

THE POSSESSED ARTIST AND THE AILING SOUL

Robert B. Heilman

TO HAVE BEEN AN ORIGINAL ADMIRER of Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, and to remain an admirer for almost a decade and a half, is very much like belonging to a semi-secret order with a somewhat odd, quite small, but widely dispersed membership. It is a very loose order, without adopted procedure and certainly without program. Membership is conferred by taste, not sought by will or exercised through evangelical rigor. Members become known to each other only when they discover each other by accident. The big point is that such discoveries do continue to be made, year after year, in more than one part of the English-reading world. Yet they are an insistent trickle rather than a growing stream that could be converted into a literary power system. Whoever has read Lowry has been unforgettably impressed, but readers have been, it appears, strangely few. The slender society of those who esteem him, whatever the strength of their convictions, have been given to contemplation rather than to promotion or even public debate: he remains a private possession rather than a public figure—far less established in a literary niche than, say, either Nathanael West or Djuna Barnes, whom in some way he brings to mind and who hardly have a greater claim upon our respect. Perhaps the disinclination of Lowry admirers to shout from the housetops is related to a certain meticulousness in their literary judgment: they customarily speak of *Under the Volcano* as a distinguished “minor” work or as a “minor classic”. This reserve is understandable; despite the often kaleidoscopic movement of both outer and inner landscape, there is some limitedness of scope, some incompleteness of human range, some circumscribing of consciousness that is felt partly in the fewness of the *dramatis personae* and partly in the enclosing illness of the protagonist (though in saying this last, one must always be mindful that the ailing soul may have extraordinary visions). But the use of “minor” is not an inadvertent disparagement: it is an honorable

by-product of that need to place which is felt only when the novel in question arouses the conviction that it is not an entertainment of the year but a work of art that will be valid for many other years.

If a historian leafed through the journals of 1947 and noted the new novels reviewed, he would not find another one written in English, I surmise, that has achieved a more durable quiet esteem than *Under the Volcano* (I exclude Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, to which I shall return later). It has survived in a "population" where the normal death rate is close to 100%. A minor irony: it has survived its own publishing house. It has survived, as we have noted, an apparent smallness of canvas, and it has also survived a quite opposite difficulty: a fecundity of suggestive detail that tends to over-stimulate the imagination, that is, to set it off in more ways than can be decently encompassed within an overall design. Something survives beyond the sense of chaos that the fecundity is in danger of creating, beyond an impression of a tropical creative richness (this in itself, of course, is not to be disparaged, even when it is imperfectly controlled). What survives, again, is something beyond the quality usually called "intensity," though the stresses that Lowry images, luxuriantly and often fantastically, do induce the severe tautness that marks some kinds of aesthetic experience. Intensity is really a secondary virtue; it can be attached to superficial forms of action (of the order of fisticuffs, for instance), just as more profound experience can be transmitted in relatively un-taut moods such as the contemplative. The criterion is not the presence of intensity but the depth of the concern—the spiritual burden—that intensity accompanies. The less substantial the matter, the more the hard and gemlike flame will resemble ordinary flushed cheeks and fever that can be aspirined away. The fire in *Under the Volcano* is not easily put out.

The sense of a largeness that somehow bursts out of the evident constriction, the fertility that borders on the excessive and the frenzied, the intensity that is not a surrogate for magnanimity, and finally an apprehension of reality so vivid that it seems to slide over into madness—these are symptoms of the work of the "possessed" artist. If he has not quite achieved majority, Lowry belongs to the possessed novelists, among whom the great figures are Dostoevsky and Melville and, some of the time, Dickens. They may be distinguished from the "self-possessed" artists: Thackeray and Trollope and, to snatch an example from current fashion, C. P. Snow. Or, since Lowry's theme is human disaster, a grievous, driving, frenetic disaster, let us take for contrast Hardy, who seems calmly to organize and impose disaster as if he were seated at some cosmic control panel. In an older writer like Hawthorne or a modern one like R. P. Warren, there is somewhat of

a conflict, or even an alternation, of possession and self-possession, of an unbridled urgency and a controlling will. The possessed artist is in the tradition of Plato's Ion, and at the risk of too neat a polarity, it may be hazarded that the self-possessed artist has ties with Aristotle's Poetics: rational analysability of form appears to imply rational creatability of form. It is not altogether a parody to picture the self-possessed artist, deep browed at his drawing board, coolly planning plot and catharsis. In C. P. Snow the key line, a recurrent one, is surely, "May I have a word with you, Lewis?" "A word"—a council—a plan—logos and logistis: life is ordered, or, if it does not wholly accede to the order designed for it, what dissidence there is is reflected, not in unruly surges of action that in their way elude the author and his decorous creatures, but through the rational comment of observers. Things never get out of hand; no wild dogs tug at the trainer's leash. Perhaps the ultimate figure in the world of self-possession is Arnold Bennett: one of his major aims seems to have been to keep his characters down, to remain the unyielding bailiff on his huge Five Towns estate. Was not this—that he would never "let go"—a subtle ingredient in what Virginia Woolf had against him? That, really, he saw Mrs. Brown only in terms of attributes that were at his beck and call? Bennett illustrates the intimate relationship, the virtual identity, between self-possession and the rigorous domination of character and scene (or at least the air of this). In some way his sense of security seems to have been involved in his paternal tyranny: for his creatures, no out of bounds, no fractiousness, no unpredicted courses, no iddish cutting loose. And if V. S. Pritchett is right, Bennett suffered accordingly: his self-possession was close to suicidal.

SUCH COMPARISONS help us to place Lowry. In sum: the self-possessed artist—the one who uses his materials as an instrument. The possessed artist—the materials appear to use him as an instrument, finding in him, as it were, a channel to the objective existence of art, sacrificing a minimum of their autonomy to his hand, which partly directs and shapes rather than wholly controls. This is how it is with Lowry. If *Under the Volcano* is a more talented book than any one of the outstanding C. P. Snow novels and is still less well known, it is in part that the work of the self-possessed artist is more accessible, less threatening, farther away from anguish; even in Hardy the inimical and the destructive are in an odd way almost sterilized because for the most part they originate in an outer world that is unyielding or uncontrollable only by fits and

starts, rather than in an inner realm of constants where catastrophe is always latent (Sue Bridehead is a rare exception). Snow works in a wider and more accommodating territory, Lowry in a very much more dangerous terrain. Possessed work may open up any depth before one, any abyss in other personalities or in one's own. It does not primarily contemplate, though it does not ignore, the ailing world, which is generally reparable in Snow, or traditionally irreparable in naturalist fiction. Rather its theme is the ailing soul. It is an ancient theme whose history concerns us here only in that in our day the theme is used with extraordinary frequency. Whether it is that illness is especially attractive to us because we find in it a novel window to reality, or an apparently better window to reality, than the less clinical ones that we have principally relied on; or that the culture is sick, as some critics aver with almost tedious constancy, and that as a consequence we must, to avoid self-deception and serve truth, contemplate only sickness—these differing conclusions are arguable.

In the contemporary use of illness, at any rate, we find quite different perspectives. In *Sound and Fury* there are various ailing souls: through them we have a complex view of decadence and of a contrasting vitality. In Robbe-Grillet's *Voyeur* clinical disorder of personality is itself the aesthetic object: despite all that has been said about Robbe-Grillet's innovations in the vision of reality, the final effect is one of a disturbingly ingenious tour de force. In *Magic Mountain* the ailment of the soul is intricately intertwined with that of the body; a host of theoretical salvations are examined, and the final note is one of hope through a surprisingly simple practical therapy. But in *Doctor Faustus* there is a more fundamental and violent illness of soul, a counterpart of a more fundamental and violent illness of body, one that is in effect chosen; we see a sick person and a sick era, sick thought that is a culmination of a tradition; yet a tradition in which the paradoxical affiliation of the destructive and the creative is terrifying.

Doctor Faustus offers some instructive parallels with *Under the Volcano*: both works belong to 1947; both recount the spiritual illness of a man that is in some way akin to the illness of an age; both glance at the politics of the troubled 1930's, but both are artistically mature enough to resist the temptations always offered by the political theme—the polemic tone, the shrill "J'accuse." Instead they contemplate the failures of spirit of which the political disorders are a symptom. They do this differently. Though both draw on the Faustian theme, Lowry introduces it less directly than suggestively, as one strand in a mythic fabric of considerable richness. Mann, by now an old hand at mythic reconstructions, revives Faustus in the grand manner. The mode of evil is affirmative: demonic posses-

sion, a rush into destruction in a wild flare of self-consuming, power-seizing creativity. In demonic possession there is a hypertrophy of ego; Lowry's hero, on the contrary, suffers from a kind of undergrowth of soul. One leaps on life raptaciously; the other falls short of the quality that makes life possible. Both the rape and the agonizing insufficiency are done with hair-raising immediacy. But Mann's style is heroic, whereas Lowry's stage is domestic. Geoffrey Firmin (the infirm Geoffrey) is more of a private figure than Adrian Leverkühn; his life has less amplitude in itself; in the concrete elements of it there is not the constant pressure toward epical-allegorical aggrandizement. But this is a statement of a difference, not of a deficiency. Both novelists are possessed; both seem to be the instruments of a vision whose autarchy they do not impair as they assist its emergence into public form. This is true of Mann, despite his usual heavy component of expository pages; it is true of Lowry, despite some artifice and frigidity in the narrative arrangements.

If Lowry's work is, compared with Mann's, "domestic", nevertheless the implied analogy with domestic tragedy is slight at best. To make one important contrast: Lowry has a range of tone that household drama never had. In fact, even in the orbit of possessed artists, his range is unusual: in recording a disaster of personality that is on the very edge of the tragic, he has an extravagant comic sense that creates an almost unique tension among moods. Desperation, the ludicrous, nightmare, the vulgar, the appalling, the fantastic, the nonsensical, and the painfully pathetic coexist in an incongruous melange that is still a unity. The serious historian of the ailing soul may achieve the bizarre, but he rarely works through humor or finds the Lowry fusion of the ridiculous and the ghastly. With Lowry, the grotesque seems always about to trip up the catastrophic, the silly to spike the portentous, the idiotic to collapse the mad. When evil is present, it is more likely to be nasty than sinister. The assailing demons tend to be mean little gremlins; in a way, Geoffrey's disaster is the triumph of meanness, not as a case-history of an eccentric flop, but as a universal image of man in the smallness to which he is always liable. This can take on its own dreadfulness, partly because petty vice contains echoes of major failures, partly because nemesis is not trivial, and partly because there is always maintained a touching nostalgia for a large and noble selfhood. In *Lady Windermere's Fan* there is a very bad line about man's being in the gutter but looking at the stars; it is bad because the play contains no vestige of real gutters or real stars, so that words alone are being exploited. But these antithetical images could be used of *Under the Volcano* without bathos, for it contains some of the more plausible gutters in modern fiction

while portraying the survival, even in them, of a dim and struggling consciousness of other worlds. Lowry is quite lucid about what is sickness and what is health, rather more so, indeed, than another possessed novelist usually credited with expertise in these polar states, D. H. Lawrence.

LOWRY DOES NOT MANAGE the cosmic texture of events that we find in *Doctor Faustus*, but there is an extraordinary texture of symbol and allusion. It is doubtless natural for the possessed novelist to call on many of the resources of poetry. The self-possessed novelist is not necessarily prosaic or shallow or one-dimensional, witness Henry James; but in the main we image him as forging steadily or deliberately ahead, on the direct prose route to his end. The possessed writer has an air of battling, not quite successfully, with a multitude of urgencies that come at him from all sides and fling off again on their own, not always forced into a common direction. If the overt action of *Under the Volcano* is slight, the metaphorical action is intense. Numerous objects, properties, occurrences, and even ideas, recollections, and observations not only exist in their own right but also work figuratively or symbolically. The nexuses are imaginative rather than casual, or logical, or chronological; hiatuses compel a high attention; dextrous leaps are called for. In such a sense the novel is "poetic," not in the sense that a mistily atavistic syntax and a solemn iambic hauteur, as often in the self-conscious experimental theatre, pass for poetic.

The "story," as I have said, is slight: Yvonne, the wife of alcoholic Geoffrey Firmin, returns, after a year's separation, to her husband in Mexico. The events all take place on the day of her return. Geoffrey's passing desires to pull out with Yvonne are overcome by a far more urgent passion for alcohol. A French movie-producer, former lover of Yvonne, is with them for a while and incredulously lectures Geoffrey. Geoffrey's brother Hugh, ex-reporter and sailor, now about to run arms to the Spanish loyalists, in love with Yvonne, spends the day with them. The chief event is an outing by bus—Lowry's own wayward bus ("making its erratic journey"), which stops for a while near a wounded Indian left by the roadside but leaves without anybody's having done anything. Late in the day Geoffrey, who has constantly been getting separated from Hugh and Yvonne, outrageously abuses Yvonne and runs into the woods near Popocatepetl. Yvonne and Hugh pursue. Yvonne and Geoffrey lose their lives by means symbolically associated with the episode of the unattended roadside Indian.

Hugh makes his boat for Spain: this we have learned from a retrospective prologue—the contents of which are certain words and thoughts of the French movie-man a year after the day of the main story. This prologue is supposed to introduce all the main themes; but there is too much there to assimilate, especially since most of the material is not dramatized. It is a cold beginning, and then one has to keep going back to it as to a table of contents—which is not the kind of re-reading that a concentrated book may legitimately demand. Further, on technical matters: the retrospects on which a one-day story must rely tend to be flaccid in style (Hugh's) or foggy in detail (Yvonne's); and coincidence has a fairly large hand in things. But, once into the story, one is less aware of these things than of the imaginative richness. The minds of the characters are sensitive recording instruments, tenacious alike of facts and of their suggestive value. The book is a cornucopia of images; both the psychic and the outer world have a tangibility which a thoughtless slice of realism could never produce; humor and horror are never alleged but are moulded into a hard and yet resilient narrative substance. Always one is driven to follow through on the evocations that trail off behind the foreground facts.

So, besides reading the story as story, we are always aware of a multitude of implications which, in their continual impingement upon us, remind us of the recurrent images of Shakespeare. The action takes place in November, on the Day of the Dead; Geoffrey feels his "soul dying"; a funeral takes place; burial customs, the shipping of a corpse are discussed; an earlier child of Yvonne's is dead; Geoffrey thinks he is seeing a dead man; a cantina is called *La Sepultura*; Geoffrey recalls Dr. Faustus's death; a dead dog is seen in a ravine; a dying Indian is found by the roadside. Always there are vultures, pariah dogs, the noise of target practice. There are a decaying hotel, a reference to the House of Usher, the ruins of the palace of Maximilian and Carlotta. Geoffrey's soul appears to him "a town ravaged and stricken"; an imaginary "little town by the sea" burns up. Frustrations and failures are everywhere—engagements are missed, the light fails in a cinema. Always we are reminded of the barranca or ravine, near the town—a fearful abyss. Once it is called "Malebolge"; there are various allusions to Dante's *Inferno*; Geoffrey feels he is in hell, quotes Dante on sin, looks at Cocteau's *La Machine Infernale*, takes a ride in a *Maquina Infernal*, calls ironically-defiantly, "I love hell"; at the end he is in a bar "under the volcano". "It was not for nothing the ancients had placed Tartarus under Mt. Aetna" There are continual references to Marlowe's Faustus, who could not pray for grace, just as Geoffrey cannot feel a love that might break his love for alcohol,

or rather, symbolize a saving attitude; as in the Faustus play, *soul* is a recurrent word. There is an Eden-Paradise theme: a public sign becomes a motif in itself, being repeated at the end of the story: "Do you enjoy this garden, which is yours? Keep your children from destroying it!" Geoffrey once mistranslates the second sentence: "We evict those who destroy." Geoffrey's own garden, once beautiful, has become a jungle; he hides bottles in the shrubbery; and once he sees a snake there.

The lavish use of such rich resources reveals the possessed artist. They might serve, perhaps, only to create a vivid sequence of impressions, feelings, and moods. But Lowry is possessed by more than sensations and multiple associations; there is a swirl of passionate thoughts and ideas as well as passions; thought and feeling are fused, and always impressions and moods seem the threshold to meanings that must be entered. It seems to me that he seizes instinctively upon materials that have both sensory and suprasensory values. How present the central conception—that of the ailing soul? There are endless symbols for ill-being, from having cancer to taking dope. But Geoffrey's tremendous drinking is exactly the right one, or by art is made to seem the right one. In greater or lesser extent it is widely shared, or at least is related to widely practiced habits; it is known to be a pathological state; it may be fatal, but also it can be cured. It lacks the ultimate sinisterness of dope, the irresistibility of cancer; hence it is more flexible, more translatable. And Lowry slowly makes us feel, behind the brilliantly presented facts of the alcoholic life, a set of meanings that make the events profoundly revelatory: drinking as an escape, an evasion of responsibility, a separation from life, a self-worship, a denial of love, a hatred of the living with a faith. (There is an always pressing guilt theme: Geoffrey, who was a naval officer in World War I, is a kind of sinning Ancient Mariner, caught by Life-in-Death, loathing his slimy creatures, born of the d.t.'s, whom he cannot expiatorily bless but must keep trying to drink away). The horror of Geoffrey's existence is always in the forefront of our consciousness, as it should be; but in the horror is involved an awareness of the dissolution of the old order, of the "drunken madly revolving world," of which Hugh says, "Good god, if our civilization were to sober up for a couple of days, it'd die of remorse on the third." At the end Geoffrey, unable by act of will to seize upon the disinterested aid of two old Mexicans, is the victim of local fascists: fascism preys upon a world that has already tossed away its own soul.

The episode which most successfully unifies the different levels of meaning is that of the Indian left wounded by the roadside. He is robbed by a Spanish

“pelado,” a symbol of “the exploitation of everybody by everybody else.” Here we have echoes of the Spanish Conquest and a symbol of aggression generally. Yvonne can’t stand the sight of blood: it is her flaw, her way of acquiescing in the *de facto*. Geoffrey finds rules against doing anything; everyone feels that “it wasn’t one’s own business, but someone else’s.” It is modern irresponsibility and selfishness; the reader is prepared also to think of the “non-intervention” policy by the refrain which echoes throughout the book, “they are losing on the Ebro.” But above all this is the story of the Good Samaritan—only there is no Samaritan. Devil take the least of these. (Geoffrey’s ship, a gunboat disguised as a merchantman, has been named the “Samaritan”—a comment upon modern Samaritanism.)

Hugh, held back by Geoffrey, is almost the Good Samaritan—Hugh who is going to run arms to Spain. To Geoffrey and Yvonne, he is “romantic”; doubtless he is, and he has his own kind of guilt; but at least he insists on action, disinterested action. Here we come to what is apparently the basic theme of the book: man, in the words of a proverb repeated chorally, cannot live without love. Lowry flirts with the danger of the topical: the Spanish war might give the novel the air of a political tract. But ultimately, I think, the author does succeed in keeping the political phenomena on the periphery of the spiritual substance, using them for dramatic amplification of his metaphysic. It would be possible to read Geoffrey, always impersonally called the Consul, as dying capitalism, as *laissez faire*, or as sterile learning, like the speaker in Tennyson’s *Palace of Art*. But such readings, though they are partly true, too narrowly circumscribe the total human situation with which Lowry is concerned.

THE CONSUL’S CLIMACTIC ACTS of hate are a world’s confession. Yvonne thinks of the need “of finding some faith,” perhaps in “unselfish love.” Whence love is to be derived, or how sanctioned and disciplined, is a question which the symbols do not fully answer. Yet it is the effect of Lowry’s allusions—Dante, Faustus—to push the imagination toward a final reality that transcends all historical presents, however much each present may comment upon and even modify it. Most of all this effect is secured by his constant allusion to Christian myth and history—the crucifixion, Golgotha, the last supper, original sin. Lowry is hardly writing a Christian allegory; indeed, some of the Christian echoes are decidedly ironic. But his whole complex of image and symbol is such as to direct

a dissolving order, in search of a creative affirmation, toward that union of the personal and the universal which is the religious.

The two extremes which are the technical dangers of this kind of work are the tightly bound allegory, in which a system of abstract equivalents for all the concrete materials of the story constricts the imaginative experience, and a loose impressionism, in which a mass of suggestive enterprises sets off so many associations, echoes, and conjectures that the imaginative experience becomes crowded and finally diffuse. It is the latter risk that Lowry runs. For the present account, to avoid excessive length, consistently oversimplifies the ingredients that it deals with, and it fails to deal with many other ingredients—for instance, the guitar motif, the cockfight motif, the theme of mystics and mysteries, the recurrent use of Indians, horses, the movie *The Hands of Orlac*, etc. Lowry has an immensely rich and vigorous imagination, and he never corks his cornucopia of evocative images and symbols. Some disciplinary rejections, some diffidence in setting afloat upon the imagination every boat that he finds upon a crowded shore, would have reduced the distractedness to which the reader is occasionally liable and would have concentrated and shaped the author's effect more clearly. This is to say, perhaps, that the possessed artist might at times borrow a little from the soul of the self-possessed artist. But if one might wish for a more ordered synthesis of parts, one would never want a diminution of the power in Lowry's possessed art. There is great life in what he has written—in his solid world of inner and outer objects in which the characters are dismayed and imprisoned as in Kafka's tales; and in the implicit coalescence of many levels of meaning that we find in Hermann Broch. Such a multivalued poetic fiction, with its picture of the ailing soul, its sense of horrifying dissolution, and its submerged, uncertain vision of a hard new birth off in clouded time, is apparently the especial labor of the artistic conscience at our turn of an epoch.