

A LIVERPOOL OF SELF

A Study of Lowry's Fiction other than  
Under the Volcano.

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is an investigation of a group of central themes which run through Lowry's work; it centres on such key-words as 'isolation', 'alienation', and 'self-absorption'. Lowry's protagonists are seen as men trapped in "a Liverpool of self"; they are characteristically torn between a desire to escape from their prison and a desire to remain in it. Although Lowry invests his self-absorbed heroes with a certain splendour, fulfilment only comes to them when they become capable of reaching beyond themselves and entering into community with another.

In the Introduction, I have briefly reviewed Lowry's early life and works. We can find, in his insecure childhood and in his obsessive identification with Conrad Aiken and Nordahl Grieg, evidence of his own alienation; the search for a stable human relationship is central to even his earliest work.

Chapter I is a discussion of Lunar Caustic; I distinguish between the two major versions of this book, finding in each a distinct aspect of the search for relationship. The chapter concludes with some observations on the probable structure of The Voyage That Never Ends as Lowry first conceived it.

After his second marriage in 1940, the relationship between man and wife became, for Lowry, the prototype of the community which his

protagonists seek. In Chapter 2 I discuss Dark As the Grave Wherein My Friend Is Laid and La Mordida, in which the marriage relationship is central.

Chapter 2 concludes with an analysis of Sigbjørn Wilderness' 'metaphysical alienation'; Chapter 3 traces the cyclical pattern of Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place in terms of the constant struggle to break down the distinction between the inner world of the mind and the outer 'real' world.

In "The Element Follows You Around, Sir!" and "Ghostkeeper" we see this 'real' world itself in the throes of a kind of nervous breakdown; in Chapter 4 I attempt to find the meaning of these puzzling stories, and conclude that, like the rest of Lowry's work, they affirm the necessity of the individual to find himself in relation to others.

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TRINITY

Imprisoned in a Liverpool of self  
I haunt the gutted arcades of the past.  
Where it lies on some high forgotten shelf  
I find what I was looking for at last.  
But now the shelf has turned into a mast  
And now the mast into an uptorn tree  
Where one sways crucified twixt two of me.

Selected Poems of Malcolm Lowry, p. 74.

## INTRODUCTION

Under the Volcano has been recognized, in recent years, as being among the finest twentieth-century novels. This upsurge of interest is easier to explain than the preceding years of neglect, for the novel can be seen at once as a Faustian tragedy, as an unsurpassed study of the mind of an alcoholic, and as a disturbing account of the self-destructive impulse at work in a man's mind - an account which appears increasingly relevant in a world which seems set on destroying itself. Yet in spite of this interest in Under the Volcano, the rest of Malcolm Lowry's fiction remains oddly neglected; and this is a pity, for although Under the Volcano is Lowry's finest work, Ultramarine, Lunar Caustic, Dark As the Grave Wherein My Friend Is Laid, and Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place are far from inconsiderable.

Throughout his work, Lowry constantly returns to a small group of central themes - isolation, exile, dispossession. His protagonists are pre-eminently men who are locked in the gaol of their own minds; they can relate neither to others nor to the environment in which they find themselves. From Dana Hilliot, the English boy of Scandinavian origin sailing half the world, to Roderick McGregor Fairhaven, the Scots-Canadian inspecting the ruins of Pompeii, they are wanderers, men who cannot find their context in their immediate situation. The story Lowry tells of them traces their attempts, successful or unsuccessful, to achieve fulfilment by coming to terms with the world outside themselves.

For Lowry, the release from self comes through relationship with others; isolated contemplation of the world reveals only a meaningless chaos. For what Lowry's protagonists risk, in their self-absorption, is, paradoxically, a loss of their self-awareness, of their sense of personal identity. I can only think of this sense of identity as a product of ourselves in relation to our environment; it is our consciousness of ourselves as acting, thinking, or feeling in response to what is outside us. For man this environment is a social one; only to a peculiar few does a solitary life in the bush have any permanent appeal - the rest take at least wives or mistresses when escaping from civilization. Most of our time is spent in reacting in various ways to others, and it is this interaction which defines us as individuals. To be cut off from human contact is to run the risk of losing our awareness of this definition; the castaway and the alcoholic can both run into grave psychological dangers.

Yet at the same time, to relate to another person means that we must in some sense identify ourselves with him; we must accept, or assume, a similarity between two modes of consciousness. The self-absorbed man, more conscious of the differences which separate him from his fellows than with the similarities which unite him with them, may find it impossible to make this assumption; in this case his isolation might feed itself indefinitely. Nevertheless the circuit has eventually to be broken, for we cannot know ourselves, or even be ourselves, in isolation. We can only affirm our identity by relating to, and identifying with, others; not to do so is hell.

And no other writer has given us a clearer insight into the



appalling attractions of hell, of the desire to obliterate the self in a continual ecstasy of anguish. Each of Lowry's protagonists (excepting, perhaps, Dana Hilliot) is a battleground where the demands and rewards of life - the offered devotion of a wife, the responsibilities to other men - are pitted against the impulse to isolation and self-destruction - an impulse which is generally expressed in a besetting drunkenness. The desire for life and love is passionate, even desperate; the desire for oblivion, for death, remains a constant obsession. Rarely does either impulse win out completely (Under the Volcano is the magnificent but negative exception); although Lowry characteristically affirms man's ability to overcome himself, the victory is never final, but must be won again and again.

The life of a writer who draws his material from his inner response to the outside world inevitably suggests insights into his creative processes. In Lowry's life we can see the genesis of his major themes; more important, it throws some light on his novel In Ballast to the White Sea, which was lost when the Lowrys' shack burned down in 1944.

The son of a rich Liverpool cotton broker, Lowry never appears to have been close to his family; like his brothers, he inherited his father's love of exercise, but unlike them he had none of his father's aptitude for commerce. His mother was the only member of the family towards whom he showed any real affection; his father, he felt, regarded him as "a kind of item on the business agenda."<sup>1</sup> He was sent to boarding-school at the age of seven, and was never again to live with his family on anything like a permanent basis. From the first he was an outsider; for four years he was almost blind, and as a result

was persecuted by the other boys:

An autopsy on this childhood then reveals:  
That he was flayed at seven, crucified at eleven.  
And he was blind as well, and jeered at  
For his blindness.<sup>2</sup>

By 1929, the year in which he entered Cambridge University, Lowry had survived a public school education, steeped himself in the works of Melville and Conrad, and undertaken the voyage to the Far East which was to be the basis of Ultramarine. In the accounts given by his friends of the Cambridge years<sup>3</sup> we see him still an outsider; he is described as chronically shy, afraid of sexual contact, and afraid of anyone in a position of authority. Although to some Lowry was a gay, brilliant talker or a happy-go-lucky ukelele player, the abiding impression these reminiscences leave is of a desperate need on Lowry's part for security in his relationships with others. "He was always making embarrassing gestures," recalled John Davenport, "insisting we become blood-brothers with appropriate ceremonials, things like that."<sup>4</sup>

In about 1928 Lowry read Conrad Aiken's Blue Voyage, and as a result initiated a correspondence with the American author which lead to a long and close friendship. Already recognized as a distinguished writer of both verse and prose, Aiken must have been, to Lowry, a father-figure. Lowry's father, an eminent and forceful man in his own milieu, was utterly unequipped to comprehend his son's aspirations; against his authority could be set Aiken's, a man of equal eminence in his own sphere. From the beginning Lowry and Aiken understood each other. "The fact is that we were uncannily alike in almost everything, found instantly that we spoke the same language, were astonishingly en rapport," Aiken has written.<sup>5</sup>

Yet although Lowry found a kind of emotional security in his relationship with Aiken, the relationship itself came to posit further psychological dangers, for so intense was Lowry's identification with the older writer that he felt the boundaries which divide one personality from another breaking down, and in this process he found himself being absorbed by Aiken. In a letter to Aiken dating from the period when he was working on Ultramarine, Lowry wrote:

. . . I have [read\*] my blasted book with increasing misery: with a misery of such intensity that I believe myself sometimes to be dispossessed, a spectre of your own discarded ideas, whose only claim to dignity appears in those ideas.<sup>6</sup>

The result was a self-protective reaction on Lowry's part, an attempt to subsume Aiken's personality into his own; in Aiken's Ushant, Hambo (Lowry) asks D. (Aiken):

Am I not your son, in whom you are destined to be well pleased? . . . What possible escape is there for you from the logical and temporal sequence, as members of a series, by which it is your fate simply to become a better 'you' in me--? I shall become a better 'you' and you will be dead.<sup>7</sup>

Fortunately both writers survived their encounter; after 1937 they continued to write to each other, and spoke of each other with genuine affection, but did not maintain close contact.

The other relationship which had a crucial formative influence on Lowry's work was his identification with the Norwegian writer, Nordahl Grieg. It was probably in 1929 that he first read The Ship

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\* This word is indecipherable in the ms.; "read" is an obvious reading.

Sails On; deeply impressed by the novel, he signed on a Norwegian tramp steamer bound for Archangel during his first long vacation at Cambridge (1930), with the intention of meeting Grieg if possible. After being paid off at Aalesund, in Northern Norway, Lowry went on to trace Grieg in Oslo; the striking series of coincidences which led up to and surrounded their meeting was, for Lowry, an "absolutely glaring testimony to the existence of the transcendental in the whole business."<sup>8</sup> Yet their meeting was not to be repeated, and it appears that Lowry wrote to Grieg only once afterward.<sup>9</sup>

In Ballast to the White Sea grew out of Lowry's notes on the voyage and the meeting with Grieg, and his account of the novel in his first letter to David Markson reveals the immense significance which the episode had for him.<sup>10</sup> The protagonist was a Cambridge undergraduate, referred to in the letter as A, who is identified "by and large, more or less, with reservations", with Lowry himself. A is an isolated drunkard who wants to write, but this desire is paralyzed by a curious identity-crisis brought on by reading another man's book:

. . . the more A reads X's [Grieg's] book the more identified he becomes with the principal character of that book, Y [Benjamin]. . . the more so as the experience of Y--by extension that of X too--closely--indeed supernaturally resembles his own: not merely that, but X's book uncannily resembles the one A's been trying to write himself, which it seems to have rendered futile.<sup>11</sup>

This sense of identity grows until A's life becomes completely disoriented:

He neglects his studies, starts to drink like a fish, finds his own work increasingly worthless, gets through an exam on Dante's Inferno by consulting a blind medium who tells him what the

questions will be, at last becomes, in spite of that, so closely identified with X that now when he does pull himself together and write, he can't be sure that he isn't transcribing whole sections of X's novel which, whenever he is sober, which is not often, he has to destroy.<sup>12</sup>

Lowry, it seems, identified with Grieg only through the character of Benjamin; he was startled by the sense of having his own experience so precisely duplicated by another mind. Yet this very duplication suggested to him that the world in which man finds himself is not without meaning; in In Ballast to the White Sea the discovery of the correspondences between A and X is an integral part of their regeneration.

The depth and obsessiveness of his identification with Aiken and Grieg indicate the extent of Lowry's alienation from the world around him. He was attracted to them, at first, through their work; but while Grieg offered a curious parallel in experience, it is attractive to assume that he found in Aiken a mind which, rather than sharing his own experience, attempted to approach and to analyze experience in the same way. Nevertheless, both must have appeared to be a kind of validation of his own vision and his own ideals in an environment which considered such a vision, such ideals, to be, at best, eccentric.

In Ultramarine, Lowry's first novel, the themes and symbols which run through all his work are adumbrated. It is the story of Dana Hilliot, a rich man's son who tries to gain first-hand experience of life by shipping aboard a tramp steamer bound for the Far East. Because he is a novice, because he is rich, and because he wishes to remain faithful to the shadowy and virginal figure of his girl, Janet, he is despised by most of the crew. Dana's chief persecutor is his immediate boss, Andy, who is the ship's cook, and a man with whom Dana feels a powerful

underlying kinship; it is only through Andy, he knows, that he will come to be accepted by the crew. But Andy does not recognize this kinship, and Dana can only try to prove himself among the others by demonstrating his prowess at swimming and drinking; these gestures prove futile, for as long as he remains sexually inexperienced the crew consider him to be less than a man. He is faced with the problem of having to sin, having to break faith with Janet, in order to live with the men around him.

Eventually Dana comes to be accepted by the crew without losing his virginity; after a failure which both he and Andy share, they talk together over a bottle of whisky, and Dana realizes that in spite of his flaunted virility, Andy is essentially a man who has missed out. He has lost his capacity for love, and all that is left to him is the indiscriminate and joyless act of copulation. Understanding this, Dana can accept the "promiscuous stallion instinct" in himself, and in so doing can see the nature of his kinship with Andy; yet at the same time he finds himself able to transcend the older man:

I have identification with Andy: I am Andy. I regard it all now with sanity and detachment. But I have outgrown Andy. Mentally, I have surrounded Andy's position, instead of being baffled and hurt by it.<sup>13</sup>

His acceptance by Andy leads to his acceptance by the rest of the men; and by the end of the novel Dana is ready to proceed from the hell of the seamen's mess to the deeper hell of the stokehold.

Lowry always considered Ultramarine to be a largely derivative work. "Blue Voyage", he told Aiken, "has become part of my consciousness; & I cannot conceive of any other way in which Ultramarine might be

written,"<sup>14</sup> and to Grieg he wrote: "Much of Ultramarine is paraphrase, plagiarism, or pastiche from you."<sup>15</sup> Certainly Lowry had not yet subsumed Aiken's style into his own when he wrote Ultramarine; the careful use of contrasting narrative methods to show differing modes of consciousness in a single central protagonist, the running commentary on the protagonist's own psyche, which leads to an ironical juxtaposition of his responses and his reflections on the integrity of those responses, are techniques which Lowry had learned from Blue Voyage. Yet the resemblances between the two novels are stylistic rather than thematic, and if Lowry's book is the more sentimental, its irony the less accomplished, it is still in many respects the more powerful. The issues raised are deep-rooted and painful; by contrast, Aiken's novel appears contrived and narcissistic. It can be argued that the contrivances which Lowry borrowed from Blue Voyage diminish Ultramarine's impact, that the irony implicit in Aiken's technique does not gel with the pain of the situation which Lowry wished to convey. There is some truth in this; but even when he wrote this first novel, a double vision, at once passionate and ironical, had become, and was to remain, an essential part of what he had to say. Blue Voyage suggested techniques for casting his material into this double vision.

Ultramarine owes much less to The Ship Sails On; only in the theme of a young man's initiation into the adult world do the novels parallel each other. Benjamin, the boy making his first voyage on a tramp steamer, has little difficulty in being accepted by the crew; The Ship Sails On is concerned with his increasing participation in the adult world, and the growing knowledge of pain and despair which such partici-

pation , in Grieg's view, entails. In the end, it is only through a kind of malevolence directed at the ship, which itself epitomizes the hostility of the world toward man, that Benjamin prevents himself from committing suicide. Ultramarine has none of this rather facile pessimism; it is a book which ultimately affirms man's capacity for fulfilment. Although his resolution is a little glib, a little easy, in this first novel, the implication that man finds himself through relating to others is a theme which Lowry explores throughout his work.

Yet while Lowry's novel is finally more serious and more moving than Grieg's, it leaves the reader dissatisfied. The reason, I think, is that Dana's escape from his isolation is unconvincing. It is well enough for him to become 'one of the boys', but he knows himself that the crew's world is not, in the end, his own. Nor does the altruistic desire to help others which Dana develops in his letter to Janet appear to be more than an adolescent effusion which commits him to no specific action. Janet herself is too vague a figure to represent a real possibility for human interaction. At this point in his life, I suspect, Lowry was aware of man's need for relationship with others; but did not as yet know how that need might be assuaged. Within months of the publication of Ultramarine, Lowry began to find in marriage the paradigm of the kind of relationship which his protagonists seek.

Of all human relationships, that between husband and wife is the most demanding; it can also be the most rewarding. At best, the prolonged and intimate interaction which marriage involves can enable the self-absorbed man to escape from the prison of his mind; here, if anywhere, the love of another can become a fact of his existence. If,



on the other hand, he has lost his capacity to love, marriage will only serve to define still more clearly his isolation. Two stories, "In Le Havre"<sup>16</sup> and "Hotel Room in Chartres",<sup>17</sup> both published within a year of his first marriage to Jan Gabriel,<sup>18</sup> begin Lowry's long study of the relationship between man and wife.

With this motif emerges the impulse to isolation, to self-damnation, which is to characterize Lowry's later protagonists. Dana Hilliot has isolation forced on him; his struggle is to win the affection and respect of the crew. In the new situation the protagonist is offered love, but finds himself strongly tempted to reject it.

"In Le Havre", an account of the self-recriminations of a man, who, in a moment of anger, had told his wife that he did not love her, is one of Lowry's least successful stories; "Hotel Room in Chartres", on the other hand, is a fine, neglected piece. The story is a concise analysis of the painful ambivalences which can underlie even a deep and mutual love between two people:

. . . he saw his wife coming swiftly towards him, and felt instantly a tenderness for her and relief that she had come; but when he moved towards her to speak, found himself suddenly fighting down a desire to hurt, a brute within him that surprised even himself. And when he finally did speak, it was non-committally, as if to a stranger.<sup>19</sup>

The conflict within the protagonist is between his love for his wife and his desire to return to his seafaring past. "He had left the sea", we are told, "no longer able to endure the pain of its reality, as now without the presence of that reality he could no longer bear the pain of its illusion."<sup>20</sup> On the train to Chartres he wants to join the group of sailors, who, he believes, are going to their ship; they

symbolize for him the past which he wishes to escape into. The sailors, however, are returning home; they are seeking the very love and security which the protagonist has wanted to reject. Realizing this, he is able to initiate a reconciliation with his wife, and the story closes with the couple "folded together in each other's arms crying with joy that they had found each other once more."<sup>21</sup>

Lowry's first marriage proved to be a disaster, and it is presumably for this reason that the motif of the broken marriage recurs in his earlier work as a symptom of the protagonist's isolation. Not until the 1940's does Lowry return again to the idea of marriage as an alternative to alienation. Yet throughout his writing he is concerned with anatomizing the forces within man which prevent him from becoming a part of the world outside himself. Although he invests those who remain "imprisoned in a Liverpool of self" with a certain heroic stature, value lies in living with, and for, others. Unless the self-absorbed man can somehow bring himself to participate in other lives, he shares the fate of Rilke's 'self-lost':

For angels never come to such men's prayers,  
nor nights for them mix glory with their gloom.  
Forsakenness is the self-loser's doom,  
and such are absent from their father's cares  
and disincluded from their mother's womb.<sup>22</sup>

FOOTNOTES: INTRODUCTION

<sup>1</sup> Harvey Breit and Margerie Bonner Lowry, eds., The Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), p. 260.

<sup>2</sup> From "Autopsy" (title by Earle Birney), a poem printed in Canadian Literature (Spring, 1961), 23.

<sup>3</sup> In, for example, Conrad Knickerbocker, "Malcolm Lowry in England," Paris Review 38 (Summer, 1966), 13-38, and "A Portrait of Malcolm Lowry compiled by Arthur Calder-Marshall", The Listener, 78-2011 (12 October 1967), 461-3.

<sup>4</sup> Paris Review 38, 23.

<sup>5</sup> Conrad Aiken, "Malcolm Lowry: a Note", Canadian Literature 8, 30.

<sup>6</sup> In an unpublished ms. letter in the Special Collections Division of the University of British Columbia Library.

<sup>7</sup> Conrad Aiken, Ushant (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1962), p. 355.

<sup>8</sup> Selected Letters, p. 263.

<sup>9</sup> In 1938, from Los Angeles. He wrote: "Although I have not written to you my consciousness has never been far away from you: nor has my friendship." In Selected Letters, p. 15-16.

<sup>10</sup> He told Grieg "My identity with Benjamin [sic] eventually led me into mental trouble." (Selected Letters p. 15-16.)

<sup>11</sup> Selected Letters, p. 255.

<sup>12</sup> Selected Letters, p. 261.

<sup>13</sup> Malcolm Lowry, Ultramarine (Toronto, Vancouver: Clarke, Irwin & Company, 1963), p. 185.

<sup>14</sup> See note 6.

<sup>15</sup>Selected Letters, p. 16.

<sup>16</sup>Published in Life and Letters, X-55, (July 1934), 462-6.

<sup>17</sup>Published in Story, V (September 1934), 53-58.

<sup>18</sup>In December 1933.

<sup>19</sup>Story, V, 55.

<sup>20</sup>Story, V, 53.

<sup>21</sup>Story, V, 58.

<sup>22</sup>Rilke, "The Olive Garden", tr. J. B. Leishman.

## CHAPTER I

Lowry worked on Lunar Caustic from 1936 until his death, and at least six complete typescripts have survived. They may be grouped into two distinct versions, the earlier called The Last Address and the later called Swinging the Maelstrom. In his last years in England Lowry was working on a melding of these two versions into a novella; his final choice for the title was Lunar Caustic. The task of melding was completed by Earle Birney and Margerie Lowry, who have published a version of Lunar Caustic;<sup>1</sup> but this edition has inevitably lost much of the coherence of The Last Address and Swinging the Maelstrom, for these versions differ considerably in method and intention. I shall, therefore, discuss them separately, keeping the title Lunar Caustic to refer only to the projected complete work.<sup>2</sup>

Lowry said that Lunar Caustic was "intended to play a sort of Purgatorio to the Volcano's Inferno."<sup>3</sup> This hint is useful, because Purgatory is a kind of median between Heaven and Hell, a place of transition where opposites meet. Here evil is cauterized from the soul, and with this knowledge the soul is ecstatic in its agony; and although the process is a kind of death, this death is the prelude to rebirth. But modern man cannot commit himself to such a Dantesque conception of Purgatory, even as a metaphor; his faith in salvation is not strong enough. The world of Lunar Caustic is deeply ambiguous, and is closer to hell than heaven.

The setting is a hospital in New York,<sup>4</sup> "that city which always holds a paradise in one hand and an inferno in the other."<sup>5</sup> The cry of the hospital patients is described as

partly a cheer and partly a wailing shriek, like some cry of the imprisoned spirit of New York itself, that spirit haunting the abyss between Europe and America and which broods like futurity over the Western Ocean.<sup>6</sup>

The city we see in the story is one in which the transitory is most in evidence. Its factories wave a farewell to life; the ships which come and go bring sometimes a suggestion of hope, but more often of hopelessness. Encompassing the polarity between joy and despair, placed uneasily between the New World and the Old, it personifies a kind of insecurity. It is a city perched on the edge of a chasm.

The hospital, which "might be called a prison, an asylum, the Great Whore that sits on the waters,"<sup>7</sup> lies on the East River in the centre of this city of shifting meanings. In the two wharves before the observation ward we are presented again with the juxtaposition of life and death, of hope and despair; on the one is the powerhouse and the hanging noose, while moored at the other are the white and blue boats "which seemed to tell as they nudged and nibbled ceaselessly at the suicidal blackness of the water, of white and blue girls in summer."<sup>8</sup> Between the wharves is the wrecked barge on which, momentarily, the protagonist sees the crumpled body of a sailor; this barge, to which the boy Garry will return again and again in his stories, is the external emblem of the world of decay in which the patients live. Throughout the description of the setting, opposites coexist, but the negative elements predominate; we are made more aware of death

than of life, of decay more than of any possible regeneration.

The ambivalence of the outside world is reflected in the patients and staff of the hospital. Garry, for example, is an entertaining innocent, but one who has committed a horrible crime. He is a moral paradox personified; neither guilty nor guiltless, in him the cycle of innocence - guilt - repentance - redemption is broken. He is creative, but this creativity itself can be seen both as an attempt to formulate a vision of reality and as an attempt to avoid coming to terms with reality. Again, we can see in Claggart a conscientious doctor who is doing his best in an almost impossible situation, and an insensitive bully who cares little for his patients.

In this world where reality is multifaceted, Sigbjørn Lawhill, the protagonist of The Last Address, is utterly alone:

. . . we suspect that he must be looking, rather than trying to remember something. Perhaps it is for his father, who heroically went down alone with his ship, a month after losing half his crew with cholera: or his son, who went away and shot himself. . . . or his wife, who left him when he started to drink? Or, perhaps like the poor cat who had lost an eye in a battle, he is just looking for his sight?<sup>9</sup>

A drunkard and a sailor, he has neither others to care for nor insight into himself. There is nothing, either in terms of awareness of the past or relationships in the present, by which his personality might be defined; he is a man in a vacuum, a man without identity. The Last Address is an account of his search to find himself in relation to others; for only by caring for and helping others can he escape the limitations of his own mind. This theme is adumbrated in his cryptic shout as he enters the hospital:

"Veut-on que je disparaisse, que je plonge, à la recherche de l'anneau . . . I am sent to save my father, to find my son, to heal the eternal horror of three, to resolve the immedicable horror of opposites."<sup>10</sup>

The only way Lawhill can structure this chaotic world at the beginning of the story is through his "hysterical identification" with Melville; he integrates his experiences in the hospital by relating them to the patterns of experience which Melville works out in Moby Dick and Billy Budd, so that he associates Garry with Melville's Pip, who, by losing his sanity, saw into a deeper reality, and while watching the groping hand during the puppet-show, he murmurs to himself "Leviathan."

The parallels with Melville serve not only as an indication of Lawhill's neurotic perception of the world, but also form a major structural element in the story. Lawhill is associated both with the doomed Pequod and the alienated Ahab; the first quotation from Moby Dick which is applied to him suggests some impending disaster - "feeling that he encompassed in his stare oceans from which might be revealed that phantom destroyer of himself." Like Ahab, he has to risk destruction in order to test reality, and the destruction might be total annihilation - insanity or a death of the spirit - or the necessary prelude to regeneration.

The first people Lawhill meets on waking up in the hospital are Garry and Horowitz, the spiritual father and son for whom he has been searching. They are ostensibly in the hospital because their insanity is dangerous - Garry has killed a young girl and Horowitz has threatened to kill his brother-in-law's family; nevertheless Lawhill cannot accept that they are, in any usual sense of the word, insane. He feels that



Garry is a kind of unlettered Rimbaud, a boy whose obsession with "the decay at the centre of the world" reveals a perceptive intuition which is fundamentally artistic; the stories which Claggart dismisses as normally abnormal fantasies are, to Lawhill, frightening and valid visions of a chaotic world. Similarly he sees Horowitz as the Wandering Jew, a man who epitomizes in himself suffering mankind, and is sympathetic to his claim that he had been institutionalized because of his Communist views.

With the companionship of these two people, Lawhill begins to take an interest in those around him. He is quickly sickened by the degradation and casual cruelty which seems an accepted part of the hospital life, and, realizing his own relative health, determines to try to help them. Yet at the same time, watching the trapped and derelict patients, he becomes increasingly aware of the ambiguities of existence; when he sees the old men eating, he

gradually understood the meaning of death, not as a sudden dispatch of violence, but as a function of life, which of all things is the most mysterious and terrible.<sup>11</sup>

There can be no unity within life itself, for the unity is composed of both life and death; terror is inescapable. Opposites collapse into one another; he reflects that "even Nature herself is shot through with jitteriness,"<sup>12</sup> and thinks of the world as a "collaboration between a lunatic and a drunkard."<sup>13</sup>

For Lawhill, insanity is often an understandable response to an insane world; the job of the physician is not to teach his patients to adapt to this world, but to give them a new awareness of themselves. With his new-found concern for others, he tries to explain to Claggart

that many of the patients are being brought to a debased and servile acceptance of themselves and of the world:

"many who are supposed to be cuckoo here, as opposed to the sick, are simply, well, not even exactly extreme people, who perhaps once saw, however confusedly, the necessity for change, for rebirth . . . but they were unable to make the grade organically and sank back into the degeneration they now embrace."<sup>14</sup>

He makes a special plea for Garry, whose creative gift, he contends, is going unnourished, when its encouragement could both help Garry himself and lead the world to something better, and for Horowitz, who is a kindly and harmless old man.

Claggart, the apologist for the world as it is, has no difficulty in discrediting Lawhill's arguments. He sees Lawhill's complaints about the inhumanity of the hospital as merely reflecting his refusal to accept authority, and his perception of the patients' need for rebirth as no more than a projection of his own neurosis. He never admits that Lawhill's ideas have any kind of objectivity; they arise only from "his own state." When apparently talking about other patients, Lawhill is really talking about himself; in finding merit in Garry's stories he is really playing out his own desire to write.

In this clash between Lawhill and Claggart, it is impossible to say that either is right or wrong. Both are, in their own terms, men of goodwill; they simply cannot communicate. There is no way for Lawhill to express his ideas within Claggart's terms of reference, and therefore, he cannot persuade him to change the situation. Under this trial he begins to validate Claggart's analysis; he is reduced to bitter and insulting sarcasm, to fantasizing on his experience in

the world, and to challenging the doctor to a test of strength.

The encounter with Claggart represents the farthest extension of Lawhill's attempt to live in the outside world and to help those around him, and although the parallels with Melville imply that truth, or at least goodness, lies with Lawhill in the shifting ambiguities set up in the episode,<sup>15</sup> the attempt fails, and he begins to slide back into the abyss of his own self-absorption. Looking out at the city from the annexe to Claggart's office, he sees that a storm is gathering; symbolically it is the storm which threatens to engulf humanity as well as his own mind, but only the patients in the hospital, rejected by the "sane" world, are aware of its approach. As the storm breaks Lawhill feels for a moment a sense of release, of "being already outside, of being free, free to run with the wind if he wished, and as fast, and as far away as possible from the hospital."<sup>16</sup> But the hope that regeneration will come with the storm is raised only to be immediately extinguished, for he realizes that "the bars were there; he couldn't escape the bars of his mind, the bars riveted and set by the cause of his presence."<sup>17</sup>

Lawhill's recognition of the fundamental identity between the inner world and the outer is the last twist of the knife; he is trapped not merely in the hospital or in the world, but within his own psyche, and is himself a product of the decay which he finds at the centre of the world. Man's state is hopeless; unable to reach outside himself, he can never become complete. In despair, Lawhill sums up the immense agony of the story in a passage which draws together the East River, the grotesque ships which pass on it, and the equally grotesque minds which brood over it:

The world of the river was one where everything was uncompleted while functioning in degeneration and from which as from the barge the shape of their own shattered or unformed souls was cast back at them. And all complementary factors had been withdrawn from this world! Its half-darkness quivered with the anguish of separation from the real light, just as in his nightmares the tortoise crawled in agony looking for its shell, and nails held nothing together, or one winged birds dropped exhausted across a maniacal, sunless moon.<sup>18</sup>

The forces working to destroy Lawhill begin to close in. The appearance of the Martha's Vineyard reminds him of the trip he took with his wife to New Bedford - the place from which Melville started his whaling voyage; and he begins to see a recurring pattern emerging in the chaos of the storm. His quest for truth or destruction has started in the same place as Ahab's, and each is accompanied by a clairvoyant boy who is, in some sense, himself. With this realization Lawhill remembers that the name of the ship which had brought him to Melville's starting-place was, appropriately, the Providence; and this ship, at the height of the storm, sails past the hospital. Yet though the name of this ship, and its reappearance at this crucial moment, reinforce the idea of a pattern in the world's chaos, the pattern remains one of anguish. The patients, seeing the Providence pass, rush to the window and begin to scream, and their scream is associated with the "mechanic calamity of the rocking city . . . with the pandemonium, it might almost have been, of all the wars all over the world . . ."<sup>19</sup> Each man, we see, stands alone against a malevolent destiny.

Lawhill learns that his friendship with Garry is to be broken up; he is returned to the isolation in which he began. At this moment a seaplane appears - as a roar associated with a seaplane had accompanied

the groping, menacing white hand during the puppet-show - which becomes, in a terrifying fantasy, the Moby Dick which is to destroy Lawhill. The destruction comes in a flash of lightning, but it proves to be neither total extinction nor the shattering of the old self which is a necessary prelude to rebirth; he is left

the possessor of an even more terrible knowledge, that this was not the ultimate darkness, nor darkness falling over his mind forever, but only his spiritual annihilation, from which his body, whose release was even now presaged, would be delivered to complete, in its own time, the outward and physical event of death.<sup>20</sup>

As Garry tells Claggart, "It only looks like spring." The regeneration which Lawhill had hoped for cannot come about in the world in which he finds himself; he is condemned to the life-in-death of perpetual incompleteness.

Lawhill is little changed by his stay in the hospital. When he leaves he immediately starts to drink again; and he is still searching for human contact, imagining passers-by to be his relatives, or patients he had met in the hospital. As he throws his empty bottle at an obscene sketch on a lavatory wall which symbolizes for him all the obscenity in the world at large, he remembers how Garry had described the murder of the girl - "It was only a little scratch." The two acts of violence link Lawhill and Garry together, and Lawhill is forced to recognize the paradoxical duality of human nature - the coexistence of innocence with guilt, of compassion with a frightening capacity for violence - as operating within himself. "What," he finally asks, "was to become of them all? Why had man been placed in this hell? And if that could be explained, through whom had the offence come that

children had to suffer it equally?"<sup>21</sup> There can be no answer to such questions, and Lawhill's only escape lies in embracing his isolation. At the end of the story he returns to the presexual state which Garry has never left, finding security and oblivion in retiring "to the obscurest corner of the bar, where, curled up like an embryo in the womb . . . Sigbjørn Lawhill could not be seen at all."<sup>22</sup>

The Last Address is an often terrifying account of a man trying to raise himself out of the pit of self-absorption, but it is a work which leaves the reader dissatisfied. One of the reasons, I think, is that the onus of blame for Lawhill's failure is placed largely on the world outside him. His rejection by a man as unsympathetic as Claggart constitutes an evasion of the central problem - Lawhill's responsibility to others. Consequently the questions we want to ask - to what extent Lawhill has chosen isolation in the past, and to what extent he is continuing to choose it in the present - can never be answered. And because we cannot determine the validity of his observations of the world around him, we can attach no value to his final non-solution.

Swinging the Maelstrom is a reworking of the situation and setting of The Last Address, but two crucial changes - the protagonist's failure as a jazz musician, and his relationship with the doctor - lead towards a resolution of these problems. Bill Plantagenet's failure as a musician is used in part to emphasize the fact that his isolation is the product of an inadequacy in himself; it is both a symptom of and a metaphor for his total spiritual failure. This point is made when he tries to persuade Philip, the doctor, that he is not a good piano

player because his hands cannot stretch an octave. Philip replies, apparently irrelevantly, "You didn't leave Ruth because your hands couldn't stretch an octave," but he later adds, "Perhaps it was your heart you couldn't make stretch an octave."<sup>23</sup>

The fact that Bill and Philip are cousins gives Bill a position of responsibility among the patients. As he develops a friendship with the boy and the old man,<sup>24</sup> he comes to feel, like Lawhill, that the hospital cannot help them. He determines to discuss their cases with Philip, and they accept him as a potential saviour. But Bill's job is harder than Lawhill's, for his cousin, unlike Claggart, is a humane and perceptive man. Philip works as well as he can in a situation which he cannot entirely control; during the puppet-show it seems to Bill that the drama

was being diverted from its course by some sinister disposition of the puppeteer's: he sensed Philip's increasing discomfort, as of a god, he thought, who discovers all over again that man is not long<sup>25</sup> to be trusted with the strings of his destiny.

However, the most striking aspect of Philip's character, as contrasted with Claggart's, is his experience of horror. When Bill begins to suggest that the doctor does not understand suffering, Philip reveals a knowledge far deeper than his own; deeper because, while Bill has inflicted suffering on himself, Philip has to live with the responsibility of inflicting it on others.

In their relationship as cousins, their detachment from the patients, their joint responsibility for Garry and Kalowsky, and their knowledge of horror, Philip and Bill form a two-man community within the hospital. Despite the slight ambiguity in their relationship, marked by the

"certain rebelliousness" which Philip rouses in Bill, and the long silences which occasionally punctuate their conversations, they can like and understand one another. Nevertheless, Philip is the greater person; his knowledge is wider, his insight, suffering, and humanity deeper. As a result, Bill finds himself unable to press his arguments for Garry and Kalowsky; instead he comes to accept the necessity for the apparently inhuman institution of which Philip is a part. Lawhill failed in his plea to Claggart because they could not communicate; Bill fails precisely because he can sympathize with Philip's point of view so readily.

In becoming virtually part of the system which is crushing the patients, Bill fails to live up to the spirit of his promise to Garry and Kalowsky. He is unable to tell them that he had implicitly condoned their treatment in the hospital, and so for the first time a false note enters into their friendship; he says little to them on returning from Philip's office, and refuses to meet Garry's eyes. As a result of his community with his cousin, he is driven to isolate himself once more. This isolation, however, is not quite that which Lawhill reverts to at the end of The Last Address, for while Lawhill had looked at the world and decided, in effect, that nothing could be done, Bill realizes the necessity of doing something; his guilty participation in the system which has produced Garry forces him to recognize his responsibility to combat the evil around him.

His release comes after he has momentarily actualized the violence within himself by throwing his bottle at the obscene sketch. In conversation with a friendly stranger, to whom he introduces himself as "Herman Melville," he mistakes the name of a passing ship; the name



he hears is the Acushnet - the ship on which Melville made his whaling voyage. The ship turns out to be a Spanish Loyalist, engaged in conflict with the White Whale of Fascism, and although there is danger in joining her, she offers an escape from the paralyzed self-absorption which is Lawhill's only response to a world of irresolvable ambiguity. Bill is able to accept the implication that he, like Melville, must voyage, must be prepared to risk total destruction: "As he began to wash the blood from his hands, he had the peculiar feeling that it was his ship, which would take him on his night journey across the sea."<sup>26</sup> He is still isolated, since he has lost contact with Philip, Garry, and Kalowsky, but the blood he is washing from his hands is his own; he has broken out of the self-destructive circuit which had trapped Lawhill, and is ready to renew his spiritual quest.

As studies in alienation, The Last Address and Swinging the Maelstrom are not comparable to Lowry's major works; they reveal neither the appalling insight into man's potential for self-destruction which we find in Under the Volcano and the later Mexican novels, nor the awareness of man's need to relate himself to his total environment which is a major theme of Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place. Nevertheless, an examination of these stories enables us to draw some tentative conclusions about The Voyage That Never Ends, which was to have been composed, as Lowry first conceived it, of the trilogy Under the Volcano - Lunar Caustic - In Ballast to the White Sea.

The basic pattern of the trilogy was, as Lowry called it, "withdrawal and return." The withdrawal is from the community of mankind into a kind of hell - the hell of alcoholism, of utter isolation, of self-absorption;

and this self-absorption is also self-abnegation, a complete loss of the individual sense of being. This descent into hell is an integral part of the process of regeneration, a recognition of the powers of darkness which operate in the human psyche; but it must be followed by a re-entry into the world. The protagonist begins to relate to and identify with others, and with this identification comes the realization that he has to act in the world. The final step is his complete involvement in the world; with action his human potential, his ability to love and to create, becomes actual.

In Under the Volcano, Geoffrey Firmin has gone so far in his self-absorption that he cannot make the return. We learn from the letter which Laruelle reads in the first chapter the desperation with which the Consul yearns for Yvonne's return to him, but when she actually appears he is tragically incapable of responding to her, either verbally or sexually. As the day wears on he is drawn increasingly to Parian and the Farolito; when, with the discovery of the dying peasant, he is faced with the human necessity for action, he is not even tempted to play the Good Samaritan. Finally he chooses his isolation. "I love hell," he tells Hugh and Yvonne; "I can't wait to get back there." Yet in fact he has no choice, for, like Milton's Satan, he has become his own hell; his self-absorption has been carried to such an extent that his entire spiritual energy is channeled towards his own destruction.

The Last Address is an account of an attempt to make the return, but the attempt fails because the only relationships which the protagonist can enter into cannot, by their nature, survive. On the other hand, Bill Plantagenet, motivated by his kinship with his cousin and

his sense of guilt towards Garry, begins to act; he is able once more to orient himself in the outside world.

In Ballast to the White Sea evidently reworked and extended the themes of Lunar Caustic. A, like Lawhill and Plantagenet, is trapped in a circuit of inaction; he drinks heavily, is unable to relate in any significant way to others, and can only identify with a writer who is personally unknown to him. His identification with X does not serve to structure reality for him; it is so strong that it becomes a threat to his own identity. Obsessed by the idea that he has in some sense been written by X, A is paralyzed by his inability to find any source of value in the world.

Like Plantagenet, he is eventually able to break out of his isolation; after a period of hesitation he undertakes his voyage to the ambiguous White Sea, with the intention of meeting X. The journey also turns into a pilgrimage to the past, for A, after being paid off from his ship, finds himself close to his mother's grave. In the churchyard he meets a girl with whom he falls in love - the setting clearly indicates the idea of rebirth - and in doing so he begins to re-establish contact with others. Finally the series of coincidences which lead him to X, and the correspondences between them, suggests some design in the chaos which man perceives; and this experience renews each writer's faith in his creativity. The search for value is over; it is found to lie not in the individual self, but in fulfilling the self through interaction with others.

FOOTNOTES: CHAPTER I

<sup>1</sup>Published in Paris Review 29 (Winter-Spring 1963), and by Jonathan Cape (London: 1968). References to the Cape edition are given in parentheses ().

<sup>2</sup>Of the copies held in the Special Collections Division of the U.B.C. Library, tss. 1-5 are titled The Last Address, tss. 6-8 Swinging the Maelstrom. References to The Last Address are from ts. 4; those to Swinging the Maelstrom are from ts. 8: these are the most complete texts of the two versions.

The fragmentary ts. 9, titled Lunar Caustic, may be the uncompleted melding which Lowry was working on in England; the remainder of this version may be found subsumed in ts. 10, the intermediary melding by Margerie Lowry and Earle Birney.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, the unpublished letter to Robert Giroux, dated January 11, 1952, in the U.B.C. collection.

<sup>4</sup>The hospital is evidently Bellevue, although it is not named in the story.

<sup>5</sup>The Last Address, p. 68.

<sup>6</sup>The Last Address, p. 5. c.f. Swinging the Maelstrom, p. 20. (p. 13).

<sup>7</sup>The Last Address, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup>The Last Address, p. 4. c.f. Swinging the Maelstrom, p. 16. (p. 12).

<sup>9</sup>The Last Address, p. 1-2. (p. 9).

<sup>10</sup>The Last Address, p. 3. Lawhill is quoting from Rimbaud's "Nuit de l'Enfer," a section of Une Saison en Enfer. (p. 11).

<sup>11</sup>The Last Address, p. 20. (p. 27).

<sup>12</sup>The Last Address, p. 19. (p. 26).

<sup>13</sup>The Last Address, p. 23.

<sup>14</sup>The Last Address, p. 40. c.f. Swinging the Maelstrom, p. 45-6.  
(p. 52).

<sup>15</sup>Claggart is the false accuser in Billy Budd. The episode closely parallels Chapter 20 of Melville's novel: in each case the innocent and honest (Billy Budd, Lawhill, and, by extension, Garry) is accused by duplicity (the two Claggarts); the innocent is left literally or figuratively speechless, and can only express himself in violence.

<sup>16</sup>The Last Address, p. 69. c.f. Swinging the Maelstrom, p. 54.  
(p. 65).

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>The Last Address, p. 70. c.f. Swinging the Maelstrom, p. 54-5.  
(p. 65-6).

<sup>19</sup>The Last Address, p. 78. c.f. Swinging the Maelstrom, p. 60.  
(p. 69-70).

<sup>20</sup>The Last Address, p. 86.

<sup>21</sup>The Last Address, p. 90A.

<sup>22</sup>The Last Address, p. 91. (p. 76).

<sup>23</sup>Swinging the Maelstrom, pp. 9 and 10. (p. 19).

<sup>24</sup>Called Kalowsky in Swinging the Maelstrom.

<sup>25</sup>Swinging the Maelstrom, p. 30. (p. 36).

## CHAPTER II

Lowry based the first projected version of The Voyage That Never Ends - the Under the Volcano-Lunar Caustic-In Ballast to the White Sea trilogy - largely on his life before his second marriage. In each of these novels we see a protagonist trapped in his own self-consciousness, his self-absorption, and trying, with greater or lesser success, to renew himself by involving himself in others. Yet I feel an unsureness in the kind of involvement which Lowry's protagonists work towards. The desire to become a father-figure to a retarded boy or the decision to fight in the Spanish Civil War are well enough as steps toward spiritual reintegration; but can we really find a cure for alienation in the quasi-teleological pattern which leads A to X? My own view is that we cannot, for metaphysics can be at best only a correlative for a felt experience. The only solution to the problem of isolation is to stop being isolated.

It seems certain that the experience of four years of almost uninterrupted happiness, when, living in Dollarton with Margerie Lowry, he worked on Under the Volcano, brought Lowry to this solution. After the loss of In Ballast to the White Sea and the completion of Under the Volcano he began to draw his material from this later phase of his life, and as a result there is a shift in the context, and to some extent in the nature, of the problems confronting his protagonists. In the

earlier works the hero searches for relationship with those outside himself, but in the later works this relationship exists and is complete. Nevertheless, the protagonists' self-absorption remains largely unconquered, so that they see-saw between a neurotic awareness of all the threats, real and imaginary, from within and from the outside, which isolate them, and an awareness of themselves as instrumental to the happiness of a loved one.<sup>1</sup>

As a result of this shift in emphasis, Lowry's later works are less spectacular in conception than his earlier ones. His later heroes are not called on to meet spiritual annihilation in a flash of lighting; nor, in general, will a single encounter bring them a revelation. Instead we see the daily conflict between opposing forces in a man's psyche as he tries to assimilate the world through his relationship with another.

The most important of Lowry's later protagonists is Sigbjørn Wilderness, the central character of Dark As the Grave Wherein My Friend Is Laid and La Mordida, and the hero of the later projected versions of The Voyage That Never Ends. His is the eye which sees, but more particularly the mind which assimilates and interprets, the outside world. This is not to say that Sigbjørn is without character (although he is what the public schoolmaster would call a 'weak' character); it is rather that as a result of his unusual, even paranoiac, awareness of the 'otherness' of the world outside himself, we become less conscious of him as a personality reacting on others than as an isolated mind grappling with its fear of everything which it does not understand. And it understands very little: Sigbjørn is preoccupied with the

differences between himself and others, and with his failure to comprehend or even to become very interested in them as people; he is aware of a metaphysical force which appears to guide the direction of his life, though he can never elucidate the precise meaning or nature of that force; a novelist himself, he has moments in which he sees his own life as being written, so that he is no longer in control of himself. In an early passage in Dark As the Grave he imagines a ballet in which all the fears that are to dominate his Mexican journey are personified:

There was a dancer, (a) alpha for acrophobia . . .  
dancer (b), the fear of discovery, a jester . . .  
there was (y), a grinning witless mask . . . the  
fear of disease; and dancer (z), with a mask that wept,  
the fear of losing Primrose; there was the fear of  
Primrose's fear . . . and with Wilderness's own  
face streaming with blood, the fear of himself . . .  
fear of Mexico . . . the motor face of fear of  
accidents and traffic, and the frenzied roaring  
face of fear of fire whom he could not contemplate  
for a second; and all of them were chased about,  
herded, ordered, and finally set to dance together  
by a master choreographer . . . who was fear of  
authority. One dancer who did not seem to be pre-  
sent was the fear of death but perhaps he was not  
so much a fear as a medium in which one lived.<sup>2</sup>

Such tableaux, we are told, are part of Sigbjørn's normal mental life. He is crushed and alienated by fear; the novel opens with him sitting at the back of the plane so that he will not be seen, and in his first casual encounter with a fellow-passenger he reveals a pathetic need to give an account of himself, and so, in some sense, to justify his presence.

Against Sigbjørn's isolation stands his wife, Primrose. She represents the life-force, and the impulse toward life within Sigbjørn



is signalized by his love for her. With an enormous capacity for experiencing the world outside herself, she constantly tries to live in every situation to the full. While she too is vulnerable to the things which threaten Sigbjørn, and is, like him, capable of despair, she seldom withdraws into herself; unlike her husband, she prefers to express even her despair in action. To Sigbjørn she represents not only life and love, but also a kind of security. They make up a community within which each is safe; they are preternaturally sensitive to the flux of each other's thoughts, and have developed a private symbolism which serves to emphasize their awareness, understanding, and trust of each other. Yet even at the beginning of Dark As the Grave their marriage is in some danger of breaking up; they have lost their home and much of their work in a fire, and the effort to rebuild, to re-establish their lives, has proven too much for them. After the fire Sigbjørn had begun to drink again, and now, after a period of abstinence, he is once more starting to drink; this represents a deliberate attempt to isolate himself from the outside world, and, necessarily, from Primrose too. As they leave Canada for Mexico they have reached a state in which "they had not let go, altogether, but they had fallen . . . their marriage, and their life even, was in danger, and he knew it, and was doing nothing about it."<sup>3</sup>

In returning to Mexico, Sigbjørn is returning to his personal hell, a hell which he had escaped from eight years earlier and which he believes he has transcended in writing The Valley of the Shadow of Death (which is the title used in the novel for Under the Volcano), a novel which he had based on his experiences in that country. For Sigbjorn,

as for Geoffrey Firmin, Mexico means isolation - the agony of the separation from his first wife, the nights and mornings spent drinking in the Farolito. Nevertheless, he remembers two companions from his earlier stay in Mexico: John Stanford,<sup>4</sup> who for Sigbjørn is an evil angel, a figure closely linked with the worst memories; and Juan Fernando Martinez, a fellow drunkard, but Sigbjørn's blood-brother' and good angel. The journey to Mexico is ostensibly undertaken to meet Martinez again, but as the novel progresses we see that Sigbjørn is driven to find him by a far deeper spiritual necessity than that suggested by a meeting of old friends:

It was like a station of the cross, in the unfinished oberammergau of his life, shadowy understudy even in that, it was much as if he'd left his cross here, while he went off and got drunk on Pilsener one night and then done something else, and had forgotten the part he was playing: and now he'd had to come back here to pick it up again and finish whatever it was he had begun. Or was it he had left his cross in Oaxaca c/o Fernando Martinez, to be left till called for.<sup>5</sup>

Yet however much Primrose wants him to lay the old ghosts, and however much he wants to believe that he is in Mexico to complete his victory over the past, so that he can say "there is no dross of even the worst of those hours, not a drop of mescal that I have not turned into pure gold, not a drink I have not made sing,"<sup>6</sup> the feeling that "he had used treacherous forces to bring about his conquest . . . and by walking straight into the past like this, it was asking for them to have their revenge"<sup>7</sup> predominates. For as another friend, Hippolyte, tells him, "You are possessed, by Sigbjørn Wilderness. That is to say, Sigbjørn is possessed by Wilderness."<sup>8</sup> Not only is he locked in his own mind, and so also in his own past, but this mind itself is a waste

land which demands regeneration.

During the long period in Cuernavaca while Sigbjørn waits to hear from his publishers, and later when he is writing his letter to them, he becomes increasingly estranged from Primrose. He is able from time to time to rouse himself sufficiently to take her to see some of the neighbouring villages, but his compulsion to drink gradually becomes obsessive. Primrose's well-meaning attempts to save him from alcoholism by rationing his consumption and restricting his drinking-hours only serve to excite his resentment, and so make matters worse. Sigbjørn comes to recognize his growing identification with his own creation, the Consul of The Valley of the Shadow of Death - which is, in effect, an identification with his past self - so that, while his wife is bravely, or perhaps naively, trying to enjoy her holiday, and makes an adventure out of fetching charcoal for their stove and experimenting with Mexican cookery, he becomes increasingly immobile and self-absorbed:

. . . while Primrose was being renewed again,  
Sigbjørn seemed to see nothing, love nothing,  
swayed away from her into some anguish of the  
past, into some agony of self chained by fear,  
wrapped in the tentacles of the past, like some  
Laocoon . . .<sup>9</sup>

Sigbjørn's Consul, in Laruelle's tower, was given the choice between life and death, and chose death; his creator, living in the same place, finds himself with the same choice to make. In fact, he gradually realizes that his desire to return to Mexico was an expression of a death-wish, as the ghost of a suicide might return to the place where he had died "out of sheer nostalgia to drink the again that had nerved him to do it, and wonder perhaps that he had ever had the courage."<sup>10</sup> Sigbjørn's danger, like the Consul's is that he might find that he prefers hell to paradise, the monumental, even heroic anguish of the

drunkard to the quiet happiness of domesticity: "it was the misery of remorse, it was the memory of that old consciousness of fatality that he wished to revive, the stimulus of the old wine of complete despair whose cold internal glow he sought."<sup>11</sup> So far from returning to Mexico to confirm a victory over the past, he has actually gone back to attempt to renew and complete a defeat. This attempt is almost successful; alienated from Primrose, drinking more heavily than ever, and utterly dejected by the conditional rejection of his novel, he half-heartedly tries to slash his wrist.

With our growing awareness of the strength of Sigbjørn's death-wish, the two characters associated with Mexico, Stanford and Martinez, assume a deeper significance. Before leaving Cuernavaca, Sigbjørn recognizes the ambiguity of his desire to meet Martinez again. "Why", he asks himself, "had he used Fernando Martinez as a kind of excuse for going to Mexico? What did his friend - his 'character' Dr. Vigil - mean to him, but a nostalgia for delirium? Or oblivion. And his meeting with him another excuse, even such as 'The Consul' liked to find, for 'celebration'?"<sup>12</sup> The man whom he does meet, however, in Oaxaca is Stanford. Throughout the novel Sigbjørn has been afraid of him; he is a mnemonic of all the horror Sigbjørn had suffered and had tried to transcend, and into which he is once again falling. Yet ironically Stanford offers no real threat; he is an unimpressive fellow, characterized only by lechery and a rather uncertain bonhomie. The past holds no terrors for him, and he and Sigbjørn reminisce about the old times with the kind of half-hearted gusto which people use to evoke nostalgia for a past for which they were unenthusiastic even when it was

present. Stanford represents, in one sense, the impotence of what might be called the objective past, the past as it is physically manifested in the present, as distinct from the subjective distortions of memory; yet at the same time the meeting with him leads Sigbjørn to his fullest insight into his own relationship with his past. He realizes that Fernando was "merely the bright side of the same medal: but that medal had equally been forged in hell . . . the two men [Fernando and Stanford] were linked together with invisible bonds, save that one was good, the other evil."<sup>13</sup> Fernando, like Stanford, and like Mexico itself, operates, in the context of the struggle between life-force and death-wish within Sigbjørn's psyche, on the side of death. In excavating the Mexican tomb, and in finding the petrified head, they had symbolically plumbed together the depths of hell; in this sense Fernando is Sigbjørn's 'blood-brother'. But Sigbjørn now has to overcome hell, and so the memory of Fernando has to be transcended.

Given this, Fernando's death can be seen not as an arbitrary event, but as a necessary extension of his symbolic meaning, for his life and death presuppose a commitment to a greater world than that of the individual psyche; his is a death which implies a rebirth. When, after learning of his death, Sigbjørn and Primrose visit the house where he had lived, they find that it is now a flowering garden; similarly, as a result of his work for the bank, the surrounding valley, which had formerly been impoverished, has become fertile and prosperous. Thus his death carries with it the promise of universal rebirth; he is, as the references to Parsifal suggest, the Christ-figure who renews the earth. But for Sigbjørn, whose increasing identification with the

Consul has been carrying him towards death, there is a more specific significance in his friend's death. When he discovers that Fernando has died the Consul's death, he realizes that the Mexican died, in some sense, in his place, and in so doing has liberated Sigbjørn at once from the Consul, from his past in Mexico, and from his impending self-destruction. Just as he is a kind of Christ for the world, Fernando is the Parsifal who heals Amfortas-Sigbjørn Wilderness, the Fisher King.

Sigbjørn's healing is marked by his rebirth into faith. Throughout the novel he has been obsessed by the coincidences which appear to dominate his life, finding in them evidence of "the passion for order at the root of all things;" but although he sometimes feels himself singled out by God to elucidate the Law of Series, he is never able to bring his thinking to a conclusion. In a note on Sigbjørn, Lowry says:

his life is full of mysterious and terrifying events, from which he could deduce, if anyone could, the existence of the supernatural: of God: his tale could be considered as a kind of quest in search, less of a meaning in his life, but of a sufficient greatness of soul to accept unflinchingly the existence of a meaning and the knowledge that he will never know precisely what it is.<sup>14</sup>

Sigbjørn gradually acquires this 'greatness of soul'. He is never able to deduce a rational metaphysic or ontology from his life, but as he overcomes his successive crises - the rejection of his novel, his attempted suicide, the meeting with Stanford, and the discovery of Fernando's death - he and Primrose are drawn increasingly to an act of faith, of acceptance. Their trust in the Saint of Desperate and Dangerous Causes grows until, after learning of his friend's death, Sigbjørn finds himself able to pray not only for those he loves, but

also for humanity in general, and finally for Stanford. By the end of Dark As the Grave he is no longer exclusively preoccupied with himself, nor does he see the outside world as only threatening; he is beginning to accept himself as part of the universe, part of a pattern, and his implicit forgiveness of Stanford is symptomatic of his renewed ability to objectify the past, and to regard those outside himself with compassion.

But although the Wildernesses have succeeded in defeating the forces that threatened Sigbjørn from within, and as a result have annealed their marriage, the working-out of the destructive elements implicit in Mexico and in Sigbjørn's past is only half-complete; and so, consequently, is the process of rebirth. In Dark As the Grave it is the symbolic, psychic meaning of Mexico which threatens to trigger the self-destructive forces within Sigbjørn himself; in La Mordida, Mexico and the past, in the shape of an unpaid fine and the Mexican authorities, take on a tangible reality. Unfortunately the typescript of La Mordida is in even more chaotic a state than that of Dark As the Grave, so that it is impossible to interpret Lowry's intentions precisely, but the general shape of the novel is fairly clear. The Wildernesses, while continuing to rent their apartment in Cuernavaca, travel to Acapulco. This, the scene of some of Sigbjørn's most terrible memories, represents the farthest extension of the spiritual necessity which is driving him South, away from his home in Canada, and into his past; but while in this novel there is some overlay of the past on the present, the dominant theme is to be the real threat from the outside. After a few days in which the mood of the close of Dark As the Grave

is maintained, and in which Sigbjørn demonstrates how thoroughly he has overcome the destructive forces within himself, the investigation by the immigration authorities sets in motion a complex chain of events in which the spiritual ground which the Wildernesses had won is lost again, and which only ends, after some physical danger, in their leaving Mexico.

Prevented from leaving Acapulco, threatened with deportation and the consequent loss of Primrose, and unable to help himself except by trying to plead his case before lax and corrupt officials who will do nothing until they get their bribe - la mordida - Sigbjørn once more starts to drink heavily. The relationship between husband and wife begins again to deteriorate as they argue bitterly and frequently. Their lowest point is reached when the threat of separation becomes real; since Sigbjørn is unable to leave Acapulco, Primrose has, at short notice, to make a long and possibly dangerous journey to Cuernavaca and Mexico City by night in a second-class bus. Sigbjørn can only drink and await her return; when she gets back, tired and resentful, to find him drunk, she gives full expression to her dissatisfaction with him and with their marriage. After this, although the couple continue to drink heavily and to argue frequently, and although they are still treated with great cruelty by the Mexican authorities (who, perhaps, represent the brutality and degradation of the civilization which man has created for himself, and which the Wildernesses cannot live in), they are fundamentally united against a common enemy even while being in a more significant sense isolated from each other. The threat that they might be separated no longer comes from disaffection within the



marriage, but from the machinations of the authorities; nevertheless, as long as they are in the shadow of the immigration officials, the couple have no prospect of finding happiness in each other.

But this novel too, by tortuous ways, leads to rebirth. The Wildernesses are finally deported from Mexico; and although Sigbjørn, safe in Texas, regrets his permanent exile from that country, this regret is merely the lingering residue of his self-destructive impulse. In crossing the border into a new land he has left behind his past and the desire for death which had drawn him South; in shedding his past he sheds the old self which had been paralyzed and alienated by it, and so is reborn. In a fine long closing passage Sigbjørn sums up what had happened to them in Mexico, and the hope which he finds in the whole experience:

it was not forbidden him to hope she [Primrose] had found some greater faith in the meaning of life, in its depth, its terror. Nor to hope that what had died was himself, and what came about through these confusions these oscillations, these misunderstandings, and lies and disasters these weavings to and fro, these treacheries, these projections of the past upon the present, of the imagination upon reality, that out of these dislocations of time, these configurations of unreality, and the collapse of will, out of these all but incommunicable agonies, as of the mind and heart stretched and attenuated beyond endurance on an eternal rack, out of arrant cowardice before little danger, and bravery in the face of what seemed slight to overcome, and heart-break, and longing, had been born, darkly and tremulous, a soul.

Suddenly a vision of absolute joy seized him. They would return and finish the house . . .

But a dark swell seemed to overwhelm this dream, it was the tide rising in Acapulco, it rose ever higher and higher, engulfing the beach, the dark flood rising and rising: and yet, locked in each others arms it was as if their souls were being borne or lulled like children over this flood into

an ocean peace; a limitless peaceful moonlit swell  
running to the horizon, behind which rose slowly,  
tilted, as though held up by an invisible acolyte's  
or priest's arm, to ward off evil, the silver,  
the cross.<sup>15</sup>

The process of regeneration has now been completed. In a note at the end of the novel, Lowry tells himself "end with vision of their little house, the hammering, in spring,"<sup>16</sup> and "reborn into a spring sense of creation too, as an artist or poet. Also get the flowers that have sprung up in their garden in their absence."<sup>17</sup> These flowers, associated with those that blossom at the end of Parsifal, are a link back to the flowering garden where Fernando's house had been, and to the Valley of Etla which he had brought to fruition.<sup>18</sup> The regenerative process which he symbolized at the close of Dark As the Grave has become actual in the Wilderness' own lives: the tide of Sigbjørn's past rising at Acapulco is no longer threatening; the Southern Cross, symbol of faith and of acceptance, for which Primrose has searched unavailingly throughout her stay in Mexico is, in the closing vision, seen; and the couple, united again, can rebuild the house whose destruction marked the beginning of their estrangement.

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So far I have only touched on what might be called Sigbjørn's metaphysical alienation, which underlies the main themes of Dark As the Grave and La Mordida, and receives its clearest expression in "Through the Panama". Although Sigbjørn's grave, if rather absurd, schizophrenic state fits into the pattern of Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place as a whole, and must be discussed in that context, we can best follow its development through the two Mexican novels

and into "Through the Panama" itself.

In these novels Sigbjørn is a writer who, having completed The Valley of the Shadow of Death-Under the Volcano, is toying with the possibility of writing a novel about his own experience of transcending the events which provided the material for his work, about his struggle to subdue, and make use of, his past. Two lines of reasoning justify this idea: first, that the novelist is a kind of twentieth-century Everyman who, in being faced with the problem of imposing order on his chaotic experience, has to work through a perplexity which is universal (in this context we are reminded of Ortega's image, used by Lowry in a letter to Albert Erskine<sup>19</sup> defending his choice of a novelist as his protagonist, of man himself as a novelist making up his life as he goes along); and second, that the process of artistic creation is a paradigm for all creation, so that the novelist, in chronicling the processes at work within himself, can tell us something about the forces which act on mankind as a whole. God himself is, to Sigbjørn, the prototypical novelist, and as he reflects on his life and his efforts to transform it into art, he makes the parallel between the two creative forces:

It was as if indeed he were moving in the midst of his own creation, and even [if] that creation were a failure, the sensation was almost god-like. For did not, conceivably, god [sic] himself move within his own creation in just such a ghostly fashion, and how should we see him, when we dimly sense that he has the power at any moment to cut us out altogether from his strange dark manuscript?<sup>20</sup>

But though Sigbjørn can see his life as a kind of novel - and in fact we see him, in "Through the Panama", preoccupied with turning it

into a novel - he lacks Ortega's assurance that he is writing it himself. Throughout Dark As the Grave and La Mordida he is possessed at terrifying moments by the feeling that he is a character who is being written, whose world is being organized around him, and who is being drawn into a circle of events over which he has no control. The series of coincidences in Dark As the Grave which throws Sigbjørn's life into the pattern of the novel that he has himself written, like his awareness of the aesthetic structure of the events in La Mordida, reinforces his feeling that his life is being written by his 'daemon'.

The terror which accompanies this feeling for Sigbjørn is related, perhaps, to the terror of the loss of freewill. This terror is inevitable in a mind divided against or alienated from itself; we may compare Ginsberg's "I can't stand my own mind",<sup>21</sup> or Nietzsche's disturbing insight that it is not an 'I', but an 'it' within our minds which summons up our ideas.<sup>22</sup> We can often sense this kind of dissociation in Lowry's work; Sigbjørn tells himself in "Through the Panama" to discuss the problem of "the double, the triple, the quadruple 'I',"<sup>23</sup> and in his notes on "Ghostkeeper" Lowry speaks of "the human mind or will or consciousness or whatever, of which the owner knows nothing at all, yet which has a will of its own."<sup>24</sup> Lowry describes this dissociation as it works in Sigbjørn in a note in the typescript of Dark As the Grave:

Sigbjørn's thoughts were undistinguished, or distinguished only by being unnatural: had his profession been other than it was they might have made more sense: as it was they made to him a kind of gibbering, his reactions to things were so complex or so undone by self-consciousness that sometimes, he thought, they might not be said to exist at all.<sup>25</sup>

This kind of objectivity demands that the individual postulate an 'I' which is in some sense outside himself; but this step in itself generates others, and so suggests the existence of an indefinite number of "I's". An individual caught in this series may thus come to see himself as the sum of a possibly infinite number of modes of consciousness. Propositions of this kind cannot be thought through; we can interpret them only as the expression of a profoundly schizophrenic awareness of the self.

But at the same time Sigbjørn is, in a sense, right; he is a character in a novel, and Malcolm Lowry is the 'daemon' who is controlling his life. Again, the novel that the daemon is writing is also the novel that Sigbjørn himself, in putting his character Martin Trumbaugh in his own position, will be writing in "Through the Panama". The result is another indefinitely extended series, in which each character is controlled by a creator above himself.

At this point it becomes impossible to distinguish between the creator and the created; for both the novelist and the reader, author and character become interchangeable. The question remains, however, as to whether the whole creative process takes place within the psyche of Sigbjørn Wilderness, or whether at some point the creator becomes a force outside him. In Dark As the Grave, for example, Sigbjørn is increasingly trapped by the series of coincidences into reliving the dilemmas of his own protagonist, into making in fact the decisions which he had once made vicariously in creating a character. In this Sigbjørn himself seems to be in the process of being created; yet there is always the possibility that he is in fact imposing these

events on the world around him, so that he is not so much being driven into the Consul's position as choosing to become the Consul.

In the context of Dark As the Grave this question is meaningful, and a strong case can be made, I think, for saying that Sigbjørn's discovery of some external force shaping his life has, in that context, an 'objective' validity. When, however, the whole series is implied, as it is in "Through the Panama", the question becomes meaningless; for, by the very logic of the situation which Lowry has set up, the distinction between subjective and objective collapses.

We can now begin to see the various components in Sigbjørn's multiple identity, and so of the many perspectives in "Through the Panama". An approximate schematization would be:

The man postulated as being above, and controlling, the man with the model. In one sense he can be seen as Lowry himself; but once the series has been established we cannot say that any single box represents the final reality or the ultimate creative force. We can, then, imagine the

Sigbjørn as commentator in the margin glosses - implying in itself an association with Coleridge. Apparently uninvolved in the action of the journal itself, his tone is ironic. His commentary provides historical and metaphysical analogues to the action itself, and links him with the

Sigbjørn Wilderness, the man who is undertaking the voyage. Writing Dark As The Grave and the body of the journal itself. Attempts to objectify himself in Martin

Martin Trumbaugh, author of The Valley of the Shadow and the protagonist of the novel Dark As the

Firmin, the Consul, protagonist of The Valley of the Shadow. Also the name of the research assistant who kills an albatross.

Grave which Sigbjørn is trying to write. Also (i) Homer, and (ii) Usher

Trumbaugh. He is identified with the Ancient Mariner. Also (i) Chapman, and (ii) Poe.

builders of the canal. Identifies himself with the man who has before him a model of the canal, and who can conceive of himself as being in command of the whole action. Also (i) Keats, and (ii) Jean Epstein.

daemon writing Lowry; more important, since Wilderness and Trumbaugh are types of Man himself (Joyced, as Lowry noted, in his own petard) we can imagine the daemons writing our own lives

Note: (i) and (ii) are analogues to the action. (i) is centred on Keats' sonnet "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer"; although it is only implicit in Lowry's work, the themes, imagery and 'Chinese Box' structure of each suggests a parallel. (ii) is based on Jean Epstein's reinterpretation of Poe's story in his film of The Fall of the House of Usher.

The basal personality here is (c) - Sigbjørn as writer of the journal. Although happily married, he appears detached, and at times he feels that he has lost his love of life. His creation of Martin Trumbaugh represents in part a deliberate attempt to see himself from the outside, and so to cast his inner thought processes into aesthetic form; as a result, instead of responding to a situation directly, he characteristically thinks to himself "Martin felt . . ." or "Martin thought . . ." In this way Martin often becomes a screen which Sigbjørn uses to protect himself from the world outside him:

the red-faced engineer came in, angrily helped himself, out of the frig., to 3 glasses of wine. "Hullo, Mr. Wilderness!" (Earlier it had been Sigbjørn). Later it seemed Martin heard his name being vilified . . . Martin remarked to the engineer: "Il fait beau temps"--"But if there is this wind," shouted the engineer, "then Mr. Wilderness won't be able to go ashore in Curacao and get his whisky!" What the hell. This suggested to me however to have Martin think that the story had now gone round.<sup>26</sup>

This process is not, however, always deliberate; Martin, as a character in "Through the Panama", soon comes to express the inner turmoil of Sigbjørn himself. He is a personification of the Jungian 'shadow', the impulse to self-absorption as it operates in Sigbjørn; even when the writer is happy, his character may be in a state of abject despair, and Sigbjørn's shortage of liquor is translated, in Martin, into a case of d.t.'s. But to see Martin as merely the negative element in Sigbjørn is an over-simplification, for he is also an embodiment of the desire for passionate involvement in the world which his creator has lost, and it is through Martin that Sigbjørn is able to



begin to understand his own nature and the function of his art. Thus an opposition is often set up between the somewhat mundane writer and his passionate creation:

Martin woke up weeping, however, never before having realized that he had such a passion for the wind and sunrise.

Si, hombre, that is tequila.

(This now seems ridiculous to me, having risen early and washed a shirt.)<sup>27</sup>

Against Martin is set (d), the detached and ironic Sigbjørn who, in the margin commentary, attempts to place the whole voyage in a wider context. In his re-telling of the history of the canal he not only records the cost of man's efforts to reshape his environment, but questions the value of the civilization which humanity is building for itself. If Martin embodies Sigbjørn's desire to feel, (d) is the expression of his desire to understand; but, by the logic of the situation which Lowry has created, understanding cannot come, for beyond (d) lies (e), and beyond (e) an indefinite series. Thus we have, in "Through the Panama", an extension of the theme of isolation; we see into a mind which is fragmented, and which is trapped by the very methods through which it tries to organize experience.

FOOTNOTES: CHAPTER II

n.b. All page-references to Dark As the Grave Wherein My Friend Is Laid are to the ts. held in the Special Collections Division of the U.B.C. Library; these are followed by the locations in the published version of the novel edited by Margerie Bonner Lowry and Douglas Day (Toronto: General Publishing, 1968), given in parenthesis ().

<sup>1</sup>This situation is foreshadowed in the two stories discussed in the Introduction to this thesis - "Hotel Room in Chartres" and "In Le Havre".

<sup>2</sup>p. 19. (p.13)

<sup>3</sup>p. 389 (p.7)

<sup>4</sup>The names 'Stanford' and 'Martinez' are those used in the published version of the novel; in the ts. Lowry uses the actual names of the people on whom these characters were based. The original of Martinez was Juan Fernando Marquez, that of Stanford was John Bousfield. Marquez is also given the surname Atonalzin in "Garden of Etla" (see note 18 below).

<sup>5</sup>p. 141. (p.77-8)

<sup>6</sup>p. 467.

<sup>7</sup>p. 144. (p.80)

<sup>8</sup>p. 295. (p.152)

<sup>9</sup>p. 416. (p.165)

<sup>10</sup>p. 211. (p.77)

<sup>11</sup>p. 466. (p.210)

<sup>12</sup>p. 390. (p.3)

<sup>13</sup>p. 483. (p.221)

<sup>14</sup>p. 555.

<sup>15</sup>La Mordida (ts. held in the U.B.C. collection), p. 344-6.

- <sup>16</sup>La Mordida, p. 352.
- <sup>17</sup>La Mordida, p. 345.
- <sup>18</sup>Fernando Marquez and the Valley of Etna are also the subjects of Lowry's essay "Garden of Etna," in United Nations World 4 (June, 1950), pp.45-47.
- <sup>19</sup>The Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry, p. 329ff.
- <sup>20</sup>Dark As the Grave, p. 313. (p.141-2).
- <sup>21</sup>"America" 1.3.
- <sup>22</sup>Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, 1.19.
- <sup>23</sup>Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place (New York: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1961), p. 73.
- <sup>24</sup>Perle Epstein, The Private Labyrinth of Malcolm Lowry: "Under the Volcano" and the Cabbala (New York: 1969), p. 227.
- <sup>25</sup>Dark As the Grave, p. 559.
- <sup>26</sup>Hear Us O Lord, p. 67.
- <sup>27</sup>Hear Us O Lord, p. 41.

### CHAPTER III

Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place is at once a volume of stories and a kind of novel; although each component story can be read and analyzed independently, their intensity and richness can only be fully appreciated by regarding them within the context of the whole work. The book is a member of a genre represented by, among other works, Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio, Hemingway's In Our Time, and Faulkner's The Unvanquished and Go Down, Moses, in each of which the individual story marks a crucial point in the development of a larger pattern. Hemingway, Anderson, and Faulkner in The Unvanquished are, however, primarily concerned with exploring the growth-points in a protagonist's consciousness; only Go Down, Moses, with its complex symbolic and mythical interrelation between the stories which make it up, can be said to be closely comparable to Hear Us O Lord.

Lowry's stories are interrelated on a number of levels. They all take place in the years 1947-51. They share a unity of movement: the first story is set, clearly enough, in Vancouver; the next is an account of a journey from Vancouver to Europe; the next three are set in Italy; and the final two return to the area around Vancouver. At the same time, the starting-place is seldom forgotten; even travelling elsewhere, the protagonists constantly think back to the Burrard Inlet, with its ships, seabirds, and surrounding mountains, and to the life they lead in the squatter's settlement on its shore (with the exception

of Cosnahan of "Elephant and Colosseum", who remembers a similar life in Nantucket). Again, while the names and nationalities of the protagonists vary, they are recognizably versions of the same basic figure - the man at odds with and almost compulsively aware of the world outside him, who is struggling to win a contest within himself.<sup>1</sup> The differences in the names and nationalities of the protagonists suggest less that they are different people than that they represent a kind of Everyman.

The main unifying element in Hear Us O Lord is to be found, however, in its total thematic structure. In each story the protagonist is isolated, and is conscious of his lack of relation to his surroundings; before he can re-establish himself, he has to assimilate or overcome part of himself - he has, finally, to comprehend himself vis-a-vis his total environment. In each case but one<sup>2</sup> the battle is, to some extent, won, so that each story ends with a partial rebirth; and although no single victory can be final, each prepares the ground for a further spiritual advance. In the end the book's multiple protagonist actualizes his potential for happiness, but he is only able to do so by undergoing, in his various personae, Lowry's great cycle of "withdrawal and return" - the withdrawal into self in order, eventually, to come to terms with that which is outside - and this is a voyage which never ends. As Eliot said in a different context:

There is only the fight to recover what has been lost  
And found and lost again and again: and now, under  
                    conditions           3  
That seem unpropitious.

Lowry called his book "a sort of novel of an odd aeolian kind."<sup>4</sup> Regarded as a volume of stories, it must strike most readers as, at best, brilliant and idiosyncratic; if, however, we look at it as a kind

of novel, it becomes one of the most profound, relevant, and finally hopeful statements to have been offered to the twentieth century. We are increasingly aware of ourselves as marooned on a world which we can destroy but not comprehend; it is this awareness which informs Hear Us O Lord. Like Under the Volcano, it needs to be read many times, and it will reveal new meanings on each reading.

"The Bravest Boat" is at once the beginning and the end of the cycle of Hear Us O Lord. The setting, Vancouver, is both a point of departure (for Sigbjørn Wilderness in the next story) and a destination (for the boat itself and for the multiple protagonist of the book); the story takes place in 1951 - chronologically later than the other stories in the book which are assigned a specific date. The story serves much the same purpose in the context of Hear Us O Lord as the first chapter serves in Under the Volcano, for to come to the end of the book presupposes a return to the chronologically later beginning, when the whole spiritual journey lies once again before us. This cyclical structure underlines the fundamental theme of Lowry's work - that man, in undertaking his search for wholeness, embarks on a voyage that never ends.

To become whole the individual must come to terms with his total environment, and in "The Bravest Boat" the ambiguities of this environment, the various conflicting facets of it which have to be assimilated, are defined. On the one hand is the magnificent and inhospitable world of nature itself, represented by the mountains "whose freezing summits, massed peak behind spire, jaggedly traversed the country northward as far as the eye could reach,"<sup>5</sup> by the stormy sea, and by

the wind which buffets the lovers. Against nature is set the city, dehumanized and sterile, with its beer parlors "crawling with verminous light even in mid-afternoon and resembling gigantic emerald-lit public lavatories for both sexes,"<sup>6</sup> its opium-dens, and its group of stainless citizens trying a sixteen-year-old boy for murder. The city is emblematic of man's civilization; its name suggests its spiritual origin, for when Cain built the first city he named it after his son, Enoch.<sup>7</sup> Enochvilleport is recognizably a product of the seed of Cain.

Between the untamable world of nature and the grotesque horror of the city lies the park in which the story takes place. A refuge for the seabirds and for those who cannot live in the city,<sup>8</sup> it is a kind of Eden, a place where man and nature can be part of the same entity, and so a place where it is possible for man, even if only momentarily, to identify himself with his surroundings. And the park is a vantage-point as well as a sanctuary; from it they see not only the mountains and the city, but also the "lowly little self-built shacks and floathouses" which are "nearly the only human dwellings visible . . . that had any air of belonging, or in which their inhabitants could be said any longer to participate,"<sup>9</sup> and it is within or near the park that they see the homes "as of some stalwart Columbian Adam, who had calmly stolen back with his Eve into Paradise, under the flaming sword of the civic cherubim."<sup>10</sup> These shacks, which are to become, throughout Hear Us O Lord, both the site and symbol of a precarious but deeply-rooted human happiness, adumbrate the book's major theme; that man can only complete himself by thoroughly involving himself in the world around him, by becoming an integral part of a landscape.

We see the lovers in the landscape of the park; their position is defined both by the implied comparison with the caged animals, and by the implied contrast with the birds, who "like all birds in these parts may feel superior to man in that he is his own customs official, and can cross the wild border without let."<sup>11</sup> Yet although Sigurd and Astrid are threatened and trapped both by the elements of nature and the city, they are completely secure in the park, just as they are quite self-sufficient within their two-person community. Like the park itself, they belong neither to nature's aloof grandeur nor to the city; they have achieved, however precariously, a separate peace.

The difficulties and dangers against which this peace and community have been won are suggested by the voyage of the toy boat itself, which had drifted for twelve years, threatened both by nature's storms and man's ships, to arrive only sixty miles from its starting-point. Sigurd too, like most of the protagonists in Hear Us O Lord, has been a sailor; and in the next story, Sigbjørn Wilderness, undertaking the book's voyage back to its starting place, will have to endure the terrors of a tempest at sea. The implication is that the felicity which Sigurd and Astrid have reached can only be attained through accepting, and surviving, the dangers - physical, intellectual, spiritual - which the storm and the sea symbolize. And there is no suggestion in the story that the struggle is over, that the victory has been won for a lifetime; Sigurd and Astrid have had to face and survive many storms, and at the end we see them buffeted by the wind and lashed with spray and rain; yet toward the close of the story comes the promise of the recurrent regeneration of Spring, in terms which, with



their sense of two states or events co-existing at once in nature, take us forward to "The Forest Path to the Spring:"

Nor was it possible to grasp for more than a moment that all this with its feeling of death and destruction and barrenness was only an appearance, that beneath the flotsam, under the very shells they crunched, within the trickling overflows of winter-bournes they jumped over, down at the tide margin, existed, just as in the forest, a stirring and stretching of life, a seething of spring.<sup>12</sup>

Within "The Bravest Boat" there are other indications of the cyclical pattern which makes the story at once an introduction to and a summing-up of Hear Us O Lord as a whole. Sigurd's grandfather was a lighthouse keeper, a guide and mark for sea-borne voyagers; his father, a forest warden, was a man who lived in an interdependant relationship with the natural world.<sup>13</sup> Now, through his community with Astrid, Sigurd himself has achieved the same kind of identification with his environment. Unlike the citizens of Enochvilleport, he has attained love and compassion. And that the cycle will continue is suggested by the boy and his father trying to sail another toy boat. In the end we are left not so much with a sense of the insecurity of the equilibrium which the lovers have found in a largely hostile world, as with a sense of their capability, after so much has been overcome, to continue, essentially, to win through, to survive.

With "Through the Panama" we move back - back in time to 1947, and back to an earlier stage of spiritual development, the beginning of the voyage itself. I have discussed the psychical dissociation which is generated in Sigbjørn Wilderness by his constant need to objectify himself, to see himself from the outside. This process,

which quickly becomes habitual, even compulsive, is essentially Sigbjørn's effort to understand himself, but it leads at first only to an intellectual fragmentation.

In this self-absorption, this effort to see himself, Sigbjørn sees very little of the world outside. This inability to 'see' is a recurrent motif throughout Hear Us O Lord; in "Strange Comfort," , for example, we are told that Wilderness sees virtually nothing, and the protagonist of "The Forest Path to the Spring" compares himself to a blind man who has recovered his sight. Lowry uses the motif not only to suggest the extent of the protagonists' alienation, but also to indicate that it is through involvement with others that sight is regained. In "Through the Panama" Sigbjørn can only see through his wife's eyes; for Primrose, here as in the Mexican novels, represents a principle of life, of harmony with the universe, which opposes her husband's self-absorption:

and later, the stars: but now Martin saw the fixity of the closed order of their system: death in short. . . . (They are only not dead when I look at them with Primrose.) Wonderful truth in Lawrence about this. "Somehow my life draws (he writes) strength from the depths of the universe, from the depths among the stars, from the great world!" Think Primrose feels something like this.<sup>14</sup>

It is not that blindness and dissociation are endemic in Sigbjørn; he is leaving Eridanus, where he has lived in something of the harmony which Lawrence speaks of. He is now, however, through leaving "the only place on earth he has loved," and in trying to reassimilate his past in order to transmute it into art, thrown back into himself; he is, as the margin commentary clearly implies, a modern Ancient Mariner,

haunted by the "insatiable albatross of self," condemned once more to re-make himself.

In keeping with this role, Sigbjørn is obsessed by a sense of homelessness and a fear of death (which is also, of course, in another part of his multiple personality, a desire for death). He feels the "inenarrable inconceivably desolate sense of having no right to be where you are," and notes that "This desolate sense of alienation possibly universal sense of dispossession;"<sup>15</sup> in a grotesque dream he imagines that Death gives him forty days to live. These themes are taken up in variations on the ambiguous "Frère Jacques" refrain of the ship's engines:

Please go on!  
Why not die!  
Sonnez les matines . . .

Sans maison  
Sans maison<sup>16</sup>

Yet this alienation and desire for death are primarily symptoms of Sigbjørn's neurosis, for on board the Diderot<sup>17</sup> efficiency, courtesy, and humanity prevail. He recognizes this when he notes of his death-dream:

It is hard to believe that a disgusting and wicked dream of this nature has been produced by the soul itself, in its passionate supplication to its unscrupulous owner to be cleansed. But it has.<sup>18</sup>

Within the chaotic and fragmented world of Sigbjørn's mind, only one thing is stable - his love for Primrose. With each other they are easy and familiar, and it is only under the simultaneous threat of their separation and their passage through the Panama (which on one

level represents a final break with the past, in both Canada and Mexico) that the necessity for alcohol becomes an obsession.

The canal itself is a complex and enigmatic symbol. It is a link between two oceans, two worlds; for Sigbjørn, as I have suggested, it represents a break with, or even a transcendence of, the past - and this may be part of the point of his description of it as "something like a novel--in fact just such a novel as I . . . might have written myself,"<sup>19</sup> for his novel represents an effort to assimilate and make use of, and thereby overcome, his past. Again, in leaving the Pacific, Sigbjørn is finally committing himself to leaving his old life and undertaking anew the quest for rebirth, and we can see the canal itself as a symbol of this rebirth; it is the birth canal through which the child passes, and the experience which leads to the soul's regeneration (as Primrose notes, the significance of the word 'lock' is that one is 'locked' in an experience, while the step-like nature of the locks suggests in itself a mystical ascent which leads to renewal). Above all, I think, the canal is a symbol of control - man's efforts to control and re-make his environment, Sigbjørn's effort's, through his novel, to control and re-make the chaotic world of his mind (and also, given the 'chinese box' structure of the story, the control of man himself by agents beyond him) - and the cost at which such control is achieved. And at this level the canal suggests no way, no direction to be followed, either for Sigbjørn, or, by extension, for man himself; after the long commentary in which the cost of the canal in terms of human life and suffering has been vividly, if ironically, detailed, Sigbjørn is brought to ask "QUO VADIS?" - a question which applies not only to

Sigbjørn himself as he enters a new ocean and a new area of experience, but also to the builders of the canal and to man in twentieth-century civilization.

The process of regeneration, however, begins slowly and painfully to work in Sigbjørn. As the ship crosses the Caribbean and enters the Atlantic, he tries increasingly, through his alter ego Martin Trumbaugh, to understand himself and his ideals. For a time it becomes impossible to keep track of the levels of duplicity in Sigbjørn's - or Martin's - character; even the apparently honest and destructive self-appraisal initiated by Martin's scorn of the "non-creative bully-boys and homo-sapient schoolmasters of English literature" is marked by a tortuous self-congratulation:

Neurosis, of one kind and another, is stamped on almost every word he writes, both neurosis and a kind of fierce health. Perhaps his tragedy is that he is the one normal writer left on earth and it is this that adds to his isolation and so to his sense of guilt.<sup>20</sup>

Though he comes to an awareness of the necessity for understanding and compassion, this awareness is shot through with irony and a sense of superiority. "One should realize," he writes, "that your Hemingway has a right to shoot wild creatures and while he is engaged in that dubiously masculine occupation he is not, at least for the moment, shooting anyone else."<sup>21</sup> In the end he can only tell himself "Oh shut up. Shut up. Shut up."

It is with the coming of the storm that Sigbjørn's fragmented consciousness begins to be annealed. Still working through Martin, he gradually achieves a fuller realization of what he wants to be, and what he wants his protagonist to represent. The note of regeneration

comes through Rilke: "Things must be different with us, from the ground up, otherwise all the miracles in the world will be in vain."<sup>22</sup> Sigbjørn recognizes his isolation, but he also realizes that this is a state which he shares in common with mankind, "For alas this is the way the majority of human beings see other human beings, as shadows, themselves the only reality."<sup>23</sup> As a result he chooses for his ideals the social, humanitarian virtues - compassion, courtesy, tact, humor - which enable men to interact with one another; but his greatest ideal is represented by his love for and community with Primrose:

Above all things perhaps he wanted to be loyal to Primrose in life. But he wanted to be loyal to her beyond life, and in whatever life there might be beyond. He wanted to be loyal to her beyond death.<sup>24</sup>

At the height of the storm, when the ship cannot steer and is in danger of being broken up, Sigbjørn is at last able to cast off his self-absorption and become Everyman, at once a citizen of the world and a universal exile - "an Englishman who is a Scotchman who is a Norwegian who is a negro at heart from Dahomey who is married to an American who is on a French ship in distress which has been built by Americans and who finds at last that he is a Mexican dreaming of the White Cliffs of Dover."<sup>25</sup> From this position he is able to pronounce a kind of benediction on mankind, a benediction which is at once an acknowledgement of the necessity for human regeneration and an absolution from individual guilt:

let the whole world make a fresh start. A universal amnesty (extending even to the bullies, the Mexican immigration inspectors, and finally myself, who have never lifted a finger to speak against the death in life all about me till this moment).

Society is too guilty in the eyes of God to hold any man permanently to account in a larger sense for a crime against it, no matter how wicked: collectively, who have always--these donkey, these man--done something worse.<sup>26</sup>

In this way Sigbjørn is reconciled with his fellow-man; and this statement exemplifies an effort of compassionate understanding far in excess of that which Martin had reached before the storm. After this, the storm dies down and Bishop Light is sighted; the bells in the song of the ship's engines are rejoicing, and Sigbjørn's mission is clear: "to teach by his own example, love and reverence to all things that God made and loveth."

In "Strange Comfort Afforded by the Profession";<sup>24</sup> themes which occur in "Through the Panama" and the Mexican novels - the alienation of the artist, and his need to construct, or reconstruct, the world which he perceives - appear again and reach a partial resolution. For the first time we see the protagonist (again Sigbjørn Wilderness, but with the reservations given in note 1 below) completely alone; only toward the end of the story do we find a hint of any relationship with another living person. This isolation is accentuated by Sigbjørn's two most salient characteristics - his fear of others, and his inability to see the world around him. We first see him before Keats' house in Rome, where, after copying the words on the house into his notebook, he glances around him "with a heavier, more penetrating look--that in fact was informed by such a malaise he saw nothing at all but which was intended to say 'I have a perfect right to do this.'"<sup>27</sup> In the first few pages of the story Lowry emphasizes this inability to see,

for it is the cost at which Sigbjørn attempts to record what he perceives; the act of recording disastrously limits the perception of what is recorded:

having climbed the narrow staircase, he was almost instantly confronted by a legend in a glass case which said:

Remnants of aromatic gums used by Trelawny when cremating the body of Shelley.

And these words, for his notebook with which he was already rearmed felt ratified in this place, he also copied down, though he failed to comment on the gums themselves, which largely escaped his notice, as indeed did the house itself . . . <sup>28</sup>

Sigbjørn is unable to respond adequately to any proximate stimulus; only in reading his notebook can he feel the anguish of Keats' death or the horror of the Mamertine Prison.

But although this notebook, filled with apparently irrelevant ideas and random observations, is an accurate mirror of its creator's disordered perception, it has at the same time a certain alogical coherence, and constitutes a kind of aesthetic synthesis of the ideas which Sigbjørn is trying to reconcile; within it the sufferings of Keats and Poe, their necessity to transmute their lives into art, their common imprisonment in their souls "like hapless shipmasters, determined to drive their leaky commands full of valuable treasure at all costs, somehow, into port,"<sup>29</sup> complement each other. Outside the notebook is the unimpassioned modern world which Sigbjørn is so afraid of, whose poets never say anything like "For God's sake pity me!" - preferring to transmute their anguish into "hieroglyphics, masterly compressions, obscurities to be deciphered by experts--yes, and poets--like Sigbjørn Wilderness."<sup>30</sup>



It is through meditating on his notebook that Sigbjørn is able to comprehend his nature as an artist. Keats and Poe, he realizes were essentially men who transformed their suffering into words; the poet is distinguished from others by his "magical monopoly, his possession of words."<sup>31</sup> Sigbjørn himself is pre-eminently a man of suffering, and a man of words; although he dresses like a bank clerk, he bears no real resemblance to those around him. His alienation is an inevitable concomitant of his being a writer. Confronted, in the second notebook, with an example of his own attempt to transform suffering into words, he understands that his essential community is with Keats and Poe, and so can accept his commitment to art. Even as he crosses out the letter which recalls the worst period of his life, he wonders how much of it he can remember, and what use he could make of it. Recognizing this community with the two poets, the sufferings which make him what he is become pleasurable, so that at the end of the story he emulates each of his predecessors: Poe, who died in an alcoholic daze, by finishing his fifth "unregenerate" grappa; and Keats, who died of tuberculosis, by bursting into a "relatively pleasurable" fit of coughing.

"Strange Comfort" is, I feel, the most puzzling and most ambiguous story in Hear Us O Lord. Sigbjørn's problems - his inability to see, his incapacity to live in the world - are rationalized rather than solved; his identification with Keats and Poe offers no way out of his self-absorption. Two main lines of interpretation are to me equally attractive: first, that within the total composition the story is a deliberately false note, a pseudo-resolution which is set up only

as a contrast to the deeper resolutions offered in "Elephant and Colosseum" and "The Forest Path to the Spring;" and second, that the story represents an interim solution which prepares the way for the fuller vision which Cosnahan reaches in the next story. Both lines of interpretation point, I think, in the same direction - that Sigbjørn's sense of identity at the close of "Strange Comfort" is incomplete. The profession holds out 'comfort' to the alienated man, but no more.

"Elephant and Colosseum" is Lowry's most sustained piece of comic writing. We can read it almost as a parody of Under the Volcano, for motifs and techniques characteristic of that book are used in contexts which render them, in part at least, ludicrous: the good and evil angels which torment Geoffrey Firmin become, in this story, the twin personalities Drumgold and Cosnahan, who carry on an intermittent, ironic, and sometimes inane dialogue; the opening line of Dante's Inferno, which in another context would be an obvious presage of disaster, is used to order a glass of milk. Yet despite the lightness with which Lowry treats his theme in this story, an underlying seriousness remains. "Elephant and Colosseum", like Under the Volcano, is a study of an isolated man, an artist and magician who is trying to absorb and assimilate his world.

Cosnahan is completely alone; his wife has had to stay in America, his mother has died, and he searches in vain for his brother and his publisher. As a Manxman, he is a member of an ancient race which he sees as being rapidly scattered; he is afraid of modern civilization, and is, moreover, stranded in a country whose language he does not

understand. He is, like the rest of his family, and like the Manx race itself, an anachronism; his thoughts constantly return to those who are out of place in the twentieth century - his mother, a witch; his brother John, a Proudhonite anarchist gaoled in St. Helena; his brother Matt, the only Manx Roman Catholic priest. As he wanders through ancient and modern Rome, hag-ridden with the guilty memory of not having written to his mother before she died, and the anguish of arriving in Europe too late to see her, searching for a familiar face, and for some evidence of his recognition as a writer, he is confronted with the problem of recognizing his own identity in the face of a civilization which neither he nor his ancestors have ever been part of. His search for the translation of his book is essentially a part of this search for identity. The translation would imply recognition by others, and so assure Cosnahan that his work - and, by extension, Cosnahan himself - had value; and also, since in one sense 'translate' means "to carry or convey to heaven without death",<sup>32</sup> it would signalize Cosnahan's rebirth.

He is, however, unknown to his Italian publisher; the only result of the afternoon's attempt to find his place in Rome's chaos is that Cosnahan feels himself more isolated than ever. But instead of finding his book, he meets the elephant, Rosemary, and this meeting leads to his reintegration. Rosemary is associated both with the sea-voyage in Cosnahan's past which was the basis of his book, and with his mother, who, with the gift of a suede elephant, conferred on him some of her magical power. Thus both in magic and art, the elephant stands at the source of Cosnahan's strength, and proves to be the unrecognized

link which gives his life coherence. And in herself, at once grotesque and sublime, endowed with the virtues of humor, toleration, and wisdom, she becomes the mnemonic of an intuitive comprehension of the universe, an inverse Moby Dick who testifies to "the existence of almighty God, and His wide wild humor."<sup>33</sup>

With this intuitive comprehension, this transcending of the tragic vision of life to one at once comic and profound, Cosnahan can see his work as "precious, ridiculous, second-rate, and yet to him . . . all-important."<sup>34</sup> It is his life, but he no longer needs it to feed the 'vanity' which compelled him to seek recognition from others, and as a result, his creative powers are again liberated. More important, he can now see himself in his context as a member of the human race, and can see that this context involves, as a condition, a certain kind of isolation, of individuality:

he would ask Arthur which Huxley it was who wrote that men should not seek for their differences, rather that which draws them together, which of that very variousness, uniqueness, he'd just been thinking about; no matter, both were right . . .

man was Quayne, and man was Quaggan, man was Quillish, man was Qualtrough, man was Quirk and Quayle and Looney, and Illiam Dhone, who had been hanged. And yet lived--because he was innocent?<sup>35</sup>

Although Cosnahan is still alone, the climactic anagnorisis has enabled him to see his life as part of a meaningful pattern, in which the various spheres of past and present, the individual mind and civilization, the world of man and the world of God, are reconciled. He has become part of Rome, and he can await the arrival of his brother and his publisher with equanimity.

"Elephant and Colosseum" represents the highest degree of integration which the lone protagonist can reach, but it stops short of the renewal of Cosnahan's interaction with others. This final resolution of the multiple protagonist's alienation is postponed until "Gin and Goldenrod" and "The Forest Path to the Spring"; meanwhile the cycle of Hear Us O Lord turns again toward despair as Cosnahan's perception of harmony is negated. Although "Present Estate of Pompeii" is one of the most richly comic, and certainly the bawdiest, of Lowry's works, it is the most pessimistic episode in the book. In it a theme implicit in "Elephant and Colosseum" - the relation of man to the civilization which he has created, and which, in the face of time, is, like the individual, ephemeral - is fully explored.

The protagonist, Roderick Fairhaven, is touring Italy with his wife Tansy; but while Tansy is an enthusiastic tourist, Roderick is preoccupied with the sense of alienation which travelling in itself implies. "This, pre-eminently," he remarks, "is where you don't belong. . . . behind you, thousands of miles away, it is as if you could hear your own real life plunging to its doom."<sup>36</sup> The insecurity endemic in man is focussed in Roderick; his 'real life' lies in Eridanus, whose inhabitants live under the constant threat of eviction as "the sthenic confusion of technological advance" closes in on them. He is searching for a refuge from civilization;<sup>37</sup> Eridanus is a retreat from man's present, just as the Restaurant Vesuvius is a refuge from man's past. But neither the restaurant nor, in the context of this story, Eridanus, offer permanent sanctuary. Again and again we are reminded of humanity's vulnerability; Eridanus is threatened by a technological society,

Pompeii has been destroyed by Vesuvius, Volney speaks of the passing of civilizations, and the human race itself is obscurely endangered by flying saucers.

Yet the real threat to humanity comes not from the titanic, even occult, power of nature represented by Vesuvius, nor from whatever incomprehensible terror the flying saucers symbolize, but from within man himself:

Awestruck by his callousness, his ignorance, his lack of time, his fear that there will be no time to build anything beautiful, fear of eviction, of ejection, man no longer belongs to or understands the world he has created.<sup>38</sup>

The meaning of Pompeii lies not in its destruction but in its relative survival; it is a city ossified in its past, and so has remained an entity. Comparing its ruins with the chaotic superimposition of one age's buildings on another which he had found in Naples, Roderick comes to see man's constant need to destroy and rebuild as an expression of his insecurity. Man's desperate need for others, evidenced both by his constant building and rebuilding, and by the frenzied sexuality which so preoccupies the guide, springs from his awareness of the transience of his life. In the face of his own mortality he can only attempt to assert his identity; but this assertion constitutes an acknowledgement of the 'otherness' of the world around him, and so makes him only more conscious of his disorientation:

Roderick could not help but wonder whether man too was not beginning to stand, in some profound inexplicable sense, fundamentally in some such imperfect or dislocated relation to his environment as he. Man once stood at the center of the universe, as Elizabethan poets stood at the center of the world. --But the difference between the man-made ruins and

the ruins of Pompeii was that the man-made ones had not for the most part been found worth preserving, or had been carried away. Had some precious part of man been carried away with the ruins? Partly it was as if man built with ruin in view . . . See Naples and die!<sup>39</sup>

Although the story contains within itself, in its humor and in Tansy's vitality, the germs of an attitude which might lead to an acceptance of the world and man's place in it, this conclusion is bleak. Such achievements of beauty and harmony as man might reach (as, perhaps, the Fairhaven's shack in Eridanus) are assured, at best, of a limited survival under the shadow of an everlasting threat; the story closes with Vesuvius, dormant, but capable of once more becoming, without warning, the elemental destroyer.

With "Gin and Goldenrod" we return to Eridanus, and begin the movement toward reintegration which will culminate in "The Forest Path to the Spring." Here the threat of despoliation which had troubled Fairhaven is becoming actual; subdivisions are beginning to encroach on the area around the settlement. Throughout the story, the world of nature, the forests, birds and wildflowers with which the Wildernesses so strongly identify themselves, is contrasted with the dusty chaos of the road and the 'ugly' sterility of the new houses; although Sigbjørn observes that "the conquering of wilderness, whether in fact or in his [man's] mind, was part of his own process of self-determination," he feels that "progress was the enemy, it was not making man more happy or secure. Ruination and vulgarization had become a habit."<sup>40</sup> The frenetic activity which Fairhaven had found epitomized in Naples is moving in on Eridanus, which had hitherto been an enclave of peace and security.

Unable to live with civilization's attrition of the environment which he is part of, Sigbjørn is driven to find escape in the oblivion which alcohol offers, and the story is concerned with the aftermath of his drunken debauch. He suffers a partial estrangement from Primrose, who alternates sympathy with sheer bitchiness, he has to make the painful journey to the bootlegger's house, and he has to face again the bootlegger himself. When, however, the ordeal is over, the fission between the couple begins to be healed, and on the way back to their home they meet with hopeful signs - the friendly woman in the garden, the man with the typewriter. As they re-enter the forest, with the prospect of a drink - this time to be shared - before them, their community with each other, and with nature, is re-established. Their home is still threatened, but Sigbjørn's debt has been paid, and the impulse which had driven him to seek isolation and oblivion in alcohol has been exorcised. With this expiation comes regeneration; "a kind of hope began to bloom again."

The stories so far have been concerns with moments of crisis in the protagonists' lives, and the ways in which these are resolved. In "The Forest Path to the Spring" we see the long process by which a man achieves harmony through his gradual assimilation into the world around him. Within the structure of Hear Us O Lord it represents a movement into both the past and the future; it begins in the early years of the Second War, and takes us through to a time in which various events, including the destruction of the Protagonist's home and a voyage to Europe, have been weathered. The story is a triumphant statement of the theme of Hear Us O Lord as a whole - that man, once he is



able to overcome his self-destructive impulse and live in harmony with the natural world, is able to survive; it at once takes up the motif of regeneration which closes "Gin and Goldenrod", and brings the book back to its starting-point.

The unnamed protagonist who brings his wife to Eridanus for their honeymoon is a man divided against himself; while his love for his wife is intense, and while he quickly comes to observe and appreciate the world of nature around him, he is aware of the things which threaten their happiness. One threat is the war which is engulfing the world, and which he feels himself obliged to join; "It's a hell of a time to live," he tells his wife callously, "There can't be any of this nonsense about love in a cottage."<sup>41</sup> More important, however, is the destructive forces at work within himself, for he is the product of his past life, a life dominated by alcohol, by the city, and by the night - the self-consuming world of the jazz musician. This anti-self, the Jungian 'shadow', intrudes itself on the protagonist at disconcerting moments:

One night, coming across the porch from the woodshed with a lantern in one hand and a load of wood under the other arm, I saw my shadow, gigantic, the logs of wood as big as a coffin, and this shadow seemed for a moment the glowering embodiment of all that threatened us; yes, even a projection of that dark chaotic side of myself, my ferocious destructive ignorance.<sup>42</sup>

Even when he is happiest, returning from the spring, he finds himself overwhelmed by an unreasoning hatred, "a virulent and murderous thing that throbbed all through my veins like a passion . . . and it took in everyone in its sweep, everyone except my wife."<sup>43</sup> He sees himself

for a time as a perversion of man, possessed by "the wild forces of nature that I had read man had been sent into the world to redeem,"<sup>44</sup> a personification not only of the ferocity which draws men into war, but also of chaotic nature itself.

Despite the moments in which he is possessed by his 'shadow', the protagonist gradually begins to see a fundamental unity in the dichotomous world about him. Eridanus, named after the mythical river which is at once the river of life and the river of death, is a meeting-point of opposites, a paradigm of "the still point of the turning world." The inlet is neither river nor sea; on its one shore are nature's mountains, on the other, man's oil-refinery - which is itself both a thing of beauty and the hell which its sign proclaims. This concatenation of opposites implies in itself a balance; the wheel turns about a still point, and the wheel itself must be, in the end, a single thing. In observing the tides, the protagonist comes to understand the meaning of the Tao, the principle of stability which underlies the flux and comprehends the dichotomies in the world:

at such a time of stillness, at the brief period of high tide before the ebb, it was like what I have learned the Chinese call the Tao, that, they say, came into existence before Heaven and Earth, something so still, so changeless, and yet reaching everywhere, and in no danger of being exhausted: like "that which is so still and yet passes on in constant flow, and in passing on, becomes remote, and having become remote, returns."<sup>45</sup>

It is his wife who interprets this world to the protagonist, who brings him to recognize the beauty and vitality of nature which manifests itself about Eridanus; he recalls her talking to him "as if

I had been a blind man recovering his sight to whom she had to teach again the beauties and oddities of the world."<sup>46</sup> She lives naturally in the kind of harmony with her surroundings which the protagonist can only gradually, and sometimes painfully, achieve; their community in each other is at once a metaphor for and the indispensable basis of the greater community with the outside world which he, little by little, attains. "Perhaps", he reflects, "she was herself the eidolon of everything we loved in Eridanus, of all its shifting moods and tides and darks and suns and stars."<sup>47</sup> Yet despite his community with his wife, and their increasing friendship with the gentle fishermen who are the other inhabitants of Eridanus, he is still tormented by moments of hatred and life-weariness. Before his regeneration is complete he has to win a battle within himself; he has somehow to overcome the increasing arduousness of the daily journey up the ladder of his past,<sup>48</sup> along the ambiguous Proteus Path, to the spring, the fountainhead of life itself. Although he has seen, through his wife, the unity in nature, the self-destructive impulse, objectified in the frayed rope which he finds on the path, is still at work within him.

It is through the confrontation with the cougar, a creature which, in its beauty and its menace, suggests the duality both in nature and in the protagonist - and, by extension, in man - that he is finally able to bring about a unity within himself; for he realizes that the lion is less terrible than the products of the dark side of his own mind which, in part, it symbolizes:

Half conscious I told myself that 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 in 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 me, to 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?<sup>49</sup> And yet mysteriously the lion was all that too.

As a result he recognizes that "as a man I had become tyrannized by the past, and that it was my duty to transcend it in the present."<sup>50</sup> After the meeting with the lion, the journey along the path loses its arduousness; in fact the effortlessness with which the return is accomplished comes to have something of the quality of a mystical illumination, for the journey seems to the protagonist to be both instantaneous and to lie outside time. At the same time the gloomy and self-destructive thoughts which he had formerly entertained on the path do not disappear, but rather are subsumed to become an integral part of the unity of his consciousness. In this way he too becomes an image of the universal harmony in which light and dark, life and death, and Winter and Spring are reconciled; and with this final integration his creative powers are released, so that he is at last able to transcend and make use of his past in writing his music.

From this point on, the couple are not finished with trouble, or threat, or loss; but their assimilation of themselves into each other and into their world gives them the strength to perpetually renew themselves, so that even the burning of their shack leads to a kind of rebirth, a fresh baptism. The protagonist can grow old with equanimity, confident that his love for his wife is always increasing,

and can even see age as part of a greater flux: "I wondered if what really we should see in age is merely the principle of the seasons themselves wearing out, only to renew themselves through another kind of death."<sup>51</sup> And, watching the raindrops falling on the water, he answers Fairhaven's despair in the face of the evanescence of human life; "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."<sup>52</sup> He can at last see human lives as part of the harmonious cycle of nature, as part of the unmoving flux of the Tao; so that in the end, the couple can accept the dark and menacing reaches of the stream of life and still drink from it joyfully. With this affirmation of man's capacity to become complete, and in becoming complete, to survive, Hear Us O Lord returns to its starting-point; the supplication for endangered voyagers sounded in the Manx fishermen's hymn, is answered.

FOOTNOTES: CHAPTER III

<sup>1</sup>The interchangeability of the characters in Hear Us O Lord is suggested by a note which Lowry thought of prefacing to "Strange Comfort Afforded by the Profession:"

He [the protagonist of that story] has in any case only obliquely anything to do with the character Wilderness of La Mordida or Through the Panama, and if he happens to be called that name here it is because the author was toying with the idea, by no means as childish as it sounds, of escaping from the tyranny of inventing spurious names in short stories for protagonists whose names didn't matter - even if they were totally different characters - by giving them the same name. This would turn the author into a sort of director or producer of certain pieces in which, say, Sigbjørn Wilderness was an actor acting the part of a character whose name was beside the point, though a certain particular unique standard would come to be expected of Sigbjørn Wilderness playing a given part; so the idea here would have been something like Sigbjørn Wilderness in Strange Comfort Afforded by the Profession, (as one might say Peter Lorre in so & so) rather than a story about anyone of that name.

This ms. note is to be found in the U.B.C. Lowry collection at the end of draft I of "Through the Panama."

<sup>2</sup>"Present Estate of Pompeii" is, I think, an exception.

<sup>3</sup>"East Coker" 1.186-8.

<sup>4</sup>The Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry, p. 230.

<sup>5</sup>Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place (New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1961), p. 13. The following page-references in this chapter are to this work.

<sup>6</sup>p. 16.

<sup>7</sup>See Genesis 4:17.

<sup>8</sup>Stanley Park performs much the same function in Lowry's unpublished story, "Ghostkeeper."

<sup>9</sup>p. 17.

<sup>10</sup>p. 24.

<sup>11</sup>  
p. 15.

<sup>12</sup>  
p. 26.

<sup>13</sup> The relationship between the forest warden and his environment is one of the themes of another unpublished story, "We're All Good Ducks Here."

<sup>14</sup>  
p. 38.

<sup>15</sup>  
p. 31.

<sup>16</sup>  
p. 36.

<sup>17</sup> The allusion to Denis Diderot (1713-1784), the philosopher who struggled against persecution and poverty for twenty years to produce his influential Encyclopedia, suggests the hardships which have to be undergone if man is to try to change himself and his world.

<sup>18</sup>  
p. 40.

<sup>19</sup>  
p. 62.

<sup>20</sup>  
p. 77.

<sup>21</sup>  
p. 78.

<sup>22</sup>  
p. 81.

<sup>23</sup>  
p. 85.

<sup>24</sup>  
p. 87.

<sup>25</sup>  
p. 96.

<sup>26</sup>  
p. 96.

<sup>27</sup>  
p. 99-100.

<sup>28</sup>  
p. 100.

<sup>29</sup>  
p. 108.

<sup>30</sup>  
p. 109.

<sup>31</sup>  
p. 108.

<sup>32</sup>  
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<sup>33</sup>  
p. 161.

<sup>34</sup>  
p. 172.

<sup>35</sup>  
p. 162-3.

<sup>36</sup>  
p. 177.

<sup>37</sup> The name 'Fairhaven' itself, of course, brings together the themes of beauty and security, suggesting the protagonist's need for both.

<sup>38</sup>  
p. 188.

<sup>39</sup>  
p. 199.

<sup>40</sup>  
p. 204.

<sup>41</sup>  
p. 230.

<sup>42</sup>  
p. 233.

<sup>43</sup>  
p. 243.

<sup>44</sup>  
p. 243.

<sup>45</sup>  
p. 234-5.

<sup>46</sup>  
p. 274.

<sup>47</sup>  
p. 247.

<sup>48</sup> For the image of the ladder, see Lowry's poem "The Past",  
Selected Poems of Malcolm Lowry (San Francisco: City Lights, 1962), p. 69.



<sup>49</sup>p. 263-4.

<sup>50</sup>p. 279.

<sup>51</sup>p. 277-8.

<sup>52</sup>p. 282.

## CHAPTER IV

'Metaphysical speculations are attempts to think  
unthinkably, and it is quite hard enough to think  
thinkably" - Charles Fort, Lo!

"The Forest Path to the Spring" records the experience of a man in complete harmony with all aspects of his environment; the narrator of that story has finally found the home, the point of balance, which Lowry's protagonists are constantly searching for. In two stories, "Ghostkeeper",<sup>1</sup> and "The Element Follows You Around, Sir!",<sup>2</sup> Lowry returns to the themes of persecution and alienation; but in these stories the distinction between subjective and objective breaks down, so that we cannot say whether the persecutor is an irrational and incomprehensible agent which lies outside the human mind, or a product of that mind's occult interaction with the world outside it. They are an outcome of the interest in para-normal and psychical phenomena which is evidenced throughout Lowry's work,<sup>3</sup> and might be termed 'metaphysical horror stories': 'horror stories' because they imply (with complex reservations that I shall come to later) the existence of possibly malevolent agencies, capable of controlling our lives, which do not operate according to the scientific laws constructed by men; 'metaphysical' because this control symbolizes a condition under which life is lived.

These stories might with some justice be considered as mere

curiosities, and it must be admitted that their horror is too abstract to be gripping, their metaphysics too recondite to be persuasive. A society like ours, whose technology and philosophy have been essentially developed out of the concept of causality, may find no point or meaning in stories which postulate an occult and acausal interaction between the animate and the theoretically inanimate, between the mind of an individual and the material world which is outside that mind. Lowry's vindication lies, I think, in the fact that the motifs which characterize these stories have a symbolic rather than a literal value. In recent years mankind has regained its awareness of itself as related to the rest of the world; we have gradually been forced to think in terms of a planetary ecology. While Lowry did not think of man's place in his environment in ecological terms, he showed a parallel kind of awareness; man and the world are seen, in Hear Us O Lord especially, as a gestalt. In "The Forest Path to the Spring" the gestalt is harmonious; in "The Element Follows You Around, Sir!" it is discordant, and we can see this story as a metaphorical expression of man's inability to live in a world which he has in part created and in part destroyed.

This use of the occult as metaphor can be best seen in a passage from "Outward Bound" (which, like "The Element Follows You Around, Sir!", is a section of October Ferry to Gabriola<sup>4</sup>) in which Jacqueline Llewelyn says of her magician father:

"Daddy's had the idea that people like him are needed to combat the evil side of it all, that he maintains is flourishing more now than it did in the Middle Ages. He's got a bee in his bonnet about Hitler, for example."

"But he says that on this side too there're evil forces at work--and that there're some alchemists too among scientists, like an old wizard friend of his in Cleveland--and that in a few years they'll have the power to blow the whole world to smithereens--it sounds crazy, doesn't it?"<sup>5</sup>

We need not, I am sure, deduce from reading this passage that Lowry believed Hitler to be a devil incarnate, or that he thought it took Alchemy to create the Hydrogen Bomb; he is using these medieval images of evil to suggest the enormity of the impulse to evil, to destruction, within man today - and it is this impulse which leads to the rise of a Hitler or the invention of nuclear weaponry. This is not to say that we do not have to come to terms with the meaning of the events which occur in "The Element Follows You Around, Sir!" and "Ghostkeeper", but rather that these events are a kind of objective correlative of the imperfect interaction between man and the world which Lowry discerned.

In "The Element Follows You Around, Sir!" the distinction between the subjective and the objective, between the state of the protagonist's mind and the events in the world outside it, comes close to collapsing altogether. After the Barkerville Arms (the Llewelyns' house) has been destroyed in an unexplained fire, Ethan Llewelyn takes to drink. As a result he is not only involved in a trivial - though for a prominent lawyer somewhat scandalous - brush with the police, but his relationship with his wife, who is herself close to a nervous breakdown, deteriorates. Ethan quickly becomes, like most of Lowry's heroes, isolated and paranoiac; he is estranged from his wife and son, afraid of the police, and constantly imagines people to be laughing behind his back over his arrest.

As the tally of unseasonable storms, paranormal disasters, and uncaused fires mounts up, Ethan increasingly sees himself as being pursued by some supernatural agency intent on destroying him; yet with the collapse of the distinction between the inner and outer worlds, the possibility always remains that the agency is Ethan himself:

there appeared to be no febrifuge against this double sickness, this interpenetrating fever of madness, where effect jostled cause in a wrong dimension and reality itself seemed euchred . . . insanity and nightmare seemed to flow into life and back again without hindrance, to the frenzied infection of both.<sup>6</sup>

For although Ethan, on the one hand, is the Good Samaritan, "the helper of the little man," he is also the Wandering Jew, the man who struck Christ. For Lowry, part of the condition of being human is to partake of the dark side of man's nature, and so to share mankind's collective guilt; "had he, Ethan, struck Him?" Ethan asks himself, and replies "he, Ethan, had struck Him."<sup>7</sup> Again, Ethan's name brings to mind Hawthorne's character Ethan Brand (another man associated with fire), who spent his life in search of the unforgiveable sin, and finally found it within his own heart. Like the Wandering Jew, Ethan Llewelyn "is said to do much good among the townspeople," but under the stress arising out of his persecution and his paranoic fear of others, his guilt and hatred emerge:

. . . fears of yet another day darkening to its end with a sense of guilt. And out of the fears grew wild hatreds, great unreasoning esemplastic hatreds: hatred of people who looked at him so strangely in the street: long-forgotten hatreds of schoolmates who'd persecuted him about his eyes at school: hatred of the day that ever gave him birth to be the suffering creature he was, hatred of a world where your house burned down with no reason, hatred of himself, and out of all this hatred did not grow sleep.<sup>8</sup>

The Wandering Jew seeks rest in death; like him, Ethan is preeminently a man who is allowed no rest. In the lawyer Lowry brings together many of his images of man: like the Consul, Ethan is a black magician, a man possessed by demons; like the Sigbjørn Wilderness of "Through the Panama", he is a type of the Ancient Mariner, a guilt-laden wanderer; like Hugh in Under the Volcano and Bill Plantagenet in "Swinging the Maelstrom", he attempts to be the Good Samaritan. Each of these images, of course, contain characteristics which conflict with one another; Ethan is a man divided against himself, and the outward turmoil of the elements is an exact counterpart to the inward chaos of his mind.

The confusion between the subjective and objective is never entirely resolved. After his attempt to escape from himself by going to the cinema - an attempt which fails because the film turns out to be no less than a symbolic representation of his own plight - Ethan concludes, in the library, that "The only haunted house was the human mind. And the human mind was that of a magician . . . who had forgotten the use of his powers, but from time to time could not help using them."<sup>9</sup> Other 'intelligences' may exist, but the real destroyer is man himself; "nothing", Ethan realizes, "was supernatural" (Lowry's italics). For a moment the problem seems to be solved; although the interaction between Ethan's mind and the outside world remains 'occult' in that it is, in everyday terms, inexplicable, the fires and other calamities appear to be the result of Ethan's own impulse to self-destruction operating in the world beyond him. Yet as Ethan moves towards this conclusion the demon which possesses him reasserts its existence.

Skipping through Charles Fort's Wild Talents, Ethan comes across an account of the unexplained death by fire of J. Temple Thurston. Thurston was presumably the author of the play The Wandering Jew from which the film Ethan has just seen had been adapted, and a scene in the film is strongly reminiscent of the circumstances of the author's death.

Ethan's first reaction to this coincidence is elation; he feels, as did Cosnahan after meeting Rosemary, like a magician who has had his powers restored to him. Later, however, having returned to the beer parlor, he experiences a 'disillumination', an inversion of the ecstatic harmony of "The Forest Path to the Spring", in which he becomes completely identified with the sordid suffering and misery implicit in the bar:

it was as though, having visualized all this with his eyes shut now he were it--these walls, these tables, that corridor, with the huge woman from Gravesend, flat on her back motionless in it, obdurate as the truth this beer parlor, this place of garboons hard by the Laurentian Shield.

it was like seeing all the senseless trickeries and treacheries alcohol had here imposed on the mind; all the misery, mischief, wretchedness, illusions: yes, the sum of all the hangovers that had been acquired here, and quite overlooking those that had been healed.<sup>10</sup>

Ethan's vision is one of unrelieved horror, an "Image or state of being that, finally appeared to imply, represent, an unreality, a desolation, disorder, falsity that was beyond evil." The world revealed to him, like that of Lunar Caustic, is one whose "half-darkness quivered with the anguish of separation from the real light,"<sup>11</sup> a place where "neither death nor suicide could ever be a solution, since nothing here had

been sufficiently realized ever to possess life."<sup>12</sup> The incompleteness of this world is a product of the failure of man's magical powers; for, as the context makes clear, 'realized' carries the overtones of Fort's use of 'visualization' - to imagine a situation, and in imagining it, to create that situation. Man has either failed to create himself, or he has been imperfectly 'visualized' by his creator.

Ethan is able, eventually, to resolve his 'disillumination' and the experience of the whole "collision of contingencies" into a message of hope. The manifestation of a pattern in a series of events, he decides, asserts, even when the pattern appears diabolical, the flux of a universe which is created. Man alone is unable to perceive this flux; only when brought up against such a strange concatenation of occurrences is he "vouchsafed . . . a glimpse into the very workings of creation itself." Meditating upon this, Ethan has a momentary vision of the process of creation which is not unlike that which concludes "The Forest Path to the Spring":

Ethan seemed to see before his eyes whole universes eternally condensing and recondensing themselves out of the 'immaterial' into the 'material', and as at the continued visualisation of their Creator, being radiated back again. While meantime here on earth the 'material' was only cognisable through the mind of man.<sup>13</sup>

Since man cannot perceive the constant interchange between the 'material' and the 'immaterial', he cannot distinguish between the 'real' and the 'imaginary', or know whether he is being enlightened by God or deceived by the devil. Nevertheless Ethan is able to ask "couldn't the meaning, the message, for them, be simply that there had been a message at all?"<sup>14</sup> (Lowry's italics). His conclusion is not that he in any



sense created the sequence of coincidences himself, but that it is a product of the creative force which makes and remakes the universe.

But any hope which might be implied by this tentative resolution is undercut in the closing passage of the story, when the Llewelyns, trying to escape from the element, are followed by fire across the Prairies, and arrive in Vancouver only to see a fisherman's shack across the Burrard Inlet burning.<sup>15</sup> This shack, built on piles, takes us back to the pile-dwellings of the Nicobar Islanders, which are described in a 'filler' in the opening newspaper sequence as being among the world's most ancient type of homes. The element is still following the Llewelyns around, destroying the possibility of peace and security symbolized by the shack.

In "Ghostkeeper" Lowry returns again to the theme of the search for paradise, and explores a motif which is raised briefly in Dark As the Grave, when Sigbjørn learns that the correct translation of the warning which runs through Under the Volcano ('Le gusta este jardin? . . .') is: "Do you like this garden which is yours? See to it that it is thus: that your children don't destroy it."<sup>16</sup> Here again, however, we see a world in which the familiar conditions of everyday life fail to hold. The setting, characters, and action are all reminiscent of "The Bravest Boat", but as Tom and Mary Goodheart walk through Stanley Park a disturbing series of coincidences builds up. Tom has lost his watch; he meets an Englishman who has also lost a watch and a Frenchman who tries to sell him one, later returns a watch to the man who had dropped it, and finally picks up a watch inscribed with the name 'Henrik Ghostkeeper' - the name which had been written

in chalk on a ruined lifeboat which he had interpreted as a bad omen. There are indications of unnatural events; the headline on a spiritualist newspaper reads "Policemen Pursue Poltergeist", Mary reads an account of a flying saucer sighting, and a tree-house falls onto a bench which they had almost sat on. Although the time and place of the story are given precisely (Lowry gives the exact date, and takes the opportunity, when the couple reach Prospect Point, of recording the latitude and longitude to the nearest second), the time and space of the world which Tom and Mary perceive are gravely disoriented; in the face of this the sober advice on the picture of George V - "Keep Calm and Carry On" - appears, to say the least, inadequate.

The protagonist is, then, again confronted with the idea that his life is being shaped by an outside intelligence, symbolized, as Lowry tells us,<sup>17</sup> by the name 'Henrik Ghostkeeper'. Like Ethan, Goodheart feels that his experience offers a clue to the 'meaning' of the universe, but the clue suggests a confusing multiplicity of interpretations; a voice "as from half way up in the air" asks him: "What about the wheels within wheels, Mr. Goodheart, and not merely the wheels within wheels, but the wheels within wheels within wheels, Mr. Goodheart, that are even now still turning and evolving newer, yet more wonderful and more meaningless meanings--."<sup>18</sup> Lowry explains the significance of Goodheart's experience in a long note to the story:

The mind is not equipped to look at the truth. Perhaps people get inklings of that truth on the lowest plane when they drink too much or go crazy and become delirious but it can't be stomached, certainly not from that sort of upside-down and reversed position. Not that the truth is 'bad' or 'good': it simply is, is incomprehensible,

and though one is part of it, there is too much of it to grasp at once, or it is ungraspable, being perpetually Protean.<sup>19</sup> Hence a final need probably for an acceptance of one's limitations, and of the absurd in oneself. So finally even this story is absurd which is an important part of the point if any, since that it should have none whatsoever seems part of the point too.<sup>20</sup>

The intellect alone cannot find truth or meaning in life, even when given such clues as the concatenations of events found in "The Element Follows You Around, Sir!" and "Ghostkeeper"; it can at best apprehend that there is a meaning, but it cannot deduce what that meaning might be. Tom's release comes not on an intellectual but an emotional plane:

suddenly his fear was transformed into love,  
love for his wife, and that meaningless, menacing  
fear was transformed into a spring wood bearing  
with it the scent of peach blossoms and wild  
cherry blossoms.<sup>21</sup>

This resolution - itself reminiscent of the close of "Hotel Room in Chartres", written some twenty years earlier - might serve as an epitome of Lowry's work. Each protagonist searches for a meaning in the world which will give his life a context; but the answer to 'the problem of life' is seen to lie, if anywhere, not in its solution but in its disappearance. In "The Last Address", Sigbjørn Lawhill is unable to find any answer, and can only try to opt out of the world; Bill Plantagenet, on the other hand, is finally able to find release from himself through action. Sigbjørn Wilderness, in the Mexican novels, is reborn not because he is at last able to reconcile the contradictions in the world about him, but because he comes to an intuitive comprehension of himself in relation to his wife, to his past, and to the total gestalt of the universe. In "Through the Panama"

Sigbjørn is paralyzed by his schizophrenic perception of a jumbled reality; his escape comes with the realization of his capacity for love and compassion. And, of course, the multiple protagonist of Hear Us O Lord, who is faced with the whole confusion of civilization present and past, finds 'meaning' in human life through a slow integration into the world outside him. D. H. Lawrence said of children "They were one living continuum with all the universe. This is the essential state of innocence, of naïveté, and it is the persistence of this state all through life, as the basic state of consciousness, which preserves the human being all his life fresh and alive, a true individual."<sup>22</sup> Lowry's answer to man's alienation is to seek this living continuum with the universe; and it is found when the isolated self is subsumed into community with another.

FOOTNOTES: CHAPTER IV

<sup>1</sup>The first draft of this story is held in the Special Collections Division of the U.B.C. Library; additional material is published in Perle Epstein's The Private Labyrinth of Malcolm Lowry (New York: 1969).

<sup>2</sup>Show Magazine, March 1964, pp. 45-103. Reprinted in Winter's Tales II, ed. A.D. Maclean (New York: 1965), pp. 83-119.

<sup>3</sup>Geoffrey Firmin, for example, is a black magician, Cosnahan a white magician and water-diviner, and Kristbjorg, in "The Forest Path to the Spring", appears momentarily as a magician. In "Present Estate of Pompeii" we come across sea-serpents and flying saucers, while Sigbjørn Wilderness is possessed by his 'daemon'.

<sup>4</sup>This novel is being edited for publication by Mrs. Lowry, and has not been available for study.

<sup>5</sup>Lowry and the Cabbala, p. 225.

<sup>6</sup>Winter's Tales II, p. 84.

<sup>7</sup>ibid., p. 103.

<sup>8</sup>ibid., p. 93.

<sup>9</sup>ibid., p. 109.

<sup>10</sup>ibid., p. 114.

<sup>11</sup>See Chapter I, note.

<sup>12</sup>Winter's Tales II, p. 115.

<sup>13</sup>ibid., pp. 116-7.

<sup>14</sup>ibid., p. 117.

<sup>15</sup>Perhaps this is the Wilderness' shack, in which case it would have added significance in the context of the sequence of novels Lowry envisioned. The point may be resolved with the publication of October Ferry to Gabriola.

<sup>16</sup>Dark As the Grave Wherein My Friend Is Laid (Toronto: General Publishing, 1968), p. 140.

<sup>17</sup>Lowry and the Cabbala, p. 227.

<sup>18</sup>ibid., p. 228.

<sup>19</sup>C.f. the 'Proteus Path' in "The Forest Path to the Spring."

<sup>20</sup>Lowry and the Cabbala, p. 228.

<sup>21</sup>ibid.

<sup>22</sup>D.H. Lawrence, Phoenix, ed. Edward D. McDonald (London: William Heinemann, 1961), p. 761.

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Note: Section A lists the published works of Lowry which are referred to or discussed in this thesis. Section B gives the biographical material on which my Introduction is, in part, based. There is virtually no criticism of Lowry's work other than Under the Volcano available as yet; the items I have listed in Section C offer only the beginnings of a critical appraisal.

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