly for the divine gift of creative fire.³

The Consul, of course, resembles Lowry because many of his characteristics, problems and aspirations are Lowry's as well, but I reinforce the point that the Consul is **not** Lowry himself, but a product of Lowry's artistic mind. If the Consul were a mere reflex of Lowry then UTV would not be a satisfactory work of art. As it is, the way in which Lowry wrote the book shows exactly the distance he maintained from his life and his ability to view its events with a detached and critical mind. Lowry chose things he knew and was acquainted with as his subject matter and there is nothing wrong with this. The important point is that the things he wrote about were transformed into something with a life of its own, that could stand by itself, apart from its creator's life. Indeed the motifs and symbols that occur and interplay within the novel show that Lowry had fused the elements of it into a structure of interdependent units which have thereby an autonomy separate from the life which originally inspired them. It is not doing UTV justice to regard it only as an extension or reflection of Lowry's mind. This assertion of artistic autonomy is something which he shares with other great writers in the modernist tradition; next I would like to consider his place in this tradition.

UTV is one of the most important books published in the first half of the century and it has links with other modernist works in its literary allusions, its structure, its technique of narration and, thematically, in the anguish and despair that show Lowry's concern with the breakdown of values in the modern world.

Lowry is unsparing with literary allusions in UTV; as we find in works by other modernist writers, especially *Ulysses*, Lowry uses quotations from various works which fit into the context of the novel and are exploited to parallel or contrast its action, thus establishing not only a specific mood but also em-

³Jung, Carl Gustav, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 196.

phasizing its theme through analogues. Among these allusions we find Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, Goethe's *Faust*, Baudelaire, Shakespeare, Jean Cocteau, De Quincey, John Marston, Andrew Marvell, to make a long list short. Lowry borrows Cocteau's 'La machine infernale' and puts it in Quayhnahuac, where during the fiesta of the Day of Dead the Consul will be caught and will lose his dignity.

In UTV we witness a continuous struggle between chaos and order the different and multiple layers of meaning can be perceived through the apparently confused structure. The first chapter is a good example of this, where behind the seeming disorder, we have all the themes and motifs that will appear in the rest of the novel. The structure of UTV is very interesting and has a characteristic common to many modernist works: a complicated pattern which on the surface might seem disjointed and incoherent but which hides a deeper meaning that the reader must compose gradually as in a puzzle. There are many narrative elements in it which belong to the tradition of twentieth century literature, such as, for example, time-shifts, interior monologue; a plot that is not constructed in logical sequence but rather in an associative chain and placed in a setting that has a symbolic role.

There are twelve chapters in the book in which the point of view constantly changes - all the four main characters have one or more chapters which are narrated from their point of view. This allows us to see each character from at least three external viewpoints and also from within their own consciousnesses, since Lowry very often uses the technique of interior monologue - a device of course also used extensively by Joyce and Woolf.

It has been pointed out many times that UTV has a circular structure. It was conceived as a wheel and this image recurs several times in it. We have the Ferris wheel, that revolving backwards establishes the bridge between the first and second chapters, that is, fills in the gap of time between 1939 and 1938; we have La Máquina Infernal, already mentioned; we have the wheel of the Zodiac; we have the wheel of Fortune and the luminous wheel of the Universe with its symbolism of death and rebirth in cyclical repetition. The first chapter of UTV functions

as a prologue and an epilogue; as a prologue because it establishes all the main conflicts which will be developed in the next eleven chapters and foreshadows the drama of the Consul's struggle between salvation and damnation; as an epilogue because its action takes place on the Day of the Dead, November 1939 - one year after the main events of the rest of the novel. There is, therefore, a main time-shift (one year) from Chapter One to Chapter Two. In the remaining chapters the chronological time is twelve hours: one day in the Consul's life, as the action of **Ulysses** is similarly one day in Bloom's life. However, time is also a phantasmagoria conditioned by the Consul's 'mescalusions'. The first chapter establishes "the terrain, the mood, the sadness of Mexico", as Lowry said. There are "political and historical notes being sounded in the background: and while the story itself is being unfolded the themes and counterthemes of the book are being stated."⁴ Mexico is the ideal setting for this novel, a place where you have fiesta and mourning together, as place which is Paradise and Hell at the same time. (Lawrence used the same approach in his **The Plumed Serpent**, which also has Mexico as its setting). Meaningful landmarks appear in the first chapter: ruins of the palace of Maximilian and Carlota, the two volcanoes, the dark Dantean wood, the barranca. This chapter also hints at a sense of dread at what happened, something so shattering that it has left Laruelle, the survivor of the drama, no peace for a whole year.

The Day of the Dead, when the actions of 1938 and 1939 take place, is an archetypal day for humanity's death. In the 'realistic' context of the novel it is also the day of the Consul's and Yvonne's death, in 1938, and one year later we see Laruelle as a dead person too, spiritually dead, without hope and completely apathetic. The fiesta on the Day of the Dead parallels the Consul's feelings and drunken behaviour. Behind the excitement that drinking brings there is always a sense of tragic misery, and death is implied in many ways. We can feel death in the Spanish Civil War which is one of the motifs of the book and World War II is always a shadow on the horizon of the novel; murder is

⁴The Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry. ed. by Harvey Breit and Margerie Lowry. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), p. 66.

implied in the activities of the Mexican Fascist police and phrases such as "a corpse will be transported by express!" emphasize the presence of death from the very beginning of UTV.

Thematically UTV is also linked with modernist works, where we have the main characters as modern heroes, or rather anti-heroes, if we compare them to the mythological ones. The former are not men of astonishing deeds and extreme cunning; they are very much human with all weaknesses inherent to their condition. Their heroism is of a different kind and it consists in enduring their fate, no matter how hard it is. They are also engaged in a search for the Truth, which due to circumstances of the modern world, where any belief in the 'classical order' is absent, cannot be found or, if it is found, is not of a rewarding nature.

Another link UTV has with modern literature is Lowry's use of mythology, through which he shows a concern with the concept of separation-initiation-return. Here man is seen as a quester, trying to find his place in a spiritual and meaningful world. In Twentieth-century literature we have characters who, like the classical heroes, must search before they can find that which is worth holding on to. Conrad, Faulkner and Mann have used this pattern as a structural element in their fiction. Lowry wanted to interpret this modern man's quest and also connect it with had gone on in the past. The ironic reverse of the myth is a common procedure of modernist writers. Lowry's protagonist in UTV is engaged in a search for the very meaning of life in the face of death. The novel is a beautiful portrait of a man condemned, not by the Gods, like the classical heroes, nor by outside forces, but by inner forces, both emotional and physical. Unlike the Greek heroes, Odysseus and Heracles, for example, the Consul, because of his addiction to mescal, wins no real victory but is instead murdered by the forces of darkness in Parián. The cycle of separation-initiation-return is never completed in UTV; the use of myth in the novel is not of the same sort as in classical originals - it is, in fact, a reverse of it. In the Farolito, where the Consul realizes he is approaching death, he makes no real effort to free himself and the offers of help that he has are too feeble to be effective; as a 'hero manqué' he is conscious of his condition, of his fall, but he chooses not to rise."

Obviously this article has not examined in depth Lowry's wonderful novel. I have hinted at some of its possible interpretations and at some aspects of its technical structure. I would like to emphasize, however, that in spite of its complexity, UTV can be read on many levels, and be enjoyed. The first time I read it my response to it was almost purely emotional because at that time I had neither the means nor the experience to fully appreciate Lowry's creative genius, and only when I was writing my dissertation did I start trying to put its many puzzling pieces together.

This multi-layered aspect of a novel, that allows several readings and triggers different responses from different readers, is maybe the characteristic of a true work of art.