

THE POLITICAL STRAND IN MALCOLM LOWRY'S **UNDER THE VOLCANO**

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Malcolm Lowry claimed, in his letter to the publisher Jonathan Cape defending his manuscript *Under The Volcano* against proposed cuts, that the novel had a political strand.¹ The drunken British Consul, Geoffrey Firmin, represented the failure of will in western civilization when faced with the rise of Fascism. How valid is Lowry's claim? And what kinds of explanations for the appeasement of the "low dishonest decade" does his novel offer? These questions are more easily answered if we first, as a touchstone, examine another novel which used this typological method for a stated² political purpose, Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus*.

Thomas Mann in *Doktor Faustus* represented in the career of the novel's protagonist, the composer Adrian Leverkühn, the spirit of Fascism. Like Lowry,³ Mann used as mythic frame the legend of Doctor Faust, who sold his humanity to evil in his quest for the absolute. Mann's typological method can be explicated by using his novel as evidence to make a summary analysis of the situation in Germany as he saw it. Germany was an extreme case of the general malaise which Christendom suffered after the loss of the medieval vision of the two cities, the City of God and the city of man. Saint Augustine had drawn on Hebrew theology, Greek philosophy and Roman civics to provide Christianity with a vision of the two spheres, distinct yet analogous, which men simultaneously inhabit. It could be summed up as the brotherhood of man under the Fatherhood of God. Under the impact of Reformation and Enlightenment the dual

¹*Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry*, eds. Harvey Brait and Margerie Bonner Lowry (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1965), pp. 57-88.

²Thomas Mann, *Die Entstehung Des Doktor Faustus* (Amsterdam: Bermann-Fischer/Querido, 1949).

³Anthony R. Kilgallin, "Faust and Under The Volcano," in *Malcolm Lowry: The Man and His Work*, ed. George Woodcock (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1971), pp. 26-37. See also David Markson, *Malcolm Lowry's Volcano: Myth, Symbol, Meaning* (New York: Times Books, 1978), pp. 21-25 and passim.

focus had been lost, leaving men's view of both Divine standards and secular order in confusion. On the one hand, aspects of nature and humanity were deified; on the other, the secular became all-inclusive, leaving men with an unsatisfied longing for the absolute to be exploited by chiliastic political movements. With the loss of a traditional sense of natural order in time derived from the supernatural in eternity, European man had to impose order arbitrarily. There were two possible sources: aesthetics, derived from man's inner need for coherence; and technology, derived from the application of rationally-attained scientific knowledge about nature to its exploitation. Fascism combined the two. As the synthesis was artificial the result was parody. Thomas Mann makes this clear in his novel's protagonist, whose biography parodies that of Nietzsche and whose musical technique parodies that of Schoenberg. The method is pervasive.⁴ To give a minor example: Adrian Leverkühn while studying theology at Halle is lectured to by Ehrenfried Kumpf and Eberhard Schleppfuss. Kumpf is the Silenus type with echoes of Martin Luther and Hermann Goering, Schleppfuss the Loki type whose limp gives him a nefarious lineage up to and emphatically including Joseph Goebbels. Historical time has become a hall of distorting mirrors lending spurious diversity to a few barren types. Like his own prototype, Doktor Faustus, Adrian Leverkühn oscillates between presumption and despair (or mania and depression/melancholy, to use the terms appropriate to Mann's controlling disease image) and is haunted by the antinomian delusion, also found in Geoffrey Firmin, that an abandonment through sin to despair can reach an anguish and self-abasement so complete it earns salvation. The sadistic-masochistic element in this, and indeed ubiquitous to all fallen human experience, also appears in the sexual nexus, where love can only know association with dionysian self-transcendence when savoured with the willed acceptance of venereal disease, and in the political nexus, where revolution implies regression to that parody of Divine Paternity, the master-slave relationship. The paradox is captured by Leverkühn's use of Faustus' "Denn ich sterbe als ein böser und guter Christ."

Mann's novel is an interesting one, not least in that it leaves the reader with the unwelcome suggestion that the doomed composer's

⁴This is ably discussed by Leslie L. Miller, "Myth and Morality: Reflections on Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus*," in *Essays on German Literature* ed. M.S. Batts and M.G. Stankiewicz (Toronto: Published by the University of Toronto Press for the University of British Columbia, 1968), pp. 195-217.

musical works, and in particular "Dr. Fausti Weheklag", had aesthetic merit. Fascism had a strange barbarian beauty. The Fascist movement has been written off by some as a meaningless upsurge of nihilist violence, a black farce. But it must have had some role in the Providential design, perhaps to illustrate as did the Inferno in Dante's *Divine Comedy* God's just anger. The alternative is to admit that, for a time, God lost control of history.

"The poets spoke of earth and heaven. There were no symbols."⁵ In *Under The Volcano*, the pact with evil by a consciousness willing to relinquish reality for knowledge of the transcendental is represented by the drunkenness of the Consul. The "forêts de symboles" into which his mind enters find correspondences in the setting, the Mexican town of Quauhnahuac and two nearby mountain villages, on November 2nd, the day for commemoration of the faithful departed, 1938. This setting and its inhabitants take on a hallucinatory, Walpurgisnacht colouring in the Consul's mind, for his frantic exploratory quest beyond humanity is for death.

Under The Volcano is a many-leveled novel, but central is the love of the Consul and his mate Yvonne, who is both Margarete and Helen.⁶ As a psychological study, the novel illuminates the Consul's layers of destructive evasion of his soul's commitment to love. Since love is his ultimate reality, his drunken rejection is a suicidal fall from Grace. There are a number of particular influences acting upon the Consul: his identification with his possibly suicidal father who disappeared into the Himalayas; his ambiguous attitude to his literary foster-father; sexual anxiety, that would cast Yvonne as mother-daughter; a disastrous previous love affair; and a sense of betrayal over Yvonne's seduction by Jacques Laruelle. The Consul provides a particular illustration of a condition made general by the dingy moral ambiguities of the first Great War, and scrutinized by other writers on the lost generation: the disintegration of a sense of conti-

⁵Dennis Lee, *Civil Elegies and Other Poems* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 38.

⁶Thus in the quarrel at the Sal6n Of6lia where the original separation from love is confirmed, the Consul accuses Yvonne of Helen's sin, adultery, and of Margarete's, child murder: "Where are the children I might have wanted? You may suppose I might have wanted them. Drowned." Later at the Farolita the Consul is unfaithful with a prostitute, thus courting infection, in a setting that parodies Yvonne's imagined Canadian retreat (although the Consul has darker memories of the north, as it is associated with delirium and lost love in the station platform fragment). His art of revenge becomes forgiveness in assuming her sin and he exorcizes the ghost of Jacques Laruelle. Yvonne at the time is similarly electing his sins by drinking mescal at the nearby El Popo.

nulty and value in human experience, and its replacement by a pervasive neurotic sense of betrayal.

The overt political discussions in *Under The Volcano* are between the Consul and his half-brother Hugh Firmin, a romantic radical who struggles for human brotherhood in his newspaper reports and in his involvement with the loyalist forces in Spain opposing General Franco. But the Consul, remembering a snide comment by Jacques Laruelle, in his drunken quarrel at the Salón Ofélia in Tomalín, casts Hugh in the role of betrayer. His tormented feelings toward Yvonne overflow to destroy his affection for his younger brother. He contemptuously dismisses Hugh's argument for intervention with the declaration that aggression and destruction are historical necessities no individual good will can alter. His political views universalize his moral choice, to opt out of love, reality and life, just as his "Destroy the world" gives a cosmic frame to his self-hatred.

On the bus ride to the village of Tomalín the Consul had an opportunity to assist a fatally wounded Indian lying on the road, but he both failed to act the good samaritan and kept Hugh from intervening. The Indian was probably a bank messenger carrying funds to rural co-operatives, for President Cárdenas was attempting in this way to bring change and hope to the rural poor. Such messengers were often murdered by supporters of the wealthy conservative landowners hostile to reform. Hugh's friend the Mexican revolutionary Juan Cerillo, met in Spain, had ridden for the state Credit Bank. The parties of reaction in Mexico were supported by the wealthy landlords, the Church, the army, and foreign capitalist investors, in particular American capitalists angry at President Cárdenas for audaciously nationalizing the oil companies. Many feared that Mexico would suffer the fate of Spain. As the Consul carries the moral authority of civilized Europe, his failure to aid a wounded and threatened human being represents the failure of will in the civilized west when faced with violent evil reaction. When he finally does choose to fight, after retreating alone and drunk to the Farolita in Parián and there recognizing as his alter ego the Spanish fascist Jefe de Jardineros, Fructuoso Sanabria, the result can only be tragic. He has deliberately chosen to isolate himself in a hopeless station. Only by a last suffering scream can he reassert his unity with humanity.

By his portrayal of the drunken mind of the Consul, which dominates the novel, Malcolm Lowry was able to give his readers the experience of a civilized mind in disassociation and decay. Lowry

obviously believed that the sins of omission were as responsible as those of commission for the rise of Fascism. But Lowry's approach was mainly psychological, moral and religious: Fascism was the form evil took in his time. We are given the symptoms of civilization's political predicament, but the causes for the particular ideology Fascism assumed remain vague. Lowry in his approach is closer to Joseph Conrad than he is to the pedagogical Thomas Mann, for like Conrad Lowry is haunted by the religious man's awareness that to rebel against loving and being is to turn to the abyss of shadows that surround nothingness and hence is to be always inadequately motivated. Such a perspective may be true, but it offers little help to the historian or political scientist. The political strand is a subordinate one in *Under The Volcano*. Lowry's use of the Faust myth differs from Mann's most obviously in that, like Goethe, he gives a central place to the feminine: but beyond that, for Lowry the Faust story remains essentially a religious myth of universal significance. It does not provide an explanatory framework for a particular era but is a representation of the universal tragedy of evil, of the tragedy of man as inhabitant of what Swedenborg called "a winter garden."

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