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Under the Volcano ... the Beach: Malcolm Lowry and the Situationists

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I'm back in Paris, and in condition to write, after a series of trips that was longer than I anticipated. But I've at last discovered mescal: it's very good. (*Correspondence* 391)

Not the words of Malcolm Lowry but those of one of Lowry's greatest admirers, French writer and filmmaker Guy Debord. Debord was a key player in the short-lived but highly influential post-war avant-garde groups the Letterist International (LI) and the Situationist International (SI), the latter of which he led.¹ This essay examines the strong relationship between the work and life of Lowry and of Debord, in particular Debord's last and most important film, *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni* (1978). Before proceeding to an analysis of what, arguably, are clear parallels between Lowry's cosmos and Debord's, it may be instructive to refresh the historical and anecdotal links between Lowry's life, writing, and philosophy, and the subsequent actions of Debord and his colleagues in post-war France and elsewhere. Though the connections between Lowry and Debord range from the biographical (both escaped urbanity by moving to remote areas, to coastal British Columbia and the Auvergne region of France, respectively) to the creative (both wrote what have been called "cinematic" books), the influence of Lowry on Debord (especially latter Debord) is somewhat overlooked both by Lowry scholars and by historians of the SI.

¹ The English-language versions of the group names are used here.

This chapter endeavours to reveal occult (hitherto unknown) but useful connections between Lowry and Debord, and contribute to the vast and daunting realm of material already written about Lowry and his venerated novel, *Under the Volcano*.

The Consul on the Left Bank

In 1948, the people living in the back streets of the Place Saint-Germain-des-Pres could see a strange figure passing: it was Lowry walking day after day with the same slow, regular stride; he was going as in a dream, seeming to look at nothing, nobody. (Francillon 64)

The presence of Lowry loomed large in some quarters in post-war Paris. The French translation of *Under the Volcano*, which Lowry supervised, was a great success with critics and readers and had a strong impact on the Parisian literary and avant-garde traditions. As Lowry's second wife, Margerie Bonner Lowry, observed: "It took the English a while....But in France they just practically cross themselves when they speak of him....I've had some of the reviews and they're phenomenal. They just compare him to everybody including Proust, Dante and Shakespeare; the great writers that will live forever" (M. B. Lowry 33). Indeed, some years later, in July/August 1960, an issue of the journal *Les Lettres Nouvelles* was devoted entirely to Lowry. Lowry reciprocated this adoration, and in a letter of March 1, 1950, sent to his French translator, Clarisse Francillon, he praises her translation:

when the meaning comes through in French as it seems triumphantly to do in your version, the very fact that you have not so much advantage of

actual “ambiguity” in the words seems to make the meaning deeper and wider in range and certainly more beautiful in expression. (Lowry, *Sursum* 2:200) **█**

And in a nod to the cinematic nature of *Volcano*, Lowry also aligns himself with Jacques Laruelle, the French film director character of the novel: “the whole book *could* be taken to be M. Laruelle’s film – if so, it was my way of paying devout tribute to the French film” (*Sursum* 2:201) **█**

French avant-garde groups, most notably the LI (who often augmented their work with symbols and spoken aspects, “metagraphs”) and the SI, were quick to adopt Lowry’s novel as both a literary masterwork and as a guide to living. The key figures of the movement, particularly chief theorist Debord, were not only profoundly influenced by the style and themes of *Volcano*, working these into their own poetic-political statements, texts, and public utterances, but also by Lowry’s anarchic personal life and beliefs. Debord saw Lowry as part of a great tradition of English literature (which included Shakespeare, Swift, and Sterne). In a sense, both Lowry and Debord were “men out of their time,” drawing on classic and ancient traditions within their own rapidly changing modern milieu (the 1920s for Lowry, the 1960s for Debord). Both were evidently uncomfortable with the changes taking place as a result of advanced capitalism. Debord defined this as the “spectacle,” drawing from the texts of the young Karl Marx, who defined political economy as “the final denial of humanity.” Both Lowry and Debord hated “fake” experiences such as tourism. Clarissa Lorenz, the wife of Lowry’s mentor, Conrad Aiken, once noted that, for

² *Sursum Corda!: The Collected Letters of Malcolm Lowry* (Jonathan Cape: London), vol 2, 200.

³ *Ibid.*, 201.

Lowry, “conventional tourism was an anathema to him. He preferred his own inner landscape and orbit, sampling the cantinas” (Lorenz 64). The famed situationist techniques of the *dérive* (“a mode of experimental behaviour linked to the conditions of urban society”), psychogeography (“the study of the specific effects of the geographical environment”) and *détournement* (“rearrangement of pre-existing elements”—in short, plagiarism) owe much to the style of Lowry’s poetry, fiction, and letter writing (Situationist International Anthology).

Much of Lowry’s writing represents an experimental drift through various ambiances (such as in the opening section of *Volcano*, where the figures move and shift through the landscape), with Lowry’s stream-of-consciousness technique often illustrating the concept of the psychogeographic. Indeed, the practice of psychogeography, a drunken drift through space and time, was dubbed by Debord and his colleagues as the “Lowry game.” Admittedly, the French, perhaps bolstered by the violence of their radical milieu, were bolder in their use of experimental techniques. Lowry plagiarized many images and words from esoteric sources. But while the French writers saw plagiarism as a free and radical literary technique (often acknowledging, for example, the influence of Isadore Ducasse: “Plagiarism is necessary...it clasps an author’s sentence tight, uses his expressions, eliminates a false idea, replaces it with the right idea” [Lautréamont 263]), Lowry, sadly, did not feel so at ease with cultural borrowing, his own form of plagiarism causing him great personal anguish and distress.

Lowry’s influence also stretched to the personal and anecdotal. The ultimately tragic figure of letterist Ivan Chtcheglov led a curious Lowryesque existence. Chtcheglov wrote little and was incarcerated in psychiatric hospitals, but composed the brilliant *Formulary for a New Urbanism*, which contains, in its allusions to Poe

and the mysterious landscape, the difficult beauty of a Lowry work. Ralph Rumney, a painter and former Communist from Halifax (UK), and one of the few English situationist members, was nicknamed “the consul”

by the French wing, after the alcoholic British consul in *Volcano*, who saw Lowry in his imposing figure and aristocratic Englishness. The alcoholic figure moves in and out of reality, perceiving the human condition for “what it is” and recounting the responses to it of a “doomed man.” In Paris, Lowry, like Debord, showed a “marked preference for those dim taverns off the beaten track, little frequented unless by a handful of workmen in dungarees” (Francillon 88).

The trap that all humans find themselves within is evident in *Volcano* as it is in the later writings and films of Debord. For both, alcoholism was an antidote, what Lowry called “Gin and orange juice best cure for alcoholism real cause of which is ugliness and complete baffling sterility of existence as sold to you” (Francillon 96), a stinging prophetic description of Debord’s spectacle. The SI valued heavy drinking as much as theorizing, and it is alcohol that the French writers also took from Lowry and made their own. Debord’s increasingly melancholic writings and his description of himself as “someone who had drunk much more than he had written” (Debord, *Panegyric* 29) clearly demonstrates the debt the group owed to Lowry in this regard. As Canadian poet and Vancouver friend Earl Birney said of Lowry, “I doubt if there is another poet, from Li Po to Dylan Thomas, who managed to drink so hard and still write so much and so honestly about drinking” (qtd. in Kilgallin 74).

In search of states outside of the pain of dreary perception and convention, both Lowry and Debord shared an intense, stimulating, and damaging relationship with alcohol. In his memoirs, Debord writes frankly and without shame of his experiences as an alcoholic, quoting the Spanish poet Gracian: “There are those who

got drunk only once, but that once lasted them a lifetime” (*Panegyric* 30). Francillon recalls Lowry awoke with a “frenzied impatience,” and the “nervous trembling which shook his limbs only stopped once he had drunk the first glass of red wine and water” (87). Debord speaks of what “lies beyond violent drunkenness...a terrible and magnificent peace, the true taste of the passage of time.” For the protagonist of *Volcano*, the Consul, drunkenness invokes a state of “translucent clairvoyance” (Beckoff 16). Alcohol “frees his language so that it approaches poetry” (Beckoff 17). Debord classified mescal as “incomparable” (*Panegyric* 32). For both Lowry and Debord, drinking was a stirring phenomenon essential to living. For Lowry, “the drunkenness of the Consul is used on one plane to symbolize the universal drunkenness of mankind” (*Selected Letters* 66). Quoting Machiavelli, Debord observed that “if someone judges this way of life shameful, I find it praiseworthy, for we imitate nature, which is changeable” (*Panegyric* 33). But while Debord was defiant about his drinking, Lowry found it shameful. Lowry’s “celebrations” of alcohol in his writings are tempered by guilt and remorse. As Hugh—a manifestation of the Consul, and Lowry’s, alter ego—observes: “Good god, if our civilization were to sober up for a couple of days it’d die of remorse on the third.” (Lowry 121) The disapproval of Lowry’s Methodist father, tempered by the need for Lowry to exist on his regular stipends, resulted in further estrangement. This is the eternal struggle between parent and child. Debord knew this, noting: “men resemble their times more than their fathers” (*Comments* 20). Furthermore, both Lowry and Debord hated their fame and sought shelter from it in alcohol. In his poem “After Publication of *Under the Volcano*,” Lowry notes, “success is like some horrible disaster” (*Selected Poems* 78). Debord, for his part, quoted Li Po, “For Thirty years, I’ve hidden my fame in taverns” (*Panegyric* 33).

LI/SI contributors were also drawn to *Volcano* for textual inspiration.

Chtcheglov's "Formulary for a New Urbanism" has a complex, Churrigueresque structure: elaborate and ornate, with elements of chiaroscuro, and partly architectural in form, the essay is a lament to a Paris that is now lost (to urban development), decrying the current "boredom" of the city (also a major theme of Debord's film *In Girum*). Chtcheglov considered the *dérive* akin to a form of psychoanalysis and "a good replacement for a mass." Through aimlessly wandering, Chtcheglov finds solace in the strange poetic place names of Parisian locations and shops:

Hotel of Strangers

Saint Anne Ambulance

Showerbath of the Patriarchs

Notre Dame Zoo

The swimming pool on the Street of Little Girls

(Chtcheglov 1–4)

These peculiar ambiances throw new light on the locations: "Certain shifting angles, certain receding perspectives, allow us to glimpse original conceptions of space, but his vision remains fragmentary" (Chtcheglov 1). What are described are new perceptions of space, time, and behaviour. Using the kinds of techniques and themes expressed throughout Lowry's writings, Chtcheglov draws on the atmospheric writings of the past in order to reinvent the present (Victor Hugo, Dumas, Poe). Debord, in a companion essay, invokes the paintings of Claude Lorrain, which offer a "perpetual invitation to voyage" (Debord, "Introduction" 5–8). Lowry would have felt the same pull gazing out across the oceans.

Patrick Straram, A French-Canadian writer and poet with connections to both the LI and the SI, paid tribute to Lowry in his work *They Write to Us of Vancouver*:

We still haven't been to Canada!...Perhaps in the not too distant future?
My behaviour is no longer just enigmatic, it terrorizes, and I cannot be reproached a single gesture, an illicit word. On the contrary, my conduct is exemplary, completely disorienting. (Straram)

Straram also mimicked Lowry/the Consul's drinking. According to the memoirs of a fellow letterist,

Straram [too] drank like a fish...he was always getting into tight spots...and would do really stupid things. Several times he wound up in the cell, even in the mental hospital. Once he spent a fortnight in there and didn't want to come out. (Mension 54)

But by far the clearest admiration for Lowry is expressed by Debord. In a letter to Straram, sent on the Day of the Dead, 1960, Debord wrote:

I had the occasion, and the time, to reread [*Under the Volcano*] entirely, toward the beginning of September, on a train between Munich and Gênes. I had found it more fine, and more intelligent, than in 1953 despite loving it a lot then. ("Letter")

This fascination with the book manifested itself in the technique of the *dérive*: “ceaselessly drifting for days on end, none resembling the one before.” It seems that for the SI *Volcano* epitomized this form of drift. The novel, for example, begins with precise geographical information, then becomes somewhat fragmentary along Jacques Laruelle's own *dérive* (Lowry, *Under 15–29* passim), taking in sudden changes in direction—if you like, psychogeographically—as well as remembrances of the Taskersons, the Consul's adoptive family, covering a range of English “psychogeographical” locations, and concluding with an “eccentric orbit.” Echoing this kind of traverse, in his letter to Straram, Debord wrote:

One evening, I stopped at Cagnes-sur-Mer where – in the old village, on the hill – I went to see a girl who'd been very important to me for several years. But I neglected to notify her of my passage, and she wasn't there (but what could it say of this sort of return if she had been there?). It is necessary to say that I was perfectly drunk. I passed a very curious evening, going from one bar to another – the place is touristic enough – and at a bend in a very sombre road, I recognized, with a feeling of obviousness, the "barranca," in which I'd almost fallen...[goes on to recount various chance meetings]...all the chances for communication must be sought after, whatever the cost and whatever the illusions, which aren't frequent or easy. The regret that survives all demonstrations of such "illusions" shows that they aren't condemned to being, to remaining illusions....Thus, the influential game of Lowry, which is subject to favourable conditions (?), suffices to forcefully make appear the significant incidents that otherwise wouldn't even be remarked, certainly

not understood as such – and to make appear, at the centre, a sense of this whole day, this *dérive*. (“Letter”)

The SI carried out numerous other experiments along these lines. For example, Debord and Raoul Vaneigem spent a day in Sarcelles intoxicated by mescal. “Our crazy walks were a real descent into hell,” noted Vaneigem, clearly trying to invoke the spirit of *Volcano* (Vaneigem). For his part, Lowry’s famous letter to Jonathan Cape of January 1946, explaining the layers of meaning and symbolism behind his novel, reads like a journey or a walk through the terrain of a great artistic sensibility (*Selected Letters* 57–88). Lowry would continue to influence French culture through the century. Georges Perec, in his essay “Things I Must Really Do Before I Die” (written the year before he did), notes that “Finally, there are things it’s impossible to envisage from now on but which would have been possible not so long ago, for example: 36. Get drunk with Malcolm Lowry” (Perec 124).

Debord suffered a “deep unresolved tension between the poetico-artistic part of himself and the intransigent revolutionary” (Forsyth 26–40). He famously scrawled “ne travaillez jamais” on a wall in the Rue de Seine in 1953—a declaration of defiant laziness over any kind of work ethic. This reflects the struggles that Lowry had with his own writing. Day describes Lowry as “a man obsessed by the need to write, while at the same time finding it extremely difficult to write.” (Day 5) Lowry, like Debord, produced in his lifetime a published corpus that was pitifully small. The seemingly contradictory nature of both men is evident in Lowry’s “preternatural degree of self-awareness, even when face down on the floor of a pub or a cantina.” (ibid) Lowry is described as “a happy man; a suicide,” (ibid) an epitaph that would suit Debord.

Importantly, the SI took from Lowry his superb technique⁴ in capturing the human spirit in crisis and the failure of modern man to come to terms with the awfulness of contemporary existence. At the same time, like Lowry and the characters in his works, they seek out and find small fragments of salvation in nature, poetry, love, and alcohol. Lowry's characters commonly enjoy or endure a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances. For the SI, this amounted to a "mode of experimental behaviour linked to the conditions of urban society" (Situationist International Anthology); true, Lowry's characters escape to the wilderness from the city (think of Eridanus in "The Forest Path to the Spring"), but this is not entirely contradictory. Debord later retired to an austere part of the Auvergne, his final parting shot to the spectacle he had always despised.

The above is but a brief outline of some of the ways in which Lowry influenced a microcosm of the French post-war avant-garde. In order to further explore the importance of Lowry to this group, we turn now to Debord's 1978 film *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni* to observe further particular symbolic elements at work.

Circular Time: *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni*

"The Road of Excess leads to the palace of wisdom"

(William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and*

Hell)

⁴ Gerald Noxon notes (in Kilgallon 112) that "it was necessary that (Malcolm's) writing should have a perfectly wrought surface meaning, in the sense of the term established by Flaubert" and "a sound dramaturgy of classical origin." Debord reflected this style in his prose.

In addition to its effects on the writings of the LI/SI, Lowry's influence also stretched to other media. Debord's melancholic film *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni* (1978) is about the triumphs and tragedies of life. The title of Debord's film is taken from a medieval Latin palindrome, the kind of word play that Lowry liked. This famous macaronic verse, called the devil's verse, is a riddle in the form of a palindrome—literally, a puzzle inside a puzzle. It translates as "we wander in the night, and are consumed by fire," or "we enter the circle after dark and are consumed by fire," and is said to describe the movement of moths. Others believe that it is about the mayfly, that short-lived insect known to circle fire only to be consumed by flame. The beginning of the palindrome can also be translated as "go wandering" instead of the literal "go in a circle"; strolling or wandering around, clearly relating to the *dérive* favoured by the LI/SI.

Here again the Lowry-esque techniques come to the fore. The film makes liberal use of *détournement* and the *dérive*, repositioning existing elements into new forms. Debord was influenced by films such as *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), where documentary and fiction are combined, where maps and ephemera are used to aid a dreamlike form of reality that captures the "anguish of decay."⁵ The symbols of fire and circularity are powerful (rewatch/reread; Lowry always said that his work needed to be read many times before the full meaning could come through). We recall the words of Lowry's masterpiece: "Time was circumfluent again too, mescal-drugged" (*Under* 364).

Lowry's novel opens up with a cinematic, cosmic view of the world, gradually focussing in on characters and their trials. It is structured around a form "considered to be like that of a wheel, with 12 spokes, the motion of which is something like that,

⁵ Kilgallon notes that this too was the way to approach Lowry's novel: armed with a form of "alternative consciousness" (130–31).

conceivably, of time itself” (Lowry, *Selected Letters* 67). For Debord and his colleagues in the early stages of the history of the SI, cinema was just another revolutionary tool, what René Viénet called “the newest and without doubt the most useful means of expression of our epoch” (Viénet 213–16). Film was to be used to expose the mediated state of the contemporary world. *Détournement* was the key practical method of making cinema. It seems, however, following Lowry, that in his later works, especially *In Girum*, Debord transcended film as a revolutionary tool to create a poetic, critical biography of the modern world. Although the film does incorporate various critiques of modern society (the very first scene is of an audience enjoying a “pseudo experience”), and deals with the alienation of the individual in capitalist systems, this is connected to the personal experience of an “important subject,” Debord himself. Interestingly, certain of Debord’s film existed as a printed text (a book) before they were seen as films, further cementing the relationship between film, fiction, and literature.⁶ The film contains many citations from other films and literary texts, and like Lowry’s approach, draws on layers of Dantesque quadrival meanings.⁷

Debord intended *In Girum* to be a document of a world decaying as a result of the “widespread historical amnesia which defined the society of the spectacle” (Hussey 317). This marks the later works of Debord, which oscillated—like Hugh and the Consul in *Under the Volcano*—between political theory and poetic lament. Part of the film is a coruscating attack on advanced capitalism, on the spectacle. The rest is a lament for the lost youth of postwar rebellion. Debord was acutely aware of the

⁶ The book *The Society of the Spectacle* for example, was published in 1967; the film in 1973. The published script is included in *Guy Debord: Complete Cinematic Works, Scripts, Stills, Documents*—see Works Cited.

⁷ These meanings are, according to Kilgallin, (i) literal, (ii) allegorical, (iii) tropological, (iv) anagogical (Kilgallin 151).

tradition of ancient France and sought, like twelfth-century troubadours, an art that reconciled the aristocratic and the democratic.⁸ The film combines footage of film reenactments of moments in European history with contemporary elements and poetic narration spoken by Debord himself, laced with quotations from Bossuet, Clausewitz, and Dante (reading aloud, as Lowry liked to do, often dictating his stories and poems).

The overall theme of Debord's film reflects Lowry's obsessions. In one of Lowry's last published stories, "Strange Comfort Afforded by the Profession," Wilderness, the "hero," "despondently recognizes that the grand heroic life-style of Keats and Shelley is gone from the world. Modern writers are like bank clerks" (Binns 19). Lowry's lament at the crassness of the modern world is symptomatic of his later works and is also the theme of Debord's film. Both Lowry and Debord deliberately confuse the objective and subjective worlds of the writer and reader. Debord moves in *In Girum* from an objective critique of the modern capitalist world to subjective reflections on his own life and times, as does Lowry in *Under the Volcano*. Both texts support an impressionistic and yet modern form that is both "inward and outward looking" (Binns 41). It is not that Lowry and Debord share direct themes or politics, but that the spirit of Lowry is embedded in the very poetry of the film.

The film's opening pulls no punches in lambasting modern man in the guise of the movie-going public. Debord notes:

⁸ In this, he followed not only the chansons of modern troubadour Georges Brassens but also the English author Ford Madox Ford, who also sought refuge in southern France from the ugliness of contemporary life and art.

How harshly the mode of production has treated them! With all their ‘upward mobility’ they have lost the little they had and gained what no one wanted. They share poverties and histories and humiliations from all the past systems of exploitation without sharing in the revolts against those systems.... They are nothing but numbers on charts drawn up by idiots. (*Cinematic Works* 135–36)

Such words echo the kind of despair found in Lowry’s writing. In the novella *Lunar Caustic*, Lowry’s protagonist, Bill Plantagenet, perceives a

mischievous world over which merely more subtle lunatics exerted almost supreme hegemony, where neurotic behaviour was the rule, and there was nothing but hypocrisy to answer the flames of evil, which might be the flames of judgement, which were already scorching nearer and nearer. (*Lunar Caustic* 317)

Elsewhere, Debord notes the connections between the destruction of the natural world—Lowry’s *paradise*—and the destruction of mankind: “A Society that is ever more sick, but ever more powerful, has recreated the world—everywhere and in concrete form—as the environment and backdrop of its sickness: it has created a *sick planet*” (*Sick Planet* 81). This clearly echoes the way in which the tragedy of Lowry’s characters is mirrored by the catastrophes of the external world.

The defiance of the true artist is evident throughout Debord’s film. The opening lines, “I will make no concession to the public in this film” (*Cinematic Works* 133), state this unambiguously. Debord wishes to supersede film language: “I do not

wish to preserve any of the language of this outdated art, except perhaps the reverse shot of the only world it has observed and a tracking shot across the fleeting ideas of an era” (146). There is no desire to make a work that is user friendly. The words of Swift, “It is no small satisfaction to present a work that is beyond all criticism” (Debord, *Cinematic Works*, 147), echo Lowry’s own defence of his working methods.

To support the overall themes of the film, Debord utilizes a number of powerful symbolic elements, many of which can also be found in Lowry’s work. These are worth exploring in detail.

Water

“The entire film,” notes Debord, “is based on the theme of water. Hence the quotations from poets evoking the evanescence of everything, who all used water as a metaphor for the flowing of time” (*Cinematic Works* 223). The sequences of the film not *détourned* were shot in Venice by a small crew. Most of the shots are tracking shots of buildings and the flowing of water along the canals. Of course, Lowry’s obsessions with the sea are well known. Lowry was fascinated by Scandinavia and the Norwegian writer Nordahl Grieg, and the Consul himself longs for a water-wreathed northern paradise in *Under the Volcano*. Indeed, large sections of that novel (especially chapter 5) are filled with images and descriptions of lakes, waterfalls, and rain much needed in the Mexican locale of the novel. The Consul’s relationship with water is tragic: “The regenerative water, the mysterious river Eridanus that can put out the flames and cool the body is never reached” (Beckoff 24). Yet in Debord’s film, “the water of time remains, and ultimately overwhelms and extinguishes the fire” (*Cinematic Works* 224), rendering it therefore more symbolically hopeful.

At one point in the film, during a section on past time and the “restless and exitless present” (165), Debord quotes Ecclesiastes: “All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again” (166). Though the reference in *In Girum* is to the river Seine in Paris, locality of so many situationist adventures, the image conjures up also the circularity of time as evoked by the Ferris wheel in *Under the Volcano*. The film ends with allusions to the sea: “this civilization is on fire; the whole thing is capsizing and sinking. What splendid torpedoing!” (191) Humanity is dying—an appalling collapse which Debord participated in and which Lowry, imagining he would, depicted in his writings.

Fire

In Girum is a film about water, but it is also about fire and, according to Debord, of “*momentary brilliance* – revolution...youth, love, negation in the night, the Devil, battles and unfulfilled missions where spellbound ‘passing travellers’ meet their doom; and *desire within this night of the world*” (223). Fire, for Lowry, was ‘the element that follows you around’ (*October Ferry* 123). As Clarissa Francillon observed, speaking of Malcolm and Margerie, “Ineradicably, fire was to be inscribed along the whole course of their existence” (Lowry, *Psalms and Songs* 93). Lowry’s fascination with the occult, through his acquaintance with Charles Stansfeld Jones (aka Fred Achad, and the “magical child” of Aleister Crowley), led him to believe that his “playing about” with the occult had put him in bad repute with certain demonic forces and that it was his destiny to be pursued by the element of fire. Famously, many of Lowry’s works, including his manuscript for the novel *In Ballast*

to the *White Sea*, were destroyed by fire.⁹ In *Under the Volcano*, the Consul's letters are burned by Laruelle, and in her dying dream, Yvonne (the Consul's estranged wife) witnesses his manuscript go up in flames. According to Percy Cummins, a neighbour of the Lowrys at Dollarton who witnessed the burning of their shack, "His mind must have been a fiery furnace for all he thought about was fire" (Kilgallin 38). Lowry's doomed man (the Consul), like much of Lowry's actual work, is destined to be destroyed by flames. Lowry knew Eliot's *Four Quartets* well, and his words about "Time past and time future" (Eliot, *Collected Poems* 192; "We only live, only suspire / Consumed either by fire or fire" [191]) ring out in the title and theme of Debord's film: "It has become ungovernable, this wasteland where new sufferings are disguised with the name of former pleasures and where people are so afraid. They turn in the night, consumed by fire" (*Cinematic Works* 191).

Time

[*Under the Volcano*] should be seen as essentially trochal, I repeat, the form of it as a wheel so that when you get to the end...you should want to turn back to the beginning again. (Lowry, *Selected Letters*, 88)

Perhaps the most important aspect of Debord's film in relation to Lowry is its cyclical structure. The authors of both *Under the Volcano* and *In Girum* invite the "reader" to go back to the beginning and start again.

⁹ Though *In Ballast to the White Sea* was long thought to have been destroyed by fire, in fact a surviving manuscript existed, in the hands of Lowry's first wife, Jan Gabriel, and an edition has recently been published—see Works Cited.

In his famous letter to Jonathan Cape, who had conditionally agreed to publish *Under the Volcano*, Lowry began a defence of his technique by claiming that the slow start to the novel would be redeemed for the reader by “the reports which had already reached his ears of rewarding vistas further on” (*Selected Letters* 58). At the same time, Lowry was keen to stress the importance of the circularity of the novel; that in regard to the ending, “the beginning...answers it, echoes back to it over the bridge of the intervening chapters” (59). At screenings of Debord’s deliberately interminable first anti-film, *Hurlements en Faveur de Sade* (1952)—a film made up of black-and-white screens with only random voices as a stimulus—each screening was prefaced by the promise of “something dirty.” This “playing with time” was central both to Debord’s films and to Lowry’s art. A. C. Nyland notes that “in his later work Lowry showed great skill in presenting the passage of time” (Nyland 143). Action exists merely to “arrest the flow of thought and to make the reader conscious of the passing of time” (143). Lowry’s books formed part of what Beckoff describes as a “cosmic never-ending voyage” (Beckoff 7). The theme of circularity is stated in the palindrome form of the title, which is capable of “perfectly uniting the form and content of perdition” (Debord, *Cinematic Works*, 166), a state of eternal punishment and damnation into which a sinful and impenitent person passes after death. George Woodcock notes that “the present cannot escape the past, that the impotence of man’s present merges with the guilt of his past, is symbolically best expressed in a cinematic style where the circularity of the form, imitating the circular motion of the reel, can manipulate the overlapping and merging of time.” (Woodcock 140) In a piece for *LIGHT*, the journal of the literary spiritualist organisation the Discovery Group, during a discussion on Lowry between Rosamond Lehmann and Kathleen Raine, it was noted that:

All he has to do now, is to acknowledge that he undertook more than he can manage spiritually, and he will have to come back and do the whole thing over again (Lehmann 158).

It seems Lowry was fated to repeat incidents from his life and work.

Music

Another key aspect of Debord's film is its musical soundtrack. Only three pieces of music are used: two pieces by the baroque composer Francois Couperin and a jazz instrumental by Art Blakey and the Messengers. The music by Couperin (from his *Concerts Royaux [Royal Concerts]*), has a courtly, majestic quality to it, evoking a past age of aristocratic elegance and eloquence, invoking perhaps the classical texts that were an important symbol against the crassness of contemporary lived experience. But it is the use of Blakey that speaks most loudly to Lowry's life and work; for it is jazz, of course, that represents the kind of ambience that Lowry immersed himself in, loving and trying to imitate and evoke its tenor in his difficult, stirring, and often beautiful words. The Blakey piece in Debord's film is used to stimulate memories of a specific milieu: the Left Bank culture of Paris (a place which Lowry enjoyed too). Specifically, Saint-Germain-des-Prés was for Debord a symbol of liberation and decadence, where African American musicians such as Blakey were welcomed and frequently performed. Debord's use in this instance of the Messengers' live recording of Benny Golson's "Whisper Not" contributes significantly to the

melancholia of the film.¹⁰ Like Lowry before him, Debord knew the value and importance of jazz in painting a picture of modern life that is both poetic and destructive. The film, as we know, follows the *dérive*, the letterist concept of the drift, wandering, which in this case might be understood as a kind of improvisational jazz performance. Lowry's work is full of the *dérive*.

Conclusion

Debord's own contempt for the cinema, expressed strongly in his film, echoes Lowry's own disenchantment with the American film industry, disgusted as he was with "the poor quality of writing which was expected of him" (Lowry, *Psalms and Songs* 92). This desire, perhaps even nostalgia, for an ideal and idealized space permeates the work of both men. While Debord's film begins ferociously, it edges slowly toward a lamentation for a lost world, moving toward an exposition on passion and a regret over how ingrained routines render true emotion obsolete. Lowry examines a similar loss in his work: the phrase "one cannot live without love" resonates throughout *Under the Volcano*. In *Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni* examines the "cafes of lost youth" and reflects on the friends of Debord who have died, disappeared, or gone mad: "Suicide carried off many. 'Drink and the devil have done for the rest' as a song says" (*Cinematic Works* 164). The suicide of Lowry's friend Paul Fitte stood as a symbol for Lowry of this tragic youth ("the brilliant youth of Saint-Germain-des-pres...were drowned in the flowing waters of their century" [Debord, *Cinematic Works*, 224]). *Volcano* and *In Girum* depict humanity as looking into the abyss, "or simply down the drain" (Lowry, *Selected Letters*, 68).

¹⁰ The recording can be found on *Art Blakey Et Les Jazz-Messengers Au Club St. Germain, Vol. 1* (RCA LP 430.043, France, 1959). The Messengers' line-up includes Lee Morgan (trumpet), Benny Golson (tenor saxophone), Bobby Timmons (piano), Jymie Merritt (bass), and Art Blakey (drums).

In the film, the figure of Debord functions, as in Lowry's own use of his own "self" in his writing, neither as "facile autobiography [n]or narcissist indulgence" (Levin 103) and is, in fact, reminiscent of an earlier Debord project, *Eloge de ce que Nous Avons Aime (Homage to the Things We Loved)*, a film that celebrates his friends (e.g., Chtcheglov) and, more generally, life (food and drink). Debord expresses his love for games (his kriegspiel), just as Lowry was fond of numbers; this is their occult sensibility at play. Debord plays with the language of cinema just as Lowry plays with the language of words. Both writers contribute to a study of the "battering the human spirit takes" (Lowry, *Selected Letters* 63). Incorporated into *In Girum* are blank screens, found footage and photographs, quotations, sections from Debord's other earlier films. This echoes Lowry's use of quotations throughout his work, but especially perhaps in *Volcano*. But the difficulties of reading/watching Debord's film and Lowry's stories are transcended by the experience of the reader actually engaging with the text. Levin points out that Debord's films formed a "third avant-garde" that "synthesizes a formal modernism...and semiotic and ideological reflexivity" (108), a combination of ancient texts with new ideas and personal poetics. Lowry achieved something very similar in his own work.¹¹

The final shot of Debord's film shows the narrow canal of the city opening out to a vast expanse of empty water. This is ambiguous, but has hope.¹² Lowry, for his

¹¹ Interestingly, Debord's final published text was a slim volume called *Des Contracts*, simply a reproduction of three contracts between Debord and his main financier, the film producer Gérard Lebovici. It seems that Debord's life and works were defined as much by these "correspondences" as Lowry's were by his letters. These envoi documents become an important part of the expression of creativity for each writer.

¹² It is also reminiscent of the final scene of Alexander Sokurov's film *Russian Ark* (2002). Also of note is George Robertson's 1961 two-part film on Lowry made for the CBC TV Vancouver series *Explorations*, where Lowry's words are expressed as paths

part, expressed his own ambivalent feelings in his masterpiece: “Though tragedy was in the process of becoming unreal and meaningless it seemed one was still permitted to remember the days when an individual life held some value and was not a mere misprint in a communiqué” (Lowry, *Volcano* 11). The final words of the film we hear are:

Preparing an era for a voyage through the cold waters of history has in no way dampened these passions of which I have presented such fine and sad examples.

(Debord, *Cinematic Works* 193)

This is followed by the title:

TO BE GONE THROUGH AGAIN FROM THE BEGINNING.

Debord quoted Marx: “You can hardly claim that I think too highly of the present time. If I nevertheless do not despair of it, it is because its own desperate situation fills me with hope.” (Debord *Cinematic Works* 192) If “Lowry’s work expressed the poles of human possibility – whether to be actively part of society, fighting to change it, or whether to be outside it altogether as an addict, visionary and drop-out” (Binns 21), then a glimpse at the life and works of Debord will confirm that he followed the latter.

The epitaph on Keats’ tombstone in the Protestant cemetery in Rome reads:

where one loses one’s way and movements through space. This film also ends with the palindromic phrase “da capo”- reread.

Here lies one whose name was writ in water

Such would stand, evident in the majesty of these experimental works, as a fine tribute to the works of Malcolm Lowry and Guy Debord.

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