ALLUSIONS IN UNDER THE VOLCANO: FUNCTION AND PATTERN

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Stephen Spender points out that Malcolm Lowry's allusions in *Under the Volcano* are "used as metaphor, as analogy" in contrast to the function of allusions in the works of Joyce, Eliot, and Pound:

> In the consciousness of these poets and novelists there seems the map of an immense landscape with, on one side of a central divide, the order of the past, on the other, the chaos of the present.[1]

As a result, these modernist writers use allusions to the past as, in T. S. Eliot's word on *Ulysses,*

> . . . a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.[2]

Lowry does not share this assumption that inherent in the past is a retrievable order which the artist can allusively exploit to shape writing about contemporary experience. Instead of a temporally imposed distinction of order and chaos, Lowry sees an alikeness in the human disorder of past and present. In *Under the Volcano,* literary and historical allusions link figures across time by means of analogy, through a sameness of condition and identity.

A brief comparison of historical parallelism in Lowry's novel with that in the *The Waste Land* illustrates a fundamental difference of time perspective. In "The Fire Sermon," Eliot juxtaposes, for example, two sets of lovers, one contemporary and one historical. The former pair, a small house agent's clerk and a woman who smoothes her hair "with automatic hand," lifelessly perform the sexual act, the man with petty smuggness, the woman with mechanical indifference. Several lines later, Eliot depicts two contrasting, earlier lovers:

> Elizabeth and Leicester
> Beating oars
> The stern was formed
> A gilded shell
> Red and gold
> The brisk swell
> Rippled both shores
> Southwest wind
> Carried down stream
> The peal of bells
> White towers

1. 'Introduction," *Under the Volcano* (New York: New American Library, 1966), pp. xi, x.
2. *"Ulysses,* Order, and Myth," *James Joyce: Two Decades of Criticism,* ed. Seon Givens (New York: Vanguard Press, Inc., 1963), p. 201.

This historic couple has an aesthetic meaning absent from the contemporary pair. Possessing a lyric nobility, which is more than a mere extension of social rank (although this aspect is important to Eliot), Elizabeth and Leicester project an ordered magnificence and sensuous beauty which qualitatively distinguishes them from the dreary, emotionally barren pair of modern life. Eliot thus counterpoints past and present as two separate modes: positive and negative.

In *Under the Volcano,* allusions imply not antithesis but identity, fusing past and present. Historical figures such as Maximilian and Carlotta *correspond* to Geoffrey and Yvonne. In fact, Laruelle, in the novel's opening chapter, unconsciously identifies these two pairs of lovers:

> . . . . how they must have loved this land, these two lonely empurpled exiles, human beings finally., lovers out of their element — their Eden, without either knowing quite why, beginning to turn under their noses into a prison and smell like a brewery, their only majesty at last that of tragedy. . . . "It is our destiny to come here, Carlotta. Look at this rolling glorious country, its hills, its valleys, its volcanoes beautiful beyond belief. And to think it is ours! Let us be good and constructive and make ourselves worthy of it!" Or there were ghosts quarreling: "No, you loved yourself, you loved your misery more than I. You did this deliberately to us." . . . And suddenly they were weaping together, passionately, as they stood.
>
> But it was the Consul's voice, not Maximilian's. . . .[3]

Despite distinctions of social rank, there is none of the tonal disparity evident in Eliot's poem: the voices of Maximilian and Geoffrey are not antiphonal; they are interchangeable. In a common setting their doomed lives reach a common tragic climax. Both are killed in Mexico as representatives of European powers because of local political passions they only partially comprehend, with an admixture of nobility and impetuous folly causing death in both instances. Geoffrey ("our ruddy monarch," p. 96) and Maximilian (with Carlotta, "human beings finally") merge through features of personality and experience that transcend boundaries of rank and time. Similarly, a reference to Carlotta's future insanity (p. 14) corresponds to Yvonne's vision of herself as "a woman having hysterics, jerking like a puppet and banging her fists upon the ground" (p. 279). In contrast to Eliot, Lowry assumes that the essential contours of the human condition are not variable with past and present, and this attitude underlies his use of allusions as analogy.

For the richly allusive fabric of *Under the Volcano,* the title of the novel provides a central, organizing pattern:

> 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 it. Under the Volcano! It was not for nothing the ancients had placed Tartarus under Mt. Aetna . . . (p. 339)

3. (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947), pp. 14-15. Further references to *Under the Volcano* are taken from this edition and placed in the text of the essay.

This passage, containing the only textual reference to the title, suggests that the book's unifying concept can be found in the myth of Tartarus, in the notion of eternal punishment under the volcano. As the pagan version of hell, Tartarus correlates with, and universalizes, the Dantean intention voiced by Lowry in a letter: "the book was planned and still is a kind of Inferno."[4] In terms of characterization, the frequent allusions to the criminals of the Greek underworld give a particular kind of symbolic depth to the Consul's fate: the *barranca* into which his dead body is thrown at the novel's end is explicitly linked to "Tartarus" (p. 131). In particular, four mythological figures from the Greek underworld, Sisyphus, Tantalus, Prometheus, and Ixion mirror darkly Geoffrey's condition under the volcano.

In an essay entitled "The Myth of Sisyphus in *Under the Volcano*" Jim Barnes argues that the madman in the novel is "eternally committed" (p. 224) to flinging an old bicycle tire is like Sisyphus perpetually rolling his stone: both are "*eternally committed* to an absurd task,"[5] and both figures reflect the Consul. If the irremediable pain felt by Sisyphus and Geoffrey is the same, so are the causes of their absurd suffering. Sisyphus was condemned to labour futilely because, according to Robert Graves, he "often murdered unsuspecting travellers,"[6] and he also betrayed divine secrets. Analogous to the first crime, as Barnes notes, is an accusation that Commander Firmin, in an armed ship disguised as a merchant vessel, captured and burned the officers of a German U-boat.[7] Implicit in the guilty, pathetic words of the Consul about the abuse of mystical knowledge is a betrayal parallel to the second crime of Sisyphus:

> Give me back my purity, the knowledge of the Mysteries, that I have betrayed and lost. (p. 289).

Perhaps there is also a philosophical correspondence between the "silent joy"[8] that Albert Camus sees in the existential acceptance of Sisyphus and the Consul's "I love hell" (p. 314). In a concluding passage, voicing the dying consciousness of Geoffrey, Lowry evokes Sisyphus: an agonizing and futile struggle to reach the summit results in a downward tumble into Tartarus underneath the volcanic peak:

> He was . . . setting out with Hugh and Yvonne to climb Popocatepetl. . . . Painfully he trudged the slope of the foothills toward Amecameca alone. . . . He could go no farther. Exhausted, helpless, he sank to the ground. . . . And now he had reached the summit. . . . But there was nothing there: no peaks, no

4. *Selected Letters* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Col., 1965), p. 67.
5. *Prairie Schooner,* 42 (1968), 344.
6. *The Greek Myths,* Vol. 1. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p. 218.
7. See *Prairie Schooner,* 345-346.
8. *The Myth of Sisyphus,* trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage: 1960), p. 91. Since an English translation of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942) did not appear until 1955, it is doubtful that Camus' treatment of the Sisyphus myth influenced *Under the Volcano* (copyright 1947).

> life, no climb. Nor was this summit a summit exactly: it had no substance, no firm base. It was crumbling too, whatever it was, collapsing . . .[9]

In the novel Lowry uses another figure from the Greek underworld to image mythically Geoffrey's condition: the criminal Tantalus. In an act similar to the betrayal of the mysteries by Sisyphus and the Consul, Tantalus stole divine food from the Olympian banquet. As punishment, "an enormous stone, a crag from Mount Sipylus . . . eternally threatens to crush Tantalus's skull;" Graves writes that "the rock poised over him in Tartarus, always about to fall, identifies him with Sisyphus:"[10] both explicate the Consul's dying vision of a mountain collapsing about him. During the bull throwing, as Barnes points out,[11] Geoffrey alludes to the Tantalus myth. He ironically combines with this allusion a familiar quotation from Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," "with a wild surmise," that stresses excitement of discovery, even revelation, in a context of boredom and frustration:

> "See the old unhappy bull," the Consul was saying . . . "Waiting with a wild surmise for ropes that tantalise —" . . . "Or waiting with seven — why not? — wild surmises, for the rope which tantalises." (p. 273) [12]

The Consul views the bull, entangled in ropes and goaded by spectators, as parallel to Tantalus, who is consumed forever by hunger and thirst because he cut up his son Pelops and served him to the gods as part of a stew. In the Consul's joking with Hugh over the menu there are echoes of this cannibalism: "con German friends," "veal liver taverman," "You like to eat your mother, Yvonne?" (pp. 290-291). Less comically, Geoffrey expresses regret and anger at the destruction of his potential children, again evoking the crime of Tantalus:

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9. Yvonne's death viewed in the context of the Geoffrey/Sisyphus identification takes on further significance. According to Graves, Sisyphus's wife, Merope, "ashamed to find herself the only Pleiad with a husband in the Underworld — and a criminal too — deserted her six starry sisters in the night sky and has never been seen since." Lowry recasts positively this episode in his description of Yvonne's ascent to the Pleiads:

> And leaving the burning dream Yvonne felt
> herself suddenly gathered upwards and borne
> towards the stars, through eddies of stars
> scattering aloft with ever widening circlings
> like rings on water, among which now appeared,
> like a flock of diamond birds flying softly
> and steadily towards Orion, the Pleiades . . .
> (p. 336, Lowry's ellipse)

10. Graves, Vol. 2, pp. 26 and 29.
11. See *Prairie Schooner,* 347-348. Tantalus, whose earthly kingdom was ruined, merges with Maximilian as an analogue to Geoffrey in his loss of "consular majesty" (p. 126).
12. In this speech Lowry foreshadows the coming revelation of number seven in the form of another animal, the horse linked to the deaths of both himself and Yvonne. (W. J. Keith pointed out to me that the passage takes its origin from Ralph Hodgson's once well-known poem, "The Bull.")

> Where are the children I might have wanted? You may suppose I might have wanted them. Drowned. To the accompaniment of the rattling of a thousand douche bags. (p. 313).

For similar crimes, the Consul and Tantalus receive similar punishments; through alcoholism Geoffrey experiences the suffering of Tantalus, the "perishing . . . of unnecessary thirst" (p. 65). Specifically, the fifth chapter of the novel begins with a nightmare that duplicates the myth of Tantalus: eternal thirst amidst tormenting images of fulfillment:

> . . .the lake was lapping, the lilacs were blowing, the chenars were budding, the mountains were glistening, the waterfalls were playing . . and he was still thirsty. . . . [R]ain, that fell only on the mountains, did not assuage his thirst. . . . He was lying face downward drinking from a lake that reflected the white-capped ranges . . . Yet his thirst still remained unquenched. (p. 125).

Goeffrey's thirst keeps him imprisoned in Tartarus, and Yvonne's promise of a future paradise — tantalizingly close — becomes part of his punishment.

To give fuller definition to the Consul's life, Lowry alludes to another Greek criminal in *Under the Volcano*: Prometheus. As David Markson shows, the myth of Prometheus enters the novel obscurely through Laruelle's contemplation of a book of Elizabethan plays:

> Intaglioed in the maroon leather cover of the book was a golden faceless figurine also running, carrying a torch . . . (p. 34).[13]

Represented by this figurine is Prometheus stealing fire from the gods to give light to mankind, an action linked to Geoffrey during his ride on the Maquina infernal, as Markson notes:

> The Consul, like the poor fool who was bringing light to the world, was hung upside down over it . . . (p. 222).[14]

Besides explicit allusions to Prometheus in the novel, this myth is further elaborated by an element of local colour, the *xopilotes* or vultures; Lowry remarks in a letter that the vultures "are more than merely cartoon birds: they are real in these parts . . . they fly through the whole book and in XI become as it were archetypal, Promethean fowl."[15] Lowry's use of the Mexican setting to evoke the suffering of Prometheus counterpoints multiple references to the object of his crime: fire. Examples include the candles of mourners (p. 4), Laruelle's pocket torch (p. 12), and most suggestively, the letter burned in a candle flame:

> The flare lit up the whole cantina with a burst of brilliance in which the figures at the bar — that he now saw included besides the little children and the peasants who were quince or cactus farmers in loose white clothes and

13. *Malcolm Lowry's Volcano: Myth, Symbol, Meaning.* (New York: New York Times Book, 1978), p. 24. (Markson identifies this edition with an intaglioed Prometheus as that of "The Modern Library.")
14. Markson, p. 112.
15. *Selected Letters,* p. 79.

> wide hats, several women in mourning from the cemeteries and dark-faced men in dark suits with open collars and their ties undone — appeared, for an instant, frozen, a mural . . . (pp. 41-42).

In this pictorial synopsis of mankind (children, peasants, farmers, women, men), all illuminated by a sacrificial flame, Lowry sketches the myth of Prometheus. The Consul, whose burning letter associates him with Prometheus, also aligns himself with mankind, in a drunken, impassioned speech just before his death on behalf of "the poor . . . the poor in spirit, old men carrying their fathers and philosophers weeping in the dust . . ." (p. 372). The mythic ambiguity of Prometheus (a fusion of Christ and Satan from a Christian perspective) correlates with Geoffrey's character, who Laruelle describes in an earlier version of the novel as both "the very shape and motion of the world's doom" and "the living prophecy of its hope!"[16] Like the hero of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* the Consul embodies extreme alternatives:

> I would fain
> Be what it is my destiny to be,
> The saviour and the strength of suffering man,
> Or sink into the original gulf of things.[17]

Ultimately, Geoffrey as a Promethean figure despairingly sinks into the gulf, the *barranca,* a negative counterpart to Shelley's liberated figure, and even to the hero of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* because Geoffrey's passive, self-inflicted punishment contrasts with what Nietzsche calls "the glory of activity which illuminates the Prometheus of Aeschylus."[18] For the Consul there is no affirmation under the volcano.

Another inhabitant of Tartarus, Ixion, like Prometheus, Tantalus, and Sisyphus, provides mythological commentary on Geoffrey's character. In *Under the Volcano* the most obvious parallel to Ixion's crime, the seduction of Hera, is the adultery of Laruelle and Hugh with Yvonne. However, Ixion did not seduce the *real* Hera, but a false Hera, shaped by Zeus from the

16. These quotations are taken from *Under the Volcano* (B), First Novel Version (The Malcolm Lowry Papers, Special Collections Division, The Library, The University of British Columbia), Ch. 1, p. 4.
17. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Poetical Works,* ed. Thomas Hutchinson & G.M. Matthews (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 11. 815-18. One passage from Shelley's drama portrays vividly the nature of Geoffrey's world:

> . . . terror, madness, crime, remorse,
> Which from the links of the great chain of things,
> To every thought within the mind of man
> Sway and drag heavily, and each one reels
> Under the load towards the pit of death;
> Abandoned hope, and love that turns to death.
> (11. 19-24)

18. Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy," trans. Clifton P. Fadiman, in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty,* eds. Albert Hofstadter & Richard Kuhns (New York: The Modern Library, 1964), p. 529.

clouds.[19] He was too drunk to notice the deception. Geoffrey, who is drunk, is similarly deceived (albeit wilfully) with the prostitute Maria:

> Lightning silhouetted against the window a face, for a moment curiously like Yvonne's. "Quiere Maria," she volunteered again, and flinging her arms around his neck, drew him down to the bed. Her body was Yvonne's too, her legs, her breasts, her pounding passionate heart. . .(pp. 348-349)

Impotent with Yvonne, Geoffrey finds delusive pleasure with Maria, a false Yvonne.

In the novel, the Maquina infernal and the Ferris Wheel are visual analogues to Ixion's punishment, bound "to a fiery wheel which rolled without cease through the sky:"[20]

> The huge looping-the-loop machine . . . in this *dead* section of the fair, suggested some huge evil *spirit,* screaming in its *lonely hell,* its *limbs writhing* . . . (my underlining. p. 221).
>
> The Ferris wheel came into view again, just the top, silently burning high on the hill . . . (p. 15).

The Consul, who rides the wheeling infernal machine, is, like Ixion, bound to a barren, constrictive cycle; the recurring pattern of his alcoholism isolates him from the larger, fecundating cycle of life celebrated in the fiesta, whose purpose Octavio Paz delineates:

> Thanks to the fiesta, the Mexican opens out, participates, communes with his fellows and with values that give meaning to his religious or political existence.[21]

As symbol of the sun Ixion affirms the cycle of life and death epitomized by the children eating chocolate skulls during the fiesta; as isolated from the archetypal rhythms he sustains, bound in agony to his wheel, Ixion parodies organic continuity. Geoffrey, separated from the life his consciousness illuminates, childless, masochistically believes that Ixion, the source of light, welcomes his infernal condition:

> "Je crois que le vautour est doux à Prometheus et que les Ixion se plaisent en Enfers." (p. 219)[22]

Ixion's wheel, whose solar aspect symbolizes life — the potential affirmation registered structurally by the novel's trochal form —,[23] images as well the doomed and sterile cycle of the Consul's self-punishment in Tartarus.

In the novel Ixion merges with other mythological figures of the Greek underworld to give depth and nuance to a major theme: eternal suffering as punishment for a crime. Lowry's syncretic genius is evident

19. See Graves, Vol 1, pp. 208-209.
20. Graves, Vol. 1, p. 208.
21. Octavio Paz, "The Mexican Fiesta," *Mexico and the Caribbean,* ed. Lewis Hanke (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand, 1959), p. 176.
22. The incorrect plural forms in the quotation, "les" and "plaisent," may be Lowry's device to universalize Ixion's condition.
23.. See *Selected Letters,* p. 67.

when the book's other allusions are considered. For example, the two most significant figures alluded to from classical drama, Oedipus and Philoctetes, both extend the primary theme of inescapable suffering. Through Geoffrey's consciousness, absorbing with dark selectivity those allusions which confirm his interior sense of doom, the past is shaped into a mirror of his present despair. Allusions to such doomed artists as Shelley, Poe, and Wilde, to such doomed literary characters as Roderick Usher and Dostoevsky's Svidrigailov, and to such doomed historical figures as Maximilian and Trotsky form a composite portrait that corroborates and universalizes Geoffrey's despair. Lowry unifies disparate sources, despite their variety and chronological range, to maintain a consistent thematic focus. The novel's most important set of allusions, to Christianity, define this despairing perspective by correlating Tartarus with Hell.

Under the Volcano, like Milton's *Paradise Lost,* describes a central myth of Christianity: man's fall from grace. Mark Schorer identifies one of the novel's major themes as

> the sense of the past, of innocence and vanished pleasure, of wasted opportunity and unrelinquished memory, of Paradise Lost: "for long after Adam had left the garden the light in Adam's house burned on.[24]

A primary symbol of this theme, as Schorer demonstrates, is the garden:

> Geoffrey's own neglected garden, for example, where he hides his tequila and at the edge of which he drunkenly lectures his respectable neighbour on the true meaning of the expulsion from Paradise, from which he emerges presently to say, "Hi, Hugh, you old snake in the grass!" Then there is the sign which appears repeatedly, which seems to Geoffrey to have too many question marks and seems to say, in Spanish, "You like this garden? Why is it yours? We evict those who destroy!" Multiple other allusions to gardens and events within them come to a conclusion finally in reference to certain public officials, especially "the Chief of Gardens," by the Fascists who decree Geoffrey's end.[25]

Lowry, unlike Milton, views man's exile from the Garden of Eden as irrevocable. In Milton's theodicy the hope of a regained Paradise sustains Adam and Eve after their expulsion; the doctrine of *felix culpa* (which holds that from Adam's disobedience "much more good thereof shall spring") promises a future in which "the earth / shall all be Paradise." The Consul, unlike Adam, neither can forgive his wife's "wilful crime" nor will go "hand in hand" with Yvonne to realize her paradisal vision of a new home at Eridanus:

> Yvonne laid her hand on his arm.
> (p. 196)
>
> . . . .
>
> "Momemtito," he said, disengaging himself.
> (p. 198)

24. "The Downward Flight of a Soul," *N.Y. Herald-Tribune Book Review,* 23 February, 1947, 2.
25. Schorer, 2.

Without the motivating belief that their past happiness can be restored in the future, Geoffrey accepts with indifference "his downward flight" (p. 362), negating the redemptive possibility of Christianity.

The novel emphasizes the eternal suffering in Hell. A detail from Geoffrey's early life, his attendance at "a strict Wesleyan school" (p. 18), partly accounts for his guilt about sexuality and his sense of damnation. Through Geoffrey's meditation on Goethe's famous church bell, Lowry explicitly connects the Wesleyan training and a feeling of damnation:

> . . . the awful bell would actually touch the doomed child with giant protruding tongue and hellish Wesleyan breath. (p. 74).

Lowry's use of the Faust myth is relevant in this context, with references made to the verisons by both Goethe and Marlowe, one redemptive, the other irrevocable: the novel emphasizes the Elizabethan play which presents the damnation of Dr. Faustus as inalterable.[26] Multiple allusions to Dante's *Inferno* overwhelm the redemptive note in the title of one of the novel's epigraphs: Bunyan's *Grace Abounding for the Chief of Sinners.*[27] *(Under the Volcano* is close to being an inversion of *The Pilgrim's Progress.)* Allusions to Christianity, in a work conceived of as an *Inferno* under Mount Purgatory, illustrate the novel's theme of unavoidable suffering. Lowry uses the *barranca* under the volcano in which the dead Consul ends to synthesize allusively Tartarus and Hell, pagan and Christian suffering, and to prefigure the world's descent into hell, the abyss of war.

26. For a fuller discussion of Lowry's use of the Faust myth, see Anthony R. Kilgallin, "Faust and Under the Volcano," *Can. Lit.,* 26 (1965): 43-54.
27. For detailed analysis of Lowry's allusions to Dante, see Markson, "Index," p. 235.