

# THE LOXODROMIC CURVE

*A Study of "Lunar Caustic" by Malcolm Lowry*

*Norman Newton*

I began the *Volcano* in 1936, the same year having written, in New York, a novelette of about 100 pages about an alcoholic entitled *The Last Address* . . .

(Letter to Jonathan Cape, 2 January 1946)

**I**N JANUARY OF 1987 an exhibition entitled "The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985" opened the new wing of the Los Angeles gressive lovers of twentieth-century non-representational art, unaware of its great dependence on ideas usually considered, to use two much-abused words, "occultist" and "reactionary."<sup>1</sup>

A major point was made by the curator of the exhibition and amplified by the critic of *Time* magazine, Robert Hughes. It is the surprising concession of an argument hitherto advanced only by the enemies of the *avant-garde*:

The good news, one might say, is that early 20th century abstract art, long regarded by a suspicious public as basically meaningless and without a subject, turns out to have a very distinct and pervasive one — the last mutation, in fact, of religious experience in the visual arts. The other news is that spiritualism is so arcane and culturally eccentric that it may make the paintings look even less accessible than when they were seen as "pure" form. Yet the timing of the show is brilliant. Like late Imperial Rome, modern America is riddled with superstition, addicted to gurus, Sibyls and purveyors of every kind of therapeutic nostrum. One does not need a planchette to deduce that an exhibition which demonstrates as clearly as this one how great painters like Piet Mondrian and Wassily Kandinsky conceived the art in terms of thought forms, astral vibrations and hidden cosmic symbolism is bound to attract a far larger audience than any orthodox show of abstract art.

"The genesis and development of abstract art," argues the show's curator, Maurice Tuchman, in an enormous catalog comprising essays by him and 19 other contributors, ". . . reflects a desire to express spiritual, utopian or metaphysical ideas that cannot be expressed in traditional pictorial terms." One typical preoccupation was with the idea that the universe, instead of being the vast agglomeration of

distinct things perceived by science or realism, was a single, living entity, pervaded by “cosmic” energies; these revealed themselves in “vibrations”, the formative agents of all material shapes. Hence the desire to paint archetypal forms, so that Mondrian’s rectangles and Kandinsky’s floating circles are to be read as a kind of sacred geometry, pyramid power in paint. Hence, too, the peculiar use of light by artists like František Kupka — a shuddering lyric vibration that implies the sublimities of landscape without describing them. Then there is the imagery of duality and paired opposites — light-dark, vertical-horizontal — and of synesthesia, whereby colours correspond to musical tones, or textures to tastes and so on.<sup>2</sup>

Here we have evidence not of a sudden discovery but of the end of a period of critical falsification. It was among the critics and popularizers that we found statements that abstract art stood “for nothing but itself” or meant “whatever you want it to mean.” The artists themselves, when they wrote manifestos or gave interviews, almost always spoke, obscurely or clearly depending upon their verbal abilities, of representing deep or essential order, an order which could usually be interpreted in materialistic but sometimes in supernaturalistic terms. They were not interested only in sensually pleasing arrangements of colours and forms, a characteristic of merely ornamental art. The writings of Klee, Gabo, Malevich, Beckmann, Mondrian, Le Corbusier, Ozenfant, Moore, Boccioni, Kandinsky, Gleizes, and Metzinger, to refer only to essays found in an easily obtained book,<sup>3</sup> emphatically bear this out.

Thus artists capable of or interested in verbal explanations of their methods knew perfectly well — and still know — the connection between twentieth-century abstract or formalistic art and the perception of the universe as “a single, living entity, pervaded by ‘cosmic’ energies.” This gave them a link to ancient philosophical traditions, not necessarily “spiritual” at all (it is only critics and journalists who assume that “ancient” and “spiritual” are synonyms, a corollary of the idea that materialism is “progressive”). Thus we find the frankly materialist composer, Iannis Xenakis, who may still be considered a modern figure though his music is now heard less often than it once was, relating his philosophy to that of the Ionian Greeks and quoting (from 1927!) Bertrand Russell: “Perhaps the oddest thing about modern science is its return to pythagoricism.”<sup>4</sup>

Malcolm Lowry was an artist of his time, and his attitudes were largely formed in the late 1920s and 1930s. He was not a visual artist, though he had very sharp eyes, so he did not speak in terms of visual form and colour; he was not a composer, though he often closely approached musical composition in his methods, so he did not speak of the transformational geometries of music; he was not a film-maker, though he had a cinematic imagination, so he did not speak in terms of the permutational geometry of successive “shots” in a time-continuum. Above all he was not a critic and had none of the pedagogical instinct or affliction. His Pythagoreanism was expressed in verbal imagery, probably the least obvious way of setting out pure formal relationships.

Because he was an artist of his time he was, to a very considerable extent, a formalist. It was then, as it is now, almost impossible to create without thinking art problems through in formal terms, since all ideas of what art is were then as now in question.

The idea that "all is number" had a dual face for the artists of the period. There was that love of abstract form which is natural to artists; but there was fear of the relentless system-mongering which led to tyranny and dehumanization. Le Corbusier and Ozenfant could argue eloquently that "mechanical selection," the process which leads to the improvement of machines, is as inevitable and natural as the processes of biological evolution,<sup>5</sup> but their argument led naturally to the question, "What if the machines turn predators?" High popular science contributed, as it had since the Renaissance, to literary Utopias and anti-Utopias. Works such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and Zamyatin's *We*, anti-Utopias developed by writers with scientific or technical backgrounds (Huxley came from a renowned scientific family and Zamyatin was a naval engineer) had a strong impact. These books were novels, narratives set in the future. But the representation of idealized or "core" social developments in the context of the future is only one form of many. One may also represent these developments as conditions underlying present phenomena, in a network of core imagery as emotionally experienced, and this (it is a truism) is what many poets have done, particularly in idealized cityscapes in a context of hallucination, dream or nightmare.

ONE SUCH WORK IS Lowry's "novelette of about 100 pages," County Museum. The show must have startled many of the more naïvely pro-*The Last Address* or, as we now have it, *Lunar Caustic*. It is far more than a story about an alcoholic; it is a miniature anti-Utopia, and this gives it qualities of great resonance.

The story was one of those which Lowry could not leave alone, a sure indication of depth of reference in his case. He had actually commenced writing it in 1935, in a version which has disappeared. The novella we have now is a conflation, by Margerie Lowry and Earle Birney, of two separate treatments or versions, one called *The Last Address*, the other *Swinging the Maelstrom*. Birney and Mrs. Lowry performed as conscientious a job as possible of following Lowry's written and orally stated intentions without, as Margerie Lowry stated, "adding a line."<sup>6</sup> Thus the story presents obvious problems. Though the words are all Lowry's we cannot be sure that he would have cut and conflated its many versions into the form that we now have. Also, his intention of expanding it into a novel must be taken into account. We have three possible forms here: a short story, what might be a large section of a novel, and what may be the dense inner plan of a novel,

perhaps to be teased out, infilled with additional material and rearranged on a different armature.

It is also difficult to determine whether any of these three possible forms is to be considered as thoroughly worked out in terms of character, plot, and verisimilitude, and here we are faced with two more conundrums.

We must first consider the biographical background of the protagonist, Bill Plantagenet. He is, as always, a projection of Malcolm Lowry and as such is a powerful presence; but we are also asked to believe that he was once a professional musician, and this is difficult. Plantagenet has an incompleteness similar to that of the lawyer Ethan Llewellyn in *October Ferry to Gabriola*, another unfinished work tidied up by Margerie Lowry. In *Ultramarine* Lowry had been able to draw on his own experiences as a seaman, but after that book Lowry had the greatest difficulty in imagining the world of work. One may speculate that, if he had finished *Lunar Caustic* and *October Ferry* to his satisfaction, he would have solved or at least covered up the problem as he did in *Under the Volcano*. In that book the protagonist is an ex-Consul whose alcoholism prevents his having a sequentially ordered memory of the past and who is so overwhelmed by images of frightening and cosmic significance that the question of what he had done during his active life as a minor diplomat never comes up. The book is full of political secrets which may convince us that the Consul was once a close political observer and yet his ineffectiveness in practical matters is obvious. Thus he is no mere bumbler; but his practical incompetence excuses us from asking such questions as "What did the Consul do with passport applications?" (he probably left them lying on his desk) or "How did he cope with visiting British businessmen asking about Mexican trade regulations?" (he was probably out of the office). Since Plantagenet and Llewellyn were both alcoholics a somewhat similar approach might have been used, though repetition of the device might unmask it as an evasion. Yet, in its unfinished state, *Lunar Caustic* does present us with a figure obviously unacquainted with the details of a professional musician's life. All we have is Plantagenet's vague statement to Doctor Claggart: "I just couldn't seem to hold the boys together at all. Damn it, I don't know just what didn't happen. Of course there were complications about unions, income taxes, a price on our heads —." We do not even know if he really was incompetent as a band manager: the picture is not filled in.

Nevertheless, we can only deal with *Lunar Caustic* if we assume that it is Lowry's work, concentrating on the strong elements and refusing to hold him responsible for weak ones. The temptation is not to tackle *Lunar Caustic* at all; but it must be resisted because the story is important as a bridge between the method of *Ultramarine* and that of *Under the Volcano*. We can be sure, at least, that the basic form and movement of *Lunar Caustic* is close to the 1935 version. In revising or improving a poem or poetic work of organic nature it is simply impossible to add material

which is not at least implicitly present in the original version, for all that it may be quite buried there; the result would be incongruity. For that matter, we have the statement of Day, who has examined all the extant manuscripts and drafts of this work, that *The Last Address* and *Lunar Caustic* are closer to one another, thematically as well as tonally, than either is to the middle term, *Swinging the Maelstrom*.<sup>8</sup> *Swinging the Maelstrom* differed from the others (minor details of names and personal relationships aside) in having an affirmative ending: Plantagenet “decides to join the crew of a Spanish ship which is about to sail in hopes of bringing aid to the Republican forces in the Civil War.”<sup>9</sup>

*Lunar Caustic* resembles *Ultramarine* and the story “June the 30th, 1934” in its conscious modernism: its use of abrupt and streamlined transitions, its vision of the city as a geometrical inferno and its cinematic *montage* of silent-movie type. Again we encounter Lowry’s virtuosic adaptation of the rhetoric of the public or mass-media arts, which he at once loved and hated — loved for their possibilities, hated because they had become (as he encountered them in the U.S. and Canada) tools of the “Claggart-mind,” used for mass brainwashing and social engineering. In the following fragment each sentence is a shot:

He enters another tavern, where presently he is talking of people he had never known, of places he had never been. Through the open door he is aware of the hospital, towering up above the river. Near him arrogant bearded derelicts cringe over spittoons, and of these men he seems afraid. Sweat floods his face. From the depths of the tavern comes a sound of moaning, and a sound of ticking.<sup>10</sup>

In the passage to be quoted next, the objective and visual representation of hallucination, which might almost be filmed as a dream sequence and reminds us of passages from *Ultramarine*, mingles with a style closer to that of *Under the Volcano*, in which hallucinatory elements are represented in a more sophisticated verbal continuum which embodies as well as pictures:

He was awake. What had he done last night? Played the piano? Was it last night? Nothing at all, perhaps, yet remorse tore at his vitals. He needed a drink desperately. He did not know whether his eyes were closed or open. Horrid shapes plunged out of the blankness, gibbering, rubbing their bristles against his face, but he couldn’t move. Something had got under his bed, too, a bear that kept trying to get up. Voices, a prosopopoeia of voices, murmured in his ears, ebbed away, murmured again, cackled, shrieked, cajoled; voices pleading with him to stop drinking, to die and be damned. Thronged, dreadful shadows came closer, were snatched away. A cataract of water was pouring through the wall, filling the room. A red hand gesticulated, prodded him: over a ravaged mountain side a swift stream was carrying with it legless bodies yelling out of great eyesockets, in which were broken teeth. Music mounted to a screech, subsided. On a tumbled bloodstained bed in a house whose face was blasted away a large scorpion was gravely raping a one-armed Negress. His wife appeared, tears streaming down her face, pitying, only to be instantly transformed into Richard III, who sprang forward to smother him.<sup>11</sup>

The autobiographical factor is more important in *Lunar Caustic* than in anything else Lowry wrote, except the naturalistic shipboard scenes in *Ultramarine*. The action of the book is based on Lowry's own experiences in the Psychiatric Wing of Bellevue Hospital in New York and the characters are directly based on patients and staff he met there. For this reason, there is a great temptation to psychoanalyze Bill Plantagenet, in the hope of discovering why Lowry drank and to suggest, as it were, a posthumous cure. Thus we have David Benham, in an article which contains many useful observations, commenting on *The Last Address*, where the protagonist is called Lawhill:

*The Last Address* is an often terrifying account of a man trying to raise himself out of the pit of self-absorption, but it is a work which leaves the reader dissatisfied. One of the reasons, I think, is that the onus of blame for Lawhill's failure is placed largely on the world outside him. His rejection by a man as unsympathetic as Claggart constitutes an evasion of a central problem — the extent to which Lawhill is able to bring himself to accept responsibility for others. Consequently the questions we want to ask — to what extent he has chosen isolation in the past, and to what extent he is continuing to choose it in the present — can never be answered. And because we cannot determine the validity of his observations of the world around him, we can attach no value to his final non-solution.<sup>12</sup>

And Grace comments on *Lunar Caustic*:

By blaming external forces for his inability to play jazz, to love, or to act, Plantagenet (like Geoffrey Firmin) tries to ignore the fact that it is his own inertia that is destroying him.

Bill Plantagenet is a failure. . . .<sup>13</sup>

This is to confuse the character Lowry made out of himself with some idea of the man Lowry, certainly an easy thing to do. But I fail to see how Lawhill/Plantagenet may be said to have chosen isolation, to be self-absorbed or to be the victim of inertia. He is painfully responsive to others and is a man who has no defences against the world, rather than too many; his absorption in the inner turmoil of the outcasts in the psychiatric ward is immediate. He is isolated only in the respectable world. His mind is a chaos of wild impulses and images, rather than an inertia. His rejection of the offered cure is not a mere evasion of responsibility. The intent of the kind of psychiatric help he is offered in Bellevue — or rather would be offered if the institution were truly a hospital and not a zoo — is to make him a functioning member of a society he abhors. The question of whether there is any justification for his finding the society abhorrent does not come up in Claggart's interrogation; it is simply assumed that any such reasoning will be made up of false "defenses," arguments to permit him to continue escaping reality. But what if he is facing the reality which includes Claggart, and it is this which has driven him to alcoholism and near-madness? Claggart's idea of adjustment reminds one, to take an extreme example, of the norms of Soviet mental hospitals, where political dissidents are

automatically assumed to be mentally disturbed. The protagonist is to be adjusted, not to human society as it has existed for millenia, but to a rational model of society, a totalitarian or quasi-totalitarian Utopia.

I am certainly not suggesting that any conscientious psychiatrist, no matter how understanding, would give Lawhill/Plantagenet (or Lowry?) a sort of ticket as a holy madman, saying "he is more sane than we are" and sending him out to prophesy in the gutter until he dies. Adjustment to reality — and even a rational model, once it is in place, is real — is necessary; it is called "endurance" or "courage." But must the character accept this reality as good? What the character needs is a degree of comfort and assurance as strong as his vision of horror, the office of religion rather than psychiatry, I admit. There is something much deeper here than mere maladjustment. It is even possible to regard the protagonist's alcoholism as the result of a doomed and terribly mistaken attempt at self-medication. Plantagenet/Lawhill's alcoholism, in this interpretation, is not a defence of the ego; it is an attempt to construct an alternate ego in place of the one which has been shattered. The character has no ego because he has accepted, with the terrible literalness of a young poet who will have fame at whatever cost, all the implications of Rimbaud's *Je est un autre*. He has bifurcated his soul and sent the inner "I," unprotected, on a cosmic quest, leaving the social "I" an undirected shadow. He has attempted to harrow hell, confidently trusting in his poetic powers, and he has found that these were not enough; the poet as solar warrior has been conquered by the demons. (In this context, that of a fictional character, the question of whether the demons are real supernatural beings or not is left in abeyance.) Modern psychology has no techniques to deal with the plight of the poet-shaman who has fallen into the power of his familiars, who has lost his sanity by playing too recklessly with it.

## WHAT ARE THE NIGHTMARES of Bill Plantagenet?

Let us look first at the character of Dr. Claggart, a key figure in these nightmares, almost a presiding triune god:

Sweltering, delirious night telescoped into foetid day: day into night: he realized it was twilight though he had thought it dawn. Someone sat on his bed with a hand on his pulse, and forcing his eyes he saw a waving white form which divided into three, became two and finally came into focus as a man in a white gown.

The man — a doctor? — dropped Plantagenet's wrist. 'You've certainly got the shakes,' he said.<sup>14</sup>

Dr. Claggart is the spokesman of a society which Lowry regards, rightly or wrongly, as totalitarian. He is an apparently benign American Anglo-Saxon version of those inquisitors we find in prison dramas set in the Soviet Union: he is the

voice of the party. The attitude he represents is so common in North America that it impresses us as normal and sane; Lowry saw it as hellish. Claggart's coldness is not a matter of necessary professional detachment: he is ideologically armed against the humanity of his patients (Claggart also has a bifurcated soul) and there is no salvation for them unless they accept his world-view. As Benham says, "He never admits that Lawhill's ideas have any kind of objectivity; they arise only from 'his own state'."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, it is worse than that. Claggart proceeds in two well-defined stages of the brainwashing procedure. First he throws all Plantagenet/Lawhill's arguments against the society of which Bellevue is the mad microcosm back in his face, treating them as mere justifications and excuses thrown up by his inner state of extreme alienation (though the character is possessed by the demons of others, not alienated). In this process, Plantagenet/Lawhill is being robbed of individuality. It is never for a moment conceded that he may have observed something which is objectively true, or that his view of the world can be anything but sick and distorted. Thus, Plantagenet/Lawhill is being pressed into the mould of a medical type, a case, and as such he is considered a sort of animal undirected by rationality. In the second stage, Plantagenet/Lawhill must accept this imposed identity and consent to be remade, to be refashioned from a case into a human being. There is a tortuous but effective logic here which by making all Plantagenet/Lawhill's perceptions invalid robs him of personality: he is only a twisted individual and thus his perceptions have no general validity; but as a twisted individual he is a psychological type or case and thus has no true individuality. The sum of this is that his perceptions have no validity and he is not an individual.

Whether this is a medically legitimate way to treat insane persons I cannot say; applied to sane persons it amounts to induced insanity and is a form of brainwashing. Plantagenet/Lawhill is an alcoholic and failed shaman and is thus in deep crisis, but he is not insane.

The procedure is well summarized in the following exchange. The protagonist is about to be released and is thus in no danger from Claggart; but Claggart is here revealing his technique:

"But good Christ, Doctor, in this place the people, the patients are resigned, resigned! Can't you see the horror, the horror of man's uncomplaining acceptance of his own degeneration? Because many who are supposed to be mad here, as opposed to the ones who are drunks, are simply people who perhaps once saw, however confusedly, the necessity for change in themselves, for rebirth, that's the word."

"If you're talking about yourself, all this is very helpful. If not, I don't think you have a grasp of the facts."<sup>16</sup>

Thus Plantagenet/Lawhill is supposed to be incapable of objective observation: even if what he says appears to be valid, it is objectively only a symptom of his illness.



The truth of Plantagenet/Lawhill's criticism of the hospital, which is pretty obviously Lowry's as well, is not really under discussion here, since it would take us too far outside the framework of the story. It could well be argued, for example, that those who cannot take care of themselves — hopeless alcoholics or the insane — must be treated, no matter how kindly, as children or idiots, since, in social terms, that is what they are. We might also argue that when they were poverty-stricken they were almost always, in the past, treated as such or even as animals, and that Bellevue is a great improvement over Bedlam. Claggart implicitly makes both these points. But this is not what Lowry is concerned with. The portrayal of the city, a microcosmic image of the society, as a hellish *system* means that these unfortunates have been created by the system, which has also created Claggart as their jailor. Lowry seems to be trying to put his finger on a form of totalitarianism hidden in "the American system," a totalitarianism which has not been given any other name and perhaps needs no other because the very word "system," so commonly used, implies a rigidly directed society.

The idea that United States society is totalitarian reminds us of the New Left of the 1960s, which used words like *Amerika* with portentous insistence but never defined precisely what they meant. Lowry had many attitudes in common with the New Left, simply because they had many attitudes in common with New Romantic anarchists, Trotskyites, and other radicals of the English 1930s, a number of whose ideas they had specifically inherited. But the New Left also owed a good deal to one of Lowry's favourite authors, Jack London. London's *The Iron Heel*, a powerful and prophetic book despite the author's awkward and melodramatic verbal style, depicts a peculiarly American form of totalitarianism. London pays homage to Marx but he does not regard *Das Kapital* as a sacred text; he owes as much to Herbert Spencer and Comte. In other words, London had devoted some attention to the Utopians of capitalism and had absorbed their message. As a result his thesis is, from the socialist point of view, ambiguous and depressing. Socialism may come and should come; but an alliance between state power and monopoly capital, supported by a "scientific religion" using the terminology and forms of Christianity, is capable of lasting for centuries. This alliance, he predicts, will reach perfected form in the United States, which will become master of the world.

When I speak of a "debt" in this case I speak of a largely unacknowledged one. The New Left of the 1960s had the most obvious American and Anglo-Saxon roots — in the American socialist tradition, in the "Wobblies," in the "muck-rakers" and "trust-busters," in all the left-wing thought which London summed up before the First World War. Yet it presented a picture of ideological confusion (just as Lowry's political thought does to some) because the accepted political language of the day was generally Eurocentric, and left-wing political language in particular was Marxist in vocabulary and centred on Russia or China. American and Anglo-Saxon roots, deep as they went, were not formally acknowledged; the language

was that of the international left. Thus we have a curious vagueness and ambiguity of language, in which terms seem undefined.

THE DIFFICULTY OF DEFINITION is pretty well illustrated by the following quotation from Norman Mailer's *Armies of the Night*, whose vague but strident hysteria witnesses to both real fear and inability to identify the cause of the fear:

Brood on that country who expresses our will. She is America, once a beauty of magnificence unparalleled, now a beauty with a leprous skin. She is heavy with child — no one knows if legitimate — and languishes in a dungeon whose walls are never seen. Now the first contractions of her fearsome labor begin — it will go on; no doctor exists to tell the hour. It is only known that false labor is not likely on her now, no, she will probably give birth, and to what? — the most fearsome totalitarianism the world has ever known? Or can she, poor giant, tormented lovely girl, deliver the babe of a new world brave and tender, artful and wild? Rush to the locks. God writhes in his bonds. Rush to the locks. Deliver us from our curse. For we must end on the road to that mystery where courage, death, and the dream of love give promise of sleep.<sup>17</sup>

One of the difficulties of definition must lie in the fact that in the United States all political movements, totalitarian or not, use the language of liberty, from the Ku Klux Klan and the Aryan Nations to the Communists, with the Democrats and Republicans in between. Such is the uniformity of vocabulary that it is simply impossible to detect an overtly totalitarian philosophy. Even traffickers in drugs and pornography defend themselves in the language of civil-rights groups. Proponents of nightmarish genetic experiments, hitherto practised only by Nazi scientists in the secrecy of the extermination camps, appear on television with the style of the caring doctors of the soap operas. In the work-place, which is the real political arena, and in the market-place which is its extension, the language is that of efficiency and progress. The result, paradoxically, is one of the most secretive and evasive political systems the world has ever seen, a sort of ideological Sicily where the government is underground, or submarine like Melville's own Leviathan, the white whale, who appears as a whale-shaped airplane in *Lunar Caustic*. In the following passage, which must be read with care, the white seaplane coalesces with a point O in the protagonist's mind. This point is like the point of Hilliot's death as an old man in *Ultramarine*. In pseudo-spatial terms it is the centre of the whirlpool; in the Dunnian geometry of *Lunar Caustic* (because this story is, like *Ultramarine* and *Under the Volcano*, a Dunnian construction) it is the point where stacked worlds meet. It is also a point of symbolic death, since (returning to the maelstrom image) Plantagenet/Lawhill is sucked into it and ejected into the outside world; it ends the hospital sequence:

There was a furious crash of thunder and simultaneously Plantagenet felt the impact of the plane, and whale, upon his mind. While metamorphosis nudged metamorphosis, a kind of order, still preserved within his consciousness, and enclosing this catastrophe, exploded itself into the age of Kalowsky again, and into the youth of Garry, who both now seemed to be spiralling away from him until they were lost, just as the seaplane was actually tilting away, swaying up to the smashed sky. But while that part of him only a moment before in possession of the whole, the ship, was turning over with disunion of hull and masts uprooted falling across her decks, another faction of his soul, relative to the ship but aware of these fantasies and simultaneities as it were from above, knew him to be screaming against the renewed thunder and saw the attendants closing in on him, yet saw him too, as the plane seethed away northwards like the disembodied shape of the very act of darkness itself, passing beyond the asylum walls melting like wax, and following in its wake, sailing on beyond the cold coast of the houses and the factory chimneys waving farewell — farewell —<sup>18</sup>

In New York the point O of the mind has become a darting *mechanical* point. The political ambiguity of a machine-based culture in which hope and terror have become one has fastened on the depths of the mind. This perpetual ambiguity — actually a binarism — also results in a twisting, a distortion of the sensual level of life. The New York of *Lunar Caustic* is a city perpetually shaking itself apart, caught in a moment of disaster which, because it is timeless and frozen, parodies order:

... he saw his dream of New York crystallised there for an instant, glittering illuminated by a celestial brilliance, only to be reclaimed by dark, by the pandemonium of an avalanche of falling coal which, mingling with the cries of the insane speeding the *Providence* on its way, coalesced in his brain with what it conjured of the whole mechanic calamity of the rocking city, with the screams of suicides, of girls tortured in hotels for transients, of people burning to death in vice dens, through all of which a thousand ambulances were screeching like trumpets.

He looked out over the huge nervous city above which the last blimp of the day was trailing an advertisement for Goodyear Tyres while far above that in still merciless but declining sunlight one word was unrolling itself from the wake of an invisible plane: Fury. He was afraid. He was afraid to leave the doctor and go back to the ward. He was afraid — “The horrors,” he said abruptly. “Well — do you see New York? That’s where they are. They’re out there waiting, the horrors of war — all of them — already — and all that delirium, like primitives, like primitives, like Christ’s descent into hell. And the tactile conscience, the lonely soul falling featherless into the abyss! I daresay you don’t know what I’m talking about.”<sup>19</sup>

On the level of language, not one character in the story is capable of making a truly coherent, effective, and meaningful statement: even Plantagenet/Lawhill and Claggart, educated men, confront one another with brilliant but disorganized images or ineffectual pleading on the one side and tired professional jargon on the other.

*Lunar Caustic* is a horribly sardonic vision of what has become of America. The

world which Melville once represented for the protagonist has become a jittery hell, a madhouse, a doomed ship, and Claggart, scientist turned jailor, is its master. Claggart is neither kind nor cruel, but a keeper of the half-human, with a tolerance which is only indifference (as one might be gentle with an animal). The vocabulary of love becomes, in his mouth, a denatured jargon: "Pity. I'd like to help you, if I could — you're an interesting case."<sup>20</sup>

Yet before he has his frustrating and depressing talk with him, Plantagenet thinks that Claggart perhaps has the cure for a "mischievous world":

My God, he thought suddenly, why am I here, in this doleful place? And without quite knowing how this had come about, he felt that he had voyaged downward to the foul core of his world; here was the true meaning underneath all the loud inflamed words, the squealing headlines, the arrogant years. But here too, equally, he thought, looking at the doctor, was perhaps the cure, the wisdom and vision, more patient, still. . . . And goodness was here too — he glanced at his two friends — yes, by what miracle did it come about that compassion and love were here too?

And he wondered if the doctor ever asked himself what point there was in adjusting poor lunatics to a mischievous world over which merely more subtle lunatics exerted almost supreme hegemony, where neurotic behaviour was the rule, and there was nothing but hypocrisy to answer the flames of evil, which might be the flames of Judgment, which were already scorching nearer and nearer. . . .<sup>21</sup>

There is a form, if an odious form, of order in the city; it is a binary order, the order of "jittering." The word occurs again and again, with words of parallel meaning: "his mind seemed to flicker senselessly"; "even Nature herself is shot through with jitteriness"; "the old men who were considered too jittery or too obscene to eat with the others"; "a medicable case of the jitters"; "I was also very jittery"; "something like a hope flickered in him"; "the whole mechanic calamity of the rocking city." Such imagery connects naturally with the shakes of the drunkard; but to assume that the protagonist is simply projecting his diseased condition on the world would be to take Claggart's point of view. The world truly shares his condition. Another reflection of the binary hell is found in the following passage, where we see one half of a binary pair forever robbed of its complement:

Where were all the good honest ships tonight, he wondered, bound for all over the world? Lately it had seemed to him they passed more rarely. Only nightmare ships were left in this stream. All at once, watching the strange traffic upon it, he fancied that the East River was as delirious, as haunted as the minds that brooded over it, it was a mad river of grotesque mastless steamers, of flat barges slipping along silent as water snakes, a river of railroad boats the shape of army tanks with their askew funnels appearing to have been built on to outriggers, or they were strange half-ships, preposterously high out of the water with naked propellers thrashing like tuna fish, with single masts out of alignment. This world of the river was one where everything was uncompleted while functioning in degeneration, from which as from Garry's barge, the image of their own shattered or unformed souls was cast back at them. Yes, it was as if all complementary factors had been withdrawn from this

world! Its half-darkness quivered with the anguish of separation from the real light; just as in his nightmare, the tortoise crawled in agony looking for its shell, and nails hammered held nothing together, or one-winged birds dropped exhausted across a maniacal, sunless moon. . . .<sup>22</sup>

Beneath the surface layer of this strange civilization, which represents, at the same time, chaos and the most rigid and simple (binary) order, there are strange operations and machinations going on — bloody yet antiseptic, almost beautiful in their toy-like neatness and manipulating all four quarters of the cosmos:

Plantagenet suddenly caught sight, through the bars, of four operations being performed simultaneously in the wing opposite in high sunlit rooms of glass, so that it seemed as though the front of that part of the hospital had suddenly become open, revealing, as in the cabin plans of the 'Cunard' or in charts of the human anatomy itself, the activities behind the wraith of iron or brick or shin; and it was strange to watch these white-masked figures working behind the glass that now glittered like a mirage. At the same time the whole scene that lay before them suddenly, like the looming swift white hand of a traffic policeman, reeled towards him; he felt he had only to stretch out his fingers to touch the doctor working on the right side of the table sewing up the incision, or the nurse plastering and binding the patient or placing the blanket over the body; and it seemed to him that all these dressings and redressings in these hours of north light were at the same time being placed, torn away and replaced, on a laceration of his own mind.<sup>23</sup>

This is the world of Dr. Claggart, of the Secret Masters of pop anti-capitalism of both left and right, of the great hand which from time to time arbitrarily removes the puppets in the drivelling Punch and Judy show which is put on for the entertainment of the inmates. Beneath the jittery chaos of New York, which is America, is a cosmos uniting a world of technology, science, and logic, a world in which healing and torture are horribly one.

It is, if anything is, the dual image of what might be an American totalitarianism, a system without inflammatory political slogans and mass rallies because it does not need them. An inner trinitarian world of technology emanated by science, which is in turn emanated by the pure and merciless logic of the machine. An outer world which is chaotic in appearance but which really has the orderly but terrible geometrical form of the spiral which is at once creative and destructive — the upward-moving spiral of exponential growth, the downward-moving spiral of the maelstrom. The system is not abstractly or philosophically analyzed but presented to us in pictures and images. We may recognize it as a form of "Totalitarian Pragmatism,"<sup>24</sup> where values are defined by how efficiently they work, where the idea of efficient work is defined by the machine and where the almost Platonically ideal machine is an immense structure of mathematical logic which, like the knife of the surgeon, can heal or kill with equal ease.

Lowry is not a sociologist, even a pop one; but surely the "more subtle lunatics" who exert "almost supreme hegemony" over his "mischievous world," to refer to an

earlier quotation, are not politicians, who are anything but subtle. They are a social group of education and power. This is the first sketch of the conspiratorial, hidden world of *Under the Volcano*, where the world is ruled by a power-mongering consortium of great businessmen, scientists who are really magicians, and their armed hirelings. In this world, political slogans, even the Communist and Fascist ones for which Lowry had a certain forgivable weakness, considering the time, mean nothing at all. The only explicitly political statement in the story is made by Mr. Kalowsky and it is utterly inane:

“Wake up, you brains! Brains of the world unite! My experience in the hospital is that the workers are against us more than the capitalists. I don’t believe in God. I talk too much Bob Ingersoll wisdom and that’s why Police Megoff wants to lock me up. Jesus Christ! If the workers will wake up and buy brains I won’t need to go to the hospital! Give the patients nicer to eat! Listen, once they pulled three teeth out of me, out of my mouth. That’s the capitalist system. I should have knocked the three teeth out of him.”<sup>25</sup>

Lowry’s vision of New York/America is certainly a New Romantic one. We may find analogies with the vision of London in David Gascoyne’s *Night Thoughts* and there seems to be an echo of Blake’s *America* in

... their lips would burst with a sound, partly a cheer and partly a wailing shriek, like some cry of the imprisoned spirit of New York itself, that spirit haunting the abyss between Europe and America and brooding like futurity over the Western Ocean.<sup>26</sup>

There are also analogies with the darker side of Hart Crane’s *The Bridge*:

The phonographs of Hades in the brain  
Are tunnels that re-wind themselves, and love  
A burnt match skating in a urinal —

No imitation or unassimilated influence is implied here; indeed Lowry’s vision of New York is also akin to that found in some Spanish poets he had almost certainly not read when he wrote this story: to Lorca (*Poeta en Nueva York*), to Alberti (*New York* in the collection *13 Bandas y 48 Estrellas*), to León Felipe (*Elegía* in the collection *Versos y Oraciones de Caminante, Nueva York*). New York was simply one of the typical subjects of the late 1920s and 1930s, the “city of the future.” This image was evoked by a recent show (December 1986) in the Brooklyn Museum, also reviewed by *Time*’s Robert Hughes, whom I quoted earlier. His review recapitulates many of the themes already discussed.

The concise and mighty industrial-based forms of American building, conceived by architects from James Bogardus in the 1850’s to Louis Sullivan in the 1890’s and by the engineers of a technology whose emblematic climax was John and Washington Roebling’s Brooklyn Bridge, were among the prototypes of European avant-garde thinking before and after World War I. Even to the Russian con-

structivists, “Americanism” was something infinitely desirable: it stood for electricity, progress, a society knit together and made transparent by fast communication . . .

Their country, wrote the photographer Paul Strand in 1922, was the “supreme altar of the new God”, a trinity formed by “God the Machine, Materialistic Empiricism the Son, and Science the Holy Ghost.” Its factories, thought Strand’s colleague Charles Sheeler, “are our substitutes for religious expression” . . .

. . . welcome to the dynamo, to the total plan, the slick shell housing, the fins and flanges, the didactic sheen of stainless steel, the Aztec-style bracelet of imperishable Bakelite . . .

. . . the skyscraper multiplied the site, extruding a patch of earth into a stack of pure property, the abstract universal sign of capitalism. The standardization of its floors invoked the image of the machine, like the use of bodies as mechanical parts in Busby Berkeley’s choreography or the precisely drilled production-line kicks of the Rockettes. Its soaring shafts, tapering setbacks and elaborate stacking (for this was the age of Rockefeller Center, not of the banal glass box) hinted at vastly over-sized Mayan temples; the contrast between glittering surface and deep wells and slots of shadow suggested exuberance and secrecy conjoined, the “metropolitan style” of Big Business. . . .<sup>27</sup>

LOWRY’S SENSE OF CONSTRUCTION and form has been seriously underestimated by those who have considered his early works. Sherrill Grace, it must be said, is a notable exception: in *The Voyage That Never Ends* she sets out with admirable clarity analyses which less confident critics would have enveloped in a maze of defensive ambiguities. This sense is fully apparent in *Lunar Caustic* and may be taken to be his, not the editors’.

The novella is dominated by two kinds of movement, the binary flicker or “jitter” noted earlier and a slow circling movement, most vividly represented by the treadmill shuffling of the inmates around the ward. This formal component, with the colour, tautness, and vivid imagery of the language, make it a true poem. A rather remarkable poem, one might add, because the naturalistic component of the story — and this is pure old-fashioned naturalism of the “Lower Depths” variety, reminding us of Zola, Dreiser, or Gorky — is fully realized. Lowry considered it a “masterwork,” undoubtedly with the proposed final version in mind. The present composite version cannot be called that, because it is incomplete in parts; but it contains a good many masterly passages and shows mastery in its formal outline. It is an extraordinary feat to combine poetic imagery of the most interior and in some cases avant-garde kind with such gritty naturalism, and one particularly rare in English-language literature. The novella is remarkable on this level alone.<sup>28</sup>

As indicated earlier, *Lunar Caustic* is, in its treatment of time and in its inner geometry, transitional between *Ultramarine* and *Under the Volcano*. The word “transitional” is not meant to imply that it is of secondary interest; the scheme, for

all our uncertainty about the elements of fine shading which would have emerged if Lowry had finished the story, is a beautiful one. In essence, the structure is musical, what is called, technically, "expanded ABA form."

The first of its three parts finds Plantagenet leaving a dockside tavern and gradually working his way towards the hospital. Here the main thematic elements are introduced: the image of the sea (the Drunken Sailor), the image of degraded and wasted humanity (the ashcan into which he throws a bottle, the alley, the cat which has lost an eye in a battle), the image of postponed death (the woman in black who keeps trying to post a letter, accompanied by a clanging bell), the image of the combination or confusion of eternal and mechanistic values (the heavenly wind blowing in the Elevated), the image of official propaganda and falsifications of truth (quoted headlines) and the image of profanation of the holy (Plantagenet's drinking in the church). This first part ends with a hell-harrowing image in Rimbaudian and also Pythagorean terms: he is to knit father (Kalowsky) and son (Garry) through himself, thus healing the horror of three by making a trinity:

"I want to hear the song of the Negroes", he roars, "Veut-on que je disparaisse, que je plonge, à la recherche de l'anneau. . . I am sent to save my father, to find my son, to heal the eternal horror of three, to resolve the immedicable horror of opposites!"<sup>29</sup>

The central part — the part set in the hospital — freely develops and expands these themes.

The third and concluding part begins with a recapitulation of the motive which ended the first, the reference to the "dithering crack" of the hospital door. Plantagenet is again in the outside world. In the third section the themes of the first are repeated in a different context and with different colouring.

*The Theme of the Sea (Drunken Sailor).* He buys a book of postage-stamps depicting exotic scenes from around the world and sends them up to Garry. He is not drunk but he is carrying a bottle.

*The Image of Degraded and Wasted Humanity.* The "faces of the patients were swarming about him"; he throws his bottle into an ashcan but changes his mind and retrieves it.

*Drinking in the Church.* He repeats this action.

*The Woman in Black.* She is kneeling in the church.

*The Elevated.* Again he stops to drink under the Elevated.

*The Headlines.* These are replaced by posters: "Business as usual during alterations: Broken Blossoms: Dead End . . ."

In the end he returns to the tavern from which he started. In the washroom,

. . . he finished his bottle. Glancing round for somewhere to put it he noticed an obscene sketch of a girl chalked on the wall. For some reason, suddenly enraged, he hurled the bottle against this drawing, and in the instant he drew back to escape the fragments of glass, it seemed to him that he had flung that bottle against all the



indecent, the cruelty, the hideousness, the filth and the injustice in the world. At the same time an atrocious vision of Garry flashed across his consciousness, and an atrocious fear. "It was only a little scratch," he had said.<sup>30</sup>

In other words, his symbolic act of decency is horribly suspect. Is he protesting the degradation of woman set out in the obscene sketch or is he "subconsciously" attacking the image in the sexually frenzied spirit of Garry, who had murdered a girl? No shred of decency is to be left him. The omniscient Claggart has conquered him and he is "being watched."

Returning to the saloon he picked out a secluded place to sit, where they brought him whisky.

But feeling he was being watched, even there, he moved later, drink in hand, to the very obscurest corner of the bar, where, curled up like an embryo, he could not be seen at all.<sup>31</sup>

It may be seen that quasi-musical ABA form offers here none of the comforting resolutions that musical form is usually associated with. The repetitions, variations, and transformations on which it is based evoke the circularity of despair.<sup>32</sup>

One of Plantagenet's statements to Claggart, referring to a "loxodromic curve," appears to be a bit of erudition without context, as if he (or Lowry) merely wished to impress Claggart (or us) with his knowledge. Claggart begins:

"How is it that you remember these things and yet forget — or pretend to forget — your own identity? Why have you never told us anything concrete about yourself? Why did you believe, or pretend to believe, you were a ship? . . . And if you don't forget, why the bogus brainstorm? If it is bogus."

"Why — I tell you this pained forgetfulness — somebody said it was like rain, and he remembered much of it — is the converse of trying to remember what happened the night after one has been really drunk."

"So, there have been occasions?"

"Well, Doctor, you remember everything up to a point of that conversation about Chagall or Hiroshige or the loxodromic curve or the marines; then everything is blank and the future drones disaster and there is only remorse left for the past, which is a romantic passion. . . . But you see I remember well the last few days before I came here and I was then drinking heavily, I remember every moment, every slow lurch, every place where I welched ten cents, every evil face, each bright one. Notices on walls, names of taverns, conversations about baseball, or heaven. Every man I met, whether paralytic or not, stands out in my mind with the clarity of a Durer. It is only of before that time that the memory is an abyss, like an imagined look backward before birth."<sup>33</sup>

There are purely formal ways of explaining the loxodromic curve, but probably the navigational definition is most appropriate. The following would not have earned me many points in one of the old Admiralty exams; but Lowry's use of the term is metaphorical rather than exact.

A loxodromic curve is a line like that traced by a ship when its course is so set that it cuts all the meridians of longitude at the same angle. It is in effect the same

kind of line we would get if we laid a ruler diagonally across a map on the Mercator projection. In this projection the real shape of the earth is distorted, a globe being laid out on a flat plane, and the meridians of longitude are represented as straight parallel lines criss-crossing the horizontal lines of latitude.

It would seem strange to call a "straight-line" course a curve but that is what it is in fact, that is, on the surface of the earth. This is because the earth is, again, a globe not a flat plane, and the meridians of longitude actually curve in towards the poles. Thus a ship preserving a constant angle to meridians of longitude is actually describing a curve.

The interesting thing about the curve thus described by our ship is that it is a portion of a geometrical or logarithmic spiral, sometimes called the "spira mirabilis" because of its beauty and widespread occurrence in art-works and natural forms.

There is another use of the word "loxodromic." Loxodromic sailing, also called "oblique sailing" is used by ships sailing into the wind. Ships can only sail in the general direction of the wind by a series of tacks, first at an angle to starboard (right), then at an angle to port (left). (This is simply due to the mechanical inter-relation of sail-angle and wind-direction, which we need not go into.) If we imagine a line drawn to the ship from the point of the horizon the wind is blowing from, it can be seen that the ship is moving forward by zigzagging to each side of this line. In the days of sail the navigating officer had to determine by plane trigonometry the best angle his tacks should take on either side of this imaginary line of wind-direction, the best angle being that which would enable the ship to make the best speed through the water. He also had to determine, again by plane trigonometry, the distance the ship should run on each tack before it came about to the other tack. This was called oblique or loxodromic sailing.

Lowry, in his reference to the loxodromic curve, is giving us a clue to the structure and implications of his story. We do not have to take up this clue to enjoy the story, but taking it up does increase our appreciation.

"Loxodromic sailing" is reflected with considerable humour (Lowry is always throwing erudite or technical jokes into the most hair-raising or gloomy prose) in the second sentence of the story:

Soon he is running into a storm and tacking from side to side, frantically trying to get back. Now he will go into any harbour at all.<sup>34</sup>

Not only that, but the entire first section is a process of "tacking" towards the hospital:

Outside, again the pilgrimage starts, he wanders from saloon to saloon as though searching for something, but always keeping the hospital in sight, as if the saloons were only points on his circumference.<sup>35</sup>

In the hospital scenes, the zig-zag movements of tacking are referred to from time to time in descriptions of Plantagenet's mental state. For example, he identifies himself with a character in the puppet show: ". . . now he became Caspar, dodging absurdly from one side of the stage to the other."<sup>36</sup> And of course he is "pretending to be a ship" according to Claggart<sup>37</sup> and his responses to Claggart's questions are a form of mental tacking, in that they are continually evasive or deflecting.

In a more general sense the pattern of straight-line or zig-zag movement is continually set against that of circular movement, the circle here reminding us of the circle of the horizon. The patient spends most of the day circling the ward in a sort of grid pattern: thus any purposeful movement in the ward must follow either a straight line or a zig-zag. The "snakes and wheels" of *delirium tremens* are referred to. In the storm sequence the zig-zag of lightning and the cyclonic movement of the wind ("one leaf was spinning, another spiralled downwards") are both suggested, with a secondary evocation of the omnipresent maelstrom, which is a whirlpool or 3-D spiral.<sup>38</sup>

In Plantagenet's remark Chagall, Hiroshige, and "the marines" are associated with the loxodromic curve. The "spira mirabilis" is a constant of the visual arts, and forms derived from it are universal. It would thus be pointless to distinguish any two artists as noted for its use, and since it would be difficult to imagine two artists less like each other than the Russian Jew Chagall and the Japanese Hiroshige it would seem that their names are paired to suggest polarities, between which almost all art may be found. As to "the marines," the insignia of the United States Marines depicts, in the flat, a world globe set in front of an anchor. The shank of the anchor is invisible behind the globe, but clearly cuts across it at an angle of forty-five degrees. This would not be a loxodromic curve, but a great circle (I am not sure whether Lowry was unaware of this or was shifting to a reference to the circle).

Lowry seems to have been fond of the image of tacking or zig-zag motion inside a turning circle. We also find it in *Under the Volcano*, which is generally governed by the turning circles of time, but where the young Geoffrey Firmin first appears singing with the young Jacques Laruelle:

Oh we allll WALK ze wibberlee wobberlee WALK  
 And we alll TALK ze wibberlee wobberlee TALK  
 And we alll WEAR wibberlee wobberlee TIES  
 And-look-at-all-ze-pretty-girls-with-wibberlee-wobberlee eyes. Oh  
 We allll SING ze wibberlee wobberlee SONG  
 Until ze day is dawning,  
 And-we-all-have-zat-wibberlee-wobberlee-wobberlee-wibberlee-  
   wibberlee-wobberlee-feeling  
 In ze morning.<sup>39</sup>

The reference to the Marines and a hidden reference to their insignia in a sort of geometrical pun is not surprising, because Lowry was fascinated by all varieties

of heraldry and public signs and symbols. How specifically it is to be related to his image of pretotalitarian and quasi-totalitarian America, that "mischievous world" almost totally controlled by "subtle lunatics," is not clear, because the only other military reference is a pun of nomenclature. Claggart is of course the name of the brutal naval officer in Melville's *Billy Budd*. However, this analogy is not carried through except in terms of the story's general references to Melville, and in any case Claggart's ship is a British one. New York is an image of the chaos of war, but in a general sense, and we do not know if the seaplane shaped like a whale is a military or civilian craft.

Certainly, the choice of a single symbol to represent at once disinterested beauty, science, and world-dominating military force is common in Lowry and particularly in *Under the Volcano*, where such images occur throughout the book. Such composite symbols represent the theme, central to his work, of "the abomination standing in the Holy Place." The idea, more fully developed in *Under the Volcano*, is that modern civilization, for all its beauty and splendour (because Lowry could see such qualities in machine-based culture), is a profanation of the natural order, perverting deep knowledge of the cosmos to the uses of power and greed. Such a civilization inevitably destroys its Billy Budds, its pure and gentle souls, persons such as we may imagine Kalowsky and Garry to have been before the crimes which caused them to be committed.

I have called this essay "the loxodromic curve," though the phrase occurs only in an aside, because such mathematical images refer to a constant in Lowry's work, his idea of the work of the writer as analogous to that of the engineer, architect, or other technical worker.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a wholehearted attack on avant-garde artists in general, see *Mona Lisa's Moustache*, by T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbins (New York: Knopf, 1947). The book is tiresome and coarsely argued, but makes some telling points nonetheless.

<sup>2</sup> *Time* (Jan. 12, 1987), 59.

<sup>3</sup> See *Modern Artists on Art*, ed. Robert L. Herbert (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1964).

<sup>4</sup> Iannis Xenakis, *Musique, Architecture* (Tournai: Casterman, 1971), 73.

<sup>5</sup> Herbert, 64.

<sup>6</sup> Douglas Day, *Malcolm Lowry, A Biography* (London: Oxford, 1974), 191.

<sup>7</sup> *Psalms and Songs* (New York: New American Library, 1975), 266.

<sup>8</sup> Day, 202.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Psalms and Songs*, 260.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

- <sup>12</sup> In George Woodcock, ed., *Malcolm Lowry: The Man and His Work* (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1973), 61-62.
- <sup>13</sup> Sherrill Grace, *The Voyage That Never Ends* (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1982), 32.
- <sup>14</sup> *Psalms and Songs*, 265.
- <sup>15</sup> Woodcock (ed.), 59.
- <sup>16</sup> *Psalms and Songs*, 290.
- <sup>17</sup> Norman Mailer, *The Armies of the Night* (New York and Toronto: Signet, 1968), 320.
- <sup>18</sup> *Psalms and Songs*, 303-04.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 302, 289.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 270-71.
- <sup>24</sup> I do not mean, by the phrase "Totalitarian Pragmatism," to pass judgment on a philosophical school, something I am not equipped to do. I use the word "pragmatism" in the simple and vulgar sense, as it is defined in the dictionary. What I am trying to isolate is a strong but historically imprecise sense of a particularly North American form of totalitarianism which is a constant undercurrent in the literature of the 1920s and 1930s and is especially strong in the vision of Malcolm Lowry. This sense breaks through into inchoate political action in the New Left of the 1960s. The system is variously defined as an inner or secret control mechanism (by both fringe communists and right-wing radicals) or, more respectably, as a trend towards a system of control which may be realized but can be forestalled by rational action. External signs of this totalitarian system in the prewar period are links between American big business and European dictatorships of both left and right, various "speedup" mass-production methods which treat the worker as a machine, such as those of Frederick Taylor and Charles Bedaux (cf. Chaplin's *Modern Times*), and the growing sophistication of a business philosophy which sees man as an exclusively economic unit and which may truly be called a philosophy because it shows the capacity to absorb and adapt ideas on the highest mathematical and logical level.
- As to the use of the word "pragmatism," if any specifically North American form of totalitarianism is ever erected on the basis of "artificial intelligence," then the system of universal logic developed by Charles Peirce, to whom we owe the very word "pragmatism," will certainly be seen as a precursor.
- <sup>25</sup> *Psalms and Songs*, 300-01.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.
- <sup>27</sup> *Time* (Dec. 22, 1986), 46-47.
- <sup>28</sup> As an example of the beautifully paced prose of this story, read the paragraphs "Looking down from the high buildings . . . Farewell, farewell, life!" Note how this section builds by a "swinging" process: long periods followed by short; closely observed naturalistic and non-evocative descriptions followed by descriptions heavy with personification, allusion and other rhetorical devices; images of decay followed by images of hope; until in the end the whole binary process evaporates in mist, and the disparate parts of the city become smoky disembodied fragments in a com-

position of formal beauty — the image of death turning into a delicate and almost pretty “farewell to life.” This is not a detachable flight of fantasy: it is a gentle and insinuating presentation of the image of New York, more violent and horrifying elsewhere, as an entity shaking itself into chaos. The passage is found in *Psalms and Songs*, 261-62.

<sup>29</sup> *Psalms and Songs*, 260-61.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> The uncertain state of the manuscript does not allow us to go much further into the more delicate and smaller-scale aspects of form. It will be appreciated that one transposed paragraph can throw such a plan out and yield misleading results. I have found, though set forth in a rather shadowy fashion, what appears to be a subtle formal interplay between the number of days covered by the narrative and the number of separate sections of the narrative when it is divided in a schematic/thematic fashion. This promising scheme is interrupted by lacunae, intrusive matter and sections which appear either longer or shorter than they should be. I can only assume that, if the editors have not disrupted a scheme which was fully set out, Lowry was working towards a detailed ground-plan which he had not yet realized.

<sup>33</sup> *Psalms and Songs*, 296.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>39</sup> *Under the Volcano* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1947), 26-27; see also Chris Ackerley and Laurence J. Clipper, *A Companion to 'Under the Volcano'* (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1984), item 26.1.

**SEVEN SPECIALIZED BOOKSHOPS UNDER  
ONE ROOF AT THE NEW UBC BOOKSTORE**

- ARTS & HUMANITIES
- LANGUAGE & LITERATURE
- SOCIAL & BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCES
- PROFESSIONAL
- HEALTH SCIENCES
- GENERAL



6200 UNIVERSITY BLVD.  
VANCOUVER, B.C. V5Y 1W9

**UBC BOOKSTORE**