

On Nordahl Grieg's *The Ship Sails On*

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It is likely that many non-Norwegian readers come upon Grieg's first novel in connection with their interest in Malcolm Lowry, who was both a personal friend of Grieg and an ardent admirer of his work. In my own case, it was Lowry's letter to Grieg in 1938, wherein he acknowledges the influence of *The Ship Sails On* on his own first novel, *Ultramarine*, that led me to an examination of Grieg's book. The relationship between these two works I have dealt with elsewhere,¹ but it seems to me that *The Ship Sails On* deserves a close analysis in its own right, for it stands as one of the remarkable naturalistic novels of the first quarter of this century.

First published in Norway in 1924 under the title *Skibet Gaar Videre*, it was translated into English by A. G. Chater and published by Alfred Knopf in 1927, but has apparently been out of print since the 1930's.² Incidentally, the translator was one of Lowry's English masters at Cambridge in 1929, so it was undoubtedly he, as Douglas Day points out,³ who introduced Lowry to the Norwegian's work. The upshot of all this interest was that Lowry made a special trip to Norway in the summer of 1930 to meet Grieg, and though the details of this trip are sketchy and somewhat contradictory, the two writers did meet very briefly, and Grieg gave Lowry permission to write a stage adaptation of *The Ship Sails On* which, characteristically, Lowry never did complete.

The dramatic possibilities are there, however, and the spare, economical texture of this novel, and its repetitive, cyclical structure reflect the strong talent for drama that Grieg was to display during his short career. Like the opening scene in a Shakespearean tragedy, the first chapter of *The Ship Sails On* establishes both a structural pattern of subsequent events and a thematic motif around which Grieg was able to document his deterministic vision of the human condition. The ship in this context fulfills two functions, a literal one in that it becomes the vehicle for destruction in the course of life, and a metaphorical one in that it represents the universe or life itself. The crew of the ship is steadily and irrevocably transformed through disease and death during the course of the novel, but the ship remains unchanged, and in its bleak indifference to its human cargo it is not unlike that other "master of the longitudes," E. J. Pratt's iceberg that destroyed the human world of the *Titanic*.⁴

The initial opposition that Grieg establishes is between ship and shore, or perhaps more accurately between the ship and the seaport to which it is umbilically attached, although the larger world beyond the ship-seaport ambience is hinted at from time to time. Man, it seems, must choose one or the other of these two worlds, and once he makes his choice he is allowed no departure from its stern codes and regulations. The ship, ironically named the *Mignon*, offers, like life itself, either salvation or destruction, but in this bleak novel, the chances for salvation are rare, and man has to walk a strait and narrow road in order to achieve it. In effect, there are only two ways in Grieg's world to escape destruction: either to stay on board ship and never go ashore at all, or like Narvik, the only one of the crew who is eventually saved, to go ashore and escape immediately to the larger world which lies beyond the seaport. To partake of the seaport life and then return to the ship is in this novel tantamount

to inevitable destruction, and one of the dramatic strengths of *The Ship Sails On* is the unfolding of the way in which, one by one, the ship-seaport world takes its toll of the crew. This spectacle operates effectively whether we view it in allegorical or realistic terms, although this depends in part on how one starts the novel: it does not shift readily back and forth from realism to allegory as does, for example, Melville's *Moby Dick*, Conrad's *Lord Jim*, or Lowry's *Ultramarine*. Its sparse prose and limited texture keeps it fairly rigidly in the one mold or the other, but whether realistic or allegorical, its informing impulse is determinism, and *The Ship Sails On* emerges very close in spirit to such naturalistic works as Zola's *L'Assommoir* or Hamsun's *Hunger*.

An appropriate sense of doom, therefore, attends the protagonist of *The Ship Sails On*, Benjamin Hall, as he approaches the *Mignon* for the first time at a Norwegian dockside. A chaste and innocent youth of nineteen, Hall reflects conflicting impressions of wonder, curiosity, and fear as he nears the ship, and Grieg's description here establishes the conflicts and illusions that are to operate dramatically and ironically throughout the novel:

But one night a young face appears on the quay in the darkness; a new hand who knows nothing. He stares up at the mighty world of iron that rises up before him, and wonders within himself: What is there inside the ship, what does she conceal?

And this is what he guesses:

She is a warehouse that moves about from port to port and sometimes visits lands of beauty. A community of human lives, with darksome clefts and ravines, but also with mountains rosy in the dawn. A Moloch that crushes the lives of men between its iron jaws, and then calmly turns its face to the solitudes, as though nothing had happened. All this the ship is, and a thousand things besides. And he feels drawn to her and afraid of her.³

The ship by itself represents a kind of sealed off community which contains elements of both goodness and evil, but the ship in conjunction with the seaport ambience becomes something else again. Open to physical and moral contamination, it then becomes an arena of total life, which is more concentrated and inflexible than normal. And it is on this kind of restricted stage that Grieg sets in motion all the factors that move inexorably towards man's destruction.

On board the *Mignon*, the forces of destruction and disintegration from the seaport are already at work in the persons of the naked prostitutes who confront Hall in the fore-castle bunks. Leering at him with all their vulgarity and filth, the prostitutes not only foreshadow the eventual path to his own doom, but they provide a vivid and frightening picture of what is entailed in the loss of paradise, as represented by Benjamin's ideal love, Eva. There is an animal savagery about the prostitutes, and the clawing, screaming fight between Normanna and Gunhild, with all its reptilian imagery, is reminiscent of that epic washhouse fight between Gervaise and Virginie in Zola's *L'Assommoir*. But the most poignant measure of the human degradation and loss involved here occurs when the fireman Anton confronts his own sister, whom the seaman Aalesund has brought aboard; this dramatic revelation of the depravity that all on board, including Anton himself, have contributed to, proves too much for him, and shortly afterward he apparently takes his own life in his grief over what he has become.

Anton is a fireman and Aalesund a seaman, and the conflict between the two is therefore part of the polarization which in general operates on all ships

between these segments of the crew. As fireman, Anton is in a sense invulnerable, but as a moral figure, his position is untenable in the world of Aalesund and Oscar, the most despicable of all the seamen. Benjamin, still fresh and innocent from Eva's world beyond the seaport, takes a strong moral stand here, in berating Aalesund for his action with Anton's sister, and in this act he is supported by Narvik, the oldest and most respected of the seamen. Narvik is like Anton in that he maintains a strong sense of order and morality, but both realize that they cannot maintain this position, and eventually both leave this corrupt world, Anton through apparent suicide, and Narvik by jumping ship in Capetown and heading for the goldfields of South Africa. But this opening scene of moral conflict suggests the inevitable course of destruction for those who remain on board, and though firemen and seamen soon come together to save the crew's dog from their captain, the hostility remains, and surfaces in the violent fight that breaks out between them near the end of the novel. An obligatory scene, it also parallels the fight between the prostitutes at the beginning, and again the prevailing animal imagery underlines the basic nature of man as Grieg viewed it at that time.

Grieg's faith in man, however, and his belief in man's ultimate goodness, which later in his career was to ring out loudly in his patriotic verse and drama, is even in this bleak novel never completely subdued. Like other naturalists, such as Zola or Crane or Dreiser, he could never write man off as a mere chemical or biological organism, for Grieg always saw in man the strong urge to prevail, even if in his social circumstances he was not always able to do so. As the *Mignon* leaves port, Sivert and Benjamin talk about what leaving home really means, and the values associated with their families and loved ones remain dimly in their consciousness even at the very moments of their transgressions. There is a strong bond between these two, though they are separated by experience and innocence, for Sivert is already infected by venereal disease. In one scene in the wheelhouse, Sivert is at the wheel, and Benjamin, polishing the brass, becomes agonizingly aware of the gulf that separates them: "[Sivert] was like a dark shadow in the joyous daylight" (p. 58). Yet, ironically, he fails to heed Sivert's prophetic warning about going ashore in Cape Town, and it is on this excursion that Benjamin himself contracts venereal disease.

Benjamin's transgression occurs in part because he wants to be like the rest of the crew in sexually proclaiming his manhood, and in part because of a cruel jest of fate, in the form of a delayed letter from Eva. Because his letter does not arrive during the regular mail call, he is filled with despair and rationalizes his desperate action in terms of his community with his fellow crew members: "And for the first time Benjamin felt that these men were his only world. Betrayed by those at home, a stranger in Cape Town, they were all he had left. Benjamin had come under the law of the ship: he would show himself game with his shipmates in good and evil. The sea had got one man more in its grip" (p. 149). Sivert had received his letter from home, and after Benjamin's transgression, his own letter from Eva arrives, and the two stricken men sit together in the forecabin reading these messages of innocence and paradise from the world now forever beyond their reach. "This letter was as homeless as Anton's" (p. 173). Benjamin muses, in reference to another letter which earlier had arrived for Anton after his death, with the ironic instruction on the envelope, "Please forward" (p. 145). Sivert and Benjamin are now joined irrevocably both by their loss of innocence and by their sharing "the dire disease" (p. 170), as Grieg euphemistically describes it, and at the novel's end they have taken on completely the evil ways of the ship itself: "[Benjamin's] mouth was drawn into a bitter, evil grin. He clenched his fists and his eyes were coldly defiant; the ship seemed to have lent him her hatred . . ." (p. 219).

There is a sharp distinction in this novel between the sea as a part of the natural world and the ship as both a molding and a destructive agent. Early in his voyage, Benjamin suffers a brief but agonizing bout with seasickness, which represents a kind of initiatory rite, for when it is over, he can laugh with the seamen and become a part of the crew. "He suddenly understood what the sea means to seamen" (p. 35), he observed as he overcame his earlier self-pitying and loneliness, and assumed his manhood aboard ship. This manhood was put to a more severe test during the terrifying storm described in Chapters 13 and 14 which, like his seasickness and the fights in the forecabin, is couched in animal imagery: "Like a troop of frantic tigers with outstretched claws and foaming mouths the waves sprang upon the *Mignon*" (p. 121). The storm, however, destroys no one, and for Benjamin, who wants a shipwreck, like the one Narvik survived, to test his heroism, it arouses mainly an ecstasy for living and action. As it was for Lowry, the sea for Grieg was generally a benign agent, as opposed to the ships themselves, which were frequently the vehicles for man's destruction.

This theme of destruction is realistically and dramatically expounded throughout *The Ship Sails On* by the simple method of documenting the disappearance of crewmen, one by one, both on board ship and ashore in the various seaports. And Grieg makes it clear that the loss of the individual makes no impact whatsoever upon the cosmic indifference of the ship: "Lives and destinies come and go in the forecabin, but the ship does not change. She is eternity—" (p. 10). Aalesund, the seducer of Anton's sister, is appropriately the first to go, discovering in the first port that he has venereal disease, and subsequently jumping ship. His disappearance is hardly noticed and quickly forgotten—"by coffee-time there had never been a man on board called Aalesund" (p. 47)—but what he did lingers after him and affects others, especially Anton, who is the second to go. Whether his death is suicide or an accident is never completely resolved, but certainly his own part in the general corruption and thus in the specific betrayal of his sister, suggests at least a death wish on his part, if not actual suicide. But the presence of his corpse on board ship produces a strange effect upon the crew, as though it is a mute reminder of their collective guilt. "Something had happened, an event had shown its ugly face in the midst of this tremendous void of pale grey days; they stood still and were terrified" (p. 76). Narvik, the third crew member to disappear, is the only one who escapes the destruction inherent in the ship-seaport, and though there is no literal proof of his ultimate safety, his heading for the goldfields of South Africa is not unlike, both literally and metaphorically, Huckleberry Finn's "[lighting] out for the Territory."⁶ Of all the crew members, Narvik was the only one who never went ashore in any seaport, and thus he was the only one to escape contamination.

This drama of ship-board disappearances is paralleled by a kind of grotesque pilgrimage through Cape Town as Benjamin in his despair and bitterness leads the crew men on an orgy of drunkenness and lust. One by one the men disappear from the group into the dens of the prostitutes, until only Benjamin is left. Grieg here demonstrates a dramatic withholding of the moment of his fall, much the same as Milton did with the fall of Eve in *Paradise Lost*, where it is not until the last syllable of the final word, as it were, that her fall becomes irrevocable. So it is with Benjamin: the prostitute Rita reminds him of Eva, so he is momentarily hesitant, and he is at the point of heeding the crippled pianist's warning to him, when he reluctantly allows himself to be persuaded by Rita, and thus undergoes the final initiatory ritual into the full manhood represented by the rest of the crew.

The effect upon Benjamin and his universe is immediate; as he approaches the dock in the early hours of the morning, the depressingly grey dawn fills him

with bitterness and emptiness, and again there is an echo of the parallel scene in *Paradise Lost* where the universe itself reflects the loss of innocence. Benjamin tries to rationalize his action by pretending that not much has changed: "Everything was as before; he had simply been initiated into a vulgar, trivial secret, which had left him poorer, or perhaps richer—richer for a disillusionment. His last dream was gone and life had no riddles left. That was all" (p. 166).

But the terrible import of what he has done strikes him forcefully when he goes to the clinic to visit Little Bekhardt, another victim of "the dire disease" to disappear from the ship. Benjamin is confronted here by a vision of horror: a ward full of immobile and dying men, stricken by venereal disease—a surrealist scene not unlike the hospital scene in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. This is a vision of Benjamin's ultimate destiny, for he goes from here to a specialist who confirms his worst fears, and thus he becomes one with Aalesund, Sivert, Little Bekhardt, and all the others who committed that simple transgression.

The final chapter of *The Ship Sails On* strikes the same structural and thematic note introduced in the opening chapter, with Benjamin once again approaching the ship, but this time of course he has no choice as he had in the first instance. He has moved from a state of innocence through a series of initiatory rites, both positive and negative, and he has now ironically discovered the answer to his earlier question of whether he would ever be the same as the rest of the crew (p. 44). Filled with despair, Benjamin is at the point of committing suicide, and is prepared to take the ship's dog with him. "Santos, this day shalt thou be with me in paradise" (p. 217), he remarks, but he realizes that paradise is to be had only once, and that it exists now only in the world of Eva. As a result, he chooses to remain in the specific hell that his ship represents rather than to experience the uncertain hell of any after life; Grieg's characters are clearly made to suffer the punishments inflicted upon them for their transgressions.

In his later works, Grieg offered a more hopeful and dynamic vision of man's possibilities, especially in his plays and poetry which celebrated man's resistance against tyranny and oppression. In this early novel, however, written when he was only twenty-two, his vision was bleak indeed, but the picture of the world that he knew so well through his own seafaring experiences was a convincing and realistic one, and *The Ship Sails On* emerges even after fifty years as one of the more powerful naturalistic novels of its time.

NOTES

¹"*Ultramarine* and *The Ship Sails On*: Malcolm Lowry's Debt to Nordahl Grieg," forthcoming in *Canadian Literature*.

²In his letter to Grieg, Lowry said "I could not get *The Ship Sails On* in England as I promised you, because it was out of print." Malcolm Lowry, *Selected Letters* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1965), p. 16.

³Douglas Day, *Malcolm Lowry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) p. 117.

⁴E. J. Pratt, "The Titanic," in *Ten Selected Poems* (Toronto: The Macmillan Company of Canada, 1947), p. 35.

⁵Nordahl Grieg, *The Ship Sails On* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927), p. 2. All subsequent references are to this edition.

⁶Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1967), p. 328.