

The Malcolm Lowry Review
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SAVING LOWRY'S EDEN

Le gusta este jardín?
Que es suyo?
Evite que sus hijos lo destruyan!

... final words in Under the Volcano

These words seen by the Consul on a sign in his garden he mistranslates as "Do you like this garden?" "Why is it yours?" "We evict those who destroy it," really mean "You like this garden which is yours? Don't let your children destroy it."

In Under the Volcano, the image of the garden is associated with the Garden of Eden which as Lowry explained could be taken to be the Consul's garden or Mexico or, in a still larger sense, the whole earth.

The garden Lowry had in Cuernavaca still exists. The house still exists, delapidated if not a ruin. "We evict those who destroy" was the Consul's translation. Powerful words difficult enough to put into effect. "... long after Adam had left the garden, the light of Adam's house burned on" - from chapter one of the Volcano. How to keep Lowry's light burning there? The governor of the State of Morelos has declared that in view of its cultural associations the house is in the common interest and would see to it that the owner was approached with a view to buying the property.

Humboldt 17, along with places such as Dickens's birthplace in Portsmouth or the house in Gough Square in London where Dr. Samuel Johnson compiled his dictionary, is one that impresses by association rather than by physical appearance.

The two last mentioned are preserved with loving care. Lowry's house makes a sad contrast. It has been bought by Sr. Adan Cortez Nogueron who has just had holes knocked into the front to make way for steel blinds, and who has indicated to me that he is not interested in the "cultural aspects" of the property, but rather in making money out of the place. The steel blinds prove him to be as good as his word.

The State of Morelos, however, has no money to spare. To surmount this problem a trust under a chairman would have to be formed to assemble the necessary funds, funds not only for buying the house but to restore it to the condition that Lowry knew in real life which would be in accord with M. Laruelle's view of the place. At present it is not easy at first to reconcile the vision of M. Laruelle's house in Under the Volcano with the house as it appears today. The danger that besets it brings into sharp focus the problem as to what constitutes rightful ownership of property. By a curious coincidence, the famous Mexican General Lucio Blanco, the brother of Lowry's landlady Maria Luisa Blanco, was the very first, as early as 1917, to organize distribution of land to peasants. And Lowry himself made crucial to his story the discovery of the mortally wounded rider for the Banco Ejidal - one of those employed, often at great risk, to convey money for the development of such newly allotted lands. With Lowry art and reality interlock most powerfully. In 1925, Lucio Blanco was assassinated himself.

The Art Deco tower with its chevron shaped windows has disappeared except for the base. The other tower and the catwalk connecting it with the first tower have quite gone. Absent, too, is the inscription in gold leaf reading: No se puede vivir sin amar.

This bizarre house whose appearance as described in Under the Volcano is substantiated by early photographs is the perfect setting for an expatriate film director in the tropics

as is M. Laruelle. It is hardly surprising that the most enthusiastic preservationist is Sr. Juan Perez Padilla, head of the film institute of Morelos, who had directed many films in the course of his career. On our first meeting he said to me, "Don't worry, we are going to save the house." If Sr. Padilla's boundless energy and persistence be any indication we surely will. In view of Sr. Padilla's and M. Laruelle's like calling it is interesting to note that John Huston in his film of Lowry's novel has dispensed with the Character of M. Laruelle. Lowry himself commented on the flashback thoughts of Laruelle in chapter one: "It can be seen simply in an obvious movie sense as the wheel of time whirling backwards until we have reached the year before and in this sense we can look back at the rest of the book through Laruelle's eyes as if it were his creation." Thus, in the film version the character of Laruelle has not so much disappeared as moved to the other side of the camera, his part played by John Huston.

Added to Sr. Padilla's efforts, we have those made by a team of Cuernavaca architects headed by Sr. Alfonso Toussaint, working on a scheme called La Nueva Imagen de la Ciudad and inaugurated by the Governor of Morelos, Lic. Lauro Ortega. With the help of his colleagues, Sr. Toussaint has drawn up a detailed report on the Lowry property stressing the advantages of having a large garden in the middle of Cuernavaca.

Cuernavaca seems to have so many fewer birds and butterflies than in Lowry's day. Even the vultures have gone. "They used to congregate in the barranca" Licenciado Sergio Estrada Cajigal told me. He is Cuernavaca's leading authority on the history of the town. He also told me that at the bottom of the garden of the Lowry property there used to be a Greek style theatre, the form taking advantage of the barranca's slope. He has an old photograph of the house on the street complete with towers and catwalk and the wall not with the legend "No se puede vivir sin amar" so familiar to all lovers of Under the Volcano, but simply ANTITEATRO. Another

photograph shows the amphitheatre itself. Lic. Estrada's father, Vicente Estrada Cajigal, who was governor of the State of Morelos during the early thirties, and his mother are in the audience. The Lowry property, like the Lowry novel, vibrates with mytho-poetic and political associations. I was reminded of the story, perhaps apocryphal, of how in ancient times the theatre of Syracuse was crowded with anxious spectators watching the outcome of the battle in the inner harbor in their defense against the Athenians. From Lowry's stage, it is the Battle of the Ebro which is being watched by actors and spectators alike, the novel being interspersed with news reports on the fighting. Lowry explained that the Battle of the Ebro stood for all war.

"Hello-pussy-my-little-Priapusspuss, my-little-Oedipusspuss . . . What, is it you, my little popocat?" The cat moves through the Consul's punning names from Greek myth to the volcano both mythical and geographical of the novel's title which overlooks the garden and still is to be seen from thence on clear days. The garden slopes down until it reaches the barranca which stood in Lowry's mind as the negative and hellish counterpart to Popocatepetl. He tells of the legend which I have not heard elsewhere of how the barranca split open at the time that Christ died. All these Lowryesque elements contained in a not very large property in the centre of Cuernavaca - garden, swimming pool, view of the volcano, the bungalow in which he might have started the novel; the house he gave to Laruelle and then followed in the footsteps of his own creation by living there himself. These surely must be dedicated anew to one who is considered by many to be among the first five novelists of this century and one who through his magnum opus has made Cuernavaca known throughout the world.

There have been various suggestions as to what form the property should take. A culture centre, or library for books devoted to Latin America, a place with ample reference for the

study of distinguished foreign visitors to Cuernavaca such as Humboldt and Dwight Morrow, not to mention the most controversial visitor of all, Hernan Cortéz.

But of all the foreign visitors, Lowry occupies a very special place in Cuernavaca. He is part of a curious phenomenon: in the decade of the 30s several of England's best writers came to Mexico and produced work on Mexican themes that added lustre to their names. Most of these have still to make their mark here and will doubtless do so. Certainly this literary phenomenon should be a source of pride. Yet I would hesitate to recommend to any of my Mexican friends Graham Greene's The Lawless Roads. The way the author goes on and on about his hatred of Mexico and his dislike of Mexicans. And then to move on to D.H. Lawrence's The Plumed Serpent and the inherent evil he finds in Mexico. Even the eyes of the Mexicans upset him. "They have no centres", he says. Both Graham Greene and D.H. Lawrence are patronizing into the bargain, and so is Aldous Huxley in his Beyond the Mexique Bay. The book I would recommend by an English writer of genius would be Under the Volcano. Alone among the writers who, I think, with full justification could be called great, Lowry is able to say, "Nowhere in the world were the people more human or readily moved to sympathy than the Mexicans."-- And he was the only one on the shortlist of important English writers to be gaoled twice and expelled from this country. His vision was too true for this and other indignities to warp his judgement of the Mexican people as a whole. He also had an instinctive flair for symbol and the various levels at which a single object may be understood, which is so rooted in the art and thought here. This is true of Henry Moore who is so outspoken about the greatness of his art's debt to ancient Mexico.

Lowry in his turn at one point makes me think of an Aztec sculpture that probably neither he nor Henry Moore saw. Now in the Museum of Anthropology the sculpture is of a man carrying an obviously heavy idol on his back by means of a strap looped

over his forehead. To quote from Under the Volcano, "Bent double, groaning with the weight, an old lame Indian was carrying on his back another poor Indian, yet older and more decrepit than himself." Elsewhere Lowry described this image of the Indian carrying his father as a restatement and universalizing of the theme of humanity struggling under the eternal tragic weight of the past. It is also Freudian man eternally emerging from the psychological burden of his father Sophoclean, Oedipean, what-have-you, which relates to the burden of the Consul again.

Relating the Consul in this way to the Indian moves me much. He related in another way, too. The Consul was born in India, the land that Columbus thought Mexico to be. The fruit of this mistake lives as the indigenous people of this hemisphere continue to be misnamed and to surmount the resulting confusion the true Indians are often with equal inaccuracy referred to as Hindus. Babies born to British administrators of the Consul's parents' generation were handed over to Indian wet nurses as standard practice so at least at the beginning of their lives these children had a very close relationship with the humble of that sub-Continent. The Consul and his half-brother, Hugh, frequently nourish themselves with thoughts in the course of the novel of the land of their birth. At one point the Consul compares the Borda Garden with the garden he knew in Srinagar. And in the very first chapter the reader is informed that Quauhnahuac is on the nineteenth parallel as is the town of Juggernaut in India, on the Bay of Bengal, bringing together the real India and the India of Columbus. Mexico's increased awareness of India is illustrated by her appointing her greatest poet, Octavio Paz, as ambassador to India and naming a road Chapultepec Park after Gandhi and putting up a statue to him. But for the Consul India was the place of his childhood at the age of those children who pursued him at the fair where he took refuge in the Maquina Infernal. It was Chagall who said you cannot walk among children without remembering your own childhood, your vanished Eden. India was

the Consul's vanished Eden. Mexico his final one from which he was banished.

The Consul is thrown to his death to the bottom of the barranca. A dead dog is thrown after him. Much earlier in the novel "a hideous pariah dog" follows him into his garden when he returns there with Yvonne. He thinks, "pariah, that meant drums, too", after reflecting on the drums which still seem to be thudding from the ball he attended the past night. The Indian connection again: Pariah comes from a Tamil word meaning drum. Pariahs were the hereditary village drum-beaters. You might say the Consul was drummed out of Eden. At another point he addresses a pariah dog, "To-day thou shalt be with me in. . ." words from Christ to the penitent thief. Paradise if only after death may indeed be possible for the Consul. Perhaps the dog that was thrown down the barranca after him was the same as the one he addressed in the cantina. Christian imagery: the pariah dog as the thief who stole heaven. It also suggests the Aztec image of the dog accompanying souls to the next world. I think, too, of the tradition of drums being beaten at executions.

"We evict those who destroy". Lowry's understanding of the Eden mystery seems to go even beyond his knowledge. Did he know of the Christian doctrine of the Virgin Mary as the second Eve, the virgin for those who have "nobody with", as Dr. Vigil says in his haunting fashion. That ancient prayer, the Salve Regina, seems like an extension of the spirit of Lowry in that it should have been written by Herman Contractus the Shrunken, or Cripple. Who better to hymn the Virgin for those who have "nobody with". I think of Lowry's one-legged beggar who gave his money to a beggar with no legs, a poignant method of remaining through love within our imperfect Eden. A stroke of imagination it was for Franco Zefferelli to have the music from the Salve Regina during the bedroom scene of his Romeo and Juliet. "To thee do we cry poor banished

children of Eve, to thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this vale of tears." But it is only through the Consul's inability to love that he has "nobody with". It is interesting that a later Cuernavaca resident, Erich Fromm, should have written a book on the Art of Loving. In it he defines the inability to love as a form of madness which most people share to some extent. In Under the Volcano the Consul's drunkenness symbolizes this insanity, with not only the Consul but the world at the brink of the abyss. In the Consul's unleashing destructive forces in his mind, including the mention of uranium and plutonium, he foreshadows the dropping of the atom bomb. He regretted that it was not until after the event the book was published. The truth is, however, that the book was more prophetic than he imagined. The bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were small indeed compared to the nuclear weapons that threaten us today. And Nicaragua, the name Lowry gave to Calle Humboldt, is spine chilling in its possible implications concerning our future, or absence of a future. The writing on M. Laruelle's house with "No puede vivir sin amar" has a more urgent message than ever. A start must be made somewhere and fast. What better beginning than by rescuing the house and garden of this great and compassionate writer? It would be a move towards saving the larger Eden of the whole earth. Why is it ours?

John Spencer
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(John Spencer is an artist and sculptor working in Mexico. - PT)