

# DEATH IN LIFE

## *Neo-Platonic Elements in "Through the Panama"*

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THE EXPLORATION of Malcolm Lowry's symbolism will no doubt occupy scholars for many years; in this field at least we are offered "God's plenty". What I suggest in this article is meant as a mere foot-note to such studies as Perle Epstein's of the influence of the caballa, and as a suggestion for possible further investigations.<sup>1</sup>

To a reader who is familiar with the literature of neo-Platonism it seems likely that at times Malcolm Lowry is drawing on a system of symbols derived not only from general Cabbalistic lore, but from more particular sources in the neo-Platonic tradition. In this tradition, as it is represented by the work of such writers as Proclus, Porphyry, Apuleius and Claudianus, the Platonic view of the world as a cave of darkness is united with the Greek and Roman pantheons, and with Homer, to create a philosophical mythology — a mythology in which the fate of Psyche, of Persephone, of Narcissus and of Ulysses is understood as an allegory of the descent of the soul into the world of the senses — the dark wood or the dark sea of matter. The principal English source for this material is to be found in the writings of Thomas Taylor the Platonist; this is in part now made widely accessible through the publication of a selection of his writings by Kathleen Raine and George Mills Harper.<sup>2</sup>

Before proceeding to an examination of one of Malcolm Lowry's stories to illustrate this suggestion, it is necessary to point out that in the neo-Platonic

system of myths the soul has its true home in the heavens; through an error it falls in love with its own generated image, and proceeds into generation. That is to say, it is born into this world of darkness, where its task is to purify itself of the material grossness which encloses it, and to ascend through the elements to the heavenly region of the stars — the true home from which it has been exiled. The journey of the soul is variously represented as the flight of a bird, a voyage over the dark sea of matter, or a fall into dark waters. The life of the senses is represented as *entrapment* in a web, a dark wood, or a cave. The stars are a constant reminder of the life that has been lost through generation, or birth, since the stars to which we look up are souls that enjoy the divine life of the heavens. We yearn, like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, "towards the journeying Moon and the stars"; the Moon is regarded in this philosophy as the sphere of judgment, the staging post between the divine and the fallen worlds, since the sphere of the moon marks the limits of the world of generation.

Malcolm Lowry's story "Through the Panama"<sup>3</sup> evidently has an eschatological significance, and a gloss from "The Ancient Mariner" is there used as a comment on this statement:

... And later, the stars: but now Martin saw the fixity of the closed order of their system: death in short. The thought comes from Keyserling. (They are *not dead* when I look at them with Primrose.) Wonderful truth in Lawrence about this. "Somehow my life draws (he writes) strength from the depths of the universe, from the depths among the stars, from the great world!"

The gloss from Coleridge is as follows:

In his loneliness and fixedness the Ancient Mariner yearneth towards the journeying Moon, and the stars that still sojourn, yet still move onward; and everywhere the blue sky belongs to them, and is their appointed rest and their native country and their own natural home, which they enter unannounced, as words that are certainly expected, and yet there is a silent joy at their arrival.

As we shall see, the journey to the south and again to the north is itself a representation, in the neo-Platonic system, of the myth of a fall by generation, or birth, into the world of the senses, and of the long voyage home to the native land, the paternal port of the soul. The inclusion of this gloss in an evidently eschatological account of a voyage suggests strongly that Lowry understood "The Ancient Mariner" as drawing upon a related eschatology — a view which, given Coleridge's early interest in the neo-Platonists and in the work of Thomas Taylor, is by no means to be dismissed as absurd.

In the neo-Platonic interpretation of the voyage of Ulysses, the life of man on earth is represented as the voyage of the intellect over the dark sea of matter; the ship represents the body, the sailors the human faculties, and Ulysses the intellect.<sup>4</sup> Exiled from his true home, or natal port, Ulysses is assailed by many temptations, and finally returns to his paternal home, where he is united with Penelope, the true wisdom, and is once more at peace.<sup>5</sup> Closely associated with this myth, in Thomas Taylor's account, is that of the Cave of the Nymphs, for which the chief source is also in Porphyry. Here the cave represents the world of the senses; it has two gates, one towards the north and the other to the south. It is through the northern gate or 'port' that souls descend into the cave, and through the southern that they ascend to heaven:

From among the number of these [signs] the theologists consider Cancer and Capricorn as two ports; Plato calls them two gates. Of these, they affirm that Cancer is the gate through which souls descend, but Capricorn that through which they ascend, and exchange a material for a divine condition of being. Cancer, indeed, is northern and adapted to descent: but Capricorn is southern, and accommodated to ascent.<sup>6</sup>

These two accounts are not fused into one by Porphyry, or by Taylor, though Taylor originally published his version of Porphyry's *Voyage of Ulysses* as a footnote of great length to his translation of *Concerning the Cave of the Nymphs*; this footnote refers immediately to the following sentence in that work:

Indeed it appears to me that it was not without foundation that Numenius thought that the person of Ulysses in the Odyssey represented to us a man who passes in a regular manner over the dark and stormy sea of generation.<sup>7</sup>

When these two closely related interpretations of Homer are taken together, they produce a myth in which the human spirit embarks through a port or gate on a southerly voyage on the dark sea of matter, descends to imprisonment in the Hades of the senses in the extreme south, and then proceeds northwards to the port or gate of the north, where it may hope to escape from its long and stormy exile. There are I believe strong indications that "Through the Panama" is deliberately coloured with suggestions of this myth, and moreover that Lowry interpreted "The Ancient Mariner" as an expression of the same myth.

In "Through the Panama" the port of departure is Vancouver; in the neo-Platonic myth it is the port or gate of birth, through which the soul enters the dark sea of matter. The ship is the *Diderot* — a vessel of "enlightenment"; its engines sing "Frère Jacques" to awaken the intellect. (There is a paradox here

only on the surface, for it is only through the life of the intellect that the ship may hope to arrive at its true destination.) The birth imagery is unobtrusive; midnight and mud are traditional symbols of generation:

Leaving Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, midnight, November 7th, 1947,  
S.S. *Diderot*, for Rotterdam.

Rain, rain and dark skies all day.

We arrive at dusk, in a drizzle. Everything wet, dark, slippery . . .

(This morning, walking through the forest, a moment of intense emotion: the path sodden, a morass of mud, the sad dripping trees and ochereous fallen leaves; here it all is. I cannot believe I won't be walking down the path tomorrow.)

The use of Stanley Park and Dollarton as versions of Paradise is evident enough in two other stories in this volume — "The Bravest Boat" and "The Forest Path to the Spring"; here the paradise is lost as the voyager prepares to set out on his journey.

The journey to the south begins:

. . . The black cloudy sky was breaking and stars were brilliant overhead. The Northern Cross. November 8th. High salt wind, clear blue sky, hellishly rough sea (zig-zagged with a lashing rip tide) through the Juan de Fuca Strait. — Whale geometry of Cape Flattery: finny phallic furious face of Flattery.

The generation theme is evident here, not only in the obvious phallicism, but also in the strong wind and the "hellishly rough sea" under the sign of the North. Porphyry, in Taylor's version of *The Cave of the Nymphs*, writes:

Indeed, Boreas (the North wind) is proper to souls passing into generation: for the northern blasts recreate those who are on the verge of death . . . For the north, from its superior coldness, collects into one, detains and strengthens the soul in the most moist and frigid embraces of terrene generation. . . .<sup>8</sup>

(Here it may be noted that the Ancient Mariner is blown southward by the northern storm-blast, which is "tyrannous and strong". The similarity here and elsewhere suggests that there is a close relationship between Lowry's story and Coleridge's poem.) That the sea is "hellishly rough" is only the first example of Lowry's use, in an apparently offhand way, of conversational expressions that are meant to carry a considerable weight of significance. Since, in the neo-Platonic philosophy, this world is Hades or Hell, the sea that represents the world of the senses is indeed "hellish".

The condition of the exiled soul is that of alienation:

This desolate sense of alienation possibly universal sense of dispossession. The cramped cabin one's obvious place on earth.

At Los Angeles another passenger is taken on: "His name? Charon. Naturally." The voyage to the south continues, and the hellish desolation increases:

Strange islands, barren as icebergs, and nearly as white. Rocks! — The Lower California Coast, giant pinnacles, images of barrenness and desolation, on which the heart is thrown and impaled eternally.

In "The Ancient Mariner" the journey to the south brings the Mariner to the desolation of a world of ice. Lowry cannot directly use this in a voyage to the Panama Canal; but he can see the likeness of guano-covered islands to icebergs, and so continue the relationship with Coleridge that is made explicit first in the stories of the attempt to shoot an albatross and the saving of a man's life by an albatross. In the increasing desolation of the southward voyage, the song of the *Diderot's* engines, which awakened the mind to consciousness and adventure, now turns to a lament. The voyage has led this Ulysses into the shadow of spiritual death; the albatross of salvation is replaced by the digarilla, "a bird of ill omen". As rational consciousness awakens, man becomes imprisoned in his world:

Man not enmeshed by, but *killed* by his own book and the malign forces it arouses. Wonderful theme. Buy planchette for necessary dictation.

— Death takes a holiday. On a Liberty ship.

— Or does he? All day I hear him "cackling like a pirate."

The voyage of enlightenment and liberty, with the S.S. *Diderot* headed for the south — the world of material things — is a journey to spiritual death; the soul has been entrapped:

... I am a voice, yet with physical feelings, I enter what can only be described — I won't describe it — with teeth, that snap tight behind me: at the same time, in an inexplicable way, this is like going through the Panama Canal, and what closes behind me is, as it were, a lock: in a sense I am now a ship, but I am also a voice and also Martin Trumbaugh, and now I am, or he is, in the realm of death. ... Death himself is a hideous looking red-faced keeper of a prison. ...

The world of 'reality' as a trap, a death-in-life, a prison; this is centrally in the neo-Platonic tradition. That the human being is "a ship" is also, as we have seen, one of the traditional myths of the neo-Platonists.

IN THIS WORLD, consciousness, as for the Ancient Mariner, is a hellish condition, since the love of life is lost. Here Lowry's gloss from "The Ancient Mariner" indicates a death-in-life: "And envieth that they should live, and so many lie dead." However, the ordeals that Ulysses undergoes are preparations and testings of the soul, and Lowry sees even this state of alienation and grief as an ordeal that can be miraculously overcome:

Sigbjørn Wilderness (pity my name is such a good one because I can't use it) could only pray for a miracle, that miraculously some love of life would come back.

It has: apparently this retracing of a course was part of the main ordeal; and even at this time Martin knew it to be no dream, but some strange symbolism of the future.

The crew of this ship will not mutiny, because "(a) this is a happy ship" and "(b) they want to be home for Christmas." The symbolism here is accompanied by praise of the French and is followed by the Captain's refusal to shoot the albatross that appears "crucified on the cross-trees". The *Diderot*, it seems, represents the kind of enlightenment that is not necessarily or permanently at war with the human senses and faculties, but gives them happiness in the prospect of "home". At the same time the Captain has reverence for life and for the principle of salvation represented by the Albatross-Christ. There is, it may be, a suggestion of brotherhood in liberty in the repeated use of "Frère Jacques" in this story; certainly at the end it appears as an expression of the enlightenment of love.

The Panama Canal itself is presented, through the device of a historical gloss in the margins, as the achievement of a "great new era of enlightenment" and as a technological realization of the modern spirit. In the traveller's personal experience, however, the Canal is the most hellish part of the journey:

Blackest history of canal's horror, failure, collapse, murder, suicide, fever, at Calabra Cut. . . . Hot here as a Turkish bath in hell. Jungle has to be chopped back every day.

The *Diderot* is travelling to the eastern world (in Porphyry the abode of gods) while the *Manatee*, from London, is going to the western world (the abode, in Porphyry, of demons):<sup>9</sup>

Another ship from London, all going the other way steaming very swiftly as with the current. (Bergson.)

The British ship, as opposed to the French, is travelling with the current of history, and, as the gloss suggests, learning nothing of the madness of the westward journey to demonic mechanical achievement:

... You would scarcely credit that so many people for so many years during this long era of enlightenment could be so goddamned stupid, could be so ferociously ignorant, could have learned so little, that they went on doing precisely this same sort of bloody thing.

The emergence of the *Diderot* from the last lock of the Canal offers an end to the fear of separation, or alienation, from Primrose:

And ourselves, watching, happy, happy at the news we won't be separated after all.

As I shall show, this apparently casual comment conveys, or attempts to convey, the happiness of the watchful and awakened mind at the knowledge of its union with the soul.

The journey to the north-east is still perilous, but Charon has been dropped, and the wine (pinard) and the cake indicate the sacramental hope that at the same time demands a sacrifice, and is therefore threatening:

But what is that cake going to demand of the Trumbaughes? The cake itself seems a nightmare. In spite of stars, wind, and sun, Martin had almost foundered in some complicated and absurd abyss of self, could only pray for another miracle to get out of it.

In the late classical eschatology, the journey of the soul to its heavenly home is achieved through a process of purgation, in which it is washed by rain, blown by the wind, and tormented by lightning, so that it is purified by the elements of water, air, and fire.<sup>10</sup> Lowry duly brings this in:

Two squalls; cobalt thunderstorms. Wind catches spray and blows it across the sea like rain, a tiny squall of rain.

Martin was gloomy and savage, lying all day in his bunk predicting death and disaster.

During these last days, since going through the Anageda Passage, have been through some important spiritual passage too — what does it mean?

“What it means” is that the soul is being cured of its attachment to material things, and is passing through its purgatorial ordeal.

Terrific squall towards sunset. Thunder. Cobalt lightnings reveal a sizzling sea . . . *vision of creation.*

— Am glad to be welcomed by skipper again — really believe I have now gone through some spiritual ordeal . . . though a little hard to see what.

The voyage into the Atlantic takes the ship into a "godawful storm"; the term is not to be taken lightly, for the wind that blows from the south is the terrible wind of God that blows souls out of generation into the true life after death, the equivalent of the "good south wind" that blows the Ancient Mariner northwards. The fear of death is evoked by Lowry in the passages for translation into French where "the man was not dead but his wife told him he had died two days ago"; and "she dressed herself as the Goddess of Death." This is the "King Storm whose sheen is Fearful". The terror of death is further heightened by the Conradian description of the storm, where the gloss from Coleridge adds the suggestion of a metaphysical terror:

He heareth sounds, and seeth strange sights and commotions in the sky and the elements.

The religious dread is continued in the Rilke quotation from the Blessed Angela:

... "Si [Dieu] . . . ne me changeait pas moi-même, s'il ne commençait au fond de moi une nouvelle operation, au lieu de me faire du bien, les sages, les saints et Dieu exaspéraient au delà de toute expression mon desespoir, ma fureur, ma tristesse, ma douleur, et mon aveuglement!"

The meaning of the wind that blows the soul northward with a terrible speed into the new birth of death is to be found in the classical eschatology:

... The southern gales dissolve life. . . the south (wind) is more vehement towards the end.<sup>11</sup>

Cicero records the speed of the soul as it leaves its corporeal nature:

Add that the soul comes to make its escape all the more readily from our air . . . because there is nothing swifter than the speed of the soul; there is no sort of speed which can match the speed of the soul.<sup>12</sup>

In Lowry, the gale gets steadily worse; and the climax is reached off the Azores; here Lowry uses Coleridge's gloss:

The Mariner hath been cast into a trance; for the angelic power causeth the vessel to drive northward faster than human life could endure.

In spite of the realistic trappings, and the apparently leisurely discussion of literature and life, the intention is evidently to represent the terror of death. Lowry here permits himself a little joke:



We have had to change our course, the skipper says, and are going by dead reckoning.

The storm at sea is paralleled by the storm in Martin's soul; on the northward and eastward voyage he searches his conscience, and undergoes a kind of purification:

Now you see how easy it is to be carried away by an impulse of hatred! There is some truth in what I say (that is, it is certainly true that I hate these people) but what of the whole thing, read aright? What a testimony to my inadequacy, my selfishness, my complete confusion indeed!

The self-examination and the moral anguish in Martin's experience provide the natural counter-part of the elemental purging by wind, rain, and lightning. Doubt and fear assail the soul; the story about being thought to be the author of *The Trial*, and the claim to have recognized Kierkegaard before he was well known, are not mere anecdotes:

The author . . . feels himself to be some sort of unrecognized pioneer, who maybe even lives himself in a state of Fear and Trembling, perhaps even in undergoing some sort of Trial at the moment.

In this situation Martin somewhat surprisingly turns not to beatific visions or a sense of sin, but to well-established Pythagorean and neo-Platonic virtues:

Equilibrium, sobriety, moderation, wisdom: these unpopular and unpleasant virtues, without which meditation and even goodness are impossible, must somehow, because they are so unpleasant, be recommended as states of being to be embraced with a kind of passion.

These virtues are those recommended by the neo-Platonists, as a preparation for vision of the beautiful:

Indeed, as the ancient oracle declares, temperance and fortitude, prudence and every virtue are certain purgatives of the soul.<sup>13</sup>

It is not surprising, then, to find Lowry ending this passage with a Pythagorean insistence on the unity of being, and the need for love, not only of men, but "of all God's creatures, human and animal".

The promise of reconciliation and release is offered in the memory of a French movie of *The Fall of the House of Usher*:

. . . The unspeakably happy ending of the film, by the way, Martin thought, under the stars, with Orion suddenly turned into the cross, and Usher reconciled

with his wife in this life yet on another plane, was a stroke of genius perhaps beyond Poe himself.

The significance given here to the appearance of Orion as the cross reflects the use of pagan myth mixed with Christian doctrine. The theme of union and separation is important in the story, and seems to reflect a modification of the attainment by Ulysses, in the myth, of union with his Penelope, the true wisdom of the soul. Of this Porphyry, in Taylor's account, tells us:

... Ulysses will not always wish in vain for a passage over the dark ocean of a corporeal life, but by the assistance of Mercury, who may be considered as the emblem of reason, he will at length be enabled to quit the magic embraces of Calypso, the goddess of Sense, and to return again into the arms of Penelope, or Philosophy, the long lost and proper object of his love.<sup>14</sup>

Martin's voyage, unlike that of Ulysses, begins in union with his true love, and only the entry into the Panama Canal — the hell of a rational and mechanical "enlightenment" — threatens him with separation from her: "Primrose and myself are the sole passengers aboard the freighter." The home they have left is, it seems, the true home of Primrose, who may be disquieted on the voyage if she is reminded of it:

"Keep quiet about house or will spoil voyage for Primrose."

Martin and Primrose are happy in their union within the ship:

Nov. 9. Primrose and Sigbjørn Wilderness are happy in their cramped Chief Gunner's cabin.

Primrose is the very source of living vision to Martin; "the stars are only *not dead* when I look at them with Primrose". Primrose is shown as characteristically responding to beauty and life:

A flying fish skidding over the sapphire sea toward an albatross floating to meet it: ecstasy. Primrose in seventh Heaven.

(This is clearly a symbolical passage, the flying-fish of the soul aspiring to the albatross of salvation.) It is only with the arrival at the Panama Canal that a separation is threatened:

Bad news: due to the unexpected arrival of more passengers in Cristobal, perhaps Primrose and I are to be separated, into different cabins.

However, even the Canal does not separate them, so that it seems that Lowry is claiming a unity through the darkest part of his journey with his Primrose or

true wisdom of the soul. It is she who explains to him the significance of the locks:

Significance of *locks*: in each one you are locked, Primrose says, as it were, in an experience.

The separation seems not to take place, though this is perhaps designedly not made quite clear in the story. After the voyage through the Canal the fear of separation is removed. It is Primrose who suggests the buying of wine. Primrose is "afraid of this boat, thrown together in wartime by makers of washing machines," a significant passage, since the soul is unhappy in the ship of the body, which is to undergo its purgation. Primrose is the principle to which Martin wishes to be true:

Above all things perhaps he wanted to be loyal to Primrose in life. He wanted to be loyal to her beyond life, and in whatever life there might be beyond. He wanted to be loyal to her beyond death. In short, at the bottom of his chaos of a nature, he worshiped the virtues that the world seems long since to have dismissed as dull or simply good business or as not pertaining to reality at all. So that, as in his lower, so in his higher nature too, he felt himself to be non-human.

In this way Primrose is given the character of Martin's true soul, or wisdom. The saving of Primrose is, it seems, the concern of the ship's crew: "All night we have been saving your life Madame."

The presence of Martin's Primrose throughout the journey thus imposes an important modification of the Ulysses theme; but it does not represent a weakening of the neo-Platonic content. For to those familiar with the tradition in which Lowry is writing, Primrose is early in the story identified with Psyche, exiled from her starry home and threatened with separation from Cupid, her rational nature. In this way two different but related myths are interwoven in Lowry's story.

Of the myth of Psyche Taylor writes:

Venus is represented desiring Mercury to proclaim Psyche through all lands, as one of her female slaves that has fled from her service.<sup>15</sup>

As the ship leaves Vancouver, the first mention of Primrose reveals her "wearing all her Mexican silver bracelets, calmly tense, electrically beautiful and excited". This is a slight but distinct hint of enslavement. When Primrose is next mentioned, Martin says he must "keep quiet about house or will spoil voyage for Primrose". The true home of Psyche or the soul is in Heaven, as Taylor records:

[The descent of Psyche] signifies the descent of the soul from the intelligible world into a mundane condition of being, but without abandoning its establishment in the Heavens.<sup>16</sup>

This may be taken with the following passage in Taylor:

The gems, too, on which Psyche is said to have trod in every part of the Palace [Heaven], are evidently symbolical of the stars.<sup>17</sup>

As the ship leaves Vancouver, the stars as jewels — the floor of Heaven — shine over the lovers as they set out on their southward journey:

Leaving at night the jeweled city. Baguette of diamonds on black velvet, says Primrose: ruby and emerald harbor lights. Topaz and gold lights on two bridges. Primrose is very happy. We embrace in the dark, on deck.

And later: "Our house. Incredible jewel-like days in December, sometimes."

The embrace "in the dark" evokes the love of Psyche for her Cupid, whom she was not allowed to see, and whom she loved in the dark. That she is "happy" is a reflection of the heavenly joy from which she is now departing on her exile, with its threat of separation. Psyche, according to Taylor, is tempted into the world of material things by her sisters, "imagination and nature", at the behest of Venus.<sup>18</sup> Throughout the story, Primrose is shown taking an eager interest and delight in nature, and an imaginative response to its life. Further, in the same passage, Taylor informs us that Psyche, after her descent, is "represented as having a stumbling and reeling gait," since "Plato, in the *Phaedo*, says, that the soul is drawn into the body with a staggering motion."<sup>19</sup> This is humorously touched on when Primrose, in the storm, "comes staggering in every so often to reassure me". Lowry is at times over-ingenious in the use of his myth. He represents his Martin as "heroically" reading "a few pages of William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* each night before going to sleep, just to keep his hand in, as it were, and to keep up with the times. . . ." So he is capable of representing the "defiling" or staining of the bodily vesture of the soul, and its consequent anguish, in the following terms:

Crash! Coffee, milk, etc. falls into Primrose's lap and on the floor. I fear she will be scalded (she was too) but she is wailing because her pretty new red corduroy slacks are stained.

The sleep into which Psyche falls in the myth is interpreted by Taylor as representing the Platonic sleep of the soul, which, if not made vigilant and alert

by the intellect, will "descend to Hades, and be overwhelmed with a sleep perfectly profound."<sup>20</sup>

The death of the soul is, while merged, or baptized, as it were, in the present body, to descend into matter, and be filled with impurity . . . For to be plunged into matter is to descend into Hades, and fall asleep.<sup>21</sup>

This helps to explain the insistent use of "Frère Jacques", repeated *seven times* in the story, which moreover both begins and ends with this song. What it asks is "Brother, are you asleep?" It also calls for the ringing of the matin bells (of spiritual awakening); and it announces in turn both doom and salvation. It may therefore be taken that one of the major themes of the story is the importance of intellect in rousing the soul from its lethargy and fear. The tradition within which Lowry was working was centrally intellectualist; the soul, or affective principle in man, was saved not by love alone, but by love under the guidance of intellect, the divine principle in man. In spite of its fearful voyage, the S.S. *Diderot* is travelling eastward to the realm of light and of the gods, and it bears a name that does homage to the enlightenment of the mind.

The story ends with the awakening of the passengers to arrival at the harbour, signalled as in "The Ancient Mariner" by the lighthouse ("Bishop light") and with the engines ringing the matins of a new dawn ("Sonnez les matines!"). That this is the dawn of love is made plain by the gloss from Coleridge:

And to teach by his own example, love and reverence to all things that God made and loveth.

Finally, lest it be thought that Lowry unfairly left his readers without a warning of the kind of attention he was hoping for, we must note a hint given early in the story:

Brilliant comment of a person to whom I once lent *Ulysses* on returning it the next day: "Thanks awfully. Very good." (Lawrence also said: "The whole is a strange assembly of apparently incongruous parts, slipping past one another.")

This is a clear enough warning to the reader not to suppose that "Through the Panama" is itself a "strange assembly of apparently incongruous parts", a series of heavily annotated travel notes, and nothing more. Lowry, it seemed, hoped that he would find readers who would have more to say about his story than: "Thanks awfully. Very good." The choice of *Ulysses* as an illustration of philistine inattentiveness is perhaps not as helpful as it was intended to be; one of the problems for an esoteric writer is to judge with any accuracy what degree of

knowledge he may expect his readers to supply. It does however suggest that the use made of the sea-voyage is not simply derived from "The Ancient Mariner", but that Lowry recognized, or thought he recognized, the presence of the Ulysses myth in Coleridge's poem.

"Through the Panama" is scarcely so successful a story as others in this volume in which myth and reality are more subtly mixed. Its interest lies in the open exposure of the method, and of its relationship to classical eschatology; and this in turn suggests that we might do well to turn to "The Ancient Mariner" once again, with the help of Lowry's insights into that poem and into its relationship to the tradition.

If there is indeed a deliberate use of the neo-Platonic tradition in this story, it seems fruitless to ask where Lowry might have come across it. Interest in neo-Platonism and the publishing of Taylor's works flourished in America until 1890, as Professor Harper records.<sup>22</sup> It is possible that Lowry came across Taylor either directly or through conversation in the course of his research into the esoteric. During the past eighty years the tradition has almost entirely vanished from sight. Those of us with a predominantly academic education are only now beginning to realize its earlier importance; but an adventurous and voracious reader, seeking for what might feed rather than deaden the imagination, might well, like Yeats, have turned to the neo-Platonic tradition as a source of new significance and vitality.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Perle Epstein, *The Private Labyrinth of Malcolm Lowry—Under the Volcano and the Caballa*, New York, 1969.

<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Raine and George Mills Harper, *Thomas Taylor the Platonist*, Princeton, 1969. (Referred to hereafter as *Taylor*).

<sup>3</sup> Malcolm Lowry, *Hear Us O Lord from heaven thy dwelling place*, Philadelphia and New York, 1961.

<sup>4</sup> "Ulyxem existimamus esse intellectum animae ducem; socios, mentis agitationes et congenitas vires atque facultates." *De Ulixis Erroribus ethice explicatae*, tr. Johannes Columbus, Stockholm, 1678, p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> "But our true country, like that of Ulysses, is from whence we came, and where our father lives." Plotinus, *On the Beautiful*, quoted in Thomas Taylor, *Porphyrius, Select Works*, London, 1823, p. 271.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Taylor, *The Philosophical and Mathematical Commentaries of Proclus*, 2 vols., London, 1792, II, p. 287. (Hereafter referred to as *Proclus*.)

<sup>7</sup> *Proclus*, II, p. 294.

<sup>8</sup> *Proclus*, II, p. 289.

<sup>9</sup> *Proclus*, II, p. 292.

- <sup>10</sup> Franz Cumont, *Astrology and Religion among the Greeks and Romans*, tr. J. B. Baker, London, 1912, p. 105. See also Dupuis, *Origines de tous les Cultes*, 10 vols., Paris, 1834, VI, p. 108.
- <sup>11</sup> *Proclus*, II, p. 289.
- <sup>12</sup> *Taylor*, pp. 313-4.
- <sup>13</sup> Cicero, *Disputations*, I, xix, 43, in *Tusculan Disputations*, ed. J. E. King, London, 1927.
- <sup>14</sup> *Taylor*, p. 156 (from Porphyry.)
- <sup>15</sup> Thomas Taylor, *The Fable of Cupid and Psyche*, London, 1795, p. ix.
- <sup>16</sup> *Cupid and Psyche*, p. vi.
- <sup>17</sup> *Cupid and Psyche*, p. vi.
- <sup>18</sup> *Cupid and Psyche*, p. vii.
- <sup>19</sup> *Cupid and Psyche*, pp. viii - ix.
- <sup>20</sup> *Cupid and Psyche*, p. xiv.
- <sup>21</sup> *Cupid and Psyche*, p. xv.
- <sup>22</sup> *Taylor*, pp. 49-102.