RONALD BINNS

Materialism and magic in *Under the Volcano*

Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* (1947) remains one of the most puzzling and difficult of modern novels. The sheer density of historical, geographical, anthropological and literary reference in the novel and the ragged contours of Lowry's career make it difficult to place; critical estimates and interpretations vary wildly.

The original impulse behind the novel was almost certainly autobiographical: Lowry dramatising his miseries as a heavy drinker and an unsuccessful writer, abandoned by his wife in darkest Mexico.[1] Although the writer's biography cannot altogether be discounted when we try to account for the final shape of a narrative almost ten years in the making, the novel succeeds best not as romantic confession but as a modern epic, an elegy to the 1930s expressed through the conflicting lives and values of four *Angst*-ridden expatriates

In *Under the Volcano* the relationship between the alcoholic protagonist, Geoffrey Firmin, 'the Consul', and his estranged ex-wife, Yvonne, is complicated by the presence of Laruelle, a retired film director, and the Consul's half-brother Hugh, an investigative foreign correspondent. Both men have had affairs with Yvonne. The emotional friction generated when Yvonne returns to Mexico is rendered increasingly dramatic by their accidental involvement in what seems to be the brutal murder of an Indian. In the space of a few hours they are entangled in a chain of events which culminate in a second killing – the Consul's – and Yvonne's death under the hooves of a runaway horse.

The structure of these events and the way in which we interpret them is rendered problematic by Lowry's narrative technique. His literary affiliations were forged in the late 1920s, and his treatment of time and use of interior monologue in the novel have something in common with *Ulysses* (1922), *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). Indeed, the title of Lowry's masterpiece seems to allude ironically to *Under the Greenwood Tree*, as if to contrast his disjunctive modernist style and turbulent plot with the provinciality of theme and technique which exists in Thomas Hardy's simple account of English rural life. Most of *Under the Volcano* is in the form of a flashback and the bulk of each chapter is presented from inside the mind of one of the four principal characters. The Consul dominates the novel, both dramatically and technically; five chapters out of twelve are seen through his eyes. As in a Conrad novel we first encounter him as a legendary figure, the

subject of reminiscence long after the events of his tragedy have been concluded. The Consul's larger-than-life qualities are reinforced by the letter which Laruelle stumbles across on 'the Day of the Dead', the Mexican festival which coincides with the first anniversary of the killing. This letter, six pages of exaggerated purple prose, further promotes the epic status of the Consul. The first chapter of *Under the Volcano*, ostensibly about Laruelle, in effect functions to introduce the reader to the complex sides of the Consul's identity. Geoffrey Firmin was, we learn, an unemployed diplomat, a hopeless drunk, and a man who met a violent death. He may also have been a murderer, a black magician, a war hero, and a spy.

The three secondary characters each challenge the Consul's slow suicide through drink and offer alternative ways of life. Laruelle proposes a sensual self-indulgent acceptance of the state of things; Yvonne offers love and a home; Hugh believes in radical social change and the brotherhood of socialism. In turn the Consul rejects them all. He *likes* his solitude, his drinking, his rush towards death. These things cushion him from a world of hypocrisy and betrayal, from the hideous truth of Yvonne's promiscuity. Even Hugh's idealistic political beliefs are, to the Consul, nothing more than a hollow charade, a means whereby failures and cowards sublimate their personality problems.

What seems important in understanding *Under the Volcano* is the way in which Lowry persuades us that the Consul is somehow right to reject these alternatives, that it is *his* vision which is the deepest, the most profound. In Chapter Seven Laruelle bitterly criticises the Consul for his deviation from normal standards of behaviour; in Chapter Nine Yvonne tries to lure the Consul back to married life; in Chapter Ten Hugh puts forward his socialist ideals. The Consul spurns each ot them, and retires once more within himself. When critics consider these moments in the novel they invariably side with the Consul against the other characters.[2] The role played by point-of-view in the novel, however, seems all-important in determining the reader's sympathies, for as Nabokov tartly remarks of a character in *Transparent Things:* 'This Henry Emery Person, our Person's father, might be described as a well-meaning, earnest, dear little man, or as a wretched fraud, depending on the angle of light and the position of the observer.' From the intimacy of the Consul's mind the angle of light does not favour the other characters, and almost half the novel is seen through his eyes.

Although the Consul possesses a vast general knowledge, it is questionable whether he is really a man of erudition or intellect. He knows something of the Cabbala and Swedenborg, and he speaks knowingly of black magic, alchemy and the occult. The wide range of reference made in *Under the Volcano* to crank metaphysicians and obscure learning contributes greatly to

what are called its 'transcendental' and 'visionary' qualities; it also gives the novel something in common with other encylopedic fictions such as *Tristram Shandy, Moby Dick, Ulysses* and *Ada*. It does not, however, necessarily make the novel's hero a man of wisdom and erudition. It is difficult to accept the Consul as an intellectual in view of his recurring contempt for 'people with ideas' (309).[3] His own knowledge is both obscure and fractured. The Consul is painfully aware that his condition is one in which 'communication is lost . . . ideas stampede' (145). There is no coherent expression or development of his magical philosophy; allusions to the occult flash up, one after another, then vanish, hinting at some immense significance which is never quite thrown into focus. As the Consul lies dying he suddenly sees himself as 'the pilferer of meaningless muddled ideas out of which his rejection of life had grown' (374).

It is not simply the status and identity of the Consul which remains problematic; interpretation of *Under the Volcano* necessarily comes up against a number of central questions which relate to 'the angle of light and the position of the observer'. Is the novel epic or mock-epic? Should we read it primarily as a realist or a symbolist text? Did Lowry structure his narrative according to an organic master-plan (as he claimed in his lengthy and influential letter to the publisher Jonathan Cape),[4] or is the novel fissured by inconsistencies? It is not only what is happening in the plot which often seems ambiguous, but also what the chain of events culminating in the Consul's death actually adds up to. Lowry went to some trouble to situate his plot against the historical realities of the day – the Spanish civil war; Abyssinia; Fascism; the policies of the Cárdenas government in Mexico. At the same time the novel contains numerous mythic analogies which lend support to a metaphysical interpretation of the Consul's tragedy. Among the most prominent of these are the damnation of Faust, the expulsion of Adam from Eden, the betrayal and crucifixion of Christ, and Dante's journey through the Inferno. Lowry's use of myth has attracted extensive commentary, although Dale Edmonds argues that questions of literary influence and allusion in *Under the Volcano* have been explored at the expense of the problems posed by the narrative on a naturalistic plane.[5] Edmonds suggests that the Indian and the Consul are both victims of political assassination and that myth is of secondary importance in comparison to the plots of contemporary Mexican history. This argument is often persuasive, and Lowry himself mockingly echoes the conventional detective novel. The Consul, for example, enters Yvonne's bedroom 'innocently as a man who has committed a murder while dummy at bridge' (81). Later, in the Farolito, the Consul mysteriously compares his mental confusion to someone who made drunken indiscreet confessions to a barman:' – and why has he told him where he

lives, now the police will be able to find out – and why is the barman's name Sherlock? an unforgettable name! – ' (344). These metaphors, rather like the ironic echo of Hardy in the title, are perhaps introduced to signify the difference between the relatively cosy worlds of, say, Agatha Christie and Conan Doyle, and the brutal historical realities of Mexico in 1938.[6] In a sense *Under the Volcano* is a detective novel, though one that lacks a detective and which evokes a society in which political assassination goes uninvestigated and unpunished.

Under the Volcano begins as a nineteenth-century social novel might do, by establishing a precise sense of time and place, but it is scarcely a straightforward realist novel. Lowry retains an intitial distance towards his material: the narrator talks not of Mexico but of 'the republic', not of 2 November but of the 'Day of the Dead'. Quauhnahuac, through based on an actual place (Cuernevaca) is not, like Joyce's Dublin, exact in its geography. Parían, where the novel ends, is purely imaginary. Lowry did not trouble to consult the calendar when he set his novel on 2 November 1938, since that day was actually a Wednesday, not, as in *Under the Volcano*, a Monday – and in any case 'the day's background and actions are more characteristic of a Mexican Sunday (or, possibly, Saturday)'.[7] Other aspects of the chronology are also contradictory. If the Consul was born in 1897, could he really have been the commander of a 'Q' ship in the 1914–18 war?

The more one looks at *Under the Volcano* the more it resists any attempt to provide a single coherent 'reading'. Ambiguity is rooted in the very grammar of the narrative. Sometimes Lowry's sentences are snapped off at the ends, never to be completed; more frequently they contain words such as 'seemed', 'perhaps', 'apparently'. Uncertainty, hesitation, ignorance, and doubt are the basic conditions of Lowry's fictional world. The reader repeatedly encounters problematic episodes like this:

> Once the swing door opened, someone glanced round quickly to satisfy himself, went out: was that Hugh, Jacques? Whoever it was had seemed to possess the features of both, alternately. Somebody else entered and, though the next instant the Consul felt this was not the case, went right through into the back room, peering round furtively. (228)

The technique is reminiscent of Beckett's; authoritative statements are juxtaposed with cancellations of that authority. The two mysterious figures may be real; equally they might almost be projections of the Consul himself. Their quick, furtive glances imitate Firmin's own guilt-ridden behaviour. Any sense of an objective reality collapses. Our interpretation of this episode depends on the way in which we choose to see the Consul: the cuckolded husband being kept under observation by his jealous rivals; the anti-fascist being spied on by his political enemies; the hallucinating visionary, project-

ing his anxieties on to the contingent world. It is the narrative technique Roland Barthes calls *'jamming*, acknowledgment of the insolubility of the enigma',[8] and the metaphor is apt, since reading *Under the Volcano* is rather like listening to a radio programme which is subject to constant distortion and interference. The discourse of a narrator providing discrete units of authoritative and unchallenged description is nevertheless present in the novel, and demonstrates that Lowry, while wishing to convey a distinctly modernist sense of dislocation and relativism, was unwilling to renounce a naturalistic framework.

At the end of *Under the Volcano* the Consul dies, but a question remains, of the sort we encounter at a comic moment in *Henry IV, Part One:*

> *Glendower:* I can call spirits from the vasty deep.
> *Hotspur:* Why, so can I, or so can any men;
> But will they come when you do call for them?

Is the Consul really a black magician? Does civilisation collapse into another world war, cursed by a modern Faustus? In his heart the Consul cries out, ' "Destroy the world!" ' (289), and his curse comes true. Lowry explicitly links his hero's doom to the world's: the 'black spouts of villages catapulted into space' (375), which the Consul sees as he dies, may be the bombed villages of Spain, but 'the inconceivable pandemonium of a million tanks . . . the blazing of ten million burning bodies' (*ibid.*) is a prophetic vision of the future world war. The end of the novel seems to validate Geoffrey Firmin's earlier intimation that his own destiny is mysteriously associated with that of civilisation itself: 'who would ever have believed that some obscure man, sitting at the centre of the world in a bathroom, say, thinking solitary miserable thoughts, was authorising their doom' (146). The Consul's *Weltanschauung* is magical and opposed to rational modes of analysing history; his interests are metaphysical, his conversations full of reference to the Atlantis legend, demons, black magic, the Cabbala. Only Hugh, the communist, offers a challenge to the Consul's muddled mysticism. When Hugh moves to the forefront of the narrative the reader's attention is drawn to a wealth of contemporary political events: the Indian struggle for independence, the Japanese invasion of China, the Munich agreement, and, most of all, the Spanish civil war, in its closing stages by November 1938. Hugh is particularly preoccupied by the Battle of Ebro, the last, disastrous Loyalist offensive (begun in July 1938 and lost by 16 November). He also recalls key moments in the war: the battle of Madrid (November 1936), and the great Loyalist victory at Brihuega in March 1937.

Judged by Hugh's values the other three principal characters are compromised figures. Laruelle is a playboy gone to seed, the collector of stone

idols and a Mexican mistress, 'a confirmedly promiscuous bachelor, with a rather unctuous possessive manner towards women' (8). The Consul plays the stock-market and is involved in some sort of dubious and illegal property ownership. Yvonne is a capitalist's daughter, brought up by a wealthy uncle with financial interests in South America. The self-centred lives of these three are in sharp contrast to Hugh's. Yet Hugh ultimately offers only an ineffectual challenge to the Consul. He is a comic figure; despite all his talk of commitment the only time we see him holding a rifle is when he shoots wooden ducks at the fair. Hugh may be 'a professional indoor Marxman' (8), but his socialism is, to adopt Engels's distinction, 'utopian' rather than 'scientific'. When Hugh defends his political philosophy he refers not to Marx but to Matthew Arnold. His attitude to the Spanish civil war seems ambivalent. He is contemptuous of those who depart in disillusion 'to discredit the whole thing' but describes the role of volunteers as no more than that of 'a communist fence' (102). His knowledge of history and of contemporary events is sometimes defective.[9]

The lost short story of 1936 and the 40,000-word novella which Lowry had completed by May 1937 must clearly have lacked the dense historical reference of the final text of *Under the Volcano*, if only because many of the events mentioned in the novel had not yet happened. By shifting his time scale to 1938–9 and situating the death of the Consul against a world on the brink of war, Lowry vastly increased the prophetic impact of his tragedy. When the Consul angrily denounces Hugh's left-wing politics, he shouts: 'Not long ago it was poor little defenceless Ethiopia. Before that, poor little defenceless Flanders. To say nothing of course of the poor little defenceless Belgian Congo. And tomorrow it will be poor little defenceless Latvia. Or Finland. Or Piddledeedee. Or even Russia' (310). As a cry of rage made on 2 November 1938 this is historically accurate. A year later Latvia reluctantly agreed to a Soviet military occupation. Finland declined a similar fate and was invaded on 30 November 1939. In June 1941 the USSR was in turn invaded, by Germany. The Consul, often apparently only a self-deluding drunk, actually possesses a clairvoyant insight into the future.

Contingent reality itself seems to endorse the Consul's intuition of mysterious occult connexions at the heart of things. Lowry's Mexico emerges as a sinister, magical world of uncanny symmetries. The role of the pariah dogs as Faustian familiars or demons is underlined by puns: 'the pariah dog . . . appeared familiarly at heel' (66); 'It was a pariah dog and disturbingly familiar' (127). Often the reader's attention is nudged by hints of what is going to happen in the future. In Chapter Five we are told that the Consul momentarily resembles 'a man who does not know he has been shot from behind' (126), and the simile prefigures what will indeed happen.

As Lowry revised and rewrote *Under the Volcano* he crammed the narrative with images of decay and ruin which conjure up a pervasive atmosphere of entropy (Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* was one of the novelist's sources). The Consul's belief in a world of magical symmetries and occult causation accorded well with Lowry's technical revisions of the manuscript, since the novelist was seeking 'to make a noise like music'[10] rather than to achieve a credible realism. Lowry gave an example of his 'musical' technique to Jonathan Cape: 'M. Laruelle burns the Consul's letter [at the end of Chapter One], the act of which is poetically balanced by the flight of vultures ("like burnt papers floating from a fire") at the end of II, and also by the burning of the Consul's MSS in Yvonne's dying dream in XI'.[11] Such 'poetic balancing' may make the reader feel that the novel is highly wrought, but equally it lends credence to the Consul's perception of an irrational, magical world, since the narrative itself proceeds analogically. Lowry's rambling attempts to explain to Cape that his dissonant, fissured text made sense in terms of multiple levels of meaning meshed together in a fully-organised 'organic' structure are not very convincing.[12] Indeed, Lowry himself contradicted his elaborate defence of 'the foundations of the book, the basic structure'[13] by tacitly accepting the idea of cuts in some parts of the novel. By 1949 the novelist was willing to allow his editor to abridge the novel, and as late as 1957 Lowry was prepared to concede 'some fairly big cuts' for a paperback edition.[14]

The palimpsest qualities of *Under the Volcano* seem to derive from crucial changes in the author's sensibility during the ten years in which the novel was written. In 1934 Lowry married Jan Gabrial, a young left-wing Jewish American who was possibly in the Communist Party and who almost certainly encouraged the social awareness evidenced by the novelist's mid-1930s work. His story 'Economic Conference, 1934' (1934), for example, refers to capitalism, strikes, fascist dictatorship, the Polish corridor and numerous other contemporary matters. When Lowry and Jan Gabrial went to Mexico in 1936 Mexico was entering a turbulent phase under President Cárdenas, but unlike two other visitors from that period, Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh, Lowry was sympathetic to the President's programme of socialist reconstruction.[15] Indeed, while in Mexico Lowry struck up an important friendship with an Indian whom he referred to variously as Juan Fernando Marquez and Fernando Atonalzin. Marquez/Atonalzin apparently held strong left-wing views and was a firm supporter of the Mexican Revolution; Lowry wrote him into *Under the Volcano* in the figure of Juan Cerillo, a committed revolutionary socialist. When the American writer Conrad Aiken visited Lowry in Mexico he discovered that his old protégé 'had drifted pretty far, politically, towards something like communism. He had

been through something like a social conversion, and clearly felt a need for some sort of fraternal joining and belonging.'[16]

If Lowry began writing *Under the Volcano* sharing the politics of Hugh Firmin (in 1950 he recalled that the work 'started off' as a political parable),[17] he nevertheless completed it feeling very much more sympathetic to the Consul's irrational magical beliefs. After Jan Gabrial left Lowry in 1937 her political and literary influence on him seems to have faded rapidly, compounded perhaps by the Moscow show trials and the 1939 Nazi–Soviet pact, which evoked increasing disillusion on the Left. It is worth recalling, too, that unlike many progressive 'thirties intellectuals Lowry had actually experienced the rigours of a working man's life, and what he saw did not encourage him to glorify the proletariat: 'This was not the heroic working class where men love, looking to the future, but petty squabbles, jealousies . . .'.[18] Perhaps Lowry's affiliation with communism had been only skin deep, a matter of fashion. It is difficult to believe that Lowry ever read any Marx, and in one of his stories, 'Enter one in sumptuous armour', he makes the odd but perhaps revealing error of claiming that *Das Kapital* was written in Liverpool.

Lowry's sensibility underwent a dramatic transformation after Jan Garial's departure from his life. During the period 1942–4, when he worked on the final drafts of *Under the Volcano*, he became increasingly fascinated by the occult, 'taking astral journeys to Venus, casting sticks about in the manner prescribed by the *I Ching*, practicing Yoga exercises, and climbing about in the Sephirotic Tree.'[19] The Consul, initially based on Conrad Aiken, whom Lowry had broken with and denounced as 'pro-fascist',[20] began to engage his imagination and sympathies very much more deeply than before. The text which Lowry finally arrived at establishes an underlying complicity between the narrator and the Consul (significantly the style of Firmin's letter in Chapter One is identical with the overall style of the novel itself). Lowry's cavalier attitude to his characters ('The truth is that the character drawing is not only weak but virtually non-existent . . . the four main characters being intended, in one of the book's meanings, to be aspects of the same man') is an exaggeration, but it is true that the language and values of Hugh, Yvonne and Laruelle tend to express, surreptitiously, the Consul's. Hugh, for example, apostrophises Yvonne as the typical American female:

> Women of medium height, slenderly built, mostly divorced, passionate but envious of the male – angel to him as he is bright or dark, yet unconscious destructive succubus of his ambitions – American women, with that rather graceful swift way of walking, with the clean scrubbed turned faces of children, the skin finely textured with a satin sheen, their hair clean and shining as though just washed, and looking like that, but carelessly done, the slim brown hands that do not rock the cradle, the slender feet – how many centuries of oppression have produced them? (187)

This is an extraordinary passage which goes to the heart of the mixture of loathing and attraction which characterises the narrator's presentation of Yvonne. Though Lowry tacks on a political motive for Hugh's spasm of dislike for what Yvonne represents, it seems clear that what really repels him is her ruthless sexuality. The composite woman Yvonne represents is a curious mixture of experience ('passionate . . . divorced') and childlike innonence, as beautiful and smartly dressed as a model, but with revealingly 'brown' skin. In various ways she is a threatening figure. She has an indiscriminate sexual appetite; she couples with men who are 'bright or dark' in both a symbolic and literal sense – Yvonne has slept both with the swarthy lecherous Laruelle and the younger less-experienced Hugh. She spurns the claims of the nuclear family, since her hands will never 'rock the cradle'. She is also 'envious' of men, although why this should be so is not made clear, especially since the ways in which she destroys their ambitions are 'unconscious', and the nature of those ambitions remains unspecified. It is almost as if Lowry intended his heroine to appear as another Nicole, destroying a promising career as Dick Diver's is destroyed in Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night*, but the critique of Yvonne remains rhetorical. She can scarcely be accused of having destroyed any profound ambitions on her husband's part, since at the age of forty he is merely British consul in an insignificant Mexican town, with vague notions of one day finishing his book on Atlantis and 'Secret Knowledge'. When the Consul dies it is hard to feel that a man with a brilliant future has been prematurely torn from us. Nor, for that matter, can Laruelle's failure as a film director be blamed on her. Hugh's own career in journalism, apparently successful, has not in any way been affected by his liason with Yvonne.

The criticism lacks foundation, and it is doubly curious coming from Hugh, who, unlike the furious and disgusted Consul, knows nothing of her affair with Laruelle. Odd, too, is Hugh's particularly virulent branding of her as a 'destructive succubus'. This again highlights the sexual aspect of his hostility (since a succubus is a female demon supposed to have sexual intercourse with sleeping men), but the term is a strange one for him to use and belongs much more with the Consul's occult vocabulary. Yvonne is the source of three other violent outbursts of sexual disgust in the novel, and each comes from the Consul: his reaction to the sight of Laruelle nude (207); his description of Cliff's lovemaking as 'a kind of dysentry' (263); his Shakespearean jeers at Hugh and Yvonne's 'romantic predicament' (313). The only criticism of Yvonne which Hugh makes and which seems in keeping with his character is his subsequent comment on her indifference to the imminent victory of Franco in the Spanish civil war.

The passage in fact seems quite inconsistent with all the other things we

learn about Hugh. He seems quite free of sexual neuroses. He is unaware that Laruelle replaced him in Yvonne's affections. There seems to be no reason (in the light of his 'progressive' left-wing views) why he should be at all concerned about Yvonne's indifference to the bourgeois goal of settling down and raising a family. Lowry seems to have indulged in ventriloquism at this moment in the novel, making Hugh express an attitude which more properly belongs to the Consul.

This is not to say that Hugh Firmin is a wooden, one-dimensional character, a target for the writer's animus in a way that other fictional leftists are, like McKisco in *Tender is the Night* (1934) or Peter Slavek in Arthur Koestler's *Arrival and Departure* (1943). Lowry nevertheless loads the dice against Hugh, and it is Hugh who represents the most sustained challenge to the Consul's introspection. A true dialectical materialist would not, one assumes, lapse into dreamy moments of neo-Platonic reverie of the kind which Hugh indulges in when he thinks that 'far above was perhaps another sea, where the soul ploughed its high invisible wake' (163). The structure of the novel itself endorses the Consul's belief in historical cycles, as opposed to Hugh's linear materialist philosophy. Chapter One mysteriously reincarnates figures and situations from the main body of the novel, which is located one year earlier in time. This chapter also shows Laruelle's scepticism severely shaken by a series of mysterious coincidences which seem to attest to supernatural forces at work.

Lowry's evident indifference to society in the fiction he wrote after *Under the Volcano* was accompanied by a revealing switch away from a concern with several characters' inner lives to a single point of view. With the very limited exception of Jacqueline in Lowry's last novel, *October Ferry to Gabriola*, no one ever steps forward again as Hugh and Laruelle do to challenge the values and beliefs of the hero. This technical innovation was accompanied by an increasingly apocalyptic view of history on Lowry's part. In *Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid*, Lowry's next novel after *Under the Volcano*, the relics left by vanished civilisations are disturbingly sombre: 'A skull, bored by syphilis germs, had survived: the oddity and the meaninglessness of it'. In Lowry's 1950s story 'Present estate of Pompeii' the protagonist echoes the Consul, asking if historians 'really said anything new' in the face of recurring cycles of decay and social collapse. History is portrayed as being quite simply meaningless: 'St. Malo was wiped out, Naples defaced, but a cock in the street outside an antique Pompeiian brothel survived.' Faced by such stark and absurd images of the futility of human progress, Lowry's later heroes retreat into a comforting solipsism.

In *Under the Volcano* solipsism, embodied most profoundly by the Consul, is subjected to attack, criticism, irony. The true alternative to the Consul's

introspection is perhaps ultimately represented not by the flawed Hugh but by the fleeting figure of Juan Cerillo, the committed revolutionary socialist who represents a genuine 'adventure in a human cause' (170). In view of the way Lowry tilts the novel in the Consul's favour it's perhaps significant that Cerillo is barely permitted to pose much of a threat to Geoffrey Firmin's inward-looking values. Cerillo, an authentic revolutionary, is displaced from the central action of the novel and remains off-stage, a brief fragmentary figure in Hugh's memory. On 5 March 1949 Lowry wrote to Albert Erskine suggesting that *Under the Volcano* might be cut in various ways, and including the recommendation to keep '[Chapter] IV intact, though we might cut Juan Cerillo altogether'.[21] By 1949, however, Lowry was well on the way to convincing himself that a single point of view was acceptable as a foundation for the rest of his life's work. If he had lost his fascination with politics, history and society so too had he lost what he once identified[22] as 'the historian's willingness to see the drama of both sides'.

Notes

1 The earliest drafts of *Under the Volcano* have been lost. The much-anthologised short story of the same title is not, as is frequently claimed, the original narrative from which the novel grew, but simply a post-1940 draft of Chapter Eight.

2 T. Bareham's description of the Consul as 'infinitely the most sensitive and intelligent person in the book' is a typical one. See 'Paradigms of Hell: symbolic patterning in *Under the Volcano*' in B. S. Benedikz (ed.), *On the Novel* (London 1971), p. 115. See also the unfavourable treatment which Laruelle and Hugh receive in two of the best books on Lowry: Richard Hauer Costa, *Malcolm Lowry* (New York, 1972) and David Markson, *Malcolm Lowry's Volcano* (New York, 1978).

3 All references are to the first edition (New York, 1947).

4 See Harvey Breit and Margerie Bonner Lowry (eds.), *Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry* (New York, 1965), pp. 57–88.

5 See Dale Edmonds, '*Under the Volcano*: a reading of the "immediate level" ', *Tulane Studies in English*, XVI (1968), pp. 63–105.

6 In *Malcolm Lowry, a Biography* (New York, 1973), Douglas Day mentions that one of Lowry's schoolboy stories was 'a parody of sophisticated crime fiction' (p. 81).

7 Edmonds, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

8 Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (London, 1975), p. 210.

9 For example, Hugh's self-identification with General Winfield Scott in Chapter Four is ironically inappropriate. See Larry Clipper, 'Hugh Firmin as General Winfield Scott: a note' in *Malcolm Lowry Newsletter*, 4 (spring 1979), pp. 10–11. Hugh also states that the International Brigades were evacuated 'five weeks ago, on the twenty-eighth of September to be precise – two days before Chamberlain went to Godesburg and neatly crimped the Ebro offensive' (102). In fact Chamberlain flew to Godesberg on 22 September 1938, not, as Hugh implies, 30 September. Nor were the International Brigades withdrawn swiftly on a

precise date. The Brigades last saw action on 22 September, but repatriation was a slow business. A great farewell parade was held in Barcelona on 15 November – almost two weeks after Lowry's Day of the Dead. It is also very debatable whether Chamberlain's diplomatic manoevrings over the fate of central Europe can be held to have significantly interfered with the final course of events in Spain.

10 *Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry*, p. 200.
11 *Ibid.*, p. 70.
12 The publisher's reader's sceptical response to Lowry's analysis of *Under the Volcano* is quoted in Michael S. Howard, *Jonathan Cape, Publisher* (London, 1971).
13 *Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry*, pp. 58–9.
14 Unpublished letter to David Markson, 22 February 1957.
15 Green's account of his 1938 visit, *The Lawless Roads* (London, 1939) is propagandistic and hostile to the Cárdenas government, as is Waugh's more strident *Robbery Under Law: the Mexican Object Lesson* (London, 1939).
16 Conrad Aitken, *Ushant: an Essay* (New York, 1952), p. 351.
17 *Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry*, p. 199.
18 Earle Birney (ed.), *Selected Poems of Malcolm Lowry* (San Fancisco, 1962), p. 21.
19 Douglas Day, *op. cit.*, p. 295.
20 Unpublished letter to John Davenport, 31 August 1937. Aiken later claimed that the quarrel between the Consul and Hugh was a verbatim transcription of a row over politics he once had with Lowry; see *The Times Literary Supplement* (16 February 1967), p. 127.
21 Part of the letter is quoted in Douglas Day, 'Malcolm Lowry: letters to an editor,' *Shenandoah* (spring 1964), XV, 3, p. 8.
22 *Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry*, p. 146.

GRAHAM PARRY, *Hollar's England: a Mid-seventeenth-century View*. Michael Russell, £15.

The virtuoso Bohemian engraver Wenceslaus Hollar did much of his work in England, where he was the first topographical artist of importance. This beautifully-produced folio is a generous selection from his prints of England, with an elegant introduction and long captions by Graham Parry setting them in their historical and social context. The prints are mostly reproduced at or near original size, showing a wealth of minute detail. The majority are houses, churches, people or the bird's-eye views and panoramas that are Hollar's most original achievements, notably the stupendous 'Long view of London'. Apart from their historical importance, visual sources like this can help to bring literature vividly to life, and every student of the seventeenth century should have access to this book.

J. R. BANKS