

LETTERS FROM MALCOLM LOWRY

These two letters have been chosen because they show Malcolm Lowry discussing literary problems and their relation to the life he was constantly trying to transmute into the substance of his books. Mr. Albert Erskine, recipient of the first, was at that time editor for Reynal & Hitchcock, who published *Under the Volcano* for the first time in the United States. He is now managing editor of Random House. Mr. David Markson, recipient of the second, is a young American writer, now in Mexico City on a fellowship from the Centro Mexicano de Escritores, who first established contact with Malcolm Lowry when he wrote a thesis on *Under the Volcano* for his M.A. degree at Columbia University.

To Albert Erskine

UNDATED.

Dear Albert,

Your letter arrived without hitch . . . Meantime quam celerime my feelings and prejudices—which I hope will dispel *some* doubts—in regard to fiction about writings and writers as such:

Your feelings and prejudices are shared by me, almost unqualifiedly, on the most general plane, as indeed probably by most other writers, though one reason I feel that most other writers share them is that they have been taught since they began writing that *all* editors and producers have these same feelings and prejudices, so what's the use of writing about writers etc (even though they, the writers, somehow persist in doing so in one disguise or another) when they would be rejected etc etc? . . .

But I don't believe the general public shares the prejudice, for there is an artist, a poet in every man, hence he is a creature easy for anyone to identify themselves with: and his struggles are likely to be universal, even on the lowest plane . . . My own prejudice and feeling remain on this plane no different in essence let

alone from your good self's but from those adumbrated by wordy old Bernard de Voto in his truly horrendous excellent little bits about Mark Twain and his malicious bits about Tom Wolfe.

But I note that even Bernard de Voto had to interpolate that "he was a 'good Joycean'—he hoped—and where on this line of his argument the Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man would come in, I simply don't know. But with me the Portrait of the Artist has always partly failed (while one recognizes its—ha ha—importance of course) for not dissimilar reasons to those that made Wolfe fail with de Voto . . .

So I daresay I am even 'left' of de Voto on the subject, and as a consequence even more prejudiced than yourself and / or most editors or writers against such writing and on that point that does in the end perhaps begin to involve the whole of autobiographical fiction and much beside—particularly it would seem to depend upon the technique—moreover what if one should give a real turn of the screw to a subject that is so often treated halfheartedly? I think unquestionably what one is after is a new form, a new approach to reality itself; though I would submit also in tangential passing that I don't think those works that treat of the matter tragically or philosophically rather than romantically have suffered in acclaim by reason of this theme—Tchekov's *The Seagull* is a case—perhaps irrelevant—that comes to mind, and *Six Characters*.

Of course you can say that these are single works, but in fact virtually the entire basis of Pirandello's work involves a not dissimilar theme (in this case that art, the theatre, is somehow realer than life). My reasoning may seem slightly cock-eyed here or irrelevant again but I know what I mean. Nine out of ten people who saw *The Seagull* would scarcely remember that it is almost entirely about writing and writers or art in one way and other—what they would take to heart is that a talent not put to proper use and directed can destroy its owner, and apply that melancholy truth to their own talent, whatever it might be.

But I digress. The real protagonist of the *Voyage* is not so much a man or a writer as the unconscious—or man's unconscious—and at present it's a little difficult for me to see how I can swing what seems to me the superb irony of Wilderness living in Laruelle's house and the death of 'Vigil' unless Wilderness has written, so to speak, the *Volcano*. Apart from this, though, both *Dark as the Grave* and *La Mordida*¹—especially the latter—should exist as powerful novels

¹ "Dark as the Grave" and "La Mordida" were never-completed novels about Mexico which Lowry intended to form part of a sequence centring on *Under the Volcano*. —ED.

in themselves, if done aright, without obtrusive reference to writers or writing. There are emotional and sexual and alcoholic and even political dramas which overshadow these matters, albeit I would lose what seems to me one of the most potentially masterful scenes, i.e. when Wilderness has his novel accepted in Laruelle's house while technically under arrest, if Wilderness hasn't written the Volc.

Even so Wilderness is not, in the ordinary sense in which one encounters novelists or the author in novels, a novelist. He simply doesn't know what he is. He is a sort of underground man. Also he is Ortega's fellow, making up his life as he goes along, and trying to find his vocation. In this regard some of the notes to the Path to the Spring², though chaotic, may prove helpful re the treatment I propose. According to Ortega, the best image for man himself is a novelist, and it is in this way that I'd prefer you to look at him. He is not going to be the self-conscious author himself of so many novels, if that was what you are rightly afraid of, even though I have to make him responsible for the Volc. Moreover he is disinterested in literature, uncultured, incredibly unobservant, in many respects ignorant, without faith in himself, and lacking nearly all the qualities you normally associate with a novelist or a writer. As I've said he doesn't even think he's a novelist himself. The Volcano—which 'Laruelle' doesn't think much of at first—appears less as a novel than as a sort of mighty if preposterous moral deed of some obscene sort, testifying to an underlying toughness of fibre or staying power in his character rather than to any particular aesthetic ability of the usual kind. His very methods of writing are absurd and he sees practically nothing at all, save through his wife's eyes, though he gradually comes to *see*. I believe this can make him a very original character, both human and pathetically inhuman at once. I must approve of him as a doppelgänger and am reluctant to turn him into a steeplejack, a cartoonist or a billiard marker, though he can be all those too, for all it matters. What does he know? What he suspects is that he's not a writer so much as being *written*—this is where the terror comes in. (It came in, just then.) His tragedy or his faith or whatever is less that of Faust than that of Aylmar, the water diviner—whose story should be told briefly somewhere or other—a character of the Middle Ages who, with his wand, was used by the French authorities to track down murderers, half fake—because his talent kept failing at embarrassing moments, wouldn't work at all under certain conditions yet he had to pretend it *was* working, half genius, because he nearly always got

² This is "The Forest Path to the Spring" which appears in the collection of stories, *Hear Us Oh Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*. ED.

his man—a sort of latter day underground Aylmar, looking for himself or his soul. I'm damned if I don't think him an original fellow, not to be confused with the ordinary novelist, and I would have told you all this already, had Hear Us only gone to you and not to Giroux. (Magic didn't seem to be working very well then, or maybe it'll turn out it was working overtime and was just a bit too subtle for one.) . . .

MALCOLM

To David Markson

UNDATED

(POSTMARKED MAY 20, 1954

DOLLARTON, B.C.)

Dear old Dave,

Hold that note, Roland. Blow that horn. For one thing 3000 bucks is 3000 bucks, so why not think in terms of what it could represent—I don't mean necessarily, though the speculation be inescapable on this particular morning, how many bottles of Jack Daniels Tennessee Sour Mash Whiskey it will beget—but rather a passage to more than India, Italy, or the Whirling Cyclades: at least Europe. So if the opus bores and disgusts you anyway, why not make a good job of it and make the corrections—insert more cock, so to say—your paperback-publisher desires, and if possible, and himself not bankrupt, collect. I will provide you with a title: No Barricado for a Belly. And a pseudonym: Sigbjorn X. Ghostkeeper. Or perhaps Thomas of Erceldoune . . . This would be a palpable hit (even if the book isn't) for you, I mean should it chance to help produce the environment where you can better write what you want. For to judge from your recent letters, especially your last, it would seem that New York is not proving altogether the right place. To say the least. In my own experience—odi et amo—that particular city—it favours brief and furious outbursts, but not the long haul. Moreover for all its drama and existential fury, or perhaps because of it, it's a city where it can be remarkably hard—or so it seems to me—to get on the right side of one's despair; once having got on the wrong side of it, that is; even hangovers don't seem the same in New York as anywhere else, though to be sure they may not last so long, the deceitful medicament being more easily at hand; which only makes it worse in the end. Not that one can't learn a great deal from hangovers: everything, in fact, save how not to get one next time, but that one can too easily find oneself slipping into the state of mind in that city—

or so it seems to me—where to be slightly tight or hungover seems one's natural state, the only way to maintain one's balance and one's harmony with the place: and the bad thing about this is not the tightness so much, which as you say can be highly enjoyable . . . but that that state of mind is really as eminently rational as it is—or can be—dangerous; an uncomfortable combination. I hope I don't seem to preach. *Mens sano in corpore sano*, was all I was talking about. I don't say one can't keep fit (whatever that may mean) in New York, but after a while, does one really want to? Perhaps you rightly, as you said, consider yourself a creature of the city: as once I did: maybe though you reckon without some of your unconscious needs, nay, the absolute necessities, of that creature, such as a few stars, ruins, deserts, cathedrals, seas, forests, ducks, ships, (even if the thought of them be loathsome) uncharted waters and undreamed shores, even indeed other cities. And above all perhaps a swim when you want it: or don't you want it? In any case, you have us both feeling somewhat anxious about you; your letters get blacker and blacker—no matter that they may have cheered this benighted author up during what seemed an acutely ultimate indigo period, and no matter that the blacker they get, the more entertaining they are: that has been my and our benefit, (which reminds me I would like at this moment, with yourself, to have a game of tennis). My advantage, your altruistic and far-sighted empathy: what the hell,—I haven't given you much return. And it occurs to me, as you see, sprouting parental whiskers at this point, that, somehow or other, your providence or yourself may be making a bad job for you, of what used to be called: "withdrawal and return." Unless sexually, of course,—but that ain't all, Jules Romaines to the contrary; and I don't see even so how even that could be solved, far less fundamentally, unless you are slightly more, as the lady spiritualist observed to us, "En Rappo with the Angelitic Host."

Joking and obscenities aside, however, I even sometimes think, in my darker moments, that the poor bloody-minded old Volcano may have had a malign influence on your good self; it hurts somewhat too much to suggest you throw that God damn book out of the window and me with it, even if that were sound advice, which I'm not sure it is, and anyhow I would no doubt hotly protest: not all fathers were made for their own patricide and I never heard of Abraham asking Isaac to sacrifice him, not willingly anyhow: but keeping that work as a symbol for the moment of something or other, you ought to try somehow to transcend it, let it at least be useful to you, since it was apparently intended for you, or its author will feel he has lived in vain. I'm not sure what I mean. But no matter, to come back to the subject, you speak of the work you've done recently

not merely as bad but as though you loathed the thought of it. As for that, even if so, it can't be as bad as parts of what I've been recently writing myself: and you seem blissfully to have forgotten why you wrote the book. Quite apart from the fact that it seems to me something of a feat to write any book these days, however bad, the basic idea of writing the thing in the first place must have been founded on some deep need or you wouldn't have done it. So, I repeat, you ought to follow it up. If New York hasn't stimulated you yet into doing the kind of work you fundamentally want to do there's no need to rush to the conclusion that the fault is all Dave Markson's. It could be that you need (quite apart no doubt as sailors say, from a good strong woman) complementary factors to be found only in Europe. You can get to Europe cheaply & swiftly from New York, live there much more cheaply, and your 3000 bucks would go a long way. If—as circumstances seem to be pointing at this moment—we ourselves are going there, probably to Sicily (just to vary the volcanoes—the Volcano is coming out in Italian by the way this fall, as I think I mentioned) we could even dwell near one another, apply mutual cataplasms upon work in progress or regress. The idea is not a bad one . . .

Mexico is the most Christ-awful place in the world in which to be in any form of distress, a sort of Moloch that feasts on suffering souls, in fact: moreover, if you are known to take a drink, the bastardos will count every one you have, and wait around to trip you up. Gringo-baiting is their national sport: even bull-fighting takes second place. All in all a good place to stay out of: (even though one dreams, quixotically of returning one day—a death-wish, from my point of view, if ever there was one.) But then, of course, again, all might go merry as a marriage bell. Or rather merry if not quite as a marriage bell. And it's unquestionably a beautiful and interesting country, which you may take as the understatement of the year. The people are of course swell too: both outside and behind bars, in both senses. Only I feel that the custodian does not correspond . . . But, if for none of the foregoing reasons, a trip there for you at this period might enormously aggravate your problems, without perhaps solving any . . . However all this may be, though, your state of mind distresses us both, as I say. I came across the phrase the other day, in reference to Kafka, "the lost art of being unhappy." It would seem that, so far as you and I are concerned, the art is not perhaps so lost after all. I suppose it is idle to say—and sounds phoney—that a certain amount of despair is actually necessary for people of our peculiar temperament: it doesn't make it any the easier to suffer. Margie suspects me sometimes of suffering sometimes without there being any proper 'objective correlative' for

it: as I her: but one overlooks the fact that the mostly hellish kind of suffering of all can be simply because of that lack—the Waste Land type. Or one may suffer because one *can't* suffer, because after all to suffer is to be alive. Because I'm twice as old as you I'm not going to go it on these lines and end up by saying that when you've reached my age and transcended what I've transcended—or worse, not transcended—then you can begin to speak; you don't need to be old to suffer any more than you do to drink. Melville, at 14, speaking through Redburn, woke up to find the mildew on his soul . . .

I suspect you, though,—or at this moment—of undergoing a more special and inexplicable kind of blues. The way you write, it's almost as though you were implying, though quite without self-pity, “But nobody cares what the hell happens to me”: or rather, “Perhaps all too many people care but I don't care a damn that *they* care.” Well, this letter should certainly set your mind at rest immediately on the point that at least two people whom you really do care if they care care. Possibly this was not at all the feeling or the point and I am just projecting an emotion on to you I have sometimes felt myself, in my case largely a familial one; none of my own brothers— though they expressed themselves pleased to hear of its success in the U.S.—has ever said a word, intelligent or otherwise, about the Volcano; my mother kept Ultramarine locked up in a drawer (which was perhaps the best place for it) which perhaps is irrelevant too.

—But a truce to all this. I have just now received your next letter of the 13th, which renders much of this letter superfluous. We're both very glad indeed you're taking the line you are. Your terms by the way—the two \$1500—are exactly what I received for the Volcano—or as Aiken termed it, Under the Malcamo or Poppagetsthebotl. I'm beginning to think your book must be good, not at all as you say it is. Don't try *proving* you have any talent though, etc.; that way you can overreach yourself. But you can set your mind at rest: you have: lots of it, I can spot it a mile off, being myself a talent-scout of no mean ability. But it may take you some time to find your stride, there's lots of time too, all too much time, even, though you may not think it . . .

There's nothing but a sort of heartbreak here: we love the place too much, and that's to be, alack, in the devil's clutches. It's true *we* haven't been evicted yet, but all the people up to the lighthouse have been served with eviction notices, and even in tonight's paper there's a heartless piece: “Speedy Eviction of Squatters Sought. District Clerk Fred Saunders said legal action is being hampered by the slow process of catching up with the transient beachcomber owners of ‘dilapidated makeshift shacks’ in the area where Municipal officials plan to de-

velop the park's beach facilities." Etc. But before I begin to grow too lachrymose about this I ought to say we ought to be thankful for the line of demarcation of the evictions *does* end at the lighthouse: we have had similar scares before, and weathered them, and it is in every way possible, since there seems a special providence about the place that we still could be here ten years from now. So we're not leaving with the object of the parting being irrevocable: indeed it had been in our mind as a counter-suggestion to offer you the house in our absence, for that would least save you rent, and it can be a wonderful and healthy life, but it is no doubt far too far and unfeasible, and together with any happiness you might only inherit the anxiety too; Vancouver is culturally as dead as the dodo, and by no stretch of the imagination could it supply you with what Europe would at this stage; moreover the abomination of desolation is already sitting in the holy place and at night the glare of new oil refineries compose a veritable City of Dis. Nonetheless I cannot bring myself to say we are leaving for good: we would, to tell the truth, have been going to Europe anyhow for a while—this life is too hard on Margie as a constant thing and this continual Under-the-Volcano-my aspens all are felled-all-all-are felled feeling is so lousy it could even drive one cuckoo, I feel, in the end. So we aim not to think about this too much, enjoy what good luck we have while we have it and leave the place beautiful and in good repair and in some safe hands (if you don't want it, which you probably wouldn't anyhow and certainly won't if [they] give you your advance and you can finagle, as we hope, your European trip) with some remote but optimistic idea of eventual return . . .

I still have no exact idea when we're coming to New York, but we'll give you the exact date in plenty of time: we're hoping you'll meet us at the airport. We haven't heard from the Italian Consulate about the ship yet. We hope to sail in September for various reasons, one being that it's cheaper. Thank you for offering to put us up in N.Y. if you're there: but for god's sake don't let us put you to any trouble or anyone else out—we look forward much to seeing you there; if not, to rejoining you somewhere beyond the Pillars of Hercules.

All the very best love from us both.

MALCOLM