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KLUTZ, PHYLLIS HUFFMAN. Malcolm Lowry's Under the Volcano as Tragedy. (1975) Directed by: Dr. Randolph Bulgin. Pp. 58.

Malcolm Lowry's Under the Volcano can be viewed as a tragedy on three levels--Aristotelian, Christian, and existential.

With his choice of an epigraph taken from Sophocles' Antigone, Lowry indicates his purpose to present his Consul as an Aristotelian hero. Two basic resemblances between the character of Geoffrey Firmin and Aristotle's concept of a good tragic protagonist are moral and mental superiority and a fatal error in judgment. The Consul is basically a good man, who is intellectually perceptive and strong-willed; but he erroneously believes that total individual awareness can replace human love.

The second epigraph, a passage from John Bunyan's Grace Abounding for the Chief of Sinners, relates Under the Volcano to the tradition of Christian tragedy. As such a tragedy, the novel emphasizes the guilt attending the severance of the spiritual relationship from man's commitment to his fellow man. The Consul assumes various poses of remorse, but he refuses until the closing moments of his life to accept the true source of his guilt. An incident involving a dying Indian and a thief illuminates for Geoffrey his failure to fulfill his human responsibilities so that just before his death he experiences a brief moment of affirmation. Geoffrey's younger brother Hugh represents an expansion of the personal Christian guilt of the Consul to a universal remorse

characteristic of a world preparing for war. Another and perhaps more important source of the Consul's sense of guilt is his recognition that he does not really desire deliverance. He views himself as an Adam who does not like the Garden of Eden but whose punishment consists in having to go on living there cut off from God.

An existential and romantic view of Under the Volcano is suggested by the third epigraph, a quotation from Goethe's Faust. Existential tragedy emphasizes the necessity for action and participation, but almost to the end the Consul refuses to act. His failure to strive upward nearly dooms him to the nothingness of not-being. Finally at the eleventh hour, Geoffrey rebels against the absurd human condition and becomes an existential hero. He is a tragic figure because he acts even though he is conscious of the futility of all action.

Whether one views Under the Volcano as Aristotelian, Christian, or existential, it is possible to perceive in Lowry's writing a vision resembling that of the great masters of tragedy.

APPROVAL PAGE

MALCOLM LOWRY'S UNDER THE VOLCANO

AS TRAGEDY

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro:

by

Phyllis Huffman Kluttz

Randolph Bulgin
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the Faculty of the Graduate School at
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Day of Acceptance by Committee

Approved by

Randolph Bulgin
Thesis Adviser

483038

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Thesis Adviser

Randolph Bulgin

Committee Members

Murray S. Amst

Robert Watson

March 17, 1975

Date of Acceptance by Committee

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

A student of Malcolm Lowry's Under the Volcano would do well to begin with the author's own advice to the reader:

The novel can be read simply as a story which you can skip if you want. It can be read as a story you will 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. It is superficial, profound, entertaining and boring, according to taste. It is a prophecy, a political warning, a cryptogram, a preposterous movie, and a writing on the wall. It can even be regarded as a sort of machine: it works too, believe me, as I have found out. In case you think I mean it to be everything but a novel I better say that after all it is intended to be and, though I say so myself, a deeply serious one too.¹

That Under the Volcano was meant to achieve a poetic resonance is suggested by Lowry's plea to allow several readings for its full meaning to "explode in the mind."² Even on an initial reading, however, Under the Volcano exerts a fascinating magneticism; for in the tragedy of the tormented Consul, it is possible to see a glimmer of oneself. In a particularly enlightening letter to his publisher, Jonathan Cape (January 2, 1946), Lowry said that his novel "is concerned principally . . . with the forces in man which cause him to be terrified of himself" and with "the guilt of man, with his remorse, with his ceaseless struggling toward the light under the weight of the past, and with his doom."³

The Consul, then, is a representative figure, a symbol for the plight of mankind; but his extreme suffering prevents his development as a mere symbol. Though an intricate pattern of leitmotifs and many levels of meaning ultimately cohere as the novel is read and re-read, the individuality of the Consul himself is never obscured. He is finally a tragic figure, but he is still very much a tragic man.

Published in 1947 after twelve years of writing and three earlier drafts, Under the Volcano was the first and, in the opinion of most critics, Lowry's only major work. Until recently it has hardly received the attention it deserves. The most helpful biographical source and a solid base for critical study of Lowry is Douglas Day's Malcolm Lowry, published in 1973.⁴ Taking over the work of Conrad Knickerbocker, Lowry's first biographer, Day spent several years tracing Lowry's world-wide travels and interviewing his subject's wife, friends, and correspondents. Through Day's admirable work, Malcolm Lowry himself emerges as a tragic figure whose resemblance to Geoffrey Firmin renders credible Lowry's belief that in Under the Volcano "he was not so much writing, as being written about, possibly by some capricious and not necessarily talented daemon."⁵

Another essential work is the Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry, edited by Harvey Breit and Margerie Lowry, the novelist's widow. The most important single correspondence in this volume is the Cape letter dated January 2, 1946. Lowry had just received

news that the firm was reluctant to publish the novel in its complete form due to its "long initial tedium, the weakness of the characterization, and . . . excessive length. . . ." ⁶ Lowry's reply was a thirty-one page defense of his book, which Granville Hicks has called "'the most careful exposition of the working of the creative imagination.'" ⁷ An examination of this letter is invaluable for a study of Under the Volcano.

Several full-length studies of Lowry's work offer various approaches. The most helpful of these is Richard Hauer Costa's Malcolm Lowry, ⁸ which pursues especially the Aiken-Lowry symbiosis. Costa also deals with the very important question of autobiography in Lowry's work.

Written from a more specialized point of view, Perle Epstein's The Private Labyrinth of Malcolm Lowry: "Under the Volcano" and the Cabbala ⁹ is a rigorous examination of the motifs of the novel. Mrs. Epstein draws attention especially to parallels with Jewish mysticism. The influence of the Cabbala is definitely present in Under the Volcano, and Mrs. Epstein has accomplished a monumental task; but her work is less valuable as a thematic approach to the novel.

Of the individual essays on Under the Volcano, Dale Edmonds' "Under the Volcano: A Reading of the 'Immediate Level'" ¹⁰ surpasses all others in its interpretation of the whole novel. Ms. Edmonds' thesis is that the novel "exists powerfully as a story about people."

Douglas Day, who probably knows more about Malcolm Lowry, and by extension Under the Volcano, than any other person except Margerie Lowry, scornfully dismisses those approaches that deal almost

exclusively with "one or two of the many strands which woven together produce the whole work."¹¹ He calls for a reading of the novel "as Gestalt,"¹² in order to examine the synthesis of the various images and associations in light of what the novel really concerns. In this regard it is important to note one of the major themes of Under the Volcano--the relationship of man and the cosmos. One such gestalt reading of the novel should consider Lowry's concept of a moral order, and then examine the Consul's reaction to that view.

Part of the merit of Under the Volcano lies in its ability to elicit numerous interpretations on various levels. Lowry's own awareness of this quality has been noted earlier. Even in the examination of one theme--man's place in the universe--the novel yields multiple readings. The three epigraphs which Lowry chose to begin Under the Volcano, suggest three different readings--all of which place the novel in the genre of tragedy. Lowry, himself, attested to the importance of these quotations as main threads in the narrative when he suggested to the Cape readers: "When you get to the end, if you have read carefully, you should want to turn back to the beginning again . . . that your eye might alight once more upon Sophocles' 'Wonders are many, and none is more wonderful than man.'"¹³

The passage Lowry was citing is his first epigraph, a quotation from Sophocles' Antigone, a work whose emphasis upon moral choice implies an immediate parallel with Under the Volcano. The optimism of the first line fades with the ending reminder that "'only against Death shall [man] call for aid in vain; but from baffling maladies

he hath devised escapes."¹⁴ The Greek Chorus emphasizes the paradox of man's potential for greatness and his inevitable frailty. Such is also one view of Lowry's Consul. He is not quite a great man, but his past and present thoughts and actions reveal him to be at least not simply a melodramatic drunkard. Like the Sophoclean heroes, whom Lowry must have had in mind, the Consul is brought low as much by the universal human predicament as he is by his own nature.

The second epigraph, a brief passage from John Bunyan's Grace Abounding for the Chief of Sinners, links Under the Volcano with Christian tragedy. The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Puritan view of the relationship of man and God was quite different from that of the Greek Golden Age. No longer considered a wonderful creature, man was oppressed by a vague and undetermined guilt. According to Puritan thought, a concretely envisioned hell awaited those who refuse the grace of God. John Bunyan's dilemma, expressed in the line, "'Yet that which added to my sorrow was, that I could not find with all my soul that I did desire deliverance'" (p. 2), is that of the Christian who feels not only the guilt of original sin but the additional awareness of perversity of will. In his pre-occupation with a nebulous guilt, his apparent assurance of the reality of hell, his introspective detachment, and his proud obstinance, the Consul assumes the role of the tragic protagonist in the Christian mode.

Another way of viewing Under the Volcano suggests itself in the third epigraph, a line from Goethe's Faust, which Lowry

translates as "'Whosoever unceasingly strives upward . . . him can we save'" (p. 2). The idea of the necessity for choice, which is evident both in the epigraph and the novel, allows for an existential reading of Under the Volcano. This third interpretation casts light on the novel as a modern tragedy, and thus, completes the movement throughout the tragic genre that began with antiquity.

Starting with each of these epigraphs individually, I propose to examine Under the Volcano as a tragedy on three different levels--classical, Christian, and existential. It may appear that these different levels cannot exist simultaneously; and in some cases the passages cited as examples within my three chapters may seem contradictory. My purpose is, of course, to stress a certain viewpoint at a given time; however, more importantly, I wish to emphasize the rich texture of Under the Volcano. What may appear inconsistent will, I believe, point up the many interpretative possibilities for this great work.

CHAPTER II

UNDER THE VOLCANO AS ARISTOTELIAN TRAGEDY

The passage from Sophocles' Antigone, which opens Under the Volcano, appears at first glance an ironic comment on the ensuing narration of events in the final day of an alcoholic's life. This passage, spoken by the Chorus, appears just after the sentinel has reported to Creon the unlawful burial of Polyneices. Creon has reiterated his decree against the burial and has vowed he will learn the offender's identity. The Chorus then breaks in with a rehearsal of the remarkable achievements of mankind. In spite of all the wonders of man, however, "'against Death shall he call for aid in vain'" (p. 2). After reading Under the Volcano, one realizes the appropriateness of the Sophoclean quotation. Lowry's novel does indeed display affinities with classical tragedy, especially in the character of the Consul.

This comparison is illuminated by the Poetics of Aristotle, who greatly admired the plays of Sophocles. Of particular interest is Aristotle's discussion of the agents of a tragedy. The personalities of the dramatis personae, he said, are second in importance to the plot. The agent should display "character," or "that which reveals moral purpose," and "thought," or "the faculty of saying what is possible and pertinent in given circumstances."¹⁵

In the most successful tragedies, according to Aristotle, the moral disposition of the agents is good. Professor Lane Cooper

interpreted Aristotle's statement as meaning that such individuals are "naturally kind and generous, as well as good for something."¹⁶ Arising from within the character of the most prominent agent, however, a lack of proper or sufficient insight causes an error in judgment, which results finally in his downfall. The ideal tragic protagonist, then, is "a man not superlatively good and just, nor yet one whose misfortune comes about through vice and depravity; but a man who is brought low through some error of judgment or shortcoming." Though the poet must faithfully depict the tragic flaw, "preserving the likeness of a man," he should ennoble him, as a good portrait painter does his subject. "So, too, the poet in imitating men who are quick to anger, or are easy-going, or have other infirmities of disposition, must represent them as such, and yet as kind and honorable."

In the 1946 letter to his publisher, already cited, Lowry makes clear that his purpose in Chapter I of Under the Volcano had been to establish the Consul "in the Grecian manner as a fellow of some stature, so that his fall may be tragic."¹⁷ The novel opens on the Day of the Dead, November, 1939. It is exactly one year since the Consul's death. Jacques Laruelle, a French film producer, and Arturo Díaz Vigil, a Mexican doctor, discuss their dead friend while having a last drink together before Laruelle's departure from Mexico. From this brief conversation, the reader learns for certain only that before his death the Consul had been an alcoholic. His doctor-friend recognizes his sickness as having been not of body "but in that part used to be call: soul" (p. 5).

That the man had some sort of charismatic impact on those who knew him is evident from this fragmented conversation.

After Dr. Vigil leaves, Laruelle walks to the ruins of the summer place of Maximilian and Carlotta, rulers of Mexico from 1864 to 1867. Thinking at first that he hears their ghosts, he suddenly realizes the voices are those of the Consul and his estranged wife Yvonne. Through the identification of the Consul with the unhappy Maximilian and the analogy of both figures with Adam, the note of grand tragedy is struck at the very beginning.

The victim of Napoleon III's political scheming, Maximilian, Archduke of Austria, was tricked into accepting an invitation to become Emperor of Mexico. Later he was executed by the man who had convinced him of Mexican support. At his death Maximilian showed remarkable courage and dedication by refusing the opportunity to escape. History generally treats him and his wife, who died insane, as the tragic victims of their own idealism as well as outside political maneuvering.¹⁸

Laruelle's reverie, a mixture of dialogue between Maximilian and Carlotta and between Geoffrey and Yvonne, is really a telescoped version of the Consul's own tragedy. Maximilian expresses faith in their ability to prove themselves worthy of this new Eden: "It is our destiny to come here, Carlotta. Look at this rolling glorious country, its hills, its valleys, its volcanoes beautiful beyond belief. And to think that it is ours! Let us be good and constructive and make ourselves worthy of it!" (p. 14). Confused

with this hopeful declaration are the painful recriminations of the Consul and Yvonne, arguing about the cause of their fall from happiness:

[Yvonne] "No, you loved yourself, you loved your misery more than I. You did this deliberately to us."

[Consul] "I?"

[Yvonne] "You always had people to look after you, to love you, to use you, to lead you. You listened to everyone save me, who really loved you."

[Consul] "No, you're the only person I've ever loved."

[Yvonne] "Ever? You loved only yourself."

[Consul] "No, it was you, always you, you must believe me, please: you must remember how we were always planning to go to Mexico. Do you remember? . . . Yes, you are right. I had my chance with you. Never a chance like that again!"

Like the historical ruler of Mexico, Geoffrey realizes the possibility for happiness; but he is also aware of the reason for his failure. This awareness distinguishes the Consul as a tragic figure, and not merely a melodramatic one.

During the conversation between Laruelle and Señor Bustamente, the cinema manager, the background of Geoffrey Firmin continues to unfold. The subject arises when Bustamente gives Laruelle a volume of Elizabethan plays. Laruelle had borrowed the book from the Consul and subsequently had left it in the theatre eighteen months before. Evident in the talk between Laruelle and the townsman is the mysterious attraction, fascination almost, which the Consul had exerted. "What, after all, was a Consul that one was mindful of him?" Laruelle asks himself (p. 29).

The attitude of the Mexican townspeople is sympathetic and protective toward this man, who, especially his last year, had given the impression, "apart from being always muy borracho," of "living in continual terror of his life" (p. 30). Though Señor Bustamente is half convinced that Geoffrey is a spy, he is "prepared to be sorry . . . in his heart for the poor lonely dispossessed trembling soul that had sat drinking here night after night" (p. 30). He tells Laruelle about an occasion when the Consul "had run into the cantina El Bosque, kept by the old woman Gregorio, now a widow, shouting something like 'Sanctuario!' that people were after him, and the widow, more terrified than he, had hidden him in the back room for half the afternoon" (pp. 30-31).

The kindly sentiment of the townspeople could have been engendered as much by the Consul's nobility of spirit as his obvious need for their assistance. He could be forgiven for being a spy, if indeed he was one. For "after all, [Bustamente declares] he was simpático himself" (p. 31). As proof, the cantina operator recalls having seen the Consul "give all his money to a beggar taken by the police" (p. 31). Without understanding all his reasons, Señor Bustamente insists that the Consul was an "hombre noble" (p. 31).

Another fact about the Consul's past emerges from Laruelle's conversation with Bustamente. During the First World War, Geoffrey had become commander of an armed merchant ship, the S. S. Samaritan, when her captain was killed in an engagement with a German U-boat. When the ship reached port, the German officers were not among the other prisoners from the submarine, and it was believed that they had been

burned alive in the furnaces by the Samaritan's stokers. Though no one seriously believed that the Consul was responsible ("He was a man of honour"), he was court-martialed but was acquitted of the charge and later decorated for his gallantry in the affair.

The Samaritan incident does little to demean the Consul's character in the view of the reader. In fact, Laruelle, whose reliability cannot really be questioned, feels that the lack of stigma associated with it and the Consul's willingness to discuss it at all imply his innocence. Later in his life, when "the poor Consul had already lost almost all capacity for telling the truth and his life had become a quixotic oral fiction" (p. 33), he "sardonically announced the single-handed accomplishment himself of the deed" (p. 33), but Laruelle insists that "the German officers were merely an excuse to buy another bottle of mescal" (p. 33).

With this important first chapter, Lowry establishes the character of his protagonist. The Consul's sentiments tend towards benevolence. Furthermore, his distinguished service record shows him capable of effective leadership, a fact which alone would place him a little above most men. Unfolding is a character who in the past, at least, was thought to be both honorable and noble, and was probably respected and admired.

In Chapter I, Lowry presents the Consul through the memories of his friends and acquaintances; but in Chapter II and throughout the remainder of the novel, Geoffrey Firmin appears in his own behalf. Reaction to his drunkenness alternates from repulsion to amusement; certainly his weakness is far from admirable. But particular qualities in his character continue throughout the book to ennoble him. The

Consul's keen perception and objectivity, which separate him from ordinary men, recall Lowry's stated purpose to make him "in the Grecian manner as a fellow of some stature."¹⁹

The problem with Geoffrey is not ignorance--he recognizes his predicament and completely understands his choice of damnation. From his unposted letter to Yvonne, written the day he learned of her final divorce settlement, it is evident that he realized even then that his doom was sealed. The Consul had written:

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.

 But this is worst of all, to feel your soul dying. I wonder if it is because to-night my soul has really died that I feel at the moment something like peace (p. 36).

What is more painful to Geoffrey is his awareness of the mental paralysis which prevents him from acting to save himself. He understands that it is he who has failed to bring about the reconciliation between himself and Yvonne. Why has he not sent her a letter or a telegram, at least to tell her he received her letters? Why does he not go to America himself? Perhaps it is because he "would prefer to die in Mexico" (p. 39), since he has already made his irrevocable choice.

What is more, Geoffrey understands that his choice has denied the love and understanding which he and Yvonne once had. "Love is the only thing which gives meaning to our poor ways on earth," he writes; but he lacks the real desire to change his situation. "This is what it is to live in hell" (p. 38), to be aware of alternatives but to be

unable to seize them. The Consul suffers more intensely because he is capable of feeling more than the average man how his own actions have caused his downfall.

That Geoffrey recognizes this side of his character is suggested by his partiality for the story of Shelley's death. Standing on Laruelle's balcony, Geoffrey tells Hugh, "The story I like about Shelley is the 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 couldn't swim" (p. 204). This action, the Consul knows, does not stem from courage but from pride. His distinction between these two qualities allows him to recognize that his own lack of courage prevents him from an admission of "total defeat" (p. 25), such as Shelley could not make.

Not only is the Consul fully aware of being a failure and the reasons for it, he is just as much determined to be one. "Yet I will not give in. . . . Whatever I do, it shall be deliberately," he vows. His exercise of will has become to him a religious duty.²⁰ In the letter to Yvonne, he had said, "You will think I am mad, but this is how I drink too, as if I were taking an eternal sacrament" (p. 40). His fierce determination to struggle and suffer appears in several of his speeches. To Laruelle's attempt to invalidate his "battle for the survival of the human consciousness" (p. 217), the Consul replies, "You deny the greatness of my battle? Even if I win. And I shall certainly win, if I want to" (p. 219). Surely the Consul realizes that it is pride which makes him utter such statements as "The will of man is unconquerable. Even God cannot conquer it!" (p. 93). But

this very pride and the strength of the will it motivates recall the Greek hubris, the fatal flaw of the Sophoclean protagonists.

The Consul's mental strength, which distinguishes him from the average man, also separates him from the typical drunkard. In Chapter I, Laruelle is almost knocked over by a drunken rider. Watching him ride away, sprawling all over his mount but not once grasping the pommel to steady himself, Laruelle thinks suddenly of Geoffrey: "This maniacal vision of senseless frenzy, but controlled, not quite uncontrolled, somehow almost admirable, this too, obscurely, was the Consul" (p. 23).

All these--his acute awareness, his determination, his self-control, even his pride--arise from a nobility of spirit that would in a different cause have been a great force for good. "'Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight'" (p. 34), Laruelle reads from his borrowed copy of Doctor Faustus; no wonder the Consul's friend is shaken as he replaces the book on the table (p. 35).

Another facet of the Consul's character contributes not so much to his identification as a tragic figure but to his attractiveness as a human being. Geoffrey can laugh at his own ridiculousness. Douglas Day, Lowry's biographer, points out "that Geoffrey and his alter ego, his half-brother Hugh, are presented to us not only as tragic victims, but also as the objects of our compassionate laughter."²¹ The Consul's pitiable absurdity is no more evident than when he is lying face down in the road conversing with an absent Hugh or when he attempts to talk politely with his neighbor Quincey while his fly is unbuttoned. Throughout, however, he remains pathetically aware of a certain incongruity in his actions. Whirling around on "the huge looping-the-loop machine" (p. 221),

erected in the square of Quauhnahuac, he realizes that this "was scarcely a dignified position for an ex-representative of his Majesty's government to find himself in" (p. 222). The impact of Geoffrey's personal failures are lessened by his extreme objectivity, which extends even to self-mockery.

With the character of the Consul established in the Aristotelian mode (he is as Hugh says of himself, a "bad good man"), it is necessary to examine the Consul's error in judgment which effects his downfall. In a number of discussions of Under the Volcano, the Consul's particular weakness is termed his inability to love or, at least, to manifest love.²² An explanation of the novel based on this assumption would be unsatisfactory since it considers the effects rather than the cause of the Consul's problem.

Neither can the Consul's alcoholism be supposed the real "flaw." Especially significant is the fact that the Consul's death results not from his drunkenness but from his suspicion of the fascist connection with the dying Indian seen on the road to Tomalín. His drunkenness actually has no importance in the events of that last day except to account for his movements from Tomalín to Pariañ. An obvious explanation for his drinking is his necessity to see more clearly. Notably, his moments of clarity occur when he is very drunk: for example, his remarkably coherent outburst in the Salon Ofélia.

The Consul's error in judgment arises not from alcoholism or a failure to love but from the very qualities which distinguish his nobility. That he wishes to be aware and to be in control, worthy ambitions in moderation, tempts him to explore the limits of individual consciousness. In his letter to Yvonne, he mentions writing a book about "Secret Knowledge," in which he is "trying to answer such

questions as: Is there any ultimate reality, external, conscious and ever-present" (p. 39). From the number of cabbalistic and alchemical books with "frayed edges" (p. 175) which Hugh notices among Geoffrey's library, it would seem that the Consul has used not only alcohol but the occult to attempt to reach the deepest levels of consciousness.

Laruelle offers the best explanation for how this desire to achieve the limits of consciousness affects one's success as a human being. The inevitable result of such an endeavor is the individual's spiritual isolation from the remainder of the world. He tells Geoffrey, "'Your Ben Jonson, for instance, or perhaps it was Christopher Marlowe, your Faust man, saw the Carthaginians fighting on his big toe-nail. That's like the kind of clear seeing you indulge in. Everything seems perfectly clear, because indeed it is perfectly clear, in terms of the toe-nail'" (p. 217).

Laruelle is referring to Geoffrey's egoism, which prevents his seeing outside himself. Because of his desire for self-awareness, Geoffrey has denied the solidarity of mankind by sinking into a non-productive solipsism. His dilemma is how to resolve the need for spiritual separation and the necessity for loving. Stephen Spender's commentary has special relevance: "He has to reject love in order to be alone; he has to be killed because he rejects love."

Though not usually considered in the tradition of classical tragedy, Melville's Ahab helps to illuminate some of the aspects of the Consul's nature which define both his potential for "greatness" and his inherent "flaw." Notable in both characters are a remarkable awareness of destiny and a determination to suppress natural desires by a force of will. Both Ahab and Geoffrey perish because in the

process of their desire to understand the workings of the universe, they deny the very impulses that would save them.

Both tragic heroes are notable for their introspective insight. They are proud of their rebellion against complacency, but at the same time they recognize the ultimate result of their defiance. As Ahab nears his final struggle with Moby Dick, Starbuck pleads with him to abandon his mission of vengeance. Ahab's reply reveals an unusual understanding of his situation:

"What is it, what nameless inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what cozening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time; recklessly making me ready to do what in my own proper, natural heart, I durst not so much as dare."²⁴

Certainly, he sees the inhuman thing he has become and the chance to abandon his present course.

Ahab's speech has many of the same implications as the Consul's letter to Yvonne, written in the Farolito in Parián, almost at the end of the Consul's race to destruction. Geoffrey feels he is already in hell; though a path leads to a northern paradise and a "new life together" (p. 36), he cannot take it. He is determined to strive against his natural impulse and do what he must do deliberately. The Consul's tragic grandeur, like that of Ahab, is heightened by this complete awareness of himself and his destiny.

Another trait which Geoffrey Firmin and Captain Ahab have in common is the isolation of consciousness. Each is involved in an endeavor that separates him from the rest of mankind. Geoffrey's denial of human compassion and companionship casts him at times in

the same light as Ahab, who deliberately risks the lives of his crew to satisfy his own selfish ambition. Like the Consul, too, Ahab endures moments of near pity to remain strong in his unswerving purpose.

We have seen that in several respects Geoffrey Firmin bears the stamp of the hero of classic Greek tragedy. Though really more a Willy Loman than an Oedipus when we see him on his last day, the remarks made about him by other characters together with the evidence of his self-knowledge and his strong affirmation of will give validity to Lowry's choice of the Sophoclean quotation as his first epigraph. Perhaps the Consul possesses more than potential for greatness. Because of his awareness of his place in the world, his supreme objectivity, he not only was but is a grand figure. His military valor, whatever real merit it may have carried, is actually irrelevant. The Consul is better than the average man because he recognizes his own shortcomings and accepts the burden of guilt for his own undoing. But, like the Sophoclean hero, the Consul is also a victim of the universal machinery. His tragedy is the result of the alienation that inevitably accompanies the attainment of individual consciousness.

CHAPTER III

LOWRY'S CONSUL AS A LATTER-DAY PURITAN

The Consul's understanding of the power of necessity does not exempt him from his feeling of responsibility--and so he suffers not just from self-knowledge but also, and most especially, from guilt. This theme is related to the second epigraph, the confession in John Bunyan's autobiography, Grace Abounding for the Chief of Sinners:

"Now I blessed the condition of the dog and toad, yea, gladly would I have been in the condition of the dog or horse, for I knew they had no soul to perish under the everlasting weight of Hell or Sin, as mine was like to do. Nay, and though I saw this, felt this, and was broken to pieces with it, yet that which added to my sorrow was, that I could not find with all my soul that I did desire deliverance" (p. 2).

Bunyan recognizes the possibility of salvation for the sinner who remains open to spiritual grace; he also realizes that the responsibility for communication with God lies with man. This knowledge, that he has rejected "deliverance," increases the agony of his guilt.

The passage from Bunyan provides an interesting parallel to the Consul's excesses of guilt. Geoffrey's acute self-knowledge has already been noted. Certainly, he has the ability to view himself as objectively as Bunyan. That he does indeed suffer because of his knowledge of wrongdoing is apparent, but that his guilt has caused his alcoholism is an excuse which he would like to believe, but one which he knows is false.

Throughout the novel Geoffrey Firmin assumes the pose of the remorse-stricken alcoholic. Certainly, he recognizes his contribution to the failure of his marriage. His narcissism has led to alcoholism, which, in turn, has alienated his wife and rendered him impotent so that she has practically fallen into the arms of other men, including his friend Laruelle and his half-brother Hugh. The Consul does not blame himself entirely, however. In one of his most lucid moments, characteristically one of his most drunken, he lashes out at Yvonne:

"What have you ever done for anyone but yourself. . . . Where are the children I might have wanted? You may suppose I might have wanted them. Drowned. To the accompaniment of the rattling of a thousand douche bags. Mind you, you don't pretend to love humanity. . . ." (p. 313).

Whatever degree of guilt Geoffrey may feel about his marriage is not sufficient to permit his forgiveness of Yvonne's infidelity. Even as he finally embraces her and repeats, "'I do love you,'" he wishes to add, "'I can never forgive you deeply enough'" (p. 197).

Certainly on the day of Yvonne's return, Geoffrey does not appear the long-suffering husband. At times overwhelmed by sudden tenderness, he wants to shout for joy, "She is here! Wake up, she has come back again! Sweetheart, darling, I love you!" (p. 214). His voices tell him, "Raise your head, Geoffrey Firmin, breathe your prayer of thankfulness, act before it is too late" (p. 215). But in the midst of these ecstasies, "The weight of a great hand [seems] to be pressing his head down" (p. 215). The desire soon passes, and he needs a drink.

It is obvious, then, that the Consul's alcoholism has not been caused by the dissolution of his marriage; neither is it sustained by that event except as a feeble excuse to keep drinking. The picture of the Consul as a "Miniver Cheevy" is reinforced by his unwillingness to inform Señora Gregorio, operator of the cantina El Bosque, that her commiseration is no longer needed since his wife has now returned. Undoubtedly, the Consul enjoys the role of deserted husband, and it is highly likely that he is both hurt and aggravated by the dilemma created by Yvonne's return.

Another of the Consul's several poses of guilt is provided by the Mexican political situation in 1938. In the novel and in history, Mexico is a hotbed for various political factions which on a much wider and more dangerous scale are threatening Germany, Russia, and Spain. Geoffrey Firmin no longer represents England in an official capacity, since England, recognizing the explosiveness of Mexico's fascist ties with Spain, has some time earlier broken off diplomatic relations. Some English consuls remain in Mexico, however, posing as trade negotiators between Mexico and England, though the Mexican populace recognize their function to be espionage. Representing the general feeling of Quauhnahuac, Señor Bustamente assumes that Geoffrey is such a spy. This situation provides Geoffrey with a chance to display his enjoyment of the guilty pose, and with this fake guilt, to alleviate the torment of his real guilt.

Because of his understood identification with English spies, Geoffrey is constantly watched by members of the fascist underground, the Union Militar, which now controls the Mexican police. "The world

was always within the binoculars of the police" (p. 106), Hugh notes during his morning ride with Yvonne. Everywhere the Consul goes, he seems to be followed by men in dark glasses. Geoffrey, himself, wears his dark glasses as he and Yvonne leave the cantina on the morning of her return. In fact, Yvonne almost confuses him with "another man wearing dark glasses, a ragged young Mexican leaning against the hotel wall" (p. 51). As he is being questioned by the Chief of Rostrums in the Farolito, Geoffrey remembers his dark glasses, and, at the prompting of "some fatuous notion of disguise" (p. 362), puts them on.

His own adoption of the accessory is almost comic, but it does point up Geoffrey's penchant for role-playing. He does not mind being thought a spy because he is not one. He accepts that form of guilt because for him it is not real. By assuming this pose and all the others, he attempts to palliate the true source of his self-loathing.

Whatever guilt may be associated with the Consul's participation in the S. S. Samaritan affair is likewise suspect. Laruelle's mistrust of it has already been mentioned. Noticing on the wall of Geoffrey's bedroom a German magazine clipping showing the Samaritan, Hugh concludes that its "presence there at all must surely discount most of those old stories" (p. 184). As he dresses for their trip to Tomalin, Geoffrey proudly explains how "everything about the Samaritan was a ruse" (p. 184). Though she had the appearance of a merchant ship, the Samaritan could convert with a few moments' warning to a warship.

At the time of this conversation between the two brothers, Hugh notices with pleasure how Geoffrey has "triumphantly succeeded in pulling himself together" (p. 184). He sees him during a rare moment as a "man of abnormal strength and constitution and obscure ambition" (p. 184). His demeanor arouses doubt that the Consul is truly guilty of the crime he attributes to himself. Laruelle is probably correct in believing that Geoffrey uses this pose as another way of rationalizing his need for a drink.

It is, nevertheless, important to realize that resulting from and not causing Geoffrey's alcoholism is a very real and excruciatingly painful sense of guilt for which all the other "excuses" are mild substitutes. In Chapter I, it has been noted that the Consul drinks in order to probe the depths of human awareness. Operating incidentally with that objective is an inevitable severance from the solidarity of man. The Consul's inordinate guilt is produced by his inability to reconcile his need for separation and his strong sense of responsibility.

The event which elucidates the Consul's alcoholic excesses and precipitates the partial affirmation of the ending is the death and robbery of the Indian who is lying by the road to Tomalín. Hugh is the one who spots him from his bus window, and at his direction the bus driver stops. Hugh, Geoffrey, and several other passengers get off the bus and walk over to the man, who they see is dying. Hugh is about to touch him when he is stopped by the Consul's reprimand, "You can't touch him--it's the law," to which Geoffrey adds tentatively, "For his protection. Actually it's a sensible law.

Otherwise you might become an accessory after the fact'" (p. 243). To Hugh's objection Geoffrey replies, "'God, I feel terrible'" (p. 243).

While the rest argue about whose business it is to attend to the dying man, the passenger identified by the Consul as a "pelado" steals the money which had been placed near the man's neck to invalidate the motive of robbery. Before leaving him, however, Hugh moves the man's hat to allow him to breathe more easily and covers his wound with Geoffrey's handkerchief. Stooping over him, Hugh hears the man groan, "'Compañero'" (p. 247). The vigilante police, who suddenly arrive at the scene, force Hugh to board the bus, and the Consul forcibly restrains him from jumping off again. Realizing and perhaps sympathizing with Hugh's humanitarian inclinations, the Consul tries to comfort him, "'Never mind, old boy, it would have been worse than the windmills'" (p. 248).

The word "pelado" had just previously been defined by Hugh's reflection on an argument he and the Consul once had concerning its meaning. The Consul had maintained that the term suggests both "thief" and "exploiter" (p. 235). The man Hugh and the Consul identify as a "pelado" is indeed these things, but in the hours which follow, Geoffrey apparently recognizes that his "rejection of life" (p. 374) is as great an outrage against humanity as this man's actions. The memories of this real "Samaritan" incident prove to be ones in which Geoffrey Firmin is unsuccessful at romanticizing himself.

This incident acts as a centrifugal image throughout the novel, clarifying and uniting the various symbols and motifs. The "pelado's smeared conquistador's hands" (p. 250), which ostentatiously shuffle the dead Indian's coins, are the bloody hands of the murderer Orlac of the movie at Señor Bustamente's cinema. They are also Geoffrey's hands, described as "large" and "clumsy."

The idea of guilt centrally associated with the pelado incident reappears in the prelude to the disastrous quarrel inside the Salon Ofelia. Geoffrey's will breaks down, and he orders mescal, the drink which is for him like poison. The proprietor of the cantina, a man named Cervantes, recalls the Consul's allusion to Don Quixote's windmills. But this Cervantes has been reduced to an unskilled trainer of fighting cocks and a hunter of small animals. Waiting for Yvonne and Hugh to arrive, the Consul remembers last night's visit with Dr. Vigil to a church where he prayed to "the Virgin for those who have nobody with": "'Deliver me from this dreadful tyranny of self,'" but in his heart he cried, "'Destroy the world!'" (p. 289).

At the table with Yvonne and Hugh, Geoffrey skims Cervantes' volumes on the "History of the Conquest" while discussing the dying Indian. "'Why should we have done anything to save his life?'" he questions. "'Hadh't he a right to die, if he wanted to? . . . Why should anybody interfere with anybody?'" (p. 309). Then he unleashes his fury on Yvonne and Hugh, denouncing first his brother's vapid oratory about the capitalist system and then his wife's infidelity and selfishness. This fiery scene culminates in Geoffrey's assertion of his choice of death: "'I've been beguiled by your

offers of a sober and non-alcoholic Paradise'" (p. 313). Running out of the cantina alone, he shouts, "'I love hell, I can't wait to get back there. In fact I'm running, I'm almost back there already'" (p. 314).

This outburst has been precipitated by the recent incident in which Geoffrey was called upon to make a choice--to succor a dying man or abandon him. Finally, he rationalizes his turning away by asserting a man's right to die without interference. This is what he believes that he desires for himself. That he is not "quite serious" (p. 314) may be due to his compunction about his deliberate choice of death and his alienation from humanity.

The guilt feelings associated with the pelado incident become unmistakable during the closing moments of the Consul's life. The last words his assassin speaks to him are "'you pelado'" (p. 373). Lying on the ground, feeling his life flowing from him, Geoffrey feels the word "pelado" take hold of him: "And it was as if, for a moment, he had become the pelado, the thief--yes, the pilferer of meaningless muddled ideas out of which his rejection of life had grown, who had worn his two or three little bowler hats, his disguises, over these abstractions: now the realest of them all was close" (p. 374). The true source of his guilt is laid before him--"his rejection of life"! All the others have clearly been poses--his marital failure, the Samaritan disaster, his pretended function as a spy. In these he has been playacting as in a child's game, but about his commitment to death he feels deep remorse.

Geoffrey Firmin's final but brief recognition of the nature of his sin constitutes a mild affirmation, which is heightened by the happiness he feels as the old fiddler addresses him with the word, "'campañero'" (p. 374), ironically the same term which the dying Indian groaned to Hugh. The Consul realizes that "now he [is] the one dying by the wayside where no good Samaritan would halt" (p. 375). Imagining Jacques and Vigil explaining away his existence with the platitude, "No se puede vivir sin amar," he repeats these words aloud to himself. "How could he have thought so evil of the world when succour was at hand all the time?" he asks (p. 375).

At the moment of his death, the Consul seems capable of understanding the several displays of human love which he has seen that day. Just before the police gather in the Farolito, Geoffrey observes, or, at least, envisions a beggar with one leg dropping a coin into the hand of a legless man. At another time, he is impressed by the sight of a lame peon carrying on his back "another poor Indian, yet older and more decrepit than himself" (p. 280). The compassion he feels at these moments foreshadows the Consul's long overdue recognition scene. Then he faces for the first time the true source of the guilt he has attempted to assuage with alcohol.

Another of the principal characters of Under the Volcano seems less removed from this core of guilt. In Geoffrey's younger brother Hugh, the disquietude is more easily identifiable as universal guilt, the kind which in 1938 was beginning to fester as nations and individuals were being called upon to make choices to support or oppose

rising political factions.

Hugh seems obsessed with his failure to respond to his sympathies for the Spanish Loyalists. By this time Franco has virtually taken control of the Spanish government; but on the Day of the Dead, 1938, Hugh knows that a gigantic Loyalist offensive is being waged against the fascists at the Ebro River. The repeated allusions throughout the novel to this battle, in which the fascists were indeed miraculously checked for a brief period, serve as a refrain suggesting Hugh's nagging guilt that he is not also there.

At twenty-nine, Hugh is reacting to the approach of thirty with the usual anxiety. "He knew what it felt like, the intolerable impact of this knowledge that . . . one could not be young forever--that indeed, in the twinkling of an eye, one was not young any longer" (p. 150). So he decides suddenly during his morning ride with Yvonne, perhaps through the influence of her dream of happiness with Geoffrey on a farm, that he will that same evening board a train to Vera Cruz from where he will sail on the S. S. Noemijolea, personally escorting a cargo of T.N.T. for the Loyalist armies, "probably [to] be blown to smithereens" (p. 103) for his efforts. Alternately, his thoughts are consumed by noble plans and self-reproach. By the time he reaches Geoffrey's house, he is thinking, "And they are losing the Battle of the Ebro. Because of you, said the wind. A traitor even to your journalist friends you like to run down and who are really courageous men, admit it--Ahhh!" (p. 151).

Recalling the shame of his stunt to gain quick fame as a guitar-strumming songwriter, he berates himself: "For everything you have

done up to now has been dishonest" (p. 151). He remembers the disillusionment of the voyage on the S. S. Philoctetes and the very real pain of his disastrous removal to the S. S. Oedipus Tyrannus. More shameful in his memory is his anti-Semitism, prompted by what he believes was skulduggery in his publisher, Bolowski, whom he revenged by seducing his wife.

Yet in the midst of his reverie on Geoffrey's porch daybed, Hugh incredulously asserts, "'I have done nothing to warrant all this guilt.' 'I am no worse than anybody else'" (p. 151). Nothing he can call from his memory soothes his conscience. Even his belated decision to follow the inclination of his heart, "to give [his] life for humanity" (p. 153), does not help. Again trying to dodge, he reminds himself that he really has no responsibilities. How can I be running away from myself when I am "without a place on earth? . . . a piece of driftwood on the Indian Ocean," he rationalizes (p. 153).

Later that day Hugh indulges once again in a "Walter Mitty" daydream. While traveling with Yvonne and Geoffrey to Tomalín, Hugh imagines that he has just rescued Christ from a burning church and accepted a medal from Stalin. Anticlimactically, his thoughts insert: "Silly bastard. But the queer thing was, that love was real. Christ, why can't we be simple, Christ Jesus why may we not be simple, why may we not all be brothers?" (p. 240). Within a few moments Hugh sees a man lying apparently asleep on the side of the road.

The whole "pelado incident" which follows comments ironically on Hugh's naïve notions about brotherly love. It is true that he is restrained by Geoffrey from remaining with the dying Indian after

the pseudo-police arrive, but he hardly seems the same man who was earlier willing to give his life at the Ebro for his fellowmen.

In several respects, Hugh appears to be a younger and more sober version of the Consul himself. Several motives suggest this identification. As Geoffrey lies face down in the Calle Nicaragua, his mental conversation supplies some necessary information about the relationship of the half-brothers. Geoffrey, who is twelve years Hugh's senior, has acted more like a father than a brother to Hugh. Geoffrey hopes that Hugh's ideas "may prove less calamitous" (p. 78) to him than their father's were, but with his quixotic tendencies, the desire to climb Popocatepetl, for example, Hugh appears doomed to frustration at least as great as Geoffrey's.

At twenty-nine Hugh's behavior is still adolescent. He arrives in Quauhnahuac wearing a Texas cowboy suit complete with side arms and Stetson ten-gallon hat. He likes to think of himself as taller than he really is. The amused narrator notes that he stretches himself "to his full mental height of six feet two (he was five feet eleven)" (p. 104). He is absentminded and dependent. Frequently in the past, Geoffrey has bailed him out of imbroglios over lost passport papers.

On the morning of November 1, 1938, Hugh arrives in Quauhnahuac wearing over his cowboy suit Geoffrey's jacket and carrying his brother's Gladstone bag. The "borrowed clothes" motif reappears just before Geoffrey's death. This time the Consul is wearing the jacket, now containing Hugh's identifying papers and the incriminating cable, which the fascist police incorrectly translate. The accusing

epithet "Jew" recalls Hugh's earlier anti-Semitism. Since Geoffrey goes to his death as Señor Hugo Firmin, Lowry's intention appears to be to allow the Consul's identity to be absorbed into that of his younger brother, who significantly, does not die.

Without the character of Hugh, the Consul's sense of guilt would seem more limited in its causes. The pelado incident is, of course, not enough, though the Consul's remarks in the Salon Ofelia indicate that the incident hangs in his mind. Actually the Consul suffers from the same type of remorse which plagues Hugh when thoughts of the Ebro recur.

In his role of mentor, the Consul earlier spoke on the subject of responding to the solidarity of mankind: "The whole stupid beauty of such a decision made by anyone at a time like this, must lie in that it was so futile, that it was too late" (p. 153). His words contrast ironically with his advice to Hugh not to become "an accessory after the fact" (p. 243). The Consul's guilt, illuminated by Hugh, emerges as universal guilt, that of which Hugh speaks when he says to Yvonne, "Good God, if our civilization were to sober up for a couple of days it'd die of remorse on the third--" (p. 117). It is every man's guilt, as Hugh explains: "Try persuading the world not to cut its throat for half a decade or more, like me, under one name or another, and it'll begin to dawn on you that even your behavior's part of its plan" (p. 103).

Since Geoffrey is unable to absolve himself from responsibility for himself as a member of the human family, his decision to pursue knowledge and accept the resulting isolation plagues him constantly.

Like Faustus, with whom he is often compared,²⁵ his commitment to death requires his divorce from satisfying human relationships. His drinking permits him the power to achieve that "precarious precious stage, so arduous to maintain, of being drunk in which alone he [is] sober" (p. 85). At the same time, his drunkenness distorts into beauty the symbol for his impending death, the ugly old woman from Tarasco, who with her chicken and her dominoes seems to follow Geoffrey even to the Farolito.

For his choice of death over life, Geoffrey suffers the guilt of a religious man unable to believe in a merciful God. "God has no patience for remorse" (p. 138), he remarks to himself on one occasion. The sin he knows he is committing and his fear of the vengeance of the Supreme Being, Whom he never actually denies, strike an interesting parallel with the Puritan author of the second epigraph.

A major tenet of the Puritan faith was the necessity for involvement in social affairs. Believing that a man's state of grace could be revealed on earth only through his deeds to others, the Puritans deprecated monasticism. Faith and blind acceptance of the workings of the Almighty were implicit. The Consul's search for the kind of knowledge not afforded to the average man and his spiritual separation would have been contrary to the Puritan ethic. Though he is "broken to pieces" by the recognition of his wickedness, he cannot desire deliverance. For this reason, the Consul's sense of guilt produces constant torment, and his certainty of the vengeance of God prevents a reprieve.

Lowry emphasizes the Consul's Old Testament conception of the Supreme Being with abundant imagery deriving from the Garden of Eden. The identification of Geoffrey as a symbolic Adam is made during Laruelle's reflections early in the novel. A wild horseman passes the Consul's house, "where there would be a light in the window M. Laruelle didn't want to see--for long after Adam had left the garden the light in Adam's house burned on" (p. 22). In one of her first remarks upon arriving at her former home, Yvonne exclaims, "'My God, this used to be a beautiful garden. It was like Paradise'" (p. 98).

Geoffrey's morning walk through his ruined garden to take a draft from his hidden tequila bottle is complete with all the trappings of the Eden story--a garter snake he almost steps on, a sign which, incorrectly translated, recalls the divine warning: "You like this garden? Why is it yours? We evict those who destroy!" (p. 128). And Mr. Quincey, whom the Consul imagines to be saying, "I have seen all this going on; I know all about it because I am God" (p. 132).

With the story of the Fall very much in his mind, the Consul abruptly speaks to the amazed Quincey:

"Do you know, Quincey, I've often wondered whether there isn't more in the old legend of the Garden of Eden, and so on, than meets the eye. What if Adam wasn't really banished from the place at all? That is, in the sense we used to understand it-- . . . What if his punishment really consisted . . . in his having to go on living there, alone, of course-- suffering, unseen, cut off from God" (p. 133).

This passage illuminates the dilemma of a religious man who feels irrevocably cut off from God because of his own perversity of will.

Throughout the novel, in fact, Geoffrey feels himself being pursued by reminders of the Garden story. One of the most interesting is the allusion to "The Tale of Peter Rabbit," which occupies a place among Geoffrey's august volumes. "'Everything is to be found in Peter Rabbit,' the Consul liked to say" (p. 175). Peter is a perverse little rabbit, who disobeys the strict order of his mother by sneaking into Mr. McGregor's garden, where he is nearly caught. The terrific stomachache he suffers because of his disobedience prevents him from joining in the family feast that evening.

As though to remind Geoffrey of his sin, a rabbit appears in his mental vision during his ordeal in the Farolito. While the Chief of Gardens and Chief of Rostrums wait for official word for the disposition of their prisoner, the rabbit sits quietly in the corner. This children's story is really an allegory of the Fall. Geoffrey's partiality for it reveals his understanding of the punishment of separation for the sin of disobedience.

Ironically, it is the Chief of Gardens who gives the final nod to the other man to fire the fatal shots, and Geoffrey is finally the complete outcast. The pariah dog, always his ubiquitous and disturbing attendant, follows the Consul even to his grave. Both are thrown into the barranca, the foul-smelling ravine that Geoffrey associates with Tartarus, which lies under the volcano.

The real meaning of the garden symbolism involves the Consul's decision to pursue the depths of individual consciousness in defiance of the interdict against eating of the Tree of Knowledge. The parallel with the Faustus story is strongest at this point. Laruelle

borrowed from the Consul a copy of his collection of Elizabethan plays because he is thinking of producing a movie based on Marlowe's Doctor Faustus, the protagonist of which, it may be recalled, forfeited his salvation in exchange for superior knowledge and ensuing despair. For his disobedience of the Divine Will, the Consul feels certain of his own damnation. Actually, it appears that the isolation inevitably accompanying self-knowledge is what damns him.

In several respects, Lowry's Consul bears comparison with the tragic protagonists of Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter. Hawthorne, a literal child of the Puritans, often attempted to deny his ancestry by ridiculing early New England bigotry and fanaticism. On the subject of man's frailty and suffering, the inevitable result of disobedience, Hawthorne's attitude, however, resembles that of the Massachusetts founders.

It has been noted that Geoffrey's suffering is generated by his tremendous sense of guilt. Looking at Hawthorne's novel, one recognizes that the same is true for Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale. Hester pays a dear price for her adultery though her suffering is surpassed by that of Arthur Dimmesdale, since he bears the additional agony of hypocrisy and concealment. Both are separated from the community--Hester in a physical sense and Dimmesdale through a spiritual isolation similar to the Consul's. Even with her awareness of certain damnation, Hester's proud defiance prevents her true repentance, just as the Consul's perverse will, which "even God cannot conquer"

(p. 93), makes it impossible for him to match his guilt with true desire for deliverance.

The confession scene which closes the tragic story of Dimmesdale in The Scarlet Letter resembles the Consul's last moments. Both men recognize the source of their guilt. Dimmesdale publicly announces himself as an adulterer and a hypocrite; the Consul declares himself a "pelado," a "pilferer of meaningless muddled ideas out of which his rejection of life had grown" (p. 374). The blackness of neither novel is relieved by the belated confession of the sufferers. Dimmesdale's last words recall the Consul's doubt in the efficacy of remorse:

"It may be, that, when we forgot our God--when we violated our reverence each for the other's soul--it was thenceforth vain to hope that we could meet hereafter, in an everlasting and pure reunion."²⁶

Both novels are structured as worlds which seem predestined by an indifferent deity, whose gift of free will appears a mockery.

Like The Scarlet Letter, Under the Volcano is a novel very much concerned with the problems of man's guilt. With the Consul, this guilt arises from the failure to reconcile man's assertion of will with the Puritan conception of the man-God relationship. Geoffrey Firmin, in several respects, is the Christian and classical protagonist defying the gods; but because of the peculiar nature of his sin, his rejection of life, no purification through suffering can exist. He is damned because he wills himself to be damned. Nevertheless,

his Christian theology, which even his damnation cannot destroy, insists upon the burden of guilt.

CHAPTER IV

UNDER THE VOLCANO AS EXISTENTIAL TRAGEDY

For the third epigraph to his novel, Under the Volcano, Lowry chose a quotation from Goethe's Faust: "Whosoever unceasingly strives upward . . . his can we save" (p. 1). Before this statement made by a chorus of angels, Faust's soul had been rescued from nihilism and now it is being carried aloft to join a circle of the blessed where it will rapidly advance to perfection.

Though Goethe was using the idea of upward striving within a Christian context, his emphasis on the individual's role in the progression toward salvation illuminates another level of meaning in Lowry's story of the tormented Consul. Under the Volcano deserves a re-examination, this time as an existential tragedy. To some extent, this has already been done. In a published graduate paper written in 1959, Stanley Jedynak said of the novel, "It appears that only by enclosing the novel in an existential framework can we understand why the usual solutions to man's struggles against God, the universe, and himself prove inadequate to the Consul."²⁷

Defining existentialism as "man's unswerving search for an identification of himself amidst the fears, doubts, and agonies of life" (p. 25), Jedynak points out that "the Consul must know, he must raise questions of utmost significance to his existence as a free agent, and it is only by willing his own destruction that he can assert his freedom of choice" (p. 27). Jedynak's

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interpretation of the Consul rests upon the assumption that the Consul's death is an act of will, his decision "to lose his self in the chaos of the void in order to grapple with ultimate reality" (p. 27).

A reply to Jedynak's argument should consider the question: "Does the Consul choose or does he fail to choose?" A summary of the existential idea of freedom is helpful here.

The thinking of Jean Paul Sartre on this subject typifies the existential view. To the term "freedom" Sartre gave the meaning "human autonomy." Far from signifying "anarchy," however, Sartre's freedom is an awesome, inescapable responsibility. "I am condemned to be free," Sartre writes in Being and Nothingness.²⁸ Ernst Breisach has summarized Sartre's statements on freedom in the following commentary:

Man cannot choose to be free at one time and not at another. He has no choice, because he does not have freedom from which he can at times hide without consequences. The core of the center is that man is freedom. Freedom expresses the very lack of fixed content in man, his lack of being something. It points to man's obligation to make himself. To be sure, man can deny all of this, but he remains free nevertheless. Every act undertaken in the state of denied freedom none the less marks a decision.²⁹

According to the existential view, a human being can forge a meaning from nothingness only by seizing the opportunity to become all he can be. Through man's consciousness, the knowledge of being illuminates certain alternatives of action which are neither right nor wrong; man's freedom, however, compels him to choose. Even a failure to choose constitutes an act of freedom; but failure to

choose, that is, to make a commitment, denies a man the power to be, since being arises from existing, or the process of continual striving.

If the Consul does indeed "choose death," as Stanley Jedynak maintains, he is not, according to the preceding interpretation, an existential hero. For the most part, the existentialists are not advocates of suicide. In fact, they are not even nihilists in the full sense; on the contrary, while asserting the basic absurdity of the universe, men like Sartre and Camus insist upon man's responsibility to create his own meaning by committing himself to an involvement in life. A choice for death would signify complete surrender to nothingness. "Suicide is not legitimate," wrote Albert Camus in the "Preface" to The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays.³⁰ In that work he set out to prove "that even within the limits of nihilism it is possible to find the means to proceed beyond nihilism."³¹ Though he speaks of revolt as man's only salvation from nothingness, Camus declares, "It may be thought that suicide follows revolt--but wrongly. For it does not represent the logical outcome of revolt."³² Therefore, if the Consul does indeed make that choice, he is not an existential hero at all.

The real problem is: does the Consul do anything? When we see him on the final day of his life, he is a man standing at the edge of the abyss with the alternatives of saving himself or throwing himself over. Certainly he perceives the possibilities before him; but until the last few moments of his life, he actually chooses nothing. Yvonne's return has opened up an unexpected avenue to regeneration;

yet he fails to seize it. In fact, he shows no emotion at her sudden presence--neither sadness nor joy. Instead, he runs from one cantina to another, babbling to himself about his motives for inaction.

In spite of Geoffrey's alcoholism, his death is ironically not the result of his own actions but is simply a reflection of the cosmic absurdity engulfing him. During his wanderings through the Mexican countryside from Tomalín to Parián, he is neither walking away from the abyss nor throwing himself into it. He is, rather, being pulled in by his failure to exercise his right and privilege to be, to revolt against the dissolution of his body and spirit into non-being.

Almost to the last moment in the final twelve hours of his life, the Consul remains inert, unwilling to strive upward; but at the very end a reversal occurs, which shows him finally willing to bear the pain of being in spite of its absurdity. The last scene in the Farolito, in which Geoffrey, stupified by mescal, is questioned by men calling themselves, of all things, Chief of Gardens and Chief of Rostrums, resembles a tableau in Chaos. His vision clouded with hallucinatory images, Geoffrey's mind becomes more and more disconnected. The voice of the pimp yelling "You no pay" (p. 356) and those of the policemen charging "Bolsheviki prick," "antichrista," "espider" becomes confused with the sound in his own head of Yvonne speaking through her letters and the ominous noise of thunder outside the cantina. It is a description of a nightmare, an absurd prelude to the greater absurdity of the death which follows.

The Consul's actions just before his death fail to alter the outcome; but, in the fashion of Hamlet, they establish him as an

existential hero. Geoffrey has just been shaken by the throat and told he is "Al Capon," "a Jew chingao," and "a spider" (p. 371). Abruptly he hears a voice speaking in Spanish from the radio. The announcer's words, which the Consul translates to himself, have the air of command. They seem to Geoffrey to be "the only orders that will save the ship" (p. 371):

"Incalculable are the benefits civilization has brought us, incommensurable the productive power of all classes of riches originated by the inventions and discoveries of science. Inconceivable the marvelous creations of the human sex in order to make men more happy, more free, and more perfect. Without parallel the crystalline and fecund fountains of the new life which still remains closed to the thirsty lips of the people who follow in their griping and bestial tasks" (p. 371).

Just then Geoffrey sees "an enormous rooster flapping before him, clawing and crowing" (p. 371). It belongs to the old woman with the dominoes, the leitmotif Lowry has earlier developed to suggest the Consul's imminent death. He raises his hands in a gesture of surrender; then the rooster's excrement hits him on the face.

To establish this point as the climax is significant in viewing the Consul as an existential hero. Geoffrey rallies his human forces and revolts. He strikes the Chief of Gardens straight between the eyes and shouts at the Chief of Rostrums to give him back his letters. Then remembering the dying man he had seen along the route to Tomalin that afternoon, he unleashes a heretofore unacknowledged outrage:

"You poxboxes. You coxcoxes. You killed that Indian. You tried to kill him and make it look like an accident . . . You're all in it. Then more of you came up and took his horse. Give me my papers back" (pp. 372-373). As he is being dragged out the door, the Consul

snatches a machete from a table. Brandishing it in the air as though it were a sword, he remembers Don Quixote. Even as he stumbles backward from the shoves of the policemen, the Consul repeats, "'Give me back those letters! . . . You stole that horse'" (p. 372).

Not only does this outburst show him capable of rebelling against the circumstances of human existence over which he has no control; it also significantly affects the outcome of the novel. Until this time the policemen, following orders by phone, have suggested that Geoffrey be imprisoned. After his accusation that they were involved in the Indian's death, however, the Chief of Rostrums immediately shoves him into the square and shoots him. The decisiveness and appeal of Geoffrey's death are increased by its being precipitated by his revolt rather than the mere frailty of human existence.

The Consul's dying remark, "'This is a dingy way to die'" (p. 373), hardly compares with the lofty rhetoric of his counterpart, Shakespeare's unwilling rebel, but it certainly is characteristic of the Consul's exceptional detachment and self-awareness. It is exactly this highly developed consciousness which redeems the Consul from being at first despicable and finally pitiable. The essential quality of the Consul's situation is tragic rather than pathetic because he, unlike the rest of us, knows what is happening to him and realizes the necessity for action in spite of the absurdity of any action.

The existentialists hold that man's consciousness distinguishes him from all other things, both living and non-living. The human consciousness establishes a certain conduct as a possibility toward transcending the present state of existence; however, the individual knows that precisely because it is his possibility, nothing can compel him to adopt that conduct, and he is as free to choose one alternative as another with no compunction whatsoever. But in order to exist, and, therefore, be, the individual must engage in some sort of strife. He must experience the anguish of choosing in order to define his being. If a man commits himself to nothing by refusing to act, he is still choosing, but in a negative way. The literary character who chooses not to strive toward self-transcendence, who fails in this way to fill his empty life with a meaning arising from commitment, is tragic only if he recognizes the alternatives.

Viewed from one angle, Geoffrey's self-awareness lends nobility to his character; but with existentialism the term "noble" has no meaning. He is not a grand figure; he is, instead, an absurd one who perceives his absurdity. When he prays to "the Virgin for those who have nobody with," he says, "Though my suffering seems senseless I am still in agony. There is no explanation of my life" (p. 289). Leaning over a bar, Geoffrey hears the roaring in his ears of a train bearing a corpse through the green meadows. His thoughts echo Hamlet: "What is man but a little soul holding up a corpse?" (p. 287). "To drink or not to drink," he muses (p. 287).

That Geoffrey realizes his annihilation is imminent is very much apparent from his mental ramblings during the episode in the

Farolito, or "Lighthouse." After paying a Few Fleas for his drink, the Consul thinks vaguely, "Save me"; but, remembering the dead scorpion that the boy has just brushed off the wall, the Consul adds, "but maybe the scorpion, not wanting to be saved, had stung itself to death" (p. 338). Believing that the boy has forgotten his change, Geoffrey decides he will remain at the Farolito at least long enough to recover his money. So he sits drinking while gazing out the window with an expression of one who "pretends he hopes help, any kind of help, may be on its way, friends, any kind of friends coming to rescue him. . . . Yet he really wants none of these things" (p. 341). In the silence, Geoffrey hears his own thoughts: "Why am I here . . . what have I done . . . why have I ruined myself in this willful manner . . . why have I been brought so low. . . ." (p. 341); but the town square outside the window gives him "no answer" (p. 341). After the "unprophylactic rejection," his intercourse with the prostitute Maria (p. 348), from which he assumes he has contracted venereal disease, the Consul thinks that any hope of a new life with Yvonne is certainly futile now, though he admits "those reasons were without quite secure basis as yet, but for another purpose that eluded him they had to remain unassailable" (pp. 353-354).

A passage from one of Yvonne's letters, written six months before and read then by Geoffrey in this same cantina, reinforces the idea of his mental sloth:

"You are one born to walk in the light. Plunging your head out of the white sky you flounder in an alien element. You think you are lost, but it is

not so, for the spirits of light will help you and bear you up in spite of yourself and beyond all opposition you may offer. Do I sound mad? I sometimes think I am. Seize the immense potential strength you fight, which is within your body and ever so much more strongly within your soul. . . ." (pp. 364-365).

This passage more than any other recalls the third epigraph, Goethe's "Whosoever unceasingly strives upward . . . him can we save." The Consul's revolt, though ephemeral and futile, lends meaning to an otherwise absurd life. His "transcendence" into meaningfulness is an existential parallel to the salvation of Faust's soul through upward striving.

During this final episode, the Consul's knowledge of the impotence of his protest relates him to what Camus admired in the figure of Sisyphus returning to his stone at the foot of the hill, knowing full well the uselessness of his toil. Speaking of Sisyphus, Camus says: "At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock."³³

Like Sisyphus, who becomes tragic at these moments of consciousness, the Consul ". . . knows the whole extent of his wretched condition," but "the lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory" (p. 121). He is tragic rather than pathetic because he knows the futility of acting, yet he acts in spite of it.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY: THE TRAGIC VISION OF MALCOLM LOWRY

That Geoffrey Firmin is a tragic figure is hardly disputable; for whether one views him in an Aristotelian, Christian, or existential light, it is possible to perceive in Under the Volcano the presence of the tragic vision. This vision arises not so much from the character of the protagonist as from the author's own philosophy of life.

Lowry's sensitivity to the unresolved questions of existence shape the elements of tragedy within his novel. The Consul and, for that matter, the other characters--Yvonne, Hugh, even Laruelle and Vigil--grapple with the question, "What does it mean to be?" Because of this central problem, for which no explanation is forthcoming, the novel recalls man's inability to deal with the irrational forces confronting him. Under the Volcano, then, is cast in the tragic mode, in the first place, because of its juxtaposition of irresolvable doubt and the concrete reality of man's life. It is ironic and contradictory, as is all true tragedy.

Richard Sewall in The Vision of Tragedy comments that the tragic artist must not only be sensitive to man's dilemma within the irrational universe but be willing to show "man at the limits of his sovereignty."³⁴ No matter how one interprets Under the Volcano, he must surely see that the Consul is both man at his highest and at his lowest. His weakness in coping with the human situation is most apparent at the moment when he makes his strongest assertion as a man.

Another characteristic which associates Under the Volcano with the tragic genre is its emphasis on the inherently human quality of suffering. The Consul suffers because he experiences the primal pain and fear attendant upon a confrontation with the irrational. One is reminded of Nietzsche's dichotomy of Dionysian and Apollonian. The Dionysian man realizes the awful truth of the King Midas-Silenus myth: "'What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best for you is to die soon.'"³⁵ The Consul's experience of pain and fear is ultimately self-destructive since he almost willingly ceases to be; but Lowry, his creator, becomes the Apollonian man, wrenching art from "pain and fear contemplated and spiritualized."³⁶

Under the Volcano is a novel of considerable artistic merit and deserves a place among the great tragedies. It echoes and adds to them; in a unique and modern way, it brings them together. Within the rich texture of Under the Volcano, Malcolm Lowry has synthesized the main traditions of tragedy, to which he alludes in his appropriately chosen epigraphs.

NOTES

- 1 Harvey Breit and Margerie Bonner Lowry, eds., Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1965), p. 66.
- 2 Letters, p. 59.
- 3 Letters, p. 66.
- 4 Douglas Day, Malcolm Lowry (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).
- 5 Day, Malcolm Lowry, p. 356.
- 6 Day, Malcolm Lowry, p. 317.
- 7 Quoted in Richard Hauer Costa, Malcolm Lowry (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1972), p. 19.
- 8 Richard Hauer Costa, Malcolm Lowry (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1972).
- 9 Perle Epstein, The Private Labyrinth of Malcolm Lowry: Under the Volcano and the Cabbala (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1969).
- 10 Dale Edmonds, "Under the Volcano: A Reading of the 'Immediate Level,'" Tulane Studies in English, 16 (1968), 63-105.
- 11 Day, Malcolm Lowry, p. 321.
- 12 Day, Malcolm Lowry, p. 321.
- 13 Letters, p. 13.

14

Malcolm Lowry, Under the Volcano (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1965), p. 2. [Hereafter page numbers in this work will be noted in parentheses within the text.]

15

Aristotle, Poetics, trans. S. H. Butcher, in Criticism: The Major Texts, ed. Walter Jackson Bate, enl. ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1970), p. 23.

16

Lane Cooper, Aristotle on the Art of Poetry, rev. ed. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1947), p. 48. [All quotations from this paragraph are from this work.]

17

Letters, p. 70.

18

Frank Brendenbarg, The Making of Modern Mexico (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1964), pp. 36-37. and Hudson Strode, "Maximilian," Encyclopedia Britannica, 1970.

19

Letters, p. 70.

20

Dale Edmonds includes an enlightening discussion of this aspect of the Consul's character in her article, "Under the Volcano: A Reading of the 'Immediate Level.'"

21

Douglas Day, "Of Tragic Joy," Prairie Schooner, 37 (Winter, 1963-64), 354-62.

22

See Daniel B. Dodson, Malcolm Lowry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970). Dale Edmonds, "Under the Volcano: A Reading of the 'Immediate Level.'" and Stanley Jedynek, "Under the Volcano: An Existentialist Tragedy," Thoth, 1 (Spring, 1959), pp. 25-29.

23

Stephen Spender, "Introduction," in Under the Volcano, by Malcolm Lowry (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1965), p. vii.

24

Herman Melville, Moby Dick, ed. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1967), pp. 444-45.

- 25
See Anthony R. Kilgallin, "Faust and Under the Volcano," Canadian Literature, 26 (Autumn, 1965), 43-54.
- 26
Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter, in The Complete Novels and Selected Tales of Nathaniel Hawthorne, ed. Norman Holmes Pearson (New York: Random House, 1937), p. 236.
- 27
Jedynak, p. 25.
- 28
Jean Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), p. 439.
- 29
Ernst Breisach, Introduction to Modern Existentialism (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1962), p. 99.
- 30
Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Knopf, 1955), p. v.
- 31
Camus, p. v.
- 32
Camus, p. 54.
- 33
Camus, p. 121.
- 34
Richard B. Sewall, The Vision of Tragedy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 5.
- 35
Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 42.
- 36
Sewall, p. 6.

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