

Malcolm Lowry: The Phenomenology of Failure

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"These novels will give way, by and by, to diaries or autobiographies; — captivating books, if only a man knew how to choose among what he calls his experiences that which is really his experience, and how to record truth truly!"

Emerson, JOURNALS, January 31, 1841

I.

One can go mad in words. Nietzsche proved, documented, that. Go mad in the sense you wander afield in them, lose not yourself, but your mundane world. In fact you find yourself. Worlds of self that cohere beautifully, because they are stuck together by syntax, that marvellous glue. One recalls the image of Overbeck arriving in Turin to escort the mad Nietzsche home to Basel. The pensione people had sent a desperate telegram. Dutiful Overbeck arrived to find Nietzsche correcting proofs. Meticulously correcting proofs; moving adjectives about with surgical precision. Yet he was totally deranged. *He had this clarity about his work*, though. He could tell you what he'd just read; how it got delivered to him in the first place; what the skies were like outside as he wrote it. But his life, his being in the world, this he couldn't see at all, had no control over. Technically, sadly, he was insane:

always lucid as regards me and all other persons, but completely in the dark about himself. That is, growing inordinately excited at the piano, singing loudly and raving, he would utter bits and pieces from the world of ideas in which he has been living, and also in short sentences, in an indescribably muffled tone, sublime, wonderfully clairvoyant, and unspeakably horrible things would be audible, about himself as the successor

of the dead God, the whole thing punctuated, as it were, on the piano, whereupon more convulsions and outbursts would follow. . . .

Lowry, in his work, moves through levels of insanity to certain quiet centers where he knows he can escape himself, his world. Thus the incredible number of bucolic scenes in those last novels, and in the Mss., generally, of the final years. The incredible similarities between them; structural similarities. Some scenes, descriptions of nature, *minutiae*, moods, are rendered exactly alike. Hold two up to the light, one over the other, and you can't tell the difference. Evidently, he'd forgotten he'd already written such and such a description. Yet his mind had wandered back; wandered to a remembered past; as it wandered eternally, flirted with, Mexico — its standards of sunshine, pravity, oblivion, resurrection. Interestingly, it is the scenes of release, transcendence, that are repeated, *Leitmotiven* of an over-rigorous sanity, or rather over-rigorous attempts to check that sanity. To bring it down to earthly paradise.

II.

There is an issue which arises with Lowry that does not arise with most authors his size in the late modern period, though it is one that other times, other literatures, have witnessed. It is the issue of an author's appropriateness to his times. Lowry's reputation has grown since his death. *Under the Volcano* made him a kind of popular, literary success: the success of the better *Book of the Month Club* kind; the success of a hundred reviews; multiple translations. From there it is downhill in terms of *Volcano's* success. The short stories when they are published after Lowry's death are generally greeted with deference. Most of the reviewers had little good to say about them. George Steiner, in the *Nation*, thought them "trials and assays from the workshop of a writer who was trying to escape from the confinement of his own success." Now, years later, that opinion seems insubstantial — the fault not altogether Steiner's. Lowry is a writer who tests cultural prowess. Though his reputation has grown over the past 15 years, it has not grown in normal academic or cultural circles. Books on the English, Canadian and American novel respectively ignore him; their authors content he belongs to some other tradition than the one they are working and defining. He doesn't come to mind when one thinks of and tries to characterize in terms of form or content the post-modern age. He comes to mind only if one has labored to understand him. He requires an effort, a suspension of disbelief we do not usually expend on a recent writer. What is the mystery? Is there a mystery?

The recent publication in *American Review* of an unfinished Lowry story is a good place to begin — though the great novellas “Forest Path to the Spring” and “Through the Panama” would have to be the vehicles for any elaborate discussion of this. I found myself reading “Ghostkeeper” with interest and love. Here is a story that details the architectonics of storytelling, in the process questioning the tectonics of all such storytelling, digging into the vitals of story itself, exposing what needs (it seems to us now) exposing. The piece, by Lowry’s standards, is unfinished; yet in some strange way we can read it as complete, more satisfying than if he had drawn it out fully, instead of just in parts (as he’s done), sketching the other parts either as notes to himself or footnotes upon the act, the art, of telling such a story. In effect what he gives us is story more or less *plus* his own reflexions upon that story, *plus* a sense of how the whole was wrought, how it worked through imagination, what built in him so it had to get written, the questions, nagging ambiguities — all the things, in other words, a later period longs to find in an author’s notes, letters, journals, so the picture will be more composite, our sense of the range of creative and human response more felt. We crave such knowledge after we know the great work; we crave what Mann’s state of mind (and psychic health) was when he composed *Death In Venice*; we demand to know more of Kafka’s personal life, and any inkling of a clue can’t help but enrich the work for us. The work must exist, to be sure, beforehand, else such embellishment has nothing to attach itself to. But with Lowry the work does exist, though a good deal of it unfinished, bravely and interestingly unfinished.

Let us return to “Ghostkeeper.” Had Lowry finished it, it would be a quite ordinary piece. It would lack the very vitality that interests us in it: the questions, ambiguities, doubts it doesn’t shuffle inside the niceties, the facade, of style. Immediate *form*, in other words. Immediate and original form. It gives us what the work must now give us: that extra sense of itself, the utterly personal (as against the public, formal image: art for art’s sake, not in the 19th Century obvious sense, but the more devious sense of that axiom as late modern consciousness has evolved it): the work as configuration of its own moment of creation — incorporating into its structure as much of that moment as it can. The result is that the work engages us with fresh possibility: it does not try to bedazzle, to effectualize. Rather it draws us into itself, assuages us toward belief in itself. We come away with something knotted in our being. We have been through something not just *seen* something, stood before it in awe. The difference, on the language level (the level at which literature works or doesn’t, after all) is that between actual, biting speech (speech as gesture, that moves us to some emotion) and rhetorical argument that gets its effect from correspondence to predisposed meter and effect. One is actual, the other reflexive of human contact.

And here we are touching the heart of Lowry as a writer. Writers, artists, there are who use their work to draw themselves out of themselves; who eclipse the solipsism all solitary activity risks. There is another path, though, and artists plagued by God, solitary sin, guilt, have fallen on it without fail, defining one whole strain of world literature, though one America has almost extirpated (like the virus it is) from its current phase, and which Lowry's presence plagues — so much so, books about contemporary American literature avoid him altogether, so improperly does he fit the theses that are ridden therein. Thus Lowry's reiteration that he is being "written." That he is harassed by daimons (his euphemism). In his work he does *not* escape himself to lull in worlds of imagination he can engage as newfangled experience: that beautiful two-way mirror true imagination operating in and out of itself becomes. We follow and it replenishes in turn. It unfolds. Lowry draws little consolation from his explorations as a writer; rather he grows, horribly, beautifully, to know himself. Grows deeper and deeper in that awful, annihilating debt. Character, as a result, fades from the retinae of the work, as anything we can see plainly, or deal with in ordinary terms. The vibrancy of thought linking one self to another, and all of us to history, takes over; and the thought has the obsessive bent of an arrow seeking perfect truth: know thyself, shove deeper. The impossibility, not the pathos of it, is what returns to haunt us from the work.

III.

Part of Lowry's failure to appeal more obviously to his age is the depressing, at times morbid quality of his work. When sun shines on paradise it is a chilling sun; almost, it hasn't made it. Protagonists, or rather the protagonist has suffered to acquire that respite. Indeed, it remains only that — momentary balance, a plea from despair. The result, taking Lowry's work as a whole, has been almost too bleak, pessimistic, too unfinished in the largest sense of not brought around simply enough into a clear image of our age, our mediocre despair (every age's is), to appeal to a wide public. And yet the feeling is that, in time, it will appeal; will, even, take on the exaggerated success, say, Melville's work has, in order to offset certain other images predominant in our age.

A work like *Moby-Dick* shows us this process at work. It was a book too raw for its own times. Few *liked* it, — the somberness, the slightly affected, Shakespearean English; the allegorical train of thought; the obsessiveness. The age, 1850, thought of itself as having left those characteristics of an earlier age behind; thought of itself as "new." A more outgoing, social kind of man was in the offing; society, as that notion crests in James's time ("high society") is just beginning to be felt,

cognizance of itself just beginning to take root. Melville throws a bitter, backward glance in time. His work, in short, is not appreciated, except by similar renegades from the past, Hawthorne et al.

Jump forward seventy years, take America through its war, internecine then a world war, through the velleities of taste America moves through, language especially moves through, but also those other languages, *manners, mores*, politics in the larger sense, religion itself. The *Moby-Dick* the critics in the twenties "discover" is a very different book. Essentially, they stand outside the thick aspects of it which disturbed (or let's say did not especially please) its own age. Especially is this true of the book's language. Usually, with such bleak, tragic vision, it is the language that halts an age's casual response to it. The sentiment that inheres in that language: connotations of words, etc., particular bleak aspects of the past they dip into (in this case, the bleakness of *Lear*). But also syntax, true periplum of the mind circumscribing matter, its own past experience. It is syntax that details, as it charts, the depths we fathom in ourselves, the tool by which, as writers, we try to rescue our obsession from the age's.

We can test this by the way we, today, read, and some of us teach, *Moby-Dick*. The language is another world altogether; freshmen have difficulty with it: the heaviness of the sentences, the seriousness with which it takes itself (Ishmael, everyone in the book) despite surface levities. Yet, by a deftness we are barely conscious of, we suspend disbelief in that language. We accept it. Accept it as different, a foreign language almost. Then we go ahead and read the book anyway. We try, of course, since language is the book, style the man, etc., to see how that language works to aid the author's intention; but mostly, as we are reading the book, we are not *thinking* about the language. It is passing through us; or we are passing through it. In critical discussions of the book we tend to be talking about other things. This is because the language is not ours to begin with; we do not take umbrage at it; *cannot* (and this is a depressing thought) quite feel along its grain all that finely, our ear just won't let us, though of course we do in places. (The book is several styles, so we have several chances, several points of contact as it were.)

This is how it works: how time works to make a book that is essentially beyond (or before) its own age (let's say *outside* its own age) acceptable to a later one. If the book, beneath its lugubriousness, its difficult even unpleasant language, delves into the psyche of that age deeply enough, then a later age extols the book. It has images of that age already, even what it may then decide to call false images; it needs this other, darker image for balance.

Lowry's image of his times, America, the New World, 1940-55, is one found almost nowhere else in the literature. Sitting on the fringes of American society as he does (southward, in *Under the Volcano*;

northward, in *October Ferry to Gabriola* and *Hear Us O Lord*), that is, conceiving of his position at first infernally, then paradisaically, his view is that of outsider looking in, an alienation reflected in the individual strength and quiet, ascetic balance of the prose, prose that is the masterpiece of detachment and solitude.

IV.

Eleven years remained of Lowry's life after *Volcano*, during which he planned possibly the most elaborate continuum of novels ever conceived by an English writer. It seems clear the plan of the whole grew out of his experience with *Volcano*: his having in a sense survived that novel, the inferno of his past life that it represented. What was left after the ordeal of that book, rising like the ghost of a new self from its final chapters, was hope, hope in the specific aspect of a new way of life, almost a mystical way of life. That was what the novels had to explore from now on and do so with the single-mindedness and intensity of *Volcano*. The image was to be that of an earthly *paradiso*; or more properly, paradise regained, since the earlier work had exhausted the aspects of the Fall.

Contrary to some opinion these eleven years were prolific ones; too prolific, in terms of what resulted from them. In fact Lowry published little during that time—a handful of poems, two stories, a novella in French translation. Yet ten feet of manuscript in the University of British Columbia library attest to this prolificity—from which have been garnered and published, a collection of short stories, two unfinished novels, a novella, a book of poems, selected letters, with more to come. Lowry's canon, as the public now has it, is very much a posthumous concern.

What went wrong? Dipsomania, insanity, growing ill health, publishing problems, tell us something; but our critical instinct is to ride over these liabilities of which the human soul never ceases to find exemplification—especially, in Lowry's case, since there were clear bursts up to the very end, bursts of writing that knew where they belonged in the overall whole, by now incredibly attenuated and overdrawn in every respect. What went wrong *besides* everything else, one wants to ask; what went wrong with the work itself, so that it wouldn't get finished? The one consistency in the final period is the degree of incompleteness of the major works. An uncanny similarity, for instance, exists in the levels of incompleteness of *Dark as the Grave Wherein My friend Is Laid* and *October Ferry to Gabriola*, as though Lowry had reached similar problems in each and awaited some inspiration from the whole to resolve them.

What one notices most generally about the final work is its failure to achieve a form. *Dark as the Grave* and *October Ferry* (and to some extent the unpublished novel *La Mordida*) all fail as embryonic novels.

Most of the stories fail as short stories. They fail because the best writing in them, and some of it is magnificent, is incidental to the business-at-hand — the action, event, or story Lowry exhausts himself in telling. Inevitably, the best passages represent writing of a very different kind—writing of pure consciousness (for want of a better term): consciousness of self, nature, writing, of self-consciousness itself. In between the magnificent passages clatters the story line, sometimes painfully, almost always self-consciously. Throughout this period Lowry is cognizant of his failure with narrative and characterization, as indeed he is while writing *Volcano*; but the problem now is more central, and somehow he cannot surmount it as he does in the earlier novel. He rationalizes “a new form” around his failure: a form that will follow the configurative life of consciousness (his own, though he hopes incidentally, modern man’s) as it constitutes itself through stages of becoming. The direction is clearly towards spiritual and psychic integration of an almost mystical kind, with some awesome reflexions on his infernal past thrown in for good measure. But the theory does not stand in prospective relationship to work that will devolve from it but rather gets drawn from the work’s failure; at times gets incorporated into the work at hand, a kind of oblique discussion of why things aren’t working as they should, why narrative perhaps is obsolete as we understand it, and so on. Almost nowhere does the idea of a new form work *sui generis* to produce something new.

It is my own feeling that the idea of a new form did not come to Lowry in a vacuum from his theoretical readings but came to him from the work itself: came as signals from the work that something was wrong. The situation is generally the same, too, that gives birth to the moments of wandering form and attention that mar the final works. Always, we are solidly in the character’s consciousness (and really it matters little which character it is: Wilderness, Llewelyn, Cosnahan, Fairhaven, Trumbaugh, Goodheart. They are all essentially alike; so much so we tend not to believe the differences Lowry struggles to ascertain between them, the material differences (Llewelyn the lawyer, Sigbjørn the composer, Cognahan the writer, etc.)). Usually, the character is reflecting on some visible phenomenon, something whose contours he has noticed for the first time. Suddenly, we are moving through the visible to the invisible. We are inhabiting matter, process. Links, correspondences, evolve, or rather are observed, for it is very much a passive surveillance that this roaming consciousness enacts. And always, the moment is hinged with discovery, with the expectation of discovery. We feel we are rounding the bend or seeing beyond the mist; that something genuinely new awaits us. And always, what awaits us is further correspondence, a kind of pure symmetry which moves to become the universe. Jung suggests that at some point neither in space nor time (at least any instant of those we can comprehend) the idea of carbon becomes the actual molecule of C itself.

Lowry's spiraling consciousness moves toward such a moment, never to name it, because finally it cannot be named, but to describe the feeling or whatever of rapprochement.

V.

A second problem that arises in the final work is the confusion between life and fiction. Most of the final work is mined from real life — events, usually quite awesome, in the life of the Lowrys: houses catching on fire (theirs), arrest in Mexico on a return trip there (for which foolhardy return he blames his wife, later), threats of eviction from their squatter's shack, finally eviction itself. Eviction, the theme of it, comes to signify most of the other ills; they agglutinate around it, and salvation becomes possible only in terms of a proper response to that threat. Eviction had been a theme in *Volcano*; it gestates through that book — Firmin's displacement, his being out of history, and even out of time, as that book drives toward death (the whole action of which takes place in the mind). But the theme, held in that book in aesthetic or other suitable balance, takes over their lives; takes over, also, the final work. Monopolizes it, in a sense. He writes, must write, of what he knows — he comforts his publishers. What he does not say is why he must do so.

Lowry's was essentially a mystical intelligence. It never ceased looking for signs, correspondences to some Divine Order, threatened at times by its opposite (there was a touch of the Manichean in Lowry). Everywhere he looked he found such signs. Readers of the letters do not for a moment doubt the horror of his encounters with fire and the occult generally. As a result the world, and his experience of it, became a fairly sacred thing for Lowry. To be alive one had only to experience and recount what was already there. His whole sense of art, then, and imagination, was not creative in the simple sense but reductive, even reflexive. The writer

Perhaps the central image of Lowry's great book, *Under the Volcano*, and of his life, is an inability to face reality on the part of the protagonist. Everywhere we look in Lowry's work (and life) there seems to be this image of separation, of moving apart, a kind of ritual if not imminent schizophrenia, which in control, in aesthetic control we might add, works beautifully, the prose a searching symphony scanning experience; but out of control, moving with the awkwardness of any separate or separating reality, painstaking, timorous, awkwardly self-conscious, alert only to its own moment and fidgety paranoia, finally an engrossment few can share with the author except charitably, towards which (charity, that is) such prose spends at least half its energies.

provided experience with adequate housing; he did not arrange it from scratch or he was a mere fabulator, for which Lowry had very little respect.

Most autobiographical writers (Joyce for one, Proust for another) begin their careers with this problem: how to refine experience so that it becomes acceptable to the aesthetic judgment of the world. Joyce's first attempt at what was to become *Stephen Hero* and later *A Portrait of the Artist* was in effect an essay on himself that outlined the symbolic and actual possibilities of his own existence as a subject for fiction. The piece was submitted and rejected. What is interesting about the document is the way Joyce mines it for the later book. It is, in every sense, embryonic of the final work: thematically, symbolically, even stylistically. What lies between that effort and the final *Portrait* is legend: ten years hard work (the breath of his twenties) locating experience in its most epiphanic form, refining that experience almost out of existence, certainly out of any personal existence it might have had, incorporating into the text the theory itself of all such refinement. If *Portrait* goes too far in that refining, *Ulysses* strikes a more acceptable and perhaps more humane balance; in any case Joyce finds the balance that allows him to deal with essentially personal stuff in his so called mythic-fiction.

Other writers have had to face the problem in other ways. Proust began in a quite artificial third person and got into trouble with that person and with story itself. His challenge, unlike Joyce's, inclined toward a more honest, workable self. His breakthrough came when he realized the potential of the first person; and the futility in his case of fighting that discovery (the losses of sensibility entailed, etc.).

Lowry, in terms of natural gifts and problems engendered by those gifts, lies somewhere between Proust and Joyce. He begins his career in the third person, *Ultramarine*, though a thinly disguised third person. *Under the Volcano*, even he admits, is really only one consciousness, though divided into four aspects of that consciousness, one of which is feminine.

In no way are the characters in that book satisfactory as characters in relation to one another. So complete and encompassing is that consciousness, however, it blinds us to the fact that everything, even the other characters, are viewed through it, and do not achieve existence on their own. As characters they do not offer alternative or distinct ways of life — except technically so.

[Note: Problem of woman, generally, in the work. Lowry's *anima* resonates, merges, with some deeper upswell that sweeps woman along with it, bypasses it (and her), merges with some universal strain that is a distinctive characteristic and plaint of mysticism. Woman disappears from the work as a result (never is there as anything more than colorful, passing reference; as magnetic pole Firmin drunkenly totters around and beyond, a loss to be felt, like death or the absence of something coherent and integral, St. Thomas's maudlin definition of evil). Thus the strange quality of

They merge toward one acceptable strain of selfhood under Firmin's wide-sweeping tutelage. A good manipulator of character, Lawrence for instance, manages to present in those characters clear and distinct alternatives to the self we identify with in our reading of the narrative. To the extent we lock into that self in our reading (and we do this almost by definition) we see the other characters as different from us; as surviving, marvellously, in their own livid worlds.

Volcano is the last instance of this problem working, in spite of itself, for Lowry. Only in the two novellas, "Through the Panama" and "Forest Path to the Spring," when he shucks disguises and accepts the fluidity of the first person, does he break free of this stasis. The difference in freedom between these two pieces and all the others is startling, and one wonders why Lowry didn't realize this himself. Of course one imagines why he might not have accepted this knowledge about himself. Writing, like life, was a struggle for salvation against the odds of personal weakness, hopelessness, and fate (in which he felt the vengeance of God ready to pinpoint him for his sins). By definition nothing came easily in life. To give up on the challenge of the third person would have meant a kind of moral defeat.

Lowry feared consciousness, though he could not escape from it. In his own way he was striking out against this fear by trying to objectify it: to deal with it at a distance, in the third person. In fact he never manages this effectively; his best writing always breaks the distance he is trying to establish between himself and the protagonist. But there is an even more interesting aspect of this failure. The medical reports toward the end list his psychological condition as hopeless. It would seem now that Lowry had visions of some sort. Not boisterous visions that had him run screaming into the world but the quiet infoliating visions of paranoia and guilt, induced by alcohol, but induced also by the

impotence in the work (not felt so much in *Ultramarine* because there character is pitted against the world-at-large), felt as a genuine loss in the final works because they are works of consciousness and the stereo-typed *anima* they circumscribe, like unrealized thought, aggravates the overall search for coherence that is the mystic's dread and drive. There are several scenes where consciousness would seem to ease toward woman (the things of her world) only to imagine a bottle sitting on a table across the room: *anima* transmuted to something else. The mystic's surface-run over existence toward some higher, spiritual *Lebenswelt* is what is felt.]

This splitting of reality in the mind, which seems to serve as a kind of prelude to some authentic or mystical experience, is one that carries over into Lowry's own life. It seems, from the evidence, the idea is discovered during the writing of *Volcano*, discovered dramatically that is; later he is able, in letters, to discuss it theoretically with friends. In a letter, 1950, he is fascinated with an idea of Ortega's that life is like a work of fiction: that man makes up his life as he goes along. Lowry liked, generally, to play with such phenomenological inversions. In the periods of stasis arrived

writing itself, in his attempts to understand that madness. These he tried to incorporate into the story at hand, and since that story was about himself, or versions thereof, in the third person, the insertion was not improbable. There are examples in the later work that could be taken from standard mystical texts. It is not the case that he borrowed these, though he read such reports with interest. (William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* was a favorite.) He had an aesthetic sense that nothing could be as dull and esoteric as private visions. The visions were real, as far as we can tell: some of hell and madness and consciousness separating out of solution; others, a kind of heaven on earth, dreams of unification, under the auspices of nature, with being. The structure is fairly commonplace though he manages in detail to make them memorable. It would seem that Lowry fought insanity by keeping, or trying to keep, a distance from it in his work; partially by trying to study it, thus write about it; but also, technically, keeping it at a distance in his characters, by employing the third person.

at as he worked through the lives of his fictional characters the thought often occurred to him that man's real life (his life-world) is something he builds out of his reflexions.

This notion, typical of the modern existential imagination, assumes that man has lost a sense of great action; even that history has shaken him loose of that possibility. Geoffrey Firmin, the infirm one, is history gathered to a single awareness. He is awareness intensified; grown stagnant. He is incapable of action because of his knowledge of how futile action has become—specifically and in the general run of time. Consciousness becomes his life, his fiction. Death remains the only action as such, toward which the consciousness of the book plummets from the start.

VI.

A third thing to be noted about the final work is its obvious transcendental quality. It is writing that leads toward spiritual salvation for the protagonist and, we gather, for Lowry himself.

Lowry's struggle after *Volcano* is to find a balance, a sainthood even, in his life, out of which he's convinced his best work will rise like a phoenix. He doesn't find that balance for long. From 1950 onward, to use his own words, the path is downhill. He gets into serious difficulties with his publishers, serious because he takes them as such. His inability to finish a work, any work, becomes more than it should; consumes him in a strange way. In every sense he grows deeper and deeper in debt. He becomes determined to finish everything as a result, working furiously all over the place, sure that whatever he does will fit into the larger whole. It becomes, almost, his egotistical wish, to transcend himself and life and become some pure state of consciousness and work — a wish repeated by

his protagonists in their various retreats from civilization and attempts to transcend petty existence. Their attempt also to conquer some monumental weakness, usually alcoholism, since Lowry can name no greater threat to equilibrium and life. The image of paradise becomes, then, a paradigm one for Lowry, not just as aesthetic intentionality of the work, but as metaphor for life, his life.

By paradise many things are meant. The idea, in fact, seems to be born in the work, during the writing of *Volcano*. *Volcano* exhausts a certain vision for Lowry. He writes the book (he tells us) in expiation for his sins, his guilt, his alcoholism. His remarks to this effect are interesting in that they define a tendency that the works, after *Volcano*, depict on their own: a drive toward order against human frailty, against temptation that risks everything in its moment of relapse. Eridanus is very much an earthly paradise (dreamt of by Firmin and Yvonne, inhabited by the later characters). Firmin's garden in *Volcano* is too, but Firmin, long before we meet him, has sinned exorbitantly; he has given up on God, is luxuriating in the absence of grace, hope. Yvonne, Eve, comes to tempt him; not with fleshly conceits, or Agonistean pride, but with its opposite. In a strange way she presents him with the possibility of *reformatio, reformatio in melius*. Both of them envision paradise in its specifics, its Canadian specifics, the Eridanus of the later works. Firmin has only to choose: even to choose to want to choose. Yvonne, herself reformed, promises to do the rest. Firmin's stupor is total, however, a species of *acedia*. He cannot, unlike his inspiration Faust, even wish to be free of his torment; rather he longs to join with it, offering not even passive resistance, and is destroyed as a result.

It seems clear Lowry took his work seriously. It became his life; ideas discovered in the course of its evolution got transported into his life. In *Volcano* he came to believe

And what was that paradise? Not everything one imagines: in fact something quite ordinary: a moment, a lull between storms, nothing so interesting as a hell on earth and its possibilities for conflagration. Like Firmin's hell on earth it too is riddled with correspondences — though these to positive forces in the universe, to the Tao rather than the Cabbala, to nature rather than alchemy and black magic. Like Firmin's hell these impingements on the consciousness that inhabits it are transcendable. We could spend a lifetime, as critics of *Volcano* seem bent on doing, tracing every association, every interstice: they are, in the central image and structure of "Forest Path" (and of the Tao or "Way"), mere steps in life's way. Finally, this paradise on earth resembles none of its obvious sources. It is neither literary nor symbolic. If anything it resembles a mystical state and in that sense defies elaboration: defies making an art of any kind out of it.

Lowry's own account, in other words, of this paradise on earth, is quite a simple one. Our own estimate in terms of the whole of the work and the journey it takes to get there is more complicated. From our perspective something else comes to light. Consciousness trapped in either hell or heavenly states of earthly existence is at each instant capable of cosmic extension,

he had gone as far as man could go in depicting hopelessness. Yet he had triumphed as an artist. The paradox of that triumph he never quite understood. In any case he decided not to tamper with it: he decided to move on. There were other stages of human life that interested him: upward, transcendent stages. He had been saved from madness, destitution (he believed this); saved by a woman, a new way of life, a very different kind of nature from that experienced in Mexico, which had had detrimental effects on him; made him, in fact, suicidal, as his return there, in a moment's relapse, to refurbish that anguish, proved. It is important, I think, to accept the seriousness with which Lowry took his own actions, thoughts, and fate; a seriousness which certainly his characters share. His work is at its best when it is convincing us of that seriousness; at its worst when it seems to be straining after it: characters trying to become more than they are; to see more of the universe than they should see.

What paradise comes to mean, then, is reformation: an ideal against which to measure excesses, frailties, sheer falls from grace. It becomes, like Heidegger's death, a pole against which to realize daily consciousness of being on earth. To triumph

against these threats, as he somehow triumphed in *Volcano*, both morally and aesthetically, was his goal: to tender his new way of life so that he triumphed in it as person and artist. It is this double fixation which separates Lowry from most of the writers of the period. That he took his life and work, which was built unequivocally upon that life, as serious moral battle: that he took relapse of one to represent relapse of the other. The strain of which, along with the paradoxes that ensue, can be felt in both.

It is not simply that Lowry's world is limned with clear borders of good and evil, within which man plays a rather futile game of solitaire. This weighted morality gets buttressed with an aesthetic concern. Lowry's aesthetic, like his moral fixation, is one of correspondence: tonal and imagistic reverberation. Images, predicaments, patterns of thought connect

of becoming all that it surveys. None of this particularly helps a man's agony. Finally he is left at the mercy of what he makes of that consciousness. He can kill himself for it, as Firmin in a sense does, as Lowry (I would argue) does, in the end; or he can use it, momentarily, as Wilderness, to possess joy. And what is that joy but a momentary respite from the endless confrontation between the two states: a "teetering between past and future — between despair (the past) and hope," as Lowry describes the action of *Volcano*. Paradise, on earth at least, confronts disappointment; it is the clear insight into what we are here and now, cut loose from our universe of sources, that traps us like a universe of discourse. Nothing achieved in itself, it is a way of seeing that which lies before and ahead of us. It is a moment in which we are given the chance to recoup energies for the time when the clear seeing will have passed, as surely such moments will pass. It is a moment in which to marshal hope.

his characters like tentacles to a definite past (thus the propensity for flash-back; moments within moments; a continual drive toward the pluperfect); but also a general past, history as it is swept timelessly (out of time) into consciousness. Firmin can be Faust and Everyman in the same thought, so to speak. The result a maze, a web, a Cabbala, in which a single vibration sets the whole vibrating. The two forces, the aesthetic and the moral, coalesce; they coalesce in this drive toward completion in style no less than in thought, a drive that is defeated continually in the later work where it becomes a clear, stated intention. Even in terms of result an interesting coalescence (and failure) takes place. Lowry is unable to finish anything after *Volcano* except a few short stories. Completion, even aesthetically, becomes a problem. On the moral level the search isn't quite realized either. Lowry goes under, commits suicide. A typical perceptual structure in *Dark as the Grave* and *October Ferry* has the character about to penetrate the universe, literally and figuratively, morally and aesthetically, as Dante under the tutelage of Beatrice seems to have done. (The later characters tend to be men of exceptional clairvoyance.) It is the mixture of the two dreams, of a moral and aesthetic triumph, the dream of the mystic and artist respectively, that, in my opinion, confuses Lowry's development after *Volcano*.

One is inclined to see Lowry's drive for self-overcoming, coherence, perfection of sorts (all of which gets drawn into the notion of Eridanus), duplicated in the shape of the work itself: the long sentences, the repetitions, the great circling motions of the thought and prose, the constant seeking out of correspondences on every level, the incompleteness finally. His failure, for instance, to settle on any one project for very long, deciding that the whole was more important and worthy of attention, echoes his struggle with alcoholism and insanity. The drive for order echoes the shape of the syntax — possibly the most convoluted syntax of any writer in the modern period; sentences that weave for pages through some abstract notion of becoming, of joining with nature, or, at its most obscure, process itself; an energy, in large measure, whose instinct is to overcome, to draw everything into the parameters of an ordered linguistic world, in order to understand and control it.

VII.

What happens to Lowry after his infernal period is a kind of *reformatio* to marriage and the good (meaning full, peaceful) life; a softening of the youthful ardors and arteries in favor of the more secretive pleasures of adulthood. It is significant he was to consider *Gabriola* a more mature work than *Volcano*, at least in embryo; that he was, if not to turn against *Volcano* (the continuing reviews and accolades would not allow

that), then to consider its Faustian striving a little forced and immature; an insecurity, in short, which his present Eridanus state of mind mocked and tried somewhat to refute — because we always remember the ardor amidst the peace we think we only want from life. The tissue of the later works is the slow process of self-recovery, self-mastery; of looking inward and outward at the same moment, of building not a narrative (for narrative would seem to die along with the ardor, replaced by something very different, the heights of which perhaps are mysticism and joy) but a continuum of experience and sensibility. "The Play of Sensations," as he reminded himself, in the margin of his working notes, from time to time. Finally, of course, a compromise to save ourselves from ourselves. *Volcano* represents a period for Lowry when ideals still hold as possibilities; when imagination moves with the force of constructive potential; when he can escape his own fatality, and defeat. Why he lets that go (and it is a loss that can be fatal to the great writer) in favor of some higher truth (always some higher truth) has to do with his own physical defeat and exhaustion through alcohol; through failure essentially, the million tiny revelations it takes in our daily lives that build to a screaming dementia, a paranoia that deftly severs our love from any contact with the world; that alienates us.

The essential structure of such a *reformatio* is a new kind of love: a settling for something he hadn't expected from life, a gradual love and faith in the healing emollients of mind and body. It is significant that Lowry chose for himself (or partially had chosen for him) a way of life against everything he had conceived in early life for himself, the true shape of the traditional *reformatio in melius*: an encounter, a gradual acceptance and love. Now love opens the eyes but it also closes them for it gives in return often more than man feels he wants or should have: it anticipates and aggravates guilt. In certain types, of which Lowry was one, it succors despair, it brings with the joy an almost necessary excuse for its opposite; a need of persecution almost, as it must also keep open in some small nook of terror and fear the possibility, larger than it had been before, of temptation and fall. The garden of simplicity and delight the Consul threatens and pries apart in his mescalated visions transforms to Eridanus and Wilderness's gin and goldenrod. Significantly man's strongest

It is ironic Lowry should have come closest to depicting that state of awareness he intended paradise to become in "Forest Path," a piece in which he totally relaxes the fictional and quite unbelievable grip he has in the other works. Disbanding the "he" in favor of the more honest "I" point of view; disbanding also the need to tell a story — to fulfill the thankless exigency of plot. *Gabriola* is merely a journey toward that

hallucinagens come from nature, the very thing he thinks to outdo and outstrip in his visions; in itself, the English demon for the Eridanus Lowry, gets its flavor from juniper berries, the same conifers that rise to spectacular heights everywhere in B.C.

fulfillment, a lugubrious journey at that, full of contradictions, threats, set-backs inherent in that search. "Forest Path" was the breakthrough he wanted, though Lowry seems to have recognized that fact only half-heartedly.

VIII.

The point I want to make is that Lowry in his search for hope from a base of despair (paradise salvaged from inferno) does not in fact develop outward in terms of his own consciousness but devolves inward so he becomes enchained by another's. The Dantean model misleads him, I think, as does the model of the novel which he never really questions as a vehicle for what he's trying to do, though he finds it an impossible vehicle. Lowry seems bound by other men's systems, if not a specific system by systems in general. All of his characters at some degree zero of consciousness (and they all have such a moment) merge with one another; and all are trapped in that merging. Few of them can see beyond their condition of redundancy, of sheer correspondence with something else, some process larger than their own to which they contribute nothing, and to which they are expended. They become, in phenomenology's terms, acts of intentionality: beings clinging to something beyond themselves, some meaning that will attest to their existence, which forever eludes them. Firmin is Lowry's greatest achievement as a writer because he moves against the grain of these correspondences, resisting their implication of a second intensity existence. Firmin disputes the specifics of hope. He flings himself against the universe of thought that would reduce him to nothing. Lowry's other protagonists are less lucky. They are less demonic (though more daimonicized); they believe in transfiguration, hope, though it disappoint in its specifics. As a result they exist as tendencies, not as beings in themselves. Always they are being drawn into something beyond themselves; *something unnameable, except with the help of Ouspensky*, and other occultists who see man wedged in the cogs of a deliberate machinery. One is inclined to see Lowry as trapped by his own mind: trapped in this drive toward unravelling the secrets of the universe; only to run into the realization that he is in fact being unravelled. Trapped finally in a drive toward the pluperfect. Thus his fears (we gather quite real) he is not writing so much as being written; fears of manipulation and plagiarism of all kinds.

I have spoken of Lowry's reflexive consciousness. This consciousness works in many ways. Most often it takes place under the guise of memory: protagonist, seeing something, recalls some part of his or her past. This is the simple correspondence level. But reflexive consciousness can work on a larger scale too. *Volcano's* lugubrious opening chapter, the longest in the book, is reflexive in this sense. Vigil's wanderings in the so-called present (one of two present tenses in the book) are meant to take us into the past, whose presence will become the book. We follow him on an evening's walk (his last in this village, as the book will depict Firmin's last day on this earth). Lowry's justification for the exorbitant length of the chapter is that it introduces us to materials (locale, etc.) before those materials are drawn up and called upon as perspective — background to the lives of the protagonists. But Lowry gives us no simple introduction to this world. As Vigil, himself, wanders through the evening we receive premonitions of the tragedy to come — if not a specific tragedy then tragedy in the general sense of an awareness man cannot escape. Lowry's intention runs deeper than he knows. In effect the opening chapter does set up an intricate series of resonances (to use Bachelard's description of what images can do). Resonances of a specific and general variety. Already, in a sense, we inhabit that state of consciousness which is Lowry's trademark as a writer: already we are caught in a stasis of action, impending, delving toward, transcending. The moment itself, misprized to a degree in its own present and future possibilities, becomes the moment of history. The bare ruins of Maximilian and Carlotta's palace — two mad lovers who thought like the protagonists of this book (who have not yet been introduced, and who are as dead) to find in primeval Mexico a beginning to life — becomes an image (thus a symbol) of all such effort and loss. As early as *Volcano* Lowry had a sense of where his problem lay in this

At his best Lowry is performing a kind of reduction of hell and its opposite, paradise: he is, as he hopes, actually saying something about it: providing it with local habitation and a name. At his worst he submerges character and consciousness in the world's consciousness of these things: taking us into the dark recesses of several mythologies, the occult, into Hebraic and Christian and Eastern mysticisms. There is a balance possible between the two, of course, and to a large extent he manages this balance in *Volcano*: a moment when man sees his agony against the larger backdrop of history, the history of consciousness. And it can be a poignant moment. Unlike Eliot's Prufrock, who displays similar propensities for self-effacement, Firmin breaks the mould that would reduce his being and thought to another particle of energy in the universe. He triumphs over that assimilative process, though admittedly in a negative way. He flings himself free, almost, of time, the universe — unlike the heroes and anti-heroes he resembles, and whose *mise en scène* he moves through like a ghost during the course of the book. His final estimation of the situation is a fairly individualistic one: he doesn't care. He laughs, in fact, and in that overcomes at least the seriousness which makes self-destruction ludicrous and bathetic.

respect: how to catch the moment in its liquefaction (so to speak), outward in time. The balance between thought liquefied and matter, nature inhabited, is finer; seldom does consciousness actually build its pseudo nature, its interior landscape, rather is held like a Wallace Stevens glass up to the thing itself, playing with it, attenuating structures, forms, *correspondences* in Baudelaire's sense of things actually seen, identified.

The problem with Lowry is that he wants to do his own reflexive consciousness (i.e. the writer's) justice by allowing it to become all that it is capable of becoming; but that he wants that becoming (which as we've seen takes the character beyond mere character into history, and even process) to settle into a normal narrative framework. He wants two things which seem if not to contradict to be at war with one another.

He wants to show us the fictional, narrative instinct at work up to a point (here the main action tends to be sheer seeings: terrible encounters with the visible, as Conrad might put it; not particularly well-conceived narrative). Where that narrative breaks down, as it often does, plummeting into stasis, or seems to want to question or reflect upon itself in some way, Lowry is willing to call a halt to the narrative: to absent himself from the sidelines and enter the text as a free-ranging consciousness: saying, look, here is the problem exactly with narrative as it has been inherited: its simple-mindedness, exclusiveness, its true instinct for expansion and annihilation. The book, to use his own telling phrase, has sunk into the mind.

There are writers in the modern period who deal in the same awareness of fiction's liabilities, but who, as writers, manage to break through Lowry's dilemma. They have chosen between alternatives, not attempted to retain both; we're almost inclined to say *both traditions*. For most of these writers rebellion against the traditional modes of the novel takes cognizance of our new understanding of space and time as determined by modern science. The worst of them have simply taken mathematical formulae and experimented dryly with them: giving us, they think, a fictional correlative not of life but of what science

An important thing to realize about Lowry is that he begins as a storyteller. His first efforts at Cambridge are well fitted short stories, several of which win awards. *Ultramarine* is published when he is twenty-four, and works as a story, though of a *Bildungsroman* variety. His habit, even after *Volcano*, was to run through a draft as quickly as possible to capture the story line. Later, he'd add details, flesh. *La Mordida* is the best example of this. Some chapters are fleshed out; others exist just as notes, *addenda* — but story line is clear and that was what he thought to get hold of first. He does the same with *Dark as the Grave*. A letter of 1952 tells Erskine "700 pages of notes & drafts" have been lodged in a safety deposit box. Several unpublished stories are quick though complete drafts.

He began as a storyteller, and even toward the end is making demands on himself as such, but something happens in between. Story, narrative, breaks down for him; we see it happening in *Volcano*, are given painful example of it in the rehabilitated *Gabriola* and *Grave* texts. His best work of

tells us life reduces to formulaically. The best have realized that the traditional novel as developed on a two-dimensional, Euclidean model has indeed left us behind and deserves rebuilding from the inside; but they have followed their intuitions in this regard and have not limited themselves to a rendition of a mathematical formula which itself is undergoing revision.

Lowry, on the other hand, can be considered valuable because he gives us a temporal instance of the transformation between two worlds. Lowry documents the death of the traditional novel and provides us with both an etiology and pathology of how that death sets in, slowly, in the cells of narrative and characterization. He does not, however, break clear of his own discovery (except by implication) to actually set it to use; could not, perhaps, because of some constitutional addiction to the ethos that surrounded those earlier forms. His reliance on metered language, on the well-constructed rhythmical paragraph devolved from same, on a musical architectonics, even, we want to add, on a moral order resembling chaos that had to be held together by every syntactic device possible, held him back in his researches into new form. An obvious experiment would have been to work with smaller units; a method dependent on serial rather than developmental composition. (In a way "Through the Panama" plays with such an idea.) Such an experiment might have allowed him to control his units of inspiration more. The form he stuck with, on the other hand, drove him by its very nature to intensification, elaboration, intricate weaving of cause and effect; finally breaking under the strain. For consciousness is not a narrative (at least not immediately so). It does not easily exist as a connection of psychic events, wrought in musical or causal effect. The metaphor stream of consciousness

this period are the novellas, as we've said, both of which dismantle the very notion of story, before achieving greatness on their own.

It is characteristic of modern fiction that it has witnessed the death of story. I don't mean to put it so definitively. Let's say rather it has seen the advent of other possibilities. (We are still very much in an exploratory stage.) It makes sense that an age that honors spacial as well as temporal values; that restores a sense of the mythological (unavailable, really, to the fiction of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries); that discovers "psychology" and the very different narrative of the unconscious and dreams ("stream of consciousness," "surrealism," etc.), would also question the notion of story. This, of course, has happened, but surprisingly we still lack serious discussion of this happening; as there are poets who refuse Pound's dictum that the pentameter is finished as a measure, there are those who refuse to let story die, as though it can live as any kind of constant, as though our lives can.

What is perhaps most characteristic of the modern period is that it has focused instead on the *vehicle* of what used to be story line. (And in that sense has evolved, is evolving, a totally different sense of narrative.) Thus the concentration on language itself in writers like Beckett, Stein, Robbe-Grillet; on mythic and folk structure (Faulkner, Gass, Barth); on

is misleading in this respect. Consciousness does not flow as one steady, unquestioning, unquestioned stream, and efforts to render it as such pure and simple have met with various degrees of failure.

IX.

Most intelligent people fill their lives with a kind of running consciousness of their lives. It's not true that to be a novelist or artist you must write your self: there is such a thing as thinking yourself through existence. It works in the most unselfconscious of ways: talking to yourself, making yourself learn things, systematic curiosity, the slow construct of quotidian life. It is that thinking or consciousness level of daily existence, its strange laws and taboos, some very personal and typical, others quite archetypal, that Lowry tries to catch. What results is not fiction in any normal sense; nor is it narrative; both those things being superstructures upon basic consciousness; but consciousness itself, to use his omnipotent word, the drama of consciousness. The irony is that this should be so strange and difficult to accept (to support) in another's art; especially since it is probably the last bastion left to literature, the thing it alone can do that films cannot. But it is difficult; and it upsets the sense we have of what literature and the novel are about. I suppose it is because consciousness, in our own lives, is itself a threat, so that to encounter another's rendition of it ("universal consciousness") is an increase upon that threat, in addition to being difficult and pretentious in the extreme. Consciousness is something we yearn to flee, and what we yearn to flee *into* is what we mean by action, no matter what it is in itself finally. We dream the actual life though we

symbolic and thematic exposition (Joyce, Lowry to some extent); on psychological processes (Woolf); on dreams and surrealism (Barnes, Hawkes); on the fabricating process itself (Borges, Robbe-Grillet, Barth). Emphasis, *need* too, it would seem, has shifted, along with our disillusion. It has shifted toward methodology itself, consciousness thereof, as in modern philosophy emphasis has shifted toward *how* we know, even in such diverging philosophies as Phenomenology and Linguistic Analysis.

The fourth dimension has brought to our attention that the world of consciousness is not as it has been depicted linearly. It has given us a picture of the mind at work that can only be depicted electronically, not visually. Language, of course, has had to change accordingly, our sense of it has; and in the most effective of these writers, has become a new tool to render a new subject. In a book like *The Sound and The Fury* language actually becomes consciousness. There is not the same feeling, as often with Lowry, that language is merely equivalent to consciousness; one use of it at least. Lowry, though he too shares this disillusion with traditional narrative, and moves to offset it in his own way, never quite achieves the annealment that Woolf and Faulkner do. The awkwardness felt is an intellectual one, Joyce's problem in a sense. The feeling that he knows almost too much about his subject (*Ulysses*, *Volcano*) to let language actually take over,

inhabit a cerebral, cognizant one. We are truly children of phenomenology; intending existences, children of the "of" and "toward."

Thus another man's consciousness is a kind of hell we reluctantly inhabit, the hell of our own average lives, not the place at all we aspire to, and think naively to flee toward in the thicket of another's work, life-work. Lowry makes us suffer average existence as few authors I know. He refuses to let us escape the laws of the mind, which he calls the laws of the universe. Thus we are always confronting order of some startling kind in his work, cosmos in the extreme. The chaos of the earlier works is itself an order, the demoniac's sense of absolute non-order, equally a trap, equally a system that makes us (that turns us) irrelevant. Order is anything that threatens our sense of freedom; our *intention* for each day's living.

When we find order so subtly, so strenuously exercising itself, the danger lies in becoming too impressed with it. A cool Camus-like skepticism helps, else we tend to let it control our range of wonder; and the thing called art, the slightly blasphemous and naive thing called art, gives way to the preliminaries of mysticism. Man lives by deception; he loves, he thrives by it, and quakes when it is robbed him, as religion robs him of it. Blake's scream is the artist's scream not the populace's, which needs its priests, perennial ritual and romance. Art allows man what he knows he isn't and can't have: a kind of divinity; its scope, its transcendence, its Lethe-fulness. Mysticism checks his urges in that direction because it reduces the urge to spokes in the larger Ixion wheel; it picks up each fresh burst and the feeling soon is that we are being carried along, that our effort is just acquiescence, instead of full, pure, wanton energy in and for itself.

The dilemma of the artist who moves too close upon the order of existence and is overly impressed by it is that of the scientist who finds God everywhere under the microscope: a presence other than his own takes over the work; it loses its coincidental sense, its sharpness, its temporal bias. It *becomes* something else, not an inferior thing, indeed a

become the tissue of another psyche, the measure and lethargy of another consciousness. (A case, we might add, not of the egotistical sublime, but the *historical sublime*.) It is the tragedy of all transitional figures that they see the future but are themselves committed to retard it.

It strikes me that what replaces the notion of story in the modern period (or at least struggles to do so) is history: his-story, as Charles Olson breaks it. What Herodotus defines as "finding out for oneself." Story, at its most naive, depends upon a *particular* sense of ourselves, essentially a naive sense, partly mythological, partly fantastic, depending on the age. In any case its dependency is a partial sense, almost dream-like, though not dream-like enough. History takes man beyond himself into a wider channel of event and realization, as a result defining himself more explicitly. Description, at least, that is more acceptable to the knowledge we have of ourselves now, and our place in the world; that leaves less out.

greater beauty lies there than anywhere else, no question: *let's just say it loses itself, a sense of itself*, which sense it would seem man has needed and still needs, reinforced in his art. Art, finally, in that sense, is naive.

It's not that we would posit some naive shifting line between faith and creativity, religion and art. And yet we must distinguish the two if anything is to be grasped of this large issue, even naively do so.

Nor was Lowry unaware of this. So deeply did he penetrate the layers of his own consciousness (there was literally no end to his researches, his probings) that he saw, along with everything else along the way, the problem in its full light. The work itself reflects upon it in its shape, its vortices; and in specific places the issue is raised for consideration, as part of the process of consciousness.

X.

The fact is Lowry had a naive sense of what narrative was though his unconscious (or some other non-conscious part of him) had another, more sophisticated sense of what narrative could now become, given what the writer knows about the psychological and phenomenological workings of human consciousness, human time, etc. At times he seems to hear that alternative and the work moves, almost mid-passage, off on its own flight of discovery, genuine discovery I believe, only, at some cold conscionable moment (the moment of reckoning, guilt even, so evident in every Lowry excess, even his so-called spiritual excesses) to be drawn back to earth and the insoluble matter of narrative, its demands and narrow exigencies. Lowry is not so much the example of a writer who can't write the kind of normal, narrative novels he yearns to write (and his tastes never cease to reflect) but of one who surpasses that form, unbeknown to himself; whose genius can no longer malingering comfortably within the confines of that form. Had he listened to the suggestion of his own discoveries, and abandoned altogether the compulsion to remain within so normal a framework (in *October Ferry*, the insistence on making Llewelyn's life cohere, to give it the respectability he believed his own life and character lacked); had he driven those energies instead (lost energies, I believe, that finally debilitated him) into those discoveries, and in some impossible-to-here-describe way uncovered *their* possibilities instead of merely alluding to them, he might have achieved the new form he envisioned.

It is a normal phenomenon for an artist to dream of a new form and never or only partially achieve it. Rilke, for instance, dreamt of a new language, "a language of word-kernels" he called it, whereby he could get rid of the old encumbrances of words, the mighty resonance of words to borrow a notion of Bachelard's, which is a kind of legal lien on those

words, since they already exist in the public domain (already have a history), and come to the poet very much second-hand, whether he likes it or not. What he can do, of course, is contextualize them, give them particular emphasis in a unit of syntax and thought, and in that all important sense draw them closer to his experience, *appropriate* them. But the struggle to do so often makes itself known and shows up in the final work not always to the advantage of the work. In any case, Rilke's longing to tender words as seedlings rather than half-grown trees in the royal preserve is one we all share. And yet, in a way, he accomplished that longing; in his *Duino Elegies* he found a freedom of form approximating the freedom he longed to find in words, the atoms of poetry.

Consider, as another example, Joyce, who, after *Ulysses*, had reached a certain end in terms of what language could do for him. Moving through the subject matter of *Ulysses* Joyce moves very much through a whole culture, exhausting its individual English language as that language has rooted itself in Greek and Roman thought. What he dreams of next (abetted no doubt by his glaucous blindness) is a language of roots — an Ur-language from which Indo-European languages have sprung as separate cultural branches. He wanted to reduce history not to imagistic and nationalistic archetypes as Jung, his competitor, had done, but into linguistic ones. Instances within language itself where *logos* and *muthos* spring loose — not in any simple copula but in verbness itself. The wish, in fact, is close to Rilke's own, "the possibility of comprising all the advantages of particular languages in one and writing then: writing then!!" Rilke, however, envisioned such a language as one of ultimate paean; outward directed, transcendent, finally ecstatic.

Would it not be in this language that the perfect Hymn to the Sun would have to be composed, and isn't the pure silence of love like heart-soil around such speech-seeds? Oh, how often one longs to speak a few degrees more deeply!

Joyce, true satirist that he is, swerves inward, questioning language as it disintegrates before him into parables of absurdity, achieving not Rilke's "pure silence" and ecstasy but the pure absence of such — a difference as large as that between apotheosis and self-mockery.

In a sense *Finnegans Wake* becomes what Joyce wanted it to become: a self-inflicted wound, language drawn to its absurd conclusions in terms of its roots rather than its branches: syntax made to controvert syntax; verbness controvert verbness; words, unsexed, turned mirror images of themselves — "reconstricted out of oral style into the verbal for all time with ritual rhythemics."

Language, enacting ritual, returned shorthand to matter.

In no easy one-to-one sense does a writer realize his dream of form's or language's disintegration to pure matter. This is, in its drive toward clarity, the phenomenological drive Husserl discovers at work in the mind — which he describes as a reduction through essential psychological structures to pure structure, on which he maintains the universe of discourse rests. Lowry is less successful than either Rilke or Joyce because he is dealing with an unnatural, imposed form rather than with language. His concern lies with the novel. He wants to take the novel as it is, as it has developed, and do something quite new with it which reflects the changes in consciousness the twentieth century has undergone. He wants to do it differently from Joyce, whom he would accuse of misprizing certain human values in order to acquire structural ones (a charge William Gass, in our own day, levels against John Barth).

Part of the problem with Lowry's writing is the way each work grows out of some elaborate present reconsideration of the past. His novels, "Forest Path" excluded, do not deal in any simple present awareness. They move, like forlorn stage equipment, against some already concluded past. They are never that past pure and simple — but that past, reworked now, under the auspices of present veilleities and beliefs. Thus the tension that a work like *Gabriola* or *Grave* experiences — a tension that really has little to do with the work itself but with the author's estimation of it.

Volcano, though conceived and set in Mexico, is written in Vancouver. During the actual writing of *Volcano*, a peace is achieved in Lowry's life which gets written up, somewhat later, in "Forest Path," and later still, in a more reduced and less satisfying way, in *October Ferry*. *Dark as the Grave* and the unpublished *La Mordida* depict events in Mexico during the Lowrys' visit there after *Volcano*'s completion. Both are worked on in Vancouver, upon their return, even though the driving inspiration is of a more paradisiacal frame of mind. He sets aside "Forest Path," his most inspired work at the time, to work on *Grave*, which he believes will outdo *Volcano* in horror, an estimation it is difficult to understand and share with Lowry.

Writers, of course, deal with immediately past events all the time, but Lowry's tendency was to rethink them: reconstruct them out of authentic existence, all the while thinking he was getting closer and closer to the truth. There is this inability on Lowry's part to let things exist in themselves — not that anything ever does exist simply for any of us; but that the author must, along with everything else, give us an image of chaos that is not chaotic itself but some particular and ordered rendition of it: chaos domesticized to some local habitation and personal will. The same difficulty in Lowry that would not let him move away from the traditional novel even though it proved increasingly more recalcitrant kept him unclear on this issue as well: kept him struggling against an impossible

past, an impossible accuracy. The way his mind worked in this regard is manifested in *La Mordida* for anyone willing to take the pains to go through that manuscript in the UBC collection. The novel exists in Mrs. Lowry's typescript. Evidently, as she typed his novels she often made corrections, recommendations, restylings of various sorts, usually in brackets or marginalia. The novel concerns another aspect of the trip that inspired *Dark as the Grave* — a run-in they had with the Mexican police that resulted in house arrest and almost in his death. The version we have, a very rough version, covers the events pretty much as they occurred to the Lowrys, though of course the whole is dramatized in the third person (letters detail the same events and the horror that ensued). In places the dialogue, and narration, give us clear indication of the novel that would eventually break through the factual detail and summary — a promising novel as such, one of the few that deals explicitly with his (his character's) relationship with a woman. The characters actually have domestic arguments — the cause of which is alcoholism and general self-destructiveness. What is revealing about this manuscript is the way Margerie Lowry corrects Lowry's rendition as she types it. Continually she is saying in brackets that such and such an event is dislocated in time, that it should precede and not follow some other; corrections of sequence, names, incidents, but never interpretation. Obviously, she was fulfilling what was a desperate need on his part to get the facts straight — exactly as they had occurred. He sought such accuracy for himself, in a way bound himself to it, as he bound himself to the form of the traditional novel — the binding, in both cases, draining off a good deal of the pure inspiration.

One can guess why this rage for accuracy took over: the belief that imagination learned from experience and did not have to alter it much in the process, at least factually. In his work there is this growing realization that truth is something already there in the universe and he has only to irritate it through "correspondence" into revealing itself. More and more Lowry loses his individuality as a writer and becomes, in his all too accurate metaphor, someone who is being written. It is this passiveness, or acquiescence, which moves through the work like another's presence (another *health*), that measures the true extent, and loss, of Lowry's failure — an acquiescence of guilt or individual consciousness against which the characters rebel from time to time, usually in their thoughts, their flights of fancy, their personal vision that upsets the rigid order bounding their all too obviously bound universe. The effect is as a pattern, a ritual or rut that confounds our own honest attempts to force, through another's fictional world, an ideal order or happiness. We linger with Lowry in the attempt (to the extent that we linger at all in another's groping), and if touched with charity and love we can see something, achieve some inkling of beauty working through the mechanism of a pained mysticism; but it is a demanding and devastating enterprise, one which the modern period does not counsel or teach us to abide.

XI.

It is natural, for a great writer, to rework early material. A writer undertakes a philosophic quest into his being, and into the being of man. Some writers can conceive of each work as a separate entity: a separate stab at this being. Certain writers, less clearheaded ones like Lowry, are constantly clarifying their own being; cannot, in any real sense, see beyond its conundra long enough to enter into another character. Their work becomes one abstraction of themselves, infoliating. Each new work clarifies some aspect of the preceding, only now come to light. To take a simple example in Lowry: he never stops investigating his dipsomania. Each of the major works treats it in a slightly different way. Firmin's infirmity is recognized as man's. Man, the infirm, firm in his infirmity, a kind of floating theme of the whole.

In the Cabbala, the misuse of magical powers is compared to drunkenness. . . . (In Christianity) the agonies of the drunkard find their most accurate poetic analogue in the agonies of the mystic who has abused his powers. (*Letters*, p. 71.)

Lowry moves through drunkenness to mysticism. Firmin is a spoiled mystic; his powers, if he has such, aligned with the dark powers of the universe. Certainly he suffers something of the mystic's disease, *acedia*. Llewelyn, in *October Ferry*, is a kind of secular mystic. Whereas Firmin sees himself in the light of such dark personages as Faust, Llewelyn calls to mind Blake, Swedenborg, Cyprian of Antioch. Llewelyn indeed has visions, aided by alcohol; after many attempts he sees through the opaque curtain of the universe.

There are other examples of Lowry returning to rework the same material lest he leave something out. One of the problems facing an editor of the manuscripts is the discovery Lowry will redo the same description many times. Often, it appears he has forgotten the earlier version. The new treatment will emphasize different aspects, clarify and discard others, but will be essentially as pure — presenting the problem of having to choose between them where Lowry did not. Finally, the images within his creative unconscious were limited, structures of perception limited. He tended to return to the same visual representations — Mexico and British Columbia serving two obvious poles round which the others revolved.

In "Through the Panama" Lowry provides us with a discussion of how fiction develops from personal experience. The story evolves essentially in the first person and presents events (fears, feelings, sightings) that can be found in Lowry's own letters; yet the "I" is in fact Wilderness, his chief protagonist, or rather is on its way to becoming Wilderness. Occasionally a thought will strike and he'll enter it in the narrative (the journal) as Wilderness's.

But the "I" is writing a novel as well as keeping a journal

Of course the problem (for it is a problem of some sort) dawned on Lowry and *also* got drawn into the work, into the ruling consciousness of the work. *Dark as the Grave*, as its narrator tells us, as Lowry in his letters tells us, is an attempt to recollect lost material. The book depicts an actual trip he and his wife made to Mexico after *Volcano* was completed. The trip produces two effects, as so many of Lowry's encounters produce two effects, are themselves two-fold, inconclusive. One effect is cerebral, a conscious rehashing of the *Volcano* experience, resulting in *Dark as the Grave*. The other, more personal, closer to the bone, to the Lowrys' actual experience in Mexico (*indisposiciones nerviosas*), unregenerate alcoholism, marital squabbles over drink, fears of failure as a writer, a startling melodrama that reads more horrifyingly than anything Lowry wrote, because it scintillates with a kind of direct, unworked action: the business of his arrest by Mexican police, his nearly (for once he does not seem to exaggerate) being shot.

If *Grave* is a re-thinking of the ordeal of *Volcano*, *La Mordida* depicts how it somehow all came to life, a real *Volcano* more horrifying than the one he had imagined Firmin to inhabit. It is difficult for anyone who reads *La Mordida*, the notes and letters concerning the incident, not to conclude that Lowry courted death. He becomes his own character, divining death in exactly the way Firmin does, and almost succeeding. It is as though some incredible honesty haunts him to experience life, what allotments of it are allowed him, what particular renditions, to completion, that he might forge ahead. In any case this inability to let things be plagued his life. Continually one finds evidence of it, on the strangest levels, his wanting to be sure some

and attenuating itself into its own fictional self (*not* alter ego). The protagonist is Martin Trumbaugh and the novel, supposedly, *Dark as the Grave*, though the protagonist of that novel becomes Wilderness. Thus we get observations such as:

Nov. 9. Primrose and Sigbjørn Wilderness are happy in their cramped Chief Gunner's cabin.

Martin Trumbaugh however is not very happy.

Observations that richly suggest the way in which Lowry passed, almost phenomenologically, through his own experience in search of fictive possibilities.

By sliding through these personae, or donning masks when he sees fit, Lowry is able in a totally satisfying way to give shape to his own dilemma as a writer, better shape aesthetically than he does anywhere else. In an extraordinarily suggestive manner Trumbaugh becomes the drunkard. Rather, whenever alcohol is taken or mentioned, the result, whether in thought or fantasy, is Trumbaugh's. Notes in the text regarding alcohol and its hallucinatory powers are given Trumbaugh (suggesting on one level Lowry's attempt to keep alcohol at a distance; his attempt to manage it aesthetically, as he attempts with his visions).

dishonesty has not crept into the work, into the particular division of the world into good and evil that is his own. It is evident in the simplest structure of all, simple because Christian mysticism rests upon it, that to get beyond a dolorous condition you must burn through it, suffer it to completion. Only then is the next step clear. "Forest Path" most beautifully delineates such fulfillment and release forward, but I suspect, as a structure, it pervades the entire canon. I want, however, to focus my remarks on *Dark as the Grave*.

Lowry does not write *Dark as the Grave* in Mexico. He takes copious notes but the actual novel, like *Volcano*, is written in Vancouver, under different natural auspices (*paradise*, to borrow his term). Certainly the trip to Mexico, to re-experience what he had experienced seven years before, had reworked in his imagination during those seven years, was the unforgettable experience he wanted it to be. It is doubtful *Grave* was born of that experience. *Grave* gets born out of that experience, removed safely from it, taking as much time as *Volcano* did, though never completed. Lowry, reworking the experience, sees its possibilities as a redoing of the residual experience of *Volcano*. The strange way the book gestates, it becomes a kind of phenomenological reduction of the earlier experience. This sounds complicated, and is. I mention it only to show how Lowry got himself into such predicaments of receding perspective: *a book within an experience that is itself like an experience in a book he has written that was itself like an experience. . . so on, into absurdity.*

The problem with alcohol, as with visions induced or aided by it or by other natural or psychological means, is predictability: the process becomes one. Since what is happening to a large extent is a refining,

Sigbjørn Wilderness (pity my name is such a good one because I can't use it) could only pray for a miracle, that miraculously some love of life would come back.

It has: apparently this retracing of a course was part of the main ordeal: and even at this moment Martin knew it to be no dream, but some strange symbolism of the future.

— The French Government falls again.

In spite of having spent the night wrestling with the torments of the d.t.'s Martin Trumbaugh put in a remarkably good appearance at breakfast, looking bronzed and hearty.

"You are in good form."

"Bon appétit."

"Il fait beau temps" . . . and so on.

(This gentleman with the d.t.'s is not myself. Everything written about drink is incidentally absurd. Have to do it all over again, what about conflict, appalling sadness that can lead equally to participation in the tragic human condition, self knowledge and discipline. Conflict is

or reductive process, it makes sense that what is arrived at has a kind of predictable shape. William James notes about mystical experiences that they tend to merge in their inner reaches: the image of oneness or cohesion lying generally at the center or penetralium of all such mysteries. Visions of oneness are of a kind. The process, remarkably, is that encountered as one probes matter under a microscope — the normal then the electron microscope. There is a depth at which matter, especially organic matter, is very interesting, diversified; but there is a deeper level at which structures appear simple again and tend to gather themselves around simple nuclear shapes; presumably at an atomic level very little difference obtains. The mystical vision, to extort the analogy somewhat, traces the imaginary route Jung suggests whereby we get from the thought of carbon to the molecule itself (C) in the human body. Hypothetically, in an atom of brain tissue (containing carbon), there lodges the *thought* of carbon. It is not that there is a logical connection between the two. Here no logic or ordinary synapse obtains. Rather, it is that reduction takes us to such ambivalences, such clashings of systems, worlds of knowledge on the head of a pin.

Simply, the process, the attempt to trace the process, whether consciously (as Lowry seems to do at times) or unconsciously (which he also seems to do at times), would seem to work against a fictional mode where, if anything, specific difference (even artificial specific difference) counts. Modern art and music have managed to varying degrees to explore form in this way (though seldom the content of musical inspiration). Jungians like to illustrate their phenomenological structures with Jackson Pollack paintings — suggesting that, at inner reaches of matter, matter visually

all-important. Gin and orange juice best cure for alcoholism, real cause of which is ugliness and complete baffling sterility of existence as *sold* to you. Otherwise it would be greed. And, by God, it *is* greed. A good remark: Guess I'll turn in and catch a little delirium.)

A great deal is being said in this interchange of selves — real, fictional, supra-fictional. The remarks on alcoholism are interesting in themselves with regard to Lowry (and are repeated elsewhere): how alcoholism works on the soul like sadness to lead us to the heart of "the tragic human condition." The message seems to be that he has to rehash the whole business of alcohol (rehash *Volcano*, in a sense, which is what *Grave* attempts); that, what's been written so far, by himself and others, is "absurd" or inadequate. What is perhaps most interesting, however, is the connection made between alcoholism (its visionary powers) and writing: the implication that Lowry drinks to create, to lose himself in his creation, discard the masks of himself, become "*l'autre*" that Rimbaud imbibed other sources to become.

Throughout the piece any kind of extreme feeling tends to be allocated to Trumbaugh. As soon as something becomes an issue it gets dramatized or at least gets taken in that direction. The narrator hears about a couple on an earlier voyage who had to be separated from one another

proliferates and prefigures thought, or, at an even deeper remove, that appearance, *configuration*, determines matter in some way.

The same would seem to work in a fictional mould only to the extent it becomes a subject for the characters to pursue. And indeed on this level it works for Lowry. In "Forest Path" we have a protagonist wandering through the labyrinth of his own mind: fears, evil, failure, in search of a soul. The process works magnificently. Tracing is clear and distinct. There are enough places where we can identify with the character's obsession: the thoughts, the high points rise naturally out of a natural framework: the whole works. In *Gabriola* and *Grave* it does not. Process becomes too self-conscious. Self-consciousness attenuated to further self-consciousness of self, or something like that. We tend to pass out of visible matter as we know and understand it into process itself, whorling itself. The strain on our attentions becomes too much, the irresolution. It is my own feeling that *Gabriola* documents this madness.

XII.

Lowry's books form a plea against chaos, a plea on behalf of mind over impinging irrationality. No question, his dipsomania and self-isolation aggravated that chaos, as it obviously aggravated treatment of it, turning his defenses more and more religious, away from aesthetic or formal concerns. A choice was called for, and although he never made it in any permanent sense, it was made for him, on the spot. Lowry, I have no doubts about it, was fighting for his life in the final works, or at least for a balance, a sanity, that could make that life plausible. But he became addicted to more than he thought. Finally, alcoholic

(that keynote struck again) and he fears this happening to them. He decides "to write some of this, to take mind off possibility of its happening" to them. He can't think of anything worse than separation. The drama takes shape and begins to dramatize itself, again in the form of notes on the way to becoming a novel:

(Martin was so distressed at the idea of their separation that for a while, as is sometimes the case in the fact of actual disaster, he lost all sense of proportion, and for a moment indeed it was as if he forgot which was the more important, the threatened catastrophe of the separation itself, or the fact that having been unable to buy a bottle of Martell from the steward he was thus incumbent upon an invitation from the skipper for a drink which had never seemed more necessary and to which, since the skipper was the nearest representative of the company who had betrayed him, he had never felt more entitled.

Not surprisingly, as soon as this drama commences, alcohol gets mentioned, for its processes seem intricately linked with this process of objectification, of writing and the release of consciousness it seems to represent. When in jeopardy the instinct seems to be to reach for a drink. Drink effaces: prevents having to

that he was, he couldn't leave his fears, so used had he become to the structures of perception and cognition those fears worked in him.

His failure, finally, might be put this way. As a spiritual man his ambition was to overcome temptation and order his life; as an artist to trace that development as clearly and interestingly as possible. Because of the great bouts of alcoholism that plagued his life, the dissociations (literally, d.t.'s) he suffered during those bouts, the exile and guilt felt afterwards, he was driven to *see* (I underline the visual aspect) life on earth as a battle for integration: a battle to piece soul back together with body: to see and behave wholly, instead of in parts. From the very beginning, increasingly, to the end of his life, the central image of the work is one of separation; man separated from his past, society, woman, himself; but even on a visual level, one thing separating out of solution from another, something always about to clarify from the mists; even down to the very syntactic level where one clause continually breaks from another, qualifying the other, as the novels break from the short stories, then as novels break from each other, until the hypotaxis of the whole becomes truly a *Voyage that Never Ends*. The drive, on the level of language no less than of consciousness, is a drive to anneal that separation or clarify the thing born of it — grant it clear and distinct birth.

But spiritual and aesthetic concerns of this kind do not happily overlap in the novel. Presumably, coherence in life, states of integration or blessedness in mystical terms, are states of mind; they are seldom processes that get particularly well stated in language, though there are isolated successes where a writer has found a vehicle worthy of such a burden. Descriptions, even of higher states of mysticism than sanctification,

come to terms with the problematical in life. We recall Firmin's failure at lovemaking with the returned Yvonne and the way his mind wandered to the Farolito — which is where at the end of the book he meets Maria and continues that train of thought, that escape, to his death, on the vicarious wings of lust, beneath a photographic calendar of Canada (Eridanus).

Fear of failure was central to Lowry's life. We do not understand him unless we appreciate this fact. *Volcano* receives almost monthly praise the ten years after its publication. The archives are full of glowing, intelligent letters; reviews of the French and German translations; promises of new editions, radio transcripts, Broadway plays, movies, etc. Only one review had been negative, Jacques Barzun's in *Vogue*. Lowry had written him a painstaking rebuttal and Barzun, in the presence of such masterful prose and thorough reasoning, retracted somewhat. To the objective eye it would seem that Barzun hadn't really read *Volcano*, and was simply letting off steam as a reviewer, a phenomenon anyone who has done continuous reviewing understands. Lowry never forgot that negative review. Somehow, with paranoic proportions, it returned to haunt him the rest of his life. A psychoanalyst might say it became one with the image of the disapproving father (one with the disapproving tutor at Cambridge too, and everyone

visionary, saintly states, are often benign. Augustine dramatizes his conversion to Christianity to make it more interesting; in fact it took several years to work out details of that conversion and to settle residual, neoplatonic doubts. John of the Cross's visions, while ordered to poetic poignancy, work on us more as documents than as art (at least I offer that dissenting view), though I am willing to admit poetry is a special case and more amenable to degrees of ecstasy than the novel. Conversion, if that's what it is, or the sanctification that gets built upon that conversion, is of the whole man: an outward, all-encompassing kind of attention rendered to all God's creatures. Repeatedly, at least on the level at which Lowry is working, the image is of seeing God's permutation through organic and inorganic matter. There is an opening of vision to encompass in a sense infinity, but an almost equal closing of it in the light of that infiniteness. The mystic, converted, twice-born, whatever, hovers in that paradox. While it is possible to render that visually (as Lowry attempts to do) it is less easy to resolve it so, as indeed it gets resolved in thought, word, or deed, for the real mystic. Prose fiction by its very nature drives one to resolve, to settle matters which, in true mysticism, remain open-ended, unresolved in any technical sense, except that life, the way of life, changes for the better. Interestingly, Lowry's poetry, of which there is a considerable amount, does not interest itself in mystical subjects or visions, only the novels, as though it took the machinery of prose, the lubricity of it, to work himself into that ardor. In any case his mysticism, such as it is, is something that gets discovered in the novels, though it does not get resolved in them. In "Forest Path" it is dealt with most easily, most naturally. In *Grave* and *October Ferry* it tends to be forced: vision forced upon a very recalcitrant narrative.

else in his life, family especially, who refused to take the time to understand his madness, or worse, discredited it as that and only that). The last year of his life, in a raving letter to Dave Markson, a kind of younger brother or Hugh figure (as both he and Mrs. Lowry describe him) to whom Lowry wrote some of his greatest letters (seldom his most desperate ones though, as though Markson were some ideal, future audience), the Barzun defeat could return gigantically to level him ("the rudest review I've ever read of any book").

Finally, he was unsure of his genius, as he was often, legendarily, unsure he wasn't, when in the throes of his best work, plagiarizing someone else.

Were I asked to single out the chief aspect of Lowry's failure to finish his *magnum opus*, or any of its individual parts (and it is staggering how much was never completed, there is almost a vengeance of incompleteness there), I would cite his congenital inability to understand what I'd call aesthetic rest or hiatus. Inability to hover in ambiguities: a lack, to borrow Keats's term, of negative capability. Always he hankers after fact and reason, not metaphysically as was Keats's implication regarding Coleridge, but spiritually: to uncover some final truth about the

human soul on all levels, with and without the body. This predilection for self-realization killed, or at least further anesthetized, what was already in Lowry a weak sense of characterization; certainly it undermined action, *narrative* in the true sense.

Yet my belief is that he still could have done it: could have given his own conversion, or let's call it simply a struggle for perfection, a form in prose to match the inspiration. Could have done so had he not chosen so finite, so limited (even sociologically limited) a form as the traditional novel. Had he even broken from it as simply as "Forest Path" or "Through the Panama," letting down masks and other familiar disguises and concentrating on the moment, instead of trying, which is what he essentially tried, to give those moments dramatic placing in specific actions, *actions-toward-narrative*.

But the novel was only one prison he got himself into as a writer. The other was the combined symbology he built from every conceivable spiritual tradition, most specifically the Christian. He cannot function outside another's framework, of which the Dantean model is only one example. In the interstices of the prose, the instants of consciousness, others are found continually. Nothing is simple. No red wheelbarrows exist in and for themselves in Lowry but are always on their way to becoming something else; are so because man is always on his way to becoming something else, torn between physical and spiritual horizons. In some way the artist, unlike the mystic, has to choose. Has to choose life, as Stephen Dedalus does, as particularly of this earth, to wallow in it as a way of knowing it. Almost, he has to sacrifice some small possession of soul, or at least risk so doing.

In any case Lowry's attempt at such an impossible task provides us with an interesting study of failure, whatever that term means in the long run, and I suspect very little. He has left us a sizable and profound body of unfinished work which we can't ignore; certainly a later age will not ignore it as one perception of our own. Extraordinarily, that perception moves through our own in many ways. On the surface, Lowry's interests seem contemporary; can now be seen, twenty years after the fact, as before their time. I refer to his running from the city, his *naturalization* process, his sense of a paradise available to man — a Jerusalem, a Vancouver, where man can build with his own two hands. But even in his attitude toward that paradise, his rich ecological discussions (the threat of eviction he sees quite unequivocally hanging over man's head). Contemporary, too, in the kind of spiritualism he pursues, his interest in the occult, an interest closer to our own age than to Jung's. In a peculiar sense Lowry's work maps a contemporary pilgrimage that takes man back to the land, in search of paradise — a theme pervading our lives the past few years but little of our literature. The dream, Eridanus, is presented in *Volcano*; is grasped imagistically by Firmin, Yvonne and Hugh

respectively, with little difference as to specifics. When Yvonne tells Hugh of that dream on their ride through the excessive jungle, he laughs. It turns out he doesn't mean to laugh. It is only a matter of seconds before the thought, the image, infects him, and he adds to it, enlarges upon it. In fact he knows about Canada, has heard about Vancouver from a "Canuck in Spain, a fisherman," and regales Yvonne on the prospect of escaping there.

The description he gives is little different from Firmin's, given us via his letter, written the spring of 1938 (it is now November 1938), which Laruelle finds in the book of Elizabethan tragedies. It is also no different from the visions both the Consul and Yvonne have simultaneously, before their deaths; only then the vision is tinged with tragedy. The little cabin in the wilderness Firmin sees before his death is consumed with fire.

Volcano presents the possibility, refused, of paradise for the protagonists — the action toward death and self-destruction throughout. Even Hugh's romantic vision of aiding and abetting the Spanish Loyalists (he is to leave for Barcelona in about a week) goes up in smoke, at least as he imagines it. Certainly, the feeling is that he will fail, has failed before in such endeavors. Both active and passive choices are conceived in the book, yet both hopelessly so. Presumably, Hugh is going off to make the world safer for socialism and right reason; safer for his ailing brother, and sister-in-law, whom he loves, genuinely, and for whom he would, were such simple civil wars of the soul to be fought on behalf of one another, gladly sacrifice himself.

If you lump *October Ferry* and the Eridanus stories in *Hear Us O Lord* together, as that paradise regained, stalled as it were in its advance toward doom, then you have quite a wide mapping of a dream which has certainly touched contemporary culture, 1960-1970. What you have, chiefly, is its failure, and that because of specious weakness in man, and woman, not anything especially having to do with the times, or with Nature itself. The failure of Lowry's work aesthetically, in a sense, documents the larger social failure, or anti-social failure: the belief that any of us can forget the past; that nature, imbued so thoroughly with man's presence, history, is that easily milched of its tragic sense, the tragic sense we have bestowed on *her*. In this sense Lowry's work addresses itself to a contemporary dream; though, of course, it does so obliquely, before that dream got promoted. We have not even begun, 1973, proper disquisition upon its failure.

Even as a writer interested in what writing must become his theories are strangely contemporary. His notion of what his own work had to become against the psychological "dishonesty" of so much current literature (especially the existentialist variety) prefigures writers like Robbe-Grillet, Barth, Borges — though his own work resembles theirs not at all, and he was unable himself to make the break and achieve the new form he talked about. It would not have been their form or anything like

it, but it would, I think, have questioned some of the same narrative values. Possibly, it would have netted returns their work has not, except formally, leading us out of the existentialist maze as their work does, though forgetting almost absent-mindedly existence, my existence, yours, in the process — a charge we now see fit to level against such subtle artificers.

And yet, though contemporary from a distance, Lowry's name does not come to mind when these issues are raised. He did not discover them as subjects, of course, though his work discovers them on its own, as obstacles natural to itself. In this sense he is original and lasting. Whatever happens to consciousness in the period roughly delimited 1945-70 Lowry seems to have been in on it. In a strange way he worked through it: his work, on one level, a discussion of the dream and its failure.

It is precisely this failure that should interest us, for it speaks to our age in a more astringent way than we might care to admit. It does so in the negative, obtuse way of the wayward mystic, the anchorite who perceives civilization from a distance and who notes, in his rancor and wayward love, its patterns, its intricacies of decay. For all its incompleteness, multiple-mindedness, Lowry's work forms a rather solid statement against our age, one a later age cannot help but notice for its perverse clarity.

And yet, our inclination is to argue that in spite of everything Lowry achieves something of what he sought. The work is flawed to be sure, flawed in the sense it never gets finished, never gives him the satisfaction of nearing completion; yet in isolated places, and completely in "Forest Path," there is something achieved that is close to vision: vision as opposed to pathos (*Volcano*). Something that shows us, as well as the *Duino Elegies*, say, or Dante's *Paradiso*, instances where mind anneals with the oneness of the universe; where mind becomes the natural world, and vice-versa, where something, some part of us larger than both, because distinct from both, capable of reflecting on both, takes over. We are transported there, and, of course, it is not what we imagined or sought. Finally, it gives little and expects a lot. It raises questions, infoliates. It sets us loose in a universe of order and symmetry beyond which we cannot go unless we resort to a Dantean or Tielhardian leap of faith that will take us beyond mere vision to what makes sense of it.

Impossible. Our reaction is one of incredulity. We resist, finally, the arrogance of such visions that makes fools of us and the seriousness with which we treat our ordinary lives in the world. And yet, in some way, Lowry's momentary success at showing us these breaks, these rends in the ordinary narrative of life; his showing us even how they contend with that life, though they take us only as far as faith can take us, have spoken to

the issue; have depicted its range of possibilities. By erratic, stubborn attempts, repeated through several works, repeated within the same work itself, Lowry has given us a poetics of failure. That failure, at least, we can share, do share to whatever extent we read these final works with pleasure and love.

Lowry, most of all, would appreciate the irony of his importance as negative, or underlying force to our own age. He was a kind of inverse visionary, as he was an inverse mystic. He saw not in wide sweeping circles into the future but inwardly, his science of human nature more microscopic than telescopic. He dug in where he saw he could and described for all he was worth. He did not see the outside world in any outstanding way. Inwardly he did see, did struggle. What he describes forms a complete world. What he has left is complete, despite the unfinished aspects, the novels as he unfortunately thought they had to be called in order to be born respectably into the world.

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