

## **West-East Influences on Malcolm Lowry**

**Nigel H. Foxcroft,**

**University of Brighton**

Renowned for his masterpiece, *Under the Volcano* (1947), the late-modernist writer, Malcolm Lowry (1909-57) was fully aware of the role played by literature in heightening awareness of the interconnectedness of our environment.<sup>1</sup> His shamanic perceptions and reflective consciousness – which are brilliantly showcased in his account of the *Día de (los) Muertos*, or the Mexican Day of the Dead festival - require an interdisciplinary voyage of discovery. This chapter seeks to contribute to the development of a psychogeographic and historical framework for the investigation and evaluation of modernism's international dimensions and multicultural interconnectedness. It provides a foundation for the consideration of the influence of cultures and civilizations – east and west, ancient and modern – on modernist authors and on avant-garde artists, be they, for example, American, British, or else, Continental.

Turning to Lowry's highly creative imagination, this process of habilitation involves recognition of the key role played by the writer as a panoptic, or all-seeing shaman in pioneering the reintegration of modernism with primitivism.<sup>2</sup> For example, in *Under the Volcano* a range of modernist techniques are employed: a fragmented structure; a non-chronological narrative with flashbacks (and flashforwards); a single-day (or rather, a twelve-hour) time-span for the course of the main actions and events; multiple perspectives; psychological introspection; epiphanies; vivid images; and the superimposition of a collage of signs, notices, warnings, and menus. However, in *Under the Volcano, Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid* (1968), and *La Mordida* (1996) Lowry introduces aspects of

primitivism too.<sup>3</sup> This involves his depiction of visual art forms borrowed from the traditions of non-Western ethnic groups and civilizations, including prehistoric ones. Of considerable importance is his portrayal of the interface of Aztec and Zapotec cosmological traditions with Hispanic ones. In *Under the Volcano* the Day of the Dead is presented as having cross-cultural origins, but with contemporary implications. Yet, a prime feature of Lowry's artistry is to guard against old knowledge, or wisdom being lost to modern civilization. His recognition of Romanticism's penchant for intuition and emotion acts as a bulwark against the pure rationalism of the eighteenth-century Age of Reason.

This approach necessitates Lowry embarking on a long-term mission in pursuit of the true meaning of life, which is understood in terms of value-systems and national identities. His intercontinental, West-East quest for spiritual regeneration warrants careful reflection of the impact of pre-modern, Latin American cultures, on the one hand, and of Russian literary, cinematic, and intellectual influences, on the other. He ventures into a psychic odyssey – firstly to the Far East, then to Norway, Russia (in his literary imagination, if not physically), Mexico, and Canada to build bridges between material and metaphysical terrains. He exorcizes the animist phantoms of the Aztecs and Zapotecs as a means of revitalizing cosmic interpretations of Eridanus in his search for an inner, Taoist harmony in the universe, with the aim of bringing much needed stability to our unsettled globe.

With a photographic memory and a sharp attention to detail, Lowry possessed a heterogeneous erudition rooted in a profound interest in Anglo-American and European literature and film. His esoteric works – replete with their cultural magic - were born of a highly inquisitive mind. It spanned the continents in astutely assimilating world literature from the eighteenth up to the twentieth century, emanating from Europe and from the Americas. Engrossed in the achievements of the so-called 'Golden Age' of nineteenth-century Russian

literature, it extended to an enormous, cosmopolitan, staple diet which assimilated *oeuvres* by Czech, German, and Scandinavian authors, as corroborated by his correspondence.<sup>4</sup>

Lowry acquired a special interest in Scandinavia from one of his supervisors who also lived on Bateman Street: Leonard James Potts, Lecturer in English and Fellow of Queens' College, Cambridge.<sup>5</sup> He was enriched by Norwegian culture, especially by the writings of Nordahl Grieg and Henrik Ibsen, as well as by the paintings of the artist and printmaker, Edvard Munch, whose lithograph, *Geschrei* (1895) he reproduced in his drawing of *The Shriek*.<sup>6</sup> He was proficient in his study of the historical plays of the prominent naturalist, dramatist and theosophist, August Strindberg.<sup>7</sup>

Alluding to the “Methodist-cum-Swedenborgian Bildungsroman,”<sup>8</sup> he mentions in his correspondence another Swedish thinker by the name of Emanuel Swedenborg. Referring to “the tragedy that man is not an angel,” he conjectures, “For were we angels – some of Swedenborgs at least [...]”.<sup>9</sup> As a scientist, philosopher, theologian, and transcendentalist, the latter was captivated by metaphysical matters and mystical visions which made him intent on discovering a theory which would explain the presumed relationship between matter and spirit. However, the narrator of *Dark as the Grave* refers to “those in the Swedenborgian spiritual world, who had acquired a rooted belief in nature alone, looked down from ‘heaven’.”<sup>10</sup>

Other important literary influences on Lowry were exerted by Romantic authors, such as Nikolai Gogol - the Russian playwright and short-story writer famed for his novel, *Dead Souls* (1842) – with whose works he was familiar in English translation. He also indulged in a diverse reading of Romantic *oeuvres* of the English canon, such as the poetry of William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats. Enthralled by modernist literature, he was versed in the publications of W. B. Yeats, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Ezra Pound,<sup>11</sup> Eugene O'Neill, and T. S. Eliot.<sup>12</sup> He was and, fascinated by the North American literary scene, he frequently gave credit in his

correspondence to Herman Melville, Henry James, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, and Edgar Allan Poe. However, by far the most profound literary influence exerted on him throughout most of his life was that of the post-Romantic poet and man of letters, Conrad Aiken (1889-1973), with whom he engaged in a prolific correspondence, as indicated by the sheer quantity of their communications. Under his guidance Lowry developed his own mode of psycho-therapeutic writing in *Under the Volcano*, *Dark as the Grave*, and *La Mordida*. Although he had an introspective approach to his environs, his crises became typical of those endured by Western civilization, whose daemons necessitated reconciliation with painful memories of the past. For him, atonement was a means of cultural and spiritual renaissance.

Mentored by Aiken, Lowry was motivated by the advent of an era of psychoanalysis, pioneered by the eminent Austrian psychologist and neurologist, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). New theories in the fields of dream analysis, free association, and the unconscious contributed to an inspirational milieu which shaped his application of psychoanalytical and surrealist techniques in *Under the Volcano*. They supplied a means of liberating his imagination and stimulated him to grasp the frame of mind at the core of society's perplexing inner conflicts – clashes which markedly laid bare the world's inextricable march towards ostensibly irrational warfare.

In his scrutiny of philosophical ideas arising from Germany and Russia, Lowry familiarized himself with a multitude of omens foretelling the impending fall of modern, Western Man. This predicament was suggested in *The Decline of the West* (1918) by Oswald Spengler (1880-1936). In *Under the Volcano* Hugh is “in complete agreement” with this German philosopher,<sup>13</sup> informing Yvonne of the Consul's predictions: “When the Fascists win there'll only be a sort of ‘freezing’ of culture in Spain”.<sup>14</sup> Yet, it would be a watershed, for, in his rebuff of its Eurocentricity, Spengler viewed history in terms of life-cycles through which cultural organisms, or spiritual communities passed.<sup>15</sup>

Pledging his allegiance to the Cabbala (or Kabbalah) - the ancient Jewish tradition of pursuing mystical interpretations of the Old Testament - he claimed that it had arisen “out of numbers, letter-forms, points and strokes” and “unfolds secret significances”.<sup>16</sup> His interest in and critique of the Enlightenment were shared by Lowry, who sought an antidote to avert forewarnings expressed by Russian writers and thinkers, such as Nikolai Gogol and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. The latter stipulated that many calamities - in what, he predicted, would become an apocalyptic epoch of war and revolution - were embedded in the highly rationalistic values of modern civilization. According to him, it tended to overlook the importance of an aesthetic appreciation of beauty, turning to the capricious elements of human nature, with disastrous consequences for future generations.<sup>17</sup>

Influenced by such concerns, Lowry underwent a rebirth of the spirit, as is evident from a reading of his paradisiacal prose-poem, “The Forest Path to the Spring” in the collection, *Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place* (1961). Set on the shores of Burrard Inlet in Dollarton, North Vancouver, Canada (where he envisaged the beauty and harmony of his Edenic Eridanus), it represented for him the attainability of true freedom. In his perception, it was achievable *not* via the rationalism of the Enlightenment, but through an intuitive Romantic imagination, the fruits of which were bequeathed to future generations through the works of, for example, Coleridge, Gogol, and Dostoyevsky. Hence, he aimed to equip civilization with a psychological release from the pent-up frustrations in its Gogolian soul.

For Lowry, it is essential to keep in cosmic balance the rational and irrational forces which have been unleashed.<sup>18</sup> His Romantic imagination serves as a powerful, perceptual bridge which spans the realms of logical understanding and of the senses. It offers a means of mediation and reconciliation – a relief in which instinct bestows a tool for facilitating survival and change. It has the capacity to enable humanity to stride beyond the frontiers of the familiar into the uncanny realm of the unknown – terrains in which transcendental, visionary insight is

deemed essential.<sup>19</sup> Invigorated by surrealist genealogy debated in the Cambridge ‘little magazines’ including *Experiment*, Lowry accorded his stance with the view held by the art historian, poet, and philosopher, Sir Herbert Read (who was to co-found the Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1947): English surrealism (and modernism in general) is indeed derived from Romanticism.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Influence of Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt School**

Malcolm Lowry was traumatized by an acute awareness of the colossal loss of life caused by military hostilities and other self-inflicted catastrophes, as exemplified by the consequences of the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) and of the Second World War (1939-45). He intensely perceived the impact of the resultant, senseless devastation on the trajectory of events portrayed in *Under the Volcano*. Some of the causes of these cataclysms have been associated with a collapse of moral values in a vortex of capitalism in crisis in a scenario which “may appear to the individual consciousness as fragmentary and incoherent.”<sup>21</sup> The American author, Walker Percy warned against the precariousness of civilizations relying purely on explicable knowledge – that is, on the analytical and supposedly predictable functioning of the intellect.<sup>22</sup> The purported largescale disintegration of our cultural and moral heritage has been blamed on a dearth of confidence in the capacity of the creative and imaginative potential of the mind to generate an ethical counterbalance to humanity’s belligerence.

In this context, it is revealing to match Lowry’s shamanic world-view with refutations made by Walter Benjamin (1892-1940). This philosopher challenged the largely accepted notion that the Enlightenment supplied an all-encompassing, rational blueprint for a fully ordered universe, on the one hand, and for Hegelian and Marxist progress, on the other. Profoundly interested in German culture (in its cinema and literature), Lowry shared with Spengler and Benjamin (a prominent member of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory) a

belief in the descent of Western civilization. Fascinated by esoteric knowledge exuding from the Cabbala, Lowry and Benjamin fortuitously discerned random elements in the trail of historical events.

In his quest for authenticity Benjamin contemplated that society had abandoned nature. It had forsaken instantaneity of language and image (a Romantic concept), with implications for the development of cultural consciousness.<sup>23</sup> According to him, iconic reproduction had engulfed the process of creation, modifying its aims. It had transformed the status of the product and the producer.<sup>24</sup> The dominance of human reason and technological progress had turned life gradually into knowledge – information to be manipulated to one’s advantage. Benjamin’s train of thought implies that this relentless process is impairing humanity’s contact with the natural environment - a consequence anticipated by William Wordsworth who wrote:

The world is too much with us: late and soon, [...]

Little we see in nature that is ours;

We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!<sup>25</sup>

Benjamin observed that humanity had striven to control its *milieu* so as not to be subject to it. He contended that - by exercising its freedom and asserting its authority - it had attempted to harness the forces of the natural world for its own ends. Paradoxically, in its quest to master the universe, it had been enslaved by technology, as identified by the narrator of “The Forest Path to the Spring” who refers to the presence of a “Hell” oil refinery menacing Eridanus.<sup>26</sup> In accord with this interpretation, science has endowed on humanity an inadequate understanding of itself and of its habitat. By acting recklessly, it has stimulated a so-called “process of domination” which extends through society and is inherent in an individual’s life – whether it be inner, collective, or interpersonal.<sup>27</sup> The Frankfurt School philosophers, Max

Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno claimed that the so-called advance of modernity in the post-Age-of-Reason had led to social fragmentation. In his *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) Horkheimer links this movement with the misuse of technological advantage, contending:

The program of the Enlightenment was the disenchantment of the world: the dissolution of myths and the substitution of knowledge for fancy. [...] Knowledge, which is power, knows no obstacles: neither in the enslavement of men nor in compliance with the world's rulers. [...] Technology is the essence of this knowledge. It does not work by concepts and images, by the fortunate insight, but refers to method, the exploitation of others' work, and capital. [...] What men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men.<sup>28</sup>

According to Adorno, the Enlightenment has militated against personal freedom by suspending the dialectic of the general and the particular: "Rather than the individual finding a freedom within the totality of society, the society of the Enlightenment has arrived at a totalizing unity on which the individual cannot act: now, the individual must merely submit to the society which is too massive and well organized to be challenged, and must learn to take masochistic pleasure in his own submission."<sup>29</sup>

In this philosophical context, Lowry - who was incessantly superstitious and prone to believe in manifestly malevolent accidents – bore witness to the hopelessness of humanity's predicament in that "the nature of history inscribes itself randomly but intensively upon certain events, persons, and creations".<sup>30</sup> Fortuitously, he experienced an intensity of human tragedy mirrored in personal calamity. He endured a catastrophic conflagration which destroyed his Dollarton shack on June 7, 1944, causing the loss of his updated 1936 manuscript, *In Ballast to the White Sea* (which was intended to form the final part of his trilogy, *The Voyage That*

*Never Ends*). Although he would become recognized by the eventual publication of *Under the Volcano* in 1947, his increasing reputation was not without its paradox: it led to the constant threat of eviction from his hut on the Eridanus waterside.<sup>31</sup> Hence, calamities feature prominently in *Under the Volcano*, *Dark as the Grave*, and *La Mordida*, which allude to manifestations of the Devil at loose in a universe in which modern civilization has transformed its relationship with the natural environment to one of would-be conqueror.<sup>32</sup>

### **In Pursuit of the Souls of Civilization: Bridging the Humanities and the Sciences**

The role of the writer is not necessarily confined to one of visionary and spiritual prophet, but may extend to that of anthropologist and psychotherapist. Men of letters – including Edgar Allan Poe and Ted R. Spivey - and scientists – such as the distinguished Cambridge mathematical physicist and theologian, Sir John Polkinghorne - have called for innovative ways of reconciling the crevasse which has arisen between the humanities and the sciences.<sup>33</sup> Although these disciplines have their own distinct techniques, the importance of intuition and creative inventiveness for the stimulation of technological innovation should not be underestimated.

In an analogy made between the roles of a writer and of a shaman – both of whom have visionary and vocational attributes - Spivey emphasizes the need “for modern man to experience cultural renewal.”<sup>34</sup> Contending that “ethics and aesthetics must be integrated with science and technology in new social patterns,” he appeals for a “new synthesis of knowledge, reason, and the powers of heart and soul.”<sup>35</sup> Rod Mengham emphasizes the unifying traits of English surrealism which, arguably, is unintelligible “without a recognition of the conceptual centrality of technologies used to represent [...] objects filled with and surrounded by fantasies and memories, desires and inhibitions, whose source is in the cultural unconscious.”<sup>36</sup>

Yet, ever since the era of René Descartes and Sir Isaac Newton divisions between the sciences and the humanities have prevailed. In his “Sonnet: To Science” (1829) Edgar Allan Poe identified their bizarre mismatch 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?<sup>37</sup>

There has been a tendency for Western philosophy to fragment into two divergent movements. The first has involved the systematic, scientific study of the structure and behaviour of the physical and natural worlds, whereas the second has embarked on an instinctive investigation of human, social, and cultural domains. An irreconcilable rift has emerged between the analytical, empirical, and rational characteristics of the natural sciences, on the one hand, and the imaginative, intuitive, visionary aspects of the arts, on the other. This fissure in modern consciousness potentially endangers the very survival of the human race.

It is not be without reason that Conrad Aiken highlights the inexhaustible efforts of Geoffrey Firmin - the Consul who aspires to uncover the truth of existence in *Under the Volcano*. He describes him as the “Poppergetsthebotl of alcoholics! He will become famous”.<sup>38</sup> His pun on Sir Karl Popper and Popocatepetl (the Mexican volcano) reveals his interest in this

illustrious philosopher, who had completed an array of remarkable works - including one on the nature of scientific discovery - by the time of Aiken's 1947 letter to Lowry.<sup>39</sup> In his 1958 address to the Aristotelian Society, Popper would muse on the relationship between intuition and science. He would reach the conclusion that theories born of intuition are scientifically valid as long as they generate explanatory power and stand up to both criticism and testing.<sup>40</sup>

Another aspect of intuitive knowledge is its legacy of dissimilar philosophical interpretations – divergences which have triggered the crevasse which Lowry attempts to straddle. The Western stance depends on the notion of having a consciousness of pre-existing knowledge. Initially defined by the Greek philosopher, Plato in his Socratic dialogue, *The Republic* (c. 380 BC), this theory evolved into an understanding of rational intuition as a means of discovering truth via contemplation. It was promulgated by the French philosopher, mathematician, and scientist, Descartes in his *Meditationes de prima philosophia* (1641) (*Meditations on First Philosophy*).<sup>41</sup> By taking into account the sensory information provided by the cognitive faculty of sensibility, it was developed into the idea of perception by the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, whose *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) is cited in Lowry's correspondence.<sup>42</sup> Arising from a sense of "perception via the unconscious," a theory of the ego was elaborated by the Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, Carl Gustav Jung in *Psychological Types* (1921). In his discourse with Aiken, Lowry demonstrates his awareness of Jung's analytical psychology by referring to his chapter on 'Dream Analysis' in *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (1933).<sup>43</sup>

An intriguing angle on perceptions of historical links between civilizations arises through due consideration of the genesis of the myth of Atlantis. This lost world appeared in Plato's dialogues which claimed that its roots lay in records which had been translated into ancient Greek by the Athenian statesman, Solon. *Timaeus* and *Critias* (c. 360 BC) refers to a powerful island in the Atlantic Ocean called Atlantis. It was governed by a confederation of

kings who held sway over parts of the Continent too. Plato's declaration gave rise to a range of visionary allusions in the works of various Renaissance writers, for example, in the frame-narrative, *Utopia* (1516) by the humanist, Sir Thomas More: the second volume of his socio-political satire is set on a fictional island in the New World. Another example is the novel, *The New Atlantis* (1627) by Francis Bacon - the father of empiricism and inductive reasoning – which depicts a vision of the future emanating from a mythical, utopian island called Bensalem.

Subsequently, the Atlantis myth was retold and reconfigured by the notable United States congressman and writer, Ignatius L. Donnelly (1831-1901) in his work, *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World* (1882). In it he claims that Atlantis – which is dated as having existed since Creation in c. 4004 BC - was the place of common origin of all known ancient civilizations.<sup>44</sup> According to him, its legitimacy provides explanations for many of the similarities which he discerns between the cultures of the Old and the New Worlds. He details and categorizes their characteristics, referring to similar mythologies, traditions, kings, gods, pyramids, crosses, and sacred metals. Even their flora and fauna, he believes, has a mutual source. Explaining the purpose of his hypothesis, he devises a history of Atlantis by contending:

1. That there once existed in the Atlantic Ocean, opposite the mouth of the Mediterranean Sea, a large island, which was the remnant of an Atlantic continent, and known to the ancient world as Atlantis.
2. That the description of this island given by Plato is not, as has been long supposed, fable, but veritable history.
3. That Atlantis was the region where man first rose from a state of barbarism to civilization.
4. That it became, in the course of ages, a populous and mighty nation, from whose overflowings the shores of the Gulf of Mexico, the Mississippi River, the Amazon

River, the Pacific coast of South America, the Mediterranean, the west coast of Europe and Africa, the Baltic, the Black Sea, and the Caspian were populated by civilized nations.

5. That it was the true Antediluvian world; the Garden of Eden [...]; the Elysian Fields; [...] representing a universal memory of a great land, where early mankind dwelt for ages in peace and happiness.<sup>45</sup>

Other dubious assertions rely on his assumption that Central America, Mexico, Egypt, the Mississippi Valley, Iberia, Peru, Africa, Ireland, and the Aryan countries had been colonies of Atlantis, which had “furnished them with the essentials of civilization.”<sup>46</sup> He postulates that, in all likelihood, Egypt is the oldest Atlantean outpost, its civilization being a duplicate of that Atlantic isle.<sup>47</sup> In this scenario, a mythological representation of spiritual connections between Egypt and Peru is elaborated in terms of the original religion of Atlantis which, it is claimed, was sun-worship.<sup>48</sup> It is suggested that similarities between the ancient Egyptian and Mexican calendars – for example, the presence of five intercalary days and the joint beginning of the year on February 26 – are sufficient proof of a direct link between these civilizations.<sup>49</sup>

Attempting to demonstrate that Mexico had its birthplace in this Atlantic island, Donnelly claims that “Aztlán” (or “Atlán”) – to which the Toltecs and Aztecs (whose very name was derived from it) had traced the starting-point of their migrations – was none other than “Atlantis”.<sup>50</sup> Referring to the inhabitants of Aztlán as boatmen, he describes the place of origin of the Aztecs as that “designated by the sign of water, *Atl* standing for *Atzlan*, a *pyramidal temple* with grades, and near these a palm tree.”<sup>51</sup> His contentions are extended through his reference to the myth that the civilized races of Central America derive their mutual heritage from an Eastern source. He deems the legend of Quetzalcoatl - the leader of the Nahua clan – of particular significance in establishing the roots of the Toltecs, who flourished in Mexico

before the Aztecs. He states: “*From the distant East [...] this mysterious person came to Tula and became the patron god and high-priest of the ancestors of the Toltecs. He is portrayed as having been a white man, with strong formation of body, broad forehead, large eyes, and flowing beard. He wore a mitre on his head, and was dressed in a long white robe reaching to his feet, and covered with red crosses.*”<sup>52</sup>

Unfortunately, in Donnelly’s perceptions, this conceived, Atlantean lost world was destroyed in the Great Flood, which he dates to c. 2348 BC, as narrated in the Bible.<sup>53</sup> He reports that this very catastrophe was experienced by Aztecs, Miztecs, and Zapotecs alike.<sup>54</sup> It is traceable both through their paintings and through the chapter in their cosmogony relating to Tlaloc, the god of rain.<sup>55</sup> Donnelly highlights ostensible similarities between the pronunciation of the name, “Nata” (the hero of the story relating to the origins of the Aztecs) and that of “Noe” (or “Noah”) in *Genesis*.<sup>56</sup> The calamitous inundation is explained to have been experienced by different realms, each of which has its own account, as elucidated by Donnelly who contends:

That Atlantis perished in a terrible convulsion of nature, in which the whole island sunk into the ocean, with nearly all its inhabitants.

That a few persons escaped in ships and on rafts, and carried to the nations east and west the tidings of the appalling catastrophe, which has survived to our own time in the Flood and Deluge legends of the different nations of the old and new worlds.<sup>57</sup>

Although this discourse has been disputed by many scholars and scientists on the basis of insufficient proof, its message had a significant impact on Lowry’s thinking, for he refers directly to it in his correspondence.<sup>58</sup> As a font for his conjectures on the interdependence of life-forces, it is important in that it gives him the notion of a missing connection between the

civilizations of the East and the West, of the Old World and the New, cradled by opposite shores of the Atlantic Ocean. For the Consul of *Under the Volcano*, this apparent bond represents a lost harmony in the life of an individual, symbolized by his perception of a Mexican Garden of Eden.

In Eastern philosophy, intuition is interwoven with concepts relating to spirituality and religion. These ideas are expressed in the esoteric texts of Hinduism (which refer to Vedic, psychological, sensory experiences), Buddhism (which perceives instinct as immediate knowledge beyond the mental processes of conscious thinking), and Islam (which has a mystical, illuminative insight). Lowry makes use of the tenets of Buddhism and Hinduism in *Under the Volcano* and “The Forest Path to the Spring.” In his correspondence he refers to the German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, who was one of the first Western thinkers to divulge Eastern philosophical principles, such as those of asceticism. He believed that human beings were motivated primarily by their basic desires and by will-power – attributes which transpired to become a major cause of suffering.<sup>59</sup>

Lowry’s views on the afflictions of modern civilization – as expressed in his literary and epistolary works – warrant an examination of the role of the artist as an intuitive visionary. His bold attempts to reconcile an alienated and divided self reveal an exceptional ability to attain a state of exquisite sensibility through a heightened state of consciousness. He delves into the Cabbala in the belief that he will be able to apply its arcane knowledge for the benefit of humanity. His shamanistic vision launches him and his literary protagonists on a psychogeographic pilgrimage to exorcize the ghosts of the past which, he perceives, loom perpetually in contemporary global affairs. Through his application of psychotherapeutic writing as a cathartic healing-process he strives to achieve psychoanalytical atonement with himself and with his surroundings. *Swinging the Maelstrom* (2013), *Under the Volcano*, and

*Dark as the Grave* all bear witness to his unique mode of expression developed under Aiken's supervision.

For Lowry, the binary divide which had arisen between the rational thinking of the Enlightenment, on the one hand, and the imaginative, intuitive, and visionary facets of the arts and humanities, on the other, must be reconciled for the cultural, moral, and spiritual renewal of humanity. Motivated by a profound interest in the German and Austrian expressionist cinema of *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920) and *Las Manos de Orlac* (1924 and 1935), and in the Russian montage filmography of Sergei Eisenstein, he resorts to literary and visual arts to liberate the imagination. In so doing, he is influenced by the rise of the European avant-garde movement and by surrealism in particular – pursuits stimulated by his encounters with the esteemed artist, Edward John Burra (1905-76).<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> This chapter is a revised version of the introduction in Nigel H. Foxcroft, *The Kaleidoscopic Vision of Malcolm Lowry: Souls and Shamans* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), 1-16.

<sup>2</sup> The concept of the writer as a shaman draws on Ted R. Spivey, *The Writer as Shaman: The Pilgrimages of Conrad Aiken and Walker Percy* (Macon, GA, USA: Mercer University Press, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> Malcolm Lowry, *Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid*, ed. Douglas Day and Margerie Lowry (London: Penguin, 1972) is subsequently cited simply as *Dark as the Grave*.

<sup>4</sup> Lowry refers to Schweik, the eponymous hero of Jaroslav Hašek's humorous, satirical novel, *The Good Soldier Švejk* (1930): Malcolm Lowry, *Sursum Corda!: The Collected Letters of Malcolm Lowry*, ed. Sherrill E. Grace, 2 vols (London: Jonathan Cape, vol. I: 1926–46, 1995 and vol. II: 1946–57, 1996), II, 154.

<sup>5</sup> See Douglas Day, *Malcolm Lowry: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 112; M. C. Bradbrook, *Malcolm Lowry - His Art & Early Life: A Study in Transformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 124 and "Lowry's Cambridge," in *Malcolm*

---

Lowry: *Eighty Years On*, ed. Sue Vice (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), 131; and Gordon Bowker, *Pursued by Furies: A Life of Malcolm Lowry* (London: Flamingo, 1994), 131-32.

<sup>6</sup> Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, I, 111-12.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 104, 108, 408, and 603, and II, 254, 402, 405, 407, 424, 428, 430, and 597.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 896.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 642.

<sup>10</sup> Lowry, *Dark as the Grave*, 146.

<sup>11</sup> In a poem fragment extending his long mid-October to November 1939 letter to Conrad Aiken, Lowry relates to Eliot and Pound “prosing all the time” (Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, I, 253). In a missive to Harold Matson dated June 14, 1952, he alludes to “Ezra Pound enthroned in the White House at Victoria.” (*ibid.*, II, 588) According to Sherrill Grace, this is an indication of Pound’s advocacy of the Social Credit Party policies devised by C. H. Douglas (a British engineer who pioneered its economic reform movement). In an epistle to Albert Erskine dated early June 1953, Lowry deems its ideas utopian, declaring “whatever may be said for that economic experiment in its ideal state” (*ibid.*, II, 662). In his letter of February 5, 1954 to David Markson, he identifies these concepts with US strategy, claiming that “we have a fascist government: [...] McCarthy is their hero” (*ibid.*, II, 715).

<sup>12</sup> In a letter to Charles Stansfeld Jones dated May-June 1944, Lowry “claimed that he had learned nothing at Cambridge except for a great deal of Eliot” (Bowker, 96).

<sup>13</sup> Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano* (London: Penguin, 2000), 104.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>15</sup> Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West: An Abridged Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 71-72 and 88.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

---

<sup>17</sup> See Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the Underground. The Double* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).

<sup>18</sup> Patricia Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism/ Reading Modernism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992), 18 and 67.

<sup>19</sup> Albert Einstein discerned that “knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world” (quoted in Kathleen Taylor, “When fact and fantasy collide,” *The THES*, December 20/27, 2002, viii).

<sup>20</sup> Cited in “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, 2 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, vol. I: *Britain and Ireland, 1880-1955*, ed. Peter Brooker and Andrew Thatcher, 2013, 598. Read’s perspective was contrary to that of Humphrey Jennings who argued that surrealism was derived “from a now degraded classicism” (see *ibid*).

<sup>21</sup> David Ayers, “The Modernity of Adorno and Benjamin,” in *Modernism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 114. See also Michael M. Jennings, *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Literary Criticism* (London: Cornell University Press, 1987), 43 and 57.

<sup>22</sup> Spivey, 173.

<sup>23</sup> See Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 1235-41.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 1235. See also Jean Baudrillard, “From Symbolic Exchange and Death,” in *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Cahoon, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 426.

<sup>25</sup> Stephen Gill, ed., *William Wordsworth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 270, cited in Ayers, 120.

---

<sup>26</sup> Malcolm Lowry, “The Forest Path to the Spring,” in “*Hear us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*” and “*Lunar Caustic*” (London: Picador, Pan Books Ltd, 1991), 258. The letter ‘S’ was not illuminated in the electric sign which read “Hell” instead of “Shell.”

<sup>27</sup> See Ayers, 121.

<sup>28</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1979), 3-4, quoted in Ayers, 121.

<sup>29</sup> See Ayers, 123.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Jennings, 52.

<sup>31</sup> See Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, I, 503-04. Yet, an early draft of *In Ballast to the White Sea* was found in the papers of Jan Gabriel and published as Malcolm Lowry, *In Ballast to the White Sea: A Scholarly Edition*, ed. Patrick A. McCarthy (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2014).

<sup>32</sup> Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, I, 500.

<sup>33</sup> See John Polkinghorne, *The Way the World Is* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 109, cited in Spivey, xiii.

<sup>34</sup> Spivey, 186.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 186 and 47.

<sup>36</sup> Rod Mengham, “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, I, 598.

<sup>37</sup> See Edgar Allan Poe, “Sonnet: To Science” (1929), <http://www.online-literature.com/poe/580/> (accessed September 26, 2016). The author is indebted to the late Dr Vik Doyen, Professor Emeritus of the K. U. Leuven University in Belgium for pointing out this analogy.

<sup>38</sup> Aiken’s communication is dated February 23, 1947: Malcolm Lowry, *The Letters of Conrad Aiken and Malcolm Lowry, 1929-1954*, ed. Cynthia C. Sugars (Toronto: ECW Press, 1992), 201.

---

<sup>39</sup> Karl R. Popper, *Logik der Forschung* (Vienna: Verlag von Julius Springer, 1935), translated into English as *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1959).

<sup>40</sup> Karl R. Popper, “Back to the Pre-Socratics: The Presidential Address,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series, 59 (1958-59), 7.

<sup>41</sup> Descartes’s *Meditations on First Philosophy* is also known as *Metaphysical Meditations*.

<sup>42</sup> Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, I, 485 and 641.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 406 and 413. See also *Ibid.*, I, 252.

<sup>44</sup> This date accords with the chronology of the Church of Ireland’s Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland: James Ussher, *The Annals of the World* (London: F. Crook and G. Bedell, 1658), 12, <https://archive.org/details/AnnalsOfTheWorld> (accessed January 18, 2018).

<sup>45</sup> Ignatius Donnelly, *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World: Fully Illustrated* (Seattle, WA: CreateSpace, 2008), 5.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-87.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 188. See also 190.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>53</sup> The dates indicated are derived from Ussher, 17. For the story of the Deluge, see the *Old Testament’s Book of Genesis*, 6:17.

<sup>54</sup> Donnelly, 57.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

---

<sup>58</sup> In Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, I, 315, Lowry refers to an earlier version of Donnelly's *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World* (New York: Harper Bros, 1882).

<sup>59</sup> Lowry, *Sursum Corda!*, II, 54, 952, and 953-54.

<sup>60</sup> *Las Manos de Orlac* (referred to in Lowry, *Under the Volcano*, 30-31 and in *Sursum Corda!*, I, 510, 530, and 579) is based on the Hollywood version starring Peter Lorre, a remake of the 1924 Austrian horror film, *Orlacs Hände*.