

## The Influence of Mexican and Russian Civilizations on Malcolm Lowry's Shamanic Perceptions

Updates on '*Under the Volcano*' Round Table, *International Malcolm Lowry Colloquium 2014*, Malcolm Lowry Foundation, Museo de la Casona Spencer, Cuernavaca, Mexico, 30<sup>th</sup> October-2<sup>nd</sup> November 2014

### Abridged Paper

An inter-related set of research programmes, field visits, archive research and textual analytical methodologies have resulted in a number of publications and international conference presentations which, together, form my detailed study of the shamanic and psycho-geographic influences in the work of Malcolm Lowry.

I have considered various psychological, anthropological, and ethnographic forces - cultural, social, and linguistic – and their bearing on Malcolm Lowry's works, taking contextual references from Russian literature, history, and film.

In this way I have been able to elucidate the multiculturally complex, cosmic mind-set of Malcolm Lowry, and provide a fuller picture of his literary world, including an examination of East-West cross-cultural and historical factors.

In terms of influences upon Malcolm Lowry's work, my studies have explored the impact of Sir James Frazer's ethnographic research and of Hernán Cortés, the Spanish conquistador, upon Aztec civilization, as reflected in the novel, *Under the Volcano* (1947), set in Mexico on the Día de Muertos, or Day of the Dead. I have also considered the profound impact of Russian nineteenth-century literary and twentieth-century filmic and historical sources, as well as European avant-garde and surrealist influences, on Lowry's creative, imaginative, and spiritual consciousness - as is evident from a close reading of his letters and their manifestation as Gogolian dead souls of civilization in his oeuvres.

Pursuing Lowry's spiritual odyssey in his mystic quest for truth and salvation, I have analyzed how Zapotec and Aztec anthropological, shamanic, and cabalistic factors interface with a psychological reading of Lowry's works, notably *Under the Volcano*, *Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid* (1968), *La Mordida* (1996), and 'The Forest Path to the Spring' in *Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place* (1961).

I examine Lowry's application of psychoanalysis and synergies with cultural anthropology, the Cabbala, and various celestial outlooks, especially the subconscious, subterranean dimensions of the Mexican Day of the Dead festival in the context of Lowry's engagement with it from 1936 onwards. Fieldwork in Cuernavaca, Mexico City (the Museum of Anthropology, the Mesoamerican pyramids at Teotihuacan, and the Frida Kahlo Museum), and the Valley of Oaxaca (with its renowned pre-Columbian archaeological, religious, and politico-cosmological sites of the 10 000 year-old Mitla and the 500 BC Monte Albán) in Mexico has enabled me to incorporate an analysis of Aztec and Zapotec world-views through a detailed study of

the origins of what is now a prominent Hispanic fete.

My broader thesis is that Lowry appears to be seeking atonement with the spirits of the dead, a need to repent for the debts of the past and for the sins of mankind. Synergies are thus made with the cosmic, shamanic, and animist concepts of the universe, expressed by the divine consciousness of the Aztec and Zapotec civilizations. This is supported in a biographical context, notably in relation to the little-known novel *La Mordida* – literally meaning *The Bite*, or *The Bribe* – which traces the protagonist's efforts to atone for the daemons, or phantoms of the past which have been haunting him since his traumatic, 1945-46 visit to Mexico where he allegedly encountered corrupt immigration officials seeking bribes. Based upon this, I examine Lowry's own subconscious feelings of guilt regarding the 1929 suicide of Paul Fitte, his fellow student and close friend, in the context of his recognition of the necessity to atone for the debts of the past, repenting both for his own sins and for those of mankind.

For Lowry, the binary divide, the fissure in modern consciousness between the rational, scientific thinking of the Enlightenment, on the one hand, and the imaginative and intuitive, visionary facets of the arts (as expressed in the legacy of European Romanticism), on the other, must be bridged for the cultural, moral, and spiritual renewal of humanity. In pursuit of Lowry's search for universal harmony, cosmopolitan connections are established between the rhythms of the universe reflected in the Aztec and Zapotec world-views, the significance of the Pleiades star cluster, the intergalactic, paradisaean symbol of Eridanus, and the philosophical concepts of Taoism.

Psychotherapeutic and shamanic healing is seen as a way of enabling regeneration via ethnographic and aesthetic methods. Developing the inclinations of Ted R. Spivey, it may be deduced that, for Malcolm Lowry, true salvation is attainable only in a fusion of the two worlds (the natural with the divine, the terrestrial with the celestial) and the two minds (the rational and scientific with the spiritual, and the conscious, perceiving intellect with the subconscious imagination).

*Nigel H. Foxcroft, 5<sup>th</sup> December 2014*