

LOWRY'S PURGATORY

Versions of "Lunar Caustic"

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I N 1934 MALCOLM LOWRY spent a few days in New York's Bellevue Mental Hospital. Horrified by what he saw there, he wrote a story, now lost, about a journalist, who, through a misunderstanding, is detained at the hospital. Two years later Lowry recast the story as a novella, called *The Last Address*; and in 1940 he produced yet another version, titled *Swinging the Maelstrom*. At his death he was working on a melding of these two versions, to be called *Lunar Caustic*. Lowry himself was not to complete the melding,¹ but typescripts of the two versions are extant; we find in them not two successive states of a single work so much as two distinct works which differ considerably in method and intention.

In Lowry's original conception of *The Voyage That Never Ends* as "a Dantesque trilogy", *Lunar Caustic* was to play the Purgatorio to *Under the Volcano's* Inferno. This provides a useful hint, because Purgatory is a kind of median between Heaven and Hell, a place of transition where opposites meet. Here evil is cauterized from the soul — lunar caustic itself is the painful but medically effective silver nitrate — and knowing this, the soul is ecstatic in its agony; and, although the process is a kind of death, this death is the prelude to rebirth. But modern man cannot commit himself to such a Dantesque conception of Purgatory, even as a metaphor; his faith in salvation is not strong enough. The hospital's patients, like Purgatory's sinners, are allowed no rest; but the patients' painful shuffling around the ward is no more than a mindless "marathon of the dead." The world of *Lunar Caustic* is deeply ambiguous, and is closer to hell than to heaven.

Ambiguity runs through the descriptions both of New York and the hospital itself. The city we see in the story is one in which the transitory is most in evidence. Its factories wave a farewell to life; the ships which come and go bring sometimes a suggestion of hope, but more often of hopelessness. The cry of the hospital patients is described as

... partly a cheer and partly a wailing shriek, like some cry of the imprisoned spirit of New York itself, that spirit haunting the abyss between Europe and America and which broods like futurity over the Western Ocean.

Encompassing the polarity between joy and despair, placed uneasily between the New World and the Old, New York personifies a kind of insecurity. It is a city perched on the edge of a chasm.

The hospital, which is at once a prison and an asylum, lies on the East River in the centre of this city of shifting meanings. In the two wharves before the observation ward, we are presented again with the juxtaposition of life and death, of hope and despair; on the one is the powerhouse and the hanging noose, while moored at the other are the white and blue boats "which seemed to tell as they nudged and nibbled ceaselessly at the suicidal blackness of the water, of white and blue girls in summer". Between the wharves is the wrecked barge on which, momentarily, the protagonist sees the crumpled body of a sailor; this barge, to which the boy Garry will return again and again in his stories, is the external emblem of the world of decay in which the patients live. Throughout the description of the setting, opposites coexist, but the negative elements predominate; we are made more aware of death than of life, of decay more than of any possible regeneration.

The ambivalence of the outside world is reflected in the patients and staff of the hospital. Garry, for example, is an entertaining innocent, but one who has committed a horrible crime. He is a moral paradox personified; neither guilty nor guiltless, in him the cycle of innocence — guilt — repentance — redemption is broken. He is creative, but this creativity can be seen both as an attempt to formulate a vision of reality and as an attempt to avoid coming to terms with reality. Again, we can see in Claggart a conscientious doctor who is doing his best in an almost impossible situation, and an insensitive bully who cares little for his patients.

In this world where orientation is impossible, Sigbjorn Lawhill, the protagonist of *The Last Address*, is utterly alone; his father and his son are dead, his wife has left him. As a sailor, he is related to no particular place. There is nothing,

either in terms of awareness of the past or relationships in the present, by which his personality might be defined; he is a man in a vacuum, a man without identity. *The Last Address* is an account of his attempt to find himself in relation to others; for only by caring for and helping others can he escape the limitations of his own mind. This theme is adumbrated in his cryptic shout as he enters the hospital:

“*Veut-on que je disparaisse, que je plonge, à la recherche de l'anneau . . .* I am sent to save my father, to find my son, to heal the eternal horror of three, to resolve the immedicable horror of opposites.”

Yet Lawhill is attracted by the isolation he has to escape from; like Geoffrey Firmin, he is drawn to extinguish the self in alcoholic oblivion. The dichotomy within his own mind parallels those in the outside world.

The only way Lawhill can structure his world at the beginning of the story is through his “hysterical identification” with Melville; he integrates his experiences in the hospital by relating them to the patterns of experience which Melville works out in *Moby Dick* and *Billy Budd*. He associates, for example, the boy Garry with Melville's Pip, who, by losing his sanity, saw into a deeper reality; and while watching the groping hand during the puppet-show, he murmurs to himself “Leviathan”. The identification with Melville serves not only as an indication of Lawhill's neurotic perception of the world, but also forms a major structural element in the story. Lawhill is associated both with the doomed Pequod and the alienated Ahab; the first quotation from *Moby Dick* which is applied to him suggests some impending disaster — “feeling that he encompassed in his stare oceans from which might be revealed that phantom destroyer of himself”. Like Ahab, he has to risk destruction in order to test reality, and the destruction might be total annihilation — insanity or some irrevocable psychic death — or the necessary prelude to regeneration.

The first people Lawhill sees on waking up in the hospital are Garry and Horowitz, the spiritual father and son for whom he has been searching. They are ostensibly in the hospital because their insanity is dangerous — Garry has killed a young girl and Horowitz has threatened to kill his brother-in-law's family; nevertheless Lawhill cannot accept that they are, in any significant sense of the word, insane. He feels that Garry is a kind of unlettered Rimbaud, a boy whose obsession with the decay which permeates the world reveals a perceptive intuition which is fundamentally artistic; the stories which Claggart dismisses as normally abnormal fantasies are, to Lawhill, frightening and valid visions of

chaos. Similarly he sees Horowitz as the Wandering Jew, a man who epitomizes in himself suffering mankind, and is sympathetic to his claim that he has been institutionalized because of his Communist views.

With the companionship of these two people, Lawhill begins to take an interest in those around him. He is quickly sickened by the degradation and casual cruelty which seem an accepted part of the hospital life, and, realizing his own relative health, comes to feel that he has a responsibility to draw attention to the patients' situation. Yet at the same time, in watching the derelicts trapped in the hospital, he becomes increasingly aware of the ambiguities of existence; when he sees the old men eating, he "gradually thought he understood the meaning of death, not as a sudden dispatch of violence, but as a function of life". There can be no unity within life itself, for the unity is composed of both life and death; terror is inescapable. Opposites collapse into one another: "even Nature herself is shot through with jitteriness".

For Lawhill, insanity is often an understandable response to an insane world; the job of the physician is not to teach his patients to adapt to this world, but to give them a new awareness of themselves. With his new-found concern for others, he tries to explain to Claggart that many of the patients are being brought to a debased and servile acceptance of themselves and of the world. "Many," he argues, "who are supposed to be mad here . . . are simply people who perhaps once saw, however confusedly, the necessity for change in themselves, for *rebirth*". But Claggart, while admitting that the hospital is less than perfect, has no difficulty in discrediting Lawhill's central arguments. He sees Lawhill's complaints about the inhumanity of the hospital are merely reflecting his refusal to accept authority, and his perception of the patients' need for rebirth as no more than a projection of his own neurosis. He never admits that Lawhill's ideas have any kind of objectivity; they arise only from "his own state." When apparently talking about other patients, he is really talking about himself; in describing Garry as an unformed Rimbaud, he is merely playing out his own desire to write.

In this clash between Lawhill and Claggart, it is difficult to say that either is right or wrong. While Claggart's name, the parallels with Melville,² and the extreme distrust which leads the doctor to dismiss *Billy Budd* itself as a fabrication on Lawhill's part all suggest that truth, or at least goodness, lies with Lawhill in the shifting ambiguities set up in the episode, both are, in their own terms, men of goodwill. They simply cannot communicate; there is no way for Lawhill to express his ideas within Claggart's terms of reference, and therefore he cannot persuade him to change the situation. Under this trial he begins to validate

Claggart's analysis; he is reduced to bitter and insulting sarcasm, to fantasizing on his experience, and to challenging the doctor to a test of strength.

THE ENCOUNTER WITH Claggart represents the farthest extension of Lawhill's attempt to live in the outside world and to help those around him, and with his failure he begins to slide back into the abyss of his own self-absorption. Looking out at the city from the annexe to Claggart's office, he sees that a storm is gathering; symbolically it is the storm which threatens to engulf humanity as well as his own mind, but only the patients in the hospital, rejected by the "sane" world, are aware of its approach. As the storm breaks Lawhill feels for a moment a sense of release, of "being already outside, free to run with the wind if he wished". But the hope that regeneration will come with the storm is raised only to be immediately extinguished, for he realizes that the bars on the windows are only the external counterparts of the spiritual bars which are fixed in his own mind. This recognition of the fundamental identity between the inner world and the outer is, for Lawhill, the last twist of the knife; he is trapped not merely in the hospital or in the world, but within his own psyche, and he is himself a product of the decay which he finds at the centre of the world. Man's state is hopeless; unable to reach outside himself, he can never become complete. In despair, Lawhill sums up the immense agony of the story in a passage which draws together the East River, the grotesque ships which pass on it, and the equally grotesque minds which brood over it:

This world of the river was one where everything was uncompleted while functioning in degeneration, from which as from Garry's barge, the image of their own shattered or unformed souls was cast back at them. Yes, it was as if all complementary factors had been withdrawn from this world! Its half-darkness quivered with the anguish of separation from the real light; just as in his nightmare, the tortoise crawled in agony looking for its shell, and nails hammered held nothing together, or one-winged birds dropped exhausted across a maniacal, sunless moon.

The forces working to destroy Lawhill begin to close in. The appearance of the *Martha's Vineyard* reminds him of the trip he took with his wife to New Bedford — the place from which Melville started his whaling voyage; and he begins to see a recurring pattern emerging in the chaos of the storm. His own quest for truth or destruction began at the same place as Melville's; and now,

in the hospital, he is within sight of "the last address" at which Melville finished *Moby Dick*. Lawhill remembers that the ship which had brought him to New Bedford was, appropriately, the *Providence*; and this ship, at the height of the storm, sails past the hospital. Yet though the name of this ship, and its reappearance at this crucial moment, reinforce the idea that a pattern underlies the world's chaos, the pattern remains one of anguish. The patients, seeing the *Providence* pass, rush to the window and begin to scream, and their scream is associated with the "mechanic calamity of the rocking city".

Lawhill learns that his friendship with Garry is to be broken; he is returned to the isolation in which he began. At this moment a seaplane appears — as a roar associated with a seaplane had accompanied the groping, menacing white hand during the puppet-show — which becomes, in a terrifying fantasy, the *Moby Dick* which is to destroy him. The destruction comes in a flash of lightning, but it proves to be neither total extinction nor the shattering of the old self which is the necessary prelude to rebirth; instead he suffers a spiritual annihilation which presages his physical death. As Garry tells Claggart, "It only looks like spring." The regeneration which Lawhill had hoped for cannot come about in the world in which he finds himself; he is condemned to the life-in-death of perpetual incompleteness.

He is little changed by his stay in the hospital. When he leaves he immediately starts to drink again; and he still searches for human contact, imagining passers-by to be his relatives, or patients he had met in the hospital. As he throws his empty bottle at an obscene sketch on a lavatory wall which symbolizes for him all the obscenity in the world at large, he remembers how Garry had described the murder of the girl: "It was only a little scratch." The two acts of violence link Lawhill and Garry together, and he is forced to recognize the paradoxical duality of human nature — the coexistence of innocence with guilt, of compassion with a frightening capacity for violence — as operating within himself. Man's nature is such that he is inevitably condemned to suffer; and if patterns underlie chaos, the patterns themselves have no meaning and imply no value. Lawhill's only escape lies in embracing his isolation. At the end of the story he returns to the presexual state which Garry had never left, finding security and oblivion in retiring "to the obscurest corner of the bar, where, curled up like an embryo . . . Sigbjorn Lawhill could not be seen at all".

The Last Address is an often terrifying account of a man trying to raise himself out of the pit of self-absorption, but it is a work which leaves the reader dissatisfied. One of the reasons, I think, is that the onus of blame for Lawhill's

failure is placed largely on the world outside him. His rejection by a man as unsympathetic as Claggart constitutes an evasion of a central problem — the extent to which Lawhill is able to bring himself to accept responsibility for others. Consequently the questions we want to ask — to what extent he has chosen isolation in the past, and to what extent he is continuing to choose it in the present — can never be answered. And because we cannot determine the validity of his observations of the world around him, we can attach no value to his final non-solution.

Swinging the Maelstrom is a reworking of the situation and setting of *The Last Address*, but two crucial changes — the protagonist's failure as a jazz musician, and his relationship with the doctor — lead toward a resolution of these problems. Bill Plantagenet's failure as a musician is used in part to emphasize the fact that his isolation is the product of an inadequacy in himself; it is both a symptom of and a metaphor for his total spiritual failure. This point is made when he tries to persuade Philip, the doctor, that he is not a good piano player because his hands cannot stretch an octave. Philip replies, apparently irrelevantly, "You didn't leave Ruth because your hands couldn't stretch an octave," but he later adds, "Perhaps it was your heart you couldn't make stretch an octave".

The fact that Bill and Philip are cousins gives Bill a position of responsibility among the patients. As he develops a friendship with the boy and the old man (who is called Kalowsky in this version), he comes to feel, like Lawhill, that the hospital cannot help them. He determines to discuss their cases with Philip, and they accept him as a potential saviour. But Bill's job is harder than Lawhill's, for his cousin, unlike Claggart, is a humane and perceptive man. Philip works as well as he can in a situation which he cannot entirely control; during the puppet-show it seems to Bill that the drama

. . . was being diverted from its course by some sinister disposition of the puppeteer's; he sensed . . . the doctor's increasing discomfort, as of a god, he thought, who discovers all over again that man is not long to be trusted with the strings of his destiny.

However, the most striking aspect of Philip's character, as contrasted with Claggart's, is his experience of horror. When Bill begins to suggest that the doctor does not understand suffering, Philip reveals a knowledge far deeper than his own; deeper because, while Bill has inflicted suffering on himself, Philip has to live with the responsibility of inflicting it on others.

In their relationship as cousins, their detachment from the patients, their joint responsibility for Garry and Kalowsky, and their knowledge of horror, Philip and Bill form a two-man community within the hospital. Despite the slight ambiguity in their relationship, marked by the "certain rebelliousness" which Philip rouses in Bill, and the long silences which occasionally punctuate their conversations, they can like and understand one another. Nevertheless, Philip is the greater person; his knowledge is wider, his insight, suffering, and humanity deeper. As a result, Bill finds himself unable to press his arguments for Garry and Kalowsky; instead he comes to accept the necessity for the apparently inhuman institution of which Philip is a part. Lawhill failed in his plea to Claggart because they could not communicate; Bill fails precisely because he can sympathize with Philip's point of view so readily.

In becoming, in effect, part of the system which is crushing the patients, Bill fails to live up to the spirit of his promise to Garry and Kalowsky. He is unable to tell them that he has implicitly condoned their treatment in the hospital, and so for the first time a false note enters into their friendship; he says little to them on returning from Philip's office, and refuses to meet Garry's eyes. As a result of his community with his cousin, he is driven to isolate himself once more. This isolation, however, is not quite what Lawhill reverts to at the end of *The Last Address*, for while Lawhill has looked at the world and decided, in effect, that nothing could be done, Bill realizes the necessity of doing something; his guilty participation in the system which has produced Garry forces him to recognize his responsibility to combat the evil around him. His phone call to a relative of one of the patients suggests his need to cast himself, in some sense, in the role of a doctor.

His release comes after he has momentarily actualized the violence within himself by throwing his bottle at the obscene sketch. In conversation with a friendly stranger, to whom he introduces himself as "Herman Melville", he mistakes the name of a passing ship; the name he hears is the *Acushnet* — the ship on which Melville made his whaling voyage. The ship turns out to be a Spanish Loyalist, engaged in conflict with the White Whale of Fascism, and although there is danger in joining her, she offers an escape from the paralyzed self-absorption which is Lawhill's only response to a world of irresolvable ambiguity. Bill is able to accept the implication that he, like Melville, must voyage, must be prepared to risk total annihilation. He is still isolated, since he has lost contact with Philip, Garry, and Kalowsky, but he has broken out of the self-destructive circuit which had trapped Lawhill, and is ready to renew his spiritual quest.

AS STUDIES IN ALIENATION, *The Last Address* and *Swinging the Maelstrom* are less compelling than Lowry's major works; they reveal neither the appalling insight into man's potential for self-destruction which we find in *Under the Volcano* and the later Mexican novels, nor the awareness of man's need to relate himself to his total environment which is a central theme in *Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*. But though imperfect, they are deeply moving, and they enable us to draw some tentative conclusions about *The Voyage That Never Ends*, which was to have been composed, as Lowry first conceived it, of the trilogy: *Under the Volcano*; *Lunar Caustic*; *In Ballast to the White Sea*.

The basic pattern of the trilogy was, as Lowry called it, "withdrawal and return". The withdrawal is from the community of mankind into a kind of hell — the hell of alcoholism, of utter isolation, of self-absorption; and this self-absorption is also self-abnegation, a complete loss of the individual sense of identity. This descent into hell is an integral part of the process of regeneration, a recognition of the powers of darkness which operate in the human psyche; but it must be followed by a re-entry into the world. The protagonist begins to relate to and identify with others, and with this identification comes the realization that he has to act. The final step is his complete involvement in the world; with action, his human potentialities, his ability to love and to create, become actual.

In *Under the Volcano*, Geoffrey Firmin has gone so far in his self-absorption that he cannot make the re-entry. We learn from the letter which Laruelle reads in the first chapter the desperation with which the Consul yearns for Yvonne's return, but when she actually appears he is utterly incapable of responding to her, either verbally or sexually. As the day wears on, he is drawn increasingly to Parian and the Farolito; when, with the discovery of the dying peasant, he is faced with the human necessity for action, he is not even tempted to play the Good Samaritan. Finally he chooses his isolation. "I love hell," he tells Hugh and Yvonne; "I can't wait to get back there." Yet in fact he has no choice, for, like Milton's Satan, he has become his own hell; his self-absorption has been carried to such an extent that his entire spiritual energy is channeled towards his own destruction.

The Last Address is an account of an attempt to make the return, but the attempt fails because the only relationships which the protagonist can enter into cannot, by their nature, survive. Bill Plantagenet, on the other hand, motivated by his kinship with his cousin and his sense of guilt toward Garry, is ultimately

able to act; he begins at last to orient himself in the outside world.

Lowry's account of *In Ballast to the White Sea* (in a letter to David Markson dated August 25, 1951) indicates that the novel reworked and extended the themes of *Lunar Caustic*. The protagonist (called A in the letter), like Lawhill and Plantagenet, is trapped in a circuit of inaction; he drinks heavily, is unable to relate in any significant way to others, and can only identify with a writer, X, who is personally unknown to him. A's identification with X does not serve to structure reality for him; it is so strong that it becomes a threat to his own identity. Obsessed by the idea that he has in some sense been written by X, A is paralyzed by his inability to find any source of value in the world.

Like Plantagenet, he is eventually able to break out of his inaction; after a period of hesitation he undertakes his voyage to the ambiguous White Sea, with the intention of trying to find X. The journey also turns into a pilgrimage to the past, for A, after being paid off from his ship, finds himself close to his mother's grave. In the churchyard he meets a girl with whom he falls in love — the setting clearly indicates the idea of rebirth — and in doing so he re-establishes contact with others. Finally the series of coincidences which leads him to X, and the correspondences between them, suggest some design in the chaos which both perceive; and this experience renews each man's faith in his creativity. The search for value is over; it is found to lie not in the individual self, but in fulfilling the self through interaction with others.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ An edition of *Lunar Caustic* by Earle Birney and Margerie Lowry which combines the two earlier versions has been published in *Paris Review* 29, and by Jonathan Cape (London, 1968). Lowry's typescripts are held by the Special Collections Division of the U.B.C. Library, and are catalogued under the title *Lunar Caustic*. The latest complete text of *The Last Address* is ts. 4, while ts. 8 is the best copy of *Swinging the Maelstrom*. My quotations are taken from the Cape edition.
- ² Claggart is the false accuser in *Billy Budd*. The episode parallels Chapter 20 of Melville's novel: in each case the innocent and honest (Billy Budd, Lawhill, and, by extension, Garry) is accused by duplicity (the two Claggarts); the innocent is left literally or figuratively speechless, and can only express himself in violence.