

'Under the Volcano'

The static art of Malcolm Lowry

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THE MOST interesting aspect of technique in *Under the Volcano*, and one that links it to some of Joyce's work, is the element of 'stasis' — that is, that the novel is intended to evoke something of the aesthetic response of poetry, music or even the visual arts rather than what is normally felt towards a more conventional novel, where a series of events over a period of time effects a dynamic altering of the whole situation — for example in novels dealing with a central character's development or decay. Lowry himself suggested something of this when he wrote in a letter to his publisher:

The novel can be read simply as a story which you can skip if you want. It can be read as a story you can get more out of if you don't skip. It can be regarded as a kind of symphony, or in another way as a kind of opera — or even a horse opera. It is hot music, a poem, a song, a tragedy, a comedy, a farce, and so forth.¹

Certainly *Under the Volcano* covers some length of time, moving chronologically from point A to point B, but fictional representation can hardly escape time in some aspect. Yet Lowry is not concerned with the Consul's fall as a *process*, nor with the attempts to save him as a thing which may or may not be accomplished, but with the *contemplation* of a state of affairs — the state of affairs being that a man is in Hell. This implies some kind of moral attitude, but although this is present it is, like every other element in the book, integrated into the overall 'stasis'. For the Consul 'Hell' is being in a certain spiritual state. He refuses to participate in human affairs, he has lost affection, hope, and aspiration, and in this he is contrasted with his half-brother Hugh, who is something of the embodiment of all humanity's hopes, beliefs, frailties and persistent striving upward. Hell is

¹ Malcolm Lowry, *Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry*, ed. Harvey Breit and Margeric Bonner Lowry, 1967, p. 66.

also hatred and disgust for oneself. When pushed too hard by his 'voices' the Consul tries to escape from himself, as in the loss of identity on the 'loop the loop' machine in the fairground, symbolized by the loss of his personal belongings and his balance. But the most terrible aspect is that, like the man in *Grace Abounding*, he cannot find with all his soul that he desires deliverance. Alcohol is used at this level as a peculiarly effective image of the inexplicable fascination of the process of self destruction. He drinks to make decisions he does not feel like making when he *is* drunk. The Consul is acquiescing in his own destruction, and the Hell is that he knows this, but cannot prevent it. In the three Prefatory quotations to the novel, from Sophocles, Bunyan and Goethe, are summed up the three aspects of the central theme of Hell — namely the fulness and potential of life, the Consul's impotence, and the possibility of salvation for every man who strives upwards. But though the state of alcoholism is conveyed very vividly in the novel, Lowry carefully makes the moral issue 'static' — there is no invitation to make moral judgements. No reason is given for the Consul's alcoholism (Lowry justified the inclusion of his hero's past life on 'musical' grounds, not as an explanation of his reliance on the bottle).

Being itself the expression of a 'static' central situation, the technique as a whole tends to be of the same kind. As far as the 'story line' of the book is important, it is only as a series of scenes expressing different moods, crises of false hope and gradual decline; and as a series of opportunities for personal digressions which develop the central situation — not by providing explanations of conduct or presenting incidents it is important for us to know, but by adding fresh layers of meaning to the situation — encrusting something which is unchanging throughout the novel. The whole structure of the book may be seen as a series of scenes, each one created individually to make a stanza of a poem or movement of a piece of music. Running through the novel are innumerable images which have usually a reminding, heightening or encrusting function. The setting itself reinforces the overall impression Lowry is trying to convey, whether it is the particular image — the madman playing his endless game with the bicycle tyre, the turtle dying in a stream of blood — or Mexico itself,

with its Day of Death, poverty, gaudy savagery and cheapness of life. These details set the stage for the High Tragedy which Lowry declared he intended to write, their effect being to 'tighten up the strings' of normal experience rather than merely register it.

In addition more or less complex symbols inform the whole novel and give emphasis to the pattern which is imposed on life. For example the horse and rider occur throughout in different aspects, from the drunken horseman Laruelle sees in chapter one to the horse that kills Yvonne which the Consul releases as he is shot. Laruelle's horse and rider reflect the Consul — 'senseless frenzy, but controlled, not quite uncontrolled' (p. 23). In the main body of the work the symbol is more complicated. The unknown Indian's horse which kills Yvonne is power without direction — the force all the characters are aware of potentially when they are with the Consul; and it is contrasted with the controlled naturalness of the foals and mares in Yvonne's and Hugh's morning ride.

Set permanently in the landscape are more 'static' symbols, such as the Ferris wheel of the fairground, symbol of recurrence, the process of time and the form of the book — seen finally as the stars wheeling above Yvonne at the moment of her death. Like Dante Lowry has his 'dark wood' suggested by the name of the cantina 'La Selva', humorously associated with Dante by Hugh, and becoming real in the wood in which Yvonne dies. Perhaps most powerful of all is the 'Barranca', the ravine splitting the landscape in two as an obvious symbol of Hell. Other symbolic objects include the book of Elizabethan and Jacobean plays which Laruelle flicks open at Fastus's epitaph, the image of freedom in the releasing of birds and the notice the Consul sees and applies to himself by a mistranslation:

¿ LE GUSTA ESTE JARDIN?

¿ QUE ES SUYO?

EVITE QUE SUS HIJOS LO DESTRUYAN!

Set against, and sometimes on a physical level interacting with, this conscious pattern of symbols is the 'action' of the book — also 'static', since the characters combine towards a significant development of the action only in the most general way. A reviewer objected to the 'weakness of characterization'

in *Under the Volcano*. Lowry replied in a letter to Cape that he was not trying to 'draw characters' in the normal way. As with the other elements in this novel, the central characters are to be *looked at* rather than *lived with*, just as one contemplates the book as a whole rather than lives through it as a process. The interaction of distinctive human personalities is not so important as the way the characters are balanced against and in some cases are complementary to each other. Moreover, in them — especially in the Consul and Hugh — are embodied larger issues. Lowry claimed that all four major characters are aspects of the Consul himself. Certainly Yvonne is a part of himself which he rejects, and Hugh is perhaps even more closely connected with him. Through reminiscences about his past life Hugh develops as one aspect of Man, the Consul providing the complementary aspect. Hugh, just above mediocrity, halfway between youth and maturity, has never quite grown up. But though he has failed as a pop-star, 'Hugh, at twenty-nine, still dreamed, even then, of changing the world' (p. 9). His arguments with Geoffrey over left-wing idealism versus scepticism capture the constant reassertion of hope for ideals found in the young, everlastingly opposed to the increasing scepticism of middle-age. Again, in his recollections Hugh is reflecting some of the major experiences of all men's lives — he is 'Everyman tightened up a screw, for he is just beyond being mediocre':

And he is the youth of Everyman. Moreover his frustrations with his music, with the sea, in his desire to be good and decent, his self-deceptions, triumphs, defeats and dishonesties . . . his troubles with his guitar, are everyone's frustrations, triumphs, defeats, dishonesties and troubles with their *quid pro quo* of a guitar. And his desire to be a composer or musician is everyone's innate desire to be a poet of life in some way, while his desire to be accepted at sea is everyone's desire, conscious or unconscious, to be a part — even if it doesn't exist — of the brotherhood of man. (p. 75)

Part of Hugh's function, then, is to give greater scope to the Consul's situation. He is something of the Consul, something of all men and something of himself. He also introduces some wider issues. Hugh as a socialist and journalist records the imminent ending of the central ideological struggle of the thirties, the Spanish Civil War. The Consul himself is shot as a fascist. Hugh

stands for something of the young, mixed-up idealism of the thirties, shortly to be plunged into a savage war. The link between the Consul's state and that of Europe at large is made pointedly clear by Hugh:

What's the good? Just sobering him up for a day or two's not going to help. Good God, if our civilization were to sober up for a couple of days it'd die of remorse on the third —¹

Our interest, then, in the major characters of *Under the Volcano* is not the interest we have in, say, Emma Woodhouse, Dorothea Brooke or Ursula Brangwen. Lowry strictly subordinates personal involvement to function in the larger 'static' pattern of the novel. So with Yvonne her attractiveness and the quality of her love for the Consul are important, not as a revelation of individuality but because she is a representative of all human love and the possibility of redemption, and we must understand what it is the Consul is throwing away. Laruelle's love for Yvonne fulfils a similar function. Yvonne's every thought is for the Consul, but *he* can feel only jealousy because he thinks she and Laruelle have been lovers. This human detail is used as an adjunct of the central 'static' situation to add yet another facet to the Consul's condition — his tendency to poison everything in his own life and that of all who love him.

A most useful illustration of Lowry's 'static' technique is found in his use of scenes or incidents as images. As yet another aspect of 'being in Hell' Lowry must represent the possibility of human happiness and salvation, and this he does in Yvonne's dream of escape to Canada, the image of the butterfly which escapes from the jaws of the cat as the Consul looks on, and, most powerfully of all in the ride Yvonne and Hugh take through the morning countryside while Geoffrey sleeps. Nothing obviously significant in itself happens during this ride. Mounted on two mares and accompanied by the foals and a friendly dog they ride into the hills above the city, drink beer, talk to a little girl with an armadillo and gallop. Yet the details combine to give a powerful impression of joy, spontaneity and the goodness of of life. As a whole this scene is part of the overall static structure of the novel. It gives a glimpse of the possibility of redemption;

¹ Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano*, 1967, p. 117.

it highlights the Consul's loss and the extent of his alienation from the rest of mankind; it throws into even sharper relief his hopeless tragedy. Moreover there are specific symbolic details within the scene. The beer they drink is alcohol, but is a social and friendly drink, liberating the spirit, not like the Consul's mescal, private and hallucinatory. The dog is a friend to Man, not like the hideous pariah dogs of the city which follow the Consul. But the scene's real power to function as part of a 'static' work of art derives from something deeper than a simple pattern of symbols. It lies in the 'stuff of life' itself conveyed in the description of people being intensely natural, free and happy. In these conditions Hugh's naivete and self-dramatization are pleasantly amusing, and Yvonne treats him with tolerant affection. They can disagree and forgive, dream and feel it may come true, and, most important of all, laugh frankly together — a faculty noticeably missing from the rest of the work. The deepest level on which the scene functions is naturalistic, and this significantly distinguishes it from two scenes exemplifying what is most distinctive in Lowry's image technique.

The first incident occurs as the Consul, Hugh and Yvonne are travelling by bus to Tomalin. The bus stops, and a wounded Indian is discovered by the roadside. A little heap of silver is left under his hat. He says only '*companero*' (the word the Consul also is to speak as he lies dying). None of the passengers dares help, because he might be implicated in the affair. They are continuing their journey when Hugh and Geoffrey notice that a '*pelado*' has stolen the Indian's money, and is openly paying for his fare with it:

The *Pelado's* smeared *conquistador's* hands, that had clutched the melon, now clutched a sad bloodstained pile of silver pesos and centavos.

The *pelado* had stolen the dying Indian's money.

Moreover, surprised at this point by the conductor grinning in the window, he carefully selected some coppers from this little pile, smiled round at the preoccupied passengers as though he almost expected some comment to be made upon his cleverness, and paid his fare with them. (pp. 250-1)

The second incident is at the 'bull-throwing'. Seated in the arena the Consul and Yvonne grasp at reconciliation and salva-

tion, almost achieve them, but finally part for ever. As an accompaniment there are the incidents of the bull-ring; a series of anticlimaxes as the bull refuses to be roused, whereupon it is driven to fury by childish cruelty. Finally, ridiculously mounted, it is successfully ridden by Hugh, at which moment Geoffrey and Yvonne finally lose contact.

Both incidents are examples of a kind of novel imagery which Lowry, if he has not invented, has transformed for his own purposes. In more conventional novels the 'type scene' — that is an incident whose action images in little some of the larger implications of the novel — is an organic part of the action, although it has also what may loosely be termed symbolic powers. The visit to Sotherton in *Mansfield Park*, although full of images of the moral corruption of the Bertram family and a foreshadowing of the tragedy to come, is integrated deeply in the action because it functions also on a naturalistic level — draws its strength from roots lying in deeply observed and vividly captured life. For example, Maria Bertram and Henry Crawford, wishing to enter a part of the estate which is barred by a locked gate decide to climb over without the permission of the owner, Maria's fiancé Mr Rushworth, despite Fanny's doubts about propriety. This has a symbolic function — it images the subsequent transgression of the two when they enter another kind of forbidden territory — adultery; but this symbolism is an extension of a naturalistic, psychological truth — that we see Maria and Crawford are irresponsible and wilful by that very action which they are performing, without reference to any symbolic overtones. A similar truth applies to a writer as far from Jane Austen as D. H. Lawrence. The terms in which the naturalism works are different, because the standpoint from which Lawrence assesses life is very different from Jane Austen's. But the scenes in Lawrence which act as images are still based on an extension of the 'medium' of the whole novel, which in Lawrence's case is the workings of the unconscious mind. When Gerald Crich, in *Women in Love* holds his Arabian mare before the railway crossing, despite her fear, arousing a kind of desire in Gudrun and horror in Ursula, one of the central situations of the whole novel is vividly captured, but this symbolic function is not arbitrarily

attached to the scene 'in a vacuum'. The actual psychological forces are seen naturalistically in action, and the image is merely an extension or crystallizing of this action.

The great difference, then, between Lowry's scenes and those of Austen and Lawrence is that Lowry is *not* concerned particularly to connect their functions as images organically with the 'medium' of the novel, but, as with the other aspects of his 'static' technique, to fit them into a pattern. His images are therefore placed in a sense outside the action, to comment and reflect on or intensify the situation. Although it is credible on the level of physical probability that the passengers should see the dying Indian, he is only connected to their lives thematically. Primarily he should be seen as a dying man, since he is *placed* as a crucial image of the Consul and of all humanity — suffering like so much of Europe in 1938 while others look on unable or unwilling to help; but while being part of the 'stasis' of the whole novel, it does not grow organically out of the naturalistic 'medium' — the Consul's nightmare of *delirium tremens* or the spontaneous joy of Hugh's and Yvonne's ride together.

The bull-throwing scene presents an even more detached image. Certain spontaneous emotional responses are felt to the Indian — pity for his plight and horror at the action of the *pelado* — but the bull stimulates little of this kind of feeling. Again it is an image of the Consul's predicament. Yvonne and Geoffrey act out their last moments of hope against a background of the bull's torments; first indifferent, then driven to fury by forces it cannot understand or contend with, yet imprisoned also and unable to escape by flight. As an image it has a life of its own — its only connection with the Consul is the similarity of situation of man and beast. It is not exactly an epic simile, but the relationship it has to the action is reminiscent of a poetic rather than a novel image. Such an image's independence from the 'stuff' of the novel may be seen in the fact that its function can later change (according to Lowry) and when Hugh subdues the bull he is subduing the animal forces which the Consul later releases.

One of the few novelists to use images in a way at all similar is Thomas Hardy. For example there is a point in *Tess of the*

D'Urbervilles when the hunted Tess lies in a field all night listening to heavy thumping sounds:

Directly the assuring and prosaic light of the world's active hours had grown strong she crept from under the hillock of leaves, and looked around boldly. Then she perceived what had been going on to disturb her . . . Under the trees several pheasants lay about, their rich plumage dabbled with blood; some were dead, some feebly twitching a wing, some staring up at the sky, some pulsating quickly, some contorted, some stretched out—all of them writhing in agony, except the fortunate ones whose tortures had ended during the night by the inability of nature to bear more.¹

This is a clear image of Tess's own situation, and in its separate-ness and reflecting function it is not dissimilar to Lowry's technique, but immediately after ascertaining the cause of the noise, Tess steps into the image herself by wringing the birds' necks and drawing a moral:

She was ashamed of herself for her gloom of the night, based on nothing more tangible than a sense of condemnation under an arbitrary law of society which had no foundation in Nature. (p. 355)

Moreover *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is fundamentally a thoroughly naturalistic novel, and such images are occasional devices, not part of a complete technique. Alternatively, the technical extremism of *Ulysses* may seem closer to Lowry's 'stasis', especially in Joyce's introduction of extraneous commentary into the middle of his action, but again there is a wide rift between the two authors. If Hardy is basically traditional, Joyce leaves tradition far behind in *Ulysses*. Commentary is not linked to action in any naturalistic way because he is not looking for traditional naturalism but is creating a highly patterned version of life. Lowry, in *Under the Volcano*, is also doing this of course, but we are also aware as we read the novel that the element of naturalism is large enough to create some uncomfortable tension between it and the highly formalized images.

This struggle between naturalism and formalized art can be seen as one of the most serious obstacles to accepting *Under the Volcano* as a completely successful work of art. On one hand Lowry is writing a work constructed like a poem or symphony

¹ Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, 'Wessex', ed., 1920, p. 354.

rather than a normal novel, and to which the reader should respond accordingly. But he is also writing a novel which invites a more normal response in many ways — the reader's primary response to *Under the Volcano* is one of a certain emotional and moral involvement with the characters and situation, whatever larger 'static' view he may later take. Probably the most successful parts of the novel are those like Hugh's and Yvonne's ride, in which we feel there is an autonomous 'life' flowing without authorial arrangement. The reader may well experience some unease at the discrepancy between his expectations of the novel's 'illusion of life' and the more formalized, patterned aesthetic response also demanded by Lowry. This is most clearly seen in the case of credible coincidence. The novel bristles with symbols; they arise at a rate which is quite impossible in life. This might partly be accounted for by referring them to the Consul's own psychological state — he himself sees every incident 'informing against' him. But many objects and events have a symbolic function which has no connection with the Consul's personal interpretation — for example the constantly reappearing horse with the number seven brand; or the book of Elizabethan and Jacobean plays which Laruelle casually flicks open at Faustus's epitaph. As far as there is any answer to this problem perhaps it should be sought not in the Consul's mind but in the whole setting of the novel. Lowry explains in his letters his attempt to write a work of art equivalent in power to a Renaissance tragedy:

And I am telling you something new about hell fire. I see the pitfalls — it can be an easy way out of hard work, an invitation to eccentric word-spinning . . . but just the same in our Elizabethan days we used to have at least passionate poetic writing about things that will always mean something and not just silly ass style and semi-colon technique: and in this sense I am trying to remedy a deficiency, to strike a blow, to fire a shot for you as it were, roughly in the direction, say, of another Renaissance: (p. 80)

Mexico is the setting for the tragedy — Paradise and Hell in one. As the place in which extremes are reconciled Mexico acts as the unifying agent for the novel. Colourful, grotesque, savage, Mexico is a land outside the normal world, a land in which life is 'tightened up a screw', a land in which anything can happen.