STRANGE COMFORT

Essays on the Work of Malcolm Lowry

SHERILL GRACE

Talonbooks
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Taleebooks
P.O. Box 2076, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada V6B 3S3
www.taleebooks.com

Typeset in Garamond and printed and bound in Canada.
Printed on 100% post-consumer recycled paper.

First Printing: 2009

The publisher gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Canada Council for the Arts;
the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program; and the
Province of British Columbia through the British Columbia Arts Council and the Book Publishing
Tax Credit for our publishing activities.

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In Memory of Anne Yandle
(1930–2006)

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication
Grace, Sherrill E., 1944–
Strange comfort: essays on the work of Malcolm
Lowry / Sherrill Grace; preface by Richard Lane.

Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-88922-618-0

1. Lowry, Malcolm, 1909–1957—Criticism and
interpretation. I. Title.

PS8523.O96Z67 2009 C813'.52 C2009-902838-7
A Preface to Sherrill Grace

Richard J. Lane

Sherrill Grace has helped us see Malcolm Lowry in ways that would otherwise have potentially remained outside of our restricted vision: from her deciphering of Lowry's notoriously difficult handwriting and associated tracking down of intertexts and allusions in that vast labyrinth known as his correspondence, to her extensive critical and biographical insights into Lowry's published and unpublished works. Lowry, Grace reminds us, "was one of the great interpreters of the modern world" (1992, 3), and in relation to this greatness, an interpreter and guide needs to always move on, searching for the different perspective, the unnoticed clue, the fragment that inevitably brings about a realignment of disciplinary approaches or structures whereupon we arrive at insight. Writing in another context altogether, Grace comments on the fluidity and dynamism of her critical methodology, as she examines "origins and beginnings ... shaping and exclusions and inclusions, of power balances and imbalances, of historical or literary events, as nodes, if you like, or points of intersection ... you open up these 'nodes' for investigation, rather than simply proceeding as if they didn't exist. So the methodology [...] of your own research becomes different" (1998, 8). Quoting this comment from an interview out of context opens it up for investigation; the phrase "So the methodology [...] of your own research becomes different" appears innocuous, or, a logical conclusion to the preceding sentences. Examined more closely, it is one of the most difficult things for the critic to achieve: an authentic shift in point-of-view, a genuine re-examination of blind-spots, or the aporias that stand at the heart of our methodological certainties. What might have seemed innocuous is now uncanny, because it means that to understand Lowry, we need to constantly re-invent ourselves.

In many respects Grace has shown us Lowry anew by seeing him through the eyes of those people initially left out of the grand narrative(s) of his life, those ignored or marginalized people who crossed paths with Lowry, loved or were shocked by his intensity, his mobile, multiple personality, yet were always aware of the plasticity of
his life as it became (or simply just went) the stuff of literary creation. The author Carol Phillips narrates just such an occasion, with the lonely Lowry finding solace in addressing an Acacia tree (which he re-named "the asperin tree"); as Grace notes, "This tree became something of a symbolic presence for Lowry, who identified it with his personal loneliness and with Christ's suffering. In a poem-letter written to her [Carol Phillips] that spring, he begins by saying that 'the asperin tree outside told me to say/her leaves were trembling for your good beauty [. . .] as they have trembled since it wore the cross.' On the one hand beautiful, on the other a reminder (if not the source) of acute pain, the 'asperin tree' is a characteristically ambivalent Lowry image for the fragility of life and for a deep sense of loss, but as he develops the image it strikes an increasingly discordant note for a love letter-poem" (1991, 512). We see Lowry as Phillips saw him for that one intense moment, as the ambivalence and the discordance of his literary binding of loneliness, love, and loss registers over and over again. But we also see a scene—in a hotel room, with a lonely Lowry, a tree, and a future lover—as one that is thoroughly textual, moreover a textuality that has dramatic (here, surely, a Beckett play) and musical/operatic potential. The critical eye has helped us see, but the image—and its interpretation—remain complex and synaesthetic.

In seeing Lowry, Grace shows that we have to move with him: not just traversing his texts, but becoming aware of and moving with or alongside the "movement images" (of perception, action, and affection to use Deleuze's terms) that constitute cinematic reality and therefore his writing; as Grace says in the first essay, Lowry had an "affinity with a world view based upon perpetual movement," and furthermore, the architectonic structures of his writing were subject to perpetual re-building. Reading Lowry is to join him on multiple, never-ending journeys. Recursive writing uncannily evokes the image of the eye: a globe that sees the entire world on voyages of Nietzschean intensity—following also Nietzsche's concept of the eternal return. The circularity of Ultramarine is a clear example of the circular construction and symbolism of Lowry's texts, with its vision of "movement and the breaking of enclosing circles" where as Grace continues in essay two "lamps explode, their 'globes' flying into the sky, eyes waver, and 'diminishing' are 'captaulened east and west.' To perceive is to see, but also to grasp; in October Ferry to Gabriola Grace suggests that the protagonist's perception of reality becomes distorted and the British Columbian landscape "bristles with symbols" as "signs threaten, snatches of overheard conversation are strange messages for him and films appear to mirror and comment upon his life" (essay three). Circularity is apparent here in perichoresis—rotation and the unity of the trinity—Ethan's profane illumination thereby deriving from the interpenetration of the sacred and the profane. The time-image is as important as the movement-image in October Ferry to Gabriola, including psycho-analytical time, and that strange temporality/memory triggered by the parallels between Ethan's past and that of Thurston's protagonist in his film The Wandering Jew. Circularity, however, does not exclude history or subjective progression/regression. In comparing Lowry and Joyce in essay eight, Grace argues that "Lowry's modernism is deeply infused with romanticism" and that unlike Joyce's ahistorical synchronic vision, "Lowry's is deeply historical, diachronic, his stance prophetic and pathopoetic."

Examining Lowry involves exploring the materiality of his texts—the graphical surfaces of densely layered manuscripts and letters, of archival objects such as postcards and his personally annotated copy of Ultramarine—as well as his use of modernist and proto/postmodernist experimental form with its complex intertextual and conceptual interpenetrations and interconnections. In Sursum Corda: The Collected Letters of Malcolm Lowry (2 vols., 1995), an astounding number of letters were tracked down by Grace and added to the collection at UBC, the "editing" involved in preparing these volumes being a euphemism for detective work, transcription, translation, critical exploration, and detailed annotation among many other tasks. In essay four, Grace ponders the need for a graphological study of Lowry's writing as well as "a semiotics of the page": "what is a Lowry letter?" Grace asks. The question unfolds as a meditation upon the relationship between the real and the fictional in Lowry's writing life: "Evidence suggests that Lowry not only drafted fictive letters (to real or fictional people) for use in his art ... but that he used real letters—his own and others'—in his fiction" (essay four). Grace offers multiple theories in answer to her question, her "typology of the Lowry letters as texts" containing a Borgesian set of categories that allows us to see our way through the epistolary labyrinth: real letters; undecided letters; fictive letters; unsent letters; poem letters. Grace calls the unsent letters "the most intriguing" and also ponders the possibility that fictive/unsent letters are the categories that contain all of the others. However, Grace reminds us that "letters are more than written texts" and that Bakhtin's theory of speech genres facilitates understanding of the chasmus between real/fiction in Lowry's epistolary universe. Of course Grace is already exploring the polyphony of Lowry's narratives, discussed fully in essay five on Hear Us O Lord from heaven Thy dwelling place. The many surfaces of Lowry's texts give way here to the multiple voices of Lowry's musical writing, which leads Grace to questions of signification and the response, or not, of the "superaddressee.

It should come as no surprise, then, that in the baroque world of Lowry's texts a visual and aural aesthetic is at work, one in which Baudelaire's allegorical method is as useful as any contemporary theory for an extended interpretation. The "contemporary Mexican artist Alberto Gironella" (essay seven) is the first of many guides, which include in other essays included here: Joyce and expressionism (essay eight), Freud, Cocteau and Barthes (essay ten), and Debussy (essay eleven). Aural means to hear, a modernist breeze blowing through the oeuvre, but also it relates to the aura, that which Benjamin declares has given way in the age of technological reproducibility. Aura becomes distant and we can no longer experience it as mass
reproduction technologies (film, photography, jazz, etc.) bring the aesthetic object closer to us. Lowry remains a romantic artist, utilizing popular mass cultural forms, yet through their literary sublation, he achieves the cultural heights of tragedy and allegory (essay seven). Grace investigates the Derridean question of framing when it comes to a postmodernist response to Lowry's sublation of modernism (Gironell's art), and the fact that Under the Volcano already contains both positions in a vertiginous discourse that still reaches for, or "points beyond," profane illumination. Lowry's modernism has subsumed Joyce's myth and Baudelaire's allegory: "In Under the Volcano, Lowry reaches back into the expressionist roots of early modernism to explore the causes of alienation, solipsism, and anguish in his hero, and perhaps to exorcise them in himself" (essay eight). The figure of the chiasmus—the crossing back and forth between modernism and proto/postmodernism: loss of aura and the aural; myth and allegory; early and late/high modernism; and so on—paradoxically creates the textual author, while that most useful of critics of textuality (Roland Barthes) theorizes that it is here that the author disappears. Initially resisting Barthes's call for the return of the "documentary figure of the author," Grace journeys through Cocteau's "parody of Sophocles and ... radical rereading of Freud" in La Machine infernale (essay ten) to bring back the mother and the maid—as well as Lowry's self-plagiarism—into Lowry's bio/graphy. The aural can be a self-echo, an internal memory or repetition compulsion, that is constantly re-expressed, or it is an inner voice that is always already dialogue, a deliberate choreography of the self. Debussy, who once defined a choreographer as "a man who is very strong on arithmetic" (Orledge, np) had already demonstrated in Pelléas et Mélisande "a special interrelationship of orchestration with dialogue/voice that is analogous with Lowry's narrative form in all his fiction" (essay eleven). Symbolist opera is a fitting medium for hearing Under the Volcano.

We inevitably see double when we see Lowry: we look for his hand; and we see the hand of another; we attempt to pin down the plagiarism, Lowry's original sin that can be traced right back to his juvenilia (essay nine), and we find instead a theory and complex aesthetic practice of plagiarism and "the need for a Doppelgänger figure" (essay six). Where Lowry should be, there is another, yet that other "is" somehow still Lowry. Is this a doubled or a divided subject? Is the figure of the double a pharmakon—a poison and a medicine (or cure)? Should the double be celebrated and welcomed, or like Oedipus, cast out, banished into exile? Oedipus appears to have become the poison, the unclean thing, by ignoring his memories, by forgetting past violent encounters, especially the battle at the place where three roads meet. One of the ways in which such forgetting is potentially avoided is by constructing memory devices, be they houses through which we conceptually pass, memories being attached to imaginary rooms, or actual physically constructed memorials, such as that installed outside of the Leys Chapel in 1922, at the school Lowry attended (essay twelve). Memorials can function more widely in the service of the state—or the colonial powers that built them throughout their Empires—or memorials can remind us, as Benjamin writes, "that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule" (392). Grace sees in Under the Volcano the same ethical imperative expressed here by Benjamin; she argues that Under the Volcano "mobilizes memory ethically in an effort to overcome willed forgetting [. . . ] that Lowry wants us to remember the past, the world around us, and our responsibilities to that world, to our common humanity, our future, and future generations" (essay twelve). What is this state of emergency in Lowry's view? It is war. And it is the state of exception that can produce what Agamben calls "bare life": "When Geoffrey Firmin is shot by the military police and thrown into the barranca with other garbage (like the dead dog), he becomes a homo sacer. No one will be prosecuted or held accountable for his murder because he has first been reduced to 'bare life'—an espiér, a Jew, a creature without identity or a real name, a thing of no value who may even be a spy and, thus, a danger to the powers that be" (essay twelve). If the coming community is going to be one which is not oppressive, that does not condemn anyone to bare life, then the "memory-text" that Grace theorizes, through her profound insight gained traversing Lowry's textual aesthetic, becomes essential reading.

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Works Cited


