

# PREFACE TO A NOVEL

*Malcolm Lowry*

This preface to the French Edition of *Under the Volcano*, which casts considerable light on Malcolm Lowry's view of his own novel, was prepared while Malcolm Lowry was working with Clarisse Françillon on her translation of his novel; the final version was actually prepared in French from Lowry's English notes, so that no English original exists. The following translation has been made by George Woodcock. The edition of *Under the Volcano* in which the preface appeared was published by Corrêa and the Club Français du Livre in 1949 and reprinted by Corrêa in 1960.

**I** LIKE PREFACES. I read them. Sometimes I do not read any farther, and it is possible that you may do the same. In that case, this preface will have failed in its purpose, which is to make your access to my book a little more easy. Above all, reader, do not regard these pages as an affront to your intelligence. They prove rather that the author here and there questions his own.

To begin with, his very style may assume an embarrassing resemblance to that of the German writer Schopenhauer describes, who wished to express six things at the same time instead of discussing them one after the other. "In those long, rich parenthetical periods, like boxes enclosing boxes, and crammed more full than roast geese stuffed with apples, one's memory above all is put to the task, when understanding and judgment should have been called upon to do their work."

But to take a criticism of style—as Schopenhauer conceived it—as a criticism of the mind and character of the author or even, as others would like, of the man himself, is beside the point. That at least is what I wrote in 1946, on board a

bauxite ship in the middle of the waves between New Orleans and Port-au-Prince. That preface was never published. As for this one, the first reason for my drafting it was the fact that in 1945 my book received a very lukewarm welcome from an English firm (which has since done me the honour of publishing it). Although the publishers considered the work "important and honest", they suggested wide corrections which I was reluctant to make. (You would have reacted in the same way had you written a book and been so tormented by it that you rejected and rewrote it many times.) Among other things, I was advised to suppress two or three characters, to reduce the twelve chapters to six, to change the subject, which was too similar to that of *Poison*; in short, to throw my book out of the window and write another. Since I now have the honour of being translated into French, I take up once again my letter of reply to my publisher and friend in London. The enterprise was doubtless a foolish one: to give all kinds of good esoteric reasons why the work should stay just as it was in the beginning.

Those reasons I have now almost completely forgotten, and perhaps that is lucky for you. It is in fact all too true, as Sherwood Anderson has remarked, that in all concerning his work a writer assumes the most extraordinary pretensions and is ready to justify anything. It is also likely that one of the few honest remarks an author has ever made was that of Julien Green on the subject, I believe, of his masterly *Minuit*: "My intention was—and has ever since remained to me—obscure."

In writing this book, which was started when I was twenty-six (I am now about to salute my fortieth year) and finished five years ago, my intention did not at first seem to me obscure, although it became more so as the years went on. But, whether obscure or not, it still remains a fact that one of my intentions was to write a book.

And, indeed, my intention was not to write a tedious book. I do not believe a single author, even the most irascible of them all, has ever had the deliberate intention of wearying his reader, though it has been said that boredom can be used as a technique. But once this book did in fact appear boring to a reader—and a professional reader at that—I thought it necessary to reply to the observations of that professional reader, and here is the gist of what I wrote. All this may perhaps appear to you terribly vain and pompous, but how can you explain to someone who claims to have been bored by your prose that he was in the wrong for letting himself be bored?

"Dear Sir," I wrote then, "Thank you for your letter of the 29th November 1945. I received it only on New Year's Eve. Moreover, it reached me here in

Mexico where, entirely by chance, I am living in the tower which served as a model for the house of one of my characters. Ten years ago I had only seen that tower from the outside, and—in chapter VI—it became the place where my hero too experienced some slight vexations as a result of delayed mail . . .”

Then I went on to say that if my work had already assumed the classic form of the printed page instead of the sad and desolate aspect which characterises an unpublished manuscript, the opinion of the reader would certainly have been entirely different because of the various critical judgments that would have assailed his ears. Since the tiresomeness or otherwise of the beginning of *Under the Volcano* appeared to me dependent on the reader's state of mind, on his readiness to seize the author's intention, I suggested—doubtless in desperation of my cause—that a brief preface might neutralise the reactions which my professional reader foresaw. I continued thus: “If you tell me that a good wine needs no label, I may perhaps reply that I am not talking about wine but about mescal, and that even more than a label—once one had crossed the threshold of the tavern—mescal calls for the accompaniment of both salt and lemon. I hope at least that such a preface may bring a little lemon and salt.”

In this way I wrote a letter of round about 20,000 words, which took me the time I might just as well have employed on starting the first draft of a new novel, even more boring than the other. And since, in the eyes of my reader, the first chapter seemed to be the novel's greatest crime, I limited myself to an analysis of that long first chapter which establishes the themes and counter-themes of the book, which sets the tone, which harmonises the symbolism.

The narrative, I explained, begins on All Souls' Day, in November, 1939, in a hotel called Casino de la Selva—selva meaning *wood*. And perhaps it would not be out of place to mention here that the book was first of all conceived rather pretentiously on the sempiternal model of Gogol's *Dead Souls*, and as the first leaf in the triptych of a kind of drunken *Divine Comedy*. *Purgatory* and *Paradise* were to follow, with the protagonist, like Chichikov, becoming at each stage slightly better or worse, according to one's point of view. (However, if one is to believe a recent authority, the incredible Vladimir Nabokov, the progression postulated by Gogol was rather: Crime, Punishment, Redemption; Gogol threw almost all of Punishment and Redemption into the fire.) The theme of the dark wood, introduced once again in Chapter VII when the Consul enters a lugubrious cantina called El Bosque, which also means *wood*, is resolved in Chapter IX, which relates the death of the heroine and in which the wood becomes reality and also fatality.

This first chapter is shown through the eyes of a French film producer, Jacques Laruelle. He establishes a kind of survey of the terrain, just as he expresses the slow, melancholy and tragic rhythm of Mexico itself: Mexico, the meeting place of many races, the ancient battleground of social and political conflicts where, as Waldo Frank, I believe, has shown, a colourful and talented people maintained a religion which was virtually a cult of death. It is the ideal setting for the struggle of a human being against the powers of darkness and light.

After leaving the Casino de la Selva, Jacques Laruelle finds himself looking into the barranca which plays a great part in the story, and which is also the ravine, that cursed abyss which in our age every man presents to himself, and also, more simply, if the reader prefers it, the sewer.

The chapter ends in another cantina where people are talking refuge during an unseasonal storm, while elsewhere, all over the world, people are crawling into the air-raid shelters; then the lights go out, just as, all over the world as well, they are going out. Outside, in that night created by the tempest, the luminous wheel is turning.

That wheel is the Ferris wheel erected in the middle of the square, but it is also, if you like, many other things: the wheel of the law, the wheel of Buddha. It is even eternity, the symbol of the Everlasting Return. That wheel, which demonstrates the very form of the book, can also be considered in a cinematographic manner as the wheel of Time, which is about to turn in an inverse direction, until we reach the preceding year. For the beginning of the second chapter brings us to All Souls' Day a year before, in November, 1938.

AT THIS POINT I tried modestly to insinuate that my little book seemed to me denser and deeper, composed and carried out with more care than the English publisher supposed; that if its meanings had escaped the reader, or if the latter had deemed uninteresting the meanings that float on the surface of the narrative, this might have been due at least in part to a merit rather than a failing of mine. In fact, had not the more accessible aspect of the book been designed so carefully that the reader did not wish to take the trouble of pausing to go below the surface? "If that is true," I added, not without a certain vanity, "for how many books can it be said?"

In a more sentimental tone, but with only an appearance of greater modesty,

I then wrote as follows: "Since I am asking for a re-reading of the *Volcano*, in the light of certain aspects which may not have occurred to you, and since I do not wish to undertake a defence of every paragraph, it may be as well for me to admit that in my view the principal failing of the book, from which all the others flow, lies in something which cannot be remedied: the mental baggage of the book is subjective rather than objective; it would better suit a poet—I do not say a good poet—than a novelist, and it is a baggage very difficult to carry as far as its destination. On the other hand, just as a tailor who knows his customer's deformity tries to hide it, I have tried as far as possible to hide the faults of my understanding. But since the conception of the work was primarily poetic, these deformities may hardly matter after all. Besides, poems often call for several readings before their meaning is revealed—is exposed in the mind as I believe Hopkins said—and it is precisely that notion which you have overlooked."

I demanded the most serious examination of the text, and I asked how, without appreciating its contents, the reader had reached his view that the book was too long, particularly since his reaction might well be different after a second reading. Did not readers, just as much as authors, take a risk of falling over themselves by going too fast? And what a boring book it must be if so hasty a reading were all that could be granted!

I went on to explain that my novel consists of twelve chapters, and the main part of the narrative is contained within a single day of twelve hours. In the same way, there are twelve months in a year and the whole book is enclosed within the limits of a year, while that deeper layer of the novel—or the poem—which derives from myth is linked at this point with the Jewish Cabbala, where the number twelve is of the greatest importance. The Cabbala is used for poetic ends because it represents Man's spiritual aspirations. The Tree of Life, its emblem, is a kind of complicated ladder whose summit is called Kether, or Light, while somewhere in its midst an abyss opens out. The spiritual domain of the Consul is probably Qliphoth, the world of husks and demons, represented by the Tree of Life turned upside down and governed by Beelzebub, the God of Flies. All this was not essential for the understanding of the book; I mentioned it in passing so as to give the feeling, as Henry James has said, "that depths exist".

In the Jewish Cabbala the abuse of magic powers is compared to drunkenness or the abuse of wine, and is expressed, if I remember rightly, by the Hebrew word *sod*. Another attribution of the word *sod* signifies garden, or neglected garden, and the Caballa itself is sometimes considered as a garden (naturally similar to that where grew the tree of forbidden fruit which gave us the Knowledge of Good

and Evil), with the Tree of Life planted in the middle. In one way or another these matters are at the base of many of our legends regarding the origins of man, and William James, if not Freud, might be in agreement with me when I affirm that the agonies of the drunkard find a very close parallel in the agonies of the mystic who has abused his powers. Here the Consul has brought everything together in a magnificently drunken fashion. In Mexico, mescal is a formidable drink but a drink which one can get in any cantina much more easily, if I may say so, than Scotch whisky in the Impasse des Deux-Anges. (Let me say in passing that I see I have done wrong to mescal and tequila, which are drinks I like very much, and for that I should perhaps present my apologies to the Mexican government.) But mescal is also a drug which is taken in the form of mescalín, and the transcendence of its effects is one of the best-known experiments among occultists. It seems as though the Consul has confused the two states, and perhaps after all he is not in the wrong.

This novel, to use a phrase of Edmund Wilson, has for its subject the forces that dwell within man and lead him to look upon himself with terror. Its subject is also the fall of man, his remorse, his incessant struggle towards the light under the weight of the past, which is his destiny. The allegory is that of the Garden of Eden, the garden representing this world from which we are now even a little more under the threat of ejection than at the moment when I wrote this book. On one level, the drunkenness of the Consul may be regarded as symbolising the universal drunkenness of war, of the period that precedes war, no matter when. Throughout the twelve chapters, the destiny of my hero can be considered in its relationship to the destiny of humanity.

"I hold to the number twelve," I then added. "It is as if I heard a clock sounding midnight for Faust, and when I think of the slow progression of the chapters, I feel that neither more nor less than twelve should satisfy me. For the rest, the book is stratified in numerous planes. My effort has been to clarify as far as possible whatever at first presented itself to me in a complicated and esoteric manner. The novel can be read simply as a story during which you may—if you wish—skip whole passages, but from which you will get far more if you skip nothing at all. It can be regarded as a kind of symphony or opera, or even as something like a cowboy film. I wanted to make of it a jam session, a poem, a song, a tragedy, a comedy, a farce. It is superficial, profound, entertaining, boring, according to one's taste. It is a prophecy, a political warning, a cryptogram, a crazy film, an absurdity, a writing on the wall. It can be thought of as a kind of machine; it works, you may be sure, for I have discovered that to my own expense.

And in case you should think that I have made of it everything except a novel, I shall answer that in the last resort it is a real novel that I have intended to write, and even a damnably serious novel.”

In short, I made terrific efforts to explain my own idea of this unfortunate volume; I waged a notable battle for the work as it stood, as it was finally printed, and as it today appears for my French readers. And remember, I wrote all that in Mexico, in the very place where ten years before I had started my book, and in the end I received, from the hands of the same tiny postman who brought the Consul his delayed postcard, the news that it had been accepted.

After this long preamble, my dear French reader, 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. I do not know whether I have succeeded. And now, friend, I beg you continue your walk along the Seine, and please replace this book where you found it, in the second-hand bookseller's 100-franc box.

MALCOLM LOWRY,  
*September, 1948.*

