

editorial

THE ABSORPTION OF ECHOES

ALL WRITERS are derivative; all good writers plagiarize; theft is a literary virtue. So, with minimal exaggeration, one might characterize the fundamentals of a modern critical attitude which — more than half a century after Eliot, Pound, Joyce and Proust established in practice the artistic validity of derivation — has at last replaced the romantic and pernicious fiction that complete originality was a possible or even a desirable goal. Every artist, indeed, has a new way of looking at the world, because every personality is in some degree unique, but the world that he as an artist will see (and in his work present) inevitably includes (even if in negative) the perceptions of all those artists who have preceded him and of whose work he may be directly or indirectly unaware. When an artist is such a voracious consumer of the work of other artists as Malcolm Lowry, whose interests spilled exuberantly from literature (considered in its widest and wildest sense) into the visual (the cinema) and the aural (jazz), and all is blended with a sharply direct response to the physical environment (exemplified especially in his skill as a swimmer), then the web of influences and derivations becomes as dense and complicated as it was in the case of either Joyce or — that most haunting *semblable* — Proust.

In this issue we explore, in a series of essays by Canadian, English and American critics, and in a pair of interesting and hitherto unpublished letters by the author, this aspect of Lowry's work. The exercise may be regarded also as a probing into the whole general question of the boundaries between the derived and the original, and the extent to which an artist's success depends on his blend-

ing all that he has borrowed into a work that is self-consistent and self-subsistent, that lives within its own world and its own existence.

In this context it is perhaps significant that, while all the critics who write in this issue are quite evidently agreed in accepting *Under the Volcano* as Lowry's best work, the only one that touches on perfection, a great deal of attention is in fact paid to his lesser works: to the various versions of the novella that was eventually published in a compilation of other hands as *Lunar Caustic*, and to that curious travel story, "Through the Panama". This, I suggest, is appropriate, for, when we proceed from the contemplation of an artist's works as icons, standing in their ownness and completeness, to examining the sources of his creativity, it is inevitable that we should find them most clearly revealed in his imperfect and — in a writer who found finality as elusive as Lowry did — in his uncompleted works. These are the works in which, to borrow a word used by Lowry in the letter to Albert Erskine published in this issue, the echoes have not been "absorbed". For *absorption* surely is the key word when we consider the difference between a superbly complex and complete work like *Under the Volcano*, and an unresolved mass of writing like *Dark as the Grave wherein my Friend is Laid*.

I leave it to W. H. New, in his essay "Lowry's Reading", to carry further the introduction of the various essays and the tracing of their relationships. But, before ending, I must thank Margerie Lowry for her great helpfulness in providing the two letters by Malcolm Lowry which we publish, and also in giving generous permission for the use in some of the essays of quotations from his unpublished writings.

G.W