

Psychogeographic Impact on Malcolm Lowry's Consciousness: From the Zapotec and Aztec Civilizations to Taoism

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Abstract

This paper provides an intercontinental, cross-cultural, multi-disciplinary framework for an analysis of the influence of cultures and civilizations - both east and west – upon literature and national identity. It investigates the evolution of the cosmic consciousness of the English Modernist novelist and poet, Malcolm Lowry (1909-57) by scrutinizing the psychogeographic and subconscious dimensions of the Mexican Day of the Dead Hispanic festival which he observed in Cuernavaca in 1936.

In its analysis of the material and spiritual domains of both the Aztecs and the Oaxacan Zapotecs, it considers anthropological, cultural, and ethnographic influences associated with pre-Columbian, Mesoamerican rituals. In doing so, it determines Lowry's dedication to his quest for atonement with the spirits of the dead in works, such as *Under the Volcano* (1947), *Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid* (1968), *La Mordida* (1996), and *The Forest Path to the Spring* (1961).

In recognition of his need to repent for the debts of the past and for the alienating sins of mankind, synergies are made with cosmic, shamanic, and animist concepts of the universe, as reflected in the celestial visions of the Aztec and Zapotec civilizations. In pursuit of Lowry's search for universal harmony, cosmopolitan connections are established between the rhythms of the universe reflected in Aztec and Zapotec world-views, the significance of the Pleiades star cluster, the intergalactic symbol of Eridanus, and the philosophical concepts of Taoism.

Introduction

This paper provides an intercontinental, cross-cultural, multi-disciplinary framework for an analysis of the influence of cultures and civilizations - both east and west – upon literature and national identity. It investigates the evolution of the cosmic consciousness of the English Modernist novelist and poet, Malcolm Lowry (1909-57) by scrutinizing the psychogeographic and subconscious dimensions of the Mexican Day of the Dead Hispanic festival which he observed in Cuernavaca in 1936.

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Furthermore, a consideration of the impact of Sir James Frazer's research into the Aztec and Zapotec civilizations, as reflected in the Day of the Dead festival, leads us to an analysis of Lowry's unique combination of Modernism with cosmic shamanism. The Lowrian world-

view provides us with an anthropological basis for Kandinskian psychotherapeutic and shamanic healing, together with a sense of regeneration by ethnographic and artistic means.

Russian Literary Influences

Lowry's magic is born of a highly inquisitive mind – one which spans the continents in its assimilation of world literature, stretching from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, from the Americas to Europe. His enormous, esoteric literary diet focusses on Russian, as well as Scandinavian, Czech, and German writers. His heterogeneous erudition is rooted *both* in continental European and in Anglo-American literature. He embarks upon a spiritual odyssey in pursuit of truth and salvation. His aim is to renew what he perceives as being an increasingly materialistic, Western civilization through the power of literature and culture.

Judging from the frequency of their mention in his daily correspondence, we can identify numerous writers of the Golden Age of nineteenth-century Russian literature as Lowry favourites: Alexander Pushkin, Nikolai Gogol,¹ Fyodor Dostoyevsky,² and Anton Chekhov. Indeed, he sees himself not only as a new Goethe, or a Kafka, but also as a Pushkin, and, even, as a “second order Gogol” (Lowry, *Sursum Corda!* II 885; and I 292-93).

Such parallels are pursued in *Dark as the Grave* where Sigbjørn Wilderness reads himself into a newspaper report, as was the case with Major Kovalyov in the Gogolian fantasy, “The Nose” (1842) (Lowry, *Sursum* II: 779). A troika of divine retribution, Gogol's *Dead Souls* (1842) is described by Lowry as “one of the most lyrical and nostalgic novels ever written”. Indeed, the burning of parts two and three reminds us of the loss of his own manuscript, *In Ballast to the White Sea* which would have concluded the trilogy, *The Voyage That Never Ends*. Gogolian and Dostoyevskian links are also evident in Lowry's recognition of the importance of an aesthetic appreciation of beauty in the celestial spirit of Eridanus in *The Forest Path* (1947-61).

The Cultural Renewal of Civilization

Essential connections between the sciences and the humanities have been identified by Sir John Polkinghorne (1930-), the distinguished Cambridge mathematical physicist and theologian (Polkinghorne 109, cited in Spivey xiii). According to Ted Spivey, the solution to civilization's dilemma is “for modern man to experience cultural renewal” (Spivey 186). Furthermore, he proposed that “ethics and aesthetics must be integrated with science and technology in new social patterns”, as Modernism intended (Spivey 186). This would necessitate a “new synthesis of knowledge, reason, and the powers of heart and soul” (Spivey 47).

Since Descartes there has been a tendency for Western philosophy to fragment into two divergent movements: objectivism (based upon scientific reason) and subjectivism (referring to the soul, religion, and aesthetics). It is this *fissure* in modern consciousness - between the analytical, empirical, rational nature of science, on the one hand, and the imaginative, intuitive, visionary aspects of the arts, on the other, which has been identified as threatening to dissolve the very basis of humanity itself. Dating from Sigmund Freud (1856-1939),

prominent psychologists have established that modern rationalism has tended to *exclude* the existence of the subconscious mind.

Aware of the need for psycho-analysis, Lowry established his own mode of psycho-therapeutic writing under the supervision of Conrad Aiken, the illustrious American poet and caring, ‘surrogate father’ to whom, in February 1940, he writes, “What truer father have I than you” (*Sursum* I: 293). Both Aiken and Lowry suffered from deep psychological scars affecting them and requiring adaptation. Spivey refers to:

(1) [...] A basic life crisis, which – though often but not always hidden in the unconscious – causes various small physical and mental instabilities; (2) a way of seeing one’s life as a pilgrimage to find a lost love and joy; and (3) the gradual overcoming of a deep death wish and the achieving of a psychic growth in which life and death, love and violence, are seen in a perspective that makes possible a full acceptance of life (Spivey 151-52).

Undergoing a continuous Nietzschean struggle over the fundamental question of what it is to be human, Lowry attempts to attain a higher state of consciousness and self-revelation in order to determine how mankind can realize its full potential.

Lowry’s anthropological and psychotherapeutic investigations are inspired by Sir James Frazer, Robert Graves (an admirer of Dr Rivers’s psychoanalytic method at Craiglockhart) (MacClancy 87) and by Tom Harrisson (founder of the Mass-Observation Experiment) (Heimann). His study of the Judeo-Christian metaphysical system of the Cabbala is motivated by Charles Stansfeld-Jones - alias Frater Achad - a white magician (Bowker 320-21 and Day 294-95). Following in Frazer’s footsteps and embarking upon his own transcendental, supernatural quest for the Garden of Eden, Lowry (and, indeed, the Consul of *Under the Volcano*) traces back the roots of the Aztecs and Zapotecs. These civilizations became caught in the jaws of Spanish conquistadors, contributing to their subsequent decline. Enthralled by the Day of the Dead in Cuernavaca, Geoffrey Firmin, our shamanistic consul, seeks the existence of a divine order - the ‘Holy Grail’ of supreme truth and salvation – through the Cabbalistic and cosmic wisdoms of the past. He embarks upon a mystic pilgrimage, a spiritual mission to discover death in life and life in death.

Lowry’s *Dead Souls*: *Under the Volcano*, the Day of the Dead, and the Cabbala

The Day of the Dead festival derives from shamanic and cosmic perspectives akin to those of the animist tribes of northern Mexico. Indeed, the Yaqui and the Huichol communicate with gods and spirits, giving thanks to images, such as that of the Virgin of Guadalupe. With its focus on the Day of the Dead, *Under the Volcano* represents what Perle Epstein has described as “the great battle [...] for the survival of the human consciousness” (Epstein 50).³ A “tragic protagonist... like Tchitchikov in *Dead Souls*”, the dipsomaniac and psychotic Geoffrey Firmin is afflicted by a Gogolian sickness observed by the attentive Dr Vigil (Lowry, *Sursum* I 507 and 581). This ailment, we are told, is “not only in body but in that part used to be call: soul” – a malady which the Consul, like Lowry himself, expiates through suffering and self-sacrifice (Lowry, *Under the Volcano* 148). It is through psychoanalysis - the science of “nature *inside*”, dealing with “the obstacles to reason within the psyche” (Frosh 118) - that a

state of “intense self-revelation” is achieved (Bowker 224 and Martin 92-93, 45, and 204). Our clairvoyant Consul hallucinogenically aspires to a higher dimension of mescal-induced consciousness. By imbibing the ritualistic drinks of *pulque* and mescal, he is transformed from a priest into a god, as is the Aztec custom (Miller and Taube 138). Through “simultaneity of experience”, he embarks upon a telepathic crusade in search of civilization’s elixir of life (Orr 166).

According to Epstein, Lowry’s incorporation of the theme of William Blackstone (c. 1595-1675) - a seventeenth-century, shamanic reverend who fled from Cambridge to New England to join the Indians - links Lowry’s ethnological and psychological worlds (Epstein 51). Indeed, “in his outward search for seclusion, Blackstone represents man’s inner search for awareness” (Martin 195). In this respect, the youthful Lowry was mesmerized by Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890) – a spellbinding study of the correlation between anthropology and religion, “a voyage of discovery” into ethnography, folklore, and magic (MacClancy 79). In it Frazer documents attempts at exorcizing evil spirits in order to attain rebirth. As he explains, “in the primitive mind [...] it was thought that by transferring the evils of a whole people to an individual and sacrificing that individual, it might be possible to get rid of the accumulated sorrows of the entire community” (Downie, *James George Frazer* 33-34 (see also 21, 23, and 37)).⁴

In Aztec culture, death – as “a mirror of life” - is a symbolic celebration, necessitating sacrifice in order to nourish the souls of the deceased on their underworld journey into the afterlife (Miller and Taube 74). Associated with the culmination of the Pleiades star cluster (Lowry, *Sursum* II 367), the tradition of the Day of the Dead - whereby the living communicate with the spirits of the departed - is a widely commemorated festival of pre-Hispanic, pagan-spiritual origin, deeply rooted in the Zapotec and Aztec civilizations. In *Under the Volcano* our Consul makes the ultimate Christ-like, sacrificial surrender, dying for the sins of a bellicose mankind. He reveals “his adversaries as figures of evil by offering himself up as a sacrificial victim”, at the mercy of the trochoidal Máquina Infernal, the great eternal Ferris wheel of life (Orr 157). Such symbols are derived from Aztec mythology which “believed that each human being was, by predestination, inserted into a divine order, ‘the grasp of the omnipotent machine’” (Soustelle 112, quoted in Wutz 66).

Under the Volcano sets the stage for the annihilation of the Aztec Garden of Eden, the desecration of Mexico by Spanish invaders (evoked by the dying Indian theme), and the recurring ‘Fall of Man’. It is our Adamic Consul whom Lowry empowers to bear the burden of guilt for the sins of the world (Lowry, *Selected Letters* 85).

According to Mercia Eliade (1907-86), “the primitive magician, the medicine man or shaman, is not only a sick man, he is, above all, a sick man who has been cured, who has succeeded in curing himself” (Eliade, *Shamanism* 27, cited in Spivey 8 and 183). Portrayed as a reclusive “dark magician in his visioned cave” (151 and 206), our consul resorts to consulting his “numerous cabbalistic and alchemical books” (178). A shamanic priest on a pilgrimage, he seeks communion with his imagined, harmonious cosmic order, incorporating the “life-giving force of love” and joy (Spivey 15).⁵

However, Geoffrey Firmin’s dabbling in the supernatural forces of the Cabbala has culminated *not* in an attainment of the transcendental power of love, but in a loss of “the knowledge of the Mysteries” (Epstein 27). As Lowry himself claims, “the garden can be seen not only as the world, or the Garden of Eden, but legitimately as the Cabbala itself, and the

abuse of wine [...] is identified in the Cabbala with the abuse of magical powers [...] à la Childe Harolde” (Lowry, *Sursum* I: 595). An emblem of modern Faustian man, he has sold his transmigratory soul to Mephistopheles in his desire to achieve omnipotence. By untethering the riderless horse, our consul causes a purifying thunderstorm of Messianic divine intervention which resurrects Yvonne, his Aztecan ritual sacrifice who has imagined “herself voyaging straight up through the stars to the Pleiades”, as predicted for the sober (202-03, 216, 335, and 373-74).⁶

Exorcizing the Spectres of the Past: *Dark as the Grave*

With the cataclysmic combustion of his two-thousand-word script of *In Ballast to the White Sea*, Lowry has no alternative but to amend his plans for *The Voyage That Never Ends*, conceived as an “ordeal, a going through the hoop”, an “initiation”, and “a doing of God’s will” (Lowry, “Work in Progress” 3, cited in Grace, *Voyage* 9). Hence, we glimpse Lowry the voyeur, the visionary, the new Sergei Eisenstein on a *montaged Battleship Potemkin*, storming the Barents Sea.

Dark as the Grave exposes a Benjaminian “lost harmony between mind and world” (McCarthy, *Forests* 209). With its Dostoyevskian and Gogolian influences, this novella strives for harmony expressed through the concept of the artist as a visionary. We discover that “life flowed into art: [...] art gives life a form and meaning and flows on into life, [...] and [...] this flowing, this river, [...] became a flowing of consciousness, of mind” (*Dark* 60).

In *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* (*Under the Volcano*’s original title), *Dark as the Grave*, and *La Mordida* (1949-96) we encounter the spiritual odyssey of Sigbjørn Wilderness (Bareham 109). Indeed, Sigbjørn is, what Lowry calls, a Dostoyevskian “underground man”, a “modern anti-hero” (Lowry, *Sursum* II 424, 430, 538, and 540), “a doppelganger”, with all his contradictions (Lowry, *Dark* 7). He dreams that he is *both* a Lermontovian executioner of fate and a murderer extradited from Mexico to Canada (*Dark* 70-71). Unable to distinguish between the novel authored by himself and that by his daemon, he is shocked by the suspicion “that he is not a writer so much as being *written*” – a true identity crisis (Lowry, *Selected Letters* 332). On his return journey with Primrose from Vancouver to Cuernavaca to exorcize the ghosts, plaguing him since his last visit, Sigbjørn searches for Juan Fernando Martinez, his old friend and guardian spirit, as well as a reincarnation of the legendary Juan Cerillo, the Dr Vigil of *Under the Volcano*. Introduced to voodoo as a way of tapping the supernatural to displace science which “can only help the person whose experience is beyond it”, Sigbjørn uses it as a shamanic force to quell anxieties (*Dark* 167). Moreover, its dynamic power is seen by Lowry as a means of subduing the dark Dantean forces of nature, for it is:

A religion, to be regarded with reverence, since unquestionably it is the matter-transcending religion based upon the actual existence of the supernatural as a fact that is fundamental to man himself [...] But that is not to say that one should not regard with awe the great dignity & discipline that is behind it at its highest, nor its conception of God, nor the meaning that it gives to life [...] (Lowry, *Sursum* II 364).

Furthermore, it is a voodoo ritualistic cross that enables Sigbjørn, in his transition to rebirth, to communicate with the spirits of the dead, transformed into gods. It also provides “a way out of the infernal, closed circle into renewed voyaging” (Grace, *Voyage* 73).

However, Sigbjørn’s trip to the Zapotec high priest’s palace involves a parallel *physical* descent into the cruciform prehistoric tombs of Mitla, down towards the subterranean Column of Death. Representative of the Underworld, Mitla is perceived as the Land of the Dead (Spence 49 and 110, cited in Sugars 155). Sigbjørn’s renewal of faith is accompanied by “the mediating influence of the dead” and “the mediating spirit of [...] the Holy Virgin”, resulting in a realization of “the mystical experience that suffering had caused him to undergo” and precipitating the acute “feeling of something Renaissance” (*Dark* 262). Sigbjørn is reminded of the constellation Eridanus, the mythological Styx, encompassing Hades - the “river of life: river of youth: river of death” (Lowry, *Dark* 263, 258, 26-27, and 261).⁷

It is in the Hotel La Luna in Oaxaca where, having survived the perils of the lunar eclipse, Maximilian’s Palace, and the temple of Mitla (‘the City of the Moon’), Sigbjørn is reunited with his wife, Primrose, a reborn phoenix and moon-goddess (Sugars 158). It is Primrose who enables him to attain a state of psychogeographic harmony with life and Juan Fernando with death. In his dominion over the Mitlan tombs and the Edenic garden endowed by the Banco Ejidal, Juan provides the key to Sigbjørn’s spiritual renaissance. Furthermore, Lowry himself was captivated by the ancient rituals of the 800 BC Mitla, of the pyramids of the 500 BC Monte Albán, with its astronomical Building J where Zapotec gods were venerated, and of the 200 BC Teotihuacan. Indeed, Lowry modestly acknowledges that he «did, however, live in Oaxaca for a time, among the ruins of Monte Albán and Mitla» (Lowry, *Sursum* I 315).

From Eridanus to the Pleiades, and on to Taoism: *The Forest Path to the Spring*

Influenced by Walter Benjamin’s concern that the ascent of reason was actually turning life into knowledge (that is, information manipulated to human advantage), Lowry firmly believed that technological progress was extinguishing human contact with the natural environment. It is in *The Forest Path* - replete with its Manx myths and legends - that, having traversed Sigbjørn’s wilderness on his Proteus path to paradise, we encounter the soul of Eridanus which emphasizes a harmonious interaction with our environment.

Bearing in mind the metaphysical concepts of Lao Zi, the Chinese philosopher, Aiken, and Walker Percy, Spivey attempts to “mold a philosophical view that makes man’s knowledge – his science, that is, - a part of his human and natural environments” (Spivey 187). As a trained anthropologist, Wassily Kandinsky pursues a parallel shamanic ideal in search of cultural regeneration through ethnographic-artistic methods (MacClancy 90). Similarly, Lowry’s shaman “can be healer and guide as well as mystic and visionary” (Eliade, “Yearning” 86, cited in Spivey xiii). It identifies the spiritual need for a Benjaminian, neo-Romantic return to a harmonious relationship with our environment: in aspiring towards a rapport with the world around him, man should be part of nature, nature part of man.

Lowry’s utopian vision of the cosmos involves interpersonal and environmental relationships based on “the encompassing power of love” (Spivey xi). Culminating “on a note of harmony and rebirth”, the sensuous lyrical novella, *The Forest Path* – “a testament to hope” – enables Lowry to tap the power of his imagination and also his spiritual desire for freedom (Grace,

Voyage 100 and 102; Cross 105; and Lowry, *Selected Letters* 266).⁸ *The Forest Path* has been described by Daniel Dodson as a “prose poem on man in nature, a Wordsworthian benediction on nature’s benevolent power to transform the heart capable of seeing and receiving” (Dodson 41). In it Lowry advocates a romanticism - reminiscent of the souls of the forests in Ivan Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons* (1862) which exalts a closer relationship with our natural environment.

The Forest Path – with the sinister sign of the ‘Hell’ oil refinery on the horizon (*Forest*, 258) - also conjures up the struggle between man and nature immortalized in Alexander Pushkin’s *The Bronze Horseman* (1833). Familiar with this narrative poem through Edmund Wilson’s translation, Lowry refers to a “serious spirit of Pushkinship” in his letters (Lowry, *Sursum* II: 105 and 889).⁹ It is in *The Forest Path* that he alludes to “the very elements, harnessed only for the earth’s ruination and man’s greed” (*Forest*, 241). They “turn against man himself”, taking their revenge in the forest fire whose relentless advance “is almost like a perversion of the movement of the inlet” (*Forest*, 245 and 260). However, with its seasonal cycles, nature is indeed capable of decontaminating itself, in a regenerative way, from the heinous oil slicks violating the purity of the Eridanus Inlet (*Forest*, 236 and 281).

In Lowry’s “vision of paradise or moment of achieved balance”, the mutually trusting, hard-working community of Eridanus symbolizes an equilibrium in which love for one another is supreme, as witnessed by Lowry who lives here happily after his own honeymoon (Grace, *Voyage* 115). Eridanus is a mythological synonym for the River Po, alongside which Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) is said to have commenced composing his *Paradiso* (Lowry, *Selected Letters* 245).¹⁰ By using *nagual* to depict Sigbjørn’s entry into “the soul of a past self” to confront its wild forces in the form of the animistic cougar, or puma in *The Forest Path*, Lowry connects shamanically with his own childhood ordeals in Wallasey, Liverpool (*Forest*, 246 and 226).¹¹ Sigbjørn comes to terms with his current anxieties through “a continual awakening”, to be “baptised afresh” (*Forest*, 235 and 273).

“Known both as the River of Death and the River of Life”, Eridanus is both a bay and a southern celestial constellation (*Forest* 226-27). Relating the terrestrial to the cosmic, the natural to the supernatural universe of myths and legends, it connects us to the Chinese concept of the Tao (The Way). Faith in the wisdom of a “timeless heaven” invigorates Lowry in his pursuit of metaphysical truths concerning humanity and the processes at work in his universe of “eternal flux and flow” (*La Mordida* 216 and *Forest*, 236 and 226-27). In its emphasis upon a harmonious interaction with our environment, the Tao promotes the appreciation of an integral, primal innocence lost to modern civilization. It recognizes “man’s hunger and need for beauty, for the stars and the sunrise” sought in *Under the Volcano* (*Forest* 234). The resultant amicable interface with nature is based upon a balance in the universe, transforming *yin* (the Moon and rain) into *yang* (the sun and the earth), and vice-versa. In *The Forest Path* it is reflected in the centrifugal motion of a raindrop kissing the sea:

Each drop falling into the sea is like a life, [...] each producing a circle in the ocean, or the medium of life itself, and widening into infinity [...] Each is interlocked with other circles falling about it [...] the whole dark water was covered with bright expanding phosphorescent circles. [...] As the rain fell into the phosphorescent water each raindrop expanded into a ripple that was translated into light. And the rain itself was water from the sea, as my wife

first taught me, raised to heaven by the sun, transformed into clouds, and falling again into the sea. While within the inlet itself the tides and currents in that sea returned, became remote, and becoming remote, like that which is called the Tao, returned again as we ourselves had done (*Forest*, 285-86).

Conclusion

In conclusion, in recognition of a need to repent for the debts of the past and for the alienating sins of mankind, Malcolm Lowry makes synergies between the cosmic, shamanic, and animist concepts of the universe, reflected in the celestial visions of the Zapotec and Aztec civilizations. It is in pursuit of his search for universal harmony that he establishes cosmopolitan connections between the rhythms of the universe - as reflected in their world-views - and recognizes the significance of the Pleiades star cluster, of Eridanus as an intergalactic symbol of civilization, and of the philosophical concept of Taoism.

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¹ Lowry, *Sursum* I 292-93, and 506-07; and II 274, 625, 656, 779, 885, and 889.

² Lowry, *Sursum* I 183, 322, 325-26, 396, 433, 444, 500, 543, 636, and 642; and II 53, 104, 131, 426, 518, 820, 842, 849, and 932.

³ Ackerley and Clipper 32.

⁴ Lowry, *Sursum* II 364 and 379; Downie, *Frazer* 52; and Vickery 36, 42-43, 110-11, and 139.

⁵ See also xiv and 166.

⁶ Doyen 112 and Grace, “Luminous Wheel” 162 and 165.

⁷ Lowry, ‘Forest Path’ 231.

⁸ Although Lowry claims that he read Anton Chekhov’s comedy, *The Demon of the Wood* (1889) only in 1952, he alludes to Dante’s dark wood too. Lowry, *Sursum* II 518 and 524.

⁹ In his letters he also refers to A. S. Pushkin’s *Boris Godunov* (1825) and to *Mozart and Salieri* (1830). Lowry, *Sursum* II 105, 155, and 885.

¹⁰ Ackerley and Clipper 414.

¹¹ McCarthy, *Forests* 206.