

## MALCOLM LOWRY'S **HEAR US O LORD:** VISIONS AND REVISIONS OF THE PAST

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A group of Malcolm Lowry's stories, entitled *Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*, was published posthumously in 1961. In a letter (written in 1952) Lowry commented that *Hear Us O Lord* "seems to be shaping up less like an ordinary book of tales than a sort of novel of an odd aeolian kind . . . , i.e. it is more interrelated than it looks."<sup>1</sup> In the published version of this work there is a sense of overarching design. Recurring motifs (such as "Frere Jacques"), a common setting in many cases, and a restricted number of characters who reappear (or are referred to) throughout the tales link the individual stories. Further unity is given to the component pieces of *Hear Us O Lord* by a structural pattern that is circular in nature. With the opening story set in British Columbia, followed by an account of a sea voyage to Europe, which in turn is followed by three tales set in Italy, and finally a return to the setting of British Columbia for the two concluding tales, the collective form of the book is that of a single, continuous journey. Another major feature that contributes to the unity of *Hear Us O Lord*, and the focus of this essay, is a thematic concern shared by the diverse tales: the significance of the past.

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<sup>1</sup>*Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry*, eds. Harvey Breit and Margerie B. Lowry (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1961), p. 320. Lowry's covert allusion to Coleridge's "The Aeolian Harp" is explicated by W.H. New:

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." "A Note on Romantic Allusions in *Hear Us O Lord*," *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 1 (1977), p. 131.

The sequence of short stories opens with "The Bravest Boat," a piece which introduces in miniature the voyage pattern that gives shape to the entire work. Sigurd Storlesen, a boy of ten, had set adrift a toy boat south of Cape Flattery on June 27, 1922. This boat had wandered for twelve years and was finally discovered at low tide at Stanley Park beach by Astrid, a girl of seven. The time of the story is June 27, 1951. On this day Sigurd and Astrid walk together through Stanley Park celebrating in their memories the launching of the boat and their seventh wedding anniversary. The boat is their connective experience, the image of their union. Its voyage represents communication that, in defiance of all probability, attains success:

Twelve years it had wandered. Through the tempests of winter, over sunny summer seas, what tide rips had caught it. . . . Perhaps it had rested, floating in a sheltered cove, where the killer whale smote, lashed, the deep clear water; . . . only for the little boat to be thrown aground, catching the rainy afternoon sun, on cruel barnacled rocks by the waves, lying aground knocked from side to side in an inch of water like a live thing, or a poor old tin can, pushed, pounded ashore. . . . until it was borne out to sea once more by the great brimming black tides of January . . .<sup>2</sup>

Through this ordeal, "their little boat with its innocent message had been brought out of the past finally to safety and a home" (p. 27). By re-experiencing through memory the boat's safe passage, Sigurd and Astrid reconfirm a common feeling that their union was preordained. Because of the astral (Astrid) suggestions of fate attached to the boat, they can find in their common past an ever-renewable metaphor of their present harmony. Here, Lowry shows a sense of fate, which he locates in the past, operating *positively*. This usage reveals the affirmative intentions underlying *Hear Us O Lord*, a work that Lowry described as a "Volcano in reverse, with a triumphant ending."<sup>3</sup>

The next story in this group, "Through the Panama," is a variation on the theme of successful passage introduced by "The Bravest Boat." It is, according to Lowry, "A story in the form of notes taken on going to Europe, partly on a ship in everything but

<sup>2</sup>Malcolm Lowry, *Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1961), pp. 20-21. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

<sup>3</sup>*Selected Letters*, p. 338.

final distress off the Azores; it reads something like *The Crack-Up*, like Alfred (sic) Gordon Pym, but instead of cracking the protagonist's fission begins to be healed."<sup>4</sup> In "Through the Panama" elements of the past obtrude on the protagonist's consciousness during the voyage from Vancouver to England. He is drawn backwards in time by his "fear something will happen to [their] house in our absence" (p. 31), and this impulse, enacted by the cyclical form of *Hear Us O Lord*, results in an eventual return to Eridanus (in "Gin and Goldenrod").

The past, in its cultural aspect, also has large significance for "Through the Panama" as a mode of explication. In his "Introduction" to *Under the Volcano* Stephen Spender points out that Lowry's allusions are "used as metaphor, as analogy."<sup>5</sup> This usage of allusion Spender contrasts with that found in the works of Joyce, Eliot, and Pound: "In the consciousness of these poets and novelists there seems a map of an immense landscape with, on one side of a central divide, the order of the past, on the other, the chaos of the present."<sup>6</sup> For Lowry in *Under the Volcano* the past is not a source of retrievable order but instead, an allusive mirror of man's present despair. In "Through the Panama" allusions once more imply dark cultural affinities, to Poe's narrative of another sea voyage for example, as Lowry's letter notes.<sup>7</sup> By literary analogy, Lowry's hero, the writer Sigbjørn Wilderness, corresponds to Poe's alienated protagonist. Sigbjørn also is close to the condition sketched in Fitzgerald's *The Crack-Up*. In both instances the frustrated creative processes of a writer edge towards self-destruction: the idea of a "man not enmeshed by, but killed by his

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<sup>4</sup>*Selected Letters*, p. 267.

<sup>5</sup>(New York: New American Lib., 1966), p. xi.

<sup>6</sup>Spender, p. x.

<sup>7</sup>In Lowry's story there is the following journal entry:

Note: it must be said somewhere that Martin had been on this planet for so long that he had almost tricked himself into believing he was a human being. (p. 86)

This philosophical concern that is at once epistemological and ontological echoes the manner in which *Arthur Gordon Pym* "reveals to us the ways by which the assumed consistency, trustworthiness, the very reality of the world and of men are capable, on the instant, of disintegrating, dissolving, or becoming a mere illusion." Edward H. Davidson, "Introduction," *Selected Writings of Edgar Allen Poe* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1956), pp. xxii-iii.

own book and the malign forces it arouses" (p. 38).<sup>8</sup> Lowry's allusions to Fitzgerald and Poe seem to objectify, even to confirm, Sigbjørn's inner foreboding that he is a doomed artist. With Fitzgerald as a pessimistic referent the question is asked, "How can the soul take this kind of battering and survive? It's a bit like the toy boat" (p. 40).

This simile, however, directs the reader back to the opening tale of *Hear Us O Lord*, and implies that a triumphant ending is possible despite the context of literary pessimism. For this movement towards affirmation Coleridge provides an allusive framework. His gloss to "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" Lowry uses as marginalia to the story. During the voyage, Sigbjørn feels a "desolate sense of alienation" (p. 31), but then undergoes an emotional transfiguration patterned after the Ancient Mariner. Lowry's protagonist experiences death, first as a nightmare, then vicariously as he passes through the locks of the Panama Canal, "the keys of the universe" (p. 55), while reading about the "fever" from which "hundreds died" (p. 57) while building the Canal, a resonance of the crew members in Coleridge's poem who dropped lifeless. Sigbjørn, like the Ancient Mariner, finally overcomes "the insatiable albatross of self" (p. 31), and resolves symbolically his painful frustration with the creative process (compare "Through utter drought all dumb we stood"). Lowry chooses for his last margin note to "Through the Panama" Coleridge's gloss about the Ancient Mariner's mesmerizing narrative teaching "love and reverence to all things" (p. 98), and thus prefigures Sigbjørn's recovery of his communicative powers.

At the climax of the voyage, during a fierce storm which threatens to engulf the ship, the Coleridge allusions in the consciousness of the narrator define his fearful experience as one of ultimate triumph, and counter the bleak allusions to Poe and Fitzgerald: Sigbjørn believes the "danger of breaking in two or cracking [the] hull [is] very real" because "it is an electric welded ship" (p. 91). The threatened disintegration of the ship acts as a metaphor of Sigbjørn's possible collapse. The idea of "fissure" suggested by Poe's "Roderick Usher" (p. 90) and the idea of

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<sup>8</sup>Lowry's story is thematically identical to his novel which is referred to throughout the tale, *Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend Is Laid*, that centres on the same writer, Sigbjørn Wilderness, fearfully confronting his past through a return to the setting of his unpublished novel.

fragmentation implied by Fitzgerald's *The Crack-Up* (p. 31) give literary extension to this theme. Lowry, however, recasts both of these allusive examples positively, foreshadowing Sigbjørn's eventual integration. In the case of Poe's tale, it is through reference to Epstein's film version, which has an "unspeakably happy ending," with "Usher reconciled with his wife in this life yet on another plane" (p. 90). The danger of cracking, that Fitzgerald's title portends, is resolved by the safe arrival of the freighter in England, and by Coleridge's note affirming the healing power of language. As with the toy boat that begins *Hear Us O Lord*, the freighter transmits a message of human contact through the chaos of the storm, this time through literary history.

The next story in *Hear Us O Lord*, "Strange Comfort Afforded by the Profession," again presents the interior world of Sigbjørn Wilderness, but the setting is now a museum in Rome. This tale is the darkest one in the book; it concerns itself with the past in a manner that is close to morbidity. Sigbjørn visits the house where Keats died and takes notes on the relics that he finds there. Later, over his third grappa, he pulls out his notebook in order to add an impression of Keats' house and discovers some notes that he had made two years earlier in Richmond, Virginia at Poe's shrine. Sigbjørn rereads transcribed excerpts from letters written by Poe "in anguished and private desperation" (p. 106). He is struck by an almost occult correspondence between the letters of Keats and Poe; both artists express an anguished premonition of their early deaths:

... was it not as if Poe's cry from Baltimore, in a mysterious manner, in the manner that the octet of a sonnet, say, is answered by its sestet, had already been answered, seven years before, by Keats's cry from Rome . . .

... it was part of the same poem, the same story. (p. 110)

Sigbjørn then, in another notebook, finds the draft of a letter written by himself (but never sent) when he lived in Seattle. In it there is the phrase, "I fear a complete mental collapse" (p. 111). He associates this cry of pain with those contained in the letters of Keats and Poe.

His self-identification with these two ill-fated poets is so total that he begins to cross out the draft of his letter so it won't be put "glass-encased, in a museum among *his* relics" (p. 112). Sigbjørn

derives a "strange comfort" from his sense of communion with these two literary figures whose lives ended with tragic abruptness. Lowry concludes this story on a note of macabre humour:

Sigbjørn finished his fifth unregenerate grappa and suddenly gave a loud laugh, a laugh which . . . turned immediately into a prolonged — though on the whole relatively pleasurable — fit of coughing. (p. 113)

This final passage implies that Sigbjørn, like his Romantic exemplars, will die early, either through alcoholism like Poe or through tuberculosis like Keats. In the identification with these doomed writers there is both ambiguity and ambivalence: the literary past offers biographical models for both a too brief life and, paradoxically in this context of early death, a transcendence of time through art — a process Sigbjørn's living empathy illustrates.

The central story in *Hear Us O Lord*, "Elephant and Colosseum," explores for the third consecutive time a writer's psyche. Here, the subject is Kennish Drumgold Cosnahan, the author of a comic novel called *Ark from Singapore*. He is in Rome to see about an Italian translation of this book. His inability to contact his publishers heightens the sense of exile that he already has due to his ignorance of Italian. "For once in his life, Cosnahan had not only lost his sense of humor but felt really desperate" (p. 157). His increasing sense of foreignness, however, is removed by "anagnorisis" (p. 167), a remarkable scene of recognition which leads to a comic reversal of his alienated situation. At the zoo in Rome he encounters an elephant, Rosemary, who many years before had provided Cosnahan with a real life model for his book, *Ark from Singapore*. This moment of recognition is a comic enactment of a romantic encounter, "like that felicitous meeting in Rome by the hero of a book he'd been reading with a girl named Rosemary" (p. 134). The elephant, "a creation that testified to the existence of almighty God, and His wide wild humor" (p. 161), restores Cosnahan's comic perspective on the universe. His improbable meeting with Rosemary, the animal that he had transported from the Orient more than twenty years ago, and then later transmuted into fiction, dispels Cosnahan's gloom by invoking pleasant, youthful memories. "Elephant and Colosseum," unlike "Strange Comfort Afforded by the Profession," defines the past as an unambiguously positive force which invests the present with feelings of harmony, comfort, and communion.

"Present Estate of Pompeii," the next piece in *Hear Us O Lord*, once more narrates the experiences of a foreigner in Italy, this time Roderick McGregor Fairhaven, "the liberalminded and progressive Scotch-Canadian schoolmaster" (p. 178). Like most of Lowry's characters, he suffers from the "migraine of alienation," "the malaise of travelers, even the sense of tragedy that must come over them sometimes at their lack of relation to their environment" (p. 177). As a tourist visiting Pompeii, Fairhaven hears his "own real life plunging to its doom" (p. 177). Anxious memories of his home in British Columbia interrupt his contemplation of the ruined civilization before his eyes. In Fairhaven's consciousness the two modes of the past, the biographical and the archaeological, fuse together into a sense of dispossession. Although Fairhaven's name symbolically anticipates the triumphant resolution of *Hear Us O Lord* (in "The Forest Path to the Spring"), and presages a happy return to Eridanus in British Columbia, "Present Estate of Pompeii" remains a cautionary tale. In the tour guide's proud comment on Mount Vesuvius, "yesterday she give-a the beeg-a shake!" (p. 200), Lowry hints that the rubble of a past civilization may exemplify — even bequeath — the fragility of the "present estate." This ominous temporal correlation, imaged by volcanic destruction, reproduces on a smaller scale a thematic concern of *Under the Volcano*.

The penultimate story of *Hear Us O lord*, "Gin and Goldenrod," returns (like Fairhaven's thoughts) to British Columbia for its setting. In this brief story the characters, who are again Sigbjørn and his wife Primrose, visit a bootlegger's house, where Sigbjørn pays for all the bottles of gin that he drank the previous Sunday, and then they return to their home on the beach. The financial transaction can be viewed as a sorting out and a reckoning of a past incident blanked out by alcohol (the major theme of *October Ferry to Gabriola*). Because Primrose on the way home informs her husband that she has retrieved a bottle of gin which he had thought was lost, there is also a notion of salvage from the past: "a kind of hope began to bloom again" (p. 214). The goldenrod of the story's title contributes to this regenerative mood, representing the growth and renewal in nature that is the converse of its latent destructive capacity depicted in the previous tale by Mount Vesuvius. Thus, "Gin and Goldenrod," with its ambiguous title, functions as a thematic bridge between "Present Estate of Pompeii" and "The Forest Path to the Spring" by indicating that

with an honest reckoning of the past there can be optimism about the future.

In the concluding story to *Hear Us O Lord*, "The Forest Path to the Spring," Lowry narrates the transfiguration of the past, and also echoes motifs that have appeared throughout the circular voyage. There are hints of "The Bravest Boat" in references to the "Astra line" (p. 225) and "Wendigo" (pp. 21, 243) and in the description of the shack as "brave against the elements, but at the mercy of the destroyer" (p. 232). An allusion to "the becalmed ship of the Ancient Mariner" (p. 257) in "The Forest Path" is a reminder of the Coleridgean focus in "Through the Panama," with the phrase "we too had grown unselfish" (p. 245) asserting a comparable triumph over the albatross of self. Lowry restates positively Sigbjørn's near suicidal frustration with the creative process by means of the protagonist of "The Forest Path." The latter figure, despite having lost his symphony in a fire, is still able to create an opera. A reference to "those old Romans" (p. 224) evokes the three stories of *Hear Us O Lord* which have an Italian setting. The subject matter of "Elephant and Colosseum" recurs specifically in the question, "Now have you ever seen how an elephant was constructed? (sic)" (p. 224). The ruins of Pompeii recur in the guise of fire in "The Forest Path:" "the wreckage of a burned house" (p. 280). The narrator's courage to rebuild on the same spot, "right in the teeth of the terror of fire" (p. 280) recasts affirmatively the Pompeii theme, and answers indirectly Fairhaven's fear of dispossession. "The Forest Path" also discloses positive elements in "Gin and Goldenrod." By a reference to "goldenrod" (p. 228) Lowry gives lyrical expansion to the creative natural forces that were implicit in the preceding story. At Eridanus ("the River of Death and the River of Life," p. 226), the creative and destructive aspects of nature are fused by the narrator's perception of their interrelated pattern, a pattern whose impulse towards renewal offers him a meaningful analogue.

"The Forest Path" details the achievement of such a renewal. The narrator gives up his "old life of the night" (p. 248) as a jazz musician to live in the wilderness of Eridanus. The past, as that which is to be transformed, exists as a major aspect of his movement towards regeneration. The narrator and his wife first come to Eridanus on their honeymoon, like "strangers from the cities" (p. 226). Their arrival, in early September, coincides with the



outbreak of war, and they fear their imminent separation. Ironically, the first indication of the narrator's renewal, the recovery of his physical wellbeing (through physical activities such as rowing and swimming), increases the possibility of this separation because he was rejected previously for military service of grounds of health. Thus, he considers his stay at Eridanus to be merely an "Intermezzo" (p. 230). The couple initially plan to remain only until the end of September, but "by the end of October the glorious Indian summer was still golden and by the middle of November we had decided to stay the winter" (p. 232). Richard H. Costa argues that there is an echo of Thoreau in Lowry's story: the effort in a wilderness setting "to transcend human limitations which allow the present to be a mere replay of the past."<sup>9</sup>

A critical moment in their new life occurs when their only water barrel breaks:

... we had almost decided to leave for good when I caught sight of the cannister on the beach left by the receding tide. As I examined it the sun came half out, casting a pale silver light while the rain was still falling in the inlet and my wife was so entranced by the beauty of this that she . . . began to explain about raindrops to me, exactly as if I were a child, while I listened, moved, and innocently as if I had never seen such a thing before, and indeed it seemed I never had.

"You see, my true love, each is interlocked with other circles falling about it," she said. "Some are larger circles, expanding widely and engulfing others, some are weaker smaller circles that only seem to last a short while . . . The rain itself is water from the sea, raised to heaven by the sun, transformed into clouds and falling again into the sea."

Did I know this? I suppose so, something like it. But that the sea itself in turn was born of rain I hadn't known.

(p. 239)

The sudden transmutation of despair into wonder in the mind of the narrator, taking its source from the patterns of nature, defines the upward impulse of "The Forest Path." Associated psychologically with this moment of recognition and understanding is the salvage of the cannister, which converted from its discarded past into a useful container, becomes a symbol of renewal. Commenting on this restoration of value Lorraine McMullen writes, "That one

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<sup>9</sup>"Lowry's 'Forest Path': *Echoes of Walden*," *Canadian Literature*, 62 (1974), p. 67.

must accept the past and build upon it is a major theme in 'Forest Path.'"<sup>10</sup>

The past, however, continually threatens the narrator's regeneration. Despite the wilderness location he remains vulnerable to the encroaching urban world. In "The Forest Path" (as in *October Ferry to Gabriola*) Lowry imagines the wilderness and the city as polar opposites: "it seemed that we were in heaven, and that the world outside — so portentous in its prescriptions for man of imaginary needs that were in reality his damnation — was hell" (pp. 242-243). Although a refugee from the city, the narrator is still implicated in the worst destructive tendencies of that urban world, "in that hell of ugliness outside Eridanus" where "for the sake of making it a worse hell, men were killing each other" (p. 243).

At the same time, Lowry unsentimentally links "the pattern of destruction" (p. 243) to nature itself, specifically through the crashing sea and the blazing forest. The narrator becomes "susceptible to these moods and changes and currents of nature, . . . to its ceaseless rotting into humus of its fallen leaves and buds — nothing in nature suggested you died yourself more than that, I began to think — and burgeoning toward life" (p. 247). It is affirmation in this organic sense that Lowry's character discovers at Eridanus, the River of Death and the River of Life. Nature's regenerative aspect emerges most clearly in spring:

The very quality of the light was different, the pale green, green and gold dappled light that comes when the leaves are very small, for later, in summer with the leaves full out, the green is darker and the path darker and deeply shady. But now there was this delicate light and greenness everywhere, the beauty of light on the feminine leaves of vine-leaved maples and the young leaves of the alders shining in sunlight like stars of dogwood blossoms, green overhead and underfoot where plants were rushing up and there were the little beginnings of wildflowers that would be, my wife said, spring beauties, starflowers, wild bleeding hearts, saxifrage and bronze bells. (p. 259)

Through the dual meanings of spring, the season of rebirth and the water source from which life flows, Lowry gives archetypal significance to his narrator's own movement toward renewal.

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<sup>10</sup>"Malcolm Lowry's 'The Forest Path to the Spring,'" *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, 5 (1972), p. 75.

Nevertheless, Lowry insists on showing the fragile quality of his character's transformation. The menacing forces of the social and natural worlds are, on one level, a reminder of the dark tendencies within the narrator: at the height of his seeming happiness, the narrator is tempted to suicide by "an old frayed but strong rope" (p. 260) that he found on the path. Aghast at this impulse, he "reaved it up for use" (p. 260). This self-destructive urge, made tangible by the rope, shows the need for a less precarious transmutation of the past. Drawing creatively on his past life as a jazz musician, the narrator composes a symphony at Eridanus. Although this work is destroyed by fire, he is able to compose an opera which fuses his jazz background with what he had learned of "nature, and the tides and the sunrises" (p. 271). "And to do this, even before writing a note, it was necessary to face that past as far as possible without fear" (p. 279).

This much I understood, and had understood that as a man I had become tyrannized by the past, and that it was my duty to transcend it in the present. Yet my new vocation was involved with using that past — for this was the underlying meaning of my symphony, even my opera . . . — with turning it into use for others. (p. 279)

Recognizing that much of the past is still usable, the narrator, as with a salvaged ladder, hacks out the rotten wood and puts "its frame to use," while realizing that "a ladder was a ladder, however transmuted, and the past remained" (p. 261). By using the past in both art and life, Lowry's protagonist frees himself from the negation of the future. In the reconstruction of his house, built "on the same spot as the old house, using the burned posts for part of our foundations that now, being charred, were not susceptible to rot" (pp. 270-271), there is a notion of cleansing, purgation, through the transmutation of the past. Because the creative renewal of both self and art, exemplified by the new house, is retrospective (narration is in the past tense), "The Forest Path to the Spring" concludes *Hear Us O Lord* as a paradisaic fulfilment of the prayer that is the book's collective title.