

GREAT' CIRCLE SAILING:
A STUDY OF MALCOLM LOWRY'S PROSE

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PREFACE

The difficulty in discussing Malcolm Lowry's work is that any one book, any one episode, or symbol, leads in a multitude of ways to all other books, episodes, ideas, and symbols. The result is that many points must be postponed beyond the most propitious moment for discussion if one is to avoid trying to talk about half a dozen things at once.

The first chapter is the most various in subject matter. It deals in turn with Lowry's structures and style, his own relationship as a writer to his characters, a biographical sketch, a discussion of the biographical element in his fiction, an outline of his larger intentions, and a statement of the way to be taken in the succeeding chapters.

The remaining chapters trace Lowry's development as a prose writer and bring out his basic themes and symbols. The last chapter also ties together the use and development of theme and symbol and ends with a statement in Lowry's own words of his central concept of the eternal principle of circularity in all life.

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I

THE AUTHOR AND HIS WORK

Malcolm Lowry's prose is usually impressive but not always convincing. The very profusion of associations diffuses the reader's emotional response, sometimes to the point where intellectual speculation completely supercedes all empathy. Yet Lowry's complexity does not over-embellish the surface; rather, it creates the massive structures this thesis will investigate in later chapters.¹

Perhaps more lively characterization would have allowed a more emotional response from the reader but Lowry thought greater depth in this area would only add difficulties. For instance, he says Under the Volcano is almost empty of character. The characters do at times seem nebulous, in fact, reality itself becomes a slippery thing. But is Lowry right in

¹Speaking of Under the Volcano, Robert B. Heilman says: "The two extremes which are the technical dangers of this kind of work are the tightly bound allegory, in which a system of abstract equivalents for all the concrete materials of the story constricts the imaginative experience, and a loose impressionism, in which a mass of suggested enterprises sets off so many associations, echoes, and conjectures that the imaginative experience becomes crowded and finally diffuse. It is the latter risk that Lowry runs." (Robert B. Heilman, "The Possessed Artist and the Ailing Soul", Canadian Literature, VIII spring 1961), 16.) Lowry's impressionism may demand imaginative reading but the effect of the method is to add to the structure, for every association adds detail to one or more of the structural patterns.

saying greater characterization would harm the total effect? Surely some element is needed to offset the gigantic structure.

Under the Volcano is not a large novel yet it has the structural magnitude of an epic poem without having enough poetry to balance fully the great underlying network. Some of the short stories, especially "Elephant and Colosseum" in Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place, are interesting mainly as metaphysical puzzles.

Lowry's style and structural technique ~~rein~~reinforce each other and he was fully aware of the stylistic dangers he ran. Talking about himself in the preface to the French edition of Under the Volcano he comments:

To begin with, his very style may assume an embarrassing resemblance to that of the German writer Schopenhauer describes, who wished to express six things at the same time instead of discussing them one after the other. "In those long, rich parenthetical periods, like boxes enclosing boxes, and crammed more full than roast geese stuffed with apples, one's memory above all is put to the task, when understanding and judgment should have been called upon to do their work."²

Lowry was deeply concerned with style even while still at University. Gerald Noxon remembers from conversations at Cambridge that Lowry was unwilling to repudiate the legacy of the nineteenth-century novelists. "While discarding the aridity of a purely realistic style, he was unwilling to

²Malcolm Lowry, "Preface to a Novel", Canadian Literature, IX (summer 1961), 23.

adopt the kind of personal stenography difficult for the reader."³

Certainly Under the Volcano is poetic. Heilman explains:

If the overt action of Under the Volcano is slight, the metaphorical action is intense. Numerous objects, properties, occurrences, and even ideas, recollections, and observations not only exist in their own right but also work figuratively or symbolically. The nexuses are imaginative rather than casual, or logical, or chronological; hiatuses compel a high attention; dextrous leaps are called for. In such a sense the novel is poetic.⁴

Lowry himself says: ". . . the mental baggage is subjective rather than objective; it would better suit a poet . . ."⁵

But there is not enough poetry to balance the massive structure. Where Lowry's words are startlingly beautiful, sometimes, just because such passages are so outstanding, the result, while surprising, is a little disconcerting and the style becomes uneven. R.W. Flint finds such lines as, ". . . their hands but blown fragments . . ."⁶ anomalous. He goes on to point out an example where Lowry overshoots the mark: "Or again, 'They were embracing or so it all but seemed, passionately; somewhere out of the heavens a swan, transfixed, plummeted to earth.' Just like that--thump, and a dead swan on your hands."⁷

³Gerald Noxon, "Malcolm Lowry", Prairie Schooner, XXXVII (winter 1963/64), 317.

⁴Heilman, p. 12.

⁵Lowry, "Preface to a Novel", p. 27.

⁶Lowry, Under the Volcano (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1961), p. 72. All future footnote references will be in the form: Volc.

⁷R.W. Flint, "Weltshmertz Refurbished", Kenyon Review IX (summer 1947), 475.

But have we really any right to expect the kind of poetry we find at the end of Chapter I of the Volcano on every page?⁸

Critics have had quite a time casting about for influences. They have probably felt that such a literary writer as Lowry must be an imitator of somebody. The recently published letters show that Lowry had a very distinctive style of his own before he was twenty and the style he used throughout his career was a development of his own natural form of expression. Certainly, there were a few influences, but some critics have come up with doubtful lists. B.K. Sandwell announces to us: "About this style there can be no question. It owes much to Joyce, a bit to Lawrence, something to Proust, and quite a lot to Henry James,⁹ but it is not the style of a follower or student of any of them."¹⁰ How any writer's style could possibly show the influence of Joyce, Lawrence, James, and Proust all at the same time, and without following any of them too, is beyond me. John Woodburn, who just cannot restrain his ebullience in an article in Saturday Night says: "There will I suppose be the expected comparisons with Jackson (who wrote Lost Weekend), Hemingway, and Wolfe." But he decides finally that Lowry "is Joyce's own child."¹¹

⁸See pp. 43-44, below.

⁹In "Through the Panama" in Hear Us O Lord Sigbjorn Wilderness does speak of Jamesian integrity.

¹⁰B.K. Sandwell, "Under the Volcano by M. Lowry Shows Style, also Symbolism", Saturday Night, (1 Nov. 1947), p. 5.

¹¹John Woodburn, "Dazzling Disintegration", Saturday Review, (22 Feb. 1947), p. 10.

The Times Literary Supplement also favours Joyce but does mention Melville, Hawthorne, and Ford Madox Ford.¹² One reasons the anonymous reviewer gives for favouring Joyce is that Lowry has Joyce's love of the pun. But why look to Joyce when Lowry's tutor and spiritual mentor, Conrad Aiken, sprinkles his prose with puns too? It was Aiken who suggested Lowry call Under the Volcano either Under the Malcamo or Poppagetsthebotl.¹³ Surely if there is one major influence on Lowry it is Aiken. In Blue Voyage Demarest's comments about technique apply as equally to Lowry as to Aiken.¹⁴

¹²-----, "A Prose Wasteland", The Times Literary Supplement, (11 May 1963), p. 338. In a letter to a gentleman who thought Lowry had taken the number twelve which figures so largely in Under the Volcano from Moby Dick, Chapter XCIX, Lowry says that he did not read Moby Dick till after the publication of the Volcano. (Malcolm Lowry, "A Letter to Derek Pethick", Canadian Forum XLII (June 1962), 62.) Yet both "Lunar Caustic" and the short story "Under the Volcano", both first written in the mid-'thirties, mention Moby Dick. (Since Lowry turned the second short story into a novel it is unlikely he revised it after the 'thirties.) Conrad Knickerbocker states that when Lowry arrived in New York in the 'thirties the only thing in his suitcase was a copy of Moby Dick. (Conrad Knickerbocker, "The Voyages of Malcolm Lowry", Prairie Schooner, XXXVII (winter 1963/64), 307.) Anyway, Lowry certainly had read Redburn before he started writing. (Earle Birney, "Glimpses into the Life of Malcolm Lowry", Tamarack Review, (spring 1961), p. 37.) And there is no argument that he did read Joyce. He discussed Joyce with Noxon at Cambridge and in Under the Volcano the Consul names his remorse "agenbite"--the same term used by Stephen Dedalus in Ulysses. (David Markson, Malcolm Lowry: A Study of Theme and Symbol in Under the Volcano, (a thesis from Columbia University: 1952), p. 67. All subsequent footnote references to this thesis will be in the form: Markson, Thesis.)

¹³Malcolm Lowry, "Letters from Malcolm Lowry", Canadian Literature VIII (spring 1961), 30.

¹⁴See "Appendix A".

Once the reader learns to live with the complex style he is still faced with the problem that Lowry had trouble deciding just how far he wanted to be from his reader. Although he did intend to revise it, Chapter III of Ultramarine is written in the first person while the rest of the novel is in the third person. This is an obvious example but symptomatic of a problem. Lowry moves forward, then steps back, unsure at times whether he wants to be a novelist or a diarist. This inability to get and keep his protagonist in clear focus may be the result of a sense of insecurity as a writer. R.W. Flint comments: "Mr. Lowry lacks the confidence of the innovator: he is forever taking the reader aside to explain the larger meanings, and these meanings--"You will think I am mad but this is how I drink too, as if I were taking an eternal sacrament"--are more often than not rhetorical padding with no real dramatic significance."¹⁵

The result of Lowry's relationship with his protagonist is that we get (especially in parts of Hear Us O Lord) not a living, vivid character but a faulty projection of the Lowry psyche. Protagonists often seem to be attitudenizing, in both the prose and in the poetry. The octave of "Sunrise" begins the poem with refreshing and clear description but the sestet

¹⁵R.W. Flint, "Weltshmerz Refurbished", Kenyon Review, IX (summer 1947), 475. Unfortunately, Mr. Flint has not chosen an example empty of dramatic significance, unless by this term he simply means the aside is redundant in the context of the whole book. See pp. 39, 57, and 60 below.

strikes a false note as it begins: "But what cactuses are these on every hand?"¹⁶ In "Sestina in a Cantina" the lines: "And suddenly saw the world as a giant prison", and, "I see myself as all mankind in prison",¹⁷ seem attitudinizing and amateurish.

Despite the problems he has with autobiographical characters, Lowry usually has better success with these than with characters for which he uses other prototypes. Of the four major people in Under the Volcano it is Yvonne critics find the least convincing. (The other three major characters are based on Lowry himself.) B.K. Sandwell comments: "Looking back over the book I ask myself whether Yvonne is ever quite as clear, as comprehensible, as well defined as the Consul? Does Mr. Lowry get inside her memories, her hopes, her fears, her sense of isolation, as he does with his male character? Is that perhaps going to be his limitation?"¹⁸ And John Woodburn adds: "I do not mean to imply that "Under the Volcano" is immaculate of flaws. I do not quite believe in Yvonne, not that she is false, but that she is given obliquely, and Lowry seems strangely to have neglected her."¹⁹

¹⁶Malcolm Lowry, Selected Poems of Malcolm Lowry, ed. Earle Birney (San Francisco: City Lights, 1962), p. 33. All subsequent footnote references to this book will be in the form: Sel. Poems.

¹⁷Ibid, pp. 43 and 44.

¹⁸Sandwell, p. 15.

¹⁹Woodburn, p. 10.

Yet Lowry's achievement is considerable despite these shortcomings. At times he can entrance and amaze and, in "The Forest Path to the Spring", even overwhelm. His poetic powers are not always adequate, but he often weaves rare textures.

Lowry's difficulties are not just foolish errors; they result from his conscious aims. He understood what he was about and where his problems lay. Like Aiken²⁰ he wanted to turn all experience into art. William McConnell says of Lowry:

Most of his life from the time he left university until he discovered Dollarton was spent in physical activity. In odd corners of the globe, but, like the scattered notes which he wrote on bus transfers, cigarette papers or any other chance piece of paper, all of his life was lived for metamorphosis into short story, poem or novel. He could discard nothing and, consequently, writing to him was not the usual casting for an idea, figure of speech, or character portrayal, but rather a painful, tortuous process of selection and arrangement.²¹

To better understand Lowry's work we should know something about the man and his life.

Although we can never be sure of the exact reasons for Lowry's drinking William McConnell does suggest some:

A deep observer, he believed nothing was or could be wasted in nature and that death itself was necessary for creation.

²⁰"Since the appearance of Aiken's autobiographical 'essay' Ushant, it has been clear that Aiken himself understands his literary career in terms of the experience he has been able to express in his fiction." (Jay Martin, Conrad Aiken: A Life of His Art, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1962, p. 111.)

William McConnell, "Recollections of Malcolm Lowry", Masks of Fiction, ed. A. J. M. Smith (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1961), pp. 142-43.

Was this knowledge, perhaps, the reason for Lowry's bouts of alcoholism? . . . He did discuss everything but the reason for them with me candidly and simply (there was no false pride, no pantomiming of excuse, but simple direct statement). On several occasions I know his fear of groups triggered him off. . . . There were other occasions when he was alone and his loneliness simply could not be borne. I suspect that sometimes the creativity which constantly welled up from within himself could not be channelled as he wished it and had to be deadened by some anodyne. . . . Every tag end of event was of importance to him, and somehow [became] incorporated in his writing. This was true even of his attempts at forgetfulness, his wild occasional descents to escape the unbidden imagery he could not momentarily harness.²²

It is interesting to note that McConnell calls Lowry's alcoholic bouts occasional. David Markson, on the other hand, says he never saw Lowry sober.²³ Yet Douglas Day argues that if Lowry was as drunk as some critics have said, he could never have produced so much.²⁴ McConnell also states that Lowry showed no false pride but surely there is a false pride in drunkenness in the poems in "The Cantinas".²⁵

But Lowry's great pride was really in his creative power which he often thought of in terms of music. This metaphor played an important part in both his life and his work. In his own humorous epitaph he says that he, "died playing the ukulele."²⁶

²² McConnell, p. 144.

²³ David Markson, "Malcolm Lowry: A Reminiscence", The Nation, (7 Feb. 1966), p. 164.

²⁴ Douglas Day, "Of Tragic Joy", Prairie Schooner, XXXVII (winter 1963/64), 356.

²⁵ Sel. Poems, pp. 34-44.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 62.

In Ultramarine Dana Hilliot takes his taropatch with him on his first voyage to sea. In Under the Volcano it is Hugh who once played the guitar and the Consul's younger half-brother says when he played, the instrument strung him to life. Lowry himself played:

In Malcolm's relaxed periods he strummed a huge repertoire of songs, chanties and tunes he had composed (including a lively national anthem) on a battered ukulele, and he was never so happy as when he was immersed in this music of his own making, whether bawdy Spanish tunes picked up in some waterfront bistro in North Africa, or plaintive Chinese rise and fall he had heard in Singapore. Hours would pass delightfully, for he took it for granted you shared his happiness.²⁷

Lowry's attraction to music was a long-standing one. Upon his return from his first sea voyage he was interviewed by the press and candidly announced he proposed to go to university, compose fox-trots and write fiction.²⁸ Under the Volcano and "The Forest Path" show that he had especial admiration for Bix Biederbecke and for two guitarists of the 'thirties, Django Rhinehart and Eddie Lang. Finally, the protagonist of "The Forest Path" is, if unconvincingly, a one-time jazz musician who turns to the composition of symphony and opera.

The music in his life was just one of many things Lowry transformed into his art. McConnell points out that with Lowry symbolism was not restricted to literature: "It was part of his daily life. His world was peopled with black and white forces. His daily swim . . . was not merely a swim but a metaphysical experience [He talked of objects], not as

²⁷ McConnell, p. 147.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 142.

objects, but as living sentient forces which peopled his world."²⁹

Malcolm Lowry was born in 1909 in Caldy, Cheshire into a family of prosperous cotton brokers. He suffered rejection both at home and at school. Earle Birney says he was made to feel different by his family because he wanted to be a writer; he never got over the guilt.³⁰ The poem "Prayer (for his Father)" shows clearly Lowry's ambivalence towards his parent. "Him" refers to Lowry:

Bear him one humble phrase of love at last,
Some childhood supplication never to be lost
As I am lost whose lips had formed its shape.³¹

He was to suffer family rejection all his life. Even when Lowry was a grown man his father made it clear there would be no lessening of parental coldness, disapproval and misunderstanding. However, in a burst of unexpected generosity, the elder Lowry established a small but adequate trust fund for his son which was almost the only income Lowry had for a period of fifteen years. But Lowry could expect no other encouragement from his family. In a letter to David Markson he says:

" . . . 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

²⁹ Ibid, p. 149.

³⁰ Earle Birney, "Five Signallings in Darkness", Evidence IV, 76.

³¹ Malcolm Lowry, "Prayer (for his Father)", Evidence, IV, 83.

mother kept Ultramarine locked up in a drawer."³²

Lowry was first sent to a private school where he developed chronic ulceration of the cornea of both eyes. He was cut off from all play and reading between the ages of nine and thirteen.³³ After the eye trouble he went to the Leys, Cambridge where his housemaster was W.H. Balgarnie, the original Mr. Chips. At the Leys he excelled in studies and was both a contributor to and the editor of the school newspaper. At fifteen he became the Junior Golf Champion of England.³⁴

After the Leys he was to have entered Christ's College, Cambridge but went instead to sea. When his four month voyage to the orient was over he enrolled at St. Catherine's College, Cambridge in the fall of 1929. He had kept notes during his voyage and from these he wrote two short stories, "Punctum Indifferens Skibbet Gaar Videre", and "Port Swettenham" which were published in the Cambridge magazine Experiment, edited by Gerald Noxon. These stories Lowry later turned into Chapters IV and V of Ultramarine. "Punctum Indifferens" was chosen by E.J. O'Brien for Best British Short Stories of 1931, where it appeared under the title "Seductio Ad Absurdum". O'Brien gave the other story honourable mention in 1933.

³²Lowry, "Letters from Malcolm Lowry", p. 45.

³³These are the ages given by Earle Birney in "Glimpses into the Life of Malcolm Lowry", p. 35. John Woodburn gives the ages as ten and fourteen. (Woodburn, p. 9.)

³⁴In Under the Volcano the Consul is a good golfer.

Also while at Cambridge Lowry wrote his first novel, Ultramarine, published in 1933, in which he fictionalized his voyage at sea and portrayed the struggle of innocence in the world of men . The basic images of the sea and the wandering ship find their way into most of his subsequent work.

While writing Ultramarine he read Blue Voyage by Conrad Aiken and The Ship Sails On ("Skibbet Gaar Videre" means "The Ship Sails On") by Norwegian writer Nordahl Grieg, a nephew of the composer. "Lowry swore he would combine Aiken's poetic insight with the purity and force of Grieg's The Ship Sails On."³⁵ He was so impressed by both books he made separate voyages to search out the authors. He went to Aiken in Boston in 1929, and when Aiken returned with Lowry to England Lowry talked the American into taking him on as a pupil. In 1930 Lowry made another voyage, this time to Norway, working his way as a coal trimmer. There he met Grieg and established a friendship which lasted till Grieg's death.

Upon graduation, Lowry once more became a wanderer and spent most of the 'thirties in New York, (where he wrote "Lunar Caustic") Hollywood, and Mexico. He began the first draft of Under the Volcano in 1934 and completed it in Mexico in 1938. However, Under the Volcano was to be rewritten three

³⁵Knickerbocker, p. 304.

times before publication in 1947.³⁶ The final draft was completed in a pub at Niagara-on-the-Lake (the setting of the short story "The Element Follows You Around Sir.") on New Year's Eve, 1946 while the Lowrys were living with Gerald Noxon after the Dollarton fire.

During this second period of travel he married an American girl in Paris (he wrote "Hotel Room in Chartres" at this time) but the couple were divorced by 1939. He later married Margerie Bonner, a Hollywood starlet and writer and now his widow. She and Earle Birney have been largely responsible for the posthumous publication of Lowry's work.³⁷

³⁶McConnell says one rewriting took place in a single month after the previous draft had been lost in a fire. (McConnell, p. 150.) However, Time magazine says Lowry was severely burned in the 1944 Dollarton fire rescuing the manuscript of Under the Volcano. (-----, Time, "The Voyage that Never Ended", (2 June 1962) p. 72. Probably the most accurate account is that given by Knickerbocker. He says Lowry was burned when a burning beam fell on him and Margerie rescued the manuscript of the Volcano but all else was lost. The major loss was a huge novel In Ballast to a White Sea which Lowry planned as his Paradise. (Knickerbocker, p. 311.)

³⁷Earle Birney recounts the events after Lowry's death: Most of his many projected works lay unfinished, in disordered masses of manuscript, when Lowry choked to death in his sleep in a Sussex cottage while on a visit to England in 1957. Eventually it was brought back by Margerie to Vancouver and to the University of British Columbia. Meantime an equally huge confusion of pencilled scribbles and palimpsests of typing had been rescued by friends from his beach. While the Lowries were in Europe, their shack had been wrecked and burned into oblivion, along with the homes of all their fellow squatters, by the official preservers of Rent, Sanitation and Taxes. Margerie and I pooled the Dollarton manuscripts with the material from the English cottage, and began . . . to edit the result. (Sel. Poems, p. 10. From the introduction by Earle Birney.)

Soon after their marriage Malcolm and Margerie Lowry travelled to British Columbia where they moved into a squatter's shack on the beach at Dollarton in Vancouver's upper harbour. Here he wrote or rewrote most of his work.

The Lowrys' relationship was far more than the customary one between man and wife. They shared everything, including periods of actual want. (With customary generosity Lowry impoverished himself by sharing his royalties for Under the Volcano with all sorts of people.) He was proud of his wife's attractiveness and theatrical manner and he took an interest in her writing too. He sought her judgment and "her honest and penetrating appraisals of his work supplied Malcolm with a reserve of strength and stimulation which always carried him through the bleak non-productive periods every writer encounters. Margerie possessed that rare quality--intellectual honesty and forthrightness. They admired and respected as well as loved each other."³⁸

Lowry was a various man who studied Cabbala and numerology, lifted weights,³⁹ loved seagulls and outcasts, and hated evangelists and critics. He had a gift of total recall and was obsessed by accuracy. He revelled in his

³⁸McConnell, p. 148.

³⁹Martin Trumbaugh, the protagonist in the book Sigbjorn Wilderness is writing in "Through the Panama" wishes to be strong in order to be more practically compassionate. (Malcolm Lowry, Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place, (New York: Lippincott, 1961), p. 86. All subsequent footnote references to this book will be in the form: Hear Us.)

powers and drowned in his own lonely seas of alcohol and guilt, yet he never lost the innocence of his youth.⁴⁰ Nor was he sombre: "He had a huge Rabelaisian sense of humour⁴¹ and, oh rare quality, could laugh at himself."⁴² He was generous with both his money and his time to anyone claiming to be a writer. Physically, he was powerful, with muscular arms and a barrel chest; short and fair, he walked with a rolling gait. "Most impressive of all were his intense blue eyes which looked into and through your own, which gazed into the distance, which altered in hue as his mood varied."⁴³

Downie Kirk says that he was shy, "but 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."⁴⁴ Giving him the name Hambo, Conrad Aiken describes Lowry in Ushant:

. . . to think again of Hambo, and of the long, curious, intermittent, and wandering association with that most engaging and volatile and unpredictable of geniuses; for surely of all the literary folk whom D. [Aiken] had ever encountered, there had been none among them who had been so visibly or happily alight with genius--not that the Tsetse [T.S. Eliot] hadn't manifested something

⁴⁰Even the Consul maintains a certain innocence; he is devastated by Yvonne's infidelities.

⁴¹About Under the Volcano Lowry said: "I meant parts of it to be funny, though no one seems to have realized that." (Malcolm Lowry, "Letter to Derek Pethick", p. 63.)

⁴²McConnell, P. 146.

⁴³Ibid., p. 142.

⁴⁴Downie Kirk, "More than Music: Glimpses of Malcolm Lowry", Canadian Literature, VIII (spring 1961), 32.

of the same thing, to be sure--controlling it, moreover, to better purpose; but in Hambo it had been more moving, and convincing, and alive, for its very uncontrolledness, its spontaneity and gay recklessness, not to mention its infectiously gleeful delight in itself.⁴⁵

Lowry's personal life and personality are in everything he wrote. On the question of character portrayal, he believed it an almost impossible task for the writer to create a truthful picture of a character outside himself. The type of character portrayal he found possible he believed to be the result of his own isolated position in particular and the human condition in general. In "Through the Panama" Sigbjorn records in his diary:

I am capable of conceiving of a writer today, even intrinsically a first-rate writer, who simply cannot understand, and never has been able to understand, what his fellow writers are driving at, and have been driving at, and who has always [sic] been too shy to ask. This writer feels this deficiency in himself to the point of anguish. Essentially a humble fellow, he has tried his hardest all his life to understand (though maybe still not hard enough) so that his room is full of Partisan Reviews, Kenyon Reviews, Minotaurs, Poetry mags, Horizons, and even old Dials, of whose contents he is able to make out precisely nothing.⁴⁶

The problem of getting outside himself was with Lowry from the beginning of his career. In Ultramarine Dana contemplates writing a novel but decides he would fail:

"But the desire to write is a disease like any other disease; and what one writes, if one is to be any good, must be rooted firmly in some sort of autochthony, And there I abdicate. I can no more create

⁴⁵Conrad Aiken, Ushant/An Essay, (New York: Meridian, (1962), p. 292.

⁴⁶Hear Us, p. 84.

than fly. What I could achieve would be that usual self-conscious first novel, to be reviewed in the mortuary of The Times Literary Supplement, a 'crude and unpleasant work',⁴⁷ something of that nature, of which the principal character would be no more and no less, whether in liquor or in love, than the abominable author himself."⁴⁸

About the general human condition and the customary type of character portrayal Sigbjorn says in "Through the Panama":

For alas this is the way the majority of human beings see other human beings, as shadows, themselves the only reality. It is true these shadows are often menacing, or they are angelic, love may move them, but they are essentially shadows, or forces, and the novelist's touch is missing in their human perception. Nothing indeed can be more unlike the actual experience of life than the average novelist's realistic portrait of character.⁴⁹

It is easy to understand why the three lead male characters in Under the Volcano are various dimensions of one person. (Lowry intended a four part protagonist but Yvonne does seem separate.)⁵⁰ And much of the complexity of the book comes from the fact that Lowry places this multi-faceted protagonist in the multiple time brought forward from Ultramarine. In that book Dana's mind constantly turned to the past,

⁴⁷This phrase has the look of something added by Lowry to the revised addition but as the Inter-Library Loan Service cannot locate a copy of the 1933 edition it is impossible to tell, by comparing the two editions, and I can find no mention of Ultramarine in any 1933 issue of The Times Literary Supplement.

⁴⁸Malcolm Lowry, Ultramarine, (Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1963), p. 96. All subsequent footnote references to this book will be in the form: Ultra.

⁴⁹Hear Us, p. 85.

⁵⁰In Chapter I we are told that when Hugh left Quauhna-huac Laruelle felt almost as if a son were departing. In Chapter VI we read that to Hugh Geoffrey is "like some ghostly other self." (Volc. p. 175.)

especially where the past involved Janet. He also looked to the future and out of past happiness and future expectation constructed his dream for the present, his ideal to uphold.

At the beginning of Chapter II of Under the Volcano the four main characters have all reached an hiatus. Yvonne gave up her movie career for her marriage but her marriage is now over too. The Consul is at the last low level of self and alcoholism before the final descent. He has lost his job, is truly impotent in his attempts to effect a reconciliation with his wife,⁵¹ and the book on necromantic knowledge on which he has been working for years is obviously a dead cause. Hugh has given up his guitar playing and has left Spain. He feels terrific guilt for having abandoned the Nationalists and he finds temporary relief from the resulting desire for action when he jumps into the arena at Tomalin during the bull-throwing. Finally, there is the one-time film-maker, Jacques Laruelle, decaying in the spiritual desert of Mexico.

It is the alcoholic Consul with whom readers will most identify Lowry. Geoffrey Firmin, (the infirm one) is a lost soul whose worldly innocence is strangely intact and who cannot comprehend or cope with evil in either himself or others. But there is a lot of Lowry in Hugh also. Hugh is an idealist with the leftist tendencies common to many intellectuals of the 'thirties.⁵² At heart he desires honesty and art but he

⁵¹It is no accident the Consul embarrassingly finds his fly open when he is talking to Mr. Quincey. It is still open from the abortive attempt to make love to Yvonne. (Markson, Thesis, p. 56.)

⁵²During the Mexican period Lowry espoused leftist politics. (Aiken, Ushant, p. 351.)

must ultimately find his salvation in a cause. Laruelle too reflects Lowry. The description of Jacques' film Alastor reads like a parody of Lowry's own eclectic style.

Although Geoffrey, Hugh, and Jacques share a common basic character⁵³ and in a sense live the same problem, each is given a different fate. The Consul fails and is destroyed; Hugh takes up the guitar again before going on a dangerous mission to Spain where he will probably be killed; Jacques finally leaves Mexico and returns to France. Perhaps Hugh will achieve a victory of sorts. Laruelle will live with rebirth a possibility but not assured.

Multiplicity of a single character is carried into Hear Us O Lord where the different protagonists vary little from story to story. Another level of multiplicity is added in "Through the Panama" when Sigbjorn Wilderness, a writer in whose notebook we are supposed to be snooping, creates a character named Norman Trumbaugh who is also a writer. At times Norman and Sigbjorn are barely distinguishable. Sigbjorn even considers writing a novel about a writer whose spiritual entity is consumed by the character he has created.⁵⁴ Unfortunately, what often happens in Hear Us O Lord is that the protagonist is consumed by the author.

⁵³ They have also shared the same woman for Yvonne has been unfaithful with both Jacques and Hugh. Having to be with both of them when she returns to Quaunahuac makes her job more painful and difficult.

⁵⁴ In a letter to Albert Erskine Lowry says about himself: "What he suspects is that he is not a writer so much as being written." (Malcolm Lowry, "Letters from Malcolm Lowry", p. 40.)

Malcolm Lowry planned to write a series of six or seven novels to be called collectively The Voyage That Never Ends which was to depict the Christian cycle from Eden and innocence to Paradise and rebirth. Under the Volcano was to have been the middle book in the series since in it Lowry deals with the fall of man. But the plan was never completed. Lippincott say they will bring out two novels, October Ferry to Gabriola and The Grave Where My Friend Lies Buried within a year. Until then we have, besides a few short stories, three books, Ultramarine, Under the Volcano, and Hear Us O Lord, which this thesis will take as portraying innocence, death, and rebirth. (Under the Volcano portrays more than death; Yvonne's death is associated with light. However, the focus is upon the Consul.)

Lowry saw three of his projected novels as forming a modern Divine Comedy. Under the Volcano was to be Hell, "Lunar Caustic" was to be expanded into a novel version of Purgatory, and the lost In Ballast to a White Sea was to be the Paradise of this trilogy.

Although neither the trilogy or The Journey That Never Ends were ever completed, the four major works now published do form another cycle. Dana sets out in early summer, "Lunar Caustic" is set in August, Under the Volcano takes place in November, and Hear Us O Lord ends in April. Thus a chronological list of Lowry's most important published prose describes the cycle of the year.

Succeeding chapters of this thesis will study Lowry's work in detail, keeping in mind the relation of the author to his work while delineating the structures involved and Lowry's thinking. The thesis will concentrate upon Ultramarine, Under the Volcano, and Hear Us O Lord, which will be the basic subjects for Chapters II, III, and IV respectively. Poems, letters, and short stories will be used only to illustrate points made in discussing one of the three main works.

II

THE JOURNEY BEGUN

Ultramarine describes the first sea voyage of Dana Hilliot, a nineteen-year-old born in Christiania (now Oslo), Norway and raised in Liverpool. He discovers that on the Oedipus Tyrannus innocence and manhood do not live easily together.

Dana has left behind his virgin sweetheart, Janet, and is faced with the problem of remaining faithful to her while gaining acceptance from the crew by proving himself a man on their terms. In particular, he sets out to win the friendships of two other Norwegian-born men, Norman, a twenty-nine-year-old pantry boy, and Andy, the seasoned cook. Norman's friendship is soon won, but Andy, who has hated the boy since the moment he arrived at the dock in a chauffeured car, sets out to make life miserable for Dana.¹ The cook thinks the young toff has done a good boy out of a job and lets pass no opportunity to ride him for every mistake. But Dana perseveres, for to be accepted by Andy, who rules both amidships and in the forecastle, is to be accepted by the crew. Dana also views such a conquest as his justification to Janet.

¹Lowry's father arranged for his son's first job on a ship and then sent him to the dock in the family limousine. These things lost Lowry the respect of the crew. (Knickerbocker, p. 304.)

To return without acceptance would be to admit the futility of the voyage.

In the early parts of the book the crew ridicule Dana because he only goes ashore to drink. "What kind of a bloody man are you anyway?" he hears from all sides, from those who would exalt the male to destroy the man. Finally Dana decides to go ashore in Tsjang-Tsjang where he can forget the innocent Janet and have a night adrift. At this point he has been away from home six weeks and just as he is about to go ashore his first mail arrives, one letter from his mother and one from Janet. Angered at being caught out by Janet's letter just as he is about to betray her he finds an excuse to be angry with her and leaves the ship with both letters in his pocket and unread.

Ashore he meets Popplereuter, a German sailor looking for a bum boat to take him back to his ship. Popplereuter gives up that search and joins Dana on a round of the bars. During the evening Dana hands his new friend the two letters and Popplereuter reads the one from Dana's mother aloud. It is a brief epitome of all the nonsense and silliness foolish and unloving mothers write to sons away from home: "My Dearest Son--Just a little note to say may God bless you and keep you in the right path. I do hope you are comfortable and clean, because I don't want my son coarsened by a lot of hooligans. I've no time for more because as you know, my

my eyes are so bad these days. Very much love from your own Mother.'"² The utter non sequitur of the second last sentence is the least obnoxious thing here.

Later Dana and Popplereuter find Norman drunkenly wandering about the streets and looking for Andy. The three go to a movie, then to an anatomical museum where grizzly displays surmounted by pious sermonettes point out the physical terrors which the wrath of God visits upon fornicators.

Separated from his companions, Dana finds his way to a dancehall where he is picked up by Olga, a sixteen-year-old Russian prostitute. She opens conversation by telling him: "'Me nice girl; very nice very clean very cheap jig-a-jig very sweet very sanitary.'"³ After this ironic comment on Dana's mother's hygienic concern, Olga compliments Dana on his eyes, teeth, and hands before inviting him upstairs. Dana accepts but says he must first go outside for half an hour to think. When he returns he finds Olga dancing with Andy. "'You've got nice hands, sailor boy,'"⁴ Olga tells her new customer. Sickened by the whole affair, Dana tries to find his way back to his ship but by mistake ends up sleeping it off on the deck of a sister ship, the Hyannis. This misadventure only provides the comedians of Dana's crew with more ammunition.

²Ultra, p. 97.

³Ibid, p. 114.

⁴Ibid, p. 127.

The next day Dana finally confronts Andy. He tells the cook he would hit him on the chin if he only had one and then learns from the crew that Andy lost his chin in the war and now wears a steel plate. Dana is shamed in front of all the crew for hitting below the belt but the violent words help open the way to more peaceful communication.

Shortly afterwards, the pigeon which Norman rescued from the mast and made a pet of falls into the water. Because Norman has clipped its wings the bird becomes waterlogged and drowns before anyone can reach it. Later Dana approaches Andy, and, using their common commiseration with Norman as a starting point, apologizes for his angry words. He also tells Andy about Janet and in this way begins the friendship which has so long eluded him.

In the last chapter of the book Dana comes to realize the purpose of his voyage. At the end of the second last chapter he went down to the engine room and saw the eternal pitiless movement that drives his ship. He now understands that life at sea, indeed all life, is at bottom a painful business. He decides that he must plunge ahead in life despite what may come, for, a man, like Norman's bird, prefers freedom to the safety of the cage. Lowry prefaces the novel with lines from Chaucer's "Manciples Tale":

Take any brid and put it in a cage
And do al thyn entente and thy corage
To fostre it tenderly with mete and drinke
Of alle deynteas that thou canst bethinke
And keep it al-so clenly as thou may
And be his cage of gold never so gay

Yet hath this brid by twenty thousand fold
 Lever in a forest that is rude and cold
 Gon ete wormes and swich wrecchedness.⁵

The symbol of the bird will recur in Under the Volcano when Hugh recalls that one of his few generous acts was the freeing of a trapped bird and when Yvonne, just before she dies, looses an eagle from a cage.

Dana will no longer justify himself to Janet merely with having been accepted. He now has a reason for having fled her solicitous affection. He knows why though he loves her he had to leave and undertake the struggle of a sea voyage.

With the realization of the nature of life there comes a change in Dana's plans. Earlier he had asked where was there a cause to follow: "'Where is a workable object? Where is something to change for the better, to transform from wasting into growth--something that I can cope with? Where are the slaves that must be freed, the children who must have milk? I shall find them. I must find them.'"⁶ At the time he formulated this question he saw his humanitarian journey as a prelude to happiness with Janet. He felt he could not go back to the comfort she offered until he completed his mission. But when he comes to understand why he is at sea and what his voyage means he knows that his life cannot be divided into a period of service and a time of reward and ease. On the night he set out to betray Janet, when he felt like a man setting out

⁵Ultra, p. 11.

⁶Ibid, p. 186.

on a murder, he was saved partly by conscience, but mostly by accident and Olga's industry. Inner promptings made him leave for half an hour but Andy's appearance determined the issue. But although Dana has been mercifully granted one conquest the fight is not over; it is as continuous as the engines of the ship, as constant as the eternal pitilessness of the nether forces that drive his world. Dana knows he must always move towards the summers of light. His heart beats as do the engines of the Oedipus Tyrannus and both must sail through whatever storms may come, all the time trying to find light.⁷ Meanwhile, he must remain faithful.

Because life will not be struggle followed by reward, the periods of peace will be at best temporary. When the sought-for land is found the sailor must set out again, through danger and torment. God may help him but he must fight to keep his soul. God promises: "'I'll help you where I can. It's your chance. The ship will only get you if you deserve it. Learn the meaning of the words, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit.'

"'--but fight! nobody will see you when you are really brave.'"⁸

⁷The symbolism provides some difficulty here. The ship becomes the macrocosm and the microcosm (Dana), yet the first is pitiless. Are we to suppose then that Dana's heart is basically pitiless too?

⁸Ultra, p. 202. Benjamin Hall, the young sailor in Nordahl Grieg's The Ship Sails On, reaches the same spiritual point early in his sea life when he understands the humble and prideless joy of the seamen who have just saved their dog from destruction at the hands of the mate: "And as he stood looking at these men dancing round with eyes bright with the same happiness that sang within himself, he divined for the first time the meaning of the words--'Blessed are the poor in spirit.'" (Nordahl Grieg, The Ship Sails On, (New York: Knopf, 1927), p. 26.)

These thoughts come to Dana just after he learns he has been promoted down into the belly of the ship to work as a fireman's peggy. His period of peace, the joy of his new-found relationship with Andy, is short-lived. Dana prepares himself for new struggles, knowing that he must soon push off from the island of rest but hoping that through meekness he can find peace for his soul. His journey continues: "Then at last again to be outward bound, always outward, always onward, to be fighting always for the dreamt-of harbour, when the sea thunders on board in a cataract, and the ship rolls and wallows in the track of the frozen sea's storm--"⁹

Even Janet's letter which Popplereuter walked off with by accident but which he sends to Dana's ship is a strange comfort; the memory of Janet adds to Dana's misery. Yet this sorrow caused by his love is necessary for if it were to disappear Dana would be utterly lost. As he descends into the belly of the ship, the Oxenstjerna, which has come to symbolize his and Janet's love, passes by the Oedipus Tyrannus. The novel ends with Dana's thought: "But oh, Janet, no sorrow is so bad as that which quite goes by."¹⁰ If sorrow can die so can love. In In Memoriam A.A.H. Tennyson showed us that it is wrong just to let the memory of love wither. Dana wants to hold onto his love, even if to do so

⁹ Ultra, p. 201.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 203.

means to suffer, until that love is sublimated into a universal love for mankind. Tennyson's position is similar:

My love involves the love before;
My love is vaster passion now;
Tho' mix'd with God and Nature thou,
I seem to love thee more and more.¹¹

Ultramarine has certain subject and thematic matter in common with the first group of poems, "The Roar of the Sea and the Darkness," in Selected Poems of Malcolm Lowry.¹² "Byzantium" could well be a page of dialogue where one of the crew, probably Andy, is scoffing at Dana's ideals and berating him for not going ashore to get a woman:

--Don't come any of that Byzantium stuff
On me, me fine young toff. Just plain Stamboul
Is good enough for me and Lamps and Bill,
.
Like that wot you said about the ideal
---In a blind eye socket! But a girl's a girl
And bobhead tigers here'll treat you rough,
And give you ideal!¹³

Dana's longing for home is summed up in the last lines of "Iron Cities":

Iron thoughts sail from iron cities in the dust,
Yet soft as doves the thoughts that fly back home.¹⁴

¹¹ Alfred Lord Tennyson, In Memoriam A.H.H., CXXX, 9-12.

¹² "The initial group is reminiscent in theme and sometimes phrasing of that first novel, Ultramarine. The next two reflect the Mexican years in the mid-Thirties. But all were re-worked, some many times, in the Dollarton beach shack where most of the remainder were begun. (Sel. Poems, p. 10. From the introduction by Earle Birney.)

¹³ Ibid, p. 13.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 15.

"Old Freighter in an Old Port" describes the anonymity of ports like Tsjang-Tsjang where quintets of girls roam the streets arm-in-arm. "The Days Like Smitten Cymbals of Brass"¹⁵ records the disillusionment of a young man who like Antipholus or Redburn took his soul to sea for scouring but found instead of the heroic working class loving and looking to the future, only constant squabbles, petty jealousies and hatred of bosuns.

But the two books that Lowry read and was so impressed with while he was writing Ultramarine, that is, Blue Voyage and The Ship Sails On, shed more light on Lowry's first novel than do Lowry's poems or the two short stories published in Experiment. The influence of Aiken is especially important and long-lasting.

Blue Voyage is about an American writer, William Demarest, who is making an Atlantic crossing to Britain. One night he takes an illicit stroll on the first class deck and to his surprise meets Cynthia, an old flame with whom he is still in love. They speak for but a moment. Cynthia tells him she is going to be married and disappears forever, and Demarest returns to his second class accomodation.

Aiken's basic concern is the exploration of Demarest's mind as he contemplates his chaste goddess pacing the deck above. Even more so than Dana's Janet, Cynthia is a pursuing ghost, for whereas Janet appears only in memory and symbol, Cynthia actually accompanies Demarest across the ocean. But in

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 21.

both novels the desired woman (whom Jay Martin refers to throughout his book on Aiken as the Siren) calls to the better parts of the man. The two novels differ in that in Aiken's novel the protagonist ultimately succumbs to Circe in the form of the seductress Faubion, whereas Dana escapes from Olga. In both books the purity of the loved woman is stressed but Cynthia is the more ethereal of the two, the more idealized.

Aiken also influenced Lowry's technique and diction. Blue Voyage has the rapid movement through time and the quick change from external to internal narrative found in Ultramarine and Aiken's diction has something of the same note of erudition and slightly archaic tenor found in Lowry's prose.¹⁶ Of the two writers it is Lowry who is apt to commit excesses of diction. For instance, is anything added by having the sweat appear on the metacarpi of Dana Hilliot?¹⁷ Why can it not just run off the backs of his hands? Certainly Lowry was aware of this tendency in himself. In "Epitaph" we find:

His prose was flowery
And often glowery.¹⁸

and in Ultramarine most of the pedantries are saved for Dana's internal monologues so that Lowry uses diction to delineate

¹⁶Many of the qualities of Aiken's prose listed here are demonstrated in "Appendix A".

¹⁷Ultra, p. 53.

¹⁸Sel. Poems, p. 62.

character. In fact, Dana, who was once accused by one of his masters of being a sciolist, seems happiest in sesquipedalian streams of consciousness. Viewed in comparison, the narrator's diction is fairly normal.

Like Aiken, Lowry frequently uses lines from other writers. This technique may limit his audience but he often uses the device to good effect. A humorous example comes on page 66 of Ultramarine where a salt-tongued discussion of venereal disease is followed by Dana's recollection of lines from Wordsworth's "Preface to Lyrical Ballads": "'--a selection of the real language of men--' '---the language of these men--' '---I propose to myself to imitate and as far as possible to adopt the very language of these men.'"

Lowry was so impressed with The Ship Sails On that he not only wrote a first novel dealing with many of the same questions, but also asked for and received permission from Grieg to adapt the book for radio. The adaptation was never finished but out of the attempt grew the lost novel In Ballast to A White Sea.¹⁹

Grieg's influence on Ultramarine was more in the areas of character and plot than technique. Grieg's hero is, like Dana, nineteen years old. Also like Dana, he is from Christiania and is on his first sea voyage. Further, he too is from a prosperous middle-class family and he has left his sweetheart behind. As Benjamin Hall sets out for sea he finds that like

¹⁹Knickerbocker, p. 305.

Dana he is caught between two worlds; "The town and the ship: tonight it seems that he must choose between life's happiness and life's adventure."

"Benjamin Hall goes on board the ship."²⁰

Spiritually the two heroes have much in common. Dana wanted his love for Janet to universalize into a love for the men; Benjamin feels his love go out to the crew: "But all Benjamin knew was that he wanted to take some of Anton's burden upon himself."²¹ Where the novels differ is in that Benjamin, like Demarest, succumbs to the call of a Circe, this time with disastrous results.

The Ship Sails On also inspired some of Lowry's poems. On page 15 of Grieg's novel *Sivert*, Benjamin's closest friend, says: "It's a queer way God has of doing things: When we're at home we long to be away and when we're at sea we long for home." "The Flowering Past" echoes *Sivert's* words:

There is no poetry when you live there.

But move you toward New Zealand or the Pole,
Those stones will blossom and the noises sing.²²

On page 146 of The Ship Sails On we find: "And again he was seized with unreasoning anger; he tried to find a bitter word that might spoil *Sivert's* happiness, but his friend's smile put him to shame. Cain could not slay Abel today." "A Poem of God's Mercy" begins:

²⁰Grieg, p. 6.

²¹Grieg, p. 23.

²²Sel. Poems, p. 16.

Cain shall not slay Abel today on our good ground,
Nor Adam reel under our shrouded moon.²³

Finally, there is the sonnet "The Ship Sails On: For Nordahl Grieg" in which Lowry focuses upon the eternal aspect of the ship. The poem ends:

Since all we know is that the wind is good
And at the end the sun is what it was.²⁴

In Blue Voyage, The Ship Sails On, and Ultramarine the struggle of the soul is resolved into a struggle between the calls of the Sirens and the Circes, between that which is highest in man and that which responds to what Demarest calls the fleshpots. Yet these writers are not twentieth century sexual puritans or ascetics trying to change one aspect of modern morality. There is no hint of a dislike for sex. To each of them the Siren-Circe dilemma is only one expression of the human condition, of each individual's crucible. In Under the Volcano Lowry continues to develop the concept of the oneness of sexual and divine loves, thereby expanding the significance of the struggle begun by Dana.

²³Ibid, p. 47.

²⁴Ibid, p. 67.

III

THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH

From a seaport setting in Ultramarine Lowry moves to the arid wastes of Mexico for Under the Volcano. Once again the setting is both universal and specific.

Tsjang-Tsjang was any dirty port, the badly tarnished romantic dream of youth; Mexico is the sorrow of men. On the one hand, the oppressive heat, the dryness, the Spanish language, the cantinas, the festival on the Day of the Dead, the tequilas, the mescals, the bullthrowing, the story of those tragic lovers Maximilian and Carlotta, the myth of Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl, and the bandit fascist police make this book very specifically Mexican. On the other hand, the book constantly looks beyond the borders of Mexico: newspapers bring headlines of the Pope's impending death, Hugh worries constantly about the war in Spain, the four main characters are all ex-patriates, and on the first page Lowry takes time to pinpoint Quauhnahuac in relation to the rest of the world.

But most important, the novel reaches beyond Mexico through the universality of the underlying myth. Further, specific details of Mexico expound the myth. For instance, Quauhnahuac means "near the wood"¹ and through this and many

¹Volc., p. 49.

other means Lowry relates this middle novel to Dante's interpretation of the Christian myth.

David Markson points out some of the references to Dante.² First, in the opening scene, Laruelle leaves the Casino de la Selva (the "selva oscura" is the "Obscure wood") and walks downhill as Dante has been walking downhill at the beginning of The Divine Comedy. The medieval belief was that "the man conscious of having lost his moral way, alarmed for his soul, seeks to escape from sin and cares in which he is involved, by ascending the hill of virtue whose summit is 'lighted by dayspring from on high'".³ Second, in Hell, Canto IV, Dante finds himself "on the brink of the dolorous valley of the abyss" and in Chapter I of the Volcano Laruelle likewise stands "looking into the abyss". Third, the bell which Laruelle hears in Chapter I is described by "dolente . . . dolore" from Dante's original Italian:

Per me si va cetta dolente,
Per me si va nell' eterno dolore . . .
(Hell, Canto III)

Markson also argues that Yvonne's last thoughts: "And leaving the burning dream Yvonne felt herself suddenly gathered upwards and borne towards the stars scattering aloft with ever wider circlings like rings on water,⁴ among which now appeared, like a flock of diamond birds flying softly

²Markson Thesis, p. 18.

³Dante, Hell in The Divine Comedy, 3 vols., trans. Charles Eliot Norton, rev. ed., (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1902), p. 2. From the translator's footnote.

⁴See p. 92 below.

and steadily towards Orion, the Pleiades . . ."⁵ recall Dante's last words: "To the high fantasy here power failed; but now my desire and my will were revolved, like a wheel which is moved evenly, by the love which moves the sun and the stars."⁶ However, Yvonne's last thoughts are closer to the final thoughts of Arcularis:

And that long magnificent, delirious swoop of dizziness . . . The Great Circle . . . the swift pathway to Arcturus. . . .

In no time at all he was beyond the moon, shot past the North Star as if it were standing still . . . swooped in a long, bright curve round the Pleiades, shouted out to the little blue star which pointed the way to the unknown, . . . Oh, God, not coffers, but lights, delight, supreme white and brightness, whirling lightness above all--and freezing--freezing --freezing--

As Earle Birney points out,⁷ Lowry refers to the ravine as the Malebolge which is the particularly depressed area in the Seventh Ring of hell beneath which is the pit of hell itself. Lowry himself points to the relationship between Dante's wood of life and Chapter VII of the Volcano where "the Consul enters a lugubrious cantina called El Bosque which also means the wood."⁸

There are yet other references to Dante. We find the prototype of Lowry's barranca in Hell, Canto XII where, in the

⁵Volc., p. 337. The Pleiades are the seven daughters of Atlas. The number seven is important to the Volcano. (See pp. 61-62 below).

⁶Conrad Aiken, The Collected Short Stories of Conrad Aiken, (New York: The World Publishing Co., 1960). pp. 52-53.

⁷Birney, "Glimpses into the Life of Malcolm Lowry," p. 39.

⁸Lowry, "Preface to a Novel", p. 25.

Seventh Circle, First Round, there is a ravine that begins at the top of the mountain and is supposed to have been created at the moment Christ died on the cross. The Consul's drinking, his eternal mock sacrament, is better understood in light of the following lines from Purgatory, Canto XXI: "The natural thirst which is never satisfied save with the water whereof the poor woman of Samaria besought the grace, was tormenting me . . ."⁹ Chapter VI, the chapter devoted to Hugh, begins, "Nel mezzo del bloody cammin di nostra vita mi ritrovai in ...", and almost the same words are repeated when the Consul is in Cantina El Bosque in Chapter VII.

Much of the technique of Under the Volcano is developed from Ultramarine. The omniscient point of view is maintained¹⁰ and the novel moves from internal to external phenomena, from past through present to future, very readily. The diction is still unusual, often difficult, (at times, one suspects, needlessly so); the stream of references to other writers gains momentum. Sometimes each writer mentioned has an individual significance, for instance when the Consul rides Cocteau's Infernal Machine in the form of the ferris wheel. In other

⁹"Jesus answered and said unto her, whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life. The woman saith unto him, Sir, give me this water, that I thirst not, neither come here to draw." (John IV, 13-15)

¹⁰In Ultramarine it was dropped in Chapter III.

places a whole list of writers makes a single point, as when the Consul noses through Laruelle's library and notes for the reader some of the debris of Jacques learning, or when Lowry provides a list of the books the Consul is using to write his work on necromantic knowledge. Lowry also continues to sprinkle his pages with foreign languages with Spanish understandably coming second only to English in this novel.

The three areas in which Under the Volcano develops most markedly over the earlier novel are symbolism, structure, and poetry.

Symbolism is very important to Under the Volcano and although much of it is readily understandable, some of Lowry's private symbols would be unclear if we did not look beyond the pages of the novel. The farolito bar where the Consul takes his last drink is identified with the lighthouse and the significance of this association is ambiguous. In other places Lowry uses the lighthouse as a symbol for all that is valuable in civilization¹¹ and perhaps he is using the symbol in an ironic sense here. On the other hand, he may be turning back to Henry James' use of the lighthouse as the symbol of self.¹² The Farolito would then become identified with the abyss of self in which the Consul destroys himself.

Under the Volcano has the twelve chapter division common to epics since Virgil but Lowry points out that he chose

¹¹Hear Us, p. 276.

¹²Martin, p. 44.

the number twelve for various reasons:

I went on to explain that my novel consists of twelve chapters, and the main part of the narrative is contained within a single day of twelve hours. In the same way, there are twelve months in a year and the whole book is enclosed within the limits of a year, while that deeper layer of the novel--or the poem--which derives from myth is linked at this point with the Jewish Cabbala, where the number twelve is of the greatest importance. The Cabbala is used for poetic ends because it represents Man's spiritual aspirations. The Tree of Life, its emblem, is a kind of complicated ladder whose summit is called Kether, or Light, while somewhere in its midst an abyss opens out. The spiritual domain of the Consul is probably Qliphoth, the world of husks and demons, represented by the Tree of Life turned upside down and governed by Beelzebub, the God of Flies. All this was not essential for the understanding of the book; I mentioned it in passing so as to give the feeling, as Henry James has said, "that depths exist."

In the Jewish Cabbala the abuse of magic powers is compared to drunkenness or the abuse of wine, and is expressed, if I remember rightly, by the Hebrew word sod. Another attribution of the word sod signifies garden, or neglected garden, and the Cabbala itself is sometimes considered as a garden (naturally similar to that where grew the tree of forbidden fruit which gave us the Knowledge of Good and Evil), with the Tree of Life planted in the middle.

"I hold to the number twelve," I then added. "It is as if I heard a clock sounding midnight for Faust, and when I think I feel that neither more nor less than twelve should satisfy me."¹³

The flashback technique used in Under the Volcano impresses upon the reader the basic plotlessness of the novel for he knows after the first chapter that the story will end in tragedy. Lowry used this method to give the book the circular form important to the Journey Without End or Great Circle concept. The idea of the Great Circle comes to Lowry from Conrad

¹³Lowry, "Preface to a Novel", pp. 27-28.



Aiken who in turn got it from Thoreau.¹⁴ The circle is also important for its expression of Lowry's concept of the continuing incarnation of the Christian myth.

In the opening chapter Lowry presents many of the basic facts of the situation to be examined. Geoffery Firmin is an ex-British Consul living in Quauhnhuac, Mexico. He is an alcoholic and has been separated from his wife for over a year. She returns to him on the Day of the Dead, in November, 1938. We hear the words of the unnamed Strauss song: "Once a year the dead live for a day." The song is "Allerseelen", a song about rebirth and lost love.¹⁵

We learn later that Yvonne, an ex-movie star, has been married once before and divorced. The only issue from this first marriage, a boy, died in infancy. The barrenness of her second marriage comes from her husband. The second marriage has been unsuccessful and no attempt is made to suggest a reason for Yvonne's infidelities with Jacques and Hugh beyond the Consul's drinking.

However, Yvonne is desperately in love with Geoffery who cannot now forgive her:

"But I'm back," she was apparently saying.
 "Can't you see it? We're together again, it's us.
 Can't you see that?" Her lips were trembling. She
 was almost crying.

Then she was close to him, in his arms, but
 he was gazing over her head.

¹⁴ Martin, p. 160. Thoreau writes in the last chapter of Walden: "Our voyaging is only great-circle sailing." (Henry David Thoreau, Walden in Walden: Civil Disobedience, intro. Sherman Paul, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), p. 218)

¹⁵ Markson, Thesis, p. 14.

"Yes, I can see," he said, only he couldn't see, only hear, the droning, the weeping, and feel, feel the unreality. "I do love you. Only--" "I can never forgive you deeply enough," was that what was in his mind to add?¹⁶

Poetry often finds its way onto Lowry's page as imagery: "Each of them separately on their far bereaved cots, their hands but blown fragments of their memories, half afraid to commingle, yet touching over the howling sea at night."¹⁷

At the end of the first chapter Jacques Laruelle is spending his last evening in Quauhnahuac¹⁸ and in the distance the electrified ferris wheel for the festival of the Day of the Dead is turning. Lowry is ready to move backwards a year in time. The Chapter ends: "Over the town, in the dark tempestuous night backwards revolved, the luminous wheel."¹⁹ Perhaps we could set this down differently:

Over the town,
In the black tempestuous night,
Backwards revolved,
The luminous wheel.

¹⁶Volc. p. 201.

¹⁷Volc. p. 72. See also p. 3 above.

¹⁸Markson points out that Laruelle reads from Dr. Faustus: "Headlong I will fly into the earth," mistakenly substituting "fly" for "run" because he is thinking of the Consul's death. Then Laruelle reads the letter which has fallen from Geoffery's book, by candlelight, and as he finishes and burns the letter, a bell rings out to terminate the chapter. These three items, bell, book, and candle, are the dominating physical symbols in the scene, recalling further lines from Marlowe:

"How! bell, book, and candle . . . candle, book, and bell,
Forward and backward to curse Faustus to hell.

(Act III, Sc. II)

(Markson, Thesis, pp. 16-17.)

¹⁹Volc., p. 47.

This arrangement brings out the Japanese tanka form of the sentence. This form was one of the oriental ones Lowry worked with about 1943-44.²⁰

"Backwards" prepares the reader for the direction of the time change; the word order and sentence structure convey the idea of cyclic motion. The inverted structure creates a periodic sentence which puts all the emphasis on "wheel", the subject and last word of the sentence. The inversion of word order in the last part of the sentence creates a rhythm imitative of the turning of the wheel. ". . . the luminous wheel revolved backwards" would have been quite flat.

Lowry says about the ending of the first chapter:

The chapter ends in another cantina where people are taking refuge during an unseasonal storm, while elsewhere, all over the world, people are crawling into the air-raid shelters; then the lights go out, just as, all over the world as well, they are going out. Outside, in that night created by the tempest, the luminous wheel is turning.

That wheel is the Ferris wheel erected in the middle of the square, but it is also, if you like, many other things: the wheel of the law, the wheel of Buddha. It is even eternity, the symbol of the Everlasting Return. That wheel, which demonstrates the very form of the book, can also be considered in a cinematographic manner as the wheel of Time, which is about to turn in an inverse direction, until we reach the preceding year. For the beginning of the second chapter brings us to All Souls Day a year before, in November, 1938.²¹

²⁰Malcolm Lowry, "Four New Poems from Malcolm Lowry", Prairie Schooner, XXXVII (winter 1963/64), p. 35. See the notes by Earle Birney for comments on Lowry's interest in oriental poetry.

²¹Lowry, "Preface to a Novel", p. 26.

Lowry particularly relies on imagery in the letters, both those of Yvonne, and the Consul's single unsent letter. In his letter Geoffrey describes the terror in which he lives: ". . . Night: and once again, the nightly grapple with death, the room shaking with daemonic orchestras, the snatches of fearful sleep, the voices outside the window, my name being continually repeated with scorn, by imaginary parties arriving, the dark's spinnets. As if there were not enough real voices in these nights the colour of grey hair."²² In the same letter descriptive imagery is used to convey the joy envisaged in a life with Yvonne in a northern land:

It is a light blue moonless summer evening, but late, perhaps ten o'clock, with Venus burning hard in daylight, so we are certainly somewhere far north . . . for to the north-east over distant mountains whose purple has faded, lies a mass of almost pure white clouds suddenly as by light in an alabaster lamp, illumined from within by gold lightning, yet you can hear no thunder, only the roar of the great train with its engines and its wide shunting echoes as it advances from the hills into the mountains: and then all at once a fishing-boat with tall gear comes running around the point like a white giraffe, very swift and stately, leaving directly behind it a long silver scalloped rim of wake, not visibly moving inshore, but now stealing ponderously beachward towards us, this scrolled silver rim of wash striking the shore first in the distance, then spreading all along the curve of the beach, its growing thunder and commotion now joined to the diminishing thunder of the train, and now breaking reboant on our beach, while the floats, for there are timber diving floats, are swayed together, everything jostled and beautifully ruffled and stirred and tormented in this rolling sleeked silver . . . white white distant alabaster thunderclouds beyond the mountains, the thunderless gold lightning in the blue evening, unearthly . . .²³

²²Volc. p. 41.

²³Ibid., pp. 42-43.

At other times the poetry takes the form of parody, a form Aiken also used.²⁴ In parody of "Hymn to God the Father" the Consul, as "Donne of the Fairways" says: "who holds the flag while I hole out in three? Who hunts my Zodiac Zone²⁵ along the shore? And who, upon that last and final green, though I hole out in four, accepts my ten and three score . . . Though I have more."²⁶

The poetry Lowry first wrote during the Mexican years is both better and worse than the poems grouped under the title "The Roar of the Sea and The Darkness". The title of the second section in Selected Poems of Malcolm Lowry is "Thunder Beyond Popocatepetl" and was given by Earle Birney who simply used the title of the poem that appears first in the section. Lowry himself entitled the third section "The Cantinas".

Some of the poems of the Mexican period relate to specific passages in Under the Volcano. "For Under the Volcano" recalls the beginning of Chapter II where we first see the Consul in a cantina at dawn. The poem ends:

Death so far away from home and wife
I fear. And prayed for my sick life--

"A corpse should be transported by express," said the Consul mysteriously waking up suddenly.²⁷

²⁴"Aiken was convinced by Emile Cammaerts' Poetry of Nonsense that parody and nonsense verse are possibly poetry at its purest." (Martin, p. 67.)

²⁵"Zodiac Zone" is also the name of a make of golf ball. (Lowry, "Letter to Derek Pethick", p. 63.)

²⁶Volc. p. 207.

²⁷Sel. Poems, p. 23.

The opening line of Chapter two reads: "' . . . A corpse will be transported by express.'"²⁸

"The Volcano is Dark" ends with:

And the cries which might be the groans of the dying or the groans of love--²⁹

Almost the same words appear in the novel when the Consul is with the prostitute: " . . . how alike are the groans of love to those of the dying, how alike, those of love, to those of the dying--"³⁰

"In the Oaxaca Jail" contains the line: ". . . from the garden which evicts those who destroy!"³¹ which recalls the line the Consul mistranslates when he sees a sign during his search for a hidden bottle in his own overgrown and neglected garden:

. . . a sign uprooted or new, whose oblong pallid face stared through the wire at him. Le gusta este jardin? it asked . . .

LE GUSTA ESTE JARDIN?
QUE IS SUYO?
EVITE QUE SUS HIJOS LO DESTRUYAN!

The Consul stared back at the black words on the sign without moving. You like this garden? Why is it yours? We evict those who destroy!³²

The last line should read: "See that your children do not destroy it."

²⁸ Volc., p. 48.

²⁹ Sel. Poems, p. 26

³⁰ Volc., p. 350.

³¹ Sel. Poems, p. 28.

³² Volc., p. 132.

"Death of a Oaxaquenian" recalls the incident in Chapter VIII where the bus to Tomalin stops when an Indian is spotted lying at the side of the road. This incident is the central event in the short story "Under the Volcano".

"Delirium in Vera Cruz" brings in a theme picked up from Conrad Aiken. Like Aiken, Lowry uses the mirror as a symbol of confrontations of the self.³³ In the last poem in "The Cantinas", called "Sestina in a Cantina", (the longest poem in the book) the mirrors become the tyrannizing reflectors of the past and Lowry uses the basic symbol to examine the important theme of ghosts that is found in many places in his prose. The poem is often interesting and effective yet the quality of the verse varies. There are apt and rhythmic lines like:

The mind is like that sparkling greenhouse ocean
Glass-deceptive in the Bengal dawning,

which are imaginative and forceful. However, the poet begins to assume poses later on and the quality of the verse deteriorates.³⁴

"Thirty-five Mescals In Cuautla" is interesting in that it deals with the theme of the basic hum of the universe, the hum first heard by Dana on the Oedipus Tyrannus, the hum to be later heard by the protagonist who, under various names, wanders through the stories in Hear Us O Lord.

³³"Aiken was to use the mirror throughout his career to symbolize self-confrontation." (Martin, p. 45.)

³⁴Sel. Poems, p. 42. See also pp. 5-6 above.

Finally, a line in "At the Bar"---"and Tarquin certain of ravishable prey,"³⁵ looks back to one of Dana's internal monologues.³⁶

In Under the Volcano Lowry continues his practice of incorporating phrases from other poets into his writing. In Chapter X the Consul, drunk, finds an excuse for himself in his wife's past infidelity with Hugh:

"Stay where you are . . . Of course I see the romantic predicament you two are in. But even if Hugh makes the most of it again it won't be long, it won't be long before he realizes he's only one of the hundred or so ninney-hammers with gills like codfish and veins like racehorses--prime as goats all of them, hot as monkeys, salt as wolves in pride. No, one will be enough . . ."

A glass, fortunately empty, fell to the floor and smashed.

"As if he plucked up kisses by the roots and then his leg over her thigh and sighed. What an uncommon time you two must have had, paddling palms and playing boobies and titties all day under cover of saving me . . . Jesus. Poor little defenceless me--I hadn't thought of that."³⁷

Lowry begins with animalistic imagery of brutal sex then moves on to draw directly from Othello with, "As if he plucked up kisses by the roots", "And then his leg over her thigh and sighed", and "paddling palms". But the Consul needs no exterior Iago to lead him to kill both his wife and himself.

Lowry's various techniques often lead to considerable complexity. During the bullthrowing in Chapter IX, the Consul slowly begins his last drunk while his wife is finding allegorical significance in the brutal scene in the

³⁵ Ibid, p. 40.

³⁶ Ultra., p. 134.

³⁷ Volc., p. 315.

Tomalin arena. Conversation continues; the Consul drinks; Yvonne begins going over her past. Suddenly, Hugh, driven to action by a bad conscience, rushes into the arena to try to ride the bull, perhaps to subdue the beast. While Hugh is in the arena dust Yvonne dreams of the future and the forest cabin she wants to take Geoff to. Then she tries to talk him into leaving Mexico. For a moment she and her husband seem to find a way out and they exchange confessions of love. But the hope soon disappears. The Consul has finished almost all the bottle and is drunk; Yvonne's dream ends in horror: "Why was it though, that right in the centre of her brain, there should be a figure of a woman having hysterics, jerking like a puppet and banging her fists upon the ground?"³⁸ The chapter ends when Geoffrey takes Hugh and Yvonne to the Salon Ofelia.³⁹ On the way he sees a vision of himself crushed by the past: "Bent double, groaning with the weight, an old lame Indian was carrying on his back, by means of a strap looped over his forehead, another poor Indian, yet older and more decrepit than himself. He carried the older man and his crutches trembling in every limb under this weight of the past, he carried both their burdens."⁴⁰

³⁸Ibid, p. 281.

³⁹When the Consul begins to quote from Othello perhaps we are also intended to think of Hamlet's: "Get thee to a nunnery!"

⁴⁰Volc., p. 281. The old Indian also enters the short story "Under the Volcano" where he functions as a contrast to those who left the Indian to die by the roadside.

This chapter, in which Lowry brings to a crisis the lives of his three major characters, is superbly and economically written. External action and psychological process, dream and reality, dialogue and internal monologue, multiple time and universal allegory are mixed to carry the reader through this turning point, the real significance of which is only seen in retrospect.

When Yvonne returns to Quauhnahuac, Hugh has already undertaken a rehabilitation program with the Consul, but when Hugh leaves town for a short time Geoffrey gets himself into the drunken state in which Yvonne finds him. Although he tries to help him, Hugh feels some antagonism towards the Consul for destroying his romantic illusion of being a rebel on the run from everyone.

Hugh, who brings into the novel Dana Hilliot's idealism, must, by his very nature, find a cause.⁴¹ By the time Yvonne arrives he has already made arrangements to return to

⁴¹David Markson has traced myth in Under the Volcano. (David Markson, "Myth in Under the Volcano", Prairie Schooner, XXXVII (winter 1963/64).) One of his findings on page 345 is: "The Nemean Lion.--Hercules loses a finger choking it to death. Recalling the extent of his adolescent involvement with a guitar, Hugh thinks: 'Once the worst possible thing that could befall me seemed some hand injury. Nevertheless one dreamed frequently of dying, bitten by lions' " Lowry was a weight-lifter and Hugh thinks of himself as taller than he is, so there is some basis for the Hercules association, but has not the obvious point been passed by? For Hugh the significance of being eaten by lions is that he dreams of martyrdom and indeed finally seeks it. The clear association is with the Roman Colosseum and the Christian martyrs. Perhaps this theme of martyrdom also explains the title of "Elephant and Colosseum" in Hear Us O Lord. The symbolism of the elephant is dwelt upon at some length; perhaps the Colosseum symbolizes Cosnahan's feelings that the public is crucifying him (as in "Strange Comfort" it crucifies Poe, Keats and Gogol).

Spain in aid of the anti-fascist forces. The mission is a secret and his friends think he is merely going to sea. The bullthrowing incident relieves his impatience while waiting.

While Laruelle is understandably attracted to Hugh because he sees in the younger man his own lost idealism, his attraction to the Consul is a little more bizarre. During Yvonne's absence Jacques and the Consul find themselves bound together by a mutual sorrow for the woman they both love; they manage to share the tacit illusion that she is still there.

Lowry examines more and more deeply the relationships established early in the book while at the same time building a symbolic structure to incarnate the myth of the fall of man.⁴²

Douglas Day says that Under the Volcano is a novel about a brilliant and promising man who, because of some obscure but all-encompassing sense of guilt, is unable to love, unable

⁴² Since Conrad Aiken was Lowry's spiritual and artistic master, it is certainly possible that Lowry adopted Aiken's concept of the nature of language. Aiken began his theory with a belief in a correspondence theory of the nature of linguistic truth. He believed first that language is an image of reality, not just a conveniently arranged set of coherent symbols. He then came to view the ontological process as working two ways. He believed not only that the ontological nature of the non-linguistic universe dictates the truth value of language, but that language is ontologically creative. He believed that the writer does not recreate his own experience but creates experience as he writes, hoping that his writing will produce in the reader while he is reading roughly the same experience it created in the writer while he was writing. (Aiken obviously gave ontological status to psychological phenomena.) Thus the word and the world became fused in Aiken's thought. If, as is possible, Lowry held the same theories, his attempt to incarnate myth in his writing would be all the more meaningful. (See the last chapter of Martin's book for an outline of Aiken's beliefs concerning the nature of language.)

to allow himself to be loved, and finally--unable even to live; but who, throughout his headlong flight into hell, almost never gives in to maudlin self-pity--⁴³ who seems, in fact, at times almost happily to embrace his destruction."⁴⁴

As the incidents of the last day of the Consul's life unfold it becomes increasingly obvious that the episodes of the day cannot affect the conclusion. Firmin presides over his own destruction as surely as Joseph K. conducts his own trial.⁴⁵ The basic philosophical difference between The Trial and Under the Volcano is that Kafka leads his protagonist through a series of futile episodes which convince Joseph K. of the meaninglessness and futility of existence whereas Lowry makes it clear that the meaning of life is always close at hand. God cannot be desired as something absent but only accepted or rejected. Salvation is not something strange and new but just what Christianity (and the Romantic tradition), has always said it is, the individual human's relationship with the divine. As a Christian thinker the great tragedy for Lowry is man's rejection of the divine, however it may manifest itself. The Consul rejects it when he

⁴³Jay Martin defines sentimentality as excess of emotion for the form used. (Martin, p. 167.) Lowry's huge structure will handle almost any amount of emotion.

⁴⁴Day, p. 357.

⁴⁵Lowry expresses his admiration for Kafka through the person of Sigbjorn Wilderness in "Through the Panama". Downie Kirk says that Lowry often talked about The Castle and The Trial. (Kirk, "More than Music: Glimpses of Malcolm Lowry", p. 37.)

rejects his wife's love which was always close at hand and ready to save him.

Most existentialists would say that since life is meaningless we must exercise, to use Satre's terminology, our "fearful freedom" and create meaning through a blind leap into the dark, through an act of faith.⁴⁶ Lowry does not seem to have had difficulty finding meaning all around him.⁴⁷ Similarly, the Consul does know the way out; he never really takes his situation quite seriously.

The Consul rejects the salvation of love. Lowry prefaces the novel with the following lines from Bunyan's Grace Abounding for the Chief of Sinners:

Now I blessed the condition of the dog and the toad,
yea, gladly would I have been in the condition of
the dog or horse, for I knew they had no soul to
perish under the everlasting weight of Hell or Sin,
as mine was like to do. Yay, and though I saw this,
felt this, and was broken to pieces with it, yet
that which added to my sorrow was, that I could not
find with all my soul that I did desire deliverance.⁴⁸

⁴⁶Lowry wrote to Downie Kirk: "I have more reviews from the existentialist press! I'm tickled to death to be thought a master existentialist; it seems only the other day I was asking you what existentialism was." (Malcolm Lowry, "Three Unpublished Letters", Prairie Schooner, XXXVII (winter 1963/64). p. 327.)

⁴⁷Lowry's ideas about Christianity and meaning will become clearer in Chapter IV. Lowry does not talk about Christianity directly or specifically and there are references to both the Jewish Cabbala and Taoism, while there is no specific mention of Christ; however, the religious element is strong in Lowry's work, especially in "The Forest Path to the Spring", and the dominant religious myth in his work as a whole is that of Christianity.

⁴⁸Volc., p. 7.

The first part of this passage is reminiscent of Marlowe's Faustus's last speech:

Why wert thou not a creature wanting soul?
Or why is this immortal that thou hast?
Ah, Pythagoras' metempsychosis! were that true
This soul should fly from me, and I be changed
Unto some brutish beast! All beasts are happy,
For when they die,
Their souls are soon dissolved in elements.⁴⁹

But Faustus still desires salvation. His sin is wanhope, not rejection of God.

The Consul has placed himself in an abyss of self and unforgiveness; he has cut himself off from all love, that of both Yvonne and God. If we think in terms of Aiken's symbolism, he has reached the point of absolute self on the Great Circle.⁵⁰ Had Yvonne never left or had she returned sooner, the result would have been the same. When the Consul is on his way to Jacques Laruelle's the little postman meets

⁴⁹ Christopher Marlowe, The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus, Sc. XI, ll. 96-102.

⁵⁰ In Aiken's symbolism there are two points on the circle which hold terror for man: absolute self and absolute selflessness or crucifixion. (Conrad Aiken, The Collected Novels of Conrad Aiken, intro. by R.P. Blackmuir, (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1964). See the introduction by R.P. Blackmuir.)

him in the street and gives him a postcard from Yvonne which has wandered in the mails for a year before reaching him. The card pleads for reconciliation and the shortest note in return would have brought Yvonne back. For a while the Consul pretends that had the card arrived when it should have all would have been well. He cannot live long with this lie. He never answered any of her other letters. Finally, he uses Yvonne's card for a cruel little joke and hides it under Laruelle's pillow. No postcard, indeed no external thing or event can save him. Geoffrey knows that, "Love is the only thing which gives meaning to our poor ways on earth: not precisely a discovery, I am afraid."⁵¹ But he cannot accept the love offered.

When Yvonne is away the Consul drinks as if drinking an eternal sacrament but he promises himself he will stop drinking if she returns. However, when his desperate prayer is answered and she comes back he does not change. When Yvonne is away he is in his own private hell and when she returns he is still in "a place where even love cannot penetrate."⁵²

⁵¹Volc., p. 45.

⁵²Ibid, p. 205.

The Consul takes his underworld and its demons with him to Jacques Laruelle's house in the Calle Tierra del Fuego--the Street of the Land of Fire. While there he feels "something never felt before with such shocking certainty that he [is] in hell himself."⁵³ External phenomena re-enforces the demonology of his mind when he views the lost souls in the prohibitionist poster in the home of his wife's ex-lover:

Down, headlong into hades, selfish and florid-faced, into a tumult of fire-spangled fiends, Medusae, and belching monstrosities, with swallow-dives or awkwardly, with dread backward leaps, shrieking among falling bottles and emblems of broken hopes, plunged the drunkards; up, up, flying palely, selflessly into the light towards heaven, soaring sublimely in pairs, male sheltering female, shielded themselves by angels with abnegating wings, shot the sober.⁵⁴

Then Geoffrey asks silently if these walls have heard Yvonne's groans of love. Is this where he was betrayed? Suddenly the ruthless hand of the past settles on him as he looks at Jacques: ". . . the abominable impact on his whole being at this moment of the fact that that hideously elongated cucumi-form bundle of blue nerves and gills below the steaming and unselfconscious stomach had sought its pleasure in his wife's body brought him stumbling to his feet."⁵⁵ The Consul turns to the necessary, the therapeutic drink, the eternal mock sacrament. "Might a soul bathe there and be clean or slake

⁵³Ibid, p. 203.

⁵⁴Ibid, pp. 202-03. David Markson finds this poster just one of many things that illustrates the novel has a structure parallel to that of The Fall of the House of Usher. (Markson, Thesis, p. 26.)

⁵⁵Volc., p. 210.

its drought?⁵⁶

Ironically, carved into the lintel above the door to Laruelle's house are the words, "No se puede vivir sin amar."⁵⁷ It is not possible to live without love.⁵⁸ But Yvonne fears her husband is beyond love: "You are walking on the edge of an abyss where I may not follow,"⁵⁹ she wrote to him in one of her letters.

The letters from Yvonne which the Consul left in the Farolito months before they were returned to him on the evening he was shot, contain some of the most sensitive writing in the novel:

Turning I see us in a hundred places with a hundred smiles. I come into a street, and you are there. I creep at night to bed and you are waiting for me. . . . Days filled with cheap and tarnished moments succeed each other, restless and haunted nights follow in bitter routine: the sun shines without brightness, the moon rises without light. My heart has the taste of ashes, and my throat is tight and weary with weeping. What is a lost soul? It is one that has turned from its true path and is groping in the darkness of remembered ways. . . .⁶⁰

Once again Lowry brings forward the idea that spiritual death is the price of capitulation to the past. The Consul, unable to conquer the past, unable to forgive or be loved, forces

⁵⁶Ibid, p. 78.

⁵⁷Ibid, p. 213.

⁵⁸Ibid, p. 213.

⁵⁹Ibid, p. 347.

⁶⁰Ibid, p. 346. Yvonne comes across best in these letters. If Lowry had only given us more of this and had he taken more pains to examine her infidelities, he would have forestalled the criticism that his handling of his female character is inadequate. (See p. 6 above.)

his wife into "the darkness of remembered ways".

The double tragedy is that through rejecting her love Geoffrey can destroy both Yvonne and himself. He says he wants "to take her in his arms . . . to be forgiven and to forgive,"⁶¹ but jealousy about the past turns him from her and like Othello he asks "where should he go."⁶² Lowry's Othello goes into a back room with a prostitute. For a few moments he can forget the woman who wrote: "I want your children, soon at once, I want them. I want your life filling and stirring me. I want your happiness beneath my heart and your sorrows in my eyes and your peace in the fingers of my hand--"⁶³ In another letter she wrote: "I . . . my life is irrevocably and forever bound to yours . . . if you let anything happen to yourself you will be harming my flesh and my mind."⁶⁴ The Consul answers Yvonne's question: "In what far place do we still walk hand in hand?"⁶⁵ by letting Maria lead him by the hand to her room. He has finally capitulated to Circe. "So this was it, the final stupid unprophylactic rejection."⁶⁶ For sanitary reasons alone he cannot return to Yvonne.

⁶¹Ibid, p. 348.

⁶²Ibid, p. 348.

⁶³Ibid, p. 347.

⁶⁴Ibid, p. 367.

⁶⁵Ibid, p. 367.

⁶⁶Ibid, p. 349.

Outside the Farolito is the barranca, the ravine, and towering above, the peaks of Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl, the two volcanos which stand for the lovers in the ancient Maya legend of love. "Old Popo" has become identified with the Consul and "Ixta" with his wife. But it is the destructive element of the volcanos that is the genius of the Firmins' lives. After Geoffrey is shot someone throws him down into the ravine at the foot of Popocatepetl.

The barranca runs throughout the length of Lowry's topography. It is the primal fault that awaits the loveless. It runs close by the ruined Eden of the Consul's own yard and on to the Farolito. We have the sense throughout the novel that it is never far away.

Paths are also of basic symbolic importance to the novel. There is Blake's path through hell at the end of which the Consul sometimes sees a vision of a peaceful home somewhere in a northern country. This path is not followed through to the vision and even in Yvonne's dreams there is always nightmare in the background in which a woman is beating her fists on the ground as the cottage burns up around her. In the last story in Hear Us O Lord there will be the forest path to the spring of love and creation. The path through the woods to the Farolito is the path of indifference and destruction. The Farolito is the false spring where the last drugging mescal is drunk, where the mock sacrament is performed for the last time.

Lowry handles the point that in death Geoffrey destroys Yvonne too by relating their deaths to the Samaritan theme in the novel.

The Samaritan theme begins when the Consul recalls that while he was in command of the warship Samaritan, which was disguised as a freighter, captive German officers were thrown into the furnace by the crew. The theme comes up again when the Indian is left by the roadside to die. Faced by this echo of the Spanish Conquest, Hugh and the Consul do nothing. Yvonne cannot stand the sight of blood; this is her way of acquiescing de facto.⁶⁷ When the Consul is unable through an act of will to accept the help offered by two old Mexicans he is shot by the local fascists, who say he is a spy and a Jew. In dying he releases the horse branded with a seven, which originally belonged to the Indian shot at the roadside. The horse runs into the forest where it tramples Yvonne. By allowing the Indian to die and the horse to go to the fascists who prey upon a world in which people have lost their souls, the Consul brings about his own death.⁶⁸

The number seven branded on the horse has numerous significances. There are the seven deadly sins in Dr. Faustus and Dante; there were seven steps in the production of gold

⁶⁷Heilman, p. 15.

⁶⁸"La mort du consul répétéra la mort de l'Indien." (Max-Pol Fouchet, "No Se Puede . . .", Canadian Literature, VIII (spring 1961), p. 28.) Also, Lowry points out that it is not important if he or the reader believes in the Consul's Cabbala. The important thing is that Hitler believed in it. (Lowry, Selected Letters, p. 76.)

in alchemy; Dante's journey lasted seven days: the novel begins and ends at seven; the cock that crows seven times announces death; there are seven tabernacles in hell in occultist doctrine; and seven is the occultist number for total reality. Since seven is so important to Cabbala it is not surprising to find it branded on a "cabello" (Spanish for horse).⁶⁹

When the illegal police ask the Consul his name he answers that he is William Blackstone. This name has already occurred in the novel and to understand its importance we must, through the aid of Jay Martin, turn to Conrad Aiken:

Aiken saw Blackstone as the "predecessor and anticipator of the half-wild individualism that was to be so characteristic . . . of all that was most integral in America." . . . In moving from the site of Boston to Rhode Island when the Puritans arrived, Blackstone symbolized for Aiken the individualistic demand for freedom of self and conscience which came to characterize American literature: "One cannot think of his perpetual centrifugal retreat from civilization . . . without visualizing him as a symbol, or a charming figurehead of the individualism which was to be so striking a characteristic in New England."⁷⁰

In Ushant we find: ". . . William Blackstone, Bachelor of Arts from Cambridge, England, in search of that virgin solitude in which he might, by there hearing echoes of his own soul, find God . . ."⁷¹ And later: "But the Blackstone theme which had so fascinated Hambo [Lowry] and with which Hambo had so

⁶⁹Markson, Thesis, pp. 45-46.

⁷⁰Martin, p. 191.

⁷¹Aiken, Ushant, p. 288.

early begun to build for himself a mystic identification-- for wasn't he destined himself to be another rolling Blackstone, and from Cambridge, Eng., too?"⁷²

Jay Martin explains the full significance of the Blackstone theme in both Aiken and Lowry:

In Aiken the Archetypal American search ends in Mexico in A Heart For the Gods of Mexico (the only Aiken novel in which Lowry appears). Mexico represents the last level of consciousness. When the Consul is in the garden in Chapter V he says to the cat: "'the Indians are in here. . . . Not real Indians. . . . but in here.'" . . . 'Yes, just the final frontier of consciousness, that's all.'"⁷³

As the Consul lies on the ground shot he recalls the words, "No se puede vivir sin amar" and wonders how he could have thought so evil of the world when succour was at hand all the time. He feels strong hands uplift him and he expects to see the heights, the peaks, the Earthly Paradise at the top of his mountain he always meant to climb someday. But it is not the hand of God lifting the wounded man but the rough arms of the police throwing him into the barranca. Geoffrey finds himself falling," . . . through the inconceivable pandemonium of a million tanks, the blazing of ten million burning bodies, falling, into a forest, falling--

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Somebody threw a dead dog after him down the ravine."⁷⁴

⁷² Ibid, p. 291.

⁷³ Martin, p. 191.

⁷⁴ Volc., pp. 375-76.

IV

ERIDANUS

Although the seven stories and novellas that make up Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place were composed over a period of years and not necessarily in the order in which they appear in the collection, they form not so much a group of stories as a novel in seven chapters. In the same way parts of both Ultramarine and Under the Volcano first appeared as short stories. Not only the stories in Hear Us O Lord, but all of Lowry's writing seems to form a monolithic whole and often an understanding of the wider area leads to a better understanding of a specific work and vice versa. This chapter will concentrate on the interrelationships between the parts and the whole in Hear Us O Lord and the importance of this book in relation to the cycle of Lowry's prose published at this time.

I have heard it said that "The Bravest Boat" is overdone, that the reader reaches the conclusion long before the author. Such criticism overlooks some important factors. First, consider the setting of this story. It is "a day of spindrift and blowing sea-foam, with black clouds presaging rain driven over the mountains from the sea by a wild March

wind,"¹ and Astrid and Sigurd Storlensen are walking along a beach deserted but for a nearby hamburger stand, a small boy and his father trying to sail a toy boat on the lagoon, and two lynx in a large enclosure. The lagoon is a place cut off from the physical activity of the city but it is a place of great spiritual life; the water is not calm but whipped by the wind, the wind which for twelve years² blew Sigurd's wandering toy boat upon the sea. The boy and his father now trying to sail a boat reincarnate Sigurd and his father and the sight is to the Storlensens a reminder of the chaos their little boat faced and came through and of the storms they have since faced and come through. The leaves of memory blown across the porch like seagulls over the sea are not memories of remorse but of the beginnings of a continuing love.³ The mist, enshrouding the mind in itself, turning thought into reverie, and bringing the past into the present, the ambiguously embalming yet invigorating fog, the roaring sea, the wind, the two lovers--a beautifully woven image of romance.

¹ Hear Us, p. 13.

² The number twelve is brought forward from Under the Volcano. The boat sailed for twelve years and Astrid is now twenty-four--twice twelve. She was seven when she found the boat. This number, also brought forward from Under the Volcano, will be more important in the next story.

³ In "Lunar Caustic" Bill gives his name as Lawhill. We later find out this is the name of a schooner described as having weathered more storms than any ship afloat.

Second, there is the dialogue:

"It was twenty-nine years ago in June,
darling, And it was June twenty-seventh."
"It was five years before you were born,
Astrid, and I was ten years old and I came down to
the bay with my father."
"It was five years before I was born, you
were ten years old, and you came down to the wharf
with your father."⁴

No two lovers, no matter how dotting, could really be expected to talk this way. Why should a writer who even in his earliest short stories had the gift of realistic dialogue turn to something so different? Because he wants to force the reader to go beyond the narrative level. The language is that of ritual, the ritual of love between Astrid and Sigurd. Neither of them is trying to convey any information. Their talk brings the past into the present, not as a tormenting ghost but as a guardian angel. In Lowry's previous prose the past has always been a tyrant.

It is because ritual is such an important element in this story that Lowry has taken so much care in building the setting and mood. He has taken the care of a priest setting the altar table. All the sacramental pieces must be in place before the celebrants can proceed. For a while Sigurd and Astrid are cloistered within the city itself. In the city some of the churches have spires and frame facades with blackened rose windows, some have queer onion shaped domes, while still others are Chinese pagodas, "so that first you thought you were in the Orient, then Turkey or Russia, though

⁴Hear Us, p. 19.

finally, but for the fact that some of these were churches, you would be sure you were in hell."⁵ The two lovers, cloistered but free, can pity the lynx endlessly pacing the length of their cage.

It is not a fault but a necessity that we "come to the end" of the story before the author finishes. The reader is supposed to understand it, know how it will end, know its significance, before it is over just as the partakers in any ritual must know what they are about. The basic element of this story is its lyricism, not its narrative line. It is intended as a prose poem and it sets the ultimate mood of the entire book.

If "The Bravest Boat" indicates the final spiritual position of the book, "Through the Panama" outlines the road to be taken.

This novella is supposedly an extract from the journal of Sigbjorn Wilderness. The story is often difficult but extremely important to our understanding of Lowry's work, both within and beyond the covers of Hear Us O Lord.⁶

The novella begins with the ship's endless song, "Frère Jacques":

Sonnez les matines!
Sonnez les matines!
Ding dang dong
Ding dang dong . . .⁷

⁵Ibid, p. 17.

⁶Some critics have taken time to dash off a few superlatives about this short story; but never a word about why it's good or what it's all about.

⁷Hear Us, p. 29.

The song was mentioned in "Bravest Boat" and will recur throughout Hear Us O Lord where it comes to be the basic hum of the universe met earlier in Ultramarine and Under the Volcano. During the course of Hear Us O Lord the words of the song will undergo a sea change. It appears in the version above when Sigbjorn and his wife Primrose set out from Vancouver on the Diderot on the seventh of November, 1947, bound for Rotterdam.

Sigbjorn fears starting the journey on the seventh. His reasons can be guessed at. In Under the Volcano the number seven was identified with the deaths of the Indian, Yvonne, and the Consul and as we will see later, Sigbjorn inherits the psyches of the earlier protagonists. Also, Sigbjorn comments: "'--Significance of sailing on the 7th. The point is that my character Martin, in the novel I'm furiously trying to get a first draft of . . . has dreaded starting a journey on the seventh of any month.'"⁸ Further, the journey is to last seven weeks. Hear Us O Lord is a book of reclamation and thus it begins with the symbols of tragedy which it inherits especially from Under the Volcano and works its alchemy upon them until they become symbols of rebirth. The number seven was central to Under the Volcano, bringing together as it did the themes of personal and universal, spiritual and social tragedy.

Throughout the first part of the novella Lowry continues to build up a large structure of tragic symbols. Sigbjorn's

⁸ Ibid, p. 30.

journey begins portentously. He fears setting out on the seventh and leaving Los Angeles on the fifteenth.⁹ Shearwaters, albatrosses, and digarilla, all birds which Sigbjorn views as birds of bad omen, follow the ship, and the song of the engines becomes:

sonnez lamentina
sonnez lamentina
dong, dong, dong
doom, doom, doom.¹⁰

Things really look black when the passenger taken on at Los Angeles turns out to be a Mr. Charon.

Closely related to the theme of impending doom is that of alienation. Sometimes the engines throb, "Sans maison Sans maison."¹¹ Sigbjorn feels "The inerrable inconceivable desolate sense of having no right to be where [he is]."¹² He feels what he conceives as the possibly universal sense of dispossession. This sense of alienation and dispossession is the spiritual bequest of the Consul and must be overcome during the regenerative movement of the book.

⁹Knickerbocker tells us that Lowry sailed from Los Angeles with his first wife Jan on what became the grimmest voyage of all. They arrived in Acapulco on November 2, 1936, on Los Difuntos, the Day of the Dead. (Knickerbocker, p. 307.)

¹⁰Hear Us, p. 35.

¹¹Ibid, p. 36. Sigbjorn lives in constant fear of eviction and fire. Lowry had experienced the latter and feared the former. Later Sigbjorn wishes that someone could live in his house without fear of eviction from the civil authorities. The theme of destruction by fire is taken up again in the short story "The Element Follows You Around Sir" which is part of October Ferry to Gabriola.

¹²Hear Us, p. 31.

Lowry introduces the technique of double columns running the length of the page in "Through the Panama". If he has been able to do so to this point, the reader can no longer evade the fact that this is no ordinary voyage. As in "Bravest Boat", Lowry forces the reader to move beyond the narrative level.

The locks of the Panama Canal are spoken of as places where one is locked in an experience. But they are more. They are the passageways between levels of experience. In a letter^{to} Albert Erskine Lowry points out that his protagonist is not one man or one writer but man's unconscious mind. The passage through the Panama is the passage into the realm of the unconscious mind, from the Pacific into the turbulent Atlantic.¹³ Going through the Panama is going into the underworld and when that part of the voyage is complete Mr. Charon has done his service and is left behind in Willimstadt, Curacao.

While the main column of the page continues the description of the passage, the auxiliary column picks up various undercurrents of thought.

The first of these contrapuntal strains is the theme of the Ancient Mariner. It is developed through direct quotation from Coleridge's poem combined with Sigbjorn's own comments. The mariner, cut off from God and forced each day

¹³Hear Us O Lord moves toward a vision of God. Perhaps Lowry, like Thoreau, thought: "The unconsciousness of man is the consciousness of God." (Thoreau in Week. See Sherman Paul's introduction to the Riverside edition of Walden: Civil Disobedience, p. xvi.)

to begin his repentance anew, reinforces the themes of alienation and ominous portents developed earlier. George Woodcock suggests that the albatross about the Mariner's neck is the albatross of literary creation and its attendant curse that Sigbjorn carries with him.¹⁴

Next, the history of the canal is taken up in the auxiliary column. The canal too is ominous. It has been death to thousands and the French canal ended in ruins and now runs off the main one into a swamp like a rejected manuscript, a rejected life.

The secondary column then moves on to discuss the man who has a model of the locks with which he controls the movements of Sigbjorn's ship. Sigbjorn wonders if analogously there is someone with another model controlling the man controlling the locks. The man who controls the locks is first introduced in the main column and on the conscious level. He passes into the secondary column and the unconscious level during the time Sigbjorn is actually going through the locks. This technique seems to reinforce the idea stated above that Lowry wants to move to the unconscious level in this book.

The Scottish founder of the Bank of England and early explorer of the Panama, William Paterson, is also discussed in the auxiliary column. Paterson seems to serve as a symbol of the archetypal Anglo-American quest, much as did William Blackstone in Under the Volcano.

¹⁴George Woodcock, "Under Seymour Mountain", Canadian Literature, VIII (spring 1961), 4. Woodcock does not go on to explain this curse.

While these various topics are discussed in the secondary column, the primary one adds discussion of moral and spiritual questions to the thin narrative line.

There is the theme of Life in Death which ties in with the Ancient Mariner. Sigbjorn finds that it is up to man whether he will find life or death in life. He can only find life through resolution. In Under the Volcano the Consul failed to make an act of will and died as a result.

On the subject of morality, Sigbjorn feels that the dull virtue of equilibrium is needed in the world more than ever before. "Equilibrium, sobriety, moderation, wisdom: these unpopular and unpleasant virtues, without which meditation and even goodness are impossible, must somehow, because they are so unpleasant, be recommended as states of being to be embraced with a kind of passion, and thus invested somehow with all the attractions and attributes of qualities rare and savage."¹⁵ Sigbjorn seems to want to do for the common virtues what Wordsworth in "Preface to Lyrical Ballads" said he wanted to do for common experiences, that is, give them a romantic colouring. One could always dismiss Sigbjorn's moral theorizing as the obvious result of Lowry's having too little sobriety, moderation, and equilibrium in himself. However, we should remember that the date of composition of "Through the Panama" is 1947, only two years after the nazi terror, at a time when indeed man should have been conscious of the need for the very virtues Sigbjorn advocates.

¹⁵Hear Us, pp. 77-78.

Alienation and futility are subjects for Sigbjorn's conscious as well as his unconscious thoughts. From Rilke he remembers: ". . . for those unapparent fatalities, once one has recognized them, can be endured only so long as one is capable of expressing them with the same force with which God allows them."¹⁶ One can see how the creative artist could, through his art, express the tragedies of life, but it is not so clear how the non-artist is going to accomplish this task.

The theme of alienation is further developed by another reference to Rilke: "'For here I see once more how much is lavished on me and just plain lost.'"¹⁷ and by the introduction of the concept of what Sigbjorn calls Kafka-like occlusion. The occlusion becomes a metaphysical experience and is, in this case, the occlusion of not knowing what is happening to the ship, not being able to see how it is steered through the storm. This ignorance is only part of the wider alienation and we tend to identify Sigbjorn with the ship when we read about "the ultimate ordeal of [death]"¹⁸ in which man's fate is completely hidden.

Once out of the canal the ship enters the storm. We have passed into not only the world of the unconscious but also the world of spiritual struggle. Things look desperate and Sigbjorn wonders if he will have to go down with his

¹⁶Ibid, p. 81.

¹⁷Ibid, p. 81.

¹⁸Ibid, p. 92.

ship as did his grand-father (Lowry's maternal grand-father was a captain who drowned in the Indian Ocean). Eventually the storm dies down and the first part of the spiritual journey is completed. Then out of the "assembly of apparently incongruous parts, slipping past one another",¹⁹ comes the beginning of order until "from the whole earth, as it spins through space, comes the sound of singing."²⁰ The novella ends on a note of hope as the storm recedes and once more the thrum of the ship's engines becomes the joyful:

Sonnez les matines!
 Sonnez les matines!
 Ding dang dong!
 Ding dang dong!²¹

"Strange Comfort Afforded by the Profession" is an ironic piece describing the strange comfort Sigbjorn Wilderness derives from comparing the anguished letter he once wrote with the personal cries and troubles of Keats, Poe, and Gogol.

While in Rome Sigbjorn visits the Keats museum and in taking down part of Severn's letter describing the dying Keats he finds in his notebook the previous day's notes on the Mamertine Prison and earlier notes on Gogol's agony. Also, from two years previous, he finds notes about the Poe relics in Richmond, Virginia. In the same book is the draft of a letter he himself once wrote to the lawyer appointed by his family to handle his money. From Severn's letter Sigbjorn

¹⁹Ibid, p. 97.

²⁰Ibid, p. 96. Sigbjorn credits this line to C.A. It occurs in Blue Voyage. Aiken probably had in mind the music of the spheres. See also p. 95 below.

²¹Ibid, p. 98.

copies: "--but the fatal prospect of consumption hangs before his mind yet--and turns everything to despair and wretchedness."²² Part of one of the letters Poe never intended for publication reads: "I am perishing--absolutely perishing for want of aid. And yet I am not idle--nor have I committed any offence against society which would render me deserving of so hard a fate. For God's sake pity me and save me from destruction."²³ Poe's cry is similar to Gogol's: "What have I done to them? Why do they torture me? What do they want of poor me? What can I give them? I have nothing. My strength is gone. I cannot endure all this."²⁴ Sigbjorn ponders the significance of these cries for help and also questions why he underlined the day before: "The lower is the true prison," in his notes on the Mamertine. Meanwhile, he continues reading his record of the ironic degradation of past greatness.

His notes tell him that the example of the English language closest to Patrick ("Give me liberty or give me death,") on Henry's grave is a notice reading: "No smoking within ten feet of the Church."²⁵ Richmond, the same city that once produced that eloquent defender of freedom now abounds with pettifoggers' orders. Richmond is plastered with billboards whose language is hardly above animal grunts;

²² Ibid, p. 101.

²³ Ibid, p. 107.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 103.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 105.

the city walls are smeared with the profanities of its children. The juxtaposition of Keats' last cry and a billboard brings out this irony: "'Severn, lift me up, for I am dying.' 'Lift me up, keep them away.' Dr. Swell's Root Beer."²⁶ And inside the Valentine Museum Sigbjorn found:

Please
Do not smoke
Do not run
Do not touch walls or exhibits
Observation of these rules will insure your own
and others' enjoyment of the museum.²⁷

Sigbjorn records that ironically the letter set out for display "to be pursued at leisure by anyone whose enjoyment of it would be 'insured' so long as they neither smoked nor ran nor touched the glass case in which . . . it was preserved," ran: "It will however be the last time I ever trouble any human being--I feel I am on a sick bed from which I shall never get up."²⁸

Why should the public enjoy this display of the weaknesses of its poets. What interest has this public which does not begin to comprehend the character of these souls who were:

. . . determined to drive their leaky commands full of valuable treasure at all cost, somehow into port, and always against time, yet through all but interminable tempest, typhoons that so rarely abated? . . . Ah, now he thought he had it: did not the preservation of such relics betoken . . . less an obscure revenge for the poet's nonconformity, than for his magical monopoly, his possession of words?²⁹

²⁶Ibid, p. 110.

²⁷Ibid, p. 106.

²⁸Ibid, p. 106.

²⁹Ibid, p. 108.

But when the public sees that Poe wrote anything so common as, "For God's sake pity me!" it says: "'You see, after all, he's just like folks.'"³⁰ Is not the significance of the Mamertine that the lowest in mankind imprisons the highest?

And what has been the result of the public's attitude towards its poets? What has happened to today's poet?

It was questionable whether poets especially, in uttermost private, allowed themselves to say things like "For God's sake pity me!" Yes, they had become more like folks even than folks. And the despair in the glass case, all private correspondence carefully destroyed, yet destined to become ten thousand times more public than ever, viewed through the great glass case of art, was now transmuted into hieroglyphics, masterly, compressions, obscurities to be deciphered by experts--³¹

This passage states three distinct but related ideas. First, the protagonist views poetry as a romantic (in the Wordsworthian sense) endeavour through which the poet reveals his mind: second, that we must dig to find the modern poet's anguished cry: third, that it is the public that has for so long made a freak of the poet that has forced him into obscurities. His poetry is doomed to the seminar room and literary journals if he does not want to become a wonder for the idle curious. This is Sigbjorn-Lowry's explanation for the rift between the poet and the public, the alienation of the poet, and modern obscurity.

Lowry probably did not feel that his own poetry was particularly obscure. Birney, in his introduction to the

³⁰Ibid, p. 109.

³¹Ibid, p. 109.

Selected Poems says he thinks it is because Lowry's verse is so innocent of defences, because in it we can see him through the naively translucent masks he puts on, that he was so chary of publishing it in his own life time. As Birney points out, Lowry's distrust of the public was not unfounded. The city that ignored him when he lived there, that bulldozed his Dollarton shack when he was in Europe so that but through the goodness of some friends most of his unpublished works would have been lost, "preserves" him with a bronze plaque on the brick wall of "the new civic craphouse."³²

In "Elephant and Colosseum", Kennish Drumgold Cosnahan sits in a Roman cafe clutching his comic novel Ark from Singapore³³ and awaiting recognition. He has yet another grappa while he gathers the courage to set out once more in search of his Italian publisher. Cosnahan, a Manxman, left his Nantucket home and his actress wife (both Lowry's wives were actresses) and set out for the Isle of Man to see his mother when his brother Matthias, (who surprised the whole village by becoming a Catholic priest) wrote that the old woman was dying.³⁴ Because of some mysterious disease Cosnahan cannot

³²Sel. Poems, p. 10. There actually is a bronze plaque on the wall of the new lavatory at Dollarton beach. (Knickerbocker, p. 314.)

³³This book resembles the stories Dana tells the crew at the end of Ultramarine.

³⁴In setting out from Nantucket perhaps Cosnahan is setting out after his own Moby Dick, his own destructive element, in this case, fame. (The same theme is taken up in "After Publication of Under the Volcano". (Sel. Poems, p. 78.)) Perhaps one reason for making Cosnahan Manx is to draw attention to the fact that in Moby Dick it is the old Manxman who prophesies Ahab's destruction.

fly and by the time his boat arrives in Liverpool his mother is dead. When he does get to the Isle of Man no one recognizes him for his literary achievement and he sets out for Rome.

In Rome, because of his own terror of people, his shyness, and a series of false starts, he cannot find his way to his publisher's. He does find a branch office but they have never even heard of him there. Driven by the need for some token of recognition he sets out in search of Matthias or Arthur, his American publisher's agent, both of whom are supposed to meet him in Rome. Kennish goes first to the Forum which is filled with touring monks, friars, and priests. Everyone looks like Matthias. But even in the midst of this constant disappointment there comes a first gleam of hope in the form of the young lovers of the Eternal City, who, oblivious to the war that is hardly over, are happy in one another.

Cosnahan brings with him his own mythology. Having spoken only Manx Gaelic in his very early years, he has now forgotten much of it yet he is forced still to think in it half the time. Lowry seems to have viewed himself as in the position of the European-born American writer caught between two continents. The death of Cosnahan's mother (she represents his cultural heritage) brings to the fore all his doubts about man's ultimate reconciliation with God. Further, his mother's death seems especially sinister because it was from her (the villagers looked upon her as a witch), that he

inherited his magic power of divining water.³⁵ In "The Forest Path to the Spring" water becomes the symbol of regeneration and God and of creative power in all forms. The artist's power is the power of God.

Cosnahan finds himself faced with numerous related problems: what seems to him a woeful lack of recognition, the dilemma of having left the older language behind yet being forced to think in it much of the time, and reconciliation with his mother whom he has neglected for many ~~many~~ years. The rejection of his mother and his search for fame are symbolically related through water, for while he searches for fame he does not make use of his creative springs. The alienation from the mother would, of course, also stand for the writer's (be it Lowry or Cosnahan) neglect of his European culture. In the midst of all this despair he feels a strange tug, like when a diviner is near water, which takes him to the Rome zoo where he finds Rosemary, the elephant who is the central character in Ark from Singapore, and who was his personal charge on that voyage from the east long ago.³⁶ Since Cosnahan finds Rosemary through his magic divining power the elephant becomes identified with water and can be the agent that sets him aright in the creative path once more.

³⁵About Under the Volcano Lowry said: "The book somehow . . . assumes that the ancestor of us all was perhaps a magician." (Malcolm Lowry, "Letter to Derek Pethick", p. 63.)

³⁶Lowry actually did look after an elephant on a voyage from the east. "More than twenty years later, in the leafy shadows of the Borghese Gardens, he believed he was at last reunited with the elephant because she saluted him in the same solemn way as on shipboard, by placing a wisp of hay on her head with her trunk." (Knickerbocker, p. 304.)

Being confronted with his own past in the form of Rosemary completely rearranges the Cosnahan psyche. "Rosemary was changing into a lapis lazuli elephant, the elephant his mother gave him as a child. And the lapis lazuli elephant changing into a portrait of a young elephant, on the cover of a novel named Ark from Singapore."³⁷ Elephant, toy, and mother become a symbolic complex representing Cosnahan's personal and cultural past. Since, as we will see in "The Forest Path", the past is the spring of creativity, Cosnahan can now return to work by utilizing the past.

Cosnahan considers the strange meeting with Rosemary which was, after all, a little like meeting himself:

For was not Rosemary like a signal from his mother, nay, was it not almost as if his mother had herself produced Rosemary or at least guided his steps to her, his meek and impossible elephant, to a meeting in its gently buffoonish manner nearly sublime. And sublime because didn't it seem almost to tell him that life, all life, must have a happy ending, that it was our tragic sense that was the more frivolous, having been given us for aesthetic reasons alone, that beyond tragedy, beyond the world, if not altogether beyond our wildest dreams of optimism, that Cosnahan, though admittedly a lesser writer, was a more serious one than Shakespeare or somebody.³⁸

Cosnahan finds life basically comic. The word is used in two senses. Life is comic because it is ironic, and it is comic in the way that Dante's Divine Comedy is comic. The final vision is reconciliation with God.

Cosnahan decides that his magic power is human and that it can relate him to mankind. In this way Lowry seems

³⁷Hear Us, p. 168.

³⁸Ibid, pp. 170-71.

to find an answer to the problem of the alienation of the writer which was raised in "Strange Comfort". Although it is the writer's power over words that alienates society from him, it is only through the exercise of that magic power that the artist can be part of humanity. Like Illian Drone, the Manxman who was hanged and lived, Cosnahan is recalled to life.

In "The Present Estate of Pompeii" the protagonist is Roderick McGregor Fairhaven, a Scotch-Canadian schoolmaster who lives near the Wildernesses at Eridanus.³⁹ He and his wife Tansy (Lowry displays an unerring knack for frightful names for his female characters in this book) have left their daughter Peggy in Canada while they holiday in Italy. Lowry shows no interest in this child; he mentions her and forgets her. If he started out to write about someone whose situation varied from his own he soon changed his mind and for all literary or dramatic purposes the Fairhavens are childless.

Spiritually, Roderick is of the same cast as the other protagonists in Hear Us O Lord but he does bring into the story a few personal characteristics. Like Cosnahan he is terrified of dealing with people, (he lets his wife make the arrangements with the guide),⁴⁰ and like all the protagonists he is continually trying to find significance in phenomena around him. However, he is at the same time a

³⁹Downie Kirk was a school teacher in Vancouver when Lowry knew him and he had a summer cottage at Dollarton.

⁴⁰Margerie Lowry handled her husband's money and many of his dealings with the outside world. (David Markson, "Malcolm Lowry: a Reminiscence", p.167.)

little more dour than any of the other protagonists and he is certainly much more pompous and quite humourless. While in a cafe waiting for the rain to stop his conversation with his wife runs:

"The traveller has worked long hours and exchanged good money for this. And what is this? This, pre-eminently is where you don't belong. Is it some great ruin that brings upon you this migraine of alienation--and almost inescapably these days there seems a ruin of some kind involved--but it is also something that slips through the hands of your mind, as it were, and that, even without seeing, you can make nothing of: and behind you, thousands of miles away, it is as if you could hear your own real life plunging to its doom."

"Oh for God's sake Roddy--!"⁴¹

Even Tansy has had enough. I suppose we feel that if a man is going to sit making glum pronouncements he should do so with a little art (especially if he is the central character of a short story).

Yet despite himself Roderick is a welcome figure. He could hardly be called an engaging character, but he is something new. "Elephant and Colosseum" has probably been a long haul for the reader and the slightest fresh puff now seems like an invigorating breeze.

As he tells his wife in his own cheerful way, the prospect of ruin completely unnerves Roddy. The full wine bottle is soon half empty and Roddy looks forward with dread to the end of the ~~litre~~ litre. The approach of a general and nameless catastrophe makes him conscious of the relentless passage of time.

⁴¹Hear Us, p. 177.

Like other protagonists in this book, Roddy is extremely susceptible to ill omens. This timorous Ahab fears everything from the sighting of a white whale from the tower of the Second Narrows Bridge in Vancouver to reports of flying saucers. As we might expect, he fears for his home in Eridanus which might be gobbled up by either a trailer camp or a sub-division. Roddy knows that such an obsession with omens is hardly acceptable behaviour but, "unable to fit these matters comfortably into the filing cabinet of a civilized mind it was as if willy-nilly he'd begun to think with the archaic mind of his remote ancestors⁴² instead, and the result was alarming to a degree."⁴³

It is typical of Lowry to pay a great amount of attention to ancestors and very little to progeny. The Fairhaven's child might as well not exist; Yvonne's child is dead before the Consul meets her. On the other hand, parental histories are common. This tendency is explainable on the autobiographical level by the fact that Lowry had no children himself. On the philosophical level perhaps the interest in parentage is part of the larger wonder of how the individual existence came into being. In "Forest Path to the Spring" Sigbjorn asks why God has given so much to him.

What Roddy finds most amazing and ominous is not that

⁴²Lowry's interest in racial memory probably comes from O'Neill and Aiken. He read The Moon of the Caribbees and The Hairy Ape before his first sea voyage and it is not unusual for Demarest or Arcularis to talk about the time they were fish and amphibians.

⁴³Hear Us, p. 182.

Pompeii was suddenly destroyed by the volcano, but that any of it has been saved at all. The Christians looked back upon the destruction of Pompeii as a triumph for righteousness but now the city is in better shape than any of its contemporaries. Yet this salvation is only temporary. Then is not the salvation of Pompeii the greatest temptation for man to glory in his own deeds? And what about the creative artist? Is not the greatest temptation facing him that of finding some sort of immortality in his works?

At the end of the story Roddy finds out that unknowingly he has already conquered the volcano. Sometime during the very day he went to stand at the edge of the pit of Vesuvius, the volcano gave a big shake. One more of the symbols of death in Under the Volcano has been reversed.

It is possible that there is another explanation of the importance of the survival of Pompeii not really compatible with the first one given but worthy of consideration. This is simply that survival is possible for Roddy as well as Pompeii.

"Gin and Goldenrod" is set on a dull, warm August Sunday. The Wildernesses are on a short journey that Sigbjorn views as a possible new start. He has been at a bootlegger's the Sunday previous and he and Primrose are returning to pay the twenty-six dollars he still owes for the debauch. For Sigbjorn, the trip is a penance, yet he performs it in what is for him the easiest way. He walks instead of taking a taxi because of his dread of the taxi-driver with his knowing

grin. Despite Primrose's complaints and the pain in his side from a fall suffered in staggering home from the bootlegger's, they press on, Sigbjorn not really sure of the direction.

Eventually he is able to retrace his steps and the bootlegger settles for twenty dollars. Primrose congratulates her husband on his courage and the Wildernesses return home. On the way they pass a new subdivision and Primrose stops in the rain to pick some of her favourite flower, goldenrod.

George Woodcock says that in "Gin and Goldenrod" we get at least a whiff of sulphur.⁴⁴ It is a faint whiff. The second symbol, goldenrod, is more important here than the gin. The things associated with the goldenrod, the rain, the companionship of the couple, the hope, dominate the story. And Lowry illustrates a sense of place here that will account for much of the charm of "The Forest Path to the Spring".

Lowry was never so happy as when at Dollarton. When he was in England for his wife's health he wrote of October Ferry to Gabriola (to be published in the fall of 1966): "It is better than the Volcano, a veritable symphony of longing for the beach."⁴⁵ About Lowry's identification with Dollarton George Woodcock writes:

I do not think there is much doubt that Lowry has at least one foot well in the realm that is appropriate to Canadian Literature. . . . And we realize that he is not in fact writing about Canada as a transient outsider. He is writing about it as

⁴⁴George Woodcock, p. 4.

⁴⁵Downie Kirk, "More Than Music: Glimpses of Malcolm Lowry", p. 38.

a man who over fifteen years lived himself into the environment that centred upon his fragile home where the Pacific tides lapped and sucked under the floorboards, and who identified himself with that environment--despite trials of flesh and spirit--as passionately as those other strangers who have rendered so well the essence of their particular corners of Canada, Grove and Haig-Brown. If Mexico stirred him through that combination of antagonism and attraction which so many Europeans feel there, Canada--or at least that fragment of it which stretches out from Burrard Inlet to embrace the Gulf of Georgia--stirred him through a sympathy that led towards total involvement. . . .

It seems to me that it is in this almost rhapsodic identification with place that we find our best reason to claim much of what Lowry wrote for the literature of Canada. For it is not a sense of place that derives from mere observation, like that conveyed by a sensitive and competent travel writer; it is rather the sense of place that derives from a mental naturalization which adds to the native's sense of identity the wonder of newness a native can never experience fully after childhood.⁴⁶

None of the stories in Hear Us O Lord is more anti-social than "Gin and Goldenrod". The forest is being slashed down to make room for houses which, owing to the law, have no trees left near them. To most people all this evidence of growth would be productive of anything but despair, yet at the back of Sigbjorn's unconscious mind is surely Roderick Fairhaven's thought that mankind builds with ruin in view. The song "Keep away: Private" is odious, but surely the most ominous is that which says, "Look Out For Men!" Men, blind in their belief in progress tear down the forest, fill the mountain streams, as they continue to build the history of Canada which has been largely a work of spoilation. Men have come between man and nature. "The plight was an old-fashioned

⁴⁶George Woodcock, pp. 4-5.

one, that had become true again: progress was the enemy, it was not making man more happy or secure. Ruination and vulgarization had become a habit."⁴⁷ Everything about this progress is terrifying and ugly. The suburban dementia is filled with flat, ugly houses on bare, stricken land. The only hope is that the work of men will some day be destroyed, that the forest waiting patiently behind each one of these bourgeois horrors will in time be revenged.

"At dusk every evening, I used to go through the forest to the spring for water."⁴⁸ So begins "The Forest Path to the Spring", the novella dedicated to and seemingly largely inspired by Lowry's wife Margerie. It was this story that Lowry viewed as the final written scene in The Journey that Never Ends.⁴⁹

In this novella the reclamation of tragic symbols is completed so it is fitting that the story should begin as it does. The Consul drank as if drinking an eternal sacrament, but he drank mescal, not only an alcoholic drink but a drug. It is best known in the form of mescaline and the transcendence of its effects is one of the best known experiments among occultists.⁵⁰ The Consul's path through the woods led to the bar ironically named La Farolito--The Little Lighthouse. The Consul died on the Day of the Dead, in the season of death, on the eve of World War II. In "The Forest Path" the

⁴⁷Hear Us, p. 204.

⁴⁸Ibid, p. 215.

⁴⁹Ibid, p. 8. (From the introduction by Margerie Lowry.)

⁵⁰Malcolm Lowry, "Preface to a Novel", p. 28.

symbols of death will be reversed.

The path which in Under the Volcano was both reality and fatality⁵¹ remains as a new reality but is now the path of will:

There has always been something preternatural about paths, and especially in forests--I know now for I have read more--for not only folklore but poetry abounds with symbolic stories about them: paths that divide and become two paths, paths that lead to a golden kingdom, paths that lead to death, or life, paths where one meets wolves, and who knows? even mountain lions, paths where one loses one's way, paths that not merely divide but become the twenty-one paths that lead back to Eden.⁵²

The path at Eridanus is not only the path to the spring but also "a fraction of the only footpath through the forest between the different houses of Eridanus."⁵³ In Under the Volcano final rejection of paradise was co-existent with the final rejection of human love (Yvonne). The path at Eridanus leads to both spiritual awareness and the human community. This path leads not to the last mescal but to the true fountain of life: "It was a source of water, a source of supply; that is why it was called the spring; it is a nuisance, but not insignificant, that I have to use the same word for this as for the season."⁵⁴ Whereas the Consul died in the fall, the final resolution of the cycle of Lowry's work comes in the spring. Finally, the lighthouse now stands down the beach from them, beneficently stopping the encroaching city, the

⁵¹Ibid, p. 25.

⁵²Hear Us, p. 269.

⁵³Ibid, p. 216.

⁵⁴Ibid, p. 254.

highest of civilization protecting man from the worst man can do.

A number of new symbols are used to aid the process of reclamation. The first is the wrecked ship in the harbour, the Eridanus from Liverpool. It is nothing new for Lowry to equate his protagonist to a ship. The actual ship lying wrecked in the harbour cannot be refloated and sent on its way, but since Eridanus is also the name of both a constellation and the beach, something can be accomplished.

The beach at Eridanus is an ambiguous place. It provides only possibility. The inhabitant can find there either life in death or death in life. Lowry himself found life there and his enthusiasm finds its way into both his prose and his poetry. "Prayer from the Wicker Gate for Forty-One Doors for Forty-Two" illustrates Lowry's compact syntax, often jagged diction, and precise imagery at its best in the Dollarton period. The Octave of this sonnet is as follows:

A trillion moons the thimbleberries: coral
The thickets of diamonded frost flowers blazing:
Banked mephitic sawmill glow, and razing
The Rockies, Mars: a spun glass tinsel ball,
High on the dead year's Christmas tree, the real,
The multiflected, moon rides high, dazing
Orion, and the steel cat who, grazing
The bound of the path, becomes stiff laurel.⁵⁵

The constellation Eridanus is "known both as the River of Death and the River of Life."⁵⁶ (Eridanus is in this way

⁵⁵Malcolm Lowry, "Four New Poems by Malcolm Lowry", Prairie Schooner, XXXVII (winter 1963/64), 333. The poem was written for Conrad Aiken for New Year's, 1942. Lowry called his cottage the Wicker Gate and Aiken lived in a house called Forty-One Doors.

⁵⁶Hear Us, p. 226.

related to the Panama Canal and Mr. Charon.) According to legend, Eridanus was placed in the heavens "by Jupiter in remembrance of Phaeton",⁵⁷ who once had the splendid illusion that he could guide the fiery chariot as ably as his father Phoebus. Sigbjorn records that Jupiter's action indicates that he must have been impressed with the attempt. We can see here a basic difference between Kafka and Lowry. Kafka thought all man's actions fall short of pleasing God⁵⁸ whereas Lowry is not at all pessimistic about the possibility of pleasing the gods, for they are impressed even by the attempt.

Other symbols of reclamation are the canister used to fetch the water, the discarded ladder Sigbjorn finds awash and which he builds into the steep part of the path, (the ladder is the past which one endlessly climbs up and down ; it is also perhaps Dante's ladder in Paradise and a symbol from the Cabbala) and the very house in which Sigbjorn and Primrose live which is built upon the charred ruins of their second Eridanus house: "We built it on the same spot as the old house, using the burned posts for part of our foundations that now, being charred, were not susceptible to rot."⁵⁹

Like the path to the spring, water gathers into one symbol of many themes. When Primrose explains to Sigbjorn

⁵⁷Ibid, p. 226.

⁵⁸Downie Kirk, "More than Music: Glimpses of Malcolm Lowry", p. 37.

⁵⁹Hear Us, pp. 270-71.

the cycle of rain she shows him the principle of external motion without change and he goes on to apply this concept to the question of the individual spirit and society. First he reflects upon the current state of civilization. He remarks that so terrible and foreign to the earth has this world become that a child may be born into its Liverpools and never find a single person any longer who will think it worth pointing out to him the simple beauty of the cycle of rain. (Lowry obviously never suffered through the wearisome junior high science taught in this province.) He later reflects upon the importance of this phenomenon:

Each drop falling into the sea is like a life, I thought, each producing a circle in the ocean, or the medium of life itself, and widening into infinity, though it seems to melt into the sea, and become invisible, or disappear entirely, and be lost. Each is interlocked with other circles falling about it, some are larger circles expanding widely and engulfing others, some are weaker smaller circles that only seem to last a short while.⁶⁰

As did the path, the water, in form of rain teaches us that in finding the divine element within the individual we also find that which binds men together.

By this point we have come to expect little action on the objective plane in a Lowry story. In trying to tell Conrad Aiken the plot of October Ferry to Gabriola, Lowry ended by saying: "Well nothing happens. Nothing should in a novel."⁶¹ In "The Forest Path", most of the things most people would regard as major happenings are played down. Very little is

⁶⁰Ibid, p. 282.

⁶¹Markson, "Malcolm Lowry: A Reminiscence", p. 167.

said of the actual fire. The one big occurrence that receives attention is the appearance of a mountain lion.

Suddenly going to the spring becomes a terribly hard chore for Sigbjorn. "It seemed to me as though all our prayers having been answered and myself for once having nothing in the world to worry about for the moment, I had to find something to irk me in this chore."⁶² What Sigbjorn dislikes most is the climb up the ladder. "I came to the conclusion that it was not the chore itself, because it was heavy, but something to do with my thoughts, something that was always elicited on my return journey, especially when I came to the hill, that I really dreaded."⁶³ When Sigbjorn meets the lion he is unafraid. The two stand looking at one another and suddenly the animal springs away into the forest.

It was as though I had actually been on the lookout for something on the path that had seemed ready, on every side, to spring out of our paradise at us, that was nothing so much as the embodiment of some frightful animal form of those nameless somnambulisms, guilts, ghouls of past delirium, wounds to other souls and lives, ghosts of actions approximating to murder, even if not my own actions in this life, betrayals of self and I know not what, ready to leap out and destroy us, and our happiness, so that when, as if in answer to all this I saw a mere lion, how could I be afraid? And yet mysteriously the lion was all that too.⁶⁴

The past, which has haunted every Lowry protagonist from Dana on, with the exception of Sigurd Storlensen, is finally conquered. (Later the Wildernesses even hear the lion has been

⁶²Hear Us, p. 260.

⁶³Ibid, p. 261.

⁶⁴Ibid, pp. 263-64.

killed.) At first Sigbjorn does not realize just what the lion embodies, but when he learns the significance of it and understands why he was not afraid, he knows that the ghosts of the past can be met squarely and driven off.

The experience with the lion does strange things to time. Physical time seems to move so quickly it vanishes while spiritual time stops, thereby expanding into infinity: "It was as if something that used to take a long and painful time now took so little time I couldn't remember it at all; but simultaneously I had a consciousness of a far greater duration of time having passed during which something of vast importance had taken place, without my knowledge and outside time altogether."⁶⁵

Sigbjorn sets out to write a symphony which he thinks of as a prayer. "It must be tumultuous, stormy, full of thunder, the exhilarating word of God must sound through it, pronouncing hope for man, yet it also must be balanced, grave, full of tenderness and compassion and humour."⁶⁶

Fire destroys the symphony manuscript and the Wildernesses must rebuild their home. Even at this time Sigbjorn is not discouraged. He later comments: ". . . the devil himself, who, enemy of all humour in the face of disaster, as of all human delight, and often disguised as a social worker for the common good. . . . wants nothing so much as that man shall believe himself unfriended by any higher power than he."⁶⁷

⁶⁵Ibid, pp. 268-69.

⁶⁶Ibid, p. 266.

⁶⁷Ibid, p. 280.

Sigbjorn cannot recapture his symphony so he sets to work on opera:

Haunted by a line I had read somewhere: "And from the whole world, as it revolved through space, came the sound of singing," and by the passionate desire to express my own happiness with my wife at Eridanus, I composed this opera, built, like our new house, on the charred foundations and fragments of the old work and our old life. The theme was suggested probably by my thoughts of cleansing and purgation and renewal and the symbols of the canister, the ladder and so on, and certainly by the inlet itself and the spring. . . . I even used cannons like Frère Jacques to express the ships' engines or the rhythms of eternity.⁶⁸

While writing the opera Sigbjorn meets the past without fear and re-shapes it with his art. While using his creative force he feels his self dying: "As a matter of fact I never doubted that it was the force itself was killing me. . . and I was in every way delighted that it should, for my whole intention seemed to be to die through it, without dying of course, that I might become reborn."⁶⁹ With this attitude to his art Sigbjorn sets to work. "And I tried to write of human happiness in terms of enthusiasm and high seriousness usually reserved for catastrophe and tragedy. The opera was called The Forest Path to the Spring."⁷⁰

Lowry has now turned the short story "The Forest Path to the Spring" into his most inclusive symbol for it represents the most important of the reclaimed things in Sigbjorn-Lowry's life. From what we know of the lost novel, "The Forest Path" is probably built upon the lost In Ballast to a White Sea.

⁶⁸Hear Us, p. 271.

⁶⁹Ibid, p. 268.

⁷⁰Ibid, p. 271.

Speaking through the mask of Sigbjorn, Lowry sums up his life at Dollarton and his art:

We were still on earth, still in the same place, but if someone had charged us with the notion that we had gone to heaven and that this was the after life we would not have said him nay for long. Moreover, if we had been charged with formerly having been in hell for a while we would probably have had to say yes too, though adding that on the whole we liked that fine, as long as we were together, and were sometimes even homesick for it, though this life had many advantages over the other.

Still, indeed, we had the hellish fear of losing our little house but now the joy and happiness of what we had known would go with us wherever we went or God sent us and would not die. I cannot really well express what I mean but merely set this down in the Montaigne-like belief--or as someone said, speaking about Montaigne--that the experience of one happy man might be useful.⁷¹

The novella, the book, and the cycle of Lowry's prose end as Sigbjorn and Primrose walk through the rain. For the last time, relating the Great Circle to eastern religion, Lowry focuses upon the cyclic movement of the universe as he describes the raindrops landing in the sea:

They were perfect expanding circles of light, first tiny circles bright as a coin, then becoming expanding rings growing fainter and fainter, while as the rain fell into the phosphorescent water each raindrop expanded into a ripple that was water from the sea, as my wife first taught me, raised to heaven by the sun, transformed into clouds, and falling again into the sea. While within the inlet itself the tides and currents in that sea returned, became remote, and becoming remote, like that which is called Tao, returned again as we ourselves had done.⁷²

⁷¹Ibid, p. 281.

⁷²Ibid, p. 282.

APPENDIX A

Why is it that I seem always, in trying to say the simplest things, to embroil myself in complications and side issues, in references and tangents, in qualifications and relativities: It is my weakness as an author (so the critics have always said) that I appear incapable of presenting a theme energetically and simply. I must always wrap it up in tissue upon tissue of proviso and aspect; see it from a hundred angles; turn laboriously each side to the light; producing in the end not so much a unitary work of art as a melancholy cauchemar of ghosts and voices, a phantasmagoric world of disordered colours and sounds; a world without design or purpose; and perceptible only in terms of the prolix and the fragmentary. The criticism is deserved, of course: but I have often wished that the critics would do me the justice to perceive that I have deliberately aimed at this effect, in the belief that the old unities and simplicities will no longer serve. No longer serve, I mean, if one is trying to translate, in any form of literary art, the consciousness of modern man. And this is what I have tried to do. I am no longer foolish enough to think that I have succeeded--I am in process of adjustment to the certainty that I am going to be a failure. I take what refuge I can in a strictly psychological scrutiny of my failure, and I endeavor to make out how much this is due to (1) a simple lack of literary power, or genius, or the neurosis that we give that name, and how much to (2) a mistaken assumption as to the necessity for this new literary method. What if--for example--in choosing this literary method, this deliberate indulgence in the prolix and fragmentary, I merely show myself at the mercy of a personal weakness which is not universal, or ever likely to be, but highly idiosyncratic? That is perfectly possible; and it brings me back to my starting point. I am like that--I do think and feel in this confused and fluctuating way--I frequently suspect that I am nothing on earth but a case of dementis praecox, manqué, or arrested. Isn't all this passion for aspects and qualification and relativities a clear enough symptom of schizophrenia?

It is as a result of my uncertain and divided attitude toward you [Cynthia, who is marrying someone else] that you now finally wash your hands of me; the conflict in me between the declared and the unproclaimed produced that callow and caddish ambiguity of behavior which offended you. And now, in this letter, I continue the offense! I mumble and murmur and beat round the bush--and succeed in saying nothing. Why is it that I don't simply say that the whole trouble has been that, from the moment when I first saw you coming up the gangway to the Silurian, last year, I adored you and was terrified by you? Yes, you terrified me. But what use is there in analyzing this? None. The important thing is merely to say that I have loved you, that I love you, and that I must, now that you have dropped me, take any available way of telling you this, no matter how much the method may offend you.

Alas! all this is beside the point. Why is it that I cannot, in some perfectly simple and comprehensive manner, tell you exactly how I feel about you, and exactly what sort of creature I am? One wouldn't suppose that this would present inordinate difficulties. Yet, when I set myself the task this morning, do you know what form my unfinished letter was going to take? A long, sentimental reminiscence of my childhood! Yes, I actually believed for a moment that by some such circumferential snare as that I might trap you, bring you within my range, sting, and poison you with the subtle-sweet poison of a shared experience and consciousness. That again is highly characteristic of me. It is precisely the sort of thing I am always trying to do in my writing--to present my unhappy reader with a wide-ranged chaos--of actions and reactions, thoughts, memories and feelings--in the vain hope that at the end he will see that the whole thing represents only one moment, one feeling, one person. A raging, trumpeting jungle of associations, and then I announce at the end of it, with a gesture of despair, "This is I!" . . . Is it any wonder that I am considered half mad, a charlatan, or, worse still, one who has failed to perceive the most elementary truth about art, namely, that its first principle is selection? ... And here I struggle in the same absurd roundabout way to give you some inkling of the springs of my behaviour, in a vain hope that you will think better

of my failure to--what? To attract you. But I did attract you. To capture you? Perhaps to avoid disgusting you? Perhaps it is that. "Here I am" (I might say), "this queer psychopathic complicated creature: honeycombed with hypocrasies and subtleties, cowardices and valors, cupidities and disgusts; on the whole harmless . . ."1

¹Aiken, Blue Voyage in The Collected Novels of Conrad Aiken, pp. 153-54.

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