Malcolm Lowry's "Under the Volcano": A critical reception study.

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MALCOLM LOWRY'S UNDER THE VOLCANO:
A CRITICAL RECEPTION STUDY

BY

PAUL J. BLACK

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies through
the Department of English in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts at the
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ABSTRACT

_Under the Volcano_, a novel by Malcolm Lowry, first appeared in 1947. It met with mixed critical reception ranging from wildly enthusiastic praise to peremptory dismissal. After the initial reception little critical attention was paid to the novel for about a decade. During this period, however there were some indications that there existed a sort of "underground" of critical support for the novel. In the early 1960's there was a burgeoning of Lowry criticism and now the novel is generally acclaimed as a modern masterpiece.

This thesis is an exploration and analysis of the critical reception of the novel, primarily in North America, from 1947 to the present.

The Introduction deals with the scope of the study and provides background material on both Malcolm Lowry and _Under the Volcano_.

Chapter One of the thesis covers the original critical reception. It is divided into two sections, one treating the more popular critical media, the other exploring the more academic quarterlies. In terms of comparison, a much more healthy picture of the critical scene emerges from the consideration of the popular reviews.

Chapter Two covers subsequent reception up to the present. It also is divided into two sections, one
examining the period of underground critical support for the novel, the other dealing with criticism of the novel since its emergence as a critically-acclaimed major work of art.

In the Conclusion, the picture of the critical scene drawn from the analysis is summed up. It is suggested that a difficult, many-levelled novel might benefit from some kind of explanatory preface, and, finally, the tendency of criticism to become intentional as an author becomes more famous is pointed out.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis is essentially a chronicle of the passage of a novel, Under the Volcano, from its publication in 1947 to the present; from a point where it was deemed worthy by some of only token consideration, where it was damned by many with faint praise, occasionally lauded—but sometimes for the wrong reasons—to the point where a growing consensus finds it worthy of the most exacting and detailed scholarly attention.

Within this framework some tentative conclusions will be drawn about the critical scene in general, and about the critical fate to which a first novel, and a complex one, may be predestined. The conclusions must be tentative because, although there is no such thing as very rapid change in the critical scene as far as new fiction reviewing is concerned, some change does occur: the impact of the appearance of a new and influential wide-circulation periodical such as the New York Review of Books on the critical scene would make a study all of its own.

Frank Kermode has suggested that:

If critics have any reason for existence this is it: to give assurances of value and to provide somehow—perhaps anyhow—the means by which readers may be put in possession of the valuable book.¹

Taking this general description of the function of the critic as a starting point, this study will analyse the criticism of Under the Volcano in an effort to determine how well or poorly this criticism provides assurances of value, and more important "the means by which the reader is put into possession" of the book—the extent to which the critic delivers the book to the reader.

Insofar as judging and assessing criticism of a novel is concerned, it is this latter function of the critic that must receive the closest attention. An assurance of value is more often than not an expression of taste, and, except in extremes, difficult to comment upon. The "delivering" of a work, that is, elucidating, explaining, explicating, relating it to other works, providing the reader with the tools, as it were, to refine and enlarge his apprehension of the work of art, is the most important job of the critic. In the case of Under the Volcano this applies doubly, since it is a complex and many leveled fiction, and there are many different ways in which the reader can be put in possession of the novel.

As far as terms of reference are concerned, in this study "critic" and "reviewer" should be taken as synonymous although in general those who wrote about the novel on its first appearance will be termed reviewers, those who wrote about it later, critics. The job of the reviewer is of the same nature as the job of the critic, to provide assurances of value and elucidate the work, though the degree to which emphasis is placed on either part of the task may differ.
This study will be confined mainly to the critical reception of the American edition of the novel, though a limited amount of criticism of the English edition, where such criticism is generally accessible to the North American reader, will be included. Although the novel has been translated into numerous foreign languages—French, German, Norwegian, Spanish, Italian, Polish and Portuguese being some of them—material related to translations or commentaries on translations of the novel will be used only if it is connected with a review or critique from the body of criticism under primary consideration.

The scope of the analysis is not exhaustive; not everything that has been written about Under the Volcano will be examined. However, with the exception of reviews in the daily popular press—and it should be noted that this does not include weekly book review sections such as those in the New York Times and Herald Tribune—the study of the critical reception in North America will be almost complete. It is assumed that covering approximately 90 or 95 per cent of the critical material will give an accurate enough picture of the overall critical scene.

Malcolm Lowry was born July 28, 1909, in Birkenhead, Cheshire, England. He was to spend most of his life away from England in various enough countries so that he has been called an English novelist, a Canadian novelist, and even an American novelist.

After a trip to the Far East as a cabin boy on a freighter he went to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to meet
Conrad Aiken, whose work had impressed him greatly and whose novel Blue Voyage was most influential on Lowry's first book, Ultramarine, published by Jonathan Cape in London, 1933. The novel received such meagre attention that Under the Volcano, particularly the American edition, might as well have been a first novel—at least in terms of critical reception. Ultramarine is not mentioned in any of the original reviews of Under the Volcano.

In the years between 1932, when he graduated from Cambridge with third class honors in the English Tripos and 1940 when he married Margerie Bonner and moved to Dollarton, British Columbia, Lowry was married and divorced, and lived for varying lengths of time in Paris, Los Angeles, New York, Mexico, and Vancouver. He began work on Under the Volcano in 1936 in Mexico.

He lived in Dollarton in a squatter's cabin on the beach below the high tide line from 1940 to 1954 with time off for visits to Mexico, France, Eastern Canada, New York and Haiti. These were the most productive years of his literary career.

In 1954, under the threat of eviction from the shack on the beach at Dollarton, he went to Italy, moving to England in 1955, where he died in 1957 at Ripe in Sussex.

The first version of Under the Volcano was a short story completed about 1936. Printed for the first time in a special Malcolm Lowry issue of Prairie Schooner, Winter-Spring, 1963–64, the story is about a bus trip very much like the bus trip described in chapter VIII of the novel.
The three main characters are travelling on a bus which stops at the roadside where an Indian lies dying. No one helps him; each for different reasons follows a "non-intervention" policy, except a drunken pelado who steals the dying man’s money.

The three main characters of the story are the same Geoffrey Firmin—the Consul, Hugh, and Yvonne of the novel, but their relationships to one another are different. In the story the Consul is Yvonne’s father and Hugh is her "young man"; in the novel Yvonne is the Consul’s wife and Hugh his half brother.

By 1937 the story had grown to 40,000 words; in 1940 the entire book was re-written. In 1941 twelve publishers rejected it. From the end of 1941 to late 1944, working "about eight hours a day," Lowry re-wrote the novel once again. He received word of the novel’s acceptance by Jonathan Cape in London and Reynal and Hitchkock in New York on the same day in February, 1946.

About the book’s original reception, Lowry has written:

This is a little bit complicado; it was a considerable success—at least for me—even financial, in the U.S., though not as much as its presence as 5th on the best seller lists for

---

2See the Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry, ed. Harvey Breit and Margerie Bonner Lowry (New York, 1965), p. 63, hereafter referred to in the text as SL, followed by the page number; as: (SL, 63).

3At the time, Lowry was visiting Mexico. The news was brought by the same little postman who is a character in Chapter VI of the novel. Mr. and Mrs. Lowry were staying in the original of Laruelle’s tower. His life was marked by many such ironic coincidences.
some months would seem to indicate... I imagine about 15 or 16,000 copies altogether. Here in Canada it sold 2 copies—so far as I can gather—and was panned in the local paper. [Vancouver Sun] (SL, 251)

As a preface to the examination and assessment of the critical reception of Under the Volcano, a complex work in style, form and theme, a brief description of the novel may prove helpful.

On the surface it is the story of the last day in the life of the Consul, Geoffrey Firmin, and his estranged wife, Yvonne. She has returned unexpectedly to Quauhnahuac with a notion of somehow patching up the marriage, and of salvaging what is left of Geoffrey who seems bent on self destruction by drink. Hugh, the Consul's half-brother, is in the Mexican town on his way to join the crew of a ship which is to take arms to the hard-pressed Loyalist army in Spain.

During the course of the day, the Day of the Dead in November, 1938, Yvonne and Hugh go horseback riding while Geoffrey has a nap after unsuccessfully trying to make love to Yvonne. On their ride they visit the ruins of Maximilian's palace. Later, the threesome visit the house of Jacques Laruelle, go by bus to a bull-throwing at Tomalin, a nearby town, on which trip the incident of the wounded Indian described above takes place. At seven o'clock in the evening, twelve hours after the action has begun, Geoffrey is killed by Fascist irregular police, and Yvonne by a runaway horse. Both deaths are connected with the incident of the wounded Indian: the shots that kill the
Consul frighten a horse that he has just untethered. It is this horse which belonged to the wounded Indian that tramples Yvonne.

The action is preceded by a retrospective prologue, centred around the thoughts of Laruelle exactly one year later. In this prologue all the various themes that will be developed in the novel are introduced.

Physically the action is slight. Metaphorically and spiritually it is extraordinarily intense. Every page is jammed with allusion. Words, incidents and seemingly casual details carry enormous symbolic weight. Around the central theme "No se puede vivir sin amar,"4 which seems to form the centre of a kind of constellation, are clustered other themes: the theme of Faust; a lost-Eden theme with ramifications that include themes of oppressive guilt and a search for a lost father; a theme of alienation; a theme of modern samaritanism; a political theme worked out in terms of the Spanish Civil War, Fascism and totalitarianism; and a theme inextricably tied to the central one, No se puede vivir sin amar, the theme of the ailing soul of modern man.


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4"Man cannot live without love," a maxim of the Spanish mystic, Fra Luis de Leon.
The texts do not differ. For reasons of accessibility, unless otherwise noted, the references in this study will be to the 1965 Lippincott edition, referred to in the text as (UtV) followed by the page number.

The study proper is divided into two chapters. Chapter I deals with the initial critical reception of the novel; Chapter II has as its concern the subsequent criticism of the book. The first chapter is divided into two sections, one dealing with initial reception in the more popular, wide-circulation book review sections, the other dealing with initial reception in the more scholarly critical quarterlies. The second chapter is also divided into two sections. The first of these deals with the years immediately following the initial reception of the novel up to 1961, the year, marked by a special Malcolm Lowry issue of Canadian Literature, when the novel emerged as a major work of art deemed worthy of serious consideration—or reconsideration as the case may be. The second section of Chapter II covers the criticism subsequent to this and up to the present.
CHAPTER I
THE INITIAL RECEPTION

1: Wide-circulation Book Reviews: 1947

In the examination of the initial reception of Under the Volcano the wide-circulation book review sections are dealt with separately from the more academic quarterlies. This is done primarily because the overall impression left by the one group of reviews differs from that left by the other. The wide-circulation reviews treated in this section provide, on the whole, far more assurances of value, more of the means by which the reader might be put in possession of the novel, than the quarterlies covered in the next.

The writer of the present assessing reviews written almost two decades ago, is, of course, at a great advantage: the novel now has a most substantial reputation; there is a great body of criticism, praising and elucidating it. The purpose for which comments are made on the superficiality or questionable value judgement in initial reviews is not merely to point out the frailty of some individual reviewers. A superficial review, for example, can in most cases be attributed to the small space allowed it, and, in fact, may be inevitable. It is hoped that by pointing at weakness as well as strength, by examining initial reception in the light provided by later, more detailed studies of the novel,
a picture of an overall critical scene may emerge. The conclusion will be reached that, for whatever reasons—limitations of space, editorial deadlines, a plethora of sensibility deadening, mediocre novels to review—the critical scene that emerges from a study of the wide-circulation book reviews, in spite of its limitations, is a far healthier one than emerges from an examination of the more limited circulation, more academic quarterlies.

L.C. Merrit, in a study of widely circulating book reviews indexed in Book Review Digest, came to the conclusion that in general they were characterized by "a chorus of praise, a reluctance to condemn, and a strong tendency to say nothing one way or another."5

With some exceptions6 the original reviews of Under the Volcano are favorable. Their praise for the novel, however, is put in such terms7 as to make it impossible to dismiss it as representative of the long series of uncritical nods of approval described by Mr. Merrit.

Examples of the more perceptive reviews, providing elucidation and assurances of value, can be found in the New York Times and Herald Tribune book review sections, and in the Saturday Review of Literature.


6Especially in Jacques Barzun's review in Harper's Magazine; see below, p. 17.

7Especially in John Woodburn's review in the Saturday Review of Literature; see below; p. 14.
H.R. Hays, in the *New York Times* Book Review Section, describes the novel as one

which achieves a rich variety of meaning on many levels, which is written in a style both virile and poetic, which possesses profundity of insight, which is, in short, literature.®

He gives a brief summary of the action of the novel, along with short descriptions of the main characters. He suggests that Hugh is a "romantic of action...not spontaneous in anything he does, who wants to be a hero or martyr but cannot respect his own motives,"(5) in contrast to the Consul whom he describes as "utterly cynical" toward social problems. Some issue could be taken with these conclusions that would stem more from the too-abbreviated summing up of fairly complex characters than from any fundamental misinterpretation.

The reviewer spends some time on the Faust theme, noting that Yvonne is "perhaps a corrupt Margaret" and that the Consul is constantly willing his own damnation. Hell, according to Mr. Hays, is symbolised by the Consul's perceptions of the scene: volcanos; pariah dogs; above all, the barranca which has a double significance, symbolising both the depths of the inferno, and the cleavage between Geoffrey, and Yvonne or life.

He suggests that the book can be read at various levels of meaning: the level of perception and thinking of a damned hero; the level of action and the objective

8*New York Times Book Review*, XXIII (23 Feb., 1947), 55. Subsequent citations of this review are indicated in the text by page number; as: (5).
political situation; and the level of allegory, with Hugh
and Geoffrey symbolising the failure of the English to
deal with fascism and aggression on an international scale.

Mr. Hays has a word on the "difficulty" of the book,
commenting that "the obscurities...are in themselves
provocative of worthwhile discussion."(5)

Mark Schorer, writing in the New York Herald Tribune
book review section9 has high praise for the novel:

Under the Volcano is ostensibly the story of
a man's disintegration and death, but within
this appearance is the deeper reality of man's
fall from grace, the drama of how we are damned
and who shall be saved, the basic contrast in
human history of the mind confronted by destiny.
One other novelist in this century, James Joyce,
has brought to his fiction such primary
experience, and devised a method whereby the
naturalistic surface opens into endlessly
amplifying symbolic depths, a style capable of
posing these final questions in an aesthetic
unity, of holding event and symbol story and
meaning absolutely together, of preventing, that
is, allegory. It would be no service to Mr.
Lowry to push the comparison further.10

Mr. Schorer suggests that the reader "should be allowed
to discover for himself...the subtle and complex structure,"
but does comment that, of the recurring symbols, "gardens
are of primary importance." He mentions Geoffrey's decayed
garden where the Consul delivers a drunken sermon on the
real meaning of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, the
sign "Do you enjoy this garden which is yours? Keep your

---

9Lowry notes that Mr. Schorer also reviewed it "in
Vogue, of all places." (SL, 251).

10New York Herald Tribune Book Review (23 Feb., 1947),
2. Subsequent citations of this review are indicated in the
text by page number; as: (2).
children from destroying it!" in that garden, and Geoffrey's encounter, in the final scene of the novel, with the "Chief of Gardens."

Mr. Schorer delineates the specific nature of the tragedy in *Under the Volcano*, stating:

Instead of narrowing down to a more and more precise pathos like so much of our best literature, this novel amplifies into wider and wider meanings, to the limits of experience, not merely literary myth, and one is left at the end, as after tragedy, at once exhausted and exhilarated. Following Geoffrey Firmin so utterly into the abyss, we are, through the paradox of all genuine aesthetic experience, ourselves released from it. (2)

Although the themes of the novel take on many configurations according to Mr. Schorer, he breaks them down into two basic ones introduced in the first chapter by M. Laruelle, and developed in the following eleven. They are:

...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..." the sense of the doomed future, the spirit of the abyss, death, damnation, the descent into hell which is actually the substance of the novel. (2)

Both Mr. Hays and Mr. Schorer offer information about the story of *Under the Volcano*, and its main characters, judgement as to the novel's worth, and a good deal of elucidation.

John Woodburn, in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, has a much more impressionistic review with little analysis of the novel but certainly with the most extravagant praise to be found in any of the original reviews. He states that
he found it impossible to read the book only once:

When I had finished reading this book for the first time I could not bring myself to set down what I thought of it. I was so much within its grasp, so profoundly affected by the tides of its prose, the faltering arc of its tragic design...that I said to myself: you are this book's fool, it has stolen you and mastered you by some trickery, and you cannot appraise it tranquilly until it leaves you alone. It has not left me alone. In the street, in my room, where it has set its sorrowful music to the metronome of my clock, in the company of many or only one, it has been with me insistently. I have read it twice, and the second time has bound me to it more tightly than before.

Although he has a great deal more to say about the novel's effect on him, than about its qualities as a novel qua novel, Mr. Woodburn does comment on its complex design. He compares it to drawings of shaded cubes which "first seem four, then miraculously eight, then incredibly sixteen;" he mentions "skeins of inference and nuance" which come to the surface on second reading, "and the swift agenbite of inwit of which Joyce was the cool master and Malcolm Lowry his apt, not aping pupil."(9)

The reviewer suggests there will be comparisons with Charles Jackson, Wolfe and Hemingway, resolving the comparisons by stating: Lowry is an "artist", Jackson an "able writer;" Under the Volcano is a "better, far better" novel than The Sun Also Rises; and "Lowry has Wolfe's wild eloquence and bravura, but more grace and more compassion."

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11Saturday Review of Literature, XXX (22 Feb., 1947), 9. Subsequent citations of this review are indicated in the text by page number; as: (9).
He concludes his review with the comment:

I have never used the word in a review and I am aware of the responsibility upon me in using it, but I am of the opinion, carefully considered, that Under the Volcano is a work of genius.

Ladies and gentlemen; this magnificent, tragic, compassionate, and beautiful book—and my neck.(10)

George Mayberry's review in the New Republic is divided into succinct comments on "Time, Place, Dramatis Personae, The Argument," followed by a critique. Not surprisingly, considering the editorial bias of the New Republic, his attention is focussed on the socio-political aspects of the novel.

The meaning of Under the Volcano—if in so complicated a structure sense can be distinguished from form—again is multiple. Broadly speaking it is a social novel—the Consul's sickness cannot be distinguished from the sickness of the world that killed him....

More explicitly it is a political novel: although the Consul ridicules Hugh's concern for the Spanish Republic, he himself is killed by sadistic Mexican fascists.12

In spite of the heavy emphasis on the novel's political theme, he does suggest that what lifts it from "the ruck of most contemporary fiction" is its view of life "as expressed in the Consul's inability to extricate himself from disaster," and quotes from the novel:

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. It is not Mexico of course but in the heart.(36) (UtV, 36)

12New Republic, CXVI (24 Feb., 1947), 36. Subsequent citations of this review are indicated in the text by page number; as: (36).
Mr. Mayberry's comments on Lowry's style are first approving and then damning. Unless one is convinced that James Joyce was "never free" of "banality and pseudo-poetry" one would hardly be likely to accept the following comments on Lowry's style:

...the prose is limitless in range, in feeling— and in taste. Lowry's mimicry—of pidgin English, of cablese, of Hollywood press agentry, for example— is as good as the early Sinclair Lewis; his reflective manner is worthy of the weight and dignity of his thought; but he is capable of the banality and pseudo-poetry of which one of his masters, Joyce, was never free.(36)

Elizabeth Johnson in Commonweal centres her superficial and occasionally confusing review on the novel's description:

...the lifelike smell and feel of Mexico; the tortilla-laden, sweetish, dusty smell that is all pervading, the impassive but sudden passioned Mexicans, the mangy animals and birds, filthy "old" children, the insanity and color of the fiesta and surrounding countryside and the violently flowered landscape; the apparent lack of motion (fly in amber) then the sudden dart of knives.13

The value of such praise is questionable since, among other things, the reviewer has included in her catalogue items that don't really apply to the novel. While the reviewer may be especially sensitive to smells, Lowry does not seem to be. The description in the novel is almost entirely visual and auditory; nowhere in the novel can one find the smell of tortillas even mentioned; no one ever draws a knife. One is left, at times, not knowing just

13Commonweal, XLV (7 March, 1947), 523. Subsequent citations of this review are indicated in the text by page number; as: (523)
what the reviewer is trying to say, as at the end of the following comment:

Where he goes off in flaming, uncontrolled hyperbole is with his characters. There is too much pomp and preciousness in the endless soul-dives of Geoffrey, Yvonne and Hugh; too much is said. The reader gasps for relief; but flashes the hidden streams of psychological why's and wherefores. (524)\(^{14}\)

Jacques Barzun's review in Harper's Magazine is short, and approaches the contemptuous. The novel is described as "fulsome and fictitious." Mr. Barzun writes:

Mr. Lowry...is on the side of good behaviour, eager to disgust us with tropical vice. He shows this by a long regurgitation of the materials found in Ulysses and The Sun Also Rises. But while imitating the tricks of Joyce, Dos Passos, and Sterne, he gives us the mind and heart of Sir Philip Gibbs. His three men and lone woman are desperately dull even when sober, and despite the impressive authorities against me, so is their creator's language.

Mr. Lowry has...moments borrowed from other styles in fiction—Henry James, Thomas Wolfe, the thought-streamers, the surrealists. His novel can be recommended only as an anthology held together by earnestness.\(^{15}\)

As previously noted, Lowry answered Mr. Barzun's review in a lengthy letter. He suggested that he was not on the side of good conduct, and had written a preface for the English edition (refused by his publishers) ending:

All applications for use by temperence societies should be accompanied by a case of Scotch addressed to the author. Now put it back on the three-penny

\(^{14}\) It is not too surprising that in a letter to Jacques Barzun replying to his review of the novel, Lowry wrote: "I have just got another batch of reviews, all of them good, and all of them more irritating than yours." (SL, 146).

\(^{15}\) Harper's Magazine (May, 1947), in final unpaginated advertising section.
shelf where you found it. (SL, 147)

In the same letter, he mentions influences that Mr. Barzun does not—William James, the Cabbala—discussed the problem of influences in general, and specifically referring to the review, writes:

As a matter of fact—and to my shame—I have never read Ulysses through, of Dos Passos I have only read Three Soldiers, and of Sterne I have never been able to read more than one page of Tristram Shandy. (This does not rule out direct influence, but what about what I've invented myself?) I liked The Sun Also Rises when I read it 12 years ago but I have never read it since nor do I think I've ever been particularly influenced by it. Where the Volcano is influenced, its influences are for the most part other, and for the most part also I genuinely believe, absorbed. (SL, 144)

Mr. Barzun answered the letter, promising to re-read the novel, and commenting:

My review was no doubt too brief and I accept your estimate that it was too scornful. With the best will in the world I could not find it other than derivative and pretentious: it is that combination of misdeeds that aroused my scorn. But I am free to admit that I may have been entirely wrong in this judgement. In fact you have an array of critical talent on your side which makes my cavil negligible. Since I truly respect the capacities of your applauders, I hope for your sake and theirs that as regards Under the Volcano I have made a mistake. (SL, 440; italics mine)

Mr. Barzun's letter was a personal one and was not printed in Harper's Magazine.

The reviews in the Spectator and the Times Literary Supplement are in a sense antithetical. Much approval is registered by the T.L.S., the Spectator reviewer has harsh criticism of the novel. In some cases the same point is seized upon and used to entirely different ends. For example,
of the one day setting of the novel, D.S. Savage writes in the Spectator:

Mr. Lowry, however, is concerned with the individual predicament; and the generally more ambitious scope and complicated structure of his novel, [more than John O'Hara's Appointment in Samarra,] makes his concentration upon so small a section of his character's lives—the action takes place on one November day: the Day of the Dead—accordingly inadequate.16

On the same subject, the reviewer in the T.L.S. writes:

By his strict preservation of the unities of action, time, and place, Mr. Lowry produces a powerful effect of concentration.17

Mr. Savage suggests that "Mr. Lowry, like his lost and drifting central character, the Consul, Geoffrey Firmin, has intellectual pretentions."(474) In contrast, the T.L.S. reviewer states:

So strong is the light which the author directs upon his central character that the shadow it casts is one of tragic dimensions...he has created a character in whose individual struggle is reflected something of the larger agony of the human spirit.(477)

Mr. Savage has criticisms of the novel that are curiously at variance with other of its reviews. Few critics on the American side of the Atlantic failed to mention the novel's strong sense of place; its description, some went so far as to imply, was the only fine quality of the book.18

Yet the Spectator review states:

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16Spectator (10 Oct., 1947), 474. Subsequent citations of this review are indicated in the text by page number; as: 474.

17Times Literary Supplement (20 Sept., 1947), 477. Subsequent citations of this review are indicated in the text by page number; as: (477).

18Cf. especially reviews in Commonweal, above, p. 16, and Arizona Quarterly, below, p. 31.
There is, too, some visual and emotive weakness in the book; the scenic descriptions are somewhat imprecise and do not successfully provide the "objective correlative" to the emotion which is struggling—or is it?—to get across. (475)

The T.L.S. reviewer considers Lowry's manner to be "sometimes perplexingly elliptical," but the review is in general very favorable suggesting as it does that the book is:

...neither morbid nor of minor significance. If there is morbidity here it is akin to that of Elizabethan tragedy born of an involved and passionate interest in the secrets of the fall of man. (477)

In Mr. Savage's review there is a good example of the not-uncommon practice of a critic dwelling on what he would prefer a novel to be, rather than examining it as it is. He complains that not enough antecedent details of the action are given. He wants more information about the Consul's divorce, Yvonne's infidelity, "and so on." Only "much less relevant flashbacks" are provided; one of them being, according to the reviewer, the Samaritan incident.

It is curious that Mr. Savage dismisses the Samaritan incident as irrelevant. The Consul was the captain during the Great War of a Q-Boat ironically called the Samaritan. A mysterious episode involving the burning alive of some German officers in her boilers resulted in a court martial for the Consul—he was acquitted but the novel is not insistent on the fact of his innocence. The memory of it all haunts him. Also, central to the action of the novel, as has been mentioned, is the incident of the wounded.

\[19\] See above, Introduction, p. 6.
Indian lying beside the roadside, for whom there are no good samaritans. In terms of the objective action of the novel, the importance of guilt in the Consul's psychic life, and the overwhelming irony throughout the work, the Samaritan incident seems most relevant.

It can be seen, in terms of reviews that are more than exercises in critical rhetoric, Mr. Hays and Mr. Schorer have done well in elucidating the novel. Mr. Woodburn's passionate account of his own experience of the work could almost be classed with Mr. Barzun's summary dismissal of it were it not for the fact that Mr. Woodburn praises it with more vigor, if possible, than Mr. Barzun deprecates it, and that subsequent criticism of the novel might lead one to rank Mr. Woodburn's sensibility and taste somewhat higher than Mr. Barzun's. The New Republic review, although colored, perhaps, by an editorial bias, offers an intelligent reading of at least one aspect of the novel—the political. The Commonweal review needs no further comment than that already provided by Lowry.

The value of re-assessing 1947 reviews in the light of subsequent criticism merely in order to say that "X" was right, "Y" was wrong, is questionable. What does emerge from the analysis, however, is a picture of a critical scene that though hazardous—the too short superficialities of the Commonweal and Spectator reviews, the vitriolic and arbitrary legislation of a reviewer who admits freely that he "may have been entirely wrong"—has its compensations—the honest attempt at "delivering" the novel by Mr. Schorer.
and Mr. Hays, and even to a certain extent, Mr. Mayberry, the possibility of encountering reviewers like Mr. Woodburn who acknowledge the fact that a novel such as Under the Volcano can no more be appraised on first reading than a novel like Ulysses.

In the next section the original reception of Under the Volcano in the more limited circulation quarterlies, in particular, Kenyon Review, Partisan Review, Yale Review, Arizona Quarterly and the Seewanee Review, will be dealt with. One might expect more elucidation, evidence of a certain amount of persistent attention, and a more honest attempt to deliver the novel to the reader from these more "literary" journals. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Largely because of the efforts of Mr. Hays, Schorer, Mayberry and Woodburn, the conclusion must be reached that a new novel by an unknown author is given fairer, though by no means really adequate treatment in the more popular mass-audience book-review sections.
A careful examination of the original reviews of Under the Volcano in the more limited-circulation, literary quarterlies, by a person not familiar with the novel, would leave the impression, more than anything else, that it was extraordinarily "difficult."

With one exception there is no attempt at an elucidation of the book's many motifs and layers of meaning. Most of the reviews are superficial, and at least two are definitely misleading, in their conclusions, one holding that the novel is a political tract, another that it is an account of bohemian life and the party manners of the twenties.

When the novel is praised it is for the most part for minor virtues such as its description and sense of place. When it is criticised it is often for questionable flaws: the flaw, for example, of incorporating thematic symbolism; or the flaw of being "difficult."

Elizabeth Hardwick devotes slightly over 300 words to Under the Volcano, reviewing it along with six other novels in Partisan Review. She praises the novel, but in rather

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The exception is Robert Heilman's review in the Seewanee Review, see below, p. 30. Lowry described it in a letter to his editor as "the most heartening and encouraging review...I have yet read (albeit I made the slight mistake of reading the Kenyon Review immediately after it). (SL, 152)
strange terms:

The most interesting thing about Under the Volcano is that in it one returns to the flavor and color of the bohemian twenties, though the actual date of the action is meant to be, so far as I can tell, 1938 or later.21

The fourth paragraph of Under the Volcano begins:
"Towards sunset on the Day of the Dead in November, 1939, two men in white flannels...."(UtV, 4). What follows is Jacques Laruelle's conversation with Dr. Vigil about the Consul and the events of the Day of the Dead, 1938, the day on which the action of the novel proper (from chapter two onwards) takes place.

That this is the date of the action is indicated both directly and indirectly throughout the novel. Setting the action on this day provides a great deal of the atmosphere, as well as contributing to the grim irony of the work: the Consul is a dead soul and at one point on this day traditionally set apart for prayers for the dead attempts to pray for his own salvation but cannot. Lowry, in a letter to Jonathan Cape, writes:

...it is important to remember that when the story opens it is November 1939, not November 1938, the Day of the Dead, and precisely one year after the Consul has gone down the barranca, the abyss that man finds himself looking into now (to quote the Archbishop of York) the worse one in the Cabbala, the still unmentionably worse one in the Qlipoth, or simply down the drain, according to taste.(SL, 68)

Miss Hardwick also delves into intentionality in a

21Partisan Review, XIV (March-April, 1947), 199. Subsequent citations of this review are indicated in the text by page number; as: (199).
peculiar fashion:

It is an ambitious and expansive novel and probably for that reason Lowry has made his central character, the Consul, an alcoholic in whose mind the past and present remain undifferentiated.(199)

For her, Lowry's characters are "exotic and enticingly unreal." She would like to know "how did they get to be where they are, what do they live on?" The novel is fairly clear on both these questions. The Consul has just left the diplomatic service. Hugh is a journalist and is about to become a seaman (an occupation he has had before) running T.N.T. to Spain. Yvonne is on a mission to try and patch up her marriage to Geoffrey. The review winds up with the suggestion that Lowry's style

recalls Djuna Barnes' Nightwood and some of the characters, particularly Yvonne, the Consul's wife who was a child star in western pictures, remind one of Fitzgerald! These echoes are not mentioned to discredit Lowry. Indeed they are evidence of the completeness of his mood, his identification with the purities and dooms of twenty years ago.(199-200)

Twenty years ago, in this case, means 1927. Especially because of the political theme in the novel and its close link with events along the Ebro in 1938, one can only come to the conclusion that Miss Hardwick's impression of the novel is misleading at best, and at worst, reflects a most superficial reading of the book. She does, however, give the author credit for "astonishing and often brilliant images, marvels of description, and much evidence of the long hesitation that results in the triumphant metaphor or adjective."(199)
Robert Heilman, writing in the Seewanee Review, devotes more space to the novel, reviewing it with three others. His comments are more acutely critical and certainly more perceptive than Miss Hardwick's. He praises the book as being powerful and poetic:

The book is a cornucopia of images; both the psychic and the outer worlds have a tangibility which a thoughtless slice of realism could never produce; humor and horror are never alleged but are moulded into a hard and yet resilient narrative substance. But one is always driven to seek out the evocations that trail off the facts.22

He mentions allusions to the Bible, Doctor Faustus, and the Divine Comedy, suggests that the basic theme of the book is: "man, in the words of a proverb repeated chorally, cannot live without love;" and recognises the political theme, qualifying his recognition:

But ultimately, I think, the author does succeed in keeping the political phenomena on the periphery of the spiritual substance, keeping them symbolic, using them for dramatic amplification of his metaphysic.(491)

Like so many other critics of the novel, Mr. Heilman has something to say about the "difficulty" of the book. He suggests that the opening, the "retrospective prologue," "is a cold beginning, and then one has to keep going back to it as an index—which is not the kind of re-reading that a concentrated book may legitimately demand."

He also comments:

The two extremes which are the technical dangers of this kind of work are the tightly

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22Seewanee Review, LV (Summer, 1947), 489. Subsequent citations of this review are indicated in the text by page number; as: (489).
bound allegory, in which a system of abstract
equivalents for all the concrete materials of
the story constricts the imaginative experience,
and a loose impressionism in which a mass of
suggestive enterprises sets off so many associa-
tions, echoes, and conjectures, that the
imaginative experience becomes diffuse. It is
the latter risk that Mr. Lowry runs.(492)

Mr. Heilman would like a few more "disciplinary
rejections, some diffidence in setting afloat upon the
imagination every boat that he finds upon the shore." He
is, nevertheless, quite lavish in his praise of the novel,
gives his reader a hint of the depths to which Under the
Volcano can be entered, and although these depths are not
fully explored in the novel, some of the main motifs, such
as that of the Samaritan, the Eden-Paradise theme, and the
symbolic nature of the Consul's drunkenness, are elucidated.

Orville Prescott, in the Yale Review's round-up of
new novels, calls the Volcano, an "impressive, difficult,
exasperating book." Although he gives Lowry credit for
being able to create "astonishing effects, suggest several
layers of meaning, and weave emotional spells," he follows
the compliment with the charge:

But his addiction to symbolism, his pedantry, his
regular lapses into obscurity are needless
obstacles to communication. At times Mr. Lowry
deliberately refuses to supply essential
information. At others he almost wallows in
dark, opaque, beautiful sounds with no more
specific meaning than symphonic music.23

Mr. Prescott also turns his attention to the author's
state of mind. He suggests that "such writing as described

23Yale Review, XXXVI (Summer, 1947), 767. Subsequent
citations of this review are indicated in the text by page
number; as: (767).
above betrays a state of mind which is a variety of literary decadence."

One of the most interesting remarks in the review, in that it possibly betrays a whole set of critical assumptions out of which Mr. Prescott operates, is:

Laborious study could undoubtedly unravel more of Under the Volcano than meets the eye at the first reading no matter how attentive. But what right has an author to require so much from his readers? (767)

Mr. Prescott suggests that the novel is:

...a story about the schizophrenia of modern man, his sense of guilt and his flight from reality as symbolized in the alcoholism of a former British Consul drinking himself to death in Mexico. (767)

The difficulty of summing up in one sentence what the novel is about is obvious. Mr. Prescott's comments, particularly the one about "symphonic music", should be juxtaposed with Lowry's description of Under the Volcano to Jonathan Cape:

It can be regarded as a kind of symphony, or in another way as a kind of opera—or even a horse opera. It is hot music, a poem, a song, a tragedy, a comedy, a farce, and so forth. It is superficial, profound, entertaining and boring according to taste. It is a prophecy, a political warning, a cryptogram, a preposterous movie, and a writing on the wall. It can even be regarded as a sort of machine: it works too, believe me, as I have found out. In case you think I mean it to be everything but a novel I better say that after all it is intended to be and, though I say so myself, a deeply serious one too. But it is also I claim a work of art somewhat different

24 Anthony Kilgallin answered Mr. Prescott's rhetorical question by using it as an inscription to his unpublished Master's thesis: "The Use of Literary Sources for Theme and Style in Under the Volcano," submitted to the University of Toronto, 1965.
from the one you suspected it was, and more successful too, even though according to its own lights. (SL, 66)

Mr. Prescott's review fails most of all in its being so far removed from any semblance of an attempt to examine the novel "according to its own lights." One might expect a little less simplistic generalization, more elucidation—something more, in any case, than a confused thrusting upon the novel of the reviewer's taste which seems to be basically for the simple and away from the "difficult."

Ray B. West, Jr. does not go so far as to suggest that no author has the right to require a second reading of a novel to unravel more than meets the eye on first reading, but does comment that "the reader feels a little assurance that a detailed analysis of the structure would be rewarding."

In a review of several novels, in the Western Review, he writes that "Malcolm Lowery's [sic] Under the Volcano is the most puzzling of the group, and it is in many ways the most disheartening." 25

Beyond some superficial typing of the main characters and a brief summary of the plot, Mr. West has this criticism:

Mr. Lowery [sic] has been taken up by some of the better critics and his novel has been praised beyond its merits, but it is certainly (in its intentions at least) deserving of serious consideration....The book is crowded with events which suggest rather than signify the doom under which this trio act out the twenty-four-hour span of the book.(59)

25 Western Review, XII (Autumn, 1947), 59. Subsequent citations of this review are indicated in the text by page number; as: (59).
Mr. West does not resolve the apparent contradiction in his contentions that the novel is worth serious consideration and at the same time a detailed analysis of its structure would be unrewarding.

Vernon A. Young, reviewing the novel in the *Arizona Quarterly*, complains that it is overly derivative. His complaint specifically is that it errs in the direction of:

...involution, "literary" effects, erudite associationism, intellectual puns (some not so intellectual, as "Yvonne the terrible"), reverie in long unpunctuated sentences, thematic symbolism: all inherited from Joyce, one risks, and not as intriguing as when Joyce first "forged the uncreated conscience of his race."26

He quotes from the novel:

> For man, every man Juan seemed to be telling him, even in Mexico, must ceaselessly struggle upward. What was life but a warfare and a stranger's sojourn? Revolution rages too in the tierra caliente of each human soul. (282) (*UtV*, 108)

Mr. Young then suggests: "The structure of the novel is needlessly complicated if this thin metaphor is its centre." One might take issue with the assumptions both that the metaphor is the centre of the novel, and that it is "thin". The point of view in the metaphor is Hugh's; it is part of a section exploring his character, which is romantic, frustrated and, as Lowry has suggested, "slightly preposterous". Mr. Young probably bases his assumption on one of the three inscriptions of the novel: "Whosoever unceasingly strives upward...him can we save."

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26 *Arizona Quarterly*, III (Autumn, 1947), 282. Subsequent citations of this review are indicated in the text by page number; as: (282).
The reviewer recommends the book to the reader "who has a relish for analogy," citing a few examples, including "the Spanish signboard 'You like this garden? Why is it yours? We evict those who destroy!'" The Spanish signboard actually reads:

¿LE GUSTA ESTE JARDIN
QUE ES SUYO?
¡EVITE QUE SUS HIJOS LO DESTRUYAN!

Lowry has the Consul misread it as Mr. Young has mistranslated it, presumably as an amplification of the Eden-Paradise theme.

Beyond the "delights of stalking Mr. Lowry's symbolism," the reviewer praises the "clarity of the physical presentation of the scene," and "the deliberate choosing of Mexico as the background rather than the decaying capitals of Europe or America."(283) The reference to the "delights of stalking" the symbolism must be regarded as ambiguous as it follows the complaint that the book errs in the direction of "thematic symbolism". Mr. Young does not make clear just exactly why it is a virtue to use Mexico as a scene rather than the "decaying capitals" of Europe or America.

R.W. Flint begins his review in the Kenyon Review by saying: "This novel resists classification." His account of the story is: "Two Englishmen, a Frenchman and an

27The sign recurs several times in the novel; in one place it is translated correctly: "Do you like this garden...that is yours? See to it that your children do not destroy it!" (UtV, 232).
American woman gather in a Mexican town to celebrate the destruction by drink of one of their number.28

The statement is misleading to a degree. In it Mr. Flint has suggested that there are four main characters; he continues to do so throughout the review. In fact, the Frenchman, Jacques Laruelle, though he unifies the novel by tying together past, present, and future, beginning, middle, and end, plays only a very minor role in the events of the Day of the Dead, 1938. The Consul, Hugh and Yvonne visit his house from 1:30 till shortly before 2:30 in the afternoon. The visit takes up slightly less than half of Chapter VII. The word "celebrate" is ambiguous. It would fit if Mr. Flint meant that there was a ritualistic quality about the destruction of the Consul, or even that his destruction was a kind of sacrifice, but there is nothing else in the review to suggest that this is what he means. In any case, it is two of "their number" that are destroyed, the Consul and Yvonne.

Mr. Flint suggests that the action of the novel is "intended to involve wide areas of experience by symbolic refraction," but largely fails to do this, remaining "inside the attitudes which provide the central myth."(475) Whatever that central myth is, Mr. Flint does not tell his reader though he does spell out in black-and-white the attitudes of two of the main characters: Hugh is a

28 Kenyon Review, IX (Summer, 1947), 474. Subsequent citations of this review are indicated in the text by page number; as: (474).
"romantic activist", Geoffrey a "romantic nihilist."

For no clear reason, Mr. Flint spends more time on the character of Hugh than any of the others. He writes:

Hugh represents political conscience and the same kind of apocalypticism gone berserk that warps the thinking of such ex-Marxists as Koestler and Burnham...Hugh (and ostensibly Mr. Lowry himself) seems to take seriously the notion that "Communism" is destined to succeed "Capitalism" as Christianity succeeded Romanitas. He feels compelled to identify himself with this wave of the future by a futile act of desperation.(476)

The assumption that Hugh's attitudes are Lowry's is a surprising one. There is little support for it either in the novel or out of it. Once having made it, however, Mr. Flint turns from the novel to its author. He accuses Lowry of failing to save himself from "spiritual vulgarity," a token of which is the "burden of irony under which the novel labors," and suggests that the author has "not quite courage enough to represent the modern tragic personality, caught between meaningless absolutes."(475)

The "strongest spiritual and stylistic influence", according to Mr. Flint, is that of Shelley.29 "There are occasional references to Prometheus for no very clear reason."

He concludes by quoting from the novel:

"For it seems to me that almost everywhere in the world these days there has long ceased to be anything fundamental to man at all." Whether or not the author speaks for himself, the remark

29Although the literary sources of the novel are innumerable, Mr. Kilgallin's source study (see above, p. 28, n. 24) establishes the main ones as Marlowe's Doctor Faustus, Goethe's Faust, Dante's Divine Comedy, the Bible, Gogol's Dead Souls, Cervante's Don Quixote and the Cabbala.
is a good explanation of the book's inadequacy on the political level, and in a larger sense, of its ultimate sterility as a history of souls. We are often asked to watch the degeneration of a soul; what we see, however, is the disintegration of a psyche. It is the novelist's task, after all, to know that something is always at stake, however obscurely and to smell that something out. To admit failure is not to say anything original about the times but rather to reveal an unfortunate lapse of simple human curiosity. (477)

Mr. Flint falls into an intentional fallacy in interpreting the character of Hugh, and betrays a certain lapse in simple human curiosity in his lack of reflection on why the Prometheus theme is introduced. His inference that Lowry and/or the novel intend to say that there has long ceased to be anything fundamental to man at all is curious when one considers the "No se puede..." motif and its relation to the story. His great emphasis on the character of Hugh, the identification of the main characters as a quartet, the picking of Shelley as the chief spiritual and stylistic influence, together with a complete lack of commentary on plot, all lend evidence to the suspicion that Mr. Flint gave the novel even less attention than Miss Hardwick who was so vague about the date of the action. 30

For whatever reasons, it can be seen that the reception of the novel in the critical quarterlies, with the exception of Mr. Heilman's study, leaves a good deal to be desired. It should, perhaps, be pointed out that the book was usually dealt with along with a few others in surveys of new fiction.

30See above, p. 24.
rather than by itself as in the more popular book review sections.

There followed a decade of silence, with only occasional evidence that there existed a kind of underground of critical support for the novel.
CHAPTER II
EIGHTEEN YEARS OF CRITICISM
The Road to Recognition: 1947–61

During the decade that followed the original publication of Under the Volcano relatively little attention, either critical or popular, was paid it. Sales dropped and it was remaindered by Reynal and Hitchcock. It was not until 1961 that the novel once again became the subject of a good deal of criticism. Then, Robert Heilman described a kind of "underground" of those who had, in the intervening years, realised the importance of the novel:

To have been an original admirer of Malcolm Lowry's Under the Volcano, and to remain an admirer for almost a decade and a half, is very much like belonging to a semi-secret order with a somewhat odd, quite small, but widely dispersed membership. Members...are an insistent trickle rather than a growing stream that could be converted into a literary power system. Whoever has read Lowry has been unforgettable impressed, but readers have been, it appears, strangely few.31

To analyse "underground" critical reception is impossible. It is a matter of word of mouth communication for the most part and cannot be documented. There is an exception to this general rule, however, in the case of Under the Volcano. In 1951, only four years after the novel had been published, David Markson wrote a Master's Thesis at


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Columbia University titled: "Malcolm Lowry: A Study of Theme and Symbol in Under the Volcano." In a letter to this writer, Mr. Markson explained that the director of the thesis was William York Tindall, who had read Under the Volcano and had been enough impressed by it to deem it worthy of scholarly study. The thesis was finished in 1952 and remains the most complete analysis of the themes and symbols of the novel. It is, at this time, unpublished, and its influence on critics and scholars is impossible to estimate precisely.

Sparse as they were in the 1950's, occasional indications appeared that at least some critics recognized the value of Under the Volcano. Mr. Tindall mentioned the novel in his book The Literary Symbol, published in 1955. He described Lowry as being in the symbolist tradition of Joyce, Kafka, Lawrence and Woolf, and compares the Volcano favorably to Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea and John Hersey's Marmot Drive. He suggests:

Less propaganda than vision, this book is richly textured and intricately composed. Its course is that of tragedy: a great man (great because he embodies our culture) falls through an inherent flaw, and we are moved by pity and fear.32

Although qualified by this reading of the novel as essentially a tragedy, Mr. Tindall interprets it mainly in socio-political terms:

Geoffrey embodies the intellectual in what was once our society. Spain is falling and fascists are around, but, evading responsibility, he does nothing to preserve the culture to which he is

heir. With divorce from Yvonne (who suggests reality or a way to it) and drink his escapes from an increasingly terrible world, Geoffrey symbolizes a ruling class with its learning, charm and incapacity; and in his drunken snores is heard "the muted voice of England long asleep."33

In his revised edition of Forces in Modern British Literature, published in 1956, Mr. Tindall again commented on the novel, calling it "one of the most successful symbolist novels of recent years, surpassed in subtlety, however, by Elizabeth Bowen's A World of Love."34

In John McCormick's Catastrophe and Imagination, published in 1957, Lowry is compared to Andre Malraux. After commenting on the themes of the novel, the essential one being "the necessity of love and the impossibility of its realization," Mr. McCormick suggests:

Lowry's themes are those of the greatest novelist of ideas, Andre Malraux, but Under the Volcano has a compassion and above all a sad and wild humor that is foreign to most modern literature.35

That same year, 1957, Lowry died. Harvey Breit, who was to become the editor, along with Margerie Bonner Lowry, of the Selected Letters, wrote an obituary in the New York Times Book Review. It contains this comment on Under the Volcano:

It is a novel so vivid and relentless and murderous and beautiful that you will remember its extraordinary life years after you have

33Tindall, op. cit., p. 37.
made a judgement about it—and whatever the
judgement it is overwhelmed by the life.\textsuperscript{36}

There can be no question that Lowry's death was to
some extent responsible for the burgeoning of Lowry
scholarship in the early 1960's. It is a truism that
critical attention of any kind begets further critical
attention and in the obituary and biographical notes
occasioned by Lowry's death \textit{Under the Volcano} was inevitably
mentioned. Mr. Breit, who wrote the obituary in the \textit{New
York Times}, also wrote a biographical note in \textit{Paris Review}.
In the Autumn of 1960 "Recollections of Malcolm Lowry" by
William McConnell appeared in \textit{Canadian Literature}; in the
spring of 1961 a biographical note prepared by Earle
Birney with the assistance of the author's widow prefaced
a selection of Lowry's poetry in \textit{Tamarack Review}. Biographi­
cal notes also appeared in the \textit{Times Literary Supplement}
and the \textit{Spectator}.

In 1958 George Woodcock revised an article he had
published previously in the \textit{Northern Review} for \textit{Modern
Fiction Studies}.\textsuperscript{37} The revision was primarily stylistic
with the exception of some added comments on the accuracy
of Lowry's painting of the Mexican landscape prompted by a
trip Mr. Woodcock had taken to Mexico.


\textsuperscript{37}"On the Day of the Dead," \textit{Northern Review}, VI
(Dec.-Jan., 1953-54), 15-21; "Malcolm Lowry's 'Under the
Volcano'," \textit{Modern Fiction Studies}, IV (Summer, 1958), 151-
56. Subsequent citations of the latter article are
indicated in the text by page number; as: (151).
Mr. Woodcock has complaints to make about the minor characters of the novel, yet praises Lowry for the overall effect he gains through using them. He comments on the shallowness of these characters:

...the Mexican characters are almost all puppets—it leaves one with a rather false impression of Mexican life swinging violently between the two poles of clownish hilarity and death-obsessed melodrama. (155)

In spite of this, Mr. Woodcock has praise for the effectiveness of these "puppets":

By a concentration of petty symbolic events—a barkeep greedily eating chocolate skulls, a madman walking through the fiesta with a tire around his neck like a lifebelt, a drug addict thieving small change from the body of a murdered peasant—he builds up a complete and closely knit texture for the pattern of tragedy. (154)

Mr. Woodcock's article centres on the organic development of the work, yet he tends toward contradictory conclusions. He states that there is "too much a sense of fatality," the main characters seem "like actors who have been carefully rehearsed for their parts in the drama": (156)

...dominant pasts play an enormously important part in the present action of all the four characters, and seem to propel them almost irresistibly towards the tragedy that throughout the book one knows to be inevitable. (.55)

In spite of the "inevitability", the "sense of fatality," Mr. Woodcock suggests:

...one has no feeling in the end, as one should in a completely successful novel, that this is the only way the hero, being what he is, could have ended. (153)

Mr. Woodcock, however, does find much to praise in the novel:
...I still think there are qualities—the exuberant yet sure handling of words, the sense for tragedy and the touch of compassion, the poetic eye for image and symbol, the complex and fascinating erudition—which make Under the Volcano, considered as a prose composition and apart from its psychological validity, one of the most interesting productions of the past decades. (156)

It has been suggested above that Lowry's death was connected with the rebirth of critical interest in Under the Volcano; another factor was the publication of Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place, a collection of his short stories, by Lippincott in 1961. It was well received and won the Governor General's Prize for Canadian fiction that year.

Primarily in the light of this collection of stories George Woodcock prefaced a special edition of Canadian Literature devoted to Lowry's work with an editorial, "Under Seymour Mountain," commenting on Lowry's relationship to his adopted country. This issue, published in the spring of 1961, contains articles on Lowry and his work, previously unpublished letters and poetry, along with the first installment of a Lowry bibliography which has been brought up to date several times since then, and the announcement that the University of British Columbia had acquired most of the extant unpublished Lowry manuscripts.

The Malcolm Lowry issue of Canadian Literature contains what is still the longest (published) study of Under the Volcano, "The Possessed Artist and the Ailing Soul" by Robert Heilman, who wrote the most perceptive of the original
reviews in the quarterlies.38

In searching for a reason for the survival of the novel, Mr. Heilman suggests that it is something "beyond the quality usually called intensity...the criterion for its survival is the depth of the concern—the spiritual burden—that intensity accompanies."

He puts the novel into the class of the work of the "possessed artist," the great figures in this category being Doestoevsky, Melville, and, some of the time, Dickens." They are to be distinguished from "self possessed" artists such as Trollope, Hardy, or "the ultimate: Arnold Bennett."

What characterizes the work of the possessed artist is, according to Mr. Heilman:

The sense of a largeness that somehow bursts out of the evident constriction, the fertility that borders on the excessive and the frenzied, the intensity that is not a surrogate for magnanimity, and finally an apprehension of reality so vivid that it seems to slide over into madness.39

It is Mr. Heilman's contention that the comparisons help to place Lowry. He sums up his distinction by saying:

...the self possessed artist—the one who uses his materials as an instrument. The possessed artist—the materials appear to use him as an instrument, finding in him, as it were, a channel to the objective existence of art, sacrificing a minimum of their autonomy to his hand, which partly directs and shapes rather than wholly controls.(8)

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39"The Possessed Artist and the Ailing Soul," Canadian Literature, VIII (Spring, 1961), 8. Subsequent citations of this article are indicated in the text by page number; as: (9).
The critic repeats his objection to the first chapter, voiced back in 1947 when he first reviewed it, calling it a "cold beginning," and says the same thing about the "dangers" this kind of novel runs. 40

Mr. Heilman expands his earlier comment that the book is a "cornucopia of images" by including a catalogue that, though by no means exhaustive, runs to considerable length:

The action takes place in November, on the day of the dead; Geoffrey feels his "soul dying"; a funeral takes place; burial customs are discussed; an earlier child of Yvonne's is dead; Geoffrey recalls Dr. Faustus's death; a dead dog is seen in a ravine; a dying Indian is found by the roadside; there are a decaying hotel, a reference to the House of Usher, the ruins of the palace of Maximillian and Carlotta. Geoffrey's soul appears to him "a town ravaged and stricken"; an imaginary "little town by the sea" burns up. Frustrations and failures are everywhere—engagements are missed, the light fails in a cinema. Always we are reminded of the barranca or ravine near the town, a fearful abyss. Once it is called "Malebolge"; there are various allusions to Dante's Inferno; Geoffrey feels he is in hell, quotes Dante on sin, looks at Cocteau's La Machine Infernale, takes a ride on a Maquina Infernal, calls ironically—defiantly "I love hell"; at the end he is in a bar "under the volcano". "It was not for nothing that the ancients had placed Tartarus under Mt. Aetna...." There are continual references to Marlowe's Faustus, who could not pray for grace just as Geoffrey cannot feel a love that might break his love for alcohol, or rather symbolize a saving attitude; as in the Faustus play soul is a recurrent word. There is an Eden-Paradise theme; a public sign becomes a motif in itself....(13-14)

Lowry's main theme, according to Mr. Heilman, is that recurring theme in the work of the possessed artist: "the ailing soul;" in Under the Volcano it is Geoffrey's

40See above, p. 26; the comment on "technical dangers" is identical in the two studies.
ailing soul that is central, and Geoffrey's spiritual illness is akin to the spiritual illness of the age he lives in. Mr. Heilman contends, however, that the novel largely through the force of Lowry's allusions "transcends all historical presents."

...Most of all this effect is secured by his constant allusion to Christian myth and history—the crucifixion, Golgotha, the last supper, original sin. Lowry is hardly writing a Christian allegory, indeed some of his Christian echoes are decidedly ironic. But his whole complex of image and symbol is such as to direct a dissolving order, in search of a creative affirmation, toward that union of the personal and the universal which is the religious. (16-17)

Mr. Heilman's critique in 1961 is essentially an expanded version of his original 1947 review. What has been added is an expansion of the elucidation in the original review, and a suggestion of Lowry's place in a tradition. A comparison of the two articles serves to point out the persistence of the critic's judgement which remains fundamentally the same, and to show the quality of Mr. Heilman's original review which needed only to be expanded to fit a novel which, as the special Lowry issue of Canadian Literature evidences, had emerged from a position of relative obscurity to one of critical importance.

The Lowry issue of Canadian Literature ended a decade of near silence as far as Under the Volcano was concerned. This silence was by no means shared by the French translation of the novel. Although not the direct concern of this study, for purposes of comparison and perspective one might examine an article by Max-Pol Fouchet which also appeared

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in the special issue of Canadian Literature. M. Fouchet, who had read the novel in 1947 on the urging of Stephen Spender, wrote in 1961:

Aujourd'hui, après une nouvelle lecture, la sixième... Depuis Joyce, depuis le grand Faulkner, rien d'aussi important, rien qui aille plus loin et plus profond ne nous a été offert par la littérature étrangère.41

He offers a comment which, in the light of some of the original criticism in English of the novel, seems admirable in its restraint:

Au-dessous du Volcan est l'un des rares livres que notre temps imposera à l'avenir, quand le tri s'effectuera des fausses et des vraies valeurs, quand le bâton sera séparé de l'épi. Je plains ceux qui ne sauront pas le reconnaître. Ici ce fait le point de la critique.(26)

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41 "No se puede," Canadian Literature, VIII (Spring, 1961), 25. Subsequent citations of this article are indicated in the text by page number; as: (25).
2: Recent Criticism: 1962-66

It has been pointed out in the preceding section how a decade of comparative silence followed the original publication of Under the Volcano, a decade interrupted by a very few indications of a growing underground of critical support for the novel, ending with the special Malcolm Lowry issue of Canadian Literature.

From 1961 to the present, interest in the novel has grown steadily. A Penguin paperback edition of the novel was well received, there was another special issue (Prairie Schooner), several theses were written, the book received high praise in Walter Allen's Tradition and Dream, and the Selected Letters and a new hardcover edition of the novel appeared.

In 1962 Philip Toynbee wrote in the Observer:

Fifteen years have passed since this masterpiece was first published, yet I think we should not be too surprised that many of us had scarcely heard the author's name until very recently. For a novel to force its way above the ruck of its competent, or even admirable contemporaries, a period of this kind may well be needed. To become wise after the event is the common lot of most critics and is no great cause for shame.42

The occasion for these comments was the re-publication of Under the Volcano in a Penguin Modern Classics edition.

42Observer (29 April, 1962), p. 26. Subsequent citations of this review are indicated in the text by page number; as: (26).
This time the novel was most enthusiastically received. Mr. Toynbee sums up his critique of the novel by quoting John Woodburn's comments on the 1947 edition:

I have never used the word in a review before, and I am aware of the responsibility upon me in using it, but I am of the opinion, carefully considered, that Under the Volcano is a work of genius. (26) 43

Mr. Toynbee's review of the novel is centred on Lowry's style. He suggests that there are influences evident from both Hemingway and Fitzgerald. But he adds that the only novel by either one of them that is the equal of Under the Volcano is Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby. After an analysis of both Under the Volcano and Hear Us O Lord from Heaven thy Dwelling Place, he proceeds:

...the principal fact which emerges from all this is that both in the stories and in the novel, Lowry was a stylist as very few modern novelists understand the word at all. His highly personal tone was carefully evolved through the years not for the sake of ornament, not to surprise, not out of conceit but because he found that this was his best vehicle for exhausting all that he had to say. (26)

The Times Literary Supplement ran a long piece titled "A Prose Waste Land," in which the author elucidates the novel, going through it scene by scene pointing out the various themes, symbols and levels of meaning. An affinity between Joyce and Lowry is suggested, Lowry having "digested" the lessons of the master.

The T.L.S. reviewer attempts, as well, to place the novel in a tradition:

Even today it is difficult to relate the work clearly to any other. In a sense it belongs

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43 See above, p. 15.

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most closely to the allegorical and transcen­
dental world of the great nineteenth century
Americans, to Melville and Hawthorne, rather
than to our own.44

Two other reviews centred on the novel's art. Richard
Mayne, in the New Statesman, comments:

The technical brilliance is more subdued, than in
Hear Us O Lord... can be missed, even, on a
hasty reading: but to le lecteur averti, what
skill has gone into the book?... Under the Volcano
has enormous and majestic poignancy.45

Malcolm Bradbury, in the Critical Quarterly, suggests:

The literariness of manner often leads to
literary lapses, and yet at other times it
relates the experiences he is concerned with to
the experience of all other writers, and so
makes his work in a curious way—in Joyce's way—
universal.46

There is, in the reception of the 1962 Penguin edition,
almost universal approval of the novel as well as a certain
amount of speculation about the reasons for the critical
failure of the novel when it first appeared in England. Mr.
Toynbee suggests it might have been due to the volume of
fiction produced each year; the T.L.S. intimates that it
might have been due to the difficulty of relating the novel
to other works; the New Statesman points out that the
technical brilliance can be missed in a hasty reading.

Perhaps in order to increase the number of lecteurs
avertis George Woodcock had translated the preface to the

44Times Literary Supplement (11 May, 1962), 338.
46Critical Quarterly (Winter, 1962), 379.
Called "one of the best introductions to the novel," this preface written by Lowry himself contains clues to the importance of some of the themes and symbols of the work. The importance and significance of the number "12" is referred to; a Ferris Wheel is "if you like...the wheel of the law, the wheel of Buddha,...even eternity, the symbol of the Everlasting Return." Comments are also made on the ramifications of "wood" and "woods" and on the ultimately symbolic and cabbala-connected drunkenness of the Consul. Lowry in this preface set forth his own attitude toward the theme of the novel:

The novel, to use a phrase of Edmund Wilson, has for its subject the forces that dwell within man and lead him to look upon himself with terror. Its subject is also the fall of man, his remorse, his incessant struggle towards the light under the weight of his past, which is his destiny. The allegory is that of the Garden of Eden, the garden representing this world from which we are now even a little more under the threat of eviction than at the moment when I wrote this book. On one level the drunkenness of the Consul may be regarded as symbolising the universal drunkenness of war, of the period that precedes war, no matter when. Throughout the twelve chapters, the destiny of my hero can be considered in relationship to the destiny of humanity.(28)

The Winter-Spring, 1963-64 issue of Prairie Schooner was another special Malcolm Lowry issue. It contains three

47 By Anthony Kilgallin in "Eliot, Joyce and Lowry," see below, p. 60.

48 Canadian Literature, IX (Summer, 1961), 26. Subsequent citations of the preface are indicated in the text by page number; as: (26). No English original of the preface exists. It was written in French by Clarisse Francillon from notes of conversations with Lowry.
previously unpublished letters, and poems with an introduction by Earle Birney, the seminal story "Under the Volcano," a biographical essay and sketch, and four articles on Under the Volcano.

Conrad Knickerbocker, in the biographical essay, quotes Philip Toynbee from the Observer: "I am now persuaded that Under the Volcano is one of the great English novels of this century."\(^{49}\) The article, "The Voyages of Malcolm Lowry," has not much to say about Under the Volcano but is primarily a study of Lowry's life, where and when he wrote, his marriages and death. It also treats extensively the subject of his drinking.

In a brief sketch of student days, "Malcolm Lowry: 1930," Gerald Noxon reminisces about his friendship with Lowry at Trinity College, Cambridge. Lowry as an undergraduate was already insisting that writing must be capable of carrying meaning at many different depths, on the many different levels of intellectual and emotional communication which he discerned so clearly in Melville, for instance.\(^{50}\)

The four studies of Under the Volcano are by divers hands, and each has a different critical bias in approaching the novel. J.M. Edelstein's "On Re-reading Under the Volcano" dwells on the necessity and value of reading the novel more than once. He suggests:

\(^{49}\)"The Voyages of Malcolm Lowry," Prairie Schooner, XXXVII (Winter, 1963-64), 302.


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...it has to be re-read as soon as it has been finished for the first time out of sheer inability to escape from its powerful atmosphere, for the pleasurable awe that comes with discovering its myriad aspects once more, or for the excitement of following another of its complicated threads.  

The appeal of the novel, according to Mr. Edelstein, is greater in 1963 than in 1947, because we have more than ever "destroyed the garden which belonged to us... and have been banished." He states that the book's merit can be found, above all, in the Consul's adequacy as the "voice of our guilt and our hopelessness" in the light of the garden motto.

Mr. Edelstein also comments on the relationship between Joyce and Lowry:

That Malcolm Lowry successfully mined the Joycean lode has been pointed out before; what, perhaps, has not been sufficiently stressed is that Lowry was not just a good imitator, but a writer who had something original and ambitious to say. In doing so Malcolm Lowry not only affirmed the validity of what Joyce and others had previously done, but also proved himself while he created a work of permanent value. (399)

David Markson's article is directly concerned with the Joycean aspects of the novel. It is, he states, "a Joycean work in the strictest sense of that adjective—in fact in the Finnegan's Wake sense, of all-embracing mythic evocation." (340)

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51 "On Re-reading Under the Volcano," Prairie Schooner, XXXVII (Winter, 1963-64). Subsequent citations of this article are indicated in the text by page number; as: (337).

52 "Myth in Under the Volcano," Prairie Schooner, XXXVII (Winter, 1963-64). Subsequent citations of this article are indicated in the text by page number; as: (300). The material in the article is not contained in Mr. Markson's 1952 Master's thesis; see below, p. 37.
To indicate the extensiveness of the use of analogy and allusion, Mr. Markson explicates the Homeric parallels in Chapter X. He cites references to the Cyclops, the Laestrygonians, Aeolus, Circe, the Sirens, the Oxen of Hyperion, Calypso, and others. A similar parallel is pointed out in Chapter VI, involving the labors of Heracles. Heracles is mentioned in passing in the chapter, there are counterparts for the Nemean Lion, the Lernean Hydra, the Mares of Diomedes, the Cretan Bull, the Stymphalian Birds, the Apples of the Hesperides and the Erymanthian Boar.

Mr. Markson concludes his explication of some of the allusions, literary and mythic, with the statement:

Naturally such allusions and/or equations hardly comprise the sum of the novel. Indeed it is a paradoxical tribute to Lowry's achievement that the book has been so often praised by readers with virtually no perceptions of those undercurrents at all. For all the indivisibility of surface and symbol, however, this use of myth does remain intrinsic to Lowry's creative strategy; considerably more attention has been expended on considerably lesser matters in Joyce. (345)

Jack Hirschman's critique, "Kabbala/Lowry etc." has as its basic suggestion, the theory that in Lowry there is a "mad struggle after the fleshed word...the word that is not about something but that very something itself," which is, of course, impossible "because words can never lose their symbolic qualities even though we call them, in conversation and in literature, experience."53

53"Kabbala/Lowry etc." Prairie Schooner, XXXVII (Winter, 1963-64), 351. Subsequent citations of this article are indicated in the text by page number; as: (351). Mr. Hirschman's format is duplicated when it departs from that of standard prose.
The employment of "symbolics," symbols from the cabbala and other sources, is, according to Mr. Hirshman, "not merely for literary ends, for some stratification of levels of meaning." Lowry's complex "verbal jugglery," an aspect of his work which gives him an affinity to "Artaud, Joyce and Ginsberg," and shows an "obvious manifestation of kabbalistic influence," is not virtuosity; what it is, says Mr. Hirschman, is:

...a struggle to call up from the past threads of meaning to be woven through the poem in order that the poem finally says In homage to you Form; in allusion to you, Form; in order that it, and I may still be seen, in some small way in some small balance with you, Form.(353)

The basis for this suggestion of Lowry's intention in using symbol and allusion, and its resulting effect on what the novel "says" can be found at the heart of cabbalistic teaching, which Mr. Hirschman states is:

...that by a study of the ways in which God made himself manifest, from an area of absolute incomprehensibility through a series of universally infinite symbolic emanations, man will come to understand
(1) that there is an equilibrium in the universe and that this equilibrium in the universe is in some mysterious direct relation with an equilibrium in man,
(2) but that while it is in man, man is not in it, nor can man, by any force of his imagination, ever hope to be in it literally.
   but symbolically...in ones own time, given one's own character, drunken Consul or Dublin jew
   one will come to know, as Lowry knew so well, and risking so much for the real task of the poet in this or any other time.(354)

It should be noted that Mr. Hirschman's impressionistic though incisive critique, where it suggests intentionality, is prompted by his having heard from Mrs. Lowry of her
husband's great familiarity with the cabbala. Mr. Hirschman writes of her telling him of Lowry's intimate knowledge of the basic cabbalistic texts, The Anatomy of the Body of God and Q.B.L.

This rather esoteric and poetically written piece is followed by a straightforward article by Douglas Day, centred around the humor in Under the Volcano.

It is Mr. Day's contention that there is a danger for both biographers and critics of Under the Volcano, that in Lowry's life and in his work the "morbid, wildly erratic" will be overly stressed. He suggests that "the very simple quality of Under the Volcano that makes it so profoundly moving is...the quality that Yeats described as 'tragic joy'."

He points out some of the very humorous scenes in the novel: the garden scene with Mr. DeQuincy; the abortive love scene between Geoffrey and Yvonne; even the humor in the final tragic scene when the Consul muses that this was "hardly a position for an ex-representative of His Majesty's government to find himself in;" and connected with the rather gruesome tale of the fate of the German officers, prisoners on the Q-Boat Geoffrey commanded during the war, quotes the Consul: "people simply did not go round... putting Germans in furnaces."

Mr. Day claims: "...because the Consul laughs, because he does not really mean to destroy himself, he is, in some

54"Of Tragic Joy," Prairie Schooner, XXXVII (Winter, 1963-64), 357. Subsequent citations of this article are indicated in the text by page number; as: (357).
unclear but nonetheless real way, indomitable."(361)

He cites as central to an understanding of the novel a parable Geoffrey tells, comparing man to a mountaineer whose way, either up or down, is fraught with danger, perhaps even impossible:

In life, ascending or descending...you were perpetually involved with the mists, the cold and the overhangs, the treacherous rope and the slippery belay; only, while the rope slipped there was sometimes time to laugh.(362)

Mr. Day does not comment on the ironic pun in "overhangs" but its presence in the parable serves to some extent to support his view on the humor of the novel. His point is quite valid in that most of Under the Volcano's critics either ignore or make only the briefest mention of its humor. This could perhaps be attributed to the difficulty of dealing with the paradoxical notion of "tragic joy"—to the difficulty of analysing a figure that at once moves the reader to pity, fear, and laughter.

Walter Allen in his book Tradition and Dream, published in 1964, has high praise for the novel. Like so many of the book's critics he discusses Lowry's relationship to Joyce:

Though its indebtedness in a general sense to both Ulysses and to The Waste Land is obvious, Under the Volcano stands uniquely by itself as a great tragic novel, a masterpiece of organization and of elaborate symbolism that is never forced or strained but right, springing largely as it does out of the scenes in which the action takes place. The harmony between the characters and the phenomena of the external universe through which they move is complete; and so are the correspondences between them. In this respect Joyce in Ulysses did no better.55

Mr. Allen also mentions the echoes of Marlowe, the symbolic nature of the Consul's drunkenness, and suggests that there is a close affinity between Geoffrey and Eliot's Gerontion, both "genuinely tragic figures."

The novel, in the period from 1961 to 1964, had shown itself capable of sustaining a wide variety of critical approaches, from the impressionistic study of Mr. Hirschman to the detailed analysis of allusion of Mr. Markson. In both popular and critical periodicals there is near unanimity in the view that it is, at least, of major importance. Indicative of this, and of a growing interest in Lowry, was the publication in 1965 of a new hard-cover edition of the novel with an introduction by Stephen Spender, and the publication of the Selected Letters.

By 1965 there was enough substantial Lowry criticism for Anthony Kilgallin in "Eliot, Joyce and Lowry" to draw from various secondary sources to suggest the literary relationships: from Walter Allen's Tradition and Dream; from the Times Literary Supplement review of the Penguin edition; from William York Tindall's James Joyce: His Way of Interpreting the World; and from David Markson's Prairie Schooner article.

Mr. Kilgallin, besides drawing on these other sources, points out that

In "What the Thunder Said" the ingredients of drought, thunder, graves, bells, Christ, Symbolism, Dantean quotations, a reference to Coriolanus, all through the power of multiple evocation, all coalesce to form a unified criticism of mankind in the twentieth century. Lowry's repetition of every one
of these ingredients, and additional ones
serve the same purpose in the structure of the
novel, instead of that of the poem.\textsuperscript{56}

Further allusions and similarities to Eliot are pointed
out, the suggestion being made that "Datta, dayadham,
damyata" [sic] plays a similar part as unheeded warning in
The Waste Land as "No se puede..." in Under the Volcano.

Mr. Kilgallin's Master's thesis, "The Use of Literary
Sources for Theme and Style in Under the Volcano,"\textsuperscript{57} a most
comprehensive and exhaustive index to the sources of the
novel, also provided its author with material for another
article, "Faust and Under the Volcano." In this piece,
Mr. Kilgallin goes through the novel chapter by chapter
pointing out the allusions to the Faust figure as used by
Marlowe, Goethe, Maurice Reynard\textsuperscript{58} and even Spengler who
suggests that the dream of limitless space—of escape to
the frontier—is Faustian in the highest degree.

Mr. Kilgallin concludes his article by saying:

Employing the Faust archetype, Lowry has achieved
the sense of ironic dissimilarity and yet of
profound human continuity between the modern
protagonist and his long dead exemplars; he has
also locked past and present together spatially
in a timeless unity by transmuting the time-
world of history into the timeless world of myth,
the common content of modern literature.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{56}"Eliot, Joyce and Lowry," Canadian Author and Book-
man, XLI (Winter, 1965), 4.

\textsuperscript{57}See above, p. 28.

\textsuperscript{58}The author of The Hands of Orlac, the film version of
which is mentioned several times in the novel.

\textsuperscript{59}"Faust and Under the Volcano," Canadian Literature,
XXVI (Autumn, 1965), 54.
The tendency to overlook or fail to see the artistic qualities of the novel, to arbitrarily dismiss it on account of its difficulty, is now a thing of the past. From various journals and books from 1961 to 1966 one can extract a sizeable body of thoughtful criticism of a novel acknowledged to be far "above the ruck of its contemporaries." It has been placed in traditions, its themes explored, its relationship to other twentieth-century masterpieces examined. More and more its author has grown in reputation until Malcolm Lowry, the man, is receiving almost as much attention as Under the Volcano, the novel.

Indeed the growing interest in Lowry the man has placed more and more critical emphasis on intent, as can be seen in the difference between Stephen Spender's approach to myth and symbol in Under the Volcano and that of Mr. Kilgallin, Markson and Allen.

Mr. Spender, in his introduction to the novel, writes of Lowry, Joyce, and Eliot:

...though all three writers may use myths and symbolism and be concerned with the crisis of the modern world, the aims and methods of Lowry are the opposite of those of Joyce and Eliot. Joyce and Eliot use particular instances of modern people in order to move towards, enter into, the greater universality of a tradition of which modern life is only a fragmentary part. They use myths and symbols to get outside "the times" into the past of the tradition. Lowry uses them to exemplify "the times," to describe the Consul as illustration almost. Symbol and myth are used in Ulysses in order to absorb the characters at certain moments into a kind of cosmic consciousness. Lowry uses them with

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60 Toynbee in the Observer, 1962; see above, p. 47; see also Mayberry in the New Republic, 1947; above, p. 15.
opposite effect in order to create the interior world of the Consul. Stephen Dedalus and Bloom tend to disappear into the cosmos. We finish Under the Volcano feeling that the Consul, with all his defects, is the cosmos—and that he is also Malcolm Lowry. This is perhaps a way of saying that Malcolm Lowry and his hero are romantics. (UtV, xii)

The chief operative words in this long passage are "aims" and "effects". Without going into the validity of this kind of exploration of intention and reaction, suffice it to say that the other group of Lowry critics seem more concerned with the object itself, the workings, subtle and complex, of the novel. The closest this group come to discussing aim and effect is in discussing "method," really quite a different thing, and of which Mr. Kilgallin suggests:

...his technique of universal literary and mythic evocations follows the formula predicted by Eliot in his 1923 essay "Ulysses, Order and Myth": "In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him...it is simply a way of confronting, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history."(4)

The intentional bent in recent Lowry criticism, as shown in the critiques of Mr. Spender and Mr. Hirschman, is no doubt an inevitable result of increased interest and emphasis on Lowry the man.

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61 Italics mine.

62 "Eliot, Joyce and Lowry."
CONCLUSION

It was stated that this study was mainly a chronicle of the critical reception of a novel from 1947 to the present—a biography of a book. In addition to the assessment of individual critiques, the attempt to outline a critical scene into which a novel of great importance was plunged in 1947, some conclusions and observations might be made in the light of the examination.

One is, that for whatever reasons, Under the Volcano fared much better at the hands of the reviewers of the wide-circulation, newspaper supplement book review sections than when dealt with by the critics of the more limited circulation quarterlies. The critical scene, at least in terms of new fiction by unknown authors, that emerges from a consideration of the Saturday Review of Literature, the New York Herald Tribune and Times book review sections is far healthier than that which emerges from a consideration of such journals as Partisan Review, Kenyon Review and Yale Review.

Another is, that though time might be needed for the establishment of a solid critical reputation, and a certain amount of consideration and re-evaluation needed to build a cannon of secondary material on a novel, the fact that a good deal of time has gone by is no indication that criticism will improve. Robert Heilman had only to expand his 1947
critique of the novel to treat it in 1961. In 1963, Paul West, in *The Modern Novel* summed up *Under the Volcano* with the rather surprising (and inaccurate) statement "...the overwhelming story of an Englishman who seeks to escape technological civilization by going to Mexico," yet felt free to call it "one of the most successful symbolist novels of the century." The most exhaustive study of the novel, and one containing the seeds of almost all subsequent criticism remains David Markson's 1952 Master's Thesis, written only four years after the original publication of *Under the Volcano*.

Another observation that might be drawn from this study is that as an author's reputation grows, so grows the amount of biographical criticism of his work. In the more recent Lowry criticism one finds Stephen Spender differentiating between Lowry's intentions and those of Joyce and Eliot, and Jack Hirschman suggesting that Lowry's aims are the aims of basic cabbalistic teaching.

Though there is no conclusive proof of it, an hypothesis might be suggested to the effect that a difficult, many-leveled novel might best be accompanied by some kind of explanatory preface, a suggestion to the reader that there is probably more to the novel than he will find on a first reading. In Lowry's preface to the French edition he states:

> If you tell me that a good wine needs no label, I may perhaps reply that I am not talking about wine but about mescal, and that even more than

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a label—once one has crossed the threshold of the tavern—mescal calls for the accompaniment of both salt and lemon. I hope at least that such a preface may bring a little lemon and salt. (27)

It is impossible to say that Lowry's preface was responsible for the novel's immediate and continuing success, both financial and critical, in France. Any number of other factors may have caused this: a different attitude toward art and the novel, perhaps. However it is a fact that Mr. Markson worked with the aid of explanatory letters from Lowry, and that Mr. Kilgallin used as the starting point of his thesis the preface from the French edition. Without implying that either of these critics could not have worked strictly from the novel, it might be suggested that other critics, particularly those who reviewed the original edition in 1947, might have benefited from a preface such as the one in Au-dessous du Volcan.

In any case, at present both Lowry and Under the Volcano remain the subject of a good deal of critical attention. Douglas Day has been working, with Marjorie Lowry on two manuscripts of novels which are scheduled to appear in print in the fall of 1966—October Ferry to Gabriola, and 1967—Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid. 65 Mr. Day also has a biography of Lowry in progress. David Markson’s full-length study of Under the Volcano is completed, though as

64Tr. George Woodcock, Canadian Literature, IX (Summer, 1961).

65To be published by the New American Library.
yet does not have a publisher. Anthony Kilgallin is writing a Doctoral Dissertation on allusion and influence in Lowry's work at the University of Toronto.

In the final analysis, after comment on the under, and above-ground response to Under the Volcano, one could do worse than quote Mr. Markson, who now has ready for publication a full length study of the novel, and who, when asked about the survival of Under the Volcano, and the functioning of an "underground," replied:

Quien sabe? I've always felt it didn't really matter; a work of art is a physical fact that won't be denied, and, one way or another, and without help from dismal souls like me, will find its way to the surface.66

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66In a letter to the author, July 1, 1966.
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