

Narrative Technique in Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*

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In his letters Malcolm Lowry makes it clear that he is in rebellion against the realist novel: "unquestionably what one is after is a new form, a new approach to reality itself."¹

This rebellion of Lowry against the realist school in fiction is also voiced by Ethan in *October Ferry* to Gabriola: "A novelist presents a life of the more closely he approaches what he thinks of as his realism."² Lowry's aesthetic position and his technique owes much to Expressionism that ignores the external reality and lays emphasis on the passionate expression or the inner reality. To an Expressionist, reality resides primarily in the mind of the perceiver, not in the objective world. Lowry, who had some knowledge of and considerable interest in expressionist painting, theatre, music and film, believes that reality is dynamic and that is perpetually new finds a better medium in poetry than in prose.

Though Lowry's medium in *Under the Volcano* is prose, he writes poetry: "it is that the author's equipment, such as It is subjective rather than objective, a better equipment, in short, for a certain kind of poet than a novelist."³ To Lowry the conception of *Under the Volcano* is essentially poetic because "he saw that the novel-form's only hope of survival lay in its being taken over by poets."⁴ Unless a reader is a responsive to the poetic organization of the novel, he is prone to agree with the Cape reader that the book is much too long and over-elaborate for its content, and could have been more effective, if some of its bulk would have been exercised. Thus we have to bear in mind that the conception is poetic rather than novelistic.

As the meaning of a good poem comes to a reader after several readings, I agree with Lowry that the full meaning will reveal itself, explode in the mind, after repeated readings. It is not pretentious on Lowry's part to expect several readings of the reader. If we recall James Joyce's, assertion that he had taken eighteen Years to write *Finnegan's Wake*, he saw no reason why it should not take eighteen years to read.

The poetic organisation of *Under the Volcano* becomes evident because once, we are into the story, we are less aware of the realistic side of the story than of the imaginative richness. Heilman's remark is apt: "The minds of the characters are sensitive recording instruments, tenacious alike of the facts and of their suggestive value. The book is a cornucopia or image; both the psychic and the outer worlds have a tangibility which a thoughtless slice of realism could never produce; humour and horror are never alleged but are moulded into a hard and yet resilient narrative substance. But one is always driven to seek out the evocation that trail off behind the facts."⁵

Under the Volcano abounds in the evocation that hangs about the facts. Apart from the immediate level of the story on which Bale Edmonds lays emphasis, "We are always aware of a multitude of suggestions which, in their continual impingement upon us, reminds us of recurrent images of Shakespeare."⁶ A recurrent Shakespearean image plays a considerable part in making dramatic texture coherent as well as intricate. The same motif which was touched upon in the first act, through the imagery, is taken up again in the second; it undergoes a fuller execution and expansion, perhaps in the third and fourth. The leitmotifs of imagery bind the separate elements of the play together into a real organic structure. In *Under the Volcano* Malcolm Lowry takes recourse to this recurrent motif that unifies diverse materials into a unity.

The action takes place in November on the Day of the Dead. Geoffrey feels that his soul is dying. His soul appears to him a town ravaged and stricken. There is a reference to an imaginary town by the sea that burns up. The death imagery relates to a funeral, the burial customs and to a refrain in Second Chapter "A corpse will be transported by express!"⁷ and to the death of Yvonne's child from her first husband. Geoffrey imagines a man lying dead near his swimming pool, he recalls Dr. Faustus's death, encounters a dying Indian under the hedge, when he is on way to Tomalin. There is a reference to a Cantina La Sepultra, suggestive of death. Always there are vultures, pariah dogs, the noise of target practice. The novel begins with the desolate splendour that pervades the Hotel Casinodelaselva haunted by the ghosts of ruined gamblers and in

whose magnificent Olympic pool no one swims and whose jai-alai courts are grass-grown and deserted and the spring-boards stands empty and mournful. Reference is there to the ruin of the Maximilian palace which 'seemed part of a nightmare' and where ghosts were quarrelling: "No, you loved yourself, you loved your misery more than I. You did this deliberately to us." "I"⁸ Frustrations and failures are everywhere—engagements are missed, the light fails in a cinema.

Always we are reminded of the barranca or ravine, near the town, a horrendous abyss. The barranca becomes Dante's the Malebolge, the eighth ring of the Inferno: "The Malebolge was the barranca, the ravine which wound through the country..."⁹ There are various allusions to Dante's inferno and Dr. Vigil perhaps faintly reminds Virgil in the role of a guide to Consul's Dante. Geoffrey feels he is in hell, and quotes Donne on sin and defiantly says at Salon Ofelia 'I love hell'. There are four hundred pools of water at Quauhnahuac and Geoffrey fails to appease his thirst. Marvell's line from Clorinda and Daimon: "Might a soul bathe there and be clean or slake its drought?"¹⁰ runs like a refrain. All these recurrent images drive home the point that something has gone wrong with Lowry's universe in Under the Volcano.

They ram home the truth that the soul of Geoffrey's is sick. Soul is a recurrent word. The sickness in soul is owing to the thoroughly animistic world which surrounds Geoffrey. Animals, reptiles and birds play a major part in the field of symbolic references in the book. Geoffrey sits helplessly in the bathroom and watches a swarm of insects invading his Consciousness: "A caterpillar started to wriggle toward him, peering this way and that, with interrogatory antennae. A large cricket, with polished fuselage, clung to the curtain swaying it slightly and cleaning its face like a cat, its eyes on stalks appearing to revolve in its head. He turned, expecting the caterpillar to be much nearer, but it too had turned, just slightly shifting its moorings. Now a scorpion was moving slowly across towards him. Suddenly the Consul rose, trembling, in every limb. But it wasn't the scorpion he cared about. It was that, all at once, the thin shadows of isolated nails, the stains of murdered mosquitoes, the very scars and Cracks of the wall, had begun to swarm, so that, wherever he looked, another insect was born,

wriggling instantly toward his heart. It was as if, and this was what was most appalling, the whole insect world had somehow moved nearer and now was closing, rushing in upon him.”¹¹

It is not only the world of reptiles that fills him with sinister and uncanny feelings but animals too intrude into his mind during his stay at Senora Gregorio's Cantina El Bosque! "A starving pariah dog with the appearance of having lately been skinned had squeezed itself in after the last man; it looked up at the Consul with beady, gentle eyes. Then, thrusting down its poor wrecked dinghy of a chest from which raw withered breasts dropped it began to bow and scrape before him. Ah, the ingress of the animal kingdom! Earlier it had been the insects; now these were closing in upon him again, these animals...”¹²

The pariah dog or dogs which insistently attach themselves to Geoffrey may have a reference to the satanic black poodle which follows Goethe's Faust. This ingress of the animal kingdom into the human world has its insidious impact felt in the naming of some characters in the novel such as A Few Fleas, his father the Elephant (Roman Diasdado), the proprietor of the Farolito Cantina and the pimp is called stool pigeon. All these characters have only the semblance of human anatomy but are bereft of essential human traits.

Geoffrey is sick in the soul, because his whole consciousness has to contend with ferocious animals Prowling and reptiles crawling in his mind. Through the preponderance of animal imagery the novelist evokes' the consciousness of Geoffrey. The apocalyptic horse of death seen in the many moods and many settings during the twelve hours of the book's action is perhaps the most prominent animal imagery. It is Geoffrey who releases the restive horse at the Farolito that kills Yvonne in the stampede in the forest. In tile First Chapter we find a horse with a rider in great excitement galloping at a breakneck speed.

Thus we find that imagery in Under the Volcano is expressive rather than imitative: "existing as a powerful, autonomous figure of speech from which radiate a host of evocative meanings.”¹³ These images have ever-expanding associations and it becomes difficult for a reader to restrict the varied meanings of the symbol. The

Ferris wheel carries a multiplicity of interpretations; it is the wheel of Time, the wheel of the Law, the wheel of the Buddha. The image of the Volcano is a rich example. Sometimes it is Popocatepetl with ancient Mexican association that has stolen Geoffrey's heart away. He talks about the Mexican legend about Popocatepetl: "...in the tragic Indian legend Popocatepetl himself was strangely the dreamer: the fires of his warrior's love, never extinct in the poet's heart, burned eternally for Ixtaccihuatl, whom he had no sooner found than lost, and whom he guarded in her endless sleep."¹⁴

It is Mount Etna with Tartarus at its base. It is Moby Dick, a great white whale, pursuing and beckoning Geoffrey. It is the Mountain of Delight for Geoffrey the pilgrim. It is the mighty mountain Himavat he believes he is ascending as he dies. All these several interpretations of a symbol cause reverberations in the mind of the reader and I agree with Heilman that in a Lowry novel, especially *Under the Volcano*, "the nexuses are imaginative rather than casual, logical or chronological; hiatuses compel a high attention, dextrous leaps are called for. In such sense *Under the Volcano* may be understood as poetic-not in the sense that mystify atavistic syntax and a half-hearted Iambic hauteur as often in the seeking theatre, pass for poetic."

The imaginative richness of the novel comes from the all embracing mythic evocation, Joycean in character. The use of myth gives modern fiction a poetic character because myth is a favourite device with a modern poet like T.S. Eliot but the use of myth in *Under the Volcano* is different from that of in Joyce and Eliot. Stephen Spender makes a subtle distinction between the use of myth in Lowry's *Under the Volcano* and the creative works of Joyce and Eliot. In Lowry's novel the myth becomes an illustration of the fragmentary character of the phase of history of the thirties and the forties. In the First Chapter the writer says that Quauhnahuac splits at several places, when Christ is crucified. The crucifixion of Christ is not used here as a symbol of abounding love for the sinning humanity and a device for mastering the tormented psyche of Geoffrey. The myth of Christ is simply a picture of the disturbed period of the thirties and the forties through the character of Geoffrey and Geoffrey is a mask for the writer himself.

In Joyce and Eliot the fragmentary life in the present is related to the past and is evaluated in terms of the order of the past. The individual character is absorbed into cosmic consciousness transcending his personal self, as Tiresias in Eliot's *The Waste Land* is not an individual but the consciousness of the race. Stephen Spender's remark is highly illuminating: "They (Joyce and Eliot) use myths and symbols to get outside the times into the past of the tradition. Lowry uses, them to exemplify "the times" to describe the Consul as illustration almost."¹⁶

There is substance, no doubt, in what Stephen Spender says but it is stretching things too far, when he observes that *Under the Volcano* lacks objectivity. The primal myth of Adam in the garden overgrown and seedy in Chapter five in the novel is an attempt at enacting the fall from grace not of an individual Geoffrey but the story of the fall of Everyman from grace. The inscription on the wall of the house of M.Laruelle 'no pued, vivir sin amar' (we cannot live without loving) gives a truth that stands outside time and becomes a settled effect in the imagination of Geoffrey, though he fails to love Yvonne.

The technique of *Under the Volcano* is also cinematic. During his stay in Bonn in 1928 he became familiar with German Expressionist Theatre and film. The influence of cinema is noticeable in his choice of characters in *Under the Volcano*. M. Laruelle is a former French film producer and Yvonne is a movie actress of Hollywood. M.Laruelle contemplates a film script on Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, The impact of film is discernible in the 'kinetic writing of the novelist. Lowry creates "a moving landscape—or a still landscape against people moving"¹⁷... and this style owes much to the cinema that is kinetic. We find a good specimen of this kinetic writing in Chapter One. "The rider of the horse was so drunk he was sprawling all over his mount, his stirrups lost, a feat in itself considering their size, and barely managing to hold on by the reins, though not once did he grasp the pommel to steady himself. The horse reared wildly, rebellious—half fearful, half contemptuous, perhaps, of its rider then it—catapulted in the direction of the car: the man, who Seemed to be falling straight backwards at first, miraculously saved himself only to slip to one side like a trick rider, regained the saddle, slid,

slipped, fell backwards—just saving himself each time, but always with the reins, new with the pommel, holding them in one hand now, the stirrups still unrecovered as he furiously beat the horse's flanks with the machete he had withdrawn from a long curved scabbard.'¹⁸

The influence of film is noticeable in the use of the technique of flashback. Under the Volcano begins with M. Laruelle's remembrance of the sequence of events leading to the ruin of Geoffrey. But it is not a mere retrospect of catastrophe that overtakes Geoffrey on the Day of the Dead November 1938. Laruelle's mind recedes still further to the boyhood scenes, when he finds himself in the company of Geoffrey as guests' of the family of an English poet, Abraham Taskerson. It is flash-back within flash-back and abrupt shifts from extended scenes to close-ups.

The incorporation of *Maquina Infernal* in the novel is also symptomatic of cinematic art. Lowry saw Cocteau's *Law Machine Infernale* twice in Paris in May 1934. Cocteau's Play is a variation of the Oedipus tragedy. A *Fantome* lets the audience know about the theme before the enactment of the play. At the conclusion of the preamble, the *Fantome* says: "Spectator, this machine you see here wound up to the full in such a way that the spring will slowly unwind the whole length of human life, is one of the most perfect constructed by the infernal Gods for the mathematical destruction of a human life."¹⁹

Lowry in his letter to the Cape reader treats *Under the Volcano* as a sort of machine and this conception of a novel as a machine owes to the film *La Machine Infernale* which has the precise working of a clock. Events unfold in a manner that bring about the ruin of Geoffrey. The spring of the machine has been unwinding the whole length of the Consul's life, bringing him inexorably to the morning of November 1938, the Day of the Dead.

The influence of cinema is also seen in the recurrent expression *Las Manos de Orlac*. It is on a poster advertising a film in which the chief actor is Peter Lorre. Just after her arrival Yvonne says to Hugh about Peter Lorre's film. "I think I've seen Peter Lorre movie somewhere. He's a great actor but it's a lousy picture...he thinks his hands are a murderer's or something and keeps washing the

blood off them. Perhaps they are really a murderer's but I forget”²⁰ Through the use of the poster of Peter Lorre's movie at several places in the novel the novelist tries to Create the sense of evil and guilt proliferating.

Thus in Under the Volcano we find the presentment of the theme of Geoffrey, the British Consul, at Quauhnahuac with a compulsive longing for Yvonne mingled with the inability to Jove through the subtle technique of mythic evocation, re-current motifs, interior monologues, flash-back and montage. When a novelist makes use of the twin devices of interior monologue and a tight allegorical pattern, he is prone to slide into two pitfalls. If he lays emphasis on a tightly bound allegory, the imaginative experience becomes attenuated and if he lays emphasis on imaginative experience, the novel becomes loose impressionism. Conrad Aiken, who is supposed to be the mentor of Lowry in the field of fiction, lacks the architectonic of his disciple and his interior monologue and recondite literary allusions in Blue Voyage, Great Circle and King Coffin are not unified into an artistic whole.

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