Six

Malcolm Lowry’s Manichean Episteme:
The Paradise of Despair

Inevitable destruction is simply the teleological end of one series of possibilities; everything hopeful is equally possible.
—Malcolm Lowry, Letter to Derek Pethick

On the cardboard back of a notebook in which Malcolm Lowry kept notes for “The Forest Path to the Spring,” the writer who produced what has been called the greatest religious novel of this century (Day 350) reflects on the relation of his beliefs to his art: “When I say [I have] come to grips I don’t mean I merely passed beyond regrets & remorse to contrition. That is a great step in the soul, no doubt, but insufficient for a writer who wishing to write for God, yet has no priest, who believing, yet has no church, who is born religious, yet whose higher self dictates that he remain a heresiarch” (25:6, back cover).1 Lowry’s statement, which seems to articulate the acedia of the modern age, reveals a philosophical conflict that is apparent not only in Lowry’s story but in virtually all of Lowry’s works that were to comprise the cycle of fiction *The Voyage That Never Ends*. This conflict manifests itself in a Manichean, at times even schizophrenic, epistemology in which the mind of the novelist or a character simultaneously embraces or artistically balances visions of heaven and hell. Lowry, in his yearning for the integrated harmony of a beatific Eden and his intensely personal, mythopoeic vision of the hell of his own soul, is a romantic symbolist.

To understand the nature of this conflict in Lowry’s art, we must first understand Lowry’s work within the context of his projected cycle of novels provisionally titled *The Voyage That Never Ends*.2 Lowry’s plans for a masterwork akin to Proust’s
Remembrances of Things Past, however, were formative, and thus the exact design of the cycle cannot be formulated with certainty. Lowry’s letters and extensive notes on his “Work in Progress” reveal that he first envisioned a Dantesque trilogy and only later articulated a more ambitious plan. From Cuernavaca in January 1946, Lowry wrote to his London publisher, Jonathan Cape, that he had “conceived the idea of a trilogy entitled The Voyage That Never Ends with the Volcano as the first, infernal part, a much amplified Lunar Caustic as the second, purgatorial part, and an enormous novel I was also working on called In Ballast to the White Sea as the paradisal third part, the whole to concern the battering the human spirit takes in its ascent toward its true purpose” (63). With the Divine Comedy as a structural antecedent and model, Lowry’s trilogy is orthodoxically Christian in conception. But this concept, never realized, was transformed into a longer and, at least symbolically, less Christian journey in which the soul voyages continually in and out of various states of damnation and grace. Outlined in his “Work in Progress,” the cycle was projected as follows:

THE VOYAGE THAT NEVER ENDS
THE ORDEAL OF SIGBJØRN WILDERNESS 1
UNTITLED SEA NOVEL [ULTRAMARINE]  
LUNAR CAUSTIC
UNDER THE VOLCANO The Centre
DARK AS THE GRAVE WHEREIN MY FRIEND IS LAID
ERIDANUS [OCTOBER FERRY TO GABRIOLA] Trilogy
LA MORDIDA
THE ORDEAL OF SIGBJØRN WILDERNESS 2

(37: title page)

This longer cycle of novels that Lowry envisioned still showed a general movement from disintegration to reintegration—the manuscript version of “The Ordeal of Sigbjørn Wilderness” is
the story of a novelist who falls from a pier, breaks his back, and hallucinates during his stay in hospital, and "The Ordeal of Sigbjørn Wilderness 2" was to recount his physical and spiritual recovery—but the works Lowry completed during his lifetime do not show such a neat progressive pattern. All of Lowry's mature fiction, even the hellish *Lunar Caustic* and the halcyon "The Forest Path to the Spring," involves what Lowry called an "ingress and egress" of the soul that is eternally changing, eternally moving between two extremes.

Caught between two conflicting visions of reality, Lowry was unable to resolve in his own mind a dominant perceiving self, either in his own life or in his fiction. This psychological schizophrenia does not, however, translate into an art that is tentative in conception but rather into fiction that acknowledges the richness and complexity of possible artistic responses to the human and physical universe. *The Voyage That Never Ends* was thus conceived as a journey whose teleology is obscured by the presence of competing constructive and destructive epistemologies, one projecting a harmonious vision of the individual and nature under what Lowry terms the celestial circuits and the other a disintegration of man and nature under the disjoining heavenly circuits. Sherrill Grace has recognized this aspect of Lowry's work as the inescapable presence throughout of an encyclopaedic perceiving consciousness. Lowry's unifying principle of repetition is nowhere more obvious than in the repeated narrative pattern of withdrawal and return, and whether the movement of withdrawal from reality occurs on an epistemological or a psychological level, or more simply on the level of ordinary personal relationship, it is always a negative state characterized by narrative and stylistic stasis and by a character's emotional, spiritual, or physical death. Return from this state, like the flow of the tides, brings movement, clarity, balance and joy—'as by a miracle.' (18–19)

Lowry's Manichean epistemology is apparent in both the perception of Lowry's narrators and characters as well as the im-
plied literary epistemology of the writer himself and manifests itself in the language, images, and structure of his works.

**The Linguistic Basis of Lowry's Episteme**

Writing in the literary aftermath of Joyce's *Portrait* and *Ulysses*, Lowry was attentive to the close relationship between language, questions of epistemology, and fictional reality. In its most rudimentary form, this interconnection is apparent in Lowry's love of juxtaposing lexical opposites. His oxymoronic combinations most frequently yoke the concepts of heaven and hell. This is most apparent in *Under the Volcano* when the Consul describes his own garden and the Mexican landscape as possessing an "infernal beauty" (144). The various drafts of *Volcano* reveal constant experimentation with such combinations as "obscene beauty" (Lowry Papers 8:5, 137) and "desolate fecundity" (10:14, 1). The paradoxical word play reflects the Consul's "gruesome gaiety" (354), the fact that he "love[s] hell" (314). The joining of opposites is also evident in the many multilingual puns in which words with positive connotations are replaced by those having negative connotations. At the Salon Ofelia in chapter 10 of *Volcano*, for instance, the Consul and company order the "spectral [for special] chicken of the house" (291). Both kinds of lexical paradox reflect in miniature the schizophrenic episteme that is further expressed in Lowry's style and word play and themes.

The language of Lowry's fictional style reflects both a creative and destructive epistemology. In much of Lowry's fiction, the creative episteme is projected by the central female figure and is characterized by an affirmation of beautiful images in the world. *Primrose Wilderness* in *Dark As the Grave Wherein My Friend Is Laid* is an example: "She was a person whose creative perception was simply that of creative life and living, not a
writer, but a person who loves life, who expresses her creative life in the *living* of life* (202). The world view of Primrose, like that of Yvonne in *Volcano*, is intimately associated with Lowry’s “Columbian Eden,” the locale that Lowry describes in his most lyrical and most beautiful prose. Such lyric passages occur in *Volcano*, in the “Eridanus” passages in *October Ferry to Gabriola*, and throughout much of “The Forest Path to the Spring,” which Lowry dedicated to his second wife. These beautiful passages, with their images of natural abundance, growth, harmony, and equilibrium, reflect the novelist’s constructive projection of an ideal world. “The Forest Path” begins with descriptions of lyric beauty and calm:

At dusk, every evening, I used to go through the forest to the spring for water.

The way that led to the spring from our cabin was a path wandering along the bank of the inlet through snowberry and thimbleberry and shallon bushes, with the sea below you on the right, and the shingled roofs of the houses, all built down on the beach beneath round the little crescent of the bay.

Beyond, going toward the spring, through the trees, range beyond celestial range, crowded the mountains, snow-peaked for most of the year. At dusk they were violet, and frequently they looked on fire, the white fire of the mist. Sometimes in the early mornings this mist looked like a huge family wash, the property of Titans, hanging out to dry between the folds of their lower hills. At other times all was chaos, and Valkyries of storm-drift drove across them out of the ever reclouding heavens. (Lowry 1961, 215)

The balance, poise, and rhythm of Lowry’s prose reflects an edenic sense of place, “that marvelous region of wilderness known to the Indians as Paradise” (219). On the one hand, Lowry’s description simply conveys his spiritual affection for the environs of Burrard Inlet where he and Margerie lived in a squatter’s hut, but within the context of Lowry’s entire canon
the passages describing Eridanus convey a creative, beatific vision. For Lowry, a direct literary descendent of the English romantics, mental and physical landscapes coalesce in a vision projected by the creative mind of the artist.

Such creative projections reside in more than the lyrical beauty of his prose. Mental creativity is also associated with the Consul’s verbal puns whose private linguistic world is also part of Lowry’s constructive episteme. Often Lowry’s comedy in Volcano is at a high point in these moments of linguistic play:

‘—Hullo-hullo-look-who-comes-hullo-my-little-snake-in-the-grass-my-little-anguish-in-herba—’ the Consul at this moment greeted Mr. Quincey’s cat, momentarily forgetting its owner again as the grey, meditative animal, with a tail so long it trailed on the ground, came stalking through the zinnias: he stooped, patting his thighs—‘hello-pussy-my-little-Priapusspuss-my-little-Oedipusspusspuss,’ and the cat, recognizing a friend and uttering a cry of pleasure, wound through the fence and rubbed against the Consul’s legs, purring. ‘My little Xicotancatl.’ The Consul stood up. He gave two short whistles while below him the cat’s ears twirled. ‘She thinks I’m a tree with a bird in it,’ he added. (134)

In this particular instance, the Consul’s friendly banter, though tending toward the solipsistic, is a constructive projection of a reality that encompasses the sensual world of a cat in a garden, the human mythology of the Greek, Christian, and Mexican cultures, and the neologistic mind of the Consul. In other instances in Lowry’s fiction, the projective vision of the Consul is entirely internalized, though no less creative:

The Consul’s voice came from far away. He was aware of vertigo; closing his eyes wearily he took hold of the fence to steady himself. Mr. Quincey’s words knocked on his consciousness—or someone actually was knocking on a door—fell away, then knocked again, louder. Old De Quincey; the knocking on the gate in Macbeth. Knock knock: who’s there? Cat. Cat who? Catastrophe. Catastrophe who? Catastrophysicist. What is it you, my
little popocat? Just wait an eternity till Jacques and I have finished murdering sleep! Katabasis to cat abysses. Cathartes atratus (136)

The sense of vertigo—which, in Lowry’s fiction, indicates his constructive epistemology—triggers the Consul’s highly associative, verbal imagination. These linguistic flights of imagination test the reader’s knowledge of literature and myth as well as one’s understanding of the Consul’s temperament and the complexity of his mind.

While such associative word play frequently conveys the positive force of human consciousness and understanding, there are as many times when the language reflects a destructive episteme. In these instances, language itself is responsible for the disintegration of certain knowledge and meaning, as in the Consul’s mistranslation of

¿LE GUSTA ESTE JARDÍN
QUE ES SUYO?
¡EVITE QUE SUS HIJOS LO DESTRUYAN!5

or Dr. Vigil’s unidiomatic malapropism “Throw away your mind.” This latter expression, occurring as it does in the opening conversation between M. Laruelle and Dr. Vigil in the first chapter of the novel, establishes the epistemological uncertainty of Under the Volcano and anticipates the numerous extended conversations in which language simultaneously creates and destroys meaning in the novel.6 Perhaps the most poignant example of this linguistic uncertainty is the conversation between the Consul and Señora Gregorio:

Señora Gregorio took his hand and held it. ‘Life changes, you know,’ she said, gazing at him intently. ‘You can never drink of it. I think I see you with your esposa again soon. I see you laughing together in some kernice place where you laugh.’ She smiled. ‘Far away. In some kernice place where all those troubles you har now will har—’ The Consul started: what was Señora Gregorio saying? ‘Adiós,’ she added in Spanish. ‘I have
no house only a shadow. But whenever you are in need of a shadow, my shadow is yours.'
'Thank you.'
'Sank you.'
'Not sank you, Señora Gregorio, thank you.'
'Sank you.' (229–30)

The confusion of drink/think, life/laugh, kernice/nice, sank/thank, shadow/chateau are verbally playful constructions yet destructive of understanding. Furthermore, the linguistic mis-statements of such characters as Dr. Vigil, Señora Gregorio, and Cervantes at the Salon Ofelia mirror on a linguistic level the failure of communication between the Consul and Yvonne, as we will see later.

The potential for language to disorient the reader by reflecting a divided episteme is perhaps clearest in Lowry's "Through the Panama," a lengthy short story in *Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*. This self-conscious literary text is in the form of a diary, kept by a writer traveling from Vancouver, British Columbia, to Europe via the Panama Canal. While the story itself is experimental and perhaps imperfect, it illustrates in exaggerated form a formal linguistic disorientation like that in Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner." Lowry adapts Coleridge's use of glosses to demonstrate the diary author's schizophrenic perceptions and social disorientation. The marginal glosses of Sigbjørn Wilderness include both original, self-reflexive text and direct quotes from Coleridge and Helen Nicolay's *Bridge of Water*, an early twentieth-century history of the building of the Panama Canal. The glosses sometimes offer ironic commentary but more often create a sense of verbal pastiche. The competing texts present divergent perspectives that reflect the physical disorientation of ship travel and the psychological disorientation of the diarist who is presumably intoxicated during much of the passage. This technique, more obviously than the multilingual puns and miscommunications in *Volcano*, shows Lowry's conscious adaptation of Coleridge's use of linguistic disorientation to convey estrangement from the cultural episteme.
The Imagery of Disorientation: Vertiginous and Entropic Extremes

The sense of vertiginous motion that pervades Lowry's work reflects the "whirling cerebral chaos" experienced by many of Lowry's protagonists. While this sense of whirling is often associated with disorientation in his characters, for Lowry vertiginous motion is also intimately associated with the life force inherent in the "madly revolving world" and the celestial spheres. The images of gyration, spiraling, wheeling, and whirling are for Lowry kinetic forces that animate the universe. Conversely, the idea of entropy in Lowry's work is conveyed by images of destruction: fragmentation, collapse, dispersal, inertia, and cessation. It would be convenient if Lowry's attitude toward these sensate extremes were consistent and if the entropic images of stasis or the vertiginous images of kinetic flux were presented consistently and in isolation from each other. But this is not the case. Lowry's characters vacillate between a longing for the stasis of death and an intense sense of the joyful if chaotic flux of an animistic world. Most of Lowry's protagonists envision a world which combines constructive and destructive experiences, and his works reveal a schizophrenic view of reality.

The narrator of an unpublished version of *Lunar Caustic*, "Swinging the Maelstrom," identifies his own psychological schizophrenia, claiming "he must be at least two persons drinking: the first, to whom the whole business of living at all was abhorrent, drank obscurely and mostly out of a bottle, whereas the second, gregarious and cheerful, drank at the bar" (Lowry's Papers 22:7, 2). In the published version, edited by Earl Birney and Margerie Lowry, this schizophrenia is expressed in the narrator's ontological confusion as he alternately identifies himself as a ship and a human with the respective names of S. S. Lawhill and Bill Plantagenet (13). So intensely was Lowry engaged in creating the schizophrenic perception of characters that, in notes to himself or his publisher, he asserts that the form of his work began to reflect its content: a "schizophrenia—not in the
characters but within the story—arises” (22:5, 36B). While Lowry was probably interested in schizophrenia as a result of his commitment to the psychiatric wing of Bellevue Hospital, he was also fascinated with the idea of schizophrenia as the product of mystical perception. Lowry’s esoteric interests led him to the writings of P. D. Ouspensky, whose works on mysticism and sensationalism Lowry read with excitement (Letters 26). Lowry might have found Ouspensky’s comments on Nietzsche’s superman attractive, for they describe a divided perceiving self:

> Man is pre-eminently a transitional form, constant only in his contradictions and inconstancy—moving, becoming, changing under our eyes.

> So many and opposing principles struggle in man that a harmonious coordination of them is quite impossible. Man is a little universe. In him proceed continual death and continual birth, the incessant swallowing of one being by another, the devouring of the weaker by the stronger, evolution and degeneration, growing and dying out. Man has within him everything from mineral to God. And the desire of God in man, that is, the directing forces of his spirit, conscious of its unity with the infinite consciousness of the universe, cannot be in harmony with the inertia of a stone, with the inclination of particles for crystallization.

> And the more man develops inwardly, the more strongly he begins to feel the different sides of his soul simultaneously. (Ouspensky 1971, 105)

Ouspensky’s belief in the simultaneous existence of godlike creative powers and a tendency toward inertia in humans has much in common with Lowry’s sense of a divided self that is half creative and half self-destructive. Ouspensky himself identified such a schizophrenic state in a chapter called “Experimental Mysticism” in A New Model of the Universe. He speaks of “a sensation of strange duality in myself. When this change came I found myself in a world entirely new and entirely unknown to me, which had nothing in common with the world in
which we live, still less with the world which we assume to be the continuation of our world in the direction of the unknown” (277). Ouspensky’s mystical experiments seem designed to disjoin the self from its social identity and the cultural episteme. In his fiction, Lowry constantly experimented with narrators and protagonists who have a divided state of mind and whose epistemological processes are alternately constructive and destructive.

The imagery that expresses this schizophrenic epistemology is developed with the most complexity and richness in Under the Volcano, but it can be examined in its purest form in shorter works such as Ultramarine and Lunar Caustic. Even in his earliest work, Lowry displays his preoccupation with extraordinary sense perception which was so crucial in his epistemology. Under the influence of both alcohol and such sea writers as Joseph Conrad, Conrad Aiken, Jack London, Richard H. Dana, and Nordahl Grieg, Lowry begins his career writing about the sense disorientation associated with intoxication and sailing the sea. His first novel, Ultramarine, which he wrote while a student at Cambridge, is a virtual catalogue of hyperesthetic sensations which he collected during his six-month voyage as a deck hand on the SS Pyrrhus. The young hero in Ultramarine boards ship “having been blown through [a] six weeks’ engulfing darkness” (15) and notes the hawkers who “surge on to the ship” and the stevedores who “swing in on the derricks” (16). He stares at birds perched atop the “swaying mainmasthead” (18) and feels the “joyous derangement of the boundless waste” (24). During working hours he dodges “swinging cargo” (31) and during off hours or shore leave enjoys the “eternal vortex of youth” (37). The opening pages of the novel develop patterns of imagery that anticipate Dana Hilliot’s first drunk worthy of a sailor, an experience described as a complex of vertiginous and entropic extremes. Supine and intoxicated on his bunk aboard the Oedipus Tyrannus, Dana feels the world whirling around him until objects explode and spin off into space like dispersing celestial bodies:
Then he lay down flat on his back. He began slowly to go to sleep, gliding, as it were, down a steep incline. . . Electric lights swam past. Gas jets, crocus-coloured, steadily flared and whirred. The shouts and cries of the market rose and fell about them like the breathing of a monster. Above, the moon soared and galloped through a dark, tempestuous sky. All at once, every lamp in the street exploded, their globes flew out, darted into the sky, and the street become alive with eyes, . . eyes which wavered, and spread, and, diminishing rapidly, were catapulted east and west. (43–44)

This hypnagogic vision is an early example of Lowry's dual epistemology which is simultaneously constructive and destructive. The episode is characterized by the contradictory states of static calm as Dana lies on his back and vertiginous chaos as he imagines a disordered cosmos exploding before his eyes.

Some two years after the publication of Ultramarine, Lowry was admitted to Bellevue Hospital in New York for psychiatric observation and treatment (Day 196). His stay of two to three weeks, like his voyage on the Pyrrhus, furnished him with material for his writing. And, like his experience at sea, his incipient alcoholism and confinement at Bellevue increased his fascination with sensual disorientation and altered states of mind. The novella that resulted, Lunar Caustic, occupied his attention from the summer of 1935 until its publication in the Paris Review in 1953, and even after that. We can only speculate why the work preoccupied Lowry as much as it did and why the various versions he wrote—"The Last Address," "Swinging the Maelstrom," and finally Lunar Caustic—express such different psychological outlooks, but it seems likely that Lowry was trying to establish an imagistic vocabulary that would express his deeply divided epistemology.

The final work, about schizophrenia, reflects its subject in the multiple visions it presents. Images of life and death, heaven and hell, motion and stasis are yoked together. In Lunar Caustic Plantagenet, the central character, imagines he is "lying in the propeller shaft" (14) of the mental ward that vertiginously
whirls around him, and yet the sense of whirling finally ends in a feeling of entropic chaos and collapse, of all things are moving toward a state of inertia. Plantagenet likens this paradoxical combination to a descent into the maelstrom reminiscent of Poe:

Plantagenet suspected he was the only one who was frightened; nor was he frightened now so much by the shadows, which partook of the familiarity of his delirium. He had the curious feeling that he had made a sort of descent into the maelstrom, a maelstrom terrifying for the last reason one might have expected: that there was about it sometimes just this loathsome, patient calm. (37)

This curious yoking of disparate sensations is not accidental or anomalous but rather establishes a pattern of imagery carried throughout the work. The most conscious use of such imagery occurs when Plantagenet describes the Rimbaudian stories told by one of the patients named Garry, a young man who is arrested in his mental and emotional development but whose imaginative faculties are undiminished. Impatient with the unimaginative doctor, Plantagenet scolds, "'Don't you see its the same kind of thing [as Rimbaud]? Mélant aux fleurs des yeux des panthères—etc. And all his stories about things collapsing, falling apart.'" This feeling of collapse is directly associated with the sensation of personal vertigo: "'It extends to the world—do I have to shriek at you?—that sense of decay, the necessity of blasting away the past, the feeling of vertige'" (57). Both Garry and Plantagenet feel a need to subvert the cultural episteme, to blast away the past, which is accomplished by projecting a vision of the universe as whirling itself into a chaos that explodes and disperses leaving behind calm and stillness.

These images of hyperesthetic sense perception are critical to an understanding of Lowry's fictional world, for the vertiginous and entropic forces express the beatific and demonic animism of Lowry's Manichean episteme. The animism of Lowry's fiction is more than mere anthropomorphizing; rather, Lowry assumes that the entire physical universe is endowed
with spiritual life that can be beatific or demonic. Lowry articu­lates his animistic world view most clearly in expository pas­sages in October Ferry to Gabriola, the novel Lowry was work­ing on when he died. The autobiographical protagonist maintains that all men are “animists at heart” and seek to love the world’s objects as if they are “sentient thing[s]” (73–74). Such objects, in Lowry’s fiction acquire a life, a character, even a spiritual intellect of their own. In the chapter of October Ferry titled “The Element Follows You Around, Sir!,” which illus­trates the benign and threatening aspects of Lowry’s animism, Ethan Llewelyn describes his own consciousness as bringing the phenomenal world to life: “It was as if the subjective world within . . . had somehow turned itself inside out: as if the objective world without had itself caught a sort of hysteria” (115–16). This animistic transferal of life gives phenomena a totally independent existence: “Phenomena went galloping and gambolling over the whole countryside, though now and then . . . the ‘intelligence’ expressed itself almost benignly” (119). Be­cause it is the perceiver who endows the phenomenal world with life, these animistic forces are often projections of the per­ceiver’s deepest fears about the self or the threatening world beyond the self. Ethan, the protagonist of October Ferry, thus conceives of nature as “having a kind of nervous breakdown” (121), most apparent during the fury of electrical storms, which end with an entropic disintegration of the vertiginous move­ments of the cosmos. Ethan witnesses “huge aerial battles above the lake” which become a “kind of celestial disorder of the kinaesthesia” (120). Lowry’s protaxis, a psychological disorder in which an individual cannot distinguish himself from the uni­verse (Day 69), extends to his protagonists whose psychological conflicts are reflected in constructive perceptions of beauty in the world and destructive perceptions of a threatening phe­nomenal world.

At one extreme in Lowry’s episteme is “The Forest Path to the Spring,” the final story of Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place. A beatific animism pervades the edenic landscape of this great lyrical confession. Although the beatific
animism of "Eridanus," as Lowry called it, is implicit in the lovingly detailed descriptions of nature in the story, it is stated thematically in a description of the lighthouse on Burrard Inlet in British Columbia:

It was a whitewashed concrete structure, thin as a match, like a magic lighthouse, without a keeper, but oddly like a human being itself, standing lonely on its cairn with its ruby lamp for a head and its generator strapped to its back like a pack; wild roses in early summer blew on the bank beside it, and when the evening star came out, sure enough, it began its beneficent signaling too. (218)

Unlike the Farolito ("the lighthouse that invites the storm") of Under the Volcano, the lighthouse at Eridanus is a symbol of the dominant episteme of the story. Like the lighthouse, the story is a beautiful projection of edenic order on earth, of life in harmony with the "beneficent signaling" of the whirling heavens.

As in nearly all of Lowry's work, however, even in this most purely beatific piece, there is a counterpoint of demonic animism: "the red votive candle of the burning oil wastes flickering ceaselessly all night before the gleaming open cathedral of the oil refinery" (226). To be sure, the refinery is on a distant shoreline across the inlet on the Vancouver side, but it is always there, belching smoke by day, demonically burning by night, and always exhibiting its poignantly unfinished advertisement that reads HELL instead of SHELL (256). The refinery, a symbol of the destructiveness of the war effort, counterbalances the beneficent force of the lighthouse. The destructive epistemology represented by the refinery is clearly subordinate in the story but can, at any time, color the mental lives of the narrator and his wife:

And at night, when we opened the window, from the lamps within our shadows were projected out to sea, on the fog, against the night, and sometimes they were huge, menacing. One night coming across the porch
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from the woodshed with a lantern in one hand and a load of wood under the other arm, I saw my shadow, gigantic, the logs of wood as big as a coffin, and this shadow seemed for a moment the glowering embodiment of all that threatened us; yes, even a projection of the dark chaotic side of myself, my ferocious destructive ignorance. (233)

In this passage, the beneficent signaling of the lighthouse has been replaced by a spectral projection of "destructive ignorance." Thus, while a constructive epistemology dominates in "The Forest Path," a demonic, destructive epistemology is still present. Lowry's world view is Manichean and thus Eridanus is both "the River of Death and the River of Life" (226).

If benign, or beatific, animism dominates the lyrical "Forest Path," demonic animism prevails in Lunar Caustic. But again both poles of Lowry's epistemology are present. The following two paragraphs provide an example of the juxtaposition of these disparate world views:

Every so often, when a ship passed, there would be a curious mass movement towards the barred windows, a surging whose source was in the breasts of the mad seamen and firemen there, but to which all were tributary: even those whose heads had been bowed for days rose at this stirring, their bodies shaking as though roused suddenly from nightmare or from the dead, while their lips would burst with sound, partly a cheer and partly a wailing shriek, like some cry of the imprisoned spirit of New York itself, that spirit haunting the abyss between Europe and America and brooding like futurity over the Western Ocean. The eyes of all would watch the ship with a strange, hungry supplication.

But more often when a ship went by or backed out from the docks opposite and swung around to steam towards the open sea, there was dead silence in the ward and a strange foreboding as though all hope were sailing with the tide. (13)

In these two paragraphs we see the tension between two opposing forces: in the first a life force surging, stirring, shaking,
rousing, and bursting, in the second “dead silence.” The patients respond to the ships as if they possessed different souls, one benign, which animates the men, the other demonic, provoking thoughts of death.

Of course the animism in *Lunar Caustic*, because it is the projection of the delirious mind of the alcoholic Plantagenet, is most often threatening and demonic. “The periodic, shuddering metamorphoses his mind projected upon almost every object” (21) creates a landscape in which “Nature herself is shot through with jitteriness” (26). New York City is transformed into a “mighty force” that “groans and roars above, around, below [Plantangenet]. A bridge strides over the river. Signs nod past him” (9). “A smudged gasworks crouched like something that could spring” (12). Lowry’s setting is similar to the supernatural landscape projected by Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner but is translated into modern urban terms:

> Where were all the good honest ships tonight, [Plantagenet] wondered, bound for all over the world? Lately it had seemed to him they passed more rarely. Only nightmare ships were left in this stream. All at once, watching the strange traffic upon it, he fancied that the East River was as delirious, as haunted as the minds that brooded over it, it was a mad river of grotesque mastless steamers, of flat barges slipping along silent as water snakes. (65)

A projection of mental instability, this demonic landscape is envisioned by the story-teller Garry as a landscape of death and destruction: “This world of the river was one where everything was uncompleted while functioning in degeneration, from which as from Garry’s barge, the image of their own shattered or unformed souls was cast back at them” (65).

Though the fictional worlds of “The Forest Path” and *Lunar Caustic* may seem to be entirely different, they are in fact the product of the same dualistic world view. Whether a constructive or destructive episteme dominates, the opposing view is never entirely denied but is always waiting to reassert itself with a shift in schizophrenic perception. The same may be said
of Lowry’s entire canon. While one side of his epistemology may dominate a particular work, there is always another work that embodies the other side. Lowry’s work as a whole thus exhibits a Manichean balance between benign and demonic world views.

Under the Volcano: The Structure of Disorientation

In Lowry’s famous thirty-one page letter to his publisher Jonathan Cape, in which he defends Under the Volcano against the editorial demand to cut and revise, Lowry describes the structure of his masterpiece, defining the relation of individual parts to the whole: “That which may seem inorganic in itself might prove right in terms of the whole churrigueresque structure I conceived and which I hope may begin soon to loom out of the fog for you like Borda’s horrible-beautiful cathedral in Taxco” (61). This metaphorical description of the baroque structure of his novel was not flippant. Lowry spent two weeks writing his letter, and his papers as well as his other works (e.g., Dark As the Grave, 62) show that Borda’s cathedral and its “churrigueresque” structure preoccupied him during and immediately after the writing of Under the Volcano. Like the baroque architecture of the “horrible-beautiful” cathedral, Lowry’s work appears excessive and “horrible” in detail, but each individual arabesque contributes to the organic beauty of the whole. Lowry’s description of the structure of his novel as “horrible-beautiful” again suggests his dualistic episteme: the disposition of the vertiginous and entropic images give the novel its “horrible-beautiful” structure that is simultaneously balanced and disorienting. The overall structure of the novel is thus based upon competing aesthetic sensations of harmony, balance, and poise on the one hand, and discord, imbalance, and tension on the other.

Lowry’s Manichean episteme is evident in the images of vertigo and entropy that dominate the Consul’s alcohol-
inspired world view in *Under the Volcano*. As Max-Pol Fouchet observes, “*L’alcool, pour* [the Consul] *n’est pas un vice, mais une passion de l’âme, un moyen de la connaissance. L’éthylisme de Geoffrey atteint ce dérèglement des sens, par lequel, aux terms de Rimbaud, on se fait voyant*” (26). [Alcohol, for the Consul, is not a vice but a passion of the soul, a medium of knowledge. The chronic intoxication of Geoffrey attains to a derangement of the senses, by which, in Rimbaud’s terms, one becomes a seer.] In Lowry’s words, this way of knowing and writing approaches a “disorder of the kinaesthesia” (Letters 312) in which the Consul’s “whirling cerebral chaos” (308) produces and corresponds to the “madly revolving world” (194). The Consul’s sense derangement, like the pleasures and pains of opium, can be either benign or demonic. In the case of his fateful ride on the “Máquina Infernal,” or Ferris wheel, the sense disorientation and resulting vertigo are strictly associated with the Consul’s intense and self-inflicted suffering which inexorably leads to his death. On the other hand, the Consul’s sense of the world whirling around him, even when he is so near his tragic end, is comically translated into a joke whose irony is missed by the Mexican policeman. Making fun of his own condition, the Consul observes with tragic insight, “‘I learn that the world goes round so I am waiting here for my house to pass by’” (355). This paradoxical combination of spinning and standing still is common in the novel. The Consul experiences an entropic inertia as he perceives the world to be hurtling vertiginously around him.

The Consul also has an entropic sense of the collapse or dissemination of self and the phenomenal world. Like Yvonne, who experiences a “recurrent nightmare of things collapsing” (260), the Consul hears the remote sound of “subterranean collapse” (337). At one point the Consul feels he is literally disintegrating into the otherness of the physical universe: “He had peered out at the garden, and it was as though bits of his eyelids had broken off and were fluttering and jittering before him, turning into nervous shapes and shadows, jumping to the guilty chattering in his mind” (144–45). The sense of personal
fragmentation and disintegration is equally apparent in the Consul’s metaphor of himself as a tower of bottles, which topple, shattering his identity:

Suddenly he saw them, the bottles of aguardiente, of anis, or jarez, of Highland Queen, the glasses, a babel of glasses—towering, . . . built to the sky, then falling, the glasses toppling and crashing, falling downhill from the Generalife Gardens, the bottles breaking, bottles of Oporto, tinto, blanco, bottles of Pernod, Oxygène, absinthe, bottles smashing, bottles cast aside, falling with a thud on the ground in parks, under benches, beds, cinema seats, hidden in drawers at Consulates, bottles of Calvados dropped and broken, or bursting into smithereens, tossed into garbage heaps, flung into the sea, the Mediterranean, the Caspian, the Caribbean, bottles floating in the ocean, bottles, bottles, bottles, and glasses, glasses, glasses, of bitter, of Dubonnet, of Falstaff, Rye, Johnny Walker, Vieux Whiskey blanc Canadien, the apéritifs, the digestifs, the demis, the doubles, the noch ein Herr Obers, the et glas Araks, the tusen taks, the bottles, the bottles, the beautiful bottles of tequila. . . The Consul sat very still. His conscience sounded muffled with the roar of water. How indeed could he hope to find himself, to begin again, when, somewhere, perhaps in one of those lost or broken bottles, in one of those glasses, lay, forever, the solitary clue to his identity? (292–93)

The Consul’s concept of self and of his drinking coalesce in a catalogue of deranging elixirs, and the disintegration of self, a kind of willed self-destruction, is conveyed by the image of crashing and fragmenting booze bottles, which are emblems of his identity.

The same entropic forces that cause the fragmentation and dissemination of self are responsible for the failure of communication between the Consul and Yvonne, a failure which precipitates the tragedy of the novel. There are numerous instances where information fails to be communicated physically between
the Consul and Yvonne: Yvonne's fateful postcard that wanders abroad for a year before reaching the Consul; the letter from the Consul to Yvonne that M. Laruelle finds, a year after their deaths, in the Consul's book of Elizabethan plays; and, most importantly, the letters from Yvonne to the Consul that were either misaddressed or never answered. To the very end, the Consul cannot understand these letters: "The Consul read this sentence over and over again, the same sentence, the same letter, all of the letters vain as those arriving on shipboard in port for one lost at sea, because he found some difficulty in focussing, the words kept blurring and dissembling, his own name staring out at him." Here, the Consul's distorted perception, his self-destruction, and the loss of meaning are directly connected. In the same way that bits of the Consul's eyelids, in an earlier scene, break off and seem to merge with the landscape, language itself, by the end of the novel, has begun to disintegrate and communication comes to an entropic standstill: "But the mescal had brought him in touch with his situation again to the extent that he did not now need to comprehend any meaning in the words beyond their abject confirmation of his own lostness, his own fruitless selfish ruin, now perhaps finally self-imposed, his brain at an agonized standstill" (345).

The competing images of vertigo and entropy in the _Volcano_ are part of the novel's baroque texture, which is organized by what David Hayman, in a study of _Finnegans Wake_, has termed a nodal structure:

The key element . . . is the "prime node" or apex of the "nodal system," a passage where some act, activity, personal trait, allusion, theme, etc. surfaces for its clearest statement in the text, is made manifest, so to speak, and in the process brings together and crystallizes an otherwise scattered body of related material. This prime node is the generative center for lesser and generally less transparent passages devoted to its elaboration or expansion and strategically located in the text. The latter
Malcolm Lowry's Manichean Episteme

are reinforced by more numerous but briefer allusions to one or more of its attributes. As the units diminish in size, their distribution becomes increasingly, though never truly, random. Taken together, all of these components constitute a single nodal system though on occasion one prime node may generate more than one system and though such systems tend to be interrelated.

Hayman argues that a work of fiction can thus have a rather clearly ordered superstructure and a less obvious organization (or infrastructure) on the textual level. While the superstructure of *Volcano* is straightforward—twelve chapters suggests the number of waking hours in a day or the number of months in a year, and the number has other cabalistic and numerological associations—the infrastructure of the novel is more complex. It is governed by a primary node that serves as the center of the novel, structuring narrative as well as creating theme and metaphor. In a text like the *Volcano* which often avoids the traditional patterns of sequential narration, the primary node gives the novel formal coherence by ramifying into minor nodes of significance and clusters of motifs which give the work its baroque texture. Lowry clearly had this technique in mind when he cites in his famous letter to Jonathan Cape the baroque quality of his fiction: each literary arabesque is a minor node that relates to the central node which determines the major themes of the novel.

The central node in *Under the Volcano* is the luminous wheel, representing, in Lowry's words, not only "the Ferris wheel in the square, but . . . if you like, also many other things: it is Buddha's wheel of the law, . . . it is eternity, it is the instrument of the eternal recurrence, the eternal return, and it is the form of the book; or superficially it can be seen simply in an obvious movie sense as the wheel of time whirling backwards until we have reached the year before and Chapter II" ([Letters](Letters) 70–71). The major event involving the luminous wheel is the Consul’s fateful Ferris wheel ride which occurs close to the
midpoint of the novel. While the central location of this episode suggests its importance, the node of the luminous wheel is also the source of most of the major themes, images, and recurring details in the novel.

The Consul’s experiences with the "Máquina Infernal" (221), or infernal machine, as the Ferris wheel is called, produces the Consul’s most violent, most vertiginous derangement of the senses, and it is this disorientation that causes his identity, in the form of his passport, to be stripped from him, an event that is both the literal cause and a symbol of his destruction. The luminous wheel is thus a demonic force that gives rise to imagery, themes, and symbols associated with hell, for example, the Hotel della Selva, suggesting Dante’s wood (Cross 29), Laruelle’s circuitous descent into Quauhnahuac (23), the descent of the bus into Tomalín (252), the Farolito as “Infierno” (147), young Geoffrey Firmin’s “Hell Bunker” (20), and the older Consul’s assertion that he loves hell (314). Since the central node of the luminous wheel is also meant to be a crucifixion scene, it connects the Consul’s suffering with his ultimate destination, the barranca. Referring to the mythic formation of the ravine, Laruelle relates that “when Christ was being crucified, so ran the sea-borne, hieratic legend, the earth had opened all through this country” (15). Thus, by extension, the luminous wheel which gives rise to the demonic motifs of the inferno and the abyss of the barranca also gives rise to the related motifs of the Farolito, Parián, and pariah dogs, all nodal motifs in their own right.

As a counterbalance to these demonic motifs, the luminous wheel also generates the major beneficent force in the novel, the millwheel, which is associated with a constructive vision of cosmic harmony. References to the “the luminous wheel of this galaxy” (322), “millwheel reflections of sunlight on water” (270, 112), and “the vast spokes of the wheel whirling across the bay” (38) make it clear that the millwheel is an emblem of Yvonne’s Northern Paradise, her “Columbian Eden” (Cross). The most remarkable passage within the millwheel node comes
near the end of chapter 11, when Yvonne experiences a celestial vision that begins vertiginously and ends entropically with her death and the ascension of her soul:

They were the cars at the fair that were whirling around her; no, they were the planets, while the sun stood, burning and spinning and glittering in the centre; here they came again, Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, Pluto; but they were not planets, for it was not a merry-go-round at all, but the Ferris Wheel, they were constellations, in the hub of which, like a great cold eye, burned Polaris, and round and round it here they went: Cassiopeia, Cepheus, the Lynx, Ursa Major, Ursa Minor, and the Dragon; yet they were not constellations, but, somehow, myriads of beautiful butterflies, she was sailing into Acapulco harbour through a hurricane of beautiful butterflies, zigzagging overhead and endlessly vanishing astern over the sea.

Yvonne felt herself suddenly gathered upwards and borne towards the stars, through eddies of stars scattering aloft with ever wider circling like rings on water, among which now appeared, like a flock of diamond birds flying softly and steadily towards Orion, the Pleiades. (335–36)

Yvonne’s death is suggested by the dizzying whirling of the heavens outward and upward in an ever enlarging and continually slowing spiral that disperses into the universe. The mill-wheel offers a simultaneous but inverted parallel to the developing inferno motif, for if Quauhnahuac is hell in the Consul’s mind, it is also just as clearly an “Earthly Paradise” (10), a southern inversion of the Columbian Eden of the north. The luminous wheel thus expresses the constructive and destructive episteme of the work; as Lowry writes, Quauhnahuac “is paradisal: it is unquestionably infernal” (Letters 67).

This discordia concors, the juxtaposition of demonic and beatific aspects of the wheel, is apparent throughout the novel in clusters of often discordant images, motifs, and recurring details that are placed in proximity to provide thematic devel-
opment, dramatic tension, and baroque texture and structure. A good example is in chapter 8 where the Consul, Hugh, and Yvonne are riding the bus to Tomalin: “They were crossing a bridge at the bottom of the hill, over the ravine. It appeared overtly horrendous here. Hugh saw a dead dog right at the bottom, nuzzling the refuse; white bones showed through the carcass. But above was the blue sky and Yvonne looked happy when Popocatepetl sprang into view, dominating the landscape for a while as they climbed the long circuitous hill” (233). Within the course of a very few lines, Lowry deploys the motifs of the ravine, the pariah dog, and the inferno, suggested by the hill which eventually “circle[s] down into Tomalín.” Yet these demonic motifs are offset by the circular ascent of the characters, the Indian myth of the volcanos as lovers, and the image of blue sky—all of which are associated with the beatific forces of the novel. The paradoxical juxtaposition of motifs reveals Lowry’s Manichean episteme, his vision of a black Eden that is a medley of the paradisical and the infernal.

In addition to these nodal clusters that develop the symbolist texture and themes of the novel, there are also numerous nodal signifiers, or simple details that echo major themes and symbols, that while unrelated to the major themes in meaning, are clearly meant to recall them to the reader’s mind. A list of such minor nodal signifiers might include the “spinning flywheel of the presses” (54), Hugh standing at the wheel of an imaginary ship (103), the Consul’s description of his shakes as “wheels within wheels” (174), his “great wheeling thoughts” (200), the madman with his bicycle tire (224), the bull circling in the arena (257), and the “turning wrenched wheel of a boy’s bicycle” (280). Given there are easily over a score of such nodal signifiers, the effect is at once productive of order and disorientation. The desultory surfacing of these signifiers contributes to the structure of disorientation in the work, a structure perfectly suited to a work whose epistemology is simultaneously constructive and destructive.