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Lowry and ‘the great figure of Authority’

Tony Bareham

Most critical biographies of Lowry glance at his relationship to figures and symbols of authority. The author’s dealings with his own father, and with the political ruling powers in both Canada and, particularly, Mexico, demonstrably influence his attitude to the world about him and to his own inner lack of equipoise. But by gathering themes and motifs from across his work under this general heading it may be possible to go further than any of these accounts. Looked at from one particular angle we may see the problem of Authority as all-pervasive, before other, and more specific leitmotifs, symbols and shibboleths close again round the individual novels and stories.

One general and one particular example of this reaction stand out. The relationship between Malcolm Lowry and his father is clearly of pervasive and central importance. Douglas Day’s *in extenso* exegesis – not always accurate, and maybe sometimes over-curious – is certainly right to probe at this topic, and most other critics follow Day at least some way down his chosen path.\(^1\) Equally traumatic and pervasive is the aftermath of Lowry’s clashes with the Mexican authorities, centred on Christmas 1937 (when he was put in jail), and March 1946 (when he fell foul of the Mexican Immigration office). The former event, although it later became mythologised (see the letter to James Stern of May 1940),\(^2\) was devastating at the time: ‘I cannot believe this is true; it is a nightmare almost beyond belief’, he wrote to his friend John Davenport. And to Juan Fernando Marquez, whom we shall meet again later:

Do you wish me to leave with the impression that Oaxaca, the most lovely town in the world . . . is a town consisting entirely of spies . . . ?

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\(^{1}\) S. Vice (ed.), *Malcolm Lowry Eighty Years On* © Palgrave Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited 1989
the stupidity and hypocrisy of your detectives and the motives which are behind their little eternal spying... completely transcend any criminality and stupidity I have encountered anywhere in the world. Have these guys nothing better to do than watch a man who merely wants to write poetry?...

Lowry goes on to rationalise this local hatred:

What I have absolutely no sympathy with is the legislator, the man who seeks, for his own profit, to exploit the weaknesses of those who are unable to help themselves... simply for his own Goddamned stupid political reactionary reasons.

By 1937 the Mexican authorities had no cause particularly to love the British, and the country was increasingly pro-Nazi in its sympathies. The situation is over-simplified by Lowry in his hideous distress; the actual political pros and cons matter less than the emotional overflow for purposes of this essay, though the cross-fertilisation of ideas into the political hinterland of Under the Volcano is obvious and germane in a wider context. The episode with the Migracion in 1946 puts Lowry himself into a less ambiguous context, perhaps. Returning with his second wife virtually ten years after that first tempestuous episode, he was caught in a Kafka-esque tragi-comedy with the authorities who 'discovered' an unpaid fine from the earlier visit, and refused to let the Lowrys leave the country. The circumstantial detail is laid out in the deposition to a Californian attorney (Selected Letters, pp. 91-112). It seems to boil down to an attempt by the Migracion to extort a bribe from the recalcitrant Lowry, and the more he dug in his heels the more the Mexicans turned the screw. The after-effect was a permanent scar. For ever after Lowry manifested near-paranoia at the mere sight of a policeman or customs official:

... By the time they started for Vancouver airport it was drizzling rain, and when their plane finally took off, it was a blizzard: swirls and lashes of rain across the Seattle airport, Customs inspectors in pools – Sigbjørn shuddered. Customs inspectors! How afraid of such creatures he was – would he ever get over it?

This prickly hypersensitivity is totally irrelevant to the plot of Dark