

Beneath Lowry's Carnival: The Object in *Under the Volcano*

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*The Indian's breathing sounded like the sea
dragging itself down a stone beach.*

– Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano*¹

*[W]e remain an arbitrary outcropping of Nature,
monstrous or amphibious animals who straddle
two domains and will never quite be at home in
either.*

– Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*²

“¡EVITE QUE SUS HIJOS LO DESTRUYAN!”³

The cacophony of carnival rings loudly through English novelist Malcolm Lowry's 1947 work *Under the Volcano*, often viewed as one of the major novels of the twentieth century. As Jonathan Arac observes in his “pioneering”⁴ essay on Lowry's magnum opus, that sense of carnival arises from not only the imagery and themes of *Under the Volcano*, but also from its form. However, despite the grotesques, the ferris wheels, the heteroglossia, and the echoes of laughter that pervade the novel, a carnivalesque approach to *Under the Volcano* creates contortions and uncomfortable uni-

ties within the text. To consider the abundance of carnival tropes in *Under the Volcano* to be indicative of a Mikhail Bakhtinian “carnival sense of the world” ultimately proves reductive and problematic. Many of those tropes are present, as are other Bakhtinian trademarks, but the combined effect of these themes and forms is ultimately far-removed from the carnival form Bakhtin describes.

A number of Arac’s other observations—especially regarding the presence and role of heteroglossia in the novel—have been cited and built upon by later critics, such as Sue Vice and Patrick A. McCarthy. And while the work they have produced has proved enlightening and valuable to the study of *Under the Volcano*, Arac’s overarching assertion of the novel’s place in the carnivalesque tradition has not been questioned. Vice even goes on to endorse the novel’s place in the carnivalesque tradition, primarily on account of its heteroglossia—the multiple languages that break into the text through signs, brochures, telegrams and the like. According to Vice, “[i]t is precisely this strategy, the exploitation of what is definitional about language of artistic ends, that fits *Under the Volcano* for Bakhtin’s carnival label.”⁵

Heteroglossia and the carnivalesque, however, are independent Bakhtinian notions. While Bakhtin links polyphony and the carnival in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, a number of other notions he explores throughout his critical *oeuvre*—notions such as dialogism, heteroglossia, and the chronotope—can arise in works that do not belong to the carnivalesque tradition. Critical approaches that utilise Bakhtin’s non-carnival critical frameworks, then, need not link the literary texts they are exploring back to the carnival, as the presence of one Bakhtinian element is not necessarily indicative of (or reliant upon) the presence of another. As such, there is no unified Bakhtinian approach to literature. A work can—as I argue is true in the case of *Under the Volcano*—contain heteroglossia without belonging to the carnivalesque tradition. This is evidenced in McCarthy’s detailed study of Lowry’s entire literary output, *Forests of Symbols: World, Text and Self in Malcolm Lowry’s Fiction*. Like Vice, McCarthy endorses Arac’s observations regarding how Lowry’s “use of letters, telegrams, and printed announcements, and the frequent citations of other literary works, challenges the hegemony of any single view-point in the novel.”⁶ McCarthy, however, does not go as far as Vice does in linking this to the carnivalesque. Interestingly, McCarthy does not directly examine Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque at all in his book on Lowry’s work, although his discussion of the Mexican poet Octavio Paz’s insights regarding the role of the Day of the Dead fiesta in Mexican society bears striking similarities to the carnivalesque.

McCarthy, summarising Paz, says “through the fiesta Mexicans escape from themselves and their situations: the fiesta dissolves boundaries of time and space, gender and social class, liberating society.”⁷ He then describes how, in accordance with Paz’s conception of the fiesta, the people “renew themselves by participating in its cyclic ritual of death and rebirth.”⁸ Crucially, though, McCarthy goes on to describe how, while “we might expect to find the Consul eventually participating in these timeless rituals, emerging from himself into a sense of oneness with others and with the universe itself,”⁹ the Consul is excluded from the fiesta and its process of rebirth because “the renewal of which Paz speaks is possible only for those who can throw away their minds,” something which the Consul cannot do.¹⁰ If we accept Bakhtin’s assertion that the carnival has no distinction between spectators and participants as it “does not know footlights . . . and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people,”¹¹ then the inaccessibility of the renewing fiesta for the Consul immediately becomes rather difficult to accommodate within a carnivalesque framework. At best, a carnivalesque approach to the novel is simply diagnostic. At worst, it distorts and diminishes not only Lowry’s novel but also Bakhtin’s original notion of the genre of carnivalised literature.

Carnival is, by its very definition, a time of rebirth as well as destruction. It is, according to Bakhtin, “the festival of all-annihilating and all-renewing time. Thus might one express the basic concept of carnival.”¹² Bakhtin constantly stresses the duality and ambivalence of the carnival, which is most evident in the crowning and de-crowning of the carnival king. In *Introducing Bakhtin*, Vice says “the two states [crowning and de-crowning] are inseparable in the carnival view.”¹³ If we are to accept Bakhtin’s definition of the carnivalesque, then, we must accept that in a work belonging to that tradition, all destruction has its counterpoint of renewal. For a work such as *Under the Volcano*, in which the presence and significance of death and destruction cannot be ignored, including it in the carnivalesque tradition forces the reader to wring its pages for some form of redemption.

A far more appropriate, accurate, and accommodating approach to the novel is found in Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject. Approaching the novel anew from the perspective of Kristeva’s abject allows the novel’s imagery and language to tumble freely toward its end. When seen through a lens of abjection, the artificial sense of renewal and resurrection that is inherently imposed on the novel by the carnivalesque reading evaporates, leaving behind only the tragedy of “a religious and Faustian myth of a fall without resurrection.”¹⁴ Through abjection, the distant merriment that the carnivalesque contorts to fit the Bakhtinian idea of “carnival laughter” is allowed

to resonate in isolating despair. Illuminated by the abject, seemingly mundane or awkward passages are imbued with the profundity of allegory, and lightly comical scenes are poisoned by the barbs in our own sniggers.

The bulk of *Under the Volcano* follows Geoffrey Firmin, the alcoholic former British Consul in a regional Mexican town, through the last day of his life. That day is November 2, 1938—the Day of the Dead. His ex-wife, Yvonne, has returned to rescue him from alcoholic self-destruction. By the end of the night though, Geoffrey and Yvonne are dead. The novel unfolds from a number of viewpoints, the events of the first chapter taking place one year after the rest of the novel and told from the perspective of Jacques Laruelle, a childhood friend of the Consul who once had an affair with Yvonne. The rest of the novel is set on the one day in 1938 and the focus of the chapters drifts from the Consul, to Yvonne, to the Consul's half-brother Hugh (who is also trying to save the Consul, and who, like Laruelle, also had an affair with Yvonne), as the Consul staggers toward oblivion.

In “The Form of Carnival in *Under the Volcano*,” Jonathan Arac offers Bakhtinian carnival to help “describe the ‘nuts and bolts’ that fit together to make the book, for all its copious variety, go round in one smooth circle in a carnival path of loss and return.”¹⁵ Unfortunately, such “description” is all the carnivalesque can offer Lowry's novel. As Allon White observes, “*Under the Volcano* appears to be a work of the modern carnivalesque [but] the fiesta is the Day of the Dead and the polyphony is that of Babel. . . . [T]he novel spirals into a confusion of tongues, a tragic chaos portending the consul's incomprehension and death.”¹⁶

White mentions *Under the Volcano* only briefly in his Bakhtinian survey of modernist fiction but, in his short examination of the novel, he hints at the same idea that is at the core of this essay—that *Under the Volcano* is not a redemptive narrative and does not belong to the carnivalesque genre. Similarly, in *The Voyage the Never Ends: Malcolm Lowry's Fiction*, Sherrill E. Grace acknowledges that while the possibility of redemption is variously present in *Under the Volcano*, the novel ultimately “offers a tragic vision of destruction and loss; it is a story of hellfire, and hellfire, for Lowry, means paralysis of the will.”¹⁷

The carnivalised approach to *Under the Volcano* embodies (and proves as warranted) some of the key concerns raised by Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and *Rabelais and his World*, in which he lays out the foundations of the carnivalesque genre of literature. Bakhtin suggests that, in literature, “[t]he sensitive ear will always catch even the most distant echoes of a carnival sense of the world.”¹⁸ In the case of *Under the Volcano*, one's ear need not be particularly sensitive—every silence is torn asunder by the “bangs and cries of the *fiesta*.”¹⁹ More significantly, Bakhtin

is also careful to differentiate between what he sees as true, deep, medieval and Renaissance carnival, which was a vital part of the lives of Western Europeans up to the time of the Enlightenment, and the various modern incarnations of carnival, such as masquerade and fun fair. In contrast to medieval carnival, modern carnival offers no social or cultural regeneration. Its role in modern carnivalised literature embodies none of the duality and ambiguity of the medieval phenomenon, and its negative aspects offer only confusion and degradation. This latter category could be an appropriate form of carnival from which to approach *Under the Volcano*, but this is not the form of carnival in which Bakhtin's original notion of the carnivalesque is rooted, nor is it the style of carnival Arac uses to categorise Lowry's novel. In place of such a categorisation, I propose that we read Lowry's famous novel as a narrative not of the carnivalesque but of abjection.

Under Bakhtin's Volcano

While Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque and Kristeva's conception of the abject are well-known literary approaches, given their widespread application and appropriation, it is worthwhile clarifying the key elements of the theories and defining how I intend them to be understood in this essay.

As mentioned earlier, when I speak of the carnivalesque I refer to the "carnival sense of the world" explored by Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and *Rabelais and His World*. In these works, Bakhtin puts forth the notion of a genre of carnivalised literature. This genre, he argues, is a reflection of the significant social and cultural role that carnival once played in the lives of Western Europeans.

When applied to a work such as Rabelais' Gargantua and Pantagruel cycle, the carnivalesque genre allows the grotesque, absurd, and profane elements of the novels to be understood as contiguous with a very real world—that is, as literary manifestations of the carnival—rather than merely functioning as detached political satire or vulgar humour, which is how, according to Bakhtin, critics have traditionally approached such works.²⁰ This stems from what Bakhtin identifies as a very real role played by carnival in medieval society, functioning as a sort of pressure-release valve for the masses, allowing them to debase and degrade otherwise sacred and exalted objects, people, and institutions, reducing everything and everyone from churches, kings, and clergymen to the lowest possible level and crowning, in their place, a mock-king for a day.

According to Bakhtin, however, this degradation *must* be redemptive and regenerative: the duality of the "all-annihilating and all-renewing time" lays at the very heart of the carnival.²¹ When the carnival is over, the mock-

king is beaten and de-crowned; the world is turned right way up and those sacred objects are returned—renewed and revitalised—to their previously exalted place. This de-crowning and re-crowning “lies at the very core of the carnival sense of the world.”²² The importance of the duality of the act—the crowning and de-crowning—is frequently stressed by Bakhtin: “we repeat, crowning and de-crowning are inseparable, they are dualistic and pass one into the other; in any absolute dissociation they would completely lose their carnivalistic sense.”²³

Bakhtin also sees carnival as a great social leveler, bringing together people from all echelons of society in a “free and familiar” way. “People who in life are separated by impenetrable hierarchical barriers enter into free familiar contact on the carnival square.”²⁴ This attitude of temporary equality and familiarity permeates through carnival life and allows and instigates carnival profanities and carnivalesque mergings of “the lofty and the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid.”²⁵ This *carnivalistic mésalliance* accommodates and introduces another of the major hallmarks of carnival—carnival laughter. Carnival laughter is, yet again, deeply ambivalent. “Combined in the act of carnival laughter are death and rebirth, negation (a smirk) and affirmation (rejoicing laughter).”²⁶ It is one of the key forces that allows the high to become low, and enables the sense of community and “free and familiar” contact that defines the relational distances of carnivalesque literature. It “is directed toward something higher—toward a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders” and drags it down, in order for it to be renewed and re-affirmed as high when the carnival is over and the laughter has stopped.²⁷

As we will see, the redemption, regeneration, and renewal that is the flip-side of all downward carnival acts is not present in *Under the Volcano*. Despite the festivities in the background of the novel, there is no carnivalesque ambivalence at its core. Given the vital role of ambivalence in carnival, this alone should exclude it from the carnivalesque genre. The difficulties raised by the carnival in *Under the Volcano*—such as this lack of ambivalence—are much better accommodated in Kristeva’s abject.

Kristeva’s notion of the abject, as first explored in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, has also been much expanded and appropriated, but never in a study of Lowry’s *Under the Volcano*. In this essay, I will draw on the core principles of abjection explored in Kristeva’s original work. The abject is “neither subject nor object.” In the formation of identity, it is “opposed to *I*.”²⁸ It is a philosophy of borders and of borderline cases. It induces disgust and nausea, yet “not without laughter—since laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection.”²⁹ Abjection is “at the limit of primal repression . . . where an *I* that is taking shape is ceaselessly straying.”³⁰ As

Kristeva's examination of the abject in the writings of Louis-Ferdinand Céline shows, the abject in literature exists not only in content and imagery, but also in the form and the language of literature. Abjection lies in the hands of ghosts, in the lungs of corpses, in pools of blood and broken bones, in the venom of a laugh, even in the spaces between the words on the page and between the reader and the word.

A typical example Kristeva gives of the abject is that of the skin that forms on warm milk and our reaction to it. Neither solid nor liquid, neither product itself nor true waste product, neither clean nor unclean, it is between states and has the power to induce retching and repulsion. Our reaction against such phenomena is indicative of what helps form our *self*. Another of Kristeva's examples of the abject is the corpse: "the most sickening of wastes, [it] is a border that has encroached upon everything . . . the utmost of abjection."³¹ Something that is no longer, yet still exists. The corpse does not symbolise death, as a flat-lining heart monitor might, but it *is* death, the height of nothingness, "not signified but incarnate" and we recoil from it.³²

Sue Vice characterises Kristeva's approach as a psychoanalytically-inflected extension of Bakhtin's work. Vice lays out a number of key areas of overlap between the carnivalesque and the abject, including interests in bodily margins, the edible, and death in literature. Both approaches also seek to accommodate features of theme as well as form, such as the "language of the marketplace" that can be found in carnivalised literature, and the abjection that manifests in violent, non-sensical, or foreign languages that unsettle the reader and abject *them* from the text. A major point of difference between the abject and the carnivalesque though lies in Kristeva's interest in the human subject, which contrasts with Bakhtin's broader humanist view: whereas Kristeva's notion of the abject focuses on the individual human subject, Bakhtin's carnivalesque is more concerned with community, society, and culture.³³

Key to the application of Kristeva's abject in this essay is her distinction between semiotic and symbolic states of development of the subject's *self*. The semiotic is devoid of conventional language, social norms, and cultural influences. As those influences come to bear, the subject engages with the paternal symbolic realm, where it develops its own identity, or self. Kristeva explores the implication of this distinction in her earlier work, *Revolution in Poetic Language*. In that work, Kristeva describes the semiotic and symbolic as "two modalities of . . . the same signifying process," and goes on to explain the integral role of each modality in determining what language "means."³⁴ She identifies the two states there as essentially pre- and post-Oedipal,³⁵ while in her later work, *Powers of Horror*, she prefers to

explain the semiotic realm as maternal and the symbolic as paternal. In both explanations, the inseparability of the two realms is abundantly clear. “Because the subject is always *both* semiotic *and* symbolic, no signifying system [the subject] produces can be either ‘exclusively’ semiotic or ‘exclusively’ symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both.”³⁶ The abject is found at the boundary between those two states. To encounter the abject, which has its own language of repulsion, rejection, and disgust, is to risk regression from the symbolic and paternal towards the semiotic, the maternal. As such, by threatening to cleave the symbolic from the semiotic and collapse the symbolic order, the abject is a grave threat to the *I*.

We can differentiate Bakhtin from Kristeva by understanding Bakhtin’s carnivalesque to be anchored in the paternal-symbolic, whereas Kristeva’s abject is more concerned with the maternal-semiotic. A Bakhtinian carnivalesque approach to literature focuses on the structures, the symbols, and the relational elements both inside and outside the text—elements that cannot be approached or understood without having first mastered paternal languages and codes. Kristeva’s abject functions nearer to the other side—near the pulses of the womb and the pre-linguistic yowls of animals—and how the subject’s *self* emerges from and defines itself against the maternal-symbolic.

Abjection smoulders under the great symbolic volcanoes of Lowry’s novel. And while those volcanoes on the novel’s horizon appear to threaten the world, they would be but impotent hills were it not for the abject realm that swirls and boils beneath them. While *Under the Volcano* is full of carnival imagery, we do a disservice to both the novel and Bakhtin’s original notion if we regard it as belonging to the carnivalesque tradition.

“Only if one listened intently . . . could one distinguish a remote confused sound”³⁷

To place *Under the Volcano* in the genre of carnivalised literature, one must contort either Bakhtin’s genre or Lowry’s novel. In such a situation, one can only expect the novel to yield before the genre. A carnivalesque treatment of *Under the Volcano* fundamentally skews the novel’s trajectory, and softens its ultimate tragedy. Such an approach also problematises the novel’s relational dynamics by contorting the relationships and distances between characters, the fictional world, the reader, and the text. The distortion of the novel’s trajectory occurs because a Bakhtinian carnivalesque reading must identify elements of redemption and resurrection in order to be meaningful. Otherwise, the humiliations, debasings, deaths, and de-

struction that go hand in hand with carnival are purely negative and belong only to modern, degraded carnival, which is excluded from Bakhtin's original theory of the carnivalesque genre.

As David K. Danow observes in *The Spirit of Carnival*, humiliation and degradation without redemption problematise carnivalesque approaches to much twentieth-century literature, as best demonstrated by the literature and images that emerged from the Holocaust and concentration camps. "What if the notion of 'unfinished metamorphosis'—the idea, perhaps, of something aborted, left incomplete, in disarray, partially destroyed, not quite dead—emerges as *final* and triumphant?"³⁸ That "not quite dead," in-between state is exactly where Lowry's novel leads, and, according to White, that is where it stays. White contends that "*Under the Volcano* rejects any form of salvation." Throughout the novel both the Consul and the world are "slithering to [their] own ravine, the consul to his grave and the world to the Second World War."³⁹

In his carnivalesque examination of *Under the Volcano*, Arac makes an interesting case in favour of a cyclic element inherent in the novel's structure, underlined by recurring imagery of wheels and circles. *Cyclical* and *redemptive*, though, are not synonymous, a point underlined by Grace: "[c]ertainly little appears 'static' in the novel: everything is wheeling, reeling, and rushing, but this hallucinatory movement is circular, repetitive, and infernal. The gigantic wheeling form of the book is only one symbol of the paralysis portrayed on all levels."⁴⁰ Grace goes on to describe what she concludes to be the ultimate ambiguity of the wheel and circle symbols in the novel, but this ambiguity is far-removed from the renewal and rebirth so integral to a carnival view of the world. As Grace concludes: "*Under the Volcano* is a book about failure and *acedia*, and each of the four main levels of the text [the immediate story level, and the three esoteric levels of fable, allegory and myth] contribute to this general theme."⁴¹

For the carnivalesque, redemption, resurrection, and rejuvenation need not be literal—the Consul need not survive his own death—but the carnivalesque *world* does require renewal. In *Under the Volcano*, in contrast, it is clear that the world, even as war flares in Europe, is only a poorer place after the deaths of the Consul and Yvonne:

What happened just a year ago today seemed already to belong to a different age. One would have thought the horrors of the present would have swallowed it up like a drop of water. It was not so. Though tragedy was in the process of becoming unreal and meaningless it seemed one was still permitted to remember the days when an individual life held some value and was not a mere misprint in a communiqué.⁴²

Even on the Day of the Dead, there is no suggestion that the two ex-lovers are “back.” Their only appearance in the first chapter of the book, which is set on the first anniversary of their deaths as Laruelle prepares to leave Mexico, is as tragic, quarrelling ghosts, briefly merged with the doomed lovers Maximilian and Carlota,⁴³ who Laruelle considers as he passes their ruined palace. When we encounter the Consul and Yvonne for the first time—or meet them again, if we are re-reading in keeping with Arac’s cyclic notion—we are in no doubt that they will die today, and the Consul already cuts a pathetic, drunken figure in an early-morning bar. This argument against redemption in the novel may seem trivial, perhaps even theologically or philosophically driven, but it is a vivid illustration of the way inclusion in the carnivalesque genre problematises the very core of the novel by searching for redemption where there is none.

As touched upon earlier, another key element of the carnivalesque is “carnival laughter” or the “footprint of laughter.” One need not search long or hard to find footprints of laughter in *Under the Volcano*: the novel is a muddy field trodden over all day and night by carnival revellers. Forever face down in that muddy field though is the Consul. Every laugh in the novel nudges him deeper into abjection, isolating him from Mexican society, from English culture, from his friends, his family, his ex-wife and, finally, even from the reader.

We hear laughter in the distance but it is laughter where we do not hear the joke, effects with no causes, subjects with no objects. When the reader is finally let in on a joke, such as when we see, through the eyes of his childhood friend, Laruelle, the Consul’s sexual humiliation as a teenager in the “Hell Bunker” on an English golf course, immediately followed by his “sad, though doubtless providential, little frustrations” at being denied drinks and kicked out of a pub as a minor,⁴⁴ we are laughing along like a schoolyard bully at another child’s failure to be a man. Likewise, when we watch—almost in real time, thanks to Lowry’s impeccable control of language and structure—this drunkard crash onto the street as he sneaks away to a bar, we laugh at nothing but his humiliation:

It was just possible too of course that he might meet—
But suddenly the Calle Nicaragua rose up to meet him.
The Consul lay face downward on the deserted street.⁴⁵

Once again we are in on the joke at the Consul’s expense. We know this man is already broken. We know from the outset of the novel that this man dies this very day. We have watched him drink strychnine to steady his hands enough to pour another drink or to reach out to the hand offered to him by the love of his life who, inexplicable by anything other than love, has

come back to this Mexican hell to try to save him. Yet here Lowry makes us stand right over the Consul and laugh as he tries absurdly to maintain dignity in a speech we can hear but he is really too drunk to make: “—Hugh, is that you old chap lending the old boy a hand?”⁴⁶ It is not Hugh though, just a stranger. Hugh is still on his way back to town from Mexico City. When Hugh does get back, the Consul is resting and Hugh all but seduces the Consul’s ex-wife, the pair having had an affair in the past.⁴⁷

There is no redemption to this degradation, no carnivalesque rebuilding after this humiliation. The Consul is not brought back into the womb of the earth by being reduced to dirt, as Bakhtin’s carnival demands. After such humiliation, the Consul is left to fall into abjection, alone, on the far side of all borders. This demonstrates that, despite the abundant echoes of carnival laughter and the degradation of the Consul during a time of carnival, the faint laughter that we hear is not the carnival laughter Bakhtin describes. This is because *true* carnival laughter is to be directed at exalted objects, taking that which was high and making it low for the day, before being restored to its previously sacred place. Likewise, carnival beatings, degradation, humiliation and abuse, for Bakhtin, must be regenerative and aimed at the high. Although the Consul was once high—he was, after all, once the British Consul in Oaxaca—by the time we meet him, he has long since fallen. His wife has left him, he is stalked by pariah dogs, and the local bartenders mock him for not wearing socks, as though he cannot afford them (the truth is that his hands shake too badly with delirium tremens for him to put them on).

It is possible to step outside the novel and interpret this entire process—the fall from a government official to a drunk accompanied only by mongrel dogs—as part of a grand carnivalesque inversion.⁴⁸ As constantly reiterated though, to be truly carnivalesque, this would require far more than just degradation and downward, negative inversion: it still requires an inverse positive event or effect. For each de-crowned king a fool must be crowned ruler for a day; each death must give life; each degradation must rejuvenate. In *Under the Volcano*, the only crown we see is that of Maximilian, the executed former emperor whose crumbling palace is an abject presence throughout the novel. The Consul—once the queen’s representative in Oaxaca—might have been de-crowned but no mock-king has been inaugurated in his place. Even more significantly, when the carnival is over, the Consul is not restored to his former place, but shot through the gut and thrown into a ravine. If there is to be redemption here it is not the redemption of which Bakhtin speaks, and if there is carnival here it is not Bakhtinian. *Under the Volcano* does not need to be unified and tamed by a genre. It only needs to be left to stumble drunkenly into abjection.

“ . . . it was in eruption, yet no, it wasn't the volcano”⁴⁹

In life, the abject resides in the peripheries, suppressed and sublimated, its threat to the *I* is pushed away, spat out and negated. In a novel such as *Under the Volcano*, then, where the subject is fatally compromised by the abject, it follows that those fringe elements should be found as clear and present dangers at the heart of the novel. Here, I shall concentrate on a number of key elements in the novel that strongly evoke the abject: the recurring imagery and thematic presence of corpses and death; the unsettling and distancing of the reader; and the Consul's alignment with animals. All three of these elements recur throughout the novel and contain elements of the carnival better understood through abjection. All three also reach their climax in the novel's final pages as the Consul, drunk, alone, and wrongly suspected to be a spy, is shot and disposed of, followed into the ravine by the corpse of a dog as the language of the novel finally collapses, and the Consul and his narrative slip beyond the limits of language.

Corpses pervade the text: “. . . A corpse will be transported by express!”⁵⁰ opens chapter two, when Yvonne returns to Mexico looking for the Consul.⁵¹ She finds him in a bar, reading aloud from the Mexican National Railway timetable booklet about the requirement for a corpse to have a ticket. This scene alone toys with the boundary between living and dead in a far more immediate way than the Day of the Dead carnival does in the novel. Later, the corpse of a murdered Indian that the Consul, Yvonne, and Hugh see by the side of the road regularly returns to the Consul's thoughts.⁵² Words that evoke this scene with the corpse—most notably *pelado* (Spanish for “bum” or “vagrant”)—are soon thrown at the Consul as he lies, half dead, on the border of becoming a corpse himself. The significance of the fact he is *not* a corpse at the end of the novel and that, when we last see him, he is still falling and has not hit the ground cannot be overstated.

As readers, we cannot follow where he is going. We can follow as far as the border but only the Consul, after languishing so long in abjection, can completely transgress that boundary. We leave him where language leaves us: in the air, neither up nor down, barely alive but not dead. He screams, the trees at the bottom of the ravine close over him, then “[s]omebody threw a dead dog after him down the ravine,”⁵³ and the final words of the novel, on a page of their own, read:

¿LE GUSTA ESTE JARDÍN

QUE ES SUYO?

¡EVITE QUE SUS HIJOS LO DESTROYAN!⁵⁴

The Consul is gone and we, as English-speaking readers, are turned away. Throughout the novel we have been threatened with this. The narrative is frequently lost in stream-of-consciousness passages. Fragments of Spanish-language radio programmes and conversations from adjacent rooms leak into the text. Signs on walls and advertising posters are manifest on the page. Characters possess names like A Few Fleas, which renders even simple sentences toward the end of the novel difficult to read: “The ‘barman’—the son of the Elephant—known as A Few Fleas. . . . A Few Fleas turned back to his story. . . . A Few Fleas having returned.”⁵⁵ While this occurs near the end of the novel, as Arac observes, “from the beginning Lowry has taken risks that challenge our desire to finish.”⁵⁶ Arac, however, makes this observation when explaining the benefit of recognising the novel’s difficult elements as belonging to the carnivalesque genre. Rather than reconcile or unite those difficult elements, the abject glows in the friction between them, not least in the tension and unease between reader and text that are created by narrative decay.

For Kristeva, no writer’s work better embodies abjection than Louis-Ferdinand Céline. At times, however, when Kristeva discusses Céline, her words strongly evoke the conclusions reached by other critics such as White and Vice when approaching Lowry and *Under the Volcano*: “Céline’s narrative is a narrative of suffering and horror, not only because the ‘themes’ are there, as such, but because his whole narrative stance seems controlled by the necessity of going through abjection, whose intimate side is suffering and horror its public feature.”⁵⁷

The generic and formal challenges presented to the reader by *Under the Volcano* (and which formed the basis of Arac’s attempt to “[provide] a firm sense of what the book is doing”⁵⁸) are, rather than reconciled or tamed, offered an accommodation by an abject reading. With an appreciation of the abject, the text’s almost aggressive stance toward the reader—which Arac observes in many of the most integral aspects of the novel, with even its structure betraying Lowry’s “rhetorical preposterousness”⁵⁹—is illuminated by Kristeva’s notion: “When narrated identity is unbearable, when the boundary between subject and object is shaken, and when even the limit between inside and outside becomes uncertain, the narrative is what is challenged first.”⁶⁰ So much of *Under the Volcano* takes place at these sites of breakdown, especially the breakdown between inside and outside. The Consul’s finest speeches never pass his lips but we hear them; conversations beyond the margins of our protagonists are given the same privileges as direct dialogue between them; large amounts of alcohol and strychnine goes *into* the Consul; when he is shot, he feels “life slivering out of him like liver”; “I blow you wide open from your knees up, you

cabron . . . you pelado,” taunts his killer before pulling the trigger.⁶¹

As the mob drags him, dying, to the ravine, we discover the underlying abject. “There was this noise of foisting lava in his ears . . . yet no, it wasn’t the volcano, the world itself was bursting . . . catapulted into space, with himself falling through it all.”⁶² As the Consul is blown asunder and the world falls away, so too does the language. He endures his death throes alone and, in one huge, rambling, decaying paragraph, we tumble from Kashmir and the Himalayas to mountains in Mexico with Hugh and Yvonne by his side, then a jungle with the voices of friends and a shrieking ambulance, before seeing “a million tanks . . . ten million burning bodies, falling, into a forest, falling—”⁶³ And just as that sentence ends with a hyphen rather than a full-stop, the following sentence decays into an ellipsis. Finally, a dead dog is tossed after him down the ravine, and, as Vice observes, “on the last page the novel has transformed itself into a ‘keep off the grass’ sign.”⁶⁴

The image of the dog tossed after the Consul may appear to be just a final act of degradation and humiliation for the Consul to endure, and in a sense it is. In the context of the whole novel though, it serves as an exclamation point after constant imagery aligning the Consul with lowly animals. As Patrick A. McCarthy explains, “[t]he pariah dogs play a complex role in the novel, their relationship to the Consul changing according to circumstances.”⁶⁵ However, when this conflation is approached from the carnivalesque perspective, the Consul-animal nexus is purely a source of degradation. As Bakhtin explains in *Rabelais and His World*, the “transformation of the human element into an animal one . . . is, as we know, one of the most ancient grotesque forms.”⁶⁶

This notion is expanded upon by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, with particular emphasis on the role of the pig and “its relation to ‘low’ discourses, the body and the fair.”⁶⁷ Stallybrass and White contend that animals—especially low animals—are intrinsically linked to the lower classes in medieval carnival. Superficially, given the “focal symbolic place at the fair (and in the carnival)”⁶⁸ that Stallybrass and White describe the pig as occupying, this could appear to be a classic inversion—low temporarily made high—comfortably accommodated by the carnivalesque genre. However, their deeper examination of the role of animals in carnival is far more compatible with Kristeva’s abject than Bakhtin’s carnivalesque. Stallybrass and White identify animals in carnival as representative of the “Other” which helps to identify and reinforce “the boundaries between high and low, human and animal, domestic and savage, polite and vulgar.”⁶⁹ Just as the trained carnival animals that Stallybrass and White describe dancing, smoking pipes, and drinking beer simul-

taneously threaten and re-affirm the boundary between human and animal by transgressing it from low to high,⁷⁰ Lowry's drunken Consul enters the abject territory between the two states by transgressing it in the other direction, high to low, via degradation that is purely downward.

This Consul-animal link is present right from the novel's epigraphs from Sophocles and Bunyan—especially Bunyan: “gladly would I have been in the condition of the dog or horse, for I knew they had no soul to perish.” The Consul is most often aligned with pariah dogs, the strays of the town stalking him everywhere, even to his destruction. But he is also linked with other animals such as spiders, goats, and horses. One horse in particular—with the number seven branded on its rump—tramples Yvonne to death as a direct result of the Consul's actions.

In an illustration of the far-greater depth shown to be present in the novel by a Kristevan-abject approach, the following scene rises from mere description to powerful parable. Here, Hugh and Yvonne have left the Consul drunk at home and gone for a horse-ride around the edge of the town. But the horses they hired came with a whole brood of foals, as well as a dog:

the foals, which perhaps were not fully aware that a road was a means of getting somewhere and not, like a field, something to roll on or eat, kept straying into the undergrowth on either hand. Then the mares whinnied after them anxiously and they scrambled back again. Presently the mares grew tired of whinnying, so in a way he had learned Hugh whistled instead. He had pledged to guard the foals but actually the dog was guarding all of them. . . . It was certainly hard to reconcile this dog with the pariahs one saw in town, those dreadful creatures that seemed to shadow his brother everywhere.

“You do sound astonishingly like a horse,” Yvonne said suddenly.⁷¹

When the novel is approached from a carnivalesque perspective, this phrase could even read as a slight against Hugh, comparing him to a horse. When read through a lens of the abject, however, this extract becomes much more powerful. Through his alignment with low animals, the Consul creeps into this scene that appears, at first, to be between Yvonne and Hugh alone. The moment one gets a glimpse of the Consul, as one does through the abject, this apparently mundane section of prose becomes highly charged with a prophetic and disastrous undertone.

This scene can now be easily unpacked as an analogy of the terror of regressing from a paternal symbolic state to a maternal semiotic state: the true terror one confronts when faced with abjection. The foals, standing in

for the Consul, are yet to understand that in order to participate meaningfully in the world, one needs to obey its norms—that is, approaching the road with the social wisdom one can only attain from engagement with the paternal. Though when they stray from the road, they are not just playing and exploring; rather, they are tempted, like the Consul, to embrace abjection and flirt with the snakes in the long grass.

Also illuminated by the abject is the scene employed by Arac to demonstrate reduced or carnival laughter. Arac analyses a scene in which, a year after the Consul's death, his friend Jacques Laruelle plays a "game of divination, in which you open a book at random and squeeze the fortuitous lines for significance" with a book of Elizabethan plays which once belonged to the Consul.⁷² The page Laruelle turns to is "a comic scene in stage-Dutch": "Ick sal you wat suggesten, Hans. Dis skip, dat comen from Candy, is als vol, by God's sacrament, van sugar, almonds, cambrick, and alle dingen, towsand, towsand ding." Laruelle feels this is unsatisfactory so he tries again and divines a more pertinent quote: "Cut is the branch."⁷³ In a carnivalesque reading such as Arac's, the main interest of this scene is the "reduced laughter" in our response to Jacques Laruelle's "brooding meditation" and his effective cheating of the game of divination. When this scene is approached from the perspective of abjection, it resonates with great depth.

Abjection is immediately present in both form and theme. On a formal level, the reader is again pushed away from the text. We are confronted with nonsense, but even within that nonsense—that non-language—there are words we recognise and we cannot distance ourselves from it completely. We pick up "Candy," "almonds," "sugar," "God's sacrament." Suddenly, it sounds almost like the English of an outsider. It could be pidgin English, like we've already heard another character speak to Laruelle, or it could be the slurs of a drunk—Laruelle is, after all, sitting in a bar searching for a phrase in a game with a dead drunk.

At first reading, the stage-Dutch phrase seems to sit somewhere between the comprehensible and the incomprehensible. If the whole phrase were complete nonsense, we would immediately reject it, but we cannot push it away so quickly as we recognise some of the words. The language is left there, struggling for a place, neither subject nor object yet possessing a sense of weight and meaning. Laruelle makes the decision to completely reject the phrase and try again with another page—we should expect nothing less as, throughout the novel, Laruelle is a character of stable identity, easily defined amid the abject chaos of the Consul's life and the confusion of the Mexican fiesta.

This abjecting language is ostensibly accommodated in the carni-

valesque through Bakhtin's language theories such as heteroglossia and polyphony. But White observes that Lowry, like many other modern authors, "recuperate[s] the use of polyglossia so as to reinforce the authority of high languages . . . the cacophony of voices indicates not a robust debunking of powerful groups but a chaos of competing voices, a dissonant wailing within some twentieth-century necropolis."⁷⁴ When the novel is understood as an encounter with the abject, that heteroglossic cacophony is not forced to resolve but is, rather, allowed to ring out in its own terrifying dissonance. Like so many other aspects of *Under the Volcano*—from its themes of death and its imagery of corpses, to its alignment of the protagonist with lowly animals, and its language and form that turn the reader away from the text—it is through a framework of abjection that the novel's many languages and competing voices are most easily accommodated.

"And yet, in these times of dreary crisis, what is the point of emphasizing the horror of being?"⁷⁵

Approaching *Under the Volcano* from the perspective of Kristeva's abject circumvents the difficulties posed by a carnivalesque interpretation. The abject seeks no redemption. It is wilfully distanced by laughter. It does not strive to make sense of social orders, nor contrive relational changes to reflect a temporarily inverted sense of the world. The abject unscrews the "nuts and bolts" described by Arac⁷⁶ and allows Lowry's work to collapse into the beautiful, horrifying mess it truly is, evocative of the drunkenness that lies at the heart of the novel. It is that drunkenness, and drunkenness only, that holds this novel together. To fully appreciate it, one must approach it from as near to drunk as one can be, and that position is abjection. This essay, however, has only scratched the surface of what a Kristevan abject reading can reveal of Lowry's novel.

Furthermore, *Under the Volcano* is hardly unique in twentieth-century literature for being pushed, unwillingly, toward the carnivalesque while naturally sliding toward abjection. Much modern literature that currently struggles to find a generic framework from which to be approached could be easily accommodated within an abject framework. The abject's ability to address both the philosophy as well as the aesthetics of a text could make it a particularly powerful weapon in the post-postmodernist's fight to return meaning and values to literature. In light of Terry Eagleton's claims (somewhat evocative of Laruelle's comment in chapter one of *Under the Volcano* regarding the loss of a single life against the backdrop of World War II) that the horrors of the twentieth century have almost fatally undermined the literary genre of tragedy,⁷⁷ the abject could be deployed to approach texts as

varied as Albert Camus' *The Outsider*, Günter Grass' Danzig trilogy, Roberto Bolaño's *2666*, Bret Easton-Ellis' *American Psycho*, Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones*, Christos Tsiolkas' *Dead Europe*, or the Thomas Cromwell Trilogy by Hilary Mantel (to take some obvious examples). Kristeva's complex, psychoanalytically-informed approach to literature and the *self* can easily accommodate a range of approaches to the questions of identity and subjectivity.

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NOTES

¹ Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Modern Classics, 1977), 245.

² Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2003), 287.

³ English translation: "Avoid that your children destroy it."

⁴ Sue Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 191.

⁵ Sue Vice, "The *Volcano* of a Postmodern Lowry," in *Swinging the Maelstrom: New Perspectives on Malcolm Lowry*, ed. Sherrill Grace (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992) 130.

⁶ Patrick A. McCarthy, *Forests of Symbols: World, Text and Self in Malcolm Lowry's Fiction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 77.

⁷ McCarthy, *Forests of Symbols*, 64.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 7.

¹² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 124.

¹³ Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin*, 152.

¹⁴ Allon White, *Carnival, Hysteria, and Writing: Collected Essays and Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 148.

¹⁵ Jonathan Arac, "The Form of Carnival in *Under the Volcano*," *PMLA* 92, no. 3 (1977): 488.

¹⁶ White, *Carnival, Hysteria, and Writing*, 147.

- ¹⁷ Sherrill E. Grace, *The Voyage that Never Ends: Malcolm Lowry's Fiction* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1982), 58.
- ¹⁸ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 107.
- ¹⁹ Lowry, *Under the Volcano*, 10.
- ²⁰ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 108–20.
- ²¹ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 124.
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 125.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 123.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 127.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1982) 1. All italics in quotations are from the cited texts, unless stated otherwise.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 10–11.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 3–4.
- ³² Megan Becker-Leckrone, *Julia Kristeva and Literary Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 35.
- ³³ Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin*, 163.
- ³⁴ Julia Kristeva, “Extract from *Revolution in Poetic Language*,” in *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 27–92.
- ³⁵ Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 33.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.
- ³⁷ Lowry, *Under the Volcano*, 10.
- ³⁸ David K. Danow, *The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 35.
- ³⁹ White, *Carnival, Hysteria, and Writing*, 147–48.
- ⁴⁰ Grace, *The Voyage that Never Ends*, 42.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 41.
- ⁴² Lowry, *Under the Volcano*, 11.
- ⁴³ The Austrian Archduke Maximilian and his wife Carlota were emperor and empress of Mexico from 1864–67. In 1867, Maximilian was executed by Republican revolutionaries and Carlota returned to Europe.
- ⁴⁴ Lowry, *Under the Volcano*, 27.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

- ⁴⁷ Whether the Consul and Yvonne are formally separated is a grey area for the characters. See Lowry, *Under the Volcano*, 118.
- ⁴⁸ Perhaps more appropriate would be as a political allegory for European involvement in Mexico—the kind of allegorical/symbolic interpretation from which Bakhtin sort to liberate the work of Rabelais.
- ⁴⁹ Lowry, *Under the Volcano*, 375.
- ⁵⁰ Lowry's ellipsis.
- ⁵¹ Lowry, *Under the Volcano*, 48.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 244.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 376.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 377. English translation: "Do you like this garden that is yours? Avoid that your children destroy it." The Spanish text, as I have included in the body of this essay, reflects the "corrected" punctuation of the phrase. Earlier editions of the novel contain a punctuation error in the Spanish phrase (an unnecessary question mark). For more information, see the "Malcolm Lowry Project" website: http://www.otago.ac.nz/englishlinguistics/english/lowry/content/parent_frameset.html
- ⁵⁵ Lowry, *Under the Volcano*, 339–41.
- ⁵⁶ Arac, "Form of Carnival," 481.
- ⁵⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 140.
- ⁵⁸ Arac, "Form of Carnival," 481.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 141.
- ⁶¹ Lowry, *Under the Volcano*, 373–74.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 375.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, 376.
- ⁶⁴ Vice, "The *Volcano* of a Postmodern Lowry," 123.
- ⁶⁵ McCarthy, *Forests of Symbols*, 55.
- ⁶⁶ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 316.
- ⁶⁷ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), 44.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁷¹ Lowry, *Under the Volcano*, 110.
- ⁷² Arac, "Form of Carnival," 482.
- ⁷³ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁴ White, *Carnival, Hysteria, and Writing*, 146.

⁷⁵ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 208.

⁷⁶ Arac, "Form of Carnival," 488.

⁷⁷ Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 64.