

# FLIGHT FROM LIBERATION

*D. J. Dooley*

JAMES JACKSON'S NOVEL, *To the Edge of Morning*, did not attract a great deal of attention when it appeared in 1964. No-one seems to have suggested that it was anything more than a fairly interesting first novel; reviewers treated it with that benign condescension which they employ for novels which have not engaged their attention fully but which have the merit of being by Canadian authors. In the fiction section of "Letters in Canada: 1964," F. W. Watt paid brief attention to it. He paired it with Ralph Allen's *The High White Forest*; both of them he considered novels which "take us back into the simpler realities of war-time action," and he judged *To the Edge of Morning* the inferior of the two:

The former is little more than a fragment, the story of a few months at a stagnant airbase in the heart of the Ceylon jungle where the airmen fight less against the Japanese than against the heat which saps strength and morals, the threat of insects and disease, drunkenness, crudity, cowardice, despair, and other fruits of inactivity and the sense of futility. There is power and drama in the descriptions of the Ceylon jungle and of the Liberator bombers in flight, but the human story of guilt and expiation is unconvincing. Ralph Allen is an experienced writer and a good deal more ambitious.<sup>1</sup>

I would agree that Jackson's story of guilt and expiation has unconvincing aspects; but my contention is that his novel is, if anything, too ambitious, since it tries to explore the immense problems of free will and destiny within fewer than two hundred pages. Begun in a creative writing class at the University of British Columbia while Malcolm Lowry was still alive, it is an interesting example of his influence. Like Lowry, Jackson employs a triangular situation involving two

men and one woman (though he leaves this situation shadowy and undeveloped). There are many other resemblances; Jackson deals with alcoholism, guilt and futility, and he has some of Lowry's faults, such as overwriting and overuse of symbols — it is not only that there are too many of them, but that they call too much attention to themselves. Lowry's conception of man being given a garden for his enjoyment and turning it into a rubbish heap runs all the way through Jackson's book; like Lowry again, he identifies the circle of hell in which his central character is to be found or for which he is headed — it is the one reserved for those who have wasted their gifts. In a way the theme is that which Lowry described as his own: the forces in man which cause him to be terrified of himself. But as the epigraph from Donne suggests, Jackson intends to include both evil within and evil without:

Fire and air, water and earth are not the elements of man; inward decay and outward violence, bodily pain and sorrow of heart may rather be styled his elements, and though he be destroyed by these, yet he consists of nothing but these.

Therefore the story is something more than a plain narrative of wartime events. Ostensibly it deals with a Liberator flying a thousand miles from Ceylon to make a photographic reconnaissance of an airfield on Japanese-held Sumatra. But the main battle is not with the Japanese; it takes place in the mind of one central character, Gil Kramer. At the end of Chapter Three of *Under the Volcano*, as the Consul sips strychnine, contemplates the two volcanoes which are the image of the perfect marriage, and considers the two alternatives open to him — marriage to Yvonne and marriage to the bar or the cantina, he makes an affirmation which is of great importance in the novel:

“The will of man is unconquerable. Even God cannot conquer it.”

Lowry, of course, shows how the will of man *is* conquered; while the Liberator is in flight, flashbacks in Gil Kramer's mind explain how he lost his sense of purpose and raise the question of whether the disintegration of his will is complete. The cockpit of the airplane becomes an arena in which Lowry's problem is fought out once again.

On his arrival at the airbase nine months before, Kramer had felt himself in a nightmare world. The details of the setting are concrete and particularized enough, yet this is an outer landscape which reflects inner chaos. The rooms in the officers' billets are covered with a grey dust which makes the rubble in them seem like the leavings of an army in retreat. The impression of decay and in-

coherence is strengthened by the first man Kramer meets, who is clammy white and wrapped in a shroud:

“You mustn’t stick to the roads, you know; you mustn’t stick to the roads because the roads go round in circles. After you’ve been here a while it won’t matter; I’ve been here seven months and it doesn’t matter to me now, but just for a time you mustn’t try to stick to the roads. They don’t go anywhere, any of them.”

From the officer in charge of the base, Kramer might have expected a clear outline of his duties, perhaps a pep talk encouraging him to do them well; the wing commander, however, says nothing about the war effort, effectively discourages heroic action, and raises the fundamental question of whether any of man’s actions can have any possible significance:

“Don’t expect anything, Kramer. Don’t expect a god-damned thing. I’ve got nothing to tell you, do you understand? . . . You will not fly because there are no spares for our machines; you will have no recreation because no one has the energy for recreation; you will spend about a year here, doing perhaps ten operational trips, and then if the jungle or the dengue or the machine or the liquor don’t get you, what is left of you will be sent home. . . . Watch out for scorpions, though they come later. Beware the sidling tarantula; he’s very painful. Pass your hour with grace if not with any purpose. They maintain, the ecclesiastics, that there is a salvation.”

The ambiguous use of *grace* and the vague allusion to salvation set against the pervasive hopelessness make it evident that this novel is one of the many twentieth-century parables about the human condition which owe something to *Prufrock* and *The Waste Land*. The tarantula is a real objective threat, but it may also be a spectre which the mind conjures up; the scorpion, in turn, symbolizes the only kind of vigorous response which the individuals here are likely to make to each other — spite, hate, or malice. The wing commander wants, above all, to keep his isolated community, his microcosm, in a state of harmony; he will be satisfied with keeping a little life alive, and he wants no overwhelming questions. Unlike Prufrock, however, he has responded heroically at one stage of his life: he is a veteran of the Battle of Britain. Now he is disillusioned, guilt-ridden, and obsessive, and the irony is that Kramer is unconsciously going to pattern his life after him.

Kramer’s model till now has been his cousin Leowy, who is flying in more active theatres of the war; his own frustration is made more bitter by the concomitant story of Leowy’s success. The other members of his crew illustrate a

number of possible kinds of adaptation to circumstance — one becomes a tourist, systematically visiting every interesting place on the island, and another takes to the study of Hindu mythology — but Kramer wants only to fly. His struggle to make his existence meaningful comes to the predictable result, when a minor accident to an aircraft brings him into conflict with the engineering officer, Gunnory, and he finds himself being reproved by the wing commander for being too energetic; he is advised to adopt a more graceful resignation to the reality of their boredom. In disgust, he follows the common course and relapses into passivity and alcoholism.

He has thus accepted conditions of existence which make life not purposeful but at least possible — though always there is the threat of spiders, scorpions, and bandits, and from time to time he hears the drone of a plane (ironically called a Liberator) taking off to be murdered by fighters or perhaps to crash just off the end of the runway. Life is bearable, therefore, but it is still troubled. Kramer is afflicted with intestinal bugs but obstinately refuses to go into hospital to get completely clear of them: “Deep in his conscience he felt it was bad enough that he had stopped striving, but to fail even to endure would be worse, would be almost complete surrender.” And he cannot ignore the jungle; because it contains decaying temples and fortresses, aircraft waiting to be flown, and the burnt places where aircraft have crashed, it becomes a menacing thing to be banished by brandy: “The tentacles of fear, growing from no definable source but growing, crept into his mind and joined boredom and failure to spread their paralytic seed.” When another pilot commits suicide, he realizes that lassitude is a very insecure refuge. Yet he neither sees nor wants a way out of it. He is horrified when the wing commander recommends him for the position of flight commander; the last thing he wants is to think or to make decisions: “It would be wonderful if everyone left him alone, if he could but lie in the darkened room for the rest of his time, seeing the vague half-formed visions . . .” The paralysis of his will seems complete.

Yet when Gunnory tries to convince him to take the promotion by describing the attractions of power, he succumbs to the offered temptation:

Authority was disembodied, prescribed, official, complementary with responsibility, and neither had any attractions. But power, he saw, was personal, and thus stimulating and exciting. Power was wielded by the self, for the self's satisfaction . . . power, he saw with the sudden shock of insight, was the promise of release.

The lust for power is thus shown by Jackson as something basic and strong in man, something which continues to appeal when almost every other motive for

action is lost. He does not let his hero have his power, however, but snatches it away from him; in a perhaps predictable but certainly too neat turn of plot, Kramer's cousin Leowy arrives on the scene to take the job which has been offered. Now the scorpion in Kramer emerges:

His thoughts moved in swift explosive rushes; his mind was full of hate, fury, and a burning need for violence. He wanted to go back into the jungle, into the teeming proliferation of dense growth and darkness . . .

He has become a creature which stings, which is an enemy to the community of mankind and at home in the jungle. This psychological state is at least partially responsible for disaster: Leowy is killed in the crash of a plane which Kramer has tested and pronounced fit to fly. Kramer is now shocked into a sense of his responsibility — perhaps even an exaggerated sense — and it is in this state that we find him when the novel opens.

The flight to Sumatra therefore comes when he is in a state of shock and indecision. At its beginning, he feels a sense of release: "he could sense the jungle falling away and diminishing behind, could feel the almost imperceptible beginnings of calm within him." But the real jungle is in his own mind:

Whether he closed his eyes or not the light was a pervasive green, green faces and reflections a dim clutter of levers and handles against a black ground . . . the lulling rumble of the engines a huge wind at night among the trees, where the quadrant levers were the slow wavering hands of the undergrowth and the luminous tips of the myriad switches little phosphorescent worms crawling. . . .

He has brought all his obsessions with him, and he knows that the flight is neither expiation nor escape. He can temporarily avoid the jungle by thinking in concrete terms, by concentrating for example on the little luminous aircraft in the artificial horizon. But the human consciousness can never confine itself to immediate sensible reality for very long; the image of the jungle returns, and with it another image (suggested above by "little phosphorescent worms") of the cockpit as a death cell. It is probably Kramer's own death wish which has sent the plane and crew on a mission which is likely to terminate in their slaughter by Japanese fighter planes. Yet he feels curiously detached from these former comrades whose fate is bound up with his own.

The storm which ends his paralysis of will is, as F. W. Watt says, the most powerful and dramatic section of the book. It is an excellent piece of descriptive narrative, in which the reader is caught up, whirled about, and made to feel that he has escaped destruction only by the narrowest of squeaks. But along with

the factual description of what it is like for a plane to be caught in a tropical storm comes a philosophical enquiry: what is there in man which makes him fight against the forces of nature when it would be so easy for him to succumb to them? The complete rationalist might argue that no better explanation could be found than the one which Kramer quotes from the aircraft handbook: "at fifty inches of boost and 2700 revolutions per minute the Pratt and Whitney Twin Wasp Engine Type R-1830-43 develops approximately 1250 horsepower." Yet this scientific explanation of a certain amount of energy being required to keep the plane in flight when a certain force is bearing down upon it is, Kramer realizes, ultimately inadequate. In spite of his wish for death, he has worked to the limit of his strength and skill to live. Whether the most important reason was the "instinctive supplication" he had made at the crucial moment, or his feeling of kinship with the pilot of a "lone aircraft limping through the same night over the coast of Burma far to the north" whom he knew only through a distress signal, is not made clear, either to him or to us: "The burden he had assumed, the burden he had admitted to in thus surviving was not within his ability to comprehend." At any rate, he has been released from the prison-house of self; the images now applied to him are those of exhaustion, extinction of his former self, rebirth, and the promise of the dawn. He sees himself with a new objectivity and detachment; he realizes that the threats which he held in awe are not perdurable; he has arrived at a stage of affirmation and tentative meaning. If there is a "message" to the book, it at least begins with the idea that there is considerable benefit to human solidarity.

After this resolution, Jackson quickly dismisses his central character from the scene and concludes his story; the fact that the underlying rather than the surface meaning is more important to him is suggested by his not even making it clear whether or not the Liberator got back to Ceylon. (It seems likely that Kramer — "disembodied," "disinterested" — died of wounds after a Japanese fighter scored a hit on his plane.) The author's chief interest is in the infinite metamorphoses of the human personality; he is dealing with a world of external violence, but like Lowry he shows how the human mind itself fabricates the worst demons it has to face. He develops this theme on a number of levels, some of which — such as that associated with Hindu mythology — I have not even touched on. The realities of wartime action, as Jackson portrays them, are not simple; *To the Edge of Morning* possesses a much greater degree of complexity than has so far been pointed out.

<sup>1</sup> *University of Toronto Quarterly*, XXXIV (1964-65), 380.