

Remaking the Voyage

New Essays on Malcolm Lowry
and *In Ballast to the White Sea*

Edited by Helen Tookey and Bryan Biggs



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HELEN TOOKEY *and* BRYAN BIGGS

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In memory of
Vik Doyen
1942–2018

Contents

Acknowledgements	ix
Contributors	xi
Introduction	i
<i>Helen Tookey and Bryan Biggs</i>	
1 Haunted by Books: Malcolm Lowry's <i>Ultramarine</i> and <i>In Ballast to the White Sea</i>	21
<i>Patrick A. McCarthy</i>	
2 'We've got a bastard duke on board': Class, Fantasy and Politics in Malcolm Lowry	31
<i>Ben Clarke</i>	
3 Malcolm Lowry and the End of Communism	47
<i>Mark Crawford</i>	
4 <i>In Ballast to the White Sea</i> : The Springboard for Russian Influences on Malcolm Lowry's Visionary Intellect	61
<i>Nigel H. Foxcroft</i>	
5 <i>In Ballast to the White Sea</i> : A Plunge into the Matrix	77
<i>Annick Drösdal-Levillain</i>	
6 Walking with Shadows: Index, Inscription and Event in Malcolm Lowry's <i>In Ballast to the White Sea</i>	95
<i>Cian Quayle</i>	

REMAKING THE VOYAGE

7	'Hva vet vi?': <i>In Ballast to the White Sea</i> and the Weighting of Evidence <i>Chris Ackerley</i>	119
8	Identity and Doubles: Being and Writing in Malcolm Lowry's <i>In Ballast to the White Sea</i> <i>Pierre Schaeffer</i>	135
9	The Lost Other: Malcolm Lowry's Creative Process <i>Catherine Delesalle-Nancey</i>	151
10	Infernal Discourse: Narrative Poetics among the Ashes of <i>In Ballast to the White Sea</i> and <i>Under the Volcano</i> <i>Christopher Madden</i>	167
11	'Leaning forward eagerly': Malcolm Lowry's Moviegoers and <i>In Ballast to the White Sea</i> <i>Miguel Mota and Paul Tiessen</i>	183
12	From <i>In Ballast to the White Sea</i> to <i>Rumbo al Mar Blanco</i> : The Spanish Reception of Malcolm Lowry's Unfinished Novel <i>Alberto Lena</i>	199
13	'Glimpses of Immortality': Our Voyages with Vik Doyen <i>Sherrill Grace</i>	217
	Index	223

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All the writers we invited to contribute to this new volume responded immediately and enthusiastically. We were delighted to receive such an insightful and complementary set of chapters, which include contributions by eminent and long-standing Lowry scholars and perspectives from the fields of poetics, Russian literature, modernism, cinema studies, photography and political theory. We hope this book will stimulate further discussion and study of *In Ballast to the White Sea* in relation to Lowry's wider *oeuvre*.

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This book comes out of an ongoing project, which began in 2009, of 're-placing' Malcolm Lowry on his native Merseyside – that is, exploring the ways in which the port of Liverpool and the Wirral peninsula of his youth continued to resonate in his writing throughout his life. Through a public programme of activities organised annually as the 'Lowry Lounge', our aim has been to raise awareness of Lowry locally as a major twentieth-century writer and a figure to be celebrated. This project could not have happened without 'the Firminists' – Mark Goodall, Robert

Sheppard, Ailsa Cox and Colin Dilnot – nor indeed without the Lounge ‘regulars’ who have supported and participated in the events.

In the context of this book, we owe a huge amount in particular to Colin Dilnot, whose researches into the background material and physical landscapes of *In Ballast to the White Sea* helped inform Chris Ackerley’s annotations to the critical edition of the novel. They have also been central to our understanding, as outlined in the introduction to this book, of the ways in which the recovery of *In Ballast* casts new light on Lowry as a political writer of the 1930s and a writer deeply grounded in the social, political and geographical landscapes of the north-west of England.

Helen Tookey and Bryan Biggs

Liverpool, April 2020

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Introduction

Helen Tookey and Bryan Biggs

... so that the voyage has to be remade, the pattern pieced together once more ...

Malcolm Lowry, *In Ballast to the White Sea*¹

Who ever thought they would one day be able to read Malcolm Lowry's fabled novel of the 1930s and 40s, *In Ballast to the White Sea*? Lord knows, I didn't.

Michael Hofmann²

This book breaks new ground in Malcolm Lowry studies: it is the first collection of essays in which Lowry scholars have been able to respond in detail to the extraordinary event greeted – in slightly ironic fashion perhaps – by Michael Hofmann in the above quotation, the publication in 2014 of Lowry's 'lost' novel, *In Ballast to the White Sea*. In the quotation from the novel above, Lowry's protagonist, Sigbjørn Hansen-Tarnmoor, is writing to William Erikson (Lowry's fictionalised version of Norwegian novelist Nordahl Grieg), trying to express his feeling that Erikson, in his novel *Skibets reise fra Kristiania*, has 'already written' the novel that Sigbjørn is trying to write about his own first sea voyage; not only that, but that Erikson has in a deeper sense 'already written' Sigbjørn's own life:

But to return. Your book, then, not only made my own seem futile but robbed my voyage of its last vestige of meaning; in an important sense it cancelled that voyage; forced me out of the pattern of my destiny, so that the voyage has to be remade, the pattern pieced together once more. (*IB* 46)

The metaphor of the voyage is, of course, central to all of Lowry's writing and to his thinking about his writing (and his life, the two being inextricable); the title that he came to employ for the 'whole bolus' of his works, conceived as an ongoing, interrelated whole, was 'the voyage that never ends'.³ Sigbjørn's notion that the 'voyage' – not just his actual sea voyage, and his writing of it, but the voyage of his life – now needs to be 'remade' in the light of Erikson's novel seemed to us to provide an apt image for the title of this book, which considers the ways in which the publication of *In Ballast to the White Sea* both requires and enables readers of Lowry to look again at his *oeuvre*, to remake the voyage.

In practical terms, the impetus for this book was the conference we organised at Liverpool John Moores University and Bluecoat (Liverpool's centre for the contemporary arts) in July 2017, part of our ongoing project of 're-placing' Lowry on Merseyside.⁴ The conference was titled '*Under the Volcano, 70 Years On*', but invited papers on any aspect of Lowry's work. It became apparent both from proposals submitted and from the wider discussions and conversations during the conference that the most exciting area was precisely the new possibilities opened up by the publication of *In Ballast* – the opportunities to focus on that novel itself, from various angles and standpoints, but also the ways in which its publication changes the ways in which we can now look at Lowry's (highly interconnected) *oeuvre*, the ways in which the presence of this text can shed new and different light both forwards and backwards on to other texts.

In Ballast to the White Sea: an outline

As Patrick McCarthy states in his introduction to the novel (*IB* xxi), *In Ballast* is essentially a *Künstlerroman*, focused on the young protagonist's attempts to resolve his conflicts of identity, purpose and destiny, his 'debacle of self' (*IB* 44). More specifically, he is grappling both with a series of disasters personal to him, or to his family, and with the social and political crisis unfolding in the wider world, and his place in it. Indeed, Lowry's point throughout the novel is that the apparently personal disasters are, in fact, inextricably interwoven with the political system – capitalism – that has brought them about.

Like all of Lowry's protagonists, the central character of *In Ballast*, Sigbjørn Hansen-Tarnmoor, is a version of Lowry himself. Here he is the son of a Liverpool shipping-line owner, a Cambridge undergraduate trying to become a writer. At the opening of the novel Sigbjørn and his

brother, Tor, are struggling with guilt over their family's responsibility for the recent sinking of two of the company's ships: the text later implies that there may have been some deliberate attempt to cut costs and make more money for the shareholders. Sigbjørn has previously been to sea himself, and has attempted to write a novel about his experiences, but has been shaken by his discovery of an already existing novel by a Norwegian, William Erikson, whom he feels has written his own story better than he could have done himself; in this respect, *In Ballast* is Lowry's fictionalised account of his response to Nordahl Grieg's novel *Skibet gaar videre* (*The Ship Sails On*) and its influence on his own first book, *Ultramarine*. Sigbjørn is planning to take a ship to Norway, to try to meet Erikson, and ostensibly to adapt his novel into a play. But the reasons behind his proposed voyage are far deeper and more complex than this; in many ways the real subject of *In Ballast* is not the voyage itself (which is hardly touched on, at least in the novel's existing, unfinished state) but Sigbjørn's ongoing attempts to make sense of his own motives in wanting to undertake it.⁵ The novel's other defining event (which occurs as it were off-stage, in the implied temporal gap between the end of Chapter III and the beginning of Chapter IV) is Tor's suicide. Tor himself raises the possibility of suicide as the brothers discuss their situation in his lodgings in Cambridge; he suggests that he should kill himself not just because of guilt over the ships' sinkings, and his valueless position in relation to the class struggle, but also because his death could, sacrificially, free Sigbjørn from these things: 'Don't you think that if I died you could let all these contradictions and despairs, all the rest, pass into me as if I were a dying tree?' (*IB* 26). Sigbjørn hears his own response 'as though he were listening to another':

—Well, why not? Sigbjørn heard himself say...

—Why not what?

—Kill yourself. Yes, why not? Go on and die... (*IB* 26)

Tor does in fact go on to kill himself later that night, leaving Sigbjørn throughout the novel both tortured by guilt and haunted, in many ways, by his brother's ongoing 'presence'. Here Lowry is again dealing in fictional form with a real event in his own life, the traumatic suicide of his Cambridge friend Paul Fitte – an event for which Lowry felt, rightly or wrongly, partly responsible, and which, as his biographer Gordon Bowker writes, 'would haunt him to the grave'.⁶ This guilt would resurface in Lowry's last work, *October Ferry to Gabriola*, but it is much rawer and more central as a driving element of *In Ballast*.

The majority of the novel depicts the guilt-stricken Sigbjørn, back in Liverpool, wrestling with the philosophical and political dilemmas he feels faced with, and engaging in lengthy debates with his father and with his girlfriend Nina. A card-carrying communist, Nina reproaches him for his vacillations, his naïve fantasies of ‘your lovely Norway’ (*IB* 114). Equally, his father points out his confusion as to whether he is trying to reach Norway, the land of his birth and therefore in some senses representing the past, or Russia, where ‘the future is being hammered out’ (*IB* 64). Desperately wanting to share in the authenticity of the ‘virile proletariat’, at the same time Sigbjørn recognises the impossibility of this because of his own class position: as he says to his father with a mixture of humour and despair, ‘I’d die for communism but I haven’t the impudence to call myself a communist. Another thing, I don’t suppose they’d have me’ (*IB* 129). The uncertain destination of the *Unsgaard*, the ship he will sail on – whether to Archangel, Leningrad, or, as eventually transpires, Aalesund – mirrors Sigbjørn’s own deep-seated uncertainty about the direction he needs to take. Past, present and future are depicted throughout the novel as complexly interwoven; Norway may represent his own childhood, but at the same time, Sigbjørn feels certain, ‘Erikson in some way connects me with the future’ (*IB* 71). Even this thought, though, comes to him as an instance of the haunting that is so persistent throughout the novel: ‘when the answer came, it was as though Tor spoke it’ (*IB* 71). For Sigbjørn the future also essentially contains the past.

We suggest that there are three major aspects to the new considerations of Lowry made possible by *In Ballast*, which can be summed up as politics, place and process. Although political issues are clearly present in *Under the Volcano*, they are very much more to the fore in *In Ballast*, which shows Lowry explicitly grappling with socialism and communism as potential answers to the struggle of the working classes. *In Ballast* therefore brings into new prominence an aspect – Lowry as a political writer – which has previously tended to remain in the background. Similarly, while the places and landscapes of the north-west of England are present throughout Lowry’s writings, *In Ballast* is the only one of his novels to be actually *set* mainly in this region, thus providing a new angle on Lowry as a writer ‘of’ that particular territory. At the same time, of course, the book’s own imagined voyage is to the far norths of Norway and the White Sea, the Norwegian/British protagonist Sigbjørn caught between his desire for, as Annick Drösdal-Levillain puts it, ‘a plunge into the matrix’, a return to his maternal origins in Norway (and at the same time to track down his alter ego, mentor/nemesis, the

Norwegian Erikson), and his concept of Russia as perhaps representing the revolutionary future, the way forward out of the world's present misery. Finally, both the vital presence in the text of various 'lost others', and the way in which Lowry mythologised the loss, by fire, of *In Ballast* itself, its ongoing status as his great 'lost' work, open up questions of the importance of loss – of hauntings, doublings, burnings and ashes – in Lowry's writing and in his creative process.

Lost and found: the publication of *In Ballast*

The publication of *In Ballast* is of particular interest to scholars and readers of Lowry for a number of reasons. The first concerns the history of the manuscript itself. Patrick McCarthy, the book's editor, provides a detailed account of this in his introduction to the scholarly edition. Lowry had been working intermittently on drafts of the book since the early 1930s, but the manuscripts were destroyed when his and his wife Margerie's shack at Dollarton, near Vancouver, burned down in June 1944, leaving only a few fragments of the text.⁷ Lowry never subsequently attempted to rewrite the novel; 'instead', as McCarthy puts it, 'he mourned its loss and, in time, romanticized it as a (potentially) great book, its destruction one of the central tragedies of his life' (*IB* xix). In typical Lowry fashion, the book's dramatic loss is worked into another of his (autobiographical) fictions, *Dark as the Grave wherein my Friend is Laid* (published posthumously in 1969), where *In Ballast* becomes the lost work of his writer-protagonist Sigbjørn Wilderness.

In fact, though, there was another copy of the manuscript, entrusted in 1936 by Lowry and his first wife Jan Gabriel to her mother for safe keeping. The publication of Gabriel's memoir *Inside the Volcano* in 2000 raised hopes that an almost complete draft of *In Ballast* thus did still exist. As McCarthy explains in his introduction, the textual situation turned out to be more complex and less satisfactory than that: of the 1936 draft only a few photocopied chapters remained, and Gabriel had not only retyped Lowry's text but made corrections and revisions to it at later dates (*IB* xxv–xlv). The text is incomplete, with the last three projected chapters existing only as notes. Thus, the published version of *In Ballast to the White Sea* can only be viewed as a work in progress, a version of what would no doubt have become a very different novel had Lowry completed and revised it for publication.

McCarthy's point that Lowry preferred to keep *In Ballast* as his 'lost novel' is taken up and explored, from different angles, in several of the

chapters in the present book. McCarthy himself returns to the idea and considers the various uses to which Lowry puts *In Ballast*, not only mythologising it as his own lost work but pressing it into service as the lost (burned) novel of his fictional alter ego Sigbjørn Wilderness in *Dark as the Grave wherein my Friend is Laid*: the ‘great advantage’ of this lost novel being, as McCarthy drily puts it, ‘that Lowry need not actually write it: he could just introduce references to it, or summaries of its events, into other narratives’. Catherine Delesalle-Nancey contends that we should see the notion of loss as seminal to Lowry’s creative process, arguing that it is precisely the lost status of *In Ballast* that allows it to fulfil, ironically, the ‘paradisal’ role Lowry originally imagined for it, and to stand for the endless possibility of a new beginning, in a way that a completed novel would never have been able to do: ‘Uncompleted, and eventually lost, *In Ballast* is the absence that promises new life and creation.’ Christopher Madden, meanwhile, argues that although the 2014 publication of *In Ballast* in some ways counteracts its status as ‘lost’, the ‘paradisal’ novel itself is demonstrably as concerned with loss and with what remains – ashes, cinders, traces – as its supposedly more ‘infernal’ counterpart, *Under the Volcano*. And, of course, given the incomplete status of the text itself, the final three chapters being merely a patchwork of notes and suggestions, the reader is left in the end to speculation and guesswork – in Madden’s words, ‘deduction attempted while sifting through ashes’.

‘From the many-voiced Mersey’: *In Ballast* and Merseyside⁸

The project, referred to above, of ‘re-placing’ Lowry as a Merseyside writer began in 2009, when Bryan Biggs, Bluecoat’s artistic director, decided to curate a gallery exhibition and an accompanying programme of events to celebrate Lowry’s centenary.⁹ The aim was to raise public awareness, especially on Merseyside but also more widely, of Lowry’s life and work, of the ways in which contemporary visual artists across a wide range of media – painting, installation, film, printmaking and sculpture – continue to be inspired by his writing, and of the ways in which the topography and specific detail of north-west England continued to resonate throughout his work, representing for Lowry what Paul Tiessen has called an ‘ordinary’ topography.¹⁰ Following the success of the 2009 exhibition, and the related events, a core group, the self-styled Firminists,¹¹ decided to continue with the project, focused on an annual event, the ‘Lowry Lounge’, usually arranged around the

time of the Day of the Dead, which would go on to encompass a range of activities including talks, screenings, creative performances and – particularly relevant in the context of *In Ballast* – public walks, as well as musical interludes and a customary mescal ‘toast to Malc’.

Through these annual programmes and the new research they have generated – and boosted by publication of Lowry’s ‘lost’ novel with its largely local setting – the case for the writer as rooted in Merseyside, despite his never returning after he left in the early 1930s, has become more compelling. This book, following another, *Malcolm Lowry: From the Mersey to the World*,¹² which accompanied Bluecoat’s 2009 centenary programme, and Mark Goodall’s occasional publication, *The Firminist*, produced at the University of Bradford, contributes to a reconsideration of the impact of Lowry’s origins on his writing and its critical interpretation, and of him as a writer of the north of England. His literary significance, overlooked in the UK for so long,¹³ is now beginning to re-emerge, at least in the north-west region. In long-overdue recognition of Lowry’s importance to the cultural heritage of the Wirral peninsula, a blue plaque was erected in his home town of New Brighton in 2019, positioned on the sea wall, looking out to the Mersey estuary, and bearing the legend ‘The smoke of freighters outward bound from Liverpool hung low on the horizon.’¹⁴

From the outset, the Merseyside project was informed by an understanding of Lowry in psychogeographical¹⁵ terms – that is, an emphasis on the fundamental imbrication, in his work, of place and subjectivity, and the complex ways in which he uses place in his writing, often combining a forensic level of recalled detail with a cinematic ‘superimposition’ technique, whereby elements of different places are combined and layered over one another. A key role in the exploration of this aspect of Lowry’s work was played by Wirral-based artist and researcher, and member of the Firminists, Colin Dilnot.

Dilnot had begun to take a particular interest in the topography of Lowry’s life and work following his own move back to Lowry’s birthplace, New Brighton, in the mid-1980s. Combining observation on the ground, research using sources such as electoral registers and Ordnance Survey maps, and readings of Lowry’s published texts and unpublished manuscripts and papers, Dilnot investigated Lowry’s references to, and uses of, Wirral locations. Being physically ‘on the spot’, as well as having access to local records and the increasingly indispensable internet, enabled Dilnot to clarify points that previous writers on Lowry had been unable to investigate, as he showed in his chapter in *Malcolm Lowry*:

*From the Mersey to the World.*¹⁶ It was after reading this chapter that New Zealand-based Lowry scholar Chris Ackerley contacted Dilnot to invite him to help with his own Lowry researches. Ackerley was engaged in compiling the detailed annotations for the forthcoming scholarly edition of *In Ballast*, set mostly in Liverpool and Preston, and recognised that Dilnot's local knowledge would be key. Dilnot worked with Ackerley over several years to investigate the locations, sources and background knowledge that went into Lowry's text. They combined research trips 'on the ground' with the use of reference material such as maps, guidebooks and directories to garner information about the specific sites, streets and buildings described by Lowry, especially those that had been altered or lost altogether since the 1930s. What emerged from this research and from the rediscovered text of *In Ballast* itself was a fascinatingly new angle on Lowry – as a writer not only using his knowledge of Merseyside and Lancashire to provide the setting for his novel, but using that setting specifically to address the political situation of the 1930s in a much more visible way than in his previously published works.

In Chapter V, following the loss of two of the family ships and Tor's suicide in Cambridge, Sigbjørn is back in Liverpool, walking with his father around the city, both tormented by guilt. This chapter depicts the economic depression in Liverpool and the consequent protests:

Suddenly, rounding a corner near Gladstone Place where the Sailors' Institute stood and out-of-work seamen and firemen hung about in little groups [...] they found themselves held up in a crowd. A heavy smell of cloth, as warmly damp as the interior of a laundry, was penetrating their nostrils. Suddenly: shouts, the ringing of hooves, chaos [...] For a second Sigbjørn suspected they had been recognized and some demonstration was being made against his father. But they soon realized it was a mass workers' meeting in process of being broken up by the police. (*IB* 64)

The walk around Liverpool confronts Sigbjørn and his father with a grim picture of working-class suffering and alienation: 'These men walked down to the sea with the faltering steps of people who had been monstrously deceived. Who had deceived them? Whither that grey emptiness in the eyes of the unemployed?' (*IB* 69). On Mount Pleasant, they drift into the 'Century Theatre, the Home of Unusual Films' (*IB* 66), which is showing Pudovkin's *The End of St Petersburg*: 'The Winter Palace was captured before their eyes. St Petersburg was declared Leningrad. The workers slowly filed into the palace, the strike leader's wife following after, carrying a pail of potatoes' (*IB* 67). Coming

out of the cinema, discussing with his father whether communism can offer a way forward, Sigbjørn sees Liverpool as a kind of Leningrad-in-waiting: 'As they moved down Lime Street down past the Washington Hotel to the isthmus of Manchester Street, a vision of Leningrad was still superimposed upon Liverpool in his mind's eye' (*IB* 69). We see here Lowry using the Liverpool setting, his own detailed knowledge of the city, and of course his own background as the son of a wealthy cotton broker who had 'gone up in the world' (from modest origins in Toxteth to the more genteel New Brighton and then to affluent Caldy on Wirral) to explore the fraught social and political situation of the time.¹⁷

Michael Hofmann notes that *In Ballast* gives us 'a shift of focus to things that were never central in any of Lowry's previously published books, but which he probably knew better than anything in them: England in the 1920s and 30s, Liverpool where he hailed from, Cambridge where he went to school and university'.¹⁸ It is interesting that Hofmann does not focus explicitly here on the *political* dimension, because it is precisely this aspect, we would argue, that is the most significant 'shift of focus' enabled by *In Ballast* in terms of thinking about Lowry's work as a whole. Indeed, this point is made strongly by Vik Doyen, Miguel Mota and Paul Tiessen in their Foreword to *In Ballast*, where they note that the novel foregrounds 'the political sensibilities of a barely known Lowry [...] With its emphasis on political commitment, labour unrest and widespread economic depression that helped to define the 1930s, *In Ballast* underlines Lowry's direct and passionate political engagement during that decade' (*IB* xi). This point is taken up by a number of the contributors to the present book, with Ben Clarke, Mark Crawford, Nigel Foxcroft and Alberto Lena all exploring the ways in which *In Ballast* shows Lowry grappling with the ideological and practical conflicts over social organisation and the role of the individual that so dominated the interwar period.

Importantly, too, the more explicit political focus of *In Ballast* enables a 'shift of focus' in relation to Lowry's other works. As Crawford argues, *In Ballast* is in this respect a vital pre-text for *Under the Volcano*, whose political concerns have tended to be obscured in favour of an emphasis on its portrayal of alcoholism:

Under the Volcano famously splits the Consul's political 'self' with that of his half-brother (and 'Indoor Marxman'), Hugh, whose simplistic idealism and calls to action the Consul finds unpersuasive [...] Part of the significance of the publication of the surviving draft of *In Ballast to the White Sea* is that

we are now permitted to see the genesis of this famous struggle between the artist and the revolutionary.

Interestingly, Crawford also suggests that the ‘loss’ of *In Ballast* allowed Lowry to retreat somewhat from the complexities of this issue, taking refuge instead in a vision of a life in harmony with nature but almost completely withdrawn from wider human society:

The loss of the 1944 manuscript and the subsequent abandonment of the novel did not merely delay our appreciation of this intriguing stage in Lowry’s development. It also represented his abandonment of a paradisaical vision very different from that contained in ‘The Forest Path to the Spring’ and *October Ferry to Gabriola*, one which made more room for radical political concerns and civic engagement as essential aspects of the ‘whole man’. Instead, Lowry’s retreat from radicalism post-1947 helped to create a bias once again towards solitary consciousness and its pitfalls. A revised and completed *In Ballast* would have, at the very least, restored some balance between individual experience and that of history...

‘A Prosy Stroll’: Liverpool’s textual landscape

The publication of *In Ballast to the White Sea* opened up new dimensions to our project of re-placing Lowry. The text itself provides a new and much more explicit demonstration of Lowry as a Merseyside writer; *In Ballast* is unique in his writing in having large sections actually set in Liverpool and Lancashire. As described above, Colin Dilnot’s local knowledge enabled him to play a crucial role in the process of investigating and annotating the edition – thus creating a strong link between our ongoing project and the wider world of Lowry studies, particularly in Canada. In turn, the combination of Lowry’s text and Dilnot’s researches with Ackerley (whose annotations would comprise almost half the book) enabled us to programme, as part of the 2011 Lowry Lounge event, an *In Ballast* guided walk, following the circular walk around Liverpool city centre made by Sigbjørn and his father.

In his chapter, focusing on Lowry’s representations of life at sea, Ben Clarke argues that Lowry’s (and his characters’) understandings of shipboard life are always already textual, informed by previous narratives:

His characters’ thoughts and encounters are always conspicuously shaped by broader cultural narratives; they not only confront the sea but the myth of the sea. The oceans are always also textual landscapes, defined by writers including Aiken, Grieg, O’Neill, Melville and Conrad, but also by popular

INTRODUCTION

narratives of adventure and exploration. Lowry and his characters desire and experience the sea through their reading.

This is equally true, in a particularly multi-layered way, of the walk through Liverpool in Chapter V of *In Ballast*. As Dilnot explained to participants in the 2011 event, the walk undertaken by Sigbjørn and his father may or may not have been based on an actual walk taken by Lowry and his father, but it certainly is based, in part, on a fictional walk – that of Herman Melville’s young protagonist Wellingborough Redburn, attempting to follow in the footsteps of *his* father, in Chapter 31 of the eponymous novel – ‘With His Prosy Old Guide-Book, He Takes a Prosy Stroll Through the Town’.¹⁹ Redburn has arrived in Liverpool armed with his most precious possession, a ‘green morocco’ guidebook titled *The Picture of Liverpool*, which belonged to his father and which is full of his father’s own annotations,²⁰ its pages marked with ‘dotted lines, radiating in all directions from the foot of Lord-street’,²¹ mapping his father’s own walks through the city some fifty years prior to young Redburn’s visit. As soon as he has a free day, Redburn sets off with his guidebook to explore the city, but rapidly finds himself confounded by the discrepancies between the ‘picture of Liverpool’ on the page and the picture before his eyes, finally realising the truth with shock and sorrow:

Then, indeed, a new light broke in upon me concerning my guide-book; and all my previous dim suspicions were almost confirmed. It was nearly half a century behind the age! and no more fit to guide me about the town, than the map of Pompeii.²²

Redburn finds himself a Situationist *avant la lettre*, making an accidental *dérive* by superimposing the wrong map on to the territory.

Those of us present on the 2011 walk were therefore perhaps not so much walking on solid ground as precariously involving ourselves in a *mise en abyme* – using *In Ballast* as our *Picture of Liverpool*, we were attempting to follow in the footsteps of Sigbjørn and his father, who are following Redburn, who is following his father’s out-of-date guidebook. As we gathered in Old Post Office Place, Colin pointed out the wrecked remnants of the Central café (one of the many Liverpool cafés of the time, including the Kardomah and the Mecca, from which Sigbjørn in Chapter IV writes many of his unsent letters to Erikson), and noted that in the 1920s Sigbjørn and his father would have been able to cut directly through from Old Post Office Place to Church Street, where their walk next takes them; this cut-through, though, is now blocked by buildings

erected during the post-war reconstruction of this heavily bombed part of the city. On Mount Pleasant, where Sigbjørn and his father find themselves in the Century Theatre, watching *The End of St Petersburg* – a key encounter, which fuels the subsequent animated discussion about the pros and cons of communism – we were faced with the multi-storey car park that now occupies the site, only able to conjure the cinema ‘in our mind’s eye’ from Colin’s reading of the text and from a photograph he had found on the internet showing the building in the 1950s, by which point it was used as auction rooms, the cinema already being closed.

Later, in Chapter XI, travelling back with his father on the underground railway from Birkenhead to Liverpool’s James Street station, Sigbjørn is confronted by advertising posters for another of Liverpool’s cinemas, the Futurist, the film itself of course symbolically significant as Sigbjørn prepares to set sail:

They were sitting on straw seats, the sea-bag beside them, absently watching their own reflections opposite them lurking behind framed advertisements for theatres and cinemas: *Futurist Cinema*, *Leslie Howard in Outward Bound*, *continuous performance*, 2–II... (IB, 166)²³

In 2011, following Sigbjørn and his father ‘down Mount Pleasant in the direction of the Adelphi Hotel’ and then along Lime Street, we stopped to pay homage to the Futurist – at that point still there, but long since shut, the Art Deco façade still beautiful but falling into dereliction. That was sad enough; today, though, anyone following Sigbjørn and his father down Lime Street is confronted not by the Futurist but by a simulacrum of it – a new ‘mixed-use development’ of supermarkets and student accommodation, fronted with large panels on which are printed, as though in deliberate mockery, images of Liverpool’s lost shops and cinemas. Just as Sigbjørn, still musing on *The End of St Petersburg*, sees ‘a vision of Leningrad [...] super-imposed on Liverpool in his mind’s eye’ (IB 69), so one version of Liverpool becomes superimposed on another, as – like so many other post-industrial or post-mercantile cities now subject to ‘regeneration’ – it is continually forced to reinvent itself.²⁴

Lowry’s depiction of Liverpool as a site of ideological contestation – played out in the novel, not just in argument, but also in physical action on the city’s streets (the workers’ demonstration being ‘broken up by the police’ [IB 64]) – retains its relevance nearly a century later. The city’s reputation as a ‘city of radicals’,²⁵ with deep roots in the political left, is glimpsed in these pages, but only from the position of spectator. Lowry would certainly ‘slum it’, making excursions to the pubs around

Birkenhead docks for instance, yet his privileged background prevented any real working-class empathy, a class relation thrown into sharp focus by his experience as a deckhand on the SS *Pyrrhus* that informed his first novel, *Ultramarine*, when his presence was resented by other crew members. Yet Lowry displays a consciousness of the north-west as the heartland of the Industrial Revolution, with its 'obvious relations of exchange and property' (*IB* 185), as reflected in Chapter XIII by the lone airman's aerial survey of Liverpool and Lancashire as he sweeps over the port and its hinterland:

The densest population in the world, and an area so dynamic its influence was felt in every part of it, now spread itself before his eyes. From the air it seemed like part of a country of the future [...] where there was a continual outgoing and incoming of all that was necessary to people in an island state; and on water, earth, and in the air a continual, raving flux, beginning at one end of the world and ending at the other. (*IB* 185)

Travelling at the same time on the train to Preston, Sigbjørn, as he passes through towns he little knows, also reflects on the scene, feeling himself 'mysteriously interwoven with capitalist Lancashire' (*IB* 186), yet at the same time not belonging to it. This is not the alienation of wage labour in bourgeois society espoused by Marx, but there is something of Marx's analysis of capitalism's unstable dynamic in Lowry's speculation here: 'It was marvelous but where was it all going to lead?' (*IB* 185), ponders the pilot. 'All that seems to remain permanently here is the habit of trying out new ideas [...] How will Lancashire fare in the future and what ideas will be tried?' (*IB* 188). Lowry's existential uncertainties, projected on to the map of 'that terrible city' where he grew up, chime with Liverpool's own economic misfortunes in the decades that followed his articulation of the terrain in *In Ballast*.

Remaking the voyage: the structure of this book

This collection of essays opens, appropriately, with a chapter by the editor of *In Ballast*, Patrick McCarthy, who explores Lowry's attachment to *In Ballast* as a means of 'recuperating' what he came to see as the disastrously derivative text of *Ultramarine*, and sets up the idea (explored in more detail by Catherine Delesalle-Nancey) that *In Ballast* remained vital for Lowry precisely as a *lost* text. Three chapters follow that focus, in different ways, on Lowry's engagement with ideas of socialism and communism. Ben Clarke, as noted above, looks at Lowry's

representations of the sea and shipboard life in *Ultramarine*, *Under the Volcano* and now *In Ballast*, exploring the ways in which the ship acts as a setting within which competing narratives of class, work, masculinity and sexuality are played out. Mark Crawford looks in detail at Lowry's thinking around socialism and communism, and his ongoing attempts to theorise the relation between individual and society, between artistic vocation and socialist politics. *In Ballast*, in which this ideological debate is so much to the fore, provides significant new material in this context; as Crawford says, here '[for] the first time in Lowry's work, philosophical and metaphysical references about the nature of time, reality and consciousness are explicitly juxtaposed with political references; political ideas are tested against metaphysical ones'. In his chapter, Nigel Foxcroft considers the Russian influences on *In Ballast* more broadly, looking not just at the political dimension but also at the ways in which Lowry was inspired by Russian artists and thinkers ranging from Pudovkin to Dostoyevsky to the more esoteric Ouspensky and Gurdjieff. Foxcroft concludes that for Sigbjørn – and for Lowry – the current traumatised state of humanity can be transformed not by political revolution alone but by a 'revolution of the soul'.

Three chapters with a more geographical (or psychogeographical) focus follow. Annick Drösdal-Levillain explores Lowry's identification with things Nordic, from the ancient Norse history of his Wirral birthplace to the literary and political significance of his Norwegian writer-hero, Nordahl Grieg; she also points to a Norse mythological context for the novel's obsession with doubles and doublings. Cian Quayle provides a creative textual and photographic response to the sites and contexts of *In Ballast* and the writer's mythologising of his childhood holiday destination, the Isle of Man. Drawing on Michel de Certeau's theories of walking the city, he puts *In Ballast* into intertextual connection with André Breton's *Nadja* and Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, and traces the ways in which *In Ballast* represents Lowry's 'race with a shadow', or rather with the numerous shadows that haunt him throughout the book. Chris Ackerley's chapter interrogates his own practice in relation to textual annotation, exploring what he understands by 'the principle of validity' in annotation. He then draws on his own detailed research 'on the ground', in north-west England and in Norway, to 'annotate' the section on *In Ballast* in Gordon Bowker's valuable biography of Lowry, *Pursued by Furies*. Ackerley demonstrates how the research methods he employed in annotating *In Ballast* bring fresh knowledge to supplement, or in some instances suggest a correction to, Bowker's account.

This is followed by a set of chapters taking a more deconstructionist approach to Lowry's texts. Pierre Schaeffer focuses on the central idea of doubles in *In Ballast*. Exploring first the 'complex gemination', or doubleness, between Sigbjørn and his brother Tor (a key theme in the novel also explored by Drösdal-Levillain), he then looks at the way in which Sigbjørn throughout the novel is haunted by 'voices of conscience', the real and fantasised voices of the various figures who suggest different ways forward in his existential quest. Quoting Mladen Dolar ('Is ethics about hearing voices?'), Schaeffer argues that, for Lowry in this novel, ethics is indeed about hearing voices, as Sigbjørn tries to navigate his way forward among competing and conflicting arguments and exhortations. As noted above, both Catherine Delesalle-Nancey and Christopher Madden focus on the concept of loss as central to Lowry's poetics. Delesalle-Nancey also stresses the importance of the double, the figure of the other, drawing on the French psychoanalytic concept of the *ob-jeu* (object/play) as a process by which the loss of the other becomes the opportunity to 'play' with absence. Like McCarthy, she argues that part of the value for Lowry of *In Ballast* lies in its status as both presence and absence; it thus becomes for him an *ob-jeu*, 'a metaphorisation that allows him to negotiate the ineluctability of absence and turn it into a productive tool'. Madden, meanwhile, connects *In Ballast* to *Under the Volcano* through an exploration of both novels' obsession with deferred, sometimes *enfer*-ed, acts of communication. Sigbjørn's unfinished, unsent letters to Erikson in Chapter IV of *In Ballast* echo, or foreshadow, the letters, postcard and telegram in *Under the Volcano* – all of which arrive too late, or not at all, or to the wrong person or at the wrong time. Meanwhile, in the text of Lowry's later novel *Dark as the Grave wherein my Friend is Laid*, *In Ballast* (here redeployed as Sigbjørn Wilderness's lost masterpiece, whose remains he carries – as ballast? – in his luggage) survives merely as cinders: 'four almost perfect circles of page fragments, upon each of which, in the faded typescript of the text appeared, terrifyingly enough, the word "fire"'.²⁶ 'Placing the very real fragments of a work-in-progress in a fictive suitcase', Madden comments drily, is 'one of Lowry's most compelling *meta*-fictional images'.

The last two chapters take a more outward turn. Paul Tiessen and Miguel Mota show how *In Ballast* opens up new dimensions for the study of Lowry's interest in questions of cinema and film spectatorship, an interest that Lowry shared with other key modernist writers including Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson, H.D., Wyndham Lewis and Aldous Huxley. Setting *In Ballast* within the wider context of contemporary

depictions of ‘the moviegoer’, Tiessen and Mota argue that Lowry’s use of cinematic experience in his writing prefigures Jean-Louis Schefer’s theorisation of cinema’s ‘fund of affects’, ‘those often inexpressible thoughts and reactions that not only threaten to consume his characters as they gaze at the cinema screen, but that continue to haunt them even after they leave the actual cinema’ – exactly as we have seen Sigbjørn ‘haunted’ by the image of St Petersburg as he walks down Lime Street. Finally, Alberto Lena’s chapter extends the ‘journey’ of *In Ballast* further outwards, into the Spanish-speaking world. Lena looks at the editorial decisions, cultural significance and critical reception of the 2017 Spanish translation of Lowry’s novel by Ignacio Villaro, *Rumbo al Mar Blanco*. Noting that the Spanish publisher, Malpaso, decided to translate and incorporate only a limited selection of Chris Ackerley’s annotations to the English text, Lena explores the cultural significance of aspects of this selection process and the ways in which it affects the presentation of the novel for Spanish-speaking readers. Particularly interesting, given the present book’s emphasis on the political dimensions of *In Ballast*, is Lena’s consideration of why the Spanish reviewers, on the whole, did *not* focus on the novel’s political aspects. Lena suggests that one reason for this could be the current sensitivity, in Spain, around representations of the Spanish Civil War, following the 2007 enactment of the ‘Historical Memory Law’, expressing recognition of the victims of political, religious and ideological violence, on both sides of the conflict. Thus, interestingly, we see another way in which the ideological contestation so central to *In Ballast* continues to reverberate and, perhaps, to affect present-day reception contexts of Lowry’s novel.

In memoriam: voyages with Vik Doyen

The final contribution to this book is one that we are both deeply grateful for and yet, in another sense, sad to have to include. This is the tribute from one eminent and much-respected Lowry scholar, Sherrill Grace, to another, Vik Doyen, whose death in 2018 was an unexpected and deeply felt loss to the whole community of Lowry scholars and enthusiasts. As Sherrill shows in her warm and generous piece, Vik had been a vital presence in Lowry studies since the 1960s, both through his work and in person. Patrick McCarthy perhaps sums it up best when he writes (as quoted by Sherrill in her tribute), ‘Vik was simply one of the best people I ever knew. He was smart, generous, outgoing and good natured [...] one of the nicest people and best scholars I have ever known.’ Vik was

an enthusiastic participant in all of our Lowry-related activities on Merseyside from the outset of the project, coming over from Belgium with his wife Danielle almost every year and contributing hugely in terms of scholarly input, indefatigable energy, warmth and humour. Both Vik (who gave a paper focused on his long-standing project to produce a critical edition of *October Ferry to Gabriola*) and Sherrill (who not only gave the keynote address but was, in so many ways, the keynote presence throughout the whole event) were central to the 2017 conference from which this book originated, so it is apt that their voices are present here, albeit in such sad circumstances. We are deeply grateful to Sherrill for bringing together such a moving tribute to Vik, and dedicate this book – another chapter in the Lowryan voyage – to him.

Notes

- 1 Malcolm Lowry, *In Ballast to the White Sea: A Scholarly Edition*, ed. Patrick A. McCarthy, with annotations by Chris Ackerley (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2014), p. 46. Hereafter cited in parentheses in the text as *IB*.
- 2 Michael Hofmann, ‘Set up and put off’, review of *In Ballast to the White Sea*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 April 2015, n.p.
- 3 This phrase was used by Michael Hofmann as the title for his selection of Lowry’s works: *The Voyage that Never Ends: Fictions, Poems, Fragments, Letters*, ed. Michael Hofmann (New York: New York Review Books, 2007).
- 4 See below for further discussion of this wider project, and see Helen Tookey, ‘Re-placing Malcolm Lowry: From the Mersey to the World (and Back Again)’, *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*, 8:2&3 (2015), pp. 193–215.
- 5 This structure of deferral would later be echoed in *October Ferry to Gabriola*; as Lowry commented in a letter to his editor Albert Erskine in autumn 1953, ‘I suppose I ought to tell you for your peace of mind that I *do* get my bloody hapless characters off the bus eventually and *on* to the ferry’; *Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry*, ed. Harvey Breit and Margerie Bonner Lowry (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985 [1967]), pp. 345–46.
- 6 Gordon Bowker, *Pursued by Furies: A Life of Malcolm Lowry* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 80; see pp. 97–99 for the account of Fitte’s death and Lowry’s possible involvement in it. Bowker’s statement that Lowry remained haunted by this event to the end of his life is substantiated by its recurrence in *October Ferry to Gabriola*, where Lowry’s alter ego/protagonist Ethan Llewelyn is haunted by guilt over the death of his college friend Peter Cordwainer, described in terms that match the (admittedly uncertain) circumstances of Paul Fitte’s death: ‘If only he had not gone out that night for that last bottle of gin. “Let the bugger die!” they had shouted that night in the Headless Woman just

- before closing time'; Malcolm Lowry, *October Ferry to Gabriola*, ed. Margerie Lowry (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), p. 47. In a sad and revealing phrase, Ethan reflects: 'He hadn't wished to admit to himself that his whole life since the business of Peter Cordwainer had been in the nature of self-inflicted penance' (p. 41).
- 7 This destruction by fire is eerily prefigured in *In Ballast* itself: when Sigbjørn gives the manuscript of his novel to Nina for safe keeping, he remarks 'I didn't know whether to burn it or to give it to you' (*IB* 116); in a horrible irony, the ship that Nina is sailing on, the *Arcturion*, later catches fire, with heavy loss of life (though Nina survives).
- 8 *IB* 54.
- 9 This section draws closely on the more detailed account given in Tookey, 'Re-placing Malcolm Lowry'. The Bluecoat exhibition, *Under the Volcano: An Exhibition for Malcolm Lowry*, took place 22 September–22 November 2009 and was accompanied by a programme of talks, films, dance, poetry, a commissioned song cycle, a Day of the Dead community event and a psycho-geographical tour of Lowry's Wirral.
- 10 Paul Tiessen, 'Celebrating Lowry', review of Bryan Biggs and Helen Tookey (eds), *Malcolm Lowry: From the Mersey to the World* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), *Canadian Literature*, 208 (spring 2011), pp. 134–35 (p. 135).
- 11 Mark Goodall, Robert Sheppard, Ailsa Cox, Colin Dilnot, Bryan Biggs and Helen Tookey.
- 12 Bryan Biggs and Helen Tookey (eds), *Malcolm Lowry: From the Mersey to the World* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009).
- 13 As the British writers in this book will testify, in conversation, 'Lowry' is often taken to refer to the artist L.S. Lowry (1887–1976), from Salford, thirty miles east of Liverpool, painter of 'matchstalk men and matchstalk cats and dogs', as the 1978 novelty pop hit by Brian and Michael put it.
- 14 Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962 [1947]), p. 23.
- 15 For an excellent summary of psycho-geography as practised by its original proponents, the Situationist International, and a cogent discussion of the ways in which its principles can be usefully applied to Lowry's working methods, see Mark Goodall, "'Lowrytrek': Towards a Psycho-geography of Malcolm Lowry's Wirral", in Biggs and Tookey (eds), *Malcolm Lowry: From the Mersey to the World*, pp. 81–89. Goodall begins his chapter by citing the definition of psycho-geography from the first *Internationale Situationniste* journal in June 1958: 'the study of the specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions of individuals' (p. 81). A key component of the Situationists' psycho-geographical practice was the *dérive* or 'drift' – walking

INTRODUCTION

in and through a particular space or terrain with no fixed destination or goal, but remaining open to experiment, coincidence, chance and suggestion. Goodall goes on to comment: ‘Lowry’s writing can be read as itself psychogeographic. Lowry takes the “map” of a location, documenting and poetically reworking the experience of individuals drifting through that terrain’ (p. 84). This approach is clearly seen in Chapter V of *In Ballast*, in which Sigbjørn and his father ‘drift’ through Liverpool and are acted upon emotionally by the images and scenes that they encounter. Recent and contemporary writers and artists whose work takes a psychogeographical approach include Iain Sinclair, W.G. Sebald, Patrick Keiller, Rachel Lichtenstein and Olivia Laing.

- 16 Colin Dilnot, ‘Lowry’s Wirral’, in Biggs and Tookey (eds), *Malcolm Lowry: From the Mersey to the World*, pp. 27–36 (p. 27). Dilnot made his ongoing research available on his blog, <http://malcolmlowryatthe19thhole.blogspot.com/>, started in 2009.
- 17 Patrick McCarthy is surely right to suggest that this may be one reason why Lowry later preferred to romanticise the novel as irretrievably lost rather than attempting to revise or rewrite it: ‘since *In Ballast* was shaped by the politics of mid-1930s Europe it would have required considerable rewriting to accommodate the very different world situation of the mid-1940s’ (*IB* xxi).
- 18 Hofmann, ‘Set up and put off’, n.p.
- 19 Herman Melville, *Redburn: His First Voyage, being the Sailor-boy Confessions and Reminiscences of the Son-of-a-Gentleman, in the Merchant Service*, ed. Harold Beaver (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976 [1849]), p. 217. Lowry makes the connection explicit in Chapter VI, when Sigbjørn, having left his father, enters the Baltimore Clipper pub with ‘the ghosts of Melville and Redburn to keep him company’ (*IB* 80); Lowry goes on to quote Melville’s description of the pub’s interior (*IB* 81).
- 20 In the context of *In Ballast* it is intriguing that the ‘miscellaneous memoranda’ that Redburn’s father has scribbled in the book includes a list of expenses, which itself includes a ‘Trip to Preston, 31m[iles]’ (purpose unknown), cost £2 6s 3d (*Redburn*, p. 210).
- 21 Melville, *Redburn*, p. 211.
- 22 Melville, *Redburn*, p. 224. In his short story ‘Present Estate of Pompeii’, Lowry ironically reverses this comparison, having his protagonist/narrator remark that Pompeii is like ‘the ruins of Liverpool on a Sunday afternoon’; ‘Present Estate of Pompeii’, in *Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1962), p. 183. Redburn’s walk takes place on a Sunday (p. 219) so it is entirely possible that Lowry’s reference here is indeed to Melville’s text.
- 23 Characteristically, Lowry has the same poster appear repeatedly to Sigbjørn at various points in the text as he struggles with his own motivations for, and commitment to, taking ship; even on the train to Preston, the poster is still

haunting him, a 'stray advertisement' stuck on a tree by the side of the track (*IB* 175).

- 24 In Liverpool's case this includes frequently doubling as other cities, past and present, for film and TV production; there is a dedicated Liverpool Film Office for this reason.
- 25 See John Belchem and Bryan Biggs (eds), *Liverpool City of Radicals* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011).
- 26 Malcolm Lowry, *Dark as the Grave wherein my Friend is Laid*, ed. Douglas Day and Margerie Lowry (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 51.

CHAPTER ONE

Haunted by Books

Malcolm Lowry's *Ultramarine*
and *In Ballast to the White Sea*

Patrick A. McCarthy

Seldom if ever has an author disparaged his own published work as much as Malcolm Lowry did when admirers of *Under the Volcano* asked about his first novel, *Ultramarine*. In June 1946 his editor, Albert Erskine, expressed interest in reading the earlier novel, but Lowry called it 'an inexcusable mess of which I've been very ashamed for 13 years', and a few days later he asked his agent, Harold Matson, *not* to send *Ultramarine* to Erskine if he still had a copy (*CL* 1:580, 590).¹ Lowry was even more emphatic about the 'inexcusable mess' in later correspondence with Derek Pethick in August 1950 (*Ultramarine* was 'a ghastly abortion'), with David Markson in June 1951 ('an absolute flop and abortion and of no interest to you unless you want to hurt my feelings'), and with Robert Giroux in January 1952 ('Everything is derived, pastiche, hash') (*CL* 2:277, 401, 495). In July 1950 Lowry told George Gode, who worked for Matson's agency, that there was no possibility of translating *Ultramarine* 'as is', although he hoped in a few years to be able to rewrite the sea novel and publish it along with *Lunar Caustic*; in August, after Gode reported that *Under the Volcano* would be translated into German, Lowry responded enthusiastically, but again he specified that the 'long short story' *Lunar Caustic*, which 'they are thinking of publishing in France', was the only early work that could be translated (*CL* 2:263, 272). Two years later Lowry told Markson that *Ultramarine* was a 'wretched book', that he wished it had never 'been

published in the form it was', and that it could not be translated without first being thoroughly revised (CL 2:611). This strong opposition to any translation of *Ultramarine* contrasts with Lowry's support around that time for a French translation of *Lunar Caustic*, which he had not been able to publish in English. Douglas Day is right in saying that Lowry thought a translation of *Lunar Caustic* would provide some form of the work if he lost the manuscript as he had lost others, most notably – albeit in different ways – both *Ultramarine* and *In Ballast to the White Sea*.² But unlike *Lunar Caustic*, *Ultramarine* had already been published, as much as Lowry regretted that fact, and he was set on avoiding any renewal of interest in that novel until the long-delayed rewriting had transformed it. As late as February 1957, in response to Markson's suggestion that *Ultramarine* could be filmed – translated into another medium – Lowry again insisted that 'it has to be rewritten first' (CL 2:892).

There were several reasons for these concerns about *Ultramarine*, including the success of *Under the Volcano*, which only made Lowry more aware of the difference in quality between the two novels. Even more seriously, the possibility that he might be charged with plagiarism, as he had been in 1935 by Burton Rascoe,³ haunted Lowry and contributed to his belief that his first novel needed to be suppressed unless it could be so thoroughly rewritten that any trace of indebtedness would be removed. In the 'Work in Progress' statement that Lowry sent to Matson in 1951 he referred to plans for an 'untitled sea novel [that] would be [...] a complete rewriting of [his] twelfth rate and derivative and altogether unmentionable early novel',⁴ but all he appears to have done towards that end was to make some notes in a copy of *Ultramarine* that eventually served as the basis for the edition that Margerie Lowry published in 1962. The fact that the minor borrowings from Rascoe were left untouched in this edition is a sign of how little the novel really changed in this process. I suspect that it also shows that Lowry never told Margerie much (if indeed anything) about the accusations that Rascoe had made against him a few years before she came into his life.

Although his anxiety about *Ultramarine* became especially acute in the post-*Volcano* years, it had been apparent at virtually every stage of his career as a writer, even (or perhaps especially) when he boasted of his book's success or defended his borrowings from such writers as Conrad Aiken and Nordahl Grieg on the grounds that they were essential to his technique. In 1933, before *Ultramarine* was published, Lowry even claimed that Aiken's novel *Blue Voyage* had become 'part of [his] consciousness' and that a version of his novel written otherwise was

inconceivable, because Dana Hilliot's life between 'introverted commas' could only exist in a work that was itself a 'cento' or patchwork of quotations (*CL* 1:116–17). In this respect, Lowry imagined himself doing what Aiken and other writers were doing: as Robert Spoo has observed in a recent study of modernist writers and copyright law, one 'hallmark of modernist writing' was 'the freedom to create adaptations of, and to borrow extensively from, the work of others'.⁵

Despite his defence of such borrowing, Lowry's anxieties about the relationship of *Ultramarine* to Grieg's novel *Skibet gaar videre* (1924), which he read in translation as *The Ship Sails On* (1927), became the basis for *In Ballast to the White Sea*, a novel that Lowry began writing in 1933 as a metafictional sequel to *Ultramarine*. Whereas Dana Hilliot, in *Ultramarine*, is essentially a version of Lowry as a would-be writer who works on a ship in order to write a novel based on his experiences, Sigbjørn Hansen-Tarnmoor, the protagonist of *In Ballast*, is Lowry at the next stage, finding his attempt to be a writer thwarted by his conviction that his novel is essentially a plagiarism of *Skibets reise fra Kristiania* (*The Ship's Journey from Kristiania*) by William Erikson, a fictionalised version of Grieg. The relationship between *Ultramarine* and *In Ballast* bears a curious resemblance to the one between *Under the Volcano* and various later narratives in which Lowry makes his appearance as Sigbjørn Wilderness, author of a novel set in Mexico that has taken over his life. In *Dark as the Grave wherein my Friend is Laid* and *La Mordida*, for example, that Sigbjørn comes to believe that he is on some level a character in his own unpublished novel, *The Valley of the Shadow of Death*. The writer's dilemma in those novels is basically a variation on Sigbjørn Tarnmoor's suspicion throughout *In Ballast* that his unfinished novel and even the experiences on which he based it were already written by Erikson. The major change is that the early Sigbjørn is haunted by a book he has read, since it prevents him from successfully completing his own novel, whereas the later Sigbjørn is haunted by a novel he himself has written.

In Ballast grew out of Lowry's 1931 trip to Norway, where he met Grieg once, and – despite his later claims – probably only once. His (mis)representations of this meeting years later make it appear to have been far more productive than it seems to have been, for neither the letter that Lowry wrote to Grieg while he was in Oslo (*CL* 1:102–06), hoping for a second meeting, nor Grieg's polite but firm response that his work schedule was too busy for him to meet again with Lowry, indicates that they had discussed at length his fixation on Grieg's novel or, as Lowry

later claimed, that Grieg had given him permission to adapt *The Ship Sails On* for the stage.⁶ Near the end of his letter, Lowry refers to his fondness for Grieg's protagonist, Benjamin Hall, but it does not sound as if he is returning to a point made in their meeting. If it were not for Grieg's reference to Lowry, in his note, as 'a fellow writer' we would not know that Lowry had talked with him about his own writing, since the impression Lowry leaves in his letter is that he is a fan of Grieg's work trying to impress Grieg with his wide knowledge of literature. In view of his acute defensiveness about charges of plagiarism it is interesting that, as Chris Ackerley has demonstrated, Lowry filched most of his learned commentary on literature in this letter from Houston Peterson's recently published book, *The Melody of Chaos*.⁷

Three years later, when he was living in France and planning to join his wife, Jan Gabriel, in New York, Lowry wrote another letter to Grieg. This unpublished letter is quite different from the earlier one, since it is focused more on Lowry's own work than on Grieg's.⁸ Lowry makes no direct reference to *In Ballast* in this letter, although he was certainly writing that novel by then. Indeed, his progress on *In Ballast* might have been one reason why he wrote the letter: even if the connections between *Ultramarine* and Grieg's novel were to remain unnoticed for the time being, that could easily change whenever Lowry completed and published *In Ballast*, where the protagonist's fixation on plagiarism and his confessed 'hysterical identification' (*IB* 48) with a Scandinavian writer are central elements. In this letter to Grieg, Lowry says that *Ultramarine* had not been 'much of a success in England' but at least it 'was well reviewed'; that lines from some early poems by Grieg 'pass through the consciousness of my character' and he will delete them from future editions if Grieg objects; and that he has 'finished' the play based on *The Ship Sails On* but needs to consult Grieg before doing more. The last is almost certainly wishful thinking, or (shall we say) an alternative fact, since there is no evidence that Lowry ever completed a dramatic adaptation of the novel. Equally dubious were Lowry's statements that he had written, as opposed to having *thought* about writing, a second book, *So We Live Forever Taking Leave*, and that *Ultramarine* was being translated into French, apparently by André Gide. Both the new book and the translation were distant possibilities that he presented in his letter to Grieg as certainties, much as he did in his correspondence with Jan.⁹

Early in the 1934 letter to Grieg, Lowry writes, 'So our destiny takes us – is it a race with a shadow?' The passage refers cryptically to a play

by Wilhelm von Scholz that Lowry had seen performed in an English translation under the title *The Race with a Shadow*, in which an author is haunted by one of his characters. Lowry also refers to *The Race with a Shadow* in one of the letters that Sigbjørn writes in the fourth chapter of *In Ballast* (IB 46–47). His reason for introducing this reference in the letter is not clear, but it is an example of the posturing that recurs in his letters to Grieg, and in Sigbjørn's to Erikson. Another connection is that this letter, which might have been a model for the numerous unfinished or unposted letters to Erikson in the novel, was probably never sent.¹⁰ It is also significant that despite his acknowledgement of Grieg's influence, Lowry did not offer to send him a copy of *Ultramarine*, perhaps out of fear that Grieg might find fault with the novel or regard it as an appropriation of his own work. Even so, the combination of bravado and anxiety in the letter is fascinating.

A few months later, in a letter to Whit Burnett requesting that *Ultramarine* be entered into a best novel competition (CL 1:154), Lowry appears more confident, or at least hopeful, that his novel might help to establish him as a writer. Unfortunately it did exactly the opposite the following year, when Matson sent a copy of *Ultramarine*, along with the typescript of *In Ballast*, to Doubleday, where it was referred to Burton Rascoe. Instead of having the intended effect – to show that Lowry was an accomplished writer – the inclusion of *Ultramarine* led to Rascoe's charge that it was plagiarised from his own story, 'What Is Love?' In his biography of Lowry, Gordon Bowker implies that Rascoe was motivated by his animus against Aiken; but Lowry clearly made everything worse by claiming, unconvincingly, that after the manuscript of *Ultramarine* was lost it 'had to be rewritten very quickly from memory' and that 'some passages from Rascoe's story must have strayed into it'.¹¹ In any case, Rascoe's malicious and grossly exaggerated claims undercut whatever confidence Lowry still had in *Ultramarine*, at least as it was originally published.

Even so, Lowry appears not to have lost confidence in *In Ballast to the White Sea*, which, if it were to be published, could have provided an effective defence against further attacks on *Ultramarine*. Meanwhile, however, the possibility that Grieg might lodge a claim against him over *Ultramarine* remained. Consider for example what appears to have been his last letter to Grieg, written while he was in Los Angeles in 1939. As in the first letter, written in Oslo, Lowry inserted literary references, compliments about Grieg's work ('I have always looked on you as the greatest of living poets') and the like, but in this letter there is also a

passage in which he simultaneously confesses to plagiarism and begs for sympathy:

I wish I could tell you all the extraordinary coincidences which led up to our meeting. One day I shall. My identity with Benjamin [Hall] eventually led me into mental trouble. Much of U. [*Ultramarine*] is paraphrase, plagiarism, or pastiche, from you.

I have been married, lost my wife, importuned & been importuned by fascists[,] had a terrible sojourn in Mexico. I am but a skeleton—thank God—of my former self. (*CL* 1:192)

If anything, Lowry's confession that his novel was mainly a 'paraphrase, plagiarism, or pastiche' of Grieg's is an exaggeration. However, quite apart from the plea for sympathy, it is possible that the letter was meant primarily to serve as a defence: if there was a chance that someone, maybe even Grieg, might charge him with plagiarism, at least he could say that he acknowledged the borrowings and that they were essential to his artistic technique.

Meanwhile, it is noteworthy that by the early 1940s Lowry had begun thinking about his three main works in progress – *Under the Volcano*, 'The Last Address' (later to become *Swinging the Maelstrom*, then *Lunar Caustic*) and *In Ballast to the White Sea* – as a trilogy that he called *The Voyage that Never Ends*. Rather than being associated mainly with *Ultramarine*, *In Ballast to the White Sea* would now be part of a different series of narratives, one based on Dante's *Divine Comedy* (with *In Ballast* as *Paradiso*) and leading to a vision of redemption. He seems to have held on to this idea, at least as a possibility, until 7 June 1944, when a fire destroyed his shack, along with his manuscript for *In Ballast*.

The fire changed everything: it removed the paradisaical conclusion to the trilogy and, perhaps even more important, destroyed the book that would have served, in effect, as an apologia for *Ultramarine* by transferring Lowry's anxieties to one of his characters. Yet in time the loss opened up space for Lowry to turn *In Ballast to the White Sea* not only into a potentially brilliant novel of his own that had been tragically lost – a role that the novel played in letters to Markson, for example – but into a parallel novel written (and lost) by Sigbjørn Wilderness, his protagonist in the metafictional world of *Dark as the Grave*, *La Mordida* and 'Through the Panama'. The advantage of such a novel is that Lowry need not actually write it: he could just introduce references to it, or summaries of its events, into other narratives. For example, one draft of what became Chapter 7 in *Dark as the Grave* includes an excruciatingly

long and clumsy scene in which we learn about the circumstances behind Sigbjørn Wilderness's two novels: *In Ballast to the White Sea*, whose typescript had been burned, and *The Valley of the Shadow of Death*, not burned but as of the time of this scene not accepted for publication either. In the introduction to *In Ballast* I describe this scene as 'a result of Lowry's attempt, in his later fiction, to come to terms with the loss of *In Ballast* by passing that loss on to his protagonist and then letting the character find a way of coping with the guilt Lowry associated with his doomed novel' (*IB* xlii). At the same time Lowry preserved this part of his past, both the novel and the event in his life on which it was based, even if much of the scene is surely contrived, as when he says that William Erikson, whom he had given the fictional name of Guldbransen, not only 'generously gave [him] carte-blanche to dramatise' his novel but decided that they should collaborate on a play about their relationship: 'We should write a play about this thing—you *should* have written the book, but unfortunately I have, the play turns on that, and in the end, *you kill me!*' (*IB* 237). This passage, written in the late 1940s, made its way into *In Ballast to the White Sea* long after Lowry died, when Jan relied on what she called Lowry's notes for *In Ballast* for information about how the incomplete narrative would end.¹² In that way, perhaps, Lowry's preservation effort bore fruit, albeit not in the way that he intended.

Two decades ago, in an article on encyclopaedic or totalising visions in Lowry and Joyce, I contended that 'Lowry [...] could never really let his books go, partly because he identified each work so strongly with his own life, and also because he had a compulsive urge to make everything connect to everything else, to fit all of his works within a totalizing design'.¹³ The way in which Lowry was haunted by *Ultramarine* and *In Ballast to the White Sea* is an example of this determination. Note that in a letter to David Markson in 1951, he began his description of *In Ballast to the White Sea*, 'the book lost by fire', thus: 'In Ballast to the White Sea—once the Paradiso of which the Volcano was the first, or "Inferno" section—now incorporated hypothetically elsewhere in the whole bolus of 5 books—I think—to be called The Voyage that Never Ends' (*CL* 2:417).¹⁴ Ignoring the novel's original purpose as a sequel to *Ultramarine*, Lowry says that *In Ballast* was once part of a cycle of three books, then (he thinks) was incorporated into a series of five books, at least 'hypothetically', a term that could have several meanings. Lowry could not conceive of *In Ballast to the White Sea* as a novel strictly on its own terms: having begun as the sequel to *Ultramarine*, it always required a connection to other works. After Rascoe threatened Lowry

with accusations of plagiarism in *Ultramarine*, the plan for a sequel with obvious connections to that novel became another source of anxiety, but in time Lowry hoped to rescue *In Ballast* by making it the conclusion of a trilogy. The trilogy is a curious idea, and it is not clear how Lowry intended to link *Under the Volcano*, *Lunar Caustic* and *In Ballast*, except through Dantean analogies that might seem more persuasive if our text of *In Ballast* were to conclude with scenes of love, harmony and reconciliation like those that Lowry described to David Markson (*CL* 2:427–28), rather than with a series of notes and sketches. In terms of his aesthetics, the trilogy offered the possibility of an enlarged vision that would emerge from three interrelated narratives, but for Lowry an equally important consideration was that it offered him a means of saving *In Ballast* from being forever linked to *Ultramarine*.

Notes

- 1 All parenthetical citations of Lowry's letters refer to *Sursum Corda! The Collected Letters of Malcolm Lowry*, 2 vols, ed. Sherrill Grace (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995, 1996); cited as *CL*.
- 2 Douglas Day, *Malcolm Lowry: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 198. Lowry said much the same thing about *Lunar Caustic* in his 'Work in Progress' statement: 'The first version of Lunar Caustic has, I believe, been translated into French under the title The Last Address, something I permitted only because I was afraid of losing the manuscript.' 'Work in Progress: *The Voyage That Never Ends*', *Malcolm Lowry Review*, 21/22 (fall 1987 and spring 1988), p. 76. However, *Lunar Caustic* had *not* been translated into French when Lowry sent this statement to Harold Matson in 1951, although he had discussed the possibility of a translation with Clarisse Francillon in 1948. When it was finally translated a few years later, the title was not 'The Last Address' but 'Le caustique lunaire', trans. Michèle d'Astorg and Clarice Francillon, *Esprit* [Paris], 2 (February 1956), pp. 211–24; 3 (March 1956), pp. 340–55; and 4 (April 1956), pp. 515–43. See also note 9 below.
- 3 The source of all subsequent scholarship on Rascoe's accusations is Vik Doyen's 'Fighting the Albatross of Self: A Genetic Study of the Literary Work of Malcolm Lowry', dissertation, Katholieke Universiteit te Leuven, 1973, pp. 46–47, 213–17. See also Gordon Bowker, *Pursued by Furies: A Life of Malcolm Lowry* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), pp. 192–94; Jan Gabriel, *Inside the Volcano: My Life with Malcolm Lowry* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), pp. 79–80; and my introduction to *In Ballast to the White Sea: A Scholarly Edition*, ed. Patrick A. McCarthy, with annotations by Chris Ackerley (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2014), pp. xxvii–xxix,

- xlvi (nn. 13–15). A particularly important study of Lowry and plagiarism is Sherrill Grace, ‘Respecting Plagiarism: Tradition, Guilt, and Malcolm Lowry’s “Pelagiarist Pen”’, *English Studies in Canada*, 18 (December 1992), pp. 461–81; repr. in Sherrill Grace, *Strange Comfort: Essays on the Work of Malcolm Lowry* (Vancouver: Talon Books, 2009), pp. 103–22. Further citations of *In Ballast to the White Sea* are given in parentheses in the text as *IB*.
- 4 Lowry, ‘Work in Progress’, p. 73.
 - 5 Robert Spoo, *Without Copyrights: Piracy, Publishing, and the Public Domain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 146.
 - 6 On Grieg’s note, now in the Conrad Aiken collection at the Huntington Library, see Bowker, *Pursued by Furies*, p. 130, and Hallvard Dahlie, “A Norwegian at Heart”: Lowry and the Grieg Connection’, in Sherrill Grace (ed.), *Swinging the Maelstrom: New Perspectives on Malcolm Lowry* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 1992), p. 34.
 - 7 See *IB* 412, notes XVIII.47 and XVIII.49, as well as Houston Peterson, *The Melody of Chaos* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1931).
 - 8 Lowry’s 1934 letter (or draft of a letter) to Grieg is housed in the Jan Gabriel Papers, Division of Manuscripts and Archives, New York Public Library, 2:11.
 - 9 See Bowker, *Pursued by Furies*, p. 179. Lowry repeated his claim in late 1948, when he told a journalist that André Gide ‘had translated some of *Ultramarine*’ (Bowker, *Pursued by Furies*, p. 449). See also Lowry’s letter to Clarisse Francillon of 16 February 1949, where he refers to ‘that translation by Gide and others of my first book’ (*CL* 2:142).
 - 10 Bowker, *Pursued by Furies*, p. 123, says that before his trip to Oslo in 1931 Lowry, intent on dramatising *The Ship Sails On*, ‘had written numerous letters to Grieg but sent none of them’. I comment on Lowry’s references to *The Race with a Shadow* in the introduction to *In Ballast*, pp. xxv–xxvi and xlvi (n. 9), and in ‘Before and After the *Volcano*: Malcolm Lowry’s *In Ballast to the White Sea* and Its Afterlife’, *The Firminist*, 4 (2014), pp. 8–9.
 - 11 Bowker, *Pursued by Furies*, p. 193.
 - 12 The passage derives from a draft of *Dark as the Grave* in the Malcolm Lowry Archive, Special Collections, University of British Columbia Library (9:5, 352). On the editorial problems raised by the inclusion of these ‘notes’ in an edition of *In Ballast to the White Sea*, see *IB* xli–xlii, 451.
 - 13 Patrick A. McCarthy, ‘Totality and Fragmentation in Lowry and Joyce’, in Frederick Asals and Paul Tiessen (eds), *A Darkness That Murmured: Essays on Malcolm Lowry and the Twentieth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), p. 182.
 - 14 The ‘5 books’ by then numbered at least six (as specified in a 1950 letter to Derek Pethick, *CL* 2:277) and possibly eight, depending on how you count them.

CHAPTER TWO

‘We’ve got a bastard duke on board’

Class, Fantasy and Politics in Malcolm Lowry

Ben Clarke

Malcolm Lowry contributes to a long history of writing about the sea that uses ships to critique broader material and cultural structures. His interventions in this tradition must be central to any understanding of him as a political writer, but are characteristically complex. He constantly questions the generic forms he uses, partly by focusing on figures who are separated from the remainder of the crew by their social and economic background. The differences between their expectations and experience of life on board ship expose the class basis of dominant images of the sea. The romantic narratives that his characters internalise are middle-class fantasies of the working class that obscure their exploitation, representing them as idealised masculine figures united by their shared struggle with the elements. In contrast, Lowry’s texts insist on ships as workplaces functioning within broader capitalist structures; in *Ultramarine*, Dana Hilliot complains that sea life now means being ‘a domestic servant on a treadmill’ and that the crew consists of ‘[I]abourers, navvies, scalers, rather than sailors’.¹ The statement echoes Narvik’s claim in Nordahl Grieg’s *The Ship Sails On* that the ‘crew of a cargo boat were more labourers than sailors’,² but also the writing of working-class contemporaries such as George Garrett and James Hanley (both, like Lowry, Merseyside-born). Lowry’s middle-class characters are distinctive partly because even in their disappointment they do not abandon the desires that led them to sea but seek new ways to enact them, whether by changing their situation or by changing their

understanding of it. Their struggles to maintain their fantasies suggest that these are not superficial structures that dissolve when contradicted, but deeply rooted ideological narratives that shape their perceptions and persist partly because they are capable of producing pleasure and establishing solidarities.

A concern with class fantasies structures Lowry's first novel, *Ultramarine*, but the strategies he uses to explore them become increasingly sophisticated as his work progresses, culminating in Hugh's reflections on his time aboard the *Philoctetes* in *Under the Volcano*. *In Ballast to the White Sea* stands between these two texts, formally as well as chronologically; its recovery enables a more complex analysis of the ways in which Lowry's thoughts on the subject evolve. This chapter does not represent the process as linear, with *Ultramarine* and *In Ballast* significant only because they lead to *Under the Volcano*, but recognises that each text responds to distinct pressures as well as to Lowry's developing technical skill. It therefore emphasises Lowry's engagement with his time; he is, as Mark Williams insists, 'the product of a particularly [*sic*] historical period and in his work responded to a particular crisis in English culture'.³ He remains concerned with this crisis in his later texts, but achieves a greater critical distance from it, exploring both social struggles and the discourses that legitimise them. In this sense, Lowry not only contributes to the politically engaged literature of the 1930s but extends and reflects upon it.

In Ballast to the White Sea, with its discussions of communism and scenes such as the 'mass workers' meeting [...] being broken up by the police',⁴ is, as Patrick McCarthy observes, conspicuously 'shaped by the politics of mid-1930s Europe' (*IB* xxi), and so emphasises this quality of Lowry's work; but a consistent set of critical interests shape his writing as a whole. Reading his other texts in relation to *In Ballast* makes it easier to recognise him as a political author, concerned with the relation between individual experience and the collective narratives through which it is understood, articulated and mobilised. This does not preclude other approaches to his work, as Lowry himself emphasised. In his 1946 letter to Jonathan Cape explaining *Under the Volcano*, he described the novel as 'a prophecy, a political warning, a cryptogram, a preposterous movie, and a writing on the wall'.⁵ The description insists on politics as one element of a plural text. Its focus on multiplicity also clarifies the nature of the novel's political intervention. The narratives that inform *Under the Volcano* do not cohere into a single system but continually intersect to generate new meanings, challenging the notion of totalising

representational or interpretative structures. Lowry's claim that the book could be 'read an indefinite number of times and still not have yielded all its meanings'⁶ emphasises this proliferation. On the one hand, this insists on a political dimension to his writing; *Under the Volcano* is not just a personal drama but explores the ways in which people negotiate shared spaces and ideas, and their responsibilities to one another. On the other, it warns against reductive political models. The complexity of the text emphasises that of the world it represents, and suggests that neither admits of simple or final analysis.

Under the Volcano indicates its concerns through direct references to events such as the Spanish Civil War. Lowry identified the man 'dying by the roadside' with 'mankind dying—then, in the Battle of the Ebro, or now, in Europe, while we do nothing'.⁷ The representation of Spain and the rise of fascism understandably dominate critical accounts of the novel's political implications, but *Under the Volcano* also examines a variety of structural problems. As Patrick Deane argues, Lowry's 'desire to define the self was undoubtedly interwoven with an acute awareness of his social class'⁸ and its complex material and cultural foundations. In a capitalist society, any meaningful attempt to 'break the circle of self' (*IB* 6) involves an effort to cross class boundaries, but Lowry repeatedly emphasises that these cannot be surmounted by a simple act of will.

Under the Volcano examines class difference partly by exploring Hugh's experience of the sea. The introduction of a middle-class figure into an enclosed working-class environment exposes the concrete desires and tensions that these divisions generate. Hugh's situation is repeated throughout Lowry's work: *Ultramarine* describes Dana Hilliot's experiences on the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and *In Ballast to the White Sea* is framed by Sigbjørn's recollections of working as 'a coal trimmer on an English freighter' (*IB* 43) and his plan to return to sea as a fireman on the *Unsgaard*. The novels draw on Lowry's time as a deckhand on the SS *Pyrrhus*, but all recognise, to varying degrees, that both the experience and representation of life on board ship are informed by inherited literary and popular discourses. Their accounts of maritime labour consequently involve a critical engagement with the narratives through which it is understood.

As Pierre Macherey emphasises, this engagement with preceding texts is hardly peculiar to Lowry. A literary work 'never "arrives unaccompanied"; every book is 'furrowed by the allusive presence of those other books against which it is elaborated'.⁹ Lowry's writing is unusual only in its direct exploration of these relations. It confronts not only the sea

but the myth of the sea, a textual landscape defined by writers such as Conrad Aiken, Nordahl Grieg, Eugene O'Neill, Herman Melville and Joseph Conrad, but also by popular narratives of adventure and exploration. Lowry and his characters desire and experience the oceans through their reading. In 'Through the Panama', Sigbjørn Wilderness describes himself as the 'man who went to sea because he read *The Hairy Ape* and *The Moon of the Caribbees*';¹⁰ in *Ultramarine*, Dana Hilliot, moored 'alongside the wharf in Tsjang-Tsjang', imagines himself 'in my bed at home', having fallen asleep after reading 'Kipling's *Captain Courageous*' (*U* 133); and in *Under the Volcano*, Hugh concedes that his decision to go to sea was partly a result of 'reading too much Jack London'.¹¹ Lowry's work is marked by the tension between the sea's material and narrative forms. In terms of his concern with class, this friction centres on the distinction between the fantasy of a cohesive but accessible community united by a shared exposure to danger and the experience of a workforce organised by broader class structures.

When Lowry gave Carol Brown a copy of Conrad's *Lord Jim* in 1926, almost a year before his voyage on the *Pyrrhus*, he told her that 'it was the greatest novel ever written'.¹² Conrad is a prominent source of the myths that Lowry and his characters inhabit, and Lowry's engagement with his writing illustrates a wider-ranging negotiation with other writers. References to Conrad's fiction permeate Lowry's own. After hearing the story of the German officers burned alive in the furnaces of the *Samaritan* in *Under the Volcano*, Laruelle considers that it 'was easy to think of the Consul as a kind of lachrymose pseudo "Lord Jim" living in a self-imposed exile, brooding, despite his award, over his lost honour, his secret, imagining a stigma that would cling to him because of it throughout his whole life' (*UtV* 33); and when Hugh joins the crew of the *Philoctetes*, one newspaper comments, 'obscurely, "Oh, to be a Conrad"' (*UtV* 159). *Ultramarine* includes a lengthy conversation between anonymous sailors about the 'Belgian ruddy Congo' (*U* 166) that evokes but does not mention *Heart of Darkness*. The direct references to Conrad suggest Lowry's broader engagement with his fiction, including the fantasies that Conrad both questions and uses. *Lord Jim* explores myths of the sea through the 'excessively romantic' figure of Jim himself, whose ideas and actions are shaped by the 'light literature' he consumes as a boy, but it also reproduces some of them, in particular in its descriptions of maritime labour.¹³ As John Carey argues, Conrad believed 'British seamanship' had a particular 'moral and aesthetic significance', and his descriptions of its 'traditions of reliability, efficiency, courage and

fairness'¹⁴ are sometimes elegiac; Carey includes a section from 'Youth' in *The Faber Book of Utopias*.

Lowry's critique of this idealised conception of maritime labour parallels that of his working-class contemporaries, who also insist on the exploitation that Conrad's texts obscure. In his analysis of *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, a novel that represents disparate workers temporarily united by 'the austere servitude of the sea',¹⁵ the Liverpool writer, seaman and activist George Garrett argued that while Conrad 'could write romantically and vividly of a ship in a heavy sea [...] when it came to the men aboard he wrote as a conservative-minded ship's officer'.¹⁶ As John Batchelor observes, *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* is 'at one level about the politics of the workplace', exploring the 'power-structures' that Conrad believed 'human beings are forced to devise in order to achieve their economic objectives'.¹⁷ It naturalises not only these objectives but, as the word 'forced' implies, the response to them. Conrad represents the hierarchical structures of the ship as an inevitable result of the task and the environment, and claims that when the members of the crew are fully occupied they do not see them as oppressive, feeling 'themselves equal before the unconcerned immensity of the sea and the exacting appeal of the work'.¹⁸ Captain Allistoun's insistence to the sailors that '[if] you knew your work as well as I do mine, there would be no trouble'¹⁹ suggests differentiated but equivalent labour, an interdependence made necessary by the ocean. The *Narcissus* consequently becomes the site of what Jakob Lothe describes as a '*Gemeinschaft* that can now only be found aboard a ship'.²⁰

As Garrett argued, this image of maritime labour depends on the suppression of alternative voices. In *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, Donkin functions as a 'scapegoat; the villain of the piece'.²¹ Conrad describes him as someone who 'never did a decent day's work in his life'²² and he consequently does not fully belong to a community established by shared labour. His inadequacy results from a lack of ability as well as idleness, as he is a 'man who can't do most things and won't do the rest', and undermines his arguments that the crew should be better rewarded, that they lead a 'dorg's life for two poun' ten a month'.²³ Conrad represents his ideas of greater equality as self-evidently absurd, fantasies of 'a time when every lonely ship would travel over a serene sea, manned by a wealthy and well-fed crew of satisfied skippers', and his 'filthy eloquence upon the right of labour to live' as a substitute for the work he does not perform.²⁴ His exclusion establishes the coherence of the remainder of the crew, and the insistence that their work is a collaborative, masculine

struggle with the sea rather than just another form of wage labour obscures the economic system within which it occurs, including, as Garrett argues, the shipowners who 'send out heavily insured coffin ships and their helpless crews'²⁵ in pursuit of profit.

Garrett was not the only working-class author to argue that Conrad wrote from an unacknowledged class position that led him to obscure the social, economic and professional divisions on board ships. In James Hanley's 'Narrative', the feverish Brady condemns

Conrad and his tribe bloody masterpieces about Empire written in cabins with carpets and nice fires and more wine there tiger they're all right. What about bloody war in ship's bunkers ship's stokehold bleedin' authors shipping on tramps as passengers damn-all to do and down to Borneo and Gulf and other places and masterpiece written in London true story of the sea.²⁶

Brady's anger emphasises that class structured personal relations even in the merchant service where, Conrad claimed, 'the sense of hierarchy is weak'.²⁷ Lowry draws attention to the divisions that Conrad obscures, focusing on characters whose backgrounds separate them from their fellow workers in ways that cannot be surmounted simply by the shared experience of hardship. This not only enables him to insist, like his working-class contemporaries, that maritime labour must be understood as part of a capitalist economy, but to reveal the distance between such work and the myths of the sea that his protagonists absorb. Because the residues of these narratives often persist even after his characters have direct experience of life on board ship, the texts embody, rather than merely describe, the contradictions between dominant methods of narrating the sea and the material relations they purport to represent. Figures such as Hilliot, Hugh and Sigbjørn register these tensions in their confusion and disappointment.

Lowry's characters work rather than remaining in 'cabins with carpets and nice fires', but this does not make them part of their ships' crews any more than Conrad's labour enabled his integration. Sigbjørn argues that when he returns to sea 'I am a worker' (*IB* 95) but, as Nina recognises, this requires more than working; his decision 'may seem on the surface like an identification with the proletariat' (*IB* 112), but it does not bridge the gaps between classes. The nature and bases of these divisions are explored most directly in *Ultramarine*. Although Nicholas Bradley insists that the novel 'can charitably be described as an apprentice-work',²⁸ it is, as Hallvard Dahlie argues, more 'perceptively conceived and skillfully executed'²⁹ than this suggests, astutely tracing the social and material

divisions that separate Hilliot from the rest of the crew. It is also, as Williams insists, 'very much a novel of the early thirties',³⁰ responding to the political concerns that shaped the literary culture of the decade.

As Andy emphasises when he declares 'I hate those bloody toffs who come to sea for experience' (*U* 20–21), Hilliot is distinguished from the remainder of the crew by his relation to his own labour. He does not lose his privileges when he comes on board; as one of the crew points out, 'you've got eddication and I ain't' (*U* 164), an asset that continues to provide opportunities that others lack. He is not compelled to work, but tells the quartermaster that he has come to sea to 'amuse myself' (*U* 38). As Deane argues, Andy recognises that 'in becoming a "sailor"' Hilliot 'has not really signed on to become a worker'.³¹ He is not subject to the same economic logic as the rest of the crew and is not trying to establish himself in the profession. The fact that he is nonetheless employed at a time when, Garrett insisted, 'it was extremely difficult for a boy from the slum streets of dockland to obtain a job on one of the ships'³² is a source of considerable resentment. He is accused of 'doing a good lad out of 'is job', a claim that originates with Andy but is eventually 'what we all says' (*U* 125). In contrast to Sigbjørn, who is persistently troubled by the same accusation, Hilliot attempts to become part of the crew by sharing their labour, something he appears to achieve when he is called to work in the stokehold. Even this precarious resolution is absent from *In Ballast to the White Sea*, a difference that shows Lowry's growing understanding of the complexities of class.

The crew of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* respond to Hilliot's privileged background partly by insisting on his lack of skills. This emphasises that he has no long-term investment in his work and enables them to assert their authority over him. For the other sailors he is 'a goddam nuisance ... a bloody senseless twat' (*U* 17), unable to contribute to the collective work. The emphasis on specific knowledge means that these alternative hierarchies are always restricted to the ship; they reveal broader social and economic structures but do not displace them. This limitation is exposed in *Under the Volcano* when one 'very young seaman' asks Hugh whether he realises 'you're working for us, when we should be working for you?' (*UtV* 160). The later text does not mark a break with the concerns of *Ultramarine* but exposes problems that the earlier novel cannot articulate or even recognise.

Hilliot accepts the evaluation of the crew in part because it is articulated in a language of heterosexual masculinity that reinforces his image of the working class. He does not understand his own labour in economic

terms, but primarily as a way to demonstrate that he is not 'a nancy' (*U* 17) and to overcome his anxieties about masculinity. At sea, he tries to enact a series of myths that precede his embarkation, but his efforts are constantly frustrated by his fellow workers and experience of labour. Lowry uses this friction to expose the complexities of class divisions, a strategy he also employs in *Under the Volcano* and *In Ballast to the White Sea*, but the insights it produces are often available only to the reader. Hilliot, Hugh and Sigbjørn try to salvage their fantasies, whether by altering their situation or their perceptions; Hilliot may strip away 'my motive like an onion down to the innermost bulb of degradation' (*U* 93), but this only reveals more deeply rooted illusions. These persist partly because they serve constitutive functions. As Althusser argues, ideology is not just a network of misconceptions that can be discarded, but 'slides into human existence itself', structuring 'the "lived" experience of individuals',³³ including desire. The narratives internalised by Lowry's characters obscure class, not by erasing it but by transforming it into a source of pleasure, removed from its economic determinants. In particular, they transpose it into the language of gender, figuring the working class as the site of a valued, fully realised masculinity.

The gendered desires of Hilliot, Hugh and Sigbjørn emphasise and displace their sense that something important is missing from conventional bourgeois life, but the precarious fulfilment they achieve depends upon their enactment of fantasies of the working class derived from literary and popular myths of the sea. Hilliot establishes a relationship with Andy and secures a position alongside the firemen whom he believes 'in some queer way to be nearer God' (*U* 25); Hugh joins the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, where he is 'treated as a comrade' (*UtV* 168); and even Sigbjørn discovers 'something he had never found before' (*IB* 225) working in the stokehold. In all three instances, the characters do not escape their misconceptions but collapse the distance between their fantasies and experience, obscuring contradictions that the reader continues to recognise.

As Deane argues, Hilliot's desire to 'be a shipmate among shipmates' (*U* 74) is always interwoven with the 'sexual anxiety' that led many middle-class intellectuals in the 1930s to 'conceive of the proletariat in terms of excessive masculine potency'.³⁴ Hilliot sees a reciprocal relation between social and sexual success, arguing that to be 'accepted by the crew' is 'to justify himself to Janet' (*U* 22) and that becoming 'a man' will produce a 'unified' crew (*U* 74). He idealises seamen as forming a homosocial community connected not only by work but by shared access to women. The text recognises that ideas of class, gender and sexuality

intersect in middle-class representations of male workers, but as Deane insists, despite its 'devastating irony', it reproduces many of the narratives it explores, including the belief that 'the bourgeoisie are inherently and inescapably effete, the workers by nature potent and virile'.³⁵ Hilliot is frustrated in his attempts to perform conceptions of class that emphasise heterosexual masculinity, physical courage and endurance. When he offers 'to fight' (*U* 17) to show his manliness, the crew are contemptuous, and he is repeatedly unable to demonstrate his bravery, reproducing in comically diminished form the defining failure of Conrad's Jim when he fails to save 'Norman's mickey' (*U* 148). He is even disappointed that 'the ancient violences, the old heroic days of holystones [...] have gone', and that instead of 'being called out on deck at all hours to shorten sail, we have to rig derricks, or to paint smokestacks' (*U* 47–48). Despite this, his enthusiastic response to the news that he will begin work in the 'little hell' of the stokehold and anxiety about whether he will be 'able to do it' (*U* 186) suggest that he fulfils his fantasies of participation in working-class masculinity. This resolution depends on the erasure of the work itself. Garrett recalls that his own labour in the 'hot stokehold' was 'not work; it was torture. Secretly I cried. My hands were like raw meat. My body was wracked with pain.'³⁶ This exploitation is absent from Hilliot's narrative, which significantly anticipates but does not describe the job of a coal trimmer. Sigbjørn experiences the 'skin [...] starting to peel from his hands' (*IB* 225); Hilliot relates to the work only as the object of fantasy.

In contrast to *Ultramarine*, which represents Hilliot's immediate experience, *Under the Volcano* describes Hugh reflecting on his time at sea. Time provides a critical distance, enabling Hugh to explore the desires that shaped his experience. His interpretations anticipate those of the reader; Hugh is his own first critic, his limitations emphasising the challenges of analysis. He comes to feel 'horribly ashamed' of having 'exploited' (*UtV* 167) his position for publicity, something only possible because of his class background; his presence on the *Philoctetes* is newsworthy because of 'the prominence of his family' (*UtV* 158). He also recognises that his decision was motivated by a fantasy of escape from respectable middle-class life; despite 'receiving every assistance' from his family, he still believes himself to be 'running away to sea' (*UtV* 158–59), a romantic phrase that suggests the 'light literature' that Jim consumes. Once onboard, he is continually disappointed by the disjunction between his experience and these narratives. His frustration often focuses on the order and relative comfort he encounters, which disrupt his image of redemptive masculine suffering. Instead of a forecabin, 'a single evil-smelling room forward

with bunks around a table, under a swinging kerosene lamp, where men fought, whored, drank, and murdered', there are 'styled, separate cabins' (*UtV* 160), and the food is 'excellent', especially when compared 'with that of his public school' (*UtV* 161). There is even a 'good library' (*UtV* 163). His interpretation of these things as 'softness' (*UtV* 160) rather than improvements in working conditions contributes to his alienation from the crew, whom Hugh finds 'unbelievably spiteful and malignant, though in a petty way never before associated with the sea, and never since with the proletariat'. Their perceived malice is a consequence not merely of their resentment that '[we]'ve got a bastard duke on board' (*UtV* 159) but also of Hugh's failure to understand that work is 'dead serious' and that its hardships demonstrate exploitation by a 'company interested in your health only because it might have to pay your insurance' (*UtV* 167). Despite his evolving political understanding, Hugh retains a romantic view of the sea that obscures its definition by broader economic and cultural narratives. The *Philoctetes* does not function outside capitalism, as Hugh recognises in his disappointment that 'in no essential sense had he escaped from his past life' (*UtV* 162).

Hugh's reflections on his time at sea expose the ways in which class divisions define seemingly autonomous spaces. Like Hilliot, Hugh expects to become part of a masculine community established through shared work and exposure to risk. In practice, his ideas of belonging are challenged by the 'degree of snobbery' (*UtV* 162) he encounters and the realities of modern labour; his hands are 'worked raw then hard as boards' (*UtV* 160), but the job itself cannot sustain his romantic preconceptions. He responds by transferring to the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, a 'foul and rusty' vessel, 'battered, ancient [...] perhaps even about to sink', that is 'everything in his eyes a ship should be' (*UtV* 166). Despite leaving with dysentery, having endured poor food and exhausting work, the ship 'had not disappointed him' (*UtV* 167). His experience exposes the 'heartless system' (*UtV* 167) responsible for these conditions but also emphasises the importance of being 'treated as a comrade' (*UtV* 168) and the persistence of his fantasies of 'running away to sea'. Just as Hilliot seeks fulfilment in the stokehold, so Hugh attempts to discover a ship that he can reconcile with his illusions. His increasing knowledge of labour is paradoxically accompanied by a retreat into fantasy. The process demonstrates the ways in which ideology is capable of defining perceptions and actions even when these are contradicted by experience.

Under the Volcano uses the account of Hugh's time on the *Philoctetes* to expose the importance of fantasies in legitimising social and economic

relations. It establishes a greater critical distance from the experiences it describes than *Ultramarine*, focusing on the disjunctions between expectation and practice implicit in the earlier text and interpreting them more clearly in terms of class difference. *In Ballast to the White Sea* stands between the two novels, employing both recollection and immediate description to describe life on board ship and to explore the structures that shape its representation. Its recovery emphasises Lowry's interest in the ways in which narrative conventions inform the experience as well as the description of class. This concern can again be traced through an analysis of its accounts of maritime labour.

In Ballast to the White Sea rejects the idea that either the experience or the literature of the sea involves an unmediated encounter with elemental forces. Even at the moment of its perception, the sea is seen through a network of myths, complicating the idea of its individual experience; its story has always already been written. The novel is particularly valuable in drawing attention to this mediation, most obviously by focusing on Sigbjørn's fear that the Norwegian novelist William Erikson, in his book *Skibets reise fra Kristiania*, has already produced the account of his, Sigbjørn's, '[e]ight months as a coal trimmer' (*IB* 7), leaving him little more than 'a shadow' (*IB* 47) of Erikson's protagonist, Benjamin Wallae. Sigbjørn is convinced that Wallae's fictional life precedes his own in both senses of the word: it not only comes first but is more important, in part because it seems to have a clearer trajectory and political significance.

The questions about narration exposed by Sigbjørn's anxiety shape *In Ballast*, which is dominated, not by the description of his time on board ship, but by his reflections upon it and his anticipation of returning. Life at sea does not have an inherent significance; its meaning is generated by telling stories about it. Sigbjørn needs 'to make a book of his experience' because '[o]therwise nobody, perhaps not even himself, would ever know what he had suffered' (*IB* 7). Erikson's novel inhibits his attempts to write his own history, and consequently robs 'my voyage of its last vestige of meaning' (*IB* 46). It does so in part by interfering with his attempt to conceive of his voyage as a period in which he 'led the life of a worker' (*IB* 95); while Erikson's text describes 'a process of adjustment towards the proletariat', Sigbjørn feels his own attempts at writing trace a 'more introspective pilgrimage' (*IB* 50). Wallae's imagined life seems to have a significance that his own lacks; it is oriented towards 'the mass, the future' (*IB* 50) that Sigbjørn identifies throughout the text with communism.

For Sigbjørn, the meaning of *Skibets reise fra Kristiania* derives from its alignment of individual experience with a general process of historical development. Wallae belongs to the ‘future’ that is ‘being hammered out’ (IB 64) in Russia, and his identification with the proletariat reinforces the idea that this is a common human destiny; as Lowry’s contemporary Cecil Day Lewis put it, the communist ‘is what your sons will be’.³⁷ Sigbjørn is unable to narrate his time at sea so coherently, which prevents him from completing any account of it; he tells Erikson that ‘my own novel [...] will never be finished’ (IB 47). The complexities of his experience are central to the political significance of *In Ballast* and illuminate Lowry’s broader critical method. Sigbjørn challenges the forms he inherits by continuously reflecting on his own story and the multiple ways in which it might be told. He also rejects the idea that his voyage has a single object or meaning; as his father points out, ‘you’ve ascribed your motives for wanting to go to sea again to more than a dozen different causes’ (IB 72). His inability to achieve the unity of Erikson’s text results in a productive ambiguity that destabilises existing political as well as literary narratives. In particular, it challenges received ideas of class and work, from the conservative images of the ship as a stable, hierarchical community reproduced by Conrad, to the idea, pervasive among middle-class intellectuals on the left, that performing working-class labour would enable their incorporation into the ‘virile solidarity of the proletariat’ (IB 44). In this context, experience is valuable because it disrupts the narratives that purport to describe it, not because it offers direct access to a truth innocent of representation. The disjunction, embodied in characters whose time at sea contradicts the fantasies they nonetheless seek to maintain, exposes the ideological functions that such narratives serve and what they cannot accommodate.

Through Sigbjørn’s fictional anxieties about *Skibets reise fra Kristiania*, Lowry explores his own relation to Nordahl Grieg, and in particular to *The Ship Sails On*, which, as Dahlie argues, had a considerable ‘formal impact’³⁸ on *Ultramarine*; Lowry took ‘fictional situations, proper and geographical names, and even verbatim phrases and sentences’³⁹ from Grieg’s book. Erikson’s imagined novel also emphasises Lowry’s broader engagement with other texts. As Sherrill Grace observes, Lowry was ‘obsessed with, haunted by, yet thoroughly devoted to, the idea of plagiarism’.⁴⁰ Although some critics have reproduced his anxieties about his acts of rewriting, they are better understood as demonstrating a particular understanding of literary production. Lowry’s technique, with its ‘allusions, references, citations, and borrowings from innumerable

other texts',⁴¹ does not repeat earlier works but rewrites them to produce new meanings and critical possibilities. It is distinctive, not because it uses other narratives, but because it explores this process. As Pierre Macherey has argued, in literature 'novelty and originality [...] are always defined by relationships',⁴² a negotiation with preceding texts rather than an escape from them. Despite his fears, Lowry's creative use of other works is central to his achievement rather than a demonstration of artistic failure.

Sigbjørn's relation to Erikson emphasises this process, which is not limited to literary representations but extends to the cultural myths that inform them, from the romantic images of 'running away to sea' (*UtV* 159) that Hugh internalises to the idealised images of workers implicit in Sigbjørn's attempts to identify with the proletariat. The latter offers one way for Sigbjørn to make sense of his time at sea, but his experiences complicate rather than reinforce his understanding of the working class and therefore his politics, exposing ships as another workplace structured by capitalism. This realisation undermines not only the romantic fantasies that inform other literary narratives about the sea, but broader conceptions of the worker and the political discourses dependent on them. The knowledge leads to a greater understanding of the persistence and complexities of class structures. Sigbjørn's recognition that in order for him to 'pursue his course of action somebody more needy must go without a job' demonstrates an awareness that even his attempts to surmount class barriers depend on the exercise of class privilege. His anxiety that his decision to 'sail again' may be '[n]ot only an empty but a selfish gesture' (*IB* 82) indicates a greater understanding of material and social structures than Hilliot achieves, in part because it resists a fantasy in which class divisions are resolved. It is also paralysing, leaving Sigbjørn unable to commit to a political position or movement; he tells his father that 'I'd die for communism but I haven't the impudence to call myself a communist' (*IB* 129).

Lowry explores ships as mythical as well as material spaces, used to legitimise a variety of political positions. He intervenes in disputes over their representation by insisting on the numerous ways in which maritime life and labour can be articulated and the conflicting narratives that inform the process. In so doing, he not only rejects the idea that ships have an inherent meaning but insists that radical as well as conservative images of the sea depend on cultural myths. The image of an egalitarian masculine community united by the shared experience of labour is as deceptive as that of a spontaneous, 'natural' hierarchy; both obscure the contradictions produced by the broader relations in

which ships are always embedded. None of these fantasies align with the material conditions that Lowry's characters encounter, and he uses this to expose the fictions through which life at sea is perceived. He also insists on the ideological force of such narratives, the ways in which they resist analysis or revision. Confronted by the disjunction between their expectations and experience, Hugh and Hilliot search for new ways to fulfil their fantasies, a process that, in both cases, involves a deliberate choice of tasks that reinforce their preconceptions about working-class labour. Even Sigbjørn, despite his insistent reflection on his time at sea and its interpretation, returns hoping to find some way to 'contact life at first hand' (*IB* 4). Ideology functions through the production of desire as well as through prohibitions.

Lowry's texts are politically significant, not because they provide an objective account of maritime labour but because they expose the myths through which it is understood. These are often mediated through literary and popular texts, from Conrad to 'light literature', but are also determined by broader ideological structures. Like his working-class contemporaries, Lowry recognises that dominant representations of the sea obscure the fact that the ships are workplaces, structured by systemic inequalities, figuring them instead as sites of masculine community. These idealised images are internalised by Hilliot, Sigbjørn and Hugh. The limitations of such narratives are revealed in moments of friction, particularly with working-class crew members who continue to see these characters as defined by privilege, a 'bastard duke' rather than a fellow worker. They are also exposed by the difficulties his protagonists have in making sense of their experience. Hilliot, Sigbjørn and Hugh all attempt to resolve these problems by reiterating the fantasies that led them to go to sea. Hilliot's narrative ends at a moment of apparent fulfilment, but Hugh achieves a critical distance from his actions in recollecting them. Sigbjørn stands between the two; he discovers a value that he does not 'fully understand' in 'working with his comrades', but his constant exploration of his experience questions the possibility of fulfilment, the stable 'Meaning' or 'Purpose' (*IB* 225) he desires. His anxieties are a critical resource, providing a basis for a broader rereading of Lowry's work that recognises the political value of its plurality and obsessive concern with the contradictory fictions through which people understand their experience. *In Ballast to the White Sea* is not an anomaly, a political text by a literary author, but a novel that emphasises Lowry's consistent attempts to collapse this false dichotomy.

Notes

- 1 Malcolm Lowry, *Ultramarine* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975 [1933]), p. 47. Hereafter cited in parentheses in the text as *U*.
- 2 Nordahl Grieg, *The Ship Sails On*, trans. A.G. Chater (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1927 [1924]), p. 66.
- 3 Mark Williams, 'Muscular Aesthete: Malcolm Lowry and 1930s English Literary Culture', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 24.1 (1989), pp. 65–87 (p. 66).
- 4 Malcolm Lowry, *In Ballast to the White Sea: A Scholarly Edition*, ed. Patrick A. McCarthy, with annotations by Chris Ackerley (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2014), p. 64. Hereafter cited in parentheses in the text as *IB*.
- 5 Malcolm Lowry, 'To Jonathan Cape, January 2, 1946', in *The Voyage that Never Ends: Fictions, Poems, Fragments, Letters*, ed. Michael Hofmann (New York: New York Review Books, 2007), pp. 385–427 (p. 397).
- 6 Lowry, 'To Jonathan Cape', p. 427.
- 7 Lowry, 'To Jonathan Cape', p. 414.
- 8 Patrick Deane, 'Ultramarine, the Class War, and British Travel Writing in the 1930s', in Frederick Asals and Paul Tiessen (eds), *A Darkness that Murmured: Essays on Malcolm Lowry and the Twentieth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), pp. 119–27 (p. 119).
- 9 Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production* (London: Routledge, 2006 [1966]), pp. 113, 89.
- 10 Malcolm Lowry, 'Through the Panama', in *Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*, ed. Nicholas Bentley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 49–137 (p. 54).
- 11 Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984 [1947]), p. 157. Hereafter cited in parentheses in the text as *UV*.
- 12 Gordon Bowker, *Pursued by Furies: A Life of Malcolm Lowry* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995 [1993]), p. 53.
- 13 Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996 [1900]), p. 246, p. 9.
- 14 John Carey, 'Young Man Goes East', in *The Faber Book of Utopias* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), pp. 349–66 (p. 349).
- 15 Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979 [1898]), p. 9.
- 16 George Garrett, 'Conrad's *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*', in *The Collected George Garrett*, ed. Michael Murphy (Nottingham: Trent Editions, 1999), pp. 240–45 (p. 240).
- 17 John Batchelor, *The Life of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 61.
- 18 Conrad, *Narcissus*, p. 9.
- 19 Conrad, *Narcissus*, p. 82.

- 20 Jakob Lothe, 'Conradian Narrative', in *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*, ed. J.H. Stape (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998 [1996]), pp. 160–78 (p. 164).
- 21 Garrett, 'Conrad's *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*', p. 245.
- 22 Conrad, *Narcissus*, p. 107.
- 23 Conrad, *Narcissus*, pp. 6, 61.
- 24 Conrad, *Narcissus*, pp. 63, 107.
- 25 Garrett, 'Conrad's *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*', p. 245.
- 26 James Hanley, 'Narrative', in *Men in Darkness* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1932 [1931]), pp. 1–117 (p. 103). John Davenport claimed that Lowry had Hanley's work on his shelves when he was an undergraduate in Cambridge (Bowker, *Pursued by Furies*, p. 101). Hanley published his first book, *Drift*, in 1930, so if Davenport's memory is correct, Lowry was quick to discover his fiction.
- 27 Conrad, *Narcissus*, p. 9.
- 28 Nicholas Bradley, 'Introduction: Malcolm Lowry's Pacific Hymnal', in Lowry, *Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*, pp. 1–21 (p. 14).
- 29 Hallvard Dahlie, 'Malcolm Lowry's *Ultramarine*', *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 3.4 (1975), pp. 65–68 (p. 65).
- 30 Williams, 'Muscular Aesthete', p. 82.
- 31 Deane, '*Ultramarine*', p. 125.
- 32 George Garrett, *Ten Years on the Parish: The Autobiography and Letters of George Garrett*, ed. Mike Morris, Tony Wailey and Andrew Davies (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), p. 38.
- 33 Louis Althusser, 'Letter on Art to André Daspre', in *On Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001 [1971]), pp. 151–55 (p. 152).
- 34 Deane '*Ultramarine*', p. 122.
- 35 Deane, '*Ultramarine*', p. 123.
- 36 Garrett, *Ten Years*, p. 56.
- 37 C. Day Lewis, 'The Road These Times Must Take', *Left Review*, 1.2 (1934), p. 35.
- 38 Hallvard Dahlie, "A Norwegian at Heart": Lowry and the Grieg Connection', in Sherrill Grace (ed.), *Swinging the Maelstrom: New Perspectives on Malcolm Lowry* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), pp. 31–42 (p. 36).
- 39 Dahlie, 'Malcolm Lowry's *Ultramarine*', p. 65.
- 40 Sherrill Grace, 'Respecting Plagiarism: Tradition, Guilt, and Malcolm Lowry's "Pelagiarist Pen"', *English Studies in Canada*, 18.4 (1992), pp. 461–82 (p. 461).
- 41 Grace, 'Respecting Plagiarism', p. 472.
- 42 Macherey, *Literary Production*, p. 113.

CHAPTER THREE

Malcolm Lowry and the End of Communism

Mark Crawford

In a letter to his friend Downie Kirk dated 13 December 1950, Malcolm Lowry mused that ‘anything [that] is a revolution must keep moving or it doesn’t revolute: [communism] by its very nature contains within it the seeds of its own destruction, so by 1989, say, everything ought to be hunky dory’.¹ This startlingly accurate prophecy has been duly remarked upon in a couple of newspaper reviews of the *Collected Letters*² as well as in Gordon Bowker’s biography,³ but its basis in his early work and its implications for his later work have not yet been fully explored. My initial premise is that while the prediction itself naturally piques the interest of a broad audience, it is *especially* intriguing to Lowry scholars, who of course know that he did not throw numbers and dates around casually. The letter, framed in part by an earlier discussion of Ortega y Gasset’s philosophy of history, reports the recent death of his mother, Evelyn Lowry, and the conflict between the ‘deathward’ wish he feels to follow her to the grave and the ‘lifeward’ one towards rebirth, which, he muses, has a parallel ‘in the world outside us’: this leads to his reflecting on the ‘teleology of tyranny’, which he describes as being not nearly so hopeless in the case of communism as it was in the case of Nazism; to predicting the year of communism’s collapse; to writing favourably of Keyserling and Nehru. This was not simple rambling, but was in fact a classic Lowry letter. In terms of Sherrill Grace’s typology, this may have been an example of a ‘real’ letter, but one that nonetheless serves as part of ‘a meditation between the real and the fictional in Lowry’s writing life’.⁴

Although Lowry does not explain his choice of 1989 as communism's expiry date, his attention to matching the inner lives of his characters with the outer reality of the larger universe led to a focus on what social scientists commonly refer to as the *legitimacy* of the Russian Revolution as a concept linking the lives of individuals and that of the great social project to which they belonged. I speculate that Lowry's great belief in the microcosm and the macrocosm led him to further think that the relevant timespan during which legitimacy would persist in a critical mass of people would be approximately the same as the natural life expectancy for individuals – what we sometimes casually refer to as 'living memory'. Given the most optimistic estimates available to him of possible human life expectancies in Britain, the US and Canada in 1950, which ranged from about 68 to about 74 years, Lowry chose 72, which was serviceable to him both as a median number and no doubt as an attractive number for more mystical reasons as well. Since 1917 plus 72 equals 1989, Lowry felt confident that this would be a good approximate date for a drop-off point in the number of those with a 'living memory' of the glory days of the Revolution – in other words, a good time for a legitimization crisis.⁵

Lowry's thinking about the *telos* of Marxism, how it relates to social *praxis*, to the life of the individual and to the role of the artist, had much deeper roots than were revealed in his 1950 letters or in the books and events that had prompted them. *Under the Volcano* famously splits the Consul's political 'self' with that of his half-brother (and 'Indoor Marxman'), Hugh, whose simplistic idealism and calls to action the Consul finds unpersuasive. The importance that Lowry attached to economic and political themes in *Volcano* is also laid bare in the 1940 version, as Frederick Asals rightly stresses in his introduction to that book.⁶ Part of the significance of the publication of the surviving draft of *In Ballast to the White Sea* is that we are now permitted to see the genesis of this famous struggle between the artist and the revolutionary.

The years 1934 to 1937 were certainly a time of political awakening and (at least temporary) radicalisation for Malcolm Lowry. Vik Doyen, Miguel Mota and Paul Tiessen rightly enthuse in the foreword to *In Ballast* about

a portrait [...] that most of us have never imagined, revealing the restless literary energy, the play of mind, and the political sensibilities of a barely known Lowry [...] With its emphasis on political commitment, labour unrest and widespread economic depression that helped to define the 1930s,

In Ballast underlines Lowry's direct and passionate political engagement during that decade.⁷

It was a time when Lowry's 'hysterical identification' with Nordahl Grieg and Grieg's character Benjamin Hall reduced the literary influence of his mentor Conrad Aiken; he also would come to distance himself from Aiken both personally and politically, even confiding, in a letter to John Davenport from Mexico in 1937, that he 'no longer thought of the pro-fascist Conrad as a friend'.⁸

Nevertheless, the most important insights made possible by the publication of *In Ballast* do not lie in the revelation or explication of these straightforward shifts in personal, artistic or political attitude. Instead, they relate to the establishment of rather more complicated constitutive tensions *between* art and politics, contemplation and action, individual and society, which served to undergird Lowry's work throughout the subsequent decade, culminating in *Under the Volcano*. Lowry appears to have understood very early that these tensions could not be resolved simply by expressing Grieg's more idealistic and socially concerned content within an Aikenesque structure and prose style. Instead, he keeps Aiken's model of artistic vocation as expansion of consciousness, but starts to take it much further, beyond loosely Freudian self-analysis to a broader metaphysical position and more wide-ranging interrogation of reality – including the reality of socialist politics. *In Ballast* is the first place where this increasingly developed philosophical and aesthetic view of life is used to engage with the *political* ideas of the main characters, in an effort to create a mutually illuminating resonance between their 'inner' lives and the 'outer' reality of civilisation. The young Lowry's emerging sensibility was already sufficiently developed by the time he became politically activated in 1934–35 to operate as a 'pre-political' theory that controlled what Sigbjørn/Lowry took from socialism (an antidote to isolation and withdrawal, and a praxis for dealing with human suffering) as well as what he would ultimately come to reject (a scientific determinism, and a dogmatic and dangerous belief in ultimate or final consciousness). Coupled with this is an early depiction of bourgeois socialism as something essentially problematic, an idea that is developed further in *Volcano*.

When Lowry arrived at Cambridge for Michaelmas term in 1929, the intellectual and literary climate was not as politically charged as it would become a couple of years later. After he befriended John Davenport and was introduced to the Haldane circle, he would have met several people

with socialist leanings, but any evolution of his views was initially very gradual. After meeting Nordahl Grieg in Norway in 1931, the reactionary influence of his 'Dark Angel', Conrad Aiken, diminished; the idealistic Grieg warned Lowry about the dangers of the extreme right in Norway, including his own former mentor, the distinguished neo-Romanticist writer Knut Hamsun, who later became a prominent supporter of Quisling and Hitler. Upon his return to Cambridge in October 1931, Lowry voted for Ramsay MacDonald's Labour Party coalition 'out of a sense of injustice'.⁹ Nevertheless, there is little evidence of a growth of political consciousness in the final version of *Ultramarine*. Its protagonist, Dana Hilliot, resembled the 18-year-old cabin boy Malcolm Lowry, who had been largely oblivious to the wider political significance of the Chinese Civil War, which had been raging just 'half a mashie shot away' while the *Pyrrhus* was moored in Shanghai harbour, but which according to Lowry had 'no part in the story'.¹⁰ It is impossible to conceive of the mature Lowry not reading significance into such an event, even if (as in the case of the tragic fatalism and paralysis of the Consul), it does not result in political action. One does get a glimpse in *Ultramarine* of the mature Lowry's style and emphasis: the linking of a geographical journey with a spiritual one; the encapsulation of time within the present (probably encouraged by his recent discovery of the philosophies of Ouspensky and Dunne); and the circular structure of the story. Yet the conclusion is less a political lesson than a confirmation of the blessings of solitary consciousness, an intellectual stance that is virtually apolitical and aloof from both bourgeoisie and proletariat.¹¹

Political themes became explicit in Lowry's writing after he met Jan Gabriel in the spring of 1933. Malcolm Binns credits her with having 'singlehandedly raised Lowry's consciousness, converting him to a loosely socialist viewpoint',¹² although it is questionable how much converting she would have needed to do, given his newfound friendship with John Sommerfield, the latent influences of Grieg and the Haldane group, and the context of full-blown economic crisis and looming political catastrophe. In any case, social-political awareness is on full display in two short stories, 'June 30th, 1934' and 'Economic Conference, 1934', with the drunken debauch of the two Bills in the latter story clearly meant as a symbolic representation of the descent into chaos occurring in the outside world.

But *In Ballast* is the first place where Lowry's increasingly developed philosophical and aesthetic view of life is made explicit and is used to understand and compare the political commitments of the main

characters. He states in his Notes that 'Sigbjørn believes in communism but also believes that the soul is going out in its journey in life to seek God' (*IB* 458). The tension between these two commitments drives Sigbjørn towards a confrontation with those elements in Marxist thought that are inconsistent with spiritual journey, and for Lowry that journey is rooted in certain epistemological and ontological ideas that it is the task of the artist to understand. For the first time in Lowry's work, philosophical and metaphysical references about the nature of time, reality and consciousness are explicitly juxtaposed with political references; political ideas are tested against metaphysical ones.

Sigbjørn Hansen-Tarnmoor is nearly as young as Dana Hilliot, but, unlike Hilliot, his stint as a sailor is over, and he is now both better educated and more self-consciously a writer. Although he is troubled by Erikson's having 'taken the sea away' from him, he still believes in 'a power for good watching over all things'. His brother (and Sigbjørn/Lowry's alter ego) Tor is nihilistic and suicidal, but his injunction to 'identify with the virile solidarity of the proletariat' is attractive to Sigbjørn (even before Tor's death) as offering a bridge between theory and praxis, isolated consciousness and community. Paradoxically, the pessimistic (and self-described 'insufferable petit bourgeois') Tor recommends political activism and promotes socialism as an antidote to the 'tyranny of self', while Sigbjørn is less sure; this contrast is a sign that for the latter it is the authenticity, originality and integrity of the artist that is paramount. In Chapter III, Sigbjørn is chided by his brother for returning from the sea with 'the last thing that might have been expected: a kind of vague mysticism that doesn't suit you at all' (*IB* 25). This alleged 'mysticism' is Sigbjørn's burgeoning artistic philosophy concerning the nature of time, life and consciousness.

The first reference to Karl Marx in the novel occurs near the beginning of Tor and Sigbjørn's last conversation, sandwiched between mentions of Spinoza, Kant, Bergson and Croce on the one hand, and Søren Kierkegaard and Charles Fort on the other. Tor complains that of 'all these books', 'only two things haunt me now' even if we include Marx', namely 'our' Søren Kierkegaard's *Personal Confessions* and 'Charles Fort's *The Mad Fisherman of Worcester*' (*IB* 28). Kierkegaard was the Danish Christian existentialist who criticised the political and cultural changes associated with modern mass society in favour of an emphasis on authentic selfhood, achieved through suffering and the engaged passionate commitment of the single individual, and not through communal religious or other social activity. (Tor mentions being

haunted by Kierkegaard's remark about the impossibility of being 'as free as a bird, if only for a day' [*IB* 28].) Fort's story affirms the interconnectedness of nature and the (Jungian) principle of synchronicity as a way to account for how and why strange things happen. Mention of the story also signals Fort's more general themes of agnostic scepticism about positivistic science and claims to ultimate knowledge of any kind, and a pronounced corollary distrust of authority in all its forms, whether religious, scientific, political or philosophical.¹³

These references to Kierkegaard and Fort lend some credence to Patrick Deane's observation in his essay on *Ultramarine* that '[p]olitical considerations in Lowry are almost always attenuated and enigmatic, invariably subordinated to existential ones'.¹⁴ Tor's need to understand the disasters of the sunk Tarnmoor ships, and what they symbolise in his darkening universe, is unlikely to be fully satisfied by scientific socialism. Lowry clearly agreed with Kierkegaard's sentiment that Hegel would count as the greatest of thinkers 'if only he had regarded his system as a thought-experiment instead of taking himself seriously to have reached the truth'.¹⁵ This assessment would have seemed even more valid after Hegel was 'turned on his head' and his idealist teleology replaced with the historical materialism of Marx. Equally important to Kierkegaard's existentialist scepticism, however, was how it was conjoined with social realism and his concern to address contemporary problems in 'the present age', an emphasis later shared by Henrik Ibsen (after whom Grieg's ship was named in the voyage that inspired *The Ship Sails On* – a fact alluded to by Sigbjørn both in a letter to Erikson [*IB* 51] and in his conversation with his father Captain Tarnmoor on the golf course).¹⁶

Sigbjørn wonders aloud whether the litany of maritime disasters reaching back to that of the *Titanic* in 1912 are not 'supernatural manifestations of some kind, of change, of revolution' (*IB* 29), and notes that '[e]ven the Russians, at the very headquarters of the future' can't avoid a 'thousand setbacks' or the 'sadistic patterns of nature' that cost so many innocent lives. This is perhaps the clearest remaining difference between himself and Tor: he can't bring himself to believe that there is no divine order, only 'blind, malicious force'. Tor then echoes Voltaire's riposte to Leibniz's optimism at the end of *Candide*: 'let us cultivate our garden'; but Sigbjørn reasons that perhaps the garden is in any case to be found in a new society, a socialist vision (and not in a radically individualist doctrine of the will). To Tor's suggestion that their selves must be reborn, in Auden's words, in conscious union with the 'virile solidarity of the proletariat', Sigbjørn responds sceptically, based upon his real-life

initiation into that virility and the challenges of solidarity he faced aboard the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, asking whether Tor means it as a literary fashion. (Like Orwell, Lowry knows all too well the bourgeois middle-class socialist of the Auden/Spender/C. Day Lewis variety – respecting that they are ‘the movement’ of the early and mid-thirties, much as Joyce and Eliot were in the twenties, but questioning the ultimate authority of literature that depended utterly on the very bourgeois liberty that orthodox Marxists were apt to deride.)¹⁷ But Tor responds that if it is a ‘fashion’, then it is one that the world is waiting for, because the world is waiting for a revolution. In response to his own rhetorical question ‘But What Kind of Revolution?’ – social, literary, sexual or of the soul – Sigbjørn concludes that ‘the truth is in none of these revolutions could we be counted on’ (*IB* 31).

No sooner does Sigbjørn conclude that there is a piece of common ground that he and his brother could grapple towards – a mutual commitment to live happily – than he realises ‘how difficult it is to be happy [...] even if you do not know the reason for your misery, when the very system under which you live may render life untenable for thousands of others’ (*IB* 33). In other words, Sigbjørn does not lack socialist consciousness. But his metaphysical disagreement with Tor *does* have important practical and political implications for his development as an artist. After Tor’s suicide, Sigbjørn will affirm his brother’s commitment to socialism, but he will still carry on the philosophical debate as before. It is significant that it is Tor who states that, of all his college readings, it is works by Kierkegaard and Charles Fort that ‘haunt’ him (*IB* 28). His concessions to Christian existentialism and Fortean scepticism about scientific objectivity mean that Lowry does not put his protagonist Sigbjørn into the position of having to betray his brother’s commitments in order to remain faithful to his sense of reality (‘mystical’ or otherwise).

In his second letter, Sigbjørn confides to Erikson that

[t]hree years ago I wanted to find myself, now I want to lose myself [...] I am now equally concerned in forgetting all about myself and devoting my gifts, such as they are, to the common movement for change. It is strange however that in this letter I seem nevertheless to be drawing a remarkable amount of attention to myself. (*IB* 43–44)

Indeed, the letters he writes from the Mecca and Kardomah cafés in Liverpool mainly mourn the loss of his own ‘identity’ because Erikson has already written much of the book that he had hoped to

write. He even admits that his 'special situation' (upon discovering Erikson's book in Howell's bookshop) leads to further speculations that amount to 'party treason', betraying professed socialist convictions by accentuating his individual artistic aspirations. It is the one fundamental difference between what are two otherwise strikingly similar novels. 'Your character's pilgrimage is a process of adjustment towards the proletariat: my character is *merely one more introspective pilgrimage* into that region of the soul where man also ceases to be his own factor' (*IB* 50, my emphasis).

Erikson belongs to socialism, whereas for Sigbjørn, socialism *belongs to him*. This is not just a difference of degree of commitment, but of metaphysical *kind*, about where *telos* or destiny is to be located. (One wonders if, in the 1944 version of *In Ballast*, Grieg's notorious 1937 book defending Stalin's show trials is referred to as an example of where this fateful choice of ontologies can lead.) Sigbjørn's 'final conclusions' in the last letter to Erikson in Chapter IV refer to the secret of life being 'old creations erased by new real lives', and mention Melville's *Pierre* and its theme of scepticism towards transcendentalism and lasting progress (*IB* 53–54). Notwithstanding Sigbjørn's allegiances both to Erikson and to his brother, and Lowry's own identification with his many socialist friends and with Grieg, we find here a steadfast resistance to Marxism, or at least to those elements of it that are at odds with an appreciation of eternal flux and change and consequent choice. In Sigbjørn's subsequent dialogues this 'mystical', 'religious' and 'philosophical' position is challenged by his father Captain Tarnmoor and by his girlfriend Nina. Their warnings about Sigbjørn's fraternal and revolutionary impulses degenerating into something more pernicious have cautionary bite, improving his artistic self-awareness even as they fail to knock him off his basic metaphysical position.

The first meeting of father and son in Liverpool illustrates the inadequacy of Manichean categories and black-and-white certainties. Chapter V describes their walk around the city as they cope with the multiple tragedies of the two ship sinkings and Tor's suicide. Assignment of blame between the owner of the ships (Captain Tarnmoor) and the 'system' alludes to an exploitative capitalism, but equally striking is the contrast made between the apparent absoluteness of the present and an underlying reality that is 'fluctuant and transitory—for this architectural solidity housed many bankruptcies' (*IB* 56). A 'dense crowd', which at first Captain Tarnmoor suspects is a band of protestors against them, is in fact a workers' meeting being broken up by the police. They then

enter a showing of Pudovkin's *The End of St Petersburg* at the moment in the film where the liberal Kerensky is being condemned as 'the same thing in a different coat' (*IB* 67); but this is followed in the book by a sympathetic portrayal of Captain Tarnmoor's position as a 'middle class' employer, a 'tool in the hands of the system' who is unfairly treated in the official reports on the sinking of the *Thorstein* (*IB* 70). The father points out to his son that he could scarcely oppose his 'feeling for the masses, given that Scandinavia has always been suggestible to all ideas of emancipation' (*IB* 71). Even the logical purpose of Sigbjørn's proposed voyage is inescapably ambiguous: 'For you can't want to go to Russia if your motive is to see Erikson, who is probably in Norway. And if you want to go to Norway, the source of our ancestry, as you put it, you would scarcely choose to sign on a ship that went to Russia' (*IB* 72–73). All that Sigbjørn can say in response is that 'Erikson in some way connects me to the future' (*IB* 73). His imaginary muse Melville helps him to find direction, but only part of the way, by warning him against the 'unpardonable sin [...] of an intellect that triumphed over the sense of brotherhood within man' (*IB* 84).

In contrast, Nina prosecutes a trenchant Marxist case against Sigbjørn's philosophy. She remarks that 'the flag should always be flown at half-mast whenever a really good artist becomes "metaphysical"' (*IB* 91). She believes that the Revolution's goal, a classless society, is the only reliable guard against a chaotic, malevolent universe and a slippery slope into fascism. Tor's virtue, according to Nina, was that he didn't pretend to see an order or meaning to the world by 'tilting at windmills' like Sigbjørn did, while there were 'real wrongs to right, real enemies to fight, real grievances to redress' (*IB* 99). Neither Sigbjørn's experience as a worker nor his attempts to articulate a socialism more consistent with his idea of a spiritually authentic life impress Nina, who argues that Sigbjørn's 'old' ideology, while it may seem like an identification with the proletariat, is 'still just simply an escape from yourself' (*IB* 112); that he may have courage, but it is 'blind' and 'sentimental'. She even suggests that by drawing inspiration from 'lovely Norway' and 'your Mr. Lawrence', he could give aid to the Nazis and fascists subconsciously. Sigbjørn, like Lowry, is sensitive enough to acknowledge this danger, even as he insists that his own personal *telos* is at least as reliable as that of communism in avoiding tyranny:

—You're right, Nina. I know you're right. It's true what you say. I suppose I'm still not much more than a child who wants to be an engine-driver. I

wouldn't have the impudence to call myself a communist, not yet. But those enemies of yours are my enemies. (*IB* 115)

He acknowledges his difficulties in being able to balance abstractions with realities, but those infirmities befit a *writer*. Chapter VII ends with Ouspensky's image of the soul as an ocean liner, which underscores the point.

The exchange between father and son that unfolds in Chapters VIII–X is a deeper and more philosophical one than their earlier meeting, explicitly contrasting personal destiny with the history of Man. The father suggests that what may appear to be supernatural coincidences may in fact be 'subnormal', by which he means that they do really mean something, but 'what they do mean really is that [one's] passionate attribution of meaning to these coincidences has aroused a similar enthusiasm in the subnormal world for producing them' (*IB* 144). We are reminded in Chris Ackerley's note of Keyserling's *The Recovery of Truth* (1929), in which he states that 'man is no less responsible for what happens to him than for what he does. Man encounters only occurrences allowed to his particular nature, since his unconscious conjures up the accidents that befall him' (*IB* 354, note X.24). As Sigbjørn's father puts it, 'to ignore metaphysical problems is not to abolish them' (*IB* 144). To which Sigbjørn adds that 'all conclusions seem final to me, even when I know them to be mutable'. The view that protean mutability does not imply radical indeterminacy is informed by both Dunne's theory of time and Ouspensky's model of expanding consciousness: there is a path forward that is not random, even though it may not have a goal or end-point.

What kind of politics is compatible with such a worldview? Constantly changing but moving towards something at the same time is, in political terms, 'revolutionary', but only in the looser sense that Thomas Mann means when he says 'the revolutionary principle is really the will towards a better world [...] the will towards the future' (*IB* 145). Upon hearing that Sigbjørn's principal reason for splitting up with Nina was her insulting of the soul, his father challenges him to define what he means by a soul, and to explain his own allegiance to something so lacking in concreteness and precision. He also asks whether Nina's denigration of the whole man and the wisdom of religious thought might actually be justified temporarily by the historical juncture, 'at the moment the technic of the transition' (*IB* 147). This phrase is an explicit reference to Waldo David Frank's critique in his important address to the

International Congress of Writers in 1935: 'The orthodox revolutionary creeds, which are the technic of the transition of this crucial hour, do not comprehend the whole man' (*IB* 147).

The Captain says to his son that he thinks he notices 'the same tendencies that Ruge and Echtermeyer objected to in the German romantic school, a sort of medieval consciousness, a tendency towards mystical and ecclesiastical terminology which makes me think that you might, under certain circumstances, turn Catholic' (*IB* 151). Ruge and Echtermeyer's writing affirms Hegel's sense of society's progression towards freedom, while criticising the thoroughgoing teleology of his theory. This describes precisely Lowry's own ambivalence about Hegel's philosophy of history, and therefore about Marx's as well.¹⁸ (The Captain's remarks on this point also anticipate the work of György Lukács, who saw German Romanticism as marking the point in intellectual history where the German tradition separated from Europe and moved towards National Socialism.)¹⁹ Had he lived to see the fall of the Berlin Wall, Lowry might well have taken a triumphant bow for the accuracy of his prediction, but would have known that 'hunky dory' did not mean (*pace* Fukuyama) the End of History.²⁰ He would not perhaps have been surprised to witness the recent erosion of liberal and democratic values in many countries, as nativist and populist leaders make nostalgic appeals to rootless populations who lack a living memory of the Great Depression and the Second World War.

Sigbjørn's conversation with Captain Tarnmoor on the golf course tells us how long and how deeply Lowry had been meditating on the nature of 'revolutionary' movements, their teleologies, and their connections to individual lives, when he wrote his letter to Downie Kirk in December 1950. We now know that the discovery of Ortega y Gasset's *Towards a Philosophy of History* earlier that year was not an epiphany that set off a whole new train of thought, but rather a further validation of Lowry's long-standing view that life as self-authorship is too important to be subordinated to economic or historical 'laws'.²¹ In each of the dialogues in *In Ballast*, philosophical and aesthetic considerations are challenged by political ones, and vice versa, which results in a raising of consciousness. A steadfast insistence upon reality as perpetually variable and changing, and life as a consciousness-expanding voyage, is the pre-political position that permits the development of a highly discriminating form of socialist praxis even as it provides metaphysical resistance to aspects of Marxism.

The loss of the 1944 manuscript and the subsequent abandonment of the novel did not merely delay our appreciation of this intriguing

stage in Lowry's development. It also represented his abandonment of a paradisaical vision very different from that contained in 'The Forest Path to the Spring' and *October Ferry to Gabriola*, one that made more room for radical political concerns and civic engagement as essential aspects of the 'whole man'. Instead, Lowry's retreat from radicalism post-1947 helped to create a bias once again towards solitary consciousness and its pitfalls. A revised and completed *In Ballast* would have, at the very least, restored some balance between individual experience and that of history, providing more dramatic potential than Ethan Llewellyn's disillusionment with the everyday politics of the law. At best, Lowry might even have found Hugh, and not 'the Consul and the Farolito waiting in the shadows'.²²

Notes

- 1 *Sursum Corda! The Collected Letters of Malcolm Lowry*, ed. Sherrill Grace, 2 vols (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995, 1996), 2:307 (hereafter *CL*).
- 2 Peter Buitenhuis, 'Lowry's Tragic Genius Blossoms in his Letters', *The Globe and Mail*, 17 May 1997, D11.
- 3 Gordon Bowker, *Pursued By Furies: A Life of Malcolm Lowry* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 477.
- 4 Richard J. Lane, 'Preface', in Sherrill Grace, *Strange Comfort: Essays on the Work of Malcolm Lowry* (Vancouver: Talon Books, 2009), p. 13.
- 5 There is some evidence that Lowry perceived the Hungarian Revolution and Polish uprising in 1956 as cracks in the legitimacy of communism. In his letter to Margerie Bonner Lowry dated 25 October, he mentions the radio blaring about riots in Poland and the initial Soviet restraint: 'sounds damn good news too, not going to say I told you so, but I did nevertheless'. His initial response to the Hungarian Revolution, as evidenced in his letter to Dr Michael Raymond in November 1956, was guarded: perhaps reflecting his familiarity with Jan Gabriel's research in the 1930s, he suspected that the 'spontaneous uprising' was actually abetted by 'thorough-going reactionaries, anti-semites and ex-Nazis financed, no doubt, secretly by the U.S. And yet there seems to be truth in the spontaneity of the uprising too...'; *CL* 2:825, 848–50.
- 6 Frederick Asals, 'Introduction', in Malcolm Lowry, *The 1940 Under the Volcano, The Malcolm Lowry Review* (1994), pp. xvi–xxvii; this essay has now been made available as an Afterword in Malcolm Lowry, *The 1940 Under the Volcano: A Critical Edition*, ed. Miguel Mota and Paul Tiessen, with annotations by Chris Ackerley and David Large (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2015), pp. 487–505.

- 7 Malcolm Lowry, *In Ballast to the White Sea*, ed. Patrick A. McCarthy, with annotations by Chris Ackerley (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2014), p. xi. Hereafter cited in parentheses in the text as *IB*.
- 8 Lowry to John Davenport, 31 August 1937. Cited in Bowker, *Pursued by Furies*, p. 223.
- 9 Bowker, *Pursued by Furies*, p. 131.
- 10 Malcolm Lowry, *Ultramarine*, rev. edn (London: Jonathan Cape, 1963), p. 96.
- 11 Ronald Binns, *Malcolm Lowry* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 22.
- 12 Binns, *Malcolm Lowry*, p. 24.
- 13 Colin Wilson, *Mysteries* (London: Putnam, 1999), p. 201: 'Expressed in a sentence, Fort's principle goes something like this: People with a psychological need to believe in marvels are no more prejudiced and gullible than people with a psychological need not to believe in marvels.'
- 14 Patrick Deane, 'Ultramarine, the Class War, and British Travel Writing in the 1930s', in Frederick Asals and Paul Tiessen (eds), *A Darkness that Murmured: Malcolm Lowry and the Twentieth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p. 123.
- 15 William McDonald, 'Søren Kierkegaard', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (fall 2016 edn), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2016/entries/kierkegaard/> (accessed 9 March 2020).
- 16 *IB* 129. August Strindberg, another Scandinavian icon of the modernist movement influenced by Kierkegaard, is referenced in a discussion between Sigbjørn and Captain Tarnmoor about authenticity, creativity and plagiarism: *IB* 357, note X.47.
- 17 George Orwell, 'Inside the Whale', in *All Art is Propaganda: Critical Essays*, ed. George Packer and Keith Gessen (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 2008), pp. 120–21.
- 18 Georg W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (Chicago: Franklin Classics Trade Press, 2018). Karl Marx took his concept of history as a dialectical process with a beginning, a middle and an end from Hegel.
- 19 Lowry's distrust of, yet attraction to, this ethic and aesthetic of nostalgia is present in *Under the Volcano* and is well described by Hilda Thomas in her excellent essay 'Praxis as Prophylaxis: A Political Reading of *Under the Volcano*', in Sherrill Grace (ed.), *Swinging the Maelstrom: New Perspectives on Malcolm Lowry* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press).
- 20 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon Books, 1992). An opposing view to Fukuyama's was Samuel P. Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Touchstone, 1996). Huntington anticipated a post-Cold War world in which ethnic and civilisational conflicts would increase and the dominance of the Western model would be relativised rather than universalised. An early influence of Huntington's was Oswald Spengler.

- 21 The best description of Lowry's philosophy is contained in Sherrill Grace, *The Voyage That Never Ends: Malcolm Lowry's Fiction* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1982).
- 22 Conrad Knickerbocker, 'Swinging the Paradise Street Blues: Malcolm Lowry in England', *Paris Review*, 38 (summer 1966), p. 16.

CHAPTER FOUR

In Ballast to the White Sea

The Springboard for Russian Influences on Malcolm Lowry's Visionary Intellect

Nigel H. Foxcroft

A prolific reader of Russian literature, an ardent fan of Soviet cinema and an alert observer of the increasing appeal – both in the UK and in Europe – of communism and fascism, Malcolm Lowry applied his perceptions to his political and spiritual odyssey, *In Ballast to the White Sea*.¹ Set in the interwar period, it corroborates the appeal of Soviet Russia to many intellectuals who feared the growth of Nazism in Germany. It reveals Lowry's visionary intellect in providing cogent insight into the fragility of a world poised between the forces of capitalism, communism and fascism – a world that, beleaguered by socio-economic disintegration (which would continue until the late 1930s and beyond), teeters on the brink of warfare and annihilation.

Russian literary and filmic connections

Lowry's familiarity with *Dead Souls* (1842) by Nikolai Gogol and his constant fear of conflagration fostered his superstitious beliefs.² In this respect, Gogol's incineration of the second and third volumes of his masterpiece bizarrely correlates to the disastrous loss of the manuscript of *In Ballast to the White Sea* in the blaze that destroyed Lowry's Dollarton shack on 7 June 1944. As a consequence, the afflictions wrought by the agencies of inferno may be 'seen not merely as a hazard, but a force that exerts its will any time when the elements are out of balance'.³

Yet, in tone, *In Ballast to the White Sea* is a ‘pseudo-Dostoievskian!’ novel, for its author was influenced by the notion of culpability conveyed in *Crime and Punishment* (1866).⁴ For example, before committing suicide, Tor Tarnmoor recalls the irreconcilability of Raskolnikov’s guilt in Dostoyevsky’s novel with his justification for committing murder by claiming to be superhuman. Tormented by profound anxieties, Tor reflects: ‘—God knows [...] I’m still frightened of something—you know what Dostoyevsky said—something I can’t conceive, which doesn’t exist, but which rises up before me as a horrible, distorted, irrefutable, fact’ (*IB* 5).

However, Lowry not only philosophises but *politicises* viewpoints expressed in *In Ballast*. In this respect, Tor is intent on reversing what he perceives to be the collapse of civilisation predicted by the German philosopher Oswald Spengler in *The Decline of the West* (1918). The economic recession of the 1930s had led to the rise of Adolf Hitler, who had become Führer in August 1934 and established the Third Reich. Nevertheless, Tor is critical of the Spenglerian cyclical view of the rise and fall of civilisations and, instead, places faith in a new Russia. Oblivious to the extent of Stalinist atrocities which were to culminate in the Great Terror (1936–38), he declares to his brother: ‘—That’s the worst kind of Spenglerian nonsense. To Russia, perhaps. But to Dostoyevsky’s—’ (*IB* 8). Sigbjørn too recognises the attraction of traditional Russian spiritual values, conjecturing: ‘—The future? To Dostoyevsky’s Christianity belongs the next thousand years?’ (*IB* 8).⁵

Chekhovian humanitarian values are also a mainstay of Sigbjørn’s morals, though they are refracted through the prism of socialism. In his dialogue with his girlfriend, Nina, he empathises with the plight of the workers, with their exploitation and impoverishment. Yet he contends that the cause of their suffering is the British class system: ‘To twist an intolerable remark around: *La bêtise est mon fort*. It’s my strong point, my armour. Take that away and there’s nothing left, just as there was nothing left for Tchekov’s old lady when they took away her religion’ (*IB* 97).⁶

Another Russian playwright who features prominently in *In Ballast* is Valentin Kataev (1897–1986). Just after Sigbjørn’s retelling of his jaunt to Bygdø Allé in Oslo to become acquainted with William Erikson – the author of *Skibets reise fra Kristiania* (*The Ship’s Voyage from Kristiania*) – the narrator observes: ‘They are giving Kataev’s play at Nationaltheatret’ (*IB* 237). This refers to the 1931 film of the 1928 Moscow Arts Theatre performance of Kataev’s first novel, *Rastratchiki* (*The Embezzlers*) (1926),

the stage adaptation of which was accomplished by the influential Russian theatre director Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863–1938).⁷ Kataev was inspired by the real-life accounts appearing in the journals to which he contributed and by a national campaign against corruption instigated by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Yet his work is reminiscent of Gogol's parody of pre-revolutionary Russian society in *Dead Souls*, although, in its portrayal of two functionaries conspiring to defraud the state, it satirises not tsarist bureaucracy, but contemporary Soviet officialdom.

Although his practice of cinema-going dated from childhood, Lowry developed a fascination for Soviet cinematography as an undergraduate at St Catharine's College, Cambridge in 1929–32. He was motivated by the silent, black-and-white films shown at the university's Film Guild. They included *The End of St Petersburg* (1927) and *Storm Over Asia* (1928), both of which focus on the legacy of the 1917 October Revolution. They were directed by Vsevolod Pudovkin (1893–1953);⁸ in Lowry's fledgling novel, *Ultramarine* (1933), Dana Hilliot claims to have worked for this Russian screenwriter and advocate of montage: 'In Moscow I was a camera man under Pudovkin.'⁹

In Ballast to the White Sea focuses on *The End of St Petersburg*: a sign advertising this film catches the gaze of Captain Hansen-Tarnmoor and his son, Sigbjørn, luring them into a Liverpool cinema (*IB* 66). They scrutinise the rapid development of events in Russia that are projected on the screen and reflect on the implications of regime change. Recalling a slogan highlighting the Bolsheviks' refusal to concede to Alexander Kerensky's short-lived Provisional Government – which lasted from March until November 1917 – Sigbjørn contends: '*The Kerensky Government is only the same thing in a different coat. No compromise!*' (*IB* 67). In their excitement the Captain and his son appear 'almost as if they willed to be transported from their own seats into this world, not indeed less tragic than their own, but where hope displaced sterility, and courage, despair' (*IB* 67). Optimistic of 'the success—however you preferred to look at it—of a workers' republic' in the storming of the Winter Palace, Sigbjørn is concerned that 'they have destroyed God. There is no soul any longer there' (*IB* 67). Hence, he has reservations that calamities may ensue on this journey into the unknown: 'He had stopped outside a cinema hoarding which depicted this time no Russian peasant, but a ship of the dead setting out into the imponderable, to navigate the nexus between this world and the next, crowded for the grave; outward bound' (*IB* 77).

Political affinities: the dilemma of 1930s Europe

Lowry's political empathies tend to be progressively socialist: in his later correspondence he expresses delight at the result of British Columbia's general election to select members of the Legislative Assembly. On the formation of a new administration to implement Social Credit policies, he proclaims, 'We have a Marxist, though fortunately not communist, government now in B.C. Fantastic.'¹⁰ However, he remains a person of contradictions in that he derived considerable advantage from funds received from his father, a wealthy cotton broker. In the context of *In Ballast*, Sigbjørn too is reliant on the free market, as Captain Tarnmoor contends: '—And as for the capitalist system, even though there may be some grounds for thinking it unsatisfactory, it seems to me that you yourself have benefitted very clearly from it' (*IB* 129).

Astutely aware of the complexity of European politics, Lowry strives to provide an aesthetic response in *In Ballast* to the impact of ideology on contemporary affairs. In his psychic pursuit of survival, he assesses the human factors which have contributed to the international situation. Drawing on his familiarity with Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) and on his own maritime experiences, Lowry — via his protagonist Sigbjørn — makes an analogy between the white whale's mystique and the glowing allure of the 'phosphorous White Sea' in the Soviet era (*IB* 121):

Sigbjørn buried his face in his hands. It was as though fate had been waiting to drive this wedge of truth through his haunted mind. Yes, it was true, whatever supernatural ambiguities *Moby Dick* might have circumscribed in his flight from modern thought or through his own brain, nothing had altered the powerful fact of the white whale's actual existence. Fact! White whale! White Sea! The wedge—or was it a harpoon?—of agonizing truth was driven further in and he trembled with the pain of it. These tragedies could all have been avoided. They could be avoided in future. (*IB* 82)

As a visual metaphor, this white whale analogy politicises *In Ballast* by exposing capitalism in crisis. In this context, Sigbjørn identifies 'greediness and evil in the present state of affairs' — attributes which are fostering a 'blind, malicious force in the world' (*IB* 82). His thoughts are fostered with those of the narrator who refers to the inevitability of the disintegration of private enterprise: 'Capitalist society carried her own rusted presages of disaster within her as the whale did the lances whose wounds weakened it at the final attack' (*IB* 82). In a later conversation with his father, Sigbjørn asserts that military conflict is a fundamental

feature of capitalism. Through a vision of 'psychotic nightmare' he foresees a proliferation of hostilities, surmising: '—Well, here we are, surrounded by a strange fatality, and among other things being driven into another war ... Can't you see that the system is rotten right through?' (*IB* 130). Indeed, in his short story 'June 30th, 1934' (1939) – the original title of which was 'Metal' – Lowry refers to the Night of the Long Knives, when the Nazis embarked on a series of politically motivated executions, with the aim of consolidating Hitler's grasp on power.¹¹

Arising from the practice of alchemy – which reflected a desire to transform base metals into gold – the theme of 'metallurgies' is strongly present in *In Ballast* (*IB* 155). Sigbjørn is warned against empty dreams by his father, who considers 'the philosophical stone' implausible. He cites Isaac D'Israeli, who deemed alchemy to be one of the 'Six Follies of Science' (*IB* 144).¹² His fertile imagination transforms 'the elixir of life' into 'some further metallurgy of death' (*IB* 218). As in the poem 'There is a Metallurgy' (1938–39), Lowry's 'chthonic vision of a metallic world'¹³ predicts that only 'a metallurgy of the mind' can save the human race from oblivion.¹⁴ In the 'darkening world' of *In Ballast* the time is ripe for preventative action to avert a catastrophe akin to that which happened to the *Lusitania* (which was torpedoed by a U-boat in 1915 with the loss of over a thousand lives, an action that brought the USA into the First World War). The ramifications of that tragic event are suggested by the following passage:

It seemed to Sigbjørn [...] that they stood on the brink of the midnight of the world, a world that would never again leave a message under the stone for the pilgrim, and it was as if the chaos which man had brought to man by his greed and deceit and betrayal of his own birthright was mirrored in the swiftly drifting, tattered wreckage above them. (*IB* 134)

A pressing need for the creation of a new society – which would *not* endanger the livelihood of its members – is identified by Sigbjørn. Stimulated by watching *The End of St Petersburg*, he craves the rebirth of civilisation. He glimpses 'his own face reflected behind, another soul who sought to be reborn, who perhaps sought God in the very regions where he had been destroyed' (*IB* 68). Marking the indelible words of his now deceased sibling, Tor, he pledges to venture on 'quite a different pilgrimage' from those that have been undertaken so far (*IB* 19, 68–69).

The benefits and drawbacks of communism are the subject of intense debate between Sigbjørn and Nina (whose political allegiances lie with the Communist Party, which she has joined). However, he highlights

her lack of spiritual values, elucidating, '—We were always quarreling. Besides, she was a communist who actually belonged to the party. I had the temerity to claim to have a soul. It was this temerity she disliked and insulted' (*IB* 146). He explains his political status as follows: '—I am not in Russia. I may never go to Russia and even if I did I should probably be thrown out on my ear. And besides, I don't belong to a party' (*IB* 149). Captain Tarnmoor shares his insistence on a renaissance in belief-systems via a process of radical transformation: 'Eventually, if the whole man is to be involved, as to my mind he must, the wisdom of religious thought and the miraculous powers of men must also enter the revolutionary movement' (*IB* 147). Their deliberations revolve around their perceptions of the characteristics and trajectory of Soviet communism in the 1930s. In this respect, the Captain is *not* unmindful of the workings of the state security apparatus:

—It's the last straw you should talk to me about Russia [...] as though it were the Absolute! For I assure you in advance that it's nothing of the kind. Besides I'll be surprised—even if you do get there—if they'll let you go beyond the wharf. (*IB* 72)

In contrast, Sigbjørn's allegiance to socialism is somewhat naïve. Detecting his sentimental vices, Nina stresses his psychological dependence in the following way:

—None of the old ideology is any good any longer. It is such an act. Yours—although it may seem on the surface like an identification with the proletariat—is still simply an escape from yourself. It's more of a tense, personal, religious matter with you than anything else. [...] Can't you see that all this business about going home, to Russia, or Norway, or Spitzbergen [...] is just one more attempt on your part to crawl back into Grandma's beaded bag? (*IB* 112)

She associates his recourse to 'the dark forces of the unconscious' with 'an act of primitive revolt' (*IB* 112). She links his primordial powers of intuition with the perceptive abilities of D.H. Lawrence, who championed the pursuit of mystical communication with pre-industrialised communities as a means of achieving sexual liberation.¹⁵ With regard to his witnessing a surge in support for communism as a panacea for the ills of Nazism, Sigbjørn asserts that even Lawrence would 'have gone "red"' (*IB* 112). The politicisation of the intelligentsia is deemed a significant factor by Captain Tarnmoor, who asserts to his son: '—A few years ago young men like you used to be aesthetes, now they're communists' (*IB* 73). Sigbjørn clarifies his political allegiance by vowing

‘—I’d die for communism but I haven’t the impudence to call myself a communist. Another thing, I don’t suppose they’d have me’ (*IB* 129).

Collaboration between the USSR and Nazi Germany – resulting in the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact (August 1939–June 1941) and its rupture – is predicted by Nina, who explains to Sigbjørn:

—It’s but a step, also made in the dark, not to Communism but to Fascism. It’s like going to war—there’s that same quality of blindness about it. [...] A great many in the same position as yourself feel that they must take some such violent step in the dark as a compensation for what their brothers and fathers went through in the war. (*IB* 112)

However, she shares his contempt for Nazism: ‘—That’s our common enemy, their eyes seemed to say, focussing on the soulless swastika’ (*IB* 114). The narrator imagines that, having reached the River Mersey, a German battleship opens fire, resulting in multiple casualties. However, it is Sigbjørn who is portrayed as the hero for subduing Hermann Göring, the Nazi leader who was complicit in implementing the 1935 antisemitic Nuremberg Laws:

For a moment the sound of the winches above them was the clattering of machine-guns. The snow-mists, the terrible vaporious metallurgies of aerochemistry, the sea that raced past a thick river of blood. Goering’s bloated face rose up before him and he smashed it to jelly. (*IB* 114)¹⁶

To the White Sea: Norway or Russia?

Another aspect of Sigbjørn’s vision of the future is his simultaneous fixations on Norway and Russia, as he reveals to Tor: ‘But can you tell me why when I think of Norway I always think of Russia at the same time?’ (*IB* 8). He affirms that he has chosen a Norwegian vessel for his return to his homeland, explaining: ‘—Yes, I’ve got to get away, out, back into my own tracks, to the sources of my ancestry’ (*IB* 64). His focus on Erikson is identified by Captain Tarnmoor as an indication of psychological transformation: ‘Perhaps you do meet him again without knowing it, for just as you are home already, in a sense, on that Norwegian ship, *Unsgaard*, you also meet Erikson, identified there as a member of the crew. In short, you meet yourself. Only a new self’ (*IB* 65). Given the likelihood that Sigbjørn’s ship will dock at a Norwegian port, Captain Tarnmoor detects the futility of his son’s dual allegiances, querying: ‘—You can’t want to go to Russia if your motive is to see Erikson, who is probably in Norway. And if you want to go to Norway,

the source of our ancestry [...] you would scarcely choose to sign on a ship that went to Russia' (*IB* 72–73).

Slavic and Nordic civilisations are also differentiated in terms of chronological distinctions. In this respect, Tor conjectures, '—Isn't it possible that for us, Russia is the future, and Norway the past?' (*IB* 8). Sigbjørn is well aware of where Europe's destiny lies: 'Even the Russians, at the very headquarters of the future, can't avoid the future: a thousand apparently inexorable setbacks, in the face of which they manage to carry on' (*IB* 29). He is willing to compromise if he is unable to reach Erikson: '—If I don't go to Norway I shan't meet him. But I shall be able to dramatize that book in my watch below. And I shall see Russia, where the future is being hammered out...' (*IB* 64). The juxtaposition of these two civilisations is illustrated by the visit that Erikson and Sigbjørn make to the Viking ship which, for them, symbolises victory. The Viking fleet ostensibly remained 'unconquerable for the 200 years the Viking Age endured' (AD 800–c. 1050) (*IB* 239).¹⁷ As claimed by the narrator, having devastated Europe, the convoy travelled eastwards to Russia, southwards to the Black Sea, and then established commercial links with the 'golden lands of the Far East' (*IB* 239).

Whereas Norway is presented as personifying death, Russia represents life, as the Captain explains to Sigbjørn:

—Supposing [...] Norway to be death, your mother's death [...] and of course your own and Tor's birth, and death to be a manifestation of the same force [...] —then would it be altogether fabulous to suggest that those instincts which draw you out to Russia, which make you sympathetic to Communism, are life instincts [...] —sexual instincts? (*IB* 153–54)

With the ensuing termination of Norwegian neutrality, German National Socialism expanded as far as the Baltic. A Nazi stranglehold was placed on the unhindered export of Norwegian timber and Swedish iron ore (which became highly lucrative resources), as anticipated by Nina, who asks Sigbjørn:

—Isn't your lovely Norway the apex of Nordic culture, of all your heathen religion? And haven't they the raw materials, the ores and woods useful to—she nodded out towards the Nazi ship. And aren't you busy with your 'program of salvation,' and your 'Nordic League of Nations.' (*IB* 114)

Russian infiltration into *In Ballast to the White Sea* is achieved via flashbacks to *Ultramarine*. Journeying through Croston near Preston, Sigbjørn recollects a voyage that is remarkably similar to Dana Hilliot's

in its route to the Kwantung Peninsula (via Cape Esan, the Tsugaru Strait, Hakodate, the Sea of Japan and Korea) (*IB* 176). Indeed, the reminiscences of the protagonists of the two novels are merged:

For a moment his mind sought refuge among these memories, and they seemed good. It had been the height of summer when the *Oedipus Tyrannus* had made Dairen. It was strange that what was a comfortless experience should have an almost nostalgic attraction for him in retrospect. (*IB* 176)

As in *Ultramarine*, the port of Dairen (as it was called from 1905 to 1945, after which it became Dalian in China) plays a significant role in *In Ballast* for its connections with Russia.¹⁸ Between 1932 and 1945 it was an integral part of the Japanese puppet-state of Manchukuo, which was populated by a considerable White Russian minority, as observed by Sigbjørn: 'There had been a hint of Russia, of enormous things up country—Manchukuo now' (*IB* 176). Although he uses the contemporary Japanese name 'Dairen', his travelling companion Daland Haarfragre prefers the Russian 'Dalny' (*IB* 176).

The intended destination of Sigbjørn's vessel also fluctuates between two northern Russian cities: Archangel (or Archangelsk) on the White Sea and Leningrad (now St Petersburg) on the Baltic: '—*D/S Unsgaard, Sigbjørn Tarnmoor, limper [...]. Skibets reise fra Prester til Archangell/Leningrad*' (*IB* 61).¹⁹ The ship's route is under constant review. Its captain has orders to proceed to Archangel, but his charter is suddenly revoked – *not* in favour of Leningrad, but of Aalesund in Norway, which is nearer. In any case, most of its crew have been paid off in all the confusion (*IB* 234).

Back in Liverpool, before his departure, Sigbjørn has succumbed to transporting himself to Russia's former capital psychogeographically: 'As they moved from Lime Street down past the Washington Hotel to the isthmus of Manchester Street, a vision of Leningrad was still superimposed upon Liverpool in his mind's eye' (*IB* 69). Subsequently, he falls under the influence of Haarfragre, who emphasises its charm:

You shall have a beautiful voyage [...]. And in Leningrad you shall see [...] the wide Neva, its waters so blue where it turns abruptly! And so beautiful where she forks among the beautiful, pretty, islands, looking for the Gulf of Finland and the ocean. (*IB* 176)

This Russian city also shares a certain natural phenomenon with Scandinavia, as Sigbjørn queries: 'There are white nights there, just as in Norway?' Haarfragre clarifies that it was constructed on marshland and

benefits from nocturnal twilight: 'White nights in summer. Leningrad is built on a swamp too' (*IB* 176).

However, Lowry's intuitive vision of Russia is not monochrome, but kaleidoscopic: it is viewed through the prism of his literary imagination. His depictions are not black and white, but red and white. On the one hand, the latter colour is associated with the White Sea, white whales, white nights and the purity of the soul. On the other, derived in Russian from the word for beauty, red also symbolises communism and the Bolsheviks. Ironically, it is both the colour of the revolutionary star twinkling on the Kremlin's spires and that of the toll paid in blood. These hues chromatically polarise combatants in the Russian Civil Wars (1917–21) which were fought between the Whites and the victorious Reds. In *In Ballast*, attempting to subdue painful memories (such as Tor's suicide), Sigbjørn decodes a spiritual 'message from an astral world' (*IB* 116). Torn between past ordeals and aspirations for the future, his mental images are in a constant state of flux:

Again Sigbjørn had the curious notion that this was all a nightmare—he was in prison, condemned to death—of extraordinary detail and documentation, but never-the-less a dream; a dream in which one set out, weighed down with the ballast of the past, to the White Sea! But what was that? Did he go in pursuit of that whiteness which strikes more of a panic to the soul than redness which affrights in blood? Or was it of that very redness, the redness of the star of revolution, beautiful over the White Sea? Where was he going? [...] Whose star did he follow [...]? (*IB* 116)

Despite the ongoing uncertainty as to whether the *Unsgaard* will reach Russia, he expresses his moral tenacity to Nina: 'I am under sealed orders, that I shall soon know what I *have* to do, where I have to go. And that when I do know, when I do see my star, I'll follow it till I die' (*IB* 91).

The exigency of immediate action is recognised by both Tarnmoor siblings. Tor maintains that the unsettled balance of power is ripe for transfiguration: 'The world runs away to her own destruction like an idiot child in the dark. Our world is waiting for revolution and that's all there is to it' (*IB* 31). However, the type of change required is debatable. In Tor's study, Sigbjørn takes up a position opposite Marx's *Das Kapital* (1867) and 'some books on the Soviet film' by Pudovkin, Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948), and Paul Fejos (1897–1963) at one end of the bookcase (*IB* 31).²⁰ He emphasises the need for social transformation, for 'a revolution of the word', referring to a 1929 declaration in the modernist journal

Transition: An International Quarterly for Creative Experiment (IB 31).²¹ It calls for a linguistic revolution to 'breach and transcend the growing political divides created by the rise of communism and fascism'.²² Displaying a copy of D.H. Lawrence's *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1921), he advocates a 'revolution of the soul' – even 'a revolution of sex' (IB 31). Yet he is identified by Tor as 'some sort of mystic' who recommends esotericism as a means of rebirth (IB 32).

The significance of Russian spirituality is recognised by Captain Tarnmoor in a conversation with Sigbjørn:

—To 'neighbour' an esoteric definition should not blind you to the truth of that as demonstrated in Russia. One can supposedly love one's neighbour as one's self there because perhaps there is no good reason not to! [...] They do live a religion there, despite vexatious incidents, that's the whole point. (IB 149)

For the Captain, communism and mysticism offer alternative solutions to humanity's dilemmas:

One—dare I say the only?—possibility, and a seemingly paradoxical one, is in communism. Another possibility of refuge is in some form of esotericism, unclear to you, with which perhaps you have long and rightly suspected I was involved. And from which you have indirectly drawn a great many moral dispositions. (IB 151)

Esotericism: the influence of Ouspensky and Gurdjieff

In the late 1920s or early 1930s Lowry discovered the Russian mathematician and esotericist Peter Ouspensky (1878–1947), who was renowned for publications such as *The Fourth Dimension* (1909) and *Tertium Organum: A Key to the Enigmas of the World* (1920).²³ This philosopher and theosophist exerted a 'key influence on his thinking'.²⁴ Indeed, he declared *A New Model of the Universe* (1931) 'a terrifically exciting book' which 'aims [...] to base eternal recurrence upon scientific fact'.²⁵

In *In Ballast* various allusions are made to Ouspensky's works. *A New Model of the Universe* is cited with regard to its retelling of the legend of the Sphinx – a mythical creature that guarded the entrance to Thebes and insisted that all wayfarers solve a riddle, or else be eaten alive (IB 45).²⁶ In a reference to *Tertium Organum*, the Tao is defined as 'a square with no angles, a great sound which cannot be heard, a great image with no form' (IB 111).²⁷ It is compared to the heavily laden *Vestris*, which sailed from Hoboken on the Hudson River in November

1928, on her final voyage.²⁸ It is a portrait of ‘the overburdened world that carried within her the seeds of her own destruction’ (*IB* 111).²⁹ *In Ballast* also revives the *Arcturion* – the ill-starred whaleboat in Melville’s *Mardi* (1848) – in the form of a Tarnmoor liner reported sunk (*IB* 231). It becomes *Adam Cadmon* (*IB* 122) – the appellation for humanity given by Ouspensky in *Tertium Organum*, in which there are citations from *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) by the Russian theosophist Helena Blavatsky (1831–91).³⁰ Sigbjørn’s vision is momentarily distorted, for he associates Adam Cadmon with ‘the ancient name for man’ (*IB* 123).

In Lowry’s novel Russia is exemplified by its spiritual legacy. In this respect, Captain Tarnmoor argues: ‘If we love God then to the extent that we approach him through love of him we unite in love with our neighbours; and the closer our union with them, the closer our union with God also’ (*IB* 149). He explains that, derived from a statement made by Abbot Dorotheus of Gaza, this viewpoint is referred to in Ouspensky’s *Tertium Organum* (*IB* 149).³¹ It provides a mystical image of God as the nucleus of a world depicted as a circle, the radii of which are the diverse paths taken by human beings.³²

Various chapters of *In Ballast to the White Sea* commence with epigraphs quoting Ouspensky’s *Tertium Organum*. In Chapter XII ‘the tragedy of our spiritual quest: we don’t know what we are searching for...’ establishes the importance of identifying the trajectory of a psychic pilgrimage (*IB* 170).³³ In Chapter XIII the citation, ‘Being great it, the Tao, passes on; passing on, it becomes remote; having become remote, it returns...’ refers to Chinese mysticism (*IB* 181). Ouspensky’s depiction conjures up eternal and transcendental attributes of Taoism as ‘the form of formlessness, the image of the imageless, the fleeting and the indeterminable’.³⁴ In Chapter XVIII humanity is presented as having ‘much in common with a house filled with inhabitants’ (*IB* 233).³⁵ Its representation is akin to ‘a great ocean liner on which are many transient passengers’ and which acts as a conveyance of the soul (*IB* 233). In this context, Sigbjørn’s convictions are explained by the narrator, who recognises that, although he ‘believes in communism’, he also ‘believes that the soul is going out on its journey in life to seek God’ (*IB* 239). In response to Erikson’s claim that ‘the great thing is to see the truth of all religions [...] War used to be truth for some. Now it is up to us to stop it’, Sigbjørn acknowledges ‘the pole where the ideal and the real meet’ and declares his intention ‘to seek my truth’ (*IB* 240).

Lowry’s fascination with Ouspensky’s concept of a fourth dimension is important in assessing the state of Sigbjørn’s psychogeographic mind

in *In Ballast*. It associates the 'white city' of Liverpool – blanketed in a 'web of snow' – with Archangel (a port which is frozen for up to five months a year). A known quantity, 'the white Mersey, the *real* white sea' evokes 'the ghost of the White Sea' – an apparition of Russia (*IB* 100, 85). It meanders into the alleged fourth domain, as 'elementary spirits' exude from the mists of Florida's Lake Okeechobee (*IB* 85).

Yet Ouspensky's so-called 'Fourth Way' is rooted in the concepts of his spiritual mentor, the Russian philosopher and mystic George Gurdjieff (1866–1949). Inspired by travel, the latter developed an innovative approach to self-development. He combined and harmonised three established 'schools' (or 'ways') – relating to knowledge and consciousness, religious emotion and physical suffering – which are said to emanate from yogis, monks and fakirs, respectively.³⁶ He was convinced that his 'Fourth Way' would arouse and transcend a unified mind-emotion-body consciousness, enabling an individual to achieve full potential through a higher state of awareness.³⁷ His 'Law of Three' stipulates that every phenomenon exhibits 'active, passive, and neutralizing' forces which may affirm, deny or reconcile.³⁸ In this respect, 'the eternal pattern of three' is viewed by Sigbjørn as 'one of the secrets of existence which no one bothered to investigate' (*IB* 216).

Conclusion

In Ballast to the White Sea reflects the multifaceted influence of Russian writers, film directors and thinkers on Malcolm Lowry's political and philosophical ideas and on his creative processes. Throughout the novel, kaleidoscopic images of past, present and envisaged future events collide in a montage-like fashion: in a blaze of colour, red is pitted against white. Encumbered, on his spiritual odyssey, by the ballast of bygone times, haunted by a 'debacle of self', and traumatised by the forces of communism and Nazism in a belligerent world (*IB* 85, 147), Sigbjørn Tarnmoor perceives the need for an approach to human affairs that goes beyond a strictly political one.³⁹ For him, and for Lowry, a new ideology is essential to transform humanity via a revolution of the soul.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is informed by my monograph, *The Kaleidoscopic Vision of Malcolm Lowry: Souls and Shamans* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019).
- 2 See *Sursum Corda! The Collected Letters of Malcolm Lowry*, ed. Sherrill Grace, 2 vols (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995, 1996) (hereafter *CL*), 1:207, 466, 507, 581; and 2:154, 160.
- 3 John (Zhong) Ming Chen and Shaobe Xie, 'Malcolm Lowry and the Tao', *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, 20.3–4 (1993), p. 364, <https://journals.library.ualberta.ca/crccl/index.php/crccl/article/view/3203/2560> (accessed 26 September 2018).
- 4 Malcolm Lowry, *In Ballast to the White Sea: A Scholarly Edition*, ed. Patrick A. McCarthy, with annotations by Chris Ackerley (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2014), p. 51. Hereafter cited in parentheses in the text as *IB*.
- 5 See *IB* 250–51, notes I.52 and I.53.
- 6 He claims: 'Stupidity is my strength': see *IB* 327, note VII.73.
- 7 See *IB* 411, note XVIII.40.
- 8 Lowry listed the following Russian films among his favourites: Pudovkin's *The Deserter* (1933), and Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), *The General Line* (1929), *Thunder over Mexico* (1933) and *Alexander Nevsky* (1938). See Jan Gabriel, *Inside the Volcano: My Life with Malcolm Lowry* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p. 34; and *CL* 1:355, 405, 432, 435; 2:322–23, 515–16.
- 9 Malcolm Lowry, *Ultramarine* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), p. 93.
- 10 *CL* 2:588.
- 11 Malcolm Lowry, 'June 30th, 1934', in *The Voyage that Never Ends: Fictions, Poems, Fragments, Letters*, ed. Michael Hofmann (New York: New York Review Books, 2007), pp. 3–20.
- 12 The others are the quadrature of the circle, the multiplication of the cube, perpetual motion, magic and judicial astrology: see *IB* 251, note I.55; *IB* 344–45, note X.27.
- 13 *IB* 399, note XV.41.
- 14 Malcolm Lowry, *The Collected Poetry of Malcolm Lowry*, ed. Kathleen Scherf (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1992), p. 89.
- 15 *IB* 333, note VII.141.
- 16 See *IB* 334, note VII.151.
- 17 However, this supposition is historically inaccurate, as the Vikings did suffer defeat at the battles of Edington (878), Norditi (884), Buttington (893) and Stamford Bridge (1066).
- 18 With Port Arthur as its naval base, Dairen was under the Russian sphere of influence in 1898–1905.
- 19 Sigbjørn is listed as a fireman.

- 20 Actually Fejos – né Fejős Pál – was not a Russian, but a Hungarian-born film director: see *CL* 2:475.
- 21 *Transition*, 16–17 (spring–summer 1929), p. 13.
- 22 *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 1007.
- 23 *CL* 2:173.
- 24 *CL* 2:293. See also *CL* 1:357, 358; 2:173–74, 289, 293, 304.
- 25 *CL* 1:314.
- 26 See P.D. Ouspensky, *A New Model of the Universe: Principles of the Psychological Method in Its Application to Problems of Science, Religion, and Art* (Eastford, CT: Martino Publishing, 2013), pp. 362–65.
- 27 P.D. Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum: The Third Canon of Thought: A Key to the Enigmas of the World* (Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2013), p. 290.
- 28 *IB* 322, note VII.19.
- 29 *IB* 333, note VII.136.
- 30 Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum*, p. 202.
- 31 Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum*, p. 286.
- 32 Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum*, p. 286.
- 33 *IB* 371, note XII.1.
- 34 Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum*, p. 289.
- 35 See *IB* 406, note XVIII.1.
- 36 P.D. Ouspensky, *The Fourth Way* (New York: Vintage, 1971), p. 99.
- 37 See Ouspensky, *The Fourth Way*, pp. 4–5, 105.
- 38 Ouspensky, *The Fourth Way*, p. 189. See also Glenn Alexander Magee, 'G.I. Gurdjieff and the Fourth Way', in G.A. Magee (ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
- 39 See also *IB* 286, note IV.27.

CHAPTER FIVE

In Ballast to the White Sea

A Plunge into the Matrix

Annick Drösdal-Levillain

Malcolm Lowry's fascination with things Norwegian has been explored by the Norwegian Canadian scholar Hallvard Dahlie in several essays that link Lowry to Canadian authors and a fascination with ideas of the north. Lowry's personal myth of a Norwegian ancestry was debunked by Douglas Day and Gordon Bowker. However, the fact that Lowry invented this ancestry is perhaps more interesting than if it had actually been true, especially when we consider how regularly and insistently Norwegian references crop up in Lowry's work and life. *In Ballast to the White Sea* provides a new focus for these references, which are scattered throughout his other works like 'a thousand torn-up manuscripts thrown from the windows of the past'.¹ Thanks to *In Ballast*, the northern dimension in Lowry's work can now be considered not as an aesthetic whim but as a 'spiritual gravitation towards Norway' (*IB* 65). It confirms Dahlie's view that Lowry knew that his exile to his 'northern country' (Canada) was, besides being the single most important event in his life, 'a kind of preordained component of his own personal "nordic" mythology, adumbrated long before he reached the shores of British Columbia'.² I will probe to what extent Lowry's self-created legend is more than an 'aesthetic complement' (Dahlie) to his work, with a special focus on the pattern of intermingling resonances – past and present, Norse and Norwegian – radiating throughout Lowry's life and fiction, and more especially *In Ballast*. Specifically, I shall focus on three strands of this complex web of references: the ancient Norse past of Wirral, and the

echoes of this in Lowry's texts; the central importance to Lowry of the Norwegian writer Nordahl Grieg, and the similarities in theme between *In Ballast* and Grieg's works of the interwar period; and the Scandinavian mythological contexts running underneath the novel's obsession with the 'magic of the double'.³

'Read history. Go back a thousand years'⁴

Malcolm Lowry was born on old Norse ground: the Wirral peninsula had undergone Norse settlement since 902 when the Vikings were driven out of Ireland. Stephen Harding's research on the peninsula's present-day male population has shown that 'the Vikings are still here – [...] up to 50% of the DNA of men from old Wirral and West Lancashire families – men with surnames that were present in these areas prior to 1600 – is Scandinavian in origin'.⁵ Harding has also listed and elucidated 600 Norse place names on Wirral alone and attested the existence of a 'Wirral-Norse "mini-state"' 'answerable to nobody else: neither the English, the Welsh, the Dublin Norse, the Isle of Man, Iceland, and not even Norway'.⁶ Thingwall is where the Vikings had their parliament on Wirral. In Chapter VIII of *In Ballast* Sigbjørn and his father, playing a round of golf at Caldy, watch 'an old engine meander[ing] along a single line edging the course, towards Thurstaston' nearby, which, as Chris Ackerley notes, was 'a Viking settlement mentioned in the Domesday Book as *Thurstanetone*, "town of Thorsteinn"; but assumed to be "Thor's Stone", after a sandstone outcrop on Thurstaston Common' (*IB* 342, note VIII.35). It is interesting to note that Captain Haarfrage's question when he first meets Sigbjørn on the train is 'Do you do rock climbing?' (*IB* 171). He might as well have asked him, 'Are you a Viking?'

Not only was Lowry born on ancient Norse ground, he was also born on 28 July, a date that rings a particular note for every Norwegian as the start of the Olsok festival commemorating Olaf the Saint's death on 29 July 1030 at the Battle of Stiklestad. Olaf, considered a missionary king after he finally established Christianity in Norway, was canonised shortly after his death in 1031. An annual pilgrimage celebrating Olsok takes place each year from St Bridget's church in West Kirby to St Olav's church in Chester.⁷ The initiatory journeys of Olaf and Lowry, though a thousand years apart, seem to echo each other: Olaf went to sea at 12 as a Viking while Lowry went on holiday with his brothers to the Isle of Bute in Western Scotland, where he spent his time sailing and falling in love. Forced by circumstances, Olaf travelled to France and

was baptised in 1014 in Rouen,⁸ precisely where Lowry and his first wife Jan had an ecstatic reconciliation in 1934: 'To us Rouen was to become a symbol; the place where we began the healing process and licked each other's wounds.'⁹ Considering the correspondences between Lowry and Olaf, Captain Hansen-Tarnmoor's remark in Chapter X pointing out a medieval stream of consciousness running through his son, Sigbjørn, acquires a special resonance:

Now, here's something: I think I notice in you [...] a sort of medieval consciousness, a tendency towards mystical and ecclesiastical terminology which makes me think that you might, under certain circumstances, turn Catholic: for there is in you a strong tendency towards Catholicism in its mystic form. (*IB* 151)

Lowry made recurring references to reincarnation, derived from his interest in esoteric philosophy. As I shall explore later, the persistent presence of the past, even of the dead, is a key theme in *In Ballast*; for Sigbjørn the boundaries often seem thinned to the point of non-existence: 'He stood bent over the threshold of an old life, *between two worlds*' (*IB* 78, my emphasis).

If we 'go back a thousand years' from 1909, then, we land quite precisely when the Norsemen settled on the Wirral peninsula. Lowry encapsulates Wirral's function as a recorder of times lost: 'The tide flung restlessly onto the beach, sucking its breath over stones and shells that carried in their drums, muted, the recorded Atlantic' (*IB* 138). Be it shells, the snowflakes Sigbjørn sees flutter 'like a thousand manuscripts thrown from the windows of the past' (*IB* 122), or the submerged forest at Meols, described in *Under the Volcano* ('On the shores were the remains of an antediluvian forest with ugly black stumps showing', *UtV* 63), memories are held in and transmitted by the landscape.

The Norse scald has the same recording and transmitting function, recording events in vibrant words and passing the story on to the next generations, be it only stumps, fragments, or echoes. One last echo linking Lowry to the patron saint of Norway is contained in St Olaf's saga, as recorded by Snorri Sturluson, which reminds us that one of the main destinations of the Norsemen was the White Sea.

At this point, Lowry's hyperborean character in 'The Bravest Boat', Sigurd Storlesen, appears in its full Norse light. Storlesen features only once in Lowry's work and the name is repeated twice in 'The Bravest Boat', the opening story of *Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*, by quotation of the message found on board the balsa-wood toy boat:

‘My name is Sigurd Storlesen.’ The name suggests an interlacing of two sources: Saemundr Sigfússon, presumed author of the Elder (or ‘Poetic’) Edda, and Snorri Sturluson, author of the Younger (or ‘Prose’) Edda. It is indeed quite likely that Lowry was familiar with the sagas, thanks initially to his schoolmaster E.E. Kellett, who would have been working on his book *The Northern Saga*¹⁰ while the 17-year-old Lowry stayed with him in 1927–28 to prepare for his Cambridge entrance examination. It is very appropriate that Lowry should use the most renowned Icelandic poet as his alter ego since what he wanted above all was to be a poet. The whole set of stories in *Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place* is thus put under the Norse patronage of Snorri Sturluson, giving Malcolm Lowry, alias Sigurd Storlesen, the status of Norse poet or scald.

In the introduction to his book, Kellett defines the characteristics of the sagas, some of which further highlight Lowry’s intrinsic affinity with the sagaman, an ‘amphibious being’.¹¹ This very well characterises Lowry and his strong link to the water element. But first and foremost, the saga was ‘a prose epic considered as history and true’,¹² and not a conscious work of fiction. The sagas as a genre were characterised by a strong sense of fate, tragedy and, at the same time, farce. Particularly interesting in relation to Lowry is the absence of any distinction between natural and preternatural manifestations, and, above all, the fact that the sagas were conceived as ‘nobody’s property’,¹³ so that the idea of plagiarism was totally foreign to their authors, who composed them in order to entertain an audience and themselves too. ‘The Bravest Boat’ and the following stories can be considered as the sagas of Malcolm Lowry, alias Sigbjørn Wilderness, told by Sigurd Storlesen – alias Snorri Sturluson, alias Malcolm Lowry, the scald.

From a geographical perspective, if we look at the Vikings’ peregrinations on the map, we can see they match pretty well with Lowry’s. In this respect, it is all the more apt that summer 2014 saw a modern copy of Harald Fairhair’s ship – *Dragon Harald Fairhair* – sail in to Wallasey, precisely because of the Norse-Wirral settlement identified by Stephen Harding. The ship’s first sea voyage saw it put in to Wallasey for substantial repairs necessitated by storm damage, after which the modern Viking crew sailed back home to Haugesund, Norway. Lowry would have loved both sight and coincidence, since Sigbjørn’s guardian angel in *In Ballast* is Captain Haarfragre – with a slight switch of letters, the Norse version of Fairhair,¹⁴ and surely a reference to the emblematic King Harald Haarfagere who unified Norway in the ninth century and from whom King Saint Olaf was descended.

Flawed fathers, failing sons: Lowry and Nordahl Grieg

It can safely be assumed that, as a child growing up on Wirral, Lowry would have seen Norwegian ships pass along the coast and up and down the Mersey, and would have heard Norwegian sailors, since they formed part of the cosmopolitan Liverpool landscape and soundscape. Moreover, in Lowry's childhood, Liverpool was the north-western edge of a world at war; the port played a vital role during both world conflicts because of this geo-strategic position, characterised by a strong connection with both Norway and North America. Both directions proved decisive for Lowry. North America was where he met his first literary mentor and fantasised father figure, Conrad Aiken, and where he spent most of his writing life. Norway was where he met Nordahl Grieg, who was to play such a significant role in relation to his own writing, and who – in fictional guise as William Erikson – is so central a presence in *In Ballast*.

When Lowry encountered an English-language translation of Grieg's book *Skibet gaar videre (The Ship Sails On)*, while staying with Aiken in the US in 1929, the shock was immediate, and threw him into deep psychological turmoil. Lowry found himself writing a novel – *Ultramarine* – that had, it seemed, already been written by someone else.¹⁵ This experience is depicted in Chapter IV of *In Ballast*, where, in a series of unfinished and unsent letters, Sigbjørn attempts to convey to Erikson his feeling that the latter has already written not only his book but therefore, in a sense, his life, and that he, Sigbjørn, is nothing more than a fiction, a figment of Erikson's superior imagination:

But your book destroyed my identity altogether, so close was it to my own experience, both in fact and within my own book, that I begin to believe almost that I may be Benjamin Wallae, your character. But if that is so I ask myself, where and who is X, the projection of myself in my own novel which will never be finished. Where and who is he and who are you? (*IB* 47)

It is in order to try to answer these questions that Sigbjørn takes a ship bound for the White Sea, hoping somehow to track down Erikson and make new sense of his own life. Sigbjørn's voyage echoes that made by Lowry in 1931, on a freighter in ballast to Archangel and the White Sea, which stopped in Aalesund, on the north-west coast of Norway – from where, by a series of coincidences and multiple changes of plan, he managed to get to Oslo to meet Grieg.

This trip and Lowry's encounter with Grieg inspired *In Ballast to the White Sea*, the manuscript of which, as we know, went up in

flames on 7 June 1944. In a tragic parallel, Grieg himself had been shot down in flames six months earlier, on 2 December 1943, during an air raid over Berlin. Lowry got the news of Grieg's death while he and Margerie, recuperating from the fire and the loss of their shack, were staying with Gerald Noxon and his wife Betty in Oakville near Lake Ontario. Noxon was making a broadcast on Grieg's death for Radio Free Norway; shocked by the news, it struck Lowry that the tragedy coincided with his and Margerie's third wedding anniversary, as well as falling six months before the destruction of their shack and the manuscript of *In Ballast*. As Bowker puts it, the news was 'riddled with occult significance' for Lowry.¹⁶

Although Lowry never met Grieg after 1931, he paid discreet homage to his Norwegian hero throughout his work and kept track of him. As well as William Erikson in *In Ballast to the White Sea*, a senator Erikson appears in *La Mordida*; 'Erikson 43' is the Consul's telephone exchange in *Under the Volcano* (*UtV* 121); and '43' is also part of Captain Hansen-Tarnmoor's telephone number: 'Royal 4321' (*IB* 21). In *Ultramarine* there are '[l]etters for Firemen Wallae, Erikson, Knudson'.¹⁷ In *Under the Volcano* the character of Hugh is partly modelled on Grieg, who covered the Spanish Civil War as a journalist.

On his return from Spain in February 1938, Grieg wrote his second – and last – novel, *Ung må verden ennu være* (*May the World Stay Young*), which was published in Norway in November 1938. Grieg's novel spans the aftermath of the First World War, the beginning of the purges in Moscow in 1932–34, the Spanish Civil War in 1938 with the Battle of the Ebro, and the looming Second World War. He wrote most of this novel isolated in a fisherman's shack on Helgøya, an island off the southern coast of Norway. At the same time, Lowry was in Mexico writing, gathering experience and drinking heavily, with the drafts of *Under the Volcano*, *In Ballast to the White Sea* and *Lunar Caustic*, so to say, in ballast – the 'three novels and a play on the shelf' that he mentions in his letter to Jonathan Cape.¹⁸

Grieg's protagonist, Leonard Ashley, is a young upper-class British philologist sent to Moscow on a scholarship. His interpreter and eventually lover Kira Dimitrovna introduces him to the Communist Party and converts him to communism, but fails to convince him completely; in the end, Leonard cannot approve of the purges and trials taking place in Moscow. He remains a 'gumanist' – as Kira bitterly mispronounces 'humanist' throughout the novel – and finally decides to leave her behind and go back to England. Doubt characterises

Leonard, who wants to remain a free intellectual and a pacifist, refusing to be labelled by any ideology or political movement. This is not so much like the fiery Grieg, who defended the Moscow trials against all the evidence of deliberate crimes and executions. When asked about this, Grieg answered that the fight against fascism came first and that collateral damage was inevitable.¹⁹ However, one may wonder if Grieg did not deep down share some of his character's doubts, and could only voice them through Leonard Ashley. In 1940 Grieg married the Norwegian actress Gerd Egede-Nissen in London. He had met her in 1935 after his return from Moscow. She also happened to be the daughter of the chairman of the Norwegian Communist Party (NKP), Adam Egede-Nissen. But Grieg himself was never officially a member of the NKP.

It is unclear whether Lowry read Grieg's novel. However, in a 1939 letter to him, Lowry repeatedly includes a phrase which closely echoes, in English, the title of Grieg's book: 'Although I have not written to you my consciousness has never been far away from you: nor has my friendship. [...] Ah, the world must still be young!'²⁰ Lowry repeats the phrase three times. It suggests that he was at least aware of Grieg's novel, and testifies to the persistence of the bond Lowry felt between the two men, even if this was not reciprocated.

In Ballast and *Ung må verden ennu være* were inspired by the same period, haunted by the trauma of the First World War and with the Spanish Civil War foreshadowing the world war to come. Both novels contain powerful elements of hope and youthful aspiration, embodied by Russia in Grieg's novel, and by both Russia and Norway in Lowry's. However, in both novels, ambiguity and uncertainty remain.

Both novels also deal with the problem of guilt connected to class position and the protagonists' fathers' business interests. In *Ung må verden ennu være*, Grieg focuses explicitly on the profits made in the City, London's financial heart, from the war. The young idealist Leonard Ashley has his illusions over his father's activities in the City shattered by his better-informed friend, Hugh Redfern, who is working for the British Embassy in Moscow. Leonard's father's thriving business, he discovers, depended on good deals in the nickel trade, the same nickel used in the fabrication of bombs and shells. When Leonard's brother was killed by a shell in 1915, his father suddenly retired from business.

Anglo-Norwegian business during the First World War is a recurring feature in Grieg's interwar plays. In *Vår ære og vår makt* (*Our Power and Our Glory*) (1935), he develops the theme in relation to Norwegian

copper and pyrite being shipped to Germany and English businessmen pulling the strings from the City. The English businessman posted in Bergen, Cunningham, gives vent to his despair after receiving a telegram announcing his son's death at the front.

The parallel with Arthur Lowry and the cotton trade is latent, with the use of the material for gun-cotton being common knowledge from the First World War onwards. It is thus quite likely that Lowry had, as a young man of his time and class, put two and two together about his father's business. And when he read Grieg, these allusions and accusations must have struck home. Lowry read *The Ship Sails On* in 1929, in English. But he must also have read Grieg's *Around the Cape of Good Hope* (1922), from which he lifted a beautiful phrase we find at the very close of 'China': 'And you carry your horizon in your pocket wherever you are.'²¹ The phrase also appears in *In Ballast*, slightly altered: 'For almost anything seems better these days than carrying your whole horizon in your pocket' (*IB* 65). 'China' is set during the Chinese revolution of 1927 when both Lowry and Grieg were there in the thick of it. Grieg's character in his *Kinesiske dage* (*Chinese Days*) is running for his life to get on a ship,²² while Lowry's is playing a cricket match on board the *Arcturion*.²³ It seems that the interweaving of the two men's destinies was already at work, preparing for more.

In 'Metal', later entitled 'June 30th 1934' and written in tumultuous Paris in 1934,²⁴ Lowry gives vent to similar doubts as to his father's business activities, even though they had no apparent direct relation with the war industry. At the time, pacifist-communist ideas were spreading like wildfire in the Western world and especially in Paris. Since Lowry was an admirer of Grieg, he must have read, or at least heard of, *Vår ære og vår makt*, staged in Bergen in 1935 (though not translated into English until 1971).²⁵ This play put Grieg on the map in Norway. It was accompanied by scandal, as the play exposed the merchants and shipbrokers of Bergen as ruthless war-profiteers, not hesitating to send hundreds of seamen to certain death in 'coffin-ships' in order to pocket the insurance money. This is exactly the fear that torments Sigbjørn following the sinking of two of his father's ships, the *Thorstein* and the *Brynjarr*: haunted by the possibility that his father was guilty of causing hundreds of deaths in a drive to make more money, he overhears sailors in a Liverpool pub apparently confirming his fears: 'I said right out, you know, the *Thorstein* is a bloody death ship' (*IB* 81).

Another disturbing resonance between Grieg and Lowry crops up in the same play. Grieg has the commander of a German submarine

recall the ‘*Baralong* incident’ of 19 August 1915 to justify his decision to shoot without warning at a neutral ship he has sighted. When his startled lieutenant mentions the English shooting the U-boat crew who were swimming for their lives and ‘picking them off like ducks’, the commander retorts ‘there are more than one *Baralong* at sea. It’s swarming with them. Am I to trust a ship because it looks neutral? [...] I know only one law, and that I act upon – Fear.’ In the discussion preceding the fatal order, the lieutenant urges the commander to remember the child they shot the previous day on board the lifeboat and explains his attitude as follows: ‘I’m trying to save myself as a man.’²⁶ In *Under the Volcano* this is precisely what the Consul, ex-commander of the Q-ship SS *Samaritan*, alias HMS *Baralong*, attempts to do.

The same doubts are voiced by Sigbjørn about his father’s dealings in the *Thorstein* case:

He had heard that every piece of evidence given by the survivors and members of the crew of the *Thorstein* had been ignored in the official report [...] That made his father, then, a sort of tool, a tool in the hands of the system. And for the first time Sigbjørn understood the real meaning of the words ‘middle-class.’ But surely his father would not be a party willingly to such corruption! Not willingly, not wittingly. No. He had done it for him, for Tor; to keep them at Cambridge? That seemed impossible too. Unless...? (*IB* 70)

Sigbjørn and Leonard are both struck by sudden revelations, or realisations, about their fathers’ business activities. A brutal loss of innocence and debunking of the father image takes place, but where Grieg denounces and condemns, Lowry more cautiously questions and doubts. Similarly, Sigbjørn is forced by the more pragmatic Nina to examine his idealised concept of Norway and to question who he might unconsciously be serving *in fine*: ‘Yes, isn’t your lovely Norway the apex of Nordic culture, of all your heathen religion? And haven’t they the raw materials, the ores and woods useful to – she nodded out towards the Nazi ship’ (*IB* 114). Nina – who is not dissimilar to Grieg’s Kira Dimitrovna – bluntly debunks Sigbjørn’s naïve fantasies of Norway, pointing to the harsh underlying realities of commerce and capitalism.

**‘Between two worlds’: doubles, doublings and ancient
Scandinavian magic**

In Ballast to the White Sea contains frequent references to clairvoyance, reincarnation and the ongoing presence of the dead – a cluster of occult references that centre around the key idea of the double. As Régis Boyer shows in his study *Le Monde du double. La Magie chez les anciens Scandinaves*, ancient Scandinavian occultism was based on the notion of the double: there was no strict separation between the visible and the invisible, the profane and the sacred, life and death, so that the living and the dead cohabited and were considered as two different forms of the same being. The prevalence of this theme in *In Ballast* brings into connection the psychic and emotional resonance of Norway for Sigbjørn – who feels impelled to ‘go back’, to the country he associates both with his dead mother and his own childhood, and now also with Erikson, the alter ego he needs to confront – and the ancient Norse worldview. Both are full of doubles and doublings.

The novel starts with a pair – the ‘two undergraduates’ who become ‘two castaways on a raft’ (*IB* 3), noticeable by virtue of their pale northern colouring: ‘their two bare white heads seen among the other golden brown English where they waited, might seem to an onlooker as freakish as a pair of white swallows among their dun fellows awaiting the signal for the summer migration’ (*IB* 4). Inseparable, yet living ‘two miles’ away from each other, they are pulled together by a ‘dual magnetism’, yet drawn apart towards ‘the separate poles of their oceanic destiny’ (*IB* 4). Sigbjørn has a vision of the pair as ‘two ships’ (*IB* 5) about to leave port but suddenly ‘obstructed’ at the dock gate. They are nearly 22 – another hint at doubleness combined with twin birth: ‘Twenty-two years ago! It’s nearly that since we were born’ (*IB* 5). The twins are two sides of the same character: Sigbjørn stands for action, having gone to sea, whereas Tor stayed at home but somehow attained ‘greater maturity’ (*IB* 7). The two brothers stand for the two realities of the same being, the visible in action and the invisible in spirit. This is in keeping with the ancient Scandinavian conception of man being both material and spiritual at the same time.

The concept of reincarnation – also familiar to ancient Scandinavians – is another aspect that Sigbjørn alludes to on several occasions: ‘He stood bent over the threshold of an old life, between two worlds, the one a dismantled old world with decay at its very centre [...], and the other only as yet a lengthening shadow of a world, apprehended now only by his true substance, the shadow of himself, the self that was to come’ (*IB*

78). He is haunted by Tor's death and by his own guilt over his failure to prevent it, experiencing this almost as the presence of a past life, a past existence: 'the shadow-play of something that must have happened in another existence flickered in his mind. He lay in a prison, looking at the ceiling, hour after hour, condemned to death for his brother's murder' (*IB* 94). Nina tries to bring him back to 'facts', telling him: 'Just as you had to face Tor's death as a fact, now you have to face the death of a class – your own class' (*IB* 94). But Sigbjørn remains unconvinced that there really exists such a strict separation between worlds: 'But was Tor's death a fact? Did not something of him live on afterwards, unseen? look on and help? (Something also of him demand help?) Something that existed in essences he might never suspect' (*IB* 94).

The idea of clairvoyance is referred to by Sigbjørn's father, in a state of shock after the loss of the two ships and his son Tor. As Sigbjørn tries to express his complex feelings of doubleness with regard to Erikson ('I've got to see Erikson ... it's as though he stole my birthright. And yet I don't feel envy, merely that I am his character. No, not that, I *am* Erikson' [*IB* 66]), the Captain acknowledges that such coincidences do happen: 'They float in the air, so to speak! It's as though a few privileged individuals more sensitive or more perspicacious than the rest, simultaneously capture a warning from beyond the world and draw from the secret spiritual well which nature opens from time to time' (*IB* 66).

In the figure of Captain Hansen-Tarnmoor we can see another doubling, the successful businessman Arthur Lowry mingled with the intellectual Conrad Aiken into Lowry's ideal father figure – both shipowner and poet-philosopher, both substantial and eerie. This is expressed in the philosophical discussion between Sigbjørn and his father in Chapter X, in the course of which Sigbjørn comments wryly, 'It seems to me that life is often simply a process of the *exchange* of fathers ... That is, the eternal recurrence of the father surrogate' (*IB* 149–50).

In Chapter XIII, Lowry creates a striking doubling at the narrative level, weaving together the aerial point of view of the 'lone airman' flying over the Manchester Ship Canal and the industrial small towns along it, and Sigbjørn's point of view from the train below, enacting thus a 'twinned' perspective on the socio-industrial fabric of Lancashire, once more spanning roughly a thousand-year period:

Hadn't men of mechanical genius flocked to Lancashire just as the scholars had flocked to the universities in the Middle-Ages? But now the descendants of these men had different ambitions for their sons. They desired for them the

universities again. And so the circle was complete, he thought, men eternally passing from one class to another.

Yes, but now the more enlightened wished not to climb further up, but if possible to go lower down. (*IB* 187)

Lowry weaves together opposites – high and low, spiritual and material – and this takes us back to more down-to-earth considerations surrounding Lowry's birth, as evoked by his mother. For Evelyn Lowry, 'Mawlcorn's' 'entrance into the world had been an awkward one'.²⁷ It is impossible to know exactly what this means. But, given the remarkable concentration in *In Ballast* of references to loss and the double, I shall venture the speculative hypothesis of a lost twin as a possible clue to, or reading of, Lowry's pathological urge to fill a void, be it with a fantasised alter ego, with drink, or with words.

Many twin pregnancies spontaneously abort, often leaving a lone twin who remains unaware of his or her dual origin. In other circumstances, one twin becomes dominant at the expense of the other's development. Sometimes one twin stops developing *in utero* and is either born dead or, if development stops early, takes the form of a cyst niched somewhere in the other twin.²⁸ It may also happen that the one twin absorbs the other or cannibalises it, and the survivor fratricide carries the traumatic imprint of what happened in the 'padded cell' – an ingrained sense of guilt. This is the scenario which could be lying behind the Tor/Sigbjørn pair as the unconscious performance of an unspeakable trauma. The idea is strangely echoed by Sigbjørn's words: 'Some instinct presently bade him return, if only to the wharf the *Unsgaard* had left, the womb from which she had been severed. *That emptiness was a wound within him*' (*IB* 214, emphasis mine).

An analogy between the ancient grief and the foetus stirring in the womb is the first hint at the possibility of an early lost twin that Lowry may have unconsciously introduced and performed in his fiction. Sigbjørn's grief over his mother's death 'had lain neglected in a corner of his consciousness for many years. Now it moved again, just as he had stirred in the womb, the pain of the memory of his mother's death stirred in him' (*IB* 32). Chapter XI ends with Captain Hansen-Tarnmoor running along the railway platform shouting 'inaudible phrases' to Sigbjørn, who wonders:

What had his father been trying to say? Who could tell? He would never know, only those detonations which seemed to be blasting from the platform, blasting the special past and he recalled the words, 'cracked with grief.'

From the fog emerged, but oddly enough not with remorse but with a fatal delight, a final acceptance—yes, even a dreadful triumph, only these two certainties in the heart:

—Murderer.

—Fratricide. (*IB* 168–69)

The immediate reference is to Tor's suicide, behind which we recognise the suicide of Lowry's Cambridge friend Paul Fitte. But further down the line, with regard to the numerous allusions to twins, one may wonder if there might have been an actual lost twin. In 1956 Lowry was diagnosed with Hirschsprung disease, a deformation of the lower bowel which he jokingly called 'the great empty hall'.²⁹ The late diagnosis of Hirschsprung disease could be interpreted as a somatic expression of that lost twin, leaving persistent guilt and the equally persistent need to try to fill the remaining void.

If so, this would make absorption a survival strategy acquired before birth, in the long months spent in the womb, the 'padded cell', the 'lunatic asylum' (*IB* 156) that Lowry keeps coming back to. This could provide another angle to Lowry's compulsion to absorb the world, his attempt to absorb Conrad Aiken, the father figure, other writers and their words, Nordahl Grieg. Absorbing is the alternative to 'becom[ing] an abortion' (*IB* 156), and this is exposed very early by the twins discussing the meaning of 'matrix'. Sigbjørn is struck, as if it were a revelation to him: 'Matrix! The formative cells from which structure grows! Was the structure even now growing?' (*IB* 34). Looking at the photograph of their mother, and then of their father, it strikes Sigbjørn – and, as though they share a consciousness, Tor – that *both* parents embodied contradictory character traits, internally pulling in different directions, even as they were equally violently opposed to each other:

And the curious thing about it all to Sigbjørn, at this moment, was that his father's face seemed, in the photograph beside it, to express exactly the same quality: in this case the questing look in the eyes was refuted by a strong mouth: it was as though the eyes said 'Seek! find out!' while the mouth warned, 'If so, it is sufficient only to be that which you seek.' It occurred to him, in fact that it might be said the eyes belonged to Hamlet, but the mouth to King Lear. *A chaos of a man, indeed, who would try, in life, to play both parts at once.*

At the same time, and this was the thought in the minds of both Sigbjørn and Tor, here were two people who had fought to the death for what they conceived to be their antithetical opinions. (*IB* 33, emphasis mine)

Falling asleep in Tor's room shortly after this, Sigbjørn dreams of the childhood episode that will be referred to on several occasions throughout the book, the accident in the uterus-like cave that they dig out in the garden back in Norway:

The two children, Tor and Sigbjørn, stood under the shadow of the wall in the back garden of the deserted house. It was their birthday. Like conspirators they looked round to see nobody was watching. Then they started to dig [...] Now they would dig down to the underground railway, the Holmenkollen.

Suddenly, with a clatter, the vehicle shaft collapsed on them: all was dark.
(*IB* 35)

In Chapter X, Captain Hansen-Tarnmoor recalls, 'Machine diggers had to dig a shaft parallel to the well, and then cut across to the spot where you were entombed. It was Caesarian!' (*IB* 143) – echoing the ominous rhyme, 'Womb— [...] Tomb—', that Sigbjørn hears in the chiming of the clock for midnight after he leaves Tor's rooms on the fateful night of his suicide (*IB* 40). Both father and son insist that the childhood incident 'has absolutely no significance' (*IB* 143); yet Sigbjørn admits that he has 'suddenly realized' the way in which the two worlds, past and present, dream and reality, are connected: 'you have to make [...] a synthesis in your own destiny between the real world and the unreal' (*IB* 143). Precisely this synthesis, as Régis Boyer shows, characterises the ancient Norse conception of the world, and is at the core of the Norse idea of the magic of the double. As Sigbjørn goes on to say, 'I've always been out of step with this world when I have believed it to be simply a preparation for the next one' (*IB* 154).

In Chapter VI, Sigbjørn remembers Tor envisaging his own death and the possibility of absorbing his brother's confusions, leaving only an intuition as a trace of that transfer:

Suddenly he remembered Tor's saying 'If I die you could let all your confusions pass into me as if I were a tree'; and he knew that this in fact had happened. Or a self had died a little every day since Tor's death. Soon it would pass out of existence altogether and all that would remain was an intuition, a part of that divine and not secular law that determines man's place on earth! (*IB* 78)

Later, Nina reproaches Sigbjørn with this urge to absorb her: 'Differences were not themselves culpable. But you could not accept that, you had to try and absorb me!' (*IB* 110). The conjoined twins onboard the *Arcturion* mirror the incapacity of Nina and Sigbjørn, but also of Sigbjørn and Tor,

and perhaps Lowry and his hypothetical lost and never found twin, to separate: ‘in spite of differences it seemed that they were as inevitable to each other as the New Chang and Chen whose separation might cause death to both, or more terrible, one death’ (*IB* III). What of the survivor and the guilt ever after? Is this what the Consul embodies, via the *Samaritan* (or the *Baralong*) affair? Does Nordahl Grieg stand for the lost twin whose work Lowry absorbed without even knowing? Is this hysterical identification or something dictated by a void to be filled? Sigbjørn questions this in Chapter X:

one still hopes to find the person, even if out of the pages of a book, who will dare to leap the walls of the prison, who can point to a richer, warmer life, who knows the secrets of the sea ... Lacking such a person, by the way, it is quite conceivable one eventually takes his place oneself. (*IB* 150)

The hypothesis of a lost twin must remain speculative at the biographical level; at the textual level, however, *In Ballast* foregrounds Lowry’s preoccupation with the double through a series of twin figures connected to a strong sense of loss.

The unfinished manuscript of *In Ballast* gives the reader access to unusually fresh material, which Lowry would no doubt have gone on to revise over and over again. It brings together in concentrated form the northern references which are scattered throughout his works, acting as a key or matrix. The Norse-Norwegian double thread runs through the text like streams at different levels, or like the double-helix structure of DNA, encoding, as Hallvard Dahlie puts it, Lowry’s ‘own personal “nordic” mythology’, and revealing far more fully than any of his other works its importance in his life and in his writing.

Notes

- 1 Malcolm Lowry, *In Ballast to the White Sea: A Scholarly Edition*, ed. Patrick A. McCarthy, with annotations by Chris Ackerley (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2014), p. 122. Hereafter cited in parentheses in the text as *IB*.
- 2 Hallvard Dahlie, ‘Malcolm Lowry and the Northern Tradition’, *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 1 January 1976, <http://journals.hil.unb.ca/index.php/SCL/article/view/7829/8886> (accessed 20 October 2012).
- 3 I am referring to Régis Boyer’s book *Le Monde du double. La Magie chez les anciens Scandinaves* (Paris: Berg International, 2014). His study shows how ancient Scandinavians viewed the world and the human being as double,

- the material being of flesh and blood being continually accompanied by his immaterial, invisible but perceptible double.
- 4 Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985 [1947]), p. 351.
 - 5 Tom Mullen, 'Longship Sheds Light on Merseyside's Viking History', BBC News, 18 July 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-merseyside-28330296> (accessed 10 March 2020).
 - 6 Stephen Harding, *Ingimund's Saga: Norwegian Wirral* (Birkenhead: Countywise Publications, 2006 [2000]), pp. 21, 139.
 - 7 Stephen Harding, *The Norseman*, 1 (2009), https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/sczsteve/TheNorseman_Jan09.pdf (accessed 10 March 2020).
 - 8 The city of Rouen celebrated the thousandth anniversary of King Olaf's baptism in 2014 in the presence of the King and Queen of Norway.
 - 9 Jan Gabriel, *Inside the Volcano: My Life with Malcolm Lowry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010 [2001]), p. 57.
 - 10 E.E. Kellett, *The Northern Saga* (London: Hogarth Press, 1929).
 - 11 Kellett, *The Northern Saga*, p. 58.
 - 12 Kellett, *The Northern Saga*, p. 21.
 - 13 Kellett, *The Northern Saga*, pp. 24–25.
 - 14 Haarfagere is the original spelling; Lowry alters it slightly. There is a street by this name in Oslo near Valkyrie underground station on the Holmenkollen line. The station was only inaugurated in 1928, following a major collapse of the road running over it in 1912 while the construction work was taking place. This could be the source of 'our *Holmenkollen*' (IB 8), the accident repeatedly referred to in the novel, when the collapse of the shaft entombs the two brothers on their birthday. Transposition is at work here too.
 - 15 See Gordon Bowker, *Pursued by Furies: A Life of Malcolm Lowry* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), pp. 87, 90–91.
 - 16 Bowker, *Pursued by Furies*, p. 328.
 - 17 Malcolm Lowry, *Ultramarine* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975 [1933]), p. 70.
 - 18 Letter to Jonathan Cape, Los Angeles, spring 1939, in *Sursum Corda! The Collected Letters of Malcolm Lowry*, ed. Sherrill Grace, 2 vols (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995, 1996), 1:190 (hereafter *CL*).
 - 19 In his February 1937 article 'Dramaet i Moskva' ('The Drama in Moscow'), Grieg portrayed one of those sentenced in the trials, Karl Radek, as 'a sacrifice for a historical necessity' ('et offer for en historisk nødvendighet'). Nordahl Grieg, *Veien frem: Artikler i utvalg*, ed. Odd Hølaas (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1947), pp. 126–27.
 - 20 *CL* 1:191.
 - 21 Nordahl Grieg, *Rundt Kap det gode Haab. Vers fra sjöen* (Copenhagen: Kristiania Gyldendalske Bokhandel, 1922), pp. 11–64. The first stanza of the poem is easily

- recognisable even in Danish-Norwegian: 'og bearer med sig i lommen hele sitt livs horisont', p. 11.
- 22 Nordahl Grieg, *Kinesiske dage* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1927).
- 23 Malcolm Lowry, 'China', in *The Voyage that Never Ends*, ed. Michael Hofmann (New York: New York Review Books, 2007), pp. 21–28.
- 24 Malcolm Lowry, 'June the 30th, 1934', in *The Voyage that Never Ends*, pp. 3–20.
- 25 Nordahl Grieg, *Vår ære og vår makt* (*Our Power and our Glory*), in Erik J. Friis (ed.), *Five Modern Scandinavian Plays. The Library of Scandinavian Literature, Our Power and Our Glory*, trans. G.M. Gathorne-Hardy (New York: The American Scandinavian Foundation, 1971), pp. 299–363.
- 26 Grieg, *Our Power and our Glory*, p. 326.
- 27 Bowker, *Pursued by Furies*, p. 7.
- 28 This is commonly called 'vanishing twin syndrome' by obstetricians. At delivery, the deceased foetus may be identified as *foetus compressus* (compressed enough to be noticed) or as *foetus papyraceous* (flattened through loss of fluid and most of the soft tissue).
- 29 Bowker, *Pursued by Furies*, p. 583.

CHAPTER SIX

Walking with Shadows

Index, Inscription and Event
in Malcolm Lowry's *In Ballast to the White Sea*

Cian Quayle

Upon the Sea of Shadows we'll embark,
And like an eager boy's our hearts will beat.¹

Charles Baudelaire



In retracing the journey undertaken by Sigbjørn Hansen-Tarnmoor in Malcolm Lowry's *In Ballast to the White Sea* I have set out to respond to those same settings as they are rediscovered today, or as they have led me elsewhere in a psychogeographic *dérive*. The narrative of this journey is embodied in what Paul Tiessen has described as an 'originary topography'.² This essay also integrates photographs as an index of that experience, which echoes the deictics of *In Ballast*, based as it is in Lowry's own lived experience and autobiography. Throughout the novel Lowry inscribes himself as the author/protagonist cast in the shadow of the authors from whom he drew his influences and inspiration. The novel is also topological in its precise, cinematic sense of space, which the characters inhabit and through which they move.

In his essay 'Surrealist Precipitates: Shadows Don't Cast Shadows' (1991), Denis Hollier analyses the significance that autobiography and the cast shadow held for the Surrealists, with reference to André Breton's *Nadja* (1928): 'What the novelist must put in play here is his own ignorance, the unavoidable zones of shadow of his own destiny.'³ A closer examination of Lowry's references to the shadow reveals the complexity of a narrative device that he deploys throughout *In Ballast*. The primary form this takes is the reference to the shadows of his forebears. At the same time, it is also an important metaphor and motif, which indexes the events around which the novel is structured. Hollier discusses a move away from 'the naturalistic description of settings', a shift in the indexation of the story 'from a descriptive realism to a performative one'.⁴ Lowry explores the form of the novel via the protagonist's journey, in which the reader is carried alongside the writer. The city, sea and landscape are not just a setting but also a psychological presence and character, which shapes Sigbjørn's destiny. Lowry described Liverpool as 'that terrible city whose main street is the ocean', a phrase that evokes his complex understanding of the significance of Liverpool, the River Mersey and the Irish Sea 'channel' as a conduit for life's journey and the imagination of elsewhere.

Breton and the Surrealists explored both the significance of the shadow and its form as the disembodied artefact of an invisible object, 'an unquestionable trace, a nonequivocal mark'.⁵ In Hollier's account, the Surrealists' use of 'cast shadows' constitutes one of the rare types of sign that escape what Breton calls 'ambiguity'. Breton was fascinated by Giorgio de Chirico's *The Enigma of a Day* (1914), and de Chirico's approach to painting was resolutely philosophical and conceptual. His delineation of objects in space and the demarcation of light and shadow

are the stage upon which surreal encounters and events are played out. Considering its architectural space, it might not be too far removed to reimagine the Goree Piazza that occupied Liverpool's Strand and Dock Road in Lowry's time, and the monumental neoclassical architecture of the Three Graces, which still today line the port's waterfront, as reminiscent of de Chirico's colonnades – a similarly imperious, uncanny and foreboding presence.

The opening chapters of *In Ballast* foreshadow the traumatic event that will define the novel, the suicide of Sigbjørn's brother Tor. A series of indexical metaphors establishes a sense of transience and uncertainty in the use of the 'shadow' as a motif; standing on Castle Hill in Cambridge, on the site of the old gallows, Sigbjørn muses 'but there are unhappier places even than this [...] the station platform for instance [...] And all wharves, Tor. That smoke which is so evanescent, so like pity, like love, like a dream of the sea' (*IB* 5–6). The protagonist sets forth and follows in the shadow of Lowry, who is cast as the shadow of his own entry into the work of the writers through whom he speaks. Lowry is present as he moves and speaks through persons, places and objects, which are cast in the shadow of his own experience. The novel acts as a vehicle in which the reader is carried forward alongside the protagonist in space and time. Its narrative is a reflexive one in which Lowry is irrevocably inscribed, as fact and fiction merge or, more accurately, where the work of imagination and reality coincide: 'This is the pole where the ideal and the real meet' (*IB* 240).

Lowry's method of research as a kind of psychic archaeology introduces the eclectic appropriation of a wide range of sources, which were also the fulcrum for his anxieties around charges of plagiarism. Alongside his appropriation of literary sources, the acute accumulation and recollection of localised detail were deftly interwoven and reimaged. This included the close observation of characters met in pubs, bookshops and cafés, seen against the backdrop of the seismic world events on the horizon. In these remembered encounters, a sense of foreboding and instability presages the outbreak of the Second World War. All of this wracked Lowry's own sense of self and his social and political position as an author, which haunted his very being. *In Ballast* presents a series of existential crises, each of which points towards a shift in our understanding of the novel's trajectory and destination: 'My soul turns like a compass needle towards the Pole' (*IB* 6).



I was born and grew up in Douglas in the Isle of Man and I have transposed the setting for Sigbjørn and Tor's Castle Hill episode to Hango Hill, which lies between Castletown and Derbyhaven on the island. Hango Hill, or *Haughr Hanga* (old Norse for Gallows Hill), later renamed Mount Strange, is an isolated hillock overlooking the Irish Sea. The last standing remains of the stonework and walls of a seventeenth-century summer house can still be seen today. The location is also the site for the annual remembrance of Illiam Dhône (William Christian), the governor of the island who was executed for treason in 1663 for his opposition to the Stanleys who, from their base in Liverpool, carried out their role as Lords of Mann. Lowry refers to Dhône in his short story, 'Elephant and Colosseum': 'For Illiam Dhône had been hanged half an age ago on an open plot of land where St

Barnabas' Church now stood and by a freak turn of fortune's wheel, survived this unpleasant ordeal.⁶ Lowry too transposes the setting, as St Barnabas church once stood in Victoria Street in Douglas. Dhône was in fact executed by firing squad but the execution was botched. He did survive, but not for long, eventually succumbing to the gunshot wounds.



Later in *In Ballast*, at the Legs of Man public house, which formerly stood beside the Empire Theatre on Liverpool's Lime Street, Sigbjørn makes reference to Castletown, the ancient seat of the Manx parliament: 'The world is the Isle of Man, locate it in Castletown, on a far shore, always on a far shore conceive' (*IB* 79). This continues a strand in Lowry's writing of references to the island, in which he merges his knowledge of family and place names with history, myth and folklore. Lowry twice visited the island as a child; much later, while living in a squatter's shack on the shoreline of the Burrard Inlet just outside North Vancouver, he was befriended by retired Manx boatbuilder Jimmy Craige. It can be supposed that Lowry's conversations with Craige provided much of the information he used to build up the mythology relating to the Isle of Man that he wove into the fabric of his writing, as he merged fact and fiction.





... the river made its way through the town: flying out over the fens was a solitary, landless, gull: and he felt the power of water moving through the spirit of all these things, of water everywhere seeking the ocean, as it is said the soul seeks Brahma. (*IB* 8)

In Cambridge, Sigbjørn reimagines the tolling bell of Corpus Christi as a bell-buoy, alluding to Rudyard Kipling's 1896 poem 'The Bell-buoy'. In the same moment, Tor and Sigbjørn are confronted with the fresh horror of the sinking of the *Brynjaar*:

Over the road the bell of Corpus began to toll: *doom: doom:* a bell-buoy.
'Ware shoal! Shoal!

Tor was leaning over Sigbjørn's shoulder, and they read: *Forty Missing in Terrible Sea Disaster. Another Tarnmoor Line Tragedy [...] the second Hansen-Tarnmoor liner to sink within six weeks. The disaster of the Thorstein six weeks ago...*

The bell stopped, leaving a concave silence. (*IB* 19)

The journey in and out of the Mersey estuary is marked by red and green buoys, which guide the passage of ships as they steer a course in and out of the channel and the Irish Sea. Sigbjørn's journey to Norway sets forth from Preston Docks; in 2010 the *Maritime Journal* reported on the refurbishment of 'two historic "bell-boat" buoys that once marked the safe approach to Preston Docks':

The two 'Nelson' safe water landfall buoys were originally moored eight miles out to sea off the coast of Lytham, where the Ribble Estuary meets the Irish Sea. Today, however, they stand at two of the main entrances to Riversway, a modern development comprising a marina and a range of industrial, commercial and residential buildings. Today the Nelson buoys mark the original course of the river Ribble, which was diverted in the 19th century to enable the construction of the docks.

In 1890, in preparation for the opening of the new dock in 1892, Preston Corporation purchased two Bell Boat Buoys from the Irish Lights Commissioners for marking the Nelson 'Safe Water' mooring at the entrance to the estuary and the Penfold channel. The lights on these units were powered by acetylene gas and the bells were rung by wave motion.⁷



As the brothers walk from Castle Hill towards Cambridge and return to the confines of the town, they stop at ‘the Bath Hotel “Family and Commercial”, opposite the Friar House and the Art School’. Here the motif of the shadow is again introduced:

the shadow of the old University itself seemed to fall on them: it might have been an immense factory of knowledge where they were the humblest menial workers, shuddering in the yard in their flimsies at night, knowing little of its machinery and purpose.

They stepped over the brass sill, an action which was like entering a ship’s cabin, into the dark interior of the tavern. (*IB* 16)



In an adjacent bar, we encounter the first reference to Wilhelm von Scholz’s *Race with a Shadow*, being rehearsed by ‘The Players’. With the news of the Tarnmoor disaster the brothers encounter ‘a newsvender, a stooped bronzed man [...] he held a stick at arm’s length, so that his sleeve was short on his wrist, showing tattoo marks: a bathing girl, a flag, a crucifix, a barque in full sail: ex-sailor’. This eerie figure’s prophecy carries a dark undertow: ‘You’re going for a long journey’ (*IB* 20).

Back at Tor's lodgings the brothers engage in political and ideological deliberations, as well as discussing their mutual affinity and affection for Nina. The conversation shifts back and forth, as they also reflect upon their relationship with their parents, and what has shaped the paths they have followed so far. Now Sigbjørn is faced with the shadow of another event that haunts his being, as the presence of their mother inhabits the space of the room in which they are simultaneously present:

another old grief unfolded within Sigbjørn, a grief so bitter he had postponed ever truly recognizing it. Yet it had lain neglected in a corner of his consciousness for many years. Now it moved again, just as he had stirred in the womb, the pain of the memory of his mother's death stirred in him. (*IB* 32)

Haunted by the photograph of their mother gazing down at them, the brothers fall to considering the symbol of the *Alma Mater*, the university as mother, and the origins of the term 'matriculation':

[...] By the way, what is a matrix?

Tor pulled out a dictionary; Sigbjørn had risen again and was looking over his shoulder and the two of them having found the word, read its definition:

- Matrix: it is something holding...
- embedded within it...
- another object to which it gives shape or form...
- but also it is a die or mold as for the face of type.
- it is also a rock in which a gem is embedded.
- it is the uterus or womb; the substance beneath the cells of a tissue.
- the formative cells from which a structure grows
- as part of a cutis beneath a nail. (*IB* 33–34)

In a Freudian turn, the shape of the separate journeys they are destined to undertake is cast like the line from a ship from *Womb* to *Tomb* to *Doom* as the clock approaches the chime of midnight and Sigbjørn races to get back to his own lodgings before the curfew:

His shadow ran before him along Trumpington Street. This was unreal, unreal, was in fact a race with a shadow. An exact description for here an advertisement loomed over him: Festival Theatre. The Race with a Shadow. By Wilhelm von Scholz. Nightly. 8:30. (*IB* 39)

As Chris Ackerley notes (*IB* 282, note III.147), Scholz's play explores the rivalry between a writer and his characters. Here too, Lowry, in a sublimated echo of Scholz's play, inscribes himself within the narrative as it is subsumed in Tor's suicide, which itself was cast in the shadow of the suicide of Lowry's friend and fellow Cambridge student Paul Fitte.⁸



The final, fateful parting of the brothers, as the bell strikes midnight, is mirrored later, in Chapter VII, as Sigbjørn finds himself standing alone on the Pier Head landing stage, having parted from Nina, as the clock of the Liver Building strikes noon:

Doom. The last stroke of twelve from the Liver Building merged in the melancholy wailing of the wind that now seemed to be blowing up the essences of those lovers parted forever by the terrible ocean, of all who were parted, who eternally embraced and turned to one another again on this eternal wharf. (*IB* 122)

In Chapter IV, in a narrative shift and uncanny dislocation, the trauma and tragedy of Tor's suicide weighs on the insights provided in a series of unfinished letters that Sigbjørn writes to William Erikson (Lowry's fictional version of Nordahl Grieg). Lowry enters into a dialogue with his forebears via Sigbjørn's exchange with Erikson, and his search for meaning and the notion of the lost object, as he intends to return to his motherland and birthplace in Norway. Sigbjørn's letters to Erikson are written from, among other places, the Kardomah café and the Mecca café in India Buildings, Liverpool. In one of Edward Chambré Hardman's photographs of India Buildings a sign is visible



for the Mecca café, with a female figure in the doorway of the vast Brunswick Street archway entrance to the shopping arcade. Chambré Hardman was an Irish-born, Liverpool-based photographer whose home and studio on Rodney Street, now maintained by the National Trust, can still be visited. He is perhaps best known for his photograph *The Birth of the Ark Royal* (1950), which looks out over the Cammell Laird shipyard in Birkenhead towards Liverpool.

Throughout *In Ballast* the reader is invited to inhabit the urban space of Liverpool and the landscape of Wirral and the north-west, through which Lowry's protagonist proceeds. Here a connection can be made with Breton's *Nadja* (1928), a novel which Denis Hollier cites as representing a radical shift in 'mode of enunciation': 'the passage to the real must be inferred not by a change of object as much as by the entry onto the stage of the subject and its index.'⁹ In both novels, the author



enters the stage to participate in the action that unfolds before us. The sensory experience of the city provides the tableau for a ‘performative realism’ into which the writer inscribes himself.

In Chapter V, Sigbjørn and his father make a circular walk through the streets of Liverpool: ‘The two men, father and son, drifted slowly up and down Exchange Flagstones’ (*IB* 54). This is a journey that moves through what is a sonic as well as an urban landscape, where the timbre of the river and ocean are also present. As they attempt to make sense of recent events, the soundscape of the city rises over their discussion. The cacophony of the technological city and the minutiae of day-to-day human activity within it are referred to throughout:

In the incredible turmoil of Liverpool around them—of the shunting and shrieking of engines from the railway station; from the electric railways as their trains ground over and under the houses; along the line of docks and the cry of trams; from the many voiced Mersey (misery?); in a hundred powerfully mutating smells; in a million nightmarish noises—there was something about Captain Hansen-Tarnmoor and his son Sigbjørn of the organic absoluteness which defines the present. (*IB* 54)

In what is perhaps the key chapter of *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), ‘Walking in the City’, Michel de Certeau equates the performance of walking the city with the act of speech and utterance, which is also relevant to the interweaving of speech and space in Sigbjørn and his father’s walking journey:

Within the framework of uttering, the walker, in relation to his position, creates a near and an afar, a *here* and a *there*. In verbal communication, the adverbs *here* and *there* are actually an indicator of the locutory fact [...] – and we must add that another function of this process of location (here/there) necessarily entailed by walking and indicative of an actual appropriation of space by an ‘I’ is to set up another relative to that ‘I’, and thereby establish a conjunctive and disjunctive articulation of places.¹⁰

Walking is the means by which the narrative of *In Ballast* is carried, as Sigbjørn and his father move through the city’s streets, attempting to find ways to talk about the tragedies that have befallen them, and the path that Sigbjørn now might take. Liverpool is bounded by the threshold of river and sea, and *In Ballast* the city is counterpointed by the locations of Cambridge and Preston at the book’s beginning and end. Each phase of Sigbjørn’s journey, including his journey to Preston on the train, which departs from Liverpool Exchange Station in Tithebarn Street, alters his relationship with past, present and future.



In retracing Sigbjørn's journey, I am reminded of Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, the first novel of *The New York Trilogy* (1985). Auster inserts himself in the novel as his writer-protagonist Quinn assumes the identity of Auster, following a mysterious telephone call pleading for help. At the same time, Quinn identifies himself with his own protagonist in his crime novels: 'In the triad of selves that Quinn had become, Wilson served as a kind of ventriloquist.'¹¹ Lowry also speaks through his protagonist and characters as he duels with his own multiple selves. Like Sigbjørn, Quinn undertakes a journey across the city: 'New York was an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps, and no matter how far he walked, no matter how well he came to know its neighborhoods and streets, it always left him with the feeling of being lost.'¹² This extends our understanding of a mode of speaking – an utterance – which is also an act of ventriloquism. The separation of life and fiction dissolve as the writer/protagonist is submerged in a metafiction where real places and events form the backdrop to the search for a 'lost object'.



De Certeau's theory, in which the act of walking merges with speech, also adds another perspective from which to interpret Sigbjørn's journey: "The paths taken by the strollers consist of series of turnings and returnings that can be likened to "turns of phrase" or "stylistic devices". A perambulatory rhetoric does exist."¹³ Like Lowry, de Certeau is fascinated by 'the promenade-like unfolding of the stories silted up on a site (movements and journeys)'.¹⁴ Lowry's subjects move between the imaginary and the real in a way that is part of their significance for both the reader and author, who in this sense is walking beside the reader. Lowry's and Sigbjørn's voyage is continuously remade in an elliptical pattern in pursuit of the meaning of life, which itself resides in the shadow of events that can't be explained or that are still to come.



James Street is one of four stations on the ‘loop line’, the section of Liverpool’s underground metro service that circumnavigates the city. Leaving the cavernous subterranean void of this station, I turn away from the waterfront, and then left again into Fenwick Street. At the junction of Exchange Street West, at the back of the historic Grade II listed Martin’s Bank building, a homeless man has left his sleeping bag and a crumpled duvet on a ledge for safe keeping. Approaching the end of Fenwick Street, ahead is a car park and the ruin of a façade on Chapel Street behind the Pig and Whistle. The ‘pig’ being a nickname for the bars on merchant ships, the pub was formerly a watering hole for passengers and mariners alike on their way to and from the Pier Head. A sign outside the pub apparently once read ‘emigrants served here’. It’s a short walk from here to the Pier Head, down Chapel Street or Water Street, two of the original seven streets of the city, which lead to the riverbank and shoreline. An alternative conduit or passage also runs beside ‘the Sailors’ Church’, Our Lady and St Nicholas, and the former site of St George’s Dock. The adjacent Tower House was the site of the shoreline residence of the Stanleys, the Earls of Derby, even then an embarkation point for the Isle of Man, over which that family exerted its control. The descent of Chapel Street meets another

void at the dock exit from the Queensway Tunnel, opposite the Pier Head and the Mersey Dock Estate, which opened in 1873. Currently, the development of the Liverpool waterfront by Isle of Man-registered Peel Holdings is transforming the former decline of the docks, but is also testament to the unscrupulous corporate speculation and redevelopment of the port.



On the day of her departure for New York, Nina and Sigbjørn contemplate a future framed by their different directions, each to embark upon a journey that will take them to opposite sides of the world: 'Here was something between them that he had wrecked for himself with his own mind and that he had not the equipment to salvage' (*IB* 93). While Nina seems certain of her direction, Sigbjørn is tormented by his own lack of conviction, and particularly his lack of belief in his own worth as

a writer, in relation to the sufferings of the working class: ‘Don’t think [I’m] not affected by poverty, exploitation of workers or natives. I am. I was a worker long enough to feel it and to hate the suffering that is caused by a class system. It’s that I haven’t anything of value to say about it’ (*IB* 97). In ‘Elephant and Colosseum’, Kennish Drumgold Cosnahan similarly contemplates the destruction caused by the relentless march of capitalist ‘progress’ as he sits in a café on the Via Veneto in Rome reflecting on his home town of Douglas in the Isle of Man:

As we are forgiving to those who are committing trespasses us against, said the Manx. Assuming that there they were, those enemies, and, right at that moment, trespassing against one. As well they might assume it, thought Cosnahan looking away from his table and down the Via Veneto again, up which a huge new Cadillac the size of a conservatory was advancing soundlessly, should they recall all the beautiful old cobbled streets and ancient houses of Douglas that were still being destroyed or pulled down, and the beautiful St. Matthew’s pulled down and the countryside ruined to make a Liverpool holiday.¹⁵

As Sigbjørn watches from the Pier Head landing stage, Nina’s ship seems to disappear, temporarily obscured by the drifting snow and smoke. At the same moment, ‘[the] clock of the Liver building started to strike twelve’ (*IB* 122). Noon is the time of day when objects lose their shadow, and Sigbjørn is about to lose sight of Nina, as their journeys take them in opposite directions.



Auster's *City of Glass* carries within it the echo of *In Ballast*; in an interview from 1992 Larry McCaffery describes Auster's preoccupation with 'the multitude of selves which lie concealed behind every "I" (a motif reinforced by Auster's reflexive blurring of author and text); and the confrontation between the individual and the void of death or absurdity'.¹⁶ The interview offers many parallels for our understanding of *In Ballast* as Auster discusses events and coincidences – the 'presence of the unpredictable, the powers of contingency'¹⁷ – which have become integrated as part of his writing process. He goes on to describe a process that remains open to these 'collisions' and to the role of autobiography, where imagination and reality coincide. In the same way that Lowry sought atonement for the suicide of Paul Fitte, Auster discusses the need 'to relieve some of the pressure caused by buried secrets. Hidden memories, traumas, childhood scars – there's no question that novels emerge from those inaccessible parts of ourselves.'¹⁸

In Ballast to the White Sea is Lowry's own 'race with a shadow', or rather with many shadows – an attempt to navigate his relationship with his numerous father figures (Nordahl Grieg, Conrad Aiken, his own father and the class position he represents), to contend with his guilt over Paul Fitte's death, to try to find his own place and worth, as a writer, in a world heading into another war. In his letters to Erikson, Sigbjørn despairingly alludes to von Scholz's play to try to explain his own feelings of 'hysterical identification':

I am well aware that Goethe said the relation of an author with his principal character may be a race with a shadow: I am familiar with von Scholz' play—it was playing in Cambridge not long ago [...] But your book destroyed my identity altogether, so close was it to my own experience, both in fact and within my own book, that I begin to believe almost that I may be Benjamin Wallae, your character. But if that is so I ask myself, where and who is X, the projection of myself in my own novel which will never be finished. Where and who is he and who are you?

I have said that your book robbed my voyage of its last vestige of meaning. But as your evil art raised a being, a shadow here, who could answer to the name of Benjamin Wallae— (*IB* 47)

A shadow is also a 'distorted identification' of its object, and the theme of losing sight of that elusive object, and the search for its meaning, appears throughout the novel. Similarly, at the end of *Nadja*, on the arrival of 'X' (based on Breton's lover Suzanne Muzard), the narrator addresses this figure who has entered the space that Nadja has left:

That is the story that I too yielded to the desire to tell *you*, when I scarcely knew you – you who can no longer remember but who, as if by chance knowing of the beginning of this book, have intervened so opportunely, so violently, and so effectively doubtless to remind me that I wanted it to be ‘ajar like a door’ and that through this door I should probably never see anyone come in but you – come in and go out but you.¹⁹

In the same way the ending of *In Ballast* as we have it is also ‘left ajar’, in the sketched-out encounter with Erikson, and the enigmatic appearance of Birgit, who asks Sigbjørn, ‘Why did you come here?’ (*IB* 240). Sigbjørn’s belief that this encounter is the embodiment of all that he has searched for is qualified by Erikson’s summation of Sigbjørn’s journey:

Just as you were a character in that book, so has your long voyage brought home little more to you than that you are a pawn in the game which must be won to make the world livable for those who come after us. (*IB* 240)

Birgit repeats her question: ‘But why did you come here?’ ‘To seek my truth’, Sigbjørn replies. ‘And although I did not find it, like the hanged man in the Tarot, I was hanged upside down just the same’ (*IB* 240).



List of images

- FIGURE 6.1: Ferry at sea (Liverpool to Isle of Man), 2008 © Cian Quayle
FIGURE 6.2: Hango (Gallows) Hill, Derbyhaven, Isle of Man, 2019 © Cian Quayle
FIGURE 6.3: The Legs of Man public house, Lime Street, Liverpool (found photograph)
FIGURE 6.4: Malcolm Lowry's squatter's shack (1941–44), Dollarton, Vancouver. Malcolm Lowry Collection, Rare Books and Special Collections, University of British Columbia Library, Ref. No. BC1614-15
FIGURE 6.5: Seagull in flight, 2019 © Cian Quayle
FIGURE 6.6: Nelson bell-boat buoy, Preston, 2019 © Cian Quayle
FIGURE 6.7: Brass sill in tavern entrance, Douglas, Isle of Man, 2018 © Cian Quayle
FIGURE 6.8: Liver Building, Liverpool, 2019 © Cian Quayle
FIGURE 6.9: Edward Chambré Hardman, India Buildings, doorway with figure (Brunswick Street), Liverpool © National Trust Images/Edward Chambré Hardman Collection, Ref. No. 149423
FIGURE 6.10: Exchange Flags, Liverpool, 2019 © Cian Quayle
FIGURE 6.11: Exchange/Tithebarn Street Station, Liverpool, 2019 © Cian Quayle
FIGURE 6.12: James Street Station, Liverpool, 2019 © Cian Quayle
FIGURE 6.13: Fenwick Street at Exchange Street West, Liverpool, 2016 © Cian Quayle
FIGURE 6.14: Mersey Dock Estate, 1873; Pier Head, Liverpool, 2019 © Cian Quayle
FIGURE 6.15: Pier Head Landing Stage, Liverpool, 2008 © Cian Quayle
FIGURE 6.16: Le Pendu (found image)

Notes

- 1 Charles Baudelaire, *Le Voyage* (1831), trans. Arthur Osborne (Warwick: The Greville Press, 1991).
- 2 Paul Tiessen, 'Celebrating Lowry', review of Bryan Biggs and Helen Tookey (eds), *Malcolm Lowry: From the Mersey to the World* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), *Canadian Literature*, 208 (spring 2011), pp. 134–35 (p. 135).
- 3 Denis Hollier, 'Surrealist Precipitates: Shadows Don't Cast Shadows', trans. Rosalind Krauss, *October*, 69 (summer 1994), pp. 110–32 (p. 130).
- 4 Hollier, 'Surrealist Precipitates', p. 126.
- 5 Hollier, 'Surrealist Precipitates', p. 112.
- 6 Malcolm Lowry, 'Elephant and Colosseum', in *Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 131.
- 7 'New Life for Historic Buoys', *Maritime Journal*, 2010 <https://www.maritimejournal.com/news101/navaids/new-life-for-historic-buoys> (accessed 10 March 2020).
- 8 See Gordon Bowker, *Pursued by Furies: A Life of Malcolm Lowry* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), pp. 97–99 for an account of this tragic episode, which, Bowker comments, 'would haunt [Lowry] to the grave' (p. 80).
- 9 Hollier, 'Surrealist Precipitates', p. 126.
- 10 Michel de Certeau, 'Chapter 9 – Walking in the City', in *The Certeau Reader*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 107.
- 11 Paul Auster, *City of Glass*, in *The New York Trilogy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), p. 6.
- 12 Auster, *City of Glass*, p. 4.
- 13 De Certeau, *The Certeau Reader*, p. 108.
- 14 De Certeau, *The Certeau Reader*, p. 116.
- 15 Lowry, 'Elephant and Colosseum', p. 131.
- 16 Larry McCaffery, Sinda Gregory and Paul Auster, 'An Interview with Paul Auster', *Contemporary Literature*, 33.1 (1992), p. 3.
- 17 McCaffery, Gregory and Auster, 'Interview', p. 3.
- 18 McCaffery, Gregory and Auster, 'Interview', p. 7.
- 19 André Breton, *Nadja* (1928), trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1960), p. 156.

CHAPTER SEVEN

‘Hva vet vi?’

In Ballast to the White Sea and the Weighting of Evidence

Chris Ackerley

Before setting out from Preston, the Norwegian freighter *Unsgaard*, on which Sigbjørn Tarnmoor will make his fateful voyage to Norway, must first unload her cargo of timber (from Archangel) at a wharf ‘surrounded on three sides by ruined open walls of warehouses and filled with scrap-iron of all kinds’.¹ Having not received a new commission, the *Unsgaard* must sail in ballast, that is, weighted down by sufficient scrap iron to retain her trim and balance, which ‘explains’ the heap of scrap iron on that vacant lot: the residua of other voyages, and by implication that which might be used by the *Unsgaard* on hers:

The lot, which was more like a glance into the very soul of the obsolete, was filled with such remnants of the industrial revolution as hoop iron, circular and long bellows, ancient anvils, patent cart-wheel hoops, springs for conveyances, rain waterfall pipes, gutters and heads as well as sham stoves, antique toilet seats, copper kettles, cruet stands, fish knives, locks, hinges and nails, wringing machines and patent waterfall washing machines, not to speak of brewers’ hydrometers, saccharometers and thermometers, the properties of publicans and distillers of seventy-six years ago. (*IB* 193)

My first reading of this passage was naïve; indeed, the only thing to provoke my curiosity was the word ‘obsolete’ with its echo of Herman Melville’s ‘The Stone Fleet’, an old sailor’s lament for the ships in which he had served, but are now no more: ‘they serve the Obsolete’; but this

I had twice noted (*IB* 346, note VIII.76; 370, note XI.69), and further attention seemed unwarranted. Yet oddities remained: why ‘patent’ cart-wheel hoops, or ‘waterfall’ pipes and washing machines, and why the curious precision of ‘seventy-six years’? I might not have fossicked further, had not Google led me to an unexpected source, William Dobson’s *History of the Parliamentary Representation of Preston* (1868),² specifically, the advertisements at the back of that book. This took me only so far: I had the text, but not the texture; and ‘seventy-six’ remained a mystery.

There is no substitute, in the principle and practice of interpretation, for the direct experience of the psychogeographical terrain against which the work is set, whatever the ravages of time. In pursuit of my annotations of *In Ballast* I went up to Cambridge, explored Liverpool, walked the Wirral peninsula and Caldy Golf Course,³ and went to Norway, visiting Aalesund (where Lowry landed) and Oslo (where he met Nordahl Grieg). I also went to Preston,⁴ to get a sense of the Ribble and its docks (long gone), and the features of Fishergate (the main street). In Preston Public Library, I looked at copies (first and second editions) of Dobson’s *History*, and identified with greater precision than had been possible online details that Lowry had taken from the advertisements for F. Mann’s inventory of his Avenham warehouse and for his General Ironmongery Establishment, 113 Fishergate. This offered insight into Lowry’s borrowing practices: even when there was no need (indeed, what sort of ballast could this junk be?), Lowry had preferred an oblique semi-literary source, citing it virtually verbatim, to the rusted rails and pigs of cast iron more typically used as ballast. Even the mystery of ‘seventy-six’ was explained: Dobson’s first edition, as exciting as its title, appeared in 1868, and though self-published was free of advertising (it had previously featured in the *Preston Chronicle*); however, the second edition solicited help to pay for its reprinting, hence the twenty pages of advertisements at the back. Lowry had consulted the second edition, yet for some reason (probably, simple confusion),⁵ he had assumed the publication date of the first, as 76 added to 1856 brings us to 1932, the implied present of his novel.⁶

I have chosen this example for its total uselessness: many hours of work having gone into the creation of a gloss that few readers will bother about, because it makes little difference to the interpretation. Nor does it help to recall, from my boyhood, reading of one who entered a church late at night, to hear a sustained tapping coming from behind the choir-stalls, where an old man was carving into the stonework,

by faint candlelight, a glorious rosette; asked why he was doing this, where nobody could see it, he was told, 'God sees' (Lowry would have liked this tale). There are, it may be, two Angels of Annotation, one of comfort and another of despair, and like the Consul's Faustian voices not easily distinguished (until reconciled in what Lowry called the 'strange comfort' of the profession). Before considering Lowry's and/or Sigbjørn's Norwegian experience in Chapter XVIII of *In Ballast*, let me discuss two instances of joy and despondency in my past annotations of *Under the Volcano*, and another from the 1940 *Volcano*, chosen because they were formative in my evolution as an annotator, and helped define my working principle of *validity*.

My first venture into the dark wood of annotation was *A Companion to Under the Volcano* (1984).⁷ With the confidence of the neophyte I boldly set about the opening epigraphs, and identified in the second, from John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, minor inaccuracies, which I attributed to Lowry's carelessness (implicitly puffing my own perceptivity). A little later, and largely by luck, when looking at William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* I noticed that his version of this passage was identical to Lowry's.⁸ This elicited a better hypothesis: that Lowry was citing James rather than Bunyan; this was confirmed in the Special Collections in Vancouver, where I consulted Lowry's personal copy of the James, and with a Borges-like sense of vertigo⁹ found in a chapter entitled 'The Sick Soul' the precise quotation marked off in pencil. The experience of delight (to have come so close to authorial intention) and chagrin (to have come so close to making a fool of myself)¹⁰ was salutary: it set, early in my career, a standard for what annotation might achieve; it showed that no gloss could be considered final; and it endorsed a principle of humility, the recognition that this degree of excellence in the art (and science) of annotation could but rarely be attained. A gloss on that experience: Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist*, accused by his teacher of heresy, of having confused the possibility of the Soul reaching the Creator with that of 'ever approaching nearer'¹¹ (after all, Margerie or a Lowry scholar might have added the pencil marks later, or a Cartesian demon might have done so, in malignant jest).

A later visit from the Angel of Despair left me shaken. I had failed, in the *Companion*, to comment on Yvonne's sentimental dream, in Chapter 4, of having a farm somewhere, with 'cows and pigs and chickens'. I had not perceived any obvious allusion. Then I read Eugene O'Neill's 'Bound East for Cardiff',¹² and noted the words of the dying

Yank: 'It must be great to stay on dry land all your life and have a farm and a house of your own with cows and pigs and chickens.'¹³ My immediate reaction was (like Faustus) to burn my books, because if this was an allusion then what was not? A rule of thumb says: one connection, so what; two, maybe; three, probably; four or more, virtual certainty; by crude calculation there were here at least a dozen points of convergence (situational and linguistic) between the two texts, so the validity of the allusion was not in doubt; there remained the small problem that not one reader in a million would perceive it. It took me a long time to recognise, then absorb the lesson, that *this* was the point: as with the scrap iron on the Preston wharf, validation was not to be assessed as perceptibility but rather in terms of what Lowry later called 'the unimaginable library of the dead':¹⁴ the conceit of a vast Platonic edifice in which all works by anyone are contained, connected each to all others by invisible threads, so that (for instance) *Peter Rabbit* is tied to *Moby-Dick*. The conceit gives new urgency not to Lowry's plagiarism but rather to his 'borrowing'. The final gloss might be Mallarmé: '*Il faut [...] qu'il n'y ait qu'allusion*' [there can be only allusion];¹⁵ that is, each and every act of language participates in the infinite with all who have gone before, and others to come. This is not woolly mysticism, but a statement of the mysterious bond between particulars (Lowry's plausible Mexican gutters) and the transcendental realm created or entered into (the point is moot) by the mind.

A third instance of the hermeneutical paradox of approaching ever nearer without attaining perfection might be drawn from the 1940 *Volcano*, when Hugh says to the Consul: 'Ott fled to DiMaggio. Ripple popped to DiMaggio. That sort of stuff. McCarthy fled to DiMaggio. Ripple fanned. No runs, no hits, no errors.'¹⁶ The sequence appears as a marginal 'poem' of sorts in a 1940 letter from Lowry to Conrad Aiken, so my first impulse as annotator was simply to note this and correct two errors in the *Collected Letters*: McCarthy mistranscribed as 'Mcmathy' and Ripple as 'Rippla'.¹⁷ Then something went ping: what if Lowry was referring to an actual game? I knew enough to recognise DiMaggio, so the sensible place to look was the participation of the New York Yankees in any World Series final before 1940. It took tenacity, but I eventually found the ball-by-ball details of Game Two of the 1937 World Series (7 October) between the Yankees and the Giants, and specifically, the sixth innings of the Giants, in mid-afternoon, when Ott, Ripple and McCarthy were each snared by DiMaggio in the outfield, that single-handed set of dismissals equalling a major league record and touted

in the press accordingly ('No runs, no hits, no errors' was a refrain). I was pleased with my sleuthing, but a doubt remained: Lowry had been in Cuernavaca then, so how did he know of the game (the 'English Page' of *El Universal*, perhaps?), and as Aiken had left Cuernavaca in July that year, why in 1940 would Lowry allude to that innings with such familiarity (responding to something Aiken had written, perhaps, though no evidence of that is known)? My point is this: however definitive an annotation might seem to be, it always generates (with a perverse grinding of Gödel's gears) further unanswerable questions, other unknowns consequent upon the discoveries.

These examples indicate something of the mind-set required to interpret a complex annotation or to determine the truth of an alleged biographical incident; the intent is always to get as close as possible to the probable facts, while leaving open the possibility of reasonable doubt should new information invite or force a revision of the provisional hypothesis. This is in the way of prelude to a critique of Gordon Bowker's account of Lowry's visit to Norway in 1931, in which for various reasons many details do not sustain closer scrutiny.¹⁸ Before offering what I might consider better hypotheses for these, let me summarise the theoretical perspective from which I will argue, that is, my understanding of validity in annotation.

A principle of validity has guided my annotation for (I shudder to say) some fifty years. My Toronto PhD, 'Ambiguity in James Joyce's *Ulysses*', sought a model of ambiguity that rejected William Empson's seven (or seventy-six) types of vagueness (any linguistic feature that might lead a reader to assume more than one nuance) for something more rigorous, ambiguity as a rhetorical strategy that (like metaphor)¹⁹ controlled even as it generated polysemy. My authority was (and still is) E.D. Hirsch, Jr, *Validity in Interpretation* (1967), his insistence that 'each interpretive problem requires its own distinct context of relevant knowledge.'²⁰ I have written elsewhere and at length on the phenomenological consequences of this dictum as it relates to annotation ('When one is annotating something, one is presumably annotating some *thing*—but what is that "thing"?').²¹ To reduce an intricate tractate to its fundamental sounds: annotation entails, first, the identification of the 'interpretive problem'; and secondly, determination of factors that might, to a greater or lesser extent, constitute its distinct context of relevance, to permit better readings while allowing for the provisional nature of these. Determination of the distinct context (an intuitive understanding of the various factors that contribute to an 'intelligent reading') is not

a formulaic or mechanical process, as each problem is unique, but is perhaps like driving a car: with experience, the starts and stalls and bumps and jumps of the neophyte give way to the easy and automatic competence of the adept, who synchronises an infinitude of individual acts, though with the need for eternal vigilance (for even the best driver can go horribly wrong).

A single instance must suffice to illustrate how a naïve (yet by no means erroneous) reading can give way to what by broad consensus is a 'better reading': the final couplet of the 'Song' from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* (IV.ii.263–64):²²

Golden lads and girls all must
As chimney-sweepers come to dust.

An annotation might take as its 'interpretive problem' the image of 'golden lads', and construct a context of relevant knowledge to include such matters as the contrast of youth and age; children exploited as chimney-sweeps; the mortal chill of 'come to dust'; the contrast of gold that braves time with age that withers youth; the rhyming closure of 'must' and 'dust'; and perhaps an echo of Genesis 3:19: 'for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return'. These could be woven into an excellent interpretation, appreciative of the lightness of the verse and the jest in the face of death; but such an interpretation, however good, is modified by something that radically changes the distinct context of relevant knowledge to force a new (and better) hypothesis. I quote Hugh Kenner:

in the mid 20th century a visitor to Shakespeare's Warwickshire met a countryman blowing the grey head off a dandelion: 'We call these golden boys chimney-sweepers when they go to seed.'²³

And something unperceived is precipitated into consciousness: the image of a dandelion, a conceit both startlingly new and reassuringly familiar, death as the blowing of a common flower. I cannot pontificate for every reader, of course, but for most of my past students as originally for me it remains a persuasive emblem of how a perfectly sensible interpretation may suddenly turn into something richer and stranger, to affirm a better hypothesis than that held before.

To return to Lowry, and specifically the account of his trip, while yet a Cambridge undergraduate, to Norway, where (against all likely odds) he met his literary idol, Nordahl Grieg. There is no mention of this voyage in the earlier biography by Douglas Day, and it was not until the discovery in 1987 by Hallvard Dahlie of a long letter from Lowry (dated '8.9.31') to

Grieg, in the Nordahl Grieg Collection of the Oslo University Library,²⁴ that verification of the trip was possible. For most readers, however, the first awareness of Lowry's time in Norway derives from Gordon Bowker's *Pursued by Furies* (1995),²⁵ his life of Lowry which corrected most of the innumerable errors in Day's earlier account (1973), and made good use of archival materials, manuscript sources and contacts with those who knew the man. His account of the murky circumstances of Lowry's death is particularly valuable, and the use of such materials as newspaper items and the Coroner's Report validates his questioning of the official verdict, 'death by misadventure'. Yet when the publishers claim on the back flap that Bowker 'followed in Lowry's footsteps' and that the book is therefore 'the surest guide we are ever likely to have to that dark terrain', that contention warrants testing, as the few pages devoted to Lowry's Norwegian experience are full of errors.

These arise for a variety of reasons. Bowker had visited Oslo (though not, I suspect, Aalesund), but he did not pursue his researches far enough to question things that Lowry claimed about the visit and his meeting with Grieg; and though he had unprecedented access to the then-unpublished typescript(s) of *In Ballast*, he fails signally to acknowledge this,²⁶ and too often commits the biographical sin of arguing from the text to the life. Jan Gabriel provided information, but her sources (letters from Lowry, her memory of his memories) are not always reliable. There is another account in the manuscripts and typescript of *Dark as the Grave*, omitted from the unscholarly edition by Douglas Day and Margerie Lowry (1972) as irrelevant to the Mexican scene. There, long after the fire that destroyed his copy of *In Ballast*, Lowry recollects that novel, with many details that differ from the recovered text. Bowker ignores this material, and that in the 'Varsity' Composition Book, where Lowry noted crucial details.²⁷ I propose, therefore, to 'annotate' part of Bowker's account, pp. 124–31, in terms of the principles enunciated above, not to be provocative but rather to correct the record of one of Lowry's significant formative experiences as a writer.²⁸

[Bowker, 124]

Lowry sailed from Preston: Bowker's account of the SS *Fagervik* (more precisely, 'D/S' [*Dampskibe*]) is sound, naming the firm (Nilson Niquist), the captain (Skaugen), and the number of her crew (21). The change of orders from Archangel or Leningrad to Norway (crucial to the novel) is correct, as are the dates of departure from Preston and arrival at Aalesund; my only query concerns Lowry's acceptance by the crew, as this echoes the typescript, though there is no reason to dispute the fact (see Chapter XVI).

[Bowker, 125]

no deep harbour: incorrect, as there are deep water port facilities both south and north of Aalesund (which straddles an isthmus between two fjords); the Captain, his next destination unknown, is probably avoiding harbour charges. The ‘small island’ at which the *Fagervik* ties up, quite literally to a tree-stump, would be Lilleholmen [the little island], one or two miles south-east of the town, which slopes down steeply to the sea. Those leaving the ship would have crossed by small boat to the mainland, whence a road led directly to the town, an easy walk away (*IB* 407, note XVIII.6).

a hotel: the Møre, at Skaregate 8, towards the northern wharves, named for the district, Møre og Romsdal, of which Aalesund is the largest town. A stolid four-storey building, previously the Phenix, it was demolished in the 1950s (*IB* 407, notes XVIII.3 and XVIII.8). My thanks to Einar Gustafsson, *historieforteller* of the Aalesund Museum, for a photo of this hotel, and other useful details.

a teacher: Karsten Walderhaug, who taught at Latinskolen, the oldest gymnasium in Aalesund (1865). He kept in touch, briefly, with Lowry, writing in May 1932 for a copy of *Ultramarine* and saying that he had started a little jazz band called ‘Rumba’ playing ‘nightclubs and streets, with many jobs’ (*IB* 407, note XVIII.10).²⁹ There is no record of the book having been sent, perhaps for a Lowry-like reason: *Ultramarine*, after Norway, was further crammed with Grieg references, including some excellent touches of his poetry. Lowry’s Norwegian was abysmal, as his attempt to translate the first part of ‘Hjemme igjen’ [Home Again] testifies (*IB* 331, note VII.120);³⁰ yet Part V of *Ultramarine* ends with a rhapsodic translation of the rest of that poem. Lowry could not have done this, and no English translation existed; almost certainly his translator was Walderhaug, and Lowry (here speculation enters, a hypothesis easily destroyed, but my best guess), embarrassed by his plagiarism, did not send the translator the evidence of his borrowing.

the author’s picture: the book Walderhaug was reading is Grieg’s *Kinesiske dage* [Chinese Days] (1927), the cover of which is rippled black with neither photograph nor inscription. There is, however, a plate opposite page 96 of Putnam Weale,³¹ photographed in Hankow, with Grieg in the background (*IB* 407, note XVIII.11).

Grieg had been to his school: no, he had not. At Latinskolen, I was kindly shown the school scrapbook, meticulous records going back to the early 1900s; I was assured that had Grieg visited the evidence would be there. The museum archivist, Einar Gustafsson, confirmed this. The better hypothesis is that Lowry knew that Grieg had toured the south of Norway in 1929, reading from his anthology, *Norge i våre hjerten* [Norway in our Hearts], which was a popular success; there is no evidence of ‘a severe mauling’

(Bowker, 127), though (as Grieg's biographer has noted) some had disliked its sentimental core.³²

a poem: a mystery endures about this poem, presumably a newspaper clipping, if the authority of *In Ballast* (234) can be trusted. I will remain dubious about the coincidence of 'Nina' (below), until it turns up (I scoured the likely newspapers of the day, in vain).

the ship's name – 'Nina': Bowker notes (125) 'the strange hand of coincidence', which Lowry often gave a shake. His account of the collier from Danzig seeking men but Lowry being turned down, the skipper hiring only Norwegians, rings true, despite one oddity: Lowry, being English, was not eligible; but Sigbjørn, as Norwegian, is (Lowry did not note the irony). As the *Bergens Tidende* reveals,³³ the collier had recently returned from the White Sea, sailing under the Polish flag, but its name was the *Norna* (the Norse goddess of Fate, *IB* 408, note XVIII.16). 'Nina' may have been preferred because of the Columbus theme in Johannes V. Jensen's *The Long Journey*, the *Niña* being one of the three ships (Lowry indifferent to the distinction between 'n' and 'ñ').

a new mackintosh and a bottle of whisky: this may be so, and likewise Lowry's curious misadventure with the taxi-driver, but these details and those that follow are taken entirely from the typescript of *In Ballast* (which offers mildly differing versions), and the account is misleading in that the encounter with Grieg is unlikely to have taken place on the day of Lowry's arrival in Oslo, though some of the confusion with the taxi presumably did. My suspicion arises partly from the cultivated coincidences (though Lowry was one to whom strange things happened), but mostly from the 'circumstantial' evidence (below) that confirms the meeting with Grieg as being a week later. Grieg's apartment in Bygdø Allé (68) was not far from Hotell Parkheimen or the National Theatre, so (later) no taxi would have been needed. That Lowry is reworking facts of his experience is not in doubt; but his accounts of strange coincidence are less reliable than Bowker assumes.

[Bowker, 126]

they became friends: the experience of meeting Grieg was overwhelming for Lowry, but not for Grieg: Gudmund Skjeldal's excellent biography, *Diktaren i bombeflyet* [The Poet and the Bomber] (2012) does not mention Lowry in its index, nor in the text. Grieg was preoccupied by the need to finish a new play, *Atlantehavet* [The Atlantic], and though he was kind to his ardent disciple, talking to him for some time, offering two whiskies, and (perhaps) giving Lowry permission to adapt *The Ship Sails On* into a stage play, he clearly did not wish to cultivate a friendship with this strange enthusiast who had burst upon him unexpectedly. Bowker is surely wrong to state that the two met the next day for lunch at the Jacques Bagatelle, or

that they visited the Viking ship together, or dined at the Røde Mølle, or discussed *De unge døde* [Youth Dies, rather than Bowker's *The Young Dead*] at length. Bowker's conviction of this friendship seems to have arisen from Lowry's persistent accounts: the typescript of *In Ballast*; memories of Norway in *Ultramarine*; Lowry's 'long letter' (below) to Grieg; and Jan's 'Notes for the Last Three Chapters' compiled when she edited the original typescript. These are important sources for Lowry's Norwegian experience, but not entirely reliable, and Bowker has taken too much on trust. There is an ironic postscript to this meeting: a few months later, when Grieg was in England, he paid a similar impromptu visit to Graham Greene, whom he admired immensely but had never met; this encounter, unlike the other, led to a genuine friendship and an occasional correspondence thereafter.³⁴

Henrik Ibsen: this was indeed the name of the ship that Grieg had sailed in to Cape Town and beyond, but the suggestion that Lowry had given this name to his ship in *Ultramarine* before having read Grieg's *The Ship Sails On* is unwarranted.

[Bowker, 127]

visited the Viking Ship: Bowker claims that Grieg and Lowry together visited the Maritime Museum at Bygdøy and saw the Viking ship. This is unlikely (see *IB* 413, note XVIII.50). Two magnificent longboats had been housed at the university (then in the city centre), but in 1926 one of them, *Osbergskipet*, was taken to the new Viking Ship Museum (adjacent to the Maritime Museum) in Bygdøy. Lowry visited it there, but on another day, on his own; the other, *Gokstadskipet*,³⁵ was in 1931 still at the university (it was transferred in 1932). Lowry concludes his 'long letter' (below) by recalling how he had seen 'the' ship with Grieg, and suddenly found they were 'speaking in whispers'; it is unclear which boat (he uses the singular) is referred to, but either way Grieg's presence seems a ghost conjured by Lowry's imagination, as Grieg was too busy to visit the nearby university ship with Lowry, let alone make the longer trip to Bygdøy.

dined together at the Røde Mølle: also unlikely, but revealing for the way in which (in Lowry's revisions of *Ultramarine* and in various letters to Jan) the possibility in Lowry's mind assumed the lineaments of reality, though with the occasional give-away: 'this might have been imagination' (*IB* 412, note XVIII.48; 413, note XVIII.50).

finishing it in Cambridge: Grieg was going to Oxford, with no plans to visit Cambridge, let alone complete *De unge døde* at Grantchester (where Rupert Brooke had resided). Lowry probably mentioned to Grieg Brooke's *John Webster and the Elizabethan Drama* (1916), to which he returned in the 'long letter' written after this meeting (below).

a long intense letter: discovered by Hallvard Dahlie in 1987, and now in the Nordahl Grieg file at the Nasjonalbiblioteket (the National Library, opened 1999), Oslo. Bowker offers an extensive commentary, implying that it had influenced Grieg, specifically with respect to his completion of *De unge døde*: ‘some of what Lowry had written seems to have rubbed off in what emerged’ (p. 131). The book lends no credence to this conjecture. Further, like Dahlie and Sherrill Grace before him, Bowker fails to appreciate that not only is Lowry trying to reshape *De unge døde* before it was finally written, but is doing so with a crib, Houston Peterson’s *The Melody of Chaos* (1931), a recent study of Conrad Aiken that Lowry had relied on for his recent *Tripes* (Part 1), and which he presumably took to Oslo, as large chunks of the final letter (as well as sentences crossed out on the letter, but not recorded by Dahlie or Grace) are cited verbatim from Peterson (*IB* 412, notes XVIII.47 and XVIII.49). The letter, headed ‘*Hotell Parkheimen, Drammensveien 2, 8.9.31*’, indicates (with the evidence of the circus [below] taken into account) that it was written on the evening of the day (8 September) of Lowry’s visit to Grieg. The heightened emotion of the prose may have been another factor in Grieg’s rejection (nine days later) of the request to meet again, on the grounds that he had to ‘work as hell’, something that Lowry ‘as a fellow writer [...] will understand and forgive.’³⁶

[Bowker, 129]

Grieg had doubtless taken him to the National Theatre: unfounded speculation.

a visit to a circus: although Bowker does not amplify this detail, the Circus [og] Revy³⁷ is crucial in determining the date of Lowry’s encounter with Grieg, upon which so much of the interpretation of the ‘long letter’ (above) depends. One constant detail in all Lowry’s accounts of the meeting is that, *en route* to the little bookshop where he bought *The Dark Journey*, he passed ‘opposite the Holmenkollen’ (the underground station for the National Theatre), on what was then an open mound but is now (with unintended irony) a ring road, the place on which preparations for a circus were under way: it opened, to considerable applause, on Wednesday 9 September, and ran for about two weeks (*IB* 411, note XVIII.41). This, I affirm, validates conclusively my hypothesis that Lowry’s visit to Grieg did not take place, as Bowker implies, on the day of or shortly after his arrival in Oslo, but approximately one week later.

[Bowker, 131]

Somehow he got a ship home: my best guess is that Lowry left Oslo on 17 September, on the *Calypso* of the Ellerman’s Wilson Line, which ran weekly from Oslo to Hull on Thursdays, stopping at Kristiansand (see *IB* 284, note IV.9). Like the fictional Sigbørn, Lowry had from his father a

draft at the Nilson, Niquist & Co. shipping agency (Lille Strandgata 1, Oslo) to draw on for expenses (this might account for his failure to mention the return). Supporting this conjecture is the mention of Kristiansand (*IB* 42), which Lowry did not otherwise visit; arguing against it is Grieg's letter of 17 September which Lowry presumably took with him; but as Hotell Parkheimen was but a few blocks from Grieg's apartment and same-day postal services were then the norm, Lowry's departure on the 17th still seems probable.

Hva vet vi? [What do we know?].³⁸ Lowry arrived at Aalesund on the *D/S Fagervik* on 16 August; he spent two weeks there, and met in a *Kaffistov* a teacher from the Latin School named Karsten Walderhaug, who was reading Grieg's *Kinesiske dage* and showed him a photograph inside that volume of the author, and who may have translated Grieg's 'Hjemme igjen' for him. He half-heartedly tried to sign on a collier called the *Norna* that might have taken him to Archangel, but as a non-Norwegian was refused.³⁹ He instead went (the precise date uncertain) by boat to Aandalsnes and took the night train to Oslo, arriving in late August or early September. There he met Nordahl Grieg, but not (as *In Ballast* implies and Bowker assumes) on first arrival, but a week or so later, on Tuesday 8 September (as can be dated by a circus in town, an association consistent in all Lowry's accounts of the events), after which he walked through a storm to a bookshop (Tanum AS) in the middle of town where he bought Julien Green's *The Dark Journey*. He returned to Hotell Parkheimen and wrote his 'long letter' to Grieg that night, basing it less on his memory of Webster and the Elizabethans than on *The Melody of Chaos*, a critical study of Aiken that he had probably brought with him. Meeting Grieg had a lasting and galvanising effect on Lowry; but Bowker's contention that this was reciprocal and that they became close friends, visiting the Viking ship together, eating at the Röde Mölle, and engaging in long discussions of *De unge dode*, is unwarranted, rising from his uncritical (and undocumented) trust in the typescript of *In Ballast* that Jan Gabriel had loaned him, a few of Lowry's other writings, and his own imagination; but ignoring the contradictions therein, and not checking the evidence strenuously. There was no further encounter with Grieg, who responded (nine days later) to Lowry's request to meet again with a polite refusal. Lowry returned to England, probably leaving on the evening of Thursday 17 September, on the *Calypso*, a weekly ferry from Oslo to Hull via Kristiansand. As Grieg often said: '*Hva vet vi?*': this summary is my best guess, and will inevitably be mistaken in some respects; but it represents less a pursuit

of the biographer by an aggressive Fury of Annotation than a better set of hypotheses about Lowry's Norwegian experience that may in turn contribute to a more accurate account of his life.

Notes

- 1 Malcolm Lowry, *In Ballast to the White Sea: A Scholarly Edition*, ed. Patrick A. McCarthy, with annotations by Chris Ackerley (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2014), p. 192. Hereafter cited in parentheses in the text as *IB*.
- 2 William Dobson, *History of the Parliamentary Representation of Preston during the Last Hundred Years* (Fishergate: Dobson & Son, 1856), the first edition (Lowry used the second, of 1868; hence the apparent anomaly in citation).
- 3 My thanks to Colin Dilnot for his generosity and guidance.
- 4 My thanks to Ralph Crane for showing me around his home town, its features indelibly grounded in Chapters XIV and XV of *In Ballast*.
- 5 The principle of Occam's Razor, that the simplest explanation compatible with the facts is invariably the best, is a working assumption for any pragmatic framing of the better hypothesis.
- 6 1932 is my best guess at the fictional date, a year after Lowry's trip; but the text at times contradicts this, with references to newspapers, books and articles written later (in Chapter X, for instance, from the literary and political 'little journals' that Lowry read as they came into the New York Public Library).
- 7 Chris Ackerley and Lawrence J. Clipper, *A Companion to Under the Volcano* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984).
- 8 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Modern Library, 1902), p. 155.
- 9 Compare the narrator's exaltation on the discovery of Uqbar in Borges's 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius'.
- 10 I did worse when annotating Samuel Beckett's *Murphy*, offering a learned opinion on 'the Engels sisters', then having to send a Stop Press email to the publisher, to explain that I had missed the obvious joke (I had defined a context of *irrelevant* knowledge) about the Marx Brothers.
- 11 James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), p. 79.
- 12 Eugene O'Neill, 'Bound East for Cardiff', in *The Moon of the Caribees and Six Other Plays of the Sea*, ed. St John Ervine (London: Cape, 1923), pp. 17–18. Full disclosure: I found this when visiting Gordon Bowker, in his copy of the plays.
- 13 See my 'Lowry and O'Neill: Cows and Pigs and Chickens', *Malcolm Lowry Review*, 19 and 20 (fall 1986–spring 1987), pp. 129–30.
- 14 Untitled poem, 'There is a sort of conspiracy about the great', in *The Collected*

- Poetry of Malcolm Lowry*, ed. Kathleen Scherf, with annotations by Chris Ackerley (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1992), p. 215.
- 15 From an interview with Jules Huret in 1891, and (appropriately) in the common domain since.
 - 16 Malcolm Lowry, *The 1940 Under the Volcano: A Critical Edition*, ed. Miguel Mota and Paul Tiessen, with annotations by Chris Ackerley and David Large (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2015), p. 172, with annotation p. 381.
 - 17 Lowry, letter to Conrad Aiken of 20 March 1940, in *Sursum Corda! The Collected Letters of Malcolm Lowry*, ed. Sherrill Grace, 2 vols (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995, 1996), 1:307 (hereafter *CL*).
 - 18 This chapter was completed before I learned of Gordon's death on 14 January 2019; I have elected not to change substantially my critique of his account of Lowry's Norwegian experience, as the points of disagreement are scholarly and procedural rather than personal.
 - 19 Of any two things, it can be said that they are either the same or different: if *metaphor* asserts a similarity between two things that are 'different', then *ambiguity* entails a comparable recognition of difference between two things that are the 'same'.
 - 20 E.D. Hirsch, Jr, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967), p. vii.
 - 21 See my chapter, 'The "Distinct Context of Relevant Knowledge": Samuel Beckett's "Yellow" and the Phenomenology of Annotation', in Ulrika Maude and Matthew Feldman (eds), *Beckett and Phenomenology* (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 194–209 (p. 194).
 - 22 My discussion of the Shakespearean image derives not from Hirsch but from Hugh Kenner's *The Pound Era* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), p. 122. It illustrates Pound's sense of the Image: that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.
 - 23 Kenner, *The Pound Era*, p. 122.
 - 24 The letter, discovered and edited by Hallvard Dahlie in 1987, was published in Sherrill Grace (ed.), *Swinging the Maelstrom* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), pp. 31–42. The Nordahl Grieg Collection, then in the University Library, was transferred to the National Library (*Brevs* nr. 365b) after the university moved in 1989 from the city centre. Bowker does not mention this letter.
 - 25 Gordon Bowker, *Pursued by Furies: A Life of Malcolm Lowry* (London: HarperCollins, 1995).
 - 26 In fairness, this may have been at Jan Gabriel's behest, as (with Margerie hovering) she did not know what to do with the typescript, which was finally deposited after her death in the New York Public Library; even so, Bowker's failure to mention the script is, let us say, unusual.

- 27 Lowry's drafts (manuscript and typescript) of *Dark as the Grave wherein my Friend is Laid* are in the Malcolm Lowry Collection, UBC (Box 9:5) (the *In Ballast* material, pp. 345–52); the 'Varsity' Composition Book is also in that Collection (Box 12:14).
- 28 In what follows, I draw on my annotations to *In Ballast*.
- 29 The letter is included in the materials that Jan gifted to the New York Public Library (MS. Jan Gabriel Papers. Series iii [Box 2:6.]).
- 30 In 1934 Lowry drafted a letter (unsent) to Grieg (Jan Gabriel Papers, NYPL 2:30), recalling from 'Hjemme igjen' images of lovers but mangling Grieg's diction, his translation at odds with the polished perfection of the rest of that poem, which concludes Part V of *Ultramarine*. My thanks to David Large for first noticing this.
- 31 Pseudonym of Bertram Lennox Simpson (1877–1930), China correspondent and author of a controversial account of the Boxer Rebellion.
- 32 Gudmund Skjeldal, *Diktaren i bombeflyet: ein biograf om Nordahl Grieg* (Oslo: Cappelen Damm, 2012), p. 139.
- 33 *Bergens Tidende*, 22 July 1931, p. 2.
- 34 Several letters from Greene are held in the Nordahl Grieg Collection at Nasjonalbiblioteket (4° 2811).
- 35 In my annotation *IB* 413, note XVIII.50, 'Gokstadskipet' is carelessly mistranscribed as 'Gokstadshipet'.
- 36 Grieg's letter to Lowry of 17 September 1931, politely rejecting a further meeting, made its way to the Conrad Aiken Papers at the Huntington Library (AIK 2574).
- 37 Lowry's 'Circus Revy' implies that he thought this was its name, whereas it was advertised as 'Circus og Revy' [Circus and Review]. For details of the acts, and Lowry's scrambled translations of them, see *IB* 411, note XVIII.41.
- 38 As Lowry wrote to David Markson in 1951 (*CL* 2:428): 'Another spiral has wound its way upward. Reason stands still. What do we know?' (see *IB* 273, note III.67; 414, note XVIII.58).
- 39 Which was just as well, as the *Norna* was wrecked off Rørvik on 16 September 1931 (*IB* 408, note XVIII.16), something Lowry clearly did not know, for he would have made much of it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Identity and Doubles

Being and Writing in Malcolm Lowry's *In Ballast to the White Sea*

Pierre Schaeffer

In Ballast to the White Sea, a novel everyone familiar with Malcolm Lowry's life had believed irremediably lost in a fire that destroyed the shack he occupied with his second wife Margerie in the North Vancouver resort of Dollarton on 7 June 1944, was resurrected by a group of Lowry scholars in 2014.¹ In an essay dealing with doubles it is appropriate to point out that the text that was rescued from oblivion is an edited version of a manuscript that Lowry had entrusted in 1936 to the safe keeping of his first wife's mother. However, the *Ur-text*, whose existence became gradually known to Lowry scholars shortly before his first wife Jan Gabriel died in 2001,² seems to have disappeared, as Patrick McCarthy indicates in his introduction: instead of a complete holograph manuscript, two typescripts edited by Gabriel herself in 1991 can be found at the New York Public Library. To cut a long story short, the published scholarly edition is still very much a work-in-progress, quite different from – and possibly less sophisticated than – the 1944 version consumed by fire, for which Lowry provided an outline in a letter to his friend and disciple David Markson in 1951.³

The novel deals with the existential problems of Sigbjørn Hansen-Tarnmoor, a Cambridge undergraduate born in Norway but educated in England. His brother, Tor, also a Cambridge undergraduate, but disillusioned about his studies and life in general, announces his forthcoming

suicide in Chapter III, while both brothers also have to deal with their father's professional misfortunes. The latter is the head of a shipping company whose reputation has been seriously damaged by the sinking of two of its liners, the *Thorstein* and the *Brynjaar*. While the first three chapters lead to a tragic crescendo, the rest of the novel focuses on the way in which Sigbjørn copes with his guilt regarding his brother's death (he has failed to prevent Tor from committing suicide) and partly outgrows his burdensome past by returning to sea and enrolling as a trimmer on a ship in ballast to Archangel, which will eventually be redirected to Aalesund in Norway. From there he will also manage to get to Oslo in order to meet Erikson, the Norwegian writer who wrote a novel *Skibets reise fra Kristiania (The Ship's Voyage from Kristiania)* whose main character is, according to Sigbjørn, his fictional alter ego. This conviction that Erikson 'took the sea away from [him]' (*IB* 7) and the concomitant feeling of being *already-written* undermine Sigbjørn's own literary quest (the writing of his own novel based on his first experience as a sailor in the Far Eastern seas), yet awaken his desire to meet his literary model in order to ask permission to turn his novel into a play. Thus, Sigbjørn Tarnmoor is part of a long list of Lowryan characters who share with their author the same neuroses and obsessions. Lowry, as we know, was haunted by his hysterical identification with Benjamin Hall, Nordahl Grieg's protagonist in *The Ship Sails On (Skibet gaar videre* in the original Norwegian).⁴ He was plagued by the idea of having plagiarised Grieg (the real-life Erikson) in his own novel *Ultramarine*, whose protagonist Dana Hilliot shares some similarities with Benjamin Hall. Lowry's obsession finds its fictional equivalent in Sigbjørn identifying with Benjamin Wallae and *In Ballast* providing a kind of metafictional sequel to *Ultramarine*.

Sigbjørn is engaged in a twofold quest, an existential quest and an artistic one: in this chapter I shall assess the way he himself, but also his relatives, friends and acquaintances, undermine it or help it along. The first part of the chapter will focus on Sigbjørn's problematic *ontological doubleness* or *geminatio* with his brother. The second part will investigate the voices of authority – the inner voices of his conscience or real ones like Erikson's – which haunt Sigbjørn's inscape, and explore the ways in which they affect his voyage of self-discovery.

Autonomy, otherness and brotherhood: Tor and Sigbjørn's complex gemination

The protagonist of *In Ballast to the White Sea* is a restless young man: he was a ship's apprentice before going to university (like Lowry in real life) and he longs to return to sea. He would also like to become a writer, but feels he has been outwritten by his literary model, Norwegian author William Erikson. His search for identity is both hampered and helped along by his brother Tor, his girlfriend Nina and his father Captain Hansen-Tarnmoor. Another major difficulty that Sigbjørn has to face is to redefine his relationship with his brother.

Beyond the fact that they seem to be genetic twins,⁵ the novel exhibits a tension between their 'marked chemic dissimilarity' (*IB* 4) and a yet more arresting interconnectedness. The two boys have 'been brought close together in spirit' and rendered 'inseparable' (*IB* 4) by the sinking of their father's ocean liner, the *Thorstein*, which caused a heavy death toll and subsequent public outrage. This family tragedy has reunited them in a shared 'inner solitude' and 'common grief' (*IB* 4). But the fairly new 'armistice' (*IB* 4) between them should not make us overlook the profound 'schism' that exists between the two brothers: Tor is a nihilist who has not found any meaning to his life and who claims, Mallarmé-like, that '[a]ll the books are read' (*IB* 27)⁶ and that lectures are a waste of time. He considers himself 'an incurable petit bourgeois' and his marxmanship would thus seem to be of the 'indoor' kind;⁷ he envies his brother for his sailor's experience, though he also criticises him for having come back from the sea with 'a vague kind of mysticism that doesn't suit you at all' (*IB* 25). Sigbjørn for his part believes in the existence of a power for good which both his girlfriend Nina and Tor ascribe to a form of sentimentalism in him. However, in spite of ideological dissensions and sentimental rivalry over Nina, both brothers feel strangely tied to each other in a way that the tragic circumstances mentioned above do not wholly account for, and which the text describes in eerie, bio-psychological terms:

This quality common to them both that separated them from the mass of students was not however implicit in their foreignness. It arose rather from an inability to contact life at first hand, even if only to connect was their deepest desire: rather was it that each had become by virtue of the other's existence one place removed from life *as though the body of one brother lay across the opening of the cave of self in which the other lay captured, obstructing the light, yes, existence itself.* (*IB* 4, my emphasis)

Like the conjoined twins in Chapter VII boarding the *Arcturion*, the Tarnmoor ocean liner that Nina will travel on to go to the United States, the two brothers have become, as it were, mentally conjoined in their inability to ‘contact life at first hand’ and in view of the strange way in which Sigbjørn earlier on ‘could detect also within himself [...] the schism between them and narcissistically much of the ebb and flow of the other’s feelings’ (*IB* 3–4). This psychological interconnectedness is forcefully rendered by means of the simile italicised in the above-quoted passage, emphasising the impossibility of the brothers’ developing separate, autonomous selves.

In keeping with this line of thinking, Tor, shortly after learning that another ship belonging to his father’s company, the *Brynjaar*, has sunk, links this nightmarish event to another apparently permanent situation affecting him and his brother:

—What amazes me is that quite apart from this second disaster which seems more and more like a shocking nightmare than anything else, neither of us is real, is positive; we merge, one into the other; we’re fake, fake things, fake patchwork, jumbles of old quotations and second hand experiences. You’re something like me, something like father, something like Erikson. Even the *Brynjaar!* ... (*IB* 26)

What Tor expresses in this passage is a lack of differentiation between himself and his brother, so much so that neither of them can lay claim to a *real* existence. The ‘fake patchwork’ that he denounces includes their studies at Cambridge and their common origin, and extends to others related to them.

Given his nihilistic turn of mind, he promptly elects himself as *supernumerary* and the next quotation leaves no doubt as to what solution he has worked out to eradicate this cumbersome gemination:

— At this moment it seems to me merely the reflection of a great wreck, of a great collision somewhere else. Or perhaps it’s merely the driving home of an argument, the stipulations of which were manifest in the breaking up of the *Thorstein*. Don’t you think that if I died you could let all these contradictions and despairs, all the rest, pass into me as if I were a dying tree? But let me die, let me just fall away into the darkness and then you could advance, gliding away from all this like a ship, or no, not like a ship, not a ship... (*IB* 26)

Much as the *Brynjaar* is the double of the *Thorstein*, its twin sister in maritime tragedy, Tor feels that the two brothers’ lives reflect the same ‘wreck’, and the ‘great collision somewhere else’ can only refer

metaphorically to their own predicament. His solution, or so he claims, is to guarantee his brother's autonomy and viability by disappearing altogether and, through a fantasised transfusion of all negative moods and destructive ideas into his decaying self, ensure his brother's survival, a kind of freakish redistribution of vitality which, despite its obviously different context, brings to mind an eerie genetic peculiarity described by Joyce Carol Oates in her novel *Lives of the Twins*, where a tortoiseshell cat is said to contain his genetic twin:

'Tortoiseshells are unique creatures in that each is twins.'

'I don't understand,' Molly says nervously.

'They're freaks of nature,' says James. 'Each contains double genes. When the mother cat's egg is fertilized in the womb twin fetuses form but for some reason—ah, what pranks Nature plays! —the fetuses merge into a single organism within a few weeks: a single cat. But this cat will have the genetic material of both original twins.'

'In one cat?' Molly asks, horrified.

[...] 'The dominant twin, it might be called.'⁸

Whereas in *Lives of the Twins*, the freakish process is intra-uterine and is perversely mentioned by James, Molly's lover's identical twin,⁹ to suggest that he is the dominant one, Tor's scenario is devoid of malevolence and strikes the reader as altruistic: Sigbjørn, the dominant or more viable brother, will be the alleged beneficiary of the psychologically weaker one's self-destruction.

The similarities with the Oatesian situation are of course not genetic; they lie in the enhanced mental gemination or doubleness that will manifest itself after Tor's suicide. Like the tortoiseshell cat, Sigbjørn will sometimes behave as if he were double and his mind contained Tor's thought processes. When he explains to his father his reasons for undertaking a second sea voyage, he feels somewhat like a ventriloquist for his deceased brother:

—Is it as important why I go as that I am going?

—Yes it is [...] For you can't want to go to Russia if your motive is to see Erikson, who is probably in Norway. And if you want to go to Norway, the source of our ancestry, as you put it, you would scarcely choose to sign on a ship that went to Russia.

Sigbjørn thought, and when the answer came it was as though Tor spoke it.

—Erikson in some way connects me with the future. (*IB* 72–73)

When his brother said quite explicitly that he had been thinking

of suicide, Sigbjørn made a rather flippant answer: ‘—Well I’ve been thinking about murder, for that matter’ (*IB* 26).¹⁰ Whom he was planning to murder remains uncertain, but if his intention was to crack a joke about murdering his brother or to express some kind of hostility towards him because of Tor’s interfering with, and standing in the way of, his sentimental relationship with Nina, the rest of the novel seems to indicate that his guilty feelings for not preventing Tor’s suicide plague him and make him feel burdened with the weight of the past. Not only does he accuse himself of being his brother’s murderer in front of his incredulous father (*IB* 59–60), but he keeps on thinking like him. As he stands outside a tavern, trying to get away from his father’s guilt and the multiple newspaper headlines advertising the Tarnmoor company’s liability, he sees himself astride two worlds, the old decaying one of his father and the new one that has not materialised yet. He remembers his brother’s very words and believes in Tor’s transfusion of negativity:

Suddenly he remembered Tor saying ‘If I die you could let all your confusions pass into me as if I were a tree’; and he knew this in fact had happened. Or *a self had died a little every day since Tor’s death*. Soon it would pass out of existence altogether and all that would remain was an intuition, a part of that divine and not secular law that determines a man’s place on earth! (*IB* 78, my emphasis)

The self that has died is, as it were, Sigbjørn’s former guilt-ridden self, or so he likes to think, conniving at the scenario figured out by his brother. Sigbjørn may indeed be in the process of discarding past anxieties, but Tor lives on in him, so that the new Sigbjørn – the new man to come – is more than ever double, like Joyce Carol Oates’s freakish feline. Indeed, the new Sigbjørn will realise at the end of his journey that ‘*Only he in whom the past is stored is freighted for the future*’ (*IB* 236). This statement may well have been lifted from Johannes V. Jensen’s *The Long Journey*, referring to Christopher Columbus,¹¹ but it also happens to fit perfectly well Lowry’s purpose of presenting Sigbjørn as wiser and better equipped for the future inasmuch as he agrees to commit the past to memory rather than hoping to discard it altogether. In that respect, Sigbjørn is an exemplification of the Nietzschean individual with a bad conscience, or at least one who is not gifted with ‘the power of *forgetfulness*’, the ability to make ‘a little *tabula rasa* of the consciousness [...] – this is the benefit [...] of active forgetfulness, which is a sentinel and nurse of psychological order, tranquility, etiquette’; Nietzsche views this as ‘a form of *robust* health’, though recent history has taught us not to admire it.¹²

While not dispelling entirely the ambivalent feelings that Sigbjørn may have had towards his brother, his recurrent act of self-accusation bears witness to the fact that he is definitely not a 'tranquil' man, but a man with a conscience. We shall now see that he is also a man who, in true Lowryan fashion, hears voices everywhere.

Quests and voices

Sigbjørn is 'seeking [his] truth': these are the very words he uses at the end of his voyage in Oslo, when Birgit, his new love, asks him why he has come all this way (*IB* 240). His quest is manifold, but includes, as I have already pointed out, a desire to return to sea and fulfil himself. If one applies Greimas's actantial scheme to the story of Sigbjørn's quest, we may say that Tor is undoubtedly the main 'helper' (*adjuvant* in French), despite the touch of irony or mockery that he sometimes uses at his brother's expense.¹³ All the other characters, notably Captain Hansen-Tarnmoor and the several father substitutes in the novel (Captain Haarfragre, or Police Constable Jump who harbours fatherly feelings for Sigbjørn, among others), fall more or less neatly into the actantial category of *helpers*, although Nina, Sigbjørn's girlfriend, is both a *helper* and an *opponent*, given that her cult for action and her socialist materialism enable her to open his eyes on certain realities but prevent her from understanding the spiritual dimension of his quest. Importantly, the two boys' deceased mother also occupies an ambiguous position: she is all *helper* in the return to sea desired by her second son, but in psychoanalytical terms this desire to return to the liquid element can be read as a longing for the maternal womb, in which case she is also the beneficiary or *receiver* (*destinataire*) of her son's new self.

That the mother figure plays a central role in the narrative becomes quite clear in Chapter III when the two brothers look up the definition of the word 'matrix':

- Alma Mater, Tor was saying. It's strange how we come down to that symbol again, even in a university.
- Matriculation, for instance. By the way, what is a matrix? [...]
- Matrix: it is something holding...
- embedded within it... [...]
- it is the uterus or womb; the substance beneath the cells of a tissue.
- the formative cells from which a structure grows
- as part of a cutis beneath a nail. (*IB* 33–34)

Dwelling on the various semantic units of the word (including the maternal womb from which all beings originate and within which they are 'embedded'), and bringing up 'Alma Mater', the university which is metaphorically designated as a bountiful mother who nurtures the minds of her students, the two boys are reminded of their beginnings in life, both as fetuses and as former first-year students matriculating. Both matrices can be envisaged as life-giving and nurturing or stifling and deadly. Tor has made it clear that life at university is useless for him and he quite unambiguously opts for another form of entombment, equating his suicide with a return to the maternal womb:

—From the turmoil of the weary world, Tor was saying slowly, I return at last to the mother that bore me and retreat into the haven of the womb. So many of our friends are making that same journey, for better or for worse. And after all, why not? (*IB* 27)

Associating the maternal figure with the fulfilment of a death-wish, Lowry implicitly problematises the actantial function of Tor and Sigbjørn's mother, and the description of the photograph in Tor's room further emphasises her highly mysterious nature:

Their mother, in the photograph, a young fair-haired woman, typically Norwegian, with the sea-blue, sea-gazing eyes, looked down on them from the photograph above the books: but there was something unmalleable in that face, something forbidding, too, but at the same time not positive in those eyes even when one did not see the colour: as though whatever reality or conviction she held did not exist in its own right, but was simply a reaction to something else. (*IB* 33)

Mrs Tarnmoor is described in fairly negative terms ('unmalleable', 'something forbidding' / 'not positive in those eyes') and her fair hair and 'sea-blue, sea-gazing eyes' may remind us of the Lorelei and the treacherous deadly tricks she played on hypnotised sailors. The boys' mother attempted suicide by hanging for obscure reasons apparently related to an uncle's bankruptcy (*IB* 35), but her husband almost miraculously walked into the office and saved her. All in all, the impression we derive is that of a mysterious character, not quite the devouring mother, nor the nurturing one that one would normally expect. Her own death, prior to the family's departure from Oslo, has fixed her spiritual abode in a kind of semi-mythical, yet altogether forbidding remoteness.

However, not only is the trauma of her death rekindled in Sigbjørn's mind ('Now it moved again, just as he had stirred in the womb, the

pain of the memory of his mother's death stirred in him' [IB 32]), but his mother's voice haunts him and is part of a chorus accompanying him on his way back to his own college before the midnight curfew, apparently enjoining him to disregard the hour and return to his brother in order to prevent him from committing suicide:

Ah, midnight must have started already without his hearing it. He stopped short again, his heart beating. Go back. He listened for the clock but the clock was not striking. It was, in fact, hesitating and it was hesitating before it said something. And this is what it said.

Womb—

Yes, it said 'womb': the clock was beckoning him back, the voices were murmuring to him, 'go back, go back, go back.' His mother stood over him: Go back. He heard the clock hesitating again [...] and the clock said:

Tomb—

The clock said 'tomb' and he ran on again [...] If he failed to keep a twelve he would be sent down. If he returned he would be unable to get in. But then they'd have to leave anyway. Would they? The police? [...] In fact, somebody was running after him now, would catch him up if he wasn't careful. Both were running and gasping for breath. Tor would be gasping for breath too. He heard the sound of his own gasping. But this was a nightmare. He would wake up in sunlight after a night of horror. None of this was true. We do not associate such—

Doom, the clock said finally [...] (IB 40)

This passage finds Sigbjørn torn between two disproportionately different duties: saving his brother by returning to his college versus complying with strict curfew hours. The 'musical' piece orchestrated by his anguished self is played by his beating heart, a chorus of murmuring voices repeating the same refrain: 'Go back, go back, go back' (with his mother as the lead voice), and the fantasised clock voice playing its contrapuntal, ponderous triplet: *Womb*, *Tomb*, *Doom*. These voices are, of course, fantasised ones, the 'voices of conscience' which accompany Sigbjørn's *psychomachia* and about which Mladen Dolar raises essential questions:

A long tradition of reflections on ethics has taken as its guideline *the voice of conscience* [...] There is a widespread figure of speech [...] a metaphor (*idem*), which associates voice and conscience [...] Is this internal voice of a moral injunction, the voice which issues warnings, commands, admonishments, the voice which cannot be silenced if one has acted wrongly, simply a metaphor? Is it the voice that one actually hears, or is the internal voice still a voice, or is a voice that has no empirical manifestation perhaps the voice

in the proper sense, closer to the voice than the sounds one can physically hear? [...] Is ethics about hearing voices?¹⁴

In view of what I have said above concerning Sigbjørn being a man with a conscience, the answer is that, for Lowry, ethics is indeed about hearing voices, and the whole novel, not only the passage quoted above, exemplifies this belief. Nor can their reality be called into question from Sigbjørn's or Lowry's point of view: vocal hallucinations and acoustic fantasies are just as real as outside noises, and the internal voice, itself "an atypical voice," the intersection of the inner and the outer,¹⁵ becomes actually more real when it enhances with meaning, as it does in Sigbjørn's soundscape, the chiming of the college clock.

The exhortative voices continue after Sigbjørn's return to his own room. A photograph of his parents can be found above his bookshelves, while below it, a picture of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* on which Sigbjørn sailed completes the undergraduate's visual montage and interestingly qualifies our metaphorical understanding of the voices' message:

Over his books, his father and mother looked down at him. The room crowded with voices. Go back, go back, go, back.

Below them was a photograph of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, bearing down the Arabian coast with a load of frightened horses, burying and wallowing in her way: homeward, onward? He fell into a chair. Now in his brain he seemed to hear the creak of the encased steering, the spinal cord of the ship, the vast sea noises of night, the water against iron plates, the scream of the gale in the jackstays, and he saw again the sea rushing past him like a vast negative; or as a manuscript of music is unrolled, so was unrolling ceaselessly the dark parchment of the sea.

Go back. (*IB* 40–41)

The same refrain haunts Sigbjørn, albeit with a slight insistence that a mere comma can produce in a sentence: 'Go back, go back, *go, back*' (my emphasis). The finality of the last injunction gives us pause. Back indeed, but *where to*? The previous passage left us in no doubt as to where the young man should return. With the new contextual photographic set-up and the ensuing maritime symphony that breaks loose in Sigbjørn's brain, the interpretation of the final words seems to steer us in another direction: he is now hearing the voices of the sea, the 'call of the sea' with which his 'sea-gazing' mother is also associated. The devouring mother has already claimed one son's life. Sigbjørn's longing to return to the sea, and not knowing exactly whether he should want to aim for Russia (the land of the future, according to his brother and Nina) or Norway (the

land of his ancestry, and of his mother) points to an ambivalent object of desire hovering between *Eros* (the living impulse) and *Thanatos* (the death instinct). If his mother can be seen as a not-so-distant cousin of the German river mermaid, then a very sombre interpretation is possible and can lead us to the conclusion that the 'Go back' injunction is a way of claiming her second son's life. Such is the power of the water maidens that they

stir up your emotions because they are seductresses whose voices enthrall you, they are phallic and devouring creatures like the archaic mother. Men are all the more awe-struck by the deadly, devouring mother as very archaic impulses make them yearn to return to the intra-uterine world through death or through being devoured.¹⁶

Whether we subscribe fully or partially to such psychoanalytical interpretations, it still remains that the injunction to 'Go back' functions both ways and evinces Sigbjørn's dilemma in a forceful and eerie manner. Once again, we are reminded of other exhortative voices, those of the roaring Horseshoe Falls at Niagara, which, according to local belief, urge people to take the jump and commit suicide, as depicted in Joyce Carol Oates's novel *The Falls*. The parallel is all the more striking as the same type of repetitive and lingering refrain is used to goad people on and get them to commit the irreparable act, for instance when Revd Erskine's suicide in the first section of the novel is described in all its sublime gothic horror, focusing on the chemical disintegration of the body on which the monstrous falls seem to be feeding.¹⁷ However, whereas '[t]he Falls at Niagara [...] exert upon a proportion of the human population [...] an uncanny effect called the hydracropsyctic' (as Oates puts it in one of her novel's fabricated epigraphs), and 'render the will of the active, robust man in the prime of life temporarily invalid, as if under the spell of a malevolent hypnotist',¹⁸ Sigbjørn's inner voices, uncanny though they may be, remain fully acousmatic, that is, fully invisible and enigmatic, rather than frightening and fiendish like the Horseshoe Falls. Furthermore, the mother figure in Lowry's novel must be understood as ambivalent rather than unambiguously malevolent.

Sigbjørn's return to sea is also motivated by his desire to meet his literary model Erikson, who is neither a father figure for him nor exactly his double, but more of a 'kindred spirit' according to Patrick McCarthy (*IB* xxvii). The encirclement and absorption of the literary father, as fantasised by Lowry and Conrad Aiken in *Ushant*,¹⁹ cannot be envisaged here. In Oslo, so we are told, 'Sigbjørn has expected to meet his double

but on the contrary Erikson is his exact opposite' (*IB* 238). Physical differences are but the visible sign of an inoperative, indeed impossible, 'hysterical identification' (*IB* 48). Interestingly, if the novel dramatises the existential resolution of how the brotherly double – Tor – is outgrown through a process of physical elimination (suicide) and vocal absorption or ventriloquism, it defeats Sigbjørn's – and Lowry's – desire to come to grips with his Norwegian model. In Chapter IV, Sigbjørn's letters to Erikson remain unsent and therefore unanswered. Sigbjørn can thus give free rein, in true Lowryan fashion, to his fantasy of losing himself in Erikson's fiction. His identification with Benjamin Wallae, Erikson's protagonist, is part of what he calls 'a stage in [...] the adolescence of a creative writer' (*IB* 48). Thus, Sigbjørn can write to Erikson: 'But your book destroyed my identity altogether, so close was it to my own experience' (*IB* 47) and relish his artistic and existential misery. In Oslo, however, the encounter between Sigbjørn and Erikson does not seem to leave any room for such a narcissistic search for doubles. Or, to be more accurate, the fragments that have been put together by Jan Gabriel to provide a tentative ending to the novel in the last chapter offer two contradictory views of the potential relationship between Sigbjørn and Erikson. In the fragment written in the first person, Erikson becomes unwittingly (but deliberately on Lowry's part) a supporter of Conrad Aiken's theory about the son killing the literary father in *Ushant*:

However he was impressed with my knowledge of [his novel] [...] To tell the truth I believe he was more impressed with the dramatic possibilities of our relationship than anything else, for he once said, 'We should write a play about this thing—you *should* have written the book but unfortunately, I have—the play turns on that—and in the end, *you* kill *me*. (*IB* 237)

This passage reads like a temporary wish-fulfilment on Lowry's part, eager as he probably was to fictionalise yet another psychodramatic scene between his alter ego and Erikson/Grieg in accordance with his fantasised paradigm of literary filiation and murder.

However, in the last four pages, entitled by Jan Gabriel 'Notes from Malcolm's outline for In Ballast' (*IB* 237–41), the Norwegian capital has become quite revealingly 'the pole where the ideal and the real meet' (*IB* 240), and Erikson acts as the ultimate voice of authority while subduing his young visitor into humility. Indeed, in those very last pages, Erikson, along with Birgit, personifies socialist ideals: his sense of ethical responsibility reminds Sigbjørn that 'the day of privacy is over and [that he] must engage [him]self in the struggle common to us all' (*IB* 240). As one

would expect, the unimportance of one's self in the face of communist ideals is not very congenial to Sigbjørn, nor is the implicit statement that he may never become a great writer:

But you have also discovered that only a few in life are important and that you may not be one of them. Just as you were a character in that book, so has your long voyage brought home little more to you than that you are a pawn in the game which must be won to make the world livable for those who come after us: if that pawn suffers, who shall hear of it? (*IB* 240)

Erikson accepts Sigbjørn's vision of himself as a character the better to impose on him the idea that he is but a pawn in the real world and that his personal fate is of no consequence at all. Thus, he urges him to view his voyage as an eye-opener. Delusions of self-fulfilment should be superseded by a selfless impulse to help others and strip oneself of any remaining layer of egotism. In this divesting of oneself lies a kind of rebirth, leading Erikson to say: 'And now you are as an infant and must start again' (*IB* 241).

For Lowry's fictional alter ego, however, this is tantamount to depriving him of what fuels his artistic creativity: 'First you take away my religion and now you take away my despair' (*IB* 241). One could even go so far as to say that the religion of despair is what has spurred him on, and the cry that functions as a kind of anti-closural ending to this novel-in-the-making ('How shall I live without my misery?' [*IB* 241]) bears witness to the fact that Sigbjørn/Lowry is both unable and unwilling to let go of what Jan Gabriel called 'those nightmare visions Malc both fled and craved'.²⁰ Birgit, described as Sigbjørn's potential new sweetheart, seems more empathetic than Nina, but she shares the latter's and Erikson's brand of social realism and thus also urges Sigbjørn to 'make a depth-charge of [his] grief' (*IB* 241). Her friendly suggestion is actually what prompts Sigbjørn's final anguished cry.

In the end, the rebirth that Erikson foresees for his new friend, provided he engages himself 'in the struggle common to us all' (*IB* 240), and that Sigbjørn acknowledges as a form of self-discovery which has made his voyage worthwhile, is but short-lived. Indeed, Sigbjørn cannot accept the advice given by Erikson (and Birgit), nor does he welcome enthusiastically the rebirth supposedly generated by this encounter. He sees it as 'a moment of perfect ambivalence and pain' (*IB* 240), for although his project to turn *Skibets reise* into a play has been approved by Erikson, Sigbjørn cannot help fantasising that his future is being written: his literary dependence on Erikson is thus another example of entanglement

that deprives him of his free agency, something that he both ‘flees’ and ‘craves’, hence the painful ambivalence that he perceives. Erikson has no sooner attempted to liberate him from his past than Sigbjørn forecloses his future: the infernal pattern is once again envisaged, so much so that the ultimate cry can only be interpreted as a rhetorical question. There is indeed no living without one’s misery for Sigbjørn: as Lowry’s alter ego, he cannot throw overboard his painful identification with others on his voyage out. His doubles are constitutive of his being and of his writing self, and the novel *In Ballast* already contains the harbingers of a fraught conscience on which Lowry’s *Voyage that Never Ends* would thrive.

Notes

- 1 Malcolm Lowry, *In Ballast to the White Sea: A Scholarly Edition*, ed. Patrick A. McCarthy, with annotations by Chris Ackerley (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2014). Hereafter cited in parentheses in the text as *IB*.
- 2 Its existence was officially revealed by Jan Gabriel in her autobiographical memoir published the year before her death: *Inside the Volcano: My Life with Malcolm Lowry* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2000).
- 3 See *Sursum Corda! The Collected Letters of Malcolm Lowry*, ed. Sherrill Grace, 2 vols (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995, 1996), 2:423–32 (hereafter *CL*).
- 4 In a letter sent to Nordahl Grieg in 1939, six years after the publication of *Ultramarine*, Lowry exaggerated his indebtedness to the Norwegian writer and confessed: ‘My identity with Benjamin eventually led me into mental trouble. Much of U. [*Ultramarine*] is paraphrase, plagiarism, or pastiche, from you.’ *CL* 1:192.
- 5 On p. 5, Sigbjørn comments to Tor that it is nearly twenty-two years ‘since we were born’, and on p. 35, when Sigbjørn remembers the episode of the brothers digging in the garden, the text states ‘It was their birthday’, thus indicating that the brothers are indeed twins. Elsewhere, the text is less explicit about this, merely using the term ‘brother’. On the opening page, Sigbjørn is referred to as the ‘younger’ brother (*IB* 3), but this could apply whether they are twins or not. My interest in this chapter is in the psychological doubleness of the brothers as Lowry presents them, their ‘complex gemination’, as I put it.
- 6 In his poem entitled ‘Brise Marine’ (Sea-Breeze), Mallarmé wrote: ‘La chair est triste, hélas! et j’ai lu tous les livres./ Fuir! là-bas fuir! Je sens que des oiseaux sont ivres/ D’être parmi l’écume inconnue et les cieux!’ (The flesh is sad, alas! and all the books are read./ Oh, to fly! Fly away over there! I can feel birds luxuriating ecstatically/ in the unexplored foam and the heavens!) (my translation).

- 7 See how Sigbjørn makes fun of Tor's "virile solidarity" of the proletariat' (*IB* 31). 'Indoor marxmanship' is a kind of Marxist posture which Conrad Aiken, Lowry's other model and literary mentor, denounced in a letter to his protégé of 15 December 1939: "I think the influence of the Complex Boys, these adolescent audens spenders with all their pretty little dexterities, their negative safety, their *indoor marxmanship*, has not been too good for you" (Aiken, *Selected Letters*, p. 239). Quoted by Chris Ackerley and Lawrence J. Clipper in *A Companion to Under the Volcano* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984), p. 14, note 14.2, italics added. Lowry subsequently used the expression 'professional indoor Marxman' to deride Hugh's naïve Marxist sympathies in *Under the Volcano*.
- 8 Joyce Carol Oates (writing as Rosamond Smith), *Lives of the Twins* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), pp. 69–70.
- 9 Jonathan McEwan is Molly Marks's psychiatrist and falls in love with her. Molly discovers that he has an identical twin (from whom he is estranged) who also happens to be a psychiatrist. Once her relationship starts with Jonathan, she can no longer be his patient. At his urging, she goes to see another shrink but does not tell Jonathan that the one she is seeing – and whom she will get to know more intimately as well – is his brother James.
- 10 His attitude altogether reminds us of Lowry's own flippancy when his homosexual Cambridge friend Paul Fitte announced his decision to kill himself. Tor's suicide is based on this real-life incident, although brotherhood has been added in the novel. But Sigbjørn's encouragement, '—Kill yourself. Yes, why not? Go on and die and then they'll be sorry they treated you so mean' (*IB* 26), has the same touch of sarcastic irony as the words Lowry is supposed to have used to encourage Fitte to commit the irreversible act. Whether Lowry helped him to seal up his bedroom before he turned on the gas is purely conjectural. Lowry's reconstruction of the incident for the benefit of his first wife may have been partly fabricated and partly true, alcohol and guilt being good assistants when Lowry fictionalised reality. See Gabriel, *Inside the Volcano*, pp. 76–77.
- 11 See *IB* 409, note XVIII.25.
- 12 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic* (1887), trans. Michael A. Scarpitti (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2013), pp. 43–44.
- 13 For a brief and efficient presentation of A.-J. Greimas's actantial scheme, see Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Routledge, 1983), pp. 34–36.
- 14 Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), p. 83.
- 15 Dolar, *A Voice*, p. 84.
- 16 B. Marbeau-Cleirens, 'Imagos maternelles chez les hommes', dissertation, Paris V, 1983, p. 239. Quoted in Marie-France Castarède, *La Voix et ses sortilèges* (Paris:

Les Belles Lettres, 2004), p. 179. My translation of the original French: 'Les filles des eaux font vibrer la sensibilité parce qu'elles sont séductrices, enchantresses par leur voix, phalliques et dévoratrices comme la mère archaïque. Les hommes sont d'autant plus envahis par la crainte de la mère mortifère et dévoratrice que des pulsions très archaïques les poussent à désirer retourner dans le monde intra-utérin par la mort ou la dévoration.'

- 17 Joyce Carol Oates, *The Falls* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), pp. 26–39.
- 18 Oates, *The Falls*, unnumbered epigraphical page.
- 19 Conrad Aiken, *Ushant: An Essay* (1952) (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1962).
- 20 Gabriel, *Inside the Volcano*, p. 80.

CHAPTER NINE

The Lost Other

Malcolm Lowry's Creative Process

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The recent discovery and subsequent publication of Lowry's lost novel *In Ballast to the White Sea*, a form of *Künstlerroman* with a budding writer as its protagonist, calls attention to the importance of loss in Lowry's creative process. This is all the more striking when we consider that the manuscript of *Ultramarine*, the book which plays a central part in *In Ballast*, almost came to be lost as well, since it was left in a cab by Lowry's editor. We may therefore wonder whether this is but another manifestation of Lowry's being 'pursued by furies' – to borrow the title of Gordon Bowker's biography of the author¹ – or whether this loss, and even more so the fact that Lowry never tried to retrieve the typescript of *In Ballast*, although he must have known that a copy had been left with his former mother-in-law, do not point to loss as seminal to Lowry's creative process.

Though lost and never rewritten, *In Ballast to the White Sea* survived – until the 2014 publication of the scholarly edition – as a trace, as the presence of an absence, in other works by Lowry and in letters, most notably in a 1951 letter to David Markson where Lowry extensively discusses the plot of his lost novel. Significantly, the plot outlined partly departs from the 1936 typescript we now have, although the main idea – the identification of the young protagonist with the protagonist of another novel written by a Norwegian author who, he feels, has written before him the novel he was planning to write – remains the same. *In Ballast* appears as an evanescent novel, whose form is not fixed; a work

constantly in progress, evolving and being toyed with by Lowry, even though such recurring Lowryan themes as identification with another, the feeling of doom and of having one's life written by another, retain pride of place.

Lowry repeatedly said that *In Ballast* was meant to stand as the *Paradiso* piece in his long-planned Dantesque trilogy, a pendant to *Under the Volcano*, its infernal double so to speak.² The tragic irony of the *Paradiso* piece destroyed by fire while the *Inferno* is saved cannot escape notice. Yet isn't the very disappearance of *In Ballast* what eventually accounts for its paradisiacal dimension? Paradise can only exist as an absence, a distant horizon always to be reached, which stimulates the writer's quest and his writing. Wasn't *In Ballast* somehow fated to be sacrificed so that *Under the Volcano*, Lowry's masterpiece, might live?

The beginning of the 1936 typescript, which depicts two brothers in Cambridge looking at the grass mound opposite the prison and 'standing by the pole marking the spot of the last hanging on the Mound',³ hardly strikes a hopeful note for a book which, Lowry claimed to Markson, 'is on the side of life'.⁴ The sense of an ending and of imprisonment is further conveyed by the newspaper headline the two brothers come upon announcing the eruption of Mount Ararat, symbolically barring the possibility of Noah's Ark finding a sanctuary and saving humanity from the biblical flood, and of the two brothers' escaping disaster:

—Yes, Tor, where shall we go now in that ark of yours you always talk of building? [...] Sigbjørn looked at the stake planted on the site of the old gallows. And for a moment he had the nightmare notion that this hill where they were standing was actually Mount Ararat itself. Why make any journey? (*IB* 5)

The mention of the dead volcano's eruption seems to point to the infernal character of the novel and to make it a companion piece to *Under the Volcano* rather than its antagonist. But if pairs cannot be saved as they were in the Old Testament story of Noah's Ark, perhaps the sacrifice of one (brother or book) may allow for the other's survival, an interpretation also suggested by the gallows mound that cannot but evoke Golgotha. This may be one way to account for Lowry's affirmation to David Markson: 'Plot of *In Ballast* has a triumphant outcome'.⁵ It is true, the novel remained unfinished, and Lowry perhaps would have added 'a triumphant outcome'. As it stands today, however, frustrating any sense of resolution, the triumph may lie precisely in this absence of fulfilment. It is the empty tomb in which there remains only the trace

of an absence (the grave clothes), the sign of triumphant resurrection that liberates speech. Uncompleted, and eventually lost, *In Ballast* is the absence that promises new life and creation.

This intuition may find a confirmation in the parallel that can be made between *In Ballast* and *Dark as the Grave wherein my Friend is Laid*, both novels about novels that stage their protagonists' quests towards the origin of their creations. Just as *Dark as the Grave* is a return to the place where Sigbjørn Wilderness, alias Lowry, had written *Under the Volcano*, so *In Ballast* is motivated by Sigbjørn Tarnmoor's desire to meet the author whose works inspired the writing of *Ultramarine*. In both cases, the quest proves elusive, and the title of the later novel highlights loss and grieving for this loss as an important feature of Lowry's art.

It is clear that mirror images, duplications and embeddings play a significant part in *In Ballast*, both in its diegesis and in the structural position it holds in the economy of Lowry's works, and I shall try to show how the motif of the double, figures of the artist, creation and loss work together to delineate Lowry's creative process. To do so, I shall first examine the protagonist's attempt to become a subject and his positioning towards others who often become mirror-images, images of otherness within, as well as the quest for origins such an attempt entails. The longed-for rebirth, however, demands going through a trying experience of loss. My second contention is that *In Ballast* offers a different relationship between the subject and the other, one that substitutes for the tragic loss of the other a means to play with absence in what has been termed by French psychoanalysts *ob-jeu* [ob-play],⁶ and which relies on Freud's theory of *fort/da* developed in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The special place *In Ballast* holds in Lowry's *grand-oeuvre* as both an absence and a presence could thus designate it as his *ob-jeu*, a metaphorisation that allows him to negotiate the ineluctability of absence and turn it into a productive tool.

Trying to become a subject

Early in the novel Sigbjørn, who has recently come back from his first sea voyage as a coal trimmer, expresses 'the desire to rotate, to break away' (*IB* 11). Sigbjørn is repeatedly reproached with being too self-centred and narcissistic: 'This whirligig of self has got to slow up. If you're going to be any good as a man or as a writer it's got to finish' (*IB* 24), his brother Tor tells him, a reproach later voiced by Nina, his former girlfriend, and his father. Back from a first voyage which gave rise to much introspection

and is the material of the first book he is working on, Sigbjørn comes to realise 'the abysmal concentric conversations' (*IB* 6) that were part of his experience, and wonders:

How to break the circle of self, even in the shadow of disaster, he knew that was the thought in the hearts of them both, how to break from this hill on which they [he and Tor] were standing, the *curved coward circle* from which neither had ever emerged. (*IB* 6, my emphasis)

The womb-like circularity, emphasised by the alliteration, points to the need for rebirth. The self-centred protagonist needs to be reborn as a subject,⁷ that is, according to Paul Ricoeur,⁸ as a dichotomy between self and other, between a self with its own sense of existence and an intersubjective self altered through its relationship with others, between an active self and a passive one acted upon by others and by objects. Sigbjørn, who believes that his experience at sea, meant as self-discovery, has been stolen from him by Erikson, now feels the need to start again and to try to get a better grasp on who he is, as he writes to Erikson in an unfinished letter:

Your book, then, not only made my own seem futile but robbed my voyage of its last vestige of meaning; in an important sense, it cancelled that voyage; forced me out of the pattern of my destiny, so that the voyage has to be remade, the pattern pieced together once more. (*IB* 46)

In order to go beyond the narcissistic stage of development, Sigbjørn needs to stand aside to be able to look at himself, and to do so, he needs mirror-images, the latter implying both sameness and opposition. Thus, Erikson is at once a double and a reverse image of the protagonist:

Sigbjørn has expected to meet his double but on the contrary Erikson is his exact opposite. Whereas Sigbjørn is fair-haired, Erikson is dark. Sigbjørn is tough looking, broad-shouldered and of medium height: Erikson is tall and slender, fragile, even tragic-looking; everything perhaps that Sigbjørn as a child wanted to become. But the room and Erikson's books are, in a sinister fashion, like his own. (*IB* 238)

Erikson makes Sigbjørn realise his own narcissism, the main difference between their two novels being that Sigbjørn's is eventually self-centred while Erikson's protagonist opens up to others.⁹ The dialogue with the other appears as a dialogue between contradictory facets of the self, or as Sigbjørn says, quoting Maurice Barrès, 'a dialogue between our two Egos, the momentary Ego we are and the ideal Ego towards which we strive' (*IB* 47). Such dialogue is also at work between the two

brothers, Sigbjørn and Tor, who first appear as perfect doubles: both are fair-haired, 'a pair of white swallows among their dun fellows' (*IB* 4), keeping together and shunning their fellow students so as to avoid their remarks on the *Thorstein's* shipwreck and to support the family ship-owning company and their father. When they call their father to comfort him, they are one, as implied by the third-person singular: 'This is Tor and Barney¹⁰ speaking' (*IB* 21). However, the *Doppelgänger* soon turns out again to be an adversary, that is etymologically *ad-versus*, one that stands on the other side: Sigbjørn and Tor are two opposite sides of the same coin and one helps define the other:

But now as the sea tugs at the very souls of the sister ships lying in harbor, or as the moon draws the disconsolate twin tides of the day to herself from the shore, so a dual magnetism seemed to be pulling these brothers out again towards the separate poles of their oceanic destiny. (*IB* 4)

The two brothers' destinies seem at once intertwined and chiasmic: Sigbjørn went to sea while Tor remained to study in Cambridge, each envying the other's life. Their jealousy also bears on Nina, both brothers being attracted to her, a feature characteristic of literary stories of the *Doppelgänger* where rivalry in love is an index of the love-hate relationship between the ego and its alter ego. The double is indeed the projection outside of otherness within. And contradictions are emphasised in the novel, a striking feature of which is the great number of dialogues between characters confronting their different points of view.¹¹ There are many arguments between the protagonist and Tor, his father, Nina, Captain Haarfrage, which may be interpreted as so many instances of an inner dialogue between Sigbjørn and himself in his attempt to become a subject and face the delusion of an integrated and coherent Ego. Besides, there are many instances when it is difficult for the reader to make out who is speaking, Tor or Sigbjørn, in lines that follow one another without any introductory verbs.¹² The confusion thus created merges two different positions and voices into one. Turning the *Thorstein* into a metaphor of the self, and considering the reason for her shipwreck, Tor says: 'How man stationed in one dimension can direct his life in accordance with a law belonging to another [...] a man could go mad trying to reconcile these irreconcilables' (*IB* 25). Trying to present and reconcile irreconcilables is indeed what the various figures of the double endeavour to do. Sigbjørn's father and Nina may also be considered as embodiments of the figure of the double. On parting with Nina, Sigbjørn says: 'And we shall always remain friends. Just like

brothers, in fact. Oh well, here's to our darkness and our brightness, may they part with a gesture of extreme—' (*IB* 99).

Contradictions may even turn into inner conflict, and one part of the self turn against the other, or alternately one part be sacrificed so that the other may live. As they climb the staircase to Tor's room, Sigbjørn feels a sudden jealous anger, 'but it was as though this emotion were being experienced by somebody else for whom he was partially responsible but with whom he was not inwardly involved' (*IB* 22). Guilt creates further multiplication of the self, and the theme of betrayal and sacrifice is made obvious as Tor's study, looking over to Corpus Christi, is compared to Golgotha. The Judas–Christ motif goes together with the Cain–Abel one, a recurring phrase, borrowed from Erikson, being 'Cain shall not slay Abel today' (*IB* 26). Yet Tor does commit suicide, a sacrifice meant to allow his double to get rid of his inner contradictions and live on:¹³

Don't you think that if I died you could let all these contradictions and despairs, all the rest, pass into me as if I were a dying tree? But let me die, let me just fall away in darkness and then you could advance, gliding away from all this like a ship, or no, not like a ship, not a ship... (*IB* 26)

The *Doppelgänger* motif actually makes sacrifice and murder one and the same thing, and Sigbjørn experiences further alienation as he cannot recognise himself when he tells his brother 'Kill yourself. Yes, why not?' (*IB* 26), or again mistakes Tor for Erikson, further complicating the double motif. As Tor invites Sigbjørn to 'come with [him]', the latter declines, feeling in a vengeful way that now is Tor's 'turn to go to sea' (*IB* 39). Bringing together the long journey to the other world with Sigbjørn's voyage at sea links death and Sigbjørn's planned rebirth, as though the two moves were one, as Tor suggests:

But all the same, if I killed myself, and you signed on a Norwegian ship as you're saying you will (just as I'm always saying I'll kill myself) [...] which got you back to Norway, or we both got on a Norwegian ship, signed on *down below*, it'd be as if— (*IB* 27)

Indeed Sigbjørn's attempt to become a subject also implies, as the etymology *sub-jacere* suggests, a 'going under', to try to discover what grounds the subject. This going beneath may also hint at the unconscious. In order to be reborn into a subject, Sigbjørn explores the origins of his being. This implies, after a stay in Cambridge, a return to Liverpool and the family house, a return to the father, playing golf with him as he used to as a child, and a return to literary father figures, since the

trip Sigbjørn wants to make is also in part motivated by a desire to meet Erikson, who ‘stole his birthright’ (*IB* 66). The trip is therefore also a retracing of literary origins, the making of *Ultramarine*. To his father’s query about his desire to go to sea, Sigbjørn answers:

—Yes, I’ve got to get away, out, back into my own tracks, to the sources of my ancestry.

—That is to your own mother, to Norway.

—Well ... on a Norwegian ship. But she’s bound to Archangel for timber. I don’t know whether I’ll touch Norway.

—Then what about Erikson? (*IB* 64)

The father is quick to understand the real purpose of this going back, implying even that the simple boarding of the ship meets the appointed target:

Then your purpose, or your lack of it is dual, the Captain said [...] You have to set out; you are on a Norwegian ship; and to that extent you are home already [...] [J]ust as you are home already, in a sense, on that Norwegian ship *Unsgaard*, you also meet Erikson, identified there as a member of the crew. In short, you meet yourself. Only a new self. (*IB* 65)

In fact, the journey on a Norwegian ship is first and foremost a going back to the mother, a return to the mother-country and a tribute to the mother’s love for the sea. Sailing maternal waters in a womb-like ship is a return to the matrix, the meaning of which the two brothers look up in the dictionary:

—it is the uterus or womb; the substance beneath the cells of a tissue.

—the formative cells from which a structure grows. (*IB* 33–34)

It is therefore meant as a rebirth, and it is no coincidence that Sigbjørn is supposed to leave port on the day of his birthday. Yet working in the hold of the ship as a trimmer also implies being in close contact with the hellish fire of the unconscious, as Tor reminds Sigbjørn: ‘So that’s what you long for, is it, the fire of the unconscious, which is also the womb’ (*IB* 18). Going down below into the unconscious and into the womb-like hold brings together the life drive and the death drive. ‘From the turmoil of the weary world [...] I return at last to the mother that bore me and retreat into the haven of the womb’ (*IB* 27), Tor says as he considers suicide. The voyage to Norway is presented as a quest and a digging into the past, for, to the brothers, it evokes their mother’s threat that they’d ‘go down to the Underground Railway’ if they dug in the flower beds, an episode that took place on their birthday and that creates terror in Sigbjørn. The story,

whose brief surfacing at various points in the text signals it as recalling a traumatic incident,¹⁴ is later told by the father, who explains how the two brothers dug and fell into a shaft, compared to a womb-like crater (*IB* 143), and had to be rescued (or delivered) by mechanical diggers, which ‘had to cut across to the spot where [they] were entombed. It was Caesarian!’ (*IB* 143). The episode concentrates the Freudian womb/tomb equation, the death drive that lies within the desire to return to the mother,¹⁵ while pointing to the necessity of a Caesarean section to deliver the children and allow their rebirth. The cutting off from the maternal body is indeed vital, even though it is a painful partition.

The trials of loss

Rebirth, like birth, requires separation and forces Sigbjørn to face loss and emptiness:

And as Tor laughed again, another old grief unfolded within Sigbjørn, a grief so bitter he had postponed ever truly recognizing it. Yet it had lain neglected in a corner of his consciousness for many years. Now it moved again, just as he had stirred in the womb, the pain of the memory of his mother’s death stirred in him. More than this, perhaps, he began to feel at this moment, almost physically, the monitory presence of his mother in the room. *As a child from school who feels its own dead mother on the stair and sets her place at table and at chair.* (*IB* 32)

Faced with this loss, Sigbjørn’s reaction is to fill the void with the ghostly presence of the mother, a mother whose place at table signals an oral stage characterised by a fixation on the mother as food provider, her absence creating a void that needs to be filled. Parting from a feminine figure is a distressful experience for Sigbjørn, as evinced in his relationship with Nina. From the start, the two lovers fear separation as atomisation: ‘they had clutched each other with a sudden fear lest that rondure of the earth over whose face their destinies were being carried would separate them like two whirling atoms’ (*IB* 13). Even later, when their relationship has deteriorated, the farewell is painful, Sigbjørn suggesting that they each renounce their separate trips to start again together, although as Nina forces Sigbjørn to acknowledge, there is no place to go.¹⁶ A glimpse of Paradise can only come at the time when it is irretrievably lost, just as their idyllic relationship only exists as lost:

For a few moments it was as though they were reprieved; no conflict had been born within them [...] there was no hurry to leave paradise. This instant

was their marriage. This was what their relationship should have been: never again would they be parted.

Then the moment was over. (*IB* 106)

For Sigbjørn and Tor, the unhappiest places are those of parting – station platforms or wharves:

—Yes, the station platform, Tor replied at last. Where there are so many partings. Its heart cracked with grief, I used to think when a child [...]

—And all the wharves, Tor. That smoke which is so evanescent, so like pity, like love, like a dream of the sea. (*IB* 6)

Sigbjørn's parting from his father at the station evokes the same words, 'cracked with grief' (*IB* 168), as they utter 'inaudible phrases of parting, of love' (*IB* 168), again as though love could only be hinted at when the object is about to be lost. Just as love only seems to take shape when the other is about to be lost, so perfect happiness is immediately marred by the fear of abandonment, as Sigbjørn explains to his father.¹⁷

In *L'Absence*, Pierre Férida writes: 'the anxiety linked to the loss of the love object can be interpreted as the anxiety of the self not to be able to survive beyond the disappearance of the object'.¹⁸ Incorporating the love object is an imaginary means of denying its existence as separate from the self. But it also enables one to fight against the fear of being absorbed by the fascination exerted by the love object. Thus, Nina is described by Tor as 'absorbent – as if she would draw one into her own world' (*IB* 14), but she also reproaches Sigbjørn for rejecting her difference and trying to absorb her.¹⁹ In a dream that he has just after being reminded of Tor's suicide, Sigbjørn imagines being absorbed in a voracious maternal furnace within the womb-like ship he is about to board:

The furnace doors of the *Unsgaard* opened before him. A spiral of flame shot out. The fire fluttered like a flag, the wavering flag that covered the trimmers in the *Inferno!* The fire leapt out in the form of his mother to embrace him, to clasp him in the maw of the flames. Eight bells. On deck the trimmer off watch lowered the corpse of his mother, wrapped in the Norwegian flag. (*IB* 83)

The love–hate relationship to the love object and the contest between the subject and object as to who absorbs whom betrays the cannibalistic imagination underlying Sigbjørn's unconscious, as does his reference to Hansel and Gretel (*IB* 36) in another dream based on the traumatic episode previously mentioned when the two children are swallowed by Mother Earth. This type of relationship is repeated with Tor, and it is

telling that Sigbjørn should use phrases and words previously uttered by Tor after the latter's death, as though he had indeed incorporated his lost brother, just as he does with Nina after she has left. Such cannibalistic contest and incorporation is also at work in the complex literary connection between Sigbjørn and Erikson, between Erikson's protagonist Benjamin, and Sigbjørn's protagonist, identified only as X:

But your book destroyed my identity altogether, so close was it to my own experience, both in fact and within my own book, that I begin to believe almost I am Benjamin Wallae, your character. But if that is so, I ask myself, where and who is X, the projection of myself in my own novel which will never be finished. Where and who is he and who are you? (*IB* 47)

The same was true, according to Sigbjørn and his father, for Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne, the former feeling that the latter had already written his books better; in their conversation, the four writers merge, and Oslo becomes the new Nantucket, Moby Dick's new abode.²⁰

If incorporation is a means to avoid annihilation of the self, the confusion it creates between self and other prevents the rebirth Sigbjørn longs for, as his drifting thoughts when he is in a bar after Tor's death suggest:

He tried to shut out all thought of himself from the world, all thought of Nina, of Erikson, of his father, to free his being on existence itself; the strain of this effort suggested to him the curious idea that he was actually taking part a second time at his own parturition; but it was transient agony as yet, and he knew as the sound of the world came back that it was not yet time for his release [...] [He] tried to distinguish life's faces, the specialty of special faces, the different particular tragic sense of each life, tried to imagine what made life possible for each, and then, with horror, he realized the truth: he could not distinguish one face from another; this was what he had been brought to; all the faces were the same!

And now all the faces were his own [...] Was this the beginning of madness or the darkness that precedes a new birth? [...] This was collapse, breakdown, debacle [...] He could either go in a lunatic asylum, could give in to this [...] or he could let one part of himself, or one self, sink utterly in darkness, and abstracting from it all its disordered, kinetic power in the service of human courage [...] he could go forward. Get out! Back to the sea. Or to fire! (*IB* 79)

Accepting separation and loss, and facing emptiness without trying to fill the void, appears essential to rebirth. The trial of loss is at once

softened and brought to the fore in *In Ballast* thanks to the sympathy that others' losses arouse in many characters, a feature uncommon enough in Lowry's works to be noted. A succession of benevolent father figures sympathise with Sigbjørn's ordeals, as do the sailors on board the *Unsgaard*, and figures of authority (the father, the Captain, a policeman) are pacified: the consistent threatening Other is deflated and can no longer fill in and cover the underlying emptiness.

From subject to *ob-jeu*

In order to be able to go forward, and eventually leave port, Sigbjørn needs to accept the core of emptiness of the subject, that which allows movement: 'Isn't that all we are, husks driven before the storm' (*IB* 11), he intuits at the beginning. The erasure of Tor's name, and later Nina's, forewarns their disappearing from Sigbjørn's life but also points to lack as an essential dimension of the self: 'the metal envelope enclosing the name T.H. Tarnmoor was vacant' (*IB* 21). It would seem that in the argument between Tor and Sigbjørn, the latter believing that there is secret knowledge buried somewhere, Tor is more clairvoyant: 'The goal of the seeker of wisdom is the juncture of two obliterations. One is of knowing nothing and the other is of knowing there is nothing to know' (*IB* 12).

In a discussion with Nina, Sigbjørn comments on the very title of the novel:

In ballast to the White Sea indeed! Throw the cargo overboard – including the captain's wife. Still, a ship in ballast was none too easy in a heavy sea, and should she run into really dirty weather –

—There's a vacuum in the centre of every well-conducted tornado, he said. (*IB* 102)

As well as alluding to the sailors' saying, the reference here to the 'captain's wife' may also be a hint at Sigbjørn's mother, suggesting the need to empty her over-present absence in order that the ship of the self can move on. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that the voyage should be to the White Sea, the colour of *Moby Dick*, about which Melville writes:

Is it by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids, the immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors [...]?²¹

This whiteness also characterises the snowy landscapes of Norway or even Liverpool on the winter evening when, calling for ‘a debacle of self’ (*IB* 85), Sigbjørn is desperately waiting for Nina to come. The snow, which can so easily melt, accentuates ephemerality and absence, and there are many references to the evanescent beauty of snowflakes in the novel.²²

Besides, the final destination of the voyage to the White Sea remains uncertain, even to the Captain, and when it is eventually known, it is quickly cancelled, the ship stopping in Aalesund, cutting short Sigbjørn’s first sea voyage. What matters is not so much the destination, which can change, as the movement it creates. Sigbjørn will eventually decide to take a train to Oslo in order to try to meet Erikson, but even that encounter is not really conclusive, and ends in nothingness:

‘And now you are as an infant and must start again,’ Erikson was saying. ‘Or you leave like Tchekov’s old lady without anything.’

‘First you take away my religion and now you take away my despair.’ [...] ‘But dear God’, Sigbjørn cries. ‘How shall I live without my misery?’ (*IB* 241)

Emptiness, lack, is what creates a dynamic, fulfilment being indefinitely postponed. The importance and variety of means of transportation in the novel – walking, driving, sailing, taking the train, a taxi and, with no other apparent reason, being given access to the thoughts of an aircraft pilot – are significant. As Sigbjørn’s father says: ‘the memory of the land in which the childhood of a race was spent lives in our dreams of a lost Eden or the Blessed Isles. This yearning made us Vikings and explorers’ (*IB* 153). Sigbjørn’s many hesitations before boarding the *Unsgaard*, and his walking away from the ship, first simply as a means to take some distance and see her from outside instead of being enclosed in her, but then with the temptation of escaping, prove how difficult it is to part. It is, however, telling that it is when the ship seems to go away, leaving her berth vacant, that Sigbjørn is drawn back: ‘Some instinct presently bade him return, if only to the wharf the *Unsgaard* had left, to the womb from which she had been severed. That emptiness was a wound within him’ (*IB* 214). As it turns out, the ship has simply been moved a quarter of a mile from her original position, and Sigbjørn is eventually able to embark, unhesitatingly this time.

This points to a further step necessary for coping with loss and absence: instead of identifying with and sticking to the object, it is possible to play with it as in Freud’s *fort/da* theory. McLaughlan explains:

Freud observed how his grandson negotiated the anxiety of maternal separation by cathecting his fears into the object of the bobbin in the *fort/da* episode. For Freud, this [...] is a transformative mechanism designed to reinstate agency in a scenario (the separation from mother) that is experienced as passive.²³

Repeatedly throwing away the bobbin, so that it disappears from his view, and making it reappear by pulling the thread back, enables the child to play with presence and absence. Fédida writes: 'Playing is always recreating erasure, making what is hidden appear by making it disappear.'²⁴ It is true that here, the ship disappears from Sigbjørn's view without his agency, but the presence/absence of the ship seems to mirror a long succession of hesitations about his own going away. Besides, Fédida points out that an element of surprise is necessary to play, otherwise the thread to the lost object remains too close to manipulation. Sigbjørn's hesitations are also echoed in the forever postponed departure of Nina's ship,²⁵ and of the *Unsgaard*. As for the long-expected meeting with Erikson, supposedly the climax of Sigbjørn's journey, it is evoked twice without our knowing whether the scene is actually repeated or whether it is an alternative scene, which might even call into question the reality of the meeting; and in any case Erikson has little time for he is about to leave for England. The fragments of letters Sigbjørn writes to Erikson, but does not send, each ending with a dash, seem to play again with this presence/absence, the dash representing both incompleteness and the thread that links the subject to the absent Other.

The importance of playing with the object, to turn it into an *ob-jeu*, to take up Fédida's word, is also intimated by the many references to drama in the novel: Sigbjørn keeps encountering advertisements for a play, *The Race with a Shadow*, and he enters a pub called *The Players*, but first and foremost his relationship with Erikson increasingly turns around the idea of a play. Indeed, Sigbjørn plans to turn Erikson's novel into a play while Erikson is writing a book on Elizabethan dramatists and has himself become a playwright, taking distance from his former novel, and thereby giving Sigbjørn 'carte blanche' (*IB* 237) to dramatise his novel:

To tell the truth I believe he was more impressed with the dramatic possibilities of our relationship than anything else, for he once said, 'We should write a play about this thing—you *should* have written the book but unfortunately, I have—the play turns on that—and in the end, *you* kill *me*.' (*IB* 237)

If both drama and novels allow for a possible identification between subject and object, drama adds an intermediary part: the actor. Acting introduces distance between actor and character and therefore prevents deathly identification. Corinne Ernaudeau writes:

For the actor, the lost object that he wanted to possess is the character himself, or rather, it is the lost object of this character [...] To act the character is to play not what he says and does, but the lack that makes him speak and act. To play is not therefore to make the character present, but rather to make him absent. To render the self-absence (that is) the unconsciousness of desire.²⁶

Tamara Guénoun comments:

In this sense, the actor's acting could be qualified as acting absence. The character would be a spiritual absence allowing the actor continually to invent a relation to absence [...] In this respect, the character can be considered as this 'inter-space'. The character is this subjective trajectory, this contact object, this *ob-jeu* [ob-play], that serves as a metaphorization with regard to the ineluctable aspect of absence.²⁷

In Ballast to the White Sea intimates the necessity for the protagonist to invent a new relationship with the object and with its absence, to find an intermediate space between identification with the lost other and annihilation of the self, an intermediate space that allows for symbolisation. Playing with the presence/absence of the other is a never-ending process that enables Sigbjørn to live on, and may account for the uncompletedness of the manuscript. My contention is that *In Ballast* dramatises its own function in the economy of Lowry's works and points to the importance of loss in his creative process. As a lost object, it is first incorporated in typically Lowryan fashion, in his *grand-oeuvre*, to be kept alive as a lost object, a characteristic of cannibalistic melancholy which, according to Fédida, is not so much a regression as a phantasmal scenario.²⁸ But the way in which Lowry keeps mentioning the lost novel, the supposed mirror-image of *Under the Volcano*, in various letters, toying with the different positions it might occupy in his imagined trilogy, and then within his expanded concept of *The Voyage that Never Ends*, points to the novel as an *ob-jeu*, an in-between space that allows Lowry to domesticate the anxiety of emptiness and the fear of the blank page and play with absence/presence. At once present and absent, *In Ballast to the White Sea* warrants that the voyage of writing never ends.

Notes

- 1 Gordon Bowker, *Pursued by Furies: A Life of Malcolm Lowry* (London: HarperCollins, 1993).
- 2 Lowry mentions this in a letter to Albert Erskine, dated 22 June 1946. He writes: 'Under the Volcano was initially planned as the inferno part of a Dantesque trilogy to be called *The Voyage That Never Ends*. Lunar Caustic was the purgatorial part, but was to be much expanded. I lost all the notes for its expansion in a fire [...] *The Paradiso* part was called *In Ballast to the White Sea*, was a good deal longer than the Volcano and was completely destroyed in the fire here which took our house and all our books.' *Sursum Corda! The Collected Letters of Malcolm Lowry*, ed. Sherrill Grace, 2 vols (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995, 1996), 1:580 (hereafter *CL*). He returns to the idea in a letter to David Markson, dated 25 August 1951; *CL* 2:417.
- 3 Malcolm Lowry, *In Ballast to the White Sea: A Scholarly Edition*, ed. Patrick A. McCarthy, with annotations by Chris Ackerley (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2014), p. 3. Hereafter cited in parentheses in the text as *IB*.
- 4 *CL* 2:418.
- 5 *CL* 2:420.
- 6 The term was first used by Francis Ponge to refer to the multiplicity of subjects before the object, and was later taken up by psychoanalysts such as Pierre Fédida, René Roussillon and Jacques Lacan.
- 7 In philosophy, the Cartesian subject is supposed to be an individual able to think and grasp himself or herself as a subject, while the exterior world on which he exerts his or her thought is the object, yet this self-grasping is complicated by the unconscious as discovered by psychoanalysis.
- 8 Paul Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Seuil, 1990).
- 9 In a letter to Erikson, Sigbjørn writes: 'In my book, the mass is only important for the personal adjustment it enables one man to make; in yours the personal adjustment is important and rightly important only because it strengthens the mass' (*IB* 50).
- 10 Barney is the nickname given to Sigbjørn by his brother and his father.
- 11 The amount of spoken dialogue, often taking up full chapters, is something that is not to be found in other works by Lowry, in which we mostly access the characters' minds through 'stream of consciousness'.
- 12 See, for example, *IB* 26 or 28.
- 13 It is to be noted that Sigbjørn's father is also ready to commit suicide so that his son may move forward: 'The health of the whole and the health of the part being one, my death, the death of a bad habit, or the plucking out of an offensive, corrupt organ, is as important as your life: much more, it makes your life possible. Something that is quite dead cannot corrupt the whole' (*IB* 147).

- 14 Cf. *IB* 8, 27, 35.
- 15 The episode is indeed reminiscent of Freud's analysis of the uncanny and the fear of being buried alive in Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher'.
- 16 Cf. *IB* 105.
- 17 Cf. *IB* 146.
- 18 Pierre Fédida, *L'Absence* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), p. 92.
- 19 Cf. *IB* 110.
- 20 Cf. *IB* 61.
- 21 Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), pp. 295–96.
- 22 'What had happened since Tor's death? He couldn't remember this clearly either. There seemed a void where his memory had been. But quite suddenly it ceased to be a void, and filled with whirling fragments; like snowflakes they drifted ceaselessly to some hostile area of his brain where, for a hundredth of a second, each fragment became a fact, then melted and was gone' (*IB* 221). The ephemerality of any attempt at filling the void is thus underlined.
- 23 Robbie McLaughlan, 'The Trauma of Form: Death Drive as Affect in *A la recherche du temps perdu*', in Julie Taylor (ed.), *Modernism and Affect* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 44.
- 24 Fédida, *L'Absence*, p. 187.
- 25 It is to be noted that Nina's ship also disappears from Sigbjørn's view, creating an intense feeling of loss, only to reappear an instant later, for it had simply been obscured by the mist (*IB* 122).
- 26 Corinne Enaudeau, 'Le corps de l'absence dans la présence de l'acteur', in *Brûler les planches, crever l'écran, la présence de l'acteur* (Paris: L'entretemps, 2001), p. 41, quoted in Tamara Guénoun, 'The Character as a Figure of the Otherness that Exists in the Self', *Recherches en psychanalyse*, 2015/1 (no. 19), pp. 50A–58A, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-recherches-en-psychanalyse-2015-1-page-50a.htm> (accessed 11 March 2020), para. 22.
- 27 Guénoun, 'The Character as a Figure of Otherness', para. 26.
- 28 Fédida, *L'Absence*, p. 92.

CHAPTER TEN

Infernal Discourse

Narrative Poetics among the Ashes of *In Ballast to the White Sea* and *Under the Volcano*

Christopher Madden

Among the many phenomena that can now be called upon to support the view that *In Ballast to the White Sea* and *Under the Volcano* share a kinship¹ is the fire that nearly consumed both novels at Dollarton. Quite literally Lowry confronted the inferno, and in turn his readers confront another inferno in his work. The dangers for literary criticism of all too easily conflating the bio-social reality of an author's life with his poetics barely need rehearsing. Yet it is not only possible but patently obvious that Lowry transferred his lifelong fear of conflagration (which, it is fair to say, was not unfounded) to his narrative poetics. Witness, for example, the shadow that *In Ballast* cast across *Dark as the Grave wherein my Friend is Laid*, in which Lowry metamorphoses into Sigbjørn Wilderness, who travels to Mexico with his wife Primrose after their home is destroyed by fire. The couple are weighed down by the 'burned remnants of the manuscript' in their cumbersome luggage, 'four almost perfect circles of page fragments, upon each of which, in the faded typescript of the text appeared, terrifyingly enough, the word "fire"'.² Placing the very real fragments of a work-in-progress in a fictive suitcase is in fact one of Lowry's most compelling *meta-fictional* images. '[T]his is the book', Wilderness later confirms to Primrose. 'The real book. Now, it's as if everything we do is part of it. I can't write it, of course.'³

The writer's faith outweighs what is extant of his work, which is to be expected, once Lowry's reluctance to attempt a total restitution from the remains of the real *In Ballast* is considered. Hence, in a conversation with Peter Stanford, the individual credited with saving the fictive *In Ballast*, Wilderness's stark phrase 'the book was a dead loss'⁴ reveals a particular relationship to loss generally, psychoanalytically speaking predisposed to acting out rather than working through.

A similar resistance to the possibility of redemption is active across the communicative technologies that feature prominently throughout Lowry's *oeuvre*: the letters, postcards, telegrams and telephone calls that are instrumental to relationships between self and other, sometimes to the self alone, that infernal discourse then devolves. But what of the link between fire and communication? 'Is there not an uncanny similarity between the texts of these *envois*, Lowry's and your own?', ask Niall Lucy and Alec McHoul in 'Lowry's Envois'.⁵ A story of the lost manuscript of *In Ballast* is told here through the conceit of an open letter to Jacques Derrida, the 'Envois' section of whose *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (1987), which performs philosophy by means of the epistolary tradition, rather than through the essay genre, influences their speculative approach. The comparison drawn by Lucy and McHoul is between the absent text of *In Ballast* and the lacunae peppering 'Envois', 'a blank of 52 signs'⁶ indicating the disappearance of the speaker's correspondence precisely where it has been incinerated on the page. The publication of Patrick A. McCarthy's scholarly edition of *In Ballast* would appear to change all this, reverse the situation of speculating about an author's work on the basis of a novel-shaped lacuna. Lucy and McHoul's argument persists, however, because *In Ballast* is incomplete, remains scarred by fire, but more than anything is underwritten by the infernal symbolism and discourse operating across the extant text itself. That 'Lowry's Envois' was published before the typescripts of *In Ballast* emerged from the archives does little to blunt this chapter's argument about the enhanced function of communicative technologies across the two novels under consideration. Nor does it diminish the relevance of Derrida to Lowry, as not only Lucy and McHoul have testified but also Sherrill Grace, whose scholarship on the importance of letter writing to Lowry the individual – his paranoia around plagiarism notwithstanding – and to his poetics remains the touchstone on which the present chapter builds.⁷ The recent volume of essays *Going Postcard: The Letter(s) of Jacques Derrida* (2017) confirms the continuing legacy of *The Post Card* and helps to bolster the theoretical foundations of Lowry's

technology-technē matrix. Added to this is the most recent edition of Derrida's *Cinders* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), another instance of critical theory keeping the French philosopher's flame alive, and whose figural language not only invites strong comparisons to *The Post Card* but more crucially for our purposes offers terms that resonate with Lowry's infernal discourse.

In Ballast's status as a work-in-progress can justifiably be measured against *Volcano* as the most advanced crystallisation available of Lowry's poetics. This reinforces the critical case for reading both novels in tandem, irrespective of the competing visions of the epic sequence with which Lowry toyed but of course never fulfilled. While *Volcano's* infernal qualities leave its position in some Dantean schema in little doubt, the intended role of *Paradiso* for *In Ballast* is far less convincing. As I aim to show, the two novels are related more by their demonstration of infernal discourse than by any kind of logical progress towards redemption, and in this they indicate their rightful place in the vast unfolding canvas of *The Voyage that Never Ends*, 'the whole bolus of 5 books'⁸ Lowry described as replacing the original conception of a trilogy.

Infernal discourse exists as much by the light that fire provides as by the destruction trailed in its wake. An instructive parallel for approaching the earlier *In Ballast* and the signifying power of letters to Lowry's poetics can therefore be found at the end of the first chapter of the later, and indeed revised 1947 version of, *Volcano*. Jacques Laruelle – or 'M. Laruelle' as the text insists, with the formal precision of the postal service – is in a *cantina* and has been handed an edition of Elizabethan plays that the Consul had once loaned him. Laruelle discovers a letter written by the Consul to his wife Yvonne when it falls to the floor from the book.⁹ The letter's foreboding opener ('Night: and once again, the nightly grapple with death' [*UtV* 41]) marks entry into a mind increasingly doused in alcohol ('Several mescals later' [*UtV* 43], 'Several mescalitos later and dawn in the Farolito' [*UtV* 45] as the span of the Consul's letter writing is mapped) in which the surrealist horror of the Consul's encounters (that vulture in the washbasin!) is matched by the hopelessness of his pleading: 'I have grasped at every root and branch which would help me across this abyss in my life by myself but I can deceive myself no longer. If I am to survive I need your help. Otherwise, sooner or later, I shall fall' (*UtV* 43). There is no possibility of redemption if the request for succour fails to reach the proposed redeemer. 'I have been compelled to write this, which I shall never send, to ask you what we can do', the Consul admits towards the letter's end; 'Is not that

extraordinary?’ (*UtV* 45), a fact already inferred by the narrator before Laruelle’s reading (*UtV* 41).

Declarations of actively desired deferral are particularly loaded utterances in the formal typology of postal communications. Hence, akin to the Consul, Sigbjørn in the fourth chapter of *In Ballast*: ‘I have written, without posting, several letters (*IB* 42); ‘I have written you many letters, none of which have been posted’ (*IB* 45). Deferral afflicts the composition as much as the posting stage of letter writing: ‘I have contemplated writing you for a long time’ (*IB* 43); ‘I have long been impelled to write to you. In fact I have written to you many times’ (*IB* 47). As with the Consul, none of the letters Sigbjørn writes to William Erikson, his Norwegian literary idol, are in fact posted. Almost all of them are marked ‘not finished’; letters n and y are ‘not proceeded with’; letters f, u and x, we are told, are ‘not inserted’, Sigbjørn’s radical self-doubt seeing the envelope as a boundary too far; letters s, t, y and z, on the other hand, are abandoned at the point of salutation. The final letter is addressed to Benjamin Wallae, the protagonist in Erikson’s novel and the primary object of Sigbjørn’s hysterical identification. This turn in the consciousness of the letter writer, from Erikson via his publisher to the impossible addressee of a fictional character, signals a narcissistic retreat that compounds their stunted individuation. It also confirms the fact that the letters in the fourth chapter testify to a large degree to Sigbjørn’s entrance into and indulgence of a solipsistic space of writing, as removed from the everyday demands usually fulfilled by the postal services as it is possible to get.¹⁰

Laruelle’s reading and burning of the unsent letter inaugurates an epistolary function that cleaves to cinders. Remnants signify. ‘[A] few grey wisps of ashes floated in the thin smoke, a dead husk now, faintly crepitant...’ (*UtV* 47, ellipsis original): if the material support of the Consul’s voice goes up in smoke, the signifying power of that voice circulates revenant-like through our reading of the text. This pivotal moment and indeed the meta-critical reflections posed at the beginning of this chapter about the near destruction of *In Ballast* call to mind a key phrase from *Cinders: Il y a là cendre*:¹¹ ‘cinders there are’. In an unmistakable case of *différance*, Derrida alerts us to the grave accent on ‘la’, which converts the singular feminine definite article into the adverb: ‘there are cinders there’. ‘[The] accent,’ he explains in his Prologue,

although readable to the eye, is not heard: cinder there is. To the ear, the definite article, *la*, risks effacing the place, and any mention or memory of

the place, the adverb *là* ... But read silently, it is the reverse: *là effaces la, la effaces herself, himself, twice rather than once.*¹²

The general facticity of remains (that ‘cinders there are’ is undeniable) becomes, via deixis, the locating of remains in a particular place. In *Volcano*, cinders are actual within the text’s schema: there are cinders there, right where Lowry puts them at the end of the first chapter; and this incendiary scenario haunts the novel, the reader extrapolating cinders as figures of textuality even when no smoke is detected. This appears to be so with *In Ballast*: there where the letters are, there is no sign of smoke. According to this logic, Sigbjørn’s letters are not transformed by the actions of another character into smoke signals contaminating the text along with the dispersal of ashes. Some expansion of the term ‘infernal discourse’ is required to take account of the inherent technē of Sigbjørn’s letters and their relation to the rest of the novel, a relation that cannot but be read in light of *Volcano* while also contrasting such figural dissemination. ‘Inferno’ need not always imply consumption by fire, but nor does it exclude the anticipation or intimation of apocalypse that fire entails (in this sense it is future-oriented but not presently realised).

The transferral of focalisation from third-person narrator to the Consul’s voice in his letter is intensified by the retreat from the established setting of the *cantina* in the present to the interior space of the letter in the past. Such spatio-temporal collisions rupture the novel’s time sense. ‘...“A CORPSE will be transported by express!”’, the diegetic jolt of the second chapter’s opening sentence declares (*UtV* 48). Against the many examples of failed communications in relation to its living characters, the express service of the delivery system is pointedly ironic, even if it is the Day of the Dead. Chapters 2–II constitute the text’s main framework, which means that if the novel has a ‘beginning’ as such, it is announced in the second chapter’s first line, which immediately casts a disquieting affect, on the border between festivity and mortality (such is the sensibility of the alcoholic), over the rest of the novel. The first chapter frames the framework along the lines, it could be argued, of an extended prologue in all but name. Reproduced without intervention from the narrator or the character reading it, at most the frame suggested by the Consul’s letter is of the real reader reading through Laruelle’s eyes, although nothing in the letter or the text itself directly influences our perspective. If the burning changes this, alters our view of the letter’s potential to determine the course of events, it does so ambiguously: neither Laruelle nor the narrator discloses the reason why

the letter is consigned to ashes. Only the philosophy of cinders remains to situate our reading of the event. The ceding of diegetic control is even more emphatic in the case of the fourth chapter of *In Ballast*. Here there is neither the frame of a character reading the same letter(s) nor extradiegetic material introduced by the narrator consciously aware of the letters' existence. 'The fire: what one cannot extinguish in this trace among others that is a cinder', Derrida writes. '[M]emory or oblivion, as you wish, but of the fire, trait that still relates to the burning.'¹³ Hence the reader goes forth into *Volcano's* second chapter contaminated by thoughts of irreversibility and the irrecoverable, at the same time that structurally speaking the text has reversed time itself. It is as if we are already inspecting the contents of an urn prior to the incin(d)eration.

The cast and constitution of protagonists hailing from different, if notionally related, novels influences any view of each text's epistolary tendencies. The stark contrast between the mescal-soaked Consul, in plot terms reaching the end of his life but in theory precipitating it before its natural cessation, and the young, self-consciously wise Sigbjørn, whose desire to enter the institution of literature belies his naivety in worldly affairs, might put any comparison in dispute. Yet this polarity in the recognised phases of an individual's life has little to no effect on the intensity of expression in their letters. If the surrealist horrors of the Consul's discourse outweigh Sigbjørn's passionate advocacy of the self, this is a matter of quality rather than quantity. The tortured circumnavigation of the object of expression by means of infernal discourse holds true for both protagonists. For this reason it is important to recognise the rhythms of Sigbjørn's correspondence at length:

Only the 'voyage' remained true, in a sense the fulfilment of my dreams; the voyage within me, the voyage of my soul towards its heritage, while my body, tortured and torn away from it, suffered every torment of deprivation; so that in spite of its nature I still feel this voyage was a return, or, should I say, a pilgrimage towards a goal, or towards a beginning—or towards an attitude!—that may never in this life be reached. (*IB* 43)

Clauses pile up breathlessly against the semi-colon; the sentence structurally overruns itself, thought straining against its own progression, interrupted rather than seamless. 'Voyage' is something of a keyword in Sigbjørn's correspondence, repeated (sixteen times) to numbing effect as if to stress the manner in which the failed sending of the letters imparts the same stillborn quality to the force of the character's expression: cold abstractions are incapable of effecting positive change in the real

world. ‘Voyage’ appears preferable to ‘journey’, along with ‘pilgrimage’ one of a number of cognate terms that articulate the text’s concern for, and grammatical characterisation of, the ‘future’. Tellingly, ‘voyage’ also invokes Lowry’s projected epic, posing the thought that such verbal repetition would have registered differently across some vast metonymy had *The Voyage that Never Ends* come to fruition. In its absence, we read ‘voyage’ instead in light of the real-world actuality of that ‘never ends’. Moreover, the periphrasis on display here, one among a number of the real author’s elements of style, taps into the dawning realisation of Sigbjørn’s constitutional incapacity for synthesis, a crisis of individuation that not even a completed *In Ballast* might have attempted to resolve. Rather than showing evidence of actual and substantive change in mind and body, the *Weltanschauung* of this *Künstler*¹⁴ reveals precious few signs of the self’s evolution beyond mere alterations in the language describing it:

Three years ago I wanted to find myself, now I want to lose myself. Then I wanted to discover my place on earth, believing it to be that of a writer: now I know that I shall never find any true reality or permanence in my private universe, or multiverse. (*IB* 44)

Later, we discover that both the hero’s father and Nina, not only Sigbjørn’s lover but his brother’s as well, are convinced that his revolutionary zeal is nothing but an extension of aesthetic desire, a significant if small feature of the real universe that Sigbjørn realises deep down cannot brook the harsh realities of life for the working class under capitalism. Thus, ‘Without debacle revolution is impossible. I make a debacle of self’, conveys an essential truth that the protagonist himself cannot grasp, since while it is easy to explain the structure of historical events, it is much harder to genuinely influence them. ‘You’ve spoken to me in letters in the past of the “debacle of self”’ (*IB* 147), Sigbjørn’s father reminds his son offhandedly, which he then cynically spins into self-reflection: ‘The debacle is not, as a matter of fact, of your own self, but rather of myself: of that self which knows but does not act on its knowledge’ (*IB* 147). The reader is likely to agree, while taking the wisdom of the self-regarding paterfamilias with more than a pinch of sea salt: his sturdy denial of the catastrophes that have unfolded in his name, in which corporate negligence colludes with the unchecked urge of the powerful to protect their wealth and privilege, is a very particular evasion of reality. Like father like son. Revisiting the subject of his brother’s suicide time and again, Sigbjørn’s ‘reckoning’ with the catastrophe he knew could have been avoided similarly rings hollow.

The ironic image of father and son confiding about matters of life and death during a round of golf is therefore not lost on the reader. The established image of city and country, infernal Liverpool traversed in the fifth chapter against the paradisiacal Wirral on the River Dee, is disrupted by the circumspection of the golf club manager, a faint but telling echo of the crowds that the shipowner and his son fear will turn on them. This contamination of the image of idealised life is further underscored by one of three references to the Mostyn furnaces in Wales, 'lashing vermillion against the angry sky, as though something, or the shadow of something, were there, gesticulating in the furnace light' (*IB* 127).¹⁵ Ackerley's annotation for this image, in which he invites comparison with the view from Dollarton of the '[S]HELL Refinery at Burnaby,¹⁶ Lowry's later emblem of hell' (*IB* 341–42, note VIII.24), proves the extent to which Wilderness's observation about 'the great chain of the infernal machine of my life'¹⁷ becomes co-extensive with discursivity, namely the narrative optic provided by character, narrator or focaliser. The Captain's reference to the correspondence he has received from his son but to which the reader is not privy registers as a gaping void in terms of the text's epistolary regime, a strategy of withholding the referent reminiscent of Sigbjørn's allusion in the fourth chapter to letters that remain forever undisclosed.

The question of which letters are reproduced in the text and when is a matter not of who is writing but of who is organising such content for the reader's examination. Even against the unambiguous identity of each letter writer (primarily Sigbjørn, the Consul and Yvonne), under the terms of infernal discourse the narrator function is shrouded in uncertainty. J. Hillis Miller, in a commentary on *The Post Card*, calls us to the sense in which epistolary texts serve the logocentric notion of the unified self or ego. This applies to novels with pronounced epistolary elements but that do not wholly inhabit the novelistic sub-genre, as in Lowry. Certainly the principle of intervention is a presiding feature of third-person narration, even when diegetically speaking the terms of expression are presumed to be confined to sender and receiver in a given epistolary image. As Hillis Miller writes:

An epistolary novel differs from novels like *Middlemarch* in having, typically, no overt narrator. Nevertheless, the presence of a supervising and ordering consciousness is implied in the way the letters are put in a sequence that tells a unified story. A vestigial narrator is implied, in some cases, in the identification of the sender and receiver of each of the letters in some impersonal, exterior, notation.¹⁸

The content of Sigbjørn's letters leaves no doubt as to the character's presentation of ego: more than anything they expose their writer's tortured striving as a result of the threat that Erikson's work poses for the fulfilment of his vocation as a writer, which cannot be separated from his emerging subjectivity. It is therefore not difficult to arrive at the notion that *In Ballast* deliberately unsettles the so-called tradition of the Western novel in which 'the author, narrator, and characters are unified and remain the same through time, however much they evolve'.¹⁹ The ellipses and omissions in the fourth chapter, together with traces of loss as in the Captain's allusion to his son's letters, demonstrates not only a lack of exterior notation but differential movement across a signifying chain that the narrator and protagonist cannot unify on their own terms. Citation of the phrase 'debacle of self' by Sigbjørn's father may recognise something previously considered internal and private both to the protagonist and to the text, but in the end, cut loose from the correspondence to which we are not privy, it is another figure of loss highlighted by infernal discourse.

Semantic correspondences between the three major structural categories of the postal principle – delivery, destination and arrival – and the narrative process as a reckoning with redemption is a constant source of anxiety throughout the 'Envois' of Derrida's *The Post Card*, and has profound implications in Lowry's fiction: delivery is to deliverance, in other words, as destination is to destiny, the happy connotations of arrival in the restricted sense of the postal services rendered far more unwanted in the case of the Consul and Sigbjørn, doomed as their respective fates are to death and endless deferral. Indeed, examples abound in *Volcano* in which the three categories become increasingly disentangled. Aside from the Consul's letter there is the comical scene with the *cartero*, who delivers a postcard addressed to the Consul and written by Yvonne a year previously. By now it is far too late for the pleading in Yvonne's 'scrawl' (*UtV* 197) to alter the course of their marriage. 'Good, you've got a letter after all' (*UtV* 196) Yvonne says in a neat twist of irony shared between the reader, Hugh, and the Consul, who places *the* postcard (not *a* letter or any old post) into further circulation without end under Laruelle's pillow (*UtV* 205).²⁰ A telegram of Hugh's retrieved by the Consul from a child who takes it in a gesture of mock-criminality is secreted in the inside pocket of his jacket (*UtV* 226), along with an identity card, unbeknown to him, only to surface in the final chapter as a case of mistaken identity at the worst possible moment: the Chief of Rostrums, seeing the phrase '*Federación Anarquista*

Ibérica against Hugh's name after forcibly emptying the same pocket, unleashes a torrent of abuse (*UtV* 370) which accelerates the Consul's extra-judicial murder. 'Without an end in the sense of a successfully destined or delivered message', writes David Wills, 'adestination has no sense [...] In spite of the fact that a message can *not arrive*, which means that it *cannot* arrive in any pure sense, it *can* arrive.'²¹ Moreover, '[the] delays and deferrals of adestination can only be understood in the context of an always possible utter destruction, loss as oblivion'.²²

Derrida's speaker writes on hundreds of postcards with the same reproduction of an engraving by Matthew Paris (c. 1200–59) of Plato and Socrates. Sometimes this communication is confined to a single card, at other times it is stretched across a series of cards which are then bunched together for the post. By contrast, Lowry's protagonists turn to the secretive, almost interior, space of the letter, the limited economy of the postcard overruled in the main by its expediency. In 'Envois', the letter is the preservation of the most intimate relation possible: 'they will have only post cards from me, never the true letter, which is reserved uniquely for you.'²³ A sense that the limits of apostrophe can never be exhausted results in the futility of ever attempting that true letter. The postcard – incremental, always already holding back from the ultimate union implied by the totalising force of full written testimony – is not so much a half measure as the only measure possible. Yet a practised awareness of the postcard's availability to readers other than the intended recipient, the *jouissance* of self-exposure attending broached confidentiality, emerges as one of the motivating factors of postal desire. The postcard's inadequacy as an effective support for intimacy fails to circumscribe Derrida's speaker, provoking the text's reader to speculate on how far communication can actually go between two enunciating subjects, once sealed inside an envelope. Perhaps this sense of self-revelation to another encouraged by the letter accounts for Sigbjørn's inability to commit himself to the potential dangers opened up by the enunciative act: what, and who, will return? Or rather: what treasures (or horrors) are held in store by *return post*?

This chapter's resistance to placing communication and its modes under the sign of Eros is informed by the self-same problematics of apostrophe. In *Volcano*, the adverse effects of adestination result in a death-lined version of Eros, action perpetually divorced from the principle that motivates desire in the first place. In the final chapter, the Consul reads Yvonne's letter in a kind of echo of Laruelle's reading of his letter. Unlike in the first chapter, however, Yvonne's testimony is

filtered – its contents possibly even edited – by her husband: ‘had Yvonne been reading the letters of Heloise and Abelard?’ (*UtV* 347), he thinks to himself, providing a direct instance of exterior notation in which the most authentic expression possible is read as mere elements of style, strung together as citational writing. The elemental force of the first person collapses under the burden of adestation: ‘It is the silence that is killing me, the suspense that reaches out of that silence and possesses my strength and spirit’ (*UtV* 366). Yvonne’s insistence is inseparable from foreknowledge of the inevitable: ‘My heart has the taste of ashes, and my throat is tight and weary with weeping’ (*UtV* 346). The letter climaxes within the diegesis from a site of destruction, both backwards and forwards: moments, that is, before the Consul’s own demise. Language has taken Yvonne to the limit of her emotions, and her body retaliates. The reader’s knowledge of Yvonne’s death reinforces the sense in which the ‘I’ is illocutionary rather than performative, even if the final chapter has turned the clock back again. If the Consul has time to grasp the universal performative (‘I love you’) hovering over Yvonne’s letter, it is time that he does everything in his power to lose. The reader knows those three words could not be reciprocated even if there was some turnaround in the consciousness of the receiver: her death precludes this, all of it doomed to oblivion by his. Temporality splinters here between time on the level of discourse and time on the level of story. Language paradoxically loses force even as it becomes ever urgent, and the futility characterising the enunciative act begins to contaminate at its origin. (Yvonne’s own sense of this is redoubled when the Consul reads her letter and we read it knowing what is about to happen to Yvonne: twice in fact, since the text forces us to re-encounter her death against the Consul’s.) A similarly gruesome image from Derrida’s ‘Envois’ offers a point of comparison with Yvonne’s testimony:

And you would enjoy mixing my ashes with what you eat (morning coffee, brioche, tea at 5 o’clock, etc.). After a certain dose, you would fall numb, to fall in love with yourself, I would watch you slowly advancing toward death, you would approach me within you with a serenity that we have no idea of, absolute reconciliation.²⁴

Her death-lined phrasing reverses these coordinates – what or whose ashes fill her heart? Derrida refers to actual ingestion whereas Yvonne speaks more figuratively about a contamination without an identifiable contaminant. Crucially, both images establish the materiality that has informed this chapter’s conception of the philosophy of cinders.

Sigbjørn's failure to attain even that modicum of experience required before the rejection of Eros is made possible means that Thanatos prevails, shadowing the moments when the artist's evolution, and thus his maturation generally, appear to be in the frame. The novel's characters indulge in more than a little infernal discourse themselves, principally in the dialogue between father and son, which, as Ackerley reminds us, displays a working knowledge of Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). From the ashes of *Volcano* to *In Ballast's* obsession with the elemental, then, the philosophy of cinders is congruent with the materiality of the death/life binary. 'Still, it's strange that the cry you seem to hear is back, back, back to coal, back to the womb' (*IB* 153), Sigbjørn's father contends in relation to his son's death drive. He presses the matter further: 'But damn it all, do you believe yourself all this back to the womb business?' (*IB* 153). 'Listen to the fire...' (*IB* 153), Sigbjørn gnomically responds. A few lines later the Captain declares: 'It's not the fire so much as the coal, and not the coal so much as the elemental quality of fire, and the ancient inanimate quality of coal' (*IB* 154).²⁵ The return to inorganic matter is, of course, the presiding feature of the death drive as Freud outlines it in his text.

Arguably Sigbjørn has been preoccupied with this throughout *In Ballast*, however, long before the dialogue with his father, as when the brothers browse the philosophy books in Tor's room in the third chapter: 'What can you do with these philosophers, anyway?', Sigbjørn asks, a little provocatively we might think, given that his brother is open to (and indeed open about) the question of suicide, which in turn colours the reader's encounter with the quotation in the fourth chapter from André Breton: 'Le suicide, est-il une solution?' (*IB* 48).²⁶ 'The only thing to do is to burn them', Tor concludes. 'Scatter them to their own postulated first causes, to fire, to water, to the four winds?' (*IB* 32). For Tor, the question has run its course and the solution is self-evident. As Ackerley notes, 'among the pre-Socratics, Heraklites considered fire the primary creative element' (*IB* 276, note III.88). While this passage may appear to relate fire to the fate of Sigbjørn the emerging novelist, the opposite is implied in other discursive contexts, an intuition about elemental forces in which the demands of bio-life are weighed against the individual as the engineer of a vocation. The reception of Lowry's *In Ballast* as a work-in-progress is uncannily echoed in the fact that Sigbjørn's future as a creative artist is waylaid by the coincidence of Erikson's novel, producing an air of overwhelming futility that then hangs (with the aid of infernal discourse) over the unfinished novel. This consigns his

own work-in-progress to oblivion, the ultimate loss, or rather to its first cause: the fire of literary genesis/genius. '[S]uch a situation so engineered seems especially selected by some infernal fatality to further me to my end', Sigbjørn writes in letter k (*IB* 49). Disabused of the possibility of genius, there is only the fantasy of a second chance represented by the return to the womb. Hence, iterations of the word 'womb' are spun in a kind of verbal counterpoint that intersects with 'voyage', to which of course it is related as another cognate term for the progress, or otherwise, of bio-life itself.

Another keyword put into circulation that falls within the same category as 'womb' and 'voyage' brings the postal service into proximity with the postal principle. 'On an errand of life man sped frequently the swiftest way to death' (*IB* 77), the narrator announces in the sixth chapter, a clear instance of third-person perspective later discovered to be more like free indirect discourse: 'Here in the Post Office life roared about him, everyone was on an errand of life, however belatedly' (*IB* 212), we learn in the fifteenth chapter, culminating a few paragraphs further on with the invocation, 'On an errand of life!', where the narrator and Sigbjørn are finally conflated. 'Errand' derives from the Old English noun *ǣrende*, 'messenger', given as either *ǣrendraca* or *ǣrendsecg*, the latter related by a hair's-breadth to *ǣrendscip*, namely 'skiff or small boat', associations with the restlessly sea-borne Lowry and Sigbjørn being particularly resonant here.²⁷ Such linguistic proximity between the subject and the object of a sentence in which an errand is reported is noteworthy. Yet modern English has limited application for the errand; certainly it does not carry anything like the connotations of 'apostle', 'ambassador' or 'angel', as is the case with *ǣrendraca*. It would therefore seem uncharacteristic for a protagonist hell-bent on the expansive prospect of the 'voyage', returning to the womb or launching out on the *Unsgaard*, of course oceanic in their different ways. The meeting with Erikson, somewhat anti-climactic and non-revelatory, has the air of an errand. The difficulty of reconciling the brevity implied by 'errand of life' with the consequences of that meeting to Sigbjørn's life itself is difficult to determine as the novel reaches its 'end'. The suggestion that the protagonist's own errand of life has 'arrived' in the Dead Letter Office is, however, strong.

At this point in the text the gaps increase, the materiality of the typescripts discernible by editorial, rather than aesthetic, ellipses. The 'infer' of 'infernal' becomes more active, deduction attempted while sifting through ashes, the reader and critic alike stranded by a detectable

loosening of authorial consciousness into notes and alternative ideas. Perhaps this is where the reader should defer rather than infer, transport their perpetually incomplete reading of *In Ballast* to the text which runs along the edges of its incin(d)eration. If *Under the Volcano* necessitates an immediate return to the first chapter as soon as the Consul has been thrown into the ravine, *Dark as the Grave* is the logical next stage in the circular system – ‘the great chain of the infernal machine’ – of Lowry’s *oeuvre*. Yet we turn to it in peril. Once we discover the cindered manuscript in Wilderness’s luggage, we recognise again our lack of immunity from the inferno.

Notes

- 1 Miguel Mota and Paul Tiessen, ‘Introduction’, in Malcolm Lowry, *The 1940 Under the Volcano: A Critical Edition*, ed. Miguel Mota and Paul Tiessen, with annotations by Chris Ackerley and David Large (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2015), pp. xix–lxxiii (p. lxi).
- 2 Malcolm Lowry, *Dark as the Grave wherein my Friend is Laid*, ed. Douglas Day and Margerie Lowry (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 51.
- 3 Lowry, *Dark as the Grave*, p. 102.
- 4 Lowry, *Dark as the Grave*, p. 243.
- 5 Niall Lucy and Alec McHoul, ‘Lowry’s Envois’, *SubStance*, 22.1, 70 (1993), pp. 3–24 (p. 18).
- 6 Jacques Derrida, ‘Envois’, in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 1–256 (p. 4).
- 7 See Sherrill Grace, ‘“The daily crucifixion of the post”: Editing and Theorizing the Lowry Letters’, in *Strange Comfort: Essays on the Work of Malcolm Lowry* (Vancouver: Talon Books, 2009), pp. 70–90.
- 8 See the letter to David Markson, quoted in Patrick A. McCarthy, ‘Introduction’, in *In Ballast to the White Sea: A Scholarly Edition*, ed. Patrick A. McCarthy, with annotations by Chris Ackerley (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2014), pp. xix–lii (p. xx). Hereafter cited in parentheses in the text as *IB*.
- 9 Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), p. 33. Hereafter cited in parentheses in the text as *UV*.
- 10 Grace’s Bakhtinian analysis of the speech genres of Lowry’s letters, both fictional and real and all the gradations between the two axes, is especially relevant here (“The daily crucifixion”, pp. 82–86).
- 11 Jacques Derrida, *Cinders*, trans. Ned Lukacher (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), p. 3.
- 12 Derrida, *Cinders*, pp. 3–4.
- 13 Derrida, *Cinders*, p. 43.

- 14 For McCarthy, *In Ballast*'s 'focus on the development of an artist figure' makes it a modernist *Künstlerroman* in the tradition of Mann, Proust, Joyce and Lawrence (McCarthy, 'Introduction', *IB* xxi).
- 15 See also Lowry, *UtV* 135 and 227.
- 16 The infernal characterisation of this refinery, of course, makes the place name *Burnaby* semantically serendipitous.
- 17 Lowry, *Dark as the Grave*, p. 62.
- 18 J. Hillis Miller, 'Glossing the Gloss of "Envois" in *The Post Card*', in *Going Postcard: The Letter(s) of Jacques Derrida*, ed. Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei (Earth, Milky Way: dead letter office, BABEL Working Group, an imprint of punctum books, 2017), pp. 11–41 (pp. 21–22).
- 19 Hillis Miller, 'Glossing the Gloss', p. 21.
- 20 See also Lowry, *UtV* 19 and 218.
- 21 David Wills, *Matchbook: Essays in Deconstruction* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 62; emphasis original.
- 22 Wills, *Matchbook*, p. 63.
- 23 Derrida, 'Envois', p. 52.
- 24 Derrida, 'Envois', p. 196.
- 25 In Ackerley's neat formulation, coal and fire, representing Thanatos and Eros respectively, 'kindle this chapter' (*IB* 361, note X.78).
- 26 As Ackerley notes, the quotation is from Breton's *La Révolution surréaliste* (*IB* 289, note IV.53).
- 27 *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, ed. J.R. Clark Hall, 4th edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 9.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

‘Leaning forward eagerly’

Malcolm Lowry’s Moviegoers
and *In Ballast to the White Sea*

Miguel Mota and Paul Tiessen

Ssh! Ssh! the voice [...] warned from the darkness and there was silence.

In Ballast to the White Sea

Malcolm Lowry’s understanding of the figure of the ‘moviegoer’ was eclectic, fluid, flexible, even sometimes contradictory.¹ On one level, he was interested in the impact on moviegoers of technological form, whether of a particular film or of film in general. At the same time, he was fascinated by the moviegoer’s subjective experience, whether interior or exterior, private or public. Numerous times in his work, Lowry explores the figure of the moviegoer as it negotiates a variety of spaces and places, whether at a film screening (which for Lowry could manifest itself in sometimes astonishing ways) or in the lobbies and streets that flow spatially or temporally from or towards actual cinemas – places and spaces that a moviegoer might pause in or pass through. In pressing the moviegoer, one of the twentieth century’s most ubiquitous figures, into service on behalf of his own ever-shifting explorations of the modern subject, Lowry was extending and producing variations on a literary trope that had emerged quite palpably, especially between 1926 and 1933, among an earlier generation of literary modernists: Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson, Wyndham Lewis, H.D. and others.

In this chapter, we explore how *In Ballast to the White Sea* reveals new depictions and explorations of the moviegoer in Lowry's writing, marking both a pronounced connection to and a nuanced move away from his portrayal of that same figure in his previous novel, *Ultramarine* (1933). We position Lowry's 1935–36 novel in relation to a broader history of the figure of the moviegoer and of film spectatorship more generally during this period. At the same time, and with an emphasis on the subjective responses to cinema enacted by 'ordinary' men and women in *In Ballast*, we argue for Lowry's cinema aesthetic as a kind of anticipation of Jean-Louis Schefer's treatment of subjectivity and the screen image, a study of the complex and complicated inner world of the writer as moviegoer. Cinema, writes Schefer, 'creates a structure of realization and of appropriation of something that is real, not of something possible. The real in question is what already and momentarily lives as the spectator. That life is not a momentary and suspended life, but a memory of images and experimental affects.'² Through his depiction of the 'real' figure of the moviegoer in *In Ballast to the White Sea*, a figure that exists as the often highly ambivalent product of memory and affect, Lowry eagerly and actively participates in various modernist conversations and cultural critiques that address the complex relationship between cinema and the subject.

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Malcolm Lowry's literary technique has long been described by critics as cinematic. But what still remains insufficiently examined is Lowry's interest in his fiction in the figure of the moviegoer. At crucial points in his narratives, Lowry places his characters inside cinemas or in cinema's proximate spaces: lobbies, streets, cities. Ordinary cinemas become for Lowry extraordinary places where he unveils the private longings, tensions and vulnerabilities of his characters, secrets they might not otherwise disclose, indeed secrets that may remain forever obscured, since for Lowry, as for Schefer, 'the cinema exists within us as a kind of ultimate chamber where the hope and ghost of an *interior history* circulate'.³ Within these privileged, often extradiegetic sites, he explores finely calibrated revelations of his characters' personal worlds: what Schefer calls '*the invisible part of ourselves*'.⁴ By intensifying or subverting dominant strains of the narrative, these scenes modify our understanding of both character and story. And it is often, too, in these moments of pause in the action, as it were, that Lowry reveals the often

agonising ambivalence and tension between a comic and tragic vision that exists in both his life and work.⁵

Lowry's representation of the figure of the moviegoer reached its ambitious summation and culmination in his and Margerie Bonner Lowry's 1950 sprawling and self-reflexive 455-page adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*.⁶ But his explorations of the moviegoer already had an auspicious start in his first two novels: *Ultramarine* and its 'sequel and justification', *In Ballast to the White Sea*.⁷ These two works, both featuring semi-autobiographical protagonists, are built around sea voyages. Yet in Chapter III of *Ultramarine* as well as principally in Chapter V but also elsewhere in *In Ballast*, Lowry prominently and revealingly places his protagonists in a variety of cinema spaces, probing memory and affect with significant, often moving, results.

Already by the time he was writing his first two novels – a period overlapping the late years of the 'silent' film and the early years of the 'talkie' – Lowry would have been familiar with the trope of the moviegoer as impassive, immobilised by the force of the new mechanical medium. From 1926 to 1934, in a series of polemical works, Wyndham Lewis – a writer whom Lowry discussed with his mentor Conrad Aiken – repeatedly expressed that anxiety, rooted for Lewis in the insidious impact of the film camera on culture and society.⁸ Contemptuously viewing the moviegoer as an often unwitting co-conspirator in a vulgarised mass society, Lewis anticipated Theodor Adorno's own later critique of film as the product of a mass-produced culture which both presented a flattened version of reality and encouraged, indeed produced, a passive viewer, draining them of the potential for any form of political resistance. Lewis, along with others – including, more visibly, Aldous Huxley, whose moviegoers are massaged by the 'feelies' in *Brave New World* (1932) – treated film audiences as an illustration of his polemics, and drew predictable schematics of moviegoers as participants in their own cultural victimisation. As Sheila Watson argued in an early assessment: 'More than any other [...] the camera symbolized for Lewis the instrument which destroyed man's sense of organic unity by the separation of sight and touch. The result of such separation, [Lewis] said, is an exasperated subjectivity and a sense of estrangement and disunity.'⁹

Lewis's views of cinema's effects on its audiences – like Adorno's – imagine a moviegoer, as Francesco Casetti argues, 'immersed in the spectacle and the environment' by the apparatus itself, an apparatus that 'encourages a fusion between subject and object and between

subject and environment', rendering 'subjects – particularly their bodies – docile'.¹⁰ Yet, as Joe Kember has suggested, 'early cinema needs to be seen as a dynamic, responsive environment which developed multiple relationships – sometimes at the same time – with its varied audiences, and which therefore proliferated experiences of intimacy, empathy, curiosity, reassurance and mastery for individual spectators in place of those it was widely accused of undermining'.¹¹ In her famous 1926 essay, 'The Cinema', Virginia Woolf, addressing cinema as just such a dynamic, responsive environment, considered the figure of the moviegoer from a more detached theoretical perspective with a mixture of apprehension and fascination. She both feared film's potential to turn its viewers into passive automatons and celebrated its potential for creating new forms of reality, new forms of beauty. Pointing specifically to the peculiar behaviour of the moviegoer's eye when cut off from other senses, notably from the sense of touch, Woolf insisted that as a medium, films produced a fractured and distorted sensorium, inviting moviegoers into unexpected visual terrain; and the playful treatment or bantering wit of such films as Buster Keaton's *Sherlock, Jr.* (1924) or Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) served to illustrate Woolf's argument.¹² Yet even as she acknowledged her own ambivalence and uncertainty about the future of cinema's effect on its audiences, Woolf helped to establish the very categories of modernist analysis of the moviegoer that, through Lewis, would reach to Marshall McLuhan's work of the 1950s and 1960s.¹³

Like Woolf, Lowry's engagement with the figure of the moviegoer was informed by serious intellectual curiosity about the cinema and its interrogation of the human condition. In Lowry's case, this translated into a conscious avoidance of orthodoxies and broad theories. That Lowry was no film theorist in the conventional sense allowed him to explore what Schefer would come to call cinema's '*fund of affects*'¹⁴ – those often inexpressible thoughts and reactions that not only threaten to consume his characters as they gaze at the screen, but that continue to haunt them even after they leave the actual cinema. Like Schefer, and like Woolf, Lowry saw cinema as a complex, ambivalent, contingent experience. He neither defended nor attacked the moviegoer as moviegoer, and was reluctant to use his moviegoers as illustrative of crude social or political analysis, or as pawns in discussions about society, culture or civilisation. Indeed, he often favoured the parodic, rather than the dogmatic or programmatic, in relation both to the moviegoer's place in the modern world and to the modernists' literary assessment of that place. He typically stood back from such systematic if provocative

engagement (just as his protagonist in *In Ballast* stands back, however ambivalently, from political causes), drawn instead to the inner recesses of the moviegoer/subject, accountable largely to their own truths, caught up in their own ambition, angst and ambivalence.

In his use of the moviegoer as a figure through which to explore the self, Lowry was certainly alert to, even if somewhat self-consciously distant from, the work of others who often much more famously or elaborately addressed the status and experience of the new modern film-going subject. Not only was he familiar with the work of Lewis and Woolf and Huxley, but he kept pace too with other, more (for him) far-flung explorations of media and audience, whether theoretical or artistic. In his 1939 essay, 'Hollywood and the War', articulating in different form ideas already expressed more indirectly in *Ultramarine* and *In Ballast to the White Sea*, Lowry's analysis of the relationship between cinema and audience might indeed bring to mind Charlie Chaplin's 1936 film *Modern Times*, where the assembly-line factory worker, taking refuge from his repetitive labours in the men's room, finds himself alone, the isolated victim, more object than subject, of a one-way audio/visual surveillance device that uses the eye (here along with the voice) to entrap the worker's own eye (and ear), forcing it into frantic operation outside the body. And Lowry's thoughts on the subject may indeed recall also the nuances of Walter Benjamin's seminal mid-1930s essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'.¹⁵ Benjamin, with his attentiveness to the inheritance of the audience as mass, forever dislocated, confronting the historical decline of the 'aura' of the work of art, a process that film perhaps brings to its culmination, nevertheless, as Laura D'Olimpio argues, calls attention to *both* 'the transformation of the concept of art [and by extension, its audience] by its technical reproducibility' *and* 'the new possibilities for collective experience this contains'¹⁶ – possibilities to which Lowry was acutely attuned.

In 'Hollywood and the War', Lowry in effect summarises his reactions to the modernist imperative in its Woolf/Lewis incarnations which persisted through Benjamin and Chaplin (and, as we shall see later, Hitchcock) to the end of the decade and, reanimated in the work of McLuhan, well beyond. He offers a playfully mischievous gloss of modernists' anxieties about the loss of the body, reminding us of ways in which the eye, the ear and the hand are brought into contradictory play in much modernist discourse concerning movies and related media. Having just left Hollywood for Vancouver in August 1939, days before the Nazi invasion of Poland, he writes about the insubstantiality of

movie extras' bodies loosed from space and place in a mediated world where cinema, as well as radio, takes control of 'real' space/time and moulds it into a different ontological space. 'Somewhere in Hollywood a soldier leaned against a radio. Round his head was a bloodstained bandage. In his muddy uniform he seemed rigid with listening', Lowry writes. 'This man, an extra, despite his unlikelihood, was real. So was what he heard from Warsaw. His look, as of one who sees into hell but doesn't believe it, was real too.' But in a town like Hollywood where 'unreal' fragments of history are readily produced, where NBC and CBS loudspeakers in 1939 caused pandemonium, an observer is 'forced to wonder whether or not our extra [...] was convinced that the war was real at all. Did it not seem, perhaps, on the contrary, an ultimate Unreality?'¹⁷ Or, to adapt Lowry's statement, did it not seem, perhaps, a moviegoer's alternate reality?

By the time he turned his attention to 'Hollywood and the War', Lowry had already addressed similar concerns in two novels (one published, the other soon to be 'lost'). In the first of these, *Ultramarine*, Lowry's protagonist, Dana Hilliot, finding himself in a cinema, desperately attempts, during a breakdown in the screening, to rouse a raw and rowdy group response to his own screaming and clapping and stamping so that he might effect some kind of visceral connection to the working-class sailors who are his companions during his night on shore leave. It is all crude comedy. In *In Ballast to the White Sea*, Lowry's protagonist – more circumspect about his surroundings – finds himself in what on the surface appears a more sedate cinema space, but one where contrary tendencies comically and tragically undercut each other nonetheless. In fact, the moviegoer episode in Chapter V of *In Ballast* gains texture and meaning – in terms of both its engagement with contemporary politics and Lowry's treatment of the figure of the moviegoer – when considered in the context of the antic goings-on in Chapter III of *Ultramarine*.

In *Ultramarine*, Lowry – like Hilliot – blatantly plays off 'McLuhanesque' categories that modernists were establishing *avant la lettre*, with their attention to the impact of imbalances among the 'sense ratios' of the moviegoer. Lowry satirises both the 'ordinary' film viewer and the allegedly hapless and helpless moviegoer of modernist imagination. Thus, under his comic/satiric eye, moviegoers become a raucous mass in the presence of a preposterously inept silent movie playing in a port town in the Far East, where the protagonist's ship has docked (the *Nawab* in the 1933 edition, the *Oedipus Tyrannus* in the 1962 and later editions). They are ostensibly watching a short preceding

the feature – *Love's Crucifixion* (1928)¹⁸ with Olga Tschechowa – that offers silly, cheap emotion. It is a movie that, mechanically speaking, is subject to breakdowns.

With Hans Popplereuter (a wireless operator from another ship) as mock guardian and Joycean father, Hilliot totters along, the two men eventually 'swaying on our heels, before the snowy theatre front'.¹⁹ 'We were admitted', Hilliot says simply. While the indifferent orchestra 'tun[es] up, like tired men snoring in different keys', he feels briefly nostalgic, realising the potential of the moment when images of the past loom before him: 'A little imagination and *this was* home! One of those Saturday nights with Janet at the Birkenhead Hippodrome. Twice nightly, 6:30, 8:40!' (U 105). Or the 'King's picture-house' at Wallasey, on the Mersey (U 141) – where the same film, *Love's Crucifixion*, had played. But it is because the 19-year-old Hilliot, an insecure 'ordinary seaman', carries debilitating burdens related to class and, inevitably, sexuality, even gender, that he attempts to play to his dubious strengths as an experienced moviegoer in an effort to impress his companions. With his hoots of derision during the mechanical breakdown, he produces, however clumsily but still very much against the Lewisian imperative, an expression of freedom and agency as moviegoer, using the audience in his efforts to authenticate his masculinity. Of course, he is also attempting to flee the 'bloody toff' that he is taken to be, 'a someone who didn't belong' (U 20), what Patrick Deane has identified as 'a privileged enemy in the class war',²⁰ come to sea merely 'for experience' (U 19, 20). As Hilliot's fellow sailors put it to him: 'We all know that you got eddication and we ain't' (U 63).

In his attempts to take control of both the audience and his own body – and against the technological tyranny of the movie world which, like the River Mersey, moves 'like a vast camera film, slowly and inexorably winding' (U 142) – Hilliot initiates a performance of protest and rebellion. He is seeking his own survival. The metaphor of the river/cinema reminds him that he is a subject politically and existentially trapped within its/their vast apparatus, and soon 'he will be entangled in her celluloid meshes, and wound out to the open sea' (U 142). In his outburst, Hilliot attempts to resist the imperatives of the mechanised medium, along with Lewisian accusations of helpless passivity. But even after his valiant attempt at transgression, Hilliot, feeling once again alien in the spaces outside the cinema, knows he is too cerebral, too self-conscious, to fit in. The other sailors refuse to subscribe to his ideologically constructed fantasy of male solidarity. His 'tendency to

equate working-class identity with a romanticized masculinity blinds him to the social and economic determinants of class', as Patrick Deane points out, leading him 'to imagine [foolish solutions] to his own isolation'.²¹ In the end, Hilliot stands ambivalently poised between the desire to create a new 'reality', a new body, both through and against the tyranny of the screen image that threatens to disembody many (modernists') moviegoers, and a fear that such reconfiguration may not in fact be possible.

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In *In Ballast to the White Sea*, Lowry describes the moviegoer in terms that pivot sharply away from the Rabelaisian audience portrayed in *Ultramarine* to one more austerely sketched.²² In contrast to the earlier moviegoers' bravado, the characters in this novel pursue a gentler, more intellectual response to the spaces – political, aesthetic, corporeal – created by the relationship between cinema and its audience. At the heart of the moviegoing scenes in *In Ballast* is V.I. Pudovkin's 1927 film, *The End of St Petersburg*, which Lowry would have first seen in 1929 at the Cambridge University Film Guild, run by Gerald Noxon, who would become his lifelong friend and supporter. The supreme instance of aesthetic expression in Pudovkin's film was, for Lowry, embedded in its famous windmill sequences. Curiously, he avoids reference to these opening images in *In Ballast*, a perhaps strange omission, since he himself had been deeply affected by the shots of the windmills in the film. In a 1940 letter to Noxon, he reminisced that even after the political knowledge he had gained on his 1927 voyage to China and Japan – travelling within easy earshot of the civil war underway in China – he experienced the force of Pudovkin's work on what he insisted was a purely aesthetic level. Even as he hinted at the difficulty, if not impossibility, of separating politics from aesthetics, recognising that Pudovkin made his film to celebrate the 1917 Russian Revolution, Lowry refused to register it as propaganda. Rather, he experienced it 'emotionally', as he said, as a presumably unmediated and uncontaminated work of art: 'I merely thought [...] that it was marvellous, the best I had ever seen (etc.) up to that point: the opening sequence of windmills on the steppes made me weep, as it were, "from the sheer beauty of it"'.²³

In Chapter V of *In Ballast*, Lowry's protagonist, Sigbjørn Hansen-Tarnmoor, and his father, Captain Hansen-Tarnmoor, the head of a seemingly cursed shipping line, undertake a circuitous walk through

central Liverpool, enacting a kind of sober version of the earlier drunken staggerings of Popplereuter and Hilliot in *Ultramarine*. In the midst of their walk, a local cinema, the Century Theatre, 'the Home of Unusual Films', materialises in front of them as a 'place of refuge',²⁴ a welcome reprieve from their agonising conversations: about Sigbjørn's brother Tor, who has committed suicide; about the father's loss of two of his ships, and his men, at sea; about the direction of Sigbjørn's life, his desire to do something good and purposeful. The latter is inspired by Sigbjørn's having echoed words spoken by his brother Tor (in Chapter III), and – Sigbjørn too, like Lowry and Dana Hilliot, having spent time at sea – triggered also by his own memory of the labouring classes that so tantalise and disturb Hilliot in *Ultramarine*. Sigbjørn, a 21-year-old Cambridge undergraduate, and his father have arrived at a screening of *The End of St Petersburg*. Even in their tactful movement into the cinema, Lowry provides an entry that, however discreetly, recalls the noisy clamour of the parallel episode in *Ultramarine*. It is with a deft touch of the comic that he portrays the father and son's cautious gropings in the theatre, suddenly 'almost lost', after initially having entered the space quite 'unhesitatingly': 'Like blind men they felt their way to a seat', the text reads, playing not only with the business of moviegoing at this Home of Unusual Films but also, by implication, with the serious personal and political strains bearing on the overall narrative.

Father and son immerse themselves immediately in the story – of a young peasant who undergoes a long and difficult conversion from naïve trust in his class enemy to a commitment to communist revolution – compelled by the images that on the one hand belong to historical myth and on the other are but 'shadows' (*IB* 67). The screen seems to them a fragile membrane separating the story from their own concerns, and the story appears to inscribe itself on the patterns of Sigbjørn's ongoing search for meaning: 'The father and son sat in silence, leaning forward eagerly, seeming almost as if they willed to be transported from their own seats into this world, not indeed less tragic than their own, but where hope displaced sterility, and courage, despair' (*IB* 67). The moviegoer's body here is both present and strangely absent, suggestively anticipating Schefer's exploration of the way in which the cinema, an incorporeal medium, its movements captured in 'essential weightlessness', simultaneously produces 'the sudden rise in us of a ghostly existence', the 'vanished body', alongside a new awareness of actual bodies.²⁵ But while Lowry's description of the characters as 'leaning forward eagerly' suggests both a recognition of cinema's ability to transport the

body – and thus reimagine it – and a genuine embrace of the screen’s redemptive possibilities, it is at the same time a subtle parody of the naivety and passivity of the moviegoer in their expectations of such transport and redemption, all this even as they watch one of the film’s central events happen abruptly, unannounced, as spectacle, as shock: ‘The Winter Palace was captured before their eyes’ (*IB* 67).

Meanwhile, speaking to his female companion, a young man in a nearby section of the cinema comments on the film’s insistence on the disappearance of the soul, on the need for people to serve in useful ways. Another nearby voice, challenging the young man’s right to disturb others, ‘admonitorily’ hisses ‘Ssh, ssh!’ (*IB* 67). Moments later the young couple, students ‘who seemed to be lovers’, are yet a second time ceremoniously and ostentatiously hushed by their irritable neighbour, ‘the old man who had silenced them’. Lowry thus subtly transforms an ordinary moviegoing event – with the blind gropings of father and son, the hushings of neighbouring whisperers, the abrupt behaviour of the film’s audience at the capture of the Winter Palace – into bits, in this instance, of human comedy. His insistence on the dislocation that is so readily a function of film technique and cinema space simultaneously evokes and critiques Lewis’s concern about the shocked and isolated eye of the moviegoer.

We can note too, however, that Sigbjørn experiences cinema space on uniquely his own terms, in a manner that might recall Mrs Verloc’s moviegoing experience in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Sabotage* (1936). Her trip into the cinema above which she and her husband live demonstrates the power with which a moment of moviegoing can reveal a moviegoer’s unspoken inner life. Hitchcock shows that it is less the content of the cartoon that is playing than the dissonances Mrs Verloc feels between herself and the essentially Lewisian audience mindlessly laughing that uncover her submerged feelings with epiphanic sharpness, and give her the emotional momentum and moral clarity that she needs to kill her husband in their flat mere moments later. In the cinema scene in *In Ballast*, Sigbjørn, burdened with his own conflicted narrative, is made visible to himself, and to us, as someone whose emotional life both connects to and significantly distances itself from those of the other moviegoers. Watching Pudovkin’s film, he is terrified that he might resemble those workers among the marchers who, weary, might ‘crawl to the wayside’. Dreading his ambivalence at that moment, fearing that he might choose aesthetic idealism over political action, he thinks to himself, ‘God help me’. As the moviegoing scene approaches its end, the lights come on suddenly: ‘It was the end of the performance, which

was not continuous' (*IB* 67). As father and son get up to go, Sigbjørn notices that only they and the three people in the little whispering drama have been occupying the back rows of the cinema. The parting is flat and abrupt: 'Sigbjørn never saw them again' (*IB* 68). The two lovers, arm in arm, 'saunte[r]' out of the theatre, the grumpy old man following them. Yet though he has not interacted with them directly, Sigbjørn has nevertheless engaged with them as fellow moviegoers, though with typical ambivalence. He imagines them as members of a shared community, however momentary that community might be. Yet he simultaneously projects on to them an insurmountable distance that separates them from the 'tragic' suffering and irony that he himself continues to bear, an act of self-conscious isolation that asserts his own separateness, his aloneness in the world.

The use of, and concern with, cinema space as we are defining it here does not end with the close of the movie or with Sigbjørn's and his father's exit from the cinema. The story of the film continues to haunt Sigbjørn as the agony of his earlier conversation with his father reasserts itself once more out on the street. As father and son resume their walk, the interior space of the cinema writes itself on the public places through which they pass. Soon after leaving, the two stop

at a hoarding of the picture they had just seen [...] [A]s they stared at the garish poster of the poor peasant turning his face towards the city like a pilgrim, a slow, painful groping after something better there, Sigbjørn saw his own face reflected behind, another soul who sought to be reborn, who perhaps sought God in the very regions where he had been destroyed. (*IB* 68)

Feeling both threatened and guilty, 'again he had the peculiar fancy that that ignorant peasant, God-haunted, staggering under the burdens of his old life, but turning his face towards the suffering, heroic masses, was himself' (*IB* 68). Though, or perhaps because, it is comedically 'garish', the poster once again triggers Sigbjørn's confusion about his potential commitment to progressive social action. To his father he claims to be more ignorant than the peasant. Flagellating himself for the worthlessness of his knowledge built on the 'tag ends' of others' quotations and epigrams and paragraphs, he hides behind Cambridge as alibi: 'That peasant at any rate had some remnant even driven by starvation as he was, of the culture, of the soil, of that truth which is cored in growing things. I have no culture at all. I'm sure I never learnt anything but worthless lies at Cambridge' (*IB* 68). Heading down Mount Pleasant, they come to Lime Street, where Sigbjørn experiences a vision

of the city, the Pudovkin movie lingering in his eye: 'As they moved from Lime Street down past the Washington Hotel to the isthmus of Manchester Street, a vision of Leningrad was still super-imposed upon Liverpool in his mind's eye' (*IB* 69), a cinema-induced image that anticipates his lyrical linking of Liverpool with Archangel – and its 'new order, or new chaos' – at the opening of Chapter VII (*IB* 85).

The world of Pudovkin's peasant, in contrast to the part of Sigbjørn's world that he wishes to renounce, embodies the kind of virility that drove writers and intellectuals of Lowry's own social class during the 1930s. In one of his many unfinished and unsent letters to Erikson in Chapter IV of *In Ballast*, Sigbjørn writes, 'my duty is with what is popularly called the virile solidarity of the proletariat' (*IB* 44). Lowry himself sought ever to 'cross beyond the boundaries of his own social class and cultural milieu'.²⁶ For Sigbjørn (and for his father), the 'shadows' of the figures on the screen are 'more real to them than their own acquaintances' (*IB* 67). Cinema reality here intensifies and exceeds daily experience – all the while satirising and destabilising it – producing for Sigbjørn at one point in the story a capacious metaphor about relationships that he draws from the cinema, when, with reference to the fictional character Benjamin with whom he identifies, he describes himself as 'feeling [...] as intense as if I were watching a moving picture of myself; I was completely identified with him; I *was* him' (*IB* 129). But the solace of the cinema is little more than provisional, for the agonising reappears when father and son once more return to the spaces outside its precincts: 'If for a time they had managed to relieve the pain, it merely waited, like the conscience [...] for its next opportunity to pounce' (*IB* 68).

Additional references to, or uses of, cinema and its various spaces and manifestations are scattered across *In Ballast*. Posters for *Outward Bound* (1930), for example, shown playing at Liverpool's Futurist Cinema with Douglas Fairbanks Jr and Leslie Howard, appear intermittently throughout the text, Sigbjørn in one instance again catching his own reflection 'lurking' within the image of the poster itself (*IB* 166). Here, as with the hoarding for *The End of St Petersburg*, the poster functions as an extension of the film screen itself, reflecting a ghostly presence back to Sigbjørn – the moviegoer both haunting and haunted by cinema space. These posters at the same time convey a rather different message than the one for Pudovkin's film, for they 'depicted this time no Russian peasant, but a ship of the dead setting out into the imponderable, to navigate the nexus between this world and the next, crowded for the

grave; outward bound' (*IB* 77). This ship is no harbinger of salvation for Sigbjørn, uneasy as he remains about his identity.

Later, in Chapter XV, Lowry takes up a final set of concerns respecting the figure of the moviegoer in cinema space. Sigbjørn's desperate search for some kind of rebirth (whether spiritual or political) gives way to romantic yearnings that he again projects on to other moviegoers. From his perspective on board his ship (the *Unsgaard*) as it glides along the Ribble past Preston (north of Liverpool), he perceives people in the distance, who for a moment draw together spaces that surround cinemas and their screens: city, street, pavement. He discerns a man on the verge of entering a cinema, and conjures a refuge for him there. He imagines too that the man will be granted, if only in a cartoon, some kind of mirror, however distorted, of the mysteries of his inner being (*IB* 218) – recollecting, perhaps, what Sigbjørn has been granted, and bringing to mind the clarity that the movie cartoon brings to Hitchcock's Mrs Verloc: 'Ashore, an apron of lights flashed on over the cinema fronts [...] [O]utside another cinema, a man lingered as though haunting. He will take refuge there and see, on a cartoon, a caricature of his most private passions' (*IB* 218). Lowry's narrator empathetically imagines also the warmth and welcome that the cinema spaces might bring even to those who cannot afford its embrace: 'Poor lovers, with no rooms to go to and no money for the cinema, wandered there, and pausing, strained their eyes towards the lights and shadows of the ship' (*IB* 218). The two lovers, in fact, seem to speak back to the *Unsgaard*: "How small she is" (*IB* 218). Sigbjørn creates here his own moviegoing experience, his own cinema space, transforming both ship and shore into themselves a kind of cinema, in which he views a film of his own making and is in turn gazed at from the screen. Positioning Sigbjørn as a figure on the ship who is both watcher and watched, Lowry produces a multi-layered moviegoing subject, simultaneously dependent on both closeness and distance.

For all of its attention to the relationship between the moviegoer and the aesthetics of cinema space, even as they operate in the realm of the imaginary, the scene is not without its political resonance, for Lowry signals here that sometimes whether a moviegoer can or cannot partake of an actual movie is a question of economics and class – the two lovers here, out on the street, stand in marked contrast to the lovers inside the Century Theatre watching *The End of St Petersburg*. And they stand in contrast too to Dana Hilliot in *Ultramarine*. As Hilliot sets out to fulfil his ambitious class fantasy among the other sailors in the cinema, he

soon becomes haunted by nostalgic memories of the sights and smells of home, images of Liverpool and Birkenhead dancing in his head. He gives no thought to the expense of a couple of tickets that give him entry beyond the glistening brightness of ‘coarse glitter in the cinema fronts’, comforting himself instead with the memory of two other lovers – himself and Janet – meeting at a rainy bus stop in Birkenhead: “Where shall we go? The Hippodrome or the Argyle? [...] I’ve heard there’s a good show on at the Scala” (U 26).

We can hear Lowry’s own voice there, for, whatever ambivalences and contradictions the cinema space might have held for him, as a moviegoer he was always keen on a ‘good show’. Like many other writers commenting in a sustained way on movies or on moviegoers, he was no professional critic or theorist or film-maker. He was a literary figure, thoughtful about movies and, especially, about moviegoers. He was one of those ordinary men and women of cinema, to adapt terminology from Schefer’s *The Ordinary Man of Cinema*: ‘At the movies, I learn to be surprised at my capacity to live in many worlds at once [...] I am in effect summoning a spectator’s “knowledge” here. But it is *mine*, and so, inevitably, something of my life has transited here.’²⁷ So, too, Lowry, who, revealing and exploring an often destabilising ambivalence that embraces both the tragic and the comic, closely inspects his own life – and ours – through the lives of his moviegoers.

Notes

- 1 We are currently working on a book-length study based on Lowry’s life as moviegoer, and on his uses of the moviegoer in his writing. For supporting our research related to the present chapter, we are grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.
- 2 Jean Louis Schefer, *The Ordinary Man of Cinema*, trans. Max Cavitch, Paul Grant and Noura Wedell (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2016), p. 14. This is the first English translation of Schefer’s book, originally published in 1980 in Paris by Editions Gallimard.
- 3 Schefer, *Ordinary Man*, p. 17.
- 4 Schefer, *Ordinary Man*, p. 15.
- 5 Lowry’s extradiegetic pauses might recall too Benjamin’s and Adorno’s contemporary Siegfried Kracauer’s interest in what Miriam Hansen has called ‘ephemeral interludes’. Hansen calls attention to Kracauer’s ‘interest in forms of cinematic expression that exceed narrative motivation and integration’.

- Such 'interludes' distance the audience from 'the effects of diegetic absorption, illusionist mastery, or, for that matter, hypothesis-forming attention that have been attributed to classical narrative', turning the viewer instead 'toward a more autonomous agency that Alexander Kluge was to call "the film in the spectator's head"'; Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), pp. 14–15.
- 6 See Miguel Mota, "'We simply made one up': The Hybrid Text of 'Tender Is the Night'", in Frederick Asals and Paul Tiessen (eds), *A Darkness That Murmured: Essays on Malcolm Lowry and the Twentieth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000). See also *The Cinema of Malcolm Lowry: A Scholarly Edition of Lowry's 'Tender Is the Night'*, ed. Miguel Mota and Paul Tiessen (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1990).
 - 7 Patrick A. McCarthy, 'Introduction', in Malcolm Lowry, *In Ballast to the White Sea: A Scholarly Edition*, ed. Patrick A. McCarthy, with annotations by Chris Ackerley (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2014), p. xxi.
 - 8 Lewis's books in this context range from *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926) to *Men Without Art* (1934), with, for example, works such as *Time and Western Man* (1927) and *The Childermass* (1928) along the way.
 - 9 Sheila Watson, *Wyndham Lewis and Expressionism* (Waterloo, Ont.: MLR Editions Canada, 2003 [1964]), p. 94.
 - 10 Francesco Casetti, *Inside the Gaze: The Fiction Film and Its Spectator* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), pp. 166, 176.
 - 11 Joe Kember, *Marketing Modernity: Victorian Popular Shows and Early Cinema* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2009), p. 213.
 - 12 Scholars have increasingly paid attention to modernists' interests in films and their audiences. See, for example, Laura Marcus, *The Tenth Muse: Writing About Cinema in the Modernist Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). On Woolf, see esp. pp. 107–24; on Lewis, pp. 283–84.
 - 13 McLuhan's moviegoer emerges in some of his major works, including *The Mechanical Bride* (1951) and *Understanding Media* (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 2003 [1964]), pp. 381–96.
 - 14 Schefer, *Ordinary Man*, p. 14.
 - 15 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1935), in Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (eds), *Film Theory and Criticism*, 6th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 791–811.
 - 16 Laura D'Olimpio, 'Thoughts on Film: Critically Engaging with both Adorno and Benjamin', *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 47.6 (2014), pp. 622–37, <http://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2014.964161>.
 - 17 Malcolm Lowry, 'Hollywood and the War' (1939), *Malcolm Lowry Newsletter*, 11 (Fall 1982), pp. 4–6.

- 18 See Colin Dilnot's helpful entry on *Love's Crucifixion* in *Gutted Arcades of the Past*, his blog project about Lowry's early life and work, <http://guttedarcades.blogspot.com/search/label/Love%27s%20Crucifixion> (accessed 11 March 2020). The film was released in 1928 in Germany, where Lowry might have seen it when he studied in Bonn. Or he might have seen it in England, where it was released in 1929. But he could not have seen it on his 1927 voyage.
- 19 Malcolm Lowry, *Ultramarine* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1963 [1933]), p. 103. Hereafter cited in parentheses in the text as *U*.
- 20 Patrick Deane, 'Ultramarine, the Class War, and British Travel Writing in the 1930s', in Asals and Tiessen (eds), *A Darkness That Murmured*, p. 123.
- 21 Deane, 'Ultramarine', p. 123.
- 22 For our earlier study of *In Ballast* (and the modernist archive), see Miguel Mota and Paul Tiessen, 'Malcolm Lowry's "Lost" Novel: From Paris Stories to Canadian Ashes', in Emily Ballantyne, Marta Dvorak and Dean Irvine (eds), *Translocated Modernisms: Paris and Other Lost Generations* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2016), pp. 165–78. For an alternative approach to Lowry's uses of the moviegoer in *In Ballast*, see Paul Tiessen, 'Spectatorial Bodies and the Everyday Spaces of Cinema', in Richard J. Lane and Miguel Mota (eds), *Malcolm Lowry's Poetics of Space* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2016), pp. 87–100.
- 23 *The Letters of Malcolm Lowry and Gerald Noxon, 1940–1952*, ed. Paul Tiessen (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1988), p. 32.
- 24 Lowry, *In Ballast*, p. 66. Hereafter cited in parentheses in the text as *IB*.
- 25 Schefer, *Ordinary Man*, pp. 105, 112, 108.
- 26 Deane, 'Ultramarine', p. 119.
- 27 Schefer, *Ordinary Man*, pp. 9–10.

CHAPTER TWELVE

From *In Ballast to the White Sea* to
Rumbo al Mar Blanco

The Spanish Reception
of Malcolm Lowry's Unfinished Novel

Alberto Lena

The Spanish translation of Malcolm Lowry's *In Ballast to the White Sea*, entitled *Rumbo al Mar Blanco*, was published by Malpaso in the summer of 2017. The critical reaction was immediate and provided an opportunity for a new assessment of Lowry's work. Meticulously translated by Ignacio Villaro and drawing upon a selection of the annotations made by Chris Ackerley for the original Canadian edition, this edition represents an enormous effort in revitalising assessment of Lowry's literary contribution for a Spanish-language readership.¹

In this chapter, I assess the role played by the edition as a mediator between Lowry's work and a Spanish literary readership that tends to associate the Merseyside writer with *Under the Volcano* and with his reputation as a 'damned' author, suggested by critics such as Roberto Escudero, Angel Peña and Javier Memba, among others.² I consider the Spanish edition of *In Ballast* as cultural artefact, exploring the implications stemming from a non-literal translation into Spanish of the original title, the cultural issues arising from the selection of Ackerley's notes in the Spanish edition, and the immediate critical response to the publication of *Rumbo al Mar Blanco*, notably the relative lack of focus on the novel's political elements.

Lowry in the Spanish-speaking world

Since 1964, following Raúl Ortiz y Ortiz's monumental translation of *Under the Volcano*, the diffusion of Malcolm Lowry's work has been growing in the Spanish-language cultural world.³ He is no longer the kind of author that everybody seems to know but very few actually read. Important Spanish-language literary journals, such as *La Revista de la Universidad de Mexico* in 1964 and *Revista Quimera* in 1984, have devoted special sections to analysis of Lowry's prose and poetry. Spanish scholars such as Carmen Virgili have strongly argued for the cultural importance of *Under the Volcano*, exploring the novel's connections to Mexican history, Elizabethan theatre and the moral responsibility of twentieth-century intellectuals when faced with the menace of fascism. Virgili presented Lowry not so much as a mythical 'damned' writer, but as a complex and sophisticated intellectual who should be taken seriously for an understanding of twentieth-century history and literature.⁴

In recent decades, new research publications in Spanish have continued to stress the cultural significance of Lowry's work and its enormous moral and literary value. Scholars such as Jorge Ruffelli have explored the connections between Lowry and Mexican history.⁵ Fabrizio Mejia has considered the links between Lowry's self-destructiveness and the Mexican background of his writings.⁶ In analysing the complex symbolism and historical significance of his work, Francisco Rebolledo and Nair Maria Ferraira have shown how Lowry's literary legacy transcends his legend as an extremely subjective author. In particular, Ferraira has argued that his work represents a unique legacy, subverting British imperialist notions of greed, puritanism, moral heroism, elitism and masculinity. In this context, Lowry's work is regarded as more ambitious and ideologically richer than that of Joseph Conrad and other British writers who also travelled to Mexico, but who were unable to rid themselves of their eurocentrism and racism when writing about other cultures.⁷ Other studies place emphasis upon the intellectual and moral value of the totality of Lowry's work. José Lasaga Medina, for instance, explores the links between the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset and Malcolm Lowry in terms of the notion of calling. For Lasaga Medina, Lowry's life is a paradigm of Ortega y Gasset's authentic man; his work reveals the ambition of a man with a calling who struggles to be free and to become himself by fabricating his own life. Drawing upon Ortega's philosophy, Lasaga Medina draws attention to Lowry's artistic authenticity. He stresses the importance of freedom for an artist as suggested by

Ortega, who comments that, although the 'snob' or the 'mass-man' can fit easily into any environment, they never understand the real meaning of freedom.⁸ Both types of individual embrace social conformity and are mesmerised by charismatic leadership. On the other hand, artists such as Lowry epitomise the real meaning of freedom, in that they are constantly striving against an impersonal environment to which they fail to adapt, a struggle that enables them to become unique individuals. Therefore, they eventually discover and actualise the real meaning of freedom.⁹

However, despite this critical focus on the importance of his work, Lowry's legend as a 'damned' writer has continued to appear in many reviews and articles in the last decade. For instance, in reviewing Gordon Bowker's biography of Lowry, alongside new translations of *Lunar Caustic* and Lowry's poems, for *Revista de Libros*, the Spanish writer and literary critic of *El País*, José María Galbenzu, could not help mentioning Lowry's obsession with his own persona and the heavily autobiographical elements present in all his writings. Galbenzu does, however, argue that it is precisely the literary power of Lowry's prose that redeems his obsession with the self.¹⁰

The reception context for the 2017 Spanish translation of *In Ballast to the White Sea* was, therefore, a rather mixed one: a critical tradition that both emphasised Lowry as an author obsessed with his own persona, and that also argued for the enormous intellectual and cultural significance of his work. As we shall see, both of these elements were strongly present in the critical response to *Rumbo al Mar Blanco*.

Translating a complex title

To begin with, in order to understand the reception of Lowry's novel in the Spanish context, it is important to notice that Ignacio Villaro translates *In Ballast to the White Sea* as *Rumbo al Mar Blanco*. A more literal translation of the title would have been *En lastre al Mar Blanco*, but the Spanish title introduces other meanings. The word *rumbo* has complex associations in Spanish. It derives from the Latin *rhombós*, which is a loanword from the Greek *ῥομβός*. It is a nautical term and its meaning is linked to the geometrical patterns of the Rose of the Winds, an instrument used by sailors to display the orientation of the cardinal directions, as well as their intermediate points. Implicitly, the title *Rumbo al Mar Blanco* places emphasis upon setting sail to the White Sea. In other words, it is focused on the main character's final destination, rather than his moral disposition before undertaking the voyage.

In order to explain the choice of *Rumbo* instead of *En lastre*, the editorial introduction to the Spanish edition highlights that ‘in ballast’ is a nautical term, referring to the additional weight (sometimes sandbags) placed low in a ship to add to its stability and steadiness, especially in the absence of other cargo.¹¹ The Spanish edition does not clarify to readers that the term ‘in ballast’ also has also a symbolic meaning in Lowry’s novel. It shows the moral importance of Sigbjørn’s decision – not only is he leaving Liverpool in search of another life, he is also leaving his father, his lover Nina, and the memory of his dead brother. Like Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Sigbjørn is in many respects trying to forge another identity in an environment different from his native place. Whereas Joyce’s character becomes a revolutionary Irish artist, Lowry’s title suggests that Sigbjørn has become aware that he is a failure as a writer; he wants to break with the past, accepting his limitations as a human being, thus finally pursuing the path to authenticity.

Some reviewers, such as Rafael Narbona in *El Cultural*, noted that the title *In Ballast to the White Sea* uses a specific nautical phrase and could have been more literally translated into Spanish as ‘En lastre al Mar Blanco’, a choice that might have made the reader aware of the symbolic richness of Lowry’s novel.¹² On the other hand, Juan Ángel Juristo, reviewing the work for *Cuarto Poder*, suggests that *Rumbo al Mar Blanco* could be attractive to the Spanish reader, because it is the kind of title associated in Spanish with a sense of adventure. He also draws attention to the fact that, in many respects, this translation corresponds to Lowry’s original intentions of writing a lively narrative. Yet Juristo also observes that the English title carries an important symbolic meaning. The novel is part of a cohesive artistic design and metaphysical vision.¹³ Although a fragmented piece, *In Ballast* represents part of Lowry’s ambitious original pattern, akin to a twentieth-century *Divine Comedy*. No wonder that Juristo suggests that any single detail, such as the translation of the title of any one of his novels, might be relevant to understanding Lowry’s whole work.

Although Narbona does not mention the bleak connotations associated with the term ‘White Sea’ in Lowry’s work, he does not endorse the interpretation that Sigbjørn’s final destination could be a sort of Dantesque *Paradiso*. On the contrary, Narbona explains that Sigbjørn’s tormented existence is a case in point that Lowry never achieved any sort of spiritual peace. Neither does Sigbjørn. Like Lowry, he never manages to overcome his deeply ingrained guilt. He never enters Eden’s gates,

nor gets rid of his own nightmares. Despite all his efforts, Lowry's novel only serves to accentuate Sigbjørn's utter despair and failure. Therefore, Narbona's review of the book suggests that it is unlikely that Sigbjørn could be symbolically reborn merely by reaching the White Sea.¹⁴

Although the note in the Spanish introduction seeks to explain the meaning of the term 'in ballast' to a Spanish reader, it does not highlight other possible meanings of 'the White Sea'. As mentioned above, the introduction suggests that the main character may find a sort of *Paradiso* upon reaching his final destination. In many respects, this interpretation does not help introduce the reader to the symbolic complexity embodied in Lowry's title. As Chris Ackerley suggests in his annotations, Sigbjørn's final destination is the White Sea, an inlet of the Arctic Ocean in north-west Russia, bounded by the Kola Peninsula and Archangel. Yet the title also invokes annihilation, linked to Herman Melville's white whale and the dangerous atmosphere conveyed by Edgar Allan Poe's open-ended *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, whose incomplete and enigmatic last chapter takes place in the Arctic. The white Arctic land is described as uncharted territory which abounds with examples of regression into ancestral violence. Furthermore, Lowry's film script of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night* associates the power of the White Sea with death. All these connotations challenge an interpretation of the novel that suggests that Sigbjørn could find any sort of paradise after reaching his final destination of the White Sea.¹⁵

Introducing *In Ballast* to a Spanish audience

The introduction to the Spanish edition of *In Ballast* seems to perpetuate the myth of Lowry as a damned and grotesque writer marked by an eventful life and self-destructive tendencies. Thus, it provides a description of the origins of the novel manuscript when Lowry and his wife Margerie took refuge in their squatter's shack in British Columbia in the mid-1940s. It highlights his Canadian years as a placid time – a middle period between his complex Mexican experience and his final dramatic years and death in England. In British Columbia, however, Lowry managed to bring his inner demons to light and to project them into his fiction. This Edenic existence came to an end in June 1944 when fire broke out in their shack and the manuscript of *In Ballast* was burned, despite Margerie's efforts to save it. The destruction of the manuscript represents the tragic irony of the life of 'a dipsomaniac Dante', for the novel was meant to be the third part of a trilogy representing the attainable paradise.

The Spanish introduction stresses that the destruction of the work only served to enhance the Lowry legend. It became an idealised manuscript; a masterpiece totally lost. The introduction endorses the interpretation, put forward by Patrick McCarthy in his introduction to the Canadian edition of *In Ballast*, that Lowry might have been aware that there was another manuscript, remembering that he had given a copy to his former mother-in-law eight years before the fire, but preferring the legend of the tragically lost novel to the difficult task of revising the typescript. The Spanish introduction also suggests that there was a rivalry between Margerie and his first wife Jan Gabriel over Lowry's legacy and that that issue served to foster the romantic myth of a lost masterpiece written by a damned writer.¹⁶

The myth of Lowry as a damned writer associated with the complex story of the recovery of the lost manuscript appears in many of the Spanish reviews of this novel. For Juan Tallón in *El País*, the tragically burned manuscript mirrors Lowry's life. In fact, he argues, Lowry's work was fostered by the destructive tyranny of the self and a never-ending series of misfortunes.¹⁷ For Almudena Muñoz in her review for *Détour*, the fact that one of the manuscripts of the novel was burned echoed Lowry's destiny as a writer. She suggests a link to the apparent destiny of Virgil, whose deathbed instruction was that the manuscript of the *Aeneid* be burned (an instruction that the Emperor Augustus countermanded). Muñoz argues that, unlike Virgil or Dante, Lowry's literary destiny was that of a self-destructive doomed alcoholic – the predicament of a writer suffering from self-delusion who could not be redeemed by any sort of literary achievement. This overstatement ignores the fact that the publication of *Under the Volcano* met with enormous success.¹⁸

Juan Ángel Juristo, on the other hand, suggests that the story of the burned manuscript is just one example of the ways in which Lowry's complex life could be compared to that of a character from Greek tragedy. The hazards of the novel are also the hazards of a writer who indulged in never-ending drinking pilgrimages everywhere he went, from Cambridge to Oaxaca. Lowry's myth as self-destructive is present not only in *In Ballast* but in all his works. Juristo, however, concludes by suggesting that although some critics could see works such as *Under the Volcano* and *Dark as the Grave wherein my Friend is Laid* as merely the products of a particular milieu, Lowry's literary legacy deserves to be appreciated by new generations of readers.

The myth of the self-destructive writer is also highlighted by Rafael Narbona, who argues that the unfinished work prefigures Lowry's

tragic end intoxicated by alcohol and barbiturates, and can be seen as testimony to a life filled with torment. The manuscript destroyed by fire, he suggests, symbolises the life of the author – a life marked by being unable to settle in one place.¹⁹ As we can see, the pre-existing myth of the self-destructive writer deeply affected the immediate reception of a work conceived in the early 1930s, prior to Lowry's complex Mexican experience and his most destructive periods of heavy drinking.

A problematic unfinished work

The Spanish introduction stresses the fact that, rather than being a mere collection of literary fragments, Lowry's novel is essential for understanding his whole output. It is a well-structured piece of art charting the discovery of Lowry's heaven within his all-too-human comedy. To help persuade the potential reader, the introduction quotes from Conrad Aiken's glowing description of the work in a letter written during his visit to Lowry in Mexico in May and June 1937: 'Gosh, the fellow's got a genius [...] for sheer tactile richness and beauty of prose texture a joy to swim in.'²⁰ However, the quotation elides the passages in which Aiken stressed the novel's 'egocentric nonstop self-analysis and such a fountain of [...] projected self-love'. As the following section will suggest, these latter aspects may hold less appeal to a potential Spanish reader, who might associate the novel with adventure rather than a complex narrative crammed with introspective and philosophical passages.

The editorial introduction to the novel conveys the idea that *In Ballast to the White Sea* is a well-structured piece of art, irrespective of being an uncompleted work, even as it also perpetuates the myth of Lowry as a doomed modernist writer whose complex and tormented life seemed to be mirrored in his work. It also places emphasis on the fact that the novel represents an organic part of Lowry's larger *oeuvre*. The Spanish edition is keen to present *In Ballast* as an essential part of Lowry's ambitious literary legacy, despite its unfinished status; thus, the introduction argues that the chapters are complete sections of a novel and that the work possesses a perfectly structured plot, even though it was left unfinished by force of circumstances. This issue is particularly analysed by the early Spanish reviewers of the novel. Almudena Muñoz complains about its fragmented and unfinished nature, arguing that it is just a collection of quotations lacking a real structure. Whereas literary studies by Sherrill Grace and others have stressed the richness of Lowry's

intertextuality, Muñoz can only see this issue as a literary flaw.²¹ For her, Lowry's extensive use of other authors' works indicates his lack of originality and talent, and renders this unfinished novel less attractive. In her opinion, *In Ballast* is a dead text, a 'dreamed' novel rather than a real one.²²

Other reviewers, such as Juan Bonilla for *El Mundo*, agree that the work could be improved and that some passages are far from being artistically finished. Yet Bonilla suggests that we cannot but celebrate the power of Lowry's prose irrespective of the fragmentation of the novel, arguing that this power makes the manuscript valuable for the contemporary reader.²³ Similarly, Rebeca García Nieto, in her review for *Letras Libres*, celebrates the powerful and mysterious poetry of Lowry's prose, suggesting that its uncanny beauty is close to the mystery of Rilke's poetry. More to the point, she stresses that although it is impossible for us to know how Lowry might have finished the novel and that many passages could be improved, the unfinished book resembles an imperfect ship that has somehow managed to stay afloat. She compares the unfinished structure of *In Ballast* to the disquieting beauty of Lowry's poetry. In fact, she suggests that Lowry's poetry also seems 'unfinished', that we feel something to be 'missing' in his poems, which nonetheless does not diminish their enigmatic beauty.²⁴

For other reviewers, such as Juan Tallón, Lowry's dense style reflects his fascination with the sea, and consequently, the publication of *In Ballast* helps us understand the organic nature of the totality of his work.²⁵ In this respect, the review in *La Razón* argues that it is a mysterious novel charting the author's several experiences of the sea. Lowry's work, this review claims, can be seen as a literary recreation of an intense love for the sea – which, for Lowry, represents a metaphor for life. His trademark as an author, the reviewer suggests, is an intensely lyrical recreation charting the experience of boarding a ship and leaving a port. Thus, rather than seeing *In Ballast* as a fragmented novel, we should see it as part of Lowry's larger organic work of art; the review suggests that to fully appreciate *In Ballast* the reader should also read *Ultramarine* and *October Ferry to Gabriola*.²⁶

The organic value of the book in relation to the totality of Lowry's work is also indicated by Juan Ángel Juristo in his review for *Cuarto Poder*. Endorsing Malpaso's editorial introduction, he defends the importance of the intended trilogy in terms of forming part of a modern *Divine Comedy*. Finally, Juan Bonilla strongly defends the value of the unfinished work. He stresses that Lowry's prose has an intensity and

ambition that is completely lacking in any contemporary prose.²⁷ On the whole, the Spanish-language reviewers do not see the unfinished nature of *In Ballast* as a problem. On the contrary, the majority stress the organic importance of this novel for understanding the totality of Lowry's literary legacy.

Liverpool's long shadow: the politics of *In Ballast*

The notes accompanying *Rumbo al Mar Blanco* highlight the importance of the social and economic environment of Liverpool for understanding the development of Sigbjørn's personality and his final decision to embark for the White Sea. In spite of the enormous crisis suffered by Liverpool during the Great Depression of the 1930s, the notes furnish the Spanish reader with an image of Liverpool as a thriving port, yet one in which ordinary working people struggled to survive. The notes help the reader understand how the city symbolised the continuity between British colonialism and the human consequences of unbridled capitalism. Lowry's Liverpool, with its Custom House, its Pier Head with the interconnected circles of the tram circuit, its electric overhead railway and its Goree Piazza arcades, represented the continuity between a colonial world built upon a legacy of transatlantic slavery and the complex economic international environment following the First World War. Sigbjørn's lonely wanderings and passionate talks with his father about the shipwreck of the *Thorstein* have as a background a city dominated by a dark past and a desolate present produced by the obscure forces of modern capitalism. Yet there is still room for the dynamics of community: for instance, when father and son are watching Pudovkin's *The End of St Petersburg* at Liverpool's Century Theatre, there develops a community dynamic of sorts among a small group of moviegoers and the cinema manager.²⁸

In fact, the notes to the Spanish translation highlight how this complex urban environment had become a real Dante's inferno, by quoting the following passage from the *Divine Comedy*: 'si lunga tratta / di gente, ch'io no avrei mai creduto / che morte tanta n'avesse disfatta'. The notes avoid any mention of T.S. Eliot's use of this quotation in *The Waste Land* to represent modern hell ('A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many'), instead giving a direct reading of Dante, thus implicitly showing the reader the continuity between a medieval representation of *inferno* and the modern capitalist economy.

Despite the effort undertaken by the Spanish edition to stress the ideological importance of Liverpool in the novel, the reviewers ignored any reference to the city. For Almudena Muñoz the main characters are the product of a provincial and university-educated middle-class environment, cut off from the real world and indulging in the existentialism that seems to be the chronic illness of a privileged class. For Muñoz Lowry's characters are living in the proverbial ivory tower,²⁹ while Nina appears as a kind of superficial modern-day Beatrice. The great majority of the Spanish reviews ignored the importance for many British intellectuals of the political environment of the 1930s. The Spanish Civil War and the rise of fascism deeply affected the lives of middle-class intellectuals, such as the writers W.H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood and Stephen Spender. In fact, the contradictory character of Hugh in *Under the Volcano*, marked by guilt and remorse about the Spanish Civil War, epitomises many of that generation who risked their lives and abandoned middle-class comfort in order to fight against totalitarianism. Thus, in showing Sigbjørn's lonely wanderings through a gloomy yet commercially thriving Liverpool invaded by winter light and doomed by existential anguish, Lowry stresses that the city was at this time also being 'invaded' by foreign news relating to the revolts taking place in Spain (the Asturias Revolution that was suppressed by General Franco took place in October 1934) and Italy's claiming of Abyssinia. In fact, Italy's political takeover of Abyssinia in 1935 would dramatically challenge the international order established by the League of Nations, lending support to Hitler's territorial ambitions and ultimately leading to the alliance between Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. Moreover, Lowry's text announces what would take place in Liverpool during the Spanish Civil War, when many volunteers from the city went to Spain to fight against Franco.³⁰

In spite of the historical and political references that appear in Lowry's novel, the Spanish reviewers tended to place emphasis on *In Ballast to the White Sea* as essentially an aesthetically modernist text. This critical attitude could be seen as a strategy to avoid a controversial approach to the text, bearing in mind that since 2007 Spanish public opinion has been strongly divided in response to the passing of Law 57/2007 by the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE). This law, commonly known as the Historical Memory Law, expressed recognition of the victims of political, religious and ideological violence on both sides of the Spanish Civil War and of Franco's state. The Spanish Conservative Party criticised the law because it challenged the pact of forgetting that had been reached by the majority of political parties after Franco's death. I suggest that the

public controversy in response to the Historical Memory Law might have encouraged Spanish reviewers to emphasise the aesthetic rather than the political dimensions of Lowry's work. In fact, the translation of *In Ballast* was published at a particular moment at which subjective interpretations of the recent Spanish past seemed to dominate Spanish media, and in which Francoist ideology has not completely disappeared from the intellectual and discursive practices of contemporary Spain.³¹

The Spanish notes also highlight the importance of the monument to Nelson, in Liverpool's Exchange Flags, as a cultural icon that serves as background to Sigbjørn's passionate conversation with his father. However, unlike the annotations to the English-language edition, the Spanish notes avoid any reference to Trafalgar, where Nelson's victory over the Spanish and French navies dramatically changed Spanish military history, and which has been associated with the beginning of the decline of the Spanish Empire. In Spain, revisionist historians such as Jose Luis Olaizola have challenged the status of Nelson as a British hero, stressing disproportionate constructions of the myth of Nelson and diminishing the importance of his innovative military tactics during the battle of Trafalgar.³² The Spanish edition of *In Ballast* instead selects the notes that focus on Nelson's role in the battle of Copenhagen. In that battle, Nelson disobeyed the orders of Admiral Sir Hyde Parker, who wanted the English navy to withdraw. Nelson, who by then had only one eye, told his Flag Captain, Foley, that he was unable to see Admiral Parker's signal (as he was holding his telescope to his blind eye).

The allusions in Lowry's novel to Nelson's insubordinate behaviour during the battle of Copenhagen, and to his misquoted statement, 'England expects every man to do his duty', can be seen as challenging British imperialist ideology. Like the symbolic representation of the image of Justice in Kafka's *The Trial*, associated with victory, legal order and also corruption,³³ Lowry uses the statue of Nelson to unearth the contradictory nature of British imperialism and modern capitalism, which impose a moral order on their subjects that does not match the duplicitous and selfish behaviour of their leaders and rulers. As I have mentioned above, Lowry's subtle approach to the British Empire has been particularly analysed by Nair Maria Ferraira in exploring the relationship between *Under the Volcano* and Mexican history. Unfortunately, the Spanish reviewers of *Rumbo al Mar Blanco* do not pass any comment on Lowry's approach to critiquing the British Empire, although the notes selected for inclusion in the Spanish edition bring out new political approaches to the novel.

Crime and Punishment and the legacy of guilt

The notes in *Rumbo al Mar Blanco* place emphasis on a moral interpretation of the novel in terms closer to Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* – the redemption narrative of a nihilistic murderer. Implicitly, this interpretation stresses a possible link between Dostoyevsky's hero, Raskolnikov, and the development of Sigbjørn's consciousness and his final decision to set sail for the White Sea. In Dostoyevsky's novel, Raskolnikov, driven by extreme poverty and the ideological intoxication of radical and nihilistic ideas, murders an elderly pawnbroker, Alyona Ivanova, and her half-sister, Lizaveta. Above all, *Crime and Punishment* is a redemption novel, charting the evolution of a murderous personality from sheer nihilism into moral regeneration under the loving influence of a prostitute, Sonya.

Both Dostoyevsky and Lowry explore in their respective novels the psychological and moral consequences of guilt. In this respect, in the same fashion as Raskolnikov constantly struggles with his crime, Lowry's narrative casts a shadow of guilt over Sigbjørn's personality. He seems to be fixated on the idea that his indifference might have encouraged his brother Tor to commit suicide and that his family might be personally responsible for the sinking of the ships belonging to the family line, the *Thorstein* and the *Brynjaar*. In this respect, Rafael Narbona places emphasis on Sigbjørn's destructive temperament. For characters such as him – tormented by guilt – death could only be a kind of liberation, and yet the incomplete novel does not allow the reader to know whether Sigbjørn might have found any sort of redemption in his voyage to the White Sea.

However, despite the parallels between the works, it is important to stress that Dostoyevsky's novel is a confessional narrative leading to the moral regeneration of a killer. Although he is implicitly guilt-stricken for not having taken seriously his brother's plans to turn on the gas and commit suicide, Sigbjørn's moral development seems more subtle and complex than that of Raskolnikov. In his circuitous walk around the streets of Liverpool in the company of his father, Sigbjørn hears the latter's allusive and contradictory report. Then walking alone, he also hears the conversations of other sailors casting doubts on the Tarnmoor company, suggesting that the *Thorstein* sank as a result of cost-cutting. Lowry seeks to make the reader aware that Sigbjørn knows what might really have caused the sinking and is tormented by his father's potential responsibility for the fact that hundreds of people were drowned.

In comparison to the English-language edition, the Spanish edition puts more stress on a Kafkaesque reading of the text. In fact, there are several allusions in Lowry's novel to Kafka's *The Trial*, whose main character Joseph K is trapped by the vast machinery of an enormous state bureaucracy whose rules are unknown to its subjects.³⁴ There are passages in Lowry's novel in which it is suggested that both Sigbjørn's guilt and that of the rest of his family might be the product of an overwhelming force beyond human power. No wonder that reviewers such as Rafael Narbona noticed that underneath the father's tortured consciousness there lies a complex story marked by crime and negligence that conveys the notion that there is no God ruling over the universe. Instead, a mysterious force, impossible to define, governs the lives of Sigbjørn and his father.³⁵ In this regard, Rebeca García Nieto writes that the characters become mere spectators of their own shipwreck and want to make the reader a participant in that tragedy. To make her point, she quotes the following passage from the novel: 'God doesn't explain another of our ships going down after the *Thorstein* ... Nor does the thought of God mitigate the guilt of that shrieking sea.' Against an interpretation of the novel that stresses individual responsibility, such as an interpretation connecting it to *Crime and Punishment*, García Nieto argues that Sigbjørn and his father can only be seen as tragic characters doomed by an overwhelming fate.³⁶

Herman Melville's legacy

The front cover of *Rumbo al Mar Blanco* features an illustration of a grey whale, implicitly drawing parallels between Lowry's work and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. In fact, the notes selected for *Rumbo* contain copious references to Melville's works (for example, *Billy Budd*, *Benito Cereno*, *Moby Dick* and *Redburn*). Moreover, the notes explain the allusions to the literary correspondence between Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne, and how the relationship between Sigbjørn and Benjamin Wallae, and implicitly that between Lowry and Nordahl Grieg, echoes that of these American authors. These allusions are briefly analysed in Rebeca García Nieto's review to place emphasis on the artistic virtuosity of the novel's Chapter IV.

Despite the cultural and historical allusions to Melville's works and the relationship between the American author and Liverpool that appears in *Rumbo*, the majority of reviewers, especially Carmen Herrera in *Ámbito cultural* and Rafael Narbona, focus on biographical parallels between

Melville and Lowry, highlighting how both authors built their literary legend through writing about the sea. Narbona, however, also compares Sigbjørn to Melville's Ishmael, asserting that both of these tragic protagonists long for a kind of redemption through a return to the maternal womb.³⁷ Almudena Muñoz, in her review, also examines the literary significance of Lowry's work by comparing it to that of Melville. She argues that, unlike Melville, Lowry never managed to find, symbolically, a white whale – nor even (ironically alluding to the cover illustration of the Spanish edition) a black one. Thus, Muñoz implies, Lowry failed to achieve his literary goal, that of becoming a new Melville.³⁸

Conclusion

Almudena Muñoz's severe criticism notwithstanding, the majority of the Spanish reviewers celebrated and appreciated the Spanish translation of Lowry's lost work as an important literary event. Although many reviewers mentioned the myth of Lowry as a self-destructive, 'damned' writer when analysing *Rumbo al Mar Blanco*, this did not stop them from arguing that the novel has its own merits and demerits based on its literary quality. Moreover, despite its unfinished status, the reviewers appreciated its value for understanding the totality of Lowry's work. It is noteworthy, however, that despite the inclusion in the Spanish edition of a generous selection of Chris Ackerley's annotations, very few reviewers perceived – or commented on – the cultural and historical significance of Lowry's novel in relation to the troubled politics of the 1930s. Yet the novel depicts, and was shaped by, the ideological assumptions and expectations of the many men and women of Lowry's generation who took those problems very seriously. Despite the ongoing political controversy in Spain regarding an objective approach to the Spanish Civil War, at a time when the recovery of the remains of thousands of those shot and thrown into unmarked mass graves is still in progress, the publication of Lowry's novel invites new readings and interpretations of a complex era. By bringing Lowry's 'lost' novel to a new generation of readers, Malpaso's edition and Ignacio Villaro's translation might lay the groundwork for new interpretations and more organic approaches to the novel all over the Spanish-speaking world.³⁹

Notes

- 1 Malcolm Lowry, *Rumbo al Mar Blanco*, trans. Ignacio Villaro (Barcelona: Malpaso, 2017).
- 2 See Roberto Escudero, 'La oscura tumba donde yace Malcolm Lowry', *Ensayos Heterodoxos*, 1 (Mexico City: UNAM, 1991), pp. 154–59; Javier Memba, 'Malcolm Lowry: el alcohol se hizo literatura', *El Mundo Libro.com*, 9 September 2001, <https://www.elmundo.es/elmundolibro/2001/09/02/anticuario/999195180.html> (accessed 11 March 2020); Angel Peña, 'La maldición de los malditos: entre el volcán y el humo', *Nueva Revista de Política, Cultura y Arte*, 27 September 2009, <https://www.nuevarevista.net/revista-lecturas/la-maldicion-de-los-malditosentre-el-volcan-y-el-humo/> (accessed 11 March 2020).
- 3 Malcolm Lowry, *Bajo el volcán*, trans. Raúl Ortiz y Ortiz (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1964).
- 4 Carmen Virgili, 'El día de los muertos', *Revista Quimera*, 38 (1984), pp. 33–38.
- 5 Jorge Ruffinelli, 'Malcolm Lowry: El viaje que nunca termina', *Texto Crítico*, 9 (1978), pp. 33–36, <https://cdigital.uv.mx/bitstream/handle/123456789/6789/19789P9.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y>.
- 6 Fabrizio Mejía Madrid, 'El último trago de Lowry', *El País*, 14 August 2009, https://elpais.com/diario/2009/08/14/revistaverano/1250200801_850215.html (accessed 11 March 2020).
- 7 Francisco Rebolledo, *Desde la barranca. Malcolm Lowry y Mexico* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2006); Nair María Anaya Ferreira, 'Malcolm Lowry en el ocaso del imperio', *Valenciana*, 72 (2013), pp. 94–97. Conrad, of course, was not born in Britain but in Berdychiv, and could more accurately be described as a Polish-British writer.
- 8 Ortega considers the snob as a type of individual who claims rights without responsibilities, a type that he sees as emerging in the seventeenth century. He sees the 'mass-man' as epitomising a type of individual produced by 1920s culture. This type of individual does not belong to a specific social class and is resolved to impose his opinions violently, crushing everything that could be different from average social patterns.
- 9 José Lasaga Medina, 'Malcolm Lowry, lector de Ortega', *Revista de Estudios Ortegianos*, 18 (2009), pp. 263–71.
- 10 José María Galbenzu, 'En el centenario de Malcolm Lowry', *Revista de Libros*, 156 (December 2009), https://www.revistadelibros.com/articulo_imprimible.php?art=4518&t=articulos (accessed 11 March 2020).
- 11 There is no named author of the editorial introduction in the Spanish edition.
- 12 Rafael Narbona, 'Rumbo al Mar Blanco: Malcolm Lowry', *El Cultural*, 1 September 2017, <https://elcultural.com/revista/letras/Rumbo-al-Mar-Blanco/39962> (accessed 11 March 2020).

- 13 Juan Ángel Juristo, 'Las travesías fantasmagóricas de Malcolm Lowry', *Cuartopoder*, 1 September 2017, <https://www.cuartopoder.es/cultura/2017/09/01/rumbo-al-mar-blanco-malcolm-lowry/> (accessed 11 March 2020).
- 14 Narbona, 'Rumbo al Mar Blanco: Malcolm Lowry'.
- 15 Malcolm Lowry, *In Ballast to the White Sea: A Scholarly Edition*, ed. Patrick A. McCarthy, with annotations by Chris Ackerley (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2014), p. 244.
- 16 Lowry, *Rumbo al Mar Blanco*, pp. 6–7. See also Patrick A. McCarthy, 'Introduction', in Lowry, *In Ballast*, p. xxi.
- 17 Juan Tallón, 'El "Lowry" que sobrevivió al fuego', *El País*, 28 August 2017, https://elpais.com/cultura/2017/08/28/actualidad/1503939029_000107.html (accessed 11 March 2020).
- 18 Almudena Muñoz, 'Malcolm Lowry. A la caza de la ballena negra', *Détour: Literatura, arte y cine*, 11 September 2017, <http://diarios.detour.es/literaturas/malcolm-lowry-la-caza-la-ballena-negra-almudena-munoz> (accessed 11 March 2020).
- 19 Narbona, 'Rumbo al Mar Blanco: Malcolm Lowry'.
- 20 Conrad Aiken, *Selected Letters of Conrad Aiken*, ed. Joseph Killorin (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 218.
- 21 See Sherrill Grace, 'Respecting Plagiarism: Tradition, Guilt, and Malcolm Lowry's "Pelagiarist Pen"', *English Studies in Canada*, 18 (December 1992), pp. 461–81.
- 22 Muñoz, 'Malcolm Lowry. A la caza de la ballena negra'.
- 23 Juan Bonilla, 'Los poéticos restos del incendio de Malcolm Lowry', *El Mundo*, 28 August 2017, <https://www.elmundo.es/cultura/literatura/2017/08/28/59a45a4122601daf478b4613.html> (accessed 11 March 2020).
- 24 Rebeca García Nieto, 'Un buque de gran calado', *Letras Libres* (January 2018), pp. 50–51.
- 25 Tallón, 'El "Lowry" que sobrevivió al fuego'.
- 26 'Malcolm Lowry, otra vez bajo el volcán', *La Razón*, 27 August 2017, <https://www.larazon.es/cultura/malcolm-lowry-otra-vez-bajo-el-volcan-NK15862528> (accessed 11 March 2020).
- 27 Juristo, 'Las travesías fantasmagóricas de Malcolm Lowry'.
- 28 See Paul Tiessen, 'Spectatorial Bodies and the Everyday Spaces of Cinema', in Richard J. Lane and Miguel Mota (eds), *Malcolm Lowry's Poetics of Space* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2018), pp. 91–92.
- 29 Muñoz, 'A la caza de la ballena negra'.
- 30 See Dave Auty, *The Trophy is Democracy: Merseyside, Anti-Fascism and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Hegemon Press, 2000).
- 31 On the Spanish media's subjective position towards history, see, for instance, H. Rosi Song, *Lost in Transition: Constructing Memory in Contemporary*

- Spain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016). Regarding the presence of Francoist ideology in Spanish media, see, especially, Eloy E. Merino and H. Rosi Song (eds), *Traces of Contamination: Unearthing the Francoist Legacy in Contemporary Spanish Discourse* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2005).
- 32 José Luís Olaizola, *De Numancia a Trafalgar* (Madrid: Temas de Hoy, 2004), pp. 212–14.
- 33 See Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (London: Everyman, 1992), p. 60.
- 34 See, for instance, *In Ballast to the White Sea*, p. 142.
- 35 Narbona, 'Rumbo al Mar Blanco: Malcolm Lowry'.
- 36 García Nieto, 'Un buque de gran calado', p. 51.
- 37 Carmen Herrera, "Rumbo al Mar Blanco", de Malcolm Lowry, *Ámbito cultural*, 17 November 2017, <http://ambitocultural.es/rumbo-al-mar-blanco-de-malcolm-lowry-68615/> (accessed 11 March 2020); Narvona, 'Rumbo al Mar Blanco: Malcolm Lowry'.
- 38 Muñoz, 'Malcolm Lowry. A la caza de la ballena negra'.
- 39 I would like to thank Denise Mok, Richard Maltby, Ángel Rodríguez Merino and Ana Sánchez Velasco for all their encouragement and generosity, which were instrumental in developing my research.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

‘Glimpses of Immortality’

Our Voyages with Vik Doyen

Sherrill Grace



FIGURE 13.1: The ‘October Ferry’ manuscripts [...] show [Lowry] as a romantic who tried to express, through the magic of language, his glimpses of immortality.

Vik Doyen¹

Many Lowryans, notably those of us who speak here, have sentences that begin: ‘I first met Vik Doyen when...’ This opening is then followed by varying recollections, all of them overflowing with admiration,



FIGURE 13.2: Cates Park and the ‘Malcolm Lowry Walk’, 1987. Left to right: David Markson, Sherrill Grace, Raúl Ortiz y Ortiz, and Vik Doyen.

respect and friendship. Some of us first *met* Vik through the Lowry archives at the University of British Columbia, where we read his unpublished 1963 Master’s thesis, ‘*Under the Volcano* by Malcolm Lowry: An Ergocentric Approach’, or his doctoral thesis, ‘Fighting the Albatross of Self’. Vik was not there in person, but he was *there* nonetheless, looking over our shoulders, smiling and encouraging – and correcting – us as we worked. He was there as well in his scholarship, which was meticulous, thoroughly *au courant* with his subject, and packed with essential genetic and interpretive information. Some of us first met the man himself at Malcolm Lowry conferences held in various cities over the years, and the most memorable of these for me and for Chris Ackerley was the 1987 conference in Vancouver, where so many wonderful scholars came together for several days of meetings, papers, conviviality with mescal (after all, we were working on Lowry), trips to Dollarton and the unveiling of the plaque which is there today, awaiting your visit to Cates Park. Several of the Lowryans who gathered in Vancouver that summer have already left us: David



FIGURE 13.3: The Liverpool conference in 2017. That is Vik, smiling, in the middle, with Chris Ackerley and Jeremy Lowry (Malcolm's great-nephew) on his right, Christine Pagnouille, Sherrill Grace, Miguel Mota and Paul Tiessen to his left.

Markson, Malcolm's spiritual son, first student and constant support; Raúl Ortiz y Ortiz, Lowry's Spanish translator, a Mexican diplomat and gentleman of many talents with a passion for *Under the Volcano* (it was Raúl who brought the mescal); and Harvey Burt, the Lowrys' Dollarton neighbour, who took us on an unforgettable tour of Lowry's beach haunts.

There have been other conferences, other memorable occasions, other times when the Lowry team has gathered to be with and work with Vik, and I shall turn to those in a moment. The most important of these, however, was the one held in Liverpool, organised by Helen Tookey and Bryan Biggs in August of 2017. Most of us managed to get to Liverpool and Vik took many pictures of us together, all so happy, and all remembering the man and the works that have brought us together for fifty-five years. We could not have imagined then that we would lose Vik, who still had so much research to complete and co-authoring to do, who was so eager to get on with all his plans for a comprehensive, genetic study of *October Ferry to Gabriola*.

Victor Doyen (1942–2018) – he preferred being Vik – was a Professor of American Literature at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, a university and a city with centuries of history and a tragic twentieth-century experience of war and desecration. He is celebrated there for his inspiring teaching and collegiality over a career that went from 1974 to 2002. When you visited Vik and his wife, Danielle, in Leuven, he delighted in showing you the city, its churches and architecture, and recounting episodes and people from its illustrious history. How he came to be obsessed with Malcolm Lowry, I do not know. By the time I met him for the first time, at the UBC archives in the late 1970s, I automatically associated him with Lowry, and our non-stop conversations began in the middle of our current Lowry research – and never seemed to be concluded. The wonderful Anne Yandle (1930–2006), the Head of Special Collections in those days, already knew Vik well and loved him dearly, as the rest of us would also come to do. As I recall the three of us went to lunch at the UBC University Club, talking Lowry non-stop.

A decade later, in 1987, Vik and I met again. This time was the Vancouver Lowry conference that brought Lowryans together from all around the world. Chris Ackerley recalls that occasion especially vividly because, after the conference, UBC hosted a special, intensive graduate seminar that he and Vik team-taught on the manuscripts in the Lowry Collection. ‘The extra week, team-teaching with Vik, was invaluable for me – Vik knew so much more about the mss than I did and he did more of the teaching’, Chris writes. ‘I was exhausted, but he was like the Energizer Bunny, always wanting to do more and more.’ Chris also appreciated Vik’s ‘scholarly generosity that complemented [his] expertise’, and this quality of Vik’s is one that comes up again and again in all our memories of the man. Christine Pagnouille, a professor at the Université de Liège, had heard about her Belgian colleague; she had read his ‘remarkable piece on the genesis of *Under the Volcano*’ in *Les Lettres nouvelles*. She did not meet Vik, however, until the 1987 conference, and she remembers that ‘next to his daunting capacity as a scholar, I came to appreciate his wry humour’. We would all go our separate ways after the 1987 conference – to Beckett, to Caribbean literature, to Lowry’s letters – but we orbited around Vik’s example and we kept meeting.

Miguel Mota first met him at the 1997 International Malcolm Lowry Conference in Toronto organised by Rick Asals and Paul Tiessen. ‘I remember being struck by his kindness’, Miguel writes: ‘Though I was still a relatively new and junior scholar then, Vik immediately welcomed me as part of the Lowry community [... and] that generosity and



FIGURE 13.4: Left to right, Chris Ackerley, Vik Doyen, Pat McCarthy, Miguel Mota and Paul Tiessen, during the 2017 Liverpool conference. Photo: Hildi Tiessen.

fullness of spirit never waned.’ Pat McCarthy was also there in Toronto in 1997 and writes that ‘Vik was simply one of the best people I ever knew. He was smart, generous, outgoing, and good natured [...] one of the nicest people and best scholars I have ever known.’ Paul Tiessen recalls Vik providing a response to Rick Asals’s new book, *The Making of Lowry’s Under the Volcano*, in which Vik offered ‘a meticulous and far-ranging assessment’. And Paul also describes Vik’s contribution to the 2007 Lowry symposium at the University of Sussex, when he ‘provided a slide-show of his Lowry travels, and generously spread a great deal of his warm spirit and life-generating force to all the participants’.

In addition to enjoying his company at these gatherings, major collaborative Lowry projects were brewing, and Vik was the motivating force. Here again, it is Paul who describes Vik meeting with fellow collaborators – Chris Ackerley, Miguel Mota, Pat McCarthy and Paul – at the 2017 Liverpool conference: we had worked hard, Paul writes, ‘for five years to produce the trilogy of Lowry novels that the University of Ottawa Press published between 2013 and 2015, and so our days together

in Liverpool felt like a celebration of what we had just achieved'. The most exciting of these publications has to be *In Ballast to the White Sea*, because we had long thought this novel to have been lost in the flames when the Lowry cabin at Dollarton burned down in 1944. How it was rediscovered and how it reads form integral parts of the scholarly edition produced by these Lowry *compañeros* and testify to the spirit of cooperation that has always characterised the Lowry community.

From his first thesis through to his publications with the team, Vik Doyen's scholarship has been an inspiration to us all; therefore, I return to his words about the Malcolm Lowry he found in the *October Ferry* manuscripts: that through the 'magic of language' Lowry tried to capture 'glimpses of immortality'. This too was Vik, a man who knew the magic of language, our friend, and an eminent scholar. In Paul's words, he was a 'great gift to the Lowry world, and to others: a dear, sweet, thoughtful man who led us in acts of remembering and celebrating and laughing and looking ahead as we undertook our work on Lowry'.

December 2018

Note

- 1 There are many voices in this tribute to Vik Doyen, not least his own; this quotation is from his outstanding essay 'Reading the "October Ferry" Manuscripts', in Sherrill Grace (ed.), *Swinging the Maelstrom: New Perspectives on Malcolm Lowry* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), p. 195, and this photograph of the ferry sign was taken by Vik during his 2016 research trip to Vancouver. My heartfelt thanks to Chris Ackerley, Patrick McCarthy, Miguel Mota, Christine Pagnouille and Paul Tiessen for sharing their memories of Vik and granting permission for me to quote them here.

Index

Numbers in bold indicate illustrations

- Aalesund 4, 69, 81, 120, 125, 126, 130, 136, 162
Aandalsnes 130
Abbot Dorotheus of Gaza 72
Ackerley, Chris 8, 10, 16, 24, 56, 78, 105, 174, 178, 199, 203, 212, 218, 219, 220, 221, 221
Adam Cadmon 72
Adorno, Theodor 185
Aiken, Conrad 22, 23, 25, 34, 49, 50, 81, 87, 89, 115, 122, 123, 129, 130, 145, 146, 185, 205
Blue Voyage 22
Ushant 145, 146
Althusser, Louis 38
Ámbito cultural 211
annotation 8, 10, 11, 14, 16, 119–31, 174, 199, 203, 207–08, 209, 212
Archangel 4, 69, 73, 81, 119, 125, 130, 136, 194, 203
Arctic 203
Asals, Frederick 48, 220, 221
Auden, W.H. 52, 53, 208
Auster, Paul
City of Glass 14, 110, 115

HMS *Baralong* 85, 91
Barrès, Maurice 154

Batchelor, John 35
Baudelaire, Charles 95
Beckett, Samuel 131 n. 10
Benjamin, Walter
‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ 187
Bergen 84
Bergson, Henri 51
Berlin 57, 82
Biggs, Bryan 219
Binns, Malcolm 50
Birkenhead *see* Wirral
Black Sea 68
Blavatsky, [Madame] Helena
The Secret Doctrine 72
Bluecoat (arts centre), Liverpool 2, 6, 7
Bonilla, Juan 206
Bowker, Gordon 3, 14, 25, 47, 77, 82, 123, 125–30, 151, 201
Pursued by Furies 3, 14, 25, 47, 125–30, 151, 201
Boyer, Régis
Le Monde du double. La Magie chez les anciens Scandinaves 86, 90
Bradford, University of 7
Bradley, Nicholas 36
Breton, André 14, 96, 108, 115, 178

- Nadja* 14, 96, 108, 115
 British Columbia 64, 203
 Legislative Assembly 64
 Social Credit policies 64
 British Columbia, University of 218
 British Empire 209
 Brooke, Rupert
 *John Webster and the Elizabethan
 Drama* 128
 Brown, Carol 34
 Bunyan, John
 *Grace Abounding to the Chief of
 Sinners* 121
 Burnett, Whit 25
 Burt, Harvey 219
 Bygdøy Maritime Museum and
 Viking Ship Museum 128

Calypso (Ellerman's Wilson Line)
 129, 130
 Cambridge 2, 3, 8, 49, 50, 80, 89, 97,
 98, 102, 104, 105, 109, 120, 124,
 128, 138, 143, 152, 156, 190, 193,
 204
 Castle Hill 97, 98, 104
 Corpus Christi College 102, 156
 Grantchester 128
 St Catharine's College 63
 University Film Guild 190
 Canada 10, 48, 77 (*see also*
 Dollarton; Oakville; Vancouver)
 Cape, Jonathan 32, 82
 Cape Town 128
 capitalism 2, 13, 40, 43, 54, 61,
 64–65, 85, 173, 207, 209
 Carey, John 34–35
 The Faber Book of Utopias (ed.) 35
 Casetti, Francesco 185
 Chaplin, Charlie
 Modern Times 187
 Chekhov, Anton 62
 Chester, St Olav's church 78
 China 69, 190

 Chinese Civil War (Chinese
 Revolution) (1927) 50, 84, 190
 cinema, cinematography 8–9, 12, 15,
 16, 61, 63, 96, 183–96, 207
 cinematic writing 7
 modernism and cinema 15, 183, 184,
 186
 Soviet cinematography 61, 63
 'Circus og Revy' ('Circus and
 Review') 129, 133 n. 37
 class 3, 4, 8, 13, 14, 31–44, 53, 55, 62,
 82, 83, 84, 85, 87, 113–14, 115, 173,
 188, 189, 190, 191, 194, 195, 208
 Columbus, Christopher 127, 140
 communicative technologies 168–80
 communism 4, 9, 12, 13, 14, 32, 41,
 47–58, 61, 65–71, 73 (*see also*
 Marxism; socialism)
 Communist Party of the Soviet
 Union (CPSU) 63
 Conrad, Joseph 34, 35, 36, 42, 44, 200
 Heart of Darkness 34
 Lord Jim 34, 39
 The Nigger of the "Narcissus" 35
 Copenhagen, battle of 209
 Craige, Jimmy 99
 Croce, Benedetto 51
 Croston, Lancashire 68
Cuarto Poder 202, 206
 Cuernavaca 123
El Cultural 202

 Dahlie, Hallvard 36, 42, 77, 91, 124,
 129
 Dalian (formerly Dairen) 69
 Dante 26, 204, 207
 Divine Comedy 26, 202, 206, 207
 Davenport, John 46 n. 26, 49
 Day, Douglas 22, 77, 124, 125
 Day Lewis, Cecil 42, 53
 Day of the Dead 7, 171
 de Certeau, Michel 14, 109, 111
 The Practice of Everyday Life 109

INDEX

- de Chirico, Giorgio 96–97
 Deane, Patrick 33, 37, 38, 39, 52, 189, 190
 Derrida, Jacques 168–69, 170–71, 172, 174, 175, 176, 177
 Cinders 169, 170–71, 172
 The Post Card 168, 169, 174, 175, 176, 177
Détour 204
 Dilnot, Colin 7–8, 10–12
 D'Israeli, Isaac 65
 Dobson, William
 History of the Parliamentary Representation of Preston 120
 Dolar, Mladen 15, 143
 D'Olimpio, Laura 187
 Dollarton/Burrard Inlet, British Columbia 5, 61, 99, 100, 135, 167, 174, 203, 218
 Domesday Book 78
Doppelgänger 155–56
 Dostoyevsky, Fyodor 14, 62, 210, 211
 Crime and Punishment 62, 210, 211
 Doubleday (publishers) 25
 Doyen, Vik (Victor) 9, 16–17, 48, 217–22, 218, 219, 221
 Dunne, J.W. 50, 56

 Echtermeyer, Ernst Theodor 57
 Egede-Nissen, Adam 83
 Egede-Nissen, Gerd 83
 Eisenstein, Sergei 70
 Eliot, T.S. 53, 207
 The Waste Land 207
 Empson, William 123
 Ernaudeau, Corinne 164
 Erskine, Albert 21
 Escudero, Roberto 199
 esotericism 14, 71–73, 79

D/S Fagervik 125, 126, 130
 Fairbanks, Douglas, Jr 194
 Fairhair, Harald 80

 Far East 136, 188 (*see also* China)
 fascism 33, 55, 61, 83, 200, 208 (*see also* Nazism)
 Faustus 121, 122
 Fédida, Pierre 159, 163, 164
 L'Absence 159
 Fejos, Paul 70
 Ferraira, Nair Maria 200, 209
Firminist, The 7
 Firminists 6, 7
 First World War 65, 82, 83, 84, 207
 Fitte, Paul 3, 89, 105, 115, 149 n. 10
 Fort, Charles 51–52, 53
 The Mad Fisherman of Worcester 51
 Frank, Waldo David 56
 Freud, Sigmund 49, 105, 153, 158, 162–63, 178
 Beyond the Pleasure Principle 153, 178
 fort/da 153, 162–63
 Fukuyama, Francis 57

 Gabriel, Jan 5, 24, 50, 79, 125, 128, 130, 135, 146, 147, 204
 Inside the Volcano 5
 Galbenzu, José María 201
 García Nieto, Rebeca 206, 211
 Garrett, George 31, 35, 36, 37, 39
 Genesis (biblical book) 124
 Germany 61, 67, 84, 198 n. 18, 208 (*see also* Nazism)
 Night of the Long Knives 65
 Nuremberg Laws 67
 Gide, André 24
 Giroux, Robert 21
 Gode, George 21
 Gogol, Nikolai
 Dead Souls 61, 63
 Golgotha 152, 156
 Goodall, Mark 7
 Göring, Hermann 67
 Grace, Sherrill 42, 47, 129, 168, 205, 218, 219

- Great Depression 8, 9, 57, 207
- Green, Julien
The Dark Journey 130
- Greene, Graham 128
- Greimas, Algirdas Julien 141
- Grieg, Nordahl 1, 3, 14, 22, 23–26,
 31, 34, 42, 49, 50, 52, 54, 78,
 81–85, 89, 91, 106, 115, 120,
 124–31, 136, 146, 211
Atlantehavet (The Atlantic) 127
De unge døde (Youth Dies) 128, 129,
 130
 ‘Hjemme igjen’ (‘Home Again’)
 126, 130
Kinesiske dage (Chinese Days) 84,
 126, 130
*Norge i våre hjerten (Norway in our
 Hearts)* 126
*Rundt Kap det gode Haab (Around
 the Cape of Good Hope)* 84
*Skibet gaar videre (The Ship Sails
 On)* 3, 23, 24, 31, 42, 52, 81, 84,
 127, 128, 136
*Ung må verden ennu være (May the
 World Stay Young)* 82–83
*Vår ære og vår makt (Our Power
 and Our Glory)* 83–85
- Guénoun, Tamara 164
- Gurdjieff, George 14, 73
- Gustafsson, Einar 126
- Haarfagere, King Harald of Norway
 80
- Haldane circle (Charlotte Haldane)
 49, 50
- Hamsun, Knut 50
- Hanley, James 31, 36
- Harding, Stephen 78, 80
- Hardman, Edward Chambré 106,
 107, 108
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel 160, 211
- H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) 15, 183
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich 52, 57
- Henrik Ibsen* (ship) 128
- Herrera, Carmen 211
- Hillis Miller, J. 174
- Hirsch, E.D., Jr
Validity in Interpretation 123
- Hirschsprung disease 89
- Hitchcock, Alfred 187, 192, 195
Sabotage 192, 195
- Hitler, Adolf 50, 62, 65, 208 (*see also*
 Nazism)
- Hoboken, New Jersey 71
- Hofmann, Michael 1, 9
- Hollier, Denis 96, 108
- Hollywood 187, 188
- Horseshoe Falls, Niagara 145
- Howard, Leslie 194
- Hull (Kingston-upon-Hull) 129, 130
- Huxley, Aldous 15, 185, 187
Brave New World 185
- Ibsen, Henrik 52
- Iceland 78, 80
- Industrial Revolution 13
- International Congress of Writers
 (1935) 56–57
- Irish Sea 96, 98, 102
- Isherwood, Christopher 208
- Isle of Bute, Scotland 78
- Isle of Man 14, 78, 98–99, 112
 Castletown 98, 99
 Derbyhaven 98
 Dhône, Illiam (William Christian),
 governor 98–99
 Douglas 98–99, 104, 114
 Hango Hill (Haughr Hanga,
 Mount Strange) 98, 98
 Manx parliament 99
- Italy
 claiming of Abyssinia 208
- James, William
The Varieties of Religious Experience
 121

INDEX

- Jensen, Johannes V.
The Long Journey 127, 140
- Joyce, James 27, 53, 123, 189, 202
A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man 121, 202
- Juristo, Juan Ángel 202, 204, 206
- Kafka, Franz
The Trial 209, 211
- Kant, Immanuel 51
- Kataev, Valentin 62–63
Rastratchiki (The Embezzlers) 62
- Keaton, Buster
Sherlock, Jr. 186
- Kellett, E.E.
The Northern Saga 80
- Kember, Joe 186
- Kenner, Hugh 124
- Kerensky, Alexander 55, 63
- Keyserling, Hermann 47, 56
The Recovery of Truth 56
- Kierkegaard, Søren 51–52, 53
Personal Confessions 51
- Kipling, Rudyard
‘The Bell-buoy’ 102
- Kirk, Downie 47, 57
- Kristiansand 129, 130
- Labour Party (British) 50
- Lancashire 8, 10, 13, 87
- Lasaga Medina, José 200
- Lawrence, D.H. 66, 71
Fantasia of the Unconscious 71
- Leningrad (St Petersburg) 4, 9,
69–70, 125
- Letras Libres* 206
- Les Lettres nouvelles* 220
- Leuven, Katholieke Universiteit 220
- Lewis, Wyndham 15, 183, 185, 186,
187, 189, 192
- Liège, Université de 220
- Liverpool 2, 4, 8–9, 10–13, 35, 54, 63,
69, 73, 81, 84, 96, 97, 98, 106–09,
112–13, 120, 156, 162, 174, 191, 194,
196, 207–08
- cafés 11, 53, 106–08
- Century Theatre (‘Home of
Unusual Films’) 8, 12, 191, 195,
207
- Chapel Street 112
- Church Street 11
- ‘city of radicals’ 12
- Custom House 207
- Dock Road 97
- Empire Theatre 99
- Exchange Flags 108, 209
- Exchange Station, Tithebarn Street
109, 110
- Exchange Street West 112, 112
- Fenwick Street 112, 112
- Futurist Cinema 12, 194
- Goree Piazza 97, 207
- Howell’s (bookshop), Castle Street
54
- India Buildings, Brunswick Street
106–08, 107
- James Street station 12, 111, 112
- Legs of Man public house 99,
99
- Lime Street 12, 16, 99, 193
- Liver Building 106, 106
- Martin’s Bank 112
- Mersey Dock Estate 113
- Mount Pleasant 8, 12, 193
- Old Post Office Place 11
- Our Lady and St Nicholas church
(‘the Sailors’ church’) 112, 113
- Pier Head 106, 112, 113, 113, 114,
114, 207
- Pig and Whistle public house 112
- Queensway Tunnel 113
- St George’s Dock 112
- Strand 97
- ‘that terrible city whose main street
is the ocean’ 13, 96
- Tower House 112

- Toxteth 9
 Water Street 112
 Liverpool John Moores University
 2
 London 83
 Lorelei 142
 Los Angeles 25
 Lothe, Jakob 35
Love's Crucifixion 189
 Lowry, Arthur 84, 87
 Lowry, Evelyn 47, 88
 Lowry, Jeremy 219
 Lowry, Malcolm
 1927 voyage to Far East 84, 190,
 198 n. 18
 1931 journey to Norway 23, 50, 81,
 123, 124–31
 and Merseyside 2, 6–8
 as political writer 4, 9–10, 31–44,
 47–58
 Spanish reception of 16, 199–212
 as writer of north-west England 4,
 6–8, 13, 108
 Lowry, Malcolm, conferences on
 Liverpool (2017) 2, 17, 219, 219,
 221, 221–22
 Sussex (2007) 221
 Toronto (1997) 220
 Vancouver (1987) 218–19, 220
 Lowry, Malcolm, works by
 ‘The Bravest Boat’ 79–80
 ‘China’ 84
Collected Letters 47, 122
*Dark as the Grave wherein my
 Friend is Laid* 5, 6, 15, 23,
 26–27, 125, 153, 167–68, 174,
 180, 204
 Wilderness, Sigbjørn 5, 6, 15, 23,
 26–27, 153, 167–68, 174, 180
 ‘Economic Conference, 1934’ 50
 ‘Elephant and Colosseum’ 98–99,
 114
 ‘The Forest Path to the Spring’ 58
 ‘Hollywood and the War’ 187,
 188
In Ballast to the White Sea
 annotation of 8, 10, 14, 16,
 119–31, 174, 199, 203, 207–08,
 209, 212
 destruction of manuscript 5, 26,
 57, 61, 81–82, 135, 167, 180,
 203, 204, 205, 222
 history of 5–6
 as incomplete 5, 6, 152–53, 164,
 168, 179–80
 as *Künstlerroman* 2, 151
 as ‘lost’ novel 1, 5–6, 151–53, 164
 as metafiction 23, 26–27, 136, 167
 as *ob-jeu* 15, 153, 163–64
 as ‘paradise’ element in sequence
 6, 26, 58, 152, 169, 202, 203
 as political novel 4, 8, 9, 10,
 12, 14, 16, 32, 44, 48–58, 61,
 62, 64–67, 70–71, 73, 83–85,
 207–09, 212
 Russian influences on 61–73
 as sea narrative 31–44
 as sequel to *Ultramarine* 23–28,
 136
 Spanish translation and reception
 of 199–212
 textual interventions by Jan
 Gabrial 27, 128, 135, 146
- CHARACTERS IN
 Birgit 116, 141, 146, 147
 conjoined twins 90–91, 138
 Erikson, William 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 23,
 25, 27, 41, 42, 43, 51, 53, 54,
 55, 62, 67–68, 72, 81, 82, 86,
 87, 106, 115, 116, 136, 137, 145,
 146, 147, 148, 154, 156, 157,
 160, 162, 163, 170, 175, 178,
 179, 194
Skibets reise fra Kristiania 1, 23,
 41, 42, 62, 136, 147

- Haarfragre, Daland (Captain)
69–70, 78, 80, 141, 155
- Hansen-Tarnmoor, Captain 52,
54, 55, 56, 57, 63, 64, 65, 66,
67–68, 71, 79, 82, 87, 88, 89,
90, 137, 141, 155, 159, 173, 174,
175, 178, 190–94
- Hansen-Tarnmoor, Mrs (mother
to Tor and Sigbjørn) 86, 88,
89, 105, 141–43, 145, 157, 158,
161
- Hansen-Tarnmoor, Sigbjørn
as coal trimmer 33, 39, 153
existential quest 15, 136, 153,
157
haunted by voices 141–48
letters to Erikson 1, 11, 15, 25,
52, 53, 54, 81, 106, 115, 146,
154, 163, 170–73, 175, 194
philosophy of 51–58, 64–68
reasons for going to sea 42,
67–68, 136, 139, 144, 156,
157, 202
twinship/doubleness with Tor
86–87, 88–91, 137–41,
155–56
as version of Lowry 2, 23, 80
walk through Liverpool 8, 10,
11, 16, 54–55, 109, 190–94,
210
- Hansen-Tarnmoor, Tor 3, 4, 8,
15, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 62, 65,
68, 70, 86–87, 89, 90, 97, 98,
105, 106, 137, 138, 139, 140,
141, 146, 153, 155, 156, 157, 159,
160, 161, 173, 178, 191 (*see also*
suicide)
- Jump, Police Constable 141
- Nina 4, 36, 54, 55, 56, 62, 65, 66,
67, 68, 70, 85, 87, 90, 105,
106, 113, 114, 137, 138, 140, 141,
144, 147, 153, 155, 158, 159, 160,
161, 162, 163, 173, 202, 208
- THEMES IN
'already written' 1, 3, 23, 41, 53,
81, 136, 154, 160
cinema spectatorship 15, 185,
190–96
class guilt 83–85, 114, 173, 210–11
class struggle 3, 4, 48–58, 62
communism 4, 13, 14, 41, 48–58,
65–67, 70, 71, 73, 191
double 14, 15, 86–91, 135–48,
153–58
loss 5–6, 15, 53, 88, 91, 153, 158–61,
175, 179
Norway 3, 4, 14, 23, 67–68,
77–80, 81, 85, 86, 106, 119,
123, 124, 125, 126, 128, 136,
144, 157, 162
reincarnation 79, 86–87
Russia 4, 42, 52, 55, 61, 62, 63,
66, 67–71, 72, 73, 83, 144,
203
shadow 96–116
ships sinking 3, 8, 54, 55, 84, 87,
102, 102, 136, 137, 138, 155,
207, 210
suicide 3, 53, 54, 62, 70, 87, 89,
90, 97, 105, 106, 115, 136, 139,
140, 142, 143, 146, 156, 157,
159, 173, 178, 191, 210
'June 30th, 1934' (previously
'Metal') 50, 65, 84
'The Last Address' 26 (*see also*
Lunar Caustic)
Lunar Caustic 21, 22, 26, 82, 201
La Mordida 23, 26, 82
October Ferry to Gabriola 3, 17, 17
n. 5, 17 n. 6, 58, 206, 219, 222
'Present Estate of Pompeii' 19
n. 22
*Rumbo al Mar Blanco (In Ballast to
the White Sea)* 16, 199–212
So We Live Forever Taking Leave
(unwritten book) 24

- Swinging the Maelstrom* 26 (see also *Lunar Caustic*)
- Tender Is the Night*, adaptation of (with Margerie Bonner Lowry) 185, 203
- 'There is a Metallurgy' (poem) 65
- 'Through the Panama' 26, 34
- Ultramarine* 3, 13, 21–23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 31–34, 36–39, 41, 42–44, 50, 52, 63, 68–69, 81, 82, 126, 128, 136, 151, 153, 157, 184, 185, 187, 188–90, 191, 195–96, 206
- Hilliot, Dana 23, 31, 33, 34, 36, 37–39, 40, 43, 44, 50, 51, 63, 136, 188–90, 191, 195–96
- Under the Volcano* 4, 6, 9, 14, 15, 21, 22, 23, 26, 28, 32–33, 34, 37, 38, 39–41, 44, 48, 49, 79, 82, 85, 121, 153, 164, 167, 169, 170, 171, 172, 174, 175–76, 176–77, 180, 199, 204, 208, 209, 219
- 1940 version 48, 121, 122
- Firmin, Geoffrey ('the Consul') 48, 50, 82, 85, 91, 169–70, 171, 172, 174, 175, 176–77, 180
- Firmin, Hugh 32, 33, 34, 36, 37, 38, 39–41, 43, 44, 48, 58, 82, 122, 175, 176, 208
- Firmin, Yvonne 121, 169, 174, 175, 176–77
- Laruelle, Jacques 34, 169–70, 171, 175, 176
- Spanish translation 200
- 'Varsity' Composition Book 125
- The Voyage that Never Ends* (Lowry's conception) 2, 26, 148, 164, 169, 173
- Lowry, Margerie Bonner 5, 22, 82, 121, 125, 135, 185, 203, 204
- Lowry Lounge 6–7, 10
- Lucy, Niall 168
- Lukács, György 57
- RMS *Lusitania* 65
- MacDonald, James Ramsay 50
- Macherey, Pierre 33, 43
- Malcolm Lowry: From the Mersey to the World*, ed. Biggs and Tookey 7
- Mallarmé, Stéphane 122, 137
- Malpaso (Spanish publisher) 16, 199, 206, 212
- Manchester Ship Canal 87
- Manchukuo 69
- Mann, Thomas 56
- Maritime Journal* 102
- maritime writing 31–44
- Markson, David 21, 22, 26, 27, 28, 135, 151, 152, 218–19, 218
- Marx, Karl 13, 51, 57, 70
- Das Kapital* 70
- historical/socialist materialism 52, 141
- 'indoor Marxmanship' 48, 137
- Marxism 48, 51, 53, 54, 55, 57, 64 (see also communism; socialism)
- masculinity 14, 37–39, 43, 189–90, 200
- Matson, Harold 21, 22, 25
- McCaffery, Larry 115
- McCarthy, Patrick A. 2, 5, 16, 32, 135, 145, 168, 204, 221, 221
- McHoul, Alec 168
- McLaughlan, Robbie 162
- McLuhan, Marshall 186, 187
- Mejia, Fabrizio 200
- Melville, Herman 11, 34, 55, 64, 72, 160, 161, 203, 211–12
- Benito Cereno* 211
- Billy Budd* 211
- Mardi* 72
- Moby Dick* 64, 122, 160, 161, 203, 211
- Pierre* 54

INDEX

- Redburn* 11, 211
 'The Stone Fleet' 119
 Memba, Javier 199
 Mersey, River 7, 67, 73, 81, 96, 102, 189
 Merseyside 8, 10, 17, 31, 199 (*see also* Liverpool; Lowry, Malcolm; Wirral)
 metafiction 23, 26–27, 110, 136, 167
 Mexico 23, 49, 82, 122, 125, 167, 200, 205
 Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact 67
 Moscow 82, 83
 Moscow Arts Theatre 62
 Mostyn (furnaces), Wales 174
 Mota, Miguel 9, 48, 219, 220–21, 221
 moviegoer 183–96
El Mundo 206
 Muñoz, Almudena 204, 205, 206, 208, 212
 Muzard, Suzanne 115
 Narbona, Rafael 202, 203, 204–05, 210, 211, 212
 Nazism (National Socialism) 47, 55, 57, 61, 65, 66, 67, 68, 73, 187, 208 (*see also* Germany)
 Nehru, Jawaharlal 47
 Nelson, Admiral Lord Horatio 209
 New Brighton *see* Wirral
 New York 24, 110, 113
 New York Public Library 135
 New York Yankees 122
 Nietzsche, Friedrich 140
 Norse history and mythology 14, 77–80, 90 (*see also* Vikings)
 Norway 3, 4, 14, 23, 50, 67–68, 77–80, 81–85, 120, 123, 124–31
 Norwegian Communist Party (NKP) 83
 Radio Free Norway 81
 Noxon, Betty 82
 Noxon, Gerald 82, 190
 Oakville, Canada 82
 Oates, Joyce Carol
 The Falls 145
 Lives of the Twins 139, 140
 Oaxaca 204
 Olaf the Saint (King Saint Olaf) 78–79, 80
 Olaizola, Jose Luis 209
 Old Testament 152
 Olsok festival 78
 O'Neill, Eugene 34, 121–22
 'Bound East for Cardiff' 121–22
 Ortega y Gasset, José 47, 57, 200–01
 Towards a Philosophy of History 57
 Ortiz y Ortiz, Raúl 200, 218, 219
 Orwell, George 53
 Oslo 23, 25, 62, 81, 92 n. 14, 120, 125, 127–30, 141, 142, 145, 146, 160, 162
 Nasjonalbiblioteket (National Library) 129
 Nordahl Grieg Collection, Oslo University Library 124–25
 Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press 221
 Ouspensky, Peter D. 14, 50, 56, 71–73
 The Fourth Dimension 71
 A New Model of the Universe 71
 Tertium Organum: A Key to the Enigmas of the World 71–72
Outward Bound 12, 194
 Oxford 128
 Pagnouille, Christine 219, 220
El País 201, 204
 Parker, Admiral Hyde 209
 Peel Holdings 113
 Peña, Angel 199
 Peterson, Houston
 The Melody of Chaos 24, 129, 130
 Pethick, Derek 21

- plagiarism 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 28,
42–43, 80, 97, 122, 126, 168
- Poe, Edgar Allan
‘The Fall of the House of Usher’
166 n. 15
*The Narrative of Arthur Gordon
Pym* 203
- Preston, Lancashire 8, 109, 119, 120,
122, 125, 195
Docks 102
Fishergate 120
Nelson bell-boat buoy 102, 103
Preston Chronicle 120
Public Library 120
- psychogeography 7, 14, 69, 72, 96,
120
dérive 11, 96
- Pudovkin, Vsevolod 8, 14, 55, 63, 70,
190, 207
The End of St Petersburg 8, 12, 55,
63, 65, 190–92, 194, 195, 207
Storm Over Asia 63
- SS *Pyrrhus* 13, 33, 34, 50
- Quisling, Vidkun 50
- Rascoe, Burton 22, 25, 27–28
‘What Is Love?’ 25
La Razón 206
Rebolledo, Francisco 200
Revista de Libros 201
*La Revista de la Universidad de
Mexico* 200
Revista Quimera 200
- Ribble, River 102, 120, 195
- Richardson, Dorothy 15, 183
- Ricoeur, Paul 154
- Rilke, Rainer Maria 206
- Romanticism, German 57
- Rouen, France 79
- Ruffelli, Jorge 200
- Ruge, Arnold 57
- Russia 4, 5, 14, 42, 61–73, 83,
144, 203 (*see also* communism;
Marxism; socialism)
- Civil Wars (1917–21) 70
- Provisional Government of
Alexander Kerensky 55, 63
- Revolution (October Revolution)
48, 190
- storming of the Winter Palace 63,
192
- Scandinavia 69, 77, 86
- Schefer, Jean-Louis 184, 186, 191, 196
- Scholz, Wilhelm von
The Race with a Shadow 25, 104,
105, 115, 163
- Second World War 57, 82, 83, 97
- Shakespeare, William
Cymbeline 124
- Shanghai 50
- situationism 11, 18 n. 15
- Skjeldal, Gudmund
*Diktaren i bombeflyet (The Poet and
the Bomber)* 127
- socialism 4, 13–14, 49, 51, 52, 53, 54,
55, 62, 66 (*see also* communism;
Marxism)
- Sommerfield, John 50
- Soviet Russia *see* Russia
- Spain 16, 33, 82, 208, 209, 212
Civil War 16, 33, 82, 83, 208, 212
Asturias Revolution 208
Battle of the Ebro 82
- Empire 209
- Franco, General Francisco 208
- Historical Memory Law (2007) 16,
208, 209
- Spanish Conservative Party 208
- Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE)
208
- Spender, Stephen 53, 208
- Spengler, Oswald 62
The Decline of the West 62
- Sphinx, legend of the 71

INDEX

- Spinoza, Baruch (Benedict de) 51
 Spoo, Robert 23
 Stalin, Joseph 54
 Stanislavsky, Konstantin 63
 Stanleys (Earls of Derby and Lords of Mann) 98, 112
 Stiklestad, Battle of 78
 Sturluson, Snorri 79, 80
 Surrealism 96
- Tallón, Juan 204, 206
 Taoism 71, 72
 Tarot 116, 116
 Tiessen, Paul 6, 9, 48, 96, 219, 220, 221–22, 221
 RMS *Titanic* 52
 Tookey, Helen 219
 Trafalgar, Battle of 209
Transition: An International Quarterly for Creative Experiment 71
 Tschechowa, Olga 189
- University of British Columbia 218
 Special Collections 121
 USSR *see* Russia
- Vancouver 5, 99, 121, 135, 187, 218, 220
 Vertov, Dziga
 Man with a Movie Camera 186
 Viking ship (Bygdøy) 128, 130
 Vikings 68, 74 n. 17, 78, 80 (*see also* Norse history and mythology)
- Villaro, Ignacio 199, 201, 212
 Virgil 204
 Virgili, Carmen 200
 Voltaire
 Candide 52
- Walderhaug, Karsten 126, 130
 walking the city 10, 11–12, 18 n. 15, 109–13
 Watson, Sheila 185
 White Sea 4, 67, 69, 70, 79, 81, 127, 161, 162, 201, 202, 203, 207, 210
 Williams, Mark 32, 37
 Wills, David 176
 Wirral, Merseyside 7, 9, 14, 18 n. 9, 77–80, 81, 108, 120, 174
 Birkenhead 12, 13, 108, 189, 196
 Caldy 9, 78, 120
 Caldy Golf Course 120
 Cammell Laird shipyard 108
 Dee, River 174
 Meols, submerged forest 79
 New Brighton 7, 9
 Norse past 77–80
 Thingwall 78
 Thurstaston 78
 Wallasey 80, 189
 West Kirby 78
 Woolf, Virginia 15, 183, 186, 187
 ‘The Cinema’ 186
- Yandle, Anne 220

