

*In Ballast to the White Sea: The Springboard for Russian Influences on Malcolm Lowry's
Visionary Intellect*

Nigel H. Foxcroft

A prolific reader of Russian literature, an ardent fan of Soviet cinema, and an alert observer of the allure – both in the UK and in Europe – of communism and fascism, Malcolm Lowry applied his perceptions to his political and spiritual odyssey, *In Ballast to the White Sea* (2014).¹ Set in the inter-war period, it corroborates the appeal of Soviet Russia to many intellectuals who feared the growth of Nazism in Germany. It reveals Lowry's visionary intellect in providing cogent insight into the fragility of a world poised between the forces of capitalism, communism, and fascism – a world that, beleaguered by socio-economic disintegration (which would continue until the late 1930s), teeters on the brink of warfare and annihilation.

Russian Literary and Filmic Connections

Lowry's familiarity with *Dead Souls* (1842) by Nikolai Gogol and his constant fear of conflagration fostered his superstitious beliefs.² In this respect, Gogol's incineration of the second and third tomes of his masterpiece bizarrely correlates to the disastrous loss of the manuscript of *In Ballast to the White Sea* in the blaze which destroyed Lowry's Dollarton shack on 7 June 1944. As a consequence, the afflictions wrought by the agencies of inferno may be 'seen not merely as a hazard, but a force that exerts its will any time when the elements are out of balance.'³

Yet, in tone, *In Ballast to the White Sea* is a 'pseudo-Dostoevskian!' novel, for its author was influenced by the notion of culpability conveyed in *Crime and Punishment* (1866).⁴ For example, before committing suicide, Tor Tarnmoor recalls the irreconcilability of Raskolnikov's guilt, in Dostoyevsky's novel, with his justification for committing murder by claiming to be superhuman. Tormented by profound anxieties, Tor reflects: '—God knows [...] I'm still frightened of something—you know what Dostoevsky said—something I can't conceive, which doesn't exist, but which rises up before me as a horrible, distorted, irrefutable, fact' (*IB* 5).

However, Lowry not only philosophises but *politicises* viewpoints expressed in *In Ballast*. In this respect, Tor is intent on reversing what he perceives to be the collapse of civilisation predicted by the German philosopher Oswald Spengler in *The Decline of the West*

(1918). Indeed, the economic recession of the thirties had led to the rise of Adolf Hitler, who had become Führer in August 1934 and established the Third Reich. Nevertheless, Tor is critical of the Spenglerian cyclical view of the rise and fall of civilisations and, instead, places faith in a new Russia. Oblivious to the extent of Stalinist atrocities which were to culminate in the Great Terror or Purge (1936–38), he declares to his brother: ‘—That’s the worst kind of Spenglerian nonsense. To Russia, perhaps. But to Dostoievsky’s—’ (*IB* 8). Sigbjørn too recognises the attraction of traditional Russian spiritual values, conjecturing: ‘—The future? To Dostoievsky’s Christianity belongs the next thousand years?’ (*IB* 8).⁵

Chekhovian humanitarian values are also a mainstay of Sigbjørn’s morals, though they are dispersed through the prism of socialism. In his dialogue with his girlfriend, Nina, he empathises with the plight of the workers, with their exploitation and impoverishment. Yet he contends that the cause of their suffering is the British class system: ‘To twist an intolerable remark around: *La bêtise est mon fort*. It’s my strong point, my armour. Take that away and there’s nothing left, just as there was nothing left for Tchekov’s old lady when they took away her religion’ (*IB* 97).⁶

Another Russian playwright who features prominently in *In Ballast* is Valentin Kataev (1897–1986). Just after Sigbjørn’s retelling of his jaunt to Bygdø Allé in Oslo to become acquainted with William Erikson – the author of *Skibets reise fra Kristiania (The Ship’s Voyage from Kristiania)* – the narrator observes: ‘They are giving Kataev’s play at Nationaltheatret’ (*IB* 237). This refers to the 1931 film of the 1928 Moscow Arts Theatre performance of Kataev’s first novel, *Rastratchiki (The Embezzlers)* (1926), the stage adaptation of which was accomplished by the influential Russian theatre director, Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863–1938).⁷ Kataev was inspired both by the real-life accounts which appeared in the journals to which he contributed and by a national campaign against corruption instigated by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Yet his work is also reminiscent of Gogol’s parody of pre-revolutionary Russian society in *Dead Souls*, although, in its portrayal of two functionaries conspiring to defraud the State, it satirises not tsarist bureaucracy, but contemporary Soviet officialdom.

Although his practice of cinema-going dated from childhood, Lowry developed a fascination for Soviet cinematography while he was an undergraduate at St Catharine’s College, Cambridge in 1929–32. He was motivated by the silent, black-and-white films shown at the University’s Film Guild. They included *The End of St Petersburg* (1927) and *Storm Over Asia* (1928), both of which focus on the legacy of the 1917 October Revolution. They were directed by Vsevolod Pudovkin (1893–1953);⁸ in Lowry’s fledgling novel,

Ultramarine (1933), Dana Hilliot claims to have worked for this Russian screenwriter and advocate of montage: ‘In Moscow I was a camera man under Pudovkin’.⁹

In Ballast to the White Sea focuses on *The End of St Petersburg*: a sign advertising this film catches the gaze of Captain Hansen-Tarnmoor and his son, Sigbjørn, luring them into a Liverpool cinema (IB 66). They scrutinise the rapid development of events in Russia that are projected on the screen and reflect on the implications of regime change. Recalling a slogan highlighting the Bolsheviki’s refusal to concede to the short-lived Provisional Government of Alexander Kerensky (1881–1970) – which lasted from March till November 1917 – Sigbjørn justifies the stance taken by contending: ‘*The Kerensky Government is only the same thing in a different coat. No compromise!*’ (IB 67). In their excitement the Captain and his son appear ‘almost as if they willed to be transported from their own seats into this world, not indeed less tragic than their own, but where hope displaced sterility, and courage, despair’ (IB 67). Although optimistic of ‘the success—however you preferred to look at it—of a workers’ republic’ in the storming of the Winter Palace, Sigbjørn is concerned that ‘they have destroyed God. There is no soul any longer there’ (IB 67). Hence, he has reservations that calamities may ensue on this journey into the unknown:

He had stopped outside a cinema hoarding which depicted this time no Russian peasant, but a ship of the dead setting out into the imponderable, to navigate the nexus between this world and the next, crowded for the grave; outward bound. (IB 77)

Political Affinities: The Dilemma of 1930s Europe

Lowry’s political empathies tend to be progressively socialist: in his later correspondence he expresses delight at the result of British Columbia’s general election to select members of the Legislative Assembly. Indeed, on the formation of a new administration to implement Social Credit policies, he proclaims, ‘We have a Marxist, though fortunately not communist, government now in B.C. Fantastic.’¹⁰ However, he remains a person of contradictions in that he derives considerable advantage from funds received from his father, a wealthy cotton-broker. In the context of *In Ballast*, Sigbjørn too is reliant on the free market, as Captain Tarnmoor contends: ‘—And as for the capitalist system, even though there may be some grounds for thinking it unsatisfactory, it seems to me that you yourself have benefitted very clearly from it’ (IB 129).

Astutely aware of the complexity of European politics, Lowry strives to provide an aesthetic response in *In Ballast* to the impact of ideology on contemporary affairs. In his psychic pursuit of the essence of survival, he assesses the human factors which, he perceives, have contributed to the current international situation. Drawing on his familiarity with Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) and on his own maritime experiences, Lowry – via his protagonist Sigbjørn – makes an analogy between the white whale's mystique and the glowing allure of the 'phosphorous White Sea' in the Soviet era (*IB* 121):

Sigbjørn buried his face in his hands. It was as though fate had been waiting to drive this wedge of truth through his haunted mind. Yes, it was true, whatever supernatural ambiguities *Moby Dick* might have circumscribed in his flight from modern thought or through his own brain, nothing had altered the powerful fact of the white whale's actual existence. Fact! White whale! White Sea! The wedge—or was it a harpoon?—of agonizing truth was driven further in and he trembled with the pain of it. These tragedies could all have been avoided. They could be avoided in future. (*IB* 82)

As a visual metaphor, this white whale analogy politicises *In Ballast* by exposing capitalism in crisis. In this respect, Sigbjørn identifies 'greediness and evil in the present state of affairs' – attributes which foster a 'blind, malicious force in the world' (*IB* 82). His thoughts are merged with those of the narrator who refers to the inevitability of the disintegration of private enterprise: 'Capitalist society carried her own rusted presages of disaster within her as the whale did the lances whose wounds weakened it at the final attack' (*IB* 82). In a later conversation with his father, Sigbjørn asserts that military conflict is a fundamental feature of capitalism. Through a vision of 'psychotic nightmare', he foresees a proliferation of hostilities, surmising: '—Well, here we are, surrounded by a strange fatality, and among other things being driven into another war... Can't you see that the system is rotten right through?' (*IB* 130). Indeed, in his short story, 'June 30th, 1934' (1939) – the original title of which was 'Metal' – Lowry refers to the Night of the Long Knives, when the Nazis embarked on a series of politically motivated executions, with the aim of consolidating Hitler's grasp of power.¹¹

Arising from the practice of alchemy – which reflected a desire to transform base metals into gold – the theme of 'metallurgies' is strongly present in *In Ballast* (*IB* 155). Sigbjørn is warned against empty dreams by his father, who considers 'the philosophical

stone' implausible. He cites Isaac D'Israeli (1766–1848), who deemed alchemy to be one of the 'Six Follies of Science' (*IB* 144).¹² Yet his fertile imagination transforms 'the elixir of life' into 'some further metallurgy of death' (*IB* 218). As in the poem 'There is a Metallurgy' (1938–39), in Lowry's 'chthonic vision of a metallic world'¹³ only 'a metallurgy of the mind' can save the human race from oblivion.¹⁴ In the 'darkening world' of *In Ballast* the time is ripe for preventative action to avert a catastrophe akin to that which happened to the *Lusitania* (which was torpedoed by a U-boat in 1915 with the loss of over a thousand lives, an action that brought the USA into the First World War). The ramifications of that tragic event are suggested in the following passage:

It seemed to Sigbjørn [...] that they stood on the brink of the midnight of the world, a world that would never again leave a message under the stone for the pilgrim, and it was as if the chaos which man had brought to man by his greed and deceit and betrayal of his own birthright was mirrored in the swiftly drifting, tattered wreckage above them. (*IB* 134)

A pressing need for the creation of a new society – which would *not* endanger the livelihood of its members – is identified by Sigbjørn. Stimulated by watching *The End of St Petersburg*, he craves the rebirth of civilisation. He glimpses 'his own face reflected behind, another soul who sought to be reborn, who perhaps sought God in the very regions where he had been destroyed' (*IB* 68). Marking the indelible words of his now deceased sibling, Tor, he pledges to venture on 'quite a different pilgrimage' from those which have been undertaken so far (*IB* 19, 68–69).

The benefits and drawbacks of communism are the subject of intense debate between Sigbjørn and Nina (whose political allegiances lie with the Communist Party, which she has joined). However, he highlights her lack of spiritual values, elucidating, '—We were always quarreling. Besides, she was a communist who actually belonged to the party. I had the temerity to claim to have a soul. It was this temerity she disliked and insulted' (*IB* 146). He explains his political status as follows: '—I am not in Russia. I may never go to Russia and even if I did I should probably be thrown out on my ear. And besides, I don't belong to a party' (*IB* 149). Captain Tarnmoor shares his insistence on a renaissance in belief-systems via a process of radical transformation: 'Eventually, if the whole man is to be involved, as to my mind he must, the wisdom of religious thought and the miraculous powers of men must also enter the revolutionary movement' (*IB* 147). Their deliberations revolve around their

perceptions of the characteristics and trajectory of Soviet communism in the 1930s. In this respect, the Captain is *not* unmindful of the workings of the state security apparatus:

—It’s the last straw you should talk to me about Russia [...] as though it were the Absolute! For I assure you in advance that it’s nothing of the kind. Besides I’ll be surprised—even if you do get there—if they’ll let you go beyond the wharf. (*IB* 72)

In contrast, Sigbjørn’s allegiance to socialism is somewhat naïve. Detecting his sentimental vices, Nina stresses his psychological dependence in the following way:

—None of the old ideology is any good any longer. It is such an act. Yours—although it may seem on the surface like an identification with the proletariat—is still simply an escape from yourself. It’s more of a tense, personal, religious matter with you than anything else. [...] Can’t you see that all this business about going home, to Russia, or Norway, or Spitzbergen [...] is just one more attempt on your part to crawl back into Grandma’s beaded bag? (*IB* 112)

She associates his recourse to ‘the dark forces of the unconscious’ with ‘an act of primitive revolt’ (*IB* 112). She links his primordial powers of intuition with the perceptive abilities of D.H. Lawrence, who championed the pursuit of mystical communication with pre-industrialised communities as a means of achieving sexual liberation.¹⁵ With regard to his witnessing a surge in support for communism as a panacea for the ills of Nazism, Sigbjørn asserts that even Lawrence would ‘have gone “red”’ (*IB* 112). The politicisation of the intelligentsia is deemed to be a factor by Captain Tarnmoor, who asserts to his son: ‘—A few years ago young men like you used to be aesthetes, now they’re communists’ (*IB* 73). Sigbjørn clarifies his political allegiance by vowing ‘—I’d die for communism but I haven’t the impudence to call myself a communist. Another thing, I don’t suppose they’d have me’ (*IB* 129).

Collaboration between the USSR and Nazi Germany – resulting in the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact (August 1939–June 1941) and its rupture – is predicted by Nina, who explains to Sigbjørn:

—It's but a step, also made in the dark, not to Communism but to Fascism. It's like going to war—there's that same quality of blindness about it. [...] A great many in the same position as yourself feel that they must take some such violent step in the dark as a compensation for what their brothers and fathers went through in the war. (*IB* 112)

However, she shares his contempt for Nazism: ‘—That's our common enemy, their eyes seemed to say, focussing on the soulless swastika’ (*IB* 114). The narrator imagines that, having reached the River Mersey, a German battleship opens fire, resulting in multiple casualties. However, it is Sigbjørn who is portrayed as the hero for subduing Hermann Göring, the Nazi leader who was complicit in implementing the 1935 anti-Semitic Nuremberg Laws:

For a moment the sound of the winches above them was the clattering of machine-guns. The snow-mists, the terrible vaporous metallurgies of aerochemistry, the sea that raced past a thick river of blood. Goering's bloated face rose up before him and he smashed it to jelly. (*IB* 114)¹⁶

To the White Sea: Norway or Russia?

Another aspect of Sigbjørn's vision of the future is his alternating fixations on Norway and Russia, as he reveals to Tor: ‘But can you tell me why when I think of Norway I always think of Russia at the same time?’ (*IB* 8). He affirms that he has chosen a Norwegian vessel for the return to his homeland, explaining: ‘—Yes, I've got to get away, out, back into my own tracks, to the sources of my ancestry’ (*IB* 64). His focus on Erikson is identified by Captain Tarnmoor as an indication of psychological transformation:

Perhaps you do meet him again without knowing it, for just as you are home already, in a sense, on that Norwegian ship, *Unsgaard*, you also meet Erikson, identified there as a member of the crew. In short, you meet yourself. Only a new self. (*IB* 65)

Although it is still likely that Sigbjørn's ship will dock at a Norwegian port, Captain Tarnmoor detects the futility of his son's dual allegiances, querying:

—You can't want to go to Russia if your motive is to see Erikson, who is probably in Norway. And if you want to go to Norway, the source of our ancestry [...] you would scarcely choose to sign on a ship that went to Russia. (*IB* 72–73)

Slavic and Nordic civilisations are also differentiated in terms of chronological distinctions. In this respect, Tor conjectures, ‘—Isn't it possible that for us, Russia is the future, and Norway the past?’ (*IB* 8). Sigbjørn is well aware of where Europe's destiny lies: ‘Even the Russians, at the very headquarters of the future, can't avoid the future: a thousand apparently inexorable setbacks, in the face of which they manage to carry on’ (*IB* 29). He is willing to compromise if he is unable to reach Erikson: ‘—If I don't go to Norway I shan't meet him. But I shall be able to dramatize that book in my watch below. And I shall see Russia, where the future is being hammered out...’ (*IB* 64). The juxtaposition of these two civilisations is illustrated by the visit which Erikson and Sigbjørn make to the Viking ship which, for them, symbolises victory. The Viking fleet ostensibly remained ‘unconquerable for the 200 years the Viking Age endured’ (800 till c. 1050 AD) (*IB* 239).¹⁷ As claimed by the narrator, having devastated Europe, it travelled eastwards to Russia, southwards to the Black Sea, and then established commercial links with the ‘golden lands of the Far East’ (*IB* 239).

Whereas Norway is presented as personifying death, Russia represents life, as the Captain explains to Sigbjørn:

—Supposing [...] Norway to be death, your mother's death [...] and of course your own and Tor's birth, and death to be a manifestation of the same force [...] —then would it be altogether fabulous to suggest that those instincts which draw you out to Russia, which make you sympathetic to Communism, are life instincts [...]—sexual instincts? (*IB* 153–54)

In due course, with the termination of Norwegian neutrality, German National Socialism expanded as far as the Baltic. A Nazi stranglehold was placed on the unhindered export of Norwegian timber and Swedish iron ore (which became highly lucrative resources), as anticipated by Nina, who asks Sigbjørn:

—Isn't your lovely Norway the apex of Nordic culture, of all your heathen religion? And haven't they the raw materials, the ores and woods useful to—she nodded out towards the Nazi ship. And aren't you busy with your 'program of salvation,' and your 'Nordic League of Nations.' (IB 114)

Russian infiltration into *In Ballast to the White Sea* is achieved via flashbacks to *Ultramarine*. Journeying through Croston near Preston, Sigbjørn recollects a voyage which is remarkably similar to that of Dana Hilliot in its route to the Kwantung Peninsula (via Cape Esan, the Tsugaru Strait, Hakodate, the Sea of Japan, and Korea) (IB 176). Indeed, the reminiscences of the protagonists of the two novels are merged:

For a moment his mind sought refuge among these memories, and they seemed good. It had been the height of summer when the *Oedipus Tyrannus* had made Dairen. It was strange that what was a comfortless experience should have an almost nostalgic attraction for him in retrospect. (IB 176)

As in *Ultramarine*, the port of Dairen (as it was called in 1905–45, after which it became Dalian in China) plays a significant role in *In Ballast* for its connections with Russia.¹⁸ Between 1932 and 1945 it was an integral part of the Japanese puppet-state of Manchukuo which was populated by a considerable White Russian minority, as observed by Sigbjørn: 'There had been a hint of Russia, of enormous things up country—Manchukuo now' (IB 176). Although he uses the contemporary Japanese name, 'Dairen', his travelling companion Daland Haarfrage prefers the Russian 'Dalny' (IB 176).

The intended destination of Sigbjørn's vessel also fluctuates between two northern Russian cities: Archangel (or Archangelsk) on the White Sea and Leningrad (now St Petersburg) on the Baltic: '—D/S *Unsgaard*, Sigbjørn Tarnmoor, limper [...]. *Skibets reise fra Prester til Archangel/Leningrad*' (IB 61).¹⁹ The ship's route is under constant review. Its captain has orders to proceed to Archangel, but his charter is suddenly revoked, though *not* in favour of Leningrad, but of Aalesund in Norway, which is nearer. In any case, most of its crew have been paid off in all the confusion (IB 234).

Nevertheless, back in Liverpool, before departure, Sigbjørn had succumbed to transporting himself to Russia's former capital psychogeographically: 'As they moved from Lime Street down past the Washington Hotel to the isthmus of Manchester Street, a vision of

Leningrad was still super-imposed upon Liverpool in his mind's eye' (*IB* 69). Subsequently, he falls under the influence of Haarfragre, who emphasises its charm:

You shall have a beautiful voyage [...]. And in Leningrad you shall see [...] the wide Neva, its waters so blue where it turns abruptly! And so beautiful where she forks among the beautiful, pretty, islands, looking for the Gulf of Finland and the ocean. (*IB* 176)

This Russian city also shares a certain natural phenomenon with Norway, as Sigbjørn suggests: 'There are white nights there, just as in Norway?' Haarfragre clarifies that it was constructed on marshland and benefits from nocturnal twilight: 'White nights in summer. Leningrad is built on a swamp too' (*IB* 176).

However, Lowry's intuitive vision of Russia is not monochrome, but kaleidoscopic: viewed through the prism of his literary imagination. His depictions are not black and white, but red and white. On the one hand, the latter colour is associated with the White Sea, white whales, white nights, and the purity of the soul. On the other, derived from the word for beauty, the Russian for red also symbolises communism and the Bolsheviks. Ironically, although it is the colour of the revolutionary star twinkling on the Kremlin's spires, it is also that of the toll paid in blood. These hues chromatically polarise the combatants in the Russian Civil Wars (1917–21) which were fought between the Whites and the victorious Reds. In *In Ballast*, attempting to subdue painful memories (such as Tor's suicide), Sigbjørn decodes a spiritual 'message from an astral world' (*IB* 116). Torn between past ordeals and aspirations for the future, his mental images are in a constant state of flux:

Again Sigbjørn had the curious notion that this was all a nightmare—he was in prison, condemned to death—of extraordinary detail and documentation, but never-the-less a dream; a dream in which one set out, weighed down with the ballast of the past, to the White Sea! But what was that? Did he go in pursuit of that whiteness which strikes more of a panic to the soul than redness which affrights in blood? Or was it of that very redness, the redness of the star of revolution, beautiful over the White Sea? Where was he going? [...] Whose star did he follow [...]? (*IB* 116)

Despite the ongoing uncertainty as to whether the *Unsgaard* will reach Russia, he expresses his moral tenacity to Nina: ‘I am under sealed orders, that I shall soon know what I *have* to do, where I have to go. And that when I do know, when I do see my star, I’ll follow it till I die’ (*IB* 91).

The exigency of immediate action is recognised by both Tarnmoor siblings. Tor maintains that the unsettled balance of power is ripe for transfiguration: ‘The world runs away to her own destruction like an idiot child in the dark. Our world is waiting for revolution and that’s all there is to it’ (*IB* 31). However, the type of change required is highly debatable. In Tor’s study, Sigbjørn takes up a position opposite Marx’s *Das Kapital* (1867) and ‘some books on the Soviet film’ by Pudovkin, Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948), and Paul Fejos (1897–1963) at one end of the bookcase (*IB* 31).²⁰ He emphasises the need for social transformation, for ‘a revolution of the word’, referring to a 1929 declaration in the modernist journal *Transition: An International Quarterly for Creative Experiment* (*IB* 31).²¹ It calls for a linguistic revolution to ‘breach and transcend the growing political divides created by the rise of communism and fascism’.²² Displaying a copy of D.H. Lawrence’s *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1921), he also advocates a ‘revolution of the soul’ – even ‘a revolution of sex’ (*IB* 31). Yet, he is identified by Tor as ‘some sort of mystic’ who recommends esotericism as a means of rebirth (*IB* 32).

The significance of Russian spirituality is recognised by Captain Tarnmoor in a conversation with Sigbjørn:

—To ‘neighbour’ an esoteric definition should not blind you to the truth of that as demonstrated in Russia. One can supposedly love one’s neighbour as one’s self there because perhaps there is no good reason not to! [...] They do live a religion there, despite vexatious incidents, that’s the whole point. (*IB* 149)

For the Captain, communism and mysticism offer alternative solutions to humanity’s dilemmas:

One—dare I say the only?—possibility, and a seemingly paradoxical one, is in communism. Another possibility of refuge is in some form of esotericism, unclear to you, with which perhaps you have long and rightly suspected I was involved. And from which you have indirectly drawn a great many moral dispositions. (*IB* 151)

Esotericism: The Influence of Ouspensky and Gurdjieff

In the late 1920s or early 1930s Lowry discovered the Russian mathematician and esotericist Peter Ouspensky (1878–1947), who was renowned for publications such as *The Fourth Dimension* (1909) and *Tertium Organum: A Key to the Enigmas of the World* (1920).²³ This philosopher and theosophist exerted a ‘key influence on his thinking’.²⁴ Indeed, he declared *A New Model of the Universe* (1931) ‘a terrifically exciting book’ which ‘aims [...] to base eternal recurrence upon scientific fact’.²⁵

In *In Ballast* various allusions are made to Ouspensky’s works. *A New Model of the Universe* is cited with regard to its retelling of the legend of the Sphinx – a mythical creature that guarded the entrance to Thebes and insisted that all wayfarers solve a riddle, or else be eaten alive (IB 45).²⁶ In a reference to *Tertium Organum*, the Tao is defined as ‘a square with no angles, a great sound which cannot be heard, a great image with no form’ (IB 111).²⁷ It is compared to the heavily laden *Vestris*, which sailed from Hoboken on the Hudson River in November 1928, on her final voyage.²⁸ Thus, it is a portrait of ‘the overburdened world that carried within her the seeds of her own destruction’ (IB 111).²⁹ *In Ballast* also revives the *Arcturion* – the ill-starred whaleboat in Melville’s *Mardi* (1848) – in the form of a Tarnmoor liner reported sunk (IB 231). It becomes *Adam Cadmon* (IB 122) – the appellation for humanity given by Ouspensky in *Tertium Organum*, in which there are citations from *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) by the Russian theosophist, Helena Blavatsky (1831–91).³⁰ Sigbjørn’s vision is momentarily distorted, for he associates Adam Cadmon with ‘the ancient name for man’ (IB 123).

In Lowry’s novel Russia is exemplified by its spiritual legacy. In this respect, Captain Tarnmoor argues: ‘If we love God then to the extent that we approach him through love of him we unite in love with our neighbours; and the closer our union with them, the closer our union with God also’ (IB 149). He explains that, derived from a statement made by Abbot Dorotheus of Gaza (505–65), this viewpoint is referred to in Ouspensky’s *Tertium Organum* (IB 149).³¹ It provides a mystical image of God as the nucleus of a world depicted as a circle, the radii of which are the diverse paths taken by human beings.³²

Various chapters of *In Ballast to the White Sea* commence with epigraphs quoting Ouspensky’s *Tertium Organum*. In Chapter XII ‘the tragedy of our spiritual quest: we don’t know what we are searching for...’ establishes the importance of identifying the trajectory of a psychic pilgrimage (IB 170).³³ In Chapter XIII the citation, ‘Being great it, the Tao, passes on; passing on, it becomes remote; having become remote, it returns...’ refers to Chinese

mysticism (*IB* 181). Ouspensky's depiction conjures up eternal and transcendental attributes of Taoism as 'the form of formlessness, the image of the imageless, the fleeting and the indeterminate'.³⁴ In Chapter XVIII humanity is presented as having 'much in common with a house filled with inhabitants' (*IB* 233).³⁵ Its representation is akin to 'a great ocean liner on which are many transient passengers' and which acts as a conveyance of the soul (*IB* 233). In this respect, Sigbjørn's convictions are explained by the narrator who recognises that, although he 'believes in communism', he also 'believes that the soul is going out on its journey in life to seek God' (*IB* 239). In response to Erikson's claim that 'the great thing is to see the truth of all religions [...] War used to be truth for some. Now it is up to us to stop it', Sigbjørn acknowledges 'the pole where the ideal and the real meet' and declares his intention 'to seek my truth' (*IB* 240).

Lowry's fascination with Ouspensky's concept of a fourth dimension is important in assessing the state of Sigbjørn's psychogeographic mind in *In Ballast*. It associates the 'white city' of Liverpool – blanketed in a 'web of snow' – with Archangel (a port which is frozen for up to five months a year). Indeed, a known quantity, 'the white Mersey, the *real* white sea' evokes 'the ghost of the White Sea' – an apparition of Russia (*IB* 100, 85). Hence, it meanders into the alleged fourth domain, as 'elementary spirits' exude from the mists of Florida's Lake Okeechobee (*IB* 85).

Yet Ouspensky's so-called 'Fourth Way' is rooted in the concepts of his spiritual mentor, the Russian philosopher and mystic George Gurdjieff (1866–1949). Inspired by travel, the latter developed an innovative approach to self-development. He combined and harmonised three established 'schools' (or 'ways') – relating to knowledge and consciousness, religious emotion, and physical suffering – which are said to emanate from yogis, monks, and fakirs, respectively.³⁶ He was convinced that his 'Fourth Way' would arouse and transcend a unified mind-emotion-body consciousness, enabling an individual to achieve full potential through a higher state of awareness.³⁷ His 'Law of Three' stipulates that every phenomenon exhibits 'active, passive, and neutralizing' forces which may affirm, deny, or reconcile.³⁸ In this respect, 'the eternal pattern of three' is viewed by Sigbjørn as 'one of the secrets of existence which no one bothered to investigate' (*IB* 216).

Conclusion

In Ballast to the White Sea strongly reflects the many-faceted influence of Russian writers, film directors, and thinkers on Malcolm Lowry's political and philosophical ideas and on his creative processes. Throughout the novel, kaleidoscopic images of past, present, and

envisaged future events collide in a montage-like fashion: in a blaze of colour, red is pitted against white. Encumbered by the ballast of bygone times and haunted by a ‘debacle of self’, Sigbjørn Tarnmoor on his spiritual odyssey is traumatised by the forces of communism and Nazism in a belligerent world (*IB* 85, 147), but clearly perceives the need for an approach to human affairs that goes beyond the strictly political.³⁹ For Sigbjørn, and for Lowry, only a new ideology is capable of transforming humanity via a revolution of the soul.

¹ This chapter is informed by my monograph, *The Kaleidoscopic Vision of Malcolm Lowry: Souls and Shamans* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019).

² See Malcolm Lowry, *Sursum Corda!: The Collected Letters of Malcolm Lowry*, ed. Sherrill E. Grace, 2 vols (London: Jonathan Cape, vol. I: 1926–46, 1995 and vol. II: 1946–57, 1996), I, pp. 207, 466, 507, and 581; and II, pp. 154 and 160.

³ John (Zhong) Ming Chen and Shaobe Xie, ‘Malcolm Lowry and the Tao’, *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, 20:3–4 (September–December 1993), p. 364, <https://journals.library.ualberta.ca/crccl/index.php/crccl/article/view/3203/2560> (accessed 26 September 2018).

⁴ Malcolm Lowry, *In Ballast to the White Sea: A Scholarly Edition*, ed. Patrick A. McCarthy, annotator Chris Ackerley (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2014), p. 51. Hereafter referred to in parentheses in the text as *IB*.

⁵ See Ackerley, notes I.52 and I.53, *IB* 250–51.

⁶ He claims: ‘Stupidity is my strength’: see Ackerley, note VII.73, *IB* 327.

⁷ See Ackerley, note XVIII.40, *IB* 411.

⁸ Lowry listed the following Russian films among his favourites: Pudovkin’s *The Deserter* (1933) and Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), *The General Line* (1929), *Thunder over Mexico* (1933), and *Alexander Nevsky* (1938). See Jan Gabriel, *Inside the Volcano: My Life with Malcolm Lowry* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p. 34 and Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, I, pp. 355, 405, 432, and 435; and II, pp. 322–23 and 515–16.

⁹ Malcolm Lowry, *Ultramarine* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 93.

¹⁰ Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, II, p. 588.

¹¹ Malcolm Lowry, ‘June 30th, 1934’, in *The Voyage That Never Ends: Malcolm Lowry in his Own Words: Fictions, Poems, Fragments, Letters*, ed. Michael Hofmann (New York: NYRB, 2007), pp. 3–20.

¹² The others are the quadrature of the circle, the multiplication of the cube, perpetual motion, magic, and judicial astrology: see Ackerley, note I.55, *IB* 251, and note X.27, *IB* 344–45.

¹³ Ackerley, note XV.41, *IB*, 399.

¹⁴ Malcolm Lowry, *The Collected Poetry of Malcolm Lowry*, ed. Kathleen Scherf (Vancouver, UBC Press, 1992), p. 89.

¹⁵ Ackerley, note VII.141, *IB* 333.

¹⁶ See Ackerley, VII.151, *IB* 334.

¹⁷ However, this supposition is historically inaccurate, as the Vikings did incur defeat at the Battles of Edington (878), Norditi (884), Buttington (893), and Stamford Bridge (1066).

¹⁸ With Port Arthur as its naval base, Dairen was under the Russian sphere of influence in 1898–1905.

¹⁹ Sigbjørn is listed as a fireman.

²⁰ Actually Fejos – né Fejős Pál – is not a Russian, but a Hungarian-born film director: see Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, II, p. 475.

²¹ *Transition*, ed. Eugene Jolas, 16–17 (Spring–Summer, June 1929), p. 13.

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- ²² *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 1007.
- ²³ Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, II, p. 173.
- ²⁴ Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, II, p. 293. See also I, pp. 357 and 358; and II, pp. 173–74, 289, 293, and 304.
- ²⁵ Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, I, p. 314.
- ²⁶ See P.D. Ouspensky, *A New Model of the Universe: Principles of the Psychological Method in Its Application to Problems of Science, Religion, and Art* (Eastford, CT: Martino Publishing, 2013), pp. 362–65.
- ²⁷ P.D. Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum: The Third Canon of Thought: A Key to the Enigmas of the World* (Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2013), p. 290.
- ²⁸ Ackerley, note VII.19, *IB* 322.
- ²⁹ Ackerley, note VII.136, *IB* 333.
- ³⁰ Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum*, p. 202.
- ³¹ Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum*, p. 286.
- ³² Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum*, p. 286.
- ³³ Ackerley, note XII.1, *IB* 371.
- ³⁴ Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum*, p. 289.
- ³⁵ See Ackerley, note XVIII.I, *IB* 406.
- ³⁶ P.D. Ouspensky, *The Fourth Way* (New York, Vintage, 1971), p. 99.
- ³⁷ See Ouspensky, *The Fourth Way*, pp. 4–5 and 105.
- ³⁸ Ouspensky, *The Fourth Way*, p. 189. See also Glenn Alexander Magee, ‘G.I. Gurdjieff and the Fourth Way’, in *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism*, ed. G.A. Magee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
- ³⁹ See also Ackerley, note IV.27, *IB* 286.