

Studies in English, New Series

Volume 7

Article 24

1989

The Drunken Boat: Malcolm Lowry's Lunar Caustic

David Falk
College of Staten Island

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Falk, David (1989) "The Drunken Boat: Malcolm Lowry's Lunar Caustic," *Studies in English, New Series*: Vol. 7 , Article 24.

Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new/vol7/iss1/24

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Studies in English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in English, New Series by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

**THE DRUNKEN BOAT: MALCOLM LOWRY'S LUNAR
CAUSTIC**

David Falk

College of Staten Island

In 1935 Malcolm Lowry began the work published posthumously as *Lunar Caustic*. Although he continued to revise the book into the early 1950's, he never did give it final form or expand it beyond novella length. Yet, even as a work in progress, it occupies a key place in the career of an important novelist. *Lunar Caustic* marks Lowry's turning away from the naturalism of his earliest fiction, *Ultramarine* and the short stories which became incorporated into it. With *Lunar Caustic* Lowry became an original artist, able to convey the special realities of his demon-haunted imagination with a power and symbolic richness that would culminate in *Under the Volcano*, his masterpiece.

Lunar Caustic tells the story of a drunken British jazz musician whose marriage and career have fallen apart in America and who enters Bellevue, the most famous mental hospital of the day, to be "cured," only to be thrown out in the end and left to face the terrors of delirium and the death wish. The first critical treatment of the novella concentrated on it as a realistic portrait of an alcoholic's failure to free himself from his addiction, coupled with an indictment of the institutions of public health in America.¹ Others have read it as an expressionist rendering of the interplay between sanity and madness, like "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari,"² as an account of a man's search for selfhood,³ as a symbolic exploration of the political sickness of the Thirties.⁴

All these elements are present in *Lunar Caustic*, but they are subsidiary. At its core, the novella is concerned with man's spiritual weakness and willful acceptance of damnation. Lowry came to think of the work as part of a "drunken Divine Comedy." Though, as we shall see, the Dantean framework was to place major difficulties in the way of his ever completing the book, it indicates that all along, as in *Under the Volcano*, Lowry's focus was on what one of his characters terms "Sickness...in that part used to be called: soul."⁵

This underlying religious purpose is suggested further by the fact that key scenes in the novella derive their symbolism from the *Zohar*, the central document of Jewish mysticism. Since Epstein's Kabbalist reading of *Under the Volcano* and the circulation of the story of Lowry's

involvement with the occultist Charles Stansfeld-Jones,⁶ controversy has surrounded the question of how much importance to attach to the occult dimension of Lowry's fiction. I do not propose to tackle the entire issue here, but a number of points are worth making.

Lowry was attracted to the Kabbalist version of the quest for salvation because its complex dynamics reflected much better than traditional accounts his own experience of rising to and falling from a sense of grace and captured much more accurately the feeling tone of that experience. In addition, in the *Zohar's* description of the condition of the fall as characterized by exile, sterility, and the threat of death, he found echoed his sense of his own life's darkest rhythms, as well as his civilization's, so that these signs of spiritual ruin permeate all his fiction. Third, in the Kabbalah's transformation of even the smallest domestic details into acts of cosmic significance, Lowry found a means of giving his autobiography and the lives of his personas a weight and importance he and they try to translate into a sense of self-worth, without which salvation seems pointless. Finally, in its equation of psychological attributes with spiritual potentialities and of psychological states with spiritual conditions, the Kabbalah supplied Lowry with a vehicle for transmuting the undignified world of neurosis into the stage of Faustian tragedy.

Lunar Caustic is most fully appreciated as the record of a spiritual quest. It is Lowry's first significant attempt to grapple with the hellish forces within the self and around it. It is his first serious effort, as well, to explore the mythic dimensions of his experience and to fashion the two core motifs of his fiction, the perverse relationship between drunkenness and mystic vision and the symbolic equation of the sea voyage with the visionary's pilgrimage.

In *Under the Volcano* drunkenness is synonymous with the misuse of spiritual powers, producing a disequilibrium that denies the visionary access to the godhead and leaves him obsessed with the demonic. In *Lunar Caustic* Lowry did not try to give his protagonist, William Plantagenet, the Faustian trappings that mark Geoffrey Firmin in *Under the Volcano*. Firmin knowingly confounds alcoholic self-absorption with mystical transcendence. Plantagenet tries to draw a distinction between drunkenness and the insight of true madness:

Because many who are supposed to be mad here, as opposed to the...drunks, are simply people who perhaps once saw...the necessity for change in themselves, for rebirth....⁷

Thus, we have one signification of the title, for "lunar caustic" is the British name for silver nitrate, drops of which are put in the eyes of newborns. The cauterizing effect of madness, Plantagenet implies, like silver nitrate, allows a vision of a new life.

The drunkard makes himself incapable of spiritual regeneration. In madness may lie the way back to God: all that alcohol offers is a deeper retreat into the infernal world of delirium. Plantagenet can occasionally recognize the possibilities for redemption open to him and does make an occasional, feeble gesture toward them. Yet, at bottom, he lacks both the strength to escape his personal hell and, more importantly, the will to do so. The death wish and the despair out of which it arises are the governing passions of his life. For him, the desire for rebirth is overmastered by remorse, what Lowry calls in "Sunrise" the lidless eye staring at the agony of his existence.⁸

In his later fiction, Lowry was to devote much attention to remorse — naming an entire novel, *La Mordida*, after it. Unlike true penitence, which prepares the way for reformation, remorse is moral masochism and an excuse for spiritual sloth. Like liquor, it does not help reveal the path back to grace, but obliterates it. In his separation from God, the drunkard abandons himself to self-pity and hopelessness so that all that remains for him is to tell over again

The criminal folly of his life, or the irreparable damage he had done, such a long weary heritage of unsalvageable aftermath (p. 40).

Having denied himself the possibility of spiritual rebirth, Plantagenet sees in the world only destruction and degeneration. Like Garry, the child-murderer who becomes his friend and who is obsessed with things falling into ruin, Plantagenet can envision nothing except a nightmarish universe of miscreated forms living out their decay:

This world of the river was one where everything was uncompleted while functioning in degeneration...just as in his nightmare, the tortoise crawled in agony looking for its shell, and nails hammered held nothing together, or one-winged birds dropped exhausted across a maniacal, sunless moon (pp. 65-66).

Not surprisingly, Plantagenet is overwhelmed by a feeling of impending apocalypse, both personal and historical, and believes he is living in the "pre-existence of some unimaginable catastrophe" (p. 21).

The delirious visions in which his own damnation is depicted are matched by others in which New York, and, by extension, the entire West are consumed in the flames of judgment and world war.

Complementing this level of *Lunar Caustic* is a cluster of images relating the visionary's pilgrimage to a sea voyage. This metaphor was to become a central one in Lowry's work, and his title for his entire canon, *The Voyage That Never Ends*, is drawn from it. With much of the skill he was later to demonstrate, Lowry takes this metaphor in *Lunar Caustic* and plays numerous variations on it.

First, there is a series of ship images suggesting the opportunities for rebirth and salvation Plantagenet never seizes firmly. When he enters the hospital, he gives his name as the *s.s. Lawhill*, an Australian boat that had "survived more disasters than any ship afloat" (p. 50), and one whose name also calls up the Mountain of Purgatory. References are also made to the night sea crossing (p. 62), an archetypal symbol of rebirth.⁹ Finally, throughout, the departure of a ship is linked with the passage of hope, the most important instance being the sailing of the *Providence*, which precipitates the major crisis in the work (pp. 68-70).

These images, however, serve as a counterpoint to the main thrust of such symbols. For the most important images in *Lunar Caustic* involve shipwreck. The action of the work is framed by two such wrecks, as both Plantagenet's entrance into and ejection from Bellevue are described in nearly the same words, "With the dithering crack of a ship going on the rocks the doors shut behind him" (11). In addition, a resonant symbol is the ruined coal barge that lies below the hospital windows and represents both Plantagenet's shattered life and the collapse of Europe begun by World War I. Essential also to the thematic development of the novella are numerous allusions to works involving sea journeys to doom. *Moby Dick* is the source most cited, but also to be noted are Poe's "A Descent Into the Maelstrom" and the American folksong, "The Wreck of the Titanic." Finally, in the background constantly, though never referred to explicitly, is Rimbaud's "The Drunken Boat" with its account of a visionary pilgrimage that falls far short of the heights it aims for.

I have concentrated so far on the major thematic and symbolic elements in *Lunar Caustic* because it is around them that Lowry structures the work, not the character of Plantagenet. Indeed, until the third chapter he is not even given a name, and his personality remains minimally developed throughout.

Bunyan was one of Lowry's masters, and this almost allegorical approach was Lowry's typical way of seizing artistic inspiration. The

composition of *Under the Volcano* in a sense began with *Lunar Caustic*. Literally, it began with a short story, finally reworked into Chapter VIII of the novel, in which a wounded Indian dies by a roadside while onlookers argue that it is not their responsibility to help, but someone else's.¹⁰ Thus the novel had its origins in a political allegory of the immorality and folly of England's nonintervention policy during the Spanish Civil War. Similarly, the quest for salvation documented in the late fiction is first explored in "The Bravest Boat," the story which opens *Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*. Here, again with the barest sketching in of character, the complicated dynamics of the individual's struggle between hope and despair are paralleled to the intricate interpenetration of the creative and destructive forces in the natural world.

Lowry's concern in *Lunar Caustic* was to work out the infernal pattern of events his protagonist/persona was enmeshed in, to grasp its shape and lines of force. Character drawing interested him less because in his own life self-knowledge was not the issue — self-mastery was.

Structurally, *Lunar Caustic* has a recurring rhythm. Every chapter, after playing variations on motifs of damnation and salvation, resolves itself on a note of despair. Thus the momentum of the work proceeds in a downward spiral, aptly mirroring the content's account of a progressively deeper imprisonment in the inferno. As is generally the case in Lowry's fiction, the first chapter serves as an overture to the major themes and a synecdoche of their treatment. *Lunar Caustic* introduces immediately its principal metaphor: the "sea voyage" of the drunkard that is the failed visionary's pilgrimage to the knowledge of his doom. The protagonist's seemingly aimless wanderings in the labyrinth of New York in fact describe a circle as he travels from the saloons on the circumference to the hospital which is the center of his quest (p. 10).

The geography of this circle is infernal. Its impassable boundaries, the false havens of the taverns, are not only the source of the liquor that fuels the protagonist's descent into the demonic realms of delirium: they are themselves the abode of death, the gateway to the abyss, "From the depths of the tavern comes a sound of moaning, and a sound of ticking" (p. 10). The image is explicated in "Thirty-Five Mescals in Cuautla":

This ticking is most terrible of all...
You hear it everywhere, for it is doom.¹¹

Rising out of this hell is the hospital, which ought to be a purgatory, but is far worse. It is a place "not like a church at all" (p. 11), for it is a prison (p. 15), and the descriptions of it as a tower connect it with the watchtowers of Dante's Dis and the Tower of Babel.

The protagonist makes his way toward the heart of his private hell through a symbolic region in which signs of salvation co-exist with emblems of doom:

In the Elevated a heavenly wind is blowing... but he is...like Ahab stumbling from side to side...'Feeling that he encompassed in his stare oceans from which might be revealed the phantom destroyer of himself' (p. 10).

The passage makes evident Plantagenet's inability to strive for redemption. Instead, he is intent on striking dramatically doomed poses, as when in a church where the stages of the cross are depicted, he takes a swig of whisky (p. 11). Having consciously refused to seek grace, he is confronted with an omen of his fate in a vision of a ravaged old woman in black — the first in a series of succubi — posting a letter he is convinced is his death warrant (p. 10). With his choice made, like Geoffrey Firmin flying towards hell because he likes it, Plantagenet takes the final step, and yelling a quotation from Rimbaud's "A Season in Hell," he enters the hospital, his pilgrimage ended in shipwreck.

Chapter II provides a further generalized description of his fall, centering around another ruined ship, the broken coal barge. After these introductory chapters, the novella begins its examination of Plantagenet's season in hell. The momentum of the third chapter is supplied by the increasing domination of infernal forces, and for the first time the themes of apocalypse and perpetual exile from heaven are broached. At the chapter's heart is the first of the delirious visions that fill the work:

Horrid shapes plunged out of the blankness, gibbering...but he couldn't move...Voices... cackled, shrieked, cajoled; voices pleading with him to stop drinking, to die and be damned (p. 14).

As always in *Lunar Caustic*, it is the call of despair to which Plantagenet responds. So his delirium climaxes in a vision of apocalypse:

A cataract of water was pouring through the wall, filling the room. A red hand gesticulated...over a ravaged mountain side a swift stream was carrying...legless bodies yelling out of great eye-sockets...On a tumbled blood-stained bed in a house whose face was blasted away a large scorpion was gravely raping a one-armed Negress. His wife appeared...pitying, only to be... transformed into Richard III, who sprang forward to smother him (pp. 14-15).

The vision builds with an inexorable logic, tracing the wrath of God directed at the man who has refused to try to ascend to salvation. It begins with Noah's flood, which is connected instantly to the destruction of the *Pequod* (the red hand is Tashtego's), the end of Ahab's demonic quest. The failure of the visionary is elaborated in the next sentence whose three chief images — the destroyed mountain, the stream recalling the suicidal stream of Chapter II (p. 12), and the horror-filled eye-sockets — all point to Plantagenet's unwillingness to strive upward toward beatific vision and eternal life. The dream then depicts his acceptance of damnation as in the ruined mansion of his soul his death wish (the scorpion) leads him to throw himself upon the succubus. Closing the vision is an image of his ultimate divorce from the forces of redemption as the axis of love, the point at which the visionary achieves union with God, is inverted and becomes the hate which kills him.¹²

His separation from God foretold, hope gone, Plantagenet discovers himself in hell. The rest of the chapter is devoted to the introduction of the three other principal inhabitants of his inferno, Garry, Battle and Mr. Kalowsky. This section is framed by references to Rimbaud's "A Season in Hell," for Garry is described as resembling a portrait of the poet at age twelve (p. 15), and in Battle's mad singing Plantagenet hears the song of the Negro referred to in the passage from the poem he declaimed on entering the hospital (p. 11), the song that will figure so devastatingly in Chapter VIII.

Though Plantagenet entered Bellevue announcing that his mission was "to heal the eternal horror of three" (p. 11), in these three men is depicted his spiritual failure, not his triumph. In the symbolic passage from the youth of Garry to the old age of the Jew is presented the etiology of the protagonist's doom. In Garry we find that obsession with the destructive power of God's wrath which dominates the mind of the remorseful man: "One day one of the pipes collapsed...It was condemned!" (p. 15) Battle represents the willing acceptance of damnation: "his hyperaction is nothing *but* hyperaction...he's grown to

like degeneration" (p. 52). Finally, in Kalowsky is depicted eternal exile from God: he is the Wandering Jew.

In Chapter IV Lowry attempts for the first time to flesh out Plantagenet's character with some sense of concrete motivation. Confronted once more by the way to salvation — represented here by a doctor — the protagonist can only recount the burden of his failures. His self-pitying tale of the dissolution of his marriage and the break up of his jazz band reveals his primary spiritual weakness, his inability to avail himself of the power of love: "perhaps it was your heart you couldn't stretch an octave" (p. 19).

Remorse is the only emotion left him, and yielding to it, he is locked more securely within his despair. Thus, the deliverance from the jail of the hospital and the eventual homecoming of which he has daydreamed are now revealed to him as either idle fantasies or, worse still, further punishment for his transgressions. He now reacts to these formerly happy visions with fear, "a paradoxical remorse, as it were in advance" (p. 23) and utter hopelessness. All that survives now in his world is the frightful evidence of death and ruin, at which he is compelled to stare without relief through remorse's lidless eye.

Chapter V extends this treatment of remorse into a vision of the Last Judgment awaiting the desperate man:

[He] caught sight...of four operations being performed simultaneously...as though the hospital had suddenly become *open*, revealing...the activities behind the wraith of iron or brick or skin...At the same time the whole scene... like the looming swift white hand of a...policeman, reeled towards him...it seemed that all these dressings and redressings in these hours of north light were being placed, torn away, and replaced, on a laceration of his own mind (pp. 25-26).

The passage draws its symbolism from the *Zohar*, where it is recounted how at the hour of judgment, when all things are laid open, the four quarters of the world arraign the dead (the four operations) and punish them (the policeman's hand), proclaiming their eternal fate in a flame that issues out of the north.¹³ It is a vision that will reverberate at the end of Plantagenet's stay in Bellevue. For the looming white hand of the policeman is akin to Moby Dick, Ahab's "phantom destroyer," which will come to represent the shattering of the mind and Plantagenet's descent into a landscape where "dressings and redressings"

— attempts to heal and to atone — are futile and only exacerbate his torment.

Chapter VI is concerned with Garry and Kalowsky, and in what the protagonist, influenced by his experience in the preceding chapter, characterizes as a meeting of the doomed on Judgment Day, they recount their stories. These prepare the way for Plantagenet's recognition in Chapter VII of his status as another Wandering Jew, alienated from the whole created universe. In a puppet show intended to provide a therapeutic channeling of the patients' chaotic emotions, he discovers the "inner Africa" of his soul (p. 38), the darkest recesses of despair where he is to be victimized eternally. In the apparently pointless burlesque of the Punch and Judy show he sees reenacted the fallen man's acceptance of damnation he had envisioned in his dream of the scorpion and the Negress. Yielding to this public confirmation of his deepest anxieties, he abandons himself to despair and self-pity once more. He now sees his life's voyage as a descent into the maelstrom, "downwards to the foul core of his world" (p. 37). At the bottom he finds, in good Blakean fashion, the path back to heaven. Love is there in the form of his friends, as are wisdom and the cure in the person of the psychiatrist. Unfortunately, these possibilities can no longer serve him. Instead, for an instant there flashes through his mind a premonition of what will befall him at the end:

now he envisaged himself in the familiar role of one driven friendless through hostile country into ever darker corners, more remote hiding places (p. 38).

In the next two chapters, Plantagenet's vision of damnation is reinforced as he makes two abortive efforts to achieve rebirth. Chapter VIII opens with him sitting at the piano in the *recreation* room, trying to recapture his lost artistry and impress his fellow patients. These efforts are offset, however, by references to shipwreck as Battle is inspired to sing "The Wreck of the Titanic." This song, with its emphasis on its hero's attempt to swim home to Liverpool only to wind up in hell, again mirrors Plantagenet's sense of his own destiny. The desperate bravado of Battle's insistent rendition drowns out any chance of hope being injected into the situation. Finally giving into the madman's cue, Plantagenet abandons his search for regeneration and outside affirmation of his self-worth and concludes his futile recital with four unharmonious chords: "one for the death of Ase, one for the doom of the *Titanic*, one for the *Pequod*, one for the whale, white or black, it didn't matter which" (p. 45).

In all *Lunar Caustic*, it is Chapter IX that suffers most from Lowry's never having completed the work. Though in the preceding chapter Plantagenet has briefly become active rather than remaining a passive observer of his own disintegration, the reader is hardly prepared for his sudden casting in the role of defender of his fellows from the inefficiency, callousness, and sadism of the hospital staff.

Running through the chapter is a motif connecting William Plantagenet with Billy Budd. Beyond the pun on the names, the psychiatrist's name is Claggart, and, late in the section, the protagonist scribbles a poem about suicide entitled "*Maison de Pendu*. For Billy Budd." Though this motif is not picked up elsewhere, its inclusion here sets up interesting resonances.¹⁴ On the one hand, Plantagenet's identification with Billy Budd grows out of his denial of responsibility for his doom and extends the mask of the fundamentally innocent victim he wears at many moments. The poem, however, reveals the level of his self-victimization. The Billy Budd allusions, then, strengthen the portrait of Plantagenet we have been given, but that the doctor's name should be Claggart indicates something terrible about the world of the hospital. It is the revelation of the true nature of the world he has entered that awaits Plantagenet in his interview with the psychiatrist.

The interview begins with Plantagenet being informed that he is to be thrown out of Bellevue since as a foreigner he cannot be kept at public expense. This release is hardly a return to freedom: rather, it is like a double exile. Plantagenet has neither regained hope nor found the strength to search for it. His journey into and out of the hospital has not been a night sea crossing to a higher state of existence (p. 62). Instead, in this meeting with a potential healer that comes too late to be of use anyway, he can only exhibit the symptoms of his sickness of soul and describe the nightmare of damnation he inhabits. Further, as he tries to defend Garry and Kalowsky, he does not exonerate them, but only reveals his kinship with them.

What the interview also exposes, however, is the infernal nature of the hospital and its total appropriateness to its patients. For the doctor's insensitivity is symptomatic of a larger failing. Blake tells us that the "road of excess leads to the Palace of Wisdom."¹⁵ In *Lunar Caustic* it leads to Bellevue, where the doctors are as devoid of wisdom as their patients and just as committed to hopelessness.

Until this moment, Plantagenet has clung to the belief that true madness could be the silver nitrate enabling him to experience a vision of a new existence. The doctor's remarks reveal to him that madness

does not cauterize, it only burns. For as Lowry pointed out in an unpublished note on the novella, *Lunar Caustic* is a "sardonic and ambiguous title" since the chemical was also "used unsuccessfully to cure syphilis...as such it might stand...for any imperfect or abortive cure."¹⁶ Thus, Plantagenet sees at last that the hospital is a false purgatory in which, rather than being cured, the patients are compelled to make continually the aimless rounds of their circle of confinement, growing indifferent to, even fond of, their degeneration.

Aware at last that the opportunities for rebirth he has shunned have been illusory in any case, Plantagenet confronts the final disaster toward which he has been heading all along. In Chapter X all the major motifs are drawn together into a description of his ultimate shipwreck. The section begins with a vision of Eden (the park below the hospital) that is quickly dismissed as a delusion, replaced by the sight of the "inevitable deluge approaching" (p. 62). Again despair grips Plantagenet as he realizes his own false freedom is about to start and he must leave behind the only people he has ever truly loved. This emotion is objectified in the departure of the last of the ships in the novella, the Fall River paddlewheeler, *Providence*, an image of the withdrawal of God's benevolence from those who have crossed the Styx (Fall River) into hell.

For Plantagenet the sight also recalls the *Pequod* since it was on the *Providence* that his wife and he made their pilgrimage to New Bedford, retracing Ishmael's route — a journey to "their own white whale," divorce (p. 68). As the boat leaves, he looks on anguishedly, helpless before this image of the merging of the past disasters of his life and his future. As the screams of the other patients mount to inhuman levels, in the sky he sees one last vision of judgment, culminating in the symbolic enactment of his punishment at the hands of the devil, as in the "very act of darkness itself" (p. 72) the *Pequod* of his soul is destroyed:

A seaplane was gliding whitely past, and now it was turned, to Plantagenet it had the fins... and blunt luminous head of a whale; now it roared straight at *him*...There was a furious crash of thunder and simultaneously Plantagenet felt the impact of the plane, the whale, upon his mind...the ship was turning over with disunion of hull and masts uprooted falling across her decks...(pp. 71-72).

Here the protagonist's disintegration is completed. For this last passage is also a description of his degeneration into the insanity he had

earlier longed for — except this is a madness that brings neither relief nor illumination. Totally isolated, bereft of any comfort, Plantagenet is thrust out to sail again the great circle voyage of his doom.

Chapter XI recounts the last phase of his downfall during which the final glimmerings of hope in his spirit are quashed. This process is completed in the novella's final scene in which he attempts to assume the role of liberator he has contemplated throughout the work and unsuccessfully, if goodheartedly, taken on in Chapter IX. Having decided that he will atone with some "heroic sacrifice" that will also free mankind (p. 75), Plantagenet enters the toilet of a saloon where he finds an obscene drawing of a girl. In what he takes to be a gesture of rebellion against "all the indecency, the cruelty, the hideousness, the filth and injustice in the world" (p. 75), he flings his bottle of whisky at the picture, only to realize as an image of Garry's cutting a girl's throat with another broken bottle looms before him, that what he has done is not merely useless, but in its violence fundamentally evil as well. Cognizant at last that he has become a Wandering Jew, that his separation from what is good and creative is total, Plantagenet withdraws at the work's end into the heart of the abyss that has become his world, where all that is left him is to try to hide from the sight of God and long for death:

But feeling he was being watched...he moved...to the darkest corner of the bar, where, curled up like an embryo, he could not be seen at all (p. 76).

The text we have been examining was spliced together from two drafts after Lowry's death, and it is necessary to conclude by looking at the textual background and what it indicates about why Lowry never did complete so promising a work. In all, there are nine drafts of the novella. The first six are entitled *The Last Address*; the seventh and eighth, *Swinging the Maelstrom*; while the ninth (a truncated version reaching only Chapter IX) is called *Lunar Caustic*.¹⁷ The most important are the fifth draft of *The Last Address* — which was published in French translation in 1956 in *L'Esprit*, XXIV — and the second of *Swinging the Maelstrom*. The text edited for publication by Margerie Lowry and Earle Birney is an attempt to combine these two.

Generally, Lowry's revisions rarely affected significantly the essential themes, or even the basic plots, of his novels. Their function was to sharpen the language and supply additional levels and interfacing of symbolic meaning. However, *The Last Address* and *Swinging the Maelstrom* are fundamentally dissimilar, their differences

arising out of the shifting intentions which led Lowry to never give the work final form.

In 1940 or '41 Lowry came to think of his greatest novel, *Under the Volcano*, as the Inferno of a Dantean trilogy: *The Voyage That Never Ends*. The other two novels of which he had drafts, *The Last Address* and *In Ballast to the White Sea*, were to comprise the Purgatorio and Paradiso respectively. The idea of this superstructure is fascinating: indeed, Lowry first mentioned it in a letter to Jonathan Cape designed to impress the publisher with the importance of *Under the Volcano* and its author.¹⁸ But it is very much an afterthought.¹⁹ From what we know about the lost *In Ballast*, it appears Lowry would have had little difficulty fitting it into this governing design.²⁰ However, the problems in making *Lunar Caustic* function as a Purgatorio are enormous.

In Lowry's original conception, *Lunar Caustic* was not a depiction of the "battering the human spirit takes...in its ascent to its true purpose,"²¹ but an account of spiritual ruin. The original title clearly points up the failure of Plantagenet to make use of the avenues open to him, for, as in the published version, his last address is the "inner Africa" of the bar where he curls up in the fetal position symbolizing his inability to cope with, let alone rise above, his suffering.

The writing of *Under the Volcano* prevented Lowry from completing *The Last Address*, but he could never bring himself to let go of the work because it was his first truly original effort, and he remained convinced that it was a potential masterpiece. However, when he returned to it after producing the monumental vision of doom that is *Under the Volcano*, he had grown beyond it. By then he was, in fact, committed to creating a vision of salvation, and in the fiction begun after *Volcano* he did produce a complex, moving account of the process of redemption.

Lowry tried to incorporate *Lunar Caustic* into this body of work. He changed the title to *Swinging the Maelstrom* in contrast to Poe and to suggest his jazz musician protagonist's ability to translate the destructive forces in his life into the basis for artistic creativity. He also removed a good deal of the infernal imagery surrounding the hospital. Most significantly, he tried to shape a new ending in which Plantagenet leaves Bellevue full of a renewed spiritual strength that enables him to join with the forces of freedom and life: a rebirth symbolized by his sailing to Spain to fight the fascists. Interesting as this last possibility may seem, recalling as it does Hugh Firmin in *Under the Volcano*, Lowry could not make it work and finally

abandoned it, recognizing it was wrenching the work out of shape. The last title, *Lunar Caustic*, effectively encapsulates the tension between the infernal and the purgatorial, but does not resolve it.

The history of Lowry's efforts with *Lunar Caustic* might be read as evidence of failure. It is more accurate to view it as proof of Lowry's artistic integrity: his fidelity both to the organic conception of the work and to his late vision. Paradoxically, the unfinished state of the work calls our attention to what Lowry did succeed in making of it: a powerful Inferno in miniature, a striking minor prophecy of apocalypse.

NOTES

¹Dale Edmonds, "The Shorter Fiction of Malcolm Lowry," *TSE*, 15 (1967), 65-6.

²Sherrill Grace, *The Voyage That Never Ends* (Vancouver, 1982), pp. 29-33.

³Rosemarie Creswell, "Malcolm Lowry's Other Fiction," *Cunning Exiles: Studies of Modern Prose Writers*, ed. Don Anderson and Stephen Knight (Sydney & London, 1974), pp. 66-68.

⁴Ronald Binns, *Malcolm Lowry* (London, 1984), pp. 24-27.

⁵Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano* (Philadelphia, 1965), p. 5.

⁶Perle Epstein, *The Private Labyrinth of Malcolm Lowry* (New York, 1969) and Douglas Day, *Malcolm Lowry* (New York, 1973), pp. 293ff.

⁷Malcolm Lowry, *Lunar Caustic* (London, 1968), p. 52. All further references to *Lunar Caustic* will be cited in parentheses following the passage.

⁸Malcolm Lowry, *Selected Poems* (San Francisco, 1962), p. 33.

⁹C. G. Jung, *Symbols of Transformation* (Princeton, 1956), pp. 210ff.

¹⁰The original story is reprinted in *Malcolm Lowry: Psalms and Songs* (New York, 1975), pp. 187-201.

¹¹*Poems*, p. 35.

¹²The dream suggests two explanations for the name Plantagenet. First, it refers to a self-destructive house whose most

vicious member is triumphant as Lowry's protagonist's most negative qualities are in the ascendant. The Richard III allusion is more recondite. Lowry's first name was Clarence, and Richard's murder of his brother crops up on more than one occasion in his writing. It is relevant here since Lowry intended at one point to employ a Cain and Abel motif in the novella.

¹³Gershom Scholem, ed., *Zohar: The Book of Splendor* (New York, 1963), p. 56.

¹⁴Part of Lowry's original intention was to have his central character experience an "hysterical identification" with Melville. See Malcolm Lowry, *Selected Letters*, ed. Harvey Breit and Margerie Lowry (Philadelphia, 1965), pp. 24-25.

¹⁵William Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David Erdman (Garden City, N.Y., 1965), p. 35.

¹⁶Quoted in Grace, p. 30.

¹⁷The manuscripts are in the Lowry Collection at the University of British Columbia. For an account of the various drafts, see David Benham, "Lowry's Purgatory: Versions of 'Lunar Caustic,'" *CanL*, 44 (1970).

¹⁸*Letters*, p. 63.

¹⁹The order of composition was *In Ballast*, *Lunar Caustic*, *Under the Volcano*: that is, from Paradiso back to Inferno, a totally unlikely organic design. In addition, both *Lunar Caustic* and *In Ballast* were submitted independently for publication before *Volcano*. See *Letters*, pp. 31-32, and Conrad Knickerbocker, "Malcolm Lowry and the Outer Circle of Hell," introduction to *Lunar Caustic* (London, 1968), p. 6.

²⁰Lowry described the plot in a letter to David Markson (*Letters*, 255ff).

²¹*Letters*, p. 63.