

Malcolm Lowry: The Russian Connection

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Abstract

In *Under the Volcano* (1947) Malcolm Lowry (1909—57) presents us with a Faustian image of a British ex-Consul tormented by inner turmoil between his divided self and the socio-political environment which has alienated him.

A would-be visionary, Geoffrey Firmin undergoes a shamanic journey to exorcise the phantoms of his past by striving towards a higher state of intuitive consciousness. In the odyssey into his cinematic, psychogeographic imagination, he makes profound, psychological connections between current international events plaguing a humanity at war with itself and the spiritual dimensions of his reflective mind.

In his synergic quest for reconciliation, he is profoundly affected—as was Lowry himself—by an interdisciplinary heritage moulded by the giants of the Golden Age of Russian literature at the threshold of a revolutionary era.

Both *Under the Volcano* and *Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid* (1968) refer to Russian writers, film directors, thinkers, and politicians. We are immersed into the spiritual worlds of Alexander Pushkin, Nikolai Gogol, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Lev Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov, and Sergei Eisenstein. Then we are thrust into the contemporary arena of war and revolution by allusions to Karl Marx, Trotsky, Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler.

Despite numerous references to Russian writers in Lowry's collected letters, very little has been published on their influences, apart from a couple of articles touching on Gogol. This paper aims to correct this imbalance by investigating Lowry's Russian connection in the context of his shamanic visions.

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Introduction

This interdisciplinary paper on the English modernist novelist and poet, Malcolm Lowry (1909—57) is designed to provide a framework for reassessing his works and for evaluating his contribution to the international dimensions of modernism and surrealism. His literary achievements bear testament to his profound insight into the inter-connectedness of East—West cultures and civilizations, both ancient and modern. They also reveal his innovative perception of literature as a means of intensifying our consciousness of our interdependence on our environment.

His masterpiece, *Under the Volcano* (1947) constitutes a Faustian representation of a British ex-Consul to Mexico, tormented by the inner turmoil of his split self. We are bestowed with vivid, multi-coloured images emblazoned on the surrealist backdrop of a socio-political *milieu* which has alienated the Consul from a world at war with itself. Delving into the wisdoms of old knowledge, Geoffrey Firmin—a truly Romantic visionary—strives to preserve these ancient gifts by attaining a higher state of intuitive consciousness. By selecting a painful, shamanic path to exorcise the phantoms of his past, he embarks upon an odyssey into his psychogeographic, cinematic imagination. In so doing, he makes profound, psychological parallels between contemporary, international events afflicting humanity and the spiritual depths of his subconscious mind.

In pursuing a reconciliation with his daemons, he confronts—as did Lowry himself—the titans of the Golden Age of Russian literature, as he strides towards and, indeed, through the threshold of a revolutionary era. In this respect, both *Under the Volcano* and *Dark as the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid* (1968) grasp our attention, turning it to prominent, nineteenth-century Russian writers, on the one hand, and to twentieth-century film directors, thinkers, and politicians, on the other. Through intertwining meanings, matched by correlated allusions in his correspondence, Lowry plunges his readers into the lower depths of the spiritual worlds of Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Eisenstein. Then we are thrust into the theatres of war and revolution by images of Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, and Hitler.

Yet, despite the wealth of intertextual credits to Russian authors and intellectuals in his dispatches, surprisingly little has been published on their impact on Lowry, apart from Chris Ackerley's hypertextual companion to *Under the Volcano* and a few articles broaching on Gogol in *The Malcolm Lowry Review* (see Konigsberg, Hadfield, and Mann). This paper aims to rectify this shortfall by probing Lowry's Russian connection in the context of his shamanic visions.

W. B. Yeats, Madame Blavatsky, and the Theosophical Society

Under the influence of the occultist and ceremonial magician, Charles Robert Stansfeld—Jones (1886—1950)—aka Frater Achad, the “magical child” of Aleister Crowley—Lowry, in Deep Cove, Dollarton, incorporated numerous references to the ancient wisdom of the Kabbala(h), or Cabbala in *Under the Volcano*.¹ His interest in this philosophical system which claimed insight into divine nature sprang both from a

¹ See Bowker 321, Day 294-95, and Lowry (1995) I, 418 and 529 and (1996) II 201-03, 356, 360, 798, 799, and 875.

reaction to his Methodist upbringing and also from a longstanding inquisitiveness towards alternative spiritual ideas, esoteric knowledge, and mysticism, channeled to him through three main influences. The first came via Marguerite (Margot) (*née* Peirce)—the French Catholic wife of his elder brother, Stuart Osborne Lowry (1895—1969).² Being a medium, she shared a curiosity for the occult (Bowker 39. See also 174 and 437). The second arose from Lowry’s reading of *The Waste Land* (1922) by T. S. Eliot (1888—1965), which stimulated his preoccupation with the Vedanta, or Uttarā Mīmāṃsā, one of six orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy (see Lowry (1995) I 117 and (1996) II 509-10). The third reached him through the sway of the Irish modernist poet, W. B. Yeats (1865—1939), about whom he frequently wrote.³

Indeed, so enthralled is he with Yeats’s *A Vision* (1925) and *The Tower* (1928)—which connect with the mind, cosmology, and the divine features of a wheel of existence—that Lowry highly recommends them in his June 1944 letter to Stansfeld—Jones (Lowry (1995) I 449). Referring to the “Ghost Star” and “The Milky Way”, he quotes from *Gitanjali*, a collection of poems by Rabindranath Tagore (1861—1941), the Bengali polymath and Nobel prize-winner (*ibid.* 401). However, it is Yeats who leaves the deepest impression on him—Yeats for his introduction to *Gitanjali* (published by the India Society) and for his connections with the circle of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831—91), the Russian occultist and missionary of ancient knowledge. In actual fact, it was her Theosophical Society (founded in 1875) which provided a conduit for Hindu beliefs and the occult and also for the western transmission and revival of Theravada Buddhism, with its hermetic knowledge and images of the dead.

Peter Ouspensky, George Gurdjieff, and the Fourth Dimension

Lowry’s mastery of the writings of Peter D. Ouspensky (1878—1947) gave rise to a further Russian link. A philosopher, esoteric mystic, and theosophist, Ouspensky was reputed for *The Fourth Dimension* (1909), *Tertium Organum: A Key to the Enigmas of the World* (1920), and *A New Model of the Universe* (1931).⁴ According to Sherrill Grace, he was discovered by Lowry in the late 1920’s, or early 1930’s and exerted a “key influence on his thinking” (Lowry (1996) II 293. See also 173). In conjunction with *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” (Lowry (1995) I 314). Besides, he identifies himself with the Hanged Man: “Round his head was a golden halo. And I heard a Voice which spoke to me: ‘Behold, this is the man who has seen the Truth’” (Bowker 174-75, citing Ouspensky (1984) 240-41).⁵

With their revelations of mysterious puzzles and their contribution to the development of the notion of a fourth dimension as an extension in space, Ouspensky’s works

² Bowker mentions Margot’s maiden name as being “Peirce” and “Pearce”, respectively (16 and 666).

³ Lowry (1995) I 32, 322, 367-68, 403, 451, 503, 528-29, and 609; and (1996) II 413, 443, 444, 865, 879, and 893.

⁴ Lowry (1995) I 357 and 358, and (1996) II 173-74, 289, 293, and 304. Lowry also refers to Dunne’s *An Experiment with Time* as “a rewarding book” in (1995) I 314.

⁵ Lowry wore an Italian coin—a present from his sister-in-law, Margot—around his neck, as a talisman (Bowker 174).

provided a rich source for *Under the Volcano*. By incorporating the “Fourth Way”—proposed by George Gurdjieff (1866—1949), his influential, spiritual teacher—Ouspensky’s “Fourth Dimension” did *not* require its adherents to forsake the world *entirely*, as a prerequisite for harmony with their physical body, emotions, and mind—a process which the Consul fails to master.

Russian Cinematic Links: Sergei Eisenstein

In Lowry’s *magnum opus* we regularly encounter the iconic, *avant-garde*, Russian film director and theorist, Sergei Eisenstein (1898—1948), who pioneered the use of *montage*. Visiting Mexico to make a “non-political” film, the latter insisted on “his desire to be free to direct the making of a picture according to his own ideas of what a Mexican picture should be, and in full faith in Eisenstein’s artistic integrity” (Geduld 22 and Seton 189). Furthermore, his admiration for Mexican culture inspired him to call his films “moving frescoes” (Bordwell 19). Intermingling with the painters, Frida Kahlo (1907—54) and Diego Rivera (1886—1957), he commenced shooting *¡Que viva México!* in 1930. If finished, it would have spanned Mexican history, civilization, culture, and politics from the 1521 Spanish Conquest of the Aztec Empire by Hernán Cortés (1485—1547), right up to the 1910 Mexican Revolution, with an epilogue set on the Mexican Day of the Dead.⁶

In *Under the Volcano* we are immersed in the *Día de Muertos*. We perceive “the bangs and cries of the *fiesta* that had been going on all day”, with its “bright banners, the paper streamers [...] the great wheel” (10 and 57).⁷ *Montage* is used to juxtapose shots of the background against those of Yvonne and the Consul (Ackerley 52.3). Yet, in referring to “those wistful beautiful Oaxaqueñan children one saw in Tehuantepec (that ideal spot where the women did the work while the men bathed in the river all day)”, Lowry reverses Eisenstein’s concept—expressed in *The Film Sense* (1942)—of it being a matriarchal society (12).⁸ Just as *¡Que Viva Mexico!* was “held together by the unity of the weave—a rhythmic and musical construction and an unrolling of the Mexican spirit and character”, *Under the Volcano* focuses on “the brilliantly coloured serape of existence, part of the sun, the smells, the laughter!” (Eisenstein, *Film Sense* (1948) 197 and *Volcano*, 256).⁹

With the cinema-setting in chapter one of *Under the Volcano*—where the luminous wheel revolves *backwards* in time—we glimpse a placard identifying *The Hands of Orlac* (1935), one of Lowry’s favourite movies: “*Las Manos de Orlac*, said a poster: ... 6 y 8.30. *Las Manos de Orlac*, con Peter Lorre”, who actually starred as Dr Gogol

⁶ Footage from *¡Que Viva Mexico!* was incorporated in *Thunder Over Mexico*, *Eisenstein in Mexico*, *Time in the Sun*, and *Death Day*, released in USA in 1933—34 (Ackerley 72.2 and Bordwell 21).

⁷ ‘Fiesta’ was the intended title of the initial sequence of *¡Que viva México!* (Ackerley 4.2).

⁸ Eisenstein claims that these women are “the most beautiful in Mexico and the men the most hen-pecked” (ibid. 6.6).

⁹ Lowry associates “*serape*” with “the striped blanket that [...] every Mexican wears. And the Serape could be the symbol of Mexico. So striped and violently contrasting are the cultures in Mexico running next to each other and at the same time being centuries away” (ibid. 254.4). However, he also refers to this nation being “a country of slavery, where human beings were sold like cattle, and its native peoples, the Yaquis, the Papagos, the Tomasachics, exterminated through deportation, or reduced to worse than peonage, their lands in thrall, or the hands of foreigners” (*Volcano* 112. See Ackerley 108.3).

(30).¹⁰ In his famous 2 January 1946 letter to Jonathan Cape, Lowry clarifies that “the man with the bloody hands in the poster, via the German origin on the picture, symbolizes the *guilt* of mankind, which relates him also to M. Laruelle and the Consul again” (Lowry (1995) I 510). Yet, it also incriminates Yvonne who has affairs both with Laruelle—the film director—and with Hugh—the Consul’s half-brother:

For Hugh, at twenty-nine, still dreamed, even then, of changing the world [...] through his actions—just as Laruelle, at forty-two, had still then not quite given up hope of changing it through the great films he proposed somehow to make. But today these dreams seemed absurd and presumptuous. After all he had made great films as great films went in the past. And so far as he knew they had not changed the world in the slightest. However he had acquired a certain identity with Hugh (14-15).

A would-be Hollywood film star, Yvonne has an elevated view of her fame, for, we are told, she “must have been acting in those Western pictures M. Laruelle, who had not seen them, adroitly assured one had influenced Eisenstein or somebody” (77). Yet, in reality, she has acquired a nickname relating to Ivan the Terrible: “What she had kept hidden from the Consul, the old photographs of Yvonne the Terrible [...] for surely Hugh and Yvonne were in some grotesque fashion transposed!...” (266).¹¹

In the Silhouette of Civilization: The Intriguing Trail of Russian Literary Influences

As well as being preoccupied with Eisenstein, an icon of Russian filmography, Lowry shared the fascination of Virginia Woolf (1882—1941) with Russian writers, as expressed in ‘The Common Reader’ (1925), where she admires their sincerity in portraying ‘the human soul’ (see Rubinstein 196-206, Protopopova, and Domestico). Thus, in his correspondence, Lowry refers to Alexander Pushkin (1799—1837), Ivan Goncharov (1812—91) (Lowry (1996) II 518), Nikolai Gogol (1809—52), Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821—81), Lev Tolstoy (1828—1910), Anton Chekhov (1860—1904) (whom he characterizes as strolling “around graveyards thinking it is no go”),¹² Leonid Andreyev (1871—1919)¹³ (Lowry (1995) I 321. See also (1996) II 838-39), and, last but not least, Isaak Babel (1894—1940), the Jewish short-story writer (ibid. 906).

Nikolai Gogol

Commending both Goethe (1749—1832) and Kafka (1883—1924), Lowry views himself as a modern-day Pushkin, or even a “second order Gogol” (Lowry (1995) I

¹⁰ Lorre (1904—64), a well-known American actor of Austro—Hungarian Jewish descent fell in love with Orlac’s wife, Yvonne, an actress in the 1935 Hollywood remake of the 1925 German expressionist film (see Ackerley 24.4 and Konigsberg 160).

¹¹ Her homophobic appellation conjures up the formidably brutal tsar, Ivan IV (1530—84), the hero of Eisenstein’s epic movie, *Ivan the Terrible*, parts 1 & 2 (1944—45).

¹² The lines, “‘For God sees how timid and beautiful you really are, and the thoughts of hope that go with you like little white birds—’” (232) and his poem, ‘Thunder Beyond Popocatepetil’ suggest an awareness of Chekhov’s play, *The Seagull* (1896) (Ackerley 228.4).

¹³ He is familiar with the story, *The Seven That Were Hanged* (1909) by Andreyev (the Russian Silver-Age novelist, playwright, and short-story writer) which portrays the thoughts of condemned revolutionaries and peasants who, having received death sentences, await execution (as did Dostoyevsky in 1849) (Lowry (1996) II 71).

292-93. See also (1996) II 885).¹⁴ In *Under the Volcano* he refers to “Gogol, the *Mahabharata*, Blake, Tolstoy, Pontoppidan, the *Upanishads* [...]” in connection with the Consul’s library of “numerous cabbalistic and alchemical books” (178). This collection included works by Éliphas Lévi (1810—75) (the French occultist who first published a treatise on ritual magic), Hyde Clarke (1815—95) (the engineer and philologist), and Aleister Crowley (1875—1947) (the ceremonial magician who founded the religion and philosophy of Thelema) (see Ackerley 175.1, 175.2, and 175.3).

Moreover, Lowry connects us with the spiritual odysseys of *Doctor Faustus* (1604) by Christopher Marlowe (1564—93) and of *Dead Souls* (1842).¹⁵ He refers to Gogol’s “epic poem in prose”—which satirizes greed, bureaucracy, and corruption in tsarist Russia—as being “extraordinarily funny” and “one of the most lyrical and nostalgic novels ever written” (Lowry (1996) II 154).¹⁶ In *Under the Volcano* he reminds us of the mental anguish of a world on the brink of the Second World War (1939—45). In this *tour de force* the Consul wrestles 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” (Lowry (1995) I 506-507).

In *Dark as the Grave wherein my Friend is Laid* Lowry makes analogies with “The Nose” (1835—36), which he considers to be “a superlative story” (Lowry (1996) II 779). Deeming his life to have been written by someone else, Sigbjørn Wilderness introspects himself into a press report, as does Kovalyov in Gogol’s humorous fantasy (see Gogol (1975) 55).

Fyodor Dostoyevsky

Yearning for recognition as “a Canadian Ibsen or Dostoievsky”, Lowry continually cites the latter in his communications (Lowry (1995) I 396).¹⁷ Indeed, he admits 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” (ibid. 183-84). In *Under the Volcano* he names Svidrigailov—an obnoxious, remorseless character in *Crime and Punishment* (1866)—who is intent on winning back Raskolnikov’s sister, Dunya, at any cost. He then proceeds to paraphrase Dostoyevsky’s novel of mental anguish and moral dilemmas to demonstrate the Consul’s perpetual isolation:

Perhaps this was the eternity that he’d been making so much fuss about, eternity already, of the Svidrigailov variety, only instead of a bath-house in the country full of spiders, here it turned out to be a stone monastic cell wherein sat—strange!—who but himself? (296. See also Ackerley 294.7).

¹⁴ His enormous interest in Gogol is revealed in ibid. 274, 625, and 656.

¹⁵ He also brings to mind Gogol’s play, *The Government Inspector* (1836): “Probably they would be calling the Inspector-General” (362).

¹⁶ *Dead Souls* was originally anticipated as a trilogy, fantasizing the passage of its hero, Chichikov from a Dantean inferno, through the purgatory of divine retribution, and upwards towards paradise.

¹⁷ See Lowry (1995) I 96, 322, 325-26, 433, 444, 500, 543, 636, and 642; and (1996) II 53, 104, 131, 424, 426, 518, 820, 822, 842, 849, and 932.

Lev Tolstoy
War and Peace

Lowry's remarks on Lev Tolstoy range from "what a breeze!" to "Tolstoy? [...] what a [n] [...] awful old writer he was" (in criticism of some of his late work) (Lowry (1996) II 932 and (1995) I 96. See also *ibid.* I 189 and 352). In *Under the Volcano* he places particular focus on Tolstoy's major epic, *War and Peace* (1869).¹⁸ Weighing individual freedom against the forces of historical destiny and the Cabbala against Napoleon, the Consul confides in Yvonne:

One of the first penances I ever imposed on myself was to learn the philosophical section of *War and Peace* by heart. That was of course before I could dodge about in the rigging of the Cabbala like a St Jago's monkey. But then the other day I realized that the only thing I remembered about the whole book was that Napoleon's leg twitched— (87. See also Lowry (1995) I 450).¹⁹

Furthermore, the Consul comments on the murals of the Terminal Cantina El Bosque, observing to Señora Gregorio how "the mad pictures of the wolves!" hunt "the occupants [...] of the bar" (232). This contrasts with their pursuit by hounds in Tolstoy's novel: "Incongruously, the Consul was reminded of Rostov's wolf hunt in *War and Peace* [...] the sense of youth, the gaiety, the love!" (*ibid.* See also Ackerley 229.3).²⁰ Later, the Consul maintains to Hugh that such "'misfits'" "'who talk about going to Spain and fighting for freedom'" are "'all good for nothing, cowards, baboons, meek wolves, parasites, every man jack of them, people afraid to face their own responsibilities, fight their own fight, ready to go anywhere, as Tolstoy well perceived—'" (313).²¹ This assertion is somewhat ironic, given Firmin's apparent abdication of responsibility in failing to act to defend himself against the Chief of Rostrums in the final pages of *Under the Volcano*.

The Consul's reflections on Tolstoy develop into a conviction that "when we have absolutely no understanding of the causes of an action [...] the causes, whether vicious or virtuous or what not, we ascribe, according to Tolstoy, a greater element of free will to it" (310). In other words, our awareness of what instigates our deeds, and necessitates them, may reduce our notion of freedom (see Ackerley 308.3, 308.5, and 309.1). In addition, predestination is tied to national destiny in the Consul's dialogue with Hugh when he infers, "Can't you see there's a sort of determinism about the fate of nations?" (311). Yet, Hugh's allusion to the German philosopher, Oswald Spengler (1880—1936) (104) is rather ironic, for the latter's approach to history is contrary to Hugh's communist philosophy of dialectic evolution (see Ackerley 100.6 and 309.5). In *The Decline of the West* (1918—22) Spengler presents a cyclic view of history, contending that civilisations go through the phases of youth and then maturity, before

¹⁸ *War and Peace* provides graphic detail of the impact on Russia of the Napoleonic wars (especially the French invasion of Moscow in 1812) and traces the fortunes of members of five aristocratic families through the whirlwind of providence.

¹⁹ Lowry means the second epilogue, 'The Forces That Move Nations' (see Ackerley 82.4, 175.7, and 308.5). Tolstoy associates Napoleon with the Beast in *Revelation*, 13:8 through the numerical significance of three sixes in succession, as do the Consul (192) and Aleister Crowley (who adopted these digits as his own occult signature) (see Ackerley 82.5, 82.6, and 188.2).

²⁰ Lowry refers to Mikhail Nikanorovich in *War and Peace* as the "old Uncle" (Lowry (1996) II 817).

²¹ Hugh ironically confuses Katamasov with Katavasov, a professor of philosophy in *Anna Karenina*, querying: "'Didn't Katamasov or whoever he was believe that the action of those volunteers was nevertheless an expression of the whole soul of the Russian people?'" (313. See also Ackerley 311.2).

reaching old age and death. In this scenario, Western Europe has entered its final stages of existence.

Anna Karenina

A precursor of the modernist novel, *Anna Karenina* (1877)—with its stream-of-consciousness style—also uses real events to discuss socio-political issues (such as marriage, family, and education), on a personal level. Yet, in his rush to emphasize Tolstoy’s historical determinism, the Consul of *Under the Volcano* is corrected by Hugh for confusing *War and Peace* with *Anna Karenina* (1877) during their conversation about volunteers in the train. He is forced to concede: “‘Well, *Anna Karenina* then...’ the Consul paused” (313). Nevertheless, Lowry himself expresses no empathy with Karenina, who is ostracized by society for her adulterous love affair with Vronsky (for whom she leaves her husband and daughter). Indeed, he contrasts the plight of the cat in “Hello, Tib” (1960)—a short story by the American poet and novelist, Conrad Aiken (1889—1973)—with Anna’s tragic suicide in throwing herself under a train:

Morally her fate has considerably more meaning than that of Anna Karenina under similar circumstances, and her continuance in heaven seems to me far more assured than that of that dame. May endless dances with moths undying in the Elysian Fields be her lot!” (Lowry (1996) II 286).²²

Russian Historical and Political Connections

The Entangling Web of the Spanish Civil War: From Karl Marx to Lenin and Stalin

Alongside the images of the souls of Russian literature in *Under the Volcano*, we have a running commentary on international political events, such as the Spanish Civil War (1936—39). It was fought between democratically-elected Republicans (supported by Marxists in Mexico and the Soviet Union), on the one hand, and the fascist-backed Nationalists (led by General Franco (1939—75)), on the other. It had significant repercussions both for Mexican politics—its government supporting the Republicans—and for individuals: the Consul is confused for being a communist spy by the *Unión Militar*, a violently fascist, Spanish military organization:

The Chief of Rostrums repeated in a glowering voice [...] ‘You say you are a wrider.’ He shoved him again. ‘You no wrider.’ He pushed the Consul more violently, but the Consul stood his ground. ‘You are no a de wrider, you are de espider, and we shoota de espiders in Mejico. [...] You no wrider. [...] ‘You Al *Capón*. You a Jew *chingao*. [...] You are a spider’” (371. See also 373 and 375).

Firmin’s position is, indeed, suspicious, for he is:

an English Consul who could scarcely claim to have the interests of British trade at heart in a place where there were no British interests and no Englishman, the less so when it was considered that England had severed diplomatic relations with Mexico? (35-36).

²² However, Lowry declares that “Under the Volcano is no Anna Karenina, and was not meant to be” (Lowry (1995) I 293). In Greek mythology the Elysian Fields, or Elysium (ruled by Hades) is the final, after-life, resting place of heroic and virtuous souls.

From the outset, Hugh is homophonically associated with Karl Marx (1818—83)—the author of *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and *Das Kapital* (1867). His politics is deemed naïve by Dr Vigil: “In half an hour he’d dismissed him as an irresponsible bore, a professional indoor Marxman, vain and self-conscious really, but affecting a romantic extroverted air” (14). His gullibility is emphasized in his cursory contention to the Consul that ““communism to me is not, essentially, whatever its present phase, a system at all. It is simply a new spirit, something which one day may or may not seem as natural as the air we breathe”” (306).

In *Under the Volcano* Marx is a springboard to the turmoil of the Russian Civil War (1917—22). Confusing the White Russian Consulate with an embassy, the Consul articulates to Yvonne: “I’ve always thought a woman like you would have done very well as attaché to the White Russian Embassy in Zagreb in 1922” (64). Subsequently, he conjures up visions of White army defeats in a hostile Siberian environment to highlight the decorum of Canada: “British Columbia, the genteel Siberia, that was neither genteel nor a Siberia, but an undiscovered, perhaps an undiscoverable paradise” (354. See also Ackerley 59.1).

The theme of communism is a constant one in *Under the Volcano* which projects recurring images of key Bolsheviks, such as Lenin (Vladimir Ulyanov) (1870—1924), Leon Trotsky (Lev Bronshtein) (1879—1940), and Stalin (Joseph Jugashvili) (1879—1953). The Consul is mixed up by the Chiefs of Gardens and Rostrums for being “—*Bolshevisten*” (369) and by the former for being Hugh himself, as he has an incriminating business card in his pocket: “*Federación Anarquista Ibérica*, it said. *Sr Hugo Firmin*” (370). We discover that it was communism which drew Hugh to higher education: “It was largely owing to [...] a kindly quasi-Communist [...] that Hugh gave up his notion of dodging Cambridge” (167). Indeed, as with the Cambridge Five spy ring—some of whom Lowry encountered in the early 1930’s—the lure of reconnaissance activities always had a political dimension for him: “Once a scout you were always a Communist” (175).²³ Stalin is named in connection with Hugh’s communist sympathies, for the latter contemplates: “No, I respect Stalin too, Cárdenas, and Jawaharlal Nehru” (157. See also Ackerley 153.8). Lenin gives him an exaggerated opinion of his achievements in his outbursts of blasphemy:

—The time has come for you to join your comrades, to aid the workers, he told Christ, who agreed. It had been His idea all the while, only until Hugh had rescued Him those hypocrites had kept him shut up inside the burning church where He couldn’t breathe. Hugh made a speech. Stalin gave him a medal and listened sympathetically while he explained what was on his mind [...] He went off, the star of Lenin on his lapel; in his

²³ According to Bowker, “University contemporaries of Lowry’s, Maclean, Burgess, Blunt, Philby and Sykes Davies, not to mention the Haldanes, were to work more or less clandestinely for the communists as the struggle against Hitler accelerated” (Bowker 152-53. See also *ibid.* 200). Both Lowry and Anthony Blunt (1907-83) contributed to the June 1930 edition of the magazine, *The Venture*, which the latter had edited (*ibid.* 109. See also Watson and Willison 1394). Lowry played tennis with Donald Maclean (1913-83) in 1931 and later, in October 1956, claimed, “It seems to me possible that Mclean is a genuine boggert, however, whereas Burgess was simply fulfilling his higher serpent; quien sabe?” (Bowker 135 and Lowry (1996) II 823). He also monitored Russian “humourless actions [...] dictated & timed by a sinister sense of humour” during the “spontaneous” 1956 Hungarian Revolution (*ibid.* (1996) II 849. See also *ibid.* 836, 847, and 848-49).

pocket a certificate; Hero of the Soviet Republic, and the True Church, pride and love in his heart— (242)²⁴

Recurrent mention of Hugh's envisioned award of "the hero of the Soviet Republic and the True Church" (252) provides an ironic reiteration of his mock status, as there was actually no such award as the Star of Lenin—only the Order of Lenin, the highest Soviet decoration for exemplary service to the State, Eisenstein being a recipient.

Leon Trotsky

In exile in Mexico since 1936, Trotsky too creeps into the pages of *Under the Volcano* via the Consul's analogy to the volume of Elizabethan plays—including Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (40)—which, previously, he had lent to M. Laruelle:

'Oh, I shall forgive you then, but will you be able to forgive yourself? Not merely for not having returned it, but because the book will by then have become an emblem of what even now it is impossible to return.' M. Laruelle had taken the book. He wanted it because for some time he had been carrying at the back of his mind the notion of making in France a modern film version of the Faustus story with some such character as Trotsky for its protagonist: [...] (33. See also Ackerley 27.5)

In actual fact, it is Trotsky, for whom the Consul is mistaken when the Chief of Municipality requests his name: "¿Como se llama?" [...] 'Trotsky,' gibed someone from the far end of the counter, and the Consul, beard-conscious flushed" (358). Indeed, Firmin's assassination is a precursor to Trotsky's, by the hand of Ramón Mercader, an undercover NKVD agent, in Coyoacán, Mexico City in August 1940.

A prominent Russian Marxist revolutionary and political theorist of Jewish origin, Trotsky achieved fame through his activities in the October Revolution of November 1917. He was to become the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs (1917—18) and for Army and Naval Affairs (1918—19) (i.e. head of the Red Army) during the ensuing Russian Civil War.²⁵ However, he was also influential in the world of revolutionary art, as was Sergei Eisenstein, with his *montage*. In parallel to Lowry's modernist writing and emancipation of the imagination through new developments in European cinema, Trotsky collaborated with the founder of surrealism, André Breton (1896—1966). Indeed, they co-authored a mission statement—*Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art* (1938)—in which appeared an exposition of capitalist decadence. Also expressed was a desire for the liberation of art from Stalinist social repression, on the one hand, and from the anti-Semitism of Adolf Hitler (1889—1945), on the other. With regard to art, politics, and the misuse of film as an instrument of fascism, the stance taken by the German literary critic and philosopher of the Frankfurt School, Walter Benjamin (1892—1940) was also crucial.²⁶

Trotsky played a significant role in the activities of the Communist International—also known as the Third International and abbreviated to Comintern (1919—43)—especially during the Fourth Congress in November 1922. This organization is reflected in *Under the Volcano's* polarization of world politics into fascist versus

²⁴ The Gold Star medal was introduced in 1939 to distinguish a Hero of the Soviet Republic from other Order of Lenin holders. See also Ackerley 239.5.

²⁵ For Trotsky's rise to power, defeat by Stalin, exile, and assassination in Mexico City, see *ibid.* 28.2.

²⁶ For consideration of *Under the Volcano* in this respect, see Konigsberg 154-55.

communist camps, through its allusions to the Popular Front and to the International Brigades. Endorsed by the Seventh World Congress (1935) of Comintern, the Front united various left-wing political associations—including communist parties—in its battle against fascism. It is referred to as “a very popular front” by the Consul (66). The Brigades travelled to Spain to fight for the Second Spanish Republic (1931—39). Hugh laments their withdrawal, uttering, “So—since they got the Internationals out [...] two days before Chamberlain went to Godesberg” (106)²⁷ Yet, Yvonne harbours “romantic notions about the International Brigade—” (107) and their anthem, asking Hugh, “What do you want a guitar for? Are you going to play the Internationale or something on it, on board your ship?” (328).

From Trotskyism to German Nazism and Anti-Semitism

Under the Volcano plays a pivotal function in contrasting Hugh’s Trotskyist convictions—borne out of the Spanish Civil War—with Stalin’s pragmatism, bizarrely resulting in the infamous Ribbentrop—Molotov (or Nazi-Soviet) Pact of August 1939. Indeed, Hugh foresees this deal by assuming: “‘*And if Russia should prove—*’” (329. See also Ackerley 328.7). Similarly, he is betrayed by the blighted attempts to appease Hitler made by Neville Chamberlain (1869—1940), the British Prime Minister, in signing the Munich Agreement (1938) (103 and 240). He views the latter as a sell-out, not only of Sudetenland and Czechoslovakia, but also of Republican aspirations for Spain (see Ackerley 99.2). As a consequence, we learn that “a form of private anti-Semitism” became part of his existence which “once more began to bear a certain resemblance to Adolf Hitler’s” (174).²⁸ This observation acts as a reminder that even his “early life vaguely recalled that of another frustrated artist, Adolf Hitler” (160).²⁹ Furthermore, “in his day dreams he became the instigator of enormous pogroms—all-inclusive, and, hence, bloodless” (175).³⁰

Such nightmares echo those of the Consul who was court-martialled (and then acquitted) for having “ordered the Samaritan’s stokers to put the Germans in the furnace” (39). He then delves into the “Jewish knowledge!” of the Cabbala, flippantly claiming that “Hitler ... merely wished to annihilate the Jews in order to obtain just such arcana as could be found behind them in his bookshelves” (189-90). Interestingly, this contention is upheld by Lowry who, in his 1946 Letter to Cape, maintains that “Hitler was another pseudo black magician [...] The real reason why Hitler destroyed the Polish Jews was to prevent their cabbalistic knowledge being used against *him*” (Lowry (1995) I 516).

²⁷ See Ackerley 102.6 and 328.7 for the reasons behind the evacuation of the Brigades.

²⁸ Ironically, the surging anti-Semitism of German Nazism associated both communism and capitalism with Jewish materialism.

²⁹ Yet, Hugh’s attitude to Nazism is somewhat contradictory in his occasional criticism of it: “I once saw a Russian film about a revolt of some fishermen... A shark was netted with a shoal of other fish and killed... This struck me as a pretty good symbol of the Nazi system which, even though dead, continues to go on swallowing live struggling men and women!” The Consul’s response is certainly ironic: “It would do just as well for any other system... Including the Communist system” (305. See also 12).

³⁰ Pogroms are organized massacres of ethnic groups, originally of Jews in Russia, or in Eastern Europe.

Pushkin's Resistance Against Oppression

Lowry's empathy with the persecuted—be it with the Consul of *Under the Volcano*, or with the plight of the Jews in Nazi Germany—recalls that of Alexander Pushkin, who tacitly supported the Decembrists in their 1825 Revolt in St Petersburg. He was familiar with Pushkin through the translations of Dr Alexander F. B. Clark, FRCS at the University of British Columbia, with whom he corresponded (see Lowry (1996) II 105-106). Demonstrating his “serious spirit of Pushkinship”, he perceived—with regard to the 1938 translation of Pushkin's narrative poem—that “Edmund Wilson did one good one of the Bronze Horseman” (ibid. 889 and 105).³¹

With its 'hell oil refinery, Lowry's “The Forest Path to the Spring” (1961) reminds us of our natural environment and the strife of humanity—a strife which plays such a prominent role in Evgeny's defiance of the authority of Peter the Great (1672—1725) in *The Bronze Horseman* (1833). In Pushkin's poem, it is the Tsar who is perceived as having failed to protect his subjects from the onslaught of the 1824 Flood of the River Neva in St Petersburg, the then capital of Russia. In Lowry's lyrical novella, it is to “the very elements, harnessed only for the earth's ruination and man's greed” that its author appeals, for they “turn against man himself”, seeking vengeance in the forest fire whose incessant incursion “is almost like a perversion of the movement of the inlet” (Lowry (1991) 241, 245, and 260). Nature is, we discover, capable of regeneration and decontamination from any violation of the purity of Eridanus (ibid. 236 and 281).

Conclusion

To conclude, influenced by his reading of nineteenth-century Russian literature and his assimilation of ideas springing from the font of Russian thinkers, Malcolm Lowry combines East-West philosophies through an astute perception of the interdependence of cultures and civilizations. A modernist, yet Romantic visionary, his Russian connection rejuvenates his subconscious, imaginative intuition in his spiritual pursuit of truth, harmony, and co-existence in a belligerent world.

³¹ He also commends the influence of A. S. Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* (1825) (Lowry (1996) II 155) and *Mozart and Salieri* (1830) (ibid. 105-106. See also ibid. 885 and 894).

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