

TWO LETTERS

Malcolm Lowry

TO ALBERT ERSKINE

DOLLARTON (1946)

Dear Mr. Erskine:

Well, every man his own Laocoon!

Concerning a letter forwarded me yesterday by Hal Matson, about your having postponed the VOLCANO I wrote you one asking you if it was still not too late to change your mind without doubtless taking fully into account that it was the amount of research I seemed calmly suggesting you do, quite apart from the number of corrections I was making myself, not to say insertions, many of which may have appeared to you quite negligible, that had been responsible for the postponement.

On top of these items I perceive clearly the paradox of Cape tying up the Canadian rights with the obligation if you bring the book out this year while your author meantime makes it quietly and maddeningly impossible for you to do this.

I did not of course make any such suggestion to Cape myself, but so far as that goes I'm writing him anyhow on the subject and I'm sure he'll waive the stipulation. I have no British agent at the present. I should have had Hal's representative act for me over there, but the insane coincidence of getting the news of the book's acceptance on the same day in two countries at once was enough to ravel any author into knots.

For myself the delay has been caused by the arrival of the MSS from Mexico, as well as by second thoughts due to my recent visit there, the awful difficulty

of getting books here, the non-existence of our own owing to the fire, and numerous other difficulties I won't go into, but which, all piling up at once at this point, make me believe in Cocteau's remark, "Truly, our books hate us."

For the rest, while I am proud of having written **UNDER THE VOLCANO**, I must confess to being slightly tremulous of it. I have not been fortunate, to say the least, in my work so far and it would distress me to think you were losing interest in it so soon after you had seemed to have such high hopes for it.

There are really no echoes etc. that I do not myself really consider to be absolutely justifiable and assimilated, *absorbed*, and I have mentioned them to you partly for my own psychological benefit and partly in case you might, somehow, disagree.

I will not now make these the subject of a separate appendix to my notes but when I come to any either coincidental or otherwise will simply mention it and the page in question, since I feel you should know of their existence.

Enclosed are notes to IV. There is nothing in V to speak of save the Jardin problem, already solved, nothing in VI I can see now save the German to be verified, nothing in VII save a little Spanish and the garden again, in VIII little, IX nothing at all unless you consider something, in X I'll try to cut somewhat, and nothing to speak of in XI or XII.

This may still, I am aware, leave too much for you to do to get it out by October, but I hate to let you down, if that is what I seem to be doing, and am willing and ready to cooperate wherever and however I can. In either case, would you give me a deadline? I seem to remember there is one on the contract but I have no copy of it.

Chapter V

p. 128. Significance of "interlube" has passed from my mind. But it might have something to do with the London Daily Herald or the United Press, if that matters. Cable is based on real one and used by permission of the reporter who sent it I having sat in at the concoction thereof. Cable was, until lately, in my possession.

p. 129. For Bill H — substitute Bill Hod.

p. 130. in brackets "for he was secretly enormously etc." please cut the for.

p. 134. After sentence beginning: Unconsciously he had been watching her, please place comma after "arms", cut "against" and place another comma after "slacks."

p. 137. typographical error: emanate.

p. 138. Man with a dog named Harpo, is partly old pal of mine, John "Volun-

teer in Spain” Summerfield, who survived after all. De Quincey incident mentioned in *Volunteer in Spain*, likewise in letter to me at that time. I don’t see how anyone could be hurt, least of all John, who painted a wild portrait of me in his novel, *The Last Week End* (not to be confused with *Lost*) published in London. De Quincey comes in also because of Mr. Quincey and the knocking at the gate bit in V.

p. 140. In the middle I would have cut Yvonne’s dialogue at “saying that you wanted —” and have Hugh interrupt at that point without any “Hugh answered” It remains as it is as a concession to the reader.

p. 143. “You’ve got your cattle again I see,” Yvonne said in a bracket. It is a technical echo of something in Faulkner’s *Wild Palms*, I think in a similar bracket, “There’s your horse again,” she said, or something. The trouble about acknowledging such a thing, it embarrasses the embarrassee yet somewhere else.

p. 144. top. In Yvonne’s dialogue, please insert the word “together” between ridden and before.

p. 145. Please verify Spanish at top. I think it’s O.K.

ibid. At the end of the first long paragraph, after shadow his brother everywhere, please cut dots.

147. Ejido. Please verify. I’m pretty certain it’s right.

p. 150. Las Manos de Orlac.

p. 152. This Judas passage was written before I had read Dorothy Wellesley’s poem in Yeats Oxford book of Modern Verse, where she likewise speaks of Judas having a hangover. Any resemblance is purely coincidental.

p.154, In bottom paragraph semicolon after machinery was intentional but if you changed it to a comma that’s O.K. by me.

p. 163. *Buy* one, please give this a question mark

p. 164. Please change Bab-el-Mandeb to Arabian Sea.

p. 171. ditto.

(UNSIGNED)¹

TO DAVID MARKSON

DOLLARTON, BRITISH COLUMBIA

CANADA, JUNE 20, 1951.

(OWING TO MORE "AUXILIARY CIRCUMSTANCES")

Dear David Markson:

I thank you sincerely for your letter, the remarks therein, and the honour you do me.

As I said the least I can do is to see if I can lighten at all such a formidable chore for you in a hot summer, especially since my name means "servant of Colomb" and we have two Columbias in the address² not to mention a selva, if not oscura, while we literally do live in a forest, or rather at the edge of one.

Moreover just as I received your letter I too seemed to have been reading a bit of Faulkner hotly pursued by Djuna Barnes, Dante, Joyce, etc., and feeling frightened by *my* limitations — incidentally, if I may say so in a tone of complete joviality and politeness you made a wonderful type error, unless it was done on purpose at this point: you said "freightened." Now I only remark this because having begun this letter in pencil I went on to use it to introduce my apology, viz, that our typewriter was then lying at a garage having its inner workings cleansed by an aeolian instrument for blowing up tires: so, writing as I do now in pencil I did not lay myself open to such type-errors — if I do now, all I can say is, may they be as good as that one of yours! For you said a mouthful. If your vocation is to be a novelist you certainly couldn't do better — in my sincere if by no means new opinion — than to be "freightened" rather than "frightened" by the said limitations: one should (upon the "frighter" or life) take them to Palembang with one and deliver them in good order as may be — after all they can be among the most valuable cargo one has, those limitations! Though I don't mean quite to say as Melville somewhere marvellously puts it — one should "never wait for fair weather, which never was on land or sea, but dash with all one's derangements at one's object, leaving the rest to fortune." Not quite; very unsound advice: though it may be very necessary at times.

But this is not answering any of your questions. Re those, I think the most helpful thing I can do at the moment is to send you — it will go off by the same post as this letter — a copy of the French translation of *Under the Volcano* which contains a preface written by myself, as also a postface written by someone else, so many faces indeed that instead of being much help they probably

serve to the contrary as so many masks over the material. This preface was written in Haiti — or going there — and was originally intended for the British edition.³ (You will note that I received news of the acceptance of the *Volcano* from England and America, upon the same day, delivered by a *character* in the *Volcano*, and in a house that figures in the *Volcano*, in Mexico itself, where ten years after I'd begun the book we went back on a short visit — the original of Laurelle's house I'd never set foot in before, was now turned into apartments: the very tower described in the *Volcano* was the only place we could find to live — this sort of thing — a sort of Under Under the *Volcano* or fantasia of the Law of Series or the History of Peter Rabbit's imagination — E. M. Forster says someone should write the history of someone's imagination — is roughly the theme of what I'm working on now and one day hope to complete — I had some setbacks as you will see — who doesn't?)

In this preface also I go on about the Kabbala in a way that is — in this case — quite misleading and probably not a little juvenile, and which was no doubt suggested by the magnificently abyssal and heavenly motions of one of your bauxite freighters on which the preface was written, rather than in strict fact. Moreover we had probably been drinking rum with the skipper, not to say listening to the voodoo drums battering and tambouring and otherwise generkrupearing along that inlet when you begin to sail into that Heart of Lightness and Tightness and Barbancourt and Cinc Etoiles. It is true that the Kabbala played a part, though scarcely anterior to the fact of writing the book; I mean I didn't group it *consciously* around any of the correspondences within that un-resting and dynamic filing cabinet-cum-tree of knowledge. But that I ran into a Kaballist at a critical and coincidental moment in the writing of the book: that is true, right in this forest also. But apart from that my remarks here — though not the other remarks I have cited — can be taken about on a par with Sganarelle's Latin:

Sganarelle (assuming various comic attitudes) Cabricias arci thuram, catalamus, singulariter, nominativo, haec musa, the muse, bonus bona bonum Deus sanctus, este oratio latinas? Etiam, Yes. Quare? Why.

Geronte: Ah! Why did I not study?

Jacqueline: What a clever man!

It might have been more honestly to the point if I'd mentioned the influence of Bismarck — to wit Bix Beiderbecke — especially a break in Singing the Blues in an old Frankie Trumbauer record, in that preface — but it appears I like to be thought erudite: the truth is other; I have the kind of mind that is some-

times politely called archaic, it is true, but not in the sense that it is on really fraternal terms with the scholastics and mediaeval philosophy.

Subjective, stream of consciousness, multi-leveled and symbolic. Yes indeed, but this is too symbolic, multi-leveled, conscious and subjective a matter for me to speak about in a short letter in a way which would be much use to you.

Joyce, Dante, Djuna Barnes, Faulkner. Of these I'm not really qualified to speak either, though I'll try and reply to anything, should you ask me any specific questions. I think there are certain writers who in youth tend to react against anything like a ready-made tradition, or the suspicion that teachers or another poet taught may be foisting a tradition upon one for reasons of their own; thereafter they approach these recommended writers tentatively, preferably when they have fallen into more disrepute. Meantime the writers the writer feels *he* has discovered for himself remain the more valuable. I know that's more or less true of me.

Re Joyce and Djuna Barnes I find myself ungratefully inclining a bit to Leavis' distaff view on *The Great Tradition* (even though he is trying to impose a tradition and is dealing with the English tradition of novelists. But this is a valuable book if only it encourages you to read George Eliot's *Middlemarch*.) I've never grappled with the whole plan of Faulkner yet, though I mean to. I didn't realise for myself what a tremendous writer he was at his best until fairly recently. (Dante's still a bit too famous for me, though you caught me reading him on the sly, when your letter arrived.)

Ultramarine is very fortunately out of print (was never really printed as it was meant to be) and is an absolute flop and abortion and of no interest to you unless you want to hurt my feelings. As my brother said to me recently when I mildly suggested to him that the British Government owed me some cash — "Don't even speak of it to me!" However I mean to rewrite it — or rather to write it — one day. A later work, *Lunar Caustic* — not published yet in America because I wanted to rewrite it but I believe to be published in France as it stands — is maybe of more interest; anyway I think it's good. Unfortunately I haven't got a spare copy to send you, but maybe I can tell you what you want to know about it. You'll find some mention of the general plan in the French preface which fundamentally has not been abandoned.

My wife — who is American — wrote a grand book called *Horse in the Sky* which was very unfairly neglected and should cognately interest you — we swop horses and archtypes with each other all the time. She has just finished another much better book even than this, which I certainly feel you will hear of.

TWO LETTERS

I also have had the great privilege of being one of Conrad Aiken's oldest friends. Him I have known since my teens and the good old days of bathtub gin and the best and most helpful of fellows he is.

I am reading at the moment *The Road to Damascus* by Strindberg . . . By the well a large tortoise. On right, entrance below to a wine cellar. An icechest and dust bin. The doctor enters from the verandah with a telegram playing a long range ukulele, etc. . . .

We live an extremely sunfilled and seay life between the beach — and I mean the beach — and the forest here and if you're ever in these parts I hope you'll look us up and have a drink and some sun with us.

With kindest regards and the best of luck,

MALCOLM LOWRY

P.S. Of course send along any of your MSS you wish to and I'll make any helpful comments I can.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Margerie Lowry comments: "I can only suppose that since he went directly from the letter into the notes and comments he must have thought he'd signed the letter and he didn't. I can't think of any other reason."
- ² At this time David Markson was attending Columbia University.
- ³ There is a mystery here. No English version by Lowry of this preface appears to have survived, and in 1960, when *Canadian Literature* approached the French translator of *Under the Volcano*, Clarisse Françillon, she stated that she had not prepared the French version from a written English text by Lowry, but had written it directly in French after he had told her orally what he wanted to be said. The only known English version of the preface is in fact the translation by George Woodcock from Clarisse Françillon's French version which appeared in *Canadian Literature* No. 9.