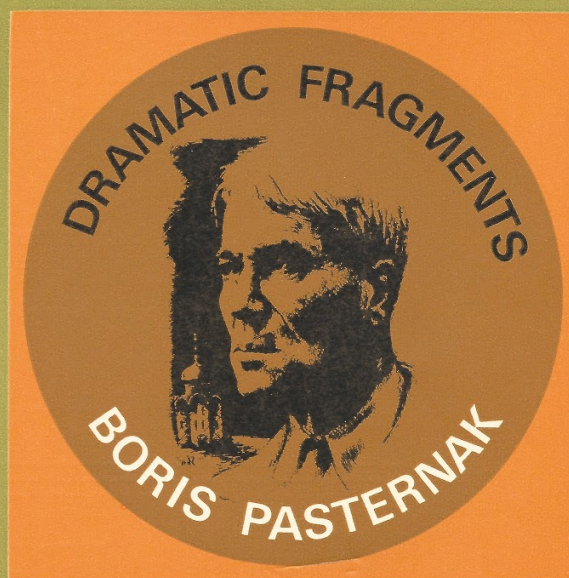
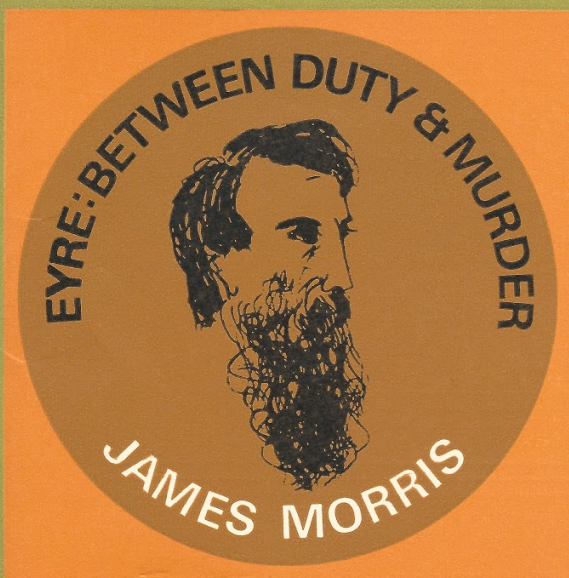


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**CULTURAL
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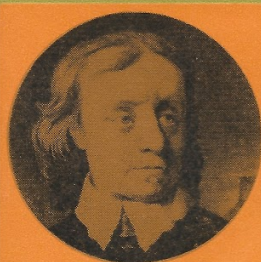
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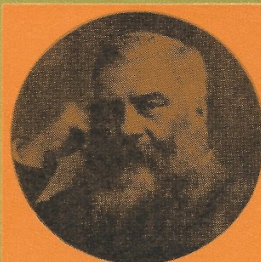
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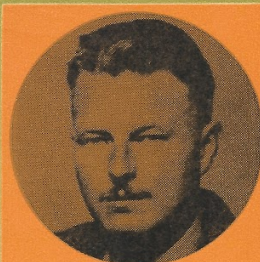
**ZERO
AT THE BONE**

GEORGE
STEINER



G. A. HENTY

ROBERT A.
HUTTENBACK



**MALCOLM
LOWRY**

MATTHEW
CORRIGAN

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AUTHORS & CRITICS

Malcolm Lowry, New York Publishing, & the "New Illiteracy"

By Matthew Corrigan

"...even the forms that madness takes, let alone the way in which madness is evaluated, are controlled by the culture in which it occurs."—LIONEL TRILLING in *Beyond Culture*

IT IS IRONY of the kind Malcolm Lowry himself would have appreciated that a decade after his death a New York publishing house should be releasing a novel by him which is in effect the novel his publishers plagued him to deliver, to their expectations, the last eight years of his life. But he could not and would not deliver it then, and in a way he has got even with them by refusing to deliver it now.

When Lowry died in 1957 he had no book in print in English. Had he wanted to purchase a copy of his masterpiece *Under the Volcano* he would have had to settle for a German or French translation. Since his death there have appeared three American editions of that novel, by three different publishers. Among the manuscripts left behind by Lowry when he died were the drafts of three-and-a-half novels, hundreds of poems, at least half a dozen short stories, essays, playscripts and journals amounting to several hundred pages. At least two of the unfinished novels have deserved fair publication before now: *October Ferry to Gabriola* (waiting to be edited before publication) and the heavily edited, recently published, *Dark As the Grave Wherein My Friend Is Laid*.¹

Despite whatever personal enthusiasm accompanied the appearance of the *Grave* manuscript in the summer of 1968, its publication in this manipulated version comes to represent a perfect testament to the intellectual and moral blindness of the New York publishing world. While Lowry was alive, struggling, and writing this

novel, at least two publishers disowned him (*i.e.*, wrote him off) because his talent did not seem likely to subscribe to their expectations of the novel *genre* either in subject-matter or form; and now, in death, publishers (albeit different ones) still unconsciously want that novel from him. In his introduction to this edition Professor Douglas Day tells us there were 705 pages of typescript, "already yellowing and crumbling," which he decided amounted to "a novel." The publishers agreed—and Professor Day set to work with Mrs. Lowry to "splice" and "cut" the manuscript to about one-half. It is not clear from Professor Day's remarks whose idea it was to edit the manuscript in this way. We have been led to believe the edition is a compromise of interests and purposes. In the introduction he lists the choices open to an editor confronting the Lowry manuscript, and seems himself to have preferred an edition closer to Edmund Wilson's version of Fitzgerald's *Last Tycoon*; that is, an edition which retained some of the flavour of the rough draft, including the notes Lowry made to himself at the different stages of his working on the novel, none of which are provided in this chaste edition. He does not say finally why this was not done, nor do the publishers—and the book was placed on the market, at least in America, as the "new Lowry novel."

Now I AM FULLY aware and appreciative of the fact that Mrs. Lowry wants to be careful with every word of her husband's released at this time, a worry that allows her to believe she can continue to rewrite him. During Lowry's lifetime she worked closely with her husband, and he often told people she knew as much about his writing as he did. I am sure she did, and still does. But when an author dies something happens to his work. It may become more important for his future reputation that the unfinished work remain so, rather than be brought to some kind of tentative and artificial conclusion. I doubt seriously if anyone, even the author's *alter ego*, even his muse, has the right to tamper in any way with what has been left uncompleted. What can be gained in the long run by doing so?

This edition of Lowry's unfinished manuscript, while it gives those of us who admire him as a writer, and who are troubled by the problem of his failure, something to work with, and to enjoy vicariously, is nevertheless an edition which will have to be redone some time in the future. This is a fact of literary history too large to argue here. Nor do I want here to impugn Mrs. Lowry's claim that she must edit and if necessary rewrite her husband's rough drafts. In her own way she is right, and must receive a justice different from that

¹ *Dark As the Grave Wherein My Friend Is Laid*. By MALCOLM LOWRY. Edited by Douglas Day and Margerie Lowry. New York (New American Library, \$5.95), 1968; London (Jonathan Cape, 35s.), 1969.

deserved by you or me, or by a publisher, were we to attempt the same thing. As it stands, however, *Dark As the Grave* is neither Lowry's novel nor his manuscript, and the publishers are to be held culpable at some future date for having beneficently overseen the production of such a pastiche. Lowry is not Thomas Wolfe; he cannot be edited with scissors and pastepot, which is what was finally done with this manuscript after the initial disagreement among the parties concerned over how it should be treated. The publishers—who ordinarily exercise such strong control over their product—for once in their lives (and for the right reasons) ought to have insisted on publishing the text and notes as they stood, making some allowance typographically—not editorially—for the non-specialist reader.

I have been told their hands were tied, that they claim in this instance a purity of motive. I am not convinced, however, that had they had complete freedom with this manuscript, the end result would have been much different. I can think of no exceptions in American publishing to what I am suggesting here. What a publisher's editor says he wants and what his firm allows are the standard definitions of optimism and defeat in this business. American publishers generally lack imagination when it comes to such challenges. They are usually insecure on questions of artistic values, as they are on intellectual and moral ones. Their treatment of Lowry while he was alive stands as adequate evidence of this.

IN THE PAST, American publishers have tried too ardently to make an author's unfinished manuscript conform to a finished format. The ghost of Maxwell Perkins—whose contribution to American literature will have to be drastically re-examined one day—looms large over the industry and has given it a rather spurious self-confidence. The idea that a man's unfinished work is not respectable unless it can somehow be stuffed into the mould of the novel, and advertised accordingly, is typically American. The editors' concern for Lowry's repetition within the manuscript (e.g., a particular incident appearing "in as many as five different versions, none immediately obvious as superior in quality to the others") is but one indication of brain-washing in this regard. As critics today we have too many presuppositions, too many ideas about literature. So what if there are repetitions? So what if Lowry lost interest in the novel form (the real point which everyone misses), that glass-house hybrid that never did get justified, and whose assumptions of form its greatest practitioners have torn asunder? The notebooks of many great writers are interesting

for this fact alone: that they show us the mind of the author trying to extricate itself, descriptively, from the same labyrinth. Often the very patterns of such repetition carry the final message. Joyce's *Portrait* is full of repetitions (whole sentences, some of them needless if we look too closely at the text), as it is also of assumptions which Joyce thinks he has made legitimately within the context of *Portrait* but which in fact are based on incidents and epiphanies found only in *Stephen Hero*. What right would anyone have to edit these?—though of course they could be expunged and a reader not know the difference.

Serious writing about self-consciousness always risks repetitiveness. It would be different if this Lowry manuscript could be turned into a "respectable" novel, one that stands on its own two feet. But it can't, any more than Lowry could be turned into a best selling novelist in his own day. The manuscript depends for its aesthetic existence on Lowry's other works, particularly on *Under the Volcano*, but also on his letters; in fact it concerns the man who has written *Volcano*, and the second thoughts he has on revisiting the actual and psychic locus of that novel. With this in mind, it would seem feasible to publish the *Grave* manuscript simply as a journal—dropping the label "novel" altogether, which is misleading, and which sets up expectations in everyone's unconscious, the editors' included. The world does not need a new novel by anybody, and we do not need to be fed the myth that Lowry left behind a "couple of nearly finished novels" which some magnanimous publisher is now going to issue; it is an injustice of an aesthetic and moral nature to do so.

Besides, let's face it, Malcolm Lowry is not for public consumption. To pretend in any way that he may still win a popular reputation is to extend further the mythology that has pervaded the world of New York publishing—a world where such an unbelievably low percentage of what is produced annually proves of any lasting value (all things considered, a percentage lower than ever before, but also lower than in any analogous situation in Western culture) that one is forced to conclude not only that there is nothing left in that literary jungle working for literature, but that there may be indistinct forces working *against* it. In spite of the uniqueness of his vision and the appropriateness of his sense of terror Lowry's true importance is an elusive thing, to be approached with delicacy and a certain peace of mind. We may not in our time be able to determine this importance except in fits and starts—as was the case of the writers with whom Lowry is most closely affined: Blake, Poe, Melville, Kafka. The least we can

do, though, is not make things more difficult for a future which may well see his terror, his excess, his vision, less pathologically than we can.

IN A COUNTRY like France the unfinished novel of so important a writer would have been published more or less as it stood, regardless of the challenge this presented to editor, typographer, or reader. (There is nothing in American publishing, for example, comparable to the 1957 French publication of Valéry's *Cahiers*, a sumptuous facsimile edition of his notebooks in 29 volumes.) In America there is thought to be something disgraceful about publishing a man's complete *oeuvres*, including the pieces that do not fit. By choosing the line of least intellectual resistance in all things America has reached the stage where she believes her own consumer myths. Plastic conformity has become the absolute of expediency, and everything from cereal to cities is pre-fabricated, pre-stressed, pre-chewed. There was a time when a serious author, even in America, kept journals, knowing full well that these too were part of his being as a writer and would play an important part after his death in allowing him to be understood, at least if what he had to say throughout his life was altogether valid. But American writers do not keep journals any longer. American publishers do not want to publish journals. Just as there is no market for unfinished novels, there is no market for journals. That we are told these things seems to be sufficient to believe them. Such unfinished material as is left behind by our writers is relegated to the hermetically-sealed depositories of our universities, where it lies dormant until an equally predictable piece of cultural charlatanism takes place—some assistant professor, with an eye to his future, convinces a junior editor in New York that with a little manual labour a "wholeness" might be arranged in such and such's work, so that it could be published. While this has happened the author has rotted away, a generation has passed possibly, and another dice throw has been realised by the fortunes of taste. What has also happened in the meantime, and this most significantly, is that the New York publishing world has had a change of blood—to explain partly, but never to justify, its seeming change of heart toward the dead author.

And indeed who is to say after a writer is dead that his letters, journals, unfinished manuscripts are not as important as his two or three novels? Renard's or Gide's or Pavese's journals mean to many what their finished creative works fail to mean. One could argue—as I believe Cyril Connolly once did—that Gide's *révélés* are rallied together almost haphazardly and with a

sometimes disappointing economy of spirit from the life-world inhabited so fully by the volumes of journals. Lowry's growth as a writer would now seem to reveal a gradual stripping off of the masks which fiction (and particularly the novel) has imposed. It is just possible he was on his way to discovering something new about literature and the possibilities of reconstruction left open to it after Joyce's rather extensive demolition-job. As he wrote in his letters: "Unquestionably what one is after is a new form, a new approach to reality itself. . . ." Such a task finally had to lie outside the novel form as we know it. It is not our concern, however, whether he succeeded in his design or not. It is enough to remark that he was one of the last major writers to believe in the visionary power of suffering and one of the last to try to write about it. As a result he found most contemporary writers, novelists especially, dishonest in what they had to say. As he put it in this manuscript:

What liars writers are sometimes, and what feeble accounts they give of their despairs. His [own] agonies must be far from unique yet it seemed to him that if but one person had survived such a thing to breathe purer air and love the light that there was hope for the human race. For one man's agony belongs to all men and to God.

In an age lacking a sane understanding of its own powers Lowry tried to find a more honest and appropriate voice for literature. While he was living his publishers didn't understand these things, as they did not understand the writing habits that were fostered by such instincts, preferring to chalk up his recalcitrance and delay to alcohol.

IT IS TRUE, OF COURSE, that Lowry was a dipsomaniac and a difficult person to deal with—yet when the whole story is told it will be evident, I believe, that he suffered in addition to his own personal demons, but not necessarily because of them, an indifference that can be listed among the subtle injustices which certain ages, in different ways, have perpetrated on their best artists. No one denies that he did not help matters; but history is full of great writers who would not know how to behave in a plush Park Avenue office—and the implications of this should disturb no one. He had the decency, at least, to keep to himself. Some authors thrive on insensitivity, their own included; others are destroyed by it. Lowry was bent on destroying himself anyway—his art was the only reprieve from suicide he accepted—so that all we want to pay attention to here is the degree to which publishers might have been re-

sponsible for the aggravation not of his personal but of his artistic losses.

Reading through the manuscript of *Dark As the Grave* one is almost forced to argue that here was a fine creative mind ruined not by alcohol or by anything as confusedly explained as "the age" but ruined for reasons that had to do with itself in dialectic with what we can only call its primary objective world. This world for Lowry was one he never knew and seldom entered in understanding; its cruelty and indifference he accepted as he accepted the fire that raged through his shack and destroyed his manuscripts—never thinking he could fight back to any advantage. The world of New York publishing and those great judgment-day board meetings which threatened his survival as a writer were part of this world he did not understand. His escape to a hand-to-mouth existence in the backwash of British Columbia, becoming a self-enlisted outcast right out of Conrad, was an unconscious gesture against this misunderstanding. So was his growing involvement with nature; so were the letters he wrote to his New York agent and to publishers, painstaking letters which, as he was writing them, bridged for him, or so he thought, the carefully measured distance between himself and that concrete thermos (significantly, almost the furthest distance by straight line from New York he could manage in North America). The letters helped until he was left with the silence of expectation, awaiting a reply which seldom came in kind, a note suggesting he could survive as a writer cut off from society, that his instincts were right. Instead he received little encouragement and almost none of the kind he needed—the kind that would have nurtured the creator in him at all costs and not tried to find, where it no longer existed, the mere maker of novels. The world of New York publishing—which he confused foolishly with the audience every writer expects and has a right to, else he dies as a writer and becomes something else—and the mind of Malcolm Lowry were never bridged at all.

IT IS DIFFICULT not to see the publication of this Lowry book in the larger context of literature's plight in America. We know now from studies of the past that a literature reflects an age not merely in basic content and form but also in its psychic tendencies. Such tendencies are to their own age usually concealed or subliminal—but that they exist and actually inform the growth and stature of that literature can no longer be denied. The agonised posture of our economically crazed society has been more and more making itself evident in

our literature. New York publishing exists on a purely mercantile level and serious writing on an increasingly academic one, and the best writers must wait it out most of their lives in small magazines (which now take up to eighteen months to publish a piece from the date of acceptance). They can, of course, do what many of them have felt forced to do, namely, sit down and write a best-seller. It is a mark of the sickness of our literacy that almost no serious American writer in the last few decades has not attempted to turn out such a "pot-boiler."

What is even more disheartening is the lack of enlightened experimentation that has come to be a part of the creative unconscious of the writer in the States, the lack of which has to do with the loss of language skills (and perhaps in the end meaningful literacy) so evident on all levels of our culture, political especially. If the writer in America becomes self-conscious and tries to experiment, his work enters the anathematised category of "serious writing" for which there is no longer even an assured opening in the small magazine. He has to publish the book himself or try to interest one of the small presses in it. (This is analogous to "off-Broadway" theatre, where one expects to find the best of what is being offered; or to "educational" television, which one needs a special device to receive, and which is almost the sole exhibitor of the kinds of worthwhile non-mythopoeic programming the basic networks in the U.K. provide.) After all these years of struggling to establish a democracy which reinforces an elementary freedom of speech, even a speech that is acceptably lyrical, we have not yet managed to centralise in our culture what is truly worthwhile and ennobling.

It is a simple fact that publishing in America has come to reflect the larger context of the plastic *Lebenswelt* we have forced upon our children—and against which some of them have responded with just revenge, by showing us how surrealistically they can make themselves at home in this world. The influences in publishing, of course, are more devious, more unconscious; the results, however, are easy to spot. To speak with New York publishers about this is to confuse them and what they believe in their hearts to resolve itself to "an honest day's work." The results begin with the startling fact, already suggested, that the big houses have nothing directly to do with literature: they do not know what it is, what it has been in the past; they do not seem to know what it can be today; and their predictions for the future could be handled by a literate fourth-year student in any of our better universities. They are completely at the mercy of the slag heap of manuscripts which builds at their feet and from

which they feel compelled to select the year's quota of books. If a book of genuine merit is accepted, almost always publishers do not know how to handle it. Such books are often accepted at the price of one or two dismissals or resignations on the editorial staff. In many cases such books are then not published but "privated" by them. (The phrase is William Gaddis', and the history of the rejection and publication of his novel *The Recognitions* is a kind of horror story.) It is almost a universal practice in America to switch publishers after a writer has had some kind of notable success, suggesting not only that a forceful "agent" has entered the wings and has negotiated a better arrangement for the author elsewhere, but more unconsciously, suggesting the author's growing dissatisfaction with the first company for other than monetary reasons and his willingness to enact some kind of ritual revenge. It is also common practice to deal with yet another publisher for one's third or fourth book. The human relationship that one finds operating between author and publisher in other times and other cultures has been eradicated almost entirely; as a result so has any sense of there being one or two houses that stand above the others in consistency of quality (as Gallimard does in France).

In some cases the switch on the part of an author from one publisher to another has to do with a phenomenon which seems uniquely American, and which seems to have been inspired by the world of Big Business. I am referring to the migration of editors from one firm to another; editors who often use their list of authors—as professors in this country do their list of publications—to bargain for better jobs. (The Lowry account, for example, changed publishers twice because of an editor, and the manuscript of *Grave* went through the hands of no less than four publishers' editors in three years, all of whom left to work for other companies.) Much has been written over the last decade on this emergence in American publishing of the editor as key figure. An author tends to speak of his "editor" rather than his "publisher"; in many cases the editor has become the amanuensis for the author's inspiration—literally taking his creative insights in hand and helping him shape them. The original owners of a number of prestigious New York houses—remembering perhaps when things were a little different, when they and not their editors took Thomas Mann to lunch at the Algonquin—have publicly deplored this phenomenon. Inevitably the reasons for their displeasure tend to overlook the real structural causes for such editorial unrest. A number of critics have complained more honestly about the surreptitious effect of

team-enterprise on writers and on literature. There is no question but that literature suffers in any struggle to uprear its head from an editorial bull-session. The point, of course, is not that an individual writer suffers (in fact the reputations of many second-rate writers are made this way), but that such a mass tampering with creative instinct affects literature unconsciously, and in ways not easy to talk about. American television, films, and merchandising generally, have recorded for posterity the effects of corporate intelligence upon creative intuition. The effect, simply, is that art does not grow under such bell-jar conditions.

IN THE CASE OF some of the better younger writers we see the effects of all this most seriously. They begin their careers individually enough, but after the second book there is a formal sameness which makes their novels indistinguishable; they become mere tailors of neat 250-page novels. Look, for example, at Frederick Buechner, John Hawkes, Thomas Pynchon, Charles Haldeman, or the late Edward Wallant: these writers have not developed as their individual talent gave promise. One can sense in their later books something of the exhaustive struggle of getting that first book accepted; or, what is more frightening, one can sense the presence of an editor looking over the writer's shoulder. Something equivalent to their innocence as writers has been lost. In few other authors is the ulterior presence of the New York publishing world more noticeable than in Malcolm Lowry. In a very real sense *Dark As the Grave* becomes a book symbolic of the frustrations of the modern author: his failure to be understood, to have his work accepted, his too easy access to self-doubt, his struggle to shape his despair so that it comes out in twelve neat chapters, "a novel." It is much more than this, of course, but the manuscript is definitely scarred by the author's anxieties *qua* author, many of which his readers could have done without.

Let me give some examples. In one of Lowry's letters to his New York publisher he tries to justify the fact that he is working on a novel about a writer. Instinctively the reaction is negative. Without reading the result of his labours (*Dark As the Grave*, in fact) the publisher reminds him there is no market for books about writers. Lowry disagrees and cites Chekhov and Pirandello. Besides, he is obsessed with the subject. Now this incident has made its way into *Dark As the Grave*. Early in the manuscript Lowry takes time out to discuss why he thinks it should be possible to write about writing:

Usually if the writer wanted to talk about his own struggles, he disguised them as those of a

sculptor, or a musician, or of any other character, as though he were ashamed of his profession. It was a pity. For to learn something of the mechanics of his kind of creation, was not that to learn something of the mechanism of destiny? There was even a sort of unwritten law about it. Indeed it was the first thing you learned: the reader does not want to hear about your rejected play. That was true: still, why not? Half the world was like a writer who has had his play rejected. In fact the world at times seemed very like a rejected play itself. Or a rejected novel, like for instance, *The Valley of the Shadow of Death*, by Sigbjørn Wilderness [i.e., *Under the Volcano*, by Malcolm Lowry].

If we continue on in the manuscript and in Lowry's letters we realise that the argument is aimed not only at the reader. In effect Lowry is trying to justify to himself the reasons for his self-absorption as a writer, now that the prerogative of self-consciousness has been stripped from the modern will. The book essentially is about the artist analysing his instinct to create, an instinct that seems to him at odds with life as it was then being lived, with survival. It is just after World War II; he has completed the fourth and final version of *Under the Volcano* and sent the novel to his New York agent once again. *Grave* begins with Lowry and his wife travelling to Mexico from their home in Canada. His intentions are compounded. He wants partly to revisit the places and people he has written about in his novel, partly to "exorcise" some old feelings, partly to re-awaken others he may have forgotten about. The trip, as we might expect, is fraught with despair. A significant part of that despair, however, is the fear that the years spent coming to terms with his demented alcoholic past (in writing *Volcano*) may have been spent in vain, as the first reports from publishers on the revised version of the novel are again negative.

So much of the tension in this unfinished novel and in the later work is describable in terms of Lowry's running conflict with New York. I do not mean artistic tension—which is always justified in terms of the work itself. I mean plain anxiety. Lowry's fears group themselves around a common nucleus. In this novel he actually lists them. They are fears of rejection, of fire destroying his house and work (Lowry had lost the manuscript of a novel in a fire), of abusing his powers as a writer through alcohol and despair, of isolation from his age and its literature: fears of eviction, both spiritual and physical. His frustration with publishers can be seen as central to these fears. For some reason he was unable not to be affected by their judgment on his work. The third version of *Volcano* had been sent to his New York agent in 1940, and subsequently rejected by twelve

publishers. He had worked on it for another four years (altogether he spent nine years on the novel) before sending it out again and undertaking this trip to Mexico. In *Dark As the Grave* we learn in detail of the effects on Lowry of its rejection once more. The implication of the new rejections is that the manuscript is too agonised, too complicated. Wilderness, Lowry, discusses with himself and with us the effects of this "cruel criticism":

... the usual bad news from America, this time something new in the language of rejection. The American editor, or reader, even pretended to have read it twice (which he might well have done without knowing it, Sigbjørn had said, since the same firm had rejected it before in a previous version as far back as 1940). "I do not give this opinion merely because I think it wouldn't sell... My sense of its second-handedness deepened on rereading"... A sense of poignance, of loss, of absolute failure now came over Sigbjørn again.

A reader's report from Jonathan Cape, suggesting Lowry re-work *Volcano*, precipitates a suicide attempt, apparently real, as is almost everything else described in this novel. The extraordinary thing is how these incidents of rejection become almost *leitmotiv* throughout the manuscript.

... he was being invited to rewrite it. What! To rewrite it again? His mind travelled right back nine solid years of continual failure from New Year's Eve, 1945, to New Year's Eve, 1936, when he was here also, in Cuernavaca... But then it [the novel] had been in a state, or nearly a state—yes, he could see by the letter—in a state they would have accepted it outright. For what they wanted to do, in effect, was for him to undo all the work he had done since then upon it, and put it back into its simplest, or at any rate its first form. But, he thought, here was temptation indeed, to give in.

Then Lowry draws a conclusion his admirers and his detractors already know, and which is implicit in all he has said thus far:

... it was failure and nothing else that had made his book more and more complicated and added all the different levels of meaning.

It is UNFORTUNATE that Lowry let publishers affect him in this way. His great mistake was relying on their judgment. New York editors were simply not the best people to understand let alone nurture the kind of ideas that came to him in the desperate solitude of British Columbia. Yet he had nowhere else to turn. He was indeed isolated; he was not a member of an intellectual coterie; he had no academic friends. In fact he may not have needed that much outside commentary on his work, for he had (with

his wife's help) an almost impeccable sense of its own rightness. But it may have helped offset the brusque criticism he was to receive from editors all his life; criticism, we tend to think, that did almost as much as alcohol to confound the development of his genius; and did so by questioning the instincts of that genius, sending it reeling aimlessly into doubt and self-analysis, the whorl of which was left on this work especially. This is not to suggest that in another age or under different conditions Lowry would have been a greater writer. That question is not possible now. It is to suggest that the shape of the work may contain, as part of its structural uniqueness, something of this unnatural imbalance of tensions. It is important that an artist develop *within* and *by means of* the state of tension that sets itself up necessarily between his own world and that of his age; between his intuition and its conception in the immediate environment. The old idea of an artist developing entirely on his own, outside his time, must be re-assessed. He outlives his time to be sure, and seems in retrospect to have forged its vanguard—but his being as a writer, and the body of work which is that state of being actualised, are themselves products of that state of tension. The writer must grow as an artist within his own time, not in some other, and certainly not only in his mind, though we can confuse the evidence of an author's life to think otherwise.

EVENTUALLY *Under the Volcano* found a New York editor who liked it and who was willing to fight the publishers for its acceptance; his name was Albert Erskine and he worked for Reynal & Hitchcock (now defunct). And Jonathan Cape changed his mind and decided to take a chance on the novel, after Lowry wrote him one of the longest justifications ever written about a work by an author to a publisher. In *Grave* Lowry bemoans the "appalling waste of time" spent on this letter, time he could have used more creatively.

Volcano, of course, was a critical success. When Lowry's editor moved to Random House he brought Lowry with him. In good faith Lowry was offered a contract the terms of which ("three books in two and a half years") it was never possible for him to meet, and he said so from the start. He worked on so many novels simultaneously that none got finished on time. Random House terminated the contract. It was not, however, only a question of needing more time. Nor was it simply a question of encouragement—which, in the years following *Volcano*'s publication, he received from Erskine. What he really needed was understanding, someone who knew how his mind worked, who realised exactly what kind of an artist he was,

and who then, on the basis of that terrifying knowledge, knew how to deal with him. Undoubtedly Erskine could have supplied such understanding—even tried to do so; but his hands were tied. When they wrote to each other they often included, in addition to the official letter (for the files), a friendly note in which each spoke his mind. The situation became worse, their friendship became tense. During the final years, when Lowry needed understanding most, it was not forthcoming. Glib judgments were made on his work-in-progress by editors. He was told it would probably not be acceptable. In effect he received messages from New York suggesting if not what to write then how to do so. That he had earned no liberty in their eyes as a writer after the critical success of *Volcano* was the most difficult thing for him to understand.

Lowry's final letters to Erskine give us some idea of the effect of all this:

...did they think, by some legerdemain, this callous discouragement and schoolboy punishment technique was going to cause me to suddenly finish it overnight? [26 January 1954]

...it would seem better, all round, that so long as I continue on my own that the status of the work remain, so to say, my own, or more my own, stage secret. In other words, I don't think I want to send you any more bits and pieces... I can't risk any further discouragement, not in the usual sense, and I don't mean this in a carping spirit, only that my self-critical faculty tends to be slightly manic-depressive, and to be frank, there are times when in process of creating I seem to need encouragement even if I think myself what I'm doing isn't entirely right, which certainly isn't fair to you; the second reason is that because of the peculiar way it seems I have to work, it's unfair to the work itself; for instance I honestly don't know at the moment whether I shall cut 200 pages out of *Gabriola*'s 500-odd and I won't know until it's finally (*sic*) typed. [22 May 1954]

And in the final letter to this editor (at least the last one printed in the *Selected Letters*), two years before his death, written from the neurosurgical ward of the Brook General Hospital in London, where he and his wife were recovering from breakdowns of one kind or another:

Needless to say I feel badly not to have delivered the goods, some goods, long ere now, it was a great pity for me we had to sever the umbilical cord with Random House at the time we did: moreover I got very discouraged, not only by the reception but by the lack of a word from anyone in regard to what small things I did publish: both "The Bravest Boat" and "Strange Comfort" have become classics in French and Italian.... [July 1955]

NOW ONE CAN ARGUE that the probable reason for the failure of so many talented novelists and for literature itself to develop in America beyond a certain stage lies outside the world of publishing, has to do with something deeper in the national psyche—and of course this would be true. But someone has to be responsible for the result, and it seems to me the writers themselves have suffered but not the publishers. What justification can there be for a New York publishing house which in one decade triples its assets yet at the end of that period is publishing less lasting literature (I am not talking of great literature) than in its first struggling years? Publishing, because of its failure to maintain itself as a promoter of culture, because of its failure to *understand* culture, has come not only to reflect our deepest cultural failings but actually to reinforce them. In the same way that so many of our national organisations have come to epitomise the failure of imagination and intellect to realise themselves, publishing has settled for documenting unconsciously that failure. It is helpful to remember that, as a profession, publishing once possessed a kind of intellectual integrity, an integrity which represented the university to the masses. Today, in America, against its own intentions, it lacks any kind of distinctive or believable voice; along with our best newspapers and magazines its voice has levelled off as a spokesman, a kind of urban half-wit, for what R. P. Blackmur called in the 1940s "the new illiteracy."

Perhaps 90 per cent of publishing today in America is the product of its own waste and the waste of our age. There was a time when literature, history, and philosophy existed by themselves on the one hand, found for themselves a publisher (if necessary were published by the author himself), then went on to find an audience. The system worked on a purely aristocratic basis: a kind of divine right of minds. The situation has changed. An ever more unenlightened democratic spirit has taken over here in the name of efficiency and profit. Literature, philosophy, history and the social sciences no longer exist primarily in the minds of the person writing on these subjects or of the person who may develop a taste for them but in the minds of the publishing world. I exaggerate, of course, but it is almost true, and it is as true of magazine as it is of book publishing. Almost all our leading magazines design the content of their issues beforehand, even their fiction. They know generally what they want and know where they can solicit it. They prefer to publish an established writer, whose name is as durable as certain soap products, rather than risk an "unknown." They do not ask Nabokov out-

right for his latest piece of 1930 sex but they know he'll come through anyway, and not upset the computed balance of their issue. Increasingly this has become the approach of book publishers as well. It is not simply a matter of anticipating or "tuning in" to taste. Nor is it a matter of creating taste intelligently. It is a much more invidious transaction. Taste is tampered with, its instincts strangulated, its possible range reduced to the most manageable proportions.

The process is visible in microcosm in the car and fashion industries. Changes are graduated so that (a) companies never outdo their creativity in one year and thus find themselves bankrupt of ideas the next; (b) the public finds the line of least resistance is still in buying "the new line." A famous fashion-designer in New York has recently remarked that he could stretch his imagination to its most baroque, come up with a ridiculous, impractical shoe for women, and that all he would have to do to make that shoe take over the market (and thus inform taste for the next few years) would be to compromise with common sense just a little: to bring the design of the shoe a degree or two back towards the "normal" shoe. The secret of controlling taste, then, is a kind of outrageous individuality coupled with a basic accepted design. It has nothing to do with genuine creative expression or self-discovery. It is a matter of altering just a little the basis of taste so that next year's fashions will go on to reflect our alterations, while being controlled by them. The results may be a permanent dissociation of taste from intelligence, creative and otherwise. As a result it is not outrageous to imagine American culture becoming—in that perfect image so much with us in this astronomical age—the product of its own waste.

IN AMERICA WE TOLERATE the illusion that television, Hollywood, publishing, give the public what it wants: that mass media are passive in nature. The same largess of error is at work here as in thinking private advertising fulfils a public need. Blake, I am sure, would have something to say about the way we confine ourselves to what we believe to be a requisite smallness of imagination. Examine, for example, the list of best-sellers in the *New York Times* any week of the year—and you find a list of "formula B" books which have nothing to do with the creative imagination that works its way through even the dullest culture, and which finally helps to define it. Here are books which have nothing to do with what we might call instinctive audience needs, expectations, or demands—but which owe their existence solely to the publishing industry itself, or more accu-

ately, to the effects of that industry. (Even the number of pages, in some cases, is decided beforehand.) Publishing is now so committed to these books that they are its worst enemy, without its realising why. It literally cannot get away from them, any more than Detroit can get away from making a Detroit-like car. After a while the acceptance of the formula, like the acceptance of the cliché, becomes an unconscious thing; we cannot break the mould, we can only continue to fill it.

What seems to have happened is this. (And perhaps the seeds were contained in the institution from the start; Alexis de Tocqueville, we recall, noted that American democracy introduced a distinctive "trading spirit" into literature.) Not only does American publishing no longer represent, except accidentally, the most imaginative adventures of the human spirit; but it has become cemented in our economy as a permanent obstacle to that spirit proliferating. What I am suggesting, simply, is that publishing now exists as a positive shaping force in our culture. It is no longer just a medium through which man's efforts at maintaining a worthwhile culture pass without interference. Its structure of prejudice has changed the shape of almost everything that passes through it. There is no longer an individual creative spirit on "its other side" which it then locates and presents to a waiting public. It has developed—like so many of our institutions that were meant originally to *serve* in some way—too much of a mind of its own. In a similar fashion the press and television networks shape everything that passes through their machinery; and certain ideas just cannot get a hearing. It is almost symbolic of the breakdown I am suggesting (a breakdown of culture, language, learning) that the major publishing houses in America have now been sold to the larger communications media—to the newspaper and television empires, thinking innocently that they can avoid infiltration of the same kinds of mediocrity. In fact what such transfers mean is that publishing has sold out to the very monolithic, impersonal forces which it once considered its natural enemy.

Publishing in this country suffers from more than the absence of a conscience: it has become co-respondent in the divorce of literacy from taste. The extent of its own ethics does not rise above requesting an author not to send his manuscript to more than one house at a time. It does not matter that some houses keep a manuscript six months before arriving at a decision, and then, if it is negative, often get a secretary to word it. One has the feeling after dealing with some New York publishers that the elaborate veneer (the advertising, the plush

offices) houses a kind of restless neurotic energy and almost no mind to focus it.

SOCIOLOGISTS WHO HAVE TURNED their attention to modern American publishing have emphasised the changes which going on the stock market and amalgamation have brought about in the concept of publishing. Publishing is big business in America—which means it has to be as successful as possible to offset its tremendous expenses. Costs of publishing a book, we should realise, increase in some proportion to the size of the house concerned. Thus a large house publishing a first novel has to sell more copies to break even than a small one publishing the same book. Fiscal pressures often mean a firm is psychologically less free than it was in its youth, though of course this is not something that is registered on the company's books. In a business where company earnings must be reported quarterly to anxious stockholders (whose interest cannot remain literary) the prospect of slow or long-range projects is not very acceptable; the pressures put on editors, and indirectly, on writers, is thus immeasurable. Publishers, caught in their own business, have discovered that there are enough possible instant successes to enable them not to worry about finding the permanent work. Literature, as an ideal, is easily lost sight of; so is the humane, as a tactic for survival.

PUBLISHING, as I have said, should provide a knowledgeable link between the innocent public and the world of creative and intellectual achievement. But in fact it works almost blindly, though always with the best intentions. In America, at least, it is so desperate not to do the wrong thing in making a decision on, say, a book about Ezra Pound, it sends the manuscript to one of the foremost critics of Pound for his advice. This particular professor—a man of exceptional critical instinct, who rather enjoys his role as undercover man for the world of Pound literature (along with the fee he gets)—has recently admitted receiving for approval almost every major manuscript on Pound submitted to publishers over the past five years. On the surface there is nothing wrong with this; but then, on the surface, there is little wrong with the behaviour of any large corporation. The professor whose advice the publishers (each unknown to the other) solicit is no longer a young man. His own work on Pound has been around long enough to be a classic, and to be out of print. As with anyone who has devoted his life to criticism, he has many enemies; undoubtedly there are people in the academic profession *he* does not like. Yet

it is before his intelligence that almost every serious manuscript on Pound must now pass and receive some kind of ratification. If he does not like a manuscript he can so weaken the editors' confidence in it that they hesitate—and in hesitation (a principle in publishing) there lies always the final truth. The chance is not taken and the manuscript is rejected. Now the professor is a brilliant man and we assume a just one. But it is conceivable that an important new book on Pound might find its very existence in displacing his. The purpose and outlook of criticism change with each age (Pound himself has said so); at some point in his career this professor is going to witness the old order of perception (with regard to Pound) collapse, and in this collapse he may well see his own books diminished. They are not literature and probably will not grow in stature. The decision the professor comes to then will depend on more than intelligence; on more even than human charity. The bubble reputation will be at stake. (It may help at this point to remember some epic prejudices maintained in the past. Virginia Woolf and Wyndham Lewis both disliked Joyce's work, the latter doing all in his verbal power to destroy it; Pound himself eventually disowned Joyce.)

Now I mean to cast no aspersions on this critic. I personally would trust his judgment when it came to a critical book on Pound. I merely want to draw attention to the situation in itself. Its insidious potential is perhaps best commented upon by another example. A poet-translator teaching at an East Coast university had a critically acclaimed translation of *Beowulf* circulating the publishing houses for years. He undertook the translation because he felt the need of a modern version that students could use, and also because, as a poet, he felt challenged by this poem, one of the earliest in any modern language. One publisher after another lost interest in his manuscript until finally he discovered, quite by accident, that the *same* academic reader had rejected it each time—a well-known medievalist at a well-known university. Presumably the professor received a stipend every time he rejected the manuscript—but reject it he did.

I use the above only as examples, and perhaps unfair ones. But consider this kind of thing happening all across the board and you get a glimpse of a type of inbreeding that may have worse effects on the future of the Humanities than any notion of intellectual incest. That the publishers are driven to such extremes indicates on one level the nature of their fear not to be out of what is happening. Granted publishers must and should seek advice. The issue is the manner of their doing so. The example given

above is, I think, different from T. S. Eliot's calling in a friend at Cambridge to scrutinise a new manuscript he is excited about: the difference is the one between the computerised factory and the corner store; it is a human difference. No single person should ever become in the eyes of a publisher the official custodian of a myth, not even the Pound myth. The logic on the part of publishers equals in a way the logic of a Madison Avenue firm that calls in an efficiency expert. In seeking, unquestioningly, this kind of opinion, publishers reveal their own true image and something of the respectability and glamour with which they yearn to adorn anything intellectual that passes through their hands. One is reminded of the classic instance in 1957 when the Ford Motor Co. tried to contract Marianne Moore to think up the name of a new series of cars it wanted to put on the market. My general point is that corporations tend to become so mindless in such matters that their behaviour displaces both individuality and imagination.

IT IS A SAD FACT that a writer in America with a serious book may wait longer now than ever before to find a publisher; conceivably he might not find one at all. John Barth, ranked by many academics as one of our best living authors, had his first novel rejected by ten New York publishers; Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* circulated the New York houses for years before someone picked it up; so did Salinger's first book. And Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, as I mentioned, was rejected initially by twelve publishers. Barth's case is worth considering. His first novel, re-issued in 1967 by his *new* publisher, contains the following prefatory note:

The *Opera* was my first novel; I was twenty-four, had been writing fiction industriously for five years, and had had—deservedly—no success whatever with the publishers. One finally agreed to launch the *Opera*, but on condition that the builder make certain changes in its construction, notably about the stern. I did, the novel was published [1956], critics criticised the ending in particular, and I learned a boatwright little lesson. In this edition the original and correct ending to the story has been restored, as have a number of other, minor passages. *The Floating Opera* remains the very first novel of a very young man, but I'm pleased that it will sink or float now in its original design.

There are other examples, but these authors are fairly representative. Now it may be polite to pretend that purely commercial interests were at stake in all these negative decisions, but this just cannot be the case. What was lacking, I am afraid, had something to do with intelligence and taste—and not even intelligence of a par-

ticularly high order. That so many publishers could make the wrong decision on so many important books is frightening. One recalls a statement made by Virginia Woolf (when she and Leonard Woolf were planning the Hogarth Press)—that the nurture and sustenance of literature depend on a publisher with intelligence at least equal to that of the author he intends to publish. It is possible that were it not for publishing houses like the Hogarth Press and human forces in publishing like the Woolfs and T. S. Eliot some of our modern classics might not have made it into print, or done so only at tremendous emotional and artistic cost to their authors.

ONE SUSPECTS the situation will get worse. It is becoming harder and harder to discover the decent things that are being published. The publishing houses in many cases can't tell which books of their year's assortment are worthwhile and which are not: often they try hardest to sell the trash and fail altogether to know how to advertise or promote the worthwhile. The best books still get "remaindered" or go out of print before they are discovered. A classic example for some future study on American publishing is the case of Marshall McLuhan. His first book, published in 1951, was remaindered. When he finally made a name for himself his new publishers literally dumped him on the market, providing the unsuspecting reader with no preparation whatsoever for the serious as well as the comic side of his genius; as a result the initial reviewers in the pulp journals floundered hopelessly in an attempt to understand what had hit them.

There was a time one could trust the best reviewers but even this has changed. Some review organs—notably the *New York Review of Books*, which received its initial support from the publishing establishment and is still "subsidised" by them through advertising—deliberately seek controversial reviews. The general effect is often the pursuit of diatribe and mudslinging: the breaking over cold stones of human reputations. Controversiality often disguises a real disinterest in literature; a yearning for power, to manipulate rather than inform. Reviews often are written to aggrandise the reputations of the reviewers, and only incidentally do justice to the books under review. Many serious books are destroyed by insensitive reviewers, and by "destroyed" I mean that the not so impartial booksellers, and the public, are discouraged from purchasing them; and the book dies in an obscure first printing. Criticism which could be the greatest check on *ersatz* literature and bad publishing becomes just another vehicle of confusion.

HEGEL REMARKED that the Roman era was the prose of history. The craze for non-fiction as opposed to fiction (in books, in magazines) is but another comment on the essentially Roman nature of our civilisation. We prefer the factual to the truly imaginative. For one thing it is easier to read, easier to assimilate and to forget. Most leading U.S. magazines prefer waterish commentary to a respectable short story or a truly imaginative essay, commentary which has almost no life of its own and whose insight will have to be replaced next issue with more of the same. The situation suggests not only the willingness of editors to give in to what they think the public wants (not realising that the public seldom knows what it wants; that potentially its horizon of taste is limitless, though of course it can be treated as though it is not) but more deeply confirms something in themselves and in our age, some unwillingness to rediscover the power of the imagination, to reassess the place of the "irrational" in life. The loss of an important dimension of literature in our lives is, I suspect, comparable to the loss of imaginative structures in our daily speech. A language that moves glacier-like towards the anonymous jargon of *Time Magazine* is a language that does not enjoy itself, that is no longer conscious of its well-springs in man's individual imagination.

PERHAPS THE MOST SERIOUS failing of our culture which publishing today reflects and in its own way does everything to accommodate (often by doing nothing) is the "new illiteracy." It is a different organism altogether from the one R. P. Blackmur spoke of in the '40s, and has to be viewed today as a disease of language as much as something intellectual or moral. American English would seem to have only so many light years left; it is diminishing in potency and style at a rate greater than any language perhaps at any other time. One can see this everywhere. Literacy as we once knew it is no longer important, is dead in effect; its replacements the mere paralinguistic shadows of articulateness, a new soft currency. We are returning, as McLuhan suggests, to an oral culture—and in this, along with everything else ingenious, America leads the world. But it is not even a kind of oral culture we can recognise. In most oral cultures of the past spoken language was on a high level of development. Our age is different. There is no pressure upon us in our daily lives to communicate by means of language: one depends on newspapers or magazines for instant information; and both have become accessories after the fact of television. The image has replaced the word, the headline

the sentence. Letter writing (once so developed an art that it could inspire a type of literature, the novel) has almost gone out of existence. One has only to pick up a newspaper in any American city to see the extent of the damage. Compare the prose therein to a newspaper written fifty or one hundred years ago. The syntax is of another order altogether. It is not syntax in the truest sense; nothing "holds together." It is mere *parataxis*, telegraphy. Six words bearing no relation whatever to each other become a headline.

One example. A year or so ago *Time* did an article on Mahler in its music section. A photograph of the Bohemian composer was reproduced, showing him in one of his dour moods. The caption beneath the picture read

GUSTAV MAHLER (circa 1905)
A fanatic whose time is now

If we think about it we can see here a perfect example of how, when language fails, profound understanding does too, and *vice versa*. Everything is "wrong" with this caption. In essence it tries to say all that the article itself says; and the kind of readers *Time* seems to want will realise this and not bother to read the article. (Much of contemporary journalism happily could do without verbal language altogether and is working unconsciously towards that day.) This is typical of the treatment given the serious artist by the new corporate mentality. Where the medium functions without any conscionable intelligence there is little chance of fair judgment. Language becomes insensitive of clearness and distinction. Intelligence gets traduced, and everything is shrivelled to the condition of a fad. The "attitude" of this caption is interesting. It would seem to be perceptibly condescending (the word "fanatic" has only one meaning in America), an apology for any superfluity of feeling that might have crept into the article itself.

Our best novelists, and there are some who

are very good, have almost no interest in language, or if they do it is an embarrassingly elementary interest. Our best poets generally have overlooked the issue, although traditionally the poet has been the custodian of language, and in those ages when he found the basic language lifeless or insufficient in some way for his purpose, struck out against it. No articulate statement exists in the literature of America today, either creative or critical. Only an "outside" group, the so-called Black Mountain poets, most eminent of whom is Charles Olson, have challenged the situation and tried to pinpoint the dead nodes of contemporary vernacular in order to rebuild the lyric idiom from scratch. But with the exception of Olson (a fanatic, perhaps, whose time is not yet) their ideas have been paltry and esoteric.

Nor are the academics much less blind to what is happening. Almost all our universities now have departments of linguistics, and new journals and books on the subject spring into existence every year. Yet there is almost a consistent failure on the part of American linguists to consider language on the European level of enquiry (along the lines, say, of Roman Jakobson or de Saussure); they are arithmeticians all, and show no interest in the power being drained from language.

Literature, and all that it represents, will survive in America, although it may have to go underground to do so, and we may have to witness the total transformation of the publishing establishment from its present half-hearted sponsorship of literature into institutions of public entertainment. That this transformation is already under way no one can seriously doubt. In the interim we can only lament the loss of some fine specimens of the creative spirit in transcendence, and in the great works that somehow make it into print, sympathise with the authors for the anguish they have undergone to acquire such freedom.