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CALL FOR PAPERS

Voyages That Never End:
Nomadic Forms and Trajectories in Malcolm Lowry and Beyond

SEAC International Conference

Université d'Angers, 15-16 October 2026

Organised by Xavier Le Brun and Anne-Florence Quaireau

In the introduction to the collection of essays they have recently edited, with a focus on the long-lost Lowry novel *In Ballast to the White Sea*, Helen Tookey and Bryan Biggs remark that "[t]he metaphor of the voyage is […] central to all of Lowry's writing and to his thinking about his writing (and his life, the two being inextricable)" (Biggs and Tookey 2020, 2). The metaphor is so central in fact as to provide its name to Lowry's projected cycle of works, *The Voyage That Never Ends*, which, had it been brought to completion in spite of its multiple reshufflings and ever-expanding scope,[1] would have come to include most of Lowry's oeuvre. As Sherill Grace had already observed about Lowry in the 1970s, "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" (Grace 1977, n. pag.). Protagonists, author and readers alike are thus perpetually asked to *remake* the voyage (Biggs and Tookey 2020, 2) that takes them across Lowry's inner world – his "inscape" (Porteous 1986; Schaeffer 2016; Lane and Mota 2016, 3) or "psychogeographic" reality (Foxcroft 2019) – while the emphasis on repetition[2] and return comes to shape the contours and purpose of Lowry's many voyages, be they textual or actual. And so beyond the voyage lies another trope, that of the nomad and the circuitous path that takes them from one point to another, and back again, abolishing destination and "overcome[ing] space as stasis" (Grace 1977, n. pag.).

Deleuze and Guattari define the nomad by his occupation of a "smooth space," which they oppose to the "striated space" emerging through state regulation and organization: "sedentary space is striated, by walls, enclosures, and roads between enclosures, while nomad space is smooth, marked only by 'traits' that are effaced and displaced with the trajectory. Even the lamellae of the desert slide over each other, producing an inimitable sound" (Deleuze

[1] On the genesis and evolution of Lowry's plan for the "Voyage That Never Ends" see Grace (1982, especially chapter 1, and 1977).
[2] On repetition in Lowry see Delesalle-Nancey 2010.

and Guattari 1987, 381). Nomads differ from city dwellers, travellers or migrants, in that movement, for them, is not a matter of reaching a given point, as any point "exists only as a relay" (380). Instead, the path itself is what defines their movement and enables them to inhabit a territory: "the in-between has taken on all the consistency and enjoys both an autonomy and a direction of its own. The life of the nomad is the intermezzo" (380). The similarity is striking with Lowry's conception of writing in which "[t]he point is pointless because individual existence is never still" (Grace 1977, n. pag.). Like Lowry's never-ending voyage, the nomad's journey is forever inchoate. It may even be said to contradict – or transcend – the very notion of movement as "the nomad is one who does not depart, does not want to depart, who clings to the smooth space left by the receding forest, where the steppe or the desert advances, and who invents nomadism as a response to this challenge" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 380).

In the wake of recent reflections devoted to voyage and to space in Lowry (e.g. Lane and Mota, 2016), the 2026 Angers conference proposes to reconfigure our conceptions of Lowry's uses of movement through the trope of the nomad. How can nomadism be called upon to gain a finer understanding of Lowry's attitude to space, territory, authority, politics and creation? In what sense is Lowry himself a nomad, both in terms of his geographical wanderings and of his nomadic practice of literature as a space of circulation for motifs, ideas and characters? And how can we characterize the in-between spaces that result – such as the indeterminate boundary between human and inhuman in *Under the Volcano* (Tollance 2004)?

Lowry's work is replete with examples of nomadic trajectories and spaces. The Quauhnahuac of *Under the Volcano* is roamed in every direction by characters who, instead of living a sedentary life in the idyllic garden they are no longer capable of inhabiting, become nomads, circumventing the main loci of the novel (Maximilian's Palace, the brewery, the Casino de la Selva) through "eccentric orbit[s],"[3] even on occasions forming "caravan[s]."[4] The circular structure of the novel similarly invites readers to retrace their own steps and become nomads themselves, interpreting the text anew in light of previous readings. In "The Forest Path to the Spring," the protagonist's reiterated journeys between the squatter's shack he inhabits with his wife and the eponymous spring structure the text and provide Lowry's alter ego with a "smooth space" in which to experience spiritual rebirth. The path itself supersedes the points it joins, offering a Lowryan instance of the nomad's "in-between," which Deleuze and Guattari depict as taking on "all the consistency." And the sea of course, described in *A Thousand Plateaus* as "the archetype of all smooth spaces" (479-480), looms large in Lowry's work, often as a transformative environment in which the journey of the self takes precedence over actual geographical coordinates.

On another level, nomadism can help us account for Lowry's creative process. Grace has pointed out the "motifs, or capillary links, that recur in his writing" (Grace 2009, 17). Characters, situations, places, seem to circulate in his work according to a nomadic logic that

[3] "This street, pursued far enough, would lead back to the American highway again and the Casino de la Selva; M. Laruelle smiled: at this rate he could go on travelling in an eccentric orbit round his house for ever" (Lowry 2000, 29).

[4] Such as Hugh and Yvonne in chapter 4, riding their mares in the company of the foals and the woolly dog: "[…] now it was it though they were a company, a caravan, carrying, for their greater security, a little world of love with them as they rode along" (Lowry 2000, 110).

has also been envisioned as a permanent "recycling" of motifs (Delesalle-Nancey 2010, 16): the shack caught between the forest and the inlet, first dreamed of by Yvonne in *Under the Volcano*, becomes reality in "The Forest Path to the Spring." Sigbjørn and Primrose Wilderness, who appear in several of the stories contained in *Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place* are also the protagonists of *Dark As the Grave Wherein My Friend Is Laid*, a novel which shares its title with the text projected by Sigbjørn in "Through the Panama." In her introductory note to *Ultramarine*, Margerie Bonner Lowry describes how the name of the ship in the novel was changed "from *Nawab* to *Oedipus Tyrannus*, in order to conform with Hugh's ship in *Under the Volcano*" (Lowry 1991, 9), revealing how such rhizomatic connections were also established retroactively in order to enhance the internal coherence of *The Voyage That Never Ends*. The entirety of Lowry's oeuvre may thus be conceived of as a smooth space navigated by nomadic motifs, each individual text not quite separate from the rest but akin to a point on the surface of that vast territory. And just as a nomad never belongs to any given point on their path, it seems that Lowry's novels or stories may not lay claim to the characters or ideas that traverse them, and abide only in the author's larger scheme.

The way Malcolm Lowry constantly intertwined writing and reality, each domain influencing the other through subtle interchanges, may also be construed as an instance of nomadism. Instead of a mimetic representation of reality – a "root-book", or a "book as the image of the world" in the terms of Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 5, 6) – Lowry favoured a rhizomatic conception of writing in which the binary opposition of literature and reality is replaced by an "assemblage" – "[t]he book as assemblage with the outside" (23). For, although "Lowry's works are essays in self-representation" (McCarthy 1994, 1) and each one of his protagonists is "a version of Lowry himself" (Biggs and Tookey 2020, 2), it is equally true that such self-portraits are "attempts to create for himself an identity" (McCarthy 1994, 1) which he may have found was evading him. In the perspective of this assemblage, the author is no longer the subject of the book, nor the world its object, but there is instead a mutual deterritorialization as reality invades fictional texts and vice versa. Biographical facts find a way out of Lowry's life and take a nomadic path in and out of his creations, just as fiction itself, no longer abiding in its realm and refusing this "sedentary" status occasionally gives the impression of writing out reality before it has even occurred[5].

Even Lowry's method of composition seems to veer away from the straight path that would take him from a beginning to an end in a linear fashion. As Sherril Grace has shown, "[t]he extant notes for each of his novels indicate that he began with a central episode for the book, as well as for each chapter, and then built upon this foundation by adding blocks of descriptive and narrative material at either end" (Grace 1982, 4). In other words, Lowry wrote nomadically from the middle, from the "in-between" space of the journey, to which the points (of departure, of arrival) are subordinated. His distinctive, "churrigueresque" style, turning sentences into spirals that seem to uncoil from a central nucleus, is the stylistic counterpart of that method that defies linearity and "striation" in much the same way as the whimsical railway lines Hugh and Yvonne ride along in chapter 4 of *Under the Volcano*[6].

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[5] See for instance Grace 1982 (chapter 1) on the "congruity" between Nordahl Grieg's *The Ship Sails On* (translated in 1927) and Lowry's experience on board the *Pyrrhus*, which in turn gave rise to *Ultramarine* (1933).

[6] "The railway – a double track but of narrow gauge – now divagated away from the grove, for no apparent reason, then wandered back again parallel to it. A little farther on, as if to balance matters, it made a similar

Finally, nomadism may prove valuable as it illuminates the political dimension of Lowry's work. The striation of space at the hands of the state or local authorities – exemplified in *Under the Volcano* by the ominous watchtower rising above the prison walls – is opposed through attempts to reimpart smooth space to the world. Eridanus, in *Hear Us O Lord*, is such an attempt – a community with no official existence, a conglomerate of fragile, even movable[7] shacks, rhizomatically assembled, and peopled by temporary or semi-permanent inhabitants. Such nomadic assemblages are of course under constant threat from the striating force of local powers, as emphasized by the stories in the collection. The encroaching presence of the city impends over the nomads and materializes conflict within space and its competing uses. *Under the Volcano* makes a similar case for a nomadic resistance to power as the Consul, although no longer in position and isolated in a now inimical country, deliberately remains in Quauhnahuac to keep haunting its cantinas in an unstoppable, downward spiral. The nomad is one who does not depart.

While this conference will be the occasion to approach Lowry through the paradigm of nomadism – relying for this on Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualization of the nomad, on Rosi Braidotti's "nomadic subject," or on any such theoretical framework as speakers will deem appropriate – it also invites contributions devoted to other British writers and artists of the 20th and 21st centuries, whether they followed in Malcolm Lowry's footsteps or produced nomadic forms entirely their own. Admittedly, Lowry's most direct influence is felt on North American literature – one thinks for instance of American postmodern writer David Markson, or of Canadian novelist and playwright Timothy Findley, whose *Famous Last Words* (1981) echoes *Under the Volcano* on the thematic and narratological levels (Grace 2017). Yet, his heritage was never limited to the New World and has impacted contemporary British writing and thinking through detours and convolutions which, in the case at hand, appear quite fitting. The practice of psychogeography stands out as an example of Lowry's roundabout influence. Pioneered by Guy Debord and other members of the Situationist International (SI), this "drunken drift through space and time," aiming at "the study of the specific effects of the geographical environment" (Goodall 2016, 15) was directly modelled on Lowry's relationship to space, especially as mirrored in the peripatetic characters of *Under the Volcano*: psychogeography, "was dubbed by Debord and his colleagues as the 'Lowry game'" (15). Modern British psychogeographers, such as Will Self or Iain Sinclair, were thus exposed to Lowry's nomadic aesthetics partly through the mediation of the French avant-garde (this does not exclude direct knowledge of Lowry's work), a genealogy which may prove worth exploring, along with the connections between psychogeographical practices – in particular the improvised wandering known as *dérive* – and nomadism. Writing in the wake of Lowry's trajectories in *American Smoke* (2013), Sinclair acknowledges the filiation: "He invented the technique I was about to employ in the wilderness of Croydon. No maps, no phone calls" (138).

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deviation towards the grove. But in the distance it curved away in a wide leftward sweep of such proportions one felt it must logically come to involve itself again with the Tomalín road. This was too much for the telegraph poles that strode straight ahead arrogantly and were lost from sight" (Lowry 2000, 119).

[7] "Hi-Doubt […] was not build upon piles sunk in the hardpan of the beach, but on log rollers, so that the whole could be floated away the easier if necessary to another place, and in this country it was not an uncommon sight to see a house, mounted on such rollers, its chimney smoking, drawn by a tug, sailing downstream" (Lowry 1961, 216).

Beyond Lowry, either predating him or existing outside the immediate reach of his influence, there also lie further deserts and seas to investigate. Nomadic works, defying genres and classifications, valuing multiplicity over unity of purpose, transitory states over stability, emerge sporadically and weave their path in-and-out of their own media, often challenging their accepted boundaries. Isn't Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) such a work? In it and through it, Woolf destabilizes the striations of genres and genders, generating unbounded freedom. A unique case for a biography (which it both is and isn't), *Orlando* starts and concludes *in medias res*, with absolute disregard either for its protagonist's birth or for his/her death. In truly nomadic fashion, the intermezzo is its realm. One may think also of experimental pieces, such as B. S. Johnson's *Trawl* (1966), or *The Unfortunates* (1969). While Lowry's biographer Gordon Bowker remarked on *Trawl*'s similarity to *Ultramarine* (Coe 2004, 146)[8], the twenty-seven sections of *The Unfortunates* saw Johnson develop his own brand of nomadic literature. Unbounded and only "temporarily held together by a removable wrapper" (Johnson, "Note"), the chapters are randomly assembled in a new order by each reader, the only predetermined stages being those entitled "First" and "Last." As a result, each of the intermediary points turns into a "plateau," i.e. "a multiplicity connected to other multiplicities" in a non-linear way (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 22).

Examples abound that allow us to perceive Lowry as one among many practitioners of nomadic forms of expression and to connect his never-ending voyages to other smooth spaces and planes of freedom. Whatever form they take, lines of flight and deterritorializations are essential to the reflection we propose to embark upon, as understanding Lowry's nomadic trajectories requires us to adopt a similar path and, heedless of walls and watchtowers, to set thought into motion.

Possible topics include, but are not limited to the following:

- Nomadic characters and motifs
- Relation to place as nomadism
- Intertextuality and nomadic texts
- Metafiction and the creation of a "smooth space" without rigid boundaries between literature and reality
- Incompletion of works as a nomadic practice that preserves openness and defers "arrival"
- Liminality and the in-between
- Smooth vs. striated spaces
- Nomadism and politics
- Nomadism and psychogeography
- Genetic criticism: the nomadic path from one version of a text to another
- Translation studies
- Stylistics: how to define a nomadic writing?

While not limited to Malcolm Lowry's work, papers (in English only) will focus on British literature and visual arts of the 20th and the 21st centuries.

[8] For a comparative reading of *Trawl* and *Ultramarine*, see Hassam 1993.

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This conference will be convened by Xavier Le Brun and Anne-Florence Quaireau. It will be held at the Maison de la Recherche Germaine Tillion, Université d'Angers, on October 15th and 16th, 2026.

Proposals of 300 words, together with a short biographical note, should be sent to Xavier Le Brun (xavier.lebrun@univ-angers.fr) and Anne-Florence Quaireau (anne-florence.quaireau@univ-angers.fr) by May 2nd, 2026. Notifications of acceptance will be sent by June 20th, 2026.

A selection of peer-reviewed papers will be published in the SEAC's journal *Études britanniques contemporaines*: https://journals.openedition.org/ebc/

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