

“My dear Anton Myrer”: A Late Lowry Letter

Introduced, transcribed, and annotated by Sherrill Grace

I

When the American writer Anton Myrer (1922-93) wrote to Malcolm Lowry on 29 January 1957, he did so to praise *Under the Volcano* and, “however belatedly,” to thank Lowry for his earlier praise of *Evil Under the Sun* (1951), Myrer’s first novel. Myrer could not have known the desperate state of Lowry’s life between 1954, when he and Margerie left Dollarton, and the winter of 1957, by which time both Lowrys had been in and out of hospital several times and Malcolm had only a few months to live. On 17 March 1957, Malcolm answered Myrer’s letter, but Myrer delayed writing back . . . until it was too late.

Shortly after hearing of Malcolm’s death on 27 June 1957, Myrer wrote to Margerie. In this 30 July 1957 letter he sent much more than respectful condolences; he wrote again about the importance of *Under the Volcano*, and he described his deep regret at not acknowledging Lowry’s letter to him:

I can’t tell you what a delight it was to receive that letter from him this spring, with its gentle exhortation—and the magnificent and generous offer of the use of the cabin, which I was planning to write in thanks for (though unfortunately we couldn’t have availed ourselves of it)—and then procrastinated over, to my immense sorrow. And now of course I wish to God I *had* written—if only so that I were not oppressed with such a sense of dereliction.¹

Myrer’s procrastination, over writing the first letter, as well as this reply, is reminiscent of Malcolm’s hesitation in 1919 over approaching Conrad Aiken. Indeed, it is perhaps not an exaggeration to suggest that Lowry’s impact on Myrer’s psyche resembled Aiken’s on Lowry. Of course, Lowry had already had just that kind of impact on David Markson, who in so many ways is Lowry’s spiritual son (see Markson, and *Sursum Corda* II, 398 and 974).

The mutual admiration of Myrer and Lowry goes back to 1951, when Lowry read *Evil Under the Sun* (probably in pre-publication copy) for Random House. Shortly after that, Myrer read *Under the Volcano* for the first time and was deeply impressed, even awed, by its quality. However, the two men never met. If they had, I can imagine that they would have forged a friendship carried out (as was Lowry's habit) by letter. According to Patricia Myrer, the writer's widow, the younger man "literally worshipped Lowry's work," and he wrote an article on Lowry for the 1960 Lowry issue of *Les Lettres nouvelles* in which he claimed that *Under the Volcano* was as great and important as *Ulysses*.² Certainly Lowry found much to praise in *Evil Under the Sun*, and it is noteworthy that in 1957 he remembered the book so positively.

There are two Lowry letters to Albert Erskine, both written in November 1951 (see *Sursum Corda* II, 480 and 481), in which Lowry speaks about *Evil Under the Sun*. It would seem that Erskine, who was with Random House at this time, must have sent the book to Lowry sometime earlier in 1951 and asked for his opinion of it. Unfortunately, however, I have not located an incoming letter from Erskine with references to Myrer or his book; nor have I found a separate assessment of *Evil Under the Sun* by Lowry.³ Until the discovery of the letter to Myrer published here, Lowry's only surviving comments are in the two November 1951 letters to Erskine. In the 24 November 1951 letter, Lowry states that he loves the novel, although he finds Myrer "stylistically often Joyced in his own petard." He goes on to describe his reaction as

divided a bit between what I feel you ought to say to *him*, & conviction it deserves wide audience (not much doubt—perhaps all too little—it will get that!)—but make no mistake, it *does* deserve sincere salutations. Indeed it makes me feel like Father Mapple. And it has sent me on several long swims already. (*Sursum Corda* II, 458)

Whether by word of mouth—Erskine reporting directly to Myrer—or by means of a written assessment, Myrer learned about Lowry's comments. In Myrer's 29 January 1957 letter to Lowry (published below), he refers to Lowry's warning that there was too much Joycean stylistics in *Evil Under the Sun*, and he insists that he paid attention to Lowry's "Mapple-esque caveat." In his role as Father Mapple (the sermonizing whaler in *Moby-Dick*), Lowry offered the younger writer precisely the kind of advice he should have had with *Ultramarine*, though in Lowry's case the obvious influences are Conrad Aiken and T.S. Eliot. Despite Lowry's advice, and Myrer's claim to have cut "most . . . of the Joycean hawsers," *Evil Under the Sun* was panned in the *New York Times* (16 December 1951. D17).

Myrer's hero, Paul Kittering, is a would-be artist recently returned to the States after active service during World War II, but he is unable to escape his memories of war or to recover his lost innocence. In a montage style, combining stream-of-consciousness with quotations from newspapers, Myrer creates a hero and a narrative that inevitably recall Joyce and—as Lowry must surely have noticed—Fitzgerald. Moreover, the somewhat heavy-handed use of Freudian concepts fails to anchor or explain Kittering's psychological state. *Evil Under the Sun*, for all its biblical allusiveness, was Myrer's first novel and it is derivative. Nevertheless, Lowry clearly found it a powerful enough treatment of a young man's struggle with the demons of war and social injustice to praise it to Erskine and to remember it in 1957. Myrer's passionate critique of war, waste, and human cruelty, and his belief in individual dignity were, after all, shared by Lowry.

Anton Myrer, who was born in Massachusetts, began his university education at Harvard before enlisting with the American Marines and serving in Guam during World War II. After being wounded, he returned home to complete his degree in 1947. Several of his early novels draw upon his war experiences: for example, *Evil Under the Sun*, *The Big War* (1957), and *The Violent Shore* (1961). *The Big War* was made into the 1996 film *In Love and War*, directed by Richard Attenborough and starring Sandra Bullock and Chris O'Donnell. Although *Evil Under the Sun* was not well-received by critics, *Once an Eagle* (1968) and *The Last Convertible* (1978) were best-sellers. They were widely translated and both were adapted for television.

The two letters that follow were sent to me in the winter of 1998 by Mrs Myrer; in going through her late husband's papers, she had found the 1994 letter to Anton Myrer, in which I inquired about his having any Lowry letters for inclusion in *Sursum Corda*, and she gave me permission to publish her husband's letter with Lowry's reply. Myrer's is a clean typescript carbon copy, unsigned, and Lowry's is a classic autograph letter (see Figure 1) with marginalia, superscriptions, cancellations, and lengthy parentheses.⁴ This brief correspondence opens a precious window onto the last months of Lowry's life and reveals his capacity to respond to younger writers with wit, sensitivity, and encouragement. It also demonstrates the nature of Lowry's impact on discerning writers like Myrer, who valued Lowry's serious exploration of human fate, his complex intertextuality, and his eloquent prose. Myrer's praise, together with David Markson's, are reminders that Lowry was in some ways a writer's writer, while at the same time addressing issues that continue to be of urgent importance to general readers.

II

Anton Myrer to Malcolm Lowry:

Hotel Albert
65 University Place
New York 3, N.Y.
29 January 1957

Dear Mr. Lowry:

It has been quite a while since my good friend Weldon Kees sang the praises of *UNDER THE VOLCANO* and urged me in no faltering terms to make its acquaintance.¹ In the interim I have read it four times—and on each occasion have been more overwhelmed than before by its power and eloquence and the dazzling complexity of its thematic structure. It is now my very vehement contention (for better or worse) that *UNDER THE VOLCANO* is one of the half-dozen really important novels of the half-century—a worthy companion to *ULYSSES* and *A LA RECHERCHE* and the Tietjens novels and a few others.² My only regret is that I didn't get around to writing you long before this: I was deterred by—what? sense of inadequacy? awe? fear of sounding good and mawkish (a clear and present danger, granted) . . . ? Something of all of them, I suppose. Veneration makes for poor conversing.—Well: I've been on the point of writing times enough. And once in San Francisco four of us, fired up by an animated and eulogistic discussion of Firmin's *Folly*, seriously debated a wild hegira up the coast to Dollarton—a pilgrimage of a sort; but we foundered on the mechanical aspects of the business. The human condition, alas. . .

But since I am writing (however belatedly), I want to thank you for taking the time and trouble to read my first novel [*Evil Under the Sun*]; and for your kind words of encouragement (and warning!—for which I'm immensely grateful—I paid heed to the Mapple-esque caveat and have subsequently severed many (most I should say) of the Joycean hawsers that you extended to me via Albert Erskine, anent the more riotous excesses of *EVIL*

1 Weldon Kees (1914-55) was an American poet, painter, and musician. Kees disappeared in 1955, possibly by committing suicide, but he had wanted to start life anew in Mexico by following the example of Hart Crane and Malcolm Lowry.

2 James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-32), and Ford Madox Ford's *No More Parades* novels (*Some Do Not*, 1924, *No More Parades*, 1925, *A Man Could Stand Up*, 1926, and *Last Post*, 1928), also known as the Christopher Tietjens tetralogy.

UNDER THE SUN. After much time and numerous vicissitudes (any number can play) Appleton-Century is bringing out another one (with perhaps more enthusiasm than it deserves) this spring; and I have taken the liberty of having them send you a copy.³ I can truthfully say there is no current writer whose opinion I value more highly. And should you be moved to read it I would be deeply interested in your reaction. (A mighty understatement indeed.)

I think you might be pleased to know how staunch a following (small but vociferous, as it should be) you have here on these shores—where complexity and eloquence are not always honored. (Not ‘arf.) Many of us were consequently keenly disappointed that the collection of short stories was not brought out—especially after they’d been more or less officially announced.⁴ Sigbjørn and his confrères deserve a broader and more permanent voice than that provided by the Rexall chain. In fact, while belaboring this subject—and this is in great measure the immediate occasion for this letter—there is an editor here who is extremely interested in your work (largely as a result of my own wildly vehement exhortations) and who would, I know, be very seriously interested in the collection of stories and in the novel on which you are currently embarked. I am aware that you probably have a prior commitment for the latter—but it strikes me that a more enthusiastic editorial response than you enjoyed with the short stories might interest you.⁵ Speaking for myself—and in some confidence—my own experience with Random House was an extremely unhappy one, in many spheres; they are, I think, far too concerned with a parade of gag books (fave lingua) and lit’ry lights (1000-watt brilliance, etc.) to care much about vigorously supporting a novelist of—dare I say it?—more purposeful mien...

3 *The Big War* appeared in 1957 with Appelton, Century, Crofts. No copy exists in Lowry’s library with the Lowry Archive in Special Collections, the University of British Columbia.

4 *Hear us O Lord from heaven thy dwelling place* was prepared for publication by Margerie Lowry and published in 1961. How Myrer knew about the stories is not clear, but Robert Giroux, Editor-in-Chief of Harcourt, Brace, had seen Lowry’s draft manuscript for *Hear us O Lord* as early as 1951, and both Harold Matson and Albert Erskine had seen or read the manuscript. In his 11 December 1951 letter to Harold Matson, Giroux thanked him for letting him read Lowry’s stories, and he praised the manuscript.

5 Whether directly from Albert Erskine, which seems unlikely, or from Harold Matson, or some other source, Myrer seems to have heard about Lowry’s work for his long-term contract with Random House and that, by 1954, the publisher had not been enthusiastic with Lowry’s results; see *Sursum Corda* II, letters 600, 601, and 602.

I earnestly hope you won't see this as an intrusion on your own affairs or concerns. And God knows it is not a promise of anything. It is only that in this barathron of venality and mixed motives that publishing has for the most part become, the state of the serious writer is a parlous one indeed; and I felt you might be interested in knowing you have another sheet to windward—and one you could readily avail yourself of, should events incline you toward the doing.

In any event, there it is. My wife joins me in warm and admiring regards; and in the fervent hope that the new novel will be all that you (and a good many others) desire it to be.

Sincerely,

[Anton Myrer]

Malcolm Lowry to Anton Myrer:

The White Cottage*	(*born 1750 & still going wrong)
Ripe Near Lewes +	(+where Tom Payne wrote the
Sussex	Rights of Man & Bloody Mary
	burned six Protestants in the Post
	Office, opposite the Bus Stop) ⁶

17 March 1957

My dear Anton Myrer:

How extraordinarily good to hear from you, yourself to write me, and heartwarming your words. I often wondered how you were faring and how it was with your work and inquired after both from Albert Erskine when I was last in New York a couple of years ago.⁷ He has a very high opinion of your work still, whether he is still your publisher or not. As for Random House, and likewise in the same confidence, I somewhat share your feelings: they are a bit like Milan Cathedral, very impressive from outside, but when you

⁶ Lewes is a picturesque eleventh century county town in East Sussex on the river Ouse. It was a short bus ride from Ripe to Lewes, where the Lowrys borrowed library books and did general shopping. Thomas Paine (1737-1809), although born and raised in England, is also closely associated with the United States, where he lived for many years and where he died. He wrote on economics, political thought and international relations, and was a supporter of the American Revolution. Paine lived in Lewes from 1768-74; he wrote and published *The Case of the Officers of the Excise* (1772) during these years. *Rights of Man*, published in two parts in 1791 and 1792, is Paine's response to the French Revolution. Between 1555 and 1557, seventeen Protestants were burned at the stake in Lewes, near the Town Hall, by Catholic counter-Reformers and supporters of "Bloody Mary" Stuart, the

get inside it's a bit chilly and abstract, I fear, something like losing one's way inside a whale. Not that I have been inside, to tell the truth, that is to say, the publishers' offices themselves or not for twenty years (not counting the numerous times my work has been doubtless wafted both in & out), and I don't think I would be there in any other respect but for Albert Erskine himself, to whom I am devoted, who was with Reynal & Hitchcock, and whom, via a useless process of complicated surrogation, I followed there, after the former's merger with Harcourt, Brace. Nonetheless Random House are technically still my publishers, &, indeed some years ago gave me a very generous contract which freed me from Want, though not finally from Fear, for, finding that I could not deliver the works in the specified time, I took advantage of a clause in the contract by which, if I cared once more to risk Want, I could take as much time as I liked, with the result that I got free of fear too, for the most part, & incidentally from Want too, but also owe them a great deal of work, not to mention money by proxy or in kind, while as for the work, that's beginning to bear some resemblance to Milan cathedral also, in size, if not in beauty.⁸ (Meantime Knopf is bringing out *Volcano* in Vintage – sic – books.)⁹ {Thank you nonetheless for your mention of a possible publishing sheet to windward, however. Heaven knows I may need one before I'm through but at present—though my loyalty is constrained thither by Albert Erskine—I do have a very real obligation to Random H, though without any clear knowledge what their reaction has been or will be, or even whether their habit is to read books at all, let alone mine, or whether they even can read, with the exception of Albert & Robert Haas.}¹⁰

Catholic Queen of Scots (1542-87) and mother of James VI of Scots and later of England. Far from being “bloody” or murderous, Mary tried hard to reach compromises with the obdurate Protestant reformer John Knox; she became a pawn in the religious and political struggles of the period. After her arrival in England from France in 1561, Mary spent much of her time (1570-84) under arrest; she was executed by Elizabeth I in 1587.

- 7 Lowry and Erskine met briefly at a party at David Markson's during Malcolm's last visit to New York in September 1954. The Lowrys stayed with the Marksons for a week before sailing to Italy on September 12th. See *Sursum Corda* II, letter 749.
- 8 Lowry's break with Random House and Erskine was not the easy matter he makes it out to be here. For the correspondence between Lowry and Erskine and the background to the break, see *Sursum Corda* II, letters 594, 595, 598, 600, 601, and 603.
- 9 Lowry signed a contract with Knopf for the reprint of *Under the Volcano* in March 1957, and the Vintage paperback appeared in February 1958. See *Sursum Corda* II, letters 698 and 705.
- 10 Robert Haas (1880-1964), a vice-president of Random House, supported the major contract awarded Lowry in 1952; see *Sursum Corda* II, letter 521.

I have extremely vivid and pleasant memories of my first reading of *Evil under the Sun*, poignant too because it brings back memories also of a house in Canada we built ourselves in Dollarton, on pikes, down an inlet (our first one was burned down) where it was extremely difficult to imagine anything but good under the sun, or would have been, were we not constantly threatened with being turned out because we had to pay no rent, & also by an expanding oil-civilization, even so as near Paradise as one could get without being singed: the house is still there, we lent it to a Canadian teacher & his wife,¹¹ but we don't know when we shall ever+ be going back, though half the time I think of nothing else & the other half write about being there. {+This appears to be written in some North country dialect: I can only hope it's true, what some grammarians say, that literary merit has nothing to do with literacy—is this a common malaise of writers? I have to look words like 'thither' up in the dictionary: sometimes twice, & even then I don't get the idea.} If I knew noone was using it, you could have it yourselves rent free, if you ever planned a holiday up there between now & the summer after next. So let us know if you ever do, & I'll get in touch with its guardians & see what's what. There's a boat too, alas, or do I mean hooray: or was; & you can dive out of the window into deep water at high-tide. And even get clams, though not by diving, & not the very big ones, as in *Evil U.T.S.*. It was there, anyway, I read the latter (& mostly wrote *U.T.V.*) & though we had to leave all our books behind including that, I still retain the most vivid memories of it, the diamond sea, the wonderful clam digging hunt, the excellent skill with which Art wove its way in & out like a Bowerbird, for good & ill, & also the unspeakable sense of evil & spoliation you conjured out of the abuse of the intellect so that I remember distinctly shaking my fist at an oil-refinery going up two miles away on the opposite bank, though this picture may seem a little unrelated unless you should understand it was in fact directed at the rape of a virgin forest. All in all, a noble job and you did not deserve to be disappointed with its reception, although give the Muse credit, perhaps for knowing what she was about, always remembering the oil-refinery and that success can be worse: in any case it was a success from the artistic standpoint, & you can always publish it again; albeit I was left with the strong impression that its author was very

11 The Burts, who also had a summer cabin at Dollarton, were close friends of the Lowrys. Harvey, in particular, took an active interest in Lowry's work and cared for the Lowrys' cabin after their departure in September 1954. See *Sursum Corda* II, letter 578, and other letters to Harvey listed on page 973.

much a creature of light, wherefore I am reminded that Eugene O'Neill once remarked if he'd known how to render happiness as dramatically as tragedy he'd have written about it. Which is perhaps something to ponder.

Meantime I shall look forward very much to receiving the new book from Appleton-Century, albeit I hope it arrives soon, or it may be much delayed: this country is headed into stormy weather, as usual, only more so, though maybe it won't after all.

Meantime too, Somebody, unseen, but wholly of good intent, has evidently been watching me writing this letter, for a little while since, happening upon an old Bible apparently not disturbed since 1750, in the attic, & unaware, until this point that your title came from Ecclesiastes, practising sortes Shakespearianae, & wondering at the same time what I might usefully say to you, I chanced upon the following:

Ecclesiastes: VI i. There is an Evil which I have seen under the sun, & it is common among men

IX iii There is an Evil among all things that are done under the sun, that there is one event unto all: yea, also the hearts of the sons of men is full of Evil, & madness is in their heart while they live and after that they go to the dead

viii [VIII. ix] All that I have seen and applied my heart unto every work that is done under the sun . . .

IX vi Neither have they any more a portion for ever in anything that is done under the sun
(By the way, why not?)

X v [IX. xiii] This wisdom have I seen also under the sun and it seemed great to me.

xi There is an evil which I have seen under the sun error which proceedeth from the ruler

IX xiii There was a little city, and few men within it:
(Hold it, hold it,—cut right there, O Ecclesiastes—
period too: that's nearly wisdom enough)
On the other hand—

IX ix Love joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity which he hath given thee under the sun: for that is the portion in this life & in thy labour which thou takest under the sun
Moreover:

IX vii —Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine (under the sun) with a merry heart for God (not to mention Appleton-Century) now accepteth thy works!¹²

I thank your wife also for her regards & the best luck to you both from me and Margerie

Sincerely

Malcolm Lowry

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- 12 Lowry has transcribed loosely from Ecclesiastes, mis-numbered chapter and verse, and added his own interjections to amuse Myrer.

NOTES TO PART ONE

- 1 Quoted from Anton Myrer's 30 July 1957 letter to Margerie Lowry; a typescript copy is now with the Lowry Archive in the Special Collections Division of the University of British Columbia. Patricia S. Myrer, the author's widow, sent me the correspondence quoted from and reproduced here, and she gave the original Lowry letter to Myrer to the Lowry Archive. It is a great pleasure to thank her, for without her care and generosity, this correspondence would never have come to light. Myrer's 29 January 1957 letter is reproduced here with her permission. Lowry's 17 March 1957 letter is reprinted by permission of Sterling Lord Literistic Inc.; © Malcom Lowry Estate.
- 2 Anton Myrer's article, "Le monde au-dessous du volcan," appeared in *Les lettres nouvelles* (see Myrer).
- 3 A check of both the Lowry Archive in Special Collections at the University of British Columbia and the Albert Erskine papers at the University of Virginia, has not turned up any further information.
- 4 In my transcription of the copy texts, I have followed the editorial principles set forth in *Sursum Corda*: dates and salutations are standardized and marginalia are inserted in brackets {} according to Lowry's indication.

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