

“UNDER THE VOLCANO”

The Politics of the Imperial Self

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IN CHAPTER TEN OF *Under the Volcano*, the tension between Hugh and the Consul touches off a bitter political argument. Feelings of jealousy and humiliation may underlie the Consul's attack on his brother, but the exchange brings into clear focus their apparently antithetical attitudes to the political struggles of the 1930's, and to the question of political action in general. Throughout the novel, Geoffrey Firmin represents himself as a confirmed quietist, whose indifference to political involvement is grounded in a conviction that history, like a man's life, is ordered by "a sort of determinism." There is nothing to be done: the people of Spain and Mexico cannot be relieved of their misery, any more than he can escape his suffering, since it is the lot of all men. Characteristically placing the upheaval in Spain *sub specie aeternitatis*, he takes comfort in the assumption that Spain's culture "will survive intact," whatever the outcome of the civil war may be. For the Consul, all intervention is self-serving interference, all Samaritans likely to conceal a predatory purpose, and he asks only to be left alone to pursue his own "little fight for freedom." But for Hugh, history is shaped by man's actions, and his failure to fight against Fascism, although he has visited many battlegrounds as a reporter, leaves him feeling guilty and ashamed. Still, he continues to style himself as an ardent anti-fascist who believes in historical progress and the brotherhood of man; and he holds on to a dream of heroic action, which he hopes to realize by shipping out on a freighter carrying arms for besieged Spain.

But we should not allow ourselves to be misled by the rhetoric of either man. However admirable Hugh's social ideals may be, his interest in political action, like his sympathy for the Jews, is of dubious origin. Laruelle's description of him as a "professional indoor Marxman" is apt: Hugh's political stance is largely posturing, part of a purely personal battle to escape self-condemnation. Finally, the cause he upholds is irrelevant, since the enemy he opposes is himself. It might be argued that it is the Consul who has a fixed commitment to a political position, whereas Hugh's leftism is likely to be discarded along with his guitar, to become

another episode in the romantic story of his life. Certainly the Consul's opposition to Hugh's socialism goes beyond his antagonism to his brother and rests on an ideological base. Prompted by his own self-hatred, Firmin views all men in Hobbesian "physiological" terms,¹ and so he is ready to accept any régime that will subdue the individual's insatiable desire for power over others. The turmoil of the 1930's has not persuaded the Consul that political authority does not remain an abstraction that arbitrates between competing interests, but represents an interest itself, and if unchecked comes to serve only itself, provoking rather than preventing "the war of all against all." But then, as his dispute with Hugh demonstrates, the Consul's reactionary position, like Hugh's socialism, has not been reached by careful political reasoning. Although he objects to Hugh's confusion of the general interest with his own compulsive need for action, the Consul's political views also are formed by psychological pressures, and serve to mystify his own narrow idea of self-interest, which he confuses with historical necessity.

And so, in their politics, as in other aspects of their characters and ideas, Hugh and the Consul present different sides of the same dilemma; or, as Lowry put it in his letter to Cape, different sides of the same man.² Political dialectics is to Hugh what his "battle for the survival of the human consciousness" is to the Consul: a struggle in which the romantic will seeks to establish its dominance. In their attitudes to action in the world of other men, Hugh and the Consul enact different strategies by which the "imperial self" pursues its manifest destiny. Neither man regards himself as an agent defined by what he does "to and with others." For both men, the "inward scene" dominates the external world and the "outward becomes the mere acting out of the inward."³ What Quentin Anderson has described as a characteristic development of the American tradition, Lowry represents as a danger common to all men in the modern western world. *Under the Volcano* explores a central theme of Anderson's *The Imperial Self* — the transformation of the public realm by men for whom the "associated life has become almost unreal," for whom "the middle ground is filled, insofar as it is filled, with projections out of the self." For the Consul, the ordinary social world of men and events is devalued by the absolute primacy he assigns his own spiritual life. The imperium of the "inner empire" of the soul reduces the world beyond the self to the status of colonial outposts, whose resources are drawn upon to serve the interests of the governing power, but otherwise ignored. Appropriately, the Consul's "imperial self" finds political expression in the British foreign service.

Firmin's disdain for political opinion and action makes it easy to overlook the importance of Laruelle's recollection that the Consul had been a British patriot who "passionately believed" in the empire he served.⁴ That he is known simply as "the Consul" suggests how fully Geoffrey Firmin identifies himself with imperial Britain. His background perfectly suits him for service to king and empire. He

is, after all, a true son of the Raj, born in India and originally intended for the Indian civil service. But there is no reason to believe that Firmin was caught up by the British imperial myth, that Britain conquered and colonized less in its own interest than in the service of humanity. Like the British Empire he represents, the Consul's attention is always directed inward, and what lies beyond is made instrumental to his own purposes, illustrating V. S. Naipaul's observation that "the Raj was an expression of the English involvement with themselves rather than with the country they ruled."⁵

Never solely a political entity, the British Empire depended upon the exercise of economic power beyond its borders to achieve its dominant position. A long-time representative of His Majesty's government, Firmin seems well aware of whose interests he serves abroad. Even in his obscure post in provincial Mexico, there are British financial concerns to be protected and advanced. The local narrow-gauge railway, built by an English company to follow a meandering route because it was paid for by the kilometre, is a legacy of the nineteenth-century exportation of British railway technology, and a reminder of whose interests were served by such trade. Although never a major colonial power in Latin America, Britain continued to have significant business interests there, such as the oil holdings in Mexico nationalized by the Cárdenas government in March of 1938, an action which occasioned a discontinuance of diplomatic relations, and leaves Firmin an ex-consul in Quauhnahuac. In a sense, Señor Bustamente is not far wrong in supposing that the Consul has been a spy, for it was surely an important part of a British consul's duties to keep a close watch on domestic political developments which might have an effect on British business interests.

BUT FIRMIN ALSO FOLLOWS political events in Mexico because he has his own investments there to oversee. However unworthy he may feel, a large part of his reluctance to follow the other members of the diplomatic corps home to Britain is a fear of the loss of his property in Mexico. Although he has no intention "of going to live among the Indians," the Consul is more serious when he tells Yvonne that he is "thinking of becoming a Mexican subject," undoubtedly to escape the confiscation of the holdings of non-Mexican nationals. Critics of the *Volcano* seem to have disregarded how the Consul earns the money to support himself while he conducts his "great battle." They are like Yvonne in this respect, who takes for granted, as the Consul sees it, his "habit of making money": "But for one's habit of making money, don't you know, all very mysterious to you, I suppose, outside looking in . . . the result of so much worry, speculation, foresight, alimony, seigniorage —." As the Consul here protests, his investments require close superintendence, which he gives, however oblivious he

may be to whatever else goes on in the world around him. The mysterious phone call he receives in Chapter Three, and drunkenly muddles through, is from a fellow investor in resource-based companies in Mexico:

he started to speak into the receiver, then, sweating, into the mouthpiece, talking rapidly — for it was a trunk call — not knowing what he was saying, hearing Tom's muted voice quite plainly but turning his questions into his own answers, apprehensive lest at any moment boiling oil pour into his eardrums or his mouth: "All right. Good-bye . . . Oh, say, Tom, what was the origin of that silver rumour that appeared in the papers yesterday denied by Washington? I wonder where it came from . . . What started it. Yes. All right. Good-bye. Yes, I have, terrible. Oh they did! Too bad. But after all they own it. Or don't they? Good-bye. They probably will. Yes that's all right, that's all right. Good-bye; good-bye!" . . . Christ. What does he want to ring me up at this hour of the morning for. What time is it in America.

When he returns from his search for a restorative drink after this ordeal, and his encounter with the man with the Trinity tie, Yvonne asks him, apropos the telephone call:

"How's the market?"

"Tom's a bit fed up because they've confiscated some property of his in Tlaxcala, or Puebla, he thought he'd got away with. They haven't my number yet, I'm not sure where I really do stand in that regard, now I've resigned the service —"

This supplies a more serious context for the Consul's jest about being turned out of Eden.

"Or perhaps," he added, in more cheerful vein, "perhaps Adam was the first property owner and God, the first agrarian, a kind of Cárdenas, in fact — tee hee! — kicked him out. Eh? Yes," the Consul chuckled, aware, moreover, that all this was possibly not so amusing under the existing historical circumstances, "for it's obvious to everyone these days — don't you think so, Quincey? — that the original sin was to be an owner of property. . . ."

Although the Consul richly enjoys sending up his neighbour, the sober, upright Quincey, "a credit to Soda Springs," their economic interests are identical. Quincey may turn "the cold sardonic eye of the material world" upon the Consul, but Firmin himself relies upon his stake in the material world, and is also an exponent of "*realpolitik*" to maintain his economic position. America has succeeded Britain in the economic domination of Latin America, but this makes little difference to the Mexicans. The American highway which turns into a goat track after it has passed through Quauhahuac is a twentieth-century version of the narrow-gauge, meandering British railway. As if to underscore this identity of interests, to many of the Mexicans he meets, Firmin *is* an American, as far as they can tell.⁶

The oil affair is mentioned by the passing English motorist who finds the Consul face down in the Calle Nicaragua. He may well be a travelling businessman, but his phony Trinity tie suggests that he is one of the many con-men,

spongers or remittance men that England set loose on the world during the height and early decline of her imperial ascendancy. Perhaps this is a rather nice distinction in any case. Economically, imperial expansion is achieved by the export of superfluous capital. Imperial states also expect their superfluous men to manage their colonial affairs, men like Quincey, the Consul, and perhaps this Englishman with the "King's Parade voice." The economic interests of these men are inextricably bound up with the exploitation of the resources of the countries they work in, and the domination of the indigenous people. As Albert Memmi maintains, it is impossible for the colonizer "not to be aware of the constant illegitimacy of his status."

A foreigner, having come to a land by the accidents of history, he has succeeded not merely in creating a place for himself but also in taking away that of the inhabitant, granting himself astounding privileges to the detriment of those rightfully entitled to them. And this is not by virtue of local laws, which in a certain way legitimize this inequality by tradition, but by upsetting the established rules and substituting his own. He thus appears doubly unjust. He is a privileged being and an illegitimately privileged one; that is, a usurper.⁷

Or, in the context of the *Volcano*, a "*pelado*." Hugh and the Consul argue about the meaning of this word; but if Geoffrey's definition is more strictly accurate, Hugh's gloss is essential to an understanding of the role the Consul plays in the country he lives in, and the effect the colonial context has on Firmin himself.⁸ Hugh has seen "*pelado*" defined somewhere "as a shoeless illiterate."

According to the Consul, this was only one meaning; *pelados* were indeed "peeled ones," the stripped, but also those who did not have to be rich to prey on the really poor. For instance those halfbreed petty politicians who will, in order to get into office just for one year, in which year they hope to put by enough to forswear work the rest of their lives, do literally anything whatsoever, from shining shoes, to acting as one who was not an "aerial pigeon." Hugh understood this word finally to be pretty ambiguous. A Spaniard, say, could interpret it as Indian, the Indian he despised, used, made drunk. The Indian, however, might mean Spaniard by it. Either might mean by it anyone who made a show of himself. It was perhaps one of those words that had actually been distilled out of conquest, suggesting, as it did, on the one hand thief, on the other exploiter. Interchangeable ever were the terms of abuse with which the aggressor discredits those about to be ravaged!

The drunken, unkempt *pelado*, with his "rapacious" hands of the conqueror, embodies for Hugh "the confusion that tends eventually to overtake conquistadores." But the Consul also lives in a state of confusion that is, in part, a consequence of imperialism. The Chief of Rostrums fits Geoffrey's definition of a *pelado*, but just before he shoots the Consul, he calls *Firmin* a "*pelado*." Both are right. Although he would hardly rob a dying man of a few coins, the Consul is also a confused conquistadore, preying upon the poor. Like the *pelado*, he lives in a fog of complacent fatalism which mystifies his readiness to take economic

advantage of the colonial situation. As the two brothers stand helpless over the dying man, Hugh notices the *pelado*, looking on from the bus, who “made again that gesture of hopelessness, which was also like a gesture of sympathy: what could they do, he appeared trying to convey to them through the window, how could they have known, when they got out, that they could do nothing?” With the same bad faith, the Consul profits from the economic exploitation of the Mexican people, while brazenly protesting against those who would “interfere” with history’s “worthless stupid course.”

HANNAH ARENDT’S VIEW OF “the imperialist character” casts some light on the muddle that finally overwhelms the Consul. Arendt sees a fundamental immaturity in the political consciousness of the secret agents and bureaucrats who created and managed the British Empire: “Imperialism to them was nothing but an accidental opportunity to escape a society in which a man had to forget his youth if he wanted to grow up.”⁹ Unconditioned by the weight of a recognized social context, the imperial will was able to seek its own fulfillment without reference to the interests of the implicitly devalued peoples and cultures of the dominated nations. Having left behind the reality of civilization in Britain, “the adventurers had a feeling of unreality and irresponsibility, the feeling, as in a dream, that everything is possible.”¹⁰ And, because imperial expansion was conceived in economic rather than political terms, there was a sense that colonization was a “pseudo-natural process” and “the imperial bureaucrats and secret agents . . . merely the instruments of this expansive force.”¹¹ Imperialism enfranchised Faustian dreams of power, while at the same time seeming to excuse the imperialist from responsibility for his actions.

But this extraordinary liberation from constraint is an allusion. As Memmi observes, “if colonization destroys the colonized, it also rots the colonizer.”¹² The imperialist cannot overcome the guilt and self-condemnation consequent upon the exploitation of the subject peoples. However much he may separate himself from the community in which he operates, the “dehumanization of the oppressed . . . becomes the alienation of the oppressor,” as Sartre argues in his Introduction to Memmi’s *The Colonizer and the Colonized*.¹³ Isolated within the culture he lives in, he has no shared world to fix for him “what is real and what is imagined, what is real and what absurd.”¹⁴ The imperialist suffers from what Arendt describes as “loneliness,” a condition “among the most radical and desperate experiences of man.” He is not merely isolated, but estranged from the people around him, and ultimately set at odds with himself. Quoting Epictetus, Arendt characterizes the “lonely” man as one who “finds himself surrounded by others with whom he cannot establish contact or to whose hostility he is exposed.”¹⁵ “Loneli-

ness" drives the Consul to his death, and it also ruins the life of Yvonne's father, once American consul to Iquique in Chile, and identified in many ways with Geoffrey Firmin. Noting the resemblance to her father in the Consul's "brooding expression," she thinks of those "long war years in Chile" and wonders "what, precisely, was her father brooding about all that time, more spiritually isolated in the land of Bernardo O'Higgins than was once Robinson Crusoe, only a few hundred miles from the same shores?" The alienation of the confused imperialist is that of the "uprooted" and "superfluous" man. In Hannah Arendt's words, "To be uprooted means to have no place in the world, recognized and guaranteed by others; to be superfluous means not to belong to the world at all."¹⁶ The Consul's "world-alienation" embodies in an extreme form the experience of the modern age, "where man, wherever he goes, encounters only himself."¹⁷ Such spiritual isolation is the inevitable fate of the imperial self, whose desire for mastery sets him against the world in which he must live.

Those critics who argue that the novel presents the Consul's alienation as a necessary consequence of the deep penetration of his vision, a kind of spiritual breakthrough, disregard Lowry's careful association of Firmin's self-destructiveness with the forces that are leading the world towards war.¹⁸ Far from suggesting any heroic Promethean struggle, his retreat to an inner world is shown to arise from the debilitating effect of the misconceptions that he has allowed to govern his life. Firmin finally submits himself to the forces that destroy him because of an enervation of the will by which "Faustian man" has lived. Following Spengler, Lowry sees in the Consul's inability to live in the world he has inherited, the death-wish of an entire civilization, even though America may rise as Britain declines. Like the drunken rider of the rebellious, runaway horse who reminds Laruelle of the Consul, the West retains its dominant position only temporarily, slipping from the saddle, regaining a precarious hold, but still plunging on to meet its inevitable end.

The collapse of the overextended British Empire provides Lowry with the perfect vehicle to explore the historical and political fate of the imperial self. In the Consul, as Tony Kilgallin observes, Lowry depicts a dying John Bull,¹⁹ giving way to the ascendant American will, as Spain had yielded to Britain. Accordingly, Quincey, the retired American walnut grower, displays the upright posture and self-possession the Consul was wont to show. Firmin confuses his "deceitful air of infallibility" modelled on the Taskersons' "erect manly carriage," maintained even in total drunkenness, for genuine imperial authority. But Quincey is fully in control of his dealings with his neighbour, as he stands watering his trim garden, and the Consul staggers through his ruined, jungle-like "estate." As an imperial power, Britain is in sharp decline, or asleep, like the Consul when Yvonne and Hugh leave for their morning ride: "A snore, ricocheting, agonized, embittered, but controlled, single, was wafted to his ears: the muted voice

of England long asleep." It may be "indefatigably English" of their "ruddy monarch" to sleep on unconcerned, but no bravado can conceal that Britain and Geoffrey Firmin have lost their imperial majesty, and retain only the spoils of conquest. But even the hold on the loot is insecure, as the Consul's unsettling ride on the Ferris wheel suggests. Suspended upside down by the "bewildering convulsions" of the "Máquina Infernal," the Consul reflects that this "was scarcely a dignified position for an ex-representative of His Majesty's government to find himself in, though it was symbolic, of what he could not conceive, but it was undoubtedly symbolic." Overturned by the wheel of history, Firmin has lost his identity — his British passport — and his confusion is that of Britain herself, divested of the external basis of her power. Having fallen, the Consul is at the mercy of those who attend upon his decline. Although his valuables are returned by the docile and friendly children he has shaken off when they begged money of him, the loss of his passport will have disastrous consequences when he falls into other hands.

However obscure it may be to the Consul, the political parallel here is both obvious and emphatic; and so is the author's intention in having Firmin look into the copybook of one of these children, and discover the following exercise :

Escruch is an old man. He lives in London. He lives alone in a large house. Scrooge is a rich man but he never gives to the poor. He is a miser. No one loves Scrooge and Scrooge loves no one. He has no friends. He is alone in the world. . . . Who is Scrooge? Where does he live? Is Scrooge rich or poor? Has he friends? How does he live? Alone. World. On.

Dickens' Scrooge has become a mythic embodiment of the economic man produced by English mercantile capitalism, exploitative of those who fall into his power, justifying his accumulation of wealth by pointing to the inexorable laws of political economy. Although Firmin's selfishness certainly has a wider significance, in one sense at least the Consul is Scrooge's great-grandson, economic man in decline, who has merely transferred the focus of exploitation overseas. He lives "on" the world, but not in it, and his loneliness is no longer bearable. Unable to believe absolutely in the ideology he lives by, still he excuses himself from responsibility for his own choices by reference to another kind of determinism.

But the Consul cannot dodge the responsibility for his actions, which return to haunt him, as the legacy of colonialism rebounds upon Britain herself. Obsessed with the disloyalty of Hugh, Yvonne and Laruelle, Firmin tries to push from his mind his own betrayal of others. Although he holds them accountable for failing him, he attributes his own failures to historical and spiritual forces too powerful to resist. But Firmin has placed himself upon the wheel of history. He has *chosen* an "historical" life as an agent of British imperial power, as the Tlaxcalans chose to betray Mexico. In the same way, he has chosen to betray those who would love him, by enclosing himself within a religious hermeticism which excludes even his

own wife. His muddled values represent a betrayal of the religious life, as his meditation on spiritual treachery suggests: "The soul! Ah, and did she not too have her savage and traitorous Tlaxcalans, her Cortez and her *noches tristes*, and, sitting within her innermost citadel in chains, drinking chocolate, her pale Moctezuma?" By rejecting human love, and courting his own death and damnation, Firmin perverts the spiritual quest to which he has sacrificed so much. The Consul may view himself self-pityingly as "the Knight of the Sorry Aspect," but the dangerous spiritual journey he has undertaken is treacherous, not quixotic. Lowry makes his self-deception clear by the telling juxtapositions in the Consul's jumbled thoughts as he is about to leave the *Salón Ofélia* after his argument with Hugh. Having rejected the possibility of a new life with Yvonne, the Consul tells her that "far from wanting it, thank you very much, on the contrary, I choose — Tlax —" Where was he? "Tlax — Tlax." He sinks off into a stupor, but is recalled "to his senses," by the little clock behind Cervantes' bar, "its ticking very loud: *Tlax: tlax: tlax: tlax: . . .*" As he hurries off to meet his death at the *Farolito*, he calls back to those he has left behind: "I like it . . . I love hell. I can't wait to get back there. In fact I'm running, I'm almost back there already."

In his letter to Cape, Lowry emphasizes the importance to his general purpose of his association of the Consul with the Tlaxcalans:

but the whole Tlaxcala business *does* have an underlying deep seriousness. Tlaxcala, of course, just like *Parián*, is death: but the Tlaxcalans were Mexico's traitors — here the Consul is giving way to the forces within him that are betraying himself, that indeed have now finally betrayed him . . . Dialogue here brings in the theme of war, which is of course related to the Consul's self-destruction. (*Letters*, p. 82)

For Lowry, the private life and the public world are never disjoined, and he sees in the self-absorption of the Consul the same inability to engage external realities and the same failure of will that led Chamberlain to Munich. The Consul believes that he can make a separate peace with the world and sidestep the struggles and sufferings of others, but like Moctezuma and Chamberlain seeking appeasement, he brings disaster down upon himself and those who follow him. Firmin is willing to countenance the rise of Fascism, hoping to be left alone to pursue his own course inward, just as he tries to avoid involvement in the plight of the dying Indian, although as Hugh observes, the Consul "was the one most nearly representing authority" among the bystanders. That Lowry means this particular abandonment of responsibility to take on a general significance is underscored by the appearance of the speeding "querulous expensive cars" bearing diplomatic plates which ignore Hugh's shouts to stop and give aid. In Hugh's eyes, such evasions typify the Consul's own diplomatic career, as well as the attitude of the western democracies to Fascism. Recalling his brother's service in Spain, Hugh indicts a diplomatic corps that could stand idly by, "hoping Franco will win

quickly instead of returning to Madrid to tell the British Government the truth of what's really going on in Spain." In this instance, Hugh's judgment on the Consul is upheld by the novel, through a characteristic chain of associations. As the travel-folder read by the Consul notes, the city of Tlaxcala is said to be like Granada, the city where he met and married Yvonne, where the "shadows" that darken their future were first cast. These shadows include his indifference to the threat of Fascism rising before him, the "hieroglyphic of the times" he has not deigned to heed. In due course, the Consul's own plea for intervention is ignored by the impassive Chief of Gardens when he is being interrogated by the brutal Chief of Rostrums. Appropriately, the Chief of Gardens bears a striking physical resemblance to the Consul. Firmin recognizes that he "might have been the image of himself when, lean, bronzed, serious, beardless, and at the crossroads of his career, he had assumed the Vice Consulship in Granada." The Consul's hands, like the pelado's, are tainted by his part in the exploitation of Mexico, and Firmin's hands are also guilty, like those of the Chief of Gardens, and the hero of *Las Manos de Orlac*, although he commits no murders himself. Munich only confirms the abandonment of responsibility, the irrecoverable decline, apparent in England's acquiescence in Franco's overthrow of the Spanish Republic. "Spain's the grave where England's glory led," and it is fitting that the map of Spain that the Consul draws in the spilled liquor on the Farolito bar precipitates his murder by the Fascists.

In as much as the Consul is a representative of British imperial power, his death may be seen as confirming his own observation, that nations "all seem to get what they deserve in the long run." Geoffrey Firmin dies by an order of history he has endorsed, a degenerate imperial consul murdered by a barbarian Fascist. In his dispute with Hugh, the Consul maintains that small nations must expect to be subjugated by great nations, since the lesson of history is that the powerful impose their will on the weak. Such a belief is perfectly consistent with his political first principles, and a comfortable doctrine for a British consul of the time to advance. But it enfranchises without qualification not only the rule of military and economic power, but also political terrorism and totalitarianism. Hannah Arendt attributes the rise of modern totalitarianism to the reintroduction into Europe of political ideologies and practices developed by the great imperial powers in their overseas possessions.²⁰ The feeling of mastery and the absence of restraint conferred upon the imperialist by his colonial privilege returned to plague Europe in the form of Fascism and Stalinism. And so despite the Consul's scorn for Hugh's suggestion that there is "some social significance" in the murder of the Indian, his own death, like that of the Indian before him, may be seen as "a kind of latter-day repercussion of the Conquest." And, for that matter, the war that is about to tear Europe apart, a repercussion of its imperial heritage.

Hampered by his drunkenness, and his brother's reluctance to understand, the Consul doesn't entirely succeed in exposing Hugh's dishonest rationalization of his political motives. But by mixing his grievance against Hugh with their political dispute, Firmin shows that he too is trying to evade the issue. His notion that intervention in the cause of "poor little defenceless" nations actually represents a "contemptible acceptance" of the *status quo*, is rhetorically effective, but utterly disingenuous. After all, intervention in the domestic affairs of weaker nations has been the order of the day for the British Empire Firmin has served. Of course, a British consul is unlikely to find the principle of political self-determination congenial, but Firmin's indifference to political freedom goes deeper still. Presumably, he would uphold the individual's economic freedom, but he scarcely acknowledges any other rights of man whatsoever. For the Consul, political freedom is no more than the right to withdraw from other men's concerns into a private world. But then, he has never been subject to arbitrary power himself, until the political thugs he has tried to ignore, prove themselves capable of violating even the sanctuary of the barroom.

After he has been shot by the Fascists, the Consul reflects that now "he was the one dying by the wayside where no good Samaritan would halt." As Lowry pointed out in his letter to Cape, Firmin's death rounds out the novel's "severe classical pattern"; but it is also intended to drive home an urgent "political warning" (*Letters*, pp. 88, 66). In the modern world, the politics of the imperial self can only be a politics of death.

THE CONSUL'S GENERAL OBSERVATIONS about political intervention may be discredited, but he has good cause to doubt Hugh's political intentions, and to fear his brother's interference in his personal life. Hugh's commitment to the cause of the brotherhood of man does not seem to embrace his half-brother Geoffrey. The moral lassitude that allows him to seduce his sister-in-law under the guise of helping to rehabilitate the Consul, is at the root of Hugh's failure to act upon his political convictions; and despite his readiness to express his views, his political objectives remain unclear. Hugh is driven by an "absurd necessity" for action, and his political ambitions, like the Consul's own confused ideas, are dangerous to himself, and others. As Hugh dimly realizes, his own behaviour, despite his efforts to help save the world, has become "part of its plan" of self-destruction. His intervention in his brother's problems only brings more misery, and finally helps bring on his death. He may "aspire to the light" with Juan Cerillo, but unlike his friend, Hugh seems incapable of action that is at once meditated and disinterested. In searching his past to find evidence of a single unselfish act, he can do no better than the bathetic recollection of his advice to a hot-dog vendor to move his cart to the Fitzroy Tavern.

Nearly thirty, Hugh is still absorbed in adolescent fantasies. Politics now offers him what the sea once did — an opportunity to display the heroic potential that he imagines lies latent in him, untapped by the triviality of everyday life. The humdrum seaman's routine stifled his earlier hopes, but he has kept his new dream safe by avoiding any political effort beyond talk. He is no more than a political raconteur, telling stories such as those he tells Yvonne, featuring the romantically conceived philosopher-soldier Juan Cerillo, and an English communist — “approximately the best man I ever knew” — who reads De Quincey before an important battle, and has a dog named Harpo. Hugh projects himself into these starring roles, but not the grim round of fighting and waiting that lie behind such images. He doesn't seem even to consider involving himself in Cerillo's work in Mexico, probably because the struggle there lacks *la gloire*, with no International Brigade, and no worldwide press coverage. Cerillo returned home to work in his own country, but Hugh shows no concern for the uninteresting poor and unemployed in England. He prefers to wander the world, looking for the next troublespot, hoping to find the kind of “real fun” he expects will be “coming out of Trinidad some day.” Inevitably, the object of political action is demeaned by his fantasies of romantic adventure. Finally, only the *beau geste* appeals to his imagination, and the chance it offers to prove himself against great and perhaps insuperable odds.

In many ways, Hugh's moral confusion and compulsive need for political action serve to characterize the uncertainties of his generation. He is Isherwood's “Truly Weak Man,” seeking to conceal his fear of inadequacy by frantic activity and by imposing upon himself tests of bravery. For the “truly strong man” there is no need “to try to prove to himself that he is not afraid, by joining the Foreign Legion, seeking out the most dangerous wild animals in the remotest tropical jungles, leaving his comfortable home in a snowstorm to climb the impossible glacier. In other words, the Test exists only for the Truly Weak Man.”²¹ Hugh is drawn to the idea of political action for the same reason he is drawn into the *corrida*, and hopes to climb El Popo. To allay his doubts, he must have frequent trials of his mettle — preferably before an audience. His dangerous voyage to Spain is envisaged as a test and a spectacle, even though, as he is painfully aware, “none of his friends knew he was going to do it.” He regards this venture as an act of atonement for his “negative, absurd, selfish, dishonest” past. And because “the Loyalists had already lost . . . no one would be able to say of *him* that he had been carried away by the popular wave of enthusiasm for Spain.” The apparent pleasure he takes in the futility of his gesture, because of the notional credit it would reflect upon him, overrides his concern for the cause of the Spanish people. For Hugh, political action has lost connection to the world of real people, real events and enduring values, dwindling to no more than the stuff of daydreams.

— The time has come for you to join your comrades, to aid the workers, he told Christ, who agreed. It had been His idea all the while, only until Hugh had rescued Him those hypocrites had kept Him shut up inside the burning church where He couldn't breathe. Hugh made a speech. Stalin gave him a medal and listened sympathetically while he explained what was on his mind. "True . . . I wasn't in time to save the Ebro, but I did strike my blow —" He went off, the star of Lenin on his lapel; in his pocket a certificate; Hero of the Soviet Republic, and the True Church, pride and love in his heart —

The nominal beneficiaries of Hugh's intervention never figure in his dreams of action because he has no interest in taking up the cause of others for their sake. His reveries are dreams of power, dreams of Faustian mastery sought by a man "just beyond being mediocre" (*Letters*, p. 75).

Hugh's need to dominate situations and other people almost invariably subverts his best intentions. Certainly he delights in the reversal of roles that leaves his imperious older brother dependent upon him. The form of aversion therapy he devises to reduce Geoffrey's drinking is a particularly diabolical stroke, which does no good, and only adds to his brother's insupportable burden of humiliation. In his reduced state, Geoffrey even dutifully confesses to Hugh that he "cheated a little on the strychnine" in his absence. Shaving the incapable Consul, Hugh hovers over him, "pleasantly menacing," waving the razor while joking about the "strength obtained by decapitation." It is hardly surprising that Firmin should feel he is being murdered slowly by Hugh's "salvage operations," as he half-seriously remarks to Yvonne. The new moral order Hugh tries to impose upon his brother is charged with a deep-seated resentment of him, which he may hide from himself, but not the Consul. Geoffrey recognizes the work of a "fine Italian hand" throughout Hugh's entire campaign to save him. But Hugh, confident of his own good intentions, blunders on. Having become involved with Yvonne once before while plotting with her to help the Consul, Hugh must recognize the delicacy of his position when she returns to Quauhnahuac. But though he realizes he should leave immediately, he stays on, in the face of his brother's evident hostility to his presence. He occupies himself by conceiving fantasies of the couple's future happiness together, marshalling the sight-seeing excursion, and monopolizing Yvonne's attention throughout the day, effectively smothering any possibility of a reconciliation between husband and wife. No doubt Firmin again pushes Yvonne at Hugh, and makes little effort to re-establish his relationship with her; but Hugh can hardly be excused. Singularly insensitive to the feelings and needs of those he would help, Hugh contrives to increase his brother's misery, rather than alleviating it. Preoccupied with his fantasies of action in the service of suffering humanity, he is unable to understand the dismal tragedy unfolding before his eyes. As Douglas Day notes, Hugh is contentedly "banging out songs of martial brotherhood on a cheap guitar as his half-brother and Yvonne are destroyed only yards from where he stands."²²

The self-effacement the situation calls for is utterly beyond Hugh. Fatuous in his self-importance, he fails to see that in this instance his intervention can only make matters worse. This need to assert himself distorts even his anti-colonialism, for Hugh wants to *confer* freedom upon others, dominating even in the process of liberation. As Mannoni and Fanon have argued, such notions of interventionism cannot really free the oppressed, but only perpetuate the colonial mentality of dependence.²³ Earlier generations of idealistic Englishmen found an outlet for their "immeasurable longings" in shaping the destinies of colonial peoples, and Hugh's kind of internationalism fulfils much the same need. A "passionate desire for *goodness*" is not enough in itself (*Letters*, p. 73); and though action is "absolutely necessary," it is essential that action be conditioned by commitment and self-knowledge. As it is, his rhetoric of activism is no less an expression of the exhausted Faustian will than the Consul's rhetoric of quietism. Unlike Juan Cerillo's socialism, there is "nothing constructive" in Hugh's politics, "merely a passion for fatality." His confused political impulses exemplify Spengler's view of the attraction of socialism for Faustian man in decline :

The Northern soul has exhausted its inner possibilities, and of the dynamic force and insistence that had expressed itself in world-historical visions of the future — visions of millennial scope — nothing remains but the mere pressure, the passionate desire to create, the form without the content. The soul was Will and nothing but Will. It needed an aim for its Columbus-longing; it *had* to give its inherent activity at least the illusion of a meaning and an object . . . For deep down beneath it all is the gloomy feeling, not to be repressed, that all this hectic zeal is the despairing self-deception of a soul that may not and cannot rest.²⁴

Even Hugh's work as a newspaperman feeds a Faustian power-urge. Spengler argues that the role of the press in modern society is to shape the "public truth" so as "to shepherd the masses."²⁵ He describes the press in military metaphors, as "an army with carefully organized arms and branches, with journalists as officers, and readers as soldiers." He sees the journalists' "intellectual artillery" as an expression of the "will-to-power operating under a pure democratic disguise." Although Hugh himself is contemptuous of the modern press — he tells Yvonne that he agrees with Spengler that journalism "equals intellectual male prostitution of speech and writing" — his work as a crusading journalist is perfectly adapted to his emotional needs. As a reporter, Hugh is able to imprint his will upon others as he could by no other activity. As Spengler observes, the press is able to decide what others think and believe: "What the press wills, is true. Its commanders evoke, transform, interchange truths. Three weeks of press-work, and the 'truth' is acknowledged by everybody."²⁶ But to achieve this power, Hugh has made his own Faustian bargain. He suspects that his exercise of power is only self-serving and probably dangerous to the welfare of the people and causes he supports. It is in his capacity as a journalist that Hugh fears his "curious thoughts"

may be “merrily brewing” the next war. And as he tells Yvonne, “Even when there are no wars think of the damage [journalists] do.” Walking by the *barranca*, Hugh imagines that he sees a large party of “defunct newspapermen,” cast down into the ravine, “still spying through keyholes and persuading themselves they’re acting in the best interests of democracy.” This, it seems, is the only punishment fit for journalists, to be cast into the “Malebolge,” Dante’s punishment for those who betray their responsibilities. Driven by self-hatred, Hugh is no more able to heal his self-division than is his brother. Just as the Consul has sought the death he finds under the volcano, Hugh also is led by a self-destructive urge to court a violent death atop his ship’s cargo of explosives.

The absolutism of the self that governs the lives of both brothers not only impoverishes the life of society, it also undermines the interdependence that is equally the basis of the private life. Lowry recognizes, with Buber, that individuality is only achieved fully in the social life, that “in the beginning is relation.” It is precisely because Lowry so intensely values the individual spirit that he fears the solipsistic drive in modern individualism. His own life offered him all too clear an insight into the fate of the imperial self, and a presentiment of the “creeping apocalypse” that threatens us all.²⁷ Like Lawrence, Lowry was particularly well qualified to offer a critique of the radical individualism that has sunk so deep beneath the surface of our lives that it is no longer recognized for what it is. Surely he would endorse much of Lawrence’s analysis of the modern individual’s inability to love, suggestive as it is of the plight of Hugh and Geoffrey Firmin.

To yield entirely to love would be to be absorbed, which is the death of the individual: for the individual must hold his own, or he ceases to be ‘free’ and ‘individual.’ So that we see, what our age has proved to its astonishment and dismay, that the individual *cannot* love . . . When the individual loves, he ceases to be purely individual. And so he *must* recover himself, and cease to love.²⁸

For both writers, the consequence of such individualism “is simply, suicide. Suicide individual and *en masse*.”²⁹

Unlike Lawrence, Lowry makes no real attempt to go beyond his searching self-criticism, to imagine new ways of being for western man. Juan Cerillo is at once selfless and fully alive, but he is seen only from afar, and is not wholly dissociated from Hugh’s heroic fantasies. He remains a lay figure who serves, like Swift’s Portuguese sea captain or Dickens’ Amy Dorrit, as a testament to the author’s good faith. If the *Volcano* overcomes despair to offer “a positive statement in defense of basic human values and human hopes,” as Alfred Kazin has maintained Lowry does,³⁰ it is because Lowry is unafraid to look directly into the face of the imperial self and report exactly what he has seen. Lowry the novelist is able to follow the path “right through hell” that is closed to the Consul, because unlike Geoffrey Firmin, he was able to see far beyond the self, and see clearly.

NOTES

- ¹ See C. B. Macpherson's commentary on Hobbes in *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962) for a suggestive discussion of the ideological basis of the position the Consul develops in his argument with Hugh. See esp. "Human Nature and the State of Nature," pp. 17-46.
- ² *Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry*, ed. Harvey Breit and Margerie Bonner Lowry (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1965), p. 60.
- ³ Quentin Anderson, *The Imperial Self* (1971; rpt. New York: Vintage, 1972), pp. 22, 57.
- ⁴ *Under the Volcano* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947), p. 31.
- ⁵ *An Area of Darkness* (London: Deutsch, 1964), p. 212. On a number of occasions scattered through the novel, Mexico is associated with India.
- ⁶ The Consul is taken for an American by Señor Bustamente, and by almost everyone he meets during his last visit to the Farolito — Diosdado, the Chief of Rosstrums and the old fiddler who attempts to warn the Consul of the danger he is ignoring.
- ⁷ *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, trans. Howard Greenfeld (1965; rpt. Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), pp. 8-9.
- ⁸ See Ronald G. Walker's discussion of the meaning of "pelado" in his *Infernal Paradise: Mexico and the Modern English Novel* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1978), pp. 261-62, 279-80.
- ⁹ *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1973), p. 211.
- ¹⁰ Margaret Canovan, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* (1974; rpt. London: Methuen, 1977), p. 32.
- ¹¹ Canovan, p. 37.
- ¹² Memmi, p. xvii.
- ¹³ Memmi, pp. xxvii-xxviii.
- ¹⁴ Canovan, p. 25.
- ¹⁵ *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 476.
- ¹⁶ *Origins*, p. 475.
- ¹⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (1954; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 89.
- ¹⁸ See, for example, Chet Taylor, "The Other Edge of Existential Awareness: Reading of Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*," *Literary Half-Yearly*, 14, no. 1 (1973), 138-50.
- ¹⁹ *Lowry* (Erin, Ont.: Press Porcépic, 1977), p. 193.
- ²⁰ In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt argues that many of the rudiments of modern totalitarian rule were to be found in the British Empire itself — for instance, in the arbitrary rule of colonial administrators, which violated Britain's heritage of constitutional government.
- ²¹ Quoted by Samuel Hynes in *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (London: Bodley Head, 1976), p. 127.
- ²² *Malcolm Lowry* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), p. 324.

- ²³ See O. Mannoni's *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*, and Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*.
- ²⁴ *The Decline of the West*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson, 2 vols. (1926 and 1928; rpt. New York: Knopf, 1976), I, 363-64.
- ²⁵ *Decline*, II, 462.
- ²⁶ *Decline*, II, 461.
- ²⁷ Anderson, p. vii.
- ²⁸ D. H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse* (1931; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), pp. 123-24.
- ²⁹ *Apocalypse*, p. 124.
- ³⁰ Kazin's letter to Albert Erskine, published in an appendix to Lowry's *Selected Letters*, p. 438.

COLONIAL WARS

Alexandre L. Amprimoz

At first model soldiers:
toys breeding honest desires
of war.

And then the real game:
flies against the screen
died like men
in my father's army.

Such germs of death
I caught in the African landscape.
There dragonflies would melt
their candied wings
in the sun,
there leaders drew with their nails
pale plans in the sand.