

On the Pastoral Challenge in Lowry's "The Forest Path to the Spring"

What characterizes the modern pastoral? One argument stresses its self-consciousness, making the reader ambivalent toward any latter-day voice that professes the idyllic (Lindenberger 345). To others, pastoral in its modern guise is by necessity "predicated on the world (of civilization, urbanity, or technology)," and must hence give expression to these forces also *within* its own setting (Peck 76). These views both suggest that the barriers between a pastoral realm and the outside world have been dismantled. At best, the result will be a civil dialectic; at worst, a civil war. The pessimistic appraisal will then find the modern pastoral an aberration that breaks "all traditional patterns" and ends in parody (Poggioli 33).

But is this necessarily so? Does the modern pastoral present a set of obsolete themes and motifs, only to mock and dismantle them? Or does it rather engage contrary forces in an attempt at reconciliation? I shall argue here for the latter position in a reading of Malcolm Lowry's "The Forest Path to the Spring." As I hope to show, the speaker of "Forest Path" employs a variety of pastoral strategies while continually testing their effectiveness. A process of iteration underlies his narrative, whereby a pastoral ideology is alternately confirmed and denied.¹

"The Forest Path to the Spring" is included in the posthumously published *Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*, a collection of tales and short novels² published after Lowry's death.³ "Forest Path" has interesting parallels with Thoreau's *Walden*, but also displays a deeper crisis as underlying both landscape and narrator.⁴ The struggle to maintain a

retreat—and to receive spiritual salvation from it—makes for a severe test of the pastoral *pharmakon* in Lowry's text.

The narrator of "Forest Path" is a jazz musician, former seaman and alcoholic. In the words of Lowry's biographer Douglas Day, "his equilibrium can be maintained only with the utmost care" (456). The protagonist exemplifies a pastoral speaker as recently characterized by Paul Alpers, that is, a voice modulated by humble and dependent circumstances typical of the traditional shepherd or swain.⁵ The speaker may blend into his or her environment, yet remain without power to influence it (13-28; 93; 185). Alpers emphasizes music as an important aspect of the pastoral, as it characteristically concerns itself with "songs and colloquies that express and thereby seek to redress separation, absence, or loss" (81). In "Forest Path," song becomes an integral part of the couple's life, and the narrator's quest evolves into one of writing an opera about their new circumstances. Integration emerges as the essential task of Lowry's narrator: to combine past with present; self with nature; experience with art, while the enterprise remains constantly in peril.⁶ The narrative of "Forest Path" can thus be read as a debate on the validity of the pastoral. It explores whether a modern, permeable environment would sustain the life and voice of a pastoral speaker.

Most commentators agree that "Forest Path" is conspicuously autobiographical.⁷ To one critic, "it is fiction only to the extent that Lowry selects and alters details of his personal history to fit a design, in much the way that Thoreau telescopes the time he spent at Walden to accord with the cycle of the seasons" (Cross 99).⁸ Another commentator stresses that the text is dedicated to "Margerie, my wife" and describes a life at "Eridanus" closely modeled after the Lowrys' years in Dollarton. Further, "the narrator's fear of eviction, his tendency to see projections of his own mind in the external world, his attempt to escape the tyranny of his ego and to transcend his past ... all suggest that the narrator is yet another of Lowry's self-portraits" (McCarthy 204-05; see Dodson 35). The Lowrys arrived in British Columbia in 1940, renting a squatter's shack on the foreshore of Burrard Inlet near the village of Dollarton. Here they found seclusion and a way of life "dying out of the world" (*Selected Letters* 314). As Sheryl Salloum argues, the seafront environment had "a vitalizing impact on Lowry, and its 'conjunction of favoring yet opposing circumstances' [*October Ferry to Gabriola* 197] came to have personal and artistic significance for him" (11-12).

Critics also tend to agree on the character of "Forest Path." One commentator sees it as a "genuine meditation" (Day 456), another sees a "devotional

impulse underlying the novella" (Cross 99), while others argue that it "encapsulates a spiritual struggle that runs through *Hear Us O Lord*" (McCarthy 205; see Epstein 130-44). In my view, the quest for an existence modelled after a pastoral ideology in "Forest Path" parallels its narrator's struggle for spiritual health. I will therefore pay special attention to the interaction between landscape and narrator, and further to the attitudes and struggles he displays toward the world of civilization and its virtues.

"Forest Path" signals that it involves a pastoral project when the narrator relates the circumstances of the couple's arrival and settling. He first⁹ describes Eridanus as a "hamlet" without "any neighbors to speak of" (*FPS* 220). The couple's decision to stay comes, appropriately enough, on the morning after Labour Day, "years ago at the beginning of the war" (*FPS* 226). They arrive from their city on the last day of vacation for the working majority. Eridanus then seems "hidden but noisy," reminding them of "a fifth-rate seaside resort" (*FPS* 226; 227). The couple's hopes of swimming in the inlet the same afternoon are thwarted by a foul stench from an oil spill. After a night's sleep in a rented seafront shack, however, their sentiments change. They now encounter a "scene of absolute emptiness and solitude," where the sunrise brings both mountain pines and power lines into relief, and a foghorn sounds "as if some great symphony had just begun its opening chords" (*FPS* 228). Realizing the promise of their location, the couple also notices the amazing cleansing powers of the returning tide: "down the inlet the oil tanker had vanished, and with it the oil slick; the tide was high and cold and deep and we swam, diving straight off the porch" (*FPS* 228; see also 235). Surrounding their newfound Arcadia is range upon range of mountains ("these peaks ... were ... guardians"; *FPS* 229), with coniferous forest stretching down towards the beach and their seafront home. The narrator accentuates the sheltered nature of their location: "Since we were in a bay *within* the inlet, the city, like the town—by which latter I mean Eridanus Port at the sawmill—the city was invisible to us, *behind* us ... was our feeling" (*FPS* 217-18).

Yet despite its professed seclusion, the Eridanus environment is at best a "middle landscape" in Leo Marx's sense (31). Dotted with factories and infrastructure, it can equally strike one as an outright industrial milieu. Tellingly, the narrator of "Forest Path" describes his local train as a quaint relic, even as an object of nostalgia, among the heavy industrial works sur-

rounding the inlet (*FPS* 281). While *Walden's* protagonist compares his locomotive alternately to a "devilish Iron Horse" or "bloated pest," its whistle sounding like "the wild scream of a hawk," Lowry's narrator hears a clearly domesticated "moo" (*Walden* 192 & 115; *FPS* 281). A pastoral realm is nevertheless defiantly proclaimed in "Forest Path." The narrator evaluates his new circumstances as "poverty stricken and abject in the eyes of the world," and yet "the world outside—so portentous in its prescriptions for man of imaginary needs that were in reality his damnation—was hell" (*FPS* 242-43). The forest spring becomes his rejuvenating nexus and ultimate pastoral marker: "It is a nuisance," he says, "but not insignificant, that I have to use the same word for this as for the season" (*FPS* 254).

Travelling to the city on a brief errand one winter day, the narrator immediately yearns for Eridanus. The contrast between the two environments is stark:

The city ... had begun to render our existence [at Eridanus] an almost impossible fable, so that I seemed to know with sad foresight how even its richest comforts that one day we might in cowardice yearn for, and finally have, would almost suffocate all memory of the reality and wealth of such a life as ours, the city, with its steam heat, its prison bars of Venetian blinds, its frozen static views of roofs and a few small dingy gardens with clipped shrubs that looked, in the winter dusk, like chicken croquettes covered with powdered sugar. (*FPS* 252)

In the face of mightier physical adversaries, Lowry's narrator ultimately posits the Eridanus shacks as defense. They are "shrines of ... integrity and independence," "helpless yet stalwart symbol[s] of man's hunger and need for beauty" (*FPS* 245; 232). Considering them "simple and primitive," he still wonders at their inherent complexity in surviving "the elemental forces [they] had to withstand" (*FPS* 232).

As in Thoreau's *Walden*, the pastoral strategy of "Forest Path" gains much of its definition by the forces that oppose it. These are considerably stronger than those in *Walden*, for several reasons. The landscape is far more industrialized, and also exposed to severe damage by the elements. The revolution of the seasons that structures both works is a harsher process in "Forest Path." As the couple live as squatters, eviction also threatens, whereas *Walden's* Thoreau has pragmatically secured permission from his landowner. Further, as compared to the strong and confident protagonist of *Walden*, the narrator of "Forest Path" speaks from a considerably weaker position: "my health had been ruined by late hours and one-night stands," he confesses, later adding that "I must have stumbled into a thousand alcoholic dawns" (*FPS* 230; 248). Wanting the resolve of *Walden's* pioneer,

Lowry's narrator initially emphasizes the difficulties of staying on at Eridanus. While projecting his doubts on his spouse, he leaves no question about his own uncertainty: "how hard it would be to actually live here, for my wife to cope [without] ordinary comforts of any kind" (*FPS* 231). Ironically, while yearning for a benevolent retreat the narrator finds himself alienated from nature and lacking practical knowledge of survival. He enters into his new life naked, and must (re)learn what a pastoral protagonist like Thoreau's can largely take for granted.

Lowry's narrator continues to see the war as an ominous presence. In Virgilian fashion it looms as an ultimate if tragic symbol of civilization, to which the "Forest Path" speaker feels himself inextricably bound: "while people were dying ... it was hard to be really happy within oneself... what could one do with one's happiness?" (*FPS* 230). His sense of obligation eventually prompts him to apply—without success—to the military. He maintains that "it was a matter of simple honor to attempt to fit myself for the slaughter if humanly possible, and it was as much this as for my marriage that I had given up my old life of night clubs" (*FPS* 231; see also 269).

Yet the narrator eventually comes to fear that he may lose his new life. As the positive effects of staying on take hold of him, he becomes depressed: "One night ... I saw my shadow ... and [it] seemed for a moment the glowing embodiment of all that threatened us; yes, even a projection of that dark chaotic side of myself, my ferocious destructive ignorance" (*FPS* 233). The narrator reminds himself not to let "pride in this humbleness spoil everything" (*FPS* 251). Later, he and Margerie make up their own horror story, in which they both disappear while walking towards the nearby spring. "This story," the narrator says, "was [perhaps] a means of propitiating fate for the miraculous fact that we had not been separated by not assuming it to be a smug certitude, a form of inoculation, since we still might be separated by the war" (*FPS* 269).

Intense hatred also threatens the narrator, enveloping everything but his wife. "I had access to the fearful wrath that was sweeping the world, or ... stood at the mercy of the wild forces of nature ... like the dreadful Wendigo, the avenging, man-hating spirit of the wilderness, the fire-tortured forest, that the Indians feared and believed in still" (*FPS* 243). Mirroring this surging emotion, the forest fire is described as a force that "sometimes suddenly turns back on its tracks and even commits suicide, behaving as if it had an idiot mind of its own" (*FPS* 243). Indeed, the narrator is once shocked at finding a length of rope along his path: "that is the awful end of such

thoughts. Had I actually been tempted to kill myself?" (*FPS* 260). Finally, he gains control of his self-loathing by identifying it as something sprung from his new surroundings. He begins to appreciate his environment while realizing its fragility: "After all it was not human beings I hated but the ugliness they made in the image of their own ignorant contempt for the earth" (*FPS* 246).

All along the couple acknowledge the difficulties of their new condition. Practical problems like obtaining water and fuel are compounded by latent feelings of inferiority and doubt. When a new family arrives at Eridanus whose values consist of "keeping up with the Joneses," the narrator admits of himself and his wife that "even [we] ourselves were not entirely absolved from identifying [our Eridanus] life with 'failure'" (*FPS* 246). Coming to terms with his emotions and gaining bodily strength, however, the narrator realizes that the major threat to their new life will come not from nature or inner hesitation, but from a society at odds with itself:

Civilization, creator of deathscapes, like a dull-witted fire of ugliness and ferocious stupidity—so unimaginative it had even almost managed to spoil the architectural beauty of our oil refinery—had spread all down the opposite bank, ... murdering the trees and taking down the shacks as it went, but it had become baffled by the Indian reserve, and a law that had not been repealed that forbade building too near a lighthouse, so to the south we were miraculously saved by civilization itself ... as if it too had become conscious of the futility of pretending that it was advancing by creating the moribund. (*FPS* 276)

While civilization here ironically parallels but also surpasses the Indian Wendigo, its most acute threat to the couple remains eviction.¹⁰ Although such action must ultimately be sanctioned by the local authorities (and never is, at least not during their described stay), it is prefigured by the city press and intolerant motorboaters, who display an openly mocking and hostile attitude towards the squatters (*FPS* 237; 274).¹¹ The narrator gives a brilliantly ironic illustration of this sentiment by shifting perspective from his own vantage at the beginning of "Forest Path." Instead of simply describing the nearby geography as seen from the shack, he invites the reader to a cruise both temporal and spatial: "If you can imagine yourself taking a pleasure steamer down the inlet from the city some afternoon" (*FPS* 218), you would eventually

be cutting across our bay with our little cabins under the trees on the beach where we lived at Eridanus, and that was our path going along the bank; but you would be able to see from your steamer what we could not, ... into Eridanus Port—or, if this happens to be today, what was Eridanus Port and is now a real

estate subsection; perhaps you would still see people waving at you before that though, and the man with the megaphone on your steamer who points out the sights would say contemptuously, 'Squatters; the government's been trying to get them off for years,' and that would be ourselves, my wife and me, waving to you gaily. (*FPS* 218-19)

If the reader feels uncomfortable at "being" on this vessel, or at least at the boat guide's derogatory comments, the narrator nevertheless persists, turning his irony into disgust. To him tourism—of which the steamer company of course is part—adulterates the landscape and caters to degenerate popular demand. Describing the "marvelous region of wilderness" that the boat tour traverses, he turns to note its present state: "[here] you may even today, among the advertisements for dyspeptic soft poisons nailed to trees, have ... a cup of chill weak tea with a little bag in it at a place called Ye Olde Totemlande Inne" (*FPS* 219).

Civilization's other major threat to the couple's retreat is a radical alteration of the landscape. They lack defenses against any such development, not owning the strip of land they inhabit: "When they spoke of damming the inlet, when a British brewery interest later talked of turning the whole place into a stagnant fresh water basin ... it was as if for a moment the sources of my own life trembled and agonized and dried up within me," the narrator says (*FPS* 235). Thus he links his former alcoholism with torpidity, while the influences of the sea are rendered as those of a pure, cleansing water.

Given the difficulties facing the couple, it is perhaps tempting to call their retreat an impossible dream. But life at Eridanus, with all its hardships, is also benign. The narrator rises from his guilt and becomes capable of happiness. His wife and their new environment aid his recovery: "Through [Margerie] I became susceptible to these moods and changes and currents of nature, as to its ceaseless rotting into humus of its fallen leaves and buds—nothing in nature suggested you died yourself more than that, I began to think—and burgeoning towards life" (*FPS* 247). Margerie's sensibility influences the narrator to speculate about the cyclic revolutions of nature. He grasps for a philosophy that makes sense of his own experience. What finally reconciles him to his past and present is partly the transitional character of nature. As this cyclic force becomes apparent to him, it also turns into a powerful metaphor for his own recovery. It allows him, as he ultimately sees it, to "die" away from his old life and memories, only to be "reborn" in conjunction with the greater processes of nature (*FPS* 268).

The narrator likens his own shifting thoughts to the motions of the

Eridanus inlet: “though they were in motion they were in order too: an inlet does not overflow its banks, however high the tide, nor does it dry up, the tide goes out, but it comes in again” (*FPS* 265). As his recovery progresses, he identifies completely with the natural: “I dreamed that my being had been transformed into the inlet itself” (*FPS* 269). He finds the religious blueprint for the motions of nature, time, and self in the notion of cyclic revolution. “At such a time of stillness,” he says of a becalmed Eridanus cove, “it was like what I have learned the Chinese call the Tao ... like ‘that which is so still and yet passes on in constant flow, and in passing on, becomes remote, and having become remote, returns’” (*FPS* 234-35). The narrator reinforces this metaphor by recalling the circuit of rain and the pulse of tides in Eridanus bay. Here the Tao is finally linked explicitly to the lives of the couple themselves: “the tides and currents ... returned again as we ourselves had done” (*FPS* 282). The narrator reconsiders the process of aging as he appears fully restored: “I wondered if what really we should see in age is merely the principle of the seasons themselves wearing out, only to renew themselves through another kind of death” (*FPS* 277-78).

One can argue that the narrator experiences a pastoral cure. Given his sentiments towards the “world” (the sorry circumstances of his old life, the ugliness of the city, and the depraved forces of civilization), there are plenty of indications that he would not have survived long in an urban environment. Instead, Eridanus becomes his Arcadia, and his wife, in a sense, his nymph. Healthy surroundings and a faithful companion restore his sense of well-being and physical strength, and lead him toward a philosophy that eventually reconciles him with his past.¹² Crucially, the narrator also strives for an inventive energy: “I would have to do something creative with my life if I did not want somehow to go to pieces,” as he says (*FPS* 249). It is arguably in this light that one should consider his repeated expressions of irritation and unease at the shack names “Dunwoiken” and “Wywurk”: they connote a passive otium, prompting the “permanently catastrophic state[s] of mind” that “Hi-doubt” and “Hangover”—neighbouring shack names—seem to foreshadow (*FPS* 219; 220; 256). These remarks can also be seen as critical of a traditional pastoral indolence; Lowry’s narrator is convinced of “nature’s intolerance of inertia” (*FPS*, 229).

The creation of the narrator’s opera echoes his evolving philosophy, with its false starts and changed objectives along the way. Importantly, the foghorn sounded at dawn of the couple’s first September morning at Eridanus strikes the narrator “as if some great symphony had just begun its

opening chords" (*FPS* 228). Come winter, he confesses that he "had been haunted for months by the idea of writing a symphony," wrested from his earlier experiences of jazz (*FPS* 266). The work is much delayed, however, and its fragments are ominously lost to fire (compare the portrayal of the Wendigo inferno [*FPS* 243], and also the narrator's stated past as a ship's fireman [*FPS* 219; 222], "attached romantically ... to the obsolete days of stokeholds" [*FPS* 249]).

The narrator's impetus then evolves into an idea for an opera, comprising *all* aspects of Eridanus, human as well as natural. This 'real' work (the Latin plural *opera* can mean "personal work" or "effort") succeeds as a more truthful, multifaceted opus, geared to his promising present as well as his troubled past. The narrator notes that in composing he first needs to "put all this into *words*, to see it, to try and see the thoughts even as I [hear] the music" (*FPS* 268). Thus we are left with the written testimony of "Forest Path" as a 'sketch' for an opera of the same name. Indeed, the text could be seen as a draft for a libretto, poised between the narrator's actual Eridanus existence and its tentative music: "Sometimes I felt our life together to be a sort of singing," the narrator says (*FPS* 266), adding elsewhere that they rarely worked without song (*FPS* 248). Troubling aspects remain, however. As the narrator testifies, life at Eridanus involves struggle from the very beginning. His gradually acquired, all-encompassing philosophy does help him cope with, and eventually embrace, his new circumstances (*FPS* 253). Yet it also fosters an ambivalence toward what he sees as the outside world, rather than producing a complete rejection of it.

In the many rhetorical outbursts against civilization in "Forest Path" the narrator's antagonism is clear. His ambivalence becomes evident indirectly, in a confusion over the terms of his new existence. As everything in Eridanus, according to the narrator's understanding, seems "made out of everything else" (*FPS* 246), Eridanus itself necessarily becomes multiform, constantly changing, yet its different aspects are interrelated. At one point he counts to five guises: "And Eridanus too, that was a ship and the name of our hamlet and seaport, and inlet, and also a constellation" (*FPS* 255). Elsewhere he maintains that "we poor folk were also Eridanus, a condemned community, constantly under the shadow of eviction" (*FPS* 225). These interchangeable forms, while fascinating, are also profoundly disquieting: "Were we living a life that was half real, half fable?" the narrator asks (*FPS* 255).¹³ The troubling dimension stems from the essentially ambiguous nature of the Eridanus name: "In the heavens at night, as my wife first

taught me, dark and wandering beneath blazing Orion, flowed the starry constellation Eridanus, known both as the River of Death and the River of Life" (*FPS* 225-26). Eridanus is at once a commercial town and pastoral hamlet; a community of poor dwellers and richer summer guests; an inlet cleansed by a vigorous tide but marred by deposits of tar and creosote. The constellation Eridanus soars and shines in the heavens, sanctioned by Jupiter, while the prow of the steamer *S.S. Eridanus*, abandoned by its owners, rusts in an abyss of filthy sediment below.

Thus the differing aspects of Eridanus can be traced to a central opposition between invigorating and degenerative powers. Yet there is also a paradoxical bond merging these various forces, wrought from myth and strengthened by the narrator's experience. While he continually grasps for happiness at Eridanus, he must (following the logic of the paradox) also acknowledge its various 'deaths'—whether consciously or not. As the reader of "Forest Path" quickly realizes, the narrator often indulges in a process of mental iteration and interplay of significance, while his self-awareness seems to operate on several levels at once.¹⁴ While his digressions at times lead him into confusion and moodiness, they also serve to blur the distinctions between the elements that nourish and those that strangle the idyll at Eridanus.

The narrator is startled by the assertion of a neighbour that Eridanus is "out of this world, brother" (*FPS* 255):

It gave me an uneasy feeling for a moment, like seeing one of those grotesque films in which they use animated cartoons with real figures, a mixture of two forms And yet did [my] confusion come from pinning the labels of one dimension on another? Or were they inextricable? As when, just about this time, the oil refinery decided to put a great sign over the wharfs, as an advertisement: SHELL. But for weeks they never got around to the S, so that it was left HELL. And yet, my own imagination could not have dreamt anything fairer than the heaven from which we perceived this. (In fact I was even fond of the evil oil refinery itself that at night now, as the war demanded more and more lubrication, was often a blaze of lights like a battleship in harbor on the Admiral's birthday.) But these problems I could never solve.... (*FPS* 255-56)

The narrator's digression on the fragmented sign applies to his present reality and environment. He allows the sign to play over his entire experience, even as he well understands that it *is* incomplete. Also intriguing is how the oil refinery gradually loses its sinister appearance. A damning response to the HELL sign, while perhaps to be expected, does not occur. For the narrator does not, like the motorboaters he once catches grappling with the shack name "Wywurk," fall into "that mood of easy tolerance that

comes only to the superior reader” once the wordplay is understood (*FPS* 220). Nothing would have been easier than to take the sign to denote the factory, to read it as “the oil refinery = HELL,” or at least as a gateway to Styx. Instead, the narrator judges the sign as a tentative description of the whole environment, including his own location. Its message is seen as directed at himself and his own life across the bay.

The oil refinery—or, for that matter, any of the factories at Port Boden—could easily have served as the symbolic arch-enemy of the pastoral enclave at Eridanus. Yet none of these industries entirely serves such a role. The narrator condemns the oil refinery for its environmental damage, but still endows it with redeeming aesthetic qualities. Viewing the plant, he concludes that it “is very fine, with the red votive candle of the burning oil wastes flickering ceaselessly all night” (*FPS* 226). Further on he likens the factory to “a strange and beautiful musical instrument” (*FPS* 229, see also 234), and later yet gathers his visual impressions to recall its “architectural beauty” (*FPS* 276).

A remarkable passage describing aluminum gas tanks further illustrates the complexity of vision presented in “Forest Path.” In the early morning sun, the tanks strike the narrator as “golden pillars . . . to a Greek temple” (*FPS* 258). Many of the area’s technological attributes are then similarly evoked—however briefly—as scenic complements to the panorama as viewed from the couple’s dwelling. The factories, smoke, gas tanks, oil tanker and motorboats all parade on a stage that might recall ancient Piraeus. Certainly these impressions last only a few moments, and the industrial structures in particular reveal their normal “ugliness” (*FPS* 258), but it is important to note the ambivalence that ensues from them. As a previous conversation makes clear, “Part of what makes this sunrise so wonderful isn’t just pure nature. It’s the smoke from those wretched factories at Port Boden” (*FPS* 233).

One may also consider the passage describing the narrator’s encounter with a mountain lion. He recalls the incident: “I must have been afraid—I mean I must have been afraid in some way of the lion—but at the hill on the spring path have been already gripped by the anticipation of a so much greater fear that the concrete fact even of a lion had been unable to displace it” (*FPS* 263). As it turns out, this episode sets in motion thoughts of great therapeutic value. They occur during the night after the encounter, as the narrator lies sleeping in bed:

Half-conscious I told myself that it was as though I had actually been on the look out for something on the path that had seemed ready, on every side, to spring out of our paradise at us, that was nothing so much as the embodiment in some frightful animal form of those nameless somnambulisms, guilts, ghouls of past delirium, wounds to other souls and lives, ... betrayals of self and I know not what, ready to leap out and destroy me, to destroy us, and our happiness, so that when, as if in answer to all this, I saw a mere mountain lion, how could I be afraid? And yet mysteriously the lion was all that too. (*FPS* 263-64)

The passage reveals that the lion the narrator dreads is primarily a 'dantesque' one, embodying his own fears and guilt. The actual lion, by contrast, receives sympathy at the news of its death: "we mourned the animal a bit, in our way" (*FPS* 263). As a result, the collected impression of the Eridanus lion is complex.¹⁵ On the one hand, the animal triggers an important phase of the narrator's recovery, serving him as a warning (and hence propelling him towards a spiritually richer existence); on the other, less willingly acknowledged, it poses a very real threat to the narrator's life at one point. Far from being merely a symbolic predator, the cougar attacks a local before having its own throat slit.

The narrator's "layering"¹⁶ of his experiences reveals an ongoing struggle to maintain the 'life' side of the Eridanus coin. He recovers by analyzing his experiences symbolically, looking for warning or hope. With crucial aid from his wife, the narrator also grasps for a philosophy appropriate to his new and fragile circumstances. With the landscape in its partly damaged and ever threatened state, and the constantly shifting influences of civilization on both environment and people, it is evident that "Forest Path" presents a pastoral more by trustful perception than ready substance. Furthermore, Lowry's narrator continually struggles with perplexity. This recalls William Empson's classic thesis that the pastoral involves a "process of putting the complex into the simple" (Empson 25). In other words, simplicity must increasingly be seen as a deliberate contrast to modern, compound experience, not as a self-sufficient or merely given trait. The modern pastoral will, in this regard, always involve conflict of some sort.

But where Empson often assumes a simple environment for the allegedly complex modern character, the narrator's surroundings in "Forest Path" are anything but simple. Eridanus is a beautiful and often peaceful community, yet equally prone to show its other faces. One recalls, for instance, the sun's striking "platinum disc" suddenly turning into "the back of a skull" (*FPS* 239; 274). The text's "counter-pastoral" forces often seem enhanced by the narrator's disclosures, yet his confused digressions ultimately render many

of these forces ambiguous. For example, he finds the city a detestable place. Yet its library provides him with books, and the same books help him form his new philosophy. Then there is the matter of the couple's third shack, built on the posts of the second. While the structure forms a triumphant image of return, it is tellingly built of driftwood from the Port Boden sawmill—ostensibly an industrial blot on an otherwise idyllic inlet scene. Further, the narrator evokes civilization as a “creator of deathscapes” that yet “miraculously save[s]” portions of the Eridanus enclave, and this by way of both its laws and inconsistencies (*FPS* 276). To the reader, the text dismantles its pastoral tendencies even as it builds them, or vice versa. It becomes increasingly clear that a sustained pastoral life and vision, given the protean nature of the Eridanus environment, must spring from a sedulous faith in recovery on the narrator's part.¹⁷

Eridanus doesn't offer any firm defense against the allegedly 'anti-pastoral' forces of civilization. It furnishes no effective border to shut them out, as it in a sense embodies these forces itself. The narrator likes to think of the shacks as a final repository of pastoral power. But even here are threats of eviction and bulldozing from the world of civilization, and of fire and storm from the natural world. While the Eridanus landscape constantly risks industrial pollution, the same landscape's natural powers (whether in the form of violent seas, winds, cold spells or mountain lions) at times also threaten the couple's pastoral existence. The enemy, fundamentally, is shown to be both within and without, and prone to metamorphosis. This flexible antagonism in turn creates an uncertainty about borders and 'alignments' in Eridanus, aptly summarized by Margerie's disclosure that the name connotes two divergent waters. Nonetheless, the narrator's recovery necessitates a reconciliation to ambiguity. Such acceptance offers him a form of transcendence from doubt when complete. Instead of suffering a permanent and paralyzing duality, the narrator rises to grasp a vital cyclic force at work. Having returned from a hiatus abroad, he is elated to find the forest spring still running, despite all obstacles:

And the spring? Here it was. It still ran, down through the jack-in-the-pulpits.... It purified itself a bit as it came down from the mountains, but it always carried with it a faint tang of mushrooms, earth, dead leaves, pine needles, mud and snow, on its way down to the inlet and out to the Pacific. In the deeper reaches of the forest, in the somber damp caves, where the dead branches hang bowed down with moss, and death camass and the destroying angel grow, it was haggard and chill and tragic, unsure measurer of its path. Feeling its way underground it must have had its dark moments. But here, in springtime, on its last lap to the sea, it was at its source a happy joyous little stream. (*FPS* 283)

“Forest Path” presents modern pastoral borne by both brave mental quest and considerable physical effort. And its pastoral is thus, in a larger sense, freed from the bond of locality. Virtually any landscape (according to the implied logic) will suffice for a pastoral retreat, and yet none will fulfill its promise. Such an extrapolation also, of course, points to a general predicament of modern landscape, and equally to the pervasiveness of the “world” in the minds of potential Arcadians. Still, “Forest Path” does not descend into the parody of pastoral some would expect. Nor does it harness the merely rhetorical evasion of counter-pastoral forces at times evident in Thoreau’s *Walden*. It remains largely faithful to a pastoral ideology and pedigree in Alpers’ sense, its narrator committed to a modest life of song where outward circumstances are often severe.

If anything, “Forest Path” recognizes a modern ambivalence toward the idyllic moment. Ambivalence importantly does not equal rejection in this context, while it does leave room for doubt and fear (and death) within the pastoral yearning. Very often the narrator himself supplies the hesitations and dreads. The reader seldom has to read “against” the narrative to grasp its range of “favoring yet opposing circumstances.” This is a fundamental quality of the modern pastoral as presented in “Forest Path,” and it poses a strong dialectical challenge to prospective users of the mode.

NOTES

- 1 I here side, albeit provisionally, with Buell’s capacious definition of the pastoral as “all literature—poetry or prose, fiction or nonfiction—that celebrates the ethos of nature/rurality over against the ethos of town or city” (23).
- 2 I borrow this characterization from the dust-jacket and publisher’s preface to the volume. Lowry himself calls his work alternately a “long short story” or “novella” (*Selected Letters*, 245 and 266 respectively).
- 3 Hereafter abridged in the main text to “Forest Path,” and to *FPS* within brackets when directly quoted or first referred to in the notes.
- 4 My reading contrasts with that of Costa, who proposes that both *Walden* and “Forest Path” present quests for transcendence that eschew “all ambiguity of viewpoint” (63).
- 5 Admittedly, there is a latent irony to the narrator’s claim in “Forest Path” that “I am ... naïve in expressing myself” (*FPS*, 267). He proves at best *consciously* naïve in his restrained power of expression and deceptively open literary referencing. Yet this does not invalidate his status as a pastoral speaker. Alpers argues convincingly that there resides a “paradox of poetic strength in modesty,” whereby pastoral poets with “self-awareness and wit ... scale down their verse,” thus “reclaiming a degree of strength relative to their [post-heroic, cosmopolitan] world” (51).
- 6 Ingham has recently argued that the narrator’s quest in *FPS* is a success, contrasting it to

- the “centrifugal” narrative of *Under the Volcano*: “in ‘Forest Path’ [Lowry employs] the *centripetal* force of Neo-Platonism to create a *stable* set of correspondences: to *integrate* cosmos and consciousness” (123).
- 7 By contrast, Grace wishes to differentiate between Lowry and the narrator of “Forest Path.” Upholding this distinction is difficult, however. Grace concedes that the text is an expression of “the Lowry Myth” (113), and her analysis (see especially her passage on the cabin and pier [115]) also incorporates biographical evidence.
 - 8 Compare Lowry’s own words in a letter from Dollarton to his agent Harold Matson of Oct. 2, 1951: “[FPS] is a story of happiness, in fact, roughly of our life here in the forest, exultant side of” (*Selected Letters* 266).
 - 9 That is, in narratological terms, following the chronology of the story, not that of the narrative, which is temporally disjointed (*Genette* 27). In an introductory reminiscence regarding Eridanus, the narrator recalls that “once we were quite alone the whole winter” (*FPS* 216).
 - 10 As Salloum points out, a similar threat drove the Lowrys from their Dollarton shack in 1954 (28-29; 34).
 - 11 In one bizarre instance, a newspaper even suggests renaming Eridanus, presumably seeing “something insulting in the name of our town of a political, even an international nature, or as denoting foreign influences, as a result of which there has been some agitation, on the part of some distant ratepayers, with I know not what motives, to change its name to Shellvue” (*FPS* 226).
 - 12 The narrator’s Taoistic inclination does not preclude an important Christian streak. Indeed, the *leitmotif* of the path is seminally Biblical, while Lowry also proves well acquainted with Pascal, Eckhardt and Swedenborg.
 - 13 O’Kill has argued that Lowry’s associative language “allowed him ‘to express six things at the same time,’ as he put it; to attempt to relate each individual moment to all its circumstances” (185). Conversely, one may argue with Kroetsch that “Lowry always, in writing, negates the naïve existence of what he names” (249). Thus Lowry’s writing would strive to position itself as both an affirmation and denial, as prone to worry any postulations it sees itself as harboring.
 - 14 This effect, of course, is strengthened by the narrative’s layering of past tense and historical present: the “I” of the text is thus constantly able to analyze and criticize itself.
 - 15 Reinforcing the compound meaning of the encounter, the waiting cougar is mirrored by an earlier, positive comment on the villagers: “Like benevolent mountain lions ... our neighbors would wait all day ... to help us in some way, or bring a gift” (*FPS* 244). Indeed, this doubling or ‘recycling’ of images in various contexts is a structural technique throughout “Forest Path,” thus strengthening the thematic resonance of the text.
 - 16 I borrow this term from Markson, who aptly characterizes Lowry’s style in *Hear Us O Lord* as one of “layered resonance” (viii).
 - 17 Compare Peck’s assertion that “all Walden’s various ‘bounds,’ ‘separations,’ and ‘intervals’ are marked off and maintained by the pastoral imagination” (85).

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