THE PLATONIC HERITAGE IN UNDER THE VOLCANO

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The number of allusions that have been hunted down in *Under the Volcano* has reached a total at once impressive and discouraging. It is difficult to keep everything straight and, more important, to discover the central vision that keeps these fragments from flying off in all directions. After the allusions have been identified and the "earnest drudgery" about which Douglas Day complains in his biography of Lowry has been done, to what degree is the "whollistic approach" for which he calls really possible?[1] I shall attempt to answer this question by analyzing the function of the Platonic heritage in *Under the Volcano,* stressing that allusion is not a mere technique but an essential part of Lowry's vision. I begin with a single allusion to Plato exploring the many implications of its use.

The placing of the allusion to Plato's Myth of the Cave — it occurs twice in the first chapter of the novel — suggests that we should give it serious consideration. By looking at it both in terms of its immediate context and in relation to the rest of the novel, we see that it is a deliberately planted detail which prepares the reader for the next eleven chapters. Jacques Laruelle is sitting in the Cerveceria XX looking through a doorway into the adjoining theatre during a power failure. Inside, the Mexican populace is celebrating the Day of the Dead. The children and hawkers yell; the pariah dogs prowl in and out of the stalls:

> The lights were not entirely dead: they glimmered, a dim reddish orange flickering. On the screen, over which clambered an endless procession of torchlit shadows, hung, magically projected upside down, a faint apology for the 'suspended function' . . . .[2]

Two pages later we find Laruelle staring over the shoulder of Senor Bustamente

> into a graveyard darkness stabbed by slashes of torchlight like heat lightning, but the vendors had lowered their voices, the children had stopped laughing and crying while the diminished audience sat slackly and bored yet patient before the dark screen, suddenly illuminated, swept, by silent grotesque shadows of giants and spears and birds, then dark again. . . . the men along the right hand balcony who hadn't bothered to move or come downstairs, a solid frieze carved into the wall. . . . (p. 34)

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[1] Douglas Day, *Malcolm Lowry: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 322.
[2] Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 32. All further references to *Under the Volcano* will be to this edition and will be included in the text of the essay.

In the original, Socrates is telling Glaucon a parable "to illustrate the degree to which our nature may be enlightened or unenlightened."[3] He tells Glaucon to imagine the condition of men living in a "cavernous chamber underground." There are an entrance open to the light and an aisle or passage down the entire length of the cave. The men have been here from childhood,

> chained by the leg and also by the neck, so that they cannot move and can see only what is in front of them, because the chains will not let them turn their heads. At some distance higher up is the light of a fire burning behind them; and between the prisoners and the fire is a track with a parapet built along it, like the screen at a puppet show, which hides the performers while they show their puppets over the top.
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> Now behind this parapet imagine persons carrying along various artificial objects, including figures of men and animals in wood or stone or other materials, which project above the parapet. Naturally, some of these persons will be talking, others silent . . . . Prisoners so confined would have seen nothing of themselves or of one another, except the shadows thrown by the fire-light upon the wall of the cave facing them, would they? . . . [And] if they could talk to one another, would they not suppose that their words referred only to those passing shadows which they saw?[4]

Lowry's frieze of men suggests the prisoners in Plato's cave chained in such a fashion that they cannot turn their heads. The fire in Plato's cave is mirrored by the orange flickering torchlight in the cinema, and of course the grotesque shadows which sweep the screen recall the procession of images on the wall of the cave. Indeed, the modern movie house with its projection room above and behind the heads of the patrons is well suited to exploitation as a modern parallel of Plato's cave. However, to emphasize the point, Lowry has carefully presented his cinema in a condition which especially brings out the similarities.

The uses to which he puts this allusion are both immediate and exended. The audience in Quauhnahuac is awaiting a glimpse of the murderer's hands just as the reader, having been carefully prepared in the opening chapter for the entrance of the Consul, awaits the entrance of the man who is responsible for Yvonne's death. Some readers with an interest in the pop culture of the thirties might know that the woman in *Los Manos de Orlac,* the film which is being shown, is also named Yvonne.[5] The frozen men, who, like the prisoners in Plato's cave, see only the illusion straight ahead of them, introduce the theme of a frequently ignorant humanity that knows neither itself nor its fellows, a theme which reverberates throughout the novel, both in the particular condition of the Consul and in the general condition of Mexico. On

[3]Plato, *The Republic,* trans. F. M. Cornford (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1945), p. 227.
[4]Plato, pp. 227-28.
[5]Tony Kilgallin, *Lowry* (Erin, Ontario: Press Porcepic, 1973), p. 134.

the political level the novel also looks beyond the borders of Mexico at a world entering the darkness of a global war. This point is made explicitly in the first chapter and realized fully in the parable-like eighth chapter where the wounded rider is left to the fascist police. We should not forget the immediate dramatic situation either. It is, after all, Jacques Laruelle who looks into the theatre and records these sights for the reader. He is a one-time movie director who thought to change the world with his films. Although now ready to return to film-making, he has been inactive for many years. His function, like the cinema's, is suspended.

In Plato's myth, the cave stands for the sensible world, and the open space above represents the metaphysical world of forms. Just as the shadow on the wall is a projection from the object paraded before the fire, so the sensible physical world is a mere emanation from the form which exists in the metaphysical realm. The myth now becomes a vehicle for describing man's spiritual journey: "The ascent to see the things in the upper world you may take as standing for the upward journey of the soul into the region of the intelligible."[6] One can also see that if there are shadows and objects in the lower (physical) realm, there must, according to the idea of corespondences, be gradation of lower and higher forms in the upper realm. In Plato, the sun becomes the symbol of the highest of all forms, the Form of the Good. Therefore, the ascent culminates with the vision of the sun. This concept of the journey to the light of the sun echoes throughout *Under the Volcano.* The Platonic allusion is reinforced not only by the plot but also by the references to both Dante and the Cabbala, perhaps the most thoroughly mined veins of allusion in the novel. *The Divine Comedy* concludes with a vision of God imaged as a point of intense light surrounded by the rose configuration of angels. In the Cabbala, the adept journeys up the ladder of emanations towards Kether (Light). And, as we shall see later, the same image is to be found in Neo-Platonism. Plato says about light:

> Now . . . suppose one [of the prisoners of the cave] was set free and forced suddenly to stand up, turn his head, and walk with eyes lifted to the light; all these movements would be painful, and he would be too dazzled to make out the objects whose shadows he had been used to see. . . . And if he were forced to look at the fire-light itself, would not his eyes ache, so that he would try to escape and turn back to the things which he could see distinctly, convinced that they really were clearer than those other objects now being shown to him?[7]

In order to interpret *Under the Volcano* in light of this passage, one must of course keep in mind the correspondence between the fire in the cave and the sun in the upper realm.

The plot of the novel is essentially this: Yvonne finds her husband in a dark cantina. It is seven in the morning and the sun is rising. She leads him into

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[6]Plato, p. 231. [7]Plato, p. 232.

the light and is his guide throughout most of the twelve hours of daylight that follow. But, as night falls, the Consul returns to the darkness, this time to the ironically named El Farolito (The Lighthouse). With Yvonne's help he has escaped the chains of the cave, but, preferring the darkness to the light and confusing the unreality of the cave with the reality of the illuminated world, he returns to the cantina for the comfort of "accustomed ways." Thus he avoids the pain of (in)sight. Having fled through the dark wood of the senses to El Farolito, a place Dr. Vigil once called an *infierno,* he plunges farther into the darkness when he is picked up by Maria, certainly a woman "for those that have nobody with," but no virgin. He follows her through a labyrinth of connecting rooms, each smaller and darker than the one before until they reach her bedroom, a lightless annex the size of a cupboard. Here the "final unprophylactic rejection" takes place. The person he has rejected is, of course, Yvonne, the Beatrice figure of the novel; and once again we can look to Plato for confirmation and enrichment of the Dantean element. According to the Myth of Ascent, Love is a mediary between the mortal and the divine. It would be difficult to find anywhere in literature a figure who more clearly represents love than Beatrice. Just as Beatrice leads Dante on his ascent to a vision of the divine, so could Yvonne, were her husband willing, lead the Consul to the northern paradise for which he in part longs, where the mountains stand against a backdrop of alabaster clouds illuminated from within by gold lighting. The imagery with which Lowry describes the imagined northern scene contrasts beautifully with the fitful lightning-like torchlight of the theatre.

Platonism also corroborates that in Chapter Eight Lowry links the Consul's spiritual malaise with his social uselessness. The Consul not only offers the dying man at the roadside no help but even tries to keep Hugh from touching the wounded rider. Plato affirms the old Greek ideal of Cosmos which says that the world and man form an organic unity. For instance, the enlightened man returns to the cave because, as a social animal, he must. He is an organism which is part of a larger organism, and so he must live as a part of the human community if he is to live at all. One commentator summarizes: "Man, being a social and political creature, has moral and political responsibilities, and the problem of being a good man is inseparable from the problem of being a good citizen."[8] The Consul's behaviour when he is confronted with the wounded rider shows clearly his moral vacuity.

Although Platonism can offer these various insights into *Under the Volcano,* the novel is even more closely allied to the tenets of Neo-Platonism. Geoffrey Durrant has already shown that both Lowry and his mentor Conrad Aiken have affinities with Neo-Platonism (see note 12), and by doing so he has placed Lowry within his proper frame of reference in terms of both his vision and his practice. Neo-Platonism, led mainly by the obscure and poetic

[8]W. T. Jones, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1952), p. 115.

work of Plotinus, developed in the third century in a milieu of religious revival and world weariness as the Roman empire began to break up. As classical secularism gave way to religion, ethics and politics turned to theology, and science to faith; man's relationship to the supreme being became all important, making Plato's bias in favour of transcendence appealing. Within this ethos Neo-Platonism developed a philosophy of religion which became a major influence in Western thought. By focusing on attainment of the inner certainty of a supra-rational vision through which one experiences the ideal world, it furthered this shift in philosophy away from ethics and towards religion.[9]

In Neo-Platonism, reality is one. Both the sensible world and the ideal to which it stands in relation are encompassed by this one reality. Reality is therefore without restriction. But, since reason comprehends only the sensible world, reality cannot be wholly known by rationalistic thinking. This gap in human knowledge must be filled by mystical experience, which, since it is necessarily private and nearly uncommunicable, is not understandable in the customary language of philosophers. Plotinus must therefore speak in metaphors, and when he does he frequently uses that light imagery which we find in Plato, Dante, and Lowry. He says that "the entire Intellectual Order may be figured as a kind of light with the One in repose as its summit as its King."[10] He speaks of the One as "a light before the light" and an "eternal irradiation." Plotinus, following Plato's hint that although the Good is beyond being it is the author of all things that are known, conceived of his Absolute as a power whose overflowing activity fills the whole universe. "This activity overflows in a succession of types of existence which decrease in reality as their distance from their source increases, until at the extremity of the creative process they disappear into a bare nothingness, just as the light given off by some source of illumination gradually fades away into darkness."[11] Certainly the Consul's death — he is shot and then thrown down into the barranca — is a fading away into darkness. But the events preceding his death are even more clearly based on the Neo-Platonic model. In *Under the Volcano,* as elsewhere in Lowry's writing, love and reality are equated, and the most loveless situation into which the Consul works himself is his encounter with Maria. The series of rooms through which she leads him suggests the Neo-Platonic emanations moving progressively away from the source of light.

In his article on "Through the Panama," Geoffrey Durrant points out that in Neo-Platonic mythology the human spirit embarks through a "gate on a southerly voyage on the dark sea of matter, descends to imprisonment in the Hades of the senses in the extreme south, and then proceeds northwards to the port or gate of the north, where it may hope to escape from its stormy

[9]Jones, pp. 296-97.

[10]Plotinus, *Ennaeds,* in *The Essence of Plotinus,* trans. G. H. Turnbull (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1934), p. 5.

[11]Jones, p. 301.

exile."[12] This myth is also applicable to *Under the Volcano* where the four main characters are all exiles. They have journeyed south to Mexico and see their salvation in terms of leaving it, either for Europe or Canada. The male characters are doubly exiled, being separated from their true selves. Hugh's exile is political and moral, Laruelle's artistic, and the Consul's spiritual. The Consul envisages in one of the letters he never sent to Yvonne a northern paradise, but although she returns ready to lead him to it, he leaves her, yelling as he goes, " 'I love hell. I can't wait to get back there' " (p. 316). And, of course, to Lowry, hell is lovelessness. The words over Jacques Laruelle's door spell out the message: "It is not possible to live without love." Then the Consul chooses to continue his spiritual exile and dies at the bottom of the barranca. Hugh subsequently goes to Spain to join the fight against the fascists, and Laruelle, perhaps spurred in part by Hugh's action as well as by the Consul's fate, starts out for Europe a year later. Durrant's analysis of the Neo-Platonic use of the myth of Psyche and Cupid in the same article is also instructive when applied to *Under the Volcano.* Psyche, who represents Cupid's true wisdom of the soul, is exiled from her starry home. When the consul returns to the abyss of self, his Psyche (Yvonne) is "gathered upwards and borne towards the stars" (p. 37).[13]

Although these comments indicate ways in which Neo-Platonic concepts are incorporated into *Under the Volcano,* they do not fully explain why Lowry should find Neo-Platonism especially attractive. Of course one of the most obvious things about Neo-Platonism is its eclecticism, and on this point Lowry's affinity is clear. His own eclecticism is so great that it brings him to the edge of artistic disintegration at times. *Under the Volcano* is, in fact, extremely like the man who wrote it. His biographers have shown us a writer who lived in a phantasmagoric world of spiritual forces and daymares, and if we were to approach the novel after the biographies, we would not be surprised to find that it is modelled on the dream. His mentor, Conrad Aitken, has said through the mask of Demarest in *Blue Voyage* that what a writer like himself produces is "in the end not so much a unitary work of art as a melancholy *cauchemar* of ghosts and voices, a phantasmagoric world of disordered colour and sounds . . . ."[14] Lowry too is such a writer and a good deal of the sense of phantasmagoria is the result of the deluge of illusions.

Although allusion might at first seem merely to contribute to the nightmare, Lowry sees it as a way out. Through a myriad of allusions he places his characters against a backdrop of art. The tradition thus becomes

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[12]Geoffrey Durrant, "Death in Life: Neo-Platonic Elements in 'Through the Panama,' " in *Malcolm Lowry: The Man and His Work,* ed. George Woodcock (Vancouver: The University of British Columbia Press, 1971), p. 44.

[13]Durrant's thesis that Lowry's mentor Conrad Aiken used Neo-Platonic myth is strengthened by the fact that Yvonne's fate is probably inspired by the similar ending of Aiken's short story "Mr. Arcularis."

[14]Conrad Aiken, *Blue Voyage,* in *The Collected Novels of Conrad Aiken* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. 153.

the screen upon which the individual creation is projected. It is the tradition which creates the framework that gives the individual creation its meaning. Richard Costa has drawn attention to a passage in "The Bulls of the Resurrection" which is to the point.[15] A young man named Rysdale has had a dream and his friend Smith suggests it might have been evoked by a haunting El Greco they have seen. Rysdale rejects this suggestion and replies that

> it was like El Greco gone mad. No, I'll tell you what it was like. It was as though a moving picture had been projected onto a Greco instead of onto a screen. There was this fixed, timeless, haunted background, but this was not part of what was going on. This was only the relief against which it could be seen, the means by which it became visible.[16]

Costa comments that this passage contains in embryo Lowry's vision of the interplay between that which is in flux and that which is frozen. I would suggest that we push this idea farther and see the scene as symbolic of the interplay between Platonic forms and the changing world of sense impressions. In such an interpretation the world of art symbolizes the Platonic ideal, and the dream that is played out against its backdrop is the individual existence. Thus the individual existence derives its reality (indicated here by visibility) from the Platonic realm. To simplify, Lowry is one of those writers who sees art as permanent and existence as transient. Thus the failure of art indicates the disintegration of meaning — which bring us back to where we began. In the cinema in Quanahuac art has certainly failed. If we see the cinema as symbolic of whatever it is that gives human existence its reality, then those passages in Chapter One of *Under the Volcano* with which we began this discussion symbolize the human community's descent into chaos. Certainly this is the thrust of the novel on both the political and spiritual levels. Plunging into world war in the late 'thirties, the world is cut off from its art and from the power of the permanent metaphysical world of Platonic forms. There is nothing to give shape to existence, and the Consul, who feels the unreality most keenly, becomes a symbol of his age.

Lowry was quite serious about the allusion to Plato's Myth of the Cave. He sees us as living not in reality but in changing shadows. But sitting in this cinema of existence, we can catch glimpses of the "real" world beyond, as, for instance, Ethan does in *October Ferry to Gabriola* when he feels that his glimpse into "the very workings of creation" is shown upon "the screen of his mind."[17] Plato, and particularly the Neo-Platonists, saw such an illumination as the way to bridge the gap between the sensible world and the ideal, between the cave and the upper air. Lowry profoundly rejected the world as most of us think of it, reality "as it is sold to you," and for many years lived in his

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[15]Richard Hauer Costa, *Malcolm Lowry* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1972), pp. 159-60.
[16]Malcolm Lowry, "The Bulls of the Resurrection," *Prism International*, 5, No. 1 (Summer, 1965), 8.
[17]Malcolm Lowry, *October Ferry to Gabriola* (New York and Cleveland: The World Publishing Corporation, 1970), p. 147. Quoted by Costa, p. 160.

own Eridanus at Dollarton. One can trace his rejection back to the time when he turned away from his earthly family in England. He was, according to John Davenport, a man who simply "hadn't wanted to be born at all."[18] An exile on this earth, he eventually destroyed his earthly person. His soul sickness was homesickness. Consequently, although in *Under the Volcano* Lowry puts forward the old classical ideal of being part of the human community, in his own secluded life he embodied more closely the Neo-Platonic perspective, and it is within that mystical and eclectic system that he should be viewed. Like the Neo-Platonists, Lowry was an eclectic, and through the multitude of allusions that both burden and enrich his writing he sought to place himself and his own art in relation to the permanent world of art.

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[18]Costa, p. 157.