

THE CONSUL'S "MURDER"

Andrew J. Pottinger

THE MAJORITY of *Under the Volcano's* critics have directed their attention away from any interpretation of the work's psychological or "literal" level, and the consequent emphasis on symbolic and mythic interpretation has seriously dehumanized the novel. Further, the reader who fails to consider in detail this "immediate" level of *Under the Volcano* may come to overlook a major component of Lowry's meanings — a dimension of irony, centred on the theme of alienation, which he painstakingly and specifically built into the novel during its rewriting, and which emerges only through an alert reading of the work as an "engaged" novel, an account of human confrontation in historical time.

Lowry adopted a fictional technique in his major novel which conforms, more exactly than interpretations of the novel's mythic structures tend to recognize, to Sartre's description of the modern novelist's imperative:

... we had to people our books with minds that were half lucid and half overcast, some of which we might consider with more sympathy than others, but none of which would have a privileged point of view either upon the event or upon himself. We had to present creatures whose reality would be the tangled and contradictory tissue of each one's *evaluations* of all the other characters — himself included — and the evaluation by all the others of himself, and who could never decide from within whether the changes of their destinies came from their own efforts, from their own faults, or from the course of the universe.

Finally, we had to leave doubts, expectations, and the unachieved throughout our works, leaving it up to the reader to conjecture for himself by giving him the feeling, that his view of the plot and the characters was merely one among many others.¹

Under the Volcano conforms to this prescription by presenting the critical reader with a universe of inter-personal evaluation which parallels in its complexity that of his own day-to-day experience. It is thus equally difficult for him to make "final" moral judgments of the actions in Lowry's fictional world as it is to answer the moral questions he actually faces every day.

By way of preliminary illustration, consider an action whose setting is even more politically intense than the Mexico of *Under the Volcano* — Robert Jordan's killing the young Spaniard who opposes his leadership of the guerrilla force in Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Hemingway goes to great lengths to present all the evidence most readers need in order to exculpate Robert from any moral guilt. The question of moral guilt arises, and is determined conclusively, within the fictional world of the novel; the reader is only called upon to assent, not to deliberate. His reading experience, in this particular respect, is very unlike his experience of day-to-day moral issues where the relevant evidence he might like to have in order to make a decision is not always available, and where other evidence seems intractably ambiguous in its moral implications. Hemingway's fictional world is morally simplified for his reader in a way that Lowry's is not.

Hemingway cannot, of course, be fairly taken as a representative for other modern novelists either in general or in particular. His position is extreme. Other novelists, however, may present far more complex moral worlds than Robert Jordan's while, nevertheless, setting out just as Hemingway does to clarify the issues involved on the reader's behalf. But the extremism of Hemingway's fictional technique in this respect makes his treatment of Robert Jordan's action an especially illuminating contrast with Lowry's treatment of a similar fictional event. Geoffrey Firmin's violent death at the hands of the three "Chiefs of Police" seems quite clearly to raise the same kind of moral issues as Hemingway "disposes of" in the case of Robert Jordan — issues which any comprehensive interpretation of the intense final chapter, and hence of *Under the Volcano* as a whole, ought to consider. In fact, a conscientious reading of this last chapter shows that moral guilt for Geoffrey's death is not positively ascribed by Lowry's narrator to anybody in particular, least of all to the men who actually kill him.

Lowry's narrative stance, unlike Hemingway's, forces the critical reader to note, above all, the temporal nature of the protagonist's situation; the "events" taking place in Parián, at the Farolito, have to be interpreted by each of the participants in the drama before they can act upon them. The same "fact" may be fitted into different patterns in the minds of different observers and so come to acquire quite divergent significance for Geoffrey on the one hand and for the three

police chiefs who kill him on the other. Unlike the reader, the three police chiefs and Geoffrey do not have the luxury of time in which to analyse each other's actions as objectively as possible; they are not free, as the reader is, to evaluate the various possible, but equally plausible interpretations of their adversaries' behaviour.

A comparison of the "Mexican version" of the novel² with the published one precisely highlights the attention that Lowry paid during revision to the construction of a pattern of incriminating circumstantial evidence that mounts up, piece by piece throughout the final chapter, against the Consul. Many, if not most, of the changes made by Lowry to this chapter were features that increased the damning appearance of Geoffrey's behaviour in the eyes of the three chiefs who must interpret what they see under the pressures of passing time. That the Consul omits paying for his drinks and for María is a modification of Lowry's original plan, as is the presence in Geoffrey's jacket of Yvonne's letters addressed to "Firmin", and Hugh's incriminating documents. In the Mexican version of the novel the Consul had destroyed the letters by the time he came to be searched, and he had not lost his passport earlier in the day. Geoffrey's drawing the map of Spain is similarly an addition in the later version of this chapter. These changes achieve two major effects: first, they emphasize, for the reader, the Consul's entrapment in circumstance; secondly, they serve to heighten the irony whereby the police-chiefs, in turn, though in a different sense of the word, are "entrapped" by their own propensity to react with the utmost suspicion towards foreigners.

The reader has, of course, been given a privileged insight into both Geoffrey's personal history and his mental processes through eleven preceding chapters during which his mind is the focus of attention. The three chiefs of police must gain a very different image of the Consul. If they have no additional information concerning him than that which they acquire during this final chapter, their image of Geoffrey is constructed partly from reports by the patrons and barmen of the Farolito, who could observe his behaviour from the time he arrived, partly from their own direct observation of and discussion with the Consul himself, and is apparently completed by information received over the telephone from some higher authority.

The possibility that the police-chiefs have an image of the Consul as an arrogant, drunken, alien criminal and spy who might well "turn dangerous" at any moment — he does, after all, make an assault on the chiefs, brandishing a deadly weapon — constitutes their "defence" in the eyes of the critical reader who faces the problems of ascribing moral guilt for Geoffrey's death. The police might well

see themselves as confronted by a man attempting to cheat their countrymen and representing their ideological enemy, Bolshevism. He resists what might be, in their eyes, a legitimate arrest while showing no signs whatever of acting peacefully; and he is finally shot in fear as much as in anger when he attempts to escape. Careful examination of two passages in particular shows how Lowry's narrator allows this defence to remain consistent with the facts, and thus refrains from endorsing Geoffrey's subjective and suspicious interpretation of the police-chiefs' actions. In the scene leading directly to the shooting, the Consul's killer is described in detail:

The Chief of Rostrums was looking down at him. . . . "What the hell you think you do around here? You *pelado*, eh? It's no good for your health. I shoot de twenty people." *It was half a threat, half confidential.* . . .

"I blow you wide open from your knees up, you Jew *chingao*," *warned* the Chief of Rostrums. . . .

(My emphases)

The language the "objective" narrator chooses to describe the Consul's killer is reserved and non-committal as far as moral judgment is concerned, and actually tends to intensify the moral ambiguity of the Chief of Rostrums' position. The use of the terms "threat" and "warned" suggests that up to this stage there may be no "premeditation" in the Chief of Rostrums' mind. His behaviour, verbal and otherwise, is quite consistent with his having an image of the Consul as a dangerous criminal. The three chiefs may well have had their image of the Consul confirmed on the telephone, and it is thus ignorance and mistaken identity, combined with suspicion, which lead to their shooting a politically and legally innocent man. Hugh, whose documents Geoffrey is mistakenly carrying, and which incriminate him so clearly in the eyes of the police, is, indeed, many of the things which the police-chiefs suspect Geoffrey of being. He is staying with the Consul for only a few days before sailing to Spain with a cargo of high explosives, and, as a journalist, he is sending information to England which reflects adversely on the *Sinarquista* cause.

The reader might conclude from this that the chiefs are morally justified in *arresting* Geoffrey, but that their warnings and threats are shown to be nothing but camouflage for a more sinister purpose: such harassment would make any man react violently. This, however, would constitute a moral decision on the part of the reader which is not directed in any strict sense by the text. If the reader ascribes moral guilt to the police for their harassment of Geoffrey, he has passed through a *process* of judgment similar to that which he undertakes in the com-

parable situations of everyday life. He comes to a decision that Geoffrey's lying about his name, carrying incriminating documents, lack of a passport and drunken arrogance is insufficient warrant for the police-chiefs' response; but this decision will be based on the reader's own moral code — not upon any code implied or set forth in the novel. Lowry structures the moral universe of *Under the Volcano* in such a manner that the narrative voice sanctions no particular interpretation or evaluation of its fictional events. The reader is left, as Sartre puts it, "with doubts, speculations, and the unachieved"; and he is left, like the protagonists, "to bet, to conjecture without evidence, to undertake in uncertainty and persevere without hope."³ Without more evidence than Lowry is willing to allow his reader, in the form, for example, of omniscient insight into the police-chiefs' minds, the novel raises the moral issues surrounding a man's violent death and yet, effectively, leaves the reader in little better a position than the protagonists when it comes to resolving them.

This point is further borne out by the narrator's presentation of the mental image (thieves, murderers) that Geoffrey constructs of his "persecutors", the fascist Unión Militar:

He started. In front of him tied to a small tree he hadn't noticed, though it was right opposite the *cantina* on the other side of the path, stood a horse cropping the lush grass. Something familiar about the beast made him walk over. *Yes — exactly as he thought. . . .* Unbidden, an explanation of this afternoon's events came to the Consul. Hadn't it turned out to be a policeman into which all those abominations he'd observed a little while since had melted, a policeman leading a horse in this direction? Why should not that horse [the property of the dying Indian in chapter VIII] be this horse?

(My emphasis)

The narrator makes no claim here to veracity of vision on the Consul's part. The key phrase introducing Geoffrey's mescal-driven speculation is an extreme example of semantic ambiguity — "Yes — exactly as he thought". Given the context, this phrase cannot reasonably be interpreted as an objective statement on the part of the narrator, "Yes — it was exactly as *Geoffrey* had thought"; the reader must interpret it as the reported thought in Geoffrey's drugged mind, "Yes — exactly as *I* thought", in which case the description and deduction that follow are both entirely subjective. In other words, there is no unambiguous claim made *by the narrator* at this crucial point concerning the guilt or innocence of the Unión Militar with respect to the Indian's death. The fact of the horse's presence with its restored though empty saddlebags does not make the Consul's explana-

tion any more acceptable to the impartial reader than, for example, the possible explanation of the police-chiefs' treatment of Geoffrey offered above. Their possession of the horse does not imply that the police have actually stolen either it, or the money which, incidentally, nobody has seen any way. Again, however, it should be emphasized that to say this is not to say that the police-chiefs are innocent, or to insist that their motivation is such as to justify the Consul's arrest from a moral point of view. No final moral judgment is indicated or suggested by these facts alone.

Under the pressures of time, however, Geoffrey must, on the basis of the limited evidence at his disposal, make exactly the same kind of prematurely final evaluation of the police-chiefs as they must, in turn, make of him. He sees the members of the Unión Militar not as men but as "fascists". In the Mexican version of the novel this interpretation of Geoffrey's was far more blatant and melodramatic — he says to the police-chiefs in his final outburst, for example, "You're pure evil". In the published version this overt political stereotyping is more restrained but the principle remains the same. As far as the Consul is concerned, the three men he confronts are not human beings, "innocent until proven guilty", but the embodiment of everything he detests.

The Consul's prime demand during his final outburst is "Give me those letters back!" For the police-chiefs, Yvonne's letters are material evidence confirming their suspicions as to Geoffrey's being a spy. However, owing to Geoffrey's paranoid interpretation of the police-chiefs' role in the death of the peasant, he sees their possession of his wife's love-letters as a horrible travesty of cosmic justice: the letters come to represent the possibility of wholehearted human trust and communion; and the police-chiefs seem, consequently, to represent the forces that destroy such communion. He sees them quite literally as the source of alienation and distrust that allows, or forces, men to "pass by on the other side."

The mescal the Consul has consumed facilitates the giving body, in a hallucinatory fashion, to these interpretations and deductions. Because he prejudices the police-chiefs in this manner, as the source of alienation and suffering, he also sees in their faces first, "a hint of M. Laruelle", the thief who robbed him of Yvonne; second, an image of himself as "the Chief of Gardens again", as the man who had allowed the dying peasant to lie alone, unaccompanied, in the dust; and third, a further image of "the policeman Hugh had refrained from striking this afternoon" and who, Geoffrey thinks, is directly responsible for the peasant's death.

The irony of this passage is extreme. The Consul recognizes the horror of alienated humanity, and indistinctly sees this lying at the root of his own and all men's

predicament; but he himself suffers from the same alienation in making such a judgment of the men he faces. In adopting the most "vicious" explanation possible of the police-chiefs' conduct, the Consul himself fails to escape from the trap of his conditioning: he fails to give the police the consideration as human beings which he feels they withhold from both him and the common people represented by the dying Indian.

The revelation of this ironic dimension through a careful examination of the novel's "immediate" level in chapter XII points the way to an enlarged understanding of the theme of communion and alienation itself. In the final chapter, some aspect of the breakdown in human communication is presented on almost every page: by calling for "Mescal" as the chapter opens, the Consul cuts himself off from normal human perception; his not paying for his drinks arises from a mistrustful misunderstanding between "A Few Fleas" and himself; and his initially cynical response to Yvonne's letters — "Had Yvonne been reading the letters of Heloise and Abelard?" — is further evidence of misunderstanding and failure to trust another human being. He jumps to conclusions concerning the possession of the peasant's horse by the Unión Militar, and drunkenly refuses to give the three chiefs his correct name, not trusting them with accurate personal information. By their conversation on the telephone, the police-chiefs seem to confirm the mistaken identity of Geoffrey with the murderer who has "escaped through seven states", Geoffrey refuses to trust in the offers of help from the old lady and the fiddler/potter, while Diosdado seems to interpret his reaching out across the bar as an attempt to strike him. At every stage, suspicion and distrust obscure each participant's vision of his fellow men so that human communion becomes impossible.

At every stage, too, the frontiers of language act to separate the Consul from those around him. The final scene in the barroom is obviously an image of the complete failure of all human communication as Yvonne's letters are mingled with the stories of the drunken Weber, and with the deserter speaking incoherently of Mozart writing the Bible. And nowhere is this theme of alienation more powerfully dramatized than when the Consul traces the map of Spain in the mescal spilled on the surface of the bar.

No direct report of the Consul's mind is presented during this episode, but the narrative seems to suggest that the map of Spain is drawn in almost automatic response to his thoughts of Yvonne, whose letters Diosdado has just returned to him. He uses the map as illustration for memories of conjugal happiness with Yvonne, and as a means of establishing a human contact with Diosdado: "These

letters you gave me — see? — are from my wife, my *esposa*. ?Claro? This is where we met. In Spain. You recognize it, your old home, you know Andalusia?" His ploy is obviously vain. "The Elephant's" command of English is too weak for him to follow the Consul's speeding mind as Geoffrey explains the connection between the three of them: Yvonne, Diosdado, and himself.

Communication, and hence communion, is impossible between them not only, however, because of this language barrier, but also, perhaps, because Diosdado is suspicious of the Consul as an American spy even before they speak. Whatever Geoffrey says to him will be interpreted within this framework of suspicion, for the existence of which neither Geoffrey nor Diosdado alone can legitimately be blamed. It is a framework created by historico-political circumstances, by the fact that Diosdado, like the cinema proprietor of chapter I, has had experience of spies in the past, and knows they bring nothing but trouble to a man like himself. Diosdado seems to interpret Geoffrey as making some kind of indeterminate political point, and it may be due to this that the three Unión Militar men eventually arrive in the Farolito. The narrative voice never makes it clear whether Diosdado himself actually calls them, and they may well have been called by the "group at the other end of the bar", whose faces "turned in the Consul's direction." Even if they are not "called" at all, the map incident forms a basis for their accusing the Consul of being a "Bolsheviki prick".

On the one hand, then, the Consul unfairly jumps to conclusions: he interprets the policeman's leading the slain (we suppose) peasant's horse as incriminating the Unión Militar and confirming the suspicious picture of them he had painted for Hugh earlier in the day. He thus fails to give the policemen the benefit of the doubt. On the other hand, Diosdado, the other men in the bar and the police-chiefs all seem to fail to give Geoffrey this same human consideration. Distrust is mutual, and neither "side" can see straight or openly for their conditioning.

The final futile attempt at unconstrained human communion is made by the old fiddler who whispers "*compañero*" to the dying Geoffrey, and it may be, though there is no certainty here either, that the only characters who can see straight, who are not alienated from their fellow men by distrust, are the ordinary Mexican people "of indeterminate class" whom, significantly, "the Consul hated to look at".

The main critical insight achieved by the enquiry undertaken here is that Lowry's concern with man's alienation from his fellow man, in a world without moral norms or community, is embodied in the ambiguous narration itself: the

reader must become aware of and experience this alienation for himself as part of the reading process:

The literary work, at its best . . . provides *moving images* (in both the descriptive and perceptual senses of the phrase), and thus engages the reader, in Sartre's term, as *homme-dans-le-monde*, as man *in situation*, and to demands not dispassionate contemplation nor political or moral activity, but rather dialogue. . . .⁴

The reader of *Under the Volcano* discovers his alienation from the protagonists each time he faces his own human response to their actions — a categorical imperative, for example, that an action like the police-chiefs' killing of the Consul be morally evaluated. He then finds himself in precisely the same kind of morally ambiguous and opaque universe as that of the protagonists when he recognizes the sheer lack of "contact" between himself and the fictional figures he attempts to judge. They are "closed off" from him. The narrative gives him a personal history of Geoffrey, the victim, which is full of ambiguity, to say the least, no matter how fully his consciousness is explored during the Day of the Dead; and he is alienated from Geoffrey's killers through his having neither omniscient insight into their minds, nor sufficient detailed information concerning their actual behaviour. The reader must eventually experience his own alienation when he finds himself unable to unearth any evidence within the novel to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that when they kill the Consul the members of the Unión Militar act against their consciences. This will seem a ludicrous conclusion only so long as the reader fails to recognize that the Consul's perception, partly due to the alienation induced and symbolized by his mescal drinking, is as distorted as that of his apparent persecutors.

Naturally, Lowry's introduction during revision of this powerful irony on the novel's literal level extensively affected the very important role played by myth and symbol in *Under the Volcano*. This study must largely ignore that dimension of the novel for reasons of space; but one or two relevant points may be made regarding the shift in relationship between the literal and other levels. In the Mexican version of the novel, myth and symbol served the purpose of "propaganda" — to cast the three police-chiefs, for example, as minions of Mephistopheles, and very little else. This attempted one-to-one allegorical relationship between symbolic and political realities inevitably presented the political and moral dimensions of human experience in historical time as flat and simplistic. The whole orientation of the novel consequently shifted during revision from being a *moralistic* attack on fascism as the source of all evil, towards emphasizing,

through irony, the very sin of which the novelist himself had been guilty in his earlier version: premature judgment of his fellow man.

Lowry both recognized and rejected the artistic aridity and invalidity of his own earlier version in which the major protagonists were little more than counters moved in the predetermined and conventional pattern of a mythic eternity where "life was a forest of symbols". He confronted the fully *human* questions of life in time which were implicit in the story he wished to tell, relinquished his earlier commitment to the essentially static universe of myth, and "restored to the event its brutal freshness, its ambiguity, its unforeseeability".⁵ And these latter are the very qualities that the reading proposed here emphasizes as characteristic of the published novel's literal level. The three police-chiefs remain at another level the minions of Mephistopheles in the story of Faust,⁶ but they are also far more. The story of Faust comes, through Lowry's revision, to have a more meaningful and powerful bearing on the condition of modern man when the figures in question are not solely allegorical, but understandably human. In the published novel, instead of seeing men as ciphers, and, like Geoffrey, pointing to the fascists as the source of alienation, Lowry *dramatizes* the tragedy of a world where, under the pressures of time, it is either possible or inevitable that the Consul and his killers interpret the facts as they do. He presents the reader with a *fictional* world of which it is virtually impossible to decide finally whether its protagonists are any more capable than human beings of escaping from the influence of a world-wide atmosphere of distrust and suspicion that conditions every perception they make.

The relationship between Lowry's Mexican version and the published novel, when viewed in this perspective, is uncannily akin to the relationship which René Girard noted between Camus' *L'Étranger* and *La Chute*.⁷ On a certain level, Lowry must have undergone the same kind of "existential conversion" as Camus, and perceived that it was an act of literary "bad faith" to give his narrative authorial sanction in the earlier version of the novel to Geoffrey's subjective vision of fascist evil. As in *La Chute*, the real question in the published version of *Under the Volcano* is no longer "who is innocent, who is guilty?" but "why do we, all of us, have to keep judging and being judged?" In *La Chute* Camus substituted for the Meursault of *L'Étranger* a hero with a different point of view. Lowry, in his published version, performs precisely the same kind of reorientation by "deserting" and "incriminating" his hero, denying Geoffrey's subjective vision the sanction of the objective narrator:

Meursault [like both the Consul *and* the Lowry who wrote the Mexican version]

viewed evil as something outside himself, a *problem* that concerned the judged [the fascists] alone, whereas Clamence [like both the Lowry of the published version and his reader] knows that he, himself, is involved. Evil is the *mystery* of a pride which, as it condemns others, unwittingly condemns itself. . . . Reciprocity between the I and the Thou asserts itself in the very efforts I make to deny it: "The sentence which you pass against your fellow men," says Clamence, "is always flung back into your face where it effects quite a bit of damage."

The argument presented here may be generalized so as to apply to the whole world of the published novel, and not only to the culminating, extreme moral encounter. Each of the relationships and interactions that the reader observes, both in retrospect and in all their immediacy, *engage* him; and each one "ultimately invokes [an] exercise of discrimination and existential choice. . . ."⁸ In this way the reader brings himself up short against the intractable questions surrounding his own life: the uncertain relationship between freedom and morality, and the "absurd" imperative of having to judge one's fellow man under the pressure of time, while seriously alienated from him in a world where "community", in any meaningful sense, is non-existent.

NOTES

- ¹ Jean Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 218-19 (my emphasis).
- ² Richard Hauer Costa, in his article "*Pietà, Pelado*, and 'The Ratification of Death': The Ten-Year Evolvement of Malcolm Lowry's *Volcano*," *JML*, 2, No. 1 (September 1971), 3-18, has noted the existence of two principal versions of the novel: the "Mexican version" completed in Mexico by 1938, and the "published version" completed in Canada.
- ³ Sartre, p. 219.
- ⁴ William V. Spanos, "Modern Literary Criticism and the Spatialization of Time: An Existential Critique," *JAAC*, 29, No. 1 (Fall 1970), 100.
- ⁵ Sartre, p. 220.
- ⁶ See Anthony R. Kilgallin's "Faust and *Under the Volcano*," *Malcolm Lowry: The Man and his Work*, ed. George Woodcock (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1971), p. 26-37.
- ⁷ "Camus's Stranger Retried," *PMLA*, 79 (December 1964), 519-33.
- ⁸ Spanos, p. 100.