

“EXILED AS THE SHIP ITSELF”: LIMINALITY AND TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITY IN
MALCOLM LOWRY’S *ULTRAMARINE*, *UNDER THE VOLCANO*, AND *DARK AS THE
GRAVE WHEREIN MY FRIEND IS LAID*

by

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ABSTRACT

The themes of empire, nationality, and self-imposed exile constitute underexplored topics in critical discussions of modernist author Malcolm Lowry (1909-1957). Until recently, most academic studies have approached his work from biographical, mythological, and psychoanalytic perspectives. While a few studies have performed historical readings of his novels, such investigations tend, primarily, to focus on his engagement with western literary and theoretical movements of the early twentieth century. Of the few studies that address the cross-cultural reach of his novels, most are limited to discussions of Mexican history and traditions, thus prioritizing a specific geographical region when they might, instead, illuminate the author's career-long engagement with cultural developments on a world scale—historical realignments triggered by wartime anxieties and the impending dissolution of the British Empire. Employing an interpretive framework that synthesizes postcolonial theory, cultural anthropology, and contemporary theories of the transnational, I demonstrate how the exile-heroes of three of Lowry's novels—*Ultramarine* (1933), *Under the Volcano* (1947), and *Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid* (1968)—struggle to navigate the experience of social liminality, dramatizing, in the process, an increasingly fraught relationship between English expatriates and imperial models of English national identity. Rejecting the well-known mythical hero's cyclical quest, so often culminating in a triumphant return to society, the Lowrian exile-hero, instead, remains in a liminal state, emblemizing, through persistent cultural questioning, a transnational concept of identity that resists institutionally prescribed models of thought and behavior.

Mom, Dad, Kim, and Leslie: this study is dedicated to you.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: THE VOYAGE THAT NEVER ENDS	1
CHAPTER ONE: <i>ULTRAMARINE</i>	14
CHAPTER TWO: <i>UNDER THE VOLCANO</i>	31
CHAPTER THREE: <i>DARK AS THE GRAVE WHEREIN MY FRIEND IS LAID</i>	57
CONCLUSION: LOWRY'S TRANSNATIONAL ETHIC AND THE FUNCTION OF THE LIMINAL HERO.....	75
LIST OF REFERENCES	80

INTRODUCTION: THE VOYAGE THAT NEVER ENDS

Where, once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees – these border and frontier conditions – may be the terrains of world literature.

—Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*

The exile is the luckiest of men.

—Malcolm Lowry, “The Exile”

The themes of empire, nationality, and self-imposed exile constitute underexplored topics in critical discussions of modernist author Malcolm Lowry (1909-1957). Until recently, most academic studies have approached his work from biographical, mythological, and psychoanalytic perspectives. While a few studies have performed historical readings of his novels, such investigations tend, primarily, to focus on his engagement with western literary and theoretical movements of the early twentieth century. Of the few studies that address the cross-cultural reach of his novels, most are limited to discussions of Mexican history and traditions, thus prioritizing a specific geographical region when they might, instead, illuminate the author’s career-long engagement with cultural developments on a world scale—historical realignments triggered by wartime anxieties and the impending dissolution of the British Empire. Employing an interpretive framework that synthesizes postcolonial theory, cultural anthropology, and contemporary theories of the transnational, I demonstrate how the exile-heroes of three of Lowry’s novels—*Ultramarine* (1933), *Under the Volcano* (1947), and *Dark as the Grave*

Wherein My Friend is Laid (1968)—struggle to navigate the experience of social liminality, dramatizing, in the process, an increasingly fraught relationship between English expatriates and imperial models of English national identity. Rejecting the well-known mythical hero's cyclical quest, so often culminating in a triumphant return to society, the Lowrian exile-hero, instead, remains in a liminal state, emblemizing, through persistent cultural questioning, a transnational concept of identity that resists institutionally prescribed models of thought and behavior.

As in the works of other modernist authors, life and art represent mutually reinforcing concerns in Lowry's novels. He came from an upper middle class background, the son of a cotton broker, who was raised on the Wirral peninsula near Liverpool, England. Bourgeois and dissatisfied, he joined the crew of a merchant ship, the *Pyrrhus*, on a voyage to East Asia, just two years before enrolling at Cambridge in 1929. By all accounts, Lowry was a man of astonishing contradictions; his main literary concern was with the modern subject's inner conflict and inability to realize an authentic sense of self. He traveled extensively throughout his life, making prolonged stays in Mexico, Canada, and the United States, and, aside from his notorious alcoholism, he is best known for the novel *Under the Volcano*. His most productive years were spent living, with his second wife, Margerie, in a squatter's shack on the coast of Dollarton, British Columbia. This home later burned to the ground, taking with it the original manuscript of *In Ballast to the White Sea*, a novel that was to feature prominently in a planned multi-volume series called *The Voyage That Never Ends*. Such trials and tribulations built Lowry's already dynamic persona into a titanic myth, inspiring fascination in the author's biography among scholars and casual readers.

A great deal of the criticism that has appeared since the publication of Douglas Day's frequently cited, yet controversial text, *Malcolm Lowry: A Biography* (1973) has made heavy use of a vast range of extant peripheral materials. Moreover, a large trove of Lowry's correspondence currently exists, including what Day calls "a document absolutely unique in literary history: a thirty-one page exegesis [of *Under the Volcano*] which demonstrated on every page that Lowry knew precisely what was going on in every chapter in his novel, why it was all there as it was, and what it all meant" (317). Other biographies, which include Gordon Bowker's *Pursued by Furies* (1993) and Jan Gabriel's *Inside the Volcano* (2000), along with Sherrill Grace's edition of Lowry's *Collected Letters* (1995-96), have catalyzed renewed scholarly interest and biographical studies of Lowry during the last fifteen years. Nevertheless, while such materials provide a wealth of insight into the author's influences, personal relationships, and literary intentions, they also constitute the root cause of what has become a major distraction from the wider, cultural impact of Lowry's work. Indeed, a great deal of the biographical criticism seems premised on explaining why Lowry, a committed writer, published only two long works during his lifetime. Such analyses severely limit the scope of his achievement and fall short of situating his work in its proper transnational context.

Myth criticism also comprises an important element in the scholarship. Some of these studies highlight the author's treatment of particular classical myths, including those of Oedipus, Sisyphus, and Philoctetes. Others employ an archetypal approach based on Northrop Frye's Jungian method, usually in an effort to explain the function of universal symbols in *Under the Volcano*. While such approaches have their merits, Andrew Pottinger has warned that the "emphasis on symbolic and mythic interpretation has seriously dehumanized the novel" (53).

Moreover, myth readings, following the theories of Joseph Campbell, are largely based on the ahistorical premise that a single, foundational myth—known as “the monomyth”—underlies all forms of representation, irrespective of their cultural-historical contexts (23). Such perspectives effectively disallow the significance of Lowry’s time period—an era of jarring historical transitions—and its influence on his writing.

Recently, a few critics have started moving away from biographical and mythological approaches, in an effort to re-contextualize novels, such as *Under the Volcano* and *Dark as the Grave* in terms of both 1930s and 1940s politics and the novels’ more immediate (and particularly Mexican) cultural influences. As Patrick Deane notes, “Political considerations in Lowry are almost always attenuated and enigmatic, invariably subordinated to existential ones” (123). His argument, however, is that these considerations still constitute an important, if frequently abstruse, strain in the author’s work. In *British Representations of Latin America*, which includes a chapter-length study of *Under the Volcano*, Luz Elena Ramirez observes a critical tendency to dehistoricize Lowry’s most frequently discussed novel (130). “If not recognized as a narrative about an Englishman in Mexico,” she explains, “[*Under the Volcano*] runs the risk of being interpreted as an allegorical projection of Western history generally, rather than as a portrait of Britain’s concrete political and social relations with Mexico during the late 1930s” (131). Only recently, then, have Lowry scholars started to adopt political-cultural approaches, which suggest, among other things, the author’s deep and intricate engagement with issues of class and nationality.

While critics have already explained the Lowrian hero’s quest for identity in a variety of ways, few studies highlight the author’s recurrent treatment of cultural ambiguity, or hybridity,

in his key protagonists: Dana Hilliot, Geoffrey Firmin (also known as the Consul), Hugh Firmin, and Sigbjørn Wilderness. In the short story “Through the Panama,” Sigbjørn describes his existential quandary as the “[p]light of an Englishman who is a Scotchman who is Norwegian who is a Canadian who is a Negro at heart” (135). An enigmatic statement, to be sure, yet its sentiment is revealing, in that it exclusively categorizes the main constituents of identity in terms of national origin.

In a prescient study of Lowry’s Englishness, a rarity amongst the extant criticism, Tony Bareham makes the following assertion:

Lowry was born into a milieu of almost daunting Englishness: it is all there, the cultureless upper-middle class cant, the stiff family relationships framed around the least tractable aspects of non-Conformity, the public school with its mystique of rugby-playing and “good form”, capped by a bohemian reaction at university. And in Lowry’s case, thrown in for good measure with a significantly self-conscious style, a sea-voyage before the mast, with all the personal and social tensions which are documented in *Ultramarine*, his first novel. (135)

What is most enlightening about Bareham’s observation, here, is that it describes those particular valences of Englishness against which Lowry’s characters continuously react. In many ways, his protagonists are unmistakably English, drawing repeatedly from memories of life and culture “at home” for points of reference amid the disorienting experience of life overseas (an experience that is typically rendered all the more disorienting by implacable dipsomania).

However, Bareham’s explanation of Englishness in Lowry’s novels needs to be taken several steps further, in order to explain how the decline of England’s imperial hegemony

accounts for a growing sense of anxiety and unease among the kinds of expatriates Lowry so consistently depicts in his novels. This needed development underlines the interpretive value of a postcolonial approach, which highlights the relationship between culture and imperialism so that Lowry's protagonists' crises of identity can be elucidated in terms of the changing political landscape of his era. One reason why Lowry critics have, to a large extent, ignored the postcolonial approach seems to follow from the intense introspection of his protagonists. In *Forests of Symbols*, Patrick McCarthy accurately describes the Consul's self-obsession as "paranoid and solipsistic, for it insists that everything centers on the Consul and that, in a sense, the world is an extension of his identity" (7-8). However, as the present study shall argue, metaphysical solipsism does not undermine the work's political involvement with issues of place, displacement, and the disorientation of identity. In fact, the inward focus of Lowry's English characters highlights, quite eloquently, the metaphysical ramifications of imperial decline upon the collective psyche of the English.

It is important to recognize just how frequently Lowry's representations of exile dramatize this kind of identity crisis. Often, his characters find themselves caught between two poles: locality, on the one hand, which can be either restorative or oppressive, and globality, on the other, which constitutes an ideal of perpetual dislocation. A fundamentally liminal figure, the Lowrian exile-hero embodies the local, yet strives to reconcile the various strands of his identity, in order to realize an ideal, global consciousness. While typically failing in this endeavor, his struggle to recuperate some meaningful sense of self, following the disintegration of nationality as a coherent refuge of identity, represents, for Lowry, a profoundly heroic act in the face of modern alienation. Therefore, a postcolonial reading of the novels must explore and evaluate the

ways in which the protagonists embody powerfully wrought iterations of an incipient transnational identity.

Transnational identity, in this study, refers to a processual concept of the self, one that is largely based on Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity. However, I prefer the term "transnational" to Hall's "cultural," simply because it emphasizes the modern experience of migration, by which this processual mode of being constitutes an ongoing synthesis of various national identities. Discouraging an essentialist view of the self, then, Hall advocates a more historically informed approach, suggesting that the self is constantly in flux and subject to a variety of internal and external influences.

Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous "play" of history, culture, and power. (236)

The merit of Hall's theory, then, lies in its special emphasis on the transformative influences of "history, culture, and power." This emphasis is key to understanding Lowry's novels in a political-cultural context, since they demonstrate the existential crises of expatriates at two critical moments of historical transition: the interwar period (*Ultramarine* and *Under the Volcano*) and the era of decolonization (*Dark as the Grave*). Whereas prescriptive models of national and imperial identity, as portrayed by Lowry, are static and essential, transnational identities constitute fluid and performative ways of being. In a particularly revealing moment from *Dark as the Grave*, for instance, Sigbjørn remarks that he and his wife, Primrose, who live in a shack on the coast of western Canada, are "more American than the Americans themselves"

(38). The idea behind this statement—that identity is neither fixed, nor inherited—informs the Lowrian protagonist’s exilic worldview in each novel.

The many nuances of his identity crisis are vastly illuminated by a synthetic approach, which incorporates Edward Said’s concept of “intellectual exile,” as a metaphysical position between cultures; Victor Turner’s notion of social liminality as a condition unhinged from the conventional rite of passage; and contemporary theories of the transnational (Said 373). To begin with, Said’s comments on the political function of the novel illustrate how the writer’s act of representation carries with it important implications concerning the very idea of national identity. In *Culture and Imperialism*, he demonstrates the mutually reinforcing relationship between representational forms and the mission of empire. By separating culture from imperialism, he argues, we underestimate western literature’s worldliness. He also observes that culture plays an important role in identity formation.

In time, culture comes to be associated, often aggressively, with the nation or the state; this differentiates “us” from “them,” almost always with some degree of xenophobia. Culture in this sense is a source of identity, and a rather combative one at that, as we see in recent “returns” to culture and tradition. These “returns” accompany rigorous codes of intellectual and moral behavior that are opposed to the permissiveness associated with such relatively liberal philosophies as multiculturalism and hybridity. (xiii)

What often emerges from cultural products, then, is the sense of how one ought to think and feel, in order to be a more representative member of one’s culture. Since culture was directly linked to

nationalism in the twentieth century, Said argues that culture, ultimately, informs one's sense of nationality, and vice versa.

More specifically, realistic novels have historically purported to reflect, whether in part or in whole, some essential, unitary identity that characterizes members of a given society. In this sense, a society's imaginative products—that is, its various cultural works—have a profound influence on the way that society conceives of itself. As Benedict Anderson famously suggests, the nation “is an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6). The nation can be considered “sovereign” to the extent that it is imagined to be free from external influence, while, in limiting its membership, the nation is premised on an idea of exclusion (7). In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy's thoughts on “cultural insiderism,” cast further light on the exclusivity of nations. “The essential trademark of cultural insiderism,” he explains, “Which also supplies the key to its popularity is an absolute sense of ethnic difference” (3). In this sense, the unifying power of nationalism derives from its creation of recognizable “others.” Homi Bhabha discusses this regulatory process, one outward manifestation of the colonizer's panoptic desire, in his theorization of colonial mimicry (126). The structural coherence of an imagined community, then, whether it is a nation, a colonizing power, or both, depends on an ability to distinguish itself from other communities. Returning to Said's argument, the political power of the literary work emerges from its capacity to feed and sustain the national “imagination.” Since culture represents, for Said, an important “source of identity,” a connection between the ostensibly apolitical products of culture and the highly political enterprises of both nationalism and imperialism begins to reveal itself.

Having recognized this phenomenon, it becomes increasingly clear how the “liberal philosophies” of “multiculturalism and hybridity” represent alternatives to an idea of singular nationality, which has, in recent history, purported to be the most significant determinant of modern identity. From hybridity emerges a more individual concept of selfhood: one that is not so much externally defined, but internally developed. The liberating power of hybrid, transnational identities (for there is not, by any means, one essential kind) allows for the rupturing of longstanding, agonistic binaries pitting “us” against “them,” those exclusionary dichotomies, which typically underlie the nation’s ideal of sovereignty. Such identities, it shall be argued, are the metaphysical inheritance of modern émigrés, “cross-dressed by [their] border crossings,” in Obi Nwakanma’s illuminating phrase (142).

In Lowry’s novels, these identities are usually showcased in their incipient forms. The great tragedy of his work, however, is that his characters so frequently succumb to their own existential despair. Having realized the inadequacy of English national identity to provide an authentic, usable model of selfhood in the modern world, they subsequently fall prey to an array of corrosive anxieties—anxieties which dramatize, microcosmically, the decline of British imperial hegemony, which becomes manifest in the individual’s metaphysical collapse. Nevertheless, even while inchoate, the transgressive and liberating potential of transnational identities are promisingly glimpsed in Lowry’s novels.

Furthermore, his work highlights an important period of historical transition, a liminal interval largely defined by a range of political and cultural upheavals. Said’s identity criticism is keenly attuned to such changes, as is evidenced in the following passage.

For surely it is one of the unhappiest characteristics of the age to have produced more refugees, migrants, displaced persons, and exiles than ever before in history, most of them as an accompaniment to and, ironically enough, as afterthoughts of great post-colonial and imperial conflicts. As the struggle for independence produced new states and new boundaries, it also produced homeless wanderers, nomads, and vagrants, unassimilated to the emerging structures of institutional power, rejected by the established order for their intransigence and obdurate rebelliousness. And insofar as these people exist between the old and the new, between the old empire and the new state, their condition articulates the tensions, irresolutions, and contradictions in the overlapping territories shown on the cultural map of imperialism. (332)

The significance of Lowry's work, in this transnational context, is that it bears witness to a very realistic psychological response, among British expatriates, to the cataclysmic changes that occurred during the early-to-mid twentieth century. Their collective anxiety can be likened to the experience of what Azade Seyhan calls "paranational communities": migrant groups that live "within national borders or alongside the citizens of the host country but remain culturally or linguistically distanced from them and, in some instances, are estranged from both the home and host culture" (10). Positioned, both physically and metaphysically, between the cultures of "home" and "host," the paranational's sense of estrangement approximates the liminal experience of the Lowrian exile-hero.

It is the concept of the liminal that underlies the Lowrian experience of exile. In nearly every case, his major characters attempt to navigate the turbulence of transition in lands where

they are considered strangers. One of the principal results of this physical displacement is the development of a double perspective (simultaneously, local and global) through which the exile is driven to reflect on the nature of man's existence. As Victor Turner observes, this kind of reflection entails benefits for society, as well as the individual.

Major liminal situations are occasions on which a society *takes cognizance of itself*, or rather where, in an interval between their incumbency of specific fixed positions, members of that society may obtain an approximation, however limited, to a global view of man's place in the cosmos and his relations with other classes of visible and invisible entities. (*Dramas* 239-40)

Separated from society during an interval of transition, the liminal subject gains an outsider's awareness of his society. Furthermore, transition liberates the subject from his responsibilities as a structurally bound member of that society, allowing for deep contemplation and "a global [as opposed to local] view of man's place in the cosmos." While in most rites of passage the liminal period is traditionally concluded by a phase known as "incorporation," Turner suggests that liminality can, in fact, become one's permanent condition of existence (van Gennep 11).

"Marginals," he explains, "Like liminars are also betwixt and between, but unlike ritual liminars they have no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity" (*Dramas* 233).

This statement aptly describes the Lowrian exile-hero's experience, especially given that these protagonists almost never return home to England.

It has been said that "together Lowry's novels express his myth which is 'his-story' of life repeated over and over again in 'The Voyage That Never Ends'" (Grace 19). By contrast, the present study de-emphasizes biographical and mythological readings in order to argue that, as far

as *Ultramarine*, *Under the Volcano*, and *Dark as the Grave* are concerned, Lowry's planned novel sequence, "The Voyage That Never Ends," might be more meaningfully considered an evocation of the author's transnational ethic, rather than a monument to own his personal journey through life. In this view, the author's work does not emphasize cyclic repetition so much as an incessant pattern of expatriation and border crossing. For the Lowrian exile-hero, then, the quest for identity entails a process of perpetual displacement, which, in turn, gives rise to a profound experience of liminal transnationality.

CHAPTER ONE: *ULTRAMARINE*

But the sea is none the less the sea. Man scatters ever farther and farther the footsteps of exile. It is ever the path to some strange land, some magic land of faery, which has its extraordinary and unearthly reward for us after the storms of ocean.

—Malcolm Lowry

Malcolm Lowry's sense of alienation from modern English society engendered a thematic obsession with the experience of self-imposed exile. He inaugurates this theme with *Ultramarine*, his much-neglected literary debut, published in 1933, which re-imagines the modernist *künstlerroman* in the sea voyage of Dana Hilliot, an impulsive young artist modeled on the author himself. Drawing on Said, Turner, and the critical discourse of transnationalism, this chapter investigates the development of Dana's liminal identity: a hybrid model of selfhood arising from its localities at the interstices of nationalities and cultures. Such a reading interrogates the symbolic value of the protagonist's ship, *The Oedipus Tyrannus*, and recasts the Lowrian identity crisis as a momentous, though frequently flawed, attempt at cultural realignment and reconciliation; it proposes that the modernist hero's voyage *into* exile might represent a useful paradigm—in which separation from society culminates in permanent social liminality—for re-situating novels of the early-to-mid twentieth century within the context of world literature.

Compared to the wealth of criticism surrounding *Under the Volcano*, sparse scholarly attention has been given to *Ultramarine*. Of the studies that exist, most discuss the novel as Lowry's earliest attempt to develop an authentic literary voice.¹ The protagonist's existential plight has frequently been framed as a futile struggle for coherence. One common reading suggests that the hero's grand realization is that in order to accept life he must first accept chaos. As Sherrill Grace notes, "being unable to accept chaos as good is Dana's great sin" ("Outward Bound" 77). Elizabeth Rankin has also argued that the hero is only able to "achieve an authentic existence" by "plunging into the destructive element . . . and realizing the positive power of chaos as creative energy" (3). While these critical assessments recognize one central aspect of the protagonist's problem, they do not discuss the roots of this "chaos" in any distinct cultural or historical terms.

Overall, there has been a general tendency to de-historicize, de-politicize, and de-culturalize Lowry's first novel, a trend which has too readily prioritized the author's aesthetic achievement over his engagement with the turbulent political climate of the early twentieth century.² Therefore, recovering the political origins of Dana's central crisis necessitates a preliminary discussion of his frustrations over English nationality as a prescriptive model for identity. To reiterate Tony Bareham's assertion: "Lowry was born into a milieu of almost daunting Englishness: it is all there, the cultureless upper-middle class cant, the stiff family relationships . . . the public school with its mystique of rugby-playing and 'good form'" (135). These characteristics represent the particular aspects of English nationality that Dana finds most

¹ See, for instance, *Malcolm Lowry* (Bareham) and *Forests of Symbols* (McCarthy).

² See, for instance, *The Voyage That Never Ends* (Grace), as well as mythological criticism approaches.

restrictive. As the novel progresses, his feelings about England grow increasingly ambivalent. While he loves the literature of the English world, he resents the ostracism he suffers in his public school years. Strolling, sulkily, about the ship in Chapter I, the ringing of its bell prompts the painful reminiscence of his failure to emulate norms of English athleticism:

He suddenly saw a small boy, himself three years ago, inkstains on his fingers, sitting upon the steps of the swimming baths at school, his eyes burning. . . .
Forlorn! The very word is like a bell. To toll me back from thee to my sad self.
What could it have been that reminded him? The engine, possibly, of the steam heater, that pounded there all day to warm the baths. Green water. It had been like plunging into moss. . . . Left out of the swimming team, the important match against Uppingham. (24)

It is during moments, such as these, that what Bareham refers to as the “milieu of almost daunting Englishness” signals the anguished, isolated, and exilic self in Lowry’s novel. Although Dana has escaped the physical confines of his upbringing, its metaphysical hold on him remains firm. On the one hand, his exclusion from the swim team elicits resentment towards an eminently English institution: the public school. On the other hand, he has yet to relinquish fully its ideological standards. Therefore, it is with a conflicted mix of bitterness and exasperation that he reflects, “He had been able to show that at least he was the fastest and most skilful [sic] swimmer on board the *Oedipus Tyrannus*—not that anyone cared” (24). Time and again, feelings of cultural ambivalence serve to catalyze the development of Dana’s transnational selfhood, as attempts to adhere to an externally prescribed version of identity, ultimately, give way to the protagonist’s acceptance of cultural ambiguity.

In rejecting the pressure to assimilate, Dana is forced to confront his homelessness. Having traveled extensively in his youth, he reflects that it is “difficult to say where [he] was most at home” (54). Indeed, the theme of contested homelands is established early in the novel, when a nameless clerk queries Dana: “Where were you born?” and Dana replies, “Oslo” (13). When asked where he *lives*, he responds, “Sea Road, Port Sunlight,” a village on the Wirral Peninsula near Liverpool (13). Likewise, when Dana meets Nikolai, the Russian fireman, another of his attempts to assert Norwegian heritage (perhaps, in order to ingratiate himself with the ship’s Scandinavian contingent) is met with the rejoinder: “I tink you are very much English all the same” (18). Curiously, though, when Dana meets Popplereuter, the German sailor, and is asked, “You are an Englishman?” he automatically replies in the affirmative (88). The inconsistency of Dana’s self-representations during interrogative moments, such as these, once again implies an ambivalent selfhood struggling against a unitary model of identity.

Despite his sense of homelessness, however, Dana’s metaphysical connections to past locales endure. This is evident when a stray carrier pigeon lands aboard the ship with a note on its leg bearing the word “Swansea” (26). The significance of this word, the name of a Welsh city, lies in its evocation of locality—that is, a particular place and time.³ For each sailor aboard the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, though, “Swansea” seems to evoke his own individual concept of “home.” As Dana observes, “Something had happened, at any rate, a tender voice from home had whispered for a moment to those in exile, a mystery had shown its face among the solitudes” (26). He experiences another flashback here, demonstrating the metaphysical itinerancy of the exile’s worldview.

³ In 1995, Szanton-Blanc, Basch, and Glick-Schiller observed a consensus view, among scholars, that “transnationalism is embedded in the local” (684).

His whole being was drowning in memories, the smells of Birkenhead and of Liverpool were again heavily about him, there was a coarse glitter in the cinema fronts, children stared at him strangely from the porches of public-houses. Janet would be waiting for him at the Crossville bus stop, with her red mackintosh and her umbrella, while silver straws of rain gently pattered on the green roof. (26)

Tinged with nostalgia and melancholic longing, this cinematic description of English life is, nonetheless, undercut by its “drowning” effect. Recalled in isolation, even the most blissful memories of home capture suffering for the expatriate, albeit an ambiguous kind of suffering that is almost valorized. As Said notes, “the intellectual as exile tends to be happy with the idea of unhappiness” (“Exile” 373). Moreover, the condition of exile is characterized by its profoundly ambivalent experience of space and time, as it locates the subject, liminally, in an indeterminate metaphysical region between the here and now and the there and then. As Obi Nwakanma explains, “To be in exile is to dwell in uncertainty—about one’s self; one’s present; one’s future” (141). Dana’s sense of uncertainty, a bewildering cultural indeterminacy, ultimately culminates in his decision to embrace exile as restorative liminal experience.

“The exile,” Said explains, “Exists in a median state, neither completely one with the new setting nor fully disencumbered of the old, beset with half involvements and half-detachments, nostalgic and sentimental at one level, an adept mimic or a secret outcast at another” (“Exile” 370-71). One of the primary aims of this chapter is to suggest that this “median state” should be considered in terms of social liminality, a concept highlighted by Victor Turner. Building on van Gennep’s theorization of the rite of passage, he considers the liminal period an intermediate phase during which “the ritual subject (the ‘passenger,’ or ‘liminar,’) becomes

ambiguous, neither here nor there” (*Dramas* 232). He also argues that liminality can become a permanent state of being. “As well as the betwixt-and-between state of liminality,” he explains, “There is the state of outsiderhood, referring to the condition of being . . . permanently and by ascription set outside the structural arrangements of a given social system” (233). Among the outsider-types, are “shamans,” “hoboes,” and “gypsies” (233). A related social group, dubbed “marginals,” include “persons of mixed ethnic origin,” “women in a changed, non traditional role,” and, most importantly, in this context, “migrant foreigners” (233).

In Dana’s case, both liminal situations are applicable, since he is both a ritual subject (on the threshold of exilic consciousness) and a migrant foreigner (a transnational wanderer). His frequent interior monologues illustrate the metaphysical turmoil of exile, a condition, which resurfaces in some of Lowry’s later novels (chiefly, *Under the Volcano* and *Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid*). It should be noted, however, that Dana’s initiation into exile, a permanent liminal state, does not instantly give rise to a revolutionary change in worldview. By the novel’s end, he still clings to a host of English colonial ideals, which romanticize self-imposed exile as an altruistic form of self-denial. What the novel does demonstrate is the ascendancy of transnational identities in juxtaposition to the decline of nationality as a prescriptive model for identity.

Dana’s gradual movement from the ritual space of transition to the permanent condition of exile is best characterized as a progression from bewilderment to acceptance. His first six weeks aboard the ship are described as the “engulfing darkness of interminable ritual spelt out by bells and jobs, a six weeks’ whirlwind of suffering” (*Ultramarine* 14). Beyond highlighting Dana’s inward despair, though, this description also serves to emphasize the voyage’s ritualistic

quality. As Turner notes, “Ritual is transformative,” in that it produces a change in the ritual subject’s condition (*Forest* 95). Applying this principle to *Ultramarine*, it becomes apparent that, beneath the novel’s *bildungsroman* plot, lies a deeper, metaphysical struggle: initiation into the permanent condition of liminal exile.

Dana’s bewilderment is premised on the dual shock of physical and emotional dislocation. By the end of Chapter I, it is clear that most of the ship’s crew considers him a nuisance. Having gone to sea for all the wrong reasons, he quickly evokes the ire of Andy, the ship’s cook, and comes to despise the manual labor of his duties as a “domestic servant on a treadmill in hell” (49). In every respect, he feels “lost without a compass,” a wandering spirit out at sea (45). Nevertheless, the peregrinations of Dana’s ship, the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, symbolize the novel’s transnational ideal of restless movement.⁴ While Grace asserts that it is rather the elusive vessel *Oxenstjerna*, which represents Dana’s “consciousness,” the protagonist’s own comparisons suggest otherwise (76). Moreover, the name *Oedipus Tyrannus*—which can certainly be read as an allusion to Dana’s strained relationship with his fatherland—should also be linked to Oedipus’s tragic series of dispossessions (twice from Thebes and once from Corinth) in *Oedipus Rex*. Ultimately, as both a vessel in transit and an object of heterogeneous origins, Dana’s ship comes to emblemize *Ultramarine*’s primary metaphor for exilic consciousness.

Near the beginning of Chapter II, Dana’s thoughts on exile first begin to take shape. Addressing Janet, his girlfriend, by way of interior monologue, he begins a lengthy dissertation on the intricacies of his identity crisis. Describing his connection to the *Oedipus Tyrannus* as an

⁴ In *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy highlights the symbolic significance of the ship as “a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion” (4).

“ideal match,” he explains, “Both of us [were] born of Viking blood, both robbed of our countries and left to make out as best we can; both, finally, with the same wandering, harbourless, dispossessed characteristics” (*Ultramarine* 53). Notably, Dana’s identification with the ship’s dispossession directly relates to his despair in lacking a coherent sense of self.

His plight is that of the modern exile, caught in transition between culturally prescribed notions of nationality and an emergent transnational mode of being—a burgeoning hybrid selfhood that is fundamentally liminal in nature. Early in the novel, Dana’s idea of heterogeneity is fraught with anxiety. “Considering also,” he remarks, “How every country from which I have been forced to emigrate has left a gaping hole in my heart, considering the fomenting heterogeneity of the crew . . . is it any wonder that I feel humiliated by it all, and as homeless, as exiled as the ship itself?” (54). Dana makes it quite clear, in this passage, that the multiple migrations of his youth amount to an experience of exile. Humiliation on this account, however, hardens into defiance as he comes to embrace exile as a restorative process of incessant border crossing. Like the ship, he has “sailed out an exile, an expatriate”; yet, as the novel progresses, his physical movement away from home and his deepening sense of cultural alienation become mutually reinforcing concerns (53). Therefore, just as physical migration gives rise to a certain metaphysics of exile, thinking of oneself *as* an exile only intensifies the desire to expatriate.

Tellingly, Dana’s reference to the crew’s “fomenting heterogeneity” expresses deepening cultural insecurities and anxieties. In the foregoing passage, he draws a clear connection between the intermixing of cultures and the threat of rebellion. The word “fomenting,” itself, precisely connotes violent revolution. Dana also displays an anxious sense of cultural dissonance much earlier in the novel, following a clerk’s statement in port that ““Seamen and firemen [aboard the

ship are] mutually to assist each other” (17). “As though,” he scoffs, “Britons and Norwegians, a Spaniard, an American, and a Greek would spend their watch below in a brotherly communion” (17). Prior to his initiation, Dana can scarcely conceive of a concept so ambiguous and disunited as that of transnational identity. While he is willing to admit that the crew comprises a “community” despite its motley make-up; he, nonetheless, likens it to “the ninth circle” (of hell), making it clear that the chaos of fomenting cultural influences within him is a chaos he remains reluctant to embrace (21-22).

In *Ultramarine*, chaos often registers as multivocal dissonance. As Suzanne Kim notes, “To come to a realistic definition of himself in the present, Dana must take his bearings through the polyphony or cacophony of many voices that, in turn, represent sundry worlds for him to recognize and to get recognized by” (113). In order to come to terms with this polyphony and recognize the humanistic value of cultural heterogeneity in *Ultramarine*, it is useful to consider Said’s method of “contrapuntal reading” (*Culture and Imperialism* 66). “As we look back at the cultural archive,” he explains, “We begin to reread it not univocally but *contrapuntally*, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts” (51). By recognizing that Dana’s anxious view of heterogeneity is tied to an earlier, Victorian sensibility, namely, that there can be no such thing as “brotherly communion” between different nationalities or races, and then examining its counternarrative—the ascendance of transnational identities—one gains a clearer sense of the cultural climate against which *Ultramarine* is set.⁵

⁵ See “Hybridism and the Ethnicity of the English” (Young).

Mortimer describes contrapuntal reading as “a form of ‘reading back’ from the point of view of the colonized that brings to light the hidden colonial history that permeates nineteenth-century European literary texts” (55). In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said applies this reading method to a number of twentieth-century works, including Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim*, E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*, and the poetry of William Butler Yeats. By reading back against *Ultramarine*’s insistently inward focus and investigating the transnational implications of Dana’s delirious journey through Asia, the “worldliness” of the text becomes more readily apparent. In this light, the disillusionment of the western subject can be interpreted as a reaction to decolonization and shifting geopolitical power dynamics. Thus, the benefit of a contrapuntal analysis lies in its foregrounding of cultural heterogeneity as a touchstone of transnational developments in the postcolonial world.

Nevertheless, while the crew’s heterogeneity describes one central aspect of the ship’s metaphorical value, the liminal experience of sea travel must also be considered. In *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, Turner presents a useful nautical analogy to explain the liminal period:

In such situations as the liminal periods of major *rites de passage* the “passengers” and “crew” are free, under ritual exigency, to contemplate for a while the mysteries that confront all men, the difficulties that peculiarly beset their own society, their personal problems, and the ways in which their own wisest predecessors have sought to order, explain, explain away, cloak, or mask . . . these difficulties. (242)

While one can only speculate as to whether the rest of the ship’s crew is so occupied, it is certainly clear that Dana spends a great deal of his time aboard the *Oedipus Tyrannus* in deep

contemplation. An ideal site for meditation, the ship is a vehicle of exile, which gives rise to many opportunities for introspection. Separation constitutes the first phase in a rite of passage. Assuming, then, that the experience of travel represents a physical rite of passage through space and time, the liminal phase of the ship's voyage presents another important dimension of its value as a metaphor for Dana's developing transnational selfhood. If the ship's continuous voyaging from port to far-flung port dramatizes an ideal of intellectual freedom, then Dana's eventual embrace of exile as a permanent liminal state reflects its ambulatory principles.

Significantly, the sea voyage also subsumes a quest for artistic purpose. At the core of Dana's identity crisis is anxiety over the nature of authorship. As he explains to the German sailor, Popplereuter, in Chapter III, "The desire to write is a disease like any other disease; and what one writes, if one is to be any good, must be rooted firmly in some sort of autochthony. And there I abdicate. I can no more create than fly" (96). The idea that a writer's work must be completely autochthonous, that all one's roots must be anchored to one location, betrays, once again, the protagonist's perspective on the entire concept of identity.

Just as he struggles to deal with the "fomenting heterogeneity" of his cultural background, Dana wrestles with the idea that his confused cultural origins are somehow preventing him from being original. He believes that all good writing should signify a single author, that is, whoever is immediately responsible for the text, and, therefore, feels that he is doomed to produce "that usual self-conscious first novel . . . of which the principal character would be no more and no less, whether in liquor or in love, than the abominable author himself" (96). The irony here, though, is not so much that *Ultramarine* represents exactly this kind of novel. It is rather that Lowry's masterful use of intertextuality, a method of creative borrowing,

is so completely antithetical to Dana's notion that good writing should be rooted in "some sort of autochthony." As McCarthy observes, Lowry realized "that since all language is to a large extent dependent on previous language, every writer is in some degree a plagiarist" (26-27). Thus, Lowry's embrace of intertextuality—the *heterogeneity* of all texts—ultimately, reinforces the idea that Dana's achievement in *Ultramarine* constitutes the valorization of cultural ambiguity and an assumption, however flawed, of a liberating transnational identity.

Ultramarine's dénouement comes in the final pages of Chapter VI, with Dana's determination to embrace exile as a nurturing font of creativity and artistic purpose. In his resolution to remain "outward bound," he forsakes the metropolitan society into which he was born (201). Curiously, though, this revelatory moment is saturated in the ideology of imperialism. "Where is a workable object?" he asks himself, "Where is something to change for the better . . . where are the slaves that must be freed, the children who must have milk? I shall find them. I must find them" (186). Dana's acceptance of liminal exile, therefore, entails a clash of contradictory interests. In particular, his desire for a "workable object"—a containable other against which he can define himself, negatively, evidences that his commitment to exile does not immediately engender a holistic, egalitarian perspective.

Therefore, Dana's acceptance of exile should not be instantly conflated with full awareness of transnationalism's liberating potential. By the end of *Ultramarine*, a major transition has indeed taken place; yet, Dana's appreciation of transnationality remains inchoate, since he fails to extricate himself from the discourse of imperialism. Even as he moves towards the social margins, his abandonment of the metropolitan center's cultural biases is far from thorough. Ultimately, the language he uses to describe his artistic goals remains fundamentally

Eurocentric and colonialist in tone: “Where are the slaves that must be freed, the children who must have milk?” Rather than consider the possibilities and merits of a transnational community, his embrace of exile is hamstrung by an inflated notion of selfless charity eerily similar in sentiment to Kipling’s “The White Man’s Burden.”⁶ “When my duty is done,” he remarks, “We shall return to the land and find it blessed” (186). Such phrases, in their emphases on duty and improvement of the land, neatly summarize the civilizing mission of empire.

Another problem of *Ultramarine* arises from its elision of native voices, an issue that has not been discussed at any length in the scholarship. Throughout, Asians are referred to as “screeching coolies” and derided as the lowest of the low amongst the ship’s crew (41 and 86). This manner of dehumanization crops up in various places throughout the novel. For instance, in Chapter III, when Dana and Popplereuter enter a bar, the emergence of the barkeep is so rendered: “A native came from behind the counter like a spider from under his leaf” (91). Likewise, Dana hails a waiter outside the *Cabaret Pompeia* as “Confucius,” and, later, in a rickshaw, addresses an Indian fortuneteller as “Gandhi” (93 and 122). By likening Asians to insects and conflating them with historical figures, Dana is guilty of stereotyping practices that were common during the early twentieth century. However, it is important to recognize that the protagonist’s persistent racial insensitivity is symptomatic of his still-ongoing transition from English nationality to worldly transnationality. Having entered into the permanent condition of liminal exile, his relatively narrow outlook has only begun to expand. In his own words: “I don’t know a damn thing yet” (186).

⁶ I.e. “Go bind your sons to exile.” See also Dana’s reference to “Kipling’s *Captains Courageous*” in *Ultramarine* (143).

It can be tempting to read the *bildungsroman* and *künstlerroman* as stories of total metamorphosis, in which the culminating revelation of the hero's life crisis bestows a penetrating and profound wisdom. By contrast, the present reading of *Ultramarine*, which has sought to foreground the empowering ambiguity of transnational identities, considers such an interpretation to oversimplify Dana's major transition in the novel. Thus, the frustration of a Dickensian ending in Lowry's *bildungsroman* can be considered one of its most profound innovations, in that it represents the subversion of an established genre for modern purposes. Rather than growing into some productive role in middle-class English society, Dana decides to leave home altogether. While it is true that his subsequent initiation into liminal exile is largely flawed, exhibiting vestiges of imperialist dogma, racialist language, and the vanity of sophomoric self-aggrandizement; his commitment to perennial translocation entails a continuous renewal of perspective and a desire for the kinds of knowledge, which arise from crossing borders, rather than dwelling within them.

As Bareham rightly points out, "*Ultramarine* is Lowry's most sociable book" (*Malcolm Lowry* 35). More so than any of his other novels, Lowry's debut describes the idea of camaraderie. In the multicultural context of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, crewed by English, Norwegian, Spanish, Greek, American, and Chinese sailors, nationality presents itself as an obstacle to community. For this reason, Dana's attempts to overcome nationality and realize a more permissive, liminal identity arises, in part, from his desire to fit in with the other men. And, while the ship's forecabin can in no way be considered a utopia of transnational harmony, ambiguous heterogeneity is, nonetheless, its defining feature.

This fact becomes abundantly clear in *Ultramarine's* final chapter. Having resolved his

quarrel with Andy, Dana sits among the other sailors and firemen, who share stories of their travels. For a substantial portion of the scene, it is impossible to tell who is speaking. Having dominated much of the novel with internal monologue, Dana's voice fades into the raucous cacophony of the other men's voices. In this sense, the drunken conversation of the forecandle serves to eliminate unitary identity. Moreover, the sailors' conversation evokes a veritable constellation of locales. Among the places mentioned are Hong Kong, Singapore, the Philippines, the West Indies, the United States, England, and the Belgian Congo. Thus emerges a transnational network: a multicultural web that is at once exhilarating and impossible to interpret. It is in the midst of this multivocality that Dana's liminal identity comes into existence.

Despite the resilience of imperial discourse, the early stirrings of transnational identity are glimpsed promisingly in *Ultramarine*. As an incipient, rival discourse, transnationalism challenges the institutional hegemony of nationalist and imperialist concepts of selfhood in its valorization of plural modes of being. In this sense, the very construct "transnationalism" requires further development, if only to better distinguish it from the monolithic "-isms" against which it stands. As Szanton Blanc et. al. observe, "Rather than use the term 'transnationalism' we should speak of transnational processes and their theoretical implications" (684). In his essay "O, Polyphemus," Obi Nwakanma heeds this latter call by highlighting "namelessness" as a modern ideal of exilic selfhood—a transgressive iteration of liminal being, which frustrates the postcolonial nation's panoptic will to knowledge. Drawing on an analogy from *The Odyssey*, he likens the exile to wandering Odysseus and the metropole to Polyphemus, the hulking Cyclops:

Polyphemus is the figure of the *patrie*: the imperium and its metropolitan power.

Its eye—the long cyclopic eye at the center of his head, allows us to read into it,

the sign of the empire, its universality, its capacity for surveillance, as well as its powers to discipline and punish . . . The African poet in America is Odysseus, the wanderer, standing before Polyphemus, America, seduced into its domain, this metropolitan cave, in search of “provisions,” trapped, and saying, before you, I am nothing. I have no identity. I am *outis*. Nobody. (144)

Rather than the glorification of artistic selfhood, then, it is the destruction of Dana’s identity, in the conventional sense of the word, which *Ultramarine* dramatizes. As he sits in the fore-castle, telling stories with the men, he has at last become *outis*, no one, and quietly assumes the mantle of liminal exile. Once again, it is an ideal of continuous, restless movement that Dana champions at the novel’s end: “To be outward bound, always outward, always onward, to be fighting always for the dreamt-of harbour” (201). By remaining a stranger, then, on the margins of society, enables him to preserve a salutary mystery of selfhood, to revel in ambiguity.

What Dana gains from his experience aboard the *Oedipus Tyrannus* is the self-assurance to embrace exile as an intellectual space of creative possibility. This is a highly consequential act, since it sets an important precedent for the subsequent novels. For Dana and Lowry’s other principal characters (especially the Consul, Hugh Firmin, and Sigbjørn Wilderness), physically escaping England, the seat of empire, marks an escape, metaphysically, from the strictures of external definition—the abandonment of a unitary concept of the self, based on nationality. What this chapter suggests, then, is that the liminal quality of exile, represented so poignantly in *Ultramarine*, speaks to an important gesture, in the works of British twentieth-century authors, towards cultural hybridity in the modern, postcolonial subject. Subverting the expectation of a triumphant homecoming, Dana persists in a liminal—or, permanently transitional—condition. In

stark opposition to the Campbellian mythic hero, then, whose cyclical journey approximates Arnold van Gennep's tripartite model of the rite of passage (through phases known as "*separation*," "*initiation*," and "*return*"), Dana Hilliot does not return to English society "to bestow boons on his fellow man" (Campbell 23). Instead, as an exile, he persists in detachment from his former society, seeking individual fulfillment beyond the politically inscribed borders of nationalism and imperialism.

CHAPTER TWO: *UNDER THE VOLCANO*

I would like to suggest that many of the most prominent characteristics of modernist culture, which we have tended to derive from purely internal dynamics in Western society and culture, include a response to the external pressures on culture from the *imperium*.

—Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*

He kept to seaports because he was a seaman in exile from the sea, and had Ability in the abstract, which is good for no other work but that of a water-clerk.

—Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*

Whereas *Ultramarine* dramatized Dana Hilliot's defiant embrace of liminal exile—a metaphysical zone of creative possibility, in which the "namelessness" of persistent migration affords an escape from the strictures of national identity—*Under the Volcano* vividly portrays the torment of cultural severance. This anxious condition arises from the exiled metropolitan's ambivalent sense of estrangement from imperial ideology in the late 1930s, just prior to the onset of British decolonization. Bereft of father and fatherland, Geoffrey Firmin, alias the Consul, struggles to recover an authentic sense of self in a moment marked by tremendous cultural upheaval. Moreover, relieved of his already dwindling consular responsibilities, he finds himself in the midst of an anguished transition from the British Empire's nationally prescribed model of expatriate identity to the more accommodating, yet far less clearly defined, metaphysical space of transnational identity. Arguing for a materialist close reading of *Under the Volcano*'s central

existential crisis, this chapter demonstrates how the Consul's lingering devotion to norms of English national identity and sense of exile from the sea finally contribute to a portrait of the ex-colonial's failure to synthesize a resilient, transnational sense of self in a world poised on the brink of becoming postcolonial.

First and foremost, the Consul's experience of self-imposed exile in Mexico demonstrates, microcosmically, the prevailing cultural climate of uncertainty among British expatriates in the interwar period.⁷ In this chapter's primary epigraph, Edward Said contends that European modernism developed, at least in part, as a response to "external pressures on [Western] culture from the *imperium*" (*Culture and Imperialism* 188). Moreover, he suggests that many expatriates experienced the dismantling of empire as a loss of self-assurance.

It was as if having for centuries comprehended empire as a fact of national destiny to be either taken for granted or celebrated, consolidated, and enhanced, members of the dominant European cultures now began to look abroad with the skepticism and confusion of people surprised, perhaps even shocked by what they saw. (189)

In *Under the Volcano*, Lowry explores this "shock" through his exiled characters' struggle to weather the metaphysical turbulence of their cultural identities in transition. For the Consul, especially, crippling dipsomania and a superstitious, solipsistic worldview coalesce to magnify

⁷ Historian John Darwin asserts that, on the whole, British expatriate communities were acutely cognizant of their precarious political situation in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. "Few," he explains, "Could have doubted their vulnerability to external shocks. The Baring 'crash' of 1890, the South African War of 1899-1902, the Boxer uprising in 1900, the *swadeshi* campaign in Bengal, and the great naval 'scare' of 1908-9, suggested how quickly their fortunes could change. *After 1918, this anxiety became chronic*. With the shrinkage of trade, more assertive nationalisms, and the shortage of capital (partly a result of Britain's war debts at home and abroad), the geopolitical and 'geo-economic' setting became more and more hostile (*Settlers and Expatriates* 337, italics mine).

this central quandary. Nevertheless, Lowry critics too often focus on explaining the protagonist's existential struggle in purely aesthetic, psychological, or symbolic terms.⁸ Perhaps because the novel does not take place in a British colonial territory and does not directly foreground the issue of imperialism, few studies prioritize its material engagement with the global politics and cultural movements of the period. Only Luz Elena Ramirez's insightful study, *British Representations of Latin America*, discusses the Consul's inner turmoil with any prolonged consideration of British decolonization, a process which began, in earnest, around the same time the novel was first published, in 1947.⁹

As for the novel's exploration of national identity, the only study centrally concerned with this topic is Andrew Miller's essay, "Under the Nation-State." Decrying the practice of substituting "gossip about Lowry's alcoholism and sexual dysfunction for critical engagement," Miller argues that the Consul represents a "deterritorialized and nomadic self" who "self-consciously considers his relation to national identity to be performative rather than essential" (2, 1, 16). Unlike the majority of Lowry critics, he contextualizes the Consul's existential struggle in terms of *Under the Volcano*'s historical-political backdrop and contributes a preliminary discussion of the novel's anti-imperialist implications. However, Miller stops just short of prioritizing a resolutely postcolonial reading—taken up in the present discussion—when he asserts that "Lowry participates in the emergence of a form of literature that might best be described not as global or postcolonial but, rather, as postnational" (4). Therefore, while Miller's "postnational" designation is certainly accurate at one level, the present chapter contends that, as

⁸ See, for examples, Haag, "The Return of the Repressed and the Uncanny Consul," Garnett, "The Myth of the Hero," and Droesdal-Levillain, "Conrad and Lowry's Aesthetics of Fiction."

⁹ See McIntyre, *British Decolonization, 1946-1997*.

hegemonic ideologies exerting tremendous force on modern conceptions of the self, British Imperialism and English Nationalism are, in fact, inexorable quantities in this, Lowry's best-known novel.

Miller's analysis also excludes a discussion of the Consul's younger half-brother, Hugh, whom Lowry, in his now-famous letter to Jonathan Cape, describes as a different "aspect" of "the same man" (*Collected Letters* 501). Emphasizing the importance of this connection, Ramirez explains that one of the successes of symbolic interpretations of *Under the Volcano* arises from their tendency to recognize two key parallels: that of the Consul's disintegration, as an allegory of imperial decline, and the metaphysical link, confirmed by Lowry, between Geoffrey (the Consul) and Hugh Firmin.

One useful concept to take away from allegorical interpretations is that of doubling, whether the parallel is between countries, between individuals (as in a person and his doppelgänger), or between political constructs and their representatives. To be sure, doubling accounts for the metonymic relationship between the British Empire's collapse and Geoffrey Firmin's failing career.

Doubling also accounts for the obvious and necessary comparison of Hugh and Geoffrey who, as two sides of the same coin, reflect the hope and despair of interwar expatriates. (131)

However, as this chapter will argue, these parallels need to be interrogated further, in order to elucidate their special significance for situating the Consul's identity crisis within the global context of British decolonization. The first, which connects the Consul's inevitable demise, metonymically, with that of the British Empire, is suggestive of a key relationship in the novel,

between the imagined ideological integrity of imperium and the contingent enterprise of the imperial agent's interpellation. This relationship becomes deceptively obscured, though no less important, as *Under the Volcano*'s cryptically nonlinear narrative unfolds, and its significance—as a metonymic link—lies in the fact that it illuminates the novel's primary tragic event, namely the Consul's inability, or stubborn refusal, to synthesize an accommodating transnational identity, which might more effectively allow him to reconcile the indelible influences of lifelong expatriatism with the strict identifying precepts of culturally instilled English nationality and imperial duty. The second parallel, describing the conflicted fraternal relationship between the Consul and Hugh—characters who do, indeed, seem to represent “two sides of the same coin”—affords critical insight into each man's metaphysical—as well as physical—sense of isolation from the ambulant, seafaring lifestyle he knew in youth.

In order to demonstrate the Consul's liminal condition—which, borrowing from van Genep's lexicon—arises post-separation (from England) and ends, as in *Ultramarine*, before the closure of any ritual incorporation, it is first necessary to discuss the particular constructions of English national identity from which the protagonist feels irrevocably alienated. Narrated by M. Jacques Laruelle—the Consul's boyhood friend and sometime cuckold—Chapter 1 of *Under the Volcano* provides unique perspective on these institutionally prescribed models of selfhood during his formative years, not least because it is the only chapter presented from a viewpoint not Hugh's, Yvonne's (his wife's), or the Consul's own. On the Day of the Dead (November 2nd) 1939, exactly one year after the Consul's murder at the hands of fascist militants and Yvonne's nearly contemporaneous death, at the hoof of a rampaging horse—Lowry's narrative finds Jacques, a French national, on the verge of leaving Mexico for Paris. As he

reflects upon this momentous departure, an afflictive sense of alienation from Quauhnahuac, a town in which he has spent nearly five years, reveals, early on, that exile—a liminal experience, in Lowry’s works, of existence between (at least) two worlds—constitutes one of the novel’s central themes. The anguished quality of this experience, which recurs in various forms throughout *Under the Volcano*, emerges through Jacques’s overwhelming “fear”: his “sense of being, after all these years, and on his last day here [in Mexico], still a stranger” or, similarly, “like a wanderer on another planet” (10). An insurmountable sense of estrangement from local culture and place also characterizes the Consul’s experience of Mexico, as is evidenced, time and again, through his numerous internal monologues. The subsequent revelations of Chapter 1, which mostly concern the Consul’s youth and early adulthood, illustrate how experiences of abandonment and displacement profoundly confuse his sense of cultural identity.

Shortly after this scene, the owner of a local movie theater, Señor Bustamente, ruminates, skeptically, on the true employment of “an English Consul who could scarcely claim to have the interests of British trade at heart in a place where there were no British interests and no Englishmen,” and silently remarks to himself that the late Consul exuded a pitiable aura of abandonment in the days leading up to his death (31).

Sr. Bustamente was prepared to be sorry for the Consul even as a spider, sorry in his heart for the poor lonely dispossessed trembling soul that had sat drinking here night after night, abandoned by his wife (though she came back, M. Laruelle almost cried aloud, that was the extraordinary thing, she came back!) and possibly, remembering the socks, even by his country, and wandering hatless and desconsolado . . . (31).

Dipsomaniacal, dispossessed of country, and deprived of his consulship (note the pun on the Spanish word *desconsolado*, or “disconsolate”), the Consul suffers an identity crisis that can be traced to political-cultural developments regarding the state of British imperialism. This context is crucial to the present argument, which, once again, articulates *Under the Volcano*’s value as a postcolonial text.

The Second World War, which had ended only two years before *Under the Volcano*’s publication, reaffirmed the fallacy of Enlightenment teleology and related notions of Western civilization’s unimpeachable moral progress—fantasies that had already been profoundly shaken in the wake of the First World War.¹⁰ More importantly, the Second World War catalyzed the international process of decolonization, a transitional period that prompted widespread cultural realignments and accelerated the irreversible decline of Britain’s overseas hegemony. Against this historical backdrop, the Consul’s despair emerges as a form of postcolonial anxiety: a metaphysical condition, arising from feelings of disenchantment with British imperial ideology. Consequently, then, Señor Bustamente’s mistaken assumption, in the passage above, that the Consul was a spy (he mispronounces the word as “spider”) is ironic—since the work of a spy often involves the extended performance and concealment of identities—and helps to articulate the liminal (that is, transitional) quality of the Consul’s own selfhood.

Jacques’s recollection of the Consul’s early life reveals a tragedy of orphanhood, displacement, and failure to assimilate respected norms of English national identity. Born in Anglo-India, once the jewel of the British imperial crown, the Consul’s sense of cultural abandonment originates with his father’s mysterious disappearance into the Himalayan foothills.

¹⁰ See Jones, “The End of Europe.”

His mother had died when he was a child, in Kashmir, and, within the last year or so, his father, who'd married again, had simply, yet scandalously, disappeared. Nobody in Kashmir or elsewhere knew quite what had happened to him. One day he had walked up into the Himalayas and vanished, leaving Geoffrey, at Srinagar, with his half-brother, Hugh, then a baby in arms, and his stepmother. Then, as if that were not enough, the stepmother died too, leaving the two children alone in India. (20)

This summary tale of death and desertion, set against the backdrop of the British Raj, underlies the Consul's identity crisis. As Miller accurately observes, "Firmin is a figure who exemplifies a condition of late-colonial displacement" (5-6). Moreover, in a historical study of British expatriate communities after decolonization, John Darwin observes, "In their different ways (and much variation) [settlers and expatriates] were the vanguard and camp-followers of the British 'world-system'—that cumbrous amalgam of empire formal and informal. When it died they were orphaned" (345). The Consul's orphanhood, therefore, can be read as a metaphor for his feelings of cultural severance from the ideological influence of empire. By contrasting his earliest attempts, as a "strange little Anglo-Indian orphan," to embrace English national identity, against his increasingly disillusioned sense of self—as the disconsolate consul of Quauhnahuac—the intricacies of his experience of liminal exile—an extended "interstructural" process of anguished transition—begins to reveal itself (Lowry *Volcano* 17; Turner *Forest* 93).

The Consul, alternately known, in youth, as "Joffrey," "The Old Bean," and "that Firmin" (with another pun, perhaps, on the word "vermin") was raised in the eccentric, not to mention prodigiously alcoholic, home of Abraham Taskerson—a famous English poet whose

family adopts him (Lowry 19-20). His primary role models, in this period, were the Taskerson boys, his adoptive brothers, whose formidable constitutions (they were “healthy and strong”) allow them to drink enormous quantities of beer at a “mediaeval pace,” even while they engage in their favorite pastime of grueling perambulation across the English countryside (19).

In a mere five-mile walk they would stop at as many “pubs” and drink a pint or two of powerful beer in each. Even the youngest, who had not turned fifteen, would get through his six pints in an afternoon . . . It was a point of honour with them that, the drunker they became, the more sober they should appear. As a rule they walked fabulously upright, shoulders thrown back, eyes front, like guardsmen on duty, only, towards the end of the day, very very slowly, with that same “erect manly carriage,” in short, that had so impressed M. Laruelle’s father. (18-19)

While physically incapable of imitating the Taskerson boys’ “monstrous bluff English fashion” as an adolescent, the Consul, nevertheless, displays, as an adult, their dutiful commitment to appearing sober at all occasions (20). Evidence of this can be found in Chapter 3, when he drunkenly ventures out of his house, in search of another drink, only to fall flat on his face in the middle of the road (“suddenly the Calle Nicaragua rose up to meet him”) (81). Accosted by a surprised fellow Englishman, who supplies him with a draught of Burke’s Irish whisky, the Consul, newly fortified, feels as though he stands “as erect as Jim Taskerson” (85). Returning home, his wife, Yvonne, asks him to sober up and leave Mexico with her. Momentarily stunned by this last remark, as “the enormity of the insult passed into his soul,” he inwardly exclaims, “As if, as if, as if, he were not sober now!” (88). Aghast at her accusation, he reassures himself:

“no one could tell when he was drunk. Just like the Taskersons: God bless them. He was not the person to be seen reeling about in the street. True he might lie down in the street, if need be, like a gentleman; but he would not reel” (89). Such attempts to preserve the appearance of self-control, if only within his own—increasingly deluded—mind, exhibit the Consul’s lingering devotion to a particular model of English national identity, which was imposed upon him, in youth, by a prescriptive tradition of self-discipline and physical robustness.¹¹ Appositely, Jacques’s statement that the Taskersons resembled “guardsmen on duty” adumbrates the ideological foundation of this version of national identity, which the boys symbolize in the Consul’s memory. Avatars of one’s moral compunction to observe “duty,” they exert a powerful force on his idea of self. This influence also comes through in Jacques’s reference to the Consul as “an *hombre noble*,” a man of honor, and the consistency of this characterization, despite the Consul’s increasingly shambolic behavior, reinforces the fact of his ideological commitment to the civilizing mission of empire (32).

Nowhere is this ongoing commitment suggested so plainly as when Jacques ironically observes that, although Geoffrey Firmin’s consular office in Quauhnahuac amounts to a “sinecure,” his belief in imperium persists (33). While he has been relegated to “a position where he was least likely to prove a nuisance to the Empire,” it is an Empire, in “which with one part of his mind at least . . . he so passionately believed” (33). This insight provides a crucial clue to unraveling Geoffrey Firmin’s crisis of identity, since he is predominantly referred to, throughout the novel, by his official title of “Consul.” Most critics have overlooked the significance of this

¹¹ Read metonymically, as a comment on the declining British Empire, the Consul’s attempts to cover up his self-destruction with the appearance of sobriety takes on additional significance. As the historian Robert Holland observes of British decolonization, “The appearances of a controlled process were everything” (53).

simple narrative detail, but its implications for discussing ideologically prescribed identities are indispensable to any postcolonial study. Miller suggests that, because Lowry repeatedly “conflates Firmin’s identity with his institutional function,” the word “consul” becomes dissociated “from the task of representing a specific nation state” (1). However, there are more complicated ideological issues at play in this act of naming. If the Consul’s metaphysical position, at the time of the narrative, can be described as liminal—that is, located between a decaying model of English national identity, informed by imperial ideology, and an uncertain sense of his still-unfolding cultural identity as a willing, transnational exile—then the irony of the official title of “consul” emerges from its sardonic evocation of the Empire’s rapidly failing capacity to effectively interpellate—borrowing Louis Althusser’s term—its imperial agents *as subjects*.

For Althusser, interpellation suggests an ongoing process by which “ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among . . . individuals . . . or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects” (1269). He likens ideology’s interpellation of the individual to the act of “hailing,” or naming, a friend or acquaintance in accordance with some mutually recognized identity (1269). However, as Homi Bhabha observes, “Designations of cultural difference [in this case, English nationality] interpellate forms of identity which, because of their continual implication in other symbolic systems, are always ‘incomplete’ or open to cultural translation” (*Culture* 233). In other words, national identity is always-already unstable, subject to the translations of other “symbolic systems.” Applying this concept to the present reading of liminal exile in *Under the Volcano*, Geoffrey Firmin’s official title of “Consul” can be said to perform two functions. Firstly, it suggests the stubborn resilience of an increasingly fractured imperial

ideology, which has acted for so long as the preeminent force in English subjectivity during the modern period. Secondly, it should be recognized as an ironic form of address, which speaks to the character's increasing disenchantment with this declining ideology (Lowry 86). Throughout the novel, the Consul's self-image as an imperial agent bears heavily on his existential crisis—a metaphysical struggle between an externally prescribed national identity and an internally evolved concept of transnational selfhood developed in exile. Considered in these terms, the Consul's growing rejection of English national identity emerges as one of *Under the Volcano's* most enduring political issues.

To further demonstrate the liminal character of the Consul's inner conflict, it is worth reiterating Victor Turner's observation from *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, that "major liminal situations are occasions on which a society *takes cognizance of itself*," and in which "members of that society may obtain an approximation, however limited, to a global view of man's place in the cosmos" (239-240). Taking the late interwar period, during which *Under the Volcano* is set, as one liminal moment in history preceding, and even presaging, another liminal period—that is, the transitional process of British decolonization—it becomes apparent that, on the eve of the Second World War and the subsequent dismemberment of Empire, which immediately followed, the Consul's existential crisis develops out of a newly endowed cognizance of his own transnational, as opposed to national/imperial, identity.

Nevertheless, the dawning of this new cognizance does not immediately overturn the Consul's self-concept as an imperial agent. Steeped in national tradition from the first, he began his life in a British colony (India); was adopted and raised by the family of a famous English poet (Taskerson); served—with distinction—in the Royal Navy during the First World War; and,

following that career, attempted to join the Indian Civil Service before landing, instead, in the Diplomatic Service, in which he acquired the official rank of Consul (33). Crucially, his interpellation as a subject of the imperium runs deep, as Jacques makes abundantly clear in his suggestion of the Consul's "passionate" belief in the British Empire (33). In a subsequent reflection, too, Jacques observes that, despite his friend's compulsion to expatriate, leaving behind the metropolitan heart of Empire, "The Consul loved England" (34). Therefore, his relationship to nation and imperium must be considered in terms of its ambivalence, which rises to the fore in a critical passage from one of the protagonist's purloined letters to his wife. Found, by Jacques, in a volume of Elizabethan plays belonging to the Consul, this oft-discussed letter provides deep insight into the protagonist's state of mind on his final day.

No, my secrets are of the grave and must be kept. And this is how I sometimes think of myself, as a great explorer who has discovered some extraordinary land from which he can never return to give his knowledge to the world: but the name of this land is hell. It is not Mexico of course but in the heart. And to-day I was in Quauhnahuac as usual when I received from my lawyer news of our divorce. I received other news too: England is breaking off diplomatic relations with Mexico and all her Consuls—those, that is, who are English—are being called home. These are kindly and good men, for the most part, whose name I suppose I demean. I shall not go home with them. I shall perhaps go home but not to England, not to that home. (37-38)

This passage is revealing for at least three reasons. First, it exemplifies the Consul's romantic habit of soliloquizing, playing the role of Faustus in a Mexican tragedy of his own design.

Second, the passage emphasizes the Consul's feeling that, despite the souring of British diplomatic relations in Mexico—President Lázaro Cárdenas having recently nationalized the country's foreign-owned oil companies—he can no longer return to England and find himself “at home.”¹² Moreover, he distances himself from the other English consuls in Mexico, whom he characterizes as “kindly and good men . . . whose name I suppose I demean.” Third, and most importantly, the Consul intimates his obsession with the idea that he is “a great explorer who has discovered some extraordinary land from which he can never return to give his knowledge to the world.” This self-characterization recurs through his periodic reference to the story of William Blackstone, a puritan settler in North America who abandoned his fellow colonists “to live among the Indians,” and, indeed, just prior to the Consul's murder—at the Farolito bar in Parián—he lies to his assassin by identifying himself neither by his given name nor diplomatic title, but as “Blackstone” (53, 373).¹³

Crucially, the explorer theme represents one of *Under the Volcano*'s most significant links to the novel *Ultramarine*, as the Consul's ominous ruminations are reminiscent of Dana Hilliot's blithe intrepidity when he announces, “When my duty is done, we shall return to the land and find it blessed” (*Ultramarine* 186). By contrast, the Consul's rueful pronouncement that he has become stranded, eternally displaced in an “extraordinary” territory to which he has laid claim—a land whose name is “hell”—illustrates the development of Lowry's vision, concerning the exile hero's liminal experience, as it transforms from the liberating openness of Dana's traveling identity in *Ultramarine* to the Consul's fractured imperial identity, poised on the brink of collapse in *Under the Volcano*. Replacing the naive optimism of Dana's call for a “workable

¹² For more on the novel's Mexican political context, see Vollman, “Afterword” (397).

¹³ For more on the Blackstone legend, see Cripps, “Lost in the Wilderness.”

object” (*Ultramarine* 186) is the impression of irremediable severance, conveyed through the Consul’s remark that “he can never return to give his knowledge to the world” (*Volcano* 37-38). This tragic sense of never being able to return “to the world”—of being exiled in alien territory—evokes the final expedition of David Livingstone, the famous English explorer whose exploits in southern Africa were premised on an imperial mission of bringing Christianity, civilization, and commerce to what was considered a benighted continent (Pakenham xxii). In Chapter 5, Quincey, the Consul’s American neighbor, greets him with the phrase, “Dr. Livingstone, I presume” (*Volcano* 138). The fact that Livingstone died on an expedition to Africa establishes an ironic parallel to the Consul’s own demise, occurring, as it does, on his metaphysical expedition to “hell.” Critically, this allusion to Livingstone also establishes a contrast to the Blackstone tale, which it recalls due to the similarity of the men’s names. On the one hand, the Livingstone reference testifies to the Consul’s clouded self-characterization as an explorer seeking to deliver knowledge and progress to an uncivilized world. On the other hand, the Blackstone allusion—which, once again, refers to a Puritan settler’s decisive abandonment of his settler community to live among the natives—indicates a fundamental break with imperialist ideology, since it underlines the Consul’s profound sense of cultural severance from English national identity. Between these two overriding sentiments, then, the Consul finds himself in a liminal space of ambivalent self-doubt: a space that he occupies throughout most of the novel, and that contributes, finally, to his unfortunate death at the hands of political hard-liners bent on ridding the country of corrupting foreign influences.

Another important allusion that undergirds the Consul’s liminal experience of exile comes through in Jacques’s comparison of his story to that of Lord Jim, the protagonist of Joseph

Conrad's eponymous novel of 1900. This comparison arises from his consideration of the Consul's life since being decorated for heroism, as the commanding officer of a British Q-Ship, during the open sea capture of a German U-Boat in the First World War.¹⁴ However, this episode, for which the Consul was awarded "the British Distinguished Service Order or Cross," has been tarnished by the mysterious disappearance of all the German submarine's officers—rumored to have been incinerated in the Q-Ship's furnaces (34).

Yet it was easy to think of the Consul as a kind of more lachrymose pseudo "Lord Jim" living in a self-imposed exile, brooding, despite his award, over his lost honour, his secret, and imagining that a stigma would cling to him because of it throughout his whole life. Yet this was far from the case. No stigma clung to him evidently . . . Unlike "Jim" he had grown rather careless of his honour and the German officers were merely an excuse to buy another bottle of mescal. (34-35)

First and foremost, the Lord Jim allusion reinforces the Consul's characterization, throughout the novel, as "living in a self-imposed exile." The issue of "lost honour" is more disputable, since the Consul's alcoholism constantly undermines his attempts to preserve a façade of self-control and upright English manliness *à la* the Taskerson boys. Nevertheless, the Consul's sense of being an outcast, or pariah, of the Empire and the English nation comes through time and again in Lowry's association of his protagonist with the image of the "hideous pariah dog," which

¹⁴ British Q-Ships were warships disguised as merchant vessels used to combat German submarines (U-Boats) during the First World War. For more on the role of Q-Ships in the First World War, see Walker, "The Q-Ships of Granton Naval Base."

recurs at intervals throughout the novel (67).¹⁵ One of the few critics to discuss the Lord Jim allusion in any detail, Ramirez observes: “There are few safe harbors left to Jim as a failed agent of the empire. He thus seeks asylum among the natives of Borneo, reinventing himself as ‘Tuan Jim.’ Likewise, the Consul is complicit in the murder of the German officers. He is both a hero and a traitor; first he flees to Spain and then to Mexico (country and colony) where he will end his consulship” (141). That the Consul is both “a hero and a traitor” evidences, once more, the ambivalent, liminal position he occupies as an imperial agent on the British Empire’s outer rim. However, Jim’s “reinvention” as “Tuan Jim,” in Conrad’s novel, also presents an intriguing parallel to Geoffrey Firmin’s reinvention of himself as “the Consul.” Both “Lord Jim” and “the Consul” represent ironic forms of address—since both men exert fairly insignificant influence in the global scheme of imperial politics—while also evoking each protagonist’s interpellation by imperial ideology.

Bound by a fanatical, yet laconic commitment to “duty,” Jim seeks to escape the stigma of cowardice and failure in light of his imperial duty, even while he remains committed to a life of perennial exile (*Lord Jim* 292). Similarly, the Consul’s sense of duty to the imperium—buried beneath layers of moribund philosophizing and caustic irony—coexists with a sense of his own exile from a home he can scarcely define. For, although the Consul fantasizes about “some northern country, of mountains and hills and blue water” and a “house built on an inlet”—a fantasy of marginal living heavily based on Lowry’s coastal shack in Dollarton, British Columbia—the Consul, nevertheless, cannot conceive of any reachable home, compounding his

¹⁵ Notably, the novel’s final line, which follows the Consul’s unceremonious burial in the *barranca* (ravine), reads: “Somebody threw a dead dog after him down the ravine” (391). It is also significant that the town, in which he is killed, is called *Parián* (353).

self-directed experience of irretrievable exile in “hell” (*Volcano* 38). Such a representation of exile, in stark contrast to the optimistic freedom displacement engenders in *Ultramarine*, contributes to the oppressive characterization of the local sphere in *Under the Volcano*: a zone that inhibits the mobility of the world traveler and his attempts to attain a global consciousness—to synthesize a salutary sense of his continuously evolving transnational identity in an age perched on the cusp of postcolonial schism. Consequently, his existential crisis can be productively considered in light of his being exiled from the sea—a space so eloquently valorized in Lowry’s first novel, as a vast, interstitial realm “betwixt and between” (employing Turner’s phrase) territories, untainted by the tyrannical politics of nationalism and empire (*Dramas* 232).

At this point, it is necessary to return to Ramirez’s assertion that the Consul (Geoffrey) and his brother, Hugh, represent “two sides of the same coin” (131). Having established that, at the beginning of the novel, the Consul finds himself culturally severed (post-separation) from English society and fully immersed in the condition of social liminality, Hugh’s decision to return to sea illustrates the restorative effect of transmarine travel in Lowry’s novels. Both brothers spent parts of their young lives at sea—the Consul, as a naval officer, and Hugh, as a deckhand on a merchant voyage to the East—and their experiences there haunt the tumultuous conflict between national identity and transnational identity, which especially underlies the Consul’s politically charged existential crisis in the novel. On the verge of thirty, and prompted by the knowledge that “one could not be young forever,” Hugh Firmin spends most of Chapter 6 lying on his bed, engaged in reflection on his youth and leftist politics (*Volcano* 157). The theme

of exile is developed considerably during this lengthy chapter, which helps to underscore Lowry's consistent representation of modern displacement as liminal experience.

But the useful thought struck Hugh: I have no responsibilities. And how can I be escaping from myself when I am without a place on earth? No home. A piece of driftwood on the Indian Ocean. Is India my home? Disguise myself as an untouchable, which should not be so difficult, and go to prison on the Andaman Islands for seventy-seven years, until England gives India her freedom? But I will tell you this: you would only by doing so be embarrassing Mahatma Gandhi, secretly the only public figure in the world for whom you have any respect. No, I respect Stalin too, Cárdenas, and Jawaharlal Nehru—all three of whom probably could only be embarrassed by my respect. (160)

This passage emphasizes the inherently political character of the protagonist's existential struggle in *Under the Volcano*. Charged with ideological sympathies for nascent nationalist and communist movements worldwide, the passage demonstrates Lowry's self-conscious inscription of timely political commentary within a novel that has been, predominantly, hailed for its aesthetic qualities. Representing the Consul's "other side," Hugh harbors a liberal-minded sympathy towards the burgeoning prospect of British decolonization. Whereas the Consul remains haunted by imperial ideology, Hugh's Marxist leanings illustrate his ethical commitment to a world free of imperialism.¹⁶ His heroes are Gandhi, Stalin, Cárdenas, and Nehru: figures

¹⁶ In an insightful study of the novel's political context, Mark L. Hama observes, "Leftist politics remained an important part of Lowry's identity throughout his life and significantly influenced *Under the Volcano*'s development" (59-60).

whose influence upon the narrative should not be understated.¹⁷ More importantly, though, Hugh's feeling of "having no responsibilities," speaks to Victor Turner's observation that, during periods of ritual transition, the liminal subject's "burden of responsibility" is lifted (*Forests* 101). This detail highlights Hugh's liminal, exilic consciousness and links his—seemingly, less dire—existential plight to that of his brother. Ultimately, the central significance of this passage—with respect to the brothers' sense of exile from the sea—lies in Hugh's identification with "a piece of driftwood on the Indian Ocean." Feeling no connection to colonial India—the place of his birth—nor any special devotion to England, Hugh's sentiments illustrate the symbolic value of the open sea as a transnational zone of identification, free from the political strictures of nationality and Empire.

Another important allusion to *Ultramarine*—whose bright-eyed *naïveté* stands in stark contrast to *Under the Volcano*'s more pessimistic portrayal of exile—emerges in Chapter 6, when Hugh recalls his decision to go to sea, aboard the vessel *Philoctetes*, with the aim of jumpstarting his career as a jazz musician (*Volcano* 162). Like Dana Hilliot, whose impressionable temperament and literary aspirations lead him to the seafaring life, Hugh Firmin's oceanic odyssey originates from "reading too much Jack London" (165). Like Dana, too, Hugh's initial experience at sea is profoundly disenchanting, since "he had expected to leave British snobbery astern with his public school [and] was sadly mistaken" (169). Moreover, the

¹⁷ Hugh's admiration for Stalin makes for a disturbing admission, although, as Vollman points out, *Under the Volcano* is "set in a time when Communism was not completely tarnished." (399) However, Vollman also observes that "by 1938, when Bukharin and the other remaining Old Bolsheviks were tried and shot on absurd charges and the Great Terror was obliterating hundreds of thousands, the show trials had received considerable publicity and the press coverage suggested rather evidently that they stank" (398-399). Taken in context, though, it does not seem that Hugh's sympathies lie with the totalitarian practices of censorship, show trials, and political executions, so much as with the ideals of Marxist politics.

conclusion of his voyage, rather than bringing him fame as a musician, instead brings “a humiliation in itself sufficient to send anyone into even more desperate retreat than to the sea” (167). On the one hand, then, Hugh’s self-deriding recollection of the voyage rebukes the careless optimism of *Ultramarine*’s Dana Hilliot, whose emergent sense of transnational selfhood—developed at sea—constitutes an unrealized model of aspiration throughout much of Lowry’s work. On the other hand, he remains cognizant of the sea’s salutary influence upon his life. “Perhaps after all,” he reflects, “He did genuinely love the sea, and that nauseous overrated expanse was his only love” (165). This ambivalence arises from Hugh’s transformative experience as a lamprimmer aboard the *Oedipus Tyrannus*—the same ship on which Dana sails in *Ultramarine*.

Hugh transfers briefly, from the modern vessel, *Philoctetes*, to the *Tyrannus* near the end of his seafaring travels. Seduced by its untimely, romantic aura, Hugh marvels, “She was, unlike the *Philoctetes*, everything in his eyes a ship should be” (173).

The condition of her bridge suggested recent contact—could it be possible?—with a typhoon. If not, she possessed the air of one who would soon attract them. She was battered, ancient, and happy thought, perhaps even about to sink. And yet there was something youthful and beautiful about her, like an illusion that will never die, but always remains hull-down on the horizon . . . Ah, his brother Geoff, too, knew these seas, these pastures of experience, what would he have done?
(174)

Nevertheless, while romanticizing the *Oedipus Tyrannus* as a ship bound for adventure, Hugh experiences disillusionment there quite unlike the optimistic epiphany Dana undergoes in

Ultramarine. “When he returned to the *Philoctetes* a month later in Singapore,” Hugh reflects, “He was a different man” (174). Having realized that “to the sailor life at sea was no senseless publicity stunt,” he becomes “horribly ashamed of ever having exploited it” (175). Ironically, though, his experience at sea both chastens him and provides a much-needed sense of belonging: “On board the *Oedipus Tyrannus* . . . Hugh had been neither abused nor toadied to. He had been treated as a comrade. And generously helped, when unequal to his task” (176). Upon returning to England, he becomes a journalist for the *Globe*, making a second and third trip to sea, covering “the British Coastal Trade” (189). Ultimately, though, Hugh’s most illustrative statement regarding his seaborne past, arises in the remark that “it was as though that experience of the sea, also, exaggerated by time, had invested one with the profound inner maladjustment of the sailor who can never be happy on land” (185). This “inner maladjustment” both conveys Hugh’s profound sense of exile from the sea and illustrates Said’s observation that the exile is in a “state of never being fully adjusted” (“Exile” 373).

Exile for the intellectual in this metaphysical sense is restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others. You cannot go back to some earlier and perhaps more stable condition of being at home; and, alas, you can never fully arrive, be at one with your new home or situation. (373)

Hugh’s own restless “maladjustment” proves lasting, as he decides that he must leave Mexico and return to the sea. His feelings on this subject are, at first, mixed: he is “afraid; and yet not afraid” (*Volcano* 190). However, his subsequent remark: “I love the sea, the pure Norwegian sea,” evidences his determination to return there: to a space in which he can come to terms with a conflicted sense of self (190). “Accept it,” he tells himself, “One is a sentimentalist, a muddler, a

realist, a dreamer, coward, hypocrite, hero, an Englishman in short, unable to follow out his own metaphors” (190). His reference, here, to being an “Englishman in short” is sarcastic, implying a belief that—for all its seeming self-assurance—English national identity merely masks a barrel of contradictions, including heroism/cowardice, idealism/realism, and various other oxymoronic pairs. Rejecting this externally prescribed model of selfhood (imposed on him both at public school and at Cambridge) and lacking the sea’s salutary influence, his sense of dispossession reaches an apex.

Fundamentally, Hugh’s sense of exile from the sea—a realm of refuge, in his imagination—casts light on the Consul’s own irrecoverable sense of fractured selfhood, since his life, too, has been similarly marked by patterns of expatriation and sea travel. “Geoff,” Hugh recalls, “like some ghostly other self was always in Rabat or Timbuctoo” (179). Crucially, Hugh’s intimation, here, that the Consul represents “some ghostly other self,” reemphasizes the brothers’ profound metaphysical connection throughout the novel. For this very reason, it is necessary to explore Hugh’s sense of exile from the sea alongside the Consul’s, similarly landlocked, crisis of identity. Both are exiles with no real sense of home and each character occupies a liminal, metaphysical space, between English national identity—a construct from which he feels alienated—and the often-tense living conditions of expatriates in late-1930s Mexico. Therefore, the Consul and Hugh’s mutual plight can be described as the anxiety of cultural severance. Orphans of the imperium, they struggle—and, ultimately, fail—to fuse the disparate transcultural and transnational strands of their personal histories to realize an authentic sense of selfhood on the eve of a world war and British decolonization. This struggle forms the

center of *Under the Volcano*'s postcolonial crisis, which arrives at its climax with the Consul's murder in the Farolito.

The Consul's murder, in Chapter 12, stems from the seething political tensions brought on by Cárdenas's nationalization of foreign-owned oil companies and the ongoing Spanish Civil War. Having abandoned himself to alcoholism, the Consul realizes, "He had reached his crisis at last, a crisis without possession, almost without pleasure finally" (366). Notably, this reference to a "crisis without possession"—although an admittedly opaque phrase—subtly recapitulates the novel's persistent theme of dispossession. The theme is also buttressed by scattered references to the Consul's "lostness" and, again, to his sensation of being "only lost, only homeless" (359, 369). Therefore, when the Chiefs of the *Unión Militar* accuse him of being a spy, his pretending to be William Blackstone constitutes not only a drunken tactic of evasion, but also suggests his ever-diminishing hold on identity. Furthermore, it is ironic that the Consul should be shot for failing to produce official documents ("where your passaporte?"), which would secure his English nationality and purpose in Mexico (385). He loses this identifying document in Chapter 7, while riding on a carnival attraction called *La Máquina Infernal*—a "huge looping-the-loop machine"—an incident that conveys, perhaps more directly than any other, his profound sense of cultural disorientation and estrangement from English national identity.

Everything was falling out of his pockets, was being wrested from him, torn away, a fresh article at each whirling, sickening, plunging, retreating, unspeakable circuit, his notecase, pipe, keys, his dark glasses he had taken off . . . his passport—had that been his passport? He didn't know if he'd brought it with him. Then he remembered he had brought it. Or hadn't brought it. It could be difficult

even for a Consul to be without a passport in Mexico. Ex-consul. What did it matter? Let it go! There was a kind of fierce delight in this final acceptance. Let everything go! Everything particularly that provided means of ingress or egress, went bond for, gave meaning or character, or purpose or identity to that frightful bloody nightmare he was forced to carry around with him everywhere upon his back, that went by the name Geoffrey Firmin, late of His Majesty's Navy, later still of His Majesty's Consular Service." (233)

First and foremost, a critique of the commodification of national identity—an image of selfhood certified by documents like the passport—emerges, in this scene, elaborating further the meaning of the Consul's "crisis without possession." Additionally, his "fierce delight" at letting go of his official documents constitutes both a rejection of his imperial associations, as well as the "final acceptance" of his position as an exile. These sentiments are boldly affirmed in his stated desire to give up "everything particularly that provided means of ingress or egress, went bond for, gave meaning or character, or purpose or identity," and the subsequent suggestion that his—supposedly essential—identity as Geoffrey Firmin is a "frightful bloody nightmare he was forced to carry around with him everywhere upon his back" implies that the weight of imperial duty ("late of His Majesty's Navy, later still of His Majesty's Consular Service") has become too burdensome to bear.

Ultimately, the Consul's dire failure, in *Under the Volcano*, constitutes an inability to synthesize a viable sense of transnational selfhood to replace an increasingly fragmented model of English national identity built on the back of one of history's most powerful and expansive empires. An exile of the British Imperium, who has been "kicked downstairs into ever remoter

consulships,” the obsolescence of his official role ironically demonstrates the hollowness of imperial ideology in a period defined by jarring cultural and political transitions (33). Once more, the Lowrian exile-hero’s quest ends with no resolution of the liminal period. Having separated from English society, he remains in the precarious state of transition. Situated between externally prescribed and internally evolved versions of identity, yet still unable to recuperate an authentic sense of self, the tragedy of the Consul’s death stems from his inability to suture over the immense wound of cultural severance from which he suffers. Therefore, in stark contrast to *Ultramarine*’s optimistic vision of what we may, retrospectively, term transnationalism and cultural hybridity, *Under the Volcano* dramatizes an ex-colonial’s irremediable cultural bewilderment and metaphysical sense of lostness in a world whose political realities have begun drastically to realign.

CHAPTER THREE: *DARK AS THE GRAVE WHEREIN MY FRIEND IS LAID*

And I crucified between two continents.

—Malcolm Lowry, “In The Oaxaca Jail”

Much of the criticism surrounding Lowry’s posthumously published *Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid* (1969) has been concerned with appropriately classifying the text and designating its exact, subsidiary function within the author’s erratic oeuvre. Frequently included in wider analyses of the post-*Volcano* corpus, *Dark as the Grave*, nevertheless, rarely constitutes the sole focus of critical study. However, as Greg Bond notes in his “Critical Reassessment,” three general trends can be observed in the extant scholarship.

Critics of *Dark as the Grave* generally agree that it is Lowry’s weakest book.

There is a strong consensus, particularly in early criticism, which concentrates on three types of judgement. Firstly, *Dark as the Grave* has been seen as a poor relation to *Under the Volcano*, secondly as the uninteresting, self-indulgent journal of the author’s journey to Mexico in 1945-46, and thirdly as an inferior novel which lacks the qualities of realist fiction, in the illusionist nineteenth-century style. (77)

Although these traditional readings have their merits, they tend to place too much emphasis on the novel’s shortcomings, directing undue attention to its narrative misadventures in an effort to diagnose them as symptoms of Lowry’s personal struggles in the post-*Volcano* years.

Consequently, *Dark as the Grave*'s numerous failings have all too frequently constituted the central element of critical discussion, distracting from its illuminating elaboration of Lowry's thoughts on the subjects of exile and travel. Notably, the novel was compiled and edited by Margerie Bonner Lowry—the author's widow—and Douglas Day, which initially raised the question of whether or not the text should be considered thoroughly Lowry's own. Nevertheless, and, perhaps, given Margerie's frequent assistance to Malcolm in editing and typing the manuscript of *Under the Volcano*, few discount *Dark as the Grave*'s relevance as an object of critical discussion, rendering Day's assertion in the preface—that the novel periodically exhibits an “embryonic greatness”—difficult to dispute (xviii). In agreement with this basic premise—and in an effort to highlight this underrated text's transnational significance—the present chapter considers *Dark as the Grave* a metafictional travelogue: a lightly fictionalized companion to Lowry's masterpiece, *Under the Volcano*, whose worldliness emerges from its direct engagement with the modern exile's ritualistic—that is to say, transformative—experience of itinerancy in a newly postcolonial world. Bearing out the theories of Victor Turner and Edward Said, Lowry's protagonist, Sigbjørn Wilderness, exhibits the ambivalent quality of liminal exile to a profound degree. Proud of his self-willed detachment from English national identity—an externally imposed model of selfhood dictated to him in youth—he, nonetheless, struggles to synthesize an authentic sense of self in line with his burgeoning transnational ethic as an expatriate artist.

As with most Lowry criticism, studies of *Dark as the Grave* are predominantly biographically informed discussions of the writer's inability to reproduce a novel on the grand scale of *Under the Volcano*; his struggles with narrative and characterization; and his nagging

belief that all of his works were, to varying degrees, incomplete. Matthew Corrigan's lengthy essay on the post-*Volcano* novels, "The Phenomenology of Failure," typifies this critical trend, drawing extensively upon biographical detail in a critique of the author's late style.

In between the magnificent passages clatters the story line, sometimes painfully, almost always self-consciously. Throughout this period Lowry is cognizant of his failure with narrative and characterization, as indeed he is while writing *Volcano*; but the problem now is more central, and somehow he cannot surmount it as he does in the earlier novel. He rationalizes a "new form" around his failure: a form that will follow the configurative life of consciousness (his own, though he hopes, incidentally, modern man's) as it constitutes itself through stages of becoming.

(413)

Despite his overreliance on the biographical, however, Corrigan's observation that Lowry's late period witnessed the emergence (however inchoate) of a new literary form—a form highlighting the "configurative life of consciousness . . . as it constitutes itself through stages of becoming"—helps to illuminate *Dark as the Grave*'s portrait of the modern expatriate's cultural identity in its perennial state of transition. As the current chapter seeks to reiterate, the protagonist's identity is neither a stable nor essential quantity in Lowry's novels. In other words, the Lowrian exile's consciousness is constantly being reconfigured: the identity it reflects repeatedly shifts among an array of transnational modes of being. For this reason, the most insightful interpretations of *Dark as the Grave*—Lowry's "weakest" novel—readily challenge its relegation to the general mass of post-*Volcano* works by prioritizing its portrayal of the protagonist's metaphysical transformation. In a reading reflective of Sherrill Grace's apt assessment that the novel "holds

considerable interest, not so much for information about *Volcano*, as for Lowry's treatment of withdrawal and return and of the writer entrapped in his work," Cynthia Sugars employs Van Gennep's theory of the three-part rite of passage—characterized by stages of separation, transition, and incorporation—in an intriguing analysis of Sigbjørn and Primrose Wilderness's pilgrimage to Mexico (Grace 61; van Gennep 191). Although she does not adequately emphasize the liminal period (it is notable that her argument does not draw upon Turner's work), Sugars's reading of *Dark as the Grave*, as the account of an important "initiation rite," productively highlights the ritualistic character of travel, and, more specifically to *this* novel, the very idea of pilgrimage (149).

Echoing Sugars's interpretation of the central rite of passage, this chapter discusses Sigbjørn's identity crisis in *Dark as the Grave* as it traces a tripartite movement. At the beginning of the novel, Sigbjørn's internal ruminations cast light on the exile's ambivalent worldview. Traveling towards Mexico, the site of youthful debauchery and the setting of his still-unpublished novel *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* (a pseudonym for *Under the Volcano*), he exhibits, through his paranoiac fear of border crossing and distaste for the logistics of travel, the anxious metaphysical condition of the Lowrian exile-hero. The middle of the novel, marked by what Grace calls the protagonist's "withdrawal," contains some of the most scathing, and, in fact, prescient, criticisms of globalization to be found in Lowry's work. These invectives, chiefly directed at America's rising cultural and economic influence as a global superpower, definitively place Sigbjørn on the side of Mexican local culture. While enamored of Mexico's rustic landscapes, his disgust with America's cultural imperialism, nevertheless, coincides with an irremediable sense of alienation from all places, excepting his former Canadian idyll. Ostensibly

seeking his long-lost friend Fernando—the inspiration for two characters in *The Valley of the Shadow of Death*—he spends the middle portion of the journey fighting the sensation that he has somehow become a character in his own novel. However, just prior to *Dark as the Grave*'s conclusion, upon discovering that Fernando has recently died, Sigbjørn attains a measure of redemption through deep contemplation, a sense of personal meaning that allows him to emerge from within himself (that is, to end his period of withdrawal) and mentally rejoin his wife, as they journey back from the “lugubrious” town of Mitla (the inspiration for Parian, site of the Consul's murder in *Under the Volcano*) towards the blissfully bucolic climes of a newly fertile Oaxaqueñan countryside (Lowry 246).

As Terence Bareham adroitly observes, “Many of Lowry's key scenes are set on journeys” (357). The opening chapter of *Dark as the Grave* presents no exception, as it finds Sigbjørn Wilderness and his wife, Primrose, in the middle of a plane ride down the west coast of the United States, from Oregon to California. This chapter's first, Faulknerian sentence, descriptive of the very sensation of travel, suggests the liminal condition of the Lowrian exile-hero. The initial phrase of this nearly page-long sentence begins, “The sense of speed, of gigantic transition, of going southward, downward, over three countries, the tremendous mountain ranges, the sense at once of descent, the tremendous regression, and of moving, not moving, but in another way dropping straight down the world, straight down the map,” sets the tone for an obsessively self-conscious narrative, abounding with direct references to the metaphysical implications of the modern expatriate's itinerant lifestyle (1). Reflective of Sigbjørn's exilic consciousness, the emphasis placed, here, on “the sense . . . of gigantic transition” also testifies to the thematic centrality of the protagonist's liminal condition—the experience of dwelling,

metaphysically, between the worlds of past memory and present reality; between the lands of exile and nativity; and, most importantly, between externally regulated models of national identity. Moreover, the vertiginous sensation of “dropping straight down the world” represents both an allusion to the novel’s predecessor, *Under the Volcano*, and an acknowledgement of the disorienting experience of travel, generally. However, in spite of his discomfort aboard the plane, Sigbjørn cannot help but indulge in a simultaneous “sense of adventure, [even] if [he] participated in it mostly for Primrose’s sake” (1). These early sentences strike a note of ambiguity, which lingers throughout the narrative whenever the subject of travel arises.

Sigbjørn’s anguished experience of exile, a liminal metaphysical condition, is intensified by the fact that he and Primrose’s home—a coastal shack on an islet called Eridanus (the fictionalized version of Malcolm and Margerie’s real-life home in Dollarton, British Columbia)—has recently burned to the ground, taking with it the manuscript of Sigbjørn’s latest novel, *In Ballast to the White Sea* (an event also based on Lowry’s life experience). Understandably aggrieved, the couple’s newfound homelessness lends increased severity to their status as exiles in Mexico. Nevertheless, it is critical to observe that Sigbjørn and Primrose’s decision to live on the geographical margins, and on the western beaches of Canada, specifically, represents a conscious, self-willed form of exile to begin with. This *physically* liminal existence—situated between society and the sea, as it were—is, therefore, only compounded by the fact that their home has lately been destroyed by the elements. Moreover, the significance of the sea as a recurrent reference point in Sigbjørn’s metaphorical repertoire primarily owes to his and Primrose’s idyllic memories of Eridanus.

As in *Ultramarine* and *Under the Volcano*, the sea represents the idealized territory of the intrepid world wanderer—a liberating zone free from the impinging strictures of national politics and traditional modes of being. It is highly significant, then, that Sigbjørn should make reference, in one of the novel's earliest intertextual allusions, to three lines from Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, in which Troilus describes his feelings of inner conflict: "*Al stereless and in a boot am I, amid the sea, between windes two, that in contrarie standen evermo*" (11). Sigbjørn's choice of this particular fragment, an evocative description of his own feelings of lostness and existential turmoil, evidences his liminal mindset as an exile. Caught "*between*" the opposing winds of cultural and historical change in the post-World War II era, and feeling, consequently, rudderless ("*stereless*"), his metaphorical comparison of himself to a lost sailor on the open sea both reaffirms the Lowrian exile-hero's nautical inclinations and reinforces his sense of disorientation at the beginning of the novel.

Crucially, Sigbjørn's personal sense of disorientation speaks to the world's rapidly changing geopolitical and historical topography in the postwar years. An illustrative passage, which suggests this tumultuous process of cultural transition and global displacement, occurs halfway through Chapter II, while Sigbjørn and Primrose stand in line, preparing to board their plane in the Los Angeles Airport. Observing a group of servicemen in the queue, Sigbjørn's thoughts turn to the diasporic consequences of the war and its aftermath.

Both the sailors and soldiers had this in common: they looked deathly tired. So many people moving about, going back to their homes, to broken homes, leaving their homes, sailors half seasick for another sea, soldiers half seasick for another war. Not all his aloofness and standing askance from anyone in uniform could

keep Sigbjørn from pity. Before he was twenty he had been a seaman and a fireman himself in the British merchant service . . . But meanwhile it was as if the war had sent the quicksilver of human lives scattering in every direction. God absently peered down through the glass, tilted the closed box again, and the scattered bits of mercury began to run back into their proper burrows. But no, here were a couple of bright little globules that refused to go in. . . . Primrose and Sigbjørn shuffled up, step by step. (35)

This passage is illustrative for a number of reasons, as it touches upon the lingering sense of world-weariness brought on by the war; Sigbjørn's aversion to nationalism and institutional power; the "scattering" of peoples throughout years of conflict; and Sigbjørn's lingering sense that he and Primrose represent categorical misfits to western societies now shifting back into order. Among these illustrations, however, it is the historical process of diaspora, so vividly evoked in Sigbjørn's reflection that "the war had sent the quicksilver of human lives scattering in every direction," which represents a unifying theme in Lowry's expatriate novels. Time and again, their narratives paradoxically valorize the anguish of social marginality, whereby the protagonists' innate sense of cultural alienation fuels an irrepressible drive to migrate. Beset by countless anxieties in their endeavors to forge authentic, internally evolved transnational identities, characters, such as Dana Hilliot and the Consul, nonetheless, evince, through their complementary exilic worldviews, that the preservation of one's individuality in the modern world is basically incongruent with the homogenizing precepts of national and imperial identities. The mindset of Sigbjørn Wilderness, therefore, presents no exception to this central theme.

In his revealing theorization of the “intellectual exile,” Edward Said draws attention to the quality of “curmudgeonly disagreeableness,” which stems from the exile’s unique liminal situation (“Exile” 373). Specifically, his instantiation of Theodor Adorno, the twentieth-century Marxist intellectual whose American sojourn during the Second World War “stamped him with the marks of exile forever,” demonstrates the intellectual exile’s fundamentally contrarian ethos and provides an illustrative subject by which to gauge the character of Sigbjørn Wilderness (375).

Paradoxical, ironic, mercilessly critical: Adorno was the quintessential intellectual, hating *all* systems, whether on our side or theirs, with equal distaste. For him life was at its most false in the aggregate—the whole is always the untrue—he once said—and this, he continued, placed an even greater premium on subjectivity, on the individual’s consciousness, on what could not be regimented in the totally administered society. (375)

Like Adorno, Sigbjørn is “paradoxical, ironic, [and] mercilessly critical.” Moreover, the two men—the one real and the other, a fictionalization of his author—possess a hatred of all systems. After all, it is only *despite* his “aloofness and standing askance from anyone in uniform” that Sigbjørn is able to sympathize with the haggard soldiers at the Los Angeles Airport (Lowry 35). Said’s observation, too, that Adorno believed life to be “at its most false in the aggregate” also speaks to the similarity between Sigbjørn, whose distaste for nationalism underlies his adoption of exile as a permanent condition, and the perennially malcontented Adorno. Finally, Said’s emphasis on the intellectual exile’s placing of a high “premium” on subjectivity resonates with Lowry’s painstakingly introverted writing style, the best of which Corrigan aptly describes as

“writing of pure consciousness” (413). As in Lowry’s previous novels, action, in *Dark as the Grave*, is always secondary to the protagonist’s internal experiences, placing Sigbjørn’s ruminations at the forefront of the narrative.

The air trip to Mexico also reveals the important detail of Sigbjørn’s tremendous fear of customs agents and border-crossing procedures. Turned back from entering the United States from Canada once before, due to a problem with his documentation, the paranoid Sigbjørn has come to despise the official restrictions placed upon travelers by national governments.

Surprisingly, critics have yet to comment on the overt political implications of this aversion.

Observing that, especially at the beginning of the novel, the protagonist’s “self-esteem is at an absolute low point, he is not writing, he is afraid of the journey and especially the borders it involves crossing, and he begins to hit the bottle,” Greg Bond suggests that the significance of the character’s border-crossing fear should be read metaphorically, since “Sigbjørn is crossing borders within himself, as he begins to journey, not only to Mexico, but into his own past” (89).

While this point is undoubtedly true, it is equally important to observe that Sigbjørn’s border-crossing anxiety indicates a hatred of nationalist institutions. As he tries to sleep on the plane, his thoughts lead him to reflect on the logistics of world travel, which he finds, increasingly, to be an extremely unpleasant affair.

Why did people travel? God knows Sigbjørn hated it all over again. Travel to him was the extension of every anxiety, which man tried to get rid of by having a quiet home. A continual fever, an endless telephone alarm, perpetual heart attack. A continual anxiety. An unending fire-alarm. A prodigious prolonged jumping conniption. Is my passport in order? How shall I prevent myself from being

robbed? How can I get my papers out of my pocket in this position? . . .
Fortunately such questions don't arise on a plane, though when you get out it's a
different matter. But have I dropped all my passports out onto the floor? I can't
move, I can't see . . . Fingerprintings—and, ah, that had done it, those
fingerprintings at the American Consulate, that had taken away the last of one's
freedom. Consulates. Customs. Conniption all over again. . . . Bribery and
conniption. (47)

Particularly in its reference to “fingerprintings,” which, here, constitute the final stripping away of one's “freedom,” this passage demonstrates Sigbjørn's basic distrust of customs procedures and border guards. Moreover, his incessant worries about losing his passport allude to the Consul's final predicament in *Under the Volcano*, which arises, in part, because of a mix-up over his travel documents. Nevertheless, the overall irony of these reflections emerges from the fact that travel represents the essential means by which the English-born Sigbjørn has been able to locate and settle his paradisaic seaside home in the western Canadian wilderness. Reflective of Said's assertion that the intellectual exile exhibits a “curmudgeonly disagreeableness,” then, Sigbjørn's paranoiac irritability and often vicious self-criticism evidence his marginal proclivities as an exile, at once devoted to expatriation and yet derisive towards the very act of travel. “Travel is a neurosis,” he later reflects, “So how should one expect that it would not make you neurotic? And when you have no home, or only half a new home—the other being burned—that was different, his thoughts mumbled to himself” (48). For Sigbjørn, travel constitutes both the cause and the effect of his neurosis. His sense of cultural displacement drives him away from England, initially, while the burning down of his and Primrose's shack in Eridanus prompts

another kind of displacement—this time in the form of literal homelessness—which, for these perennial expatriates, can only be remedied by further travel.

Sigbjørn’s characterization of him and his wife *as* exiles—“a couple of bright little globules that refused to go in,” in Lowry’s evocative phrase—is reinforced by his suggestion that the pair are eminently representative of the lost American idyll of the frontier. In fact, he goes so far as to say that “they were almost more American than these Americans themselves” (38). Nowhere else in the narrative is Sigbjørn’s pride in his own particularly Thoreauvian brand of social marginality—and concomitant disgust for modernity’s insidious urban sprawl—more in evidence than when he reflects that life on the periphery, despite its romanticization in American folk culture, is no longer a major part of the American experience.

The majority of these people when they went home, if they went home, went, figuratively and for the large part, to the very urban subsection that threatened the Wildernesses. They possessed telephones, electric lights, inside toilets, most of them automobiles . . . But how much less did any of these people, here on this quintessential cross section of America, ever think of home in such a guise as the Wildernesses? How many of these people in this queue here, when they thought of *home*, thought of the ocean breaking under the house, or the green forest bending in a Chinook? It was in their dreams, perhaps. It was in their songs, surely. (38)

While the emphasis, in this passage, on the word “home” certainly lends itself to the frequent critical assertion that Eridanus functions as a symbol of paradise throughout the narrative, it also underscores the fact that the experience of exile—that quintessentially Lowrian theme—

represents an important lens for viewing the entire novel.¹⁸ For Lowry's protagonists, Sigbjørn Wilderness not least among them, exile represents the only viable form of existence in the world. Sigbjørn admits as much when he reflects, "It was easy to romanticize their own kind of life. But it often seemed so much better to [him] than any other, for them, despite its disadvantages, that even to contemplate any other made him feel physically sick" (38). This radical position, which, once more, valorizes life on the margins as the only feasible lifestyle available, again speaks to Said's theorization of the exile's uncompromisingly contrarian attitude towards more conventional ways of being in the world.

From this marginal perspective, the homogenization of culture, through globalization, enacts a grievous sin against humanity. As Sigbjørn suggests, in his above reference to the "urban subsection" threatening Eridanus, the rapid advance of American commercialism—termed, by some, a form of *cultural imperialism*—represents one of the central antagonistic forces at work in *Dark as the Grave*.¹⁹ Sigbjørn's disgust with this development emerges repeatedly, throughout the novel, in the form of the Spanish-language refrain "Nosotros no somos Americanos ricos, nosotros somos canadienos pobres" ("We are not rich Americans, we are poor Canadians"), which he and Primrose utter each time the check arrives, in a ploy to avoid being swindled by Mexican shopkeepers and restaurateurs. Near the middle of the novel, in Chapter VI, this distaste for US imperialism comes to its head, giving rise to an impressive anti-US tirade, illustrative of Sigbjørn's view that the chief problem with US-led globalization is that

¹⁸ See, for instance, "Malcolm Lowry and the Columbian Eden" (Cross).

¹⁹ For an in-depth discussion of US imperialism and its contemporary ramifications see "Culture, US Imperialism, and Globalization" (Rowe).

it has begun to drain countries, such as Mexico, of their native identity, leaving, in its wake, only greed and metropolitan homogeneity.

Yes indeed—the necessity of having to face and come to grips with the extraordinary *mélange* of chivalry, hatred, fear, grace, admiration, chicanery, obsequious pimpery and boundless contempt that is manifested in the Mexican’s attitude toward the gringo and that was so often if not largely—he had shouted “—the fault of you bloody Americans who try to impose your beastly mythless loveless sanitary way of life and cheap tawdry expensive goods”—Primrose was at the door and he shook his fist at her—“and Coca-Cola bien fria that’s always warm and mass-produced noisy horrors and shallow selfish philosophy and moronic movies and execrable manners on a world that would explode in your face before accepting it . . . It’s all your fault, the fault of you bloody Americans who for some reason think you’re great! You keep trying to impose your bloody little way of life on everybody.” (129)

More than anything else, what Sigbjørn bemoans here is the deterioration of cross-cultural relations between Mexicans and foreigners—and, in particular, white expatriates such as himself—as a direct result of Americans trying to “impose [their] bloody little way of life on everybody.” The “boundless contempt” he encounters in Mexico, being associated with Americanness, in spite of his British passport, is at the core of his frustration, as it renders him an alien both at home (in England, where he cannot live) and abroad (in Mexico, where he is considered an American). Critically, globalization on the American model intensifies Sigbjørn’s personal sense of homelessness, prompting him angrily to tell Primrose (so often the victim of

his curmudgeonly outbursts) that they should leave Mexico and go home. Exasperated, she responds, “We’ve probably got no home anyhow, anyway” (129).

Nevertheless, while a desolate mood overhangs the middle of *Dark as the Grave*, a narrative interval punctuated, at its lowest ebb, by Sigbjørn’s half-hearted attempt at committing suicide, the novel ends by veering, quite surprisingly, upwards from its predecessor’s insistent descent into abyss, gesturing, in its closing passages, towards a real sense of personal redemption. Having learned that his old friend Fernando—a mestizo in the employ of the Banco Ejidal, a nationalized bank under President Lázaro Cárdenas tasked with redistributing land and capital to the Mexican peasantry—has very recently died, Sigbjørn experiences the personal revelation that his dually oppressive feelings of local estrangement and artistic failure are, in the end, surmountable.²⁰ Observing that the novel’s optimistic ending witnesses the realization of a complete rite of passage, Sugars notes, “Having transcended his past within the stage of separation [the preliminary phase], regained control over his life in the phase of transition [the liminal phase], and become reunited with human society and nature in the final stage of incorporation [the postliminal phase], Sigbjørn emerges from the rite of initiation prepared to confront and live life with an open and newly evolving mind” (159). However, while Sugars’s assertion—that the novel’s end brings with it the conclusion of an important rite of passage—is quite accurate, her suggestion that the protagonist has “become reunited with human society and nature” overstates the rite’s conventionality. After all, *Dark as the Grave* is emphatically *not* the story of an exile’s coming home. Certainly, Sigbjørn takes a temporary break, at the end of the novel, from his usual curmudgeonry—exhibiting a level of goodwill heretofore unprecedented—

²⁰ An *ejido* is a plot of communal land. For more on the Banco Ejidal and its role in Mexican history see “The Mexican Experience in Peasant Agricultural Credit” (Mogab).

but to conclude that he has meaningfully re-entered “human society and nature,” too readily dismisses the fact that, ultimately, Sigbjørn and Primrose persist in their condition as exiles. Significantly, the novel ends with yet another journey on the horizon, this time beyond the lush province of Oaxaca, leaving—despite Sigbjørn’s deep sense of personal healing—little indication of the couple’s final integration into society.

Nevertheless, in stark contrast to the globalized American metropolis, whose influence has already begun to spread worldwide, the novel’s final image, of the rural Oaxaqueñan landscape, symbolizes the momentary triumph of local identity over modern deracination. Sigbjørn’s sense of personal redemption, upon viewing this picturesque countryside, emerges from his association of the land with his deceased friend, Fernando, whose work it was, with the Banco Ejidal, to help peasant farmers restore their land to its prior fecundity.

Sigbjørn remembered eight years before the dreadful poverty of the villages, the pitiful few fields of corn and the sense of so much of the land that could be used to bring fruitfulness to the people lying idle simply for want of a little help. This time he was conscious of a great change, directly the result of the work of the Bank . . . It was all so different from eight years ago . . . Oaxaca had become the granary of nearly all of Mexico and the Valley of Etlá had become the granary of Oaxaca . . . “That’s all the Ejidal!” . . . The Banco Ejidal had become a garden . . . Then they were leaving the state of Oaxaca behind them, and behind them too, in the dark church of the Virgin for those who have nobody them with, one candle burning. . . . (254-55)

Ironically, though, Sigbjørn's description of the land's improvement, in this final passage, is almost completely attributed to the works of the Banco Ejidal—a nationalist institution organized by the Cárdenas regime. Nonetheless, Sigbjørn's admiration for the bank's public works arises from the human face the organization obtains by association with his lost friend, Fernando, along with the fact that, by restoring Oaxaca, the Mexican nation has effectively redeemed its soil by way of its own, independent, toil. Against Mexico's historical domination by, first, European, and then, American, powers, the newly fertile Oaxaqueñan landscape, thus, becomes a symbol of local Mexican initiative in an era increasingly pervaded by American commercialism. The novel's final sentence, which refers to a prayer candle lit for Fernando ("one candle burning"), ends, significantly, with ellipses, suggesting the lingering legacy of his altruistic work for the Mexican people. Ultimately, Sigbjørn's personal sense of healing emerges from this hopeful symbol, which affects the transformation of his *Valley of the Shadow of Death* into an Edenic space representative of new life.

So ends one of the most optimistic works in Lowry's novelistic canon, yet the protagonist's inner sense of metaphysical conflict is never satisfyingly resolved. While discussing the issue of the novel's integrity to authorial intent, Bond makes an important observation regarding Sigbjørn's central crisis: "It is symptomatic that *Dark as the Grave* is not pure Lowry," he states, "Since one of its main themes is the unstable identity of the narrator, who is incapable of sustaining any authentic sense of selfhood" (83). Like the Consul, Sigbjørn's sense of himself as an exile does not, ultimately, change, even though he comes to accept this condition with a higher degree of self-awareness than his literary forebears. As Day suggests in the novel's preface, Sigbjørn is "a middle-aged Lord Jim who no longer has illusions about his

honor” (xiv). The figure of Lord Jim, thus, emerges once more as the base model for the Lowrian exile-hero. Guilt-stricken, isolated, and endlessly defiant, he is, nonetheless, much more of an intellectual than Conrad’s mysterious “seaman in exile from the sea” (Conrad 6). Like Said’s “intellectual exile,” then, he “exists in a median state, neither completely at one with the new setting nor fully disencumbered of the old” (370-71). And once again, this median—or between—state suggests the exile-hero’s metaphysical condition of social liminality, which, as Turner observes, is largely characterized by ambiguity. Therefore, while Corrigan suggests that *Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid* fails as a novel (418), and even Day finds sections of the text to be quite “boring,” it remains critical to observe the pertinence of this text in rounding out Lowry’s career-long engagement with the theme of exile (xii). As a supplementary document to Lowry’s “complete” novels—*Ultramarine* and *Under the Volcano*—it possesses tremendous value as an elaborative guidebook. Above all, the tortuous ruminations of Sigbjørn Wilderness testify to Lowry’s increasingly obsessive interest in questions of travel, identity, nationality, and the modern expatriate’s liminal purview from the purlieus.

CONCLUSION: LOWRY'S TRANSNATIONAL ETHIC AND THE FUNCTION OF THE LIMINAL HERO

There is then not just the negative advantage of refuge in the émigré's eccentricity; there is also the positive benefit of challenging the system, describing it in language unavailable to those it has already subdued.

—Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*

Despite Lowry's predilection for self-loathing characters, the portrait of exile that emerges through *Ultramarine*, *Under the Volcano*, and *Dark as the Grave* is a surprisingly edifying one. Crucially, none of Lowry's protagonists ever suggests that reintegration into western society may afford a more preferable, or, indeed, tolerable mode of existence; and while *Under the Volcano* paints an inarguably bleak portrait of the Consul's existential implosion, the phenomenal reappearance of the ship *Oxenstjerna*, in the final pages of *Ultramarine*, alongside Sigbjørn's idyllic description of the Mexican countryside, at the close of *Dark as the Grave*, constitute hopeful images of travel to lands and waters beyond. For the young artist Dana Hilliot, embracing exile brings with it unprecedented creative inspiration, inaugurating a newfound transnational ethic in stark refutation of his prior view that "what one writes, if one is to be any good, must be rooted firmly in some sort of autochthony" (*Ultramarine* 96). And, although his language remains fraught with imperialist sentiments of misbegotten charity, his seaborne

voyage into exile—a permanent condition of social liminality—represents an escape from the externally imposed constraints of English national identity.

By contrast, in *Under the Volcano*, cultural severance becomes a void too vast to bridge, as the Consul's final descent into the *barranca* dramatizes his failure to cope with the seismic historical shifts of the mid-twentieth century. Lacking the cohering agent of imperial service, Geoffrey Firmin proves incapable of coming to terms with his fragmented identity; whereas, Hugh, his brother and “ghostly other self,” discovers that his own metaphysical health demands nothing less than a return to seagoing life (*Under the Volcano* 179). However, in *Dark as the Grave*, Lowry restores some of his debut novel's optimism, allowing his later protagonist, Sigbjørn Wilderness, to experience a measure of redemption. Nevertheless, a marked change in tone, between *Ultramarine* and *Dark as the Grave*, overturns the earlier protagonist's *naïveté*, since Sigbjørn's angry tirade against US Imperialism is in bold contrast to Dana's civilizing quest for a “workable object” (*Ultramarine* 186).

Despite their minor differences, however, each of Lowry's protagonists, here discussed, evidences the primary characteristics of what Victor Turner calls the liminal. Burdened by an upper-middle class English national identity impressed upon them through a variety of avenues in youth and faced with epochal changes on the eve of decolonization, these characters feel compelled to live, as exiles, on society's margins. While the places of retreat for these characters are various, each one makes clear the abiding sensation of his or her cultural dispossession. Each one also possesses some kind of nautical background, and as a literary trope the sea is consistently valorized for its spatial ideality. For Lowry, the sea represents an expanse removed, perhaps more so than any other physical space on earth, from ideological inscription by

imperialist and nationalist elements. With its ever-changing tides and volatile weather, the open sea resists both fixity and man's occupation, making it an ideal space of exilic refuge. In *Under the Volcano* and *Dark as the Grave*, the recurrent image of Eridanus—a stand-in for Lowry's longtime home on the shores of Dollarton, British Columbia, is doubly significant for its position on the threshold between land and sea.

This threshold position symbolically evokes what Edward Said calls the exile's "median state," a metaphysical condition of betweenness that constitutes an often contrarian, but always independent worldview ("Exile" 370). In Lowry's novels, the liminal hero in exile struggles to reconcile the disparate elements of his fragmented identity, yet remains stalwart in his defiance of nationalist and imperialist institutions. Evidencing the author's staunchly transnational ethic, these novels valorize the tremendous possibilities for individualism in those spaces, and among those people, who refuse to subscribe to institutional models of identity. Therefore, in contrast to the widespread critical view that Lowry's political engagement lies buried beneath a host of largely apolitical concerns, this transnational ethic draws heavily upon the political turmoil of the mid-twentieth century. Lowry was, without a doubt, an inwardly focused writer, but he did not ignore, so much as deceptively veil, political considerations in his work. At the root of his characters' existential crises is always a kind of metaphysical chaos triggered by what Said calls the "new economic and socio-political dislocations and configurations of our time" (*Culture* 330). As scholars seek to illuminate the transnational ramifications of western modernism (as others have already done in the works of James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, and Virginia Woolf), securing Lowry's place as an important world writer constitutes a vital project for contemporary criticism.

Through his riveting portrayals of liminal exile in these three novels, Lowry provides the contemporary reader with an inside view of existential anxiety among British expatriates in a newly postcolonial era. Rejecting the “monomyth” of western literature’s innumerable Homeric heroes, whose timeless course Joseph Campbell charts in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Lowry’s novels never culminate with homecomings. Instead, the hero initiates a self-willed retreat from familiar English society, in order to live permanently on the geographical, as well as political-intellectual, margins of the global community. Therefore, rather than becoming reintegrated into his home society, he resists the pattern of ritual closure Arnold van Gennep articulates in his paradigm of the *rite de passage*, which begins with separation, moves to a phase of transition (the liminal period), and concludes, finally, with re-incorporation into the social group. Effectively, then, the Lowrian exile hero differs from the Campbellian hero in that his embrace of exile prolongs the liminal experience indefinitely. Having separated from the society of his forebears, he actively chooses to reside in the unstable, yet reflective state of *limen* (margin), rather than re-enter society to assume some elevated position in the social order.

However, it is important to note that the Lowrian exile hero is not merely a model for hermetic living in the modern age. As Said suggests in his own interpretation of Turner’s theories, even the liminal figure—living in the margins and interstices of societies—provides an important salutary function for those who remain within the realm of societal norms. “According to Turner,” he observes, “Societies can be neither rigidly run by ‘structures’ nor completely overrun by marginal, prophetic, and alienated figures . . . there has to be alternation, so that the sway of one is enhanced or tempered by the inspiration of the other. The liminal *figure* helps to maintain societies” (141). Therefore, from his marginal position, the Lowrian exile-hero exhorts

contemporary readers to undertake important critical discussions in the postcolonial period. His global consciousness and fierce individualism initiate incisive critiques of nationalism, imperialism, and commercial globalization, while his numerous anxieties explore the emotional and psychological effects of decolonization on British expatriates—the former perpetrators of imperial hegemony—as they seek to embrace their undeniable transnationality in a post-imperial age. Ultimately, then, Lowry’s contribution to world literature emerges from his compassionate interest in the metaphysical lives of world wanderers, an ever-expanding class of people in an ever-shrinking world.

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