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**THE CREATIVE PROCESS:  
AN INTRODUCTION TO TIME AND SPACE  
IN MALCOLM LOWRY'S FICTION**

*Sherrill E. Grace*

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In his study of time in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, Sartre maintains that "the critic's task is to bring out the author's metaphysic before evaluating his technique."<sup>1</sup> The following discussion is an attempt to do just that. Malcolm Lowry gradually developed a fascinating metaphysic that describes reality as a perpetual flow and motion working in accordance with an unchanging law of change, and in his fiction, he developed techniques for the handling of temporal and spatial dimensions that would embody or dramatize his vision of life. From ambitious plans for a masterwork to the minute details of sentence structure, Lowry's work creates a dynamic world that a discussion of metaphysics, however, can only suggest.

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Malcolm Lowry, is, of course, best known for his masterpiece, *Under the Volcano*. His other works, published during his lifetime and posthumously — *Ultramarine*, *Lunar Caustic*, *Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid*, *October Ferry to Gabriola*, and *Hear us O Lord from heaven thy dwelling place* — do not represent the totality of his ambitious plans. Lying in the Special Collections Lowry Archive at the University of British Columbia are hundreds of manuscript and typescript pages and notes for two very unfinished novels, *The Ordeal of Sigbjørn Wilderness* and *La Mordida*. Taken together, the six published books with these two proposed works, the eight novels were to comprise Lowry's projected masterwork entitled *The Voyage that Never Ends*. Lowry's plans for *The Voyage that Never Ends* go back at least to 1940 when he wrote Jonathan Cape describing a trilogy by this name with *Under the Volcano* as the Inferno, *Lunar Caustic* as the Purgatorio, and a work later destroyed in a fire, *In Ballast to the White Sea*, as the Paradiso.<sup>2</sup> By 1951 Lowry, true to style, had reconstituted and enlarged his earlier *Voyage* plan. In an important "Work in Progress" statement<sup>3</sup> sent to his agent in 1951, Lowry outlined his plan for a sequence of "perhaps seven" novels thus:

WORK IN PROGRESS

*THE VOYAGE THAT NEVER ENDS*

The Ordeal of Sigbjørn Wilderness

I

<sup>1</sup>William Faulkner: *Two Decades of Criticism*, eds. Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery (East Lansing: Michigan State College Press, 1951), p. 180.

<sup>2</sup>*Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry*, eds. Harvey Breit and Margerie Bonner Lowry (Philadelphia: Lippincott and Co. Ltd., 1965), p. 63.

<sup>3</sup>Albert Erskine kindly sent me a copy of Lowry's "Work in Progress," and a copy now resides in the University of British Columbia Special Collections.

Untitled Sea Novel  
Lunar Caustic

Under the Volcano

Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid  
Eridanus  
La Mordida

The Centre

Trilogy

The Ordeal of Sigbjørn Wilderness

II

To suppose that he was content with this *Voyage* plan would be a mistake, however. Lowry was never finished with anything, and he continued to alter this plan with each new inspiration. The "Untitled Sea Novel" was to be a totally rewritten *Ultramarine*. *October Ferry* outgrew its original story form and devoured the material for *Eridanus*. According to Mrs. Lowry, her husband also decided to alter the position of *La Mordida*, inserting it between *Dark as the Grave* and *October Ferry*. *The Voyage that Never Ends*, then, was in a state of flux if not exactly on a never-ending voyage.

The continuing changes in the *Voyage* plan are entirely in keeping not only with Lowry's personality and work habits, but also with his belief that life is a never-ending voyage. Quite apart from his unfinished masterwork, this concept of voyaging is integral to each of his individual texts. The voyage is a quest without a *final* goal — except for the knowledge that the voyaging must continue. Through this concept of the voyage, Lowry attempts to give artistic shape to his vision of reality. The voyage is not purposeless wandering, but a multi-levelled movement through time and space in search of wisdom, balance, and "life." This movement provides the plot in each of his novels. Underlying the social, psychological, and religious levels of his writing are the metaphysical and epistemological quests, the journey in search of reality and the search for methods of knowing that reality.

Lowry's acceptance of a dynamic relationship between his life and art, far from being mere solipsism, springs from his belief that one can create life and self continually in art. The voyage, then, is also a search for an identity that must be created in the present and in the future if it is to exist at all. In this process of self-creation, the writer or man (following Ortega y Gasset, Lowry felt that man was a type of novelist) continually creates new masks or aspects of personality which, only when taken as a whole, comprise a balanced person. His emphasis is on continual creation; each protagonist represents a discharge of creative energy, an activity that must be maintained if life forces are not to atrophy. This need for constant creative activity is manifest in the "never ending" aspect of the Lowry voyage. Lowry believed that in no positive sense could the voyage end; the only "ends" in Lowry's work are dead-ends, abysses, hells of despair, hatred, and distorted perception. Within the Lowry world, there is no place for fixed, final goals either in individual lives or in the cosmos. According to Mrs. Lowry, Lowry could envision hell as an absolute death if an individual ceased to grow; but a heaven, a final *positive* goal, was impossible because, in Lowry's words, "he could not contemplate an

eternal spiritual orgasm."<sup>4</sup> Life, then, is repeated effort, constant motion, withdrawal and return, a journey ever "beginning again" and always "outward bound." Each novel marks a *punctum indifferens* in the voyage. The point is pointless because individual existence is never still; temporal flow cannot be broken down into static points of past, present, and future. In each of his books, the protagonist journeys through time and space and, at best, reaches a temporary point of rest and happiness before beginning again. George Santayana, whose *Three Philosophical Poets* Lowry knew well, praises Goethe's *Faust* for combining the Protestant ethic of perpetual striving (recall the prefacing quotation to *Volcano*) with a romantic belief in the value of endless pursuit.

A consideration of Lowry's *Voyage*, either the literary continuum or the concept, leads directly to questions of time and space. Just as Lowry cannot be fully appreciated without prior knowledge of his voyage theories, those theories cannot be understood without an awareness of Lowry's reverence for time and his fear of space. Over and over again in published works, manuscripts, and notes, Lowry equates time with flow, motion, and a positive Bergsonian sense of duration. Space, isolated from time, he repeatedly views as timelessness or stasis; stasis becomes hell or death, a condition of spatial enclosure, suffocation, and entrapment. The thrust of Lowry's art is to overcome space as stasis and to live within the flow of time. His writing, from early stories until his death, expresses a need for time and a terror of space which, when perceived as cut off from temporal flow, threatens to enclose and destroy. If the voyage were to end, it would necessitate — in terms of Lowry's polarities — the defeat of time and the victory of space.

The striking feature of this attitude towards time and space is its difference from the main body of Western religious and philosophical belief. Traditionally, Western man has been what might be called "space-ist." Cronos, the devourer, the God of death and mutability, is mourned, dreaded, and if possible overcome with a timeless heaven, Platonic forms, or the Grecian urn of poetry — each of these responses to mortality evoking space. Alternatively, and to a much lesser degree, Western man in the Heraclitean tradition has sought to embrace flux. The chief modern exponent of time and the temporal flux of becoming is Bergson. From Bergson's point of view, space, often identified with reductive reason, is described as death or stasis. Likewise, Count Hermann Keyserling, another Lowry favourite, insists that "the life-ideal cannot by any means be defined in static terms. It can be defined in dynamic terms only, as an everlasting state of ceaseless increase, possessing direction and a meaning, but no limits" (*Recovery of Truth*, trans. 1929). Lowry belongs with thinkers such as Heraclitus and Bergson who perceive reality as ceaseless flux and the flow of time as life — Bergson's "élan vital." In the *Voyage* as a whole and in the individual novels, Lowry was attempting to capture nothing less than reality itself. His art represents an effort to incarnate, without destroying, the eternal flow of time and to reveal the beauty and magic power of this flow by juxtaposing time with space, flow with stasis. Lowry's art arises from the dynamic tension between time and space dramatized in the endless voyage of withdrawal and return. For example, in *October Ferry* Ethan reflects:

<sup>4</sup>This information comes from my interviews with Mrs. Lowry in the Spring of 1975.

Voyage, the homeward-outward-bound voyage; everybody was on such a voyage . . . even the light, the sea outside, now due to an accident of sun and dislimning cloud looking like a luminosity between two darkesses, a space between two immensities, where it would set out on its way again, had already set out, toward the infinitely small, itself already expanding before you had thought of it, to replenish the limitless light of Chaos —<sup>5</sup>

Despising systems, religious or otherwise, as he did, Lowry emphasized the constant motion, the all-inclusiveness, the flexibility, and the creative power of his voyage concept.

The single most important symbol in Lowry's work — more important even than the sea which is a pervasive Lowryean symbol of life and motion — is the circle. He used the circle deliberately as temporal cycle, as circular structure, as globe, as wheel, or as enclosure, delighting in the rich ambivalence of its symbolism. Lowryean circles can symbolize destructive, static, enclosing space, the most powerful example being the infernal "trochal" structure of *Under the Volcano*; or, conversely, as Lowry's "symbol of tenuous order," the circle can flow and move to symbolize the interpenetration of time and space. But despite his horror of stasis — space disjunct, isolated from time, and therefore motionless — Lowry does not attempt to negate space altogether or to deny its physical reality. As with time or life in general, Lowry's attitude towards space depends upon perception. It is chiefly in terms of the circle as *Voyage* cycle, with a protagonist's expanding sphere of consciousness at the centre, that Lowry seeks to capture the Tao-like flow of reality and to create himself continuously.

Two features of Lowry's writing — his obsession with form or structure, constantly described in spatial terms, and his compression of time — are of particular interest. In exploring these two aspects of his art, one is able to touch the springs of his creative process and to reveal the relationship between Lowry's theories of time and space and his use of temporal and spatial dimensions in his novels. *Under the Volcano*, he felt, was like a "churrigueresque cathedral" while literature in general, as Wilderness says in *Dark as the Grave*, is like a house with braces, beams, and two-by-fours. Lowry's manuscripts corroborate the view that he thought of his prose in terms of blocks to be weighed and balanced one against the other.

It is easier to account for Lowry's use of spatial dimensions in the individual novels. Invariably, he spatializes the temporal flow of his narrative in order to create the stasis resulting from a protagonist's distorted perception. The most outstanding example of the spatialization of time in *Under the Volcano* is the Tlaxcala scene in chapter X.<sup>6</sup> The mingitorio, the "Caves of the Winds" contained within the Salón Ofelia, surrounds the Consul who, in his desperation, wonders why he "is always more or less here." The scene opens with Geoffrey's realization that he is not eating with the others. Instead, he is being ill in the stone toilet.

<sup>5</sup>*October Ferry to Gabriola* (New York: The World Publishing Co., 1970), p. 252. Further references are included in the text. Underlying Lowry's language in this passage is the work of his Cabbalist friend, Charles Stanfeld-Jones (Frater Achad), *Q.B.L. or The Bride's Reception*. Jones also spoke of the Cabbalist's journey as endless.

<sup>6</sup>*Under the Volcano* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), pp. 302-03. References are to the Penguin edition because it is readily accessible.

Together with disjointed snatches of Hugh and Yvonne's conversation in the dining-room and disembodied passages from a tourist folder, Geoffrey hears voices from earlier in the day — his own, Virgil's, Yvonne's, Weber's, his familiars. The babel increases until all time and space become superimposed on one infinite, eternal moment of horror. The city of Tlaxcala and the city of New York are like Geoffrey's mind, traitorous and noisy. Space is condensed and stripped of demarcation or boundary. All places — his house, Yvonne's bedroom, Tlaxcala, New York — exist here in Tomalin, in the stone toilet of the Salon Ofelia, and in the Consul's mind. Temporal movement is similarly destroyed with the loss of distinctions between past, present, and future — everything is happening now. The history of the ancient Tlaxcaltecs and the history of the conquest co-exist with November, 1938. Yvonne's plea from Chapter IV that "it will be like a rebirth" melts into Virgil's description of Guanajuato from Chapter V. The present moment — "Have another bottle of beer . . ." — loses all distinction as it disappears behind the voices of Geoffrey's familiars and the inquiring voice of the English tourist from Chapter III: "might have run over you, there must be something wrong, what?" Most frequently, spatialization occurs during memories of the past due to the tendency of a mind plagued by guilt, fear, and hatred to become stuck in the past. Spatial form in Lowry's hands creates a narrative stasis that suggests the claustrophobia of a mind unable to transcend the past. Images of Ixion or of the ferris wheel, infernal circles cut off from the flow of time, reinforce the static qualities of Lowry's spatial form.<sup>7</sup>

The compression of time is the second obvious feature in Lowry's fiction. In each of the novels, as well as in the stories, fictional time spans only a few hours, at most a few days. Within this brief time-span, the characters relive their pasts in dreams and visions, or in the limbo-like state induced by travel on the ubiquitous buses, boats, trains, and planes which fill Lowry's works. At first glance it seems odd that Lowry, concerned to capture temporal flow, would condense time instead of following the chronicle methods of, say, Galsworthy or Mann. The reason for time compression is two-fold and, in keeping with the Lowryean union of opposites, positive and negative. In the negative sense, time compression functions as the perfect analogue for a mind stuck in the past — "the mind jammed in reverse." Lowry is not Proust; the Lowry protagonist is not in search of a self that exists in timeless essences from the past, recaptured through the operation of memory. For Lowry, the sensation of being trapped in the past was a too personally real, a too constant and horrible dilemma. Becoming paralysed in the past (for Lowry, the past has a degree of reality distinct from present memories) is hell because temporal flow into present and future is annihilated. For example, in *Under the Volcano*, the most infernal of his books, the main narrative occurs in the fictional past; Geoffrey is already dead and can never escape the past. *October Ferry*, by way of contrast, portrays a sharp break between time past and time present leading into the future. Through the concentration of time into a few hours, the twelve hours of *Volcano* or the approximately four hours of remembering in *October Ferry*, Lowry is able to convey the hellish sensation

<sup>7</sup>Two studies of spatial qualities in *Under the Volcano* have been published: Victor Doyen, "Elements Toward a Spatial Reading of Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*," *English Studies*, 50 (1968), 65-74; and Terence Wright, "Under the Volcano: The Static Art of Malcolm Lowry," *Ariel*, 1 (1970), 67-76. Lowry's use of spatial form in *Volcano* should be seen within the context of his philosophic and aesthetic intentions.

of timelessness; all time is co-existent in this past world of the protagonist's mind. More positively, this compression of time which gathers up the past into a few hours presents the protagonist with the crucial opportunity to order and understand his experience. The re-living of the past offers hellish stasis, but also an opportunity for renewed motion depending upon the ability of the protagonist to change. Before time can flow into the future, the past must be acknowledged, understood, and incorporated constructively into the present.

Lowry's theory of time/space, motion/stasis, embodied in the structure of his *Voyage* cycle, as well as in the form of individual novels, in specific scenes, and in symbols and images, is also apparent in the style — in sentence structure, syntax, verb tense, punctuation, etcetera. Lowry creates the conflict of motion versus stasis, or time versus space, most dramatically in the opening paragraphs of *October Ferry to Gabriola*. The style embodies and introduces the poles of Ethan's experience. On the one hand, Ethan moves swiftly with the bus; on the other, he is immobilized, bound by his ticket. Lowry first accentuates the flow of his narrative before sharply disrupting this rhythm. A long passage is necessary to illustrate his method:

The October morning sunlight filled the swift bus, the Greyhound, sailing through the forest branches, singing straight out to sea, roaring toward the mountains, circling sudden precipices.

And the light corruscated brilliantly from the windows in which the travelers saw themselves now on the right hand enislanded in azure amid the scarlet and gold of mirrored maples, by these now strangely embowered upon the left hand among the islands of the Gulf of Georgia.

At times, when the Greyhound overtook and passed another car, where the road was narrow, the branches of the trees brushed the left-hand windows, and behind, or in the rearview mirror ahead reflecting the road endlessly enfilading in reverse, the foliage could be seen tossing for a while in a troubled gale at their passage.

Downhill: and to the right hand beyond the blue sea, beneath the blue sky, the mountains on the British Columbian mainland traversed the horizon, and on that right side too, luminous, majestic, a snowy volcano of another country (it was Mount Baker over in America and ancient Ararat of the Squamish Indians) accompanied them, with a white distant persistence, and at a different speed, like a remote, unanchored Popocatepetl.

Name:	Mr. and Mrs. Ethan Llewelyn	Seat No. 17
Address:	c/o Mrs. Angela d'Arrivee Gabriola Island, B.C.	Northbound X Southbound
Date:	October 7, 1949	

*Important:* to insure your return space on the Vancouver Island Limited register your ticket upon arrival at your destination.  
Victoria Duncan Nanaimo

"Well, damn it," he said, "I don't think I'm going to."  
"Not going to what, Ethan sweetheart?"

.....  
 "Register our tickets at the depot to insure return space. It seems to be tempting fate either way you look at it."  
 .....

And in Duncan too, the poor old English pensioners, bewhiskered, gaitered, standing motionless on street corners, dreaming of Mafeking or the fore-topgallant studding sail, or sitting motionless in the bankrupt rowing club, each one a Canute; golfing on the edge of the Gulf, riding to the fall of the pound; bereaved of their backwaters by rumors of boom. Evicted . . . But to be evicted out of exile: where then?

The bus changed gear, going up a hill: beginning: beginning: beginning again: beginning yet again: here we go, into the blue morning. (pp. 3-5)

The sentences describing the movement of the bus through the trees and morning light gradually become longer, then slightly shorter as the bus slows. Participial phrases and temporal clauses accumulate, frequently joined with conjunctions or temporal adverbs, and separated by commas. In this way, a sense of flow is established. Finally, with "downhill" and the increased speed of the bus, one sentence opens out into a sweeping seven line description of sea, sky, and distant mountains. Abruptly, this rhythm breaks. Time stops on the space of the printed page as the reader (and Ethan) confronts the bus ticket. The preceding sentences read beautifully, but it is impossible to capture in spoken words the disjunctive effect of the ticket with its oblong angular shape and spacing. The Llewelyns are objectified, distanced, isolated within the visual bounds of the ticket; they are robbed of individuality, identity, reality. A major theme of *October Ferry* is the search for identity in terms of motion and stasis, and Lowry skillfully introduces the quest at this point through his style. Who are these people anyway? The stark external fact of the ticket is no help. After the interruption of the ticket, dialogue begins. The focus narrows to the present of two passengers on the back seat within the bus. Speed and movement have vanished. The irony of Ethan's refusal to tempt fate by insuring "return space" on the bus awaits future reversals for its full impact. Even the old pensioners, left behind in Duncan, stand or sit "motionless," their limbo projected in the abrupt clauses, punctuation, and final question. Not until the bus changes gear does the sensation of movement, at first tentative then more decisive, recommence.

Lowry's attitudes toward time and space distinguish him from many other twentieth-century writers with whom he is often linked. T. S. Eliot, for example, while portraying a vision of society similar to Lowry's, sought the static and eternal in human experience through religion. To compare Lowry with Proust because he was planning a sequence of novels is also misleading, for Proust was concerned with problems of personal continuity and believed that creative memory could establish identity by recovering essences of reality from the past. He aimed at overcoming the constant temporal and spatial flux of life by creating a timeless monument to the timeless essence of self. Joyce, as well, used his archetypes and Viconian cycles to capture an ultimately impersonal and timeless ideal. That side of Lowry's vision which depicts time-past as infernal stasis, as nightmare and hallucination, is reminiscent of Poe and Melville, or

Baudelaire (all three among Lowry's favourite authors). Baudelaire, for instance, writes:

It is not to be forgotten that drunkenness is the negation of time, like every violent state of mind, and that consequently the results of the loss of time must unfold before the eyes of the drunkard, without destroying in him the habit of putting off his conversion till tomorrow, up to the point of complete perversion of all feelings, and final catastrophe.

However, when Lowry portrays the balanced perceptions of a man living in harmony with nature, his portrayal of time and space recalls Whitman's belief that life is multitudinous, pulsing, and held together in a dynamic eternity. Of course, the writer whom Lowry most closely resembles is the American poet and novelist Conrad Aiken. Aiken, influenced in his turn by Whitman, perceived time and space as multi-levelled and dynamic, and Lowry, to a great extent, followed in Aiken's footsteps.

Lowry's obsession with the past, his passion to maintain movement into present and future, and his terror of becoming immobilized, destructive, and useless are also related to his strict Methodist upbringing. While rejecting the existence of a hierarchical, timeless heaven, Lowry accepted the Calvinist attitude toward phenomenal time and the personal need for grace. His "philosophy" and art project a salvation that exists solely in the never-ending redemption of the static moment. "Whoever unceasingly strives upward . . . him can we save." If time flows into the future, then there is hope — hope that one can order the past, hope that one can create something of value, hope simply that one can be a better man.

*McGill University*