

LOWRY'S READING

An Introductory Essay

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IN TWO LARGE BOXES at the University of British Columbia are the remnants of Malcolm Lowry's library, a motley collection of works that ranges from Emily Brontë and Olive Schreiner to Djuna Barnes and Virginia Woolf, from the *Kenyon*, *Partisan*, and *Sewanee Reviews* to *A Pocketful of Canada*, from *Latin Prose Composition* to the *Metropolitan Opera Guide*, and from Elizabethan plays to Kafka and Keats. Little escaped his attention, in other words, and even such a partial list as this one indicates his eclectic and energetic insatiability for books. That he was also an inveterate film-goer and jazz enthusiast, and that he absorbed and remembered everything he experienced, makes any effort to separate out the individual influences on his work an invidious one; rather like chasing a rabbit through Ali Baba's caves, the activity seems incommensurate with its surroundings. But on frequent occasions an appreciation of the scope of his references or the source of a single allusion will take us closer to Lowry's tone and method.

Richard Hauer Costa, for example, writing in the *University of Toronto Quarterly* in 1967, points out that "unacknowledged literary kinship" between *Under the Volcano*, Aiken's *Blue Voyage*, and Joyce's *Ulysses*: the central use of the quest theme, the burgeoning sense of remorse, the "impatience" of the author with usual narrative methods, and so on. The Consul's "garden scene" in Chapter Five thus becomes an analogue to Joyce's Nighttown episode, and Lowry's dislocation of time, his recognition of what Costa elsewhere calls the "weight of the past", relates to Joyce's and Proust's. Such parallels have their value. It is by comparison that we learn our way into a new novel, and only after this process has taken place that we come to understand the individuality (if it exists) of the novel's own world.

Lowry acknowledges the comparative approach when in 1951 he finds in the work of Hermann Hesse the closest spirit to his own. And Clifford Leech uses comparison as a technical method in *Imagined Worlds* (1968) when, to investigate the "free manipulation of event" that characterizes the structure of Conrad's *Nostromo*, he brings in an analysis of *Under the Volcano* to illuminate his discussion. In both books the simultaneity of present and past, achieved by allowing an equivocal double viewpoint of character and narrator, affects our understanding of the situations and the ideas. As Leech puts it: "to have lived and to be the subject of anguish in recollection is in some sense to be living still." This has one meaning with reference to the Consul and Laruelle, another with reference to Lowry. On a still larger scale the statement could apply as one of the aims of criticism, or one of the accomplishments of art — to recreate the moment (of anguish, terror, hope, or whatever) that the author wished to convey, or to continue to engender that experience as the moment (and so the reader) alters; but these are aspects of the same problem of freedom and fate, essentially metaphysical in nature, which all of Lowry's work continually explores.

Lowry envisioned the universe as a series of Chinese boxes, with man in one of them, controlling some and controlled by others. The scheme is not quite so simple, of course, for the boxes (both external and internal) can be "factual" in any number of epistemological systems. And the whole prospect is further complicated by matters of fate and free will. Man can either control the worlds inside his mind or himself be governed, be in harmony with the sensory worlds outside him or be terrified and dislocated — and about such abstract possibilities as Destiny and Judgment (however tangible their effects in his life) he can only suppose. The scene in "Through the Panama", where Wilderness (aboard a ship in the Canal Zone) has relinquished control to the Captain, the Canal operator, and the Canal Zone Authority, is apropos. The overt image of multiple containment is obvious; embodied in it is a metaphor about the sensibility of an artist — not only to the materials that can be rendered into art but also to his own engagement with the task. The artist, that is, pursues control over a body of knowledge until it catches him and takes him over. Such knowledge is the "strange comfort" that the profession provides — whether it be the S.S. *Diderot's* captain's extra ability and hence extra grounds for fear in the face of a strong storm, or Keats' medical knowledge disabusing his mind of any hope of recovery from his tuberculosis, or Sigbjorn Wilderness-cum-Malcolm Lowry's absorption in the present-ness of the past. The past cannot be escaped nor its reality (as preserved in memory, or in Wilderness's notebook, or in Lowry's novel) denied. Herein

lies the thematic basis for both *Hear Us O Lord* and *Dark as the Grave*, and a further indication of the author's structural method.

In Lowry's letters we find other ramifications of this question of control. In 1951 he acknowledges Jung's concept of "man in search of a soul" as important to his work; in 1950 and again in 1953 Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* suggests a "not dissimilar theme", which he relates to Existentialism and to Ortega's philosophy of history. Wilderness he identifies as "Ortega's fellow, making up his life as he goes along, and trying to find his vocation". "According to Ortega," moreover, "the best image for man himself is a novelist," being written by his books as much as writing them. In Lowry's case, any perception of events-in-time is complicated by his literary experience, so that Faust and the Castle of Udolpho and Dante *in purgatorio* start to have *in him* a reality equally as forceful as the "actual" direct influence of, say, Aiken and Dollarton and Nordahl Grieg. The references multiply: Poe's maelstrom can be stepped into, O'Neill's long day's journey can be followed into night, Fitzgerald's crack-up can be experienced again in "Through the Panama", though it can end this time not in fission but in healing. Again the topics are pursued till they become his own: they cease to be *objects read* and become part of the subjectivity with which he renders experience.

AS DAVID BENHAM shows in his essay on *Lunar Caustic*, the presence of Herman Melville in Lowry's work provides another plane on which to approach questions of good and evil and the reality of the perceptions of the human mind. God and the devil—if not carrying all their Methodist connotations—do exert themselves in Lowry's world; heaven and hell exist. That one must descend to "hell" before locating "heaven" is a Jungian, Romantic concept he accepts completely—with the added implication that *in the Inferno is Paradise*, if we can see it. For Heriot in *Ultramarine*, Plantagenet in *Lunar Caustic*, and Wilderness in *Hear Us O Lord*, this is worked out in separate metaphors of voyage and discovery; for the consul it is tied up with his alcoholic descent into a Mexico that is both a landscape of fact and a state of mind. To be drunk is to be *in extremis* as far as the rational world is concerned, yet for the Consul it is paradoxically also a way of most vividly perceiving his own relationship with others. Seeing things clearly, still differs from acting on the basis of that perception. In her recent book, *The Private Labyrinth of Mal-*

colm Lowry (1969), for example, Perle Epstein has pointed out how the Consul's vision, for all its profundity and accuracy, is a sterile one because his talents are never exercised in an effort to grasp the harmony, the heaven, that (as for "successful" characters like Cosnahan or Wilderness) lay in his path.

The problem of harmonizing the mind with the outside environment is, of course, a central one in works like Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner", which Lowry absorbed so thoroughly as to bind it integrally into the structure and effect of "Through the Panama". From Coleridge, Lowry also accepted many of his ideas about the fluidity of time — a more direct borrowing, in fact, than anything from Joyce or Proust. Yet Coleridge himself absorbed so much — from the occult sciences and elsewhere — and influenced so many, that the question of primary and secondary routes of influence seems a tangle too dense to uncoil. Much came via Nordahl Grieg, for example, whom Lowry met in 1930; much came via J. W. Dunne's *An Experiment with Time* (1927), a book examining the proposition that the future can be objectively experienced in the past. Though it had a strong following during the decade or so after its publication, it has also been attacked — for "spatializing" a non-spatial concept, for identifying the problems of time passing with those of time passed, and for interpreting time as itself a process in time — but such objections did not particularly disturb Lowry. Paul Tiessen shows how Lowry's "cinematic" technique in works like *Under the Volcano*, for example, is adapted to presenting temporal flux in spatial terms. *Dark as the Grave* extends the method and most clearly demonstrates Dunne's idea.

Whereas Dunne may prove finally unacceptable to philosophical theoreticians, Lowry perceived the applicability of the theory to the process by which an artist attaches himself to his work and then is separated from it. His novel *Dark as the Grave*, that is, concerns his character Wilderness (another novelist) discovering the separation between himself and his own character Trumbaugh — in a linear sequence that opens up Dunne's notion of "regress": events in time past, relived in the memory, occur simultaneously in time present, which epitomizes in its way the process of "re-creation" that reading a novel involves readers in. But further: Wilderness, returning to his own and his novel's Mexican past, is still moving through time into the future. Out of his memory of the past he anticipates events in the future, which possess a vivid and objective reality for him and do "happen." On the basis of this "dream" experience, however, the will may exert itself and thus alter the nature of the "actual" experience that subsequently occurs. To Lowry this process was extremely important. Certain as he

was that there existed a unity between life and death, body and soul, reality and unreality, he found here a key to the metaphysics that joined them.

His search in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* was for answers to one of the dilemmas he found himself in, and his passion for fateful coincidences led him into the works of P. D. Ouspensky (*A New Model of the Universe*, 1931) and Charles Fort (particularly *Lo!*, 1931; *Wild Talents*, 1932; and *The Book of the Damned*, 1919). He travelled to Haiti (in 1947) to discover something about Voodoo, and became interested there in the work of a young Haitian writer named Philippe Thoby-Marcelin. He found occult signs in the natural world about him, and in order to interpret them, as Geoffrey Durrant suggests, he seems to have absorbed many of the ideas of Neoplatonism that developed from the school of Porphyry. Even his interest in the Greek Classics stems from this search for omens and explanations; throughout *Ultramarine* the Eumenides sound their voices, for example, till Hilliot hears. And in the later work — particularly the manuscript pages of *October Ferry to Gabriola* and *La Mordida* — fragments from Ouspensky, Tourneur, Plato, Fort, and the *I Ching* are gathered together to influence and explain the fate of Ethan and Jacqueline Llewelyn and of Sigbjorn and Primrose Wilderness.

But if Lowry sympathized with the pursuits of Ouspensky and Fort, it is in the work of a Vancouver cabbalist named Charles Robert Stansfeld-Jones ("Frater Achad") — an acquaintance of the better known English mystic Aleister Crowley — that he found much of the occult *system* on which some of his later writing hangs. Jones's work — particularly *Q.B.L., or the Bride's Reception* and *The Anatomy of the Body of God*, privately published during the 1920's — explores the theory that the universe is constantly expanding yet constantly ordered. In his terms, the expansion can be seen in the psychic progress of adepts within it; the order is described by the principles and symbols of Cabbala, which will allow to an adept the knowledge that can lead to hell or to heaven, to the barranca or the garden, to torment or to peace. Thus numbers, colours, animals, and all the symbols of the Tarot pack acquire a meaning that is significant not only within the framework of an individual story but also within the constructs of occult philosophy.

Lowry's unpublished fragment *The Ordeal of Sigbjorn Wilderness* (like *Lunar Caustic* set in a hospital) makes the metaphysical intent of human "ordeal" quite explicit; an authorial note quotes from the Anglo-Irish theosophist Annie Besant to explain the several kinds of spiritual truth in religion:

- (1) One eternal infinite incognizable real Existence.
- (2) From THAT the manifested God, unfolding from unity to duality, from duality to trinity.
- (3) From the manifested Trinity many spiritual intelligences, guiding the Kosmic order.
- (4) Man a reflection of the manifested God and therefore a trinity fundamentally, his inner and real self being eternal, one with the Self of the universe.
- (5) His evolution by repeated incarnations, into which he is drawn by desire, and from which he is set free by knowledge and sacrifice, becoming divine in potency as he had ever been divine in latency.

The passage explains much of what Lowry intended by the multiple identities that Wilderness possesses and much of the thematic unity that he hoped to develop by joining all his works into a single cycle to be called *The Voyage that Never Ends*. In that context the fiction repudiates the more obvious platitudes about character and plot analysis, and transcends even the basic structure Lowry admits to deriving from the *Divine Comedy*, in order to try to render all human experience and all its paradoxes of time, place, and perception, in something more emotionally overwhelming than abstract terms. Possibly for that reason the task was not completed; because of Lowry's own developing understanding, it never could be.

NOT ALL OF THE INFLUENCES that impinged on Lowry's consciousness can be as precisely dated as that of Charles Jones, who arrived in Lowry's life as a census enumerator in 1941. He was frequently provided with cogent subplots and evocative images, for example — as can be seen in *Under the Volcano*, or the published chapter from *October Ferry*, or the manuscript pages of a story like "Ghostkeeper" — by reading such ephemeral material as neighbourhood newspapers. His knowledge of the Greek and Roman Classics, Shakespeare, and Dante, however, presumably dates from his English public school education; Aiken, Grieg, and jazz were undergraduate enthusiasms; John Davenport was a school acquaintance, and James Stern a friend from his Paris days in the early 1930's. But Lowry's casual references to Donne, Dostoevsky, Chatterton, Crabbe, Roethke, Chekhov, Faulkner, Farrell, Dylan Thomas, Ellison, Yeats and a host of others are dropped like handkerchiefs through his letters. They have their pertinence and their own claims to recognition, but if

we stop to pick them all up we run the danger of being lured into aimless alleys.

Certainly many of the references to Canadian writing fall into this "blind" category. Lowry knew the work of Ralph Gustafson and Al Purdy and a proletarian poet of the early 1950's named Curt Lang — but not well, and not to the point of its affecting his own work in any observable way. Even the adaptations of *Maria Chapdelaine* and "The Marine Excursion of the Knights of Pythias" that he wrote for the CBC are geared to the CBC's own programme formulae. Though *October Ferry* makes passing reference to both Hémon's work and Leacock's, it was really landscape more than culture that influenced him in Canada. One particularly pointed passage in *October Ferry* makes this clear: if Canada has any originality at all it lies in its uncontrolled wilderness. To be taming it is one thing; to have it tamed is another — a dead situation that demands undoing in order to begin afresh. So the physical environment furnished him once again with a metaphor for the artist's predicament: to be taming the wilderness of language and ideas is more exhilarating than to have accomplished the task. To know that and yet still to be spurred into writing created an ironic dilemma that was Lowry's own.

He did know some writers in Canada, like Dorothy Livesay and Earle Birney, better than Gustafson and Lang, and in *Turvey* he found an ironic sensibility towards society to match his own. It is an important point, for it forces us to recognize the neglected but obvious truth that Lowry's work is genuinely comic. In all his grim systematizing there is room for laughter, and his observation of "Joyce's complaint re *Ulysses*: 'They might at least have said it was damned funny'", has a kind of reflexive barb attached to it. Perhaps this is simply another way of showing how heaven is linked with hell — or how, as in "Elephant and Colosseum", man's reaching for harmony is linked with his perception of "God's joke": the elephant. For the joke has its serious side; the elephant is named Rosemary, and "remembrance" (as *October Ferry* and *Dark as the Grave* remind us) can work both as escape from the present and as conscience to remind us of the "normality" of guilt — another example of the "strange comfort" that the fact of being human affords to an individual man.

Such a process of "taming" his own landscapes led to his constant revision of his work, his constant search for knowledge, his continual urge to read more and to begin writing again. Early in 1949 (while *Turvey* was being written), Lowry wrote to Birney to express his delight in the book. After discovering its seriousness as well as its comedy, and likening it to *The Good Soldier Schweik* and *Dangling Man* and *Dead Souls*, he adds a significant note on Gogol:

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The swing between farce and the purely lyrical might be of value technically. And the almost Moussorgsky-like sadness and longing he is able to distil simply by describing some crummy little hotel.

The range and apparent casualness of the references is typical; the fragmentariness of the observation suggests a characteristic process of authorial note-taking, both for Wilderness and himself. Like other references to his reading, it shows not only the importance he attached to the things he encountered, but also the metamorphosis they underwent in his mind. At the same time, it offers us a glimpse of his ideas in the process of being born.