

MALCOLM LOWRY'S UNDER THE VOLCANO: COMPOSITIONAL PROCEDURES

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Under the Volcano can be interpreted as a product of a compositional strategy which is common to the stream of consciousness novels. It encompasses a twofold procedure: first, the choice of techniques contributive to and mimetic of psychic chaos and second, the use of integrative elements which give the novel an intelligible form. By his choice of characters (especially Geoffrey Firmin), a society falling apart and geographical cleavage (barranca), as well as through his imagery of exhaustion and ruin, Lowry creates the disintegrative movement of his novel; the integrative elements are the unity of time, place and action and, of particular significance, repetition. The antinomy and juxtaposition of the two dominant images — the barranca and the volcanoes — confirm that this reading of the work is not arbitrary.

Donald Binns, in his article »Beckett, Lowry and the Anti-Novel«, writes that *Under the Volcano* (1947) »is a postwar novel only by the accident of its publication date«. ¹ In much the same vein, Stephen Spender, in his introductory comment to the novel, propounds the notion that it be »considered in the context of the Europe of the 1920's and 1930's«. ² Perhaps it is this »accident of its publication date«, the fact that it experimentss in the Joycean tradition after the thrust of modernism had been spent, that is responsible for it not receiving the unanimous critical acclaim which it rightly deserves. If the stream of consciousness novel may be tentatively defined by its subject matter as being »the consciousness of one or more characters; that is, the depicted consciousness serves as a screen on which the material in these novels is presented« ³ — then Lowry's novel is to be numbered within this tradition.

¹ Donald Binns, »Beckett, Lowry and the Anti-Novel« in Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer (eds.) *The Contemporary English Novel*, (Edward Arnold, London, 1980), p. 103.

² Stephen Spender in his introduction to Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano*, (New American Library, New York, 1971), p. xiv. All subsequent references to the novel refer to this edition.

³ Robert Humphrey, *Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel*, (University of California Press, Los Angeles, 1955), p. 2.

The assumption from which we proceed in our investigation of *Under the Volcano* is that, because it does figure among the stream of consciousness novels, it features certain compositional problems indigeneous to this subgenre. These novelists are plagued by a twofold difficulty. In the first place, they must confront the problem of exploring the irrational, fragmented, idiosyncratic consciousness, at times »those levels that are more inchoate than rational verbalization«.⁴ On the other hand, this kind of basically plotless narrative needs to be patterned, given unity. Psychic processes — the stream — have to be disciplined by an intelligible form. Therefore, the task before us is to look into those procedures used by Lowry to create the cleavage, schism, disintegration, to search out those elements contributive to and mimetic of the fragmented sensibility that mirrors this chaotic world. In addition, we must take a look at those procedures, or as Milivoj Solar writes, principles »according« to which all the elements of a prose literary work are in some way firmly connected into a common whole«.⁵ J. Hillis Miller, writing of Virginia Woolf's work, proposes this laconic formula: »movements towards dispersal are countered by affirmations«.⁶ The conjunction of these two procedures constitutes the novel. John Fletcher's and Malcolm Bradbury's analysis of *Ulysses*, in the article »The Introverted Novel«, stems from a similar conception:

The novel contains the degenerate history which the symbol must transcend; the compulsion towards technique becomes a feature of a world in which there is no coherence to give outside the coherence of art.⁷

What should be stressed is that the »degenerate history« is not a given but results from a chosen technical procedure.

Does a better way exist to picture discord, dissolution and fragmentation than to place the tortured consciousness of a dipsomaniac at the very center of the novel? For little less than a half of *Under the Volcano* Lowry proceeds to do this. Unfolding Geoffrey Firmin's, the hero's,⁸ alcoholic despair — »The horrible

⁴ Ibid., p. 3.

⁵ Milivoj Solar, *Teorija književnosti*, (Školska knjiga, Zagreb, 1983), p. 164.

⁶ J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition*, (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1982), p. 221.

⁷ John Fletcher and Malcolm Bradbury, »The Introverted Novel« in Malcolm Bradbury and James MacFarlane (eds.) *Modernism*, (Penguin Books, 1976), p. 406.

⁸ It is only with difficulty that one can speak of the consul as hero. *Under the Volcano* shows the same symptoms that Sean O'Faolain discovered in the literature of the twenties. He writes of the »vanishing hero«: Only when certainty returns to men at large, that is to what we call the world,

disintegrating mechanism, the light now on, now off, now on too glaringly, now too dimly, with the glow of a fitful dying battery« (p. 145) — Lowry voyages to the realms beyond rationality, to a stratum of the psyche frequented by the stream of consciousness novelists. The remaining portion of the novel is apportioned among the three other significant characters, so that the twelve chapters are distributed in the following fashion: the consul (III, V, VII, X, XII), Hugh (IV, VI, VIII), Yvonne (II, IX, X) and M. Laurelle (I). The resulting multiple perspectives not only produce a fractured reality, at times giving contradictory assessments, but testify to the impossibility of authentic communication between lives that are not only walled from each other but are also divided within themselves. This inability to bridge across silences is evident for example in Lowry's practice of »counterpointing of syn-copated dialogue and interior monologue«.9 A standout example occurs in the sequence (pp. 173—183) in which Hugh helps Geoffrey to shave. Hugh is a partial participant in the dialogue because he constantly falls back upon ruminations of the past:

«... Of course it was at the beginning of the war, a rather trying period... But he was a wonderful old chap».

«He was still praelector in mine».

(In my time?... But what, exactly, does that mean? What if anything, did one do at Cambridge, that would show the soul worthy of Siegebert of East Anglia — (pp. 175—76) Different levels of reality commingle, intrude and so »disperse« (to use Miller's term) the development of the narrative: the past intertwines with the present, monologues undermine the fluency of dialogues, hallucinations, demoniac voices crop into thought processes, wishful thinking dislodges actuality.

The social world of *Under the Volcano* testifies to a similar dislocation. Individual life has been devastated of significance: »one was still permitted to remember the days when an individual life held some value and was not a mere imprint in a communique« (p. 5). On a different level, it is sufficient to recall the consul's orphaned childhood, his isolation among the Taskerons (presented through flashbacks) and his painful separation from Yvonne to perceive that the disruption of the familial relationships within the novel is contributive to its discordant quality. Society as a whole is marked by signs of disruption. »Artillery in the foothills« (p. 151) echoes the turmoil tearing away at the fabric

can affirmation return to literature, and with it the representative Hero«. Sean O'Faolain, *The Vanishing Hero: Studies in Novelists of the Twenties*, (Eyre and Spothiswoods, London, 1956), p. 29.

9 Richard K. Cross, *Malcolm Lowry, A Preface to His Fiction*, (The Athlone Press, London, 1980), p. 10.

of Mexican society: the Union Militar, the vigilantes, the throes of the revolution. Throughout the novel (pp. 95, 97, 101, 179, 187, 232) the Battle of the Ebro (an important military confrontation in the Spanish Civil War) is referred to, especially as a motif recurring in Hugh's consciousness. On the whole, Hugh's significance should be sought out on the sociological plane of the novel. Chapter IV could be thought of as an objectification — on the social level — of Geoffrey's »cerebral chaos«. The following passage might be read as mirroring, in global terms, the alcoholic maze:

The radio came alive with a vengeance; at the Texan station news of flood was being delivered with such rapidity one gained the impression the commentator himself was in danger of drowning. Another narrator in a higher voice gobbled bankruptcy, disaster, while yet another told of misery blanketing a threatened capital, people stumbling through debris littering dark streets, hurrying thousands seeking shelter in bomb-torn darkness. (p. 152) Recollections of WWI and premonitions of the coming catastrophe are constituent elements of the text.

M. Laurelle, stopping in his walk over the barranca, the deep ravine, observes: »It was too dark to see the bottom, but: here was finality indeed, and cleavage!« (p. 15). In a far more extreme state of mind the consul pauses at its banks:

At the frightful cleft, the eternal horror of opposites! Thou mighty gulf, insatiate cormorant, deride me not, though. I seem petulant to fall into thy chops. One was, come to that, always stumbling upon the damned thing, this immense intricate donga cutting right through the town, right, indeed through the country. (p. 130).

Even if the twenty seven times that the barranca is referred to in the text do vary in importance and symbolic weight, we can say, for the sake of our argument, that the »cleavage«, the intricate »donga«, exemplifies the division and discord under discussion in this paper on the geographical level. as though Mexico itself had been sundered apart.

From the »desolate splendour« of the Hotel Casino de la Selva with its empty spingboards and its »grass-grown and deserted« jai-alai courts (pp. 1—2), to the prostitute's bed »disorderly and covered with footmarks« (p. 348), Lowry's novel abounds with descriptions and images that highlight the chaos, disorder and ruin. We need mention only a few examples: »faded blue Ford, a total wreck« (p. 13), the descriptions of Maxmilian's Palace abandoned and ruinous (pp. 14, 123), the extensive evocation in chapter III of the consul's neglected garden (for instance the des-

cription on p. 65: »The plantains with their queer familiar blooms, once emblematic of life, now of an evil phallic death«, »a ladderless springboard derelict« (p. 285). An exploration of Lowry's verbal resources would greatly expand this list but it is hoped that the cited examples make the intended point.

The elements of the novel that have been isolated thus far — the endowment of the main character with certain traits, the images of a social world in eruption, the pervading geographical metaphor of cleavage and the imagery of exhaustion and chaos are the main components of the dispersive movement of *Under the Volcano*.

3.

In the first chapter of the novel in which M. Laurelle reconsiders the tragic events that took place the previous year, Lowry presents a succinct summary of the narrative that is to follow. (In this context the reference to the motion of the Ferris wheel with which the chapter ends (p. 42) might be said to symbolize the development of the novel as a whole: »Over the town, in the dark tempestuous night, backwards revolved the luminous wheel«). In addition, certain happenings (Hugh's departure, the outbreak of WWII) take place after the conclusive event of the narrative (Yvonne's and the consul's deaths) — if the narrative is seen as a linear development — so that, if the text may be said to work out the intimations announced in chapter I, these happenings are somewhat redundant. Dispensing with suspense and »mystery«,¹⁰ Lowry writes a plotless novel, and so as to give his text an intelligible form he had to use certain technical resources to pattern his unwieldy material.

In order to assemble the novel's disparate elements and to enable the emergence of intelligible patterns, Lowry employs the unities of time, place and action. Needless to say, this traces back to the strategies Joyce used in *Ulysses*: Bloomsday, Dublin and the »odysseys« of the two protagonists through the city. The action of *Under the Volcano* takes place on the Day of the Dead in November, 1938. Chapter I which we saw functions as a sort of précis is appropriately dated exactly a year later. It should be obvious that one can speak of the unity of time in this novel only in a condition a sense — as a framework — since a feature of the kind of novel under consideration here is the simultaneity of all time (the past: memory, the present: immediate experience, the fu-

¹⁰ »The plot, then, is the novel in its logical intellectual aspect: It requires mystery, but the mysteries are solved later on«. E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, (Edward Arnold, London, 1953), p. 92.

ture: projections). The novel achieves spatial unity by having its action located in a region of Mexico. And the unity of action is the journey from Quauhnahuac to Tomalin. It may nominally be said that the bus trip to the Arena Tomalin constitutes the plot of Under the *Volcano*: the preparatory stage where the reader gets to know the travellers and their relationships, the experience on the bus (the murdered Indian, the »pelado« filching the dead man's money) and the destination reached, bringing failure of rapprochement (the consul: »I love hell. I can't wait to get back there. In fact I'm running, I'm almost back there already (p. 314) and tragedy (death).

However, alongside the unities, the integrative strategy that is very marked in the novel is Lowry's practice of repetition. In what follows it is our intention to isolate a corpus of evidence of this practice. It would be of no avail to attempt to document all the recurrences that crop up in the text but it is hoped that the most significant ones will be touched upon.

The words »No se puede vivir sin amor« (pp. 6, 209, 376), the notice on the signpost »Le gusta esta jardin« (pp. 128, 219, 232) and the numerous references to the movie »Las Manos de Orlaç, con Peter Lorre« (pp. 24, 46, 60, 109, 110, 217, 231, 240) primarily function as evident underpinnings of the chaotic text. The same can be said about the news of the impending transportation of a corpse (pp. 43, 49, 59, 284, 301) which Yvonne first hears »lobbed ... over the Bella Vista bar windowsill into the square« (p. 43) and which continually reverberate amidst the consul's cerebral chaos. Additional elements might be listed here for the repetitive use Lowry makes of them — intimations of the North, Parian, Elba, the barranca, the volcanoes — but their integrative function is not as clearcut as of those above.

There are ten references to the Indian and his horse with »the number seven branded on its rump« (p. 109) in the text. Putting aside the possibility of deeper significations which this element might be said to have¹¹, we will instance it as a phenomena of repetition, as an integrative principle of composition. It appears in the novel on the following occasions: sighted by Hugh and Yvonne on their ride (p. 109); by M. Luerelle and the consul before the bus trip (p. 213); the Indian discovered dead by the roadside (pp. 214—46); Hugh recollects meeting him during his morning ride

¹¹ Of the many symbolic readings of number seven none seem to accord with the context in which they appear in Lowry's novel. Perhaps the way to understand Lowry's choice of this number — if it was not fortuitous — is to read it as if it were used in an ironic way. For an exhaustive list of meanings of number seven see J. Chevalier and A. Gheerbrant *Rječnik Simbola*, (Nakladni zavod MH, Zagreb, 1983), pp. 585—90.

(p. 293); the consul ironizes Hugh's humanitarian instincts towards the killed Indian (p. 296); the horse crashes into and kills Yvonne (p. 335); the consul recognizes the horse at the Farolito and implicates the Chief of Rostrum in murder (pp. 354, 359, 371); the horse breaks loose into the forest when the consul is shot (p. 373). Although what should be underscored here is that by merely recurring in the text the Indian and his horse help to hold the novel together, it is possible to differentiate at least two additional modes in which this element contributes to the integrity of the novel. Upon completing the text the reader discovers that the consul is the unwitting cause of Yvonne's death (the horse crashes into the forest upon hearing gunshots), and the horse's function of being the mechanistic agent with the help of which Lowry interrelates his characters is further evidenced in the fact that all the four main characters encounter the horse, in this way creating a common, binding experience. The horse figures within the plot, if it is permissible to speak of one in this novel, in the sense that the consul is able to reconstruct and solve the »mystery« of the Indian's death (pp. 354, 371) by pondering upon the horse's presence at the Farolito.

The possible meaning of the Day of the Dead, the significance of Mexico or of the journey, the symbolic readings of the enumerated repetitions are not of interest here. What we wanted to draw attention to was their integrative function. This interest derives from the premise that a long work like the novel, especially the novels of the stream of consciousness, rely on repetition as a method of binding the text together.

Under the Volcano can be thought of as based on the tension between movements towards disintegration and the opposite integrative procedures. To illustrate this tension, and to show that our reading is not arbitrary we might look at the antinomy and juxtaposition of the two dominating images of the novel: the barranca and the volcanoes. Here are three quotations where the two appear together:

Beyond the barranca the plains rolled up to the very foot of the volcanoes into a barrier of murk above which rose the pure cone of old Popo, and spreading to the left of it like a University City in the snow the jagged peaks of Ixtaccihuatl (p. 67)

They were crossing a bridge at the bottom of the hill, over the ravine. It appeared overtly horrendous here... But above was the blue sky and Yvonne looked happy when Popocatepetl sprang into view, (p. 233)

Popocatepetl towered through the window, its immense flanks partly hidden by rolling thunderheads; its peak blocking the sky, it appeared almost right overhead, the barranca, the Farolito, directly beneath. (p. 339)

It would be insensitive to read these passages as merely images of setting. They seem to be charged with a profounder significance. On one level the barranca epitomizes the chaos and the volcanoes the scaffold whose synthesis becomes the organization of the novel. On the other hand, the antinomies contained in the passages (murk-pure cone, University City; horrendous-happy; beneath-overhead) may be understood as metaphors for the difficulty of writing (rendering experience) and the overcoming of this difficulty in the created text. If this contention is valid, Lowry incorporates within his text vivid clues for its interpretation.

*Stipe Grgas: ROMAN MALCOLMA LOWRYJA POD VULKANOM:
KOMPOZICIJSKI POSTUPCI*

S a ž e t a k

Pod Vulkanom se može interpretirati kao proizvod kompozicijske strategije koja je zajednička romanima toka struje svijesti. Ona obuhvaća dvostruki postupak: prvo, izbor tehnika koje doprinose i odražavaju psihički kaos, i drugo, upotrebu elemenata koji romanu pridaju inteligibilni oblik. Svojim izborom likova (posebice Goeffreya Firmina), društva u raspadanju i geografskog raskola («barranca»), kao i svojim slikama iscrpljenja i propasti, Lowry stvara dezintegrativni pokret svoje knjige; integrativni elementi su jedinstvo vremena, mjesta, radnje, te naročitog značaja, ponavljanje. Antinomija i jukstapozicija dviju dominantnih slika — «barranca» i vulkana — pokazuje da ovo čitanje djela nije proizvoljno.