

POEMS BY MALCOLM LOWRY

*Prefaced by
Earle Birney*

SCATTERED THROUGH THE MASS of typescript and manuscript left by Malcolm Lowry at his death, and now housed in the Special Collections section of the University of British Columbia Library, are various drafts or fragments of poems. A few of these, as the bibliography in this issue shows, were published during his lifetime, but about 150 were unknown. With the help of his widow, Mrs. Margerie Lowry, I have edited a selection of these with a view to their eventual publication as a book. The group printed below has been chosen from this work.

Since Lowry seldom dated poems, and habitually revised them, accumulating drafts indefinitely (as with most of his prose) it is not easy to arrange the present group in order of composition. From internal evidence, however, and from details supplied by Mrs. Lowry, it would appear that most of them were composed over the years between 1940 and 1954 when the Lowrys lived on the Dollarton beach, just beyond the upper harbour of Vancouver, except for three which may date, in their original conception, from the middle Thirties, when Lowry lived in Mexico.

Of these three, "Autopsy"* (which exists, untitled, in one incomplete manuscript only), is of peculiar interest for the references it makes to incidents in his early years, incidents which he seldom openly referred to, but which appear to have been traumatic, and to recur in the prose in various symbolic disguises. According to Mrs. Lowry, his parents placed Malcolm in a boarding school at seven, where he was subjected to harsh discipline. He developed a disfiguring eye ailment, which was allowed to go without adequate treatment until he was in danger of blindness, and it was necessary for him to undergo an operation and

* Titles marked in this way have been added by Mrs. Lowry and Dr. Birney to poems untitled by the author. ED.

prolonged hospitalization. Lowry felt that both his parents and the school authorities were blameable for the aggravation of his condition, and he recalled also with bitterness that his ailment handicapped him in school sports and made him the butt of schoolmates. The phrase "crucified at eleven" may refer to the time when, at his father's insistence, he joined a Wolf Cub pack and underwent some form of sadistic bullying from older members. The reference to Clare, in the conclusion, I take to be to the "Summer Images" of John Clare in which that poet describes a snail as a "Frail brother of the morn, / That from the tiny bents and misted leaves / Withdraws his timid horn, / And fearful vision weaves."

"In Tempest's Tavern"*², also from the Mexican period, is one of a group Lowry called "Songs for Second Childhood". I should guess that the Dowson reference is to the opening section of Ernest Dowson's "Serephita". The Wordsworth reference is not so easy to place, though he may have had "Resolution and Independence" in mind, or the "Sonnet Composed during a Storm," or any of several passages in Dorothy Wordsworth's *Journals*. Lowry read fairly widely in nineteenth century poetry.

The title of the other poem dating from the Mexican period, "Lupus in Fabula"*², I have transferred from another poem to which it became accidentally attached and which it does not fit (see Bibliography). The wolf became a complex symbol in Lowry's work, first of the cruelty of nature and of the "natural" man—I suspect the origin of this in the Wolf Cub experience—and later, by an interesting reversal, of the plight of all lonely creatures who cannot exist in modern society and are persecuted to extinction, including himself. "Tortu", according to the Consul in *Under the Volcano*, is a sort of Land of Cockayne containing "the ideal University", where "not even athletics is allowed to interfere with the business of . . . drinking" (p. 56). I would suppose that Lowry picked up the name when he visited Haiti in the forties, and that it was therefore not in the original draft. The nearest I can find to a Tortu is the Ile de la Tortue (Turtle Island) off the Haiti coast.

In 1942, *Under the Volcano* made an unsuccessful round of the publishers and was returned to Lowry by his agent with advice as to revision. According to Mrs. Lowry he at once set about rewriting it, while continuing to compose poems, including the "Joseph Conrad" published below. I do not know if Lowry was referring to a specific Conrad passage, but the opening lines seem to echo a sentence in *Typhoon*. Jukes, during the storm, is "harassed by the necessity of exerting a wrestling effort against a force trying to tear him away from his hold"—but Jukes is clinging to a stanchion, unable to get down to his bunk. In general

the imagery and thought of the poem recalls Lowry's own *Ultramarine*, rather than anything of Conrad (even the famous preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*), and the title may have been, as Mrs. Lowry suspects, rather casually added.

In the summer of 1944, when the revision of the *Volcano* was almost complete, the squatter's shack in which the Lowrys were living burned to the ground; fortunately the *Volcano* manuscripts were rescued, but another unfinished novel, "In Ballast to the White Sea", was destroyed with all its notes. This is the event which prompted "Lament" (though the manuscripts reveal that he continued to revise this poem up to his death in 1957). With the help of neighbors, the Lowrys rebuilt their cabin, the *Volcano* was successfully revised, and, in 1946, accepted. "Strange Type"* was written in that year, when he was correcting proofs, and "After Publication . . ."* a year later, when he was already tasting the bittersweet of success.

The many painstaking redrafts of "Hypocrisy" suggest that it was a poem he considered important, but with which he was not satisfied. It probably refers to certain unhappy experiences he underwent when he first came to British Columbia and lived unwillingly in Vancouver until he could find a home on the beach.

"The Dodder" reflects the beginning of Lowry's interest in the natural world about him at Dollarton, though that interest was still, at this stage, a rather bookish one. In an endeavour to learn how to identify the local flowers he began reading *Studies of Plant Life in Canada*, a work by an amateur nineteenth-century botanist living at Katchewanook, near Stoney Lake, in eastern Ontario. Lowry's description of the dodder, and the other flower names and epithets in this poem, follow closely Mrs. Traill even though she is noting species which do not grow around Dollarton, or indeed in western Canada. Later, under his wife's tutelage, he grew more accurate in his botanizing. The poem is nevertheless revealing and moving for its symbolic application of Mrs. Traill's remarks to his feeling of dependence upon his wife and their life of "exiled passion" on the Dollarton beach. The general idea of the poem seems to me reminiscent of a sonnet of Conrad Aiken, the sixteenth in *And in the Human Heart*, (1940), a presentation copy of which was in Lowry's library on the beach. There are at least twenty-five drafts of this poem in the U.B.C. collection.

A LAMENT - JUNE 1944

Our house is dead
It burned to the ground
On a morning in June
With a wind from the Sound.
The fire that fed
On our marriage bed
Left a bottle of gin.
Black under the moon
Our house is dead.
We shall build it again
But our home is gone.
And the world burns on.

IN TEMPEST'S TAVERN

Another than Wordsworth dropped his live work
To listen to the wind's shriek of uprooted trees,
And vessel's smashed backs under portentous seas
Scrabbling with sharks as Rydal hives with bees,
The *Ohio* smoking in Frisco on a sharp pen
Of rock, lightning a leash snarled by force
At the bounding neck of God's mad dog, the dark;
The universe snapping like hounds at some dread groom.
I believe that Wordsworth thought of the calm . . .
But to another, blessing chaos, since it must drown
In hurled gules of conflict's flesh, his own strike
Of the hour, his own grief, no peaceful lake
Lights by storm's flash. Such is the nature of his doom
That like some infant Aeolus Dowson in tempest's tavern,
He claps for better thunder, wilder typhoon.

AFTER PUBLICATION OF "UNDER THE VOLCANO"

Success is like some horrible disaster
Worse than your house burning, the sounds of ruination
As the roof tree falls following each other faster
While you stand, the helpless witness of your damnation[.]

Fame like a drunkard consumes the house of the soul
Exposing that you have worked for only this—
Ah, that I had never suffered this treacherous kiss
And had been left in darkness forever to founder and fail[.]

HYPOCRISY

I sing the joy of poverty not such
As war insults with ruin of its own
Evil. But as the soul computes when much
Of its domain is lost. Here is a town
Of which one's sudden mayoralty
Prize of long kinship with disaster
Qualifies,—to readjust the dead.
Ideas stampede here, where are encamped
The hypocrite, the undertaker—yet, lo,
They are pitiable, and in different guise,
With hanging heads, melancholy.
And shall I tell them every one
Of the good of the soul scrubbed to the bone,
The walls bare of learning as the trees
Of leaves; and the sea—beyond—less bounded
For being innocent of ships.
What voices have they now, what forms of hopes?
What is the reckoning for having cheated death?
The Cross knows what I'll not say, that last never[.]
But no one shall heed my song, nor have they ever.

LUPUS IN FABULA

Wolf, wolf, cried the boy in the fable,
Who plagued the shepherds and the sheep alike,
To return, laughing softly, to the stable,
And fold away the hours with reed or fiddle,
Bleating in music for deceived shepherd's sake.
There was no wolf then. But at night one struck;
Long famished in iron hills she saw her table
Spread whitely on the green plains of Tortu.
Wolf, cried the boy. But now no herdsmen came.
Wolf, wolf, returned the wolf, her icy heart aflame . . .
So wolf and child were well met. But I say to you
That, slept they once on never so proud an Alp,—
It is the poor wolf now who cries for help.

THE DODDER

The early flowered everlasting,
The hooded violet, the branching white
Wood-violet, brooding in the May night
Send petals forth even in Spring's wasting,
—Sped by the monkish cellarage-tasting
Of cowed cuckoo-pint, jack-in-the-pulpit!—
All of these, where there was but one poet,
In Katchewanook, lacked no contrasting.
If I seek that which, poor, leafless, rootless,
Twined with goldenrod in ill-repute lives,
It is, for exiled passion's sake, comfort
Here, on Stony Lake: nor is it fruitless
What faithful coils are goldener than leaves
To share, what blossoms parasites support.

AUTOPSY

An autopsy on this childhood then reveals:
 That he was flayed at seven, crucified at eleven.
 And he was blind as well, and jeered at
 For his blindness. Small wonder that the man
 Is embittered and full of hate, but wait.
 All this time, and always lost, he struggled.
 In pain he prayed that none other
 In the world should suffer so. Christ's
 Life compared with his, was full of tumult,
 Praise, excitement, final triumph.
 For him were no hosannas. He writes them now.
 Matriculated into life by this, remembering how
 This laggard self was last in the school Marathon,
 Or that he was last, last in everything,
 Devoid of all save wandering attention—
 Wandering is the word defines our man—
 But turned, to discover Clare in the poor snail,
 And weave a fearful vision of his own.

STRANGE TYPE

I wrote: in the dark cavern of our birth.
 The printer had it tavern, which seems better:
 But herein lies the subject of our mirth,
 Since on the next page death appears as dearth.
 So it may be that God's word was distraction,
 Which to our strange type appears destruction,
 Which is bitter.

JOSEPH CONRAD

This wrestling, as of seamen with a storm
Which flies to leeward—while they, united
In that chaos, turn, each on his nighted
Bunk, to dream of chaos again, or home—
The poet himself, struggling with the form
Of his coiled work, knows; having requited
Sea-weariness with purpose, invited
What derricks of the soul plunge in his room.
Yet some mariner's ferment in his blood
—Though truant heart will hear the iron travail
And song of ships that ride their easting down—
Sustains him to subdue or be subdued.
In sleep all night he grapples with a sail!
But words beyond the life of ships dream on.

