NOTES AND REVIEWS

Mirrors In Mirrors: Reflections on Malcolm Lowry's *Dark as the Grave*

As the modern novel withdraws more and more out of the social world into the solipsist world of the individual consciousness, the writer very often draws almost exclusively upon his own experience. This is certainly true of Malcolm Lowry's fictions. Like Proust, like Joyce, like Lawrence, he is his own subject. The Freudian could well take Lowry's two major novels and demonstrate the applicability of the master's thesis that artists are neurotics: this may be true, but it should not be allowed to hide the more important truth that *Under the Volcano* is a superb tragic novel. In *Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend Is Laid* (Penguin edition, 1972) we have a record of this novel's genesis, adding another dimension to our understanding of it. *Dark as the Grave* is a commentary, in fictional form, on the anguish and soul torment that resulted in *Under the Volcano.*

Several important contemporary novelists are taking the traditional novel of the artist, the Künstlerroman, one stage further. Samuel Beckett in the *Molloy* trilogy, Doris Lessing in *The Golden Notebook,* and B. S. Johnson in Trawl—among many others—not only present portraits of the artist in the tradition of the genre (Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* being a good example of the form), but they explore the complex psychological reasons which lie behind the urge to fictionalize reality. Like multiple mirrors reflecting their own surfaces, their art explores its own genesis.

In *Dark As The Grave Wherein My Friend Is Laid,* Sigbjorn Wilderness—Lowry's persona—is revisiting the scene of an autobiographical novel entitled *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* (Lowry's original title for his own *Under the Volcano).* Already the reflections and refractions are bewildering. In the novel written by Sigbjorn-Lowry, the protagonist, Consul of a shabby Mexican town, gives up (with the Faustian gesture of one in love with damnation) a chance of happiness with the woman he loves and follows his alcoholic destiny unto death. *Under the Volcano* is a tragic novel of great power, but seen in the light of *Dark as the Grave* it demands to be reread also as a case history: the history of the writer's *alter ego,* his self that died (or was killed off) in the necessary exorcism of Lowry's Consul-persona so that the Sigbjorn-persona could live. The Consul is what Lowry might have been; Sigbjorn is what Lowry would like to be.

Dark as the Grave has little literary merit. It is a barely fictionalized account of how another novel came to be written and, because of this, is a fascinating appendix to a great contemporary novel. Returning to the Mexico of *The Valley of the Shadow of Death,* Sigbjorn feels himself drawn along the paths his doomed protagonist had taken: he walks back into a reality where a different self had been at home, and the question which faces him (and which the novel answers) is, has he grown beyond his former self?—or is the Consul's destiny his own? The places he visits and the people he meets again are all reflections of a past self with which he must come to terms. "But for one thing by far the most potent ghost he had to encounter was himself, and he had very considerable doubts as to whether it wanted to be laid at all" (p. 110).

For Sigbjorn, writing is a means of triumphing over the alien nature—the otherness—of experience. Drink may ease the pain, lead to mystical illuminations (and oblivion) but to write is to face the pain, and through knowledge comes strength. By writing about himself, Sigbjorn comes to know his true self, his demon, the god in man. His life and his writing are symbiotic: ". . . he seemed to see how life flowed into art: how art gives life a form and meaning and flows on into life" (p. 60). Sigbjorn's visit to Oaxaca is analogous to Lowry's writing about it: the fictional author physically retraces and relives the earlier path he beat through the hell of Oaxaca; Lowry relives it by recreating the experience in the novel. In *Dark as the Grave,* he suggests that the most interesting aspect of the Consul's story lies not in any part of it, but in how and why it came to be written. "How even much more interesting than the book he had written would have been a book about his actual struggle with whatever it was he was struggling with, if only his own material" (p. 59). It is this struggle and what it represents that is central to the later novel.

God Himself, thinks Sigbjorn, "has the power at any moment to cut us out altogether from His strange dark manuscript" (p. 155). God's novel is quite surrealistic: meanings exist but are hidden, signs are ambiguous or paradoxical, yet one must grasp out after significance. The complexity of the torn palimpsest of past and present is made more confusing by the proliferation of possibly epiphanic moments. Primrose, Sigbjorn's wife, has a wash, "Was there," he wonders, "any meaning in this cleansing process?" The act of writing a novel demands that the author recognize the luminous moments; recognize, that is, the significance of it all.

For Sigbjorn—as, one suspects, for Lowry—there is no key to all the mysteries. The realization of truth which comes through suffering (his truly classical anagnorisis) is that the human spirit need not be defeated by the burden of life and the hell of otherness. The Consul chose death. Absurdly, heroically, sordidly, magnificently, he chose the barranca as a way out of hell; Sigbjorn, on the other hand, walks out of hell into life. "Look" he could cry with Lawrence, "we have come through." Sigbjorn has known hell, knows the reality of the barranca of the soul, but still triumphs. He can accept it all, the horror and the boredom and the glory: his prayer is an act of acceptance, an act of understanding: he can embrace his dead friend, his old enemy, even the world: "But this time in his prayer, childlike, Sigbjorn included not only Fernando, himself and Primrose, but the man in supplication whose hands were still held high, the woman with the child and the bottle of habanero, and the drunk, but the manager of the bank and even the world. Then almost as an afterthought, he included John Stanford" (p. 254).

The cry of anguish which concludes *Under the Volcano* is transformed into a prayer, a spontaneous cry of hope. Although Fernando, his friend, is dead, he lives on in Sigbjorn's memory (as in his novel). The novel ends with "one candle burning," "a statement of faith," says Primrose, "a way of saying: 'my dear one, I have not forgotten.' And like the cross, it is a symbol of acceptance of suffering, but it's also of resurrection" (p. 256). Out of the flames of the Consul's death, came Sigbjorn, purged.

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