‘Lowrytrek’
Towards a psychogeography of Malcolm Lowry’s Wirral

Like a man stomping with heavy steps towards a murder, towards Calder, towards Hoylake, along the sandy edge of the links, then at the last minute veering away, and down the Mersey to Paradise Street ¹

(Fig. 1 the river Mersey going out to sea)

One of the finest, and most succinct, definitions of psychogeography was printed in the first edition of the journal Internationale Situationniste (June, 1958):

**Psychogeography** The study of the specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions of individuals.²

The document was unsigned but numerous experiments utilising this method, developed out of surrealism and the practices of Baudelaire’s flâneur, appeared thereafter contributing to an intriguing if haphazard bolus. When seeking out a new way


² ‘Definitions’ in Libero Andreotti and Xavier Costa (eds), *Theory of the Dérive and Other Situationist Writings on the City* (Barcelona: Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 1996), pp. 68-71
of approaching the works of the British writer Malcolm Lowry, the psychogeographic mode seems to me to be extremely useful. This is particularly true when attempting to associate in some way Lowry’s stories, letters and poems with the geographical locations that they were born out of (in this instance one of the important locations—Lowry’s birthplace on the Wirral peninsula in Cheshire). This landscape clearly had a profound effect on the young Lowry and impregnated not just his early writings, based on aspects of the travel and the ocean, but also his imaginary journey along ‘The Voyage That Never Ends’.

Why do a psychogeography of Malcolm Lowry? Perhaps in order to answer Brian O’Kill’s question: ‘why does nobody write like this anymore?’ O’Kill identifies a peculiar problem with reading Lowry ‘eighty years on’ born out the observation that Lowry’s influences, style, perceptions look to the past (Melville, Poe, Gogol) yet are at the same time ‘modern’ even ‘beyond modernism...a precursor of today’s postmodernism’. Lowry’s writings are complex, mysterious, archaic and experimental. Lowry’s totally unique style then cannot be read in conventional literary critical modes and this is perhaps why his work has faded so rapidly from the general critical canon (in the same way that the early surrealist and expressionist models of reading that Lowry revered were replaced by more ‘ideological’ models of criticism). Perhaps anyway Lowry answers the question himself in one of his early letters (to his mentor Conrad Aiken) when he orders himself: “I must...identify a finer scene: I must in other words give an imaginary scene identity through an immediate sensation of actual experience”.

That scene is psychogeographical.

This essay therefore attempts an introductory approach to Lowry’s texts and to the landscape of his life from a psychogeographical perspective. A text is only part of the effect. The rest must be achieved out in the ‘real’ world with a pair of stout boots, one of Lowry’s books and a hip flask of very strong drink.

It’s no surprise that with its emphasis on imagination, movement, mysticism and consciousness that psychogeography has been recently adopted as a means of interpreting literary texts. The psychogeographic approach can sniff out hidden aspects of a writer’s work; but it can also importantly take the reader of Lowry’s texts away from the page and into the ‘real’ environment. The trick is to import some aspects of the text (fragments, poetry, illustrations, lists, images) with you into the landscape. Then, augmented by the physical world and any stimulus that the drifter wishes to partake of, the world opens up and the difference between dreams and reality becomes less clear. Lowry, of course, did a superb job of transporting the reader into different and unusual

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3 Brian O’Kill, ‘Why Does Nobody Write Like This Anymore?’ in Sue Vice (ed), Malcolm Lowry Eighty Years On (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 9-17

4 Harvey Breit and Margerie Bonner Lowry (eds) Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 8
worlds (even if these were of the self) and really can’t be bettered. But a trip through Lowry’s physical world acts as an extra dimension to his words and expressions.

Psychogeography provides the opportunity for experimenting with a particular geographical location. Guy Debord wrote that ‘Psychogeography, retaining a rather pleasing vagueness, can thus be applied to the findings arrived at by this type of investigation, to their influence on human feelings, and even more generally to any situation or conduct that seems to reflect the same spirit of discovery’.  

The variety of possible combinations of ambience in a curious place like a Cheshire peninsula ‘gives rise to feelings as differentiated and complex as any form of spectacle can evoke’. The Wirral can be a place as weird and disturbing as any textual fantasy.

It is true that most ‘psychogeographical’ experiments have taken place within the urban environment: capital cities such as Paris or London for example. But there is no reason why a place such as Merseyside cannot be effective for psychogeographical exploration. George Melly (a native of Liverpool) once noted London’s failure to establish itself as a centre for surrealism, ascribing this to the city’s ‘masculinity’ and ‘oafishness’.  

Melly’s argument- that ‘Surrealism...has lodged principally in provincial minds’- supports the idea that places such as Liverpool are ripe for psychogeographical experimentation. Furthermore, it is possible that a rural location can yield interesting and significant psychogeographical occurrences, as a drift across to and around the peninsula will prove. Although Lowry portrayed his childhood on the Wirral as one of ‘perpetual gloom’ (to quote his brother Russell), the proximity of nature and the sea to this home had a marked effect on his work. To some extent, Lowry’s sensitive nature thrived in such a peaceful place, an escape from the urbanity he felt ill at ease in.

The Consul on the Left Bank

Of all the writers admired by the theorists of psychogeography- the Situationist International (SI), and their precursors the Lettrist International (LI)- both radical groups of late twentieth century thinkers, artists, poets, madmen and drunks- Malcolm Lowry particularly stands out. In a letter to Patrick Straram sent out on the Day of the Dead in 1960, Guy Debord (chief theorist of the SI) wrote: ‘I had the occasion, and the time, to reread it (Under the Volcano) entirely, toward the beginning of September, on a train between Munich and Gênes. I had found it more fine, and more intelligent, than in 1953 despite loving it a lot then’. Many of the Situationists lived their lives as imitations of Lowry’s anti-hero ‘The Consul’ (and therefore perhaps Lowry himself). One of the few English members of the collective Ralph Rumney, a tall and well-read painter, was even nicknamed ‘The Consul’ by French members of the group. The

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Consul’s words from *Under the Volcano*—“Nothing in the world was more terrible than an empty bottle! Unless it was an empty glass” was a philosophy favoured for the SI’s numerous drunken dérives (the practice of drifting through geographical spaces in an experimental manner) about the less salubrious districts of Paris. An entire chapter of Debord’s autobiography was devoted to the Lowry/Consul-esque notion that ‘There is nothing like beer to straighten you out’.

Both the LI and the SI took from Lowry his superb technique in capturing the human spirit in crisis and the failure of ‘modern man’ to come to terms with the awfulness of contemporary existence. However, like Lowry, and the characters in his works, they seek out and find small fragments of salvation in nature, poetry, love, alcohol. Lowry’s characters commonly enjoy or endure ‘a technique of transient passage through varied ambiences’. For the LI and the SI this amounted to a ‘mode of experimental behaviour linked to the conditions of urban society’; Lowry’s characters escape to the wilderness away from the city (think of the ‘Eridanus’ in ‘Forest Path to the Spring’) but this is not entirely contradictory. Debord later retired to an austere part of the Auvergne, his final parting shot to the spectacle he had always despised.

The alcoholic figure moves in and out of reality perceiving the human condition for ‘what it is’ and recounting the responses to this of a ‘doomed man’. In Paris, like Debord, Lowry showed a ‘marked preference for those dim taverns off the beaten track, little frequented unless by a handful of workmen in dungarees’. The trap that all humans find themselves within is evident in *Under the Volcano* as it is the later writings and films of Debord. Debord and Lowry both felt estranged from their ‘designated’ roles: Debord regularly called himself a filmmaker while Lowry insisted on being described as a poet. For both, alcoholism was an antidote: ‘Gin and orange juice best cure for alcoholism real cause of which is ugliness and complete baffling sterility of existence as sold to you’ Lowry once wrote, a philosophy with which the French radicals and their critiques of post-war capitalism would surely concur.

It was not Debord, however, but the tragic figure of Ivan Chtcheglov that created the finest psychogographical work— his 1953 essay *Formulary for a New Urbanism*. Chtcheglov’s text is still the most useful ‘manual’ for an experimental drift through an ambient location and one that we could use on Merseyside. In the essay he begins by lamenting the Paris that is now lost (to urban development) and decrying the current

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9 Francillon 'My Friend Malcolm', pp. 96

‘boredom’ of the city. Through aimlessly wandering, Chtcheglov finds solace in the strange place names of Parisian features:

**Hotel of Strangers**

**Saint Anne Ambulance**

**Showerbath of the Patriarchs**

**Notre Dame Zoo**

**The swimming pool on the Street of Little Girls**

These peculiar ambiences throw new light on the locations. ‘Certain shifting angles, certain receding perspectives, allow us to glimpse original conceptions of space, but his vision remains fragmentary’. What are described are new perceptions of space, time and behaviour, all themes expressed in Lowry’s writings. Chtcheglov, like Lowry, draws on the atmospheric writings of the past in order to re-invent the present (Victor Hugo, Dumas, Poe). Chtcheglov considered the dérive akin to a form of psychoanalysis and was ‘a good replacement for a mass’. The paintings of Claude Lorrain evoke a ‘perpetual invitation to voyage’. Lowry will have felt the same pull gazing out across the oceans.

**The Map is Not the Territory**

Lowry's writing can be read as psychogeographic. Lowry takes the ‘map’ of a location documenting and reworking poetically the experience individuals experience drifting through that terrain. For chapter ten of *Under the Volcano* Lowry took a Mexican cantina menu and reproduced it in the narrative of the novel, using the often strange language of the translations of the dishes to spring off into other fields of expression and suggestion. The accidental experiential nature of the object here is important; it is no longer a cartography but a poetic terrain. In 1957 Debord took a map of Paris and cut it up collaging it back into a new ensemble called *The Naked City* (heralding, incidentally, the Situationist technique of détournement). Again, the original meaning of the object is forgotten or overwritten by new meaning. Lowry’s use of quotations and references, whilst causing him much anguish (especially in relation to Conrad Aiken and Nordahl Grieg) was echoed in his protégée David Markson’s novel *Reader’s Block*. If only Lowry had been aware (perhaps he was?) of Lautréamont’s dictum much beloved of the surrealists and Situationists: ‘Plagiarism is necessary…it clasps an author’s sentence tight, uses his expressions, eliminates a false idea, replaces it with the right idea’. 11

The patterns evident in life and the natural world could be utilised in artistic expression. Lowry’s famous letter to Jonathan Cape justifying the form of the

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manuscript for Under the Volcano arguing the case for it to be published as it stands, reads like a journey or a walk through the terrain of a great artistic sensibility. The ‘subject’ (ostensibly the publisher, Cape, but subsequently the reader) is guided through the novel by Lowry but is invited to reflect and drift. He speaks of the reader at the beginning of the novel thinking ‘God, this is tough going’ but being driven on by ‘reports which had already reached his ears of the rewarding vistas further on’. The first chapter...sets..the mood and tone of the book as well as the slow melancholy tragic rhythm of Mexico itself-its sadness- and above all else establishes the terrain’. 12 The author leads the reader through the pages and the place acknowledging that along the way they will discover ceaseless wonders.

Much has been written about Lowry’s fascination with the occult and the appearance of cabbalistic imagery in his works. This too, I would argue, has a psychogeographical aspect to it. Critics (especially literary ones) tend to be dismissive of Lowry’s enthusiasm for the work of Charles Fort, G.I. Gurdjieff and P.D. Ouspensky. Yet Ouspensky’s creation (or adoption, depending on which account you favour) of the ‘Fourth Dimension’ in Tertium Organum echoes aspects of the dérive. In his work Ouspensky was interested in accounting for a new order of experience, the myriads of thought and experience are incomprehensible to the usual human way of viewing phenomena. Lowry (and the psychogeographers) sought to explore though physical and textual drifting, a variant of such a vision. The ‘passage of a few people through a brief moment in time’ suggests an Ouspenskian mode: ‘The true motion which lies at the basis of everything is the motion of thought’. 13

Quoting Katherine Mansfield (herself a devotee of Gurdjieff), Lowry states ‘Major literature, in short, is an initiation into truth’. 14 For Lowry the Cabala was ‘a system of thought that creates a magical world within this one’. Lowry was also influence by W.B. Yeats’ esoteric concept of the ‘physical-psychic experience’ (Lowry called it the ‘single psychic experience’). Yeats’ book A Vision combines anecdote, automatic writing, observation, occult speculation. It is a difficult with an unusual, confusing and ornate form (Lowry described his own work as having a ‘churrigueresque’ structure) and is obscure much in the way that Lowry’s texts, borrowing heavily from Yeats- especially the symbolic image of the ‘wheel’- would be criticised for being. (Interestingly, a hypertext companion to A Vision is available, made with the intention of making the work more accessible and easy to navigate [http://www.yeatsvision.com]. One wonders if a similar project may be useful for Lowry’s works, making a ‘drift’ through the text a ‘virtual’ possibility).

12 Breit and Bonner Lowry (1985), pp. 58


For Yeats the phantasmagoria is defined as a shifting series of real or imaginary figures as seen in a dream or created as an effect in a film. This theme is echoed in the articulations of the importance of ‘glimpsed phenomena’ evident in early writings on psychogeography. The borders of the mind, like those of the landscape are constantly shifting and blurring. And so any trek around a landscape such as the Wirral shifts and blurs, changes focus; its form is transformed by the sea mist, by the destructive imposition of architecture (the ventilation shafts of the Mersey Tunnel; a lighthouse) and by mind altering substances. Recurring symbols, whether they be in poetry, stories or a landscape are to the psychogeographical imagination, bearers of meaning and cohesion. The notion of a recurring cycle of events was of great significance for Lowry.

Leys and ‘The Leys’: Psychogeography, Liverpool and Cuernavaca

Undertaking his own dérive through the life and works of Gustave Flaubert, Julian Barnes asks: ‘Why does the writing make us chase the writer...Why aren’t the books enough?’. Barnes is intrigued by two of Flaubert’s ‘unfinished books’ much in same way that Lowry scholars obsess over his mostly unfinished oeuvre. Lowry admired Flaubert (Markson describes Madame Bovary as one of Lowry’s ‘big books’ and there are parallels between the two writers. Like Flaubert, Lowry couches his complaints in ‘letters of astonishing fluency’. Flaubert came to resent the success of Madame Bovary, his masterpiece which ‘makes others see him as a one-book author’. But this kind of exercise can be very effective; drifting through the detritus of a writer’s life and works,

15 Julian Barnes, Flaubert’s Parrot (Basingstoke and Oxford: Picador, 1985), pp. 2


17 Barnes, Flaubert’s Parrot (1985), pp. 25
making one’s own ‘sense’ of the fragments collected along the way (and other writers have done this with urban landscapes, especially Paris: Louis Aragon; Walter Benjamin; Edmund White). With Lowry it is useful also to take a ‘physical’ trip around his work and early life and this is what the walk is all about. In *Rings of Saturn*, the German writer W.G Sebald undertook a walking tour of Suffolk coast spinning off from his supposed route into history, memory, art and death, and this could serve as an inspiration for the Wirral experience. But what we find on such an excursion?

The undertaking of a psychogeographic walk around Lowry’s Wirral (rather than Mexico) is not a perverse as it first seems. As Janet and Colin Bord note in their book *Mysterious Britain*, the Wirral is one of the areas of the UK not yet fully explored for its zodiac mirrored trackways and leys. It is suspected that a formation of ley lines occurs on this site and it would be useful for any Lowry excursion around the location to bear this unusual aspect in mind (one aspect of the psychogeographic approach is to follow randomly selected/composed routes). Lowry would approve of such a mystical component to his birthplace, aside from the obvious attraction of linking the name of his former public school with the ‘old straight tracks’. A psychogeography of the Wirral is an exercise. Like Debord’s *Naked City* map we can take the terrain apart and crate our own new route(s) through and around the locations of Lowry’s past. In addition the psychogeographical offers the possibility of imbuing existing places with new meanings. This, for example, is a location spotted on a recent drift across the terrain:

(Fig.3 Photograph of ‘Lowry Bank’)

Scenes such as this offer great psychogeographic potential. Beyond ‘Lowry Bank’ is the river Mersey and the route out to the sea was crucial for Lowry. The most satisfying drift around the Wirral keeps on close to the water or to pints along the route where even if the sea is not visible its presence is felt. The Hoylake golf course, home to the ‘Hell Bunker’, is a good example of this where the tranquillity and staidness of the golf course and its club house are haunted by the sea waves beyond. It’s impossible not to imagine the young Lowry driving his golf balls across the green but dreaming of the vast indifferent ocean and what it holds for the intrepid traveller. Lowry’s works were born of sea and tragically died in flames.
Using the principles of psychogeographical techniques such as the ‘Naked City’ or the ‘Exquisite corpse’ is it possible to find, for example, Cuernavaca on Merseyside? Debord’s ‘Exercise in Psychogeography’ (Potlach #2) or ‘Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography’ offers such possibilities. In the latter piece Debord relates the anecdote of a friend who ‘wondered though the Harz region of Germany while blindly following the directions of a map of London. The former advocates the collecting of aphorisms/place names/characters and twisting them into surprising new formations (‘Claude Lorrain is psycho-geographical in the juxtaposition of a palace neighbourhood and the sea’ 18). Anyway, Lowry himself suggests such a methodology. Ackerley and Clipper note how Lowry drew on Melville’s Redburn for inspiration: the young hero of that text adopting an antiquated map of Liverpool to help him navigate the city19. Lowry quotes sections from a Mexican (Tlaxcala) travel folder in chapter ten of Under the Volcano. Photography is advisable: Rumney once set out to record a dérive around Venice that resulted in the work ‘The Leaning Tower of Venice’. The images augment the text to exhibit and recreate the various sites of interest. Of course these images are not usually the ‘conventional’ tourist view of the city but are trained instead on the hidden aspects of the location. His ‘late’ submission of this document led to his expulsion from the SI.

Regardless of the tools employed to assist the drift, one adopts the psychogeographical mode upon setting out on a walk around a place such as the Wirral. It is this that can lead to a stimulating discoveries and the passage to the fourth dimension of a writer’s work.


Conclusion

The conditions of the theory of psychogeography are inherent in the work of Malcolm Lowry. Psychogeography involves both the dropping of the usual motives for movement and action (‘the drift’) but at the same time calculation and recording of the possibilities of such a dérive. I believe that to some extent this is how Lowry worked: he let his poetic sensibilities flow creating a mesmerising hypnotic word play and terrain. Yet at the same time as a writer was careful to record everything and shape it into a textual piece capable of being fixed and read by another individual. It was once said of Ralph Rumney that his belief was that ‘The production of artefacts is valueless unless it is born out of a firm and consistent philosophy of life’. Lowry did not manage to complete his masterpiece ‘The Voyage that Never Ends’; nor perhaps should he have. As Chctcheglov noted year ago (and as a psychogeography of ‘that terrible city where the main street is the ocean’ confirms): ‘dreams spring from reality and are realised in it’.  

Despite wishing to ‘alternately to kill Liverpool and myself’ the landscape and the ghosts of Lowry’s past are still there. Malcolm Lowry was one of the few artists to have in my view capable of achieving this dimension.

‘My imagination leads me to visualise a sort of battle between life and delirium, in which life...is fighting to give that delirium a form, a meaning’

(Malcolm Lowry)

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20 Gilles Ivain (Ivan Chctcheglov) in Andreotti and Costa (1996), pp. 15

21 Breit and Bonner Lowry (1985), pp. 8

22 Malcolm Lowry ‘Work in Progress’, (1988), pp. 74