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Weaving Fearful Vision: Malcolm Lowry's Poetry

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Mark Ellis Thomas
1984
This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Mark E. Thomas

Approved, May 1984

J. H. Willis, Jr.
Kevin J. McManus
David Rosenwasser

David Rosenwasser
DEDICATION

For my parents
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my gratitude to Professor Jack Willis, whose patience, generosity, and good sense are a model to be emulated in and out of the classroom; to Professor David Rosenwasser, for the arguments that helped hone this essay from its inception; to Kimberley Sands, for frequent enlightenment and constant encouragement. They deserve much credit for this essay, whose shortcomings are all my own.
Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to introduce Malcolm Lowry's poetry and show how images of violence offer a means of structuring the body of poetry.

After noting the lackadaisical treatment of the poems by Lowry's critics, the essay begins a series of close readings by dividing seventeen poems into six categories: storm poems, tavern poems, poems of remorse, volcano poems, poems of necrolatry, and poems of possible reconciliation. In each of these categories, study of violence reveals that Lowry's fears (of God, death, life, and love) are manifested in images of alcoholism and venereal disease and animal imagery. The essay also shows the connections both between the poems and the fiction and between the poems and biography.

This essay concludes that, since it is Lowry's life that attracts the audience for his art, the correlation between art and experience is especially close in his work; so while study of the man and study of the poems should not be confused, they are mutually enlightening. Finally, the results of this study suggest that the poems are worth greater consideration than has hitherto been afforded them.
Weaving Fearful Vision: Malcolm Lowry's Poetry
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& note on hedgerow baulks in moisture sprent
The jetty snail creep from the mossy thorn
With earnest heed and tremulous intent
Frail brother of the morn
That from the tiney bents and misted leaves
Withdraws his timid horn
& fearful vision weaves

John Clare, "Summer Images" (106-12)
Malcolm Lowry (1909-57) is remembered, if at all, as the author of one celebrated novel, *Under the Volcano* (1947). Yet he also wrote the novel *Ultramarine* (1933) and a number of works that were published posthumously: the novels *Dark as the Grave Wherein my Friend Is Laid* (1968) and *October Ferry to Gabriola* (1970), the novella *Lunar Caustic* (1963), the collection of short stories *Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place* (1961), and *Selected Poems* (1962). Most of those who have heard him mentioned in literature classes associate Lowry with alcoholism and Mexico, but, while these are salient and significant features of his greatest book, most readers of *Volcano* would protest that such reductive labels are caricatures of that rich work of art.

Even among the critics who have accepted *Volcano* into the modern canon, the evaluations of Lowry's other work are widely divergent, but with this common restriction: the subject is his fiction. In a recent review, for example, of Sherrill Grace's *The Voyage that Never Ends: Malcolm Lowry's Fiction*, the distinguished Lowryan Dale Edmonds twice refers to Lowry as "a one-book author." Surprisingly, no one has challenged the apathetic, somewhat slothful response
of Lowry's critics to his poetry. The subject of inadequate, scanty comment, it has been dismissed as brooding, fragmentary doggerel. The Lowry article in *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism* affords an example where, in a twenty-page compendium, one-half page is given to a mixed review of *Selected Poems*. Like the reductive terms used to describe *Volcano*, most evaluations of Lowry's poetry carry only a germ of truth and not a seed of fairness.

A revision is necessary, especially now that interest in Lowry is on the upswing. John Huston's film of *Volcano*, expected this fall, has already sparked renewed admiration in Lowry's work (more precisely, in the fiction--again). But unless a voice is heard for the poetry, it will almost certainly be overlooked again. The poetry has nevertheless pulled its own weight thus far; since publication, *Selected Poems* has undergone at least six printings and, remarkable for a book of verse more than twenty years old, has never gone out of print. Moreover, it was recently published in German translation. What is it about Lowry's poetry that engenders such popular appeal in spite of critical silence?

The answer may be indicated, ironically enough, by the work of critic William Gass, one of the most creative and interesting writers of Lowry commentary.
For his review of two books on suicide Gass borrowed the title of a Lowry poem, "The Doomed in Their Sinking." Attracted to Lowry as a subject because of Lowry the man, Gass shares our society's widespread fascination for dipsomaniac artists. Lowry's friend Dylan Thomas epitomizes the poet whose personal reputation lures his audience to his work. Lowry is of this type; his reputation as a drunk and a suicide arouses the sympathy and curiosity of readers. Lowry's work receives readers with the promised glimpse of its author, sinking.

Like the man in his poem, Lowry was most eloquent in his sinking. Lowry's work is, in a sense, the record of his self-destruction; images of violence and misfortune offer a means of structuring the apparent confusion of the poetry.

As early as 1938, Lowry envisioned a book of poems entitled The Lighthouse Invites the Storm. While in Los Angeles recovering from his "terrible sojourn in Mexico," he wrote to Nordahl Grieg (the Norwegian novelist, one of Lowry's heroes) offering to send him a copy, though the volume had not yet been assembled, much less published. Lowry had been writing verse since his days at St. Catharine's College, Cambridge (1929-32), but his production was sporadic. Nevertheless, by 1946, he told Albert Erskine, his editor
at Reynal and Hitchcock: "I've got masses of poems left (one of which was published by The Atlantic Monthly)--enough to make two volumes I'd thought of calling The Lighthouse Invites the Storm and Wild Bleeding Hearts." The latter title is never again mentioned, but in 1951 the Lighthouse volume was included in a fifty-page outline as a part of his projected cycle The Voyage That Never Ends, for which Volcano was the center. Robert Giroux, then at Harcourt, Brace, responded that: "The outline of . . . VOYAGE THAT NEVER ENDS, promises what might be the most important literary project of the decade." The grand plan was never realized; Lowry offered Erskine the Lighthouse poems for what seems to be the last time in 1952.

Although Lowry's Lighthouse volume was never published, he wrote and revised the poems until his death "by misadventure" in England in 1957. The Selected Poems of Malcolm Lowry, the only compilation of Lowry's verse, appeared in 1962, edited by Lowry's friend, the scholar-poet Earle Birney, assisted by Margerie Lowry, Malcolm's widow. Lowry had arranged the poems into groups, and Selected Poems makes use of four of his original subtitles: "The Roar of the Sea and the Darkness" (a line that appears in Ultramarine), "The Cantinas," "The Comedian," and "Songs from the Beach: Eridanus." Eridanus was Lowry's
name for Dollarton Beach along Burrard Inlet, Vancouver, B.C. where he and Margerie lived from 1940-54.

Birney's introduction to *Selected Poems* stresses that Lowry was "an international man," with interests that ranged from jazz to the occult. The geographic settings of the poems are diverse, too, threading their way from ships to Mexico to Canada. But Lowry's poetry, despite its diversity of setting, is unified by its vision of calamity and misfortune.

Although she does not include the poems among Lowry's "major works," Muriel C. Bradbrook writes: "No less than four of Lowry's major works culminate in a storm scene, and in each case it is man's total relation to his environment which is imaged in this violence without and within." What Bradbrook says about the fiction is pertinent to the poetry, but her comment is most helpful when we recognize that "man's total relation to his environment" includes the spiritual realm. Volcanoes, storms, and jail cells are real enough threats, and Lowry fears them, but they are, nevertheless, symbols of much larger threats. In the storm, Lowry is battered by God, not wind. A volcano may instead be Hell, and the jail cell is the prison of self wherein Lowry must face the dilemma that he, too, is fascinated with the image
of himself sinking--his fears are also his fetishes, and he cannot do without them. Alcoholism is only the most obvious manifestation of this treacherous double-bind. Lowry craves his poison.

William Gass provides an insight into Lowry's character when he writes that Lowry did not want to write popular novels, Lowry wanted to write masterpieces. The mundane was anathema to him, and, once we see this, we can predict what sort of antagonists he will choose for himself. They will be awesome, huge and unconquerable. His poems reveal something about the nature of Lowry's fears and his conception of his antagonists; Lowry chooses to be tormented by God, love, death, and life.

In one of his stories, Lowry writes, "I have often wondered whether it is not man's ordeal to make his contrition active." Life, in Lowry's view, is a long forbearance of the suffering one brings upon oneself. Lowry, then, is not a rebel; instead, he is a puppet of desire and fear. Or, to change the metaphor, Lowry is trying to catch a glimpse of himself in the abyss without falling in. The poems show that Lowry is ambivalent about his bêtes noires. Vacillating between an instinct for self-preservation and a tendency toward self-destruction, he is both attracted to and repelled by threats to his life and sanity.
But perhaps this is too rational an explanation, for, in a strange way, suicide and immortality become part of the same welter for Lowry. As Richard Hauer Costa says, "Lowry's sense of death was an oxymoron--a welcome horror--and the spirit cuts across these pages as it did [in Volcano.]."  

In choosing poems for this study, I have tried to indicate the pervasiveness of violent images in the poetry as a whole and to show several of the forms they take, such as storms, animals, and volcanoes. I chose seventeen of Lowry's most characteristic poems and arranged them into categories: 1) storm poems ("The Lighthouse Invites the Storm," "In Tempest's Tavern," "A Poem of God's Mercy," followed by sailing poems which comment on the ironic absence of storms, "Days Like Smitten Cymbals of Brass," "Look Out! The Bloody Bosun," and "The Flowering Past"); 2) tavern poems ("Without the Nighted Wyvern," "Xochitepec," "Sestina in a Cantina"); 3) poems of remorse ("Whirlpool" and "Sunrise"); 4) volcano poems ("Thunder Beyond Popocatepetl" and "The Volcano Is Dark"); 5) poems of necrolatry ("For the Love of Dying" and "He Liked the Dead"); 6) poems of possible reconciliation ("The Doomed in Their Sinking" and "Be Patient for the Wolf"). I have found these categories helpful in dealing with the poems, but they are not
definitive. Some poems share characteristics with poems in other categories, and the categories themselves are not exhaustive or absolute but representative and heuristic.

One of the most intriguing of Lowry's poems which treats the storm metaphor is "The Lighthouse Invites the Storm." The short poem that bears the title of Lowry's proposed volume is probably unfinished. Its nine lines and incomplete rhyme scheme (abbaabbac) suggest that it might have become a sonnet (Lowry's favorite verse form). Its incompleteness, representative of many of the poems, is emblematic of Lowry's weakness as a writer. Its attraction lies not only in its significance as the standard-bearer of Lowry's poetic work, but also in both its curiously fragmentary state and its relation to his fiction.

The poem, presenting a storm-driven freighter dangerously near rocks with wheeling seabirds overhead, focuses on the birds. It is a prayer of sorts for the "birds of the darkness of winter," which are guarded by a "good spirit" (ll. 5, 8). The storm taunts the birds. The birds are strangely compelled to fly by the very weather that threatens them with disaster. Their "flights . . . are / Importuned with frost," and their iced wings are "bonded for flight by zero's seals" (ll. 5-6, 7). Seeing the
birds fly safely, Lowry wonders about the spirit that watches over them. The implicit question is whether the same spirit will protect him against the storm.

Lowry's birds, from the vultures of Volcano to the doves, kingfishers, and gulls of the poems, often represent some extraordinary quality in man, from profound depravity to transcendent reason. Here, the storm-battered birds are portrayed as potential victims of catastrophe, but the "fiery seabird," rather like Coleridge's albatross, is ominous; it portends a different and larger calamity than its own--the ship's. The birds here, therefore, are both harbingers and recipients of the storm's fury; and in this sense they are figures for the poet.

This puzzling, fragmentary poem offers more than one figure for the poet. Lowry, an insistently introspective poet, rarely contrives a narrative in which he does not play a part. Besides the birds, whose guardian is a muse-like character, there is a dominating lighthouse. The beacon, while not controlling the chaos, at least illuminates it. Likewise, the poet imposes order only within the confines of his poem--the world at large remains unwieldy. To readers of Volcano, the lighthouse carries the additional significance of its connection to the Farolito, the fatal cantina where the Consul goes to drink mescal. The
Consul calls the Farolito (Spanish for "little lighthouse") "the lighthouse that invites the storm." In the sense that the Farolito is the beacon to the storm that rages inside the Consul, the storm itself is a third figure for the poet.

The conflation of the lighthouse and tavern images makes the connection, important throughout Lowry's work, between storms and strong drink. But the lighthouse gains its most universal significance when Christ is called the "pharos of the world." If Pharos (the lighthouse at Alexandria) is Christ, then the Consul is self-consciously seeking spiritual succor analogous to shelter from the storm. Through a rather Blakean synthesis, the Consul (or Lowry, permittably) sees a single path that leads to both damnation and redemption. This scheme is not only Blakean, but Dantinean. An acknowledged model for Volcano, The Divine Comedy leads through Hell in order to reach Paradise. But in Lowry, the process of penance, like the reliance on Alcohol for spiritual insight and poetic inspiration, does not ensure its outcome. The poet's ambivalence about inviting the storm or seeking respite from it is characteristic of an artist who would at once destroy and memorialize himself.

Lowry's storms are variously destructive or purgative; ultimately, they are a manifestation of
Lowry's God, who scourges His fallen creation and threatens to revoke His covenant with Noah. "In Tempest's Tavern" presents a protagonist poet who invites the chaos to terrify, and perhaps to destroy, him. The poet, a persona for Lowry himself, is not only "Another," but is an essentially different type of poet from "Wordsworth" (1. 1). Lowry conceives of Wordsworth as an admirer of quiet, pastoral beauty; the Wordsworthian Romantic ideal, in Lowry's view, contradicts his own experience. Whereas the poet of Rydal Mount listened to humming "bees," Lowry hears the "Scrabbling . . . of sharks" (1. 4). The first half of the poem portrays the wreckage of the storm--"uprooted trees, / And vessels smashed backs under portentous seas"--as well as the storm itself: "Lightning a leash snarled by force / And the bounding neck of God's mad dog, the dark," effecting a strong contrast between Lowry and "Wordsworth who thought of the calm" (11. 2-3, 6-7, 9). The storm's description sounds Shakespearean, like natural disturbances in Macbeth that are ominous recriminations for Duncan's murder, or those in Lear that reflect Lear's madness. Lowry cites no specific sin as the source of his incessant remorse, but the presence of guilt is unmistakable--and all the more menacing because it lacks any particular explanation. Nevertheless, Lowry
presents the storm as God's agent, an awesome but justified minister.

Although Lowry clearly distinguishes his vision from that which he attributes to Wordsworth, he makes use of a typically Romantic technique—internalizing a landscape—in the second half of the poem. Internalization is implicit in the preposition and enclosing "Tavern" of the title. Wordsworth's own "Tintern Abbey" and "Resolution and Independence," Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight" and "The Aeolian Harp," and "Yeats's "The Wild Swans at Coole" are examples of similar, inward focus; each of these poems presents an objective view of its environment before moving towards a subjective expression of the poet's feelings. The second half of "In Tempest's Tavern" abandons the concrete images of ships and sharks and speaks of the poet's "own grief" (1. 12). The storm's corporeal self, "conflict's flesh," drowns grief in "hurled gules" [sic] (gales?) (1. 11).

The poem's technique reveals the poet's Romantic inclination, but its argument falls on the dark side of Romanticism, that of the self-destructive urge, associated with abuse of alcohol and drugs and with madness and suicide. Lowry's is not the Romanticism of the superannuated Wordsworth, but rather it is that of Chatterton, De Quincey, John Clare, Ernest Dowson,
and so many others. Lowry repudiates the placid realm of the Lake Poets, since "no peaceful lake / Lights by storm's flash" (11. 12-13). Furthermore, he blesses the chaos because it drowns his grief (which, as "his own strike / Of the hour" and "His live work," is his poetry [11. 11-12, 1]). The poem ends with Lowry in a characteristic pose: "Such is the nature of his doom / That like some infant Aeolus Dowson in tempest's tavern,/ He claps for better thunder, wilder typhoon" (11. 13-15). The Dowson allusion is to "Sum Qualis Eram Bonae Sub Regno Cynarae": "I cried for madder music and for stronger wine" (not, as Birney suggests, to Dowson's "Seraphita"23). Lowry claps his hands together--imitating the thunder, applauding, and conjuring at once--for his own destruction.

Lowry's storm is a physical threat, but as the scourging minister of God, it also threatens his spiritual well-being. The "dark" is "God's mad dog," whose infectious bite results in madness. The dark is Hell because the absence of light is figuratively the absence of God. The storm, therefore, is a complex metaphor for Lowry; like Blake's road of excess that leads to the palace of wisdom, or like Lowry's scheme of redemption through suffering, the storm combines Heaven and Hell.
One of Lowry's early poems establishes the paradoxical equivalence between God's mercy and the storm. "A Poem of God's Mercy," one of the few poems about which Lowry's comments are available, treats a Pentecostal visitation of the Holy Spirit with mixed images of calm and conflict. In 1957, he recalled the effect of the poem's gruesome detail (e.g. "Ishmael . . . stiff in 28th Street, / With a New Bedford harpoon in his brain, / His right lung in a Hoboken garboon" [11. 3-5]) on one of its auditors: "I . . . remember reading that poem—which was written in 1936, one of my first—to a girl, intending to cheer her up, instead she passed out."²⁴

The first lines, by insisting that "Cain shall not slay Abel today," implies that such a crime is ordinarily expected each day. As in Finnegans Wake, the Fall is reenacted over and over again. But this is the eve of Judgment Day, and a pre-storm stillness settles over all. Long-parted lovers are joined, the homeless are sheltered, Ishmael will not be mutilated, and prayers will be heard at last, "for at dawn is the reckoning" (1. 30). The only hint of what tomorrow holds is offered by the "poets of God's mercy, harbingers of the gale" (1. 25).

The storm metaphor extends to include the end of life on earth. Lowry's God is vengeful, His "mercy"
ironic, and Lowry, unforgiving of himself, does not expect redemption without its price (cf. his self-crucifixion in two other poems, "In the Oaxaca Jail" and "Trinity"). Yet the storm's danger and dramatic pageantry continue to entice him. With amor fati he continues to invite God's storm to take him.

When Lowry shipped out in 1927 for six months aboard a freighter, no doubt he had hopes of encountering a windspout or two; the voyage proved disappointingly uneventful. Nevertheless, Lowry turned the experience into literature with Ultramarine and the related sailing poems that are conspicuously absent of storms.

In the ironically-titled poem, "The Days like Smitten Cymbals of Brass," for instance, he admits: "I had expected the roar of the sea, / and of tempest, / not this sullen unremitting calm" (11. 8-10). Lowry deflates the titular, grand-sounding "Days" to "days like rust smitten from iron decks / . . . beaten into one deafening roar / of sunlight and monotony" (11. 5-7), and ironically turns "thunder" into "gunfire" and the Anglo-Saxon kenning "whale-road" into "road of concrete" (11. 12, 11). Indeed, irony governs the entire poem: "When I returned I boasted of typhoons / Conrad would not have recognized" (11. 22-23). Not only are the would-be adventurer's expectations frustrated, denying him the unique experiences he sought, but the ironic
upshot is that he comes to possess a "unique anguish /
which has been some solace through the years" (11.
24-25).

In this mocking poem, the young seaman does not
find "the heroic working class," the darlings-at-a-
distance of Cambridge communists, but "petty squabbles,
jealousies" (11. 13, 15). Rather than a Wordsworthian
love of nature which culminates in love of men, Lowry's
disgust with innocuous nature leads him to contempt
for his fellow seamen and even for "man ashore" (1. 18).
He contracts "a hatred of bosuns, of Mr. Facing Both
Ways," the liaison between officers and deck hands,
whose name--from one of the citizens of Fair-Speech
in Pilgrim's Progress--informs the double-edged irony
of the poem. Beneath their irony and pomposity, the
last two lines--"But to have possessed a unique
anguish / has been some solace through the years"--
express the cold comfort of his alienation (11. 24-25).

As an alienated, young seaman Lowry undertakes to
reshape the world in "Look Out! The Bloody Bosun":
"I like to think we're sealing the old world / Down
for a dose of red lead" (11. 9-10). Working on the
ship, which is in dry-dock and safe from storms, Lowry's
persona in this poem is less ironic, but no less dis-
satisfied than his counterpart in the previous poem.
The ship, "laid up," is described with metaphors for
illness: venereal disease, the source of a particular phobia for Lowry, is implicit in "dose" and in the phallic "hammers which grindstones wait to whet their lust." Furthermore, the bosun is a "two-faced pimp" (11. 10, 11-12, 14). The bosun reappears as a procurer in another poem set in the aftermath of destruction: "The bosun is a pimp as white as snow" is the first line of "Visiting the Wreck: An Able Seaman Explains." Still, the primary dread in "The Bloody Bosun" is not of disease but of boredom. Tedium is a difficult and thankless subject: "this monotony is our Sturm and Drang / Of which few poets have the heart to sing" (11. 7-8). The passing hours are "like Seagulls stuffed with bread," full of the scraps of easy living (1. 6). Surrounded by dreariness and decay, Lowry's young seaman daydreams of "our longed-for suffering / The sea!" (11. 4-5). To escape his hum-drums situation, he constructs metaphors of violence. Using his imagination, Lowry is, in fact, scaling down the old world. He meditates on "abstract hulls"--a figure which merges the hulls of dreamed-of ships with the hull, or husk, or his rusty reality.

Understandably, the dreamy sailor is lax in his task. I imagine him on the deck, hammer resting by his side, when the bosun catches him by surprise and dresses him down mercilessly. Lowry fears that he
may be "one who falls into the trap / Set by that
two-faced pimp who sees mere rust" (11. 13-14). The
bosun's "trap" is the surprise of a spot-check, or it
could be an even more literal booby trap designed to
ensnare, endanger, or merely frighten a sailor who dozes
at his watch. On another level, the bosun's trap is
designed to make Lowry see as the bosun sees. Where
Lowry envisions metaphors for the ship, the bosun sees
"mere rust." The bosun's vision denies intellectuality,
abstraction, and ambiguity. Lowry realizes that the
trap of single-vision would alienate him from his art
as well as from the world.

Lowry's stormless sailing poems all imply what is
explicit in "The Flowering Past": "poetry is other-
where" (1. 5). Perhaps an explanation for Lowry's
apparent restlessness is that he was frustrated in his
search for a place that could charge him with inspiration.
His search, including his 1927 voyage to Shanghai,
covered three continents. After returning from that
trip to the Far East, Lowry went to Bonn to study
German (1928), to Cambridge, Massachusetts to sit at
the feet of Conrad Aiken, whom he called his "spiritual
father" (1929), to Norway to meet Mordahl Grieg,
to France and Spain with the Aikens (1933), back to the
United States (1934), on to Mexico (1936), and to
British Columbia, Canada (1939). During this
twelve-year period, he published *Ultramarine*, graduated from Cambridge, and began *Under the Volcano* and *Lunar Caustic*. But what Lowry needed was not a perspective of proximity so much as one of distance, as "The Flowering Past" indicates.

"The Flowering Past" is probably one of the two most frequently printed Lowry poems (the other being "Xochitepec"): it has appeared in the *New York Times*, the Lowry number of *Les Lettres Nouvelles* (in French translation, its title there "Nulle Poesie"), in *Contact*, and in Sherril Grace's recent treatment of Lowry's fiction, *The Voyage that Never Ends*, besides having a place in *Selected Poems*. Birney suggests that it was written in Dollarton around 1950.27

Although it is in the prevalent sonnet form, "The Flowering Past" differs from most of the other poems in its section, "The Roar of the Sea and the Darkness," for it contains more images of *terra firma* than of the sea. Nevertheless, it is a poem about shipping out, leaving home in search of new and exotic subjects for poetry. The landscape—a cityscape, actually—could be that of the Liverpool Lowry left behind, with its "trams and streets . . . / The cinema fronts and shops" (11. 5-6). Lowry's perspective in the octet is so familiar, so close to his environment, that he seems to have fallen prey to the trap of
single-vision of "Bloody Bosun"—his nearness denies him art: "There is no poetry when you live there" (1.1). Everything around him refuses to metamorphose into subjects for poetry:

Those stones are yours, those noises are your mind,
The forging thunderous trams and streets that bind
You to the dreamed-of bar where sits despair
Are trams and streets: poetry is otherwhere.

(11.2-5)

The poet, suffering because he finds no fit subjects for poetry at home, desires to suffer more intensely. Lowry significantly dreams of a bar as the site for his most exquisite despair. Like the faraway places which promise to inspire him, his suffering—if it is of epic proportions—will temper and strengthen his writing. This is the exigency established in the octet: the poet believes that familiar subjects are unpoetic, and he dovetails the dream of exotica with the dream of alcoholic suffering.

The sestet provides a predictable solution, but with a twist in the last line. The poet, his perspective corrected by distance, sees the poetry he left behind: "But move you toward New Zealand or the Pole, / Those
stones will blossom and the noises sing" (11. 9-10). Because he searches for what he has abandoned, the poet is like a "sleeping child / That never rests," a somnambulist emigré caught in the paradox of having to return home successful in his quest when he "never can come home, but yet must bring / Strange trophies back to Ilium, and wild!" (11. 11-12, 13-14). Conrad Knickerbocker, who died while preparing a biography of Lowry, wrote of the poems: "Private and fabulous rather than public and legendary, [Lowry] pursued in his work, as in his life, the theme of exile, not only the isolation of man from man, but man from paradise." The twist is that home was not drab, old England but Ilium, the site of the greatest epic poetry. The poet faces the unenviable task of bringing "tropies back to Ilium" that are worthy of the Trojan's admiration.

The "dreamed-of bar" of "The Flowering Past" is an image which connects that poem to those which I call the tavern poems. Indeed, the image is very like those in "Without the Nighted Wyvern," which posit an imagined tavern in which drinkers suppose an ideal tavern whose patrons hypothesize yet another, even more ideal tavern. The latter poem also introduces the nightmarish vision of animals, representing the horrors of alcoholic drinking, which is typical of the tavern poems.
The poem begins with a Baudelairean premise, "Notions of Freedom are tied up with drink," which is, like the title, ambiguous; freedom may be associated with drink, or it may be ironically "tied up" or trammeled, by drink. Line two begins the series of ideal taverns, which is then extended: "Our ideal life contains a tavern / Where man may sit and talk or just think" (11. 2-3); "Or yet another tavern where it appears / There are no No Trust signs no No Credit" (11. 5-6); "... a really better land where man / May drink a finer, ah, an undistilled wine" (11. 9-10); "Weaving the vision of the unassimilable inn / Where we may drink forever without owing / With the door open, and the wind blowing" (11. 12-14).

"Without the Nighted Wyvern" is either a joyous drinking poem itself or it posits another, unwritten poem of happy, uncomplicated intoxication. The duplicitous irony of the poem is informed by its title (chosen by Birney for Selected Poems). In one sense, the phrase "without the nighted wyvern" has the meaning of line four: "All without fear of the nighted wyvern"; that is, there is no fear because the wyvern is absent. Yet the phrase also suggests that the wyvern, a heraldic figure of a dragon, waits outside the tavern.

While "Wyvern" praises an ideal world "without pain" and with limitless free drinks, the poem also
maintains an insistent threat that, since its taverns are propositional, the real world is not so hospitable. The alcoholic's drink does not really "intoxicate . . . without pain," nor is it unaccompanied by the threat of the nighted wyvern. So, because the wyvern waits outside, even this halcyon poem of alcoholic paradise indicates the menace of violence which will threaten the poem. The wyvern is terrifying because Lowry knows that it is unreal and yet he perceives it. The poem proposes an escape to fantasy, yet the reality left behind contains fantastic elements—e.g., the wyvern. The confusion of fantasy and reality is typical of the tavern poems, which often display violence upon or through animal figures.

"Xochitepec" makes a good companion poem for "Without the Nighted Wyvern"; the former ascends from haunting dreams to nightmarish reality. The two poems are nearly mirror-images of each other in terms of their gradations of metaphors, and the oblique threat of "Wyvern" is multiplied and made palpable in "Xochitepec."

"Xochitepec" is a terrifying poem. It makes a moot distinction between "Those animals that follow us in dream" and "those / Which hunt us . . . in life," for the "real-life" animals are nightmarish also (11. 1, 2-3). The wyvern is included in this poem, too, as
one of the "Symbols of death, heraldic" (1. 6).
The wyvern and other "shapes of delirium" (1. 5) fix
this poem in the mind; the animals lend structure to
the poem by their very presence--they "haunt . . .
[Lowry's] scheme / Of building" (11. 4-5). Each one
has a presence like that of Yeats's "rough beast,
but these do not signal a coming apocalypse. Lowry's
world is already in its death-throes, and, like the
"grim vinegarroon" in the poem of the same name:
"stings itself to death beneath the stone" ("Grim
Vinegarroon," 1. 15). Yeats's symbol, generated from
his cyclical theory of history, has worldwide importance.
Lowry's animals are, on the other hand, the hallucinatory
images associated with his private catastrophe.

Xochitepec is a village between Mexico City and
Oaxaca. "Xochitepec" was probably written during
or after Lowry's December, 1937 visit to Oaxaca just
after Jan Gabriel, his first wife, left him, in Mexico
City, for the last time. Lowry's biographer, Douglas
Day, describes the Oaxagenian sojourn:

Oaxaca, where one could find the best
mescal in Mexico . . . was a nightmare:
he listened to a pair of fawns being
slaughtered for his hotel's dining room;
two enormous turtles, upended, bled to
death on the pavement outside the hotel; a vulture perched on his washbasin. With these hallucinations (if they were hallucinations) came the old paranoia. 

Even the harmless animals are tortured and are torturous.

Our cats lay quivering under the maquey; A meaning had slunk, and now died, with them. The boy slung them half stiff down the ravine, Which we now entered, and whose name is hell. But still our last night had its animal: The puppy, in the cabaret, obscene, Looping-the-loop and soiling all the floor, And fastening itself to that horror Of our last night . . . (11. 8-16).

The cats and the puppy are Lowry-figures, pathetic and clownish in their alcohol-related deaths. The cats are poisoned by the maquey plant, the source of pulque (Lowry's favorite drink at the time). "Half stiff" with rigor mortis and with alcohol, the cats are tossed into the ravine. Is this the same barranca the Consul and the pariah dog--another haunting animal--are thrown into at the end of Volcano? This recurrent, archetypal motif is based on experience;
an extremely drunk Lowry once actually fell into such a ditch of sewage. 34

The incident of the puppy is probably drawn from Lowry's experience as well. A sick puppy appears in "Not With a Bang," a story Jan Gabriel wrote about her last night with Malcolm (Story, Sept.-Oct., 1946, pp. 55-61). Jan makes the connection between Malcolm and the puppy: "He would give her a dog, a symbol, saying, in effect, 'This innocent, helpless, gentle creature is my husband Michael [i.e., Malcolm]; look after it and mop up after it and cherish it and give it protection.'" 35 The "Michael" of Jan's story accidentally kills the puppy, probably a fiction of a macabre incident in 1933, when Lowry broke the neck of a friend's pet rabbit while petting it. 36

As awful as the cats and dog are, the deer are worse:

... and very last day
As I sat bowed, frozen over mescal,
They dragged two kicking fawns through the hotel
And slit their throats, behind the barroom door. . . . (11. 15-19).

The two fawns, as figures for Malcolm and Jan, also represent young love which has come to a monstrous
end. The vision of their death is hallucinatory, and may well be the result of delerium tremens. The two young fawns, like the pets, represent the crucified innocents of the world. But, on a more personal level, they are Lowry's metaphor for his failed marriage. The "animals that follow us in dream" are obviously self-generated, so that all the animals in this poem are projections of Lowry. Sunk low in drunkenness and paranoid depression, which he reinforced with more remorse and alcohol, Lowry found animal images a suitable representations of himself.

In "Xochitepec," Lowry finds that terrifying images from his past haunt him. Writing poetry may be his attempt to exorcise such demonic visions. At the same time, he could not completely absolve himself of those violent visions, for they made it necessary for him to write and gave him something to write about. Eventually, he would write a tavern poem about the "resurgent sorrow" that continually fed his special genius.

Lowry's tour de force of versification is a double sestina, "Sestina in a Cantina," which features six speakers (Legion, St. Luke, Sir Philip Sidney, Richard III, El Universal, and the Swine), and is set in "A waterfront tavern in Vera Cruz at daybreak." The form requires six key, repeated words, "dawning"
and "sunset," which introduce the temporal setting, and also provide a play of contraries in the poem; "prison" and "horrors" are two minatory dangers of drink; "ocean" and "mirrors" introduce spatial setting and share a reflective property which is external in oceans (that is, allowing one to see oneself in the world) and internal in "mirrors" (where one sees the world in oneself).

For Legion, this is a "dawn of drinking," "mnemonic" of many others like it—"some spent in prison" (11. 3, 1, 2). Dawn is "clean and delicate," but in its "pale light . . . horrors / Stampede like . . . wolves" which seem "plump . . . in distorting mirrors" (11. 4, 5-6). Legion is drunk and despairing also in the second stanza, where he talks of "Investing every tongue and leaf with horrors, / And seeing . . . in the nauseous ocean / The last shot of our life" (11. 9, 11-12). The "ocean" becomes the final drink, or "shot," of a drowning man.

St. Luke is "a ship's doctor," as his Biblical namesake was a physician, and his speeches, first to Legion, then to Sidney, reveal that he understands Legion better than any other speaker. He warns Legion that: "The mind has many slanting lying mirrors" and "ways of keeping us in prison, / The better there to supervise its horrors" (11. 14, 17-18).
Appearing as a man of military honor, Sir Philip Sidney is a delightful character who proposes a soldier's pragmatic solution to Legion's fear: "Why do you not, sir, organize your horrors / And shoot them one day" (11. 19-20). Sidney further suggests that the execution be carried out "at sunset, / [so] That we may wake up the next day not in prison," (1. 20-21). The absolution would be on the "cold beach at dawning / To lave away the past in colder ocean" (11. 23-24). Sidney's suggested ocean bath is a mock-baptism. To "lave away the past" is also a sort of drowning of the old self so that the new self may emerge. And drowning is precisely what occurs in the Biblical subtext of this poem, Mark 5:9-13; there Jesus meets a man possessed by demons, "And he asked him, What is thy name? And he answered, saying, My name is Legion: for we are many" (5:9). Jesus sent the demons into a herd of swine, "and the herd ran violently down a steep place into the sea" and drowned (5:13). The major discrepancy between Lowry's poem and its Scriptural precursor is that Legion's exorcism is partial and temporary.

Luke replies to Sidney that Legion "likes his horrors, / And if he shot them would do so at dawning / [so] That he might have acquired some more by sunset" (11. 26-28). Luke, interceding for Legion, explains
that he is no longer free.

But Legion remains his own best spokesman, as he tells how "fatal conversations before mirrors, / / Have shattered by their beauty every sunset / And rendered . . . old dawning" as a horrible hangover (11. 33, 35-36). "Delerium in Vera Cruz" is another poem in which Lowry addresses a mirror; in that poem he breaks all the glass in a hotel room (1. 14). The terrifying horrors of alcoholism are different for Lowry from the terrors of the storm. Storms are extrinsic, sent by God to scourge the poet and the world. But, the "fiends and all the spindly breed of horrors" are immanent in the poet himself, for they generate not from the bottle but from his "mirrors." The horrors are, therefore, a reflection of the part of Lowry that seeks his own destruction.

Again we encounter the vague animal menace that characterizes the tavern poems. Legion directs his listeners' attentions to "The oxen standing motionless . . . / Outside our tavern now, outside our prison" (11. 37-38). The oxen are reminiscent of the wyvern waiting outside the happier bar in "Without the Nighted Wyvern." Other animals in this poem are the wolves, the ironic, oligarchic "tossing moose-heads," and the Swine, who, as the embodiments of Legion's horrors, have the final word of the envoi.
Richard III, a barman, berates Legion; he mistakes Legion's anxious remarks about sunset for "avid[ity] for the sunset" (1. 49). Richard, spiteful and contemptuous, admonishes the sun to rise no more after today. Part of his speech is paraphrased from Shakespeare's play: "Shine out, fair sun, till I have bought a glass, / That I may see my shadow as I pass" (R III I.ii.262-63). Lowry's Richard says: "Shine out fair sun till you have bought new mirrors / That you may see your shadow pass the ocean, / And sunken no more pass our way at dawning" (11. 50-52). Shakespeare's Richards, both II and III, are rulers associated with mirrors, but Legion does not regard a man as ruler. Instead, he has crowned the "tossing moose-heads" in an intense epiphany of horror that is also a comic political judgment: rulers are mere animal heads stuffed with sawdust.

The "early edition" of El Universal asks Legion why love has failed to comfort him. Legion replies that he has "babbled . . . of love," but the mention of love introduces the grisliest description of the horrors, which are "Ready to suck the blood out of the sunset / And amputate the godhead of the dawning" (11. 70, 71-72). Not only are the horrors portrayed in images of violence--vampirism and amputation (possibly castration)--but Legion sees himself "as all mankind,"
a surrogate. An equally important point is that Legion is never nihilistic; his horrors threaten the things of worth to him. To Lowry, they probably appear as tremendous foes of writing. As day breaks over Vera Cruz (indeed the "true cross," where Legion's suffering assumes a Christ-like proportion), the Swine are driven from their "prison," the tormented Legion (1.73). But their exodus from him is temporary, for, although they are "Bereaving him of horrors . . . yet they are leaving him his mirrors" (1.75), out of which Legion will certainly resurrect them.

Like the horrors, remorse constantly renews itself. "Whirlpool" is the title and the essential image of a poem about the dynamics of remorse. A diagram of the poem would show Lowry at a stationary point adjacent to a revolving circle: each point on the circle will pass in front of Lowry again and again. The poem's imagery is typically pelagic: "Resurgent sorrow is a sea in the cave / Of the mind" (11.1-2). Lowry admits (rather awkwardly) that his poem and his mind have surfeit of sorrow: "--just as in the poem / It gluts it" (11.2-3). Lowry does not recommend the whirlpool of sorrow, but rather he warns us: "Abandon it!" (1.4). Perhaps, if we escape it, we can forget; Lowry suggests that we "gather poppies"--the flowers of forgetfulness (1.5). Ironically courageous, we
can "brave / The fringe of things," and thus "deny . . . that inner chasm" (1. 6). On the fringe, or beach, we may find a seashell, a seagull's skull, or the miscellaneous timber of a shipwreck. These things are all reminders of the past--even the seashell contains "the hush of the sea" (1. 7)--but they evoke only dead memories, which are, therefore, safe. Nevertheless, our attempt to escape the whirling menace will prove futile, for Lowry says that we "will not escape that other surf . . . still must you receive / In that cave the special anguish of your life" (11. 13, 10-11). Unlike the beach, where the past is commemorated only in relics, the whirlpool's remembrance of the "past is not washed up dead and black and dry / But whirls in its gulf forever, to no relief" (11. 15-16). The whirlpool animates the past, continually revitalizing remorse.

"Sunrise" is another poem which deals with incessant remorse, but, where "Whirlpool" might be faulted because its initial image makes the poem a foregone conclusion, "Sunrise" is a better poem both for its structure and for its reversal of expectations. "Whirlpool"'s rhyme scheme degenerates in the final quatrain (abbaabbacddcxd), but "Sunrise" is a tight Shakespearean sonnet.

The initial stanza presents Lowry "sober" and
horseback-riding "into the bran [sic] new dawn" (1. 1). With "steady hand," his newly-shriven being is "all but newly born" (11. 2, 3). His steed is "surcingeless as heaven" (1. 6). Lowry's newness encourages the easy analogy between himself and the dawn, traditionally the promise of a new start. His horse, associated with heaven, almost makes him an Apollo figure. But Lowry never permits himself a fully godlike character. "In Tempest's Tavern," for example, presents him as only "like some infant Aeolus Dowson" (1. 14); (my emphasis). The sense of freedom in the first two quatrains derives in part from the hint of something left behind, some obligation or penance of which he has (perhaps inadequately) been "new-shrived" (1. 3): "Ah, the years behind seemed lost, and lost the deed, / As pommel and stirrups unheeded I cantered along" (11. 7-8). But the freedom and absolution are ephemeral for Lowry. The landscape begins to change, and the once "smiling grandiloquent plain" (1. 4) now bristles with "cactuses . . . on every hand" (1. 9). The horse's gait increases from a canter to a gallop; and "galloping," repeated three times, indicates just how "unrelenting" the horse becomes (11. 12, 13). The dawn changes to an "evening land" (1. 12), and there appear the Lowryan animal visions: "Wild dogs and spectres, all enveloping" (1. 10). The grotesque animal terror of this poem
achieves its finest expression in the closing couplet: "Bound to that unrelenting fatuous horse / Whose eyes are lidless and whose name, remorse" (11. 13-14).

Lowry is "bound" to the horse that was "surcingeless" earlier. The ramifications of this reversal are significant. The horse, the method of escape from the "years" and "deed" left behind, becomes inescapable itself; a dumb, "fatuous" beast becomes an agent of torture that will not allow Lowry to forget, but only to regret. The similarity between the horse and alcohol, as used by Lowry, is also inescapable. Lowry's carefree morning drink (cf. the poem "Eye-Opener") leads to another and another, building momentum until he is "galloping" toward disaster.

The violence that so often takes the shape of animals which threaten Lowry may also appear as a part of the landscape or climate. Storms and whirlpools, as we have seen, are menacing, destructive forces; volcanoes, too—as one might expect from their forbidding presence in his greatest novel—are liable to erupt in Lowry's poems. The storm and the volcano both are capable of violence in "Thunder Beyond Popocatepetl" and "The Volcano Is Dark."

Douglas Day, who generally dismisses Lowry's poetry, sees a "brooding sort of loftiness" in "Thunder Beyond Popocatepetl." Interestingly, the version
he prints in the biography differs from that in Selected Poems. Day had access to the same, problematic manuscripts as Birney. For example, Day writes of the problem of dating the poems:

It is often impossible to determine the date of composition of a Lowry poem: whenever he wrote one, Margerie typed it and added it to the stack of pages that grew slowly over the years, without any indication of when it had been written. So, though one knows that, say, "Xochitepec" was clearly not written before Lowry went to Mexico, one cannot say with any pretense of accuracy when after the Mexican period it was composed.40

Because the manuscripts sometimes contain several variant drafts of a poem, the choice of which one to print is perhaps an arbitrary, editorial decision.41 Of the Day version's variants (1. 1 thunderclouds thunder clouds; 1. 2 High-piled High-piked; 1. 10 approved approval; 1. 13 Chekhov Tchechov), only two propose any significant difference: "High-piked" and "approval."42 The latter makes less sense to me, given the context of the phrase, "man's approval lease," than does Birney's choice, "approved." The former,
although ambiguous as to whether "piked" refers to peaks or to halberds, lends a martial air to its line--"High-piked beyond Popocatepetl"--that "High-piled" does not. The aggressive, martial tone of "thunderclouds . . . / High-piked beyond Popocatepetl" is appropriate for the poem, which is full of conflict and force.

The thunderclouds press upon the volcano, pinned there by the wind. The setting is anthropomorphized; the clouds become the heart. The winds that pin the clouds to the far side of the volcano become the "winds of reason" with the capacity to spill over the ridge and become "madness" (11. 4, 5). Popocatepetl itself is the "splitting mind," split not only by the external forces of reason and madness, but also by its fissure, through which fiery magma may erupt and flow uncontrollably down either the slope of reason or the slope of madness (1. 5).

Even though the precariousness of this situation is profound, Lowry finds the absence of conflict unacceptable; because it can only "drift . . . without reason," the mind that is not chastised and strengthened will "settle / . . . in the last darkness and at the end" (11. 6, 7-9). Lowry opposed the "psalmists of despair" who refuse to acknowledge anything beyond "man's approved lease" of threescore and ten years
(1. 10), he warns them: "Reason remains although your mind forsakes / It" (11. 11-12).

As the "good wind's defender," Lowry defends reason, and he presents a scheme of redemption that is patterned somewhat on a Thomistic paradigm. That is, Aquinas recognized philosophy and theology as discrete bodies of knowledge nevertheless mutually enlightening. Lowry similarly separates reason and grace, for the former "remains" while the latter flies. His metaphor involves "white birds," a traditional symbol of God's grace. Powerful winds, already shown to represent reason, benefit the birds which "fly against the thunder to a place where Chekhov said was peace" (11. 12-13). This is, to paraphrase Blake, progression through Contraries. Because of, rather than in spite of the confluences of contraries--thunder and peace, rational reason and irrational grace, mind and heart--the moment of wholeness and completion is possible. That moment occurs "When the heart changes and the thunder breaks" (1. 14). Lowry's language and tone of awed admiration are reminiscent of the refrain of Yeats's poem, "Easter 1916": "all changed, changed utterly / A terrible beauty is born."

The yoking together of opposed concepts is not original in Lowry, of course. It is a favorite technique among the metaphysical poets, especially
Donne, and Lowry may have learned it from Donne, whom he mentions reading in his letters ("Donne means damn all to me now," ca. 1932).\textsuperscript{43} Donne himself borrowed the concept of sex as \textit{piccolo morte} from the Italian poets, and he popularized the Renaissance euphemism of "dying," meaning sexual climax. Lowry incorporates that concept in another volcano poem, "The Volcano is Dark."

Lowry expands the Donneian pun on "dying" to embrace both the literal and the metaphoric levels. The chief irony of "The Volcano is Dark" stems from the simultaneity of the destructive instant of eruption, when "suddenly thunder / Engulfs the haciendas," and "the act of procreating," in which the poet imagines "billions of men moaning, / And the hand of the eternal woman flung aside" (11. 1-2, 3, 5-6). The volcano here is unlike the one in "Thunder Beyond Popo"; here, the volcano is flagrantly sexual, informing the metaphor of man's "organ frozen into a gigantic rock, / Shattered now . . ." (11. 7-8). Men's organs, "frozen" in erection, are like the "gigantic rock" of the volcano in that they ejaculate and erupt, "shattered." The phalluses of men and of the volcano oppose each other in a \textit{concordia discors} of love and death. The poem ends with one of Lowry's favorite phrases: "And the cries which might be the groans of the dying / Or the groans of love"
Lowry's connection of sex with violent death is probably symptomatic of his syphilophobia.

The phrase that ends "The Volcano Is Dark" occurs in Volcano in the context of a whore's bed. The demon of syphilis haunted Lowry in poems that range in geographic setting from Oaxaca to Vancouver (cf. "In the Oaxaca Jail" and "Christ Walks in this Infernal District Too"). In the poem "Thirty-five Mescals in Cuautla," where the calendar from the whore's bedroom in Volcano reappears, Lowry says: "If that death's in her it's here in me (1. 35).

So even the sexual aspect of love is not without its menace. References to venereal disease occur throughout the poems and the prose. The story "The Present Estate of Pompeii," for example, shows Roderick Fairhaven and his wife Tansy guided through the ruined city by Signor Salacci, a salacious native Pompeiian who boasts: "Pompeii was a school of immorality. No hypocrite life like ours." Signor Salacci is also proud of the "obscene paintings," "a statue of Priapus," "a love room," and "an erotic frieze," and he recounts the preparations for "orgy feasts." The brothel is an attraction which draws the remark from the guide that "cheap is always dangerous . . . In southern Italy is plenty clap. Seventy per cent of people have-a the clap but now is American penicillin--whissht, in a
few days!—so nobody know percentage. " The poems display the grotesqueries of V.D. more graphically: "For Under the Volcano" shows that a syphilitic "peon's face is a mass of corruption"; in that poem, where Lowry is "betrothed to the puking vacuum and the unfleshible root" (1. 26), female and male genitals repel one another, making sex impossible.

Day recounts Lowry's confessions in 1955 under sodium pentathol at Atkinson Morley's, a London psychiatric hospital:

He had been, he claimed, ridiculed in school because his penis was too small. He had started drinking in his teens chiefly because alcohol could serve as a sexual substitute, necessary because of a lack of confidence. He had tried his luck with prostitutes, and had been a miserable failure. This last was not a very surprising revelation when one considers that Lowry's upbringing had been strongly Low Church fundamentalist; and that he had been a true syphilophobe ever since his oldest brother Stuart, then about nineteen, had taken him, aged five, to an anatomical museum in Liverpool's Paradise Street which specialized in depicting, by a large number of pallid plaster casts, the ravages of venereal diseases.
The significance of Lowry's fear of sex is that he utilized it to express in art the unattainability of love in the modern world. But the connection between love and death may have been expanded by Lowry from the physical to the mystical realm. That is, we have seen how he regarded the storm's chastisement as God's justified punishment; consider then, whether death would not have seemed to be an ultimate form of atonement, a Christ-like expression of love for God. If Lowry saw himself as worthy only of God's wrath, then perhaps only by negating himself through death could he become worthy of God's love. Rilke, whom Lowry read in the original German (and half of the duumvirate Lowry evokes in his poem to the masters "Rilke and Yeats"), may have influenced this aspect of Lowry's concept of death. William Rose writes in "Rilke and the Conception of Death":

For Rilke . . . death is a goal, but not one to be achieved by mere romantic longing . . . but one to be striven for with all the fervour of an inspiring ethical purpose. His conception of death was bound up indissolubly with an incessant search for contact with God. 47

Lowry explores this concept of Liebestod more fully in the poems "For the Love of Dying and "He Liked the Dead."
"For the Love of Dying" poses a rhetorical question whose implied answer denies life. Such a life as Lowry's, in love with death, might end itself. We have seen that the modern world in Lowry's view renders human love unattainable. Only by loving death can he hope ever to achieve an indissoluble union with his beloved. This death-wish, it should be clear, is not masochistic, for Lowry never expresses pleasure at the prospect of pain. Rather, he sees violence, directed toward himself, as a means to a mystical or spiritual end. The pain Lowry feels in life is the consequence for some vague sin, perhaps the sin of being alive, just as venereal disease is, in Lowry's view, the consequence of sex. So, because "masochism" is inaccurate, perhaps "necrolatry," in an abstract sense, better conveys the affinity for the dead in these poems.

In the second of the five couplets of "He Liked the Dead," Lowry admits that he is: "No Rupert Brooke and no great lover" (1. 3). The allusion is to Brooke's poem "The Great Lover," which lists simple pleasures, such as "White plates and cups . . . / / Wet roofs . . . the strong crust / Of friendly bread" as the amours of the great lover. Lowry, who "remembered little of simplicity," has difficulty trying "to count the things which he held dear" (11. 4, 2). Because he
can recall having "known no love," even the title's statement of affections is ironic and self-deflating (1. 8).

The closing couplet--"The grass was not green not even grass to him; / nor was sun, sun; rose, rose; smoke, smoke; limb, limb"--is negative, and culminates the poem's plethora of negations and diminutives ("poor," "dead," "no," "little," "never," "not," "nor"). A radically new way of perceiving results from the poet's necrolatry. Lowry no longer recognizes grass, sun, or roses as familiar, ordinary objects; however, the inability to perceive ordinary objects may imply an inverse ability to perceive the extraordinary, supernatural realm.

Lowry's attention to the occult may be second only to Yeats's among twentieth-century poets. The Caballa, for example, is an integral part of Volcano. (Also, when Lowry wrote from England in 1957, he asked only for two books of magic from his library and MSS in Dollarton.) "Tarot" makes the occult element explicit in this poem (1. 6). Lowry may be punning on "tarette," a "merchant vessel of the Middle Ages" (OED), in order to juxtapose a vast quantity of alcohol ("a shipload of beer") with the promise of divination. An additional--or alternative--pun in line six may be on "beer"-"bier," which would yoke
both alcohol and death together with the magic "tarot." At any rate, selling one's soul for any amount of beer is an ironic deflation of Faustus' bargain with Mephistopheles. The desire to strike such a trade ironically reveals that one's soul is already lost. Lowry's situation, then, as portrayed in "He Liked the Dead," is that he is alienated not only from the unrecognizable world but also from himself. His alienation, most simply, is the result of fear. Lowry fears his talent, and he fears the loss of it. He sees alcohol and magic as guardians of his gift, but they turn on him, posing even greater threats to life and sanity.

Before Lowry could hope to phrase some sort of reconciliation with his fears, he had first to prove capable of evaluating his situation as honestly and objectively as possible. "The Doomed in Their Sinking," while as fatalistic a verse as its title indicates, is both as honest and as objective as any of Lowry's work. Its honesty shows in the unveiled defects of character which typify Lowry's depressive nature. Its objectivity lies in the cool tone with which those shortcomings are enumerated. The poem's passion is strong, but tightly controlled, making it one of Lowry's best.

The narrator describes a drowning man (unsurpris-
ingly much like Lowry) as "a ship adrift, / / . . .
or listing with iceberg's impact"--either aimless and bound for calamity or the recent victim of violence (11. 1, 3). The significant characteristic of this doomed figure is his eloquence. His speech is full of rationalizations--finding others at fault for his peril--and circumlocutions of the immediate danger he faces. We do not hear him speak, but the narrator apprises us of the situation: "It was melancholy to hear him try to shift / The blame on us for his sure guilt; but gift / Of clarity he lacked " (11. 4-5). The doomed man seems to spin words as if they were lifelines, for although "It was long before he was silent," he makes "No tactile appeal for help" (11. 8, 7). The narrator considers finally that the man had been "most eloquent in . . . his sinking" (1. 12).

Lowry's speaker displays such emotional restraint and reserve that a sense of character is imparted by the cool tone of his comments. He analyzes and ruminates: "I tried to sift / Later the mystery of man's dissembling / When most he needs aid . . . / . . . I have considered it since" (11. 8-11). In fact, the narrator provides a means by which Lowry distances himself from the poem. If we assume on the basis of the previous poems that the doomed figure represents Lowry, then the detached
narrator is another. By the narrator's attention to the eloquence of the Lowry-figure, we see him as comparable to one who reads Lowry. The narrator describes "the doomed . . . as most eloquent in their sinking." This passive reader, caring only for the words and not for the man, is transfixed by the doomed man's expressiveness: "When the doomed are most eloquent in their sinking, / It seems that then we are least strong to save" (11. 12-13). The narrator's ironic prayer is that the unaided man's death "prove no titanic case" (1. 14).

By making the one man's doom a "titanic case," Lowry returns to the initial image of a man as a ship "listing after iceberg's impact," but, beyond punning on the 1912 disaster of the Titanic, he also increases the scope of the poem to include the macrocosm. "The Doomed in Their Sinking" could be read as a Christian poem, with the doomed man, Christ, unable to convince the narrator of his "sure guilt." In whatever way the poem is read, the implication of a "titanic case" is that the world's doom is related to or reflected by Lowry's own death. More than the ironic projection of his own suffering onto the world, it is Lowry's capacity to see himself with such objectivity that distances him from the poem without sacrificing strong feeling.
Another way for Lowry to reconcile himself with fear, after distancing himself with poems, is to negate himself altogether. So great is the eventual identification of one with the other in "Be Patient for the Wolf," that he assimilates the horrors, and they assimilate him.

The development of the wolf image in Lowry's work is hinted at but not treated intensively by Birney and others. These critics take as their point of departure Lowry's childhood experience of joining a "Wolf Cub pack and suffering . . . some sort of sadistic bullying from older members"; he had joined "at his father's insistence." Birney writes:

The wolf became a complex symbol in Lowry's work, first of the cruelty of nature and of the 'natural' man--I suspect the origin of this in the Wolf Cub experience--and later, by an interesting reversal, of the plight of all lonely creatures who cannot exist in modern society and are persecuted to extinction, including himself. 50

Elsewhere, Birney offers this gloss of "Be Patient for the Wolf":

The longest of these verses in the "Canadian" section, and the most eerily moving, is
unfortunately unfinished; . . . it is the poem in which Lowry seems to come nearest to establishing a stasis, a way of living, or at least of dying, with his horrors, of subduing them by identification with them.\textsuperscript{51}

Birney, by virtue of his familiarity with the poems, is an authoritative if laconic commentator. But he does nothing (besides quote five and one-half lines) to explain how "Be Patient for the Wolf" is "moving," or, more pertinent to this discussion, how it signals "a stasis" from which Lowry identifies with horrors.

The fifty-one, roughly blank verse lines of the poem constitute four eleven-line stanzas and one seven-line stanza, which functions as an epode. Although the poem is unfinished, an odal structure seems to have been intended, with the first pair of stanzas as strophe, and the second pair as antistrophe. My groupings here are not totally arbitrary, as a look at each stanza's first line will show. "Be patient for the wolf is always with you" and "Be patient for the wolf is ever with you" (11. 1, 12) reiterate the same idea. "Be patient for the wolf is patient" and "Be patient because the wolf is patient" (11. 23, 24) both express a greater sympathy—the physical proximity
is replaced by closeness of spirit. "Be patient, because of the wolf, be patient" (1. 45) shows that the wolf has become a reason, an explanation, in itself. This movement, from proximity to sympathy to identification, allows for the stasis that leads to reconciliation.

A changed conception of God helps precipitate the reconciliation of the poem. Here, God is sorrowful and an agent of restitution, probably aligned with the "weeping father" of line seven and with the idea of separation of father and son: "Half the face of God seeks half its face. / And he will find your genius in the dark / And give it back without a bondsman" (11. 9-11). No longer is God a vengeful figure, waiting to pounce upon sinners. Lowry intimates a new sympathy with God and for the losses suffered by others: "God will come out of such ignorance as this, / Not like a jack-in-the-box but like a tree / Turned weeping father in delirium" (11. 5-7).

Lowry is never very far from Dante in plotting the pathway through hell to paradise; he quotes the opening line of The Divine Comedy, submerging it in his own meaning: "At the beginning of the inferno, in the middle / Of the wood, the image teeters between mother and sea" (11. 41-42). The mother-image, like the earlier father-image, wavers on the periphery of
While Lowry chides himself to be patient, the only ones who do not wait are the parent-figures: "Only the bell that follows does not wait / Galloping mother-faced across the fields / To abrade you to the bone with a rough chime" (11. 38-40). But the separation from parent-ghosts is necessary if one can come to terms with other self-generated horrors, so Lowry admonishes: "Pay no heed to the bell nor to the aged sea / But to the dear kind wolf pay allegiance" (11. 43-44).

Lowry brings himself to understand the paradox—in order to reclaim himself, he must lose himself. Hence the liberating effect of accepting his demons—including that of sex: "you'll find your blood-warm cave and rest at last" (1. 47) evokes an image of post-coital sleep. Lowry no longer struggles against the horror, or against himself: "Be patient, because of the wolf be patient— / His step is your own now, you are free, being bereft" (11. 50-51).

The reconciliation that marks "Be Patient for the Wolf" should not be overemphasized. Its inclusion here is more for the purpose of illustrating contrast than of suggesting a general trend in Lowry's poetry toward acceptance. Its tone of resignation, its farewell to Lowry's old antagonist, "the unvintageable perception."
sea," is not the benchmark of a new direction (as was, for example, Yeats's "The Circus Animals' Desertion," with its own "ungovernable sea"). Instead, it may mark only a hiatus, a cease-fire in the conflict between Lowry and the subjects of his poems--God, alcohol, the sea, and sex.

We should recognize that Lowry was a poseur. His reputation as an irrepressibly cheerful drinking companion, compared to his lugubrious remorse in a poem such as "Sunrise," discovers at least one mask, and maybe two. He had the capacity to mock his own balefulness, as in his "Epitaph":

Malcolm-Lowry
Late of the Bowery
His prose was flowery
And often glowery
He lived, nightly, and drank, daily,
And died playing the ukulele.

But Lowry's posing is not a satisfactory explanation for the tremendous attention and almost unswerving emphasis in his poems on images of violence. These poems, through such images, illustrate a view of life as harried, tortured, and finally tragic.

Day purports that Lowry rarely submitted poems for publication because he considered them unfinished
and not on a level with his prose, but Birney is probably closer to the truth when he asserts: "It was, I think, because his verse was so innocent of defenses, that he was chary of publishing it in his lifetime." Writing poems evidently satisfied Lowry in a way that prose writing did not. The relative attractions of poetic form probably included its conciseness and its independence from certain strictures of fiction, such as plot and characters, but the primary advantage of poetry for Lowry must have been the chance both to explore his own psyche more directly and with fewer defenses, and to write with greater freedom of self-expression than he allowed himself in his prose fiction.

Lowry's poems, like his horrors, pullulated in his psyche. His awareness of the world as fallen and of his own human shortcomings explained for him not only his self-destructiveness but the world's stampede toward its own doom as well. Many of Lowry's poems were written or revised during the Second World War, and the cataclysm must have seemed to him a gross reflection of the storm in his own soul.

Still, we come to Lowry's poems not for what they say about the world, but for what they show us about the man. Each poem's treatment here is autotelic, but there is also a close correspondence between the
poems and Lowry's experience. Because Lowry's physical, psychological, and emotional experiences provide fodder for his poetry, and because his biography and reputation attract us to his work, the correlation between experience and art is an especially close one. Lowry's life and death centered on his art. Gass, aware of Lowry's life as active contrition, writes: "Redemption through art was his real creed." Lowry's final offering to his antagonists is the literature he left behind, and the poetry is the forthright, least mediated portion of that offering.

The title of "Thoughts to be Erased From My Destiny" implies that even the poem commits suicide. Its odd length (13 lines) and mention of a biographical "fragment" remind us that when we read Lowry we are often dealing with incomplete poems. In a sense, the poetic fragments themselves are victims of violence. Still they survive their author. Lowry leaves us his poems, even the one to be erased, and therein lives more successfully after his death than he could while drinking and writing. The "fragment of biography" is expressly hueristic; Lowry's life--and the manner of his death--are a key to his art. Imagining his future reader, he writes: "He reads but does not understand, / Save where, in some fragment of biography, / Is written: 'Perished by his own hand'" (11. 11-13).
Lowry thus predicts our approach to his work. Although we sometimes have the feeling of picking through wreckage when we read Lowry, searching for the whole or salvageable items from among the testament to violence which remains, we are always assured that this violence--and the feeling behind the poetry--is authentic, born of experience.
Notes

1Dale Edmonds' review of Sherril E. Grace's The Voyage that Never Ends: Malcolm Lowry's Fiction appeared in Malcolm Lowry Newsletter 12:3-7 (Spring 1983).

2Richard Hauer Costa follows in the erring footsteps of Earle Birney (whose language he echoes) with this comment: "Lowry managed in his lifetime to published only . . . one [poem] outside Canada--a quatrain that was buried in the Contributor's Column of the Atlantic" (p. 80). It was the Contributor's Club, not Column, that printed Lowry's poem in October of 1941 (168:501). The poem, "In Memoriam: Ingvald Bjorndal," heads the Contributor's Club (a spot enjoyed by poems by Lewis Thomas and Vladimir Nabokov that same year), and is not a quatrain but a full-blown sonnet.


4e.g., Robin Mathews, Queen's Quarterly 70:283.

5Malcolm Lowry: Funfunddreissig Mescals in Cuaulta: Gedichte, Trans. Joachim Sartorius (Reinbekbei Hamburg:
Rowohlt, 1983).


9_Letters_, p. 114.


12_Letters_, p. 308.

14 Birney, Introduction to *Selected Poems*, p. 7.


19 "In Tempest's Tavern," from "Some Poems by Malcolm Lowry," *Malcolm Lowry: The Man and His Work*, ed. George Woodcock (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1971), p. 94, is the only poem discussed here that is not from *Selected Poems*. Henceforward, only line references will be given.


21 Lowry, *Volcano*, p. 201.

22 The objectivity of 11. 5-6, "The Ohio smoking in
Frisco on a sharp pen / Of rock," is a case in point. In fact, the Ohioan was stranded off San Francisco on Oct. 7, 1936--while Lowry was sailing from San Diego to Acapulco. Bruce D. Berman, *Encyclopedia of American Shipwrecks* (Boston: Mariners Press, 1972), p. 219. Considering Lowry's fascination with the sea and disasters, it is entirely likely that he eventually learned that the Ohio sank (with loss of life) off British Columbia on Aug. 26, 1907.

23Birney writes: "I should guess that the Dowson reference is to the opening section of Ernest Dowson's 'Serephita' [sic]" (Woodcock, p. 92).


26*Day*, pp. xi-xiii.


29 Interview with David Rosenwasser.

30 It was the first of two poems headed "The Drunkards" I and II in New Yorker (5 May, 1962), p. 46. Its companion poem retains that title in Selected Poems, p. 40.

31 "Xochitepec" is one of the few poems about which Lowry writes in his letters. It was anthologized, first by A.J.M. Smith, then by Ralph Gustafson. Responding to an inquiry from Gustafson, Lowry tells that the poem, also known as "Lupus in Fabula," was written at the same time as page 88 of Volcano and scrawled in the margin of the Ms. He explains that "Xoxhitepec" [sic] is the earlier and better title, but he does not instruct Gustafson to correct it. Earle Birney has replaced the original title and appointed "Lupus in Fabula" to another poem. The Smith edition of this poem, the only one other than Selected Poems which I have seen, varies
somewhat from Birney's. Smith's version has, I think, been improved by Birney. *Letters*, p. 412.

32 Day, p. 234.


34 Day, p. 224.

35 Day, p. 231.

36 Day, p. 172.


38 "Sestina in a Cantina" first appeared in *Canadian Poetry Magazine*, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 24-27. (Sept. 1947), Earle Birney, editor. The stanzas are printed in confused order there so that St. Luke's first speech includes stanzas which are actually part of Legion's second speech. Dr. Birney has assured me that the order in *Selected Poems* is correct, but he offered no explanation as to how such a strict form as a sestina could have been jumbled in the first place.


Some poems exist in as many as twenty-five versions, without any indication of chronology or authorial preference. cf. Woodcock, p. 93.

Day, p. 284.

Letters, p. 8.

Lowry, Volcano, p. 349, 351.

Lowry, "The Present Estate of Pompeii" in Hear Us O Lord, pp. 185, 189, 195.

Day, p. 25.


Interview with Kimberley Sands.

Woodcock, p. 92.

Canadian Literature 44, p. 198.

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Besides Birney's Bibliography (Canadian Literature 8:81-88, 9:80-84, 11:90-95, 19:83-86 [1961-64], the most comprehensive listing of Lowry's poetry is in Univ. of British Columbia Library Reference Guide 42: "Malcolm Lowry 1909-1957, An Inventory of His Papers in the Library of the University of British Columbia," Judith O. Combs, 1973: "the poetry . . . consists of 744 items (about 300 titles) of handwritten and typed drafts most of which are unpublished" (p. 8).

VITA

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