

LOWRY'S DEBT TO NORDAHL GRIEG

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“SANTOS,” he said, “this day shalt thou be with me in paradise” (*The Ship Sails On*).¹ Addressed to the ship’s dog by Benjamin Hall as he was contemplating suicide, this statement is said by Douglas Day in his recent biography of Lowry to be “almost the only lines that he was able to lift directly from Grieg.”² It is true that Lowry didn’t lift many lines directly and indeed, the only exact borrowing of a complete sentence that I have been able to find is not the above, but the one which Tony Kilgallin correctly identifies in his recent book on Lowry: “Outside was the roar of the sea and the darkness.”³ Grieg had used this sentence to conclude the second chapter of *The Ship Sails On*, and Lowry used it verbatim on two occasions, to conclude the fifth chapter of *Ultramarine*⁴ and as the final sentence in his short story, “On Board the *West Hardaway*.”⁵ In addition, he used a slightly modified form, “The Roar of the Sea and the Darkness,” as one of the subtitles in his projected collection of poems to be called *The Lighthouse That Invites the Storm*.⁶

Nevertheless, what Lowry confessed to Nordahl Grieg in his 1938 letter⁷ is essentially well-grounded in fact, more so than critics have to date acknowledged, for scattered throughout *Ultramarine* are some two dozen or so examples of “paraphrase, plagiarism, or pastiche” from Grieg. Some of these, it is true, are simple one-word borrowings in the form of proper and geographical names, or phrases and sentences which vary only slightly from Grieg’s usage, but others involve significant extensions or modifications of the originals to the extent that though Grieg is discernible, the craftsmanship of Lowry is also very much in evidence. The general effect is therefore one of a careful and respectful pastiche rather than mere plagiarism, for Lowry uses Grieg’s material to transform his own experiences and perceptions into a powerful private aesthetic, thus demonstrating that he was unwilling even at the outset of his career to settle for the straight-forward realism that characterizes Grieg’s novel. Already Lowry was beginning to reflect what was to become a major component of his later fiction,

a vision of the irrational, of the chaotic, of the grotesque, of an internal rather than primarily an external universe. Grieg's novel, a powerful narrative though it is, remains basically a literal and static work, closely akin in tone and purpose to the naturalistic works of Zola or Hamsun, while Lowry's points unmistakably towards the surrealism of Conrad Aiken or James Joyce. He wanted, certainly, "the power and purity of Grieg,"⁸ but it is clear throughout *Ultramarine* that he was striving for more levels of meaning than were provided by *The Ship Sails On*, and even in the simplest of his borrowings this note of restlessness, of probing, of experimentation, comes through.

In connection with his use of Grieg's material, a related question arises as to why Lowry gave such a relatively strong Norwegian flavour to his first novel, and how he could bring this aspect off without the sense of artificiality or awkwardness that one might expect from a non-Norwegian. Indeed, even when he resorts to the many examples of the Norwegian vernacular throughout *Ultramarine*, the note of appropriateness is achieved, as well as an aesthetic integration between the experience of the moment and the vision evoked by the disparate and seemingly disjointed Norwegian phrases. It is clear that throughout his life Lowry felt a strong affinity for Norway and the Norwegians; he was fond, for example, of romanticizing his maternal grandfather, Captain Boden, and transforming him into a Norwegian seaman who went down with his ship.⁹ And aside from his friendship with Grieg, he undoubtedly met many Norwegians during his sea voyages, particularly when he sailed to Norway as a coaltrimmer on a Norwegian ship. It seems, too, that he must have undertaken at some time during his early years a formal study of the Norwegian language,¹⁰ his command of which stayed with him sufficiently to translate in 1941 a Norwegian letter found in a bottle in the North Atlantic and sent to the Canadian government.¹¹ It is interesting that on this occasion he signed his name "Malcolm Boden Lowry," as though invoking his "Norwegian" grandfather to properly inspire him. The continued recurrence of Norwegian names and phrases throughout his later fiction provides evidence of the lingering effect that his early identification with Norway produced. To the youthful and romantic Lowry, Nordahl Grieg must have seemed a remarkable man indeed, all the more so since he had already written much the same kind of novel that he himself was attempting, so it is perhaps little wonder that his idolizing took at times the form of plagiarism and paraphrase.

Set out in tabular and abbreviated form, the passages from *The Ship Sails On* that Lowry apparently availed himself of suggest at first glance a rather alarming

degree of plagiarism, but a close examination of their contexts reveals that much more was involved than outright borrowing.

The Ship Sails On

She is a warehouse that moves about from port to port... a community of human lives... A Moloch that crushes the lives of man... and then calmly turns its face to the solitudes as though nothing had happened. (2)

... it was all so unreal, a beautiful white dream. (10)

He folded it carefully... and dropped it into the chest. Is was as though he had buried a part of his life. (10)

You'd do better playing at Child Jesus in the temple instead of going to sea. (19)

For a second Benjamin looked down into the abyss of his own contemptibleness... (19)

Outside was the roar of the sea and the darkness. (26)

... the town roared, the siren shrieked. (37)

... the town roared around them. (149)

You son of a bitch, you bastard toad — (52)

A mystery was present... From out of this hard iron world... had come something alive, something tender and helpless. (111)

Ultramarine

... that permitted him only vaguely to be aware of the ship as a sort of Moloch, as a warehouse. (41)

... how incredibly swiftly they had become a community... (21)

... gliding calmly among the solitudes as though nothing had happened. (p. 22 of "On Board the *West Hardaway*.")

... as for Janet, she seemed to him at this moment to be a white dream... (p. 13 of "*West Hardaway*.")

... folding them over and over and then, with such remorse, dropping them into my sea box, a part of my life gone. The end of a chapter. (85)

It'll teach 'im that not every little Christ Jesus in the temple can come running round cargo steamers. (131)

Hilliot stared for a moment down into the depths of his own contemptibleness... (34)

Outside was the roar of the sea and the darkness. (173; also p. 22 of "*West Hardaway*.")

... the siren roared... and the town roared back... (29)

Behind the numbered sheds the town roared. (36)

... that was the way to treat him, the bastard toad — (22)

Something had happened... a tender voice from home... a mystery had shown its face among the solitudes. (26)

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| <p>A white motor-boat came skimming out of the harbour, making for the <i>Mignon</i>. (139-39)</p> <p>Seamen's letters are only for . . . Narvik, Sivert, Leif, and Risor. (142)</p> <p>It's the dire disease — you know what. (170)</p> <p>It would not take much, the relaxing of a muscle, and then he would be in the power of the sea and the sharks. (219)</p> | <p>A white motor boat came curtsying out of the harbour, rolling nearer and nearer. (28)</p> <p>Letters for . . . Seamen McGoff and Bre-dahl. (74)</p> <p>Look! How everyone he touches is smitten with the dire disease. (73)</p> <p>How easy . . . it would be to put an end to everything. . . the relaxing of a muscle, and it would all be over. (40)</p> |
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In addition to these extended passages, there are a number of simple literal borrowings, chiefly Norwegian geographical and proper names from Grieg's novel, and with these Lowry does some interesting things. The seaport of Tvedestrand, the home of Grieg's character Sivert, becomes for Lowry the birthplace of both Andy and Norman, as well as the original registration port of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. The names "Leif" and "Pedro" appear in both novels, as does "Nikolai," and with this latter name Lowry goes so far as to emulate Grieg by adding a rider, though in a reverse way from Grieg. Grieg's character, "the white-haired lad, whom they call Sivert, though he was christened Nikolai" (*The Ship Sails On*, 6), thus rejects his name, while his counterpart in *Ultramarine* accepts it: "I am the one they call Nikolai, but my real name is Wallae" (*Ultramarine*, 17). It is interesting, too, that in each novel it is this Nikolai figure who initially befriends the respective protagonists, with Lowry making his a fireman instead of a seaman as in Grieg. Both novelists, finally, exploit the standard Norwegian joke/insult concerning Bergen which, incidentally, was Grieg's birthplace, so undoubtedly he understood the epithet's implications. "'You Bergener!' shouted Oscar, though he knew very well the steward came from Flekkefjord" (*The Ship Sails On*, 52) represents an insult whose magnitude Lowry apparently understood when he used it to reveal a kind of perverse integrity of Andy, who had been fired twelve years earlier as second mate because "he had struck the new captain, a Stavanger man, for calling him a Bergener" (*Ultramarine*, 16).

Even in these elementary borrowings we are aware of Lowry's ability to manipulate fictional material, and to extend the components of Grieg's literal realism into a more complex structure and aesthetic. *The Ship Sails On* lends itself chiefly to a narrative level of reading, and a closely related social protest

level, though I don't find this element as strong as one critic suggested in his brief study of Grieg in 1945.¹² For example, when the mate scolds Sivert and Benjamin for idling, warning the former that he "will never see Tvedestrand again" (*The Ship Sails On*, 61), the name simply represents a seaport in Norway, and the mate's belligerent and unfeeling attitude towards the seamen reflects a stock situation found in scores of sea stories. Lowry, in that brilliant opening scene of *Ultramarine*, does a different thing entirely when he reveals the fact that both Andy and Norman had been born in Tvedestrand. Everything in this terse, stichomythic scene rapidly establishes the isolation of Dana Hilliot: he has replied first to the anonymous Board of Trade clerk and awaits, as it were, the replies of Andy and Norman, which turn out to be identical except for names and ages, and thus a double opposition to Dana's identity is established at the very outset. Andy and Norman have in common their Tvedestrand birthplace and their current Liverpool address, while Dana is separated from them by all factors — age, birthplace, and residence. I am not suggesting that the mere repetition of "Tvedestrand" is sufficient to carry this burden by itself, but it is one of the elements of this remarkable scene that reflects Lowry's conscious manipulation of what otherwise might simply be regarded as borrowed material.

Throughout the first weeks of his voyage, Hilliot has many occasions to muse upon his isolation and expatriation, and in a parenthetical interior monologue addressed to Janet he links all this — through a description of the ship — with Tvedestrand again:

— the tramp steamer *Oedipus Tyrannus*, outward bound for hell. When you come to think of it — an ideal match. Both of us born of Viking blood, both robbed of our countries and left to make out as best we can; both, finally, with the same wandering, harbourless, dispossessed characteristics. Her very history is enough to fill me with a narcissistic compassion! First she was registered in Tvedestrand, then bought by an English firm. . . . She sailed out an exile, an expatriate, with *Seamen* scarcely substituted for *Matroses*, or *Firemen* for *Fyreötere*. (*Ultramarine*, 53)

Andy and Norman, born in Tvedestrand, clearly belong with the ship from the start, while Dana, in spite of his desperate wish for it to be otherwise, is an outsider on that score as well, as he is constantly reminded in the course of his ship-board duties. And of course one of the major themes of this novel is the tracing of how he ultimately effects a community with his shipmates, and with Andy and Norman in particular.

ON THE WHOLE, the passages that I have listed above reveal a much more subjective and introspective character in Hilliot than in Benjamin Hall, who frequently emerges primarily as a spokesman for Grieg's own social and political views. Hall "guesses," even before he boards the *Mignon*, that "she is a warehouse . . . , a community of human lives . . . , a Moloch that crushes the lives of men," but there is no urgency or threat experienced by him at this point, though he does feel "drawn to her and afraid of her" (*The Ship Sails On*, 2). Hilliot's parallel reflections about the *Oedipus Tyrannus* occur during his first night at Tsjang-Tsjang, while he is still in isolation from the shore-bound crew, his mind in turmoil over his fleeting thoughts of suicide, the homosexual advances of the quartermaster, and in general the "roar of the town" beyond the dock. He recalls that at school he was unable to grasp a sense of order even in a discipline like geometry, and now in his suffering state he is unable to assign a tangible shape to the causes or nature of his alienation. "This was it, this was always it, this lack of order in his life which even now permitted him only vaguely to be aware of the ship as a sort of Moloch, as a warehouse" (*Ultramarine*, 41). Benjamin Hall becomes a part of the "community of human lives" almost in his first confrontation with Aalesund and Oscar, and his transformation from "a new hand who knows nothing" (2) to one "who suddenly understood what the sea means to seamen" (35) occurs with virtually no inward turmoil and only a brief bout of sea-sickness and vomiting to signify the purging of his former self. When Hilliot, on the other hand, thinks about how swiftly the "fourteen men in a forecastle . . . had become a community," he is immediately propelled in thought from "his place there on the poop" towards a chaotic eternity, a "world within world, sea within sea, void within void, the ultimate, the inescapable" (*Ultramarine*, 21). Since he is not part of this community as yet, he takes refuge in the tangible things around him, "the visible structure of the ship", and is soon momentarily elated by the endless possibilities of what the ship represents. The restricted "community of human lives" which we see literally being decimated one by one in Grieg's novel, is being transformed in Hilliot's imagination into "another land line, another climate, another people, and another port which would emerge, inevitably, out of such nothingness" (*Ultramarine*, 22-3).

Grieg clearly is motivated by a deterministic impulse in his concern to show us the devastating effects of "the dire disease"; his world, represented by the *Mignon*, is ordered, predictable, inflexible, and ultimately destructive, and the only way for one to survive is to leave the ship before it destroys him. Of all the

crew, only Narvik can do this, and it is significant that he never goes ashore with the crew to partake in their endless orgies, and he is thus spared the destruction which inhabits this ship-seaport ambience. All others who leave the ship, like Aalesund and Little Bekhardt, leave as doomed men, ravaged by "the dire disease." The threat of venereal disease runs through Lowry's novel as well, but as far as the immediate crew of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* is concerned, it is present off stage rather than on stage, as it were: only Norman of the present crew has been infected but, along with everyone else, he passes "short-arm inspection" and is ready for action again. But the accounts that Dana hears about the ravages of syphilis on former crew members, and the vivid specimens he sees in the Tsjang-Tsjang anatomical museum all provide dramatic reasons for Hilliot's obsessive fear of infection. The projection he has of what he will be once he breaks "all the shy, abstemious promises with which [Janet] invested him" reflects this paranoia:

. . . see him if you will for yourself, Dana Hilliot, the syphilitic, as he strolls aimfully down Great Homer Street. Look! How everyone he touches is smitten with the dire disease. It is just that one little word, the word that kills. Now everything is wasted. . . . This is he, the human husk, the leaf of ash, ashes to ashes and dust to dust. (*Ultramarine*, 73)

But of course all this does not come to pass in Lowry's book, while "the word that kills" performs devastatingly in *The Ship Sails On*. When Little Bekhardt tells Benjamin that he is infected by "the dire disease," its effects are already apparent in his increasing blindness and growing madness. And Benjamin's subsequent glimpse of the Cape Town hospital ward full of inert, bandaged victims reveals in tangible form that there is ultimately no escape from the consequences of his transgression. Lowry's vision, by contrast, though more chaotic than Grieg's, is optimistic and expansive, for Hilliot and his mates do receive second and third chances, as it were, whereas for Grieg's characters one slip spells out irrevocable doom.

Much of the effect that Lowry achieves in his use of Grieg's material derives from the skill with which he expands it beyond its literal limitations and integrates it with his shifting styles. Grieg's novel rarely transcends its literal dimensions, although in a sense it depends on how one starts the novel: it is in one way as effective as a total allegory as it is as a realistic social document, but it has to be one *or* the other, and can't effectively change in midstream, as it were. *Ultramarine*, on the other hand, repeatedly moves back and forth between its literal and non-literal levels, just as it moves backwards and forwards in time,

and it is in these shifting contexts that Grieg's words and situations are effectively transformed. When Benjamin Hall changes from his shore clothes to his seaman's attire and puts away his blue suit, he feels "it was as though he had buried a part of his life" (*The Ship Sails On*, 10), but his action is merely a chronological and mechanical step in his transformation. The equivalent scene in *Ultramarine* unfolds in retrospect as Hilliot after weeks at sea prepares to go ashore in Tsjang-Tsjang:

... I reentered the forecastle to dress. There I took my blue suit out of my sea box. While dressing I remembered how the first night aboard the ship I had creased these self-same trousers, holding them under my chin, folding them over and over and then, with such remorse, dropping them into my sea box, a part of my life gone. The end of a chapter. . . . But now it was the right time to wear my blue suit again. (*Ultramarine*, 85)

Grieg's Benjamin Hall *does*, of course, bury permanently a "part of his life," for there will never again be for him "the right time" to wear his suit in any kind of innocent reunion with Eva. Hilliot can still do so with Janet, for though he becomes insensibly drunk every time he goes ashore, his forays leave him sexually as chaste as ever. The "end of a chapter" is not in Hilliot's case the end of a book as it effectively is for Benjamin, for whom indeed "everything is wasted" after his seduction by the prostitute.

Basically the difference here involves Lowry's comic vision of life as opposed to the bleak determinism of Nordahl Grieg, outlooks which are reflected in the consequences of the "letter" episodes of the two novels. Benjamin Hall fails to receive his expected letter from Eva during the normal mail delivery in Cape Town, and in a fit of disappointment and revenge goes ashore where he is willingly seduced by Rita and, as he later discovers, venereally infected by her. The next day Eva's delayed letter arrives, full of the innocent love which would have saved Benjamin the day before; irrevocably doomed, he decides against suicide, and remains to become part of the corruption of the ship and its crew. Dana Hilliot also fails to receive his letter from Janet during the regular mail call and, like Benjamin, he feels he now has sufficient grounds for breaking his vows of chastity. "Surely Janet wouldn't mind that," he rationalizes; "she would *want* me to be a man, a hell of a fellow like Andy. . . . Tonight things would all be changed, tonight I should be the hero, the monster —" (*Ultramarine*, 79, 81). Though Janet's letter does arrive before he goes ashore, he is still determined to "become a man," but at the point of succumbing to the prostitute Olga he hesitates, remembering the letter: "Give me half an hour," he tells Olga, "I want

to cool my brain a little and think" (*Ultramarine*, 116). Olga, however, is not in a cooling mood, and when Dana returns, she has given herself over to Andy, and Hilliot's chastity is thus for the moment preserved.

There is a strong sense of the comic in this scene as there is, indeed, in much of *Ultramarine*, and it is in this respect that Lowry most sharply differs from Grieg. In a relatively minor borrowing — the episode of the motor boat approaching the *Mignon* — this aspect of Lowry's art is subtly illustrated. Grieg's depiction of this scene is precise and literal, not charged with any hidden possibilities, and when we learn that the boat is bringing the pilot on board, we recognize the incident simply as another example of Grieg's familiarity with a common marine procedure. Lowry makes subtle changes in Grieg's wording: "A white motor boat came *curtsying* out of the harbour, *rolling* nearer and nearer" (*Ultramarine*, 28; italics mine), changes we begin to understand upon learning the boat's mission: "the order came for all hands to muster for a short-arm inspection while a fat doctor hauled himself up the Jacob's ladder" (28). When we realize that during the course of his inspection, the fat M.O. is a homosexual (he takes Norman inside for "an interview"), we grasp the appropriateness of the words "curtsying" and "rolling." There is no such comic relief in Grieg from the spectre of venereal disease and indeed, the sense of the comic rarely is present in any form in his novel, let alone in connection with "the dire disease." Grieg may have given Lowry the vocabulary, but Lowry's vision and aesthetic powers enabled him on most occasions to achieve a satisfying transformation of his borrowed material.

In assessing Lowry's debt to Nordahl Grieg, it is impossible to determine infallibly the dividing line between borrowing and originality, but it seems clear that the passages I have indicated in this paper derived specifically from *The Ship Sails On*. With other similarities between the two novels — the young, romantic hero, the existence of the idealized, innocent girl back home, the confrontation between innocence and experience, and so on — attribution is more tenuous, for fictional elements like these are as much the stock in trade of *Bildungsroman* in general as they are borrowings from any specific author. And of course Lowry's own experiences aboard the *Pyrrhus* and other ships probably counted more than any readings he may have done when he began the writing of *Ultramarine* in 1928. I do not know exactly when Lowry inserted the Grieg material into the body of his novel, but the evidence I have examined suggests that it was some time between the fall of 1930 and the fall of 1932, at which time he first submitted his manuscript to Chatto and Windus. Though according

to Earle Birney, Lowry had read *The Ship Sails On* in translation before going to Cambridge in October of 1929,¹³ the first explicit reference to Grieg in anything Lowry wrote occurs in his short story, "Punctum Indifferens Skibet Gaar Videre", published after his return from his visit to Grieg in the fall of 1930.¹⁴ And since Conrad Aiken makes no mention of the influence of Grieg in his reminiscing about the revision of *Ultramarine* during the summer of 1929,¹⁵ it is likely that it didn't occur to Lowry to use Grieg's material until after he had met him. His letter to Grieg in 1938 indicates the close identification he experienced with Benjamin Hall, and of course it is quite possible that Lowry's attempts to write a stage version of *The Ship Sails On* led him to make some fictional use of this material.¹⁶

According to Douglas Day, Lowry was "literally terrified that some reviewer might check . . . *Ultramarine* out of a library and discover that it contained material stolen from Conrad Aiken and Nordahl Grieg."¹⁷ It does of course contain such material, though Day states it doesn't, but it contains it in somewhat the same way that, say, Eliot's *Waste Land* contains material stolen from others: it is transformed through the borrower's vision and art into something quite different from the original. Lowry may have been putting us on about his fears, but I think he did protest too much about the mediocrity of *Ultramarine*; George Woodcock pointed out some years ago that "it is not an unworthy work,"¹⁸ and a not insignificant part of its strength derives, I think, from the effective use that Lowry made of material from Nordahl Grieg.

NOTES

- ¹ Nordahl Grieg. *The Ship Sails On*. (New York, 1927). Subsequent references are indicated internally.
- ² Douglas Day. *Malcolm Lowry*. (New York, 1973), p. 119n. The sentence appears, slightly modified, in *Under the Volcano* (New York, 1947), p. 229. ("Yet this day, pichicho, shalt thou be with me in —")
- ³ Tony Kilgallin. *Lowry*. (Erin, 1973), p. 108.
- ⁴ Malcolm Lowry, *Ultramarine*. (Philadelphia and New York, 1962), p. 173. Subsequent references are indicated internally.
- ⁵ Malcolm Lowry. "On Board the *West Hardaway*," *Story*, Vol. III, No. 15 (October 1933), 22.
- ⁶ Earle Birney, ed. *The Collected Poems of Malcolm Lowry*. (San Francisco, 1962), p. 9.
- ⁷ Malcolm Lowry. *Selected Letters*, ed. Harvey Breit and Marjorie Bonner Lowry. (Philadelphia and New York, 1965), pp. 15-16.

- ⁸ Quoted in Day, *op. cit.*, p. 117.
- ⁹ Conrad Knickerbocker states flatly that Captain Boden was "a Norwegian seaman." *Prairie Schooner XXXVII* (Winter, 1963-64), 303. Day, however, states that he was "a well-known Liverpool shipowner and mariner." *op. cit.*, p. 58.
- ¹⁰ Day, *op. cit.*, p. 121n. Though Day suggests that Lowry learned only "a drinker's vocabulary" in Norwegian, his precise use of Norwegian throughout *Ultramarine* seems to contradict this.
- ¹¹ *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 1941, p. 501.
- ¹² Dik Lehmkuhl, "Echo From the North: The Voice of Nordahl Grieg," *Transformation*, 3. London, 1945, p. 165.
- ¹³ Earle Birney, "A Malcolm Lowry Bibliography," *Canadian Literature*, 8 (Spring, 1961), 82. Grieg's novel, published in Norway in 1924, was translated into English in 1927 by one of Lowry's Cambridge masters, A. G. Chater.
- ¹⁴ Lowry's title contains the Norwegian title of Grieg's novel, *Skibet Gaar Videre*. This story, published in the winter of 1930-31, and "Port Swettenham," published in February of 1930, were both incorporated into *Ultramarine*. "Port Swettenham" contains no reference to Grieg, whom Lowry visited between July and September of 1930.
- ¹⁵ Conrad Aiken, "Malcolm Lowry: A Note," *Canadian Literature*, 8 (Spring, 1961), 29-30.
- ¹⁶ I find it puzzling that Grieg, a relatively successful dramatist, would entrust a stage-adaptation of his novel to a non-dramatist, but this is perhaps another of the many unsolved details of the whole Grieg-Lowry relationship.
- ¹⁷ Day, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-27.
- ¹⁸ George Woodcock, "Malcolm Lowry as Novelist," *British Columbia Library Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (April 1961), 26.