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Souls and shamans in space. The cosmopolitan, prismatic psychology of Malcolm Lowry

Introduction

Inspired by a plethora of multicultural, international influences – especially Russian literary sources – the twentieth-century English late-Modernist novelist and poet, Malcolm Lowry (1909-57) was stimulated by a prismatic, multifaceted approach to his writing.¹ Although relatively underrated and non-canonical, he was endowed with an effervescent, encyclopaedic, and eclectic mind-set which combined conceptions of temporal with spiritual, on the one hand, and terrestrial with cosmic dimensions of his environment, on the other. In reinterpreting his vision of the world, we encounter psychological, psychogeographic, and anthropological forces at work in his approach to what was to become Jacob Bronowski's *Ascent of Man*.²

In view of the recent centenary anniversary of the birth of Malcolm Lowry in 1909, it is particularly appropriate to reflect upon the nature of his extensive outlook and what inspired it. Lowry was entranced by the Day of the Dead celebration which he witnessed in Quauhnahuac – Hispanicized to

1 The award of funding by the University of Brighton for a one-semester research sabbatical is graciously acknowledged in having made possible this paper - an earlier version of which was delivered at the *2009 Malcolm Lowry Centenary International Conference*, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, 23 – 25 July, 2009.

2 An eminent mathematician, science historian, and presenter of the highly acclaimed documentary, *The Ascent of Man* (1973), Jacob Bronowski (1908-74) was a Cambridge contemporary of Lowry, cited in the latter's letters (Malcolm Lowry, *Sursum Corda!: The Collected Letters of Malcolm Lowry*. Ed. Sherrill E. Grace, 2 vols. London: Jonathan Cape, 1995, I, 75). Both were actively involved with the literary magazine, *The Experiment* (1928-31). See also *ibid.*, 70 and 120.

Cuernavaca, Mexico in November 1936 and which commences his multi-layered novel, *Under the Volcano* (1936-47). Lowry also became captivated by the Cabbala, or Kabbalah – an interest which derived from his early fascination with resolving esoteric enigmas about states of consciousness, as well as psychological and higher dimensions of existence.³

These mysterious puzzles were revealed in Peter D. Ouspensky's *The Fourth Dimension* (1909), *Tertium Organum: A Key to the Enigmas of the World* (1920) and *A New Model of the Universe* (1931).⁴ Ouspensky (1878-1947) developed the notion of a fourth dimension as an extension in space. According to Prof Sherrill E. Grace, he was discovered by Lowry in the late 1920's, or the early 1930's, and was a "key influence on his thinking".⁵ Indeed, his works were a source for *Under the Volcano* in so far as Lowry frequently refers directly to this Russian philosopher, mystic, and theosophist in his letters.⁶ Moreover, mentioning *Tertium Organum*, Lowry declares that *A New Model of the Universe* is "a terrifically exciting book" which "aims [...] to base eternal recurrence upon scientific fact".⁷

A further influence on Lowry's way of thinking was Charles Hoy Fort (1874-1932) "whose speciality is the analysis of peculiar coincidences for which there exists no scientific explanation".⁸ Considered by some to be the father of modern paranormalism, marvelling at links between seemingly unrelated pieces of information, Fort was adept at transforming coincidence into metaphysical depth.⁹ Indeed, Lowry – whose own intuition surmised that certain immortal patterns of existence constituted the cosmos – often mentions the impact of this American author and science critic, declaring that he has known "of no writer who has made the inexplicable seem more dramatic than Charles Fort".¹⁰ Yet, his credence in the leverage of apparently strange combinations of numbers and of the coincidence of events in determining our fates is also reminiscent of the beliefs held by both the Aztecs and Zapotecs in determining five nameless, unlucky days in each

3 The Cabbala refers to mystical Jewish teachings based on an esoteric interpretation of Hebrew scripture.

4 Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, I, 357 and 358, and II, 173-74, 289, 293, and 304). Lowry also alludes to Dunne, *Experiment with Time* as "a rewarding book" in *ibid.*, I, 314.

5 *Ibid.*, II, 293.

6 *Ibid.*, II, 173 and 293.

7 *Ibid.*, I, 314.

8 *Ibid.*, I, 315.

9 See *Ibid.*, II, 697, 700, 712, 713, and 714.

10 *Ibid.*, I, 315-16.

year of their 365-day solar calendar.

Therefore, in tracing Malcolm Lowry's life-long quest for a harmony to unite Man's natural, supernatural, and celestial roots, we must embark upon a spiritual odyssey on a mystic mission to attain truth and salvation.¹¹ This journey leads us to appreciate Lowry's skilful synthesis – in his pursuit of souls and shamans – of the seemingly diverse domains of anthropology, psychoanalysis, the Cabbala, and even voodoo in his ethnopoetic novels, *Under the Volcano* and *Dark as the Grave wherein my Friend is Laid* (1945-68).

In search of the souls of civilization. The Russian connection

Although he retained long-standing links with East Sussex – the domain of other prominent Modernist writers (including Ford Madox Ford and Virginia Woolf), Henry James, Conrad Aiken, and Rudyard Kipling – Malcolm Lowry, a prolific reader of world literature, was captivated by travel, especially to the Far East, Mexico, the USA, and Canada. In his search for adventure and cultural paradise and following in the footsteps of D. H. Lawrence, he was lured to Mexico twice – once in 1936-38 and again in 1945, living in the cities of Cuernavaca and Oaxaca. Fascinated by the legacy of the Aztecs, Lowry drew on his wide, life-long interests in social, cultural, and linguistic anthropology in his search for an understanding of the Spanish impact upon Aztec civilization. Of particular appeal were the consequences of Hernán Cortés's conquest and skilful subjugation of the Aztec Empire in 1519-21. Lowry was enthralled by ongoing dilemmas facing indigenous civilizations, such as how to preserve their heritage while adjusting to a new politico-cultural environment. Such quandaries culminated in his novels, *Under the Volcano* and *Dark as the Grave*, both set in Mexico, the former actually on the *Día de los Muertos*, or Day of the Dead.

Intriguingly, Malcolm Lowry's cultural magic is born of a highly inquisitive mind – one which spans the continents in its cosmopolitan

¹¹ For further information on the author's research project, see Nigel Foxcroft, "The Shamanic Psyche of Malcolm Lowry: An International Odyssey", *CRD Research News* 26 (Summer 2010): 18.

assimilation of literature, stretching from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, from Europe to the Americas. His enormous, esoteric, staple diet of reading includes Russian, Scandinavian, Czech, and German authors. His heterogeneous erudition is rooted *both* in Anglo-American and in Continental European literature and film.

It is through the adventures of Sigbjørn Wilderness in *Dark as the Grave* that Malcolm Lowry embarks upon an eternal metaphysical journey to Mictlan – the Underworld of Aztec mythology – to uncover dead souls. He travels to Oaxaca to which Lowry refers as “the most lovely town in the world & with some of the most lovely people in it” to encounter euphoric, living shamans, such as the multilingual Zapotecan, Juan Fernando Márquez.¹² According to Douglas Day, as well as being a linguist, a drinker, and a messenger for the Ejidal Bank, Juan Fernando possesses the skills of a doctor, translator, adventurer, and chemist which must have fascinated Lowry in his endeavours to cure the world by discovering a new elixir of life.¹³ In pursuit of veracity and redemption Lowry attempts to atone for past misdemeanours and, especially, for the sins of the dead. Equipped with a vivid vision of the invigorating power of literature, film, and cultural enrichment, his objective is to provide renewal for what he considers an increasingly materialistic civilization.

Inspired by the great writers of the Golden Age of Russian literature – as was Virginia Woolf in her famous essay entitled, ‘The Common Reader’ (1925) where she refers to their honest depiction of ‘the human soul’ – Lowry frequently cites these influences in his daily correspondence.¹⁴ His favourites include Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837),

12 Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, I, 183.

13 See Douglas Day, *Malcolm Lowry: A Biography*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1973, 242-43, and Gordon Bowker, *Pursued by Furies: A Life of Malcolm Lowry*. London: Flamingo, 1994, 235.

14 Virginia Woolf, ‘The Common Reader’. Available:

<<http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/w91c/chapter16.html>>.

See also Roberta Rubinstein, ‘Virginia Woolf and the Russian Point of View’, *Comparative Literature Studies*, 9, no. 2 (June 1972), 196-206. Available:

<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4024599410.2307/40245994>>; Darya Protopopova, ‘Virginia Woolf’s Versions of Russia’, *Postgraduate English*, 13 (March 2006). Available:

<<http://www.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english/DaryaProtopopovaArticle.pdf>>; and Anthony Domestico, ‘The Russian Point of View’. Available:

<http://modernism.research.yale.edu/wiki/index.php/%22The_Russian_Point_of_View_%22>. All accessed 29 Oct 2012.

Nikolai Gogol (1809-52),¹⁵ Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-81),¹⁶ and Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) whom he describes as wandering “around graveyards thinking it is no go”.¹⁷ Indeed, Malcolm Lowry visualizes himself not only as a new Goethe, or a Kafka, but also as a Pushkin, and, even, as a “second order Gogol”, famous, of course, for his novel of purgatory, *Dead Souls* (1842).¹⁸ Such literary influences are reflected in *Under the Volcano* where he admits to grappling with “the forces in man which cause him to be terrified of himself” and with “the guilt of man, with his remorse, with his ceaseless struggling toward the light under the weight of the past, and with his doom”.¹⁹ Nevertheless, he iconoclastically confesses that “like the novelist, Dostoievsky”, he has “practically a pathological sympathy for those who do (what others think is) wrong” and “absolutely no sympathy with [...] the legislator; the man who seeks, for his own profit, to exploit the weaknesses of those who are unable to help themselves”.²⁰

Analogies with Gogol’s works are pursued in *Dark as the Grave wherein my Friend is Laid* in which Sigbjørn Wilderness, believing his life is being written by someone else, reads himself into a newspaper report, as does Major Kovalyov in the fantasy, ‘The Nose’ (1835-36) which Lowry considers “a superlative story”.²¹ Furthermore, described by Lowry as “extraordinarily funny” and “one of the most lyrical and nostalgic novels ever written”, *Dead Souls* possesses both hilariously fantastic, and darkly satiric components.²² Intended as a paradoxical troika of divine retribution, its preconceived three volumes chronicles the passage of its hero, Chichikov from the inferno, through purgatory to the final stage of paradise. The tragic burning of the second and final parts of Gogol’s novel is bizarrely reminiscent of the loss of Lowry’s own Dollarton manuscript of *In Ballast*

15 He is immensely interested in Gogol’s writings. See Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, I, 292-93, and 506-07; and II, 274, 625, 656, 779, 885, and 889.

16 In his letters he constantly refers to the works of Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (1866) being one of his favourite novels. See Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, I, 322, 325-26, 433, 444, 500, 543, 636, and 642; and II, 53, 104, 131, 426, 518, 820, 842, 849, and 932.

17 See *ibid.*, I, 321, and II, 838-39.

18 *Ibid.*, I, 292. See also II, 885.

19 *Ibid.*, I, 506 and 507.

20 *Ibid.*, I, 183-84. Lowry longs to be recognized as “a Canadian Ibsen or Dostoievsky”. *Ibid.*, I, 396.

21 *Ibid.*, II, 779. See also Nikolai Vasilyevich Gogol, “The Nose”, in *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975, 42-70 (p. 55).

22 Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, II, 154. See also *ibid.*, II, 779, and Nikolai Vasilyevich Gogol, *Dead Souls: A Poem*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998.

to the *White Sea* which would have concluded his trilogy, *The Voyage That Never Ends*.²³ Yet, for Lowry it is the cosmic and celestial spirit of Eridanus in *The Forest Path to the Spring* (1947-61) which unlocks his aesthetic appreciation of beauty.

Lowry's anthropological and psychotherapeutic bridge between the arts and sciences

In consideration of the role of the writer as both visionary and spiritual prophet, there is another aspect which deserves our attention – that of anthropologist and psychotherapist. Writers, such as Edgar Allan Poe and Ted R. Spivey, and scientists, for example, Sir John Polkinghorne (1930-), the distinguished Cambridge mathematical physicist and theologian, have called for ways of bridging the arts and the sciences.²⁴ In his analogy between the visionary, vocational role of the writer and that of the shaman, Spivey emphasizes the need “for modern man to experience cultural renewal”.²⁵ Furthermore, he contends that “ethics and aesthetics must be integrated with science and technology in new social patterns”, appealing for a “new synthesis of knowledge, reason, and the powers of heart and soul”.²⁶

In reflecting upon the historical divisions between the sciences and the humanities, we cannot but observe that, since René Descartes (1596-1650) and Sir Isaac Newton (1643-1727) who bridged the gap, there has been a tendency for Western philosophy to fragment into two divergent movements: the systematic, scientific study of the structure and behaviour of the physical and natural worlds, on the one hand, and the more instinctive investigations of the human, social, and cultural domains, on the other hand. It is this *fissure* in modern consciousness to which to Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49) alludes in his “Sonnet: To Science” (1829) – that chasm between the analytical, empirical, rational nature of the natural sciences and the

23 Luckily, an early draft of *In Ballast to the White Sea* rescued by Lowry's first wife, Jan Gabriel has been discovered recently, lodged in the New York Public Library. It is shortly to be published in a scholarly edition.

24 John Polkinghorne, *The Way the World Is*. Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983, 109, cited in Ted R Spivey, *The Writer as Shaman: The Pilgrimages of Conrad Aiken and Walker Percy*. Macon, GA, USA: Mercer UP, 1986, xiii.

25 Spivey, 186.

26 *Ibid.*, 186 and 47.

imaginative, intuitive, visionary aspects of the arts – which endanger the very survival of humanity itself. Indeed, in his analogy Poe refers to science in the following manner:

Science! true daughter of Old Time thou art! [...]
Why preyest thou thus upon the poet's heart, [...]
Who wouldst not leave him in his wandering
To seek for treasure in the jewelled skies,
Albeit he soared with an undaunted wing? [...]
To seek a shelter in some happier star?
Hast thou not torn the Naiad from her flood,
The Elfin from the green grass, and from me
The summer dream beneath the tamarind tree?²⁷

Furthermore, dating from Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), prominent psychologists have established that modern rationalism has tended, ironically, to *exclude* the existence of the subconscious minds, as studied in the social sciences, though Lowry continually maintains the need for psycho-analysis. Indeed, in *Lunar Caustic* (1968), *Under the Volcano*, and *Dark as the Grave* he establishes his own mode of psycho-therapeutic writing which he develops under the supervision of the illustrious American poet, Conrad Aiken. The latter acts as his mentor and “surrogate father” and is eulogized by Lowry who asks, in a letter dated late February 1940: “What truer father have I than you”.²⁸

Souls and shamans.

The material and spiritual worlds of the Aztecs

A consideration of the impact of ethnographic research into the Aztec mind by Sir James George Frazer (1854-1941) leads us to an analysis of the influence which this Scottish anthropologist, folklorist, and classicist had upon Lowry. The latter owned an abridged edition of *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915), Frazer's encyclopaedic, comparative investigation into the

27 See: <<http://www.online-literature.com/poe/580/>>. The author is indebted to Prof Vik Doyen, Professor Emeritus of the K. U. Leuven University in Belgium for pointing out this analogy. The way in which Poe “questions the desertion of the imagination by the objective forces of science” is also highlighted by Dixil.

28 Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, I, 293.

correlations between anthropology, magic, and religion. Lowry was truly mesmerized by this spellbinding study which has been described as “a voyage of discovery” into ethnography, folklore, and magic which “traces an evolutionary sequence in human thinking from the magical to the religious to the scientific”.²⁹ Its author empathizes with attempts at exorcizing evil spirits to produce rebirth, explaining that “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”.³⁰

In combining Modernism with shamanism, on the one hand, and with the Cabbala, on the other, the Lowrian world-view aspires to moral and spiritual regeneration by ethnographic and artistic means. It also enables him to reflect upon the anthropological significance of psychotherapeutic and shamanic healing.³¹ An Aztec perspective spotlighted the precarious balance envisaged between the material and spiritual worlds which had to be maintained by their rulers and shamanic priests, if misfortune, or disaster were to be averted.

In agonizing over the fundamental question of what it is to be human, Malcolm Lowry engages in a continuous Nietzschean struggle, attempting to attain a higher state of consciousness and self-revelation in order to determine ways in which mankind can realize and fulfil his potential. Inspired by Sir James Frazer, Robert Graves (an admirer of Dr Rivers’s psychoanalytic method at Craiglockhart), and by Tom Harrisson (founder of the Mass-Observation Experiment), he launches into both anthropological and psychotherapeutic investigations.³²

29 Jeremy MacClancy, “‘Anthropology’: ‘The latest form of evening entertainment’”, in David Bradshaw, ed., *A Concise Companion to Modernism*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003, 79. Grace in Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, II, 365-66. See also *ibid.*, II, 364, 379, and 384.

30 R. Angus Downie, *James George Frazer: The Portrait of a Scholar*. London: Watts, 1940, 33-34 (and 21, 23, and 37). See also Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, II, 364 and 379; R. Angus Downie, *Frazer and the Golden Bough*. London: Victor Gollanz, 1970, 52; and John B. Vickery, *The Literary Impact of “The Golden Bough”*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1973, 36, 42-43, 110-11, and 139.

31 For an analysis of links between Shamanism, transpersonal psychology, and the visual arts, see S. Michaelson, ‘Shamanism, the Visual Arts and the Healing Process’, Proceedings of the International Interdisciplinary Scientific Symposium, “Psychology and Social Adaptations of (Neo)Shamans in the Past and the Present”, *Ethnological Studies of Shamanism and Other Indigenous Spiritual Beliefs and Practices*, vol 14 (1) (August 2010), 80-89.

32 See MacClancy in Bradshaw, 87, and Heimann, Judith M. *The Most Offending Soul*

Lowry's study of the Judeo-Christian metaphysical system of the Cabbala is progressively motivated by his encounters with Charles Robert Stansfeld-Jones (1886-1950), alias Frater Achad, and his occult, magical practices in Deep Cove, a hamlet near Dollarton.³³ He deemed the latter to be a *white* magician, unlike the Consul of *Under the Volcano* who "fell into the abyss", "having all the elements of the universe against him".³⁴ He was dazzled by Frater Achad's cabbalistic teachings in *Q.B.L. or The Bride's Reception*, first published in the 1920's, and *The Anatomy of the Body of God* (1925).³⁵ Indeed, it was "at a critical and coincidental moment in the writing of the book" that he became acquainted with Stansfeld-Jones and his occult library.³⁶ In his letter of September 7, 1943 to Gerald Noxon, he proclaimed: "We have made the acquaintance of a magician".³⁷ According to Sherrill E. Grace, Stansfeld-Jones – who was "associated with Aleister Crowley, the infamous black magician" – was "born and educated in England" and "probably called on the Lowrys as a census-taker on 2 June 1941".³⁸ In March 1950 Lowry referred to him as a "very good fellow, a mystic [...] who gave me much of the esoteric inspiration and material for the book" – i.e. for *Under the Volcano*.³⁹ According to Martin Williams, mysticism may have also reached Lowry via Margot, the French wife of his elder brother, Stuart (1895-69).

Following in Frazer's footsteps and embarking upon a transcendental, supernatural quest for the Garden of Eden, Malcolm Lowry traced back the cultural and historical roots of modern Mexico to the Aztecs. Caught in the jaws of the Spanish conquistadors who contributed to its alarmingly rapid decline, this civilization was threatened not only militarily but also by subsequent, humanly-transmitted, smallpox and typhus epidemics afflicting the indigenous peoples as early as 1520-21. In the context of *Under the Volcano*, enthralled by the Mexican Day of the Dead and attaining an ecstatic state of consciousness, our shamanistic magicians –

Alive: Tom Harrisson and His Remarkable Life. Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 1999.

33 See Bowker, 321, Day, 294-95, and Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, I, 529 and II, 201-03, 356, 360, 798, and 799.

34 Bowker, 321. See also Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, II, 202.

35 Q.B.L. was reprinted by Samuel Weiser in 1972.

36 Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, II, 400 and 402. See also I, pp. 447, 450, and 452, and II, 3, 213, 319, 321, and 524.

37 *Ibid.*, I, 427.

38 *Ibid.*, I, 419-20.

39 *Ibid.*, II, 211.

the Consul and, indeed, Lowry himself – seek the existence of a divine order. They follow astrological signs and perceived Cabbalistic wisdoms in search of the ‘Holy Grail’ of supreme truth and salvation. We are bewitched by their mystic pilgrimage, a spiritual mission to discover death in life and life in death.

Under the Volcano. A case study of the dominion of the spirits of the dead on the threshold of ethnological and psychological universes

The roots of psychoanalytical atonement

Malcolm Lowry’s inner struggle to decipher the workings of the universe dates back to his strict Methodist childhood and is ingrained in deep psychological scars which influenced his perception of the world. The significance of these psychic factors is recognized by Ted Spivey who 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.⁴⁰

Yet, it is in *Under the Volcano* that Lowry attempts to expiate his internal suffering through “the survival of the human spirit”.⁴¹ A “tragic protagonist... like Tchitchikov in *Dead Souls*”, the dipsomaniac, or alcoholic, and introspectively psychotic Geoffrey Firmin is afflicted by a Gogolian sickness observed by our attentive guardian, Dr Vigil.⁴² This ailment, we are told, links both material and spiritual worlds “not only in body but in that part used to be call: soul” (148). It consists of a malady which the Consul, or rather ex-Consul, like Lowry himself, strives to atone

40 Spivey, 151-52.

41 Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano*. London: Penguin, 1962, 312. Further references to this novel are given after quotations in the text. See also Chris Ackerley, and Lawrence J. Clipper, *A Companion to “Under the Volcano”*. Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 1984, 32.

42 Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, I, 507. See also 581.

for through self-sacrifice and suffering. It is via psychoanalysis – the science of “nature *inside*” dealing with “the obstacles to reason within the psyche” – that a state of “intense self-revelation” is achieved.⁴³ 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”.⁴⁴ Yet, in Geoffrey Firmin’s case, Lowry’s shaman is unable to overcome his own afflictions which mirror “the universal ‘drunkenness’ of mankind during the war”, as documented in his 1946 ‘Letter to Jonathan Cape’.⁴⁵

In dealing with the psychological impact of death and destruction, the incorporation of the supernatural reflected in the dual images of William Blackstone (c. 1595-1675) and the Day of the Dead is used to link Lowry’s ethnological, psychological, and spiritual worlds.⁴⁶ A British pioneer, reverend, and witchcraft-adherent from Cambridge, Blackstone travelled across the Atlantic to settle in New England and then decided to preach to American Indians. His dual identity has been identified by Jay Martin who claims that “in his outward search for seclusion, Blackstone represents man’s inner search for awareness” (195).

The Day of the Dead

Aztec culture, death – “a mirror of life” – is a symbolic celebration, necessitating sacrifice to satisfy the gods and to nourish the souls of the

43 Stephen Frosh, “Psychoanalysis in Britain: ‘The rituals of destruction’”, in Bradshaw, ed., *A Concise Companion to Modernism*, 116-37, 118; and Bowker, 224. See also Jay Martin, *Conrad Aiken: A Life of His Art*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1962, 92-93, 45, and 204.
 44 Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism, Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask. New York: Pantheon Books, 1964, 27, cited in Spivey, 8 and 183. See also Michael Tucker, “Towards a Shamanology: Revisioning Theory and Practice in the Arts,” in H. Van Koten, ed., *Proceeds of Reflections on Creativity*, 21 and 22 April, 2006. Dundee: Duncan of Jordanstone College, 2007: ISBN 1 899 837 56 6 and Michael Tucker, *Dreaming with Open Eyes: The Shamanic Spirit in Twentieth-Century Art and Culture*. London: Aquarian Thorsons, Harper Collins, 1992.

45 Malcolm Lowry, *Selected Letters*, ed. Harvey Breit and Margerie Bonner Lowry. London: Jonathan Cape, 1965, 66.

46 See Perle S. Epstein, *The Private Labyrinth of Malcolm Lowry: “Under the Volcano” and the Cabbala*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969, 51.

deceased on their underworld journey into the afterlife.⁴⁷ The Mexican tradition of the Day of the Dead festival is associated with pre-Columbian, Mesoamerican rituals. It also derives its traditions from shamanic and cosmic concepts of the universe akin to those which have been preserved by the modern-day, animist tribes of northern Mexico. In this respect, the Huichol (and the Yaqui) worship and communicate with numerous gods and spirits, giving thanks to Christian images, such as the figurine of the Virgin of Guadalupe which – in Lowry’s novel, *Dark as the Grave* – attracts the attention of Primrose and Sigbjørn Wilderness “as a model ... dressed in bright print and carrying in one hand a lamp” (Lowry, *Dark as the Grave*, 115).⁴⁸ It recurs in *Under the Volcano* as “the Consul’s longing” where it “was so great his soul was locked with the essence of the place” (204). With its influence on the 260-day ritual cycle of the Aztec and Zapotec calendar year, the Day of the Dead is also connected with the Pleiades star cluster. In this respect, Lowry informed the editor of *Vancouver Sun*:

The Egyptians, the Aztecs, the Japanese all worshipped them. And the Festival of All Hallows, All Saints Day, the Mexican Day of the Dead etc. are all associated with the culmination of the Pleiades. It is thought [...] that these universal memorial services commemorate a great cataclysm that occurred in ancient times.⁴⁹

As Clemente Vicente M. pointed out in an interview conducted with him at Monte Albán on 6 November, 2010, the Zapotecs too believed in the significance of the Pleiades, especially regarding the date of their first appearance in the sky.

The Day of the Dead is a widely-commemorated festival which sets the scene and provides a key to comprehending *Under the Volcano*. Of pre-Hispanic, pagan-spiritual origin, it is deeply rooted in ancient Aztec civilization, enriched by later Spanish Catholic influences. Held on 2 November each year, it follows the commemoration of deceased children and infants on 1 November, the Day of the Innocents, or Little Angels. With its bright masks and skulls, vivid costumes, loud singing and dancing, as well as the laying out of orange marigolds and the favourite dishes and

47 Mary Miller, and Karl Taube, *An Illustrated Dictionary of the Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1997, 74.

48 Further references to *Dark as the Grave* (abbreviated simply to ‘*Dark*’) are given after quotations in the text.

49 Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, II, 367.

drinks of the deceased alongside their graves, this event connects the living with the spirits of the dead. Indeed, it is believed that, as a symbol of rebirth, the souls of the fallen journey back from the underworld to greet the world of the mortals.

Such evocative images are reproduced in *Under the Volcano* which opens with Dr Vigil and M. Jaques Laruelle reminiscing about Yvonne and Geoffrey Firmin. Furthermore, we are told how our clairvoyant British Consul has attempted to be reincarnated by aspiring, hallucinogenically, to a higher dimension of mescal-induced consciousness. Nevertheless, like Lowry, he confuses mescal, the alcoholic spirit distilled from the agave plant (the genus of the aloe, or maguey), for mescaline, the psychedelic drug made from the peyote cactus. By imbibing *pulque* – an ancient, sacred, ritualistic, alcoholic drink also made from the agave – he endeavours to transform himself from a priest into a god, in accord with Aztec and Zapotec customs.⁵⁰

**In pursuit of civilization's elixir of life.
An Aztec sacrificial victim**

In Aztec civilization it was deemed to be a great honour to be a human sacrifice, for, as Jacques Soustelle has claimed, in Aztec mythology it was “believed that each human being was, by predestination, inserted into a divine order, ‘the grasp of the omnipotent machine’”.⁵¹ Ironically, the Aztecs were said to cherish the very value of the Consul's great eternal Ferris wheel of life by encouraging the gruesome extraction of the pulsating heart of a victim, or volunteer. Intended to placate the gods, it would sustain the living universe, both spiritual and material.

The (shaking) Consul of *Under the Volcano* embarks – through “simultaneity of experience” – upon a telepathic crusade in search of civilization's elixir of life.⁵² In doing so, he is inspired by Yudhisthira's

⁵⁰ *Aztec Gallery Guide*. London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2002. See also Miller and Taube, 138.

⁵¹ Jacques Soustelle, *The Daily Life of the Aztecs on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest*, trans Patrick O'Brian. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961, 112, quoted in Michael Wutz, “Archaic Mechanics, Anarchic Meaning: Malcolm Lowry and the Technology of Narrative,” in Joseph Tabbi and Michael Wutz, eds, *Reading Matters: Narrative in the New Media Ecology*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1997, 53-75, 66.

⁵² John Orr, “Lowry: The Day of the Dead,” in *The Making of the Twentieth-Century*

search for light in the Hindu *Mahabharata*, an ancient Sanskrit epic poem (129).⁵³ Indeed, this scene in the opening lines of Chapter 5 may be interpreted as the Consul's attempt – “cut off from God” – to trace “the all-but-unretraceable path of God's lightning back to God?” and so escape from the darkness of the Qliphoth and from sliding down the inverted Sephirotic Tree into the *barranca* (or ravine/precipice) below it (137 and 44).⁵⁴

However, the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors has already set the stage for the annihilation of the Aztec Garden of Eden, the desecration of Mexico (evoked by the dying Indian theme), and the endlessly repeated ‘Fall of Man’, now on the brink of Armageddon.⁵⁵ Despite John Orr's claim that Lowry reveals “his adversaries as figures of evil by offering himself up as a sacrificial victim”, the Consul is not without fault for his errors.⁵⁶ After all, it is he who unwittingly unleashes the riderless horse which provides the destructive, evil force which kills Yvonne.⁵⁷ Despite his attempts to bear the guilt of “putting Germans in furnaces”, he is ironically shot to death by a minor fascistic official, becoming victim of what George Woodcock calls “self-induced murder” (39).

**Divine consciousness.
From the Cabbala back to the Pleiades**

The complexity of the Consul's death mirrors his multifaceted approach to life. A reclusive “dark magician in his visioned cave” (151 and 206), he is portrayed as being a learned scholar who regularly consults Elizabethan plays (33) – presumably tragedies – and “numerous cabbalistic and alchemical books” (178). In this respect, treatises on science and magic by John Dee (1527-1608), the mathematician, astronomer, astrologer, and

Novel. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987, 148-68 (p. 166).

53 See also 178. It has been suggested by Martin Williams that Lowry may have been influenced by the Vedanta philosophical traditions of Hinduism which emphasize self-realization.

54 Personal e-mail from Vik Doyen dated 7 September, 2009. See Day, 344-45.

55 *Under the Volcano* is set mainly in 1938 – i.e. after Operation Hummingbird (1934) – better known as the Night of the Long Knives – when the Nazi regime in Germany purged itself from its political adversaries.

56 Orr, 157.

57 Lowry, *Selected Letters*, 84-85.

adviser to Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603) spring to mind. A priest on a pilgrimage, the Consul follows in the footsteps of the Aztecs, as Sigbjørn Wilderness is to do in his pursuit of the Oaxacan Zapotecs in *Dark as the Grave wherein my Friend is Laid*. Both civilizations are renowned for their shamanic, animist interface with the forces of the supernatural and of the cosmos. These ancient rituals were rooted in worship of deities, such as those of the sun and the moon, as is evident from excavation of the pyramids at Monte Albán (dating back to 500 B.C.) and at Teotihuacan (100 A.D.).

Seeking a harmonious cosmic order – incorporating the “life-giving force of love” and joy – through communion with his god, *Under the Volcano*’s Consul has dabbled simultaneously with the mystical and supernatural forces of the occult.⁵⁸ However, this interference in the laws of nature has culminated *not* in an attainment of the transcendental power of love, but, actually, in the *loss* of “the knowledge of the Mysteries”.⁵⁹ An emblem of modern Faustian man, our Consul has sold his transmigratory soul to Mephistopheles in his desire to achieve omnipotence. He lies entrapped, entombed by the pyramidal edifice of mankind which has also misused its powers to do good. He has become a victim of his magic, as Lowry suggests when he writes that “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”.⁶⁰ By untethering the riderless horse, our Consul – a cosmic hologram of stark reality – relinquishes his attitude of non-interference and, in his dying agony, trusts that Hugh and Yvonne will understand the meaning of “*no se puede vivir sin amar*” (213) (“*one cannot live without loving*”).

Although the Consul ultimately perishes, his ex-wife, Yvonne – an Aztec ritual sacrifice – is resurrected. Images are conjured up reminding us of how she previously imagined “herself voyaging straight up through the stars to the Pleiades”, as predicted for the sober.⁶¹ They also bring to mind

58 Spivey, 15. See also xiv and 166.

59 Epstein, 27.

60 Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, I, 595.

61 Lowry, *Under the Volcano*, 202-03, 216, 335, and 373-74. See Victor Doyen, “Elements Towards a Spatial Reading,” in *Malcolm Lowry: “Under the Volcano”: A Casebook*, ed. Gordon Bowker. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987, 101-13, 112 and Sherrill E. Grace, “The Luminous Wheel,” in *Malcolm Lowry: “Under the Volcano”: A Casebook*, 152-71 (pp. 162 and 165).

the following passage in Lowry's 1949-50 screen adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night* (1934):

Higher and upwards towards the Alps and the starry heavens, so that the sensation we have is of chiasmus, the reverse of the beginning, as if we were leaving the earth and returning to the sky, at the same time into the origin of that faint wordless yet deep bass rhythm still expressed by the throbbing *Frère Jacques*. [...] We begin to be borne straight upwards into the night sky and the stars, that source bearing and direction of so much of human wisdom – but eternal reminder also that our being and will are elsewhere. [...].⁶²

The actuality of being turned into a star is that the Yvonne of *Under the Volcano* is shamed for eternity for her extra-marital affairs with Hugh and M. Jacques Laruelle. This was as the case too with Merope – the faintest of the seven Pleiades sisters – to whom Lowry refers in his letters for having had a liaison with a mere mortal. Indeed, he writes of “the seven sisters & the myth of the Lost Pleiad” as being “the one cedar in the seven firs”.⁶³

Dark as the Grave wherein my Friend is Laid.

The quest for absolution from suffering in perpetuity

Exorcizing the ghosts of the past. The artist as visionary

With the cataclysmic, Gogolian combustion of the two-thousand-word script of his saga, *In Ballast to the White Sea*, Malcolm Lowry was forced radically to revise his blueprint of *The Voyage That Never Ends*.⁶⁴ According to Sherrill Grace, conceived as an “ordeal, a going through the hoop”, an “initiation”, and “a doing of God’s will”.⁶⁵ Under the influence of the Norwegian writer, Nordahl Grieg, we now glimpse Lowry the voyeur,

62 Miguel Mota, and Paul Tiessen, eds, *The Cinema of Malcolm Lowry: A Scholarly Edition of Lowry's "Tender is the Night"*. Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 1990, 241-42.

63 Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, II, 367.

64 Sherrill E. Grace, *The Voyage That Never Ends: Malcolm Lowry's Fiction*. Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 1982, 8.

65 Malcolm Lowry, “Work in Progress: A Statement”. Malcolm Lowry Archive, University of British Columbia, 1951, “Work in Progress”, 3, cited in Grace, *Voyage*, 9.

the visionary, a new Sergei Eisenstein, on his *montaged* Battleship Potemkin, storming the Barents Sea from Russia westwards to Scandinavia.⁶⁶ Hence, it is in *Dark as the Grave wherein my Friend is Laid* and *La Mordida* (1949-96)⁶⁷ that the consular hero of *Under the Volcano* is transmuted into the ursine Sigbjørn Wilderness, who, bestowed with Norwegian ancestry, resumes Lowry's spiritual odyssey in search of his roots.⁶⁸

Born of Romantic, Dostoyevskian, and Gogolian aesthetics, *Dark as the Grave* is preoccupied with the notion that the role of the artist is one of a prophet, or visionary, as is the case in Nikolai Gogol's short story, entitled "The Portrait" (1835).⁶⁹ Exposing a Benjaminian "lost harmony between mind and world", Lowry's novella reveals 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).⁷⁰ Described by Lowry as a Dostoyevskian "underground man", Sigbjørn is actually the superstar of *Dark as the Grave*.⁷¹ He is also a "modern anti-hero", "a doppelgänger", with all his contradictions (*Dark*, 7),⁷² He dreams that he is *both* an executioner of fate – as in Mikhail

66 A keen cinema-goer, Lowry was fond of Russian films, including those directed by Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948) (*Battleship Potemkin* (1925), *The General Line* (1929), *Thunder over Mexico* (1933), and *Alexander Nevsky* (1938)); Vsevolod Pudovkin (1893-1953); and Alexander Dovzhenko (1894-56) (*Aerograd* (1935)). See Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, I, 355-56, 404, 405, 406, and 435, and II, 185, 186, 323, and 516.

67 Although Malcolm Lowry commenced writing *Dark as the Grave wherein my Friend is Laid* and *La Mordida* in 1945 and 1949 respectively, both these novels lay unfinished – in the form of notes and drafts – for many years. *Dark as the Grave* – initially placed by Lowry in a bank vault for 'safe keeping' – was rediscovered, by Douglas Day, only in 1965, lying among manuscripts held on deposit at the University of British Columbia library in Vancouver, Canada.

68 The final syllable of Sigbjørn is Norwegian for 'bear', as deduced by Hallvard Dahlie in "A Norwegian at Heart: Lowry and the Grieg Connection," in Sherrill Grace, ed., *Swinging the Maelstrom: New Perspectives on Malcolm Lowry*. London: McGill-Queen's UP, 1992, 38.

69 In his short story entitled "The Portrait" (1842), Nikolai Gogol is concerned with the role of the artist and his creation.

70 See also Patrick A. McCarthy, *Forests of Symbols: World, Text and Self in Malcolm Lowry's Fiction*. Athens, USA: U of Georgia, 1994, 209.

71 Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, II, 538. Sigbjørn Wilderness is also the author of *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* (the original title for *Under the Volcano*). See also Tony Bareham, *Malcolm Lowry*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989, 109.

72 See Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, II, 424, 430, and 540, and also Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the*

Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* (1840) – and also a murderer being extradited from Mexico to Canada (*Dark*, 70-71).⁷³ Unable to distinguish between the novel which he himself has composed and that which is being authored by his daemon, he is shocked by the suspicion “that he is not a writer so much as being *written*” – a true identity crisis.⁷⁴

**Cosmic reincarnation.
The phantoms of the spirits of the dead**

On his return journey with Primrose from Vancouver to Cuernavaca, Sigbjørn seeks out Juan Fernando Martínez (modelled upon the real-life figures of Juan Fernando Márquez in Oaxaca and Fernando Atonalzin) to exorcize the ghosts, or phantoms, which have been plaguing him since his last visit.⁷⁵ His former friend and guardian spirit, Martínez is the reincarnation both of the legendary Juan Cerillo and of the Dr Vigil from *Under the Volcano*. In his attempts to communicate with the paranormal, Sigbjørn is introduced to voodoo by a Dr Hippolyte, who supplicates for the supernatural to supplant science, as it “can only help the person whose experience is beyond it, [...]” (*Dark*, 167).

Voodoo provides Sigbjørn (as it does Lowry who is also an adherent) with an alternative way of approaching anxieties by means of occultism. Its ostensible, dynamic vitality is recognized by Lowry as a way of subduing the dark Dantean forces of nature, for in his letters he refers to it as:

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 [...].⁷⁶

Underground). Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the Underground* (1864) is a novella of ideas and a prelude to *Crime and Punishment* (1865-66).

⁷³ Sigbjørn's belief in fatalism reflects Pechorin's preoccupations in Lermontov's novel.

⁷⁴ Lowry, *Selected Letters*, 332.

⁷⁵ Lowry refers to Atonalzin in his essay, “Garden of Etna”. See Day, 240-44 and Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, I, 176 and 187.

⁷⁶ Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, II, 364.

Described by Sherrill Grace as “a way out of the infernal, closed circle into renewed voyaging”, the voodoo ritualistic cross is depicted as a means of enabling the spirits of the dead, transformed into gods, to communicate with the living.⁷⁷ As with the Day of the Dead in *Under the Volcano*, it is also said to highlight the most appropriate path through the awkward stage of transition towards rebirth. Hence, Sigbjørn’s trip to the Zapotecan high priest’s palace involves a *physical* descent into the Underworld, encompassing the cruciform prehistoric tombs of mysterious Mitla, right down into the subterranean Column of Death. Bearing the name of “Mictlan”, Mitla represents the Land of the Dead.⁷⁸ Its enigmas captivated Lowry, as did Monte Albán – with its famous, astronomical Building J – which he also visited, acknowledging in his correspondence that he “did, however, live in Oaxaca for a time, among the ruins of Monte Albán and Mitla [...]”.⁷⁹ Named after a Mexican tree whose wood and flowers are white like the moon at night, Monte Albán – or ‘White Mountain’ – was a significant socio-economic and political centre, enlivened by veneration of the gods.

Hence, the revival of Sigbjørn’s faith in *Dark as the Grave* is facilitated by “the mediating influence of the dead” and “of [...] the Holy Virgin’ (*Dark*, 262). This results in his radical realization of “the mystical experience that suffering had caused him to undergo” (*Dark*, 263). Indeed, it precipitates an acute “feeling of something Renaissance”, emphasizing the need for cultural and spiritual renewal (*Dark*, 263). He is reminded of the transformational power of Eridanus as the gateway to Hades, which, it was believed, could be reached by crossing the Styx by ferry. In Greek mythology this mythological river marked the boundary between the Earth (the land of the living) and the Underworld (the domain of the dead) and thus represented the “river of life: river of youth: river of death: [...]” (*Dark*, 261).⁸⁰

Surviving the potential perils of the lunar eclipse, Maximilian’s

77 Grace, *Voyage*, 73.

78 See Lewis Spence, *Arcane Secrets and Occult Lore of Mexico and Mayan Central America*. Detroit: Blaise Ethridge Books, 1973, 49 and 110, cited in Cynthia. Sugars, “The Road to Renewal: *Dark as the Grave* and the Rite of Initiation,” in Sherrill Grace, ed., *Swinging the Maelstrom: New Perspectives on Malcolm Lowry*. London: McGill-Queen’s UP, 1992, 149-62 (p. 155).

79 Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, I, 315.

80 See also Lowry, *Dark*, 26-27 and “The Forest Path to the Spring”, 231. Further references to the latter work (abbreviated to ‘*Forest*’) are given after quotations in the text.

Palace (transposed from Cuernavaca), and the temple of Mitla (“the City of the Moon”), Sigbjørn is reunited with Primrose, who is a lunar-goddess reborn.⁸¹ This takes place in the romantic setting of the Hotel La Luna on the Playa La Boquilla near Puerto Ángel on Oaxaca’s Pacific Coast. Thus, he is able to attain a state of harmony with life through his wife, and with death and the natural environment through Juan Fernando. In his dominion over the Mitlan tombs and the garden endowed by his Banco Ejidal, the latter is the key to his spiritual transformation, his phoenix of renaissance. It is also one which enables Lowry himself to come to terms with his own feelings of guilt – which were to haunt him for the rest of his life – for the suicide of his close university friend, Paul Fitte in 1929.⁸²

The Forest Path to the Spring.
The Proteus path and the rhythms of nature

Enthused by a profound interest in German (and Russian) literature and cinema, Malcolm Lowry is aware of certain drawbacks which he sees as the by-products of the ascent of technological progress. These were identified by the German philosopher, Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) who, as a member of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, was concerned that the beauty of individual contemplation was being turned into information designed for a mass audience which can be manipulated politically.⁸³ Lowry too is alarmed that this relentless process involving the so-called propagandization and commodification of knowledge may extinguish Man’s immediate contact with his natural environment.

In order to counteract these centrifugal forces which ostensibly distance mankind from his natural environment, Malcolm Lowry traverses the Protean path to paradise. In this respect, the soul of *Dark as the Grave’s* Eridanus reappears in *The Forest Path to the Spring* set on the shores of Burrard Inlet, near Dollarton, North Vancouver, Canada. Here Lowry and his second wife, Margerie Bonner lived close to nature, in a shack near the

81 Sugars, 158.

82 See Bowker, 97-100 and Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, I, 3, 83, 85, and 93, and II, 701, 856, and 858.

83 For a discussion of the significance of Benjamin’s essay on the “Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility” (1935-39), see Richard J. Lane, *Reading Walter Benjamin: Writing Through the Catastrophe*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2005, 125-30 and 160-61.

Burrard Inlet. Replete with its Manx myths and legends and also reminiscent of *Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place* (1961), *The Forest Path to the Spring* reconciles many Lowrian predicaments. Indeed, it enables him to achieve a sense of harmony with his natural and cosmic environments, stimulated by his interest in the stars which he shares with Margerie.

Consideration of metaphysical, ethical and aesthetic perspectives is recommended by Ted Spivey who also draws attention to revelations made by the mystic sixth-century B.C. Chinese philosopher, Lao Zi – also known by the name of Lao-tzu – the founder of Taoism. This thinker’s ideas can be related to Malcolm Lowry’s *The Forest Path to the Spring* in that they “mold a philosophical view that makes man’s knowledge – his science, that is, – a part of his human and natural environments”.⁸⁴ Furthermore, it is in this sensuous lyrical novella that Lowry pursues a prophetic, shamanic ideal to realize cultural healing and regeneration. Like the Russian avant-garde artist and trained anthropologist, Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), he applies ethnographic-artistic methods to recognize the importance of beauty and to communicate the inner feelings of the human soul.⁸⁵ Indeed, his shaman “can be healer and guide as well as mystic and visionary” – characteristics which Mircea Eliade (1907-86), the Romanian philosopher, found befitting in his craving for paradise.⁸⁶ Yearning for redemption through liberation from the “claustrophobia of power”, Lowry identifies mankind’s emotional and spiritual need for a Benjaminian, neo-Romantic return to his natural and supernatural environments. For him, in aspiring towards a greater rapport with the world around him, Man should be part of nature, nature part of Man.

Certainly Lowry’s vision of the beauty and harmony of his natural environment and of the cosmos is a utopian one. Spivey has called such an image “a unified whole interpenetrated by the grace and love of God”.⁸⁷ In this scenario, he contends, interpersonal, human, and environmental relationships are based ideally on “the encompassing power of love” which Lowry recognized in *Under the Volcano*.⁸⁸ Culminating on a Chekhovian “note of harmony and rebirth”, *The Forest Path to the Spring* is “a testament

84 Spivey, 187.

85 See MacClancy, 90.

86 Mircea Eliade, “The Yearning for Paradise in Primitive Tradition,” in *The Making of Myth*, ed. Richard M. Ohmann. New York: G. P. Putnam, 1962, cited in Spivey, xiii.

87 Spivey, xi.

88 *Ibid.*

to hope”, life, and love.⁸⁹ In it Lowry magically probes the potency of the imagination, tapping the spirit’s desire for freedom. He describes it as “a story of happiness, in fact, roughly of our life here in the forest [...]. So far as I know this is the only short novel of its type that brings the kind of majesty usually reserved for a tragedy”.⁹⁰ It has been portrayed 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”.⁹¹ Furthermore, it advocates a romanticism which, reminiscent of the souls of the forests in Ivan Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons* (1862), exalts a closer, shamanic relationship with our natural environment.

With its sinister sign of the “Hell” (instead of “Shell”) oil refinery (258), *The Forest Path* brings to mind the struggle between man and nature immortalized in Alexander Pushkin’s *The Bronze Horseman* (1833).⁹² Lowry was familiar with this narrative poem through the translations of Edmund Wilson in 1938 and also of Dr Alexander F. B. Clark, FRCS, a professor in the Department of Modern Languages at the University of British Columbia from 1917 to 1949 with whom he corresponded.⁹³ Revealing his “serious spirit of Pushkinship”, Lowry refers directly to this work in his letters, remarking that “Edmund Wilson did one good one of the Bronze Horseman”.⁹⁴ It is to “the very elements, harnessed only for the earth’s ruination and man’s greed” that he alludes in *The Forest Path*, for they “turn against man himself”, taking their revenge in the forest fire whose relentless advance “is almost like a perversion of the movement of

89 Grace, *Voyage*, 100 and Richard K. Cross, *Malcolm Lowry: A Preface to His Fiction*. London: Athlone, 1980, 105. See also Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, II, 518 and 524, as well as Grace, *Voyage*, 102. Although Lowry claimed that he read the four-act comedy, *The Demon of the Wood* (1889) by the Russian playwright, Anton Chekhov – a proponent of the Naturalist School – only in 1952, there are some similarities between the two works: Chekhov’s misanthropic wood-demon, a tree conservationist, alludes to Dante’s dark wood. 90 Lowry, *Selected Letters*, 266.

91 Daniel B. Dodson, *Malcolm Lowry*. London: Columbia UP, 1970, 41.

92 See N. H. Foxcroft, “The Principle of Conflict in Certain Historical and Lyrical works of A. S. Pushkin: A Thematic and Linguistic Investigation” (M.Phil. thesis, University of Sheffield, 1984), 136-92, 214-25, and 221-24; and John. Fennell, “Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin, *The Bronze Horseman*”, in *Pushkin: Selected Verse*. London: Bristol Classical, 2001, 233-55.

93 See Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, II, 105-106.

94 Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, II, 889 and 105. In his letters he also cites the influence of A. S. Pushkin’s *Boris Godunov* (1825) (II, 155) and *Mozart and Salieri* (1830) (II, 105-106). See also II, 885 and 894.

the inlet” (*Forest*, 241, 245, and 260). However, with its cyclic seasons, nature is completely capable of regenerating and decontaminating itself from the heinous oil slicks violating Eridanus’s purity (*Forest*, 236 and 281).

Raindrops and Tao. The paradisiacal solace of the soul of Eridanus

In what Sherrill Grace has called Malcolm Lowry’s “vision of paradise or moment of achieved balance”, the mutually trusting and hard-working community of Eridanus in *The Forest Path to The Spring* is depicted as a salient symbol of equilibrium where love for one another is supreme. Indeed, writing from personal experience, Lowry himself lived here in Dollarton quite happily after his honeymoon, having just married Margerie Bonner in 1940.⁹⁵ Yet, Eridanus is not only a geographical, but also a prismatic, mythological space, being a synonym for the River Po on the banks of which Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) is said to have commenced composing his *Paradiso*.⁹⁶ It is also a place for reflection: by entering “the soul of a past self” to confront its wild forces – for instance, the animistic cougar, or puma of *The Forest Path* – Lowry connects with the ordeals of his own childhood in Wallasey near Liverpool (*Forest*, 246 and 226).⁹⁷ He must come to terms with his current conscious and subconscious anxieties through “a continual awakening”, so that he can be “baptised afresh” to anticipate the future (*Forest*, 235 and 273).

As well as being a bay in the geographical sense, Eridanus – a key symbol for Malcolm Lowry – has extraterrestrial dimensions too, for it is also a southern celestial constellation, “known both as the River of Death and the River of Life” (*Forest*, 226-27). It relates the earthly to the cosmic, the natural to the supernatural world of myths and legends. Faith in the congenial wisdom of this “timeless heaven” invigorates Lowry in his pursuit of metaphysical truths about humanity and of the processes determined by his encircling universe of “eternal flux and flow”.⁹⁸ As with the Aztec Day

95 Grace, *Voyage*, 115. See also Lowry, *Selected Letters*, 245 and Ackerley and Clipper, 414.

96 Lowry, *Selected Letters*, 245. See also Ackerley and Clipper, 414.

97 See also McCarthy, *Forests of Symbols*, 206.

98 Patrick A. McCarthy, ed. *Malcolm Lowry’s “La Mordida”: A Scholarly Edition*. London:

of the Dead, *The Forest Path* emphasizes a harmonious interaction with our environment through the Tao (The Way) which is portrayed as promoting the appreciation of an integral primal innocence lost to modern civilization ('Taoism'). Its depiction evokes "man's hunger and need for beauty, for the stars and the sunrise" – aspirations which Yvonne (and Lowry himself) seek both in *Under the Volcano* and *The Forest Path* (*Forest*, 234). For Lowry, an amicable interface with nature is attainable through balance with the universe. Achieved by life processes in terms of the energy flow of Qi, it enables the transformation of *yin* (the Moon and rain) into *yang* (the sun and the earth) (and vice-versa). Indeed, the elliptical movement of the Pleiades constellation is reflected, terrestrially, in *The Forest Path* by the centrifugal motion of life, by the sensuous images of a rain droplet kissing the ocean:

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).

Hence, it is through raindrops, rainbows, and "deer swimming towards the lighthouse" (*Forest*, 287) that Malcolm Lowry in *The Forest Path* "finally establishes the point where above meets below and so reconciles also the point where magician and mystic become one – the axis of love".⁹⁹ Incarnated by "seagulls with their angelic wings", the soul of Eridanus represents for Lowry cryptic bonds between the natural and the

U of Georgia P, 1996, 216, and *Forest*, 236 and 226-27.

⁹⁹ Epstein, 11. In his *Sensitive Chaos* (1962) the anthroposophist, Theodor Schwenk (1910-86) also writes about the need for cosmic and "water consciousness," referring to an inherent cyclical movement as signifying transformation. In this state of flux particles are said to merge into a single, transcendental entity. Founded by the Austrian social thinker, Rudolph J. L. Steiner (1861-1925), anthroposophy is generally regarded as an esoteric philosophy influenced both by European transcendentalism and by theosophy.

supernatural, astronomy and astrology (*Forest*, 287).¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

Therefore, Malcolm Lowry's spiritual journey has taken us on an exploration of his ceaseless pursuit of the path to redemption, as expressed in *Under the Volcano*, *Dark as the Grave wherein my Friend is Laid*, and *The Forest Path to the Spring*. As we have seen, this voyage inevitably involves human suffering and sacrifice. Our examination of what has been termed the "Ascent of Man" by Dr Bronowski – with all the inherent human pitfalls – may have enticed us to join the quest for the natural, supernatural, and celestial origins of mankind.

However, the division in modern consciousness between the analytical approach of the natural sciences (cultivated by Renaissance thought and the Enlightenment), on the one hand, and the aesthetic, imaginative methods of the humanities (fostered by Romanticism), on the other, is, perceived by Malcolm Lowry as being detrimental to the development of western civilization. It is through Aikenian psychoanalytical self-revelation and a harmonious Benjaminian relationship with the natural environment, as reflected in the works under consideration, that Lowry aspires to a higher state of consciousness on his spiritual odyssey. According to Mircea Eliade, the demise of culture empowers a renaissance through "suffering, death, and resurrection (= rebirth)".¹⁰¹ In *Under the Volcano* we bear witness to the attempts of our intoxicated Consul to attain a higher state of awareness, using his imaginative mind to discern the reasons for the "Fall of Man", banished from the mythical Garden of Eden and confronted by the terrifying sign: *¿Le gusta este jardín, que es suyo? ¡Evite que sus hijos lo destruyan!* (235).¹⁰²

Energized by Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, Lowry identifies the need for the self-sacrifice of his Consul in *Under the Volcano*. Despite his pursuit

100 See M. A. Atwood, *Hermetic Philosophy and Alchemy*. New York, 1960, cited in Epstein, 19.

101 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. William R. Trask. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959, 196, cited in Spivey, 183.

102 The Consul mistranslates the original Spanish version as: "You like this garden? Why is it yours? We evict those who destroy!" (132). However, he later corrects his interpretation to: "Do you like this garden, [...] that is yours? See to it that your children do not destroy it!" (235).

of the rituals of Aztec civilization – culminating in the Day of the Dead tradition – our Consul is proven incapable of finding the path to true love and harmony with Yvonne. This renders life unbearable and death inevitable. Nevertheless, notwithstanding his misuse of astrology and the Cabbala in the pursuit of ultimate truth, we are left with the enduring images of the holographic Consul and Lowry himself. In their search for spiritual salvation, they are transformed into shamanic sorcerers, delving into the powers of magic and mysticism in pursuit of deeper meaning.

Dark as the Grave provides us with a mirror of Lowry's own disasters and deprivations experienced in Mexico, interpreted by him as signs of the Devil incarnate. Yet, as an artist, Lowry may be seen as a visionary too, influenced by highly-motivating nineteenth-century Russian writers. In this respect, he perceives art as influencing both life and the soul of Man.

As a culmination of Lowry's moral and spiritual trajectory, *The Forest Path* offers us a Utopian vision of a stable, harmonious association between the domains of mankind, the natural environment, and the cosmos. Moreover, this cosmopolitan novella implores us to heed the rhythms of the universe, reverberating in the Chinese concept of the Tao (see the *Interdisciplinary Encyclopaedia* and *Tao/Dao – The Way*). We visualize how natural and supernatural surroundings – encapsulated in Lowry's icon of the Edenic paradise of Eridanus – are capable of triggering the rebirth of our relationship with our environment. With his own prismatic hallmark of creativity, shamanic mysticism, and prose poetry, Lowry provides us with a sensuous and spiritual response to his array of enigmas plaguing mankind. He traverses the subconscious, imaginative intuition invigorating European Romanticism, as do the Russian writers, Alexander Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov in their depiction of the 'Superfluous Man'.¹⁰³

It is becoming increasingly evident that the bankruptcy of Western civilization's over-reliance on the *materialistic* principles of universal reason – as advanced by the Scientific Revolution, often at the expense of aesthetic, moral, and spiritual considerations – necessitates a new renaissance in intellectual thought. Inspired by the paradisiacal symbol of the soul of Eridanus, Malcolm Lowry reaches the conclusion that true salvation is attainable only in the fusion of the *two* worlds (the natural and the divine) and the two minds (the rational and the spiritual).

103 For Aiken's observations, see Spivey, 158 to whom Lowry refers directly in his letters: Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, II, 539.