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MACMILLAN MODERN NOVELISTS

MALCOLM LOWRY

Tony Bareham

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MACMILLAN

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For Margaret

Author's Note

I have written quite extensively on Lowry in the past, though not recently. Hence this book enabled me to make a re-evaluation. In some cases this has involved changing my mind, particularly about the short stories. I can only hope that readers find it a more honest stance on my part to admit that I was probably wrong in the over-enthusiastic appraisal I made of some of the material in *Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place* in a previous evaluation, than to cling for consistency's sake to opinions I no longer really feel.

My thanks are due to:

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General Editor's Preface

The death of the novel has often been announced, and part of the secret of its obstinate vitality must be its capacity for growth, adaptation, self-renewal and even self-transformation: like some vigorous organism in a speeded-up Darwinian ecosystem, it adapts itself quickly to a changing world. War and revolution, economic crisis and social change, radically new ideologies such as Marxism and Freudianism, have made this century unprecedented in human history in the speed and extent of change, but the novel has shown an extraordinary capacity to find new forms and techniques and to accommodate new ideas and conceptions of human nature and human experience, and even to take up new positions on the nature of fiction itself.

In the generations immediately preceding and following 1914, the novel underwent a radical redefinition of its nature and possibilities. The present series of monographs is devoted to the novelists who created the modern novel and to those who, in their turn, either continued and extended, or reacted against and rejected, the traditions established during that period of intense exploration and experiment. It includes a number of those who lived and wrote in the nineteenth century but whose innovative contribution to the art of fiction makes it impossible to ignore them in any account of the origins of the modern novel; it also includes the so-called 'modernists' and those who in the mid- and late twentieth century have emerged as outstanding practitioners of this genre. The scope is, inevitably, international; not only, in the migratory and exile-haunted world of our century, do writers refuse to heed national frontiers – 'English' literature lays claim to Conrad the Pole, Henry James the American, and Joyce the Irishman – but geniuses such as Flaubert, Dostoevsky and Kafka have had an influence on the fiction of many nations.

Each volume in the series is intended to provide an introduction to the fiction of the writer concerned, both for those approaching him or her for the first time and for those who are already familiar with some parts of the achievement in question and now wish to place it in the context of the total *oeuvre*. Although essential information relating to the writer's life and times is given, usually in an opening chapter, the approach is primarily critical and the emphasis is not upon 'background' or generalisations but upon close examination of important texts. Where an author is notably prolific, major texts have been selected for detailed attention but an attempt has also been made to convey, more summarily, a sense of the nature and quality of the author's work as a whole. Those who want to read further will find suggestions in the select bibliography included in each volume. Many novelists are, of course, not only novelists but also poets, essayists, biographers, dramatists, travel writers and so forth; many have practised shorter forms of fiction; and many have written letters or kept diaries that constitute a significant part of their literary output. A brief study cannot hope to deal with all these in detail, but where the shorter fiction and the non-fictional writings, public and private, have an important relationship to the novels, some space has been devoted to them.

NORMAN PAGE

Introduction

Few modern novelists present more vexatious problems than does Malcolm Lowry. There are plenty of sources for the facts of his life, but it takes very little investigation to make one aware that these sources conflict, often contradict each other, and that they lend themselves to radically differing interpretations.

This account of the novelist's life uses three principal sources – Douglas Day's *Malcolm Lowry*¹, purporting to be the official biography; Gordon Bowker's compilation of interviews and personal accounts, entitled *Malcolm Lowry Remembered*²; and the *Selected Letters*³, edited by Lowry's second wife, together with Harvey Breit. Here, one might think, would be a corpus of reliable and consistent material provided from among the reminiscences of the novelist's friends and contemporaries, from his own correspondence, and from a scholar dedicated to providing an accurate Life of the writer.

The problems are soon manifest. Day is horribly inaccurate. He spells names wrong, confuses dates, and blurs continuity of outline. Reading the reminiscences collected by Bowker it quickly becomes clear that Lowry presented wildly differing facets of his personality to different friends and contacts. Several of these reminiscences, moreover, have occasion to be partial, self-defensive, or less than totally frank. Even the letters, carefully sifted through, are those of a man who was frequently evasive, over-optimistic in his promises, unstable. Thus, there is not a single consistently reliable witness upon whom we may call.

This seems to strike a negative note in an attempt at presenting a clear outline of Lowry's life and work. With Malcolm Lowry nothing *was* clear or simple. He regarded life as 'a forest of symbols'; the phrase is Baudelaire's, and Lowry used it often.

He had an abnormal sensitivity to the power of coincidence and accident. He was so introspectively self-critical that he frequently lost track of the essential difference between fact and subjective wish. And alcohol wrought extreme changes, schisms and contradictions in him. To take but one example: his warmth and charisma of character are testified by source after source. 'The very sight of that old bastard makes me happy for five days' was the involuntary testimony of one friend. Yet the same man who inspired this warm praise could stagger drunk into a neighbour's house, stare at his handicapped child and ask, 'what kind of man are you if this is the sort of kid you produce?' (Day, p.462).

What kind of man was this indeed, who presented such divergent aspects of character to the world? Beyond a certain point it is none of our business. There will always be discrepancies between the morality of the created artifact and the social persona of the creator. But Malcolm Lowry carries this problem to its extreme. More importantly, because he is so predominantly an author who draws upon himself to create his fiction, we are bound to take some account of the nature and causes of these schisms.

There is yet another major problem of which the reader or student must be aware when coming to Lowry for the first time. His published output up to the time of his death in 1957 comprised two novels – *Ultramarine* (1933), and *Under the Volcano* (1947) – a handful of short stories, and a few poems. Most of the stories comprise material later incorporated into or ultimately associated with the novels themselves. Since his death there have been two more novels – *Dark As The Grave Wherein My Friend Is Laid* (1969), and *October Ferry To Gabriola* (1971) – two collections of short stories and novellas, principally *Lunar Caustic*⁴, and more poetry. But every one of these posthumous volumes has been the work of editors combing through Lowry's papers.

After Malcolm's death his second wife, Margerie, made it her life's work to conflate and to splice into shape the multiplicity of drafts, notes, alternative versions, through which he worked. There are plenty of critical voices which argue that the posthumous fictions can scarcely stand for judgement as the work of Malcolm Lowry alone. Worse still for anyone attempting a critical overview, grave doubt is often expressed about the quality of this posthumous work, regardless of purity of authorship. Yet in most quarters Lowry is recognised as the author of one of the masterpieces

of twentieth-century fiction. He emerges as that most vexatious of critical problems – the ‘one book’ author.

The one book is, of course, *Under the Volcano*. Frequently reissued, filmed, prescribed on many university literature courses, it is a brilliant, compelling and innovative work of high art. But nothing else he did is deemed to come within touching distance of it. Lowry demonstrates neither the relentless development in power and technique which characterises the growth of an artist like Dickens, nor the ability to leap forward over his intermittent lapses which marks the career of Hardy.

Goodness knows, this is not because Lowry was an occasional writer. He never had a job; he never did anything but write, supported for a good deal of his life by subventions from his father. Writing seems to have been as much a compulsion as a vocation.

His work methods are described more fully at a later point in this study, but the sense of near pathological commitment with which Lowry approached the creative process must be made clear from the outset. Why did a man so devoted – and so privileged – publish so little?

Though born in England Lowry lived most of his creative life abroad; in Mexico, in Canada, and on forays to continental Europe from his New World base. *Under the Volcano* and *Dark as the Grave* have Mexican settings; *October Ferry* is located in British Columbia; the very early *Ultramarine* takes place on a voyage to the Far East; most of the major short stories have Canadian or Italian backdrops. From the very early 1940s Lowry was virtually an exile from the English literary world. Actually isolated from nearly all outside influences, the most palpable were always American rather than British. Do we then place him as ‘Canadian’, ‘Commonwealth’, ‘American’, or what? This study will regard him, despite geographical factors, as still centrally English. I have written elsewhere in defence of this stance.⁵ But the ‘Lowry industry’ has its critical headquarters in the New World, and its judgements of the novelist may be slanted or vitiated by a desire to ‘claim’ Lowry for a particular school or style of American writing.

Mention of the Lowry critical ‘industry’ raises another general problem of which the new reader should be aware. *Under the Volcano* is a wonderfully rich and complex novel. It needs many readings and substantial erudition to grasp the deeper layers of meaning which run down through its texture. At its heart there is a

passionate clarity of feeling, but there have been too many critics concerned only with esoteric corners of the book.

Thus the biography is contentious, the material of the fiction often opaque, the validity of the canon difficult to establish, and the critical field cluttered. Beyond these problems again lie the specific issues of style, presentation, methodology and genre which must engage the would-be student of Lowry's art, and with which this introduction to the novelist seeks to deal.