

BEYOND AUTOBIOGRAPHY: ART AND LIFE IN MALCOLM LOWRY'S **ULTRAMARINE**

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Malcolm Lowry was well aware of the traditional arguments against writing novels about novelists. In a letter to his editor, Albert Erskine, he acknowledges the prejudice on the part of "most editors and writers" against "fiction about writings and writers as such" and even admits sharing that prejudice — "on the more general plane." But he goes on to say, "I don't believe the general public shares the prejudice, for there is an artist, a poet in every man, hence he is a creature easy for anyone to identify themselves with: and his struggles are likely to be universal, even on the lowest plane." Thus he sees no reason for Erskine to object to his latest protagonist, novelist Sigbjørn Wilderness.¹

The thoughts Lowry expresses to Erskine in this letter are simple and clear — and they hardly constitute what one would call an eccentric view.² Still, few commentators on Lowry's work seem to have taken his defense of the artist-novel seriously. Assuming that Lowry wrote about writers and artists because he didn't know how to write about anything else, they have seen little need to pursue the artist-theme much beyond its autobiographical basis.³

I do not deny that the autobiographical basis exists. Anyone who has read Douglas Day's biography is well aware of how closely Lowry's protagonists are modeled on his own life. And it's quite true,

¹Malcolm Lowry, *Selected Letters*, ed. Harvey Breit and Margerie Bonner Lowry (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1965), pp. 329-330.

²For one especially uncanny echo of Lowry's thoughts, see Maurice Beebe's remarks on the subject in *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts*. Says Beebe, "for many men there may be a lesson in the example set by the artist. Just as every artist is a man, every man is to some extent an artist, a maker of things, and the alienation of the artist is not unlike that of many men in a world where the center does not hold and where even the crowd is a lonely one. To try to create something out of chaos, if only by cultivating our gardens, is to heed the lesson of the artist." *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts* (New York: NYU Press, 1964), p. 313.

³One of the few who does call attention to the theme is W.H. New, who observes that "Lowry was enchanted with the notion that the novelist was the ideal metaphor for man." *Malcolm Lowry* (Toronto: McClelland and Steward, 1971), p. 12.

as Day observes, that those few attempts to "create" a protagonist, to give him a separate identity and vocation (as in the case of Ethan Llewelyn, a lawyer) are less than convincing. Nevertheless, it is one thing to say that Lowry's protagonists are thinly disguised versions of himself; it is quite another to say that they are *only* that. If Lowry had trouble creating believable fictional personae, he had no such trouble fictionalizing the one persona that he did have at his disposal. If he did not *choose* to make his protagonists writers and artists in the usual sense of that term, he did choose to use their vocation to his own artistic advantage, to use it as he himself saw it — as a metaphor for the human condition itself.

Actually, any one of Lowry's novels or stories about writers or artists could serve to illustrate my point. *Dark As the Grave* comes immediately to mind, as do several stories in *Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*.⁴ But perhaps the best focus for my discussion is Lowry's first novel, *Ultramarine*, since it is here that his artist theme originates.

In many ways, *Ultramarine* is a very conventional novel. Like so many essentially autobiographical first novels, it is a story about growing up and out of youthful illusions, coming to terms with oneself and one's place in the world. In this case, it is the story of Dana Hilliot, a young aspiring writer who has come to sea for the first time, hoping to gain some experience he can convert into novel material. In essence, Dana fits the prototype of the artist hero outlined by Maurice Beebe in his critical study of the artist novel: he is sensitive, introverted, self-centered, passive, and capable of abstracting himself mentally from the world around him. In essence, too, the themes of Lowry's novel are similar to those that Beebe identifies as central to the *Künstlerroman*: quest for self and the relation of art to life.⁵ Still, there are important differences between this novel and such classic examples of the *Künstlerroman* tradition as Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*. If Dana Hilliot is the familiar artist-as-exile, he is a very reluctant exile. He does not want out of society, to write; he wants into society, to belong. Consequently, his internal struggle is somewhat different from Stephen Dedalus's, and the novel does not really conform to the structural pattern that Beebe

⁴The pertinent stories are "Through the Panama," "Strange Comfort Afforded by the Profession," "Elephant and Colosseum," and "The Forest Path to the Spring." Also relevant are *Lunar Caustic*, *Under the Volcano*, and the unfinished story "Ghostkeeper."

⁵Beebe, p. 5.

describes. That is, Dana Hilliot cannot be said to "test and reject the claims of love and life, of God, home, and country, until nothing is left but his true self and his consecration as artist."⁶ He tests these claims, it is true, but he does not reject them. For what Dana Hilliot learns is that in rejecting the claims of love and life, the artist rejects his true material and in the process rejects himself.

I have said that Dana does not share the voluntary exile's desire to escape the bounds of society, that his real desire is to be accepted within that society; but actually this is only partially true. In fact, he is drawn in nearly contrary directions by forces within himself that he only dimly understands. On the one hand, he longs to be part of the ship's society, to be accepted by ship's cook Andy (a kind of ambiguous father-figure) and the rest of the crew, not as a "toff" but as equally one of them. To this end he dreams of heroic gestures — rescuing someone from the mainmast perhaps — that will prove his manhood and win his shipmates' respect. On the other hand, he is well aware of the inauthenticity of his very existence on the ship. He is there, as both he and the crew well know, "for experience," not because he has to earn a living as they do, and thus he will never be one of them. Moreover, he does not really want to be one of them, except on his own terms. He will trade his separate identity as idealist and aspiring writer only for the identity of hero. And this restriction, as it turns out, is part of Dana's problem.

In her insightful essay on this novel, Sherrill Grace discusses the circle motif in *Ultramarine*, pointing out Dana's tendency to enclose himself within the "impenetrable and terrible boundaries" of his self-created hell" in his efforts to "order and contain reality." For Grace, the circle image dominates the novel, with Dana "circling away from" the present by retreating into the past, but then finally locating himself at the center: "As centre to his circle," she says, "he will move and in moving transcribe an ever new circumference."⁷ But the circle is only one of the structural patterns at work in *Ultramarine*. Equally important, it seems to me, is the pattern that emerges from the opposition between the movement upward, which Dana longs for at the beginning of the novel, and the movement downward, which he eagerly accepts at the end. This opposition is set up early in the novel when Dana, having imagined that heroic

⁶Beebe, p. 6.

⁷Sherrill Grace, "Outward Bound," *Canadian Literature*, #71 (Winter 1976), pp. 76-77.

gesture of rescuing a fellow crew member from the mainmast, is denied the opportunity to live out his fantasy by going up after a stranded carrier pigeon or "mickey." In Dana's mind, as I have said, the heroic rescue mission would allow him to prove himself:

For to be accepted by Andy, who seemed to rule amidships as he did the forecandle, was that not to be accepted by the crew? And to be accepted by the crew, was that not also to justify himself to Janet [his girlfriend]? Certainly he was willing to do anything, cost what it might, to show that he was one of them, that he did belong. How often, for instance, as now, he had looked up at that mast with extraordinary desire! Some day, he felt, someone would be up there and lose his nerve: he, Dana Hilliot, would bring him down. The captain would call for him and congratulate him. 'My boy, I'm proud of you; you're a credit to the ship —'⁸

But when the opportunity comes, he is pushed aside by the crew, who have nothing but contempt for his heroic aspirations.

For Dana, this incident is an indication of his failure and, characteristically, he exaggerates its importance in his own mind. (In fact, his reaction here very closely resembles Stephen Dedalus's self-pitying withdrawals after various personal rebuffs in his adolescence.) "What was the good of understanding?" he wonders.

The pigeon might be the very messenger of love itself, but nothing would alter the fact that he had failed. He would hide his face from Janet forever, and walk in darkness for the rest of his days. Yet if he could only see her at this moment, she would give him another chance, she would be so gentle and companionable and tender. Her hands would be like sun gently brushing away the pain. His whole being was drowning in memories, . . .

Oh, his love for her was not surely the fool of time like the ship: it was the star to the wandering ship herself: even labour, the noble accomplishment of many years, could be turned into an hourglass, but his love was eternal. (*Ultra*, p. 27)

What Sherrill Grace would point out here is that Dana uses memory to escape the present situation, that he encloses himself in the past (in this case a heavily romantic past) to protect himself from the pain of his injured pride. But we might notice a couple of other important aspects of the situation as well. For one thing, the pain is brought on

⁸Malcolm Lowry, *Ultramarine* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 22. Future references to this work, hereafter cited as *Ultra*, will appear in the text.

in the first place by Dana's heroic aspirations, aspirations which seem to be as heavily romantic as the memory he retreats into. (Even the language of the two passages just cited suggests their similarity, with the predominate conditional-tense verb "would" creating a dream-like atmosphere in both.) And for another thing, the retreat is not only into memory but into poetry — in this case Shakespeare's sonnet.

This tendency to think in terms of literary allusions is habitual with Dana Hilliot. When he thinks of the ship as a community in itself, his thoughts drift off to Dante: ". . . World within world, sea within sea, void within void, the ultimate, the inescapable, the ninth circle. Great circle . . ." And later, when he hears the ship's bells ring and is at once engrossed in memories, he thinks, in Keatsian fashion, ". . . Forlorn! The very word is like a bell. To toll me back from thee to my sad self" (*Ultra*, p. 25). In fact, until we are well into the novel, these frequent literary allusions (in Dana's consciousness, not Lowry's) are the only clue we have that Dana is a writer. Still, their occurrence in these crucial passages, almost always associated with memory or withdrawal, tells us something about the kind of writer Dana is trying to be, namely, the kind who regards his art as Stephen Dedalus does, as a way to transcend the snares or everyday reality and "fly above the nets" that threaten to enclose him.

This is not to say, however, that Lowry endorses the aesthetic theory of Stephen Dedalus as James Joyce seems to do.⁹ If Dana Hilliot enlists on the *Oedipus Tyrannus* as a Dedalian disciple, his actual journey leads him away from Stephen's theory of art. And the force that leads him away is the force opposing his "transcendent" aspirations, the force embodied deep within the ship's engine room and stokehold.

The engine room is always a source of fascination for Dana. When first he pokes his head in to watch, amid a "maelstrom of noise," he feels "humiliated" by the "nicety with which lever weight and fulcrum worked, opening and closing their hidden mechanisms and functioning with such an incomprehensible exactness!" (*Ultra*, p. 24). For Dana the engine room is the symbol of order: not order which calms and satisfies but order which terrifies in the sense that Blake's "tyger" terrifies: because it bespeaks a mystery incomprehen-

⁹Of course there are those who see Joyce's handling of Stephen as touched with irony, but even these usually assume that the aesthetic theory Stephen propounds is Joyce's own.

sible to the human mind. Later, when the engines are shut down, Dana feels a sympathy with the engine's "disunion" but is once again reproached by what he sees as "the desire of the link for the pivot, of the lever weight for the fulcrum. . . . that revolution from complex he so desired" (*Ultra*, p. 41).

Psychologically, we can understand Dana's strange attraction/repulsion in regard to the engine room. On the one hand he longs for a similar order within his own life (as every Lowry protagonist does). But on the other, he sees that order as cold, mechanical, inhuman, even anti-human, and he naturally resists the surrender of will that such order seems to demand. At this point, we readers probably find ourselves sympathizing with Dana's ambivalent attitude. Like Dana, we cannot fail to admire the beauty of the machinery, described by Lowry with such splendid attention to detail and in such seductive prose rhythms. But neither can we ignore the negative tone of such passages as that describing the "whirling clanks holding horribly in their nerveless grip the penetrating shaft that turned the screws" (*Ultra*, p. 24). However, as the passage moves into a description of the ship's fireman, Nikolai, in the fiery stokehold, we are able to see that the driving force behind the engines is not a nerveless, pitiless mechanism at all; it is unbounded energy, chaos, the raging fire in the ship's furnaces. As Dana looks into the stokehold we get a glimpse of that chaos, none too subtly associated with hell: "[Nikolai] threw the slice [bar] away, and hastily shovelled more coal into the furnace, then he returned to his slice. The furnace blazed and roared, the flying clinkers were driving him further back into his corner, the fire was beating him. He dropped the slice with a curse, and mopped his face with his sweat rag. 'Plenty hard work!' he shouted grinning up at Hilliot, a firebright field. 'Like hell you say,' Hilliot muttered" (*Ultra*, p. 24). To the reader, the implication is obvious: if Dana is to achieve the order he craves he must descend into the maelstrom, into some version of hell. Only by plunging into the destructive element (the familiar Lowrian element, fire) and realizing the positive power of chaos as creative energy can he ever make genuine contact with his fellow man and achieve an authentic existence. But Dana somehow misses this, misses it because he is so intent on transcending unpleasant experience, on moving up and away from chaotic reality into a realm of artificial order — the self-enclosed and enclosing order of self-consciousness, of the past, and, I would add, of art.

I have spoken before of how frequently Dana's thoughts are framed in literary terms, of how his tendency to withdraw from present reality often takes the form of withdrawal into art. In the long middle section of *Ultramarine* (Chapter 3, which is sometimes compared to the chaotic "Nighttown" section of Joyce's *Ulysses*) this tendency is especially notable. For instance, when Dana first meets the German Hans Popplereuter, with whom he will spend the evening drinking and talking in broken German and English, he thinks of the situation in two comforting literary contexts:

I drank deeply, tilting the rim of the glass and pressing it on my nose. I had not heard of many of the ports, and it seemed to me that some of them were not ports but countries. But what did it matter? We were ashore! And I felt suddenly comfortable and happy. I would dismiss Janet from my mind. I *could* drink, anyway; there were no complications about that. While here — and what could be more delightful? — was a representative of another community, another world, drinking; the wireless operator of a world such as my own, with a stokehold, a galley, and a forecastle. It was like being in Homer and drinking with an Ethiopian. Or 'Ben Jonson entertains a man from Stratford.' (Ultra, p. 86)

As the evening goes on and he becomes more and more drunk, he compares himself to Melville, to Masefield, to Chatterton, and finally even assumes the identity of Shakespeare, telling his German friend, "Read my collected works first, several thousand volumes, including the much discussed Othello, all tightly bound, paying special attention to my masterpiece, *How to Be Happy Though Dead*," and referring him to "my much maligned and certainly dangerous and misleading work, Hamlet" (Ultra, p. 95).

Of course there is more than a touch of irony in all these references, for Dana is well aware that "the apparent facts are largely imaginary." That is, he knows he is the type who "dreams of archetypal images" and can only confront his life through the comfortably distant and distorting lens of art, especially literature and film. Unfortunately, though, Dana's self-knowledge has no liberating effect; beneath his apparent cavalier surface he knows enough to despise himself but not enough to extricate himself from the "introverted commas" within which he lives his life. Consequently, the drunken "descent" into consciousness in this "Nighttown" section is no descent at all; it is simply another failed attempt at

transcendence, and Dana returns to the ship in the morning essentially unchanged from what he was before he went ashore.

But if Dana learns nothing from this experience, the reader profits more. For he sees the self-contempt that is at the heart of Dana's problem, the self-consciousness which, along with the impulse to irony, virtually paralyzes his every attempt at achieving authenticity. What Lowry has done in this section is to reject a cliché of the *Künstlerroman* tradition: the episode in which the protagonist, rejected by society, delves deep within himself and discovers the artistic vocation that will save not only himself but the society that has rejected him. For Lowry, as I have said, the myth of the artist as one who "tests and rejects the claims of love and life . . . until nothing is left but his true self and his consecration as artist" is a false and dangerous myth. It is false because it does not account for the fierce struggle with the "destructive element" that the artist cannot transcend but must continually wage; and it is dangerous because it can pave the way for so much bad (i.e., pale and passionless) art.

And so Dana is still in search of both self and vocation when he returns to the ship. He has come face to face with his "flawless insincerity" but is still unwilling or unable to forsake the confines of his comforting self-accusations, his familiar guilt, his reassuring self-pity; he is still afraid to confront the chaos at the heart of real being.

Dana's essential sameness is evident when we see him in Chapter 4, back aboard the ship, still longing for the heroic opportunity that will automatically make him "fit in" with his shipmates and put his life in order. In particular, he has two fantasies in mind: he still envisions a heroic rescue to redeem what he saw as his "failure" in the earlier incident with the mickey, but he also dreams of a fight with Andy, a dramatic confrontation in which he will finally stand up to the cook, asserting his dignity and flinging back in Andy's face the most cutting insults he can think of.

When the opportunity comes, he seizes it with a vengeance, lashing out at Andy with all his pent-up fury. But instead of feeling better afterward, he feels miserable and deflated. His shipmates are all on Andy's side, and his carefully rehearsed insults, remarks about Andy's "chinless" face, turn into embarrassments when he learns that Andy has lost his chin in the war. Shortly afterwards, the second opportunity presents itself but likewise ends in a sense of deflation. When Norman's mickey, having escaped its cage, is discovered in the

water alongside the ship, in immediate danger of drowning, Dana sees a new chance to be the hero. Once again, however, he is restrained by the crew, who see his determination as rash and foolish, more nuisance than heroism.

In the end, it is these two events, trivial as they may seem, that bring Dana "down to earth" and into authentic confrontation with himself. Realizing the foolishness of his heroic fantasies, he begins to see that the transcendent impulse behind such fantasies is at the source of his problems. All along he has conceived of life in aesthetic terms, on the one hand dreaming of archetypal images, imagining heroic plots, searching for ready-made myths and structures to explain and excuse his experience; on the other, ordering his life in terms of irony and self-contempt. Now he sees that the images, plots and structures as well as the safely distancing irony have done more to close life off from him than to open it up. The aesthetic impulse, whatever form it finally takes, is actually opposite to the creative impulse, the life impulse, which is chaos itself. It has taken Dana some time to realize this, but finally he seems to see it. Late in the novel, as he stands in the engine room entrance, looking down into the stokehold once again, he muses: "Why was it his brain could not accept the dissonance as simply as a harmony, could not make order emerge from this chaos? Surely God had made man free from the first, tossing confusion of slime, the spewings of that chaos, from the region [sic] beast. Chaos and disunion, then, he told himself, not law and order, were the principles of life which sustained all things, in the mind of man as well as on the ship" (*Ultra*, p. 157).

Once this realization is made, the rest comes easily. Overcoming his pride, another "aesthetic" form, he makes peace with Andy. Then, as he continues to peer down into the engine room,

... all at once the malestrom of noise, of tangled motion, of shining steel in his mind was succeeded by a clear perception of the meaning of the pitiless regularity of those moving bars... and he saw that at last the interdependence of rod grasping rod, of shooting straight line seizing curved arms, of links limping backward and wriggling forward on their queer pivots, had become related to his own meaning and his own struggles. At last there dawned upon him a reason for his voyage, and it was the strong, generous ship he knew he must thank for giving it to him. (*Ultra*, p. 158)

The reason for his voyage, we now see, has been to bring Dana

back to the source of true being, symbolized by the furnaces in the ship's stokehold:

Looking down he could see through the bulkhead doors where the red and gold of the furnaces mottled the reeking deck, and the tremulous roar of the cages' fires dominated a sibilant, continual splutter of steam. The *Oedipus Tyrannus's* firemen, among whom he again recognized Nikolai, half naked, gritty and black with coal, and pasty with ashes, came and went in the blazing light, and in the gloom; flaming nightmares, firelit demons. The furnace doors opened, and scorpions leapt out; spirals of gas spun and reeled over the bubbling mass of fuel, and sheets of violet flame sucked half-burned carbon over the quivering firewall into the flues. With averted head and smoking body Nikolai shot a slice bar through the melting hillocks, and twisted and turned them. The iron tools blistered his hands, his chest heaved like a spent swimmer's, his eyes tingled in parched sockets, but still he worked on, he would never stop — this was what it was to exist — (Ultra, pp. 158-59)

For Dana the furnaces have taken on a new significance, a personal significance that he may have dimly sensed before but never understood. He now sees the necessary connection between chaos and order, between the hellish fires in the stokehold and the smoothly functioning machinery in the engine room. And he realizes that he, too, must admit chaos into his life — the chaos of true *being* that he has been afraid to confront head-on, without the protective buffer of irony or art. If he can do this, if he can overcome his desire to transcend experience and actually descend into the maelstrom then he will have learned how to live.

What does this new realization mean for Dana as writer, as artist? This is a matter of some disagreement among the critics. According to Douglas Day, it means "the growing up out of the childish disease of the desire to write." Says Day, "By the end of *Ultramarine*, Dana opts for the *le Vita activa* over the *vita contemplativa*."¹⁰ It is easy to see what leads Day to this conclusion, for earlier, in Chapter Three, Dana had indeed described his vocation as a "childish disease." And only a few pages after the passages just cited, Dana says in one of his imagined letters to Janet, "As for my books, I shall throw them overboard and buy new ones . . . Let their

¹⁰Douglas Day, *Malcolm Lowry: A Biography* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), p. 163.

writers sign on troismâts and learn how to swarm up a rope with passion! My writing? You or any woman can do that for me. I don't know a damn thing yet" (*Ultra*, p. 171). But Day fails to note two important points. First, the Dana of Chapter Five is not the same ironic, self-contemptuous person he was in Chapter Three. If he deprecates the kind of writing he has been doing, it is not with bitterness or cynicism but with new resolution and determination to leave old ideas about art behind. And besides, we actually see, only ten pages later, that Dana is writing again. As the men sit around on deck, trading stories and recounting dreams, Dana thinks, "Hell, I could make up a dream as good as this, couldn't I? Yes, but what? Jesus what *can* I make up? But wait a minute. If those animals got loose, yes, supposing . . ." (*Ultra*, p. 182). At this point he is just beginning to discover a more authentic voice that emerges naturally out of the chaos of dream and interfused dialogue around him. And it is no accident that the story he starts to tell (to "write," so to speak) is a story itself about chaos — the chaos unleashed when imprisoned animals break out of their cages and wreak havoc on a ship — for Dana has himself been one of these caged animals and the fact that his new vision is comic, not terrifying, is evidence of how far he has come.¹¹

What we see in these final pages, then, is a dramatization of the writer at work, making up his story as he goes along. And what we are meant to see in the revitalized Dana Hilliot is a man — no longer a boy — who has learned to make up his life as he goes along as well.¹² The parallel between the two situations is no accident. Rather, it is the consequence of Lowry's belief that the true relation of art to life is not one of opposition but of correspondence. For Dana Hilliot, there is no need to reject the claims of life — nor is there need to repudiate art. For him, as for Lowry, the claims of art and life are identical. In both, one must resist the aesthetic impulse, the impulse to transcend; in both, one must learn to relinquish control, to live with a certain amount of chaos and uncertainty; in both, one must be willing to risk the *descent*.

Thus it seems to me clear that the use of the writer protagonist in *Ultramarine*, as in all Lowry's novels and stories about artist

¹¹The story that Dana begins to "write" here is familiar to readers of Lowry: it is the same story Kennish Drumgold Cosnahan, protagonist of "Elephant and Colosseum," will turn into a successful comic novel in the *Hear Us O Lord* volume.

¹²My phrasing here deliberately echoes the passage from Ortega y Gasset that Lowry was to run across and appropriate many years later. See *Selected Letters*, pp. 210, 331.

figures, is not a mere accident of autobiography. It may have been incidental at first, but in Lowry nothing is incidental for long. The more one reads of Lowry, the more one sees in his rich and complex designs.

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