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## Essays and Studies

## The Postcolonial Imagination

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## A Preface to Malcolm Lowry's Last Notebook.

Lowry's work is full of the impossible and necessary task of the search, the finding, the losing again, the will to assemble, the being enabled to speak by the failures... to speak too late, too soon, in the wrong place, on the wrong occasion, to the wrong listener. (Robert Kroetsch)<sup>1</sup>

Like many other writers, Malcolm Lowry kept a series of notebooks during his various travels, jotting down quotations, snippets of conversations, ideas about and responses to the immediate environment, alongside poetry and prose and a sprinkling of literary theory. The notebooks would eventually form larger pieces of published text. Ignored by most critics, except for those seeking biographical information, is Lowry's *Last Notebook*,<sup>2</sup> a text which can be read as a notebook with no novel attached, and therefore of no real significance, or, as an exemplary modernist collage. The latter may seem surprising and overly generous given the *Last Notebook*'s marginal status; however, it is precisely this status which links the notebook to other modernist texts, in particular those of the Surrealists and modern authors who sought out the 'primitive'.

Like the protagonists of Lowry's *October Ferry to Gabriola*, in the *Last Notebook* Malcolm and Margerie Lowry are travellers in search of a new home. In 1954, as Sheryl Salloum notes, the Lowrys learnt of the serious nature of forthcoming attempts to remove the 'squatters' shacks from the beach at Dollarton, North Vancouver: 'A notice of eviction, the approaching cold of winter, concerns for Margerie's health, and an impending one thousand dollar income tax debt forced the Lowrys to abandon their 'beloved shack'. In August 1954 they left Dollarton, but Lowry never gave up hope of returning and recapturing the vitality and happiness he had found there'.<sup>3</sup> Not only had the Lowrys left the place that had been their home for fourteen years, but they were also leaving the 'idyll' that had enabled them both to work extensively on the manuscript of *Under the Volcano*. In the short-story 'The Forest Path to the Spring', following this biographical approach, we see the 'Lowrys' on their beach from the viewpoint of a pleasure steamer: '... the man with the megaphone on your steamer who points out the sights would say contemptuously, 'Squatters; the government's been trying to get them off for years', and that would be ourselves, my wife and me, waving to you gaily'.<sup>4</sup> Further on in the story, the 'Lowrys' ask

<sup>1</sup> Robert Kroetsch, 'Hear us O Lord and the Orpheus Occasion' in Sherrill Grace, ed., *Swinging the Maelstrom: New Perspectives on Malcolm Lowry*, McGill-Queen's University Press (Montreal & Kingston, 1992), pp. 257-8.

<sup>2</sup> Malcolm Lowry, *Last Notebook*, The University of British Columbia, Special Collections Division, Malcolm Lowry Manuscript Collection, Box 7, Folder 14. All further references are cited in the text by page number.

<sup>3</sup> Sheryl Salloum, *Malcolm Lowry: Vancouver Days*, Harbour Publishing (Madeira Park, BC, 1987), p. 123.

<sup>4</sup> Malcolm Lowry, *Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*, Douglas & McIntyre (Vancouver, 1987), p. 219.

themselves 'But could you rent Paradise at twelve dollars a month?',<sup>1</sup> a question that would have disturbing consequences after 1954.

The Lowrys moved first to Italy, where Malcolm was deeply unhappy, leading to another move, to England, in 1955. After some hospitalization on Malcolm's part, the Lowrys settled for a while in Ripe, Sussex. Shortly before his death in June 1957, Malcolm and Margerie went on a tour of the Lake District and surrounding areas, still in search of the fallen paradise of the beach at Dollarton. In this sense, the *Last Notebook* is a travel narrative, describing the vacation, and narrating nostalgia, structured much like the 'Journal of Sigbjørn Wilderness' in 'Through the Panama':<sup>2</sup> 'Tuesday/June 4. Hawkeshead/Much colder day, showers... /June 5. Wednesday:/Again took the bus to/Ambleside... /... -took a bus to/Newby bridge, then walked/in a shower, eating/sandwiches, to lakeside... /Thursday June 6 -/set off to Rydal water, crossed/the little bridge, by this time our/little bridge, came out on to a/clear space of meadows...' (pp. 23-4). The *Last Notebook* opens on Ascension Day, at Lindesfarne, where the Lowrys visited a bird sanctuary and the monastery. The physical attempt at recovering the paradisiacal home is thus matched by a visit to a religious or metaphysical site: the *Last Notebook* maps the attempted recovery of a prelapsarian innocence:

Importance for the writer, once having  
learned something, to  
repossess the position of his own free  
ignorance: the impressions life  
makes on the uninstructed consciousness,  
viz upon ones ignorance may have  
a poetic truth in the presentation... (p. 3)

This physical and metaphysical longing for 'ignorance' is not merely an individual response to a nightmarish situation; it also places Lowry firmly in the tradition of a long line of modernists, who sought their answers outside of the modern world. In this case, the final pages of the *Last Notebook*, which are usually ignored by those scavenging for biographical information, may actually be the most significant. Lowry cuts into the narrative of the vacation with a typical quotation within a quotation: 'Protection through the ages No 7', which is one in a series of advertisements from the 'London & Manchester Assurance Company'. Number seven in the series is 'The Fetish':

The Fetish.  
The West Afrikan  
native Fetish worn as a  
misfortune consists of a  
carved human body  
purse... (p. 26)

On the left-hand page is a rough sketch of 'The Fetish' done in the style of a naïf; two arrows lead from the base of the quotation to the right-hand page, where there

<sup>1</sup> Malcolm Lowry, *Hear Us O Lord*, p. 228.

<sup>2</sup> Malcolm Lowry, *Hear Us O Lord*, pp. 29-98.

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<sup>1</sup> C. Rhodes,

is written 'OUT OF ORDER, OF ORDER'. (p. 27) Although this is a quotation from the rational discourse of modern advertising ('You can secure protection for/yourself and your/dependents under a London & Manchester policy' (p. 26)), the drawing and 'OUT OF ORDER' statement disrupts the conclusion to a pastoral, if disturbed and disseminated, description of the English Lake District.

So what is this reference to 'The Fetish' doing here? Locating Lowry's *Last Notebook* even more firmly within the modernist tradition, the reference can be read as a typical Primitivist obsession — where 'primitive' is a Western category — connected to Lowry's attempted repossession of 'free ignorance'. Colin Rhodes notes how Primitivism '... represents an attempt on the part of Western artists to retreat from 'reason' and thereby gain access to the very sources of creativity itself'.<sup>1</sup> The primitive art-work was initially seen, by those who regarded it in an aesthetic, not anthropological sense, as being in direct contact with all those values lost in a materialist, ever more mechanized world. For Lowry, removing the layers of Western knowledge is presented in the *Last Notebook* as leading to 'poetic truths': thus the preservation in the notebook of dialect and description, alongside geological observation (no doubt one of his infamous intertextual 'quotations'). But the constant sense that everything Lowry finds in the Lake District is being compared to Dollarton undermines this representation of a primitive 'uninstructed consciousness'; the lines most quoted from the *Last Notebook* tend to disrupt its own modernist project: 'Impression that objects are trying to/communicate to you with love:/Beyond limitations of country & time/the pier in Grasmere trying to/look like Dollarton' (p. 12). This is usually read as a classic piece of nostalgia where Lowry is saying that the Grasmere pier looks like the one he so loved in Dollarton; but the text actually says that the pier is *trying* to look like the one at Dollarton and that inanimate objects are *trying* to communicate with the narrator. This verb indicates not the success of the communication/likeness, but the failure, which also reads as a failure on the narrator's part, the latter because the Lake District is supposed to be a place where the Primitivist impulse can reign, as well as looking entirely like another structured environment (the leisure landscapes of Vancouver). The Lake District landscape is forever *haunted* by Dollarton — it does not reproduce it — *and* all the other literary precursors. In fact, the more that modern society is stripped away from the Lake District landscape, the more the literary and cultural precursors which have interpreted that landscape are made apparent. When Lowry says in the *Last Notebook* that he is reading Wordsworth, he then goes on to underline the fact that Marjorie is '*looking at him*' (p. 21); thus, a trip in the countryside is as much a literary experience as anything else (as countless visitors to the area are more than aware):

Afternoon fine & hot, rowed  
Margie to island—difficulties of  
aluminium boat.  
On island:  
wonderful springy soft turf  
with wild thyme, buttercups &

<sup>1</sup> C. Rhodes, *Primitivism And Modern Art*, Thames & Hudson (London, 1994), p. 133.

daisies. Stone shelter where  
W. wrote poem. Ecstatically  
happy afternoon. (p. 20)

In *October Ferry to Gabriola*, the idealised island as an escape from the protagonist's problems can never be reached; here, in the Lake District, the island is not only reached far too easily, but it has also been reached and textually interpreted prior to the Lowrys' arrival.

Lowry's *Last Notebook* seems to be caught between its own modernist assertions and their relative failure (which does not necessarily mean it is not a modernist text; D. H. Lawrence's various Mexican 'Primitivist' adventures were also failures in many ways). Steven Connor notes that 'the principle of the modernist artwork is that it be complete in itself'.<sup>1</sup> With its theoretical preface and poetical main text, the *Last Notebook* fulfils this requirement. But, as a text, the *Last Notebook* is also aware of the failure of uncovering the 'free ignorance' preceding knowledge, discovering only more texts in the process. Perhaps in this latter sense, the *Last Notebook* is an early or proto-postmodern document.

Sue Vice, in 'The Volcano of a Postmodern Lowry' argues that Lowry's texts do indeed show the signs and wonders of postmodernity. She notes that 'Critics... have identified elements in postmodern writing of pastiche, self-reference, a schizophrenic attitude to history, the death of the author and of the subject, collage, and allegory'.<sup>2</sup> While Vice's main concern is *Under the Volcano*, Lowry's various notebooks are also exemplary collages and thus deserve to be investigated in a similar way. In the *Last Notebook* we have already seen how the landscape is always already textualized; this connects with Lowry's use of a tangled web of 'commodified' texts in *Under the Volcano*, '... those tangible reminders that our knowledge of the world consists only of the already written, the textual...'.<sup>3</sup> Landscape is also contextualized, where local dialect competes with geological analysis, enframing the Romantic poetic tradition. All the different discourses and fragments of text are thus composed into a collage — but the collage technique was a modern as well as postmodern tool. Postmodern collage is all to do with the '... severing of materials from their original contexts...'.<sup>4</sup> as a way of stressing the importance of the signifier and the surface, and a blurring of the differences between primary source, and secondary critical, texts. In other words, postmodern collage deconstructs the binary oppositions which maintain the art-work as a separate entity from other modes of representation (such as advertising). But while all this undoubtedly happens as such in Lowry's text, the question remains, is this done with the desire for 'severance and discontinuity',<sup>5</sup> the shocks and fractures of a postmodern *hypertext*, or is this collage constructed to function in other ways? The modernist collage is exemplified by the work of the Surrealists: 'Breton once remarked that

<sup>1</sup> Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*, Basil Blackwell (Oxford, 1989), p. 107.

<sup>2</sup> Sue Vice, 'The Volcano of a Postmodern Lowry' in *Swinging the Maelstrom: New Perspectives on Malcolm Lowry*, p. 123.

<sup>3</sup> Sue Vice, p. 123.

<sup>4</sup> Steven Connor, p. 213.

<sup>5</sup> Steven Connor, p. 214.

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surrealist collages are 'slits in time' that produce 'illusions of true recognition' 'where former lives, actual lives, future lives melt together into one life'.<sup>1</sup> The *Last Notebook* is a collage in this surrealist sense; the objects trying to communicate across 'limitations of country & time' are not just the past meeting the present, but also the present/future trying to meet the past, in the process recreating a more 'perfect' existence. Where the postmodern collage would celebrate the chance effects of such time-travel, in favour of further playful generations of chance-effects, the modernist collage remains relatively closed, with its overriding purpose or design.<sup>2</sup> Both types of collage deal in contradictory images, and both divert the stable meanings of objects/texts to 'awaken... to a new reality...' as Aragon noted.<sup>3</sup> In the *Last Notebook*, the 'new reality' is an attempted *sublation* of the old, whereby the failures of the modernist enterprise would be resolved.

The resolution never happens, it is a dream or desire; the text remains upon and unresolved in this sense. It is followed only by Lowry's death; no more texts could be written, except for the endless spawning of critical commentary, to which this paper belongs. The *Last Notebook* is thus structurally modernist, while pointing thematically to the failure of such centred dreams and desires. Does this leave the reader with an indeterminate series of statements that self-deconstruct? Or can this all be related to a particularly Canadian experience? Caught between his nostalgia for Vancouver and his desires for the Lake District, Lowry is twice exiled and doubly marginalized. Kroetsch has described an analogous experience:

I speak as a writer, but, if pressed, I would extend my notion of the predicament to include Western Canadians in general. We are marginalized by the unspeakably full page of our knowing. History. Literature. America. Britain. Europe. The page announces itself as jam-packed... that is one of the strategies of the full page.

But we who are twice marginalized cannot forget, dare not forget, the unspeakably empty page. The page that is our weather, our rivers, our rocks.<sup>4</sup>

In this sense of the flicking between full page and empty or blank page, which is what the *Last Notebook* does with its theoretical preface and poetic text, perhaps the *Last Notebook* should also be called a *montage*, whereby it creates a cinematic superimposition of Dollarton/The Lake District. The empty page demands new literary forms that escape the weight of European and American tradition; Lowry attempts to write the empty page, however, with the modern techniques that always assert his division and separation from 'nature'. Kroetsch, of course, is not arguing for a realist description — quite the opposite; *his* postmodernism allows him to strategically wrest the concept of the 'empty' landscape away from those who represent it as such, to construct instead the Canadian voices and myths that fill that landscape in their own way.<sup>5</sup> Thus his often stated admiration for Rudy

<sup>1</sup> Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, MIT Press (Cambridge, Mass./London, 1993), p. 168.

<sup>2</sup> See Hassan's useful comparison list, reproduced on pp. 111-2 of Steven Connor.

<sup>3</sup> J. Chénieux-Gendron, *Surrealism*, trans. V. Folkenflik, Columbia UP (NY, 1990), p. 69.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Kroetsch, *A Likely Story: The Writing Life*, Red Deer College Press (Red Deer, Alberta, 1995), p. 95.

<sup>5</sup> See my discussion of Kroetsch and postmodernism: 'The Double Guide', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. XXX, No. 2 (1993), pp. 19-27.

Wiebe. Lowry's experimental techniques, are neither realist nor postmodernist; the fact that he can never recover some kind of 'free ignorance' because 'nature' and 'the primitive' are constructs, does not automatically make him a postmodernist, as this would deny the pathos of his texts, the nostalgia for that 'free ignorance'.

Sue Vice argues that postmodernism provides '... a new and refreshing' interpretive model for approaching Lowry's work.<sup>1</sup> This is certainly the case in relation to biographical criticism, where Lowry's texts are often seen as literally reproducing Lowry's life. Vice notes that in the case of *Under the Volcano*, 'the events of Lowry's life did not become mimetically transferred to that novel but instead reappear in altered forms, similar to the way in which infant traumata reappear in neuroses in the adult'.<sup>2</sup> 'Lowry' is, rather, a character in each of his textual collages, and that character can never be entirely equated with some other subject named 'Malcolm Lowry'. But I would also argue that the proper name 'Malcolm Lowry' is too strongly emblazoned across his texts, implicated in too many narrative perspectives, to allow for an entirely postmodern, death-of-the-author style, interpretation. For example, to return to the 'Forest Path from the Spring' quotation, where the narrator invites the reader to view the beach at Dollarton, and the 'squatters': '... that would be ourselves, my wife and me, waving to you gaily'.<sup>3</sup> While it is wrong to equate these characters in an entirely mimetic sense with Malcolm and Margerie, there is no doubt that the biographical fact that the Lowrys did leave the beach, and the shacks were destroyed, adds to the pathos of the 'Forest Path' scene. Further, the fact that the narrator is on the boat with the reader, saying in so many words: 'look — there's me, on the beach, happily waving at you' only adds to the sense of separation and division from that moment of happiness. In the *Last Notebook*, there is the sense that the narrator is always distanced from such happiness, either temporally or spatially (or both), and this distancing can indeed be related to the transference of infant traumata to adult neurosis as Vice suggests. Vice rejects biographical realism in favour of the 'altered forms' of postmodernism; I would argue that Lowry makes those 'altered forms' works of art in a modernist sense. Thus, in the 'Forest Path' scene, the narrator is both inside the scene (on the beach) and outside (viewing/narrating at a distance). He is like Breton's 'man cut in two by a window' where '... the subject is somehow split both positionally — at once inside and outside the scene — and psychically — 'cut in two''.<sup>4</sup> This is the fantasmatic subjectivity of the *Last Notebook* and *Under the Volcano*. Vice argues that the mixture of high and low voices in Lowry creates a *polyglossia*, which destabilizes the master narrative voice(s) of modernity. Yet the surrealist model also explains the fluidity of subject positions and voices in relation to the 'altered forms' of traumata; Freud proposed that the primal scenes of infant traumata may be fantasies which '... have all the effectivity of real events'. In primal fantasy, '... the subject not only is in the scene but also may identify with any of its elements'.<sup>5</sup> The polyglossia is

<sup>1</sup> Sue Vice, p. 123.

<sup>2</sup> Sue Vice, p. 127.

<sup>3</sup> Malcolm Lowry, *Hear Us O Lord*, p. 219.

<sup>4</sup> Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, p. 59.

<sup>5</sup> Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, pp. 58 & 59.

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<sup>1</sup> Sue Vice,

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therefore not necessarily some kind of subversion of the centred modernist subject; rather, the modernist voice is disseminated across the text in a surreal way. In the *Last Notebook* the polyglossia is hardly subversive; in one incident Malcolm and Margerie are trying to get a train to Carlisle. A local says:

'who tells thee twere the last train t. Newcastle  
that's not true There are four  
more trains t. Newcastle'  
'Well yes, but do any of them stop?'  
'Ay, there's the rub. they  
doan' t stop'. (p. 11)

This local character, while humorous, is hardly 'liberated' by the inclusion of his voice in the collage; although the strange logic of the local is compared here with the rational logic of the experienced traveller, in other instances the narrator is presented as muddled and absurd: 'Please mind your head/When leaving seat... /... please seat your head/when leaving mind' (p. 12). Near the end of the *Last Notebook* the 'voice' of a rational assurance company is juxtaposed with that of the 'irrational' Fetish; does the latter undermine the former? Or does its use simply reinforce 'the primitive' voice as a subjugated construct? Vice argues that Lowry's polyglossia is carnivalesque, liberating in this Bakhtinian sense. His work cannot belong, in this case, '... to the glossily packaged high-tech part of postmodern literature...'.<sup>1</sup> Instead, according to Vice, Lowry belongs to some other part of postmodernism, since his work is a '... collage with a conscience'.<sup>2</sup> This latter phrase is highly problematic; it implies that modernist texts, such as Breton's and Aragon's lack a conscience, viewing similarly the 'hard' commercialized postmodern. While the latter may be partially true, the division of hard/soft postmodernism is also problematic, suggesting that one type of postmodernism is in the service of commercialism or capitalism, while the other type is in the service of political resistance. These two types of postmodernism need further explanation on Vice's part, before Lowry's work can be appropriated as part of a political programme. In asserting that Lowry's work is firmly within the modernist tradition, particularly as it is related to the Surrealists, I am arguing for a less clichéd conceptualisation of modernism. Lowry's *Last Notebook* also embodies a tricky historical dilemma — how to negotiate between the forms of a European modernist past and a Canadian postmodern and postcolonial future. Ultimately, as seen in the *Last Notebook*, Lowry never lost England in his various travels, but he did lose Canada on that last visit to the Lake District.

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<sup>1</sup> Sue Vice, pp. 132-3.

<sup>2</sup> Sue Vice, p. 133.