

WRIDER/ESPIDER:
THE CONSUL AS ARTIST IN
UNDER THE VOLCANO

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In a letter to James Stern written in May 1940, Malcolm Lowry described, among other things, his 1937 arrest in Mexico. According to Lowry, he was arrested because he was mistaken for a communist friend and was unable "to explain why I absolutely had to be drawing a map of the Sierra Madre in tequila on the bar counter." Once in jail, he was accused of being a spy: "Hissed they (as *Time* would say), 'You say you a wrider but we read all your wridings and dey don't make sense. You no wrider, you an espider and we shoota de espiders in Mejico'" (SL 29).¹ Douglas Day believes Lowry was more apt to have been jailed because of his public drunkenness and "some difficulties over his passport (or lack of it)," and he is undoubtedly right to look skeptically upon Lowry's melodramatic account (Day 238). As to the allegation that Lowry was a spy rather than a writer, perhaps the charge was made in precisely those words, but it is also conceivable that Lowry's recitation of what he experienced a few years earlier was influenced by the draft of *Under the Volcano* that he completed about the time he wrote to Stern. In the last chapter of that draft, as in the published text (UV 371), the Consul's declaration that his name is William Blackstone and that he is a writer is contradicted by one of the fascist chiefs, who threatens him: "'You say your name is Black. Is no Black.' He shoved him backwards a little. 'You say you a wrider. You are no wrider, you are de espider and we shoot de spiders in Mexico'" (UBC 26:5, 27).²

Critics of *Under the Volcano* disagree about whether or not the Consul is really a spy, but few readers doubt that Geoffrey Firmin is indeed a writer. Unfortunately, he is an *artiste manqué*, a failed (or at least inactive) writer who talks about finishing his

book but can barely manage to compose a letter; Yvonne even suggests, not altogether ironically, that he could have used the town's public scribe to answer her letters (UV 53). In view of Lowry's assertion that the book's "four main characters" may be regarded as "aspects of the same man, or of the human spirit" (SL 60), it is significant that the other three major characters are also failed or former artists: Jacques Laruelle is a former movie director, Yvonne an ex-actress, Hugh an unsuccessful song writer and more recently a journalist who has filed his last story. The plight of the artist is central to most of Lowry's fiction, including *Under the Volcano*, which contains numerous references to artists and artist figures; even Hitler, according to Hugh, may be regarded as "another frustrated artist" (UV 156). Three supporting characters—Dr. Vigil, Mr. Quincey, and Cervantes—have names that echo or approximate those of well-known writers, and the narration often evokes a literary paradigm: "Darkness had fallen like the House of Usher" (UV 22). The powerful hold literary works have over Lowry's principal characters may be indicated by Hugh's experiences at sea, which were influenced by Jack London, of whom he had read "too much"; more surprisingly, those experiences also followed patterns suggested by Conrad and Melville, although at the time Hugh had read neither author (UV 157, 162, 165, 167). Similarly, Geoffrey's life has been profoundly shaped not only by the many authors he has read but, more directly, by the English poet Abraham Taskerson, with whose family he spent his adolescent years.

Lowry establishes the Consul's role as artist in several related ways. There is, first of all, his sense of identification either with writers, as when he imagines himself "a sort of Donne of the fairways" (UV 203), or with literary characters such as Don Quixote (UV 39, 79). Moreover, both his immersion in occult studies and his alienation from other people are consistent with the Consul's image of himself as a misunderstood visionary artist, an image reinforced by his reading of the world as a symbolic extension of his mind. In particular, the Consul's feeling that he is at once separate from the world and inseparable from it may be traced to the attitudes of the French symbolists. Maurice Beebe's comments on Baudelaire are pertinent here: "Merging with the crowd, yet remaining alone; in the midst of the world, yet hidden from it—such a paradox may be resolved only if we recognize

that for Baudelaire what is outside the self is 'a forest of symbols which correspond to his various states of mind or feeling.'" Thus in Baudelaire's poem "Correspondances," for example, "there is no separation, ideally, between self and cosmos" (Beebe 131). For the Consul, however, this simultaneous involvement with, and isolation from, the world tends to result not in coherence and significance but in the fragmentation and dissolution of the self.

Finally, there are the Consul's meager writings: the book he plans to write, his poem scribbled on the back of a bar tab, and his letter to Yvonne. In these enterprises Lowry portrays significant aspects of his own art but also shows, in painful detail, the danger that lies in wait for the artist whose obsessive self-involvement cuts him off from other people. The unwritten book, the unposted letter, and the unfinished poem all indicate that the Consul's solipsistic reading of the world in personal terms, and his refusal or inability to recognize any reality other than his own—in short, his failure to love another person as much as he loves his isolation and suffering—make him less a "wri~~ter~~" than an "espid~~er~~."

Writing to Yvonne in Spring 1938, the Consul asks whether she imagines him at work on his book on "ultimate reality" or suspended between the cabbalistic sephiroth Chesed (Mercy) and Binah (Understanding), balanced precariously over a spiritual abyss. He considers himself inadequate for the task of writing the great book (instead, he believes, he "should have been producing obscure volumes of verse. . . . Or at best, like Clare, 'weaving fearful vision'"), but he observes wryly that the advantage in writing a book on "Secret Knowledge" is that the title explains why the book cannot be published (UV 39). By November, when Yvonne returns to him, he obviously has made no progress on the book. Even so, in a moment of repentance, he pledges to cut down on his drinking and then, perhaps, return to the book, which he now says (or thinks) will include "sensational new data on Atlantis" as well as "chapters on the alchemists" (UV 86). Yvonne later tells Hugh that Geoffrey has not worked on the book since she met him, which means that the book has been set aside for at least three years; furthermore, neither she nor Hugh knows whether or not Geoffrey is really informed about "all this alchemy and cab-

bala business," although his possession of a large number of books on the subject indicates a certain seriousness about it (UV 118). Nonetheless, advising Yvonne to take Geoffrey to an idyllic fishing village in British Columbia where he will have no distractions, Hugh says "perhaps he'll be able really to get down to his book" (UV 122), and at the bullring, Yvonne fantasizes about their house in Canada, where Geoffrey would write his book and she would type it (UV 271). Her vision of the Northern Paradise turns infernal in the dark woods that lead to Parián, however, and as Yvonne dies she envisions the Canadian house on fire, with the burning pages of the book manuscript scattered along the beach (UV 336).

The fire Yvonne sees in her dying moments is based on the one that destroyed the Lowrys' shack in June 1944, taking with it the only manuscript of Lowry's novel *In Ballast to the White Sea*. For that matter, Yvonne's vision of their life in British Columbia, in a shack between the forest and the beach, is clearly an idealized portrayal of the life Malcolm and Margerie Lowry led in Dollarton, where Malcolm wrote in longhand and Margerie transcribed "all his manuscripts from the slanting script with its queer familiar Greek e's and odd t's into neat clean pages" (UV 271).³ As Yvonne imagines it, Geoffrey's book would be composed in an atmosphere of wholeness (they would work together on the book which would be, in effect, their child) and harmony with nature:

and as she worked she would see a seal rise out of the water, peer round, and sink soundlessly. Or a heron, that seemed made of cardboard and string, would flap past heavily, to alight majestically on a rock and stand there, tall and motionless. Kingfishers and swallows flitted past the eaves or perched on their pier. Or a seagull would glide past. . . . (UV 271)

Yvonne's vision of "simplicity and love" stands in sharp contrast to the ambiguity, confusion, and alienation of the Consul's life. Significantly, she imagines the Consul outside (writing his book, chopping wood, fetching water from the well), but the settings where we more often see him are interiors, either the dark cantinas where he confronts his demons or mechanized enclosures (the bus and the "infernal machine"). While there is little doubt

that on some level he and Yvonne desire much the same sort of life, Geoffrey's obsessive concern with symbolic correspondences, his solipsistic retreat into his own mind, and of course his drinking all insure that he and Yvonne will never live to enjoy the Northern Paradise.

As Chris Ackerley has noted, the book the Consul plans to write apparently involves "the re-assembling of Atlantis in terms of a secret knowledge which will lead to spiritual perfection" and is based upon "the identification of the magic and mysteries of Mexico with those of ancient India" (Ackerley 80, 82).⁴ The parallels between Mexico and India that the Consul hopes to uncover or restore are imaginatively foreshadowed on the opening page of *Under the Volcano*, where the narrator places Quauhnahuac on the same latitude as "the town of Juggernaut, in India, on the Bay of Bengal" (UV 3). The Consul's subject matter generally resembles Lowry's in its encyclopedic nature, its emphasis on the interconnectedness of all things, both physical and spiritual, and its inquiry into the possibility of restoring the primordial harmony that the Consul imagines was represented by Atlantis. The Consul's book is in fact a kind of occult *Volcano*, a portrayal of what Lowry himself might have written (or left unwritten) had he given himself over wholly to mysticism.

The unwritten book is also a prime example of one of Lowry's recurrent themes in *Under the Volcano*: the failure of language as a means of salvation. Letters that remain unwritten or unmailed, Yvonne's postcard that wanders around the world before finally reaching Geoffrey, signs that the characters misread ("¿Le gusta esta jardín que es suyo?") or whose implications they ignore ("No se puede vivir sin amar"), words that Geoffrey and Yvonne could speak to one another, but don't—in these instances and others we see precisely the sort of fragmentation, the fall into division, that the Consul's book, ideally, would reverse. Throughout the novel, that division is represented topographically by the abyss or barranca. In chapter 1, Laruelle stands on the bridge over the barranca, which he associates with "finality" and "cleavage," and recalls the legend that the earth split open throughout Mexico when Christ died (UV 15). On the same bridge, Geoffrey once advised him to "make a film about Atlantis" and talked "about the spirit of the abyss, the god of storm, 'huracan,' that 'testified so suggestively to intercourse between

opposite sides of the Atlantic" (UV 16). This sense of cleavage pursues the Consul through the book, affecting him politically through the severance of diplomatic relations between Britain and Mexico and personally through his divorce from Yvonne and his failure at intercourse when she returns; in his letter to Yvonne, he imagines himself "teetering over the awful unbridgeable void, the all-but-unretraceable path of God's lightning back to God" (UV 39), and his failure to bridge that abyss will be made explicit by his fall into the barranca at the end of the novel.

Since the book he plans to write involves the rediscovery of lost spiritual truths, Geoffrey's psychic fragmentation, which gives birth to his "familiar," and his lack of "equilibrium" (UV 39) make it impossible for him to sustain his vision. Lowry's insistence on a complex relationship between author and work is particularly evident in the Consul's inability to write a book that is so obviously the antithesis of his own alienation and despair. Thus it is appropriate that our last vision of the imagined book manuscript, as it burns and its pages scatter in Yvonne's final hallucination, is reflected a chapter later (although simultaneously, within the novel's chronology) by the Consul's dying vision of universal conflagration: "the world itself was bursting, bursting into black spouts of villages catapulted into space, with himself falling through it all, through the inconceivable pandemonium of a million tanks, through the blazing of ten million burning bodies, falling into a forest, falling—" (Pagnouille 48; UV 375). In this final scene, the manuscript has become the world, and the Consul's vision, which links his death to the mass destruction of the impending world war, also implies a return to the primordial chaos from which his manuscript was to have been an attempt to extract a principle of order. The pandemonium or infernal chaos into which Geoffrey rapidly descends, from his appearance at the Farolito to his fall into the barranca, works on several levels here, implying a lapse into a totally undifferentiated state that obliterates all sense of identity.

Obviously, one reason why the Consul cannot finish the book is that he does not write it: he talks about it, imagining the reviews that will compare his discoveries to those of Ignatius Donnelly (see A&C 132, 133), but instead of actually taking pen in hand and drafting a chapter he wallows in alcoholic self-pity. Lowry's many unfinished manuscripts make the analogy be-

tween the Consul and his creator almost irresistible, but there is at least one crucial difference between the two: Lowry was a dedicated writer who found it easy to start projects but hard to complete them, while the Consul only thinks and talks about writing his book. In his letter to Yvonne, the Consul's quip that the book's title, "Secret Knowledge," explains why it can never come out (UV 39) is meant both seriously and ironically, expressing his belief both that he is inadequate to the task and that there is no language that can convey "ultimate reality" directly and unambiguously. Immediately afterwards, his reference to himself as Don Quixote ("the Knight of Sorry Aspect") is equally significant: associating himself with the knight whose greatness was based on delusions, he reveals once again his recognition of his own absurdity, his commitment to the products of his imagination over material reality, and his inability to extricate himself from the identity that he has forged from models that mean as much to him as Amadis did to Cervantes' famous knight.

There is another failure underlying, or at least contributing to, Geoffrey's inability to write his book. That is his violation of the philosophy of the impersonal life—*la vida impersonal*—which is encapsulated in Dr. Vigil's advice to Laruelle, "Come, amigo, throw away your mind" (UV 6, 12; cf. DG 239). This philosophy assumes that although we are morally responsible for our actions, we should understand that our lives take place in the context of larger patterns and thereby recognize the greater and more significant reality that lies outside us. In his essay "Garden of Etna," Lowry associates the need to see one's life as "impersonal" with the cyclic form of time and history (which of course is incorporated into the structure of *Under the Volcano*), and he notes that the conception of others as "spiritual manifestations of oneself," although "evil," is "not wholly an illusion" (GE 46). What is wrong is to regard oneself as central and all-important: Andersen connects *la vida impersonal* with "the Oriental view that the cause of suffering is action resulting from desire for a separate self" (Andersen 438). Both in his vision of himself as terribly, irrevocably alone and in his solipsistic vision of the world as a projection of his mind—the two poles of his relationship to external reality that lead his sense of his own identity to become increasingly blurred and fragmented—the Consul violates the

principles of harmony and equilibrium in the vision of "ultimate truth" that he would present through his book.

The letter he writes to Yvonne, but never mails, is one of Geoffrey Firmin's most eloquent and moving statements in the entire novel—and perhaps his most honest assessment of his situation, as well. Even so, the letter is replete with ironies whose significance emerges only in the aftermath of the Consul's death. Inserted in the anthology of Elizabethan plays that the Consul lent to Jacques Laruelle in Spring 1938, lost when Laruelle misplaced it some months later, the letter resurfaces in chapter 1, a year after the Consul's death, when Sr. Bustamente finds the volume of plays and gives it to Laruelle. Since the letter falls out of the book just after Laruelle reads passages from Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, Walker and Holt observe that Geoffrey's "first words come as if straight from the pages of *Faustus* and are suited to it: 'Night: and once again the nightly grapple with death, the room shaking with daemonic orchestras'" (Walker and Holt 112). In the letter, the Consul's statements that "the name of this land is hell" and "this is what it is to live in hell" (UV 36, 38) recall Mephistophilis' line, "Why this is hell, nor am I out of it" (Marlowe 12 [sc. iiii]), a declaration which, although quite true, lures Faustus into a false sense of security. A final irony in the Consul's letter is contained in the line at which Laruelle stops reading: "come back to me, Yvonne, if only for a day" (UV 41). This letter, coincidentally resurfacing on the anniversary of its author's death, is so clearly an omen of that death that Laruelle can only burn it, thereby inadvertently confirming, once again, the identification of the doomed author with his text.

The most thorough analysis of the letter and its place within the novel has been carried out by Charles Baxter, who argues that Laruelle's burning of the letter represents "the simultaneously reverent and murderous attitude held toward language, particularly the language of art, in Lowry's novel" (Baxter 115). Baxter defines those attitudes as those of "the symbolist and the ironist," two aesthetic types represented by the Consul; in burning the letter, Laruelle gives us a momentary glimpse of the nineteenth century symbolist's belief that literary language can allow "the object to burn with significance and light" before

reverting to the modern ironist's recognition of the arbitrary and unstable relationship between language and whatever it purports to represent. It might be added that the most obvious problem with the letter is that even as he writes it, Geoffrey knows—and says in the letter (UV 40)—that he will never send it, just as he will not finish writing his book. The act of writing is therefore inherently ironic, for it is only by mere chance that the letter falls out of the volume of plays and gains an audience: Laruelle, and through him, us. Our reading is apparently incomplete, for the letter's text begins and ends with ellipses, and by destroying the letter, Laruelle tries to insure that it will have no subsequent readers. Nonetheless, Lowry emphasized that the novel's shape is "essentially *trochal*" (SL 88), and as we begin another revolution of his luminous wheel the letter will exist briefly before being destroyed once again.

Baxter has linked the Consul's failure as visionary artist to that of the Poet in Shelley's *Alastor*.⁵ In that poem the imagination, divorced from the objects of natural affection, enters into a deadly solipsism that eventually destroys the Poet (Baxter 118-19). Toward the end of chapter 5, Geoffrey refers to *Alastor*, telling Dr. Vigil, "Ah, that the dream of dark magician in his visioned cave, even while his hand—that's the bit I like—shakes in its last decay, were the true end of this so lovely world" (UV 147). He repeats the lines to Jacques Laruelle in chapter 7, this time changing "this so lovely world" to "this so lousy world" (UV 202). The Consul's reference is to lines 681-88 of *Alastor*, where Shelley laments the Poet's death. Both Kilgallin and Pagnouille have noted that the Consul changes Shelley's "the true *law* / Of this so lovely world" to "the true *end* of this so lovely world," converting the passage into an eschatological vision that foreshadows the Consul's own death in chapter 12 (Kilgallin 31-32, Pagnouille 79). *Alastor*'s connection with the Consul's fate is reinforced, ironically, by the statement Geoffrey makes to Dr. Vigil immediately after citing the lines from Shelley: "Jesus. Do you know, *compañero*, I sometimes have the feeling that it's actually sinking, like Atlantis, beneath my feet" (UV 147). Like Shelley (UV 204), the Consul will sink and drown rather than admit he cannot swim; his allusion to the sinking of Atlantis connects his own isolation to the spiritual crisis that his book supposedly would resolve; and the rare use of *compañero* (comrade), a word associated both with the Indian's

death and with his own death (UV 247, 374), provides us with yet another omen of the Consul's doom.

Since Lowry associates *Alastor* with the Consul's role as the introverted visionary artist obsessed with the products of his own imagination, it is interesting that in the 1940 typescript of *Under the Volcano* the lines quoted here are actually written by the Consul on the title page of *Doctor Faustus*, as Laruelle discovers in the process of playing *sortes Shakespeareanae*:

Too astonished to heed what he might have amusingly construed as a warning to himself, Laruelle tried opening the book with his left hand and, scarcely giving time to whatever knowledgeable coalitions there might be to do their work, he brought his finger down, to his relief, on the title page of the play. But looking again, Laruelle saw that the page was not blank at all; something was faintly pencilled upon it, as though an attempt had been made to rub it out. Looking still closer, and holding the book even closer up to the dismal light he read:

O, that God
 Profuse of poisons which
 a star that feels
 No proud exemption in the blighting curse
 He bears, over the world wanders for ever
 Love as incarnate death! Oh, that the dream
 Of dark magician in his visioned cave
 Raking the cinders of a crucible
 For life and power, even when his feeble hand
 Shakes in its last decay, were the true end
 Of this so lovely world.

University of Tortu, Lithuania, 19—

And under this, over and over again had been written and erased, and rewritten as if by a man obsessed by a single thought, yet continually rejecting that thought even as another will within him endlessly jostled round it, the one word: Priscilla. (UBC 25:17, 21-22; ellipsis in typescript)⁶

In this typescript, the letter's ambiguous status as a text that is simultaneously present and absent, written to someone else yet not meant to be read, is mirrored by the words written in the book and then erased, which suggest both the instability of language and the Consul's inability to believe in language as a

means of redemption.⁷ The words the Consul inscribes in the book alternate not only between presence and absence but also between Shelley's solipsistic image of the "dark magician in his visioned cave" and the Consul's tentative reaching out to Priscilla (as the wife was called at this stage of composition). His wife's name, obsessively written, erased, and rewritten, represents the Consul's attempt to find love in another person, while the *Alastor* passage, celebrating the Poet's inner vision (even at the cost of life), implies that eventually the Consul will regard his own inner reality as more important than the life around him.

In the 1940 draft, the Consul writes the lines from *Alastor* on the title page of *Doctor Faustus* rather than in his letter, yet what he inscribes in the book resembles what he writes in his letter. In the novel's final form, the description of Geoffrey's handwriting in the letter dramatizes the conflict between life and death that he is experiencing:

But there was no mistaking, even in the uncertain light, the hand, half crabbed, half generous, and wholly drunken, of the Consul himself, the Greek e's, flying buttresses of d's, the t's like lonely wayside crosses save where they crucified an entire word, the words themselves slanting steeply downhill, though the individual characters seemed as if resisting the descent, braced, climbing the other way. (UV 35)

Although this is presented to us through Laruelle's eyes, it undoubtedly reflects the Consul's own vision of himself, one that is highly romanticized and yet ironic. The general pattern of the handwriting represents Geoffrey's descent into the abyss, a descent interrupted by numerous instances of heroic resistance that imply his struggle against an implacable fate. Ackerley and Clipper note that the Consul's "t's foreshadow the encounter at the lonely wayside cross with the dying Indian" (A&C 60), but the crucifixion imagery here is ambiguous: the isolated crosses might suggest the Consul's role as sacrificial victim, but the t's that crucify entire words may also reveal his capacity to drag others to destruction along with him.

The Consul's isolation is a recurrent theme in his letter, as in the novel generally. Aware that at least some of the "reality" he experiences is hallucinatory, like the scornful repetition of his name by "imaginary parties" (UV 35), he is nonetheless unable to

escape the feeling that his own reality is somehow deeper or more significant than that of others. Like Marlowe's Faustus, he is a doomed explorer of forbidden realms: "And this is how I sometimes think of myself, as a great explorer who has discovered some extraordinary land from which he can never return to give his knowledge to the world: but the name of this land is hell" (UV 36).⁸ He also associates himself with Blake, who knew that "right through hell there is a path" (UV 36), and in his vision of the Northern Paradise he imagines that he and Yvonne are like Swedenborg's eastward-facing angels (UV 37), even though his own tendency is always to look away from the sun. Writing his letter in the Farolito, which comes to represent his imprisonment in his own mind, the Consul laments that no one else can tell him about Yvonne, and even finds that she cannot possibly understand him: "You cannot know the sadness of my life" (UV 40). Geoffrey's conviction of his difference from others derives in large part from his alcoholism, the drinking which he carries out "as if I were taking an eternal sacrament" (UV 40). His drinking reinforces the inwardness and preoccupation with the self that characterize his meditations, perhaps allowing him to see brilliantly, as when he alone understands "the beauty of an old woman from Tarasco who plays dominoes at seven o'clock in the morning" (UV 50), but at the same time making it all but impossible to tell anyone what he has envisioned; it is also what renders him incapable of understanding "more than the governing design" of Yvonne's letters (UV 38).

Virtually every aspect of Geoffrey's life—his decision to remain in Quauhahuac after Britain severs diplomatic relations with Mexico, his involvement in occult mysteries, his failure to mail the letter to Yvonne, his drinking—seems calculated to prevent him from having to give up his isolation. Since, as Walter Ong has noted, "Writing and reading are solitary activities that throw the psyche back on itself" (Ong 69), the Consul's immersion in these processes both reflects and stimulates his radical separation from other people. Ideally, the letter he writes to Yvonne would lead to her return and end his suffering, but while he includes a brief vision of their Northern Paradise (UV 36-38) and recognizes that "love is the only thing which gives meaning to our poor ways on earth" (UV 40), he is principally intent on cultivating his image as sufferer. In terms of *la vida impersonal*, the

Consul's "excessive remorse," which attributes "formidable value" to himself (GE 46), is a fatal flaw that inevitably results in his eviction from the garden of his soul. While the obsession with his suffering and his private visions provides him with the material for his writing, it also makes it very difficult for him to construct a coherent vision of reality in his book, or even to communicate his suffering to Yvonne by mailing the letter.

The Consul's representation of himself as a tormented soul recurs memorably in the unfinished poem he writes below his bar tab on the back of a menu at the Restaurant El Popo, where Yvonne and Hugh find it when they stop for a drink on the way to the Farolito. The bill is headed "*Recknung*" (UV 330), the Consul's inadvertent pun on English "reckoning" underscoring the portentous implications of German *Rechnung* (bill, reckoning).⁹ The boundaries of the text below the chit are undefined, as Lowry is concerned with revealing the remnants of the composition process rather than a finished product. On the left are various rhyming words and phrases the Consul tried out, while the poem on the right is described as "an attempt at some kind of sonnet perhaps, but of a wavering and collapsed design, and so crossed out and scrawled over and stained, defaced, and surrounded with scratchy drawings—of a club, a wheel, even a long black box like a coffin—as to be almost undecipherable" (UV 330).

Even so, enough remains of the text to make it clear that the Consul identifies himself with the "poor foundered soul / Who once fled north" (UV 331). The poem concludes ambiguously: throughout *Under the Volcano*, the north has been associated with rationality, civilization, and redemption, and the south with dissolution, as in the description of the highway on the book's opening page (UV 3) or the numerous visions of British Columbia as the Northern Paradise. Here, however, the tormented flight northward seems to reverse the dominant pattern of the book's geographical symbolism by associating the north with the infernal regions. The phrase "who once fled north" haunts Yvonne, echoing in her mind five times as she and Hugh leave the restaurant to plunge into the dark woods (UV 331-32). Yvonne soon comes to understand the poem much as we do, as evidence that

the Consul has rejected the possibility of salvation: "'Who once fled north.' But they were not going north, they were going to the Farolito. Nor had the Consul fled north then, he'd probably gone of course, just as to-night, to the Farolito" (UV 332). Once again, then, the Consul's isolation, his self-involvement, and his flight from redemption are reflected in his role as artist.

Even more than his letter or his book, the Consul's unfinished poem is intimately and complexly related to Lowry's own writing. In *Dark as the Grave Wherein my Friend Is Laid*, Sigbjørn Wilderness recalls having written this same poem on the back of a Mexican menu, then rediscovering the menu and poem while he was writing *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* (as *Under the Volcano* is called in the later works) and inserting it into the manuscript as something written by the Consul (DG 84-85). What Sigbjørn describes is what Lowry actually did—his original poem, written on the back of a menu that advertises the Mexican national lottery, is now included in the William Loftus Templeton Collection at the University of British Columbia—so that Lowry manages to attribute his own composition to two of his characters, one of whom assigns it, in turn, to the other. While the strategy enables us to see Geoffrey and Sigbjørn as variations on their creator, it also distances Lowry from the Consul by placing his romanticized poem within the frame of Sigbjørn's fiction. Written out of his despair at the breakup of his first marriage, Lowry's poem signals his conviction of his own worthlessness and his inability to seek salvation: Ackerley and Clipper note that the poem resembles Francis Thompson's "The Hound of Heaven," (A&C 410), but while Thompson's persona finds salvation despite himself, the Consul's persona seems inevitably headed toward destruction.¹⁰ By projecting his poem's language onto the Consul, Lowry relives the hopelessness he felt when his first marriage broke up, but he also exorcises the ghost of his own past by placing the poem within the context of *Under the Volcano* and then framing that book with *Dark as the Grave*, where the poem takes on new meaning as a harbinger of the Consul's death.

Already in *Under the Volcano*, the Consul's unfinished poem reflects Lowry's ambiguous attitude toward the relationship between writing and death. Richard Kearney's description of Samuel Beckett might apply to Lowry as well:

Beckett's obsession with the *suffering of being* springs from his awareness that language—and more particularly writing—is a process of dying. Language brings us face to face with our own mortality by making us aware that we can never escape from time so as to become fully present to ourselves. We are finite, temporal, decentred beings who, as the structuralists declare, are *spoken by* language before we choose to *speak* it. (Kearney 70)

Thus, in Beckett's trilogy (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*), despite their desire to lapse into silence and die, the narrators are kept alive by the words they write, speak, or imagine themselves speaking. Malone, for example, resolves to tell himself stories to pass the time while he waits to die, and when he finishes, presumably he is dead. For Beckett, being is inseparable from perception or consciousness, which requires articulation: as the Unnamable says, although he cannot believe in the "facts" of which he speaks, "I am obliged to speak. I shall never be silent. Never" (Beckett 291).

The awareness of death inherent in Beckett's language makes explicit one of the conditions that Maurice Blanchot finds in modern literature generally (Blanchot 87-107). Considering Kafka's belief that his best writing established a "relation with death," Gide's statement that he wrote "to shelter something from death," and Proust's conception of art as a personal triumph over death, Blanchot suggests that these writers recognize a fundamental kinship between writing and death. In writing, Blanchot argues, all three authors "want death to be possible: [Kafka] in order to grasp it, [Gide and Proust] in order to hold it at a distance" (Blanchot 95). Likewise, in his essay "Language to Infinity," Michel Foucault has pointed to "an essential affinity between death, endless striving, and the self-representation of language," an affinity particularly evident in alphabetical language, whose phonetic representation of spoken language begins the process by which language comes to dwell upon itself (Foucault 55-56).¹¹ Walter Ong, too, has noted the long-established relationship, in Western culture, between writing and death, beginning with Plato's attacks on writing in the *Phaedrus* and St. Paul's declaration that "the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life" (2 Cor. 3:6). Paradoxically, the "dead" text preserves language, so that "its removal from the living human lifeworld, its rigid visual

fixity, assures its endurance and its potential for being resurrected into limitless living contexts by a potentially infinite number of living readers" (Ong 81).

The association of writing with death or entrapment within the work is a recurrent theme in Lowry's later fiction, culminating in his conception of "death as the accepted manuscript of one's life" (WP 74). In *Under the Volcano*, the Consul's writing is associated with death from the first words that Laruelle reads when he picks up the unposted letter to Yvonne: "Night: and once again, the nightly grapple with death" (UV 35). Between the margins of his sheets of paper, Geoffrey attempts to carve out his own space, create his own reality, forge his identity. The unfinished book or poem, the unmailed letter, is for this reason preferable to its completed counterpart, because it remains within the realm of the Consul's imagination, under his control. The many examples of Geoffrey's own readings, most obviously the sign in the garden that he misreads as a threat of eviction, indicate that a completed and published text comes to signify not what its author might have intended but what the individual reader sees in it. Similarly, in his poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," Auden observes that when poets die, their words are "modified" by every reading and become continuous with their readers' lives.

Lowry establishes the point another way. As Baxter notes, when the Consul's writings are exposed to the gaze of others, the "products of his imagination suddenly become commodities, *things*" (Baxter 116). The potential status of his writings as objects subject to manipulation by others is underscored by the emphasis on their physical appearance, much as the novel's typography tends to emphasize the existence of other written language—on signs and in the Tlaxcaltecan tourist brochure, for instance—as commodities. When Laruelle picks up the letter to Yvonne or when Yvonne imagines typing the Consul's manuscripts, the description of the Consul's handwriting emphasizes the document's physical appearance (UV 35, 271), while their susceptibility to fire removes the letter and manuscript from the realm of pure imagination and places them solidly within the temporal world of consumable objects.

Even more clearly, the poem that Hugh and Yvonne discover is circumscribed by the menu on whose reverse side it is

written. Yvonne first reads the printed side, seeing the typed list of prices, the wheel-within-wheel logo of the national lottery, and the picture of "a smiling young woman" holding up lottery tickets which in turn portray a cowgirl who reminds Yvonne of her career as an actress in Western movies (UV 329). Within the context of the *Volcano*, these images take on new and unforeseen meanings. Not only the cowgirl but the "happy mother caressing her child" in the lottery logo are ironically connected to Yvonne's past (her child died of meningitis at the age of six months); the woman with the lottery tickets who is seen "beckoning roguishly" has her counterpart in María, the prostitute with whom Geoffrey would be having intercourse around the time when Yvonne looks at the menu; the wheel suggests the book's circular structure as well as the pattern of fate that controls the Consul's destiny; and the image within an image—the woman contained within two wheels, the cowgirls on lottery tickets held by another woman—is related to the *Farolito*, whose increasingly smaller rooms are in turn a model of the universe (cf. UV 200, 343, 347). The illustrations on the menu provide the context for the Consul's poem and, perhaps, influence the Consul's own drawings that surround the poem: the wheel and coffin, in particular, echo the images of entrapment on the other side of the menu, and the poem's references to escape, death, and a "cold cell" continue the theme.

In his poem, the Consul describes himself (or his persona) as being unaware that "his pursuers gave up hope / Of seeing him (dance) at the end of a rope." The ironic connection between the persecutors and their victim, both of whom have abandoned all hope, is one of the finer touches in the poem, which, like his letter to Yvonne, shows that the Consul possesses real insight into his situation. Even so, the two works inevitably seem exaggerated, melodramatic, inescapably focused on his private world to the exclusion of other realities. Like his tendency to undertake ambitious projects (his book on "ultimate reality," no less) and leave them unfinished, the Consul's emphasis on his internal vision is typical of one strain of romantic artist—one that Shelley found sufficiently strong in his own character to write *Alastor* as, in effect, a warning to himself to resist the allure of imaginative parthenogenesis. (Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is based on much the same principle, albeit with the twist that Frankenstein fails

not only to consider other people but to love his own creation as well.) Another aesthetic type that seems to be represented by the Consul is the expressionist: Sherrill Grace connects expressionism to Geoffrey's "projection of inner confusion upon external reality" and his inability "to distinguish between self and not self . . . to act or to love" (Grace 99, 109). Both the Poet of *Alastor* and the expressionist envision the world in terms of self, thereby violating the precept of *la vida impersonal*.

There is perhaps one more prototype for the Consul's role as artist, one that suggests why his work seems deficient, why he is unable to bridge the gap between writer and audience (and, indeed, is unwilling even to seek an audience). That prototype may be implied, ironically, by the Chief of Rostrums' declaration that the Consul is not a "wriider" but an "espider" (UV 371). The spider, or spy, resembles the plagiarist in merely appropriating what rightfully belongs to someone else, but the Consul as artist is less a plagiarist than a solipsist or egotist. In this regard he resembles the spider who, in Swift's *The Battle of the Books*, spins its web out of the materials of its own body, scorning everything that it does not produce. For Swift, who favored the Ancients (the bee) over the Moderns (the spider), the bee is an example of liberal and humanistic thought; in Lowry's terms, it might exemplify *la vida impersonal*. The spider, however, represents an art founded on narrowness and conceit. Cutting himself off from others, the spider proclaims his own superiority and self-sufficiency, but the results are unsatisfying: if his webs survive, that is only because they are hidden in a corner where they will not be put to use.

If the plagiarist represents one type of failed artist in Lowry's fiction, his converse is the egotist who, like Swift's spider, regards his imagination as both original and self-sufficient. Both types fail to create an authentic art because they misjudge or misconstrue the relationship of the self to exterior reality: the plagiarist assimilates another's text, thereby declaring hegemony over all written language, while the spider blindly asserts his superiority to both nature and culture. A crucial difference between the Consul and Lowry, in this respect, is indicated by *Under the Volcano* itself, for the novel incorporates the products of the Consul's imagination, written and otherwise, into a larger vision that includes other distinct viewpoints, discourses,

and frames of reference.¹² Whereas the Consul can discover no way out of the labyrinth of his mind, we are permitted to glimpse the paths he has missed on his way through the dark woods to the Farolito, as he progressively excludes every reality but that of his tormented imagination. And the reality he most clearly evades, denies, and excludes is that of Yvonne, the intended recipient of his unposted letter, his would-be collaborator on the unwritten book, and the instrument of salvation from whom he flees to the Farolito. If, as Lowry tells us over and over, one cannot live without loving, then the failure of the Consul as artist tells us that in Lowry's view, at least, any art not founded on the capacity to love is also doomed to fail.

NOTES

¹ In this article I have used the following abbreviations for published works listed in Works Cited: A&C (Ackerley and Clipper, *A Companion to "Under the Volcano"*), DG (*Dark as the Grave Wherein my Friend Is Laid*), GE ("Garden of Etna"), SL (*Selected Letters*), SP (*Selected Poems*), UV (*Under the Volcano*), and WP ("*Work in Progress: The Voyage that Never Ends*"). The abbreviation UBC precedes references to unpublished materials in the Malcolm Lowry Archive, Special Collections Division, Main Library, University of British Columbia. Archival references include box, file, and page number—e.g., UBC 26:5, 27 for box 26, file 5, page 27 in the Archive. For permission to quote from unpublished documents I am grateful to the estate of Malcolm Lowry and to the University of British Columbia. Reprinted by permission of Sterling Lord Literistic, Inc. Copyright © by estate of Malcolm Lowry.

² Day says that "Lowry always insisted that the Spanish word for 'spy' was 'espider,' not 'espía'" (Day 269), but in *Under the Volcano* the term "spider" (UV 30) or "espider" (UV 371) indicates a Mexican character's attempt at an English word rather than Lowry's faulty Spanish. Whether the phrasing originated in Lowry's experience, his imagination, or a fertile combination of both areas, the allegation that he or his character was not a writer but an "espider" recurs in *Dark as the Grave Wherein my Friend Is Laid* (DG 124) and the *La Mordida* manuscript (UBC 14:8, 315). The charge in *Dark as the Grave* is one Sigbjørn recalls from his arrest during his previous trip to Mexico, while in *La Mordida* both Primrose and Sigbjørn are called "spiders." In both cases, the entire section echoes the conclusion of *Under the Volcano*, suggesting that Sigbjørn's experiences are repetitive and are essentially inextricable from his fiction.

³ This passage merely describes the Consul's handwriting as "slanting," but in chapter 1, when Laruelle looks at the Consul's letter, he sees "the words themselves slanting steeply downhill" (UV 35). Thematically, this is appropriate as a description of the Consul's tendency toward self-destruction: Lowry even noted that chapter 8 begins with the word "Downhill" (SL 78). It is not, however, an accurate description of Lowry's own handwriting, which tended to slant upward, even in his pencil draft of the passage that describes the Consul's handwriting as going in the other direction (UBC 28:24, 12). The "Greek e's and odd t's" (UV 271) will be recognized by anyone who has worked with Lowry's manuscripts.

⁴ See Asals' article for extensive discussion of Lowry's Indian sources and the parallels between India and Mexico.

⁵ For a broader consideration of the relationship between *Alastor* and *Under the Volcano*, see Chapman.

⁶ In this sequence there are three misquotations: Geoffrey's "a star that feels," "Love as incarnate death," and "the true end" are errors for Shelley's "a slave that feels," "Lone as incarnate death," and "the true law." Since Lowry was often careless about quoting, it is perhaps unwise to read too much significance into the erroneous citation from Shelley in this draft. Misquotations that persist into the published work are another matter altogether, since Lowry and his editor, Albert Erskine, were generally conscientious about trying to eliminate unintentional errors.

⁷ Lowry's own copy of *Eight Famous Elizabethan Plays* contains a similar erased text of a poem, written in his hand, which the inventory to the University of British Columbia's Lowry Archive identifies as "possibly the first draft of 'Strange Type'" (Combs, p. 3 of addendum headed "Malcolm Lowry's Library"). In that poem (SP 79), Lowry deals again with the ambiguity and instability of language—this time in the form of printer's errors that lend new meaning to a literary work or to the world.

⁸ Brian Shaffer relates the Consul's image of himself as explorer to another Faustian figure, Conrad's Kurtz (Shaffer 146).

⁹ The American edition has *Rechnung* (UV 330), but this seems to be an error caused by the attempt to correct Lowry's German.

¹⁰ It is worth noting that the epigraph page of the 1945 *Volcano* typescript contains four epigraphs: the three that are printed in the published book and another, inserted between the Sophocles and Bunyan quotations (but marked for deletion), from "The Hound of Heaven," lines 122-25 (UBC 27:6).

¹¹ See also "What Is an Author?" in which Foucault observes that the original "conception of a spoken or written narrative as a protection against death has been transformed by our culture. Writing is now linked to sacrifice and to the sacrifice of life itself. . . . Where a work had the duty of creating immortality, it now attains the right to kill, to become the murderer of its author. Flaubert, Proust, and Kafka are obvious examples of this reversal" (Foucault 117).

¹² Cf. Baxter's observation that "the Consul could not have written, or imagined, *Under the Volcano*, because it contains a dialectic of opposing views toward the physical world—the Consul's and Hugh's" (Baxter 124).

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