

MALCOLM LOWRY AND THE NORTHERN TRADITION

by
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Canadian novelists during the first half of this century, in so far as they occupied themselves with Canada's rural and urban landscape, depicted it almost exclusively in terms of a physical and literal backdrop to human experiences. This was equally true of both indigenous and immigrant writers, and for such otherwise diverse novelists as Stead, Grove, Callaghan, and Niven, Canada remained, or emerged, as "a limitless territory rising from imagination into fact," to borrow a useful phrase from Kildare Dobbs' *Running To Paradise*. But for many of our novelists who have emerged in the last twenty-five years or so, the reverse process is true, for what is depicted in such novelists as Kroetsch, Atwood, Godfrey, Hood, Cohen, and Carrier are the various ways in which Canada is being transformed from fact into imagination. These novelists have taken the "facts" about Canada — its geography, history, and culture — and created out of them a distinctive mythology which is unmistakably connected to the northern, the frontier, the paradisaical aspects of Canada, and have forged in a relatively short period of time both a tradition and a fictional mode which are significantly different from any earlier movements in our literature.

Northrop Frye hinted at the emergence of this somewhat indefinable and imaginative view of Canada many years ago, even though he also recognized the necessity of her writers exploiting Canada's "environmental reality." But, he went on, "there would be nothing distinctive in Canadian culture at all if there were not some feeling for the immense searching distance, with the lines of communication extended to the absolute limit, which is a primary geographical fact about Canada and has no real counterpart elsewhere."¹ In terms of Canada's settlement and development, this "immense searching distance" is most dramatically revealed in the attitudes Canadians and others have had towards western and northern expansion, attitudes which alternated between awe and

¹Northrop Frye. *The Bush Garden* (Toronto, 1971), p. 10.

terror, depending either on such simple determinants as weather or season, or on more complex and intangible factors like perception and the imaginative re-creation of the unknown, which Frye sees manifested in Tom Thomson as "The tension between the mind and a surrounding not integrated with it."²

Frye made the above observations respectively in 1952 and 1940, and one could undoubtedly discover much evidence in our painters of the 1920's and 1930's of the imaginative transformation of the Canadian reality, and of the increasing artistic exploitation of Canada's northern and frontier mystique. The historian W. L. Morton sees it as part of a much larger phenomenon, "the northern character [which] springs not only from geographical location, but from ancient origins in the northern and maritime frontier of Europe,"³ all of which makes the totality of the Canadian experience qualitatively different from that of the American experience. "Because of this separate origin in the northern frontier," Morton argues, "Canadian life to this day is marked by a northern quality, . . . the strong seasonal rhythm, . . . the wilderness venture, . . . the puritanical restraint . . . [and] the psychological tension. . . . The line which marks off the frontier from the farmstead, the wilderness from the baseland, the hinterland from the metropolis, runs through every Canadian psyche."⁴

Among our current novelists, Robert Kroetsch has perhaps traced this line most consistently in his fiction, much of which takes place on what he calls in *Gone Indian* "the far, last edge of our civilization." But an earlier and a seminal contribution to this tradition was provided by Malcolm Lowry, a writer whose personal life represented an obsessive "running to paradise" that far transcends anything that Kildare Dobbs meant by it, and who almost instantaneously transformed the literal landscape of his adopted British Columbia into a mythological paradise which was to serve as the informing metaphor of so much of his work. It is an aspect of Lowry's Canadian character, I think, that his idea of paradise was not merely an intellectual concept, and did not assume the notion of unflawed perfection, which has consistently been the American version. It involved his taking a tangible though tenuous possession of a corner of the New World, in which he could live a precarious and uncomplicated life as close to the natural order as possible. The American critic Matthew Corrigan makes a perceptive observation about Lowry's contribution to this tradition, as he sees him "sitting on the fringes of American society" viewing it either from a southern perspective in *Volcano* or a northern one

²*Ibid.*, p. 200.

³W. L. Morton. *The Canadian Identity* (Madison, 1961), p. 89.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 93.

in *October Ferry*. "Conceiving of his position at first infernally, then paradisaically," Corrigan goes on, "his view is that of the outsider looking in, an alienation reflected in the individual strength and quiet, ascetic balance of the prose, prose that is the masterpiece of detachment and solitude."⁵

To digress a moment, it is clear that the movement from fact into imagination, that is, the metaphorical exploitation of Canadian actualities, would have come about in Canadian writing, with or without Malcolm Lowry, for it represents an inevitable consequence of Canada's general maturation process. In its simplest form, it reflects a reaction against the excessive celebration of fact in our earlier novelists, even in those substantial ones like Grove, MacLennan, or Wilson, and in our popular documentary writers of the Pierre Berton school. In a more fundamental way, the transition reflects an overcoming of the kind of national and psychological insecurity or self-consciousness that Simon Lesser refers to in his *Fiction and the Unconscious*. He sees this pattern emerging wherever dominant middle-class values are undermined by a national coming of age, and where an intellectual climate is thus created wherein novelists can feel free of the constraint to depict only actual as opposed to imaginative experiences. "The desire to conciliate a sensed fear of fantasy," Lesser argues, "is one of the perennial motives for realism,"⁶ and when one considers the close relationship in Canada between national self-consciousness, middle-class values, and realism in fiction, one can see the applicability of Lesser's arguments here.

In a sense, then, Malcolm Lowry happened upon the scene at an opportune time, but as suggested above, it was his seizing upon a geographical fact and exploiting its multiple and complex implications which in retrospect can be judged as a critical juncture in Canadian fiction. All his fiction, with the exception of *Ultramarine*, was in part or in whole shaped by the concept of a "northern paradise," and it is one of the many ironies of his life that this concept was most pervasive in those works he didn't live to see published — *Hear Us O Lord* and *October Ferry*. Yet one of the two post-*Volcano* stories that were published in his lifetime does substantially illustrate the artistic and mythological framework of this combined "northernness" and "paradise" nexus, and I suspect that this is one of the reasons why Lowry was constantly so satisfied with "The Bravest Boat." What Lowry does in this story, and even more satisfactorily in his posthumously-published "Forest Path to the Spring," is to construct a new mythology wherein a number of archetypal situations or forces in human experience are infused with a contemporaneous recognition of "the very

⁵Matthew Corrigan, "Malcolm Lowry: The Phenomenology of Failure," *Boundary 3* (Vol. III, No. 2) Winter, 1975, p. 412.

⁶Simon O. Lesser. *Fiction and the Unconscious* (New York, 1962), p. 7.

lineaments of a new land," to use the words from one of his own poems.⁷ Muriel Bradbrook, an early friend of the young Lowry, and seemingly a sharer of his "instant" recognition of Canada, has pointed out perceptively that "the strength of Canada derives from resisting the mythology of others,"⁸ and many other Canadian novelists besides Lowry have of course built positively on this kind of rejection. Robert Kroetsch has spoken of the liberating effect that the Canadian experience, as opposed to the Old World mythos, brings to him. "I guess I'm a frontiersman," he said, "and I like the sense of its newness. . . . [For] our generation of Canadian writers . . . it's the excitement of having something that is brand new. . . . Much as I admire *The Odyssey*, I want to get free of it. I want to get loose, and to do it I re-tell the story, I re-enact it, in my own way."⁹ Margaret Atwood warns writers that they are doomed if they "[try] to use somebody else's social mythology,"¹⁰ a caveat she successfully heeds in the transformation of the Canadian wilderness into a metaphorical Eden in *Surfacing* — a "paradise" characterized by "seasonal rhythms," "lonely savagery," "wilderness roughness," "puritanical restraint" and "psychological tension," to call up some of Morton's terms again.

One can perhaps fault Lowry for mechanically mythologizing the experiences and components of his newly discovered paradise, but even in such a relatively slight story as "The Bravest Boat" the mythological framework allows an imaginative dimension that a literal narrative reading doesn't fully support. In a very real sense, this story is a parable of creation, and the various juxtapositions — of idyllic park and ugly city, of free animals and caged animals, of the joy of life and the ominous threat of extinction — represent Lowry's consistent views about the nature of existence even in this Eden-like park which has materialized out of the chaos. Within this perspective, Sigurd and Astrid transcend their literal childlike actions and functions and take on respectively the allegorical roles of the creator and recipient of life. The boat launched by Sigurd sailed through the midst of chaos, "all these years before Astrid was born," and Lowry here in an extended passage depicts a northern scene, a vast chaos in which nevertheless the components of eventual form, shape, and harmony were already in motion:

⁷Malcolm Lowry, "Old Freighter in an Old Port," in *Selected Poems*, (San Francisco, 1962), p. 14.

⁸Muriel Bradbrook. *Literature in Action* (London, 1972), p. 153.

⁹In Donald Cameron. *Conversations With Canadian Novelists*, Part I (Toronto, 1973), pp. 86, 91.

¹⁰In Graeme Gibson. *Eleven Canadian Novelists* (Toronto, 1972), p. 14.

Ah, its absolute loneliness amid those wastes, those wildernesses of rough rainy seas bereft even of sea birds, between contrary winds, or in the great dead windless swell that comes following a gale; and then with the wind springing up and blowing the spray across the sea like rain, like a vision of creation, blowing the little boat as it climbed the highlands into the skies . . . and then sank down into the abyss . . . in ceaseless motion, rising and falling . . . and all this time a sound, like a high sound of singing, yet as sustained in harmony as telegraph wires, or like the unbelievably high perpetual sound of the wind where there is nobody to listen, which perhaps does not exist. . . .¹¹

The launching of the boat in this chaos is both literally and allegorically an act of faith, and like a seed blown by the winds, it must land on favourable soil to complete the process of life. The coincidence of the boat's survival, of Astrid's finding it in this self-same park where the story unfolds, and of her marrying Sigurd, may offend the literal-minded reader, but this same reader would probably accept the coincidences of *Genesis*. In Lowry's vision, life is constantly created out of some chaos in some paradise, and like his biblical prototypes, Lowry's creations are also threatened with perpetual eviction. This polarity in Lowry — the joy of creation counter-balanced by the precarious nature of existence — assumes a particularly dramatic dimension in its unfolding within a geographical setting that is sufficiently akin to the original Eden to allow for both a literal and mythological acceptance.

In his adaptation of the Canadian paradise to his personal vision, Lowry is in effect establishing a tangible means of emerging from the ever present chaos within himself. Matthew Corrigan made the observation that "Lowry moves through levels of insanity to certain quiet centers where he knows he can escape himself, his world,"¹² and thus he returns again and again to the physical manifestation of his paradise — the forest, the islands, the water, and his own hand-crafted, fragile structures within this paradise. There is an obvious thread which runs here from Lowry to Atwood in her *Surfacing*, where the narrator also moves through "levels of insanity," and by an immersion into the elements of her ancestral sources, she achieves a position of isolation and self-knowledge. Atwood's northern or frontier landscape is, I think, of a different texture from Lowry's, for amongst other things it represents in a political sense an escape from American predators. As the narrator moves into the second stage of her

¹¹Malcolm Lowry, *Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place* (London, 1962), p. 22. Subsequent references noted internally.

¹²Matthew Corrigan, *op. cit.*, p. 408.

progression towards order, the wilderness also takes on a more surrealistic dimension than is found anywhere in Lowry, except for moments in *Volcano*. In Lowry, man's movement towards peace or resolution is normally accompanied by the harmonious parallels of nature, but in *Surfacing*, this process involves a distortion or perversion of the natural world. In Part I of *Surfacing*, the narrator's state of illusion was appropriately complemented by an externally pleasant view of the wilderness world — by its surface reality and security. But this Eden soon reveals either its hostile, ominous aspects or its complete indifference, as in the final scene of the novel, where the narrator has arrived at a kind of mystical-existential resolution of her earlier "levels of insanity."

This difference between Lowry and Atwood, which is reflected also in Kroetsch, Cohen, Godfrey and Carrier, derives, I think, from the degree of immersion in the Canadian scene. Lowry remained, in spite of his almost frenetic commitment to his Eridanus, a kind of dedicated outsider who never surrendered or transcended his initial delight with his new found land. The other novelists bring to their fiction a qualitatively different heritage and as a result perhaps a more political or involved commitment, and are much more aware than Lowry was of the specific components of the Canadian scene they deal with in their fiction. In simplistic terms, Lowry provided an initial example of how one might transform the physical fact of Canada through imagination into a meaningful mythology, while the others have explored this possibility from perspectives that involve other facets of the Canadian experience.

It is clear, both from what Lowry has said about his Eridanus, and from the rich literary output of the ensuing decade and a half, that his fortuitous exile to his "northern country" was probably the single most important event in Lowry's life. Characteristically, however, he didn't really see this experience as constituting a completely new direction for him, but rather he absorbed or interpreted it as a kind of pre-ordained component of his own personal "nordic" mythology, adumbrated long before he reached the shores of British Columbia. W. L. Morton, it will be remembered, traces the development of Canada's northern character along the "frontier [that] extends from Norway by Scotland and the North Atlantic Islands to Greenland and Canada,"¹³ and Stephen Leacock, though admittedly more of a humorist than a historian, has argued that "the Scandinavian races . . . are, in a sense, more Canadian than ourselves," and that "the peculiar tone and rigour of our climate . . . will turn us all into Scandinavians before it has done with us."¹⁴ Within this

¹³W. L. Morton. *op. cit.*, p. 89.

¹⁴Stephen Leacock. *Canada: The Foundations of Its Future* (Montreal, 1941), p. 17.

perspective, one of the original sources of Lowry's northern tradition can be seen in his early affinity with persons, places, and things Norwegian, a note that runs through all his fiction, from the Latin/Norwegian title of a 1931 story, "Punctum Indifferens Skibet Gaar Videre," to his ambiguous identifying of various "Norways" in *October Ferry to Gabriola*. Where exactly this affinity to Norwegian experience began is not clear, but undoubtedly his attraction to the sea stories of Conrad, Dana, O'Neill, and Grieg had much to do with it initially, and his subsequent meeting with Grieg in 1930 most certainly consolidated this legacy. At any rate, it soon formalized itself into his own self-generated legend of his "Norwegian" grandfather, a Captain Boden who went down with his ship in the Indian Ocean, a legend which served him well aesthetically in much of his work, particularly in *Ultramarine* and *Hear Us O Lord*. As with that other perpetrator of a self-generated mythology, William Faulkner, the Lowry legends constitute an aesthetic complement to his fiction, and in this sense, it is difficult to forgive Douglas Day for destroying the myth by unearthing the prosaic fact that Captain Boden "died peacefully in his bed, at the age of 90."¹⁵

Yet the fiction does, of course, survive independently of the legend, and the northern tradition, whether generated by the physical fact of British Columbia or by Lowry's personal romanticizing, occupies a large part in his work. It is articulated early in *Under the Volcano* and serves as a recurring juxtaposing motif to the central theme of death in that novel, and provides an ironic — because unattainable — solution to Yvonne's agonizing question she poses in her long-unread letter to the Consul: "In what far place do we still walk, hand in hand?"¹⁶ His answer is in his unmailed letter to her, and it is a solution which appropriately can only be achieved in some other world than the inferno of his present life:

I seem to see us living in some northern country, of mountains and hills and blue water; our house is built on an inlet and one evening we are standing, happy in one another, on the balcony of this house, looking over the water. (*Volcano*, pp. 36-7)

Yvonne's question is ultimately answered in "The Bravest Boat," which portrays this possibility in a "northern country," where in effect Geoffrey and Yvonne are re-incarnated as the Norwegian characters, Sigurd and Astrid, "both bare-headed, and both extremely fair, and hand-in-hand" (*Hear Us O Lord*, p. 14). The Eden-like setting of this story is evoked in five of the seven stories that make up *Hear Us O Lord*, and most intensely in "Forest Path to the Spring":

¹⁵Douglas Day. *Malcolm Lowry* (New York, 1973), p. 59.

¹⁶Malcolm Lowry. *Under the Volcano* (New York, 1947), p. 366. Subsequent references noted internally.

... and then you would be sailing directly northwards into the snow-covered mountain peaks, past numerous enchanting inhabited islands of tall pines, down gradually into the narrowing gorge and to the utter-most end of that marvelous region of wilderness known to the Indians as Paradise. . . . (*Hear Us O Lord*, p. 219)

The orientation in both these visions — one a prophecy and the other an actuality — is northward, and throughout Lowry's work a journey northward invariably spells out salvation or peace, while the reverse journey always brings the characters close to doom or disaster. The journey motif constitutes a separate study in Lowry, and I don't intend to pursue it here, except to say that whether with a prolonged voyage as in "Through the Panama" or a relatively short one as in *October Ferry to Gabriola*, Lowry was consistent in his exploitation of both the literal and the symbolic properties of northernness. Perhaps the inlet of Eridanus represented a tenuous and momentary balance in man's "voyage that never ends," for here, as the narrator of "Forest Path" suggests, "there was neither sea nor river, but something compounded of both, in eternal movement, and eternal flux and change, as mysterious and multiform in its motion and being, and in the mind as the mind flowed with it, as was that other Eridanus, the constellation in the heavens, the starry river in the sky. . ." (*Hear Us O Lord*, p. 234). The Consul much earlier had wryly suggested that British Columbia was "an undiscovered, perhaps an undiscoverable Paradise" (*Volcano*, p. 353), but his successors in Lowry's fictional worlds, though they in a sense shared the literal limits of this definition, were nevertheless able to derive from this northern paradise some very tangible measures of peace and fulfillment.

The motif of the northern journey as a means of salvation or self-realization occupies a significant place in the fiction of those contemporary novelists who, in varying degrees, can be viewed as belonging to the Lowry tradition. I have already touched briefly on the relationship of Atwood to Lowry, and it is worth noting the emphasis placed in *Surfacing* on the literal crossing of the frontier into Canada; though the ensuing northward journey is soon transformed into a psychological quest, it nevertheless unfolds within a literal wilderness that, like Lowry's, takes on various mythological dimensions. In *Beautiful Losers*, Leonard Cohen offers what is perhaps the most extreme example of a transformation of Canadian fact (history) into mythology, and again the connection between the northern journey and individual salvation is made clear. On one occasion, the narrator interprets Edith's sexual fantasy in terms of such a journey, whereby both time and place would be transformed to effect his union with Catherine:

Perhaps she meant: Come on a new journey with me, a journey only strangers can take, and we can remember it when we are ourselves

again, and therefore never be merely ourselves again. Perhaps she had some landscape in mind where she always meant to travel, just as I envisage a northern river, a night as clear and bright as river pebbles, for my supreme trip with Catherine Tekawitha.¹⁷

Cohen has a more ironic, and certainly a more cynical, notion of paradise than Lowry, but his surrealist exploration of Canada's history in an attempt to effect a resolution between present-day sterility and the life force of an imaginatively re-created past represents as much a "running to paradise" as Lowry's geographically-oriented missions. In his approach and in his concern with the historical and cultural components of the Canadian experience Cohen anticipates Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* or Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear*, and all these works have in common with Lowry a mythological transformation of a northern or frontier experience.

Of all the current novelists, Robert Kroetsch has perhaps the closest affinity with the northern tradition and aesthetic vision of Malcolm Lowry. In all his novels, except *Words of My Roaring*, the frontier setting of Canada's north-west constitutes an absolutely essential element to the working out of the fictional odysseys of his protagonists. Both literally and allegorically, *But We Are Exiles* employs the northern journey device the most dramatically, for while the Mackenzie River generates on the literal level a physical and navigational drama of its own, it is transformed through Kroetsch's artistry into its mythical and symbolic dimensions, wherein are synthesized the disparate elements of Peter's and Mike's motives, jealousies, and transgressions. They have returned to the northern wilderness from which their Eve, Kettle Fraser, had many years earlier been exiled, "a world to which she dreamed of returning, for it had become freedom and excitement and utopia to her."¹⁸ Mike Hornyak in one sense is like Lowry's Sigbjorn Wilderness and Ethan Llewellyn, perpetually threatened with eviction and dispossession. But more important, in his predatory qualities, he is akin to David in *Surfacing*, a person ultimately unfitted for permanent occupation of any Eden. What neither David nor Mike understood about the effects of Lowry's "northern country" was what Carol failed to understand in *Gone Indian*, "the consequence of the northern prairies to human definition: the diffusion of personality into a complex of possibilities rather than a concluded self."¹⁹

¹⁷Leonard Cohen. *Beautiful Losers* (Toronto, 1966), pp. 14-15.

¹⁸Robert Kroetsch. *But We Are Exiles* (Toronto, 1965), p. 33.

¹⁹Robert Kroetsch. *Gone Indian* (Toronto, 1973), p. 152.

David, Anna, Mike, Demeter and a host of minor characters in *The Studhorse Man* — these are all “concluded” selves, unable ultimately to accommodate themselves to the kind of spirit that inhabits the “far last edge of our civilization.” Peter Guy, Hazard LePage, Jeremy Sadness, the narrator of *Surfacing* — these individuals are able to incorporate into their consciousness and subsequent altered vision of reality the same kind of epiphany experienced by Lowry’s Sigbjorn Wilderness:

It was as if he stood on the brink of an illumination, at the near side of something tremendous, which was to be explained beyond, in that midnight darkness, but which his consciousness streamed into, . . . and this flowing current appeared to him now in the guise of something irreversible, like that current in the Fraser River . . . back home in British Columbia . . . and it was like too the black star-laden current of Eridanus itself. . . .²⁰

The “something tremendous” in Lowry is invariably associated with his “undiscoverable Paradise” of British Columbia, and this theme, as it specifically concerns the Consul and his Edenic counterparts in Canada, has been competently explored elsewhere.²¹ But though for Lowry this was essentially a private, and even selfish, vision, for he was always his own best character, he nevertheless grasped intuitively the implications of what he was on to, and by transcending the restrictions of an archetypal paradise, he was able to give rich expression to the fictional possibilities of a northern tradition, and thus point out one of the many ways that Canadian experiences can be imaginatively exploited.

²⁰Malcolm Lowry. *Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid* (Toronto, 1968), pp. 43-44.

²¹Richard K. Cross. “Malcolm Lowry and the Columbian Eden.” *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. XIV, No. 1. (Winter, 1973), pp. 19-30.