

# MORE THAN MUSIC

## *Glimpses of Malcolm Lowry*

*Downie Kirk*

*Sir, more than kisses, letters mingle souls;  
For, thus friends absent speak.*

JOHN DONNE

**I**T WOULD TAKE a symposium of the friends with whom Malcolm Lowry corresponded to describe him adequately from his letters. Yet, one correspondent, basing his impressions upon letters which were written during the decade that was the most productive period of his literary career, can still give a significant view of the man and the artist. One naturally wonders, of course, what right one really has to quote from the private letters of an author; one is sharply reminded of Heine's remark: "To publish even one line of an author which he himself has not intended for the public at large—especially letters which are addressed to private persons—is to commit a despicable act of felony."

But in the case of Malcolm Lowry one may perhaps be pardoned, for obviously some of the care that made him revise almost every paragraph he wrote, went into the composition of his letters, although it is doubtful that he wrote them with a view to publication. In fact, it is their very naturalness that makes them valuable. He obviously wrote many of them under pressure, at a time when he was absorbed in the composition of his novels and his poetry; for he makes frequent references to the long stretches of strain caused by his creative work, in the midst of which he would write a letter in reply to an invitation to spend an evening of complete relaxation from his creative endeavours.

When I'm working at very high intensity [he says on one occasion] the writing of even the smallest note often takes an incredibly long time—an occupational psychological aberration of some sort doubtless due in turn to the fact that the narcissistic care which one sometimes expends on prose makes a fellow forget a

letter should be spontaneous and to hell with the semicolons, since your friend doesn't want to look at them anyway but is simply interested in hearing from you.

Joseph Conrad once said that he could compare the strain of writing *Nostramo* only to the everlasting sombre stress of the westward winter passage around Cape Horn. So it must have been with Malcolm Lowry; for he drove himself mercilessly to produce his works: with him there was a passionate necessity to reflect and to distill in its purest form something within him that would not give him peace. And many of the letters—"the only true heart-talkers," as someone has said—are as revelatory of Lowry as his autobiographical fiction. The expression of his thought is neither cryptic nor obscure. His commentary on life and literature is all the more precious because it is good vivid talk by the Lowry whom not many could listen to with complete comprehension for any length of time because of the abstruseness of his references and the broad leaps in his thoughts. He was, of course, shy, and although he was dying to communicate, he often remained silent; when he did open his mouth, it was to release a flood of words that dazzled you with its brilliance but frequently left you bewildered about its meaning.

We are now aware of Malcolm Lowry as an outstanding novelist, as a distinguished short-story writer and as a considerable poet, but his power as a critic is practically unknown. His book reviews and literary criticisms, although not numerous, are penetrating. His letters, moreover, reveal him as a sensitive critic of literature, politics, music, art and philosophy; in them he discusses with acute perception and in clear style a wide range of unusual subjects.

In one letter he tells about reading José Ortega y Gasset—especially his wonderful lecture on Goethe, and his *Towards a Philosophy of History*. In the latter work the Spanish philosopher suggests that human life in its most human dimension is like a work of fiction, that man is a sort of novelist of himself, who conceives the fanciful figure of a personage with its unreal occupations and then, for the sake of converting it into reality, does all the things he does. Lowry says this idea recommends itself to him because he feels that man is a kind of novelist of himself. He thinks, too, that there is something valuable from a philosophic point of view in trying to put down what actually takes place in a novelist's mind when he conceives what he conceives to be the fanciful figure of a personage.

The part that never gets written, with which is included the true impulses that made him a novelist or dramatist in the first place, and the modifications of life around him through his own eyes as those impulses were realized, would be the true drama, and I hope to finish something of this sort one day.

At this point he inserts a long parenthesis in minute handwriting in the margin

of his typed letter, which I quote in full, because its remarks on Pirandello exhibit the honesty, fairness and insight of his literary criticism :

This would be not unlike Pirandello who—I quote from an article in *The Partisan Review*—“inverts the convention of modern realism, instead of pretending that the stage is not a stage at all, but the familiar parlor, he pretends that the familiar parlor is not real as a photograph *but a stage* containing many realities.” This is Shakespeare’s speech come true. My feeling is that Pirandello may not have wholly appreciated how close to truth his view of human life might be, as a consequence of which the realities of “Six Characters in Search of an Author,” say, do not measure up to the profundity of the view, though I have not studied him sufficiently, and the accepted critical opinion upon Pirandello is apparently faulty.

Lowry continues his analysis of Ortega’s *Towards a Philosophy of History* by stating that although Ortega is not concerned in this work, at any rate, with fiction, it is the thesis upon which he bases his view of history—namely, that man is what has happened to him. This thought interests Lowry because it is a philosophy that begins with one’s existence, links up with Heidegger and Kierkegaard, and hence with Existentialism. Writing in June, 1950, he notes that Existentialism has already become a music hall joke in France and that it contains an element of despair that is absent in Ortega. Sartre’s Existentialism, as far as he can understand it, strikes him as “a sort of reach-me-down or second-hand philosophy”, changed dramatically to fit the anguish of the French in their struggle against the German occupation. In conclusion, however, he says :

Even so, it’s refreshing to read a philosophy that gives value to the drama of life itself, of the dramatic value of your own life at the very moment you are reading.

Commenting on Ortega’s thought that the snob is hostile to liberalism, with the hostility of a deaf man for words, that liberty has always been understood in Europe as the freedom to be one’s real self and that it is not surprising that a man who knows that he has no mission to fulfil should want to be rid of it, Lowry says that this idea at first sight appeared to him, among other things, one of the most convincing arguments against communism that he had ever read in such a short space, but that on second thought he realized it was only a statement in defence of the old school of liberalism, and he states that such a school could not exist without the possibility of free discussion of revolutionary tenets, including even those contained in communism for that matter, or without the right to practical absorption of revolutionary tenets where desirable.

THE POLITICAL SITUATION in the world looked grim to Lowry in 1950, although it did not seem to him half so hopeless as it had done in 1939 or even in 1938. In one letter, for instance, he writes: "Sometimes I get the impression that not even the people who are actually in the process of making history know in the least what is *really* going on. Or if they do, it seems appalling that they should be in the position that they are." As for the eventual outcome of the present human predicament, he felt that mankind, striving toward a rebirth, would probably achieve a better world in the not too-distant future. He was familiar, of course, with the pessimistic picture drawn by Orwell in his 1984, as he often talked about the novel; but he was more hopeful than Orwell, and although he was painfully aware that man, if he did not take care, might destroy himself—as we might infer from *Under the Volcano*—he felt that the revolutionary forces of our time would change for the better the present shocking situation in world politics. He says, optimistically, that "anything that is a revolution must keep moving or it doesn't revolute: by its nature it contains within it the seeds of its own destruction; so by 1989, say, everything ought to be hunky-dory, all of which certainly doesn't make it any easier to live in 1950."

Elsewhere Lowry discusses at length religion, witchcraft and Voodooism—subjects in which he took an intense interest. Referring to *Mythologie Vodou*, a book on witchcraft, by his Haitian friend, Milo Marcelin, he takes exception to a review of it in *Time* magazine; he explains that it is a book not about Voodoo chiefly but about witchcraft, and that there is a difference, although it is not perhaps apparent to the layman.

Lowry points out that Voodoo is essentially a religion to be regarded with reverence, since it is without question a matter-transcending religion based upon the actual existence of the supernatural—a fact that is fundamental to man himself, compared with which most other religions are simply techniques to hide that fact or at least to keep the supernatural at relatively safe distances. He feels that only the Negroes are powerful enough or holy enough to be able to handle it, and that even they of course abuse it. He thinks, furthermore, that the white man should regard with awe the great dignity and discipline that is behind Voodooism at its highest, its conception of God and the meaning it gives to life—and this he says is the religion of a race that we so often glibly think of as inferior, or comprising medicine men, or the powers of darkness, etc. He appeals for greater understanding of the coloured people with words that are as timely today as when he wrote them ten years ago:

Heart of Darkness indeed! Joseph Conrad should have been to Haiti. What he failed to understand was that the savages of the Congo had, to some extent, *subdued* the dark forces that are in nature by creating their religion in the first place in order to subdue them, that that, in its way, was a civilizing almost a pragmatic process . . . It is clear that Comrade Joseph did not allow himself to be corrupted by any savages though; he stayed in Polish aloofness on board in company with some *a priori* ideas.

Lowry himself felt that in his rich and varied life there had been many communications between his mind and others by means outside the channels of sense, and he was so convinced of the existence of thought transference that he could not dismiss it as mere coincidence. The subject of telepathy occurs often in his letters. Once a "mysterious" crossing of our letters (this resulted in much confusion and the resort to telegrams) caused him to write:

I am being so supermeticulous about what is more or less spontaneous because I perceive, having been reading *Bergson*, that the difficulties on one plane of communication and the too great facilities on another (if telepathic ones can be called such) might have led you into some inconvenience, than which little is worse on Saturday afternoon . . .

MALCOLM LOWRY was blessed with a keen sense of humour, though critics seem to have overlooked this priceless quality in his writings. He once said that he intended to write a book dealing with the peculiar punishment that is meted out to people who lack the sense of humour to write books like *Under the Volcano*. He was, in fact, a very witty person, and his wit could not help overflowing into his letters. It usually appears in a tone of good-natured banter. Commenting on the reception *Under the Volcano* received in France, he writes facetiously:

Finally, I thought that you would be tickled to know, *The Volcano* has made a hit in France, where it is coming out three times in the next month: first in a classic series, then *Correa*, and it is also being serialized in the Paris daily newspaper, *Combat*. They have decided that it is the writing on the wall, that your amigo is everything from the *Four Quartets* (which he has never read) to Joyce (whom he dislikes)—finally relate him to the Jewish prophetic Zohar (of which he knows nothing)—they have some other comments, too, about Macbeth, but that is nothing to what someone is just going to say in Victoria, over the C.B.C., where they have decided that the Consul is really Moby Dick, masquerading as

the unconscious aspect of the Cadborosaurus in the Book of Jonah, or words to that effect.

A knowledgeable devotee of the cinematographic art, Lowry once said that if *Under the Volcano* were filmed in his lifetime, he would insist on helping to direct it, and in his letters he makes many interesting references to films. He tells, for instance, of going to see the film *The Hairy Ape*, which he had heard was good; he considered it *djevelsk* (Scandinavian for devilish) in the worst sense, although the suspense was subtly increased by the accident of the lights failing for an hour right in the middle of the showing. He recalls that people looked very sinister and strange standing about in the foyer, and he made a note that he ought to use this in a book; then he remembered that he had done so in *Under the Volcano*. In another letter he says that he went to see the old silent film *Intolerance*, played straight through without any music at all, which he considered a great mistake, as Griffith wrote his own score. "Very few silent films," he remarks, "will stand being played like that, without music, which I think is interesting. *The Passion of Joan of Arc* is an exception."

With regard to C. F. Ramuz's novel, *When the Mountain Fell*, Lowry makes some enlightening remarks on the author's style, in which he detects the influence of the movies. From his reading of Clifton Fadiman's remarks printed on the cover of *When the Mountain Fell*, he had gained the impression that Ramuz's style was being approached in an odd way, that it was supposed to be natural—that is, artless, unsophisticated, stark, stern, unintellectual, above all uninfluenced. He says he cannot see how a style, no matter how arrived at—often he imagines largely by cutting—can hope fundamentally to be much more than simply appropriate, in the fullest sense, to what the author is writing about. He says also that he did not find Ramuz' style particularly simple and that he can detect many sophisticated influences including avant-garde cinema. But as far as he is concerned the story is none the worse for that. His concluding remarks on style are illuminating:

Just the same one is all in favour of a clear, pure, concrete style, and one with the utmost of simplicity, etc. But if one has arrived at that position, it is unlikely that the style has been uninfluenced. Doubtless one has to pass through a maximum of influences before achieving a style at all. It is difficult to see how a style like Ramuz, even if it achieves great clarity, can be called unsophisticated. Anyhow his simplicity, such as it is, strikes me as having cost a great intellectual effort.

Lowry's life-long interest in style, as well as his deep love of language and his ready championship of the outcast, mark him as a kindred spirit of the great Aus-

trian critic and poet Karl Kraus, who, like Lowry, concerned himself throughout his life with literary style and poetics, carried on an unending campaign against inaccurate and slovenly use of language, and fought against injustice, corruption and hypocrisy wherever he found them. Lowry doubtless knew the work of Kraus, because he was steeped in the writings of the authors of Central Europe. He often spoke in admiration of Kraus's compatriot and contemporary—Hermann Broch. But he talked most about the German-Jewish novelist, Franz Kafka, who like himself was definitely influenced by the *cabala* and the works of Søren Kierkegaard. There is much of Kafka's philosophical and religious symbolism—as well as traces of his compact, intense and closely reasoned style—in *Under the Volcano*. In his conversations Lowry made frequent references to *The Trial* and *The Castle*, and in one letter he writes that he appreciates a Kafka-like scrupulousness on my part, but hastens to remind me that “Kafka believed that while the demand on the part of the divine powers for absolute righteousness even in the smallest matters was unconditional, human effort, even at its highest, was always in the wrong.”

Lowry had great sympathy for the younger authors who were struggling for recognition and was most generous in assisting them. When he reviewed their work, he made his criticism in the spirit of kindness, but he could be caustic, as when he reviewed Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*. He considered it a very questionable book—a paradox, in fact; for Merton had gone into a Trappist monastery pretending to give up *everything* and yet went on writing books. But even in Merton's book Lowry recognized a kind of sincerity or dedication and felt that the book was important enough at this point in history to be considered on another plane altogether. He ends his entertaining review with a timely, striking thought: “That a Monastery *might*, in essence, be the capital of the world at this juncture is a possibility which not even Nietzsche were he alive would care to question—or would he?”

No account of Malcolm Lowry's life and work at Dollarton could be complete without mention of his love of British Columbia and especially the country closely surrounding his shack on Burrard Inlet. His descriptions of it permeate his fiction and the abundance of feeling he had for the place overflows into his letters. The fear that he might be evicted from his beloved house on the beach caused him much anxiety which he expresses in his letters. Nor did these feelings end on his departing to Europe in 1954. From Ripe, near Lewes, in Sussex, he wrote in April, 1956: “Though we like this place quite a bit, please don't think we have abandoned Dollarton; we have not and think of it constantly.” And finally, about

seven months before his untimely death, he wrote these nostalgic words: "I am writing like mad on *October Ferry to Gabriola* . . . It is better than the *Volcano*, a veritable symphony of longing for the beach. We hope to return D.V., meantime think of you often and are often homesick."

Reading Lowry's letters again was a great pleasure for me. The immense vitality, the exuberant humour, the depth of thought and the broad humanity expressed on almost every page, often in the richest of poetic imagery, gave me moments of sheer delight. As a tribute to Malcolm Lowry—the man and the artist, I should like to quote, in closing, from a poem of his friend, Conrad Aiken, for whom he had the greatest admiration and who in turn cherished him as if he were his own son:

Music I heard with you was more than music,  
And bread I broke with you was more than bread.

