

OUTWARD BOUND

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I
N 1927, aged eighteen, Malcolm Lowry travelled to the far East as a cabin boy aboard the *Pyrrhus*. Some time after his return to England six months later he began work on a novel, his first, which was to be called *Ultramarine*. With Conrad Aiken's *Blue Voyage* and Nordahl Grieg's *The Ship Sails On* as models, Lowry slowly put together his story of a young man's initiation into life aboard a cargo freighter. The young hero, Dana Hilliot, rejects the present realities of sea-life and a hostile crew by persistently escaping into memories of the past until events on board force him to choose between a continued destructive withdrawal into self and a dangerous but creative acceptance of life. This initiatory voyage came to represent the logical starting point in Lowry's projected *The Voyage That Never Ends* which was to comprise all of his inter-related and major works including *Under the Volcano*.

Ultramarine, however, partly due to its derivativeness and partly due to the overshadowing fact of *Under the Volcano*, has been consistently neglected by readers and critics alike. That the continued neglect of Lowry's first novel is unwarranted is the basic assumption of this study. George Woodcock, in his "Introduction" to *Malcolm Lowry: The Man and his Work*, emphasizes *Ultramarine's* importance:

[M]uch of the matter of his early novel finds its way, transformed, into *Under the Volcano*, and its experiments with time and memory, with the reality of the past making the present unreal, will be repeated in all the major novels. A reading of it is indispensable to a full understanding of Lowry.¹

Ultramarine, originally published in 1933, was reprinted with some of Lowry's later revisions in 1963. According to Margerie Lowry's "Introductory Note," it was intended to be "in its rewritten form, the first volume in . . . *The Voyage That Never Ends*."² With this purpose in view, Lowry changed the name of Dana's ship to the Oedipus Tyrannus and made other links with the *Volcano*. Although the book obviously remains a first novel and is certainly not of the stature of *Under the Volcano*, *Ultramarine* is seldom, if ever, given its due. For the most part, critics are content to point out the novel's debt to Aiken's *Blue*

Voyage and Grieg's *The Ship Sails On*.³ Lowry himself was ashamed of the book.

In spite of weaknesses, the structure of the book illustrates the tremendous control which Lowry was developing over his materials. As with the *Volcano* and *Dark As the Grave*, in *Ultramarine* Lowry expands a short period of time, approximately forty-eight hours, into the months and years enfolded in Dana's consciousness. Nineteen years are contained within the small circle of two days passed in one place.

The structure of *Ultramarine* is circular. Beginning in Dana's mind, the narrative circles repeatedly from external action and dialogue back into Dana's consciousness until the final line of the book places the reader within the hero's mind once more. The book is crowded with images of circles and encircling — the engines, wheeling birds, eyes, Dana's lost compasses — even the ship, the harbour of Tsjang-Tsjang, and the sea, function as further layers of encircling reality.

Within the first four chapters, Lowry counterpoints two geographical and spiritual points along the circumference of the superimposed circles of the voyage and Dana's consciousness. The first geographical and spiritual point is the ship's departure for the East which Dana remembers as the book opens. It is essential to emphasize that *Ultramarine* begins as the Oedipus Tyrannus is nearing the port of Tsjang-Tsjang, the furthest point of her voyage. In Dana's mind, however, the ship is still preparing to leave Liverpool. During the course of the first four chapters, Dana moves deeper into his past before gradually circling his way back again, in Chapter IV, to the time of his departure from home. His memory transcribes an enormous circle until it catches itself up at the crucial moment of severance, the sailing of his ship. This point in time haunts him because it symbolizes severance from his youth and initiation to life. Furthermore, it is just this initiation or birth, this breaking out of the womb-like circle of his past, from which he shrinks in dread.

The second geographical and spiritual point of Dana's vicious circle is the furthest point of the voyage, the harbour of Tsjang-Tsjang and the abyss of the present self. While the ship is idle at dock, Dana, his mind and soul in an analogous static state, plumbs the very depths of his private hell. This hell, projected upon external reality by his distorted vision, results from his constant re-living of the past in the present and his persistent refusal to welcome life. Transfixed, like a "tin-foil Jesus", between these two points, Dana must first learn to recognize the self-inflicted hell for what it is and then to move out of his closed circle of time and space.

By the end of Chapter I with the boat docked and night falling, Dana, who has refused to enter life by going ashore, retreats to his bunk and his memories of the past. The visions which he has as he falls asleep highlight his spiritual crisis. Dana is so entirely enclosed in self that he cannot consciously articulate his

problem until the end of the book. The readers, drawn into the maelstrom of Dana's mind, experience the claustrophobic horror of a consciousness closed in upon itself. Believing that the ship "had a manifold security: she was his harbour; he would lie in the arms of the ship", Dana glides into a sleep immediately filled with wheeling screaming horror:

Above, the moon soared and galloped through a dark, tempestuous sky. All at once, every lamp in the street exploded, their globes flew out, darted into the sky, and the street became alive with eyes; eyes greatly dilated, dripping dry scurf, or glued with viscid gum: eyes which held eternity in the fixedness of their stare: eyes which wavered, and spread, and, diminishing rapidly, were catapulted east and west; eyes that were the gutted windows of a cathedral, blackened, emptiness of the brain, through which bats and ravens wheeled enormously. . . .

Significantly, the vision is one of movement and the breaking of enclosing circles: lamps explode, their "globes" flying into the sky, eyes waver, and "diminishing" are "catapulted east and west"; even the enclosing glass of windows is shattered allowing bats and ravens to "wheel enormously" through their empty frames. This is a vision of the chaotic flux which Dana must accept. At this point in his voyage he is only capable of seeing this chaos as nightmarish horror. The closest he comes here to confronting his true position is suggested in the final sensation of the dream and the Chapter — without his compasses (to draw continual circles or to locate his own centre) he is "Lost. Lost. Lost."

In Chapter II, the ship static in the harbour parallels Dana's increasing withdrawal into an abyss of self. Dana escapes the reality of present time and space by dredging up time past and pre-voyage places until they form a hard shell of encrusted memory around his timorous psyche. The climax of his descent into self comes, when, with perception inverted and distorted, he envisions the *Oxenstjerna*, a symbol of movement, life, and a positive growing past, the ox-star "that shines above the lives of men", grounded and oozing death:

It is the *Oxenstjerna* they are talking about, the *Oxenstjerna* that has gone aground. It is the *Oxenstjerna* which now turns over and sinks into the sand, while the oil spreads a mucous film over the Mersey; and now the white sea gulls . . . known by name to the dockers, are dying by the score.

With the virtuosity that characterizes *Under the Volcano*, Lowry forges here a most striking image of stasis and enveloping death which functions like a magnet within the heart of the book. In one brief passage he enfolds the cluster of motifs surrounding the *Oxenstjerna* with the various bird motifs in the novel and even with the haunting motif of eyes; "a mucous film" (like all the eye imagery, drawn from Lowry's personal sufferings) recalls the vision of eyes in Chapter I, and fuses with the general theme of Dana's spiritual blindness. Lowry's technique, in a miniature example such as this image of the *Oxenstjerna*, as well as in larger

structural units, is one of enfolding and encircling. The image is superficially quite simple, but it vibrates with a plenitude of centripetal meaning. In addition to embodying several motifs, motifs which can only be fully understood when viewed within the totality of the book, the Oxenstjerna passage symbolizes Dana's consciousness. Like the ship he has gone aground and "now turns over and sinks into the sand".

THE LOWEST POINT of Dana's descent occurs in Chapter III as he stumbles about Tsjang-Tsjang in a drunken nightmare. This lowest point, however, fully in keeping with Lowry's concept of the fusion of opposites, marks the beginning of his ascent; Dana grapples with the recognition and articulation of his position. His self-analysis is still typically exaggerated and maudlin but he at least admits to these aspects of his nature. Enclosed within the rhetoric of his self-portrait is the further realization that he alone creates his heaven or hell:

Tinfoil Jesus, crucified homunculus (who is also the cross), spitted on the hook of an imaginary Galilee! Who is the crown of thorns dripping red blossoms and the red-blue nails, the flails and the bloody wounds. The tears, but also the lips cupped to embrace them as they fall; the whips, but also the flesh crawling to them. The net and the silver writhing in the mesh, and all the fish that swim in the sea. — The centre of the Charing Cross, ABCD, the Cambridge Circle, the Cambridge Circus, is Hilliot — but every night, unseen, he climbs down and returns to his hotel — while the two great shafts, the propeller shafts, the shafts of wit, laced with blood, AB, CD are the diameters.

Now with his navel as centre and half CD as radius, describe a vicious circle!

Amidst a geometrician's paradise of circles, Dana sees himself as a cheap poseur, a Christ who climbs down from his self-inflicted cross to seek the shelter of his bed in a hotel room. The image of Dana as the centre of a circle with the four circumference points making a cross, ABCD, crystallizes his physical and spiritual dilemma; the points are fixed, the radius is given, the circle is closed, vicious.

Questioning his entire purpose for this voyage, Dana explains his failure in the very terms which will help him break out of his calcified circle of time and space. Challenging Janet's belief in him he cries,

could you still believe in me, still believe in the notion that my voyage is something Columbian and magnificent? Still believe in my taking a self-inflicted penance; in this business of placing myself within impenetrable and terrible boundaries in order that a slow process of justification to yourself may go on. [sic]

Naming the names and saying the words is always magic with Lowry. Dana will soon break out the seemingly "impenetrable and terrible boundaries" of his

self-created hell. As centre to his circle he will move and in moving transcribe an ever new circumference.

By Chapter IV, Dana's agonized attempts to re-inhabit the past have brought him circling back to the point at which the book opened, the departure from England of the Oedipus Tryannus. In the retrospect of his return to Liverpool after the farewell with Janet, the Mersey strikes him as "like a vast camera film slowly and inexorably winding. Soon he will be entangled in her celluloid meshes, and wound out to the open sea." In a sense, Dana has encircled in memory his own position (much as he does later with Andy); he has come full circle. Now is the time to strike out anew. The challenge to Andy represents his first decisive action of the voyage. He does not grasp the profound truth, however, that this intense moment which gathers up all his anger and frustration is, in fact, a "punctum indifferens". Life cannot be seized and frozen in this way for it flows on, forever eluding the grasp. As the card players remark upon returning to their game after Dana's interruption, "— pass —" "— pass —" "— pass —".

The ship sails on or, at least in Chapter V, it prepares to leave port. Prior to the ship's departure, the culminating crisis of the book occurs. Norman's pet pigeon (with consequences that recall the Ancient Mariner's albatross) escapes from its cage and drowns. Dana and the crew stand by helplessly watching it die while a nearby motor boat "its occupant spinning the easy wheel while it circled around gaily . . . turned on itself and rolled in its own swell." The last moments of the ship's stasis at the dock parallels Dana's inability to save the bird. Suddenly, amidst rolling winches and coiling ropes, "the windlass clanking and racing around gladly" and the tiger "moulding its body to the shape of its cage", Dana remembers Norman's grief at the loss of his pet and sees the truth:

No, such things couldn't happen really. But Norman's words made a sort of incantation in his brain. "Time! Of course there would have been time. Time wouldn't have mattered if you'd been a man."

This truth is useless, however, unless one knows how to use it, and Dana is still uncertain. With the renewed peace of the vessel under sail, he contemplates the roaring fires in the "pulsating and throbbing" engine room:

Why was it his brain could not accept the dissonance as simply as a harmony, could not make order emerge from this chaos? . . . Chaos and disunion, then, he told himself, not law and order, were the principles of life which sustained all things, in the mind of man as well as on the ship.

Being unable to accept chaos as good is Dana's great sin. In his efforts to order and contain reality, he has only succeeded in stifling himself, and life, within a tightly sealed tomb of time and space.

Now that he has admitted the priority of chaos, he is ready to move on to a

reconciliation with Andy who symbolizes the forces of life into which Dana must be initiated. With the meaning of the maelstrom and "a reason for his voyages" clearly perceived, Dana looks down into the engine room once more. There he sees Nikolai, the fireman, serving the very source of energy and chaos:

The iron tools blistered his hands, his chest heaved like a spent swimmer's, his eyes tingled in parched sockets, but still he worked on, he would never stop — this was what it was to exist —

Never to stop in the journey of life, this is Dana's discovery. Life is flux, chaos, energy, while death, like a ship gone aground, like a fixed, transcribed circle ABCD, is stasis. Paradoxically, life exists in the fiery abyss of the ship and Dana cherishes his discovery while "somewhere," as if warning that this point of rest is a "punctum indifferens," "a lantern clanged with eternal, pitiless movement."

Significantly, *Ultramarine* does not end on this pinnacle of insight. Although the narrative rhythm reaches completion by the end of Chapter V, the novel continues, mirroring in its structure what Dana has still to learn. In this sense *Ultramarine* was an ideal prologue for Lowry's intended voyage that never ends. Dana Hilliot, prefiguring the restless voyaging of subsequent Lowry heroes, realizes that he has "surrounded Andy's position" and must move on; life is a continual movement of centre and circumference:

(There is . . . a stormflood within, as my heart beats with the beating of the engine, as I go out with the ship towards the eternal summers. A storm is thundering out there, there is the glow of tropical fire! Bad, or good, as it happens to be, that is what it is to exist! . . . It is as though I have been silent and fuddled with sleep all my life . . . I know now that at least it is better to go always towards the summer . . . Then at last again to be outward bound, always outward, always onward, to be fighting always for the dreamt-of-harbour . . . —)

Then, lest this solution of life's mystery appear too simple, Lowry charts the next stage in Dana's initiation. A fireman is ill and Dana is chosen to replace him; he must descend into the abyss of life which he earlier contemplated with acute insight. During his last moments on deck, a strange craft drifts through the night mist morseing her name: *Oxenstjerna*. Like a voice from his past this ship calls to him, reminding him that on the point of creating a new circle into the future he must take the past with him — as comfort and as threat. If he again makes the profound mistake of withdrawing into a hard shell of time and space, he will destroy his world. For life is perpetual activity "always outward, always onward".

Certainly *Ultramarine* is not an *Under the Volcano* but then few books are. That it is a worthwhile book in its own right is equally clear. In his first novel, Lowry explored the problems of time and space and of self-enclosed perception which distinguish his fiction. The structure of the book, prefiguring in its involu-

tions the structure of the *Volcano*, supports Lowry's vision of a mind so turned in upon itself, so obsessed with the past, that only a series of shocks can unroll it. For such an individual (for life itself Lowry would have us believe) the achievement of equilibrium is temporary; beyond one hurdle lies the next, a worse one; "that is what it is to exist." As a member of Lowry's *Voyage* cycle and precursor of *Under the Volcano* or as an independent novel, *Ultramarine* succeeds in its portrayal of initiation; the voyage is begun, the ship is outward bound.

NOTES

- ¹ *Malcolm Lowry: The Man and his Work* (University of British Columbia Press, 1971), p. 5.
- ² *Ultramarine* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1963), p. 7. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
- ³ See, for example, the first two chapters of Richard Hauer Costa's *Malcolm Lowry* (Twayne Publishers, New York, 1972). By far the best discussion of *Ultramarine* to date is Chapter II of Tony Kilgallin's *Lowry* (Press Porcepic, 1973). Kilgallin reveals many further influences on or allusions in the novel.

ARTISTS AND OLD CHAIRS

Miriam Waddington

A puff of wind
 a stretch of sky
 a rush of air —
 and Helen
 who commands the stars
 and planets
 now commands
 a chair.

Old and whiskered
 its stuffings
 thinning —
 it wakes up
 one morning
 on the junkman's truck
 alive and even
 grinning.

Whoosh and thump!
 It lands
 in Helen's garden
 with a mighty bump;
 and there among