The Byron Centre

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Malcolm Lowry 100 Years On: A View with a Byronic Perspective

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The last few weeks have not been kind to the Byron world – Hermann Fischer is seriously ill [and was to die two weeks later], and Andrew Nicholson has died at a tragically young age. I am proud to have been Andrew's doctoral supervisor – and all Byronists owe him an enormous debt for the Clarendon edition of the Prose, the John Murray Letters, and the many volumes of the Garland Pforzheimer The Younger Romantics *which he edited – not to mention his helpfulness, his unselfish attitude to his material, and that impish eccentricity, the jaunty postcards – and the seriousness which underlay it all. In another medium he will also be remembered as the editor of the Oxford Mahler Companion. If ever there was a walking indictment of the short-termism of the RAE, it was Andrew. If we look at the first stanza of* Don Juan *Canto XV in Andrew's edition – I have to omit the transcribed deletions as I read –*

> *Ah! – what should follow slips from my reflection –*
> *Whatever follows neertheless may be*
> *As apropos of hope or retrospection –*
> *As though the lurking thought had followed free –*
> *All present Life is but an Interjection –*
> *An "Oh!" or "Ah!" – of Joy or Misery –*
> *Or a "Ha! Ha!" – or "Bah" a Yawn – or "Pooh!"*
> *Of which perhaps the latter is most true.*[1]

Here we find 9 dashes – and one full stop at the end of the stanza. In the Clarendon edition we find two full stops (one after the word 'free' which might seem counter-intuitive), three commas, one colon, and two dashes (one of them where there is ironically no dash in the Ms!) – and of course no way of retrieving the accidentals in the apparatus. Now of course the two editions are doing different things (the Clarendon providing a reading text with some apparatus and Andrew's a reading of the Ms), but what a loss there would be to our understanding of this wonderfully dotty opening to the Canto without Andrew's transcription. I received a little e-mail note from a mutual friend on Andrew's death headed 'Fallen Comrade'. Andrew would have liked that. He was also a Lowry fan – where comrade often appears translated as 'Compañero'. He was indeed that.

* * *

Well why Lowry at this Lecture? Really just because one hundred years after his birth I wanted to think about Lowry again – back in the seventies I wrote a bit about him – and since then of course I have the Liverpool connection – Lowry having being born in 1909 in New Brighton and brought up in Caldy next to Hoylake – and I've also had the chance to visit some of the Lowry sights in Mexico. I remember having a morning beer in an empty bar opposite the original of Jacques Laruelle's

house in Cuernavaca – empty that is apart from another Scotsman announcing he was there on a Malcolm Lowry pilgrimage! Field research on Lowry could always be misinterpreted. And then it was interesting to think if there could be connections between Malcolm and George Gordon which might at least have a heuristic value – and so here we are. Lowry's own poetry might seem an obvious place to start, but with some exceptions it probably isn't. He wrote a lot in the sonnet form – that idea of formal control we will come back to, and the strange notion of freedom in addiction too that we find in this example:

> Notions of freedom are tied up with drink.
> Our ideal life contains a tavern
> Where man may sit and talk or just think,
> All without fear of the nighted wyvern;
> Or yet another tavern where it appears
> There are no No Trust signs no No Credit
> And, apart from the unlimited beers,
> We sit unshackled drunk and mad to edit
> Tracts of a really better land where man
> May drink a finer, ah, an undistilled wine
> That subtly intoxicates without pain,
> Weaving the vision of the unassimilable inn
> Where we may drink forever without owing
> With the door open, and the wind blowing.[2]

This is a classically controlled sonnet with an octave and a sestet concluded by a couplet, the sestet made tense in its unrealistic hope both by the syntax and by the awkward rhymes of man/pain/wine/inn after the easy rhymes of the octave, with that tension splendidly released by the perfect rhyme of the couplet and the wonderful open assonance of the vocalic leading sound on where/we/without/with/wind. He could do it, could Malcolm, from time to time. And we will come back as I've said to these ideas of freedom and formal control. He could also just be funny of course, as could Byron, and I can't resist this:

> The only hope is the next drink.
> If you like, you take a walk.
> No time to stop and think,
> The only hope is the next drink.
> Useless trembling on the brink,
> Worse than useless all this talk.
> The only hope is the next drink.
> If you like, *you* take a walk.[3]

But the main tone as in the novels is the hunt for the freedom or beauty of death, in counterpoint to the guilt and horror which are the hunt's and death's inevitable accompaniment. Here is Lowry again – one of my favourites among his poems:

> The tortures of hell are stern, their fires burn fiercely.
> Yet vultures turn against the air more beautifully
> than seagulls float downward in cool sunlight,
> or fans in asylums spin a loom of fate
> for hope which never ventured up so high
> as life's deception, astride the vulture's flight.
> If death can fly, just for the love of flying,
> What might not life do, for the love of dying?[4]

This is really a sestet of very uneasy rhymes (or two tercets with the last line of each proving the only clear signpost of where we are: sunlight/flight) – and then the snapping lock of the couplet – where certainty, grandeur, comes under the paradoxical cover of a question mark – the question lifting the voice almost as an aspiration, the perfect rhymes both horrific and uplifting in the sense of the absolute, life-in-search-of-death. So contrary to what you might think given the subject matter and the awful shambolic life, Lowry's poems can be rather carefully crafted. And there is a certain kind of higher romantic gloom.

The other place one might think of starting and looking for Lowry-Byron parallels other than their joint love of alcohol of course – more extreme in Lowry's case – is simply in that higher romantic conception of the author as an outcast figure, a Childe Harold wanderer in Greece or Mexico, a pilgrim not in search of salvation but of freedom, with the all-too-real understanding that freedom may mean isolation, homelessness, and an

inability if push comes to shove to relate to others if that compromises – as it inevitably will – that pure (but useless?) freedom. Lowry himself admired Byron in just this kind of generalised way. But I will not pursue the biographical – at least that is not my main intent – both Lowry and Byron have suffered too much in Freudian hands – in Lowry's case Freud alias Douglas Day his first biographer and in Byron's, well, take your pick.

But as you probably guess there are two themes in here I think it will be interesting to follow – the ambiguous nature of freedom on the one hand, and the author's need for control ("the form of his coiled work" in Lowry's words). *Under the Volcano* is in some ways a troubled meditation on the nature of freedom and its relationship to commitment (are they opposites? are they the same?)

"No se puede vivir sin amar" says the inscription on Laruelle's house. But the Consul in charge of the ship *Samaritan* is accused of killing his German prisoners, and in the central scene of the novel (the acorn from which it grew) he refuses to help the messenger who has been attacked and robbed by the roadside. In some profound sense not just sexual his love for Yvonne, his estranged wife, is flawed – his politics are at best those of despair, at worst those of the authoritarian right. His half-brother Hugh is going to fight against Franco in the Spanish Civil War, but the Consul believes resistance useless against the forces of power (whose exactly? the Mexican authority's? Franco's backed by Hitler? the world's? corrupt

nature's?). And yet, and yet... it is the Consul who has a commitment which he believes gives him freedom – commitment that is to alcohol – and it is Hugh who seems ineffectual – "just beyond being mediocre" as Lowry wrote in his famous letter to Jonathan Cape in January 1946.[5]

The idea of addiction as a commitment is not so strange – the psychological manouevre is the same as any cause (or religion) which proclaims one has to lose the self in order to find it – in Kierkegaardian terms what is lost is angst – one is free from the responsibility of choice, and the self is wholly identified with the cause (or the addiction). The finale in which Yvonne frees an eagle from captivity and the Consul frees the stolen horse of the messenger who was robbed, which then in its panic kills Yvonne, is a kind of remake at the tragic level of an earlier crucial scene in the novel *Ultramarine* where a pet bird escapes but drowns. Just before he frees the horse the Consul has made (technically) successful love to a whore, and just after he is shot (you see we don't need Freud!), but as he lies dying, he is addressed fleetingly by a bystander as "compañero" – friend, comrade. The intervention in freeing the stolen horse links him to others, but is nevertheless destructive and pointless. Yvonne in freeing the eagle is also freeing the Consul – it is both, she feels, "a triumph" and "a loss". The Consul (or Lowry) is that "old maker of tragedies" – love inverts into control, or if it does not, it evaporates into a meaningless freedom. Freedom inverts into imprisonment (by addiction, by love,

by a political commitment), and where it does not it evaporates into selfishness and chaos in the Consul's case, and ineffectuality, in Hugh's.

And Byron? Well, in *Manfred* the hero is cursed in his own selfhood which in some way or another is figured forth as his incestuous relationship with Astarte – or we presume incestuous – non-love rather than love, and his freedom to die "old man, tis not so difficult to die" is at the expense of his rejection of all other kinds of relationship, human or metaphysical. And in the late dramas the same conundrum is put again and again – if freedom of action is a relative concept does it mean at all: if it is an absolute does it not in fact equate to death. Love, oddly enough, though a possibility in these plays, does not actually *impinge* on the central dilemmas. *Cain* and *Werner* are – as I have argued elsewhere before – the most extreme cases in which the higher romantic values of individual freedom are found not only wanting, but to be equated with death – its very existence on earth in *Cain,* and the anarchy of the 30 Years War in *Werner's.* In *Werner* the irrelevance of human love, and in *Cain* the rejection of it as a meaningful lien on the self, are to put it mildly striking. There is a kind of utter gloom in Cain's "*but me*" that rings of the last line of the last chapter of *Under the Volcano* – "somebody threw a dead dog after him down the ravine". One cannot live without love. Apparently not. But that is not to say that love comes as a naturally available panacea – it like freedom can invert

into its opposite, or simply be ineffectual in the face of a different commitment.

The twist which Lowry puts on this, and which is our second theme, is the analogy between the author's control of his/her material, and control over others in life. This is even more intense – and culpable? – where the control is invisible. For Lowry, working through a reading of the philosopher Unamuno, this analogy actually blossoms into something more worrying – not just an analogy but a direct connection – so when in his letter to Cape he talks of the novel "as a sort of machine: it works too, believe me, as I have found out" he is referring to the catastrophic effect he believes the novel has had on the characters on whom it was based. Leaving aside the scary superstition, the more general point is clear – the maker's "rage for order" is but another version of the tyrant's. Lowry believed, using Van Gogh's phrase, that art needs a "design-governing posture", even if that posture is not perceivable by the audience. Self-evidently this hidden structure affects the reader clandestinely; even if the structure is not hidden however, the very form of a novel is a structuring or ordering, not only of its material, but of the *reader's* world. How to "give away" this control – free the horse without killing the Yvonne – have the "door open, and the wind blowing" – became the obsession, and yes, ironically that's what it was, the controlling obsession, of Lowry's fiction after *Under the Volcano* – notably in *Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid* and *October Ferry to Gabriola.* Somehow or other the

terrible impasse of the identification of freedom with death and of love with both control and ineffectuality had to be dissolved – it was almost as if *Under the Volcano* had to be unwritten. And indeed the closing paragraph of *October Ferry* (at least as we have it) is a kind of rewriting of the visions both Yvonne and the Consul have as they die – but now in a lower key. Yvonne's vision of an all-consuming fire slipping into the dark waters of Eridanus and her assumption towards Orion and the Pleiades seems almost literally to be reworked. The shift reminds me of Melville at the end of the sermon in *Moby Dick* or in *A Squeeze of the Hand*:

> man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fireside, the country...'[6]

Here at the end of *October Ferry* the domestic possibility escapes the imperative of the absolute... it is still about death, the final ferry journey, but with the energy taken out of it somehow. This passage starts off like Bocklin's *Isle of the Dead*, but ends up in a very different place...

> [The island] Gabriola... Ah, how wild and lonely and primeval and forbidding it looked! Not a light glimmered, not a house shone through the trees, there was nothing but the cliffs, so high the trees on the top

> seemed dwarfed, mere broken bottles guarding the rim, the cliffs, and the uproar of the black sea at their base.... at the same moment there burst forth a shattering din and everyone clapped their hands to their ears. It was the ferry, blasting on its siren with a deep, protracted chord of mournful triumph. In the sky the stars came out. Capella, Fomalhaut, in the south, low over the sea, then Algol and Mira.
>
> And now through the twilight as the echoes died away... [they] distinguished the outlines of a sheltered valley that sloped down to a silent, calm harbor. Deep in the dark forest behind was the glow of a fire with red sparks ascending like a fiery fountain; yes, someone *was* burning tree stumps to clear his land. The sound of lowing cattle was borne to them and they could see a lantern swinging along close to the ground. A voice called out, clear, across the water. And now they saw the dock, with silhouetted figures moving against a few lights that gleamed in the dusk...[7]

When Byron came to the great ottava rima poems, he too needed a "design-governing posture". What could you do after *Manfred*? – after exile – after the failure of the natural alternative in *Childe Harold* Canto 3. Whatever, it had to incorporate its own idea of form – it would, dare one say it, have to un-write – all right, maybe "deconstruct" – the romantic manipulations of the *Turkish Tales*, *Childe Harold* even the *Hebrew Melodies*, and

unpick itself as it went. In the new context where freedom could be against life, where love itself could, raised to the level of total commitment, be the freedom of death (the end point of that line of thinking I suppose is Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*), a retreat was necessary, not a retreat into ancien regime control but yet a retreat which would somehow preserve freedom in its necessary compromised state – "necessarily" that is, to avoid, to repeat, the knots of *Faliero*, *Foscari*, *Cain*, *Werner*. So we have – of course – two design-governing postures – grandly that of the epic in *Don Juan*, or the *Vision of Judgement*, less grandly but all-pervasively that of the ottava rima itself in *Beppo*, *Vision of Judgement* and *Don Juan*; in all three poems the stanza firmly in control of its material and of the reader, and yet not only not concealed, but itself the very first visible, audible, fact of the poem:

> Most epic poets plunge in 'medias res,'
> (Horace makes this the heroic turnpike road)
> And then your hero tells, whene'er you please,
> What went before – by way of episode,
> While seated after dinner at his ease,
> Beside his mistress in some soft abode,
> Palace, or garden, paradise, or cavern,
> Which serves the happy couple for a tavern.
>
> That is the usual method, but not mine –
> My way is to begin with the beginning;

The regularity of my design
Forbids all wandering as the worst of sinning,
And therefore I shall open with a line
(Although it cost me half an hour in spinning)
Narrating somewhat of Don Juan's father,
And also of his mother, if you'd rather.

And later:

My poem's epic, and is meant to be
Divided in twelve books; each book containing,
With love, and war, a heavy gale at sea,
A list of ships, and captains, and kings reigning,
New characters; the episodes are three:
A panorama view of hell's in training,
After the style of Virgil and of Homer,
So that my name of Epic's no misnomer.

All these things will be specified in time,
With strict regard to Aristotle's rules,
The *vade mecum* of the true sublime,
Which makes so many poets, and some fools;
Prose poets like blank-verse, I'm fond of rhyme,
Good workmen never quarrel with their tools;
I've got new mythological machinery,
And very handsome supernatural scenery.[8]

The posture of epic design is here just that – but note that the effect is not to satirise epic, but to free this poem from

its posture (ie we as readers react not by thinking how dumb Virgil and Homer are, but by feeling liberated ourselves – we empathise with the jauntiness – only a real duffer would read this as anti-epic – and I suspect they could not have read it aloud if they did) – this is control trying to work against itself. And only if you have some idea of what lies behind this, chronologically speaking in terms of *Manfred* I mean, can you appreciate its deadly seriousness, or rather, its un-deathly seriousness. There is satire of poetry in *Don Juan* goodness knows (a mere four stanzas later for a start: 'Thou shalt not set up Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey;/Because the first is crazed beyond all hope,/The second drunk, the third so quaint and mouthy') but we must not confuse that with this other major strand of *Don Juan*'s DNA – its wrestling with how to present freedom in an art which is inevitably controlling, or how to speak about a freedom which does not either prevent love or subsume it:

> Was it not so, great Locke? and greater Bacon?
> Great Socrates? And thou Diviner still,
> Whose lot it is by man to be mistaken,
> And thy pure creed made sanction of all ill?
> Redeeming worlds to be by bigots shaken,
> How was thy toil rewarded? We might fill
> Volumes with similar sad illustrations,
> But leave them to the conscience of the nations.

I perch upon an humbler promontory,
Amidst life's infinite variety:
With no great care for what is nicknamed glory,
But speculating as I cast mine eye
On what may suit or may not suit my story,
And never straining hard to versify,
I rattle on exactly as I'd talk
With any body in a ride or walk.

I don't know that there may be much ability
Shown in this sort of desultory rhyme;
But there's a conversational facility,
Which may round off an hour upon a time.
Of this I'm sure at least, there's no servility
In mine irregularity of chime,
Which rings what's uppermost of new or hoary,
Just as I feel the 'Improvisatore.'

'Omnia vult *belle* Matho dicere – dic aliquando
Et *bene*, dic *neutrum*, dic aliquando *male*.'
The first is rather more than mortal can do;
The second maybe sadly done or gaily;
The third is still more difficult to stand to;
The fourth we hear, and see, and say too, daily;
The whole together is what I could wish
To serve in this conundrum of a dish.

A modest hope – but modesty's my forte,
And pride my feeble: – let us ramble on.
I meant to make this poem very short,
But now I can't tell where it may not run.
No doubt, if I had wish'd to pay my court
To critics, or to hail the *setting* sun
Of tyranny of all kinds, my concision
Were more; – but I was born for opposition.

But then 'tis mostly on the weaker side:
So that I verily believe if they
Who now are basking in their full-blown pride,
Were shaken down, and 'dogs had had their day,'
Though at the first I might perchance deride
Their tumble, I should turn the other way,
And wax an Ultra-royalist in loyalty,
Because I hate even democratic royalty.

I think I should have made a decent spouse,
If I had never proved the soft condition;
I think I should have made monastic vows,
But for my own peculiar superstition:
'Gainst rhyme I never should have knock'd my brows,
Nor broken my own head, nor that of Priscian,
Nor worn the motley mantle of a poet,
If some one had not told me to forgo it.[9]

This is a key passage as many of us have realised, but we have often I believe misinterpreted its effect on the reader or listener. The whole drift not only of what it says, but of how it says it, is that freedom is not about belief or commitment, though it is about engagement (and Juan of course rescues the orphan where the Consul will not help the dying "pelado"). The absence of "servility" is not a consequence of commitment but rather of "variety", of the "improvisatore" of the "conundrum of a dish" that is life. Here freedom is the very opposite of the Consul's – it is not having a clear sense of who one is or what one does – and also the very opposite of Hugh's – stanza 23 would not go down well with those on the Ebro. We must not abstract the political from the poetic or indeed the religious, "the irregularity of chime" applies to them all. But ticking away as part of this thorough-going enactment of the uncommitted but talkative human being is the ottava rima – reminding us in "hoary/ improvisatore" and "poet/forgo it" in particular that we are in a machine, and that that machine while under strain will not allow "infinite variety" to evaporate into chaos. Freedom as commitment, freedom as chaos. Neither is what we really want. There is in Don *Juan* a negotiation, a counterpoint with the melody sometimes pushing one way, sometimes the other, but with the second voice always audible.

Perhaps putting Lowry alongside Byron can help us, just a little, understand "how seriously human" Byron's great comic poems are, when we listen to them properly.

Endnotes:

[1] Andrew Nicholson, ed., *The Manuscripts of the Young Romantics: Lord Byron*, vol.X (New York and London: Garland, 1995), p. 53.
[2] Malcolm Lowry, 'Without the Nighted Wyvern', in *Selected Poems*, ed. Earle Birney (San Francisco: City Lights, 1962), p. 39.
[3] 'No Time to Stop and Think', *Selected Poems*, p. 38
[4] 'For the Love of Dying', *Selected Poems*, p. 29.
[5] Sherril E. Grace, ed., *Sursum Corda!: The Collected Letters of Malcolm Lowry* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), pp.497-535. In January 1946 Lowry wrote in response to Cape's reader's criticisms of *Under the Volcano* one of the great literary defences of the century.
[6] Hermann Melville, *Moby Dick* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1952), p. 308.
[7] Malcolm Lowry, *October Ferry to Gabriola*, ed. Margerie Bonner Lowry (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), pp. 332-3
[8] Jerome J. McGann, ed., *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, vol. V, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 10-11 and p. 73, from *Don Juan* Canto I.
[9] *CPW*, pp. 594-6, from *Don Juan* Canto XV. The Ms as edited by Nicholson reads 'a humbler' for 'an humbler', and 'when it will be done' for 'where it may not run' – as well as having much more dashing punctuation (Nicholson, op.cit., pp. 61-3).