

MALCOLM LOWRY

A Note

Conrad Aiken

MY OPINION OF MALCOLM LOWRY as a writer is of course already on record, in the “blurb” which I was asked to write for *Under the Volcano* when it first appeared. More extensively, it can be found in the portrait of Lowry—on the whole, pretty accurate—in *Ushant*, my autobiography, where he appears as Hambo. In the last section of this is a fragment of imaginary dialogue between us which was actually written at Cuernavaca in 1937, when I was staying with him, and which, allowing for the necessary “heightening”, is very close to the mark. It will suggest, I think, something of the remarkable spiritual and aesthetic and psychological symbiosis that grew up between us immediately after our first meeting in 1929. He had read my novel *Blue Voyage*, and wrote me about it to Rye, Sussex, where he assumed I was still living; and he asked me to lunch with him, either in London or Cambridge, where he was to matriculate in September. On finding that I was in the *other* Cambridge—on the Charles River—he at once inquired whether I would consider taking him on as a pupil, the terms to be arranged. The terms were arranged, he set sail on a freighter from Liverpool to Bermuda, on another from Bermuda to Boston, and arrived one day in July on my doorstep in Plympton Street, Cambridge, next door to the Grolier Bookshop, with a taropatch in one hand and a small battered suitcase in the other.

The suitcase contained an exercise book (and not much else) in which was as much as he had then written of his first novel, *Ultramarine*; and it was on this, as I have described at length in *Ushant*, that we were to work all that wonderful summer. *Blue Voyage* he knew better than I did—he knew it by heart. Its influence on him was profound and permanent, and was evident even in that

first title—he was delighted with my suggestion that he might well have taken the next step and called the book *Purple Passage*. But though the influence was to continue even into the later work, a matter that was frequently and amusedly discussed between us, and was also to comprise a great deal that was said by me in conversation, it was much more complicated than that. The fact is that we were uncannily alike in almost everything, found instantly that we spoke the same language, were astonishingly *en rapport*; and it was therefore the most natural thing in the world that a year later, when difficulties arose between him and his father, I was able to act as mediator (I had by then returned to Rye), and, as a result of this, for the next three years, in *loco parentis*. I became his father.

Time and space were to interrupt this quite marvellous relationship, but never to change it. *Tout passe, l'amitié reste*. His first letter to me had begun: "I have lived only nineteen years, most of them badly." Would he have thought that he lived the *rest* of his short life badly? No, I don't think so. The work speaks for him, and he knew that it was superb.

