

“ALASTOR”: THE SPIRIT OF UNDER THE VOLCANO

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In his letter to Jonathan Cape, Lowry says that *Under the Volcano* was “written on numerous planes with provisions made . . . for almost every kind of reader.”¹ He might well have added “and for almost every kind of critic.” Certainly the list of sources and analogues that is given in this letter, together with those implicitly or explicitly mentioned in the novel, is long enough to keep critics busy for the next millennium.² But Lowry’s imagination, like the imaginations of all writers, must have been shaped not only by these conscious and well documented sources but also by other influences, equally powerful, of which he may very well have been unaware. So the question arises: might there not be some important literary or mythical analogue for the Consul’s tormented journey other than those cited in the novel and in the letter to Cape? And, if there is, how should we begin to look for it? The novel’s structure, Lowry says, may be compared to a wheel, a wheel that spins and spins but always returns to its starting point.³ This idea of movement within certain limitations is emphasized by the fact that Lowry frequently compares the Consul to figures who, though constantly on the move, are locked into some kind of spatial or temporal prison: Ixion circling on his wheel of flame, Faust searching for the ultimate experience long after his soul has immured itself in Hell, and Adam, trapped by the temporal limitations of a fallen Eden. Although Lowry has skillfully and consciously linked the Consul’s travels on the last day of his life to the movements of these three figures, none of them provides a

¹Malcolm Lowry, *Selected Letters*, ed. Harvey Breit and Margerie Bonner Lowry (New York: Capricorn Books, 1969), p. 66.

²Although work has been done on Lowry’s diction, his use of time and space, his interest in jazz, his use of film techniques etc., most critics are concerned with proving either that the mythic and symbolic levels of the novel are of primary importance or that the novel’s real meaning lies in the interplay of people, places, and things as they exist in linear time and corporeal space.

³Lowry, *Selected Letters*, pp. 70-71.

completely satisfactory "poetic analogue" for the agonies inherent in the Consul's journey. In fact Lowry says that the closest we can come to finding this analogue is in the sufferings of "the mystic who has abused his powers."⁴ We should begin, then, by looking for some figure who has mystical powers that he has abused. And, since the loss of Yvonne is such an important part of the Consul's sufferings, this analogous figure should also have suffered the loss of a loved one. In addition, of course, he must be a solitary figure, one who, like the Consul (and Ixion and Faust and Adam), is on a journey that leads inexorably towards death.

In chapter seven of *Under the Volcano*, Hugh strolls over to the Consul and Jacques Laurelle, who are discussing the latter's film version of "Alastor," and says, "'Alastor,' 'Alastor,' . . . Who is, was, why, and/or wrote 'Alastor' anyway?"⁵ He gets an answer to part of his question — "Percy Bysshe Shelley" — but not to the rest of it. Hugh's ignorance concerning this early work of Shelley's is understandable. Written in 1815, "Alastor or the Spirit of Solitude" is perhaps the least known of Shelley's major works. An introspective, romantic, and sometimes rather tedious poem, it describes, through the eyes of an unnamed persona, the life and death of a "lovely youth" who gains mystical insights by drinking deep of the "fountain of knowledge"; but, as he is acquiring these insights, he unwittingly neglects the feelings of others and remains oblivious to the ministrations of a lovesick Arab girl. He is subsequently punished for this neglect by the Spirit of Human Love who causes him to fall in love with a luminously beautiful dream maiden, who so obsesses the Poet's soul that he loses all interest in the external world and soon finds himself moving through fear, isolation, and despair and, ultimately, towards death. If we look behind *Under the Volcano's* twentieth-century dialogue and behind its ironic almost self-mocking tone to its "deeply serious"⁶ poetic centre, we find a work remarkably similar in characterization, imagery, diction and, most important, structure to Shelley's "Alastor." When Lowry said that the closest poetic analogue to the sufferings of the Consul could be found in the agonies of the mystic who had abused his powers, he was, of course, speaking of mystics

⁴Lowry, *Selected Letters*, p. 71.

⁵Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 207.

⁶Lowry, *Selected Letters*, p. 66.

in general and not of Shelley's mystic-Poet; and yet, when all the resonances that exist between the two works are taken into consideration, it seems impossible that the imagination that created *Under the Volcano* was not shaped, at least to some degree, by the plight of Shelley's fated wanderer.

Let us first of all consider some general and fairly obvious parallels between the lives of the two protagonists. The Poet is young, gentle, and beautiful. A "child of grace and genius," he is "ever obedient to high thoughts" but, while still young, he leaves his "cold fireside" and travels around the world. The Consul's youth is remarkably similar. While he is staying with the Taskersons in England, the young Geoffrey Firmin is described as a poet and is also said to be beautiful, graceful, and innocent: "a virgin to put it mildly."⁷ Perhaps because his nose is "always in a book," he is also thought to be a genius, one who will soon possess a "knowledge of the Mysteries."⁸ When his stepmother dies and his father deserts him, he too leaves what may be called "a cold fireside" in order to travel. Later in their lives, both the Poet and the Consul fall rapturously in love with a female who is passionate, articulate, dark-haired, and, in some sense, another self. Both women are associated with air, fire, and music; one is "clothed entirely in sunlight."⁹ and the other has "warm light"¹⁰ emanating from her limbs. At some point these ladies vanish from the lives of the protagonists, and the edenic world associated with them also disappears. After the Poet awakens from his dream of the visionary maid, he becomes aware of the "cold light" of morning; the air is silent and the landscape empty. When the Consul awakes from his sleep and finds that Yvonne has left, he too finds himself in a world that is repeatedly defined as "cold," "silent," and "empty."¹¹ It is, of course, not so much that the external worlds of the Poet and the Consul have changed, but that their inner ones have; external reality simply reflects this fact. After the departure of the two females, thoughts of death permeate the lives of the two characters. After waking to an empty cold world, the Poet asks:

⁷Lowry, *Under the Volcano*, pp. 22-27.

⁸Lowry, *Under the Volcano*, p. 291.

⁹Lowry, *Under the Volcano*, p. 98.

¹⁰Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Complete Works*, ed. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, Vol. I (New York: Gordian Press, 1965), 1.175.

¹¹Lowry, *Under the Volcano*, pp. 22-27.

Does the dark gate of death
Conduct to the mysterious paradise
O Sleep? (ll. 211-13)

And shortly after Yvonne leaves the Consul, he speaks of his "nightly grapple with death" and his fear that his soul has already died. The Poet's journey eventually takes him to one silent nook on the brink of a precipitous ravine where he finds a spot to lay his "languid head"; the Consul's travels lead him to another kind of nook, the Farolito in Parián, which is so close to a ravine that he hears the sound of "subterranean collapse." The Poet, whose heart ever "beat in mystic sympathy/ With nature's ebb and flow," (ll. 652-53) dies peacefully on the edge of the precipice just as the moon sets. The Consul whose heart could only beat in mystic sympathy with a bottle of mescal, is shot and thrown into the precipice an hour after the moon sets.

The Poet and the Consul may also be seen as Narcissus figures who, after neglecting their respective Echos (the Arab maiden and Yvonne), become so immersed in their own concerns that death is inevitable. Oblivious to the Arab maiden's ministrations, the Poet falls in love with the dream maiden. When he tries to embrace this intangible other self, however, he wakes up and finds himself in a world which, like Narcissus', is associated with water, reflection, and death. Later on in his journey the Poet encounters yellow flowers, emblems of his own self-absorption, which, Narcissus-like,

For ever gaze on their own drooping eyes,
Reflected in the crystal calm [of the stream.]
(ll. 407-08)

The Consul's relationship with Yvonne follows a similar pattern. Although Yvonne functions on one level as an ideal mate, she can also be seen as an Echo figure whose desire for love and attention the Consul repeatedly ignores. What obscures his ability to respond to her is the image he has of himself drinking mescal in the Farolito in Parián: "That prospect [fills] him with an almost healing love . . . for it [is] part of the calm, the greatest longing he [has] ever known."¹² It is the contemplation of this other self drinking mescal that eventually lures the Consul away from Yvonne to the Farolito

¹²Lowry, *Under the Volcano*, p. 203.

and death. Images of water, reflection, and death are associated with the Consul's world just as they are with the Poet's; even the Narcissus image is present. In a letter the Consul writes, but never sends, to Yvonne, he compares the beauty of the cantina to "the cold jonquil beauty one rediscovers in death" (p. 41). The jonquil is a variety of narcissus and here, as in the myth, it is associated with death. And on his final journey through the forest, the Consul, like the Poet, encounters "yellow flowers" that grow on either side of the stream.

Both the Poet and the Consul are solitary, rather passive figures who move through landscapes that are informed by very similar images: embracing trees, forest paths, swans in flight, a horned moon whose setting is associated with the hero's death, streams, yellow flowers, solitary stars, painted birds, and an omnipresent abyss that threatens the lives of both. In addition to these specific images, the two works share certain clusters of images associated with darkness, oppression, death, descent, ascent, isolation, immobility, and imprisonment. Often, as one would expect, an image from the poem appears in a somewhat ironic or twisted form in the novel. Streams, fountains, and waterfalls, for instance, are common to both works, but in *Under the Volcano* the stream is as likely to be a gutter; the fountain, a dry concrete structure; and the falls, a reservoir "built on two levels" that somehow reminds the Consul of "organized ultimate sweat." While images in the Poet's world often defy natural laws — whirlpools ascend, rivers run away from the sea, and so on — they have an ordered, slightly distanced predictability. Even when the waves of ocean's "multitudinous waste" rush to "mutual war," we never fear that the Poet will be destroyed by this tumult because everything in his world is simply an externalization of his inner one: the windings of the cavern are the windings of his thoughts, the yellow flowers are emblems of his self-absorption, the homeless streams are images of his homelessness, and so on. In a very real sense he moves through a world that he has created and, as Shelley says, he is like an "elemental god" in this world — nothing in it can destroy him. It is the chaos that rages within that is his true enemy.

Unlike the Poet, the Consul moves through a landscape that is both symbolic and realistic and there are times when neither the reader nor the Consul can be absolutely certain which is which. Thus, the dead child is both a real dead child and an image of the

Consul's dead soul, and the armadillo that tunnels into darkness is both a real armadillo and an image of the Consul's refusal to face the light of truth. Because of their ambiguous nature (the bird that frequents the Consul's garden is called "the ambiguous bird"), images in the Consul's world are often unpredictable and threatening: — they slip, slide, perish, and sometimes attack: "Now a scorpion was moving slowly across towards him . . . But it wasn't the scorpion he cared about. It was that, all at once, the thin shadows of isolated nails, the stains of murdered mosquitoes, the very scars and cracks of the wall began to swarm . . . wriggling instantly toward his heart" (p. 152).

Interestingly, both the Poet and the Consul seem to realize that the images that surround them are related in some way to their own lives. The Poet says:

O stream!

Whose source is inaccessibly profound,
Whither do thy mysterious waters tend?
Thou imagest my life. Thy darksome stillness,
Thy dazzling waves, thy loud and hollow gulfs,
Thy searchless fountain, and invisible course
Have each their type in me.

(ll. 502-08)

And after the Consul has had several mescals in the Farolito, he suddenly becomes aware of the symbolic nature of everything that has happened during the day.

It was as if his fall [from a better way of life] had been broken by a narrow ledge, a ledge from which he could neither climb up nor down, on which he lay half stunned, while far below him the abyss yawned, waiting. And on it as he lay, he was surrounded in delirium by these phantoms of himself, the policeman, Fructuoso Sanabria, that other man who looked like a poet, the luminous skeletons, even the rabbit in the corner and the ash and the sputum on the filthy floor — did not each correspond, in a way he couldn't understand yet obscurely recognized, to some fraction of his being? And he saw dimly too how Yvonne's arrival, the snake in the garden, his quarrel with Laurelle and later with Hugh and Yvonne, the infernal machine, the encounter with Senor Gregorio, the finding of the letters, and much else beside, how all the events of the day indeed had been as indifferent tufts of grass he had half-heartedly clutched at or stones loosed on his downward flight. (p. 362)

In this passage the Consul not only recognizes the fact that every item in his environment has a symbolic function, but he also retranslates these items back into a symbolic landscape of tufts of grass and loosened stones. In other words, the Consul's mind, for just a brief moment, creates a solipsistic mental landscape that is very much like the Poet's — a landscape where every aspect in what appears to be an external world is really a projection of the inner one.

Although Lowry's use of certain images makes the reader feel that he is in an ironic world that, at times, comes close to being a grotesque parody of the one that the Poet inhabits, Lowry's diction does much to mitigate this impression and to give the reader the feeling that he is in a world that is as much nineteenth-century romantic as it is twentieth-century ironic. For instance, which of the following phrases are Shelley's and which are Lowry's?

horned moon	horn of moon
down the abyss	into an abyss
a green ravine	a deep ravine
of Cashmire	in Kashmir
inmost sanctuary	white sanctuary
sculptured on alabaster	white alabaster
long-forgotten lyre	songless lyre
eyes hung in the gloom	eyes pierced the gloom
of thy deep mysteries	of the mysteries
hither he came	thither he bent his steps ¹³

This romantic ambience is further heightened by that peculiar mixture of Narcissism and misguided Platonism that seems to be characteristic of both protagonists. They first imagine an impossibly perfect creature — an ideal self in a sense — and then, realizing that she belongs to another realm, despair because she is unattainable. In the Preface to "Alastor," Shelley describes this aspect of the Poet's plight very clearly. Instead of looking for several different people, each of whom would possess *one* of the characteristics that he finds desirable, the Poet unites his "requisitions" and attaches them to a single image, the visionary maid. Then, having envisioned this perfect creature, he succumbs to despair because he senses that he cannot find her in the corporeal world. The Consul does something similar. Idealizing his early

¹³The phrases in the left hand column are Shelley's; those in the right are Lowry's.

relationship with Yvonne,¹⁴ he dreams that it must "still exist somewhere" and, fixated on this vision, he is unable to accept the real Yvonne when he sees her standing before him. Later, when the Consul is drinking mescal at the Farolito, he has a dream "of a phantom dance of souls . . . seeking permanence in the midst of what [is] only perpetually evanescent or eternally lost."¹⁵ Although he doesn't realize it, the Consul himself is one of these confused souls. So too, of course, is the Poet. Having more or less accepted the fact that their ideal mates are lost, the Poet and the Consul react very differently. Denying the external world, the Poet abandons himself to the alastor that burns within; but the Consul can never turn his back completely on the external world: he just shifts allegiance, from Yvonne to the cantinas, and then tries to convince himself that every drink is an "eternal sacrament."

Despite differences in genre,¹⁶ the two works have numerous structural similarities. Both were published with a preface or note in which the author a) insists on the allegorical and symbolic nature of the work and b) justifies the ways of the protagonist to the prospective reader. In the initial section or chapter of both "Alastor" and *Under the Volcano*, the reader is first told of the death of the protagonist and is then made to feel that he was an exceptional human being whose life story is well worth the reader's attention. The remainder of both works — be it 600 lines or 300 pages — is a retrospective narrative. There is also a sense of the elegiac in both works: there has been a death not only of an exceptional man but of an exceptional age. After the Poet's death

Nature's vast frame, the web of human things,
Birth and the grave . . . are not as they were.
(ll. 719-20)

¹⁴Yvonne seems to have a flair for this sort of Platonic romanticizing too. In her letter to Geoffrey she says, "I do not know where you are. Oh it's all too cruel. Where did we go I wonder? In what far place do we still walk hand in hand?" (p. 367).

¹⁵Lowry, *Under the Volcano*, p. 288. Compare the sentiments expressed in this passage with these words that Shelley wrote in a letter to Mr. Gisborne: "I think one is always in love with something or other; the error . . . consists in seeking in a mortal image the likeness of what is perhaps eternal" (*Complete Works*, Vol. II, p. 401).

¹⁶Since Lowry keeps insisting on the poetic nature of his work, these differences are not so great as one might assume. In the letter to Cape, Lowry says that "the conception of the whole thing was essentially poetical" and that, like a poem, the novel should "be read several times;" only then will its "full meaning . . . reveal itself [and] explode in the mind" (p. 59).

And in chapter one of *Under the Volcano* Laurelle thinks back to the time, only a year ago, when the Consul was still alive — a time “When an individual life had some value.”

In addition to these similarities, both works are structured around the motif of a voyage or journey — a journey that is at once an escape from and a quest for: the Consul’s journey frequently being a macabre and ironic version of the Poet’s. In “Alastor” the Poet tries to escape from the power that imprisons him and makes him feel

As an eagle grasped
In folds of the green serpent, feels her breast
Burn with the poison, and precipitates
Through night and day, tempest, and calm, and cloud,
Frantic with dizzying anguish;
(ll. 227-31)

but, at the same time, he is questing for those two “starry eyes” with their “serene and azure smiles” that seem to beckon him onward.

In *Under the Volcano* the Consul, like the Poet, is both searching for something and trying to escape from something; but the issue in the novel is somewhat more complex. The Consul is trying to escape from many things: his past, his future, being drunk, being sober, and so on. He also wants to run away from guilt — guilt caused not only by his separation from Yvonne but also from his involvement in the Hell’s Bunker episode, from his performance aboard the S.S. Samaritan, and from his relationship with Maria. These four temporally separated events function not independently but as a fusion in the Consul’s mind, and this fusion is the nagging, soul-consuming fury from which the Consul seeks release. Looking at these four events closely, we see that each involves some kind of loss: loss of innocence and a best friend (Hell’s Bunker), loss of honour and self respect (S.S. Samaritan), loss of an edenic world and Yvonne (Yvonne’s departure), and loss of hope and the desire for life (the episode with Maria).

Perhaps the most difficult of these four events to understand is the Hell’s Bunker episode. When Jacques Laurelle first meets the fifteen-year-old Geoffrey Firmin at the home of Abraham Taskerson, the two become inseparable friends and spend an idyllic summer sailing, golfing, and practicing the fine art of picking up girls, an art

understood by both boys to be "nothing very serious." One night, however, Laurelle accidentally discovers Geoffrey and his girl disporting themselves in a "very serious" manner in a part of the golf course known as Hell's Bunker. When Laurelle comes upon the bizarre scene, he is not able to control his laughter. Although the two boys behave "with remarkable aplomb" and later visit a pub called, prophetically, *The Case Is Altered*, their friendship immediately begins to deteriorate. But what grieves Geoffrey about this whole business is not simply that he has lost a friend and his sexual innocence, but that there also seems to be some sense in which he has betrayed himself to himself. It is as if for a moment he saw his own bizarre performance through Laurelle's eyes and found the whole thing utterly shameful. Laurelle does not seem to condemn Geoffrey, but Geoffrey certainly condemns himself and, because of this condemnation, he resents Laurelle and refuses to have anything more to do with him.

While the incident in Hell's Bunker separates the Consul from his only friend, the one on board the S.S. Samaritan exiles him from all humanity and gives him an excuse to bury himself in drink and undistinguished consulships. In this episode, too, something that appears to be "nothing serious" turns out to be very serious. The S.S. Samaritan, camouflaged as an innocent British cargo steamer, moving like "a stray sheep on the immeasurable green meadows of water" (p. 38), suddenly turns into a dragon "belching fire" when a German submarine surfaces. Since the captain of the S.S. Samaritan is killed during the skirmish, and since Geoffrey Firmin is next in charge, he is deemed responsible for the subsequent burning to death alive of all the German officers. Following the court martial Geoffrey feels that he has not only lost all self-respect but the respect of the rest of the world as well. Whether or not the Consul did order the brutal deaths of all the German officers is uncertain. The important thing about this episode is that once again the Consul is ashamed of the way he has acted; whether or not the rest of the world condemns him is secondary.

The Consul's early relationship with Yvonne seems, at first, to be a chance for rebirth: the earth once again becomes a good place with "the roses and the great tree . . . [and] at night their cries of love" (p. 53). Perhaps because of his previous failures, and the fact that this love is "too horribly unimaginable to lose," the Consul

turns again to the cantinas, thereby causing the situation that he most fears — Yvonne's departure. When he wakes at night and finds her gone, he rushes to El Inferno to be with "the debris and detritus of the streets and the bottom of the earth" (p. 352). Just as the Poet in "Alastor" "overleaps the bounds" by immediately beginning to think of death when he discovers that his dream maiden has vanished, so the Consul "overleaps the bounds" by rushing on to the path that leads first to El Inferno and then to Parián, or death.

Having lost his friend, his self-respect, and his wife, the Consul has little else to lose — except perhaps hope, and he loses this when he plunges his "burning, boiling, crucified organ" suicidally into Maria. It is during this episode that we begin to realize that the four events are linked not only in Lowry's mind but also in the Consul's. He has already equated the Farolito and the Case Is Altered in chapter seven, and when he puts his arms around Maria, he thinks, for a moment, that he is holding Yvonne; but that particular illusion soon sinks into the sea like "one huge black sailing ship, hull down" (the S.S. Samaritan episode). The encounter with Maria ("death, death, and death again") is also, he realizes, the horror "of waking up" in Oaxaca "after Yvonne had gone." The Consul is not only back in that cold, silent, empty world but, in a sense, has never really left it. Somehow the Case Is Altered, the S.S. Samaritan, El Inferno, and the Farolito are all the same place.¹⁷ And it is this "one" place with its associations of shame, guilt, and self-pity that forms the "alastor" that weighs so heavily on the Consul's soul. This is the burden from which he longs to escape.

Having discovered what the Consul is running *from*, we must now attempt to ascertain what he is running *towards*. In a sense, of course, it is Yvonne or at least "the unity they once knew" — a unity which the Consul feels "must still exist somewhere" (p. 45). Certainly he keeps seeing Yvonne (as the Poet keeps seeing the visionary maid) in "every shadow," but his real love, his true vision of hope and peace is, as we have seen, the image of himself drinking mescal at the Farolito in Parián. It becomes apparent after a while that what the protagonists are fleeing from and what they

¹⁷For a fascinating discussion of the ways in which Lowry compresses space and time see Sherrill E. Grace. "The Creative Process: An Introduction to Time and Space in Malcolm Lowry's Fiction." *Studies in Canadian Literature* (Winter, 1977), 61-68.

are questing for are one and the same thing — death. The Poet's decision to follow the visionary maid is also a wish to "meet lone Death," and when his journey is less than twenty-four hours under way, he is described as having "a cheek of death." And after Yvonne leaves, the Consul speaks of his "nightly grapple with death," and his soul yearns to visit Parián — a word that means death. Both the Poet and the Consul are possessed by daemons or alastors (Greek: *a*, not; *last/lath*, forgetfulness) that seem determined not to let their victims forget that "*ne se puede vivir sin amar*"¹⁸ and that death, therefore, is their only alternative.

The journeys that the Poet and the Consul undertake are similar not only in nature and function but, most importantly, in structure. Both may be divided into four related stages: the travelling that is done before the loss of the idyllic world, the travelling that is done immediately after it, that which begins when the protagonist first succumbs to despair, and the fourth and final headlong rush through the forest into the arms of death. During the initial stages of their travels, the Poet is described as "self-contained" and the Consul as "self-possessed" (emphasis mine), but during the last three stages of the voyage, each is contained or possessed by an alastor that will not let him forget the past. Being haunted and tormented by this inner daemon, both protagonists lose their ability to have any real contact with other human beings.

The second stage of the journey, the one that begins immediately after the disappearance of the visionary maid and of Yvonne, is marked by meaningless wandering and by images of coldness, silence and emptiness. The Poet wanders day after day "a weary waste of hours," and the Consul wanders into and out of "the misericordes of unimaginable cantinas where sad-faced potters and legless beggars drink at dawn" (p. 41).

The third stage of both the Poet's journey and the Consul's begins when each first succumbs to despair — a moment marked in both works by the flight of a swan. During his wanderings, the Poet comes to a marsh where he sees a swan "scaling the upward sky." It is at this point that he suddenly realizes that the corporeal world "echoes not his thoughts," only the visionary maid can do that and she, obviously, is not to be found in the corporeal world. As a

¹⁸Lowry, *Under the Volcano*, p. 11 and p. 213. These words appear on one of the towers of Laurelle's "extraordinary house."

“gloomy smile/ Of desperate hope” wrinkles his lips, he is filled with despair and sets sail in the little shallop to “meet lone Death.” The Consul too sees a swan, or imagines he sees one, shortly after Yvonne returns from her year-long absence. After Concepta pours the drinks, the Consul and Yvonne find themselves alone together for the first time since her return. He knows he should take her in his arms but, tormented by his familiars, he remains motionless. In his mind’s eye he seems to see himself and Yvonne embracing passionately, but he also sees “somewhere, out of the heavens, a swan transfixed, [plummeting] to earth” (p. 75). Shortly after he has this vision he is, like the Poet, filled with despair and he senses that he is already one of the “doomed men” who are “waiting for the shutters to roll up” in the nearest cantina. Once he has linked himself with these “doomed men” it is only a matter of minutes till the word *Parián* (death) flashes into his mind. Fearing impotence, he has become its prey and has let the moment for embracing Yvonne pass by. “This was the moment, then, yearned for under beds, sleeping in the corners of bars, at the edge of dark woods, lanes, bazaars, prisons, the moment when — but the moment, stillborn, was gone” (p. 75); not only gone, he suspects, but wilfully “slaughtered.” In “*Alastor*” the image of a swan flying to its mate is an emblem of something the Poet has lost — his hope of finding a mate; in *Under the Volcano* the plummeting swan is also an emblem of something the protagonist has lost — in this case, his sexual potency. Unlike Yeats’s swan, Geoffrey Firmin can shudder only in the limbs not in the loins.

As the third stage of the journey continues, both protagonists move slowly toward that climactic moment when each is required to make a crucial decision: for the Poet this moment occurs at a gleaming well in the forest; for the Consul it occurs in a stone *excusado* outside the *Salón Ofélia*. The fact that each is required to make a decision does not, however, mean that their choices are free ones; both the Poet and the Consul have been living in a predetermined world for quite some time. The bus that takes Hugh, Yvonne, and the Consul to the arena in Tomalín functions much as the “little shallop” does in “*Alastor*”: both vehicles emphasize the passive nature of the protagonists and the extent to which their lives are shaped by forces over which they have no control. The Poet’s boat circles “immeasurably fast” as it climbs the ascending waters of the whirlpool toward the forest, and the Consul’s bus circles

around and around as it travels "faster and faster" down the mountain toward the forest.¹⁹ After the Poet's boat has survived the reverting stress of the waters within the cave, it moves into a dreamlike wood where it drifts lazily on a placid stream. Similarly, the Consul and his two companions spend a relatively unstressful few hours in the arena in Tomalín. Like the period spent by the Poet in "the musical wood," this interlude seems to be a hiatus in the protagonists' movement towards death.

This interlude is over for the Poet when the stream takes him to a gleaming but slightly sinister well, where he stares at his own "treacherous" reflection. While he is thus occupied, he suddenly becomes aware of a spirit behind him — a spirit clothed not in the "borrowed robes" of the "visible world" (emphasis mine) but in "undulating well/ And leaping rivulet." Although some scholars feel that this spirit is just another manifestation of the visionary maid, the evidence in the text does not support such a reading. For one thing, the visionary maid is a light *within* his soul; this spirit is obviously external. For another, the visionary maid has been associated with borrowed items: her veil is *like* "warm wind" and her voice is *like* the "sounds of streams and breezes." The spirit does not have to have robes that are borrowed from the visible world because it is the visible world — or at least that part of it that the Poet is able to apprehend at this time.²⁰ The Poet holds communion with this spirit "as if he and it/ Were all that was." For the first time since his dream, the Poet seems to be aware of some power other than the one exerted by the visionary maid. This is not to suggest, however, that this spirit is an entirely positive figure: it is, after all, associated with "evening gloom" and, in the same section, "gloom" is associated with the grave.²¹ Perhaps the spirit is offering

¹⁹For an interesting discussion of Lowry's use of cinematic techniques and the way in which the movement of the bus "imitates the panning motion of a mobilized picture camera" see Paul Tiessen's "Malcolm Lowry and the Cinema" in *Malcolm Lowry: the Man and His Work* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1971).

²⁰Strictly speaking the spirit can not be a part of the visible external world because, from the minute the Poet steps into the little shallop, he has been confined to an internal landscape. Within the boundaries of this inner world, however, the terms "visible" and "invisible" may be used as metaphors to distinguish different aspects of the psyche.

²¹When Yvonne and the Consul are watching the bullfight, "a spirit of intercession and tenderness [hovers] over them, guarding and watching" (p. 278). Unlike the Poet's Spirit, however, this one does not seem to have any direct affect on the Consul's decision to go to Paríán.

the Poet an alternative: not life, but a life-in-death existence — a placid and passive retreat under the shadowy boughs of the “musical wood.” But the Poet remains, as he must, “obedient to the light/ That shines within his soul” (ll. 492-93) and, as he continues to follow the windings of the dell, the fourth and final stage of his journey begins.

The peaceful interlude is over for the Consul when he enters the stone *excusado* which looks, appropriately, like a tomb. While sitting there, he begins to read the travel literature on Tlaxcala with its “pure air” and “many beautiful flowers.” Although he says that he “would have been glad of a mirror,” he does not really need one; he is, like the Poet, confronted by a “treacherous likeness” of himself, not in a gleaming well, but in a vision. In the vision he sees himself wandering through the town of Tlaxcala with its numerous white cantinas; but, best of all, there is “nobody there, no one . . . not even Yvonne.” Suddenly his soul begins to yearn for Tlaxcala — a word which, like *Parián*, means death — but it also yearns for the *Farolito* in *Parián*. Like the Poet, he has to make a choice and, at first glance, it seems to matter little whether the Consul chooses Tlaxcala or *Parián* since both words means death; but the cantinas in Tlaxcala are — like the Poet’s musical wood — silent, beautiful, and totally isolated from the rest of humanity. The cantina in *Parián*, however, is dirty, cluttered, and frequented by men who “shoot first and ask questions later.” In a sense, then, the Consul’s choice is not unlike the Poet’s. Neither protagonist has a choice between life and death but only between a wholly unreal, life-in-death dream world or the harsh reality of an untimely grave. Since the Consul, like the Poet, exists in a world controlled by Fate, he too is compelled to choose the more direct path to death. And so he rushes out of the cantina towards *Parián* and begins the fourth and final stage of his journey — a stage that for both the Poet and the Consul is undertaken on foot.

After the Poet leaves the dark well, several changes begin to take place. No longer languorous, he now moves with “rapid steps” along the stream which has, significantly, begun to turn downward as it flows with “wintry speed” through a landscape that has suddenly become barren and threatening.

On every side now rose
Rocks, which, in unimaginable forms,
Lifted their black and barren pinnacles
In the light of evening, and, its precipice
Obscuring the ravine, disclosed above,
Mid toppling stones, black gulfs and yawning caves,
Whose windings gave ten thousand various tongues
To the loud stream.

(ll. 543-50)

The Poet's sudden and rapid movements seem to suggest a reversal of his former passive nature, but Shelley reminds us that he moves as one who is "roused" (we should note the passive voice) by some "madness from the couch/ Of fever." The Alastor that has inhabited and animated the Poet from the moment he dreamed of the visionary maid will not have completed its task until the Poet has surrendered the powers of life and death to its tyranny — as he does when he lies down on the brink of the precipice. Only then do hope and despair, "the torturers," sleep.

The Consul, like the Poet, rushes towards his death as he begins the final stage of his journey. Leaving Hugh and Yvonne in the Cantina, he runs out, calling back to them crazily, "I love hell. I can't wait to get back there" (p. 316). His assertive and somewhat violent departure seems to be decisive and active but, like the Poet, he has little control over his actions or words. Just before he leaves, he finds himself saying terrible things to Hugh and Yvonne — the two people he loves most in the world. He is appalled. "Was the Consul saying this? Must he say it? — It seemed he must" (p. 314). For the Consul, as for the Poet, the landscape suddenly becomes threatening: the forest grows "darker and darker," trees "roar," and the volcanos seem "to have drawn nearer." Like the Poet, the Consul goes directly to his own little nook, the Farolito in Parián. Although his body does not lie down and surrender itself, his spirit certainly does. The lady with the dominoes, the old fiddler, and his own better judgement urge him to flee, but he is unable to move; both his will and time . . . are paralyzed. Unlike the Poet, he has no last moments of peace. Even after he has been shot, hope and despair continue to torture him: first he thinks he has climbed to the top of the volcano, then he feels himself "falling through it all . . . falling into a forest." The fact that the Poet ends his life on the brink of the precipice, whereas the Consul ends his in its pit, is due more to differences of genre than of narrative. Shelley, after all,

was writing a nineteenth-century romantic account of the journey of a sensitive soul through a mental landscape of rocks and plants and streams; Lowry, on the other hand, was writing a twentieth-century ironic account of the journey of a sensitive — if somewhat liquor-logged — soul through a realistic landscape of soldiers, spies, and cantinas. In fact, if the underlying tone of the novel were not so serious, it would be quite possible to see the book as a parody of “Alastor.”²² But it is serious, “deeply serious.”

While not wishing to deny the obvious and very conscious influence of Marlowe’s *Faustus*, Dante’s *Inferno*, the Cabbala, or any of the fifty or more mythic and literary parallels that David Markson mentions in his illuminating recent study, I would like to suggest that Shelley’s “Alastor” helped to shape and define Lowry’s imagination in ways which, while perhaps unconscious and difficult to prove are, nonetheless, profound. Despite difference in genre and tone, there is something about the whole of Lowry’s novel — its fatalism, characterization, imagery, diction and, most importantly, its structure — that is closer to Shelley’s “Alastor” than to many of the conscious and sometimes self-conscious sources that Lowry cites in the letter to Jonathan Cape. Lowry was a true poet and was of Shelley’s party without knowing it.²³

Waterloo, Ontario

²²This is not to say, of course, that there are not numerous parodic passages in the novel; but while Lowry may parody the quests of Hugh, Laurelle, and Yvonne, he treats the central agony of the Consul’s quest very seriously. Nor can Lowry be said to parody Shelley’s style: the long convoluted sentences, the romantic phraseology, and the linguistic excesses are as much a part of Lowry’s bag of tricks as they are of Shelley’s.

²³With apologies to Blake and, in another sense, to Shelley.