

# THE ALCOHOLIC ON ALCOHOLISM

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**I**F YOU BELIEVE IN heaven, be assured that Malcolm Lowry is there (and probably hates it). It is perhaps an unlikely destination for a man who occasionally sold his clothes to buy a drink, and wrote about people who might sell their souls for a dash of bitters. Lowry's principal — virtually his only — subject was his own mind and the demons that lived there. And mean, spiteful creatures they were! But his instincts were always right. The poor damned wretches who stumble through his stories, their foggy minds periodically lit by insights almost too sharp to believe, are always looking for a route to salvation through faith. That they never find anything to have faith *in* is quite beside the point. If heaven makes any sense at all, it's intent that counts. And their intentions (like Lowry's) are honourable.

*Under the Volcano*, Lowry's masterpiece, is a novel written (and designed to be read and understood) on many levels. It is about a man's distaste for what he finds in himself and his inability to live with it. It is about the need for love, and the pain of being unable to give it. But it is also a political novel, concerned with mankind's capacity for organized cruelty in a world moving toward fascism. It is filled with mysticism, signs, omens and portents, all expertly woven into the narrative by a man who knew the Cabbala and other dusty doctrines, and who firmly believed that nothing is quite what it seems. It is influenced by the cinema and by Lowry's taste for jazz. It is as complex as Joyce's *Ulysses*, to which it is often compared.

More than anything, though, it is about drunkenness. And this is the aspect of the book that has never been adequately interpreted. All the critics mention it, of course. One could not write about *Under the Volcano* without mentioning drunkenness. But many take the attitude that it is unimportant, that the book succeeds almost in spite of it. Some of them seem embarrassed by the confessional nature of it, as they would probably not be by the most explicit sexual revela-

tions. Most of them, I think, simply have no conception of the devious workings of the alcoholic mind. They are blind victims of the blessed ignorance that comes from not having wasted any considerable portion of their lives getting drunk. Which is all the more reason to pay attention, because it's all there if one can find it.

To begin more or less at the beginning, why was Lowry a drunkard? In attempting, without any real hope of success, to answer this question, it is worth noting that virtually every protagonist in a Lowry story is provided not only with an overwhelming sense of guilt to justify his urge for self-destruction, but with a tangible *reason* for it. Ethan Llewellyn, in *October Ferry to Gabriola*, agonizes over a prep school friend who hanged himself. It is suggested that he was almost an accomplice in the tragedy. Everywhere he looks, there are reminders of the dead friend. In *Volcano*, Geoffrey Firmin, the Consul, broods over the execution of some German prisoners on a British gunboat he commanded during World War I. The circumstances surrounding this event are always kept vague. Sometimes the Consul dismisses it as nonsense: " 'People simply did not go around,' he said, 'putting Germans in furnaces.' " This remark is recalled by his friend, Jacques Laruelle, in the long retrospective first chapter, which takes place exactly one year after the action of the story. But, Laruelle remembers, at other times he seemed to be tortured by the memory of the act, and to demand the blame for it: "But by this time the poor Consul had already lost almost all capacity for telling the truth . . . and the German officers were merely an excuse to buy another bottle of mescal."

There is ample room for doubt that the incident ever took place. For one thing, the Consul's age (which we can compute from other information) would have made him impossibly young, at the time of the incident, for the high naval rank which would have accompanied command of a ship engaged in vital missions.

Was Lowry's arithmetic bad? Not likely; he was usually careful of detail, and it is hard to believe that he would have let such an error slip through in a book he had worked on for ten years.

The obvious probability is that Lowry deliberately clouded this phase of the Consul's past. He created the possibility of a shameful secret, and along with it the strong likelihood that there was none. This is the sort of thing an alcoholic clings to: a reason for drinking so awful that it can only be hinted at, but which can yet be shucked off if he is ever seriously called to account for it. There is, of course, no need to simulate the feeling of guilt. All alcoholics have that automatically — about their drinking.

It is worth asking why Lowry felt it necessary to create a reason for his hero's alcoholism. Aside from the fact that a drunkard feels comfortable with a reason, it is also undoubtedly a concession to his readers. People who are not compulsive drinkers have a tendency to seek explanations for those who are. It makes for interesting conversation and it gives them a sense of the fitness of things ("there's a logical reason for everything"). The fact is that the vast majority of alcoholics do not know why they drink. Those who have permanently renounced alcohol are quite definite on this matter. Those who have not cannot be trusted on this or any other matter having to do with drinking.

While it is impossible to single out a reason for Lowry's insatiable drinking, it is easy to pick out a pattern in his life which fits it. His father, a prosperous merchant (whose stuffiness may be partially measured by the fact that he signed his letters "Your affectionate Dad"), was hardly the type to warm up to a son whose first ambition was to be a jazz musician — especially since Lowry's three older brothers had all toed the mark and played the game. There was, from the beginning, friction and misunderstanding between the Liverpool cotton broker and his youngest son.

Lowry was agonizingly shy as a child, hardly less so as a man. An eye ailment kept him almost blind from his ninth to his thirteenth year. He had a nursemaid who, he said, used to beat him and once attempted to kill him. The bitterness engendered in youthful mishandling never left him, and it is given voice in a number of his poems, notably in "Autopsy".<sup>1</sup>

The best piece ever written about Lowry's prep school and university days was done by Conrad Knickerbocker,<sup>2</sup> a superb reporter and a sensitive and sympathetic chronicler. Lowry, he says, had a neurotic fear of venereal disease, the product of an almost endless series of parental lectures on the subject, complete with pictures *and exhibits*, long before he was old enough to be in any danger of contracting such an illness (at least in the traditional way). They left him a "sexual hypochondriac" for the rest of his life.

Martin Case, a brilliant biochemist and one of Lowry's closest friends at Cambridge, calls him "A true syphilophobe" who talked about syphilis so much that people thought he had it. (It must be remembered here that syphilis, in those pre-penicillin days, was a far more terrifying disease than it is now, almost akin to leprosy in its capacity to inspire fear.) But his aversion to girls went quite beyond the bacterial. Case relates that he once tried to introduce him to a girl, "a literary type", but Lowry would have none of it: "... he thought we were

making fun of him. He simply couldn't believe that anyone wanted to meet him, nor . . . that his talents commanded great respect in others."

Lowry was, says Case, "frightened of people in charge". That says as much about the potential or incipient alcoholic as could ever be said in so compact a phrase. He was frightened of people in charge — not just the policeman or the boss, but the room clerk, the usher, the stranger on the telephone (who must be in charge of something, or one would not be talking to him). In Case's corroborative anecdote, it was a janitor.

Lowry's stories repeatedly support this description. In *Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid*, Sigbjørn Wilderness (i.e. Lowry) marvels at the courage of a young man who faces the customs and immigration people at the airport unshaven and uncombed, "whereas Sigbjørn for fifteen minutes prior to landing . . . would have been dodging in and out of the lavatory and plaguing Primrose as to whether he looked 'all right' . . . this man . . . even daring to smoke . . . seemed to him the epitome of everything that he would like to be."

Lowry is, then, in many respects a prototypical alcoholic. But he veers wildly from the true path of alcoholism in one all-important respect: the ability to write so clearly and honestly about his addiction. His subtle understanding of his own devious alcoholic mind is the more astonishing because he attained it while still addicted to alcohol. The feat virtually required dividing himself in two, divorcing the mind of the writer from that of the man, in order that one might examine the other.

There is a simple and obvious reason for the alcoholic's inability to talk honestly about his condition. All alcoholics lie. It is intrinsic. They lie to their friends, they lie to themselves, they even lie to other alcoholics. Non-addicted drinkers often brag about how much they drink; alcoholics almost always minimize it. This is not to say that the alcoholic is basically dishonest. He may be a model of virtue in all things, except where his drinking is concerned. But this is misleading, because almost every decision an alcoholic makes is influenced by its possible effect on his ability to get a drink, now or two weeks hence.

To illustrate: given a choice of two parties to attend at some future date, the alcoholic will, within seconds, weigh half a dozen factors quite beyond the imagination of the normal person. The possible congeniality of the company may *not* be one of them. He may, in fact, prefer to spend the evening with people he doesn't much like. If the prospective host is lavish with his spirits, that will obviously weigh in his favour. But more important is his *style* of entertaining. Does he urge people to pour their own drinks? Does he leave the liquor around

where anyone can get at it? Is the drink-mixing spot out of sight of the room where the guests congregate? Do the host and hostess tend to over-drink (which draws attention away from others who do)? The list of possible questions is unlimited, but the experienced alcoholic will consider all of them. If the signs are favourable, he will get three times as much to drink as the average guest, without anyone's seeing him. If he is plainly very drunk at the end of the evening, he will be put down as one of those unfortunate people who can't hold their liquor, at least by those who don't know him. (The "invisible" drink is, of course, the source of the persistent notion that alcoholics regularly get roaring drunk on three or four drinks.)

If all this seems exaggerated, it is not. If it seems ludicrous, well, it is. The total dedication of a good mind to such a trivial pursuit is patently ridiculous. But it's deadly serious to the millions of good minds so dedicated at this moment.

I HAVE DWELT on this at such length because it is essential that the reader understand the inspired duplicity of the alcoholic mind if he is to appreciate Lowry's unique achievement. It is a mind thoroughly given over to deceit, trickery, and plain lying. And Lowry's was typical of the species. He lied, cheated and cozened with all the skill at his command, which was considerable. But Lowry the Writer pulled off the remarkable feat of dissociating himself from the drunkard, and writing about him with the clearest eye that has ever been fixed upon him. And he did all this without ever conquering his addiction. True, there were apparently periods of relative sobriety, but he never really renounced liquor and he died drunk. The alcoholic, even during a sober spell, simply does not share his secrets. Lowry broke that rule, and the result is *Under the Volcano* — something of a literary miracle.

In her book on the Cabbalistic significance of *Under the Volcano*, Perle Epstein footnotes an explanation of a mystically symbolic twelve-day journey, during which the subject remains in a trance, with the comment, "This aspect of ritual suffering is relevant to Lowry's hero, who goes through twelve chapters of hell in an inebriated state to his martyrdom."<sup>28</sup>

This viewpoint, while perhaps quite valid, is an example of the usual critical approach to the drunkenness theme in *Volcano*. It is seen as pure symbolism; only its figurative meaning is important. The fact that Lowry was literally a drunk, writing about genuine, mind-shattering, cold-sweat, hand-shuddering drunkenness, is apparently thought inconsequential.

The tragedy of the Consul in *Volcano*, best described, lies in his inability to love another human being. The phrase, “*No se puede vivir sin amar,*” recurring throughout the novel, is translated by almost every critic as “you cannot live without love,” when it really means: “You cannot live without *loving.*” The difference is pivotal. Hardly anyone, deserving or not, is totally unloved. Certainly, the Consul was not. But *loving* comes from within and cannot be forced. Its absence is intensely personal and painful.

Stephen Spender, in his introduction to the 1965 edition of *Volcano*, says: “Fundamentally, *Under the Volcano* is no more about drinking than *King Lear* is about senility. It is about the Consul, which is another matter, for what we feel about him is that he is great and shattered . . . Most of all, *Under the Volcano* is about the breakdown of values in the twentieth century.”

Spender is one of Lowry’s most perceptive critics, but we cannot so easily separate the Consul from his drinking, because we cannot separate him from *Lowry*. Drunkenness, in *Volcano*, is not merely a thematic device to exemplify mankind’s insensitivity to the evil within itself. Nor is it merely a technical device to sustain the Consul’s wild fantasizing. It *is* both these things, but it is not *merely*, nor even primarily, them. It is integral to the Consul’s tragedy because it is integral to Lowry.

It is important to mention here that Lowry was not able to create characters in the normal novelistic sense. All his major characters are versions of himself. This being true — conceded by critics and by Lowry himself — I shall not be reluctant to discuss the Consul as if he were Lowry, which, in so far as his alcoholic behaviour is concerned, he is.

Toward the end of the first chapter of *Volcano*, Jacques Laruelle finds a letter the dead Consul wrote, but never mailed, to the wife who had left him (but would return). After her departure, the Consul wrote, he had taken the train to Oaxaca, where they had once been happy together. The trip was a horror. Awful things happened to him, but even worse was what happened within him. Like most seekers after hell, he finds it in his own mind. He sees himself “as a great explorer who has discovered some extraordinary land from which he can never return to give his knowledge to the world: but the name of this land is hell.”

In Chapter Ten, we will hear him shout, as he runs drunkenly into the woods, toward his death: “I love hell. I can’t wait to get back there.” Like Rimbaud (“*Je me crois en enfer, donc j’y suis*”), the Consul has created his own hell. Rimbaud, a poet, saw no need to put the words in the mouth of another, but the distinction is unimportant. The Consul’s season in hell is Lowry’s own.

The most significant line in the letter, however, is a simple statement: "You cannot know the sadness of my life." The apparent meaning is plain: the Consul wants his wife to come back; in the timeworn phrase of lovers everywhere, he cannot live without her. But he means much more than that. He means the sadness of *all* of his life, including that part she had shared with him. He means both what had made him a drunk (if he only knew what that was) and the fact that he is a drunk, and that being a drunk is a terribly sad thing, so sad, indeed, that one cannot face it without a drink.

"You cannot know the sadness of my life." This to Yvonne, who would have said that she well knew the sadness of his life, for she had lived it with him and found it so sad that she had left him. And yet the Consul is right. Because no one who is not an alcoholic can ever understand the alcoholic's need to drink. He does not understand it himself, but he knows what it *feels* like, something no "outsider" can know. (This is the basis of the success of Alcoholics Anonymous. It is not love or sympathy that the alcoholic seeks in AA — he may well get those at home — but the company of people who know how he feels. He can find that nowhere but with other alcoholics.) "You cannot know the sadness of my life." It is true. She cannot.

(It can be argued that she could know the sadness of his life by becoming an alcoholic herself. This is true. If she could, somehow, achieve that dubious goal, she would finally know the sadness of his life. But it would not interest her much, for she would then be totally immersed in the sadness of her own life.)

The *Times Literary Supplement*, in an unsigned lead article on Lowry,<sup>4</sup> says he "could remember almost everything that happened during bouts of drunkenness — no alcoholic amnesia, there . . ." The statement is naively absurd. All alcoholics have blackouts — periods, often of several hours, in which they function almost normally, may not even seem very drunk, but of which they can remember nothing at all. Lowry was no exception,<sup>5</sup> as is repeatedly made clear in his writing.

In Chapter Five of *Volcano*, it is eleven a.m. The Consul has been poking about in his garden, looking for (and finding) a hidden bottle. He sees his wife and brother on the porch, waves . . . and wakes up in the bathroom, an hour and a quarter later, holding a glass of stale beer, from which he drinks slowly, "postponing the problem soon to be raised by its emptiness."

The average person, waking in this condition, would be repelled by the very thought of a drink. To the Consul, the few swallows of warm beer are as anti-toxin for the plague. But they must be taken deliberately, "postponing the prob-

lem". And the problem is that they will not be nearly enough. There are bottles of fresh cold beer — celestial nectar — in the icebox, a room or so away. Soon, he will have to open one of them. Why not now? Because the one thing a bathroom assures is privacy, the opportunity to drink alone, the absolute assurance that no one who loves you will say — and no one else who matters ever says it — "Don't you think you've had enough?"

Now, Hugh and Yvonne have been carefully *avoiding* criticism of the Consul's drinking. He could, if he wished, stride boldly to the icebox, pop open a beer, and be momentarily restored to health, without drawing so much as a sidelong glance. But he fears what they will — or even might — be thinking. For it is one more affliction of the alcoholic that he is always ashamed of his drinking. This is why, drunk or sober, he maintains the fiction that he could drink moderately, and surely will next time. He does not, *ever*, consider stopping until he faces the fact that moderation is not within his power.

ONE DEVICE the alcoholic uses to enforce the self-delusion that he doesn't "need" the drink is the tactic of spurious indifference. *Under the Volcano* is practically a textbook in the use of this gambit, which is absurdly simple. Given a drink after a period of abstinence (of any length), the alcoholic simply delays drinking it. That's all, and it is pointless, but he feels like a hero. Alcoholism being primarily an emotional ailment, the mere presence of the drink is calming. Deferring the moment of consumption supports the belief that it will be voluntary. It is a ritual as fixed as the mating dance of the curlew, and its consummation is even more certain: he will drink the drink.

At the beginning of Chapter Seven of *Volcano*, the scene is the home of Jacques Laruelle. Laruelle, a decent man, has been Yvonne's lover when she fled from the Consul's drunkenness, and the Consul is uncomfortable there. Drinks are poured. He does not touch his, but instead scans the countryside through binoculars from a balcony, commenting lightly on random topics. The implication is plain: he is so indifferent to liquor that he has forgotten the drink is there. He has not forgotten.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, Yvonne suggests that they leave to see the fiesta. She is more uncomfortable than he in Laruelle's house, but this has not occurred to the Consul, involved as he is totally with himself. Almost desperately, she pleads with him to come. Quietly, but actually with equal desperation, he expresses a



lack of interest in the fiesta and suggests that she and Hugh go along, and that he join them later.

Laruelle goes downstairs to see Hugh and Yvonne out. Left alone, the Consul permits himself to become aware of the profusion of good things that have come his way, quite unbidden. He has not touched his drink, the others have barely touched theirs, and the cocktail shaker is not empty. He is surrounded by alcohol. But still he does not drink. The Consul is playing the game to the limit. He even eats half a canapé — proving he is in no danger, for it is well known that alcoholics have no interest in food.

Laruelle returns and angrily attacks him: “Am I to understand that your wife has come back to you, something I have seen you praying and howling for under the table — really under the table . . . And that you treat her as indifferently as this, and still continue only to care where the next drink’s coming from?” The Consul is stunned by this “staggering injustice” (no one but the player ever takes the game seriously).

Laruelle goes off to prepare for a tennis match, and the Consul suddenly decides to return a telephone call received hours before. The Herculean task of looking up the number puts him in a sweat. He finds the number, forgets it, looks it up again, half completes the call, hangs up in panic. It is too hard. He cannot make the call without a drink. He dashes back to the upper room, downs all the drinks plus the residue in the shaker, and saunters back downstairs, returned to the living. The telephone call is forgotten.

The game is over, this time. But he takes pride in the fact that it was played by the rules. At no time, he tells himself, did he intend to drink those drinks until the telephone crisis left him no choice. At no time, in fact, was there the slightest possibility that he would not drink them. For the experienced player, there is always a crisis.

A few hours later, the Consul, Hugh and Yvonne are sitting in the arena at Tomalín. What they are watching is not a bullfight, but a sort of bull baiting. The bull is not killed, or even hurt much. He is simply pestered unmercifully and robbed of his dignity. It is more sad than brutal, suggestive of a people desperate to be amused but unsure of how to go about it, and metaphorically of a world which laughingly tolerates gratuitous cruelty and seems about to end with a disinterested whimper. (It is 1938, and a different spectre is haunting Europe.)

Hugh takes a drink from a small bottle of rum he has brought, and passes it to Yvonne. She takes a sip and hands it to the Consul, who sits “holding the

bottle gloomily in his hands without drinking.” The game is on again. Yvonne and Hugh, not being compelled to drink, can drink freely. The Consul, who must drink, must also pretend that he is indifferent to it. He can wait for the crisis. It comes quickly. In response to a challenge from the bull ring, Hugh goes down to ride the bull. He does it well, but the strain is too much for the Consul. Yvonne tells him there is no danger: “It’s all right, Geoff. Hugh knows what he’s doing.” But the Consul is not, cannot allow himself to be, reassured. “‘The risk . . . the fool,’ the Consul said, drinking habanero.” But of course. And he drinks it all — all but a swallow for Hugh, so no one can say, “Oh, did you finish it?” The craftiness of the presumably befuddled alcoholic, when he is simultaneously protecting his liquor supply and his “honour,” cannot be overestimated. The giant flaw in this virtuoso performance is that the audience doesn’t know the show is on. Those who know him are not studying him. Why should they? They know him.

The Sal6n Of6lia, where the three go next, turns out to be a veritable theatre-in-the-round for the Consul’s repertoire. “‘Mescal,’ the Consul said, almost absentmindedly. What had he said? Never mind. Nothing less than mescal would do. But it mustn’t be a serious mescal, he persuaded himself. ‘No, Se6or Cervantes,’ he whispered, ‘mescal, poquito.’”

This short passage introduces several basic alcoholic concepts. First, the Consul has ordered the deadly mescal (instead of something “safe” like tequila or whiskey) quite by accident, it seems. Well, now it’s done, he might as well take it. Probably just what he needs. Second, there is the idea of the “serious” drink. The alcoholic finds it comforting to think that he won’t get drunk unless he *wants* to. While this may be true for the moderate drinker, who can stop when he starts “feeling” his drinks, it is most emphatically untrue for the alcoholic, who drinks faster as each drink blurs his sense of guilt. This is a distinction the alcoholic refuses to make, even as he refuses to concede that his drinking is abnormal. Third, he tells the bartender “poquito” — just a little one. Needless to say, the drink will be regulation size, or the bartender will quickly have it called to his attention. But the concept of the “little” drink is cherished by those for whom every drink is too big.

There is a swimming pool at the Of6lia, and Hugh and Yvonne decide to go in. The Consul does not join them. This was predictable. Alcoholics are spectators. Their single hobby leaves no time for other avocations. But there are other reasons. The drunk’s fabled bluster, for one thing, is tempered with great caution. He knows that, if he tries to participate in any activity requiring skill,

he will do it badly, and he is doubly reluctant to take part in anything at which he was once expert. Even if he could still do it reasonably well, the deterioration of his skills would be apparent to him, and he would be ashamed of what he has done to himself. Living constantly with shame, he shuns anything which will intensify it.

The principal reason for his spectator status, though, is simply that the recreational activities of others get them out of the way so he can drink unobserved. This is why the alcoholic is always urging others to "have some fun," go swimming, go dancing, go to the theatre, go anywhere — go away, in short, and leave him to his own miserable fun.

Secret drinking leads inevitably to the practice of drink counting, which, as done by the alcoholic, has no relation to standard arithmetic. Lowry expounds this point deftly, as the three principals sit down to eat at the *Ofélia*. The Consul is, at first, in a jovial mood. He has had, by alcoholic count, very little to drink — because the others did not see him drink the eight or nine secret mescals. He has sworn Cervantes, the bartender, to silence. Still, Hugh and Yvonne seem to suspect. Cervantes must have told on him. The bartender is a native of Tlaxcala; years ago the Tlaxcaltecs had betrayed Moctezuma to Cortez. With superb drunken logic, the Consul reasons that this Tlaxcaltecan has been "unable to resist" the equally grave crime of betraying him to his friends. How else could he justify Hugh's and Yvonne's attitude toward him? According to his double-entry drink-counting system, he has been observing a code of conduct so nearly puritanical that he really ought to let down a bit and have a drink. He is probably surprised they don't suggest it. The fact that they can see he is drunk does not occur to him. By *his* count, he is obviously sober in *their* eyes.

Refusing to accept their concern for him as genuine, the Consul accuses Hugh and Yvonne of using his problem as a pretext for their own love-making. Although they may have been lovers in the past, this is untrue now. But the alcoholic mind, ever suspicious, ever anxious to divert the attack from itself, lashes out at targets of opportunity. Do-gooders, he charges, always have an ulterior motive. Shifting to a political analogy, he derides Hugh's revolutionary fervour, insisting that nations "get what they deserve in the long run." Indirectly, he is suggesting that he, too, will get what he deserves finally, regardless of their solicitude, which isn't really as unselfish as they pretend, so why don't they leave him alone. He is tempted, he says, by Yvonne's offer of "a sober and non-alcoholic Paradise", but he prefers to live in hell. Shockingly final as this sounds, it is not really a major decision at all. It is one made repeatedly by alcoholics

who face the problem while at their lowest point of resistance. Paradise is an agony away, and hell is so handy.

Arthur Calder-Marshall, the British novelist, said of Lowry that “he regarded drinking as an essential part of the creative act.” The anonymous critic in the *Times Literary Supplement*, quoted earlier says that Lowry used alcohol as a “vision-giving drug”. Max-Pol Fouchet, who did so much to popularize Lowry’s work in France, falls into the same error. He says of the Consul, and presumably means it of Lowry as well, “*L’alcool pour lui n’est pas un vice, mais une passion de l’âme, un moyen de la connaissance.*”<sup>6</sup>

This is a tiny sampling of the notion, common among critics of Lowry, Dylan Thomas and others similarly afflicted, that alcohol or any other drug can be used as a creative instrument. It cannot. The idea that this medium of oblivion can be a “*moyen de la connaissance*” is patently ridiculous. So how does the belief originate? Probably with writers themselves, in collaboration with sympathetic friends. An intelligent, talented man finds it hard to explain why he spends so much of his time in a state of boozy ineffectuality. How nice to be able to say — or have his friends say for him — that it makes him do what he does, and does very well, even better. If a banker or a welder or a jockey said it, it would be properly labelled nonsense. But so deep is the mystery of creativity, even among artists themselves, that a writer can get away with it. And the fact is that the imaginative mind often *does* see a brighter picture of the world under alcoholic influence. Sadly, it is not a reproducible picture.

LOWRY, who understood alcoholism as few alcoholics have, was unlikely to have been taken in by the “creative binge” myth. But he was thoroughly familiar with its origins, as he demonstrated in an early passage in *Under the Volcano*.

At the beginning of Chapter Two, Yvonne returns to Quauhnahuac and the Consul after a year’s absence. She finds him drinking in a hotel bar at seven in the morning. Nothing, obviously, has changed since she left. He has been praying for her return, which is totally unexpected, but still he greets her cautiously, suspicious of what she may demand of him. Recognizing that she is stunned by this negative welcome, he frames a long conciliatory discourse, which he does not speak aloud. In it, he tries desperately to explain why his drinking is vital and beautiful and essential. It concludes:

“All mystery, all hope, all disappointment, yes, all disaster, is here, beyond those swinging doors. And, by the way, do you see that old woman from Tarasco sitting in the corner, you didn’t before, but you do now?” his eyes asked her, gazing round him with the bemused unfocussed brightness of a lover’s, his love asked her, “how, unless you drink as I do, can you hope to understand the beauty of an old woman from Tarasco who plays dominoes at seven o’clock in the morning?”

Every alcoholic with a soul has *thought* a soliloquy equally bittersweet. Every morning drinker has pitied the poor sober wretch who simply has no conception of the utter loveliness of “an old woman from Tarasco who plays dominoes at seven o’clock in the morning” or reasonable facsimile. This capacity to invest the ordinary or the ugly with an aura of beauty — very real, however fleeting — is the one positive justification ever put forward for the alcoholic’s addiction. All other reasons are defensive, mere excuses.

Note well, however, that Lowry does not attempt to make the old woman beautiful to us — which he could surely do if alcoholic creativity were not a myth. He tells us only that she looked beautiful to the drunk, which is quite a different thing.

Remember, too, that the words are not spoken. Even the highly articulate Consul, we must assume, could not have said the words as skillfully as his mind heard them. The wonder of it is that Lowry could write them. Obviously, he could not have done so without having had the alcoholic experience, but the writing of this passage was, none the less, a triumph over — not of — alcoholism.

The whole concept of words imagined but not spoken is well known to alcoholics. They yearn to say the things that will make everything all right, or to hear them from others. Unable to speak the words, they dream them. And they imagine them, with equal vividness, coming from others. After the Consul and Yvonne have left the bar and are walking home:

“The Consul was beginning to shake again.

“ ‘Geoffrey, I’m so thirsty, why don’t we stop and have a drink?’

“ ‘Geoffrey, let’s be reckless this once and get tight together before breakfast.’

“Yvonne said neither of these things.”

So expertly and profusely does Lowry use this device that the reader must be alert for it, or he will get the impression that a great deal more is being said than actually is. A high percentage of the material which appears between quotation marks in *Volcano* is never actually spoken.

To this point, I have said little about the humour in *Under the Volcano*. Surprisingly, there is quite a bit of it. In Chapter Three, for example, the Consul

dashes out to get a drink while Yvonne is bathing, and is soon found lying face down in the street, fully conscious but disinclined to get up. He is roused by a passing Englishman, a hearty Colonel Blimp sort of chap, who disputes Geoffrey's "absolutely all right" with the marvellously logical argument that a man lying face down in the middle of a moderately busy street cannot be entirely all right. They exchange old-school-tie pleasantries, and they part with Geoffrey trying to give him his card, which on closer examination turns out to be someone else's. In another book it would be hilarious; in this one we find it hard to laugh. Such incidents are not funny when they happen to real people — and the Consul has become disquietingly real to us. There is additional evidence of Lowry's comic sense throughout the book, but like the passage cited it seldom invokes real amusement.

Critics who knew Lowry's sense of humour first-hand seem to resent the picture that is often drawn of a brooding, morbid, obsessed man. He was, says Douglas Day, "an essentially happy man", and critics have been remiss in failing to note "the saving grace of humor, the refusal to take too seriously the annihilation of the transparently autobiographical *personae* who serve as his heroes." The Consul, says Mr. Day, "throughout his headlong flight into hell, almost never gives in to maudlin self-pity . . . seems, in fact, almost happily to embrace his destruction."<sup>7</sup>

We are called upon here to admire a man who carries himself and his wife to their deaths, severely damages the lives of all those who love him, and casts a little darkness on almost everyone he meets, because he does it all without getting glum about it.

No, if I like the Consul, it is because I know that he *does* want desperately to make right all the things he has made so wrong. If I feel compassion, it is because I understand a little of the mysterious agony that prevents him from doing it. But, more to the point, the whole thesis of Mr. Day's argument is false because it is precisely Geoffrey's alcoholic self-pity that turns him back every time he is inclined to make a move toward his own salvation.

Robert B. Heilman, in a more credible vein, mentions Lowry's "extravagant comic sense that creates an almost unique tension among moods" and refers to "the Lowry fusion of the ridiculous and the ghastly."<sup>8</sup>

The sad truth is that drunks are funny. It is one more cross alcoholics must bear to know that, in addition to being simultaneously condemned and pitied, they are also being laughed at. Lowry was too good a writer and *too serious a student of his own condition* to overlook that vinic verity. But the ability to laugh

at oneself is hardly a denial of morbidity. It may, indeed, be the only palliative for it and, as such, the mournful proof of its existence.

One of the things that presumably make drunks funny is that they can't think clearly. But this is not always true. As I have pointed out, the alcoholic often becomes a master logician when his liquor supply is threatened. What he *does* find it almost impossible to do is to make a moral decision when the alternatives are tough. And this is at the very centre of Lowry's "study" of the alcoholic mind. It is exemplified in the scene at Laruelle's house when the Consul and Yvonne are briefly left alone, and she begs him to forgive her infidelity. The Consul, who knows that the transgression was as much his as hers, looks within himself and finds that he wants her, needs her, wants and needs to love her. The right answer is obvious. But he is a man, steeped in Victorian notions of male honour, as well as in self-pity. He finds it impossible to say, "I forgive, I love," with conviction. Only fairness and simple self-interest weigh in its favour. And what are these against the bias of centuries? No doubt, they would be controlling factors to the clear mind, able to evaluate an ethical question on its merits. But the alcoholic mind shuns the mental labour involved, in favour of the pre-tested response. By this manner he rejects her, and all is lost.

At that moment, the Consul makes the commitment which he will finally confirm in the Farolito, the evil cantina where he falls into the hands of local fascist officials who, he realizes, are going to kill him. A moment comes when they neglect to keep watch on him. He can walk out, and save his life. But he needs one more drink — "one for the road." He has, in fact, chosen to die. And it is not only for symbolic reasons that Lowry has him prefer that last drink to a run for survival. It is the choice an alcoholic might well make in such a situation. Accustomed to reaching for a drink whenever a difficult decision must be made, he finds it perfectly natural to do the same when faced with the most awesome decision of all. In lesser matters, the drink often postpones the decision until someone else must make it. And so it does in this case. The Consul does not think of himself as electing to die. Rather, he is letting someone else make the decision — which is easier to live with, even for a little while.

I have tried to show that it is Lowry's brilliant analysis and interpretation of the alcoholic mind that makes *Under the Volcano* one of a kind. The Consul's drinking is not incidental to the narrative, nor simply a device to allegorize the mess mankind has made of itself. Almost nothing Lowry says about alcoholic behaviour is simple description or mere colourful detail to lend verisimilitude to the story. The very critics who have been so keenly responsive to secondary

meaning on almost every page of the book, have largely failed to perceive the full significance of the passages which deal with drinking as a complex problem in itself.

It should be clear that alcoholism was foremost in Lowry's mind — ahead of mysticism, politics, domestic relations *per se*, the mystery of Mexico, and all the other elements which make the book such a diversified feast — as he wrote *Under the Volcano*. The primary evidence is in the book itself. But there is more.

Lowry's reaction to the success of Charles Jackson's *The Lost Weekend* is important in this regard. Some of his distress is expressed in his *Letters*,<sup>9</sup> but his almost paranoiac response to it is better described by the Lowry-figure in *Dark as the Grave*, who says that, had he realized how successful it would be, he might have killed himself. *The Lost Weekend* is a good popular novel about alcoholism, hardly comparable to Lowry's masterpiece. But it is clear that Lowry considered it a premature invasion of his private domain.

Lowry's own definitive statement on the subject comes at the end of the preface he prepared for the French edition of *Volcano*.<sup>10</sup> After discussing various aspects of the book at some length, he says finally: "... it would perhaps be honest of me to admit to you that the idea I cherished in my heart was to create a pioneer work in its own class, and to write at last an authentic drunkard's story." That seems plain enough, in or out of context.

On the matter of his inability to create characters, Lowry once wrote: "There are a thousand writers who can draw adequate characters till all is blue for one who can tell you anything new about hell fire. And I am telling you something new about hell fire."

Was it new? It was an old story to millions of alcoholics. But none of them had ever been able to put it on paper. Malcolm Lowry did. And that was new.

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *Canadian Literature*, Spring 1961.
- <sup>2</sup> "Swinging the Paradise Street Blues," *Paris Review*, Summer 1966.
- <sup>3</sup> *The Private Labyrinth of Malcolm Lowry: 'Under the Volcano' and the Cabbala* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969).
- <sup>4</sup> *TLS*, January 26, 1967.
- <sup>7</sup> See, for example, *Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1965), p. 189.
- <sup>6</sup> *Canadian Literature*, Spring 1961.
- <sup>5</sup> "Of Tragic Joy," *Prairie Schooner*, Winter 1963.
- <sup>8</sup> "The Possessed Artist and the Ailing Soul," *Canadian Literature*, Spring 1961.
- <sup>9</sup> P. 46 *et passim*.
- <sup>10</sup> "Preface to a Novel," *Canadian Literature*, Summer 1963.