

Postcards

Ferris Wheels, Faust, and Forms of Influence in Malcolm Lowry and Graham Greene¹

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Abstract

Ferris Wheels seem to fascinate film-directors – notably Carol Reed in *The Third Man* (1949), based on Graham Greene’s story and script. Though Ferris Wheels figure less conspicuously in twentieth-century novels, Malcolm Lowry provides an exception in *Under the Volcano* (1947), a novel also comparable to *The Third Man* in other ways. One explanation might be that Greene simply drew on Lowry’s example when developing his film-script (later published as a novella) – work begun very shortly after *Under the Volcano* had appeared. More plausibly, each writer might be understood to have responded separately, though similarly, to the unique pressures of their age. Identifying how these stresses were represented in their work, through cognate symbologies, may suggest some productive ways of reading historically.

Keywords: Graham Greene, Malcolm Lowry, Ferris Wheels, *film noir*

Carol Reed begins his *film noir*, *The Third Man* (1949) – based on Graham Greene’s story – with a bleak survey of the ruins of Vienna, devastated during the Second World War. Yet within the film’s first minute – before its central figure, Holly Martins (Joseph Cotton), has even arrived in the city – the camera has picked out an apparently undamaged structure, still looming, intact, over Vienna’s shattered buildings and rubble-strewn streets. This surviving landmark is the Wiener Riesenrad:

the huge Ferris Wheel, 65 metres tall, which dominates the skyline above the city's Prater fairground. Its striking early appearance anticipates the film's most celebrated scene: the sequence in which Holly discovers the full truth about Harry Lime (Orson Welles), during a precipitous circuit around the Wheel. As it rises and descends over the ruined fairground, Lime blandly acknowledges his callous role in Vienna's post-war penicillin racket. Like the Devil tempting Christ in a high place, he also tries to interest Holly – his oldest friend, and once his greatest admirer – in the money to be made from murder: justifying himself, or trying to, by denigrating peace, democracy, religious faith, and brotherly love. For Holly, “a world of easy friendship, hero-worship, confidence that had begun twenty years before” seems now, Greene records, to have “certainly come to an end” (*The Third Man* 82).

Film-makers surveyed by the British Film Institute in 1999 voted *The Third Man* the best British movie ever, confirming the long influence in the cinema of Reed's hauntingly *noir* vision. The location of that shattering conversation between Orson Welles and Joseph Cotton seems to have maintained a particular appeal – the Prater Wheel figuring prominently in later films such as *Scorpio* (1973), the James Bond movie *The Living Daylights* (1987), *Woman in Gold* (2015), and several others. Maybe Ferris Wheels naturally attract filmic imagination, offering in their shape and movement obvious analogues for the mechanism of cinema itself – for those large reels of film which rotated steadily, until replaced by digital technology, around both movie cameras and projectors. In other ways, a Ferris Wheel might offer a handy device to writers, too, as *The Third Man* illustrates: as a context, or metaphor, for lives or expectations turned upside down. This potential is not much exploited in twentieth-century fiction, though Malcolm Lowry provides a notable exception in *Under the Volcano* (1947) – a novel nearly contemporary with *The Third Man*, and intriguingly comparable, in a range of ways to be explored in this essay.

Comparisons concerned are all the more striking as *Under the Volcano* is in many respects so *dissimilar*: very different in structure and style from Greene's story for the film – published in 1950 as a novella – and a continent apart in setting. In *The Third Man*, James Joyce's

influence figures only as an improbable joke, whereas clear comparisons with *Ulysses* (1922) are suggested by Lowry's near-confinement of *Under the Volcano* to a single day, and by the stream-of-consciousness tactics through which it is represented. Consistently with Greene's original, Reed's vision could hardly be darker, favouring nocturnal locations in ruined Vienna streets often illumined only fitfully, if at all. In Lowry's Mexican setting, on the other hand, characters are often overwhelmed by the colourful, exotic life that swirls around them, or just by the heat and brilliance of the sun. Intriguingly, though, a Ferris Wheel figures just as early in Lowry's novel – and in due course just as significantly – as it does in *The Third Man*. A few pages into *Under the Volcano*, Laruelle – appropriately, maybe, a film director – notices “the slowly revolving Ferris wheel, already lit up, in the square of Quauhnahuac”: the town where Lowry's alcoholic protagonist, Firmin, spends the carnival “Day of the Dead,” his own last day alive (16). As in *The Third Man*, this early glimpse anticipates a climactic scene, in a middle chapter of the novel. This describes Firmin imprudently taking a drunken ride on “the Great Wheel . . . MÁQUINA INFERNAL . . . the huge looping-the-loop machine . . . [which] suggested some huge evil spirit, screaming in its lonely hell” (224). Trapped as if “in a little confession box,” he “zoomed upwards . . . hung for a moment upside down at the top . . . then . . . crashed down” (225). Scary at the time, this upside-down moment has fatal consequences. All Firmin's personal belongings tumble out of his pockets. At the end of the novel, his failure to produce identity papers or a passport proves crucial, facilitating the trumped-up accusations a fascist militia use to condemn and murder him.

In every sense a turning point, this scene on the Ferris Wheel appears “undoubtedly symbolic,” even to Firmin himself (225). In one way, it is emblematic of the structure Lowry establishes for his novel. Shortly after its completion, in an explanatory letter to his publisher, he compared its division into twelve chapters – each roughly corresponding to an hour of Firmin's last day – to hearing “a clock slowly striking midnight for Faust” (*Selected Letters* 66). The inexorable rotation of the Great Wheel reduplicates the ominous circling of clock-hands towards the “lonely hell” of Firmin's doomed last hour. The way the “infernally

machine' zoomed upwards . . . then . . . crashed down" is also typical of conflicting trajectories – towards heights and depths, or even heaven and hell – which are inscribed from the beginning in the topography of *Under the Volcano* and repeatedly highlighted for its readers. Almost like a travelogue, the opening pages describe how, above Quauhnahuac, "the two volcanoes, Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl, rose clear and magnificent into the sunset" (11). Though at an altitude of six thousand feet itself, Quauhnahuac is situated, literally, under volcanoes, and the attention of its citizens, and of the novel's characters and readers, is regularly drawn upwards, towards their remote, snowy summits. But the town also straddles a *barranca*: a canyon, envisaged by Firmin as

a frightful cleft . . . mighty gulf . . . cutting right through the town, right, indeed, through the country, in places a two-hundred-foot sheer drop into what pretended to be a churlish river during the rainy season, but which . . . resume[d] its normal role of . . . gigantic jakes. (134)

Divided so sharply between height and depth, shining summit and gigantic toilet ("jakes"), this volcanic landscape extends Faustian themes, mentioned in Lowry's explanatory letter, which are accentuated from the first page of *Under the Volcano*. One of its epigraphs is taken from Goethe's *Faust* (1808, 1832): copious further references to this work and to Christopher Marlowe's version of the legend – Laruelle even contemplates a film treatment – offer a series of analogues for the divided nature of Lowry's protagonist. Like Faust – aspiring towards infinite wisdom and understanding, though by means of a pact with the Devil – Firmin is a cultured, intelligent man, familiar with centuries of art and literature, yet hell-bent on darkness and self-destruction, even while still in full view of the light. His entrapment in "the eternal horror of opposites" (134), and their inscription in the precipitous landscape of Quauhnahuac, figure particularly starkly in the novel's conclusion. This describes the accidental death of Firmin's wife Yvonne almost simultaneous with his own. After momentary thoughts of hellfire, and of "the cars at the fair . . . whirling around her . . . the Ferris Wheel," Yvonne feels herself "gathered upwards and borne towards the stars" – like other creatures Lowry has described "up, up, up, soaring," as "might indeed the

human soul from the jaws of death” (335; 337; 144). Firmin’s murder is described comparably, though more sombrely. Shot by the militiamen, he sees “above him for a moment the shape of Popocatepetl, plumed with emerald snow and drenched with brilliance,” and even dreams fleetingly of reaching its summit (373). This last illusion of ascent, though, is simultaneous with his dying body being hurled downwards into the gulf or “gigantic jakes” of the *barranca*.

In Greene’s novella version of *The Third Man*, Faust is directly referred to only once: when Holly contrasts Lime’s covert criminality with the flagrant evil of “Marlowe’s devils,” who “wore squibs attached to their tails” (104). Greene and Reed nevertheless develop Faustian topographies readily comparable to Lowry’s. “Eternal opposites” are highlighted by an early sequence in the film, improvised by Paul Hörbiger, playing the hall porter in Lime’s apartment block. Struggling to convince Holly that his friend is no longer to be found there, the porter explains that a fatal accident may recently have despatched him “to hell” – a suggestion accompanied by a vigorous gesture *upwards* – or possibly, he adds, now pointing down, “to heaven.” Lime may not yet be in hell, as he merely faked his death in that accident, but *The Third Man* presents him from the beginning as a creature quite literally of the underworld. Another early scene shows him being buried in Vienna’s central cemetery – or so Holly and the police still suppose. When the policeman, Calloway (Trevor Howard), realises the truth, he reflects that “we should have dug deeper than the grave,” suggesting Lime may belong to some Hades even darker and more abysmal than the tomb.

It is not one that contains him for long. In a scene as celebrated as that sequence on the Prater Wheel, a shaft of light picks him out of the stygian darkness of a Vienna street, revealing him to Holly – and to cinema audiences – as if he has truly returned from an underworld, or from the dead. Almost immediately, he vanishes again – as if “with a puff of smoke,” Calloway suggests, like one of Marlowe’s devils – disappearing once more into an underworld: Vienna’s immense sewer-system, stretching for miles beneath its streets. It offers only a temporary refuge. Eventually cornered there by Holly and the police, Lime dies underground, in darkness. One of the film’s last sequences shows him

struggling in vain to regain the upper world – his fingers stretching out, helplessly, through ventilation holes in a manhole-cover he no longer has the strength to lift.

Like Firmin, in other words, Lime perishes in the depths of a “mighty gulf” or “gigantic jakes” – a sewer, actual rather than unofficial – while still aspiring upwards, towards the light or freedom of the upper air. These endings, along with other similarities, suggest a straightforward question about *Under the Volcano* and *The Third Man*. Why should these fictional works, despite obvious dissimilarities, so coincide in their Faustian topographies, as well as in the prominent role each accords to a Ferris Wheel? An obvious answer – of a kind long favoured by literary criticism – is that the resemblances might not be coincidental, but simply a consequence of Greene following Lowry’s example. Further evidence for this possibility might even be offered by Greene himself. Understandably, authors are seldom inclined – or able – to give exact accounts of their creative processes, or how these might have originated. Yet in the case of *The Third Man*, Greene is surprisingly precise. In a letter written on 30 September 1947, he describes the inspiration for *The Third Man* occurring two days earlier, shortly after 10 pm, in a toilet in central London. “Drank beer till about 10,” this letter reports,

& then I still felt restless, so I walked all up Piccadilly & back, went back in a gent’s in Brick Street, & suddenly in the gent’s, I saw the three characters, the beginning, the middle & the end, & in some ways all the ideas I had – the first sentence of the thriller about the dead Harry who wasn’t dead, the risen-from-the-dead story, & the one the other day in the train – all seem to come together. (*Graham Greene: A Life in Letters*, 146)

Under the Volcano was published in September 1947. Greene might naturally have been interested by its setting in Mexico – a location he had used himself in *The Power and the Glory* (1939) and in *The Lawless Roads* (1939) – and might well have read it early, by the end of the month. Knowledge of Lowry’s themes and devices – that mighty gulf and Ferris Wheel – might have contributed to his initial vision of *The Third Man* on the 28th, extending a few months later, perhaps unconsciously, into his work on the filmscript, begun in February 1948. This possibility even explains the unusual location of his moment of inspiration. Where else

could the influence of *barrancas*, gulfs and sewers flow into imagination more readily than in a jakes, or gents?

Unfortunately for this convenient explanation, it is contradicted by several factors in the gestation of *The Third Man*. Greene did record his admiration for Lowry, but only in the 1970s, and it is unlikely that he had read *Under the Volcano* before the late 1950s: the copy he owned was a 1958 edition. Even if a review, or a literary acquaintance, had offered him some early familiarity with Lowry's work, a stimulus stronger than any literary influence seems to have been offered by Greene's encounter with the "smashed dreary city of Vienna," as he calls it in *The Third Man* (13). As Norman Sherry's biography explains, it was not until he arrived there, early in 1948 – sent by the producer, Alexander Korda, to develop the film script – that he learned about the role of the sewers in the city's recent history. As Greene's letters likewise record, it was only while familiarising himself with Vienna's landmarks that he realised the potential of "the fantastic central cemetery," or, probably, of "the Great Wheel revolving slowly over the foundations of merry-go-rounds" in the ruined Prater park (Sherry 244; Greene *The Third Man* 14). Much as he may have intuited his story's structure or moral vision in that Brick Street toilet, it seems clear that Greene's scenery and symbology were mostly worked out, as it were, on location. He was far from alone, after all, in finding inspiration in that location. Like Hörbiger's adroit inversion of heaven and hell, Orson Welles's celebrated *ad lib* about the cuckoo clock was added only in the course of filming – improvised while shooting that scene set on the Prater Wheel.

Though perhaps seeming to discard an interesting possibility, suspending speculation about Greene's indebtedness to Lowry opens up an altogether more rewarding mode of interpretation. This recognises that similarities between *Under the Volcano* and *The Third Man* need not indicate literary influence, but may be better understood as cognate responses urged upon Greene and Lowry, separately, by the unique pressures of the war and its aftermath. Obviously inescapable at the time, these stresses can account for most of the features discussed above. Authors working during the Second World War, as Lowry did when completing *Under the Volcano* – or in the years immediately following,

when Greene wrote *The Third Man* – encountered not just one day of the dead, but many: days and days of death and destruction, throughout Europe and beyond. As the camera pans across apparently limitless ruins, at the start of *The Third Man*, the voiceover reminds audiences how ubiquitously the war's destruction had been experienced, pointing out that "Vienna doesn't really look any worse than a lot of other European cities." Division of its shattered streets into ill-assorted US, British, Free French and Soviet Zones nevertheless specifically highlights – alongside effects of the war just ended – fears of the Cold War which already seemed its inevitable successor. A grim reminder of this new conflict's possible outcome also appears in the novella when Holly's lasting disillusion with Lime is compared to the poisoning of a city by atomic warfare.

Recent history and its likely consequences are also extensively represented in *Under the Volcano*. References to the First World War, the Spanish Civil War, and the Munich agreement figure throughout, alongside longer accounts of recent history and characters' arguments about its "worthless stupid course" (311). The novel's opening chapter, set in November 1939, and its conclusion – describing Firmin's murder at the end of the Day of the Dead a year earlier – also strongly anticipate the destruction of the Second World War. Though Firmin struggles to direct his dying vision upwards, towards the volcanoes' shining summits, his thoughts soon subside instead into images of "villages catapulted into space . . . the inconceivable pandemonium of a million tanks . . . the blazing of ten million burning bodies" (375-376). On the next page, the novel's last, Lowry moves like Greene beyond the war itself and towards concerns with the precarious nuclear age it had fostered. This final page extends warnings about eviction from a garden which have figured throughout – Lowry explaining to his publisher that "the allegory is that of the Garden of Eden, the Garden representing the world, from which we ourselves run perhaps slightly more danger of being ejected than when I wrote the book" (*Selected Letters* 66).

As that Biblical reference to Eden suggests, the Second World War impacted on imagination not only through its immense physical destruction, or fears of worse to follow, but also as a profound religious or

moral shock. Some of this was registered even in its early years. In 1941, assessing “Books and the War” in *Penguin New Writing*, Stephen Spender was already commenting on “humanity with its faith in moral systems and religions shaken, at the mercy of the demonic forces of a machinery which it has itself invoked” (III, 145). He describes fascism in similar terms – as “a deliberately chosen life of damnation . . . macabre diabolism . . . the angels and the demons of an earlier time, have simply been suppressed in our consciousnesses” (V, 129; VII, 130). By the end of the war – following revelations about the concentration camps and the use of atomic weapons in 1945 – a sense of moral failure in the face of “demonic forces” was still harder to resist. Scepticisms about democracy, religious faith, and brotherly love – so blithely expressed by Lime – were inevitably shared more widely. So was Holly’s judgement that a world of confidence and friendship might simply have “come to an end.” As if through some universally drunken movement around a “Great Wheel” or “infernal machine,” power and morality, heaven and hell, readily seemed, by 1945, to have been turned upside down. As well as helping to explain comparable tactics and symbologies in *Under the Volcano* and *The Third Man*, this general sense of moral inversion – even “deliberately chosen . . . damnation” – might be identified at work more widely in contemporary imagination, and in German fiction, as well as in literature in English. In a novel published in the same year as Lowry’s, *Doctor Faustus* (1947), Thomas Mann explores “historical conditions . . . shattering events of the time” through another figure who descends into darkness and self-destruction – like Firmin, or Europe itself – despite full knowledge of centuries of art and culture (168).

Spender indicates a further troubling aspect of the war’s impact – also implied by one of the darkest sequences of *The Third Man* – when he mentions forces “suppressed in our consciousnesses.” Some sinister reciprocity with an underworld is already implied by Lime’s apparent return from the dead and renewed contact with Holly. But the sequel is still more disturbing. Pursuing Lime down into Vienna’s sewers reveals to Holly an immense, disorienting subterranean domain – its existence hitherto unsuspected, and its scale bewildering. “What a strange world unknown to most of us lies under our feet,” the narrator of Greene’s

novella reflects, adding that “we live above a cavernous land of waterfalls and rushing rivers, where tides ebb and flow as in the world above . . . everywhere in the darkness is the sound of falling and rushing water” (115-116). Rushing tides and waters in this cavernous underworld amplify its murky vitality, sinisterly subtending the life and topography of the “world above.” Innocent Holly’s descent into this disturbing domain is emblematic, in one way, of the world’s plunge into the darkness of the war years. But this “subterranean ‘world of dream and death’,” as one critic calls it, also hints that the “diabolism” unleashed in those years might not have been altogether foreign to civilisation (Thomas 10). It may have been merely “suppressed” within it – or within depths of the mind itself – everlastingly ebbing and flowing, malevolent and inexpugable, beneath the supposedly rational orders of the daylight “world above.”

No wonder *The Third Man* appealed so immediately to its first audiences, projecting the nerves of their age – even the powers of the unconscious – into such compelling metaphors on the screen. Nevertheless, while the sewers, Ferris Wheels and demonic figures in *The Third Man* – or in *Under the Volcano* – encapsulated contemporary stresses so effectively, neither fiction, obviously, should be seen as altogether unusual in finding images appropriate to the life of its times. Metaphors and images in almost any work of literature are likely to be historically specific to some extent, shaped at least in part by the particularities of the contemporary world. Cedric Watts has recently offered ways in which the processes involved – not always much analysed in literary criticism – might be further formalised and discussed. Recalling that “in chemistry, a saturated solution may precipitate solids,” Watts suggests that in novels, likewise, “a replete theme may precipitate an object, an image or a name . . . the abstract becomes concrete” (65). He illustrates this possibility of “thematic precipitation” through reference to Joseph Conrad’s fiction: a highlighted pair of spectacles in *Nostromo* (1904), for example, naturally arising from and emphasising a theme of short-sightedness more widely evident in the novel.

Watts’ “precipitation” could be compared with Bertolt Brecht’s concept of “*gestus*” – the use in drama of an object or gesture which encapsulates and makes palpable a nexus of ideas, tensions or attitudes

(200). Though both Watts and Brecht are mostly concerned with the tactics of individual works, the modes of analysis they offer might be productively extended towards the imagination and literary symbology of entire periods. In the fiction of the first decades of the twentieth century, for example, suffering or mistreated horses turn up repeatedly, in novels as otherwise diverse as Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907), D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1921), Lewis Grassic Gibbons' *A Scots Quair* (1932-1934), and indeed *Under the Volcano*. The example of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866) perhaps encouraged these repeated appearances. But they might also be understood as symptoms – or “precipitates” – of an age in which the machinery of modern technology steadily displaced older, friendlier, equine forms of transport and locomotion.

Reading in this way – attributing distinctive, recurrent images to social, political or historical influences – avoids the kind of naïve assumptions about literary borrowing this essay flirted with earlier. It allows, instead, Fredric Jameson's persuasive imperative, “Always historicize!” (9), to be applied not only to literary form – his principal concern – but more widely, identifying historically-activated “precipitations” in symbol, metaphor, and image, or even in areas of character or moral vision. It might also, reciprocally, contribute to fiction's illumination of history itself: even inviting an inversion of Jameson's mantra. In seeking to recover the significance of the past, “Always fictionalize!” might be worthwhile advice. Imagination as compelling as Lowry's, or Greene's, resists the risk that the Second World War – its “pandemonium of a million tanks . . . ten million burning bodies” – might fade, as the decades pass, towards mere statistics and anodyne historical report. Works such as *The Third Man* and *Under the Volcano* demonstrate how immediate its impact may remain – dramatised through the vision and emotion of beleaguered characters, the broken landscapes they inhabit, and the profound moral challenges they encounter. Firmin's plunge into that cloacal *barranca*, or Holly's into Vienna's sewers; Lime's re-appearance from stygian shadows, or his glib malice as the Great Wheel swings over the ruined city – all carry forward

a devastated darkness, instrumental for later generations' apprehension of history, heaven and hell.

Note:

ⁱ I'm very grateful to Michael Hill, of the Graham Greene Society, for information about Greene's reading and knowledge of Malcom Lowry, and to Niklas Salmose, of Linnaeus University, Växjö, for advice about cinematography.

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