

# THE DESCENT INTO HELL OF JACQUES LARUELLE

## *Chapter I of "Under the Volcano"*

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IT IS HARDLY NEWS that Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* is a profoundly autobiographical work, but worth stressing is the extent to which the novel was prompted by a desire, not for self-discovery, but for self-mastery. The writing of the novel was meant to provide Lowry with the necessary psychic distance from what he called the "forces in man which cause him to be terrified of himself"<sup>1</sup> so that he would not succumb to them. By projecting these forces from within the self into the novel, Lowry hoped to transform them permanently into fiction: to confine them between the covers of his work so that they could no longer function as a real force in his life.

The process is most obvious with Geoffrey Firmin, whom Lowry described as composed of "self + bad guilty imagination."<sup>2</sup> The Consul is the nexus for what was most self-despairing and self-destructive in Lowry. As the Consul's story, *Under the Volcano* tells of his capitulation before the terrifying forces within, and tells us in such a way that this defeat is a given. For Chapter I is set on the anniversary of the Consul's death so that what we witness in the eleven ensuing chapters is the unfolding of a fate we know already to be sealed.

The inescapability of the Consul's doom contributes heavily to its tragic weight and makes him the towering figure he is. But it is this very ineluctability that finally serves to separate Lowry from his persona. Lowry the man is not only still alive at the novel's completion with a future before him, he has turned the destructive energies of the self into the source of creative triumph.

The Consul becomes a warning, then, for Lowry, not a prophecy. But it is essential to see how much reliance Lowry places on being a successful author as the sign of his transcendence of what Jung would call the shadow. Until the publication of *Under the Volcano*, however, he had little cause for self-congratulation. He had published only one novel, *Ultramarine*, which embarrassed him<sup>3</sup> and which he felt, wrongly, was derivative to the point of plagiarism. Two other novels, *In Ballast to the White Sea* and *Lunar Caustic*, were unfinished: and during the writing of *Under the Volcano*, *In Ballast* was destroyed by fire, survives only as thirteen crumbling bits of charred manuscript, on one of which can

be read, ironically, the words, "the goodness of fire." Finally, an earlier version of *Under the Volcano* had been rejected by numerous publishers.

Lowry's basic reaction to his writing career before *Under the Volcano*, then, was a sense of inadequacy that shaded into guilt.<sup>4</sup> This reaction surfaces in a number of ways in *Under the Volcano*. All four major characters are failed artists. The Consul's failure derives from his own despair: he calls his work on mystic wisdom "Secret Knowledge" so that when he cannot complete it, he will have a rationalization handy. Yvonne's failure stems from a mischanneling of her womanly creativity and a consequent sense of inauthenticity. In Hugh we get enacted, not only Lowry's fear of being caught at plagiarism, but the concern behind that fear that his art may only be spawned by a desire for attention, may be just a self-dramatizing pose. It is through Jacques Laruelle, however, that Lowry explores most thoroughly the consequences for himself of artistic failure.

As the typescript of *Dark as the Grave* indicates, Laruelle is, like the Consul and Hugh, a persona for Lowry: comprised of "self plus imagination."<sup>5</sup> The French filmmaker is called upon to do what Lowry himself is, to subsume the dark aspects of the self into a larger creative totality. The work opens, then, with an artist who has taken upon himself particularly the burden of making meaningful the human condition and confronts him, in Geoffrey Firmin's story, with the starkest vision of the shadow's triumph. It is the ultimate challenge, but Laruelle's response will be woefully inadequate.

On one level, a repeated note in Laruelle's interior monologue is his failure of comprehension. He cannot understand Yvonne's return;<sup>6</sup> he cannot fathom the Consul's hints about occult matters (16), and finally, he can only throw up his hands before the mysteries of the previous year's events and mutter, "Quien sabe?" (31). More seriously, as Jung tells us, the unassimilated shadow acts through projections and transforms the world into our "unknown face."<sup>7</sup> The first chapter is full of symbolic embodiments of the Consul — the arisen dead whose destructive energies now govern the Day of the Dead, the only time in the novel. These projections Laruelle (the perceiving consciousness) refuses to acknowledge are, at bottom, representations of his own negative drives. This refusal turns the Consul into the voice of Laruelle's own despair, and in the course of the chapter that voice will drown out all others so that it is, at last, both the only one Laruelle hears and the one with which he speaks to himself. Thus, Laruelle does not merely re-experience the downfall of Geoffrey Firmin in the chapter,<sup>8</sup> its central action involves his own descent into the Inferno.

**T**HE CHAPTER BEGINS with a descent from the stratosphere into a landscape of loss and decay, ending at the first of the ruined palaces around

which Laruelle's journey will be focused: the Hotel Casino de la Selva, whose "mournful" diving boards, empty swimming pool and overgrown jai alai courts are evocative of religious despair (3). All that remains functioning in this place are two tennis courts, the game in which love equals zero. Here on the Day of the Dead, 1939, have come Laruelle and Dr. Vigil to commemorate the "continuous tragedies" (5) in the life of their dead friend, Geoffrey Firmin.

The ironies of the situation are many and painful, for the novel opens with a portrait of survivors who are afflicted with the disease that killed the man they have come to mourn. As Vigil shares the alcoholism that is the most blatant symptom of Firmin's sickness of soul, Laruelle suffers from the Consul's inability to love. Though on his house is emblazoned the motto, "No se puede vivir sin amar," Laruelle can only react to this fundamental insight with annoyance, as something some "estupido" has written (6). His relations with women are short-lived, unsatisfactory, epitomized by his affair with a Mexican mistress with whom he always quarrels and whom he is planning to leave without regrets.

These emotional shortcomings have an even blacker side that is hinted at in his name, for "la ruelle" is the narrow space surrounding the bed of a monarch, and the suggestions of voyeurism here are more than borne out in the course of the novel. In fact, at three critical points Laruelle was a spectator at scenes of sexual disaster for the Consul. He stumbled upon and disrupted Firmin's sexual initiation in the "Hell Bunker" (21), where his presence obviously contributed to the feelings of guilt and inadequacy the Consul afterwards always associates with sex so that, at the end of the work, as the Consul has intercourse with the prostitute, he imagines Laruelle is again spying on him (351). Third, Laruelle came upon the Consul and Yvonne arguing and then embracing passionately in the ruins of Maximilian's Palace (14-15). In this last instance, the role of voyeur shades into that of interloper, and, indeed, Laruelle did cuckold Firmin.

This act of putting himself in the Consul's place has disastrous consequences for Laruelle. If he had thought by usurping his friend's place merely to enjoy the fruits of sensuality, what he finds is that, instead, Firmin has passed on to him, like a prophetic mantle, his own anguish.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Laruelle has been drawn into the Consul's vice: "it was only during the last year that he had been drinking so heavily" (29). We first see him, slightly drunk, pouring himself some Mexican anis because it reminds him of French absinthe, trying through alcohol to overcome his sense of alienation and dispossession (9) as the Consul drank to dull the pain of his separation from God — and with as little success.

Moreover, like Firmin, who ceased work on his manuscript of "Secret Knowledge" (39) because he no longer believed in a vision of salvation, Laruelle has lost faith in his art. Once he imagined himself the Frère Jacques who, by means of a film version of the Faust legend based on Trotsky, would sound the alarm warning the world of the destruction it was brewing. Now, however, he finds

such dreams of saving man through art “absurd and presumptuous” (9). For the devastation has begun, making tragedy “unreal and meaningless” (5), and, in any case, in the Faustian drama of the Consul’s fall, Laruelle has not experienced a catharsis, but only “grief and bewilderment at an unassimilable catastrophe” (8). He does not possess the strength of will or vision to turn these furies into mercies, in one of Lowry’s favourite phrases. Rather, the main action of the chapter will involve his own shadow’s victory.

Laruelle’s journey begins under threatening skies at the Faustian hour when “dogs [begin] to shark” (7). It will take him from the ruined palace of the hotel in a downward (10), circular direction (23), describing “eccentric orbits” around his house (23) — “his useless tower against the coming of the second flood” (29). Finally, at seven p.m., the time of the Consul’s death the year before, Laruelle will reach his destination, the Cervceria XX: “the place where you know” (7). The cantina’s name also refers to the occult number for rebirth,<sup>10</sup> but for Laruelle the name is as ironic as the Farolito, with its allusion to Christ, is for the Consul. Here he will discover neither the knowledge that can give him hope nor the means of regeneration.

The Frenchman imagines he is making a journey of a quite different sort. He plans to leave the next day on the first leg of a voyage away from Mexico to his own home, Paris. The imagery surrounding these plans suggests that they entail a successful completion of the pilgrimage in *The Divine Comedy*. For Laruelle came to Quauhnahuac — under the volcano — from Hollywood, his dark wood, the place where he had been “hurt in his art and destiny” (210). Now, having witnessed the Consul’s damnation, he intends to depart from Vera Cruz, the True Cross.

Lowry carefully undercuts any optimism, however. Laruelle’s desire to leave the Consul behind is enacted symbolically in his decision not to follow the last bus from Tomalin back to town — the return trip the Consul never made — but to head instead to the railroad station from which Hugh, the other survivor, departed. This attempt to turn away from the horrors of the past is futile, for the train station sounds the first notes of the bleak theme of “a corpse will be transported by express” (43) that will become an important motif for Firmin’s death. Further, that the station seems dead, as if no trains ever arrive or leave (7), indicates that Laruelle will not escape so easily from the nightmare world of the Consul. Indeed, the home he longs for is threatened by the very political forces which murdered Firmin.

Laruelle is incapable of an adequate emotional or moral response to the war: “One side or the other would win. . . . And in either case one’s own battle would go on” (9). As if in answer to this failure of brotherly love, the scenery of his favourite walk is transformed into a wasteland of barren fields and dead trees, and he becomes aware suddenly of an approaching storm (10). Laruelle ima-

gines for a moment that he would like nothing better than to be drenched, but this vague desire for purification is dissipated as, studying the clouds, he realizes that the storm is a symbol of "love which comes too late" and its unslakeable thirst, as well as an emblem of divine wrath (10). In addition, the storm is a repetition of the past: at the time of Firmin's murder just such a storm broke out of season.

The entire scene is a perfect synecdoche for Laruelle's quest. Trying to turn his back on the Consul's landscape, he only succeeds in revealing the "consul" within himself: his inability to love and his egoism. As the scene opened with his avoiding the bus route that reminds him the Consul is dead, it closes with him becoming aware that, inadvertently, he has been following the direction of the Consul's fateful bus ride in Chapter VIII, and with this awareness hope is quashed.

**A**T THIS POINT OCCURS ONE of the most significant events on his journey. Laruelle has intended to go in the direction of the model farm, scene of Hugh's idyllic ride with Yvonne in Chapter IV. Instead, on a "sudden impulse" (12), following the subconscious promptings of despair, he takes the road past the prison to the second of the ruined palaces that mark the stages of his descent into hell.

Maximilian's Palace is one of the more complex symbols in the chapter, but its immediate relevance for Laruelle is as the home of a usurper and the place where "love had once brooded" (14), and so his approach to it is through a landscape that calls up his own usurpation of Firmin's place with Yvonne. The Frenchman tries to justify his affair by relating his passion for Yvonne to the emotions he experienced when first viewing Chartres cathedral (12). In his case, however, this equation of physical and spiritual love is unwarranted since he is a parasite. As he has borrowed the Consul's wife, so he could only remain in Chartres by going "scandalously in debt" (12). Thus his happy memories are replaced by the burden of past sorrows, which, it seems, emanate from the mountains surrounding him: an ironic image that turns one of the novel's key symbols of spiritual transcendence into a metaphor for remorse.

This foreshadowing of Laruelle's ultimate spiritual failure is answered by another projection of the Consul's: the wreck of a blue Ford under whose wheels bricks have been wedged to prevent its sliding irrevocably into a ditch as Firmin's life was one long descent into the barranca (13). Feeling a "sort of kinship, an empathy" (13) with the wreck, Laruelle becomes impatient for it to complete its descent. This is the closest Laruelle comes to recognizing his spiritual oneness with the Consul, and, painfully, there spring into his mind the words of the long misdirected postcard from Yvonne that is delivered to the Consul on the day of

his death: the postcard which, partly in revenge, Firmin leaves under the pillow on Laruelle's bed as if willing that the adulterer should read its words of love and reconciliation just as Hugh calls from Parian to tell him of the murders. With this first mention of Parian, its distinctive landmark, the prison with its watch-towers, looms up in stark contrast to the spires of Chartres, and as darkness begins to fall like the "House of Usher" (14), Laruelle is escorted into the ruins of the palace by an obscene concourse" (14) of hellish, insect-like birds which will reappear in Chapter IV as a symbol of adulterous love (98).

Like the Hotel Casino de la Selva, the ruins of Maximilian's Palace objectify the dark night of the soul, but the imagery here is bleaker and cuts deeper:

the pool, covered with green scum [waited] to close over his head. The shattered evil-smelling chapel . . . the crumbling walls, splashed with urine, on which scorpions lurked . . . slippery stones covered with excreta. . . (14)

Worse than the dark wood, this is the cloacal atmosphere of hell itself. At the same time, as the Poe allusion indicates, it is an emblem of the shattering of the mind under the weight of madness and suicidal depression: a further projection of the Consul's doom. What I want to stress, however, is the ruins' relevance to Laruelle. Though capable of making the connection between Maximilian and Geoffrey Firmin, Laruelle cannot see that in the Franco-Austrian puppet he is being confronted with a projection of his own shadow. Like the murdered usurper, Laruelle is a Frenchman in Germanic guise — having developed his artistic vision during an apprenticeship to the Ufa filmmakers (24) — and he, too, has come to Mexico pursuing dreams of greatness only to be undone by the fatal beauty of the place (10).

Laruelle's inability to recognize the manifestations of the shadow and its consequences are explored further. The Frenchman — who, we now are informed, is dressed like the Consul (15) — heads downhill over a terrible road, full of potholes, to the bridge across the barranca in another recapitulation of Firmin's last day. Laruelle remembers a conversation with the Consul on this same bridge in which Firmin compared the barranca to Atlantis, another Eden engulfed by flood, and suggested Laruelle make a film on the theme. The Consul then went on to tell Laruelle of the storm god *huracan* that "testified so suggestively to intercourse between opposite sides of the Atlantic" (16). Laruelle still cannot understand what Firmin meant, perhaps because he does not wish to acknowledge this reminder of his adultery with the American Yvonne. But in an oblique fashion, he was also being informed that he had yielded to his own "spirit of the abyss" and has ruined his own symbolic garden of Eden: informed by a man of similar fate who for once had drunk himself sober enough (16) to look into the abyss and see that its destructive energies could be turned to creative use if one could face them honestly. Laruelle, however, will never achieve this assimilation of the shadow — as he will never make the Atlantis film — so that thinking of

his meeting the Consul in Quauhnahuac after so many years, he is unable to see the enormous possibilities for growth in their coming together again and dismisses it as meaningless, a "favorite trick of the gods" (16). Instead, staring into the barranca what he is reminded of are the incidents, especially the Hell Bunker incident, that disrupted and ultimately severed their friendship.

Laruelle's failure even to recognize, never mind come to terms with, the dark aspects of his personality is, again, answered by a reincarnation of the Consul's losing struggle with his shadow in the figure of the drunken horseman riding wildly — "a maniacal vision of senseless frenzy, but controlled, not quite uncontrolled" (23) — whose perilously maintained equilibrium will soon be shattered, plunging him to death. This vision prepares the stage for the climactic phase of M. Laruelle's journey.

Mindful at last of the circular route he has been following, he heads down the Avenida de la Revolucion on the final round of his descent into hell (23). The last bus to Tomalin passes, in another reminder of Firmin's journey to doom, while across the road Laruelle spies Dr. Vigil's office and thinks how the doctor's publically proclaimed role as pediatrician and specialist in nervous disorders contrasts with the notices in men's rooms advertising his skill in treating sexual problems — notices the Consul will discover only when it is too late for Vigil to help him (352). It is not only Geoffrey Firmin who dies when a cure is available. The West seems determined to follow his example, and as Laruelle nears the cinema adjoining the Cervecería XX, the passage of newsboys hawking a pro-Nazi paper makes him aware of a "kind of fever" (24) in the air.

Before he can reach the theatre, the rain begins to fall in torrents, and he races for cover toward the marquee, his earlier desire to get soaked to the skin gone. For the thunderstorm that has already been identified as a visitation of divine wrath now comes to represent the war as well: "people are taking refuge from the storm as in the world they are creeping into bomb shelters."<sup>11</sup> The cinema, however, proves no refuge from either manmade or divine devastation; rather, it is transformed into a symbolic theatre of operations in which the forces of darkness combat the forces of light. On the one hand, the electricity has failed, plunging the theatre into a "graveyard darkness" (28) at once evocative of the "lights going out all over Europe" and of hell: "Dark shapes of pariah dogs prowled in and out of the stalls. The lights . . . glimmered, a dim reddish orange, flickering" (26). Further, the German film being shown, *Las Manos de Orlac*, comes to represent the schizophrenic nature of Western civilization:

An artist with a murderer's hands; that was the ticket, the hieroglyphic of the times. For . . . it was Germany itself that, in the gruesome degradation of a bad cartoon, stood over him. (25)

*Las Manos de Orlac* will become a significant motif in *Under the Volcano* for

the refusal to acknowledge our collective guilt and the failure to conquer our destructive impulses.<sup>12</sup>

The scene at the theatre and the Cervceria XX has especially ominous significance for Laruelle. If he had hoped through this journey to find a way out of the Consul's destructive universe back to a world of his own, he is to be sorely disappointed. As the Cinema Quauhnahuac and the Cervceria XX are, in reality, one establishment, so Laruelle's life is inextricably bound up with Firmin's. That it should be *Las Manos de Orlac* playing gives us an additional clue that Laruelle's identity is being merged with the dead Consul's and governed by its terrible rhythms.<sup>13</sup> As the film is a bad remake of an earlier work (24), so the Frenchman's fate is to be a pale carbon of the Consul's. Interestingly, when Laruelle enters the cantina, he orders the Consul's drink, tequila, before catching himself and switching to anis, and Sr. Bustamente, the manager, is particularly taken with Laruelle's English tweed jacket (26) and addresses him as "Companero" (26): the last word the dying Consul hears. Moreover, *Las Manos de Orlac* heightens our sense of Laruelle's impending personal disaster since its presence on his Day of the Dead sounds the theme of eternal recurrence and negates the possibility of achieving rebirth: "we have not revived it. It has only returned" (26).

In other ways, too, Lowry clearly indicates that this voyage of the filmmaker "home" to the cinema does not result in the discovery of a basis for hope and renewed creativity. What Laruelle finds at the Cinema Quauhnahuac is a cruel counterpoint to his earlier vision of changing the world through art. The plot of *Las Manos de Orlac* itself involves an artist's defeat before the forces in man which cause him to be terrified of himself. It deals with a scientist and a musician who both love a woman named Yvonne. When the artist's hands are crushed in an accident, the jealous scientist performs a transplant in which his rival is given the hands of a murderer. These seem to possess a will of their own and lead him to menace the woman he loves.

The blackout in the theatre needs to be viewed as the death of Laruelle's artistic aspirations, and it is an added irony that the film is suspended at seven o'clock, the moment of the Consul's death. Furthermore, there are images that relate the theatre to Bunyan's Vanity Fair — it is like "some gloomy bazaar or market" (24) — and connect its "endless procession of torchlit shadows" (26) — with Plato's Myth of the Cave, suggesting that Laruelle has devoted himself all along, out of a desire for self-aggrandizement, to what is illusory.

**A**S ALWAYS IN THE NOVEL, the loss of hope is coupled with the realization of personal guilt. As Laruelle studies the poster for *Las Manos de*



*Orlac*, he is made to confront at last the fact that his adultery with Yvonne has contributed to the Consul's death: that the artist with a murderer's hands is, in a painfully real sense, himself (25). The themes of the loss of creative power and the awareness of guilt are united by way of the volume of Elizabethan plays Sr. Bustamente now hands over to Laruelle. For the Frenchman had borrowed the book from the Consul to use in his Faust project, only to leave it — unread — in the cantina (28), and this testimony to his unfulfilled aspirations becomes a symbol of his betrayal of the Consul's friendship as well, "an emblem of what . . . it is impossible to return" (27).

The return of the book is the signal for Laruelle's final descent into hell. Appropriately, it is accompanied by the drawing near of a costumed figure, "a sombre pillar . . . bearing a tray of chocolate skulls" (27), and the suddenly loud sounds of the storm. Sitting rigidly with the book before him, Laruelle feels "like someone lying in a bath after all the water has run out, witless, almost dead" (29). This demonic parody of his former desire for purification leads him to view the storm as the coming of the second flood, against which he is unprotected, and his hopelessness deepens when he recalls that it is the "Night of the Culmination of the Pleiades" (29), for what was to the ancient Mexicans the beginning of the new year is to him the end of the world. Furthermore, through this allusion the full extent of his despair is revealed. The "Culmination of the Pleiades" is a central motif in the description of Yvonne's death, and Laruelle has been careful, up to this point, not to acknowledge her fate in any way.

Laruelle's attention returns to the volume of plays, and opening it at random in a game he has learned from the Consul, he comes upon a passage from Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*:

Then will I headlong fly into the earth!  
Earth, gape! it will not harbour me! (34)

He has misread the quotation, however, substituting "fly" for "run" in the first line and "Earth, gape!" for "O, no" in the second. In this way the voice of Faustus's despair becomes Geoffrey Firmin's, and the passage is turned into one more recapitulation of the Consul's death in which his corpse will be thrown into the abyss of the barranca. For Laruelle, too, the passage is ominous, and staring at it, he feels his own soul drawn "downward into a gulf, as if in fulfillment of his spirit" (34) of these words of doom. When he looks more closely and sees his mistake, he takes comfort in the original: "Under the circumstances to run was not so bad as to fly" (34). But this is false consolation since the passage echoes Firmin's last words to Yvonne and Hugh as he rejects their attempts to save him: "I love hell. I can't wait to get back there. In fact I'm running . . ." (314). Moreover, the original passage prefigures Laruelle's forthcoming descent into hell, which will be less dramatic than the Consul's but just as dire.

Closing the book, Laruelle discovers that the colophon is the Egyptian god Thoth, who as scribe records the eternal fates of the dead. Thus the anthology is transformed into a book of judgment, and opening it again, Laruelle reads the proclamation of the Consul's damnation:

Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight,  
And burned is Apollo's laurel bough,  
That sometime grew within this learned man,  
Faustus is gone: regard his hellish fall. . . . (34)

This judgment is also an admonition to Laruelle, something Lowry makes clear to us by echoing Marlowe's imagery in the warning that closes the novel: Do you like this garden which is yours? Make sure your sons do not destroy it!

Laruelle is deeply shaken by this epiphany, but there is still more for him to learn in this "place where you know," and what awaits him is a final, heart-rending meeting with the spirit of the Consul. As Laruelle shuts the anthology, two sheets of paper fall to the floor — an unsent letter from Firmin to Yvonne. When Laruelle reads it, it is as though he were listening to the voice of the damned, returned on the Day of the Dead to describe its torment. The Consul's letter is the most moving piece of writing in the novel, a graphic portrait of the pain of love that comes too late and visionary failure made even more terrible by Firmin's acute awareness of what is happening to himself and his utter inability to counter any longer the awful forces within the self.

As Laruelle finishes the letter, the storm ends, and in its aftermath, the *Cerveceria XX* returns to life and is imbued with a "beauty and a sort of piety" (41). However, Laruelle does not participate in the scene. He sits meditatively, hearing the Consul's cry at the end of the unsent letter — "come back . . . I am dying without you . . . come back . . . if only for a day" (41) — answered by the words of Yvonne's misdirected postcard: "*Darling, why did I leave? Why did you let me?*" (13). This is the "secret knowledge" that is Laruelle's final lesson, a bequest from the Consul that serves to seal the Frenchman's utter disillusionment. For in the light of the deaths of the year before, these cries from the grave seem to epitomize the sheer futility of love and to deny totally the saving wisdom of "No se puede vivir sin amar."

For the second time in the chapter, Laruelle yields to a "sudden definite impulse" (41). As earlier he had been drawn to the ruins of Maximilian's Palace away from the Edenic model farm, so now he gives in to despair and sets fire to the Consul's letter. The burning letter is the third and last of the ruined palaces that mark the stages of his voyage, but this time this emblem of the ruin of the house of the soul is not one he merely encounters, it is one he produces himself:

Laruelle set the writhing mass in an ashtray, where beautifully conforming, it folded upon itself, a burning castle, collapsed, subsided to a ticking hive through

which sparks like tiny red worms crawled . . . while above a few grey wisps of ashes floated . . . a dead husk now, faintly crepitant. . . (42)

This final rejection of the principle of love is the last step on Laruelle's descent into hell, and his doom is announced by the solemn music of a bell, "*dolente . . . dolore*" (42), calling up the inscription over the portals of Dante's *Inferno*. In this final divorce from what is creative and healing within the self the journey of M. Laruelle ends. Unwilling to face the negative forces within himself, unable to cope with the knowledge when it is thrust upon him, Laruelle becomes in the final analysis a demonic Frère Jacques who does not ring the bell to awaken the world to the dangers threatening it. Rather, the bell tolls for him.

A number of critics have suggested that Chapters II-XII be read as Laruelle's Faust movie<sup>14</sup> — indeed, Ackerley and Clipper insist that it be read that way.<sup>15</sup> These critics are prompted by a passage in Lowry's famous letter to Jonathan Cape:

The wheel [whose turning closes the chapter] superficially . . . can be seen simply in an obvious movie sense as the wheel of time whirling backwards until we reach the year before and Chapter II and in this sense, if we like, we can look at the rest of the book through Laruelle's eyes, as if it were his creation.<sup>16</sup>

The tentative language here and the tone should indicate a need for caution in taking Lowry at face value, as should the context in which the passage emerges. Lowry had no intention of making major revisions in the novel after so many years of arduous rewriting, and the suggestion that the rest of the novel *might* be seen as Laruelle's film is simply the easiest way of suggesting to Cape's none-too-perceptive editor that the chapter has an organic relationship to the whole; it offers him a handle — no matter how factitious — with which to grasp the need to leave intact a chapter he has otherwise misread and severely criticized, but of which Lowry, rightly, is extremely protective.

There is, in fact, no basis for reading the rest of *Under the Volcano* as Laruelle's Faust movie.<sup>17</sup> To do so is to misconstrue Laruelle's function within the novel and its underlying psychodynamics as drastically as does the John Huston film, which leaves him out totally. Laruelle's failure to transcend the worst in the self is the frame for the novel. As prologue, his descent into hell sets in motion the larger tragedy of Geoffrey Firmin. As epilogue it closes the infernal circle inside which that failure confines the self permanently. It is Lowry who achieves the spiritual and artistic triumph: he creates a modern Faust; Laruelle only becomes one.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Malcolm Lowry, *Selected Letters*, ed. Harvey Breit and Margerie Bonner Lowry (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1965), p. 66.

- <sup>2</sup> Lowry, Typescript of *Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend Is Laid* (Univ. of British Columbia Collection: unpublished).
- <sup>3</sup> *Letters*, p. 269.
- <sup>4</sup> Matthew Corrigan has explored some of the ramifications of this issue in "Malcolm Lowry, New York Publishing, and the New Illiteracy," *Encounter* 35, July 1970.
- <sup>5</sup> Typescript of *Dark as the Grave*.
- <sup>6</sup> Lowry, *Under the Volcano* (New York: New American Library, 1971), p. 6. For convenience, all further quotations from the novel will be cited in parentheses in the body of the text.
- <sup>7</sup> C. G. Jung, *Psyche and Symbol*, ed. V. S. de Laszlo (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958), p. 8.
- <sup>8</sup> William H. New, *Malcolm Lowry* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1971), p. 32.
- <sup>9</sup> This is suggested by Laruelle's being dressed in the sort of English tweeds worn by Geoffrey Firmin at his death.
- <sup>10</sup> Perle Epstein, *The Private Labyrinth of Malcolm Lowry* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 68.
- <sup>11</sup> *Letters*, p. 69.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- <sup>13</sup> In the earliest version of the novel, Lowry tried to make Laruelle literally become the Consul. The best account of the early draft is Sherrill E. Grace, *The Voyage That Never Ends* (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1982), pp. 39ff.
- <sup>14</sup> See Tony Kilgallin, *Lowry* (Erin, Ont.: Press Porcépic, 1973), pp. 131-47, and Richard K. Cross, *Malcolm Lowry: A Preface to His Fiction* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 34.
- <sup>15</sup> Chris Ackerley and Lawrence J. Clipper, *A Companion to Under the Volcano* (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1984), p. 15.
- <sup>16</sup> *Letters*, pp. 70-71.
- <sup>17</sup> That Lowry employs Expressionist techniques of the sort Laruelle would use in directing a film — a point Kilgallin and Ackerley and Clipper make much of — means only that Lowry is indebted to Expressionist cinema and that his persona Laruelle shares his tastes. It in no way indicates that the consciousness governing Chapters II-XII is Laruelle's.

