

straw (p. 222). Scurrilous and flippant fairy tales for a civilization that has lost its sense of mission. Vonnegut's style resembles the behavior of one of *Jailbird's* characters who is always "overacting his surprise and dismay like an actor in a silent movie" (p. 130). For Vonnegut is addicted to the half melodramatic, half consciously humorous hyperbole of the silent movie director. He exaggerates the contrast between unbelievable innocence and cruel power mongering, between foolish optimism and apathetic defeatism. His anti-novel is thus in the tradition of Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*. The black humor and flippancy behind which Nathanael West and Kurt Vonnegut hide their sometimes sentimental, neo-Christian visions of goodness are best understood as emanating in spirit from the softhearted father of American literary satire who grew increasingly pessimistic in old age, Mark Twain.

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RICHARD K. CROSS

Malcolm Lowry: A Preface to His Fiction

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. Pp. 146. \$12.50.

"No symbols where none intended": Samuel Beckett's dictum in *Watt* could stand as a warning to overzealous exegetes of Lowry's writing. Like Joyce, Lowry attracts those whose predilections are for the symbol rather than the surface. The hermetic researcher has the perfect subject in Lowry, whose mythopoeic vision can lead to undreamed of treasures. Of course, Lowry's world is a forest of symbols but, as Richard K. Cross points out in his *Preface*, his fiction fuses symbolism and mimesis. If some recent studies have explored the cabalistic labyrinths, Cross's study emphasises—rightly I believe—that there are important depths, too, in the representational surface of Lowry's writing.

Because of this emphasis, Cross's *Preface* is the ideal critical work for those who are new to Lowry's writing. He adopts the

reader's guide approach, leading the reader chronologically through the oeuvre from the apprentice work (which, placed in context, is Lowry's necessary preparation for *Under the Volcano*) to *Under the Volcano*—the examination of which dominates the study—to the later works (seen as interesting fictional reflections on the *magnum opus* rather than as significant in their own right). Cross ranks *Under the Volcano* alongside *Nostramo*, *Ulysses*, and *Doktor Faustus*, as one of the classics of high modernism; this assertion he demonstrates with both clarity and insight.

Under the Volcano is concerned with that which is common to all men, at all times, in all places; it is concerned with life, death, and the difficulty of loving; it is concerned with the exploration of essentially contested concepts—and it is concerned with a drunk in Mexico. And Mexico is there in all its moods of desolate splendor, of sinister magnificence and tawdry beauty. The mood music is as memorable as the Alexandrian rhythms of Durrell's *Quartet* and it establishes the slow, melancholy, tragic measure of Mexico as the backdrop to the action of the novel. As Richard Cross points out, the Consul's last, violent day has implicit parallels with a world that is slipping into the global violence of World War II, but the symbolic overtones should not overshadow the felt reality of the world that Lowry creates.

Each character reads himself into the landscape. Geoffrey's despair is articulated through the night imagery in his letter to Yvonne: ". . . Night: and once again the nightly grapple with death, the room shaking with daemonic orchestras, the snatches of fearful sleep, the voices outside the window, my name being continually repeated with scorn by imaginary parties arriving, the dark's spinets. As if there were not enough real noises in these nights the colour of grey hair. Not like the rending tumult of American cities, the noise of the unbandaging of great giants in agony. But the howling pariah dogs, the cocks that herald dawn all night, the drumming, the moaning that will be found later, white plumage huddled on telegraph wires in back gardens or fowl roosting in apple trees, the eternal sorrow that never sleeps of great Mexico." Geoffrey's world is a Kafkaesque nightmare, and the metaphors are real. The surface is the symbol: here are no biblical floods or Lawrentian rainbows: Sisyphus is a man on a greasy pole, Fate is a Ferris Wheel.

There are, too, some marvelous dialogues—Geoffrey playing Holy Fool to the pompous Mr. Quincey, or the drunken confrontation on Calle Nicaragua—which are closer to Proust or Joyce than to Kafka. But often it is the spaces between the words that are most meaningful. Geoffrey's hurt, his hate, his fear, his pain, his love for Yvonne, all lie so close that he cannot adequately articulate his emotions; yet—and this is a major achievement—the novel conveys this to the reader. We experience his world from inside: life is nasty, brutish and solitary; man is a wretched creature—who can apprehend perfection. There coexists with the violent and grotesque realities of Mexico another reality. "Right through Hell there is a path, as Blake well knew, and though I may not take it, sometimes lately in dreams I have been able to see it."

If the surface of life in Quauhnahuac is vividly achieved, so too is the possibility of paradisaical escape. All the protagonists

dream. Their dreams are realized with such intensity that they are as vital as the hell in which they exist. They are impossible dreams, dreams which give meaning to life, dreams which must always and can never be true. If Geoffrey could regain his faith in life then these dreams could be real. But like Faustus, also man enough for damnation, he moves inexorably towards self-destruction, absurd, grotesque, heroic.

Richard Cross by no means ignores the symbolic sub-text of Lowry's major novel, but by drawing attention to the narrative surface he focuses on a crucial aspect of the fiction. A Baedeker for the stony terrain and a Virgil for the infernal regions, Cross's *Preface* is as good a guide as I know for those entering the world of Malcolm Lowry.

Robert Chapman

