

A NOTE ON ROMANTIC ALLUSIONS IN HEAR US O LORD

by
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Malcolm Lowry's fondness for the English Romantic poets affected both his reading and his rhetoric. In so doing, it affected also the substance of what he had to say. Nowhere in his work is this more evident than in *Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*.

Lowry's Cambridge and public school literary education would have given him close acquaintance with the Romantic writers, but this knowledge was honed by his intellectual sympathy with them. It is no surprise, therefore, to find references to Keats and to Coleridge throughout his stories. The central irony of "Strange Comfort Afforded by the Profession", for example — that of knowledge creating more fear of a situation at the same time as it increases one's ability to contend with it — depends upon a central allusion to Keats. The allusions to Coleridge are even more widespread. "Through the Panama" not only borrows directly — both for substance and structure — from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, but also re-enacts the Mariner's quest for emotional knowledge and intellectual animation.

In a sense Lowry even saw his own life in Coleridgean terms; "Monsieur Lowry, he is the ancient mariner, said the steward", he quotes in a 1947 letter to John Davenport.¹ In a covert reference to Coleridge's "The Aeolian Harp", in a 1952 letter to Albert Erskine, he also indicates how the Romantic sense of the relationship between Man and Nature informed the whole of *Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*: "*Hear Us* . . . seems to be shaping up less like an ordinary book of tales than a sort of novel of an odd aeolian kind . . ."² An excerpt from Coleridge's poem asks:

¹*Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry*, ed. Harvey Breit and Margerie Bonner Lowry (Philadelphia and New York: Lippincott), 159.

²*Letters*, p. 320. M. C. Bradbrook has pointed out this connection in *Malcolm Lowry: His Art and Early Life* (Cambridge: University Press, 1974), p. 125.

And what if all of animated nature
 Be but organic Harps diversely fram'd,
 That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
 Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
 At once the Soul of each, and God of all?

Lowry, obviously, saw his stories both as separate entities and as a unified organic whole. Coleridge's lines serve both to remind us of the technical structure — the use of analogues, motifs, images — that provides this unity, and to focus our attention on the work's intellectual basis. The "diverse frame" of each story is animated by a mind that is aware of its own simultaneous unity and variability. The "mariner's progress" that appears explicitly in "The Bravest Boat" and "Through the Panama" and implicitly in the developments that occur in the subsequent stories invokes this mental introspection and gives it shape. But the animating power which so controls the shape and force of the work — "the Soul of each and God of all" — possesses concrete identity only in the individual forms to which it gives life. Lowry's personal life transformed this notion into an artistic crisis, made him see the artist as the product as much as the producer of his work.³ The development that is adumbrated by "The Bravest Boat" and that culminates in "The Forest Path to the Spring" works out an artist's progressive realization of identity that his mind, interacting with the world, creates for him. And what the book as a result establishes is both a set of particular observations isolated for us also to perceive and a sense of the psychological context which allows the particular acts of perception to convey metaphorical meaning.⁴

Muriel Bradbrook, in *Malcolm Lowry: His Art and Early Life*, has demonstrated convincingly how Lowry's early experiences provided many of the incidents of his later fiction and affected its form; she alludes also to the way in which this sensibility reflects the passage in Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (I, 357-400), in which the poet recalls being first pursued by a mountain peak as he rowed out on a lake beside it, and later haunted,

³See, eg., *Letters*, pp. 210, 331.

⁴I am indebted to my colleague, Geoffrey Durrant, for letting me read his unpublished paper on Wordsworth's patterns of literary perception, "The Logic of Vision — Wordsworth's Gleams and Flashes", which has influenced some of the comments on Wordsworth which follow. Also relevant in this context are two more of Durrant's studies, *William Wordsworth* (Cambridge: University Press, 1969), and "Death in Life: Neo-Platonic Elements in 'Through the Panama'", in George Woodcock, ed., *Malcolm Lowry: The Man and His Work* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1971), 42-55.

morally swayed, by the experience.⁵ Earlier in that same section of his poem, Wordsworth alludes to Coleridge's Aeolian Harp; by Book V he develops the aeolian image into a commentary on perception (both sensory and moral/intellectual) which bears further upon Lowry's *Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*:

Visionary power
 Attends the motions of the viewless winds,
 Embodied in the mystery of words:
 There, darkness makes abode, and all the host
 Of shadowy things work endless changes, —there,
 As in a mansion like their proper home,
 Even forms and substances are circumfused
 By that transparent veil with light divine,
 And, through the turnings intricate of verse,
 Present themselves as objects recognised,
 In flashes, and with glory not their own.
 (V, 595-605)

The image of the "wild March wind" with which Lowry opens "The Bravest Boat" seems in this context more than a mere tonal setting; it provides a hint about Lowry's language, his attempt to embody "visionary power . . . in the mystery of words" and (by overlaying one story on another) to present "form and substance . . . as objects recognised, /In flashes, . . . with glory not their own". The "endless changes" of form with which darkness affects the vision disrupt but heighten rather than destroy the appreciation of the world he is trying to realize.

Wordsworth's intent in this passage was to assert how language and nature connect and how a person "doth receive, /In measure only dealt out to himself, /Knowledge and increase of enduring joy /From the great Nature that exists in works of mighty Poets". (V, 591-95) Lowry's intention seems to have been related. The successive "storms" that affect the Storlesens of "The Bravest Boat" and the Wildernesses of the subsequent stories, for example, are abodes of darkness — mansions *like* but *not* the "proper home" of the book's perceiving eye — which give dimension to the *home and the identity articulated at the end* by "The Forest Path to the Spring".⁶ The knowledge and joy which the narrator of that final segment of the book discovers in Nature are a knowledge and a joy that are communicated to the reader by language. And the response which arouses

⁵Bradbrook, p. 109.

⁶Lowry drew a connection between his Dollarton landscape and that of Wordsworth's Grasmere in a letter to David Markson dated 15 June 1957. *Letters*, p. 413.

this knowledge and joy derives from a sense of language as an associative phenomenon, as metaphor carrying “glory not its own”, rather than as objective isolated denotation.

In this connection it is useful to see what Wordsworth made of the distinction between objective observation and subjective engagement in another poem, “Elegiac Stanzas suggested by a picture of Peele Castle, in a storm, painted by Sir George Beaumont” (1805). The poem was written to commemorate his brother John, who was drowned in a storm on February 5th, 1805; the Peele Castle of the poem is on an island off the Lancashire coast. The immediate textual connection between this poem and Lowry’s book might at first seem forced, were it not for Lowry’s recurrent use of puns and double meanings — Sigbjorn Wilderness’s name offering one set of examples. Given this technique, and given also the allusions to storm and drownings that occur in both the poem and the book, it seems not unacceptable to seek significance in the recurrent canon round fragments in the stories (*Frère Jacques, dormez-vous?*, which most English versions render loosely as “Brother John”) and in the title Lowry chose (at least as early as 1951)⁷ for the book as a whole. “Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place” is a Manx fishermen’s hymn, invoking God’s aid to “little barks” on a “raging” sea; the tune to which it is sung is called “Peel Castle”. Though that particular reference is to a Manx castle, the name and the storm associations are likely to have caused Lowry to make an implicit Wordsworthian connection. That likelihood is made even stronger when we consider the poem’s implications as well as its surface subject.

The poem, that is, reads at one level simply as commemorative verse, but it develops by contrasting two ways of perceiving the world and becomes a commentary on the nature of the relationship between writer and subject. The central stanzas contrast the poet’s reflection on the way he would have statically depicted the Castle had he relied solely on a particular observation he once made of it, and a metaphoric rendering of the landscape which invites him to active moral contemplation:

How perfect was the calm! it seemed no sleep;
 No mood, which season takes away, or brings:
 I could have fancied that the mighty Deep
 Was even the gentlest of all gentle Things.

Ah! then, if mine had been the Painter’s hand,
 To Express what then I saw; . . .

⁷See his letter to Harold Matson, 2 October 1951. *Letters*, pp. 266-68.

I would have planted thee. . .
 Amid a world how different from this!
 Beside a sea that could not cease to smile;
 On tranquil land, beneath a sky of bliss.

Thou shouldst have seemed a treasure-house divine
 Of peaceful years; a chronicle of heaven. . . .

So once it would have been, — 'tis so no more;
 I have submitted to a new control:
 A power is gone, which nothing can restore;
 A deep distress hath humanised my Soul.

Meaning lies no longer solely in the thing itself but also in the process of perceiving it, and heaven is static and meaningless unless seen in the context of imperfect human experience.

To return once more to *Hear Us O Lord* is to see Lowry writing (of the lynx in "The Bravest Boat"):

The squirrel's hairbreadth escape . . . seemed meaningless. But all at once it did not seem meaningless that they had been there to see it.⁸

(and of the landscape in "The Forest Path to the Spring"):

But last night I had seen something new . . . the whole dark water was covered with bright expanding phosphorescent circles . . . perfect expanding circles of light . . . And the rain itself was water from the sea, . . . raised to heaven by the sun, transformed into clouds, and falling again into the sea.

. . . the sun broke through the clouds, sending a flare of light across the water . . . and touching the mountains, where the mist rising now almost perpendicularly from the black abysses fumed heavenward in pure white fire.⁹

"I understood," says the narrator of "The Forest Path", ". . . that as a man I had become tyrannized by the past, and that it was my duty to transcend

⁸*Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place* (Philadelphia and New York, 1961), 23.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 282-83.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 279.

it in the present."¹⁰ To lodge oneself statically in the past is to deny one's connection with the world. "A deep distress hath humanized my Soul," writes Wordsworth; "... Not without hope we suffer and we mourn." That Lowry's literary world, like Wordsworth's, was closely related to his personal life needs no underlining; yet to appreciate the relation between Lowry's work and Wordsworth's is also to see something of the way in which the personal life was transcended in the literary form.

The "mystery of words" where "darkness makes abode" is a realm in which Lowry, like Wordsworth, can discover joy. And the fact that the joy and the darkness are so inextricably intertwined re-affirms the connection between the work of literature and the world of human experience. The knowledge and joy of "The Forest Path to the Spring" are not possible without the essential suffering revealed in "Through the Panama" or "Strange Comfort Afforded by the Profession". As the balance between them is in flux, the literary artifact, to be true to the kinetic nature of the world, must avoid representing it in a static way. Hence Lowry's concern for varying his perception of the identity of Wilderness, and for varying the identities which Wilderness and the other personae-narrators can perceive, can be seen as the literary articulation of a kinetic consciousness.

Lowry's own statements about *Hear Us O Lord* all attempt to explain its form. He had established something of the theory in his mind as early as 1940, when he wrote to James Stern:

It is possible to compose a satisfactory work of art by the simple process of writing a series of good short stories, complete in themselves, with the same characters, interrelated, correlated, good if held up to the light, watertight if held upside down, but full of effects and dissonances that are impossible in a short story, but nevertheless having its purity of form'. . .¹¹

But for Lowry no process of writing was ever "simple", and even the "sameness" of the interrelated characters came under question. When he wrote to Albert Erskine about his book in 1953, at a time when *October Ferry to Gabriola* was still to form part of it, he was at pains to point out his sense of the book's multiplicity:

Does *Gabriola* make sufficient sense or lose too much without its symphonically adjacent companions? As things stand, *Gabriola* . . . is — or will be — a novel. But so is "The Forest Path to the Spring" another short novel. *Gabriola* and "Forest Path" taken together make, as you will see, *another* kind of novel. *Hear Us O Lord* . . . would

¹¹Letters, p. 28.

be, if done aright, less a book of short stories than — God help us — yet *another* kind of novel. . . .¹²

The repeated re-enactment of voyage and return, the canon round motifs, the changing viewpoint, the shifting identities, the multiple story form itself — all testify to the density of his effort. The form is not complex out of perversity, but from a desire more adequately to communicate his understanding of moral values which had human application. To paraphrase Lowry's own words, readers are asked less to find meaning in the book's events than to find meaning in their "being there to see" them. By participating in the act of observing, readers partake of a "humanizing" process; they are asked to become aware of the interpenetration between joy and distress, to savour the mixed blessings of knowledge, to appreciate the metaphoric power of language, and to reflect upon the interaction between the world of nature sensorily perceived and the world of nature ethically transformed by the contemplative mind. In devising the form he did in which to couch these perceptions, Lowry at once turned his own private world into art and gave contemporary voice to the humane values of the Romantic tradition.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 338.