

## From Russia to Eridanus:

### The Taoist Psychogeographic Ecosphere of Malcolm Lowry

Nigel H. Foxcroft (N.H.Foxcroft@brighton.ac.uk)

#### Abstract

In tracing the evolution of the cosmic consciousness of Malcolm Lowry (1909–57), a prominent English Modernist novelist and poet, this paper provides a multi-disciplinary, cross-cultural, intercontinental framework for analysing the influence of cultures and civilizations—both east and west—upon national identities and value-systems, expressed through literature.

In its investigation of the material, cosmological and spiritual domains of the Aztecs and Oaxacan Zapotecs, the paper considers anthropological, cultural and ethnographic influences associated with pre-Columbian, Mesoamerican rituals and primordial forces. Hence, it can be said to scrutinize the psychogeographic ecosphere of existence in its cycles of life, death and renewal, probing the subconscious dimensions of the Mexican Day of the Dead Hispanic festival observed by Lowry in Cuernavaca in 1936. It also evaluates his dedication to a quest for atonement with the spirits of the dead in his various works, ranging from *Under the Volcano* to *The Forest Path to the Spring*.

In recognition of Lowry's need to repent for the debts of the past and for the traumatic sins of mankind, synergies are made with the animist, cosmic and shamanic concepts of the universe reflected in the celestial visions of the Aztec and Zapotec civilizations. In pursuit of Lowry's search for *yin-yang* universal harmony on his psychic journey from Russia, via Mexico, to Canada, cosmopolitan, cross-disciplinary connections—including Sino-Japanese links—are established among the cyclic rhythms of the universe reflected in Aztec, Zapotec and Taoist world-views; the highly significant Pleiades star cluster; the ubiquitous, intergalactic symbol of an Edenic Eridanus; and the philosophical and cosmic concepts of Taoism.

## Introduction

This multidisciplinary, cross-cultural paper<sup>1</sup> investigates the evolution of the cosmic consciousness of the prominent English Modernist novelist and poet Malcolm Lowry (1909-57) by scrutinizing the subconscious and psychogeographic dimensions of the Mexican Day of the Dead Hispanic festival, which he observed in Cuernavaca in 1936.

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

Furthermore, a consideration of the impact of Sir James Frazer's research into the Aztec and Zapotec civilizations, as reflected in the Day of the Dead festival, leads us to an analysis of Lowry's unique combination of Modernism with cosmic shamanism. His increasingly Taoist world-view provides us with an anthropological basis for Kandinskian psychotherapeutic and shamanic healing, together with a sense of spiritual regeneration by ethnographic and artistic means.

## Russian Literary Influences

Lowry's magic is born of a highly inquisitive mind—one which spans the continents in its assimilation of world literature and thought, stretching from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, from the Americas to Europe. His enormous, esoteric literary diet embraces Russian as well as Scandinavian, Czech and German writers. His heterogeneous erudition is rooted both in continental European and in Anglo-American literature, with an attraction to Mexico, on the one hand, and to China and Japan, on the other—having visited the Far East in 1927, as portrayed in his first novel, *Ultramarine* (1933). He embarks upon a spiritual odyssey in pursuit of truth, salvation, and an evaluation of east-west value-systems. His aim is to renew what he perceives as being

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an ever-more-materialistic Western civilization through the power of literature, culture and philosophical reflection, stimulated by the yearning for a Taoist Eridanus, and providing an alternative life-cycle to the one to which he was accustomed.

Judging from the frequency of their mention in his daily correspondence, we can identify numerous writers of the Golden Age of nineteenth-century Russian literature as Lowry favourites: Alexander Pushkin, Nikolai Gogol,<sup>2</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky,<sup>3</sup> and Anton Chekhov. Indeed, Lowry sees himself not only as a new Goethe, or a Kafka, but also as a Pushkin, and, even, as a “second order Gogol” (Lowry (1995) I 292-93. See also Lowry (1996) II 885).

Such parallels are pursued in *Dark as the Grave*, where Sigbjørn Wilderness reads himself into a newspaper report, as was the case with Major Kovalyov in the Gogolian fantasy “The Nose” (1842) (ibid. II 779). Gogol’s *Dead Souls* (1842) is described by Lowry as “one of the most lyrical and nostalgic novels ever written” (ibid. II 154). Gogolian (and Dostoyevskian) influences of this nature are precursors of Lowry’s recognition of the importance of an aesthetic appreciation of beauty in how the celestial spirit of Eridanus brings harmony and peace to *The Forest Path* (1947-61). However, every *yin* is accompanied by a *yang*: the burning of parts two and three of *Dead Souls*, the troika of divine retribution, reminds us of the catastrophic loss of Lowry’s own manuscript, *In Ballast to the White Sea*, which would have concluded the trilogy, *The Voyage That Never Ends*—a “voyage that can have no ending, precisely because every now is a new beginning”, a portal to the future (Wood (1976) 58). Of course, Lowry’s preoccupation with fire—as a representation of *yang* in a Taoist *yin-yang* outlook—can be “seen not merely as a hazard, but a force that exerts its will any time when the elements are out of balance” (Chen and Xie 364).

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<sup>2</sup> Lowry (1995) I 292-93, and 506-07; and II 274, 625, 656, 779, 885, and 889.

<sup>3</sup> Lowry (1995) I 183, 322, 325-26, 396, 433, 444, 500, 543, 636, and 642; and Lowry (1996) II 53, 104, 131, 426, 518, 820, 842, 849, and 932.

### **The Cultural Renewal of Civilization**

The need for essential connections between the natural sciences and the humanities has been identified by Sir John Polkinghorne (1930– ), the distinguished Cambridge mathematical physicist and theologian (Polkinghorne 109, cited in Spivey xiii). According to Ted Spivey, the solution to civilization’s dilemma is “for modern man to experience cultural renewal” (Spivey 186). Furthermore, he proposes that “ethics and aesthetics must be integrated with science and technology in new social patterns”, as Modernism intended (ibid. 186). This would necessitate a greater recognition of the symmetry of nature’s design and beauty. It would entail a “new synthesis of knowledge, reason, and the powers of heart and soul”, in an ideal Edenic existence where social turmoil and political unrest would be balanced by a more judicious approach both to human interaction and to our ecosphere (ibid. 47).

Since Descartes there has been a tendency for Western philosophy to fragment into two divergent movements: objectivism (based upon scientific reason) and subjectivism (referring to an aesthetic and/or spiritual interface). It is this *fissure* in modern consciousness—between the analytical, empirical, rational nature of science, on the one hand, and the imaginative, intuitive, visionary aspects of the arts, on the other—which has been identified as threatening to dissolve the very basis of humanity itself. Dating from Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), prominent psychologists have established that modern rationalism has tended to exclude the existence of the subconscious and spiritual minds. Alluding to Po-tuan Chang’s monograph entitled *Understanding Reality*, John (Zhong) Ming Chen and Shaobe Xie, in their significant article on ‘Malcolm Lowry and the Tao’, refer to “the dichotomy between the spontaneous, the intuitive, the natural and the conscious, the cultural, and the unnatural—between ‘the mind of Tao and the human mind’ (Chang 5)” (373).

Aware of the need for a new psycho-analytic approach to life, Lowry established his own mode of psycho-therapeutic writing under the supervision of Conrad Aiken, the illustrious American poet and caring, ‘surrogate father’ to whom, in February 1940, he writes, “What truer father have I than you” (1995 I 293). Both Aiken and Lowry suffered, in their childhoods, from deep psychological scars requiring prolonged adaptation. Spivey refers to:

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

Undergoing a continuous Nietzschean struggle over the fundamental question of what it is to be human, Lowry attempts to attain a higher state of consciousness and self-revelation in order to determine how mankind can realize its full potential by being more in tune with the ecosphere and the constant change of the cyclical (temporal), Taoistic rhythms of the eternal symphony of life, death and renewal.

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

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

The Day of the Dead festival derives from shamanic and cosmological perspectives akin to those of the animist tribes of northern Mexico. Indeed, the Yaqui and the Huichol communicate with gods and spirits, giving thanks to images, such as that of the Virgin of Guadalupe. With its focus on the Day of the Dead, *Under the Volcano* symbolizes what Perle Epstein has described as “the great battle [...] for the survival of the human

consciousness” (Epstein 50).<sup>4</sup> A “tragic protagonist [...], like Tchitchikov in *Dead Souls*”, the dipsomaniac and psychotic Geoffrey Firmin is afflicted by a Gogolian sickness observed by the attentive Dr Vigil (Lowry (1995) I 507. See also 581). This ailment, we are told, is “not only in body but in that part used to be call [*sic*]: soul”—a malady which the Consul, like Lowry himself, expiates through suffering and self-sacrifice (Lowry (2000) 148). It is through psychoanalysis—the science of “nature *inside*”, dealing with “the obstacles to reason within the psyche” (Frosh 118; original emphasis)—that a state of “intense self-revelation” is achieved (Bowker 224 and Martin 92-93, 45 and 204). Our clairvoyant Consul hallucinogenically aspires to a higher dimension of mescal-induced consciousness to reflect upon the significance of the eternal wheel of existence. By imbibing the ritualistic drinks of *pulque* and mescal, he is transformed from a priest into a god, as is the Aztec custom (Miller and Taube 138). Through “simultaneity of experience”, he embarks upon a telepathic and psychogeographic crusade in search of civilization’s elixir of life (Orr 166).

According to Epstein, Lowry’s incorporation of the theme of William Blackstone (c. 1595–1675)—a seventeenth-century, shamanic reverend who fled from Cambridge to New England to join the Indians—links Lowry’s ethnological and psychological worlds (Epstein 51). Indeed, “in his outward search for seclusion, Blackstone represents man’s inner search for awareness” (Martin 195). In this respect, the youthful Lowry was mesmerized by Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890), a spellbinding study of the correlation between anthropology and religion, “a voyage of discovery” into ethnography, folklore, and magic (MacClancy 79). In it Frazer documents attempts at exorcizing evil spirits in order to attain rebirth. As he explains, “in the primitive mind [...] it was thought that by transferring the evils of a whole people to an individual and sacrificing that individual, it might be possible to get rid of the accumulated sorrows of the entire community” (Downie (1940) 33-34 (see also 21, 23 and 37)).<sup>5</sup>

In Aztec culture, death, as “a mirror of life”, is a symbolic, cyclic celebration, necessitating sacrifice in order to nourish the souls of the deceased on their underworld

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<sup>4</sup> See also Ackerley and Clipper 32.

<sup>5</sup> For further details, see Lowry (1996) II 364 and 379; Downie (1970) 52; and Vickery 36, 42-43, 110-11 and 139.

journey into the afterlife (Miller and Taube 74). Associated with the culmination of the Pleiades, or Seven Sisters, star cluster (Lowry (1996) II 367), the tradition of the Day of the Dead—whereby the living communicate with the spirits of the departed, who are temporarily reborn in the here and now—is a widely commemorated festival of pre-Hispanic, pagan-spiritual origin, deeply rooted in the Zapotec and Aztec civilizations. In *Under the Volcano* our Consul makes the ultimate Christ-like, sacrificial surrender, dying for the sins of a bellicose mankind. He reveals “his adversaries as figures of evil by offering himself up as a sacrificial victim”, at the mercy of the trochoidal Máquina Infernal, the great eternal Ferris wheel of life (Orr 157). Such symbols are derived from Aztec mythology, which “believed that each human being was, by predestination, inserted into a divine order, ‘the grasp of the omnipotent machine’” (Soustelle 112, quoted in Wutz 66).

*Under the Volcano* sets the psychogeographic stage for the annihilation of the Aztec Garden of Eden, the aggressive desecration of Mexico by Spanish invaders (evoked by the dying-Indian theme), and the recurring ‘Fall of Man’. It is our Adamic Consul whom Lowry empowers to bear the burden of guilt for the sins of the world, for he perceives that “modern society has corrupted humanity’s innate ‘goodness’ [...] and pristine innocence” (Chen and Xie 374. See also Lowry (1965) 85).

According to Mercia Eliade (1907–86), “the primitive magician, the medicine man or shaman, is not only a sick man, he is, above all, a sick man who has been cured, who has succeeded in curing himself” (Eliade (1964) 27, cited in Spivey 8 and 183). Portrayed as a reclusive “dark magician in his visioned cave” (Lowry (2000) 151 and 206), our consul resorts to consulting his “numerous cabbalistic and alchemical books” (178), seeking “a new blending of antinomies” to reconcile the configurations of universal elements, the building blocks of nature (Chen and Xie 377). A shamanic priest on a pilgrimage, he seeks communion with his imagined, harmonious cosmic order, incorporating the “life-giving force of love” and joy to balance and cleanse the internal and external forces at work in the Taoistic universe of existence (Spivey 15).<sup>6</sup>

However, Geoffrey Firmin’s extraordinary dabbling in the preternatural or supernatural forces of the Cabbala has culminated *not* in an attainment of the

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<sup>6</sup> See also *ibid.* xiv and 166.

transcendental power of love and inner tranquillity, but in a loss of “the knowledge of the Mysteries” (Epstein 27). As Lowry himself claims, “the garden can be seen not only as the world, or the Garden of Eden, but legitimately as the Cabbala itself, and the abuse of wine [...] is identified in the Cabbala with the abuse of magical powers [...] à la Childe Harolde” (Lowry (1995) I 595). An emblem of modern Faustian man, he has sold his trans-migratory soul to Mephistopheles in his desire to achieve omnipotence. By untethering the riderless horse, our consul causes a purifying thunderstorm of Messianic divine intervention which resurrects Yvonne, his Aztec ritual sacrifice, who has imagined “herself voyaging straight up through the stars to the Pleiades”, as predicted for the sober (ibid. I 523. See also Lowry (2000) 202-03, 216, 335 and 373-74).<sup>7</sup>

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

With the cataclysmic combustion of his two-thousand-word script of *In Ballast to the White Sea*, Lowry has no alternative but to amend his plans for *The Voyage That Never Ends*, conceived as an “ordeal, a going through the hoop”, an “initiation”, and “a doing of God’s will” (Lowry (1951) 3, cited in Grace (1982) 9). Hence, we glimpse Lowry the voyeur, the visionary, the new Sergei Eisenstein on a *montaged Battleship Potemkin*, storming the Barents Sea.

*Dark as the Grave* exposes a Benjaminian and Taoist “lost harmony between mind and world” (McCarthy (1994) 209). With its Dostoyevskian and Gogolian influences, this novella strives for a symmetry expressed through the concept of the artist as a visionary, with a “primordial natural force, possessing an infinite supply of power and creativity”—features which match those of the Tao (Ku-ying Ch’en (1981), quoted in Chen and Xie 359). Indeed, we discover that “life flowed into art: [...] art gives life a form and meaning and flows on into life, [...] and [...] this flowing, this river, [...] became a flowing of consciousness, of mind” (Lowry (1969) 60). With its *yin* elements, this aquatic imagery is an antecedent to the focal role played by water, in all its forms, as a life-giving, curvilinear force in *The Forest Path to the Spring*.

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<sup>7</sup> In addition, see Doyen 112 and Grace (1987) 162 and 165.



In *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* (*Under the Volcano*'s original title), *Dark as the Grave*, and *La Mordida* (1949-96) we encounter the spiritual odyssey of Sigbjørn Wilderness (Bareham 109). Indeed, Sigbjørn is what Lowry calls a Dostoyevskian “underground man”, a “modern anti-hero” (Lowry (1996) II 424, 430, 538 and 540), “a doppelganger”, with all his contradictions (Lowry (1969) 7). He dreams that he is *both* a Lermontovian executioner of fate and a murderer extradited from Mexico to Canada (ibid. 70-71). Unable to distinguish between the novel authored by himself and that by his daemon, he is shocked by the suspicion “that he is not a writer so much as being *written*”—a true identity crisis (Lowry (1965) 332; original emphasis). On his return journey with Primrose from Vancouver to Cuernavaca to exorcize the ghosts psychogeographically plaguing him since his last visit, Sigbjørn searches for Juan Fernando Martinez, his old friend and guardian spirit, as well as a reincarnation of the legendary Juan Cerillo, the Dr Vigil of *Under the Volcano*. In doing so, he completes a circuitous, spatial motion with regard to the law of circular, or cyclical, movement, which, in the Taoist philosophy, governs both human beings and water and is illustrated by the *yin/yang* circle (see Chen and Xie 362).

Yet, it is voodoo to which Sigbjørn turns as a shamanic force to calm his anxieties and as a way of tapping the supernatural to displace science, which “can only help the person whose experience is beyond it” (Lowry (1969) 167). Hence, the dynamic power of voodoo is also seen by Lowry as a means of subduing the dark Dantean forces of nature, for it is

a religion, to be regarded with reverence, since unquestionably it is the matter-transcending religion based upon the actual existence of the supernatural as a fact that is fundamental to man himself [...]. But that is not to say that one should not regard with awe the great dignity & discipline that is behind it at its highest, nor its conception of God, nor the meaning that it gives to life [...]. (Lowry (1996) II 364)

Furthermore, it is a voodoo ritualistic cross that enables Sigbjørn, in his transition to rebirth, to communicate with the spirits of the dead, transformed into gods. It too provides “a way out of the infernal, closed circle into renewed voyaging” (Grace (1982) 73).

However, Sigbjørn's trip to the Zapotec high priest's palace involves a parallel *physical* descent into the cruciform prehistoric tombs of Mitla, down towards the subterranean Column of Death. Representative of the Underworld, Mitla is perceived as the Land of the Dead (Spence 49 and 110, cited in Sugars 155). Sigbjørn's renewal of faith is accompanied by "the mediating influence of the dead" and "the mediating spirit of [...] the Holy Virgin", resulting in a realization of "the mystical experience that suffering had caused him to undergo" and precipitating the acute "feeling of something Renaissance" (Lowry (1969) 262). Sigbjørn is reminded of the constellation Eridanus, the mythological Styx, encompassing Hades—the "river of life: river of youth: river of death" (ibid. 261).<sup>8</sup>

It is in the Hotel La Luna in Oaxaca where, having survived the perils of the lunar eclipse, Maximilian's Palace, and the temple of Mitla ('the City of the Moon'), Sigbjørn is reunited with his wife, Primrose, a reborn phoenix and moon-goddess (Sugars 158). As with Yvonne in *Under the Volcano*, the narrator's wife in *The Forest Path*, and Margerie Bonner in real life, Primrose has a clear understanding of connections between the seasons and the movement of the stars and constellations across the night sky. It is Primrose who enables Sigbjørn to attain a state of psychogeographic harmony with life and Juan Fernando with death. In his dominion over the Mitlan tombs and the Edenic garden endowed by the Banco Ejidal, Juan provides the key to Sigbjørn's spiritual renaissance. Furthermore, Lowry himself was captivated by the ancient rituals of the 800-B.C. Mitla, of the pyramids of the 500-B.C. Monte Albán, with its astronomical Building J where Zapotec gods were venerated, and of the 200-B.C. Teotihuacan. Indeed, Lowry modestly concedes that he "did, however, live in Oaxaca for a time, among the ruins of Monte Albán and Mitla" (Lowry (1995) I 315).

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

Influenced by Walter Benjamin's concern that the ascent of reason was actually turning life into knowledge (that is, information manipulated to human advantage), Lowry firmly believes that technological progress is extinguishing human contact with the

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<sup>8</sup> Lowry also refers to this conception of Eridanus in Lowry (1969) 26-27, 258, and 263, and Lowry (1991) 231.

natural environment. He advocates the “direct and unmediated observation of and contact with nature to gain new knowledge and insight and re-establish a different system of values” (Chen and Xie 374). It is *The Forest Path*—replete with its Manx myths and legends—which “constitutes an unabashed encomium on the yin [...] as a quintessentially vital balancing force” (Chen and Xie 357). Having traversed Sigbjørn’s wilderness on his Protean path to paradise, we encounter the soul of Eridanus. This temporal, spatial and spiritual heart of the universe facilitates a peaceful, harmonious interaction and ecological co-existence with our environment. It is the focal point where the all-pervasive *yin* and *yang* elements of the Tao—considered to be “Mother of the universe”—are in a state of equilibrium (Chen and Xie 358. See also Wood (1976) 54). In *The Forest Path* it is the narrator’s wife who is “an integral part of nature” and “greatly facilitates her husband’s truly organic integration into it” (Chen and Xie 377).

With regard to our ecosphere and bearing in mind the metaphysical concepts of Laozi, Aiken, and Walker Percy, Spivey attempts to “mold a philosophical view that makes man’s knowledge—his science, that is—a part of his human and natural environments” (Spivey 187). A parallel shamanic ideal in search of cultural regeneration through ethnographic-artistic methods is pursued by Wassily Kandinsky, a trained anthropologist (MacClancy 90). Similarly, Lowry’s shaman “can be healer and guide as well as mystic and visionary” (Eliade (1962) 86, cited in Spivey xiii). It identifies the spiritual need for a Benjaminian, neo-Romantic return to a congruous Taoist relationship with our natural environment: in aspiring towards a rapport with the world around it, humanity should be part of nature, nature part of humanity.

However, the universal laws of nature also apply to the cosmos, as the narrator in *The Forest Path* intuitively discerns when he “realizes that humans and cosmos, however tiny or gigantic, are equally subject to the same Taoist laws of relative stillness and absolute movement, as well as to mutability, seasonal and/or cyclical” (Chen and Xie 376). In this respect, as with Lowry, his utopian vision of the cosmos involves interpersonal and environmental relationships based on “the encompassing power of love” as a way “to withstand the elemental forces it had to withstand [...] in defiance of eternity, and yet as if in humble answer to it [...] [:] as much a part of the natural surroundings as a Shinto temple is of the Japanese landscape” (Spivey xi and Lowry (1991) 233). Culminating “on a note of harmony and rebirth”, the sensuous lyrical

novella *The Forest Path*—“a testament to hope”—enables Lowry to tap the power of his imagination and also his spiritual desire for freedom (Grace (1982) 100 and 102; Cross 105; and Lowry (1965) 266).<sup>9</sup> *The Forest Path* has been described by Daniel Dodson as a “prose poem on man in nature, a Wordsworthian benediction on nature’s benevolent power to transform the heart capable of seeing and receiving” (Dodson 41). In it Lowry advocates a romanticism—reminiscent of the souls of the forests in Ivan Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons* (1862)—which exalts a closer relationship with our natural environment: “Often all you could see in the whole world of the dawn was a huge sun with two pines silhouetted in it, like a great blaze behind a Gothic cathedral. And at night the same pines would write a Chinese poem on the moon” (Lowry (1991) 216). Yet, the moonlit, nocturnal stillness of the sky at night—associated with *yin* in the Taoist system of values—is also a time when “little shellfish called Chinese Hats [...] are on the move!” (ibid. 237. See also 243). A backwards reading of Lowry’s terminology—transforming “hats” into “star”—further exemplifies the attainable tranquillity of the cycles of natural motion and their relationship to an eastern view of the vast, cosmological universe. In this respect, Chen and Xie contend that Lowry “subverts and at least partially replaces the dominant western value system with that of Taoism” (370).

On another plane, *The Forest Path*—with the threatening, sinister sign of the ‘Hell’ oil refinery on the horizon (Lowry (1991) 258)—conjures up a *yin-yang* imbalance between humanity and nature immortalized in Alexander Pushkin’s *The Bronze Horseman* (1833). In it humanity—personified by the enlivened equestrian statue of Tsar Peter the Great (1672–1725)—attempts to defy the natural laws, but the ‘soft’, aqueous elements take their revenge in the Great Flood of St Petersburg in November 1824. Familiar with this narrative poem through Edmund Wilson’s translation, Lowry refers to a “serious spirit of Pushkinship” in his letters (Lowry (1996) II 105 and 889).<sup>10</sup> It is in *The Forest Path* that he alludes to “the very elements, harnessed only for the earth’s ruination and man’s greed” (Lowry (1991) 241). In “the

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<sup>9</sup> Although Lowry claims that he read Anton Chekhov’s comedy *The Demon of the Wood* (1889) only in 1952, he alludes to Dante’s dark wood too. See Lowry (1996) II 518 and 524.

<sup>10</sup> In his letters he refers to A. S. Pushkin’s *Boris Godunov* (1825) and to *Mozart and Salieri* (1830): cf. Lowry (1996) II 105, 155 and 885.

shadow of the war”, they “turn against man himself”, taking their revenge in the forest fire whose relentless advance “is almost like a perversion of the movement of the inlet” (ibid. 231, 245 and 260). However, with its seasonal cycles, nature is indeed capable of decontaminating itself, in a regenerative way, from the heinous oil slicks violating the purity of the Eridanus Inlet (ibid. 236 and 281).

Lowry’s “vision of paradise or moment of achieved balance” is experienced by “renouncing the world altogether” to attain spiritual integrity and unity by harmonizing his inner and outer worlds (Grace (1982) 115 and Lowry (1991) 233). Dwelling “at the edge of eternity” in Dollarton, British Columbia, the humble, mutually trusting, yet hard-working community of Eridanus symbolizes a Taoist equilibrium in which love for one another is supreme, as witnessed by Lowry, who lived there happily after his own honeymoon (ibid. 279). Eridanus is a mythological synonym for the River Po, alongside which Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) is said to have commenced composing his *Paradiso* (Lowry (1965) 245).<sup>11</sup> By using *nagual*—“a person’s animal-spirit companion” used “as a means of communicating with ancestors and deities” (Joyce (2010) 79 and 245)<sup>12</sup>—to depict Sigbjørn’s psychogeographic entry into “the soul of a past self” to confront its wild forces in the form of the animistic cougar, or puma in *The Forest Path*, Lowry connects shamanically with the tyranny of his own childhood ordeals in Wallasey, Liverpool (Lowry (1991) 246 and 226).<sup>13</sup> The reflective experiences endured during his daily sojourns—both physical and spiritual—to and from the spring enable Sigbjørn to transcend his terrifying anxieties, derived from past experiences, to discover his real self through “a continual awakening”, to be “baptised afresh” (ibid. 235 and 273).

“Known both as the River of Death and the River of Life”, Eridanus is both a bay and a southern celestial constellation (ibid. 226-27). Relating the terrestrial to the cosmic, the natural to the supernatural universe of myths and legends, it connects us to the Chinese amoral concept of the Tao, or Dao, signifying ‘The Way’, or ‘The Path’. Encapsulated in the fundamental intertext of *Tao Te Ching*, which, as Barry Wood first discovered, Lowry paraphrases and then cites, its principles are attributed to the 6th-

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<sup>11</sup> See Ackerley and Clipper 414.

<sup>12</sup> See also 236.

<sup>13</sup> See also McCarthy (1994) 206.

century-B.C. Chinese philosopher Laozi, and shared with Confucianism, Chán, and Zen Buddhism (Wood (1976) 55. See also Chen and Xie 357-58). Being “immanent, not transcendental”, the Tao “designates the inherent laws governing the changes and movements of all cosmic substances and natural objects” (ibid. 359). It plays a focal role as a recurring theme in *The Forest Path*, where its wave-like, monistic omnipresence, with its philosophical and cosmological dimensions, is portrayed by Lowry as pre-dating the birth of heaven (*yang*) and of earth (*yin*) in the following way:

[A]t such a time of stillness, at the brief period of high tide before the ebb, it was like what I have learned the Chinese call the Tao, that, they say, came into existence before Heaven and Earth, something so still, so changeless, and yet reaching everywhere, and in no danger of being exhausted: like ‘that which is so still and yet passes on in constant flow, and in passing on, becomes remote, and having become remote, returns’. (Lowry (1991) 236)

Indeed, in applying “the law of relative stillness and absolute movement operating in nature” to the human sphere, Chen and Xie have even gone as far as, persuasively, contending that “Lowry reshapes his whole vision of the human world and Nature in accordance with Taoism, and stresses harmony, balance, and peace. The Taoist or Edenic Eridanus thus epitomizes his ideal world of existence” (371 and 357).

It is his faith in the wisdom of a Taoist, ubiquitous and “timeless heaven” which invigorates Lowry in his pursuit of metaphysical truths, giving him a deeper insight into humanity and the processes at work in his mystical universe, extending from the “eternal flux and flow” of his ever-changing opera “on the very windrow of existence” (Lowry in McCarthy (1996) 216 and Lowry (1991) 236, 226-27 and 244). In its emphasis upon a harmonious interaction with our natural environment, the Tao promotes the appreciation of an integral, primal innocence missing from modern civilization. It recognizes “the feeling of something that man had lost, of which these shacks and cabins, brave against the elements, but at the mercy of the destroyer, were the helpless yet stalwart symbol, of man’s hunger and need for beauty, for the stars and the sunrise” sought in *Under the Volcano* (ibid. 234). The resultant amicable interface with nature is based upon a balance in the universe, transforming *yin* (the Moon and

rain) into its opposite, *yang* (the sun and the earth), and vice-versa. In *The Forest Path* it is reflected in the centrifugal motion of a raindrop kissing the sea:

Each drop falling into the sea is like a life, I thought, 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 [...]. [...] [T]he 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. (Ibid. 285-86)

### **Conclusion**

In recognition of a need to repent for the debts of the past and for the sins of an alienating mankind, Malcolm Lowry makes synergies between the cosmic, shamanic, and animist concepts of the universe, reflected in the celestial visions of the Zapotec and Aztec civilizations. He discovers that “the spiritual centre in man is the integrating perceiver of the world”, though, in the light of the Copernican Revolution, he recognizes that we are circumscribed by an extensive, elliptical cosmos which does *not* orbit the Earth (Wood (1976) 55). It is in pursuit of his multicultural, psychogeographic search for a Taoist universal harmony “in his effort to redress the reigning imbalances, natural and social” (Chen and Xie 377) that Lowry establishes crucial, cosmopolitan connections in his various, though coherent, world-views. When combined, his wide-ranging outlooks on civilization are united in a recognition of the true significance of the Pleiades star cluster, of Eridanus, as an unpretentious, yet powerful, intergalactic, ecospheric symbol of a rejuvenated civilization, and, last but not least, of the equilibrial, philosophical concepts of Taoism.

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