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MASKS AND THE MAN: THE WRITER AS ACTOR

"The gigantic tragedy of life goes too fast for those who must merely sit down on some tomb and between scenes try and interpret it, especially when they themselves are actors."

Sigbjorn Wilderness

When Malcolm Lowry died in 1957 he had no book in print in English. Had he wanted to purchase a copy of his masterpiece *Under the Volcano* he would have had to settle for a German or French translation. Since his death there have appeared three American editions of that book, a revised edition of his earlier novel *Ultramarine* (published originally when he was twenty-four but reworked throughout his lifetime), a pamphlet of poems, a British edition of *Lunar Caustic*, a collection of short stories (the latter two books edited by his wife), and his *Selected Letters*. Amongst the other manuscripts left behind by Lowry when he died were three and a half novels, hundreds of poems, at least half a dozen short stories, essays, playscripts, and journal-notebooks amounting to several hundred pages. At least two of the unfinished novels are sufficiently complete to merit publication: *October Ferry to Gabriola* (now tentatively scheduled for publication) and the novel here reviewed, *Dark As the Grave Wherein My Friend Is Laid*. In his fine introduction to this novel, Professor Day tells us there were 705 pages of typescript, "already yellowing and crumbling," which Mrs. Lowry and he "spliced" and "cut" to about one-half—a task we well believe was "tricky work, calling for patience and restraint." Together the editors have done a remarkable job and almost every Lowry admirer will be grateful to them.

Surprisingly, the book works as the kind of novel Lowry intended; at least if we let it. A powerful singlemindedness brings the fragments, the excesses of emotion, imagination, self-enquiry together. Indeed all the machinery of a novel as brilliant as *Volcano* is present: the quest clearly defined and adequate, the right kind of symbolic props, the landscape (or "deathscape" as he calls it) appropriately used as in the great novel, the descending and ascending spirit. But although the structure is more or less complete, the style, what is said and thought, needs to have

Dark As the Grave Wherein My Friend Is Laid. By MALCOLM LOWRY. Edited by Douglas Day and Margerie Bonner Lowry. The New American Library, New York, 1968.

been submitted to the author's critical intelligence, particularly to his rather fine sense of dramatic timing. Had he lived, the narrative threads would have been tightened, symbolic connections made more secure, and the whole not only rewritten but rewoven; Professor Day's estimation that it would have taken Lowry perhaps another four years is just.

The novel, to put the matter as simply as possible, is about Lowry the writer (herein named Sigbjorn Wilderness), and thus, as he would like to argue, about man the artist ("For to learn something of the mechanics of his kind of creation, was not that to learn something of the mechanism of destiny?"). It is also about Lowry the alcoholic, the lover of death and Lethe, the sinner paralysed in the act of repentance, the hermit and aspiring saint, the naturalist, the liar, the suicide, the man perennially terrified (of God's punishment, fate, disease, fire, eviction, and the possible failure of second love just as he seems to be understanding it); in short, about an infinite number of characters in search of the author, who is also himself. So autobiographical and psycho-critical is the book that it almost obviates the need for any further commentary (on the levels of its own enquiry) on this part of Lowry's life, at least if read in conjunction with the letters of the same period, the voice and style of which are almost at one with this novel. The only juggling of fact Lowry seems to permit himself is in the occasional changing of dates, to make near "correspondences" frighteningly perfect, and in this he would consider himself merely improving upon nature.

The time of the novel is 1945 ("...it was as if the war had sent the quicksilver of human lives scattering in every direction."). Sigbjorn and his wife Primrose are travelling to Mexico from their sea-enisled home in British Columbia, ostensibly to find his old Mexican friend of eight years before, the model for Dr. Vigil in his novel *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* (Lowry's original title for *Under the Volcano*), but more honestly to find themselves, or himself, amid the ruins of his alcoholic past. This friend, with whom he has not been in touch all these years, lives in Oaxaca, the one place on earth Wilderness is terrified of, representing as it does the Gehenna of his youth, the tearing apart of himself no less than of his first marriage, the locus of the agony he had exorcized finally in his novel; or had he? The more deeply Wilderness moves southward, toward Oaxaca, the more deeply and almost phenomenologically he enters his past. His fears descend on him en masse and he tries to sort them out; personified and masked, these demons appear to him in a kind of morality tableau on the plane. They are, as we might imagine, not the everyday fears of ordinary men. Wilderness, however, has God to fall back on and something called hope, neither of which the consul, the protagonist in his previous novel, understood as wholly applicable to

himself. This book then is an attempt on Wilderness' part to retrace the terrain both actual and psychic of his earlier novel (which by the way has not yet been accepted for publication), but with the hope that deeper discoveries of self are in the offing. Of this he is of course not sure. The trip may be but the more complicated workings of fate. But he reminds himself he has had no choice. Their house outside Vancouver has recently burned to the ground and the manuscript of a novel along with hundreds of poems destroyed. Part of the self-knowledge Wilderness hopes to gain on this journey must spur the will to live, enabling him to return and rebuild their house on the same spot, and somehow, to continue on as a writer. The first inkling of hope comes when, on the plane southward, he remembers several lines of one of the lost poems.

Wilderness' understanding cannot quite approach his fears head-on; while they will readily appear to him with masks and fireworks they will not relinquish the secret they hold like an indistinct black light up to his mind. Yet in the course of the novel, his mind, seldom at ease, encircles these fears in a never-ending dialectic. The novel obviously was intended to find its shape around such confrontations. The trip through Mexico leading to Oaxaca (put off until the very end) itself takes on a circulatory motion, duplicated visually in the vultures that gyre in the high sunlight, and on another level, duplicated in the circumlocation of the style. There must be over a dozen attempts by Wilderness to come to terms with his suffering, yet each time it eludes his cerebral grasp and he must resolve its agony in alcohol or in some unexpected upsurge of hope, gleaned God knows where, but having at least something to do with man's almost actor-like ability to mask the awfulness of his self-consciousness.

Time, with his blunt rod of steel, his useful nailset, had driven these agonies below the surface of his mind. Now they came up flush with it. Flattened and indurated they were still into his very being: but there, nonetheless, now they were, as they had not been, plainly for his visible eye to see, for years, and they hurt. But suffering at least, that of the mind, the soul, will not stand any concrete description. Nails, even the cross, from which we take our hope, are of the earth. But the suffering itself seemed to come from somewhere else, was from elsewhere and doesn't want to be described, and it seems in perpetual metamorphosis, and frenzied mixed metaphor, impossible simile.

The moments when hope works (and there are many in this book, as there is much good humor) are as magnificent as we find them in any literature—and this not merely because the suf-

fering, depicted sometimes brutally and sometimes ingenuously, is real, but because in an age when such suffering is too often misprized by the artist or sublimated out of existence in allegiance to some comic god (of form, or whatever), Lowry makes it seem important to try to speak about such. In any case something more than compassion compels us to listen.

Primrose said, "Is it? I must know."

"It's not *the* place, of course."

Though this was not *the* place [i.e., not the barranca into which the consul's body had been tossed at the end of *Volcano*], it was vast, threatening, gloomy, dark, frightening: the terrific drop, the darkness below. They lingered long on the scene, and Primrose beautifully remarked: roads that are laid straight east and west, those get the sun all day, but roads that go north and south get the sun later, and lose it by three o'clock in the afternoon. It was like a poem. It was difficult to see how any happiness could come—for the Consul, his hero, it would not—out of this but so it did, floating like an essence. It was the happiness engendered, strangely enough, by work itself, by the transformation of the nefarious poetic pit into sober or upright prose, even if jostled occasionally by Calderón, or it was the happiness engendered by the memory of work finished, of happy days, other evening walks, or rather, more accurately, of the memory of their escape—from some or other part of that transformation, after tea, when they discussed it to some sort of conclusion, and in this respect purposely of turning evil into good—to see Mauger, the fisherman with his tales of salmon drowning eagles, or of how the wind blowing wildly seemed to keep the tide high up a whole day, or of beaked fish with green bones.

There are a number of important themes and instances of *leitmotif* throughout, many of which consolidate attempts in earlier Lowry works to come to terms with his kind of experience: the whole question of illusion/reality, of the writer "being written," connected as it is with Lowry's belief that he was moving toward giving us, in *Wilderness*, modern man's consciousness at work, is connected with *Wilderness* seeing himself every so often as an actor (and thus, to the extent he is a writer, a plagiarist). Lowry's growth as a novelist would now seem to reveal a gradual stripping off of the masks which fiction and particularly the novel have imposed. Though *Volcano* was but a faint abstraction of real life, Lowry's life, this novel is an attempt to rid the same kind of situation of its former abstraction, thus to retrieve from it whatever was lost the first time around. It is as though Lowry is questioning the very nature of fiction itself, and trying to come

up with something which might just be more lasting, something of value which was once a part of literature (at least the visionary, mystical variety) but has long since been lost, as it may be lost in the very life modern man has concocted for himself. As Wilderness descends into his past, life itself (enlarged as it always was for Lowry against the Mexican terrain: this country "crucified between two continents") comes to bear a frightening resemblance to his imagination; at one level of his despair the journey becomes itself a book (directed perhaps by good, perhaps by evil forces) more frightening than the one Wilderness had tried to write, in which he feels he is being led blindfold (he hopes by God) to the right kind of *dénouement*. Throughout the novel he speaks of the "fictitiousness" and mendacity of his life; several times he sees someone he thinks resembles himself, or sees himself as resembling someone, and momentarily becomes that other person; he imagines himself other writers and inhabits their worlds, even feeling at one point a bit like the divine author Himself, "moving in the midst of His own creation." Lowry held none of these fears vainly. He was a proud man only in that he felt he had a right to live as a writer, a right he felt all his life threatened—by parents, publishers, Mexican Police, and finally by the public at large.

Imperceptibly, the forces of hope win out over the forces of despair. There is a gradual sense of redemption in the novel, finally threatened, yet we gather finally overcome, when Wilderness discovers his friend has been dead all these years, murdered not unlike the way the consul was murdered in his own novel. What is real and what is illusory come together in a final terrible coincidence. The strain is released. They visit the countryside where his friend, once an adviser to the Banco Ejidal, had helped make the igneous terrain fertile; they visit a ruined Aztec city; they visit a church built on its ruins. The novel ends with Sigbjorn and Primrose riding out of Oaxaca, looking at the undulating fields of grain, his friend's "garden." A sense of the power given man to turn the quotidian disaster of his life into triumph has come over Wilderness. Nothing has changed except perhaps the angle of his seeing. A sense of the "magnificence of being alive" is still "shot through with sadness"; but the meaning he sees lies in the occasional imbalance between the two, and the slight edge something indefatigable in man gives the forces of hope.