PART FIVE
CANADA AND LATIN AMERICA: MALCOLM LOWRY
AND THE OTHER AS SYMBOLIC FIELD

Denn das Schöne ist nichts
als des Schrecklichen Anfang, den wir noch grade ertragen,
und wir bewundern es so, weil es gelassen verschmäht,
uns zu zerstören.
—Rainer Maria Rilke, “Die erste Elegie” (Duino Elegies, 4–5, lines 4–7)¹

CANADIAN TEXTS ADDRESS the same general issues as US American ones: Columbus and the conquest of the Americas, other historical events such as the Mexican Revolution, nature, gender, and so forth. Their sheer number and quality makes these texts essential objects of a study of North American perspectives on Latin America, and to place these chapters here means regarding them not only as a highlight of this study, but also as important intertexts for US American books of the last fifty years. At the same time, the books to be discussed fill in significant historical gaps of this study. Malcolm Lowry’s Under the Volcano, which is the main subject of this chapter, historically refers to the period leading to World War II and was published shortly after the end of the war. It shows North American and European visitors in Mexico at this ominous historic moment, and its mood is quite different from the texts referring to the postrevolutionary period of disillusionment, like Porter’s or Beals’s, but also from those referring to the 1950s, notably the escapist immersion into the Other we have seen in Kerouac’s On the Road. In Under the Volcano there is no escape. The next chapter begins with fictions under the shadow of the Vietnam War and the social uncertainties of the 1970s and after, similar to those US texts discussed in Chapters 6–10, but it continues into the beginning of the twenty-first century and thereby brings us virtually up to date.

Looking for a specific Canadian inter-American position involves overcoming the prejudice that Canadians are not interested in what goes on south of the Rio Grande/Río Bravo. On the occasion of Prime Minister Harper’s visit to some Latin American and Caribbean countries in the summer of 2007, the Toronto Globe and Mail quipped, “Every Canadian prime
minister discovers ‘Latin America’ and then forgets about it. Perhaps Stephen Harper will be different, although it’s hard to know why.” The writer continues to comment on the lack of interest and information and argues, “Canada’s foreign-policy interests are not seriously engaged in the hemisphere, except for a few issues in a few places. To describe Latin America [as Canada’s ‘back door’ is simply wrong” (Simpson A 15). In particular, for many Canadians it is the presence of the United States that seems to prevent a proper perspective on the countries further south. In the introduction to their collection Desde el invierno: veintitrés cuentos canadienses, Margaret Atwood and Graeme Gibson wrote, “When we look south (which we do rather often in Canada), our gaze is blocked by the United States. The same thing happens when Latin Americans gaze far enough to the north.”

Not surprisingly, the Canadian alterity discourse refers, first of all, to the United States. Beginning with the American Revolution, the exodus of American loyalists to Nova Scotia and other areas, and the defense of those British colonies that would later become part of Canada in the War of 1812, Canadian writers have developed often very critical perspectives on the neighbors to the south: their material, economic, and technological success and their form of government that was often seen as chaotic, and above all their expansionist tendencies. Sometimes, for instance in Margaret Atwood’s novel Surfacing, the destroyers of nature and of social coherence are called “Americans,” no matter what nationality they belong to: “they’re what’s in store for us, what we are turning into” (Surfacing, 129). This critique of US American materialism (not so much of the ecological as of the cultural destructiveness) resembles Latin American comments on the “moloch” of the North, for instance the Uruguayan essayist Enrique Rodó’s attack on US utilitarianism mentioned in Chapter 1. And again, as in Atwood’s well-known poem “Backdrop Addresses Cowboy,” the “American” is portrayed as a hyper-masculine invader of the more passive, receptive, feminine country beyond the border, “the space you desecrate/ as you pass through” (Selected Poems, 71), in this case the Canadian space.

As in many statements by Latin American authors, Canadians often see their country as “the better America” in danger of being overrun by the superior demographic, economic, and political power of the United States. Such asymmetrical relations have been thematized for instance in connection with NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement among the United States, Mexico, and Canada that was extolled as serving integration and pan-American unity but in fact highlighted the existing and persisting differences. “US, Mexican, and Canadian narratives have all as emerging literatures addressed the here/there, Old World/New World, problematic. Yet a postcolonial consciousness toward and into the twenty-first century may
increasingly view not only Europe but the US as an overwhelming presence” (Smorkaloff 92).

The lateness of Canadian nationhood and the comparatively weak self-perception as a nation have made it difficult for Canadian scholars to join the trend toward transnational hemispheric studies that are seen by many to be another form of US cultural imperialism. The problem is addressed in Winfried Siemerling and Sarah Phillips Casteel’s introduction to their excellent anthology *Canada and Its Americas*.3

There is a danger [. . .] that a defensive Canadian nationalism and self-protective instinct vis-à-vis the United States may inhibit the development of alternative paradigms of hemispheric American studies that Canadianists, with their historically weak nationalism and acute awareness of the imperial tendencies of the United States, are uniquely positioned to produce.

For indeed, it is crucial to note that the almost off-handed dismissal, on the part of many literary theorists, of the “nation” or the “nation-state” as a category of literary and cultural analysis remains problematic, despite all theoretical arguments against essentialisms, for literatures that had to fight under postcolonial circumstances for national status as late as the 1960s. Are not the projects of “Canadian literature” and “littérature québécoise,” for instance, on the verge of being remarginalized after having existed as fully institutionalized fields for only a few decades? (Siemerling and Casteel 10–11)

The contributors to *Canada and Its Americas* try to deal with this problem by exploring the possibility of “counter-worlding” (Leahy)4 the imperial culture, that is, by focusing on specific Canadian areas of attention such as Canadian multiculturalism, the trans-border history of dealing with African slavery, internal forms of center and margin (notably the position of Québec but also the situation of the First Nations), migration, and Canadian interaction with parts of Latin America, for instance the Caribbean. All in all, this emphasis on problems of the marginalized both in the theoretical and the analytical parts of the anthology provides Canadian perspectives for the new field of international and transnational hemispheric studies. However, as some of the contributors recognize and as David Leahy formulates it,

in characterizing the political-economic relationships between the US and Canada or Quebec as imperial/colonial dyads, I am flattening out or erasing the multiple ways that Canada and Quebec have been or are imperialist in their own right and participate in and benefit materially from the imperialistic aspects of Canadian and Québécois capital, from the profitability of our international agencies, or from our national and foreign policies—for example, vis-à-vis First Nations in Canada and Quebec, the alienation of peasants from
the land in Chad and the Yangtse Valley to the benefit of Canadian and Québécois corporate interests, or cheap labour from Jamaica or Trinidad. (Leahy 64)

The two chapters on Canadian texts try to consider this doubleness: the implication of the Canadian discourse on Latin America in a general and basically hegemonic Latinamericanism and the counter-discursive potential of literature in general and literature from a specifically Canadian perspective in particular.

An abundant number of Canadian literary texts deal with the—also inter-American—issue of US-Canada relations and perceptions. However, there also exists a significant body of texts on Latin American topics, encounters, and experiences, texts that bespeak a growing interest. The double issue of the journal Canadian Literature devoted to “Hispanic-Canadian Connections” as early as 1994 indicates this tendency, as does the anthology Compañeros: An Anthology of Writings about Latin America edited by Hugh Hazelton and Gary Geddes in 1990. Compañeros contains poems, short stories, and selections from novels and travel writing by eighty-seven authors. About half of the texts have been translated from French or Spanish; that is, they were written by Québécois or Hispano-Canadian authors, the latter a large and growing group due to the increasing number of people migrating north. Tendencies observed in both publications have continued since then. One is the role that immigrants and refugees from Latin America play in Canadian intellectual life. These writers figure prominently in both books, but I am not concerned with them, because their perspective on their countries of origin is necessarily different from what one might call the mainstream. Another is the strong interest that writers from Québec have taken in Latin America—not too surprising given the fact that their own province in terms of language is also some version of “Latin” America, and that their postcolonial views of center and periphery might find equivalents in Latin America proper. I exclude them here as well because what interests me most is the Anglo-Canadian as part and variant of a North American perspective.

Most obviously, and notwithstanding huge Canadian economic investments in Latin America, the Canadian discourse does not openly involve hegemonic thinking because it is part of the Canadian self-image that one is in about the same position of comparative weakness vis-à-vis the United States as, for instance, Mexico. Indeed, it might be this very position of solidarity that could subvert any claim to Anglo-Saxon superiority and make subject positions more complex. Thus, is there a specifically Canadian variety of interdiscursive tensions and ambiguities? I will begin with a novel that makes
Canadian remoteness from the field of action a constituent of the transformation of this field into a symbolic space.

In the field of inter-American literature, Canada has produced some heavyweight titles. Arguably the best novel set in Latin America and written by a non–Latin American author is Malcolm Lowry’s *Under the Volcano* (1947). It is certainly the best North American one, if one wants to regard Lowry as a Canadian writer although he was born in England and died there. *Under the Volcano* is one of the masterworks of twentieth-century world literature and one of the most complex late modernist texts. The protagonist’s fatal experiences in Mexico have a symbolic, that is, religious, philosophical, and political reach far beyond any simple representation of alterity. Yet the book contains descriptions of Mexican landscapes, towns, people, and customs from the point of view of *gringo* visitors that have led to some angry Mexican reactions. For instance, Lazlo Moussong, in his devastating critique of *Under the Volcano* as an artistic failure, argues that

in Lowry’s perception of Mexico, instead of values, we find unbearable weaknesses; heavy-handed distortions; excessively narrow compartmentalization; and, in the smug, petty, superficial way in which he views Mexico and its people, we discover the same point of view as is common among the thousands of North American ne’er-do-wells and European pensioners who settle in Cuernavaca and various other paradises and subsequently proceed to depict the immitigable mediocrity of their lives in exotic hues (217).6

Moussong does not proceed to exemplify these points, but instead quarrels with Lowry’s use of symbols, his characters and so forth, that is, the book’s qualities that have granted it its present international status.7 It is exactly these general qualities that have made other Mexican writers canonize Lowry—“San Malcolm,” as Óscar Mata has called him. The renowned author and critic Hernán Lara Zavala has devoted a lengthy essay to *Under the Volcano*. He comments on Lowry’s life, alcohol addiction, literary influences, and aesthetics, and the complex, multilayered symbolism of the novel, a “magnificent and monumental” work that also “describes the intimate tragedy of a whole country, Mexico, by way of the personal experience of an artist like Malcolm Lowry.”8 Lowry is said to have identified with this tragedy, but Lara Zavala neither explains what is tragic about his country, presumably because he thinks this is obvious, nor does he describe at length in which manner Lowry makes use of Mexican settings, characters, and customs. This simply does not appear to be problematic. But what about the “Mexican local colour heaped on in shovelfuls” (qtd. in Day 316) that publisher Cape’s reader objected to in his report on the manuscript of the
novel? Although an in-depth and general analysis of this much-discussed novel would far exceed the scope of my study and although, on the other hand, a reduction of the text to the category of a novel about Mexico would be like reading *Moby-Dick* as a novel about whales, some comments on Lowry’s use of Mexican material are appropriate.9

*Under the Volcano* is a novel about the fall of one man, Geoffrey Firmin, the British consul in the Mexican city of Quauhnahuac, or Cuernavaca.10 Geoffrey’s death at the end of the book occurs at the same hour as that of Yvonne, his estranged wife who has just come back to try a fresh start of their relationship. The twelve chapters of the novel give us the last twelve hours in the life of the Consul on the Day of the Dead, November 2, 1938, enriched by many flashbacks and digressions, and, additionally, information about the activities of those closest to him. Apart from Yvonne, these are his much younger half-brother Hugh and Geoffrey’s French boyhood friend Jacques Laruelle, both of whom have betrayed Geoffrey by having slept with Yvonne. The events of Chapters 2–12 are presented from the point of view of Geoffrey, Hugh, or Yvonne. Laruelle is the focalizing figure in Chapter 1, set on November 2, 1939. This chapter presents his and the local physician Dr. Vigil’s memories of the catastrophe that took place exactly one year ago, gives a general introduction to the setting, and sets the tone, especially when Laruelle reads a letter from Geoffrey in which he desperately implores Yvonne to come back, a letter he never posted. The central cause of Geoffrey’s decline and the breakup of his marriage is his progressive alcoholism. During much of his last hours, the Consul is drunk on pulque, tequila, and especially mescal, at times so suffering from delirium tremens that, for instance, he has to ask his brother to shave him. One might say that Geoffrey quite intentionally drinks himself to death, although he is factually killed by the bullets of rightist police officers who take him for a spy.

There is hardly any dramatic outer action in the course of Geoffrey’s last day, before the end, that is. A summary of Chapters 2–12 requires but little space: Yvonne and the Consul meet for the first time after her return to Cuernavaca and walk to their home; they try to make love, but Geoffrey proves impotent and continues drinking. Hugh and Yvonne meet, have an outing on horseback through a pastoral landscape, and visit the desolate area of Maximilian’s palace, which reminds them of the tragic fates of the emperor and his surviving wife Carlotta. In his garden, Geoffrey talks to his American neighbor and is then visited by Dr. Vigil, who invites Geoffrey, Hugh, and Yvonne to his hometown Guanajuato, an invitation rejected by Geoffrey. Hugh shaves the Consul and discovers Geoffrey’s Cabbalistic and alchemical books. Geoffrey and Yvonne visit Laruelle’s place; Laruelle quarrels with the Consul about his treatment of Yvonne, and they then visit the
fair, where Geoffrey steps on the Ferris wheel, is turned upside down, and loses his identity because his papers fall from his pockets. They take the bus to Tomalín and see a wounded and dying Indian lying in the road, but submit to the hint of the locals that they must not help him because this might implicate them in the affair. At the bull ring, Hugh wrestles a bull. While Yvonne and Hugh take a swim, Geoffrey drinks and after a quarrel, sets out for Parián. Yvonne and Hugh are looking for him in the forest; Yvonne hurries in the direction of the bar El Farolito in a beginning storm and is trampled to death by a runaway horse. During the same hour, the Consul reads Yvonne’s letters, has sex with a prostitute, gets into an argument with police officers and some local officials, apparently fascist Sinarquistas who accuse him of being a communist and spy, and is eventually shot and thrown into a ravine, one of Cuernavaca’s barrancas.

The bulk of the novel consists of conversations, memories, dreams, hallucinations, and long passages in which the focalizing character experiences his or her surroundings. All of the characters are guilty: Geoffrey for his inability to love and to accept Yvonne’s love, for his—as it often appears, willful—inability to overcome his addiction, but also for his inactivity, his acedia; for his Faustian readiness to surrender to his devils, to accept as fact that he is already in hell and wants to fathom its depths of despair; for his search for the knowledge of the abyss; additionally, also for having perhaps been involved in the war crime of literally sending captured German submarine officers “to hell” by not preventing (or worse) the stokers of the British ship ironically named Samaritan from burning them alive in the furnaces. Yvonne is guilty for having left Geoffrey (who had of course given her sufficient cause), for her failure to save him, and for her infidelities. Hugh is guilty for having betrayed his half-brother with Yvonne, for failing to save both Geoffrey and Yvonne because he is absent during the decisive moments, but also for his failures as a leftist intellectual who lacks seriousness and true devotion, and as a partisan of the Spanish loyalists—he has missed the decisive final Battle of the Ebro as he misses the scene when Yvonne gets killed. Laruelle is guilty, too, for having betrayed his friend and for his inability to create the films he wants to make and that need to be made. As in an ancient tragedy, they come together on the stage of Mexico and meet their death or their final failure.

This means that for the main characters, the Other is not Mexico or the Mexicans but the foreign, the uncanny side of the self. Not only are they guilty: they feel guilty, and it is this part intellectual, part emotional estrangement from their better selves that makes them suffer. Undoubtedly, this suffering is self-centered, even if it acquires Faustian dimensions as with the Consul. Unlike Rumaker’s “Gringos,” hardly ever do they project the
strange part of themselves upon the Mexican Other; rather, they blame each other, but also themselves. They are or feel unable to do anything for the suffering local people around them. The dying Indian’s appeal, “‘Compañero’” (Volcano, 290), remains without answer. It is obvious that they are not ready or able to accept the claim of the Levinasian Other, which also means the divine, absolute Other revealing itself through the face of the other human being. If, according to some religious beliefs, despair and sin can be defined as remoteness from the Supreme Being, then this means that their Other has been replaced by their selves, that is, the devil within. This is what they are trying to come to terms with when they realize that failing to attend to the Other will cost them their essential identity, as in Hugh’s obsessive, “idiotic syllogism: I am losing the Battle of the Ebro, I am also losing Yvonne, therefore Yvonne is . . .” (280). When the old fiddler bends over the dying Consul and uses the same “‘Compañero,’” (414), there may be a hint that, if outer alterity can be overcome, so, too, the inner estrangement, but the end is and must remain inconclusive.

This looks as if Moussong were right in his assessment. There are a gringa—Yvonne is American—and three gringos in the looser sense, all of them falling or failing, all of them caught in their own private problems. However, as Lowry points out in his famous forty-page letter to his publisher Jonathan Cape, “the four main characters [are] intended, in one of the book’s meanings, to be aspects of the same man, or the human spirit, and two of them, Hugh and the Consul, more obviously are” (Volcano, 10). That is, their “mediocrity” is an intentional representativeness, Geoffrey and his entourage are Everyman; or, as the author puts it, “This novel then is concerned principally, in Edmund Wilson’s words (speaking of Gogol), with the forces in man which cause him to be terrified of himself. It is also concerned with the guilt of man, with his remorse, with his ceaseless struggling toward the light under the weight of the past, and with his doom” (17). On this quasi-allegorical level, even the minor Mexican characters have a symbolic function. For instance, the drunken horseman whom Laruelle observes in Chapter 1 “is by implication the first appearance of the Consul himself as a symbol of mankind” (21).

In spite of the considerable degree of psychological realism in the depiction of the Consul as an alcoholic truth-seeker, Lowry does not attempt to write a realistic novel, nor, in spite of a number of pertinent observations the main characters make, does he attempt to present a picture of contemporary Mexican reality. Instead, as he puts it in his letter, Mexico appears as a symbolic realm:

The scene is Mexico, the meeting place, according to some, of mankind itself [. . .], the age-old arena of racial and political conflicts of every nature, and
where a colourful native people of genius have a religion that we can roughly describe as one of death, so that it is a good place [. . .] to set our drama of a man’s struggle between the powers of darkness and light. Its geographical remoteness from us, as well as the closeness of its problems to our own, will assist the tragedy each in its own way. We can see it as the world itself, or the Garden of Eden, or both at once. Or we can see it as a kind of timeless symbol of the world on which we can place the Garden of Eden, the Tower of Babel and indeed anything else we please. It is paradisal: it is unquestionably infernal. (19)

Mexico is a projection surface. Although this in itself might be linked to discursive patterns I have discussed in this book, and although this is not to say that Lowry is exempt from the North American or European assumptions about Latin America, an analysis of the novel in terms of its subscribing to a dominant Latinamericanist discourse would not be particularly rewarding.

What Lowry provides, instead, is a demonstration of the relativity of discourses, of the fuzzy edges of meaning construction. Chapter 10 of the novel is a very good example. Here, the Consul is sitting in the toilet of a bar, reading a tourist brochure on the city of Tlaxcala, a text giving topographical and historical information from which we get lengthy quotes, interrupted by fragments of a conversation between Hugh and Yvonne overheard by drunk Geoffrey. They recapitulate the scene with the dying Indian by the road, Hugh putting it into a political context, arguing from a communist position, explaining Cárdenas’s policy vis-à-vis the agricultural cooperatives and the fascist danger, linking it to the conquest and a long history of exploitation, whereas Yvonne tries to de-politicize the incident, turning it into a sheer accident of a drunken peon. The Consul from his toilet position chimes in with dissenting opinions. The whole scene amounts to a cacophonic concert of voices giving their diverging opinions of things Mexican: its social and political situation and its history.

All of the characters involved in this scene (with the exception of the barkeeper Cervantes) are foreigners or, as we may assume in the case of the writer of the travel folder, cater to the tastes of foreigners; all have assimilated portions of prevalent discursive constructions of Mexico. And in each case, other factors such as the Consul’s drunken hallucinations, the idea of treason that connects the historic Tlaxcalans (who sided with Cortés) with the treacherous couple Hugh and Yvonne and makes Geoffrey angry and jealous, the personal situations of Yvonne and Hugh informing their political opinions, color their versions of these discursive constructions. The Other cannot be grasped by a single approach, Lowry seems to say, but he has no intention of introducing anything like a superior view. Instead, the whole scene is symbolic of the confusion and downhill movement of all the
main characters, but also of the country and the world at large, and part of an overall web of symbolic levels. To claim that the characters establish a coherent albeit reductionist picture of Mexico would miss the point of this work, which stands in the tradition of modernism and of symbolist American Renaissance writing Lowry alludes to so often: “In its frantic attempt to distil meaning out of this chaos the symbolistic work may resort to layers upon layers of learned historical and cultural allusions only to make us realize as in Moby-Dick, or in Under the Volcano, for that matter, that all these strata of literary, religious, political, or philosophical sense do not finally cohere among themselves” (Friedl 187).

This symbolic and symbolist approach applies even to the physical and political reality of Mexico, which I will take as my main example. Lowry uses spatial references that point to several levels of meaning: (seemingly) objective, cartographic space; the symbolic space between heaven and hell that demarcates the scene of the novel as a whole; the discursive space that is the result of societal claims and descriptions, in this case the political, historical, and cultural orderings of Mexico; and the geographies created in the characters’ minds. The book begins with a detached authorial—or celestial—view from outer space, gradually zooming in on the place of the first scene, the conversation between Laruelle and Dr. Vigil at the Hotel Casino de la Selva:

Two mountain chains traverse the republic roughly from north to south, forming between them a number of valleys and plateaux. Overlooking one of these valleys, which is dominated by two volcanoes, lies, six thousand feet above sea-level, the town of Quauhnahuanac. It is situated well south of the Tropic of Cancer, to be exact, on the nineteenth parallel, in about the same latitude as the Revillagigedo Islands to the west in the Pacific, or very much farther west, the southernmost tip of Hawaii—and as the port of Tzucox to the east on the Atlantic seaboard of Yucatan near the border of British Honduras, or very much farther east, the town of Juggernaut, in India, on the Bay of Bengal.

The walls of the town, which is built on a hill, are high, the streets and lanes tortuous and broken, the roads winding. A fine American-style highway leads in from the north but is lost in its narrow streets and comes out a goat track. Quauhnahuanac possesses eighteen churches and fifty-seven cantinas. It also boasts a golf course and no fewer than four hundred swimming-pools, public and private, filled with the water that ceaselessly pours down from the mountains, and many splendid hotels.

The Hotel Casino de la Selva stands on a slightly higher hill just outside the town, near the railway station. It is built far back from the main highway and surrounded by gardens and terraces which command a spacious view in
Canada and Latin America

every direction. Palatial, a certain air of desolate splendour pervades it. For it is no longer a Casino. You may not even dice for drinks in the bar. The ghosts of ruined gamblers haunt it. [. . .]

Toward sunset on the Day of the Dead in November 1939, two men in white flannels sat on the main terrace of the Casino drinking anís. [. . .] As the processions winding from the cemetery down the hillside behind the hotel came closer the plangent sounds of their chanting were borne to the two men; they turned to watch the mourners, a little later to be visible only as the melancholy lights of their candles, circling among the distant trussed cornstalks. Dr Arturo Díaz Vigil pushed the bottle of Anís del Mono over to M. Jacques Laruelle, who now was leaning forward intently. (Volcano, 49–50)

This shifting of the perspective from the, as it were, objective and remote to the subjective, attentive, immediate is handled with consummate skill. The seemingly neutral positioning of the town on a global map raises the question of why precisely these points of reference are mentioned. Mountain ranges and valleys belong to physical geography but will later find echoes in the more symbolic mountains and valleys of memory and longing. What appears as innocuous turns out to be endowed with deeper meaning. Revilla-gigedo Islands and Tzucox simply signify the westernmost and easternmost points of Mexico on the nineteenth parallel of latitude, that is, territorial, political inscriptions of space, yet Hawaii is Yvonne’s birthplace, and India that of the Consul, and therefore have strong personal connotations. “Juggernaut,” however, evokes not so much a town but an overwhelming force that will crush those in its path, like Geoffrey Firmin.14

These places are part of a wider, globe-encircling band that comprises the area in the Pacific where the Samaritan destroyed the German submarine, and those northern parts of the Indian subcontinent where Geoffrey grew up, Kashmir, and where his father disappeared in search of a holy mountain, the Himalayas. The lateral positioning of the town is later supplemented by an additional line connecting it to the north, that is, Canada or, more precisely, Greater Vancouver where much of the novel was written, an area of salvation that the Consul dreams of in his unposted letter to Yvonne: “some northern country, of mountains and hills and blue water” (82), a lost utopia where lightning is seen from afar, but no thunder heard, as Geoffrey writes, and where he owns an island as Yvonne tells Hugh in Chapter 4. Canada forms a symbolic alternative to heaven and hell as represented by the Mexican topography and functions as a place of mental and emotional escape. However, there can be no discernible Canadian perspective on Mexico because Canada itself is only a projection or at best a memory of two of the characters.
There are other geographical rays connecting the town with the world. The first extends to Spain—Granada, where Geoffrey and Yvonne first met, and the Spain of the Spanish Civil War that is coming to a close between the two dates of the novel. The word “republic” rather than “country” in the very first sentence refers to Mexico in its fragile postrevolutionary state, certainly not an “empire” as under the reign of unfortunate Maximilian. However, it refers also to the Spanish Republic that was supported by Mexico and whose cause was lost while Hugh was still dreaming of fighting for it. Another such ray extends from Quauhnahuac/Cuernavaca to England, where orphaned Geoffrey was raised in a family of alcoholics. Again, the personal connections have geopolitical connotations: the action of the novel takes place at a time when the British Empire is still in existence, and countries mentioned—Canada, India, British Honduras—are parts of it, that is of an old order that is soon to collapse. Ironically, Firmin is a British ex-consul because Britain had severed diplomatic ties after the Mexican president Cárdenas had nationalized the petroleum industry in an effort to stabilize the Mexican economy and to put the national resources into the hands of the Mexican people.

Thus, Mexico is at the center of the world. Its physical topography is the result of the geological forces bringing about the Americas and provides the material for making it a natural paradise but also a natural inferno. Its political geography is to a large degree the result of outside forces: American and British economic interests, and German fascism and its local offshoots trying to gain influence and to subvert both the Cárdenas government and the role of the Anglo-Saxon powers on the eve of World War II. This political situation forms a backdrop for the private story and is symbolized by the Indian on horseback who appears several times and who is obviously one of Cárdenas’s messengers carrying money to the agrarian cooperatives under the ejido system. In Chapter 7, the messenger is robbed and severely wounded, presumably by anti-Cárdenas forces, and the rest of his money is stolen by a disgusting petty thief, a pelado, the representative of Mexicans exploiting other Mexicans, while Geoffrey, Hugh, and Yvonne are watching helplessly. Before the rightist Sinarquistas kill the Consul, he has released the messenger’s horse, which then tramples Yvonne to death, the final element of this symbolic concatenation. Of course, one might say that Geoffrey’s uselessness as a constantly intoxicated Consul helps the antagonistic forces to gain supremacy. Just as the political interacts with the personal, so do both levels interact with the higher forces of destruction symbolized by man and his institutions just as much as by exterior nature. As Laruelle observes, again linking physical topography with the political and the metaphysical, “It was still raining, out of season, over Mexico, the dark waters rising
outside to engulf his own *zacuali* in the Calle Nicaragua, his useless tower against the coming of the second flood” (75).

The same mixture of factuality on the one hand, and fictionalizing and psychologizing fact-bending and symbolizing on the other, that we have seen applied to Mexico as a whole also occurs on the local level. Quauhnahuac is made into a biblical or Puritan “city upon the hill” in a way that is hardly warranted by the actual topography of Cuernavaca, and the walls encircling this ideal place are made to appear as high as they might at best have been in the historical past (Ackerley and Large, Malcolm Lowry Project). The evocation of the town’s ideality is undercut by the curious, ironic mixture of contrastive elements—“eighteen churches and fifty-seven *cantinas*”—that evaporates the echoes of a travel brochure by the ironic “boasts a golf course,” and particularly by hints of the decay and neglect of the streets and roads that are supposed to facilitate communication and progress. This impression carries over into the smallest topographical entity, the hotel, where the signs of hopelessness accumulate. The town is a mental construction even where we still hear the authorial narrator. This tone corresponds to the mood of the people there: the mourning Mexican citizens in their procession and the depressed foreign visitor. Yet throughout the book, such correspondences work both ways. If Mexico stands metonymically for the world, Quauhnahuac stands for all of Mexico and the individual for all humanity. Therefore, Laruelle’s reflections confirm the value of the individual in the face of anonymous mass warfare: “One would have thought the horrors of the present would have swallowed [the events of last year] 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” (51).

There are other geographies on a smaller scale than the mapping of the opening pages, for instance the arrangement of the towns alluded to, that are symbolically associated with betrayal (Tlaxcala), hell (Oaxaca), and the possibility of salvation (Guanajuato). It is important to notice that the symbolic range of the centrally located town of Quauhnahuac/Cuernavaca, where the novel is set, fluctuates between the Garden of Eden and the Inferno, in a sense collapsing the two.

Notwithstanding his weakness, his lack of commitment—“He had few emotions about the war, save that it was bad” (55)—Laruelle is a keen observer, and what he observes is the disquieting effect of the unfamiliar but also the familiarity of the Other:

The leaves of cacti attracted with their freshness; green trees shot by evening sunlight might have been weeping willows tossing in the gusty wind which
had sprung up; a lake of yellow sunlight appeared in the distance below pretty hills like loaves. But there was something baleful now about the evening. Black clouds plunged up to the south. The sun poured molten glass on the fields. The volcanoes seemed terrifying in the wild sunset. [. . .] A sense of fear had possessed him again, a sense of being, after all these years, and on his last day here, still a stranger. Four years, almost five, and he still felt like a wanderer on another planet. [. . .]

How continually, how startlingly, the landscape changed! Now the fields were full of stones: there was a row of dead trees. An abandoned plough, silhouetted against the sky, raised its arms to heaven in mute supplication; another planet, he reflected again, a strange planet where, if you looked a little farther, beyond the Tres Marias, you would find every sort of landscape at once, the Cotswolds, Windermere, New Hampshire, the meadows of the Eure-et-Loire, even the grey dunes of Cheshire, even the Sahara, a planet upon which, in the twinkling of an eye, you could change climates, and, if you cared to think so, in the crossing of a highway, three civilizations; but beautiful, there was no denying its beauty, fatal or cleansing as it happened to be, the beauty of the Earthly Paradise itself. (55–56)

This is a wonderful example of our dealing with the Other.15 Alterity is subject to individual perception and projection and entails the double process of attempted familiarization and, on the other hand, rejection, alienating. Mexican landscape in places resembles what Laruelle knows well, but the series of comparisons emerges into what by its sheer, sublime extension remains unknowable: the Sahara. From here it is only one further step to make it extraterrestrial, totally alien. This double direction of familiarizing and alienating is stylistically marked by oxymoronic phrases like “plunged up” and metaphorically visualized by the two “arms” of the plough, a common and familiar object here anthropomorphized and pitied for having been “abandoned” in a world of increasing and hostile strangeness. There is the opposition of green and black, but even the pretty and familiar, the nourishing (“loaves,” “plough”) is subject to a destructive process—“[t]he sun poured molten glass on the fields”—that in turn, like the country as a whole, can be stunningly beautiful. The description in its antonymic evocation or naming of hell-fire and paradise is representative for the novel as a whole in its continuous double movement between these two poles and in its continuous ambiguity, its metaphoric condensations creating, paradoxically, semantic openness and constant fluctuation.

Mexico, then, is a “place” in de Certeau’s terms only on the simplest level of observation and description: where there is a volcano there cannot be a city. Almost immediately, though, it becomes a “space” that “occurs as the
effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it” (de Certeau 117). Where de Certeau is thinking more of discursive, that is historical, political, and social inscriptions of space, Mexico is here seen also and primarily as a projection of individual minds that may be more or less oriented by discursive traditions but are themselves part of an overall multilayered symbolic order, or rather a multiply connected rhizomatic process. The mountain chains form “between them a number of valleys and plateaux” (Volcano, 49)—indeed, some of the “thousand plateaus” described in Deleuze and Guattari’s study. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the volcanoes. Popocatépetl and Iztaccíhuatl are the tragic lovers in indigenous myths and thus symbolize Geoffrey and Yvonne’s fate. Although they are static topographical elements of “place,” in the novel they seem to shift about, hide behind each other, and, although this is completely unrealistic from a location in Cuernavaca, in the perceiver’s eye change size and proximity: “Popocatepetl towered through the window, its immense flanks partly hidden by rolling thunderheads; its peak blocking the sky, it appeared almost right overhead, the barranca, the Farolito, directly beneath it. Under the volcano!” (380). The Consul promptly remembers that Tartarus is located right under Mount Aetna and, once again, realizes that he is in hell and that his hopes of ascending Popocatépetl and thus divine heights will remain in vain.

There is no space here to point out similar processes connected with symbols like the garden, the barranca, the bars, the wheel, water and thirst, and so on. It is the multiple interconnectedness of the text, including its pervasive intertextuality both on the authorial and the figural level, that prevents the novel from becoming “a hideous and intolerable allegory” (Melville, Moby-Dick, 205). It is only on the symbolic level that an appearance like the following escapes what Moussong has called “unbearable weaknesses” and “heavy-handed distortions” in Lowry’s perception of Mexico:

Bent double, groaning with the weight, an old lame Indian was carrying on his back, by means of a strap looped over his forehead, another poor Indian, yet older and more decrepit than himself. He carried the older man and his crutches, trembling in every limb under this weight of the past, he carried both their burdens. (Volcano, 321)16

This, we may assume, is the epitome of what Lara Zavala has referred to as Lowry’s identification with “the intimate tragedy of a whole country, Mexico.”