

# Neo-Platonism, Integration, Identity

Malcolm Lowry's  
"The Forest Path to the Spring"

In what has by now become a substantial body of scholarship dealing with Malcolm Lowry, critics have brought to light at least as many aspects of Lowry the writer as the writer himself created literary personae: the alcoholic autobiographer, the poet (recently rehabilitated by Kathleen Scherf), the cabbalist, the genius-who-feared-he-was-a-plagiarist, the expressionist, the epic modernist/symbolist, the romantic, and the metafictionist, to name some of the best known. Nonetheless, as far as I know Geoffrey Durrant has been the only critic to deal explicitly with Lowry the Neo-Platonist in any real detail—though not for any lack of Neo-Platonic themes in Lowry's work—and it is this aspect of Malcolm Lowry I propose to explore further, specifically in "The Forest Path to the Spring."<sup>1</sup>

It should first be noted, however, that these various Lowrys, like his various personae (Geoffrey Firmin, Sigbjørn Wilderness, Kennish Drumgold Cosnahan and so forth), while all different, are not completely differentiable: they interpenetrate, just as Lowry's work and his life did. Indeed, to a remarkable degree, the concept informs the elements of all of his works individually and collectively, as he believed all the elements in the world around him resonated with an interior consistency: everything in the universe was cut from the same cloth, and the whole could be seen in all of its parts.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, this sort of interpenetration is also fundamental to Neo-Platonist thought. As R. T. Wallis notes, Plotinus agreed with "the Stoic doctrine of 'cosmic sympathy' [namely] the view that since the world is a living organism, whatever happens in one part of it must produce a sympathetic

reaction in every other part (II.3.7, IV.4.32ff). . . . Similarly [Plotinus believed], just as it is possible to discern an individual's character from his eyes, so human destiny may be read in the stars (II.3.7.4-10)" (70-71).<sup>3</sup> Needless to say, images of interpenetration—of various parts of the physical world, and especially of the physical and spiritual worlds—figure prominently in "Forest Path," as do references to the constellations, especially Eridanus.

In his 1970 article, "Death in Life: Neo-Platonic Elements in 'Through the Panama,'" Durrant persuasively demonstrates that "Panama" is informed by Neo-Platonic myths of the journey of the soul, from the fall from heaven into the world of the senses through the long voyage home, ascending through the elements to the heavenly region of the stars, the soul's true home. "Forest Path" describes a similar journey, but it is less a physical voyage than a mental and spiritual one, though there are a number of similarities and parallels with regard to the mythic referents detailed by Durrant, some of which are striking. For example, Durrant notes that "[t]he journey of the soul is variously represented as the flight of a bird, a voyage over the dark sea of matter, or a fall into dark waters" (14). Lowry's narrator in "Path" mentions the gulls returning home from the city (which the story identifies largely with the dark, fallen, hellish world) no less than six times (216, 224, 256, 262, 273, 287);<sup>4</sup> the narrator further increases the potency of the image by referring to their "angelic wings" (287), calling them "dove-like" (268), and explicitly linking them with the spring by observing that in this season they "pecked their old feathers off to make room for their new shiny plumage like fresh white paint" (226). Moreover, the "Death in Life" motif that gives Durrant his title finds itself echoed repeatedly in "Path": the narrator talks of "the starry constellation Eridanus, known both as the River of Death and the River of Life" (227); one morning the sun "looked like a skull," but soon the narrator discovers that this was only "a pose" (240-41); ice can be "dead" and can also be "alive" (246); through the offices of his wife, ever his spiritual teacher and guide—Beatrice to his Dante—the narrator becomes "susceptible to the moods and changes and currents of nature, as to its ceaseless rotting into humus of its fallen leaves and buds . . . and burgeoning toward life" (249). The narrator reinforces the motif of cyclical death and rebirth as it applies both to the seasons and human life when he wonders "if what really we should see in age is merely the principle of the seasons themselves working out, only to renew themselves through another kind of death" (281), and earlier links the process to creativity,

asserting that his “whole intention seemed to be to die through [the creative process], without dying of course, that [he] might become reborn” (271). Further reinforcing the interpretation that the story primarily recounts a spiritual journey, the narrator ten times calls the twenty-minute trip to the spring a “journey”; significantly, he does not use the word to refer to the much longer trip to the library in Vancouver (254-55).

In addition to these mythic and thematic correspondences, Lowry points directly to a connection between the two stories, referring explicitly to “the becalmed ship of the Ancient Mariner” (260; the gloss from Coleridge’s poem provides a key element in “Panama”), as well as mentioning once and quoting four times from “Frère Jacques” (274; 218, 244, 279, 280)—which as Durrant notes Lowry quotes no less than “*seven times*” in “Panama” and the significance of which he explains as follows: “What it asks is ‘Brother, are you asleep?’ It also calls for the ringing of the matin bells (of spiritual awakening)” (25; italics Durrant’s). Once again it comes as no surprise that the first three times that “Path” quotes the song, only the first four lines appear, while the last quotation includes “Sonnez les matines.” Lowry underscores the importance of the bell motif by prefacing the final quotation with the observation that

The bells of a train, slowly moving northward along the coast tracks, began to sound through the fog across the water. I could remember a time when these bells had seemed to me exactly like the thudding of school bells, summoning one to some unwelcome task. Then they had seemed like somber church bells, tolling for a funeral. But now, at this moment, they struck clear as gay chimes, Christmas bells, birthday bells, harbour bells, pealing through the unraveling mist as for a city liberated, or some great spiritual victory of mankind. (280)

The sound of a ship whose engines thud the rhythms of the song merges with these other bells (not to mention the cabin named Four Bells) as physical reality interpenetrates with memory and spiritual reality to form a potent symbol of spiritual awakening and of the movement from death to life, a theme Lowry’s narrator confirms while merging it with images of light and darkness when (referring to his wife) he talks of “a continual sunrise in our life, a continual awakening. And it seemed to me that until I knew her I had lived my whole life in darkness” (235).

While images of light and darkness are central to the Neo-Platonic myth of the soul’s journey, with the sun and stars representing the soul’s celestial home, and darkness (especially that of the cave) representing the soul’s descent into the fallen world of the senses, few would dispute that light and

dark also form the basis for the most dominant strain of imagery in all of English literature; hence there is little point in belabouring all of its iterations in “Path.” Nonetheless, a few bear mentioning.

The narrator’s earlier life, the one he comes to Eridanus to transcend, he characterizes as excessively nocturnal (“I had been a creature of the night,” he remarks [248], and recounts how he spent most of his waking hours in the cavelike atmosphere of jazz bars); the city itself is almost invariably described in terms of night, darkness, and even hell. Moreover, while it strains credulity when the narrator, who claims to have been a seaman, tells the reader that he has no knowledge of the stars, it nicely fits the purposes of the story to have his wife and spiritual mentor explain to him the names of the constellations (especially Eridanus)—to point out, that is, these images of the soul’s true home. There are a great many other images of light, of course, and because a number of them resonate strikingly with Neo-Platonism it will be appropriate to return to them, but first it will be necessary to outline some aspects of Neo-Platonism that Durrant does not cover.

The cornerstone of Neo-Platonic thought is its refinement of the platonic distinction between the world of ideals and the sensible world, which is made up only of shadows or imperfect manifestations of those ideals. Both the world of being, or true existence, and the transitory world of becoming are arranged in *continua*. Plotinus presupposes a source from which all things emanate, becoming less like the source the farther they are from it, like ripples on water (V.1.7; V.2.1). The twice-told “parable of the raindrops” in “Path” provides the most obvious example of resonance with this aspect of Neo-Platonism; here is its second iteration:

Only when my wife felt the warm mild rain on her naked shoulder did she realize it was raining. They were perfect expanding circles of light, first into circles bright as a coin, then becoming expanding rings growing fainter and fainter, while as the rain fell into the phosphorescent water each raindrop expanded into a ripple that was translated into light. And the rain itself was water from the sea, as my wife first taught me, raised to heaven by the sun, transformed into clouds, and falling again into the sea. (286)

In Neo-Platonic theory, moreover, these emanations from the source are continuous: each bears the imprint of its predecessor, though more and more faintly, but the divine source is present and can be apprehended even at the lowest levels. Briefly, the source is the One: absolute, devoid of quality, subsuming all into indivisible unity. The next level, *ὁ νοῦς* (*ho nous*, often translated as “intellect”), while not sensible, provides the *potential* for

thought, for intellection, and is the repository for the platonic ideals. Next comes the “all-soul,” ὁ λόγος (*ho logos*)—the Word—which has the power to realize intellection. From this emanates the cosmos: all physical objects are thus emanations, and it is possible to work back from the world of the senses to gain an apprehension of the divine source (V.1.10; V.2.1; V.2.2).

In this context, some of the images of light become more significant, especially those of a portion of the physical world, often with a metaphysical dimension, silhouetted against the source of light. For example, the story’s first page describes “a huge sun with two pines silhouetted in it, like a great blaze behind a gothic cathedral”—an image that is repeated twice more in the story (229, 235). The description continues, “[a]nd at night the same pines would write a Chinese poem on the moon.” (As Durrant notes, “the Moon is regarded in this philosophy as the sphere of judgement, the staging post between the divine and the fallen worlds” [14], so the image is particularly appropriate for the beginning of the story.) Later, a pine tree is transformed into a sailing ship, first against the moon, and later against the sun, before again “changing into the tallest pine on the hill” and becoming associated with the tragic story of his heroic and self-sacrificing grandfather, who was, like the ancient mariner, “becalmed” (259-60). The Neo-Platonic import of these images is considerable: they represent the soul’s aspiration towards its true home, and further emphasize the stages that it must transcend: the physical world (the tree itself), and also a higher, metaphysical world of which the physical world is an emanation (poetry, spirituality, self-sacrifice, and the archetypes of “journey”). The most striking image of the divine source’s presence even in the lowest levels of emanation, and of the soul’s aspiration to return to that divine source, appears later in the story, and also illustrates how Lowry uses “reflection” to convey both interpenetration and emanation:

I dreamed that my being had been transformed into the inlet itself, not at dusk, by the moon, but at sunrise, as we had so often also seen it, suddenly transilluminated by the sun’s light, so that I seemed to contain the reflected sun deeply within my very soul, yet a sun which as I awoke was in turn transformed, Swedenborgwise, with its light and warmth into something perfectly simple, like a desire to be a better man, to be capable of more gentleness, understanding, love—(272)<sup>5</sup>

While light imagery conveys much of the story’s Neo-Platonic import, Plotinus also speaks directly of music: harmonies unheard in sound provide the harmonies we hear, awakening the soul to an awareness of beauty and of

the divine, he believed (I.6.3), a concept that strongly influenced the English Romantic poets. Consider, for example, these lines from Keats' "Grecian Urn":

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  
 Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on:  
 Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd  
 Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone. (11-14)<sup>6</sup>

Compare this from "Path": "As the mist rolled up towards us . . . it was as if the essence of a kind of music that had forever receded there . . . became unlocked, began to play, to our inner ear, not music having the effect of music . . . [but] like a whispering of the ghosts of ourselves" (278), or "What I am really getting at is probably that in some composers I seem to hear the very underlying beat and rhythm of the universe itself" (270).

It is no accident that the narrator of the story is a musician, and is writing an opera called *The Forest Path to the Spring*, which contains all the elements of the short story he actually narrates. The metafictional aspects of this interpenetration—the familiar sense of *mise en abyme* where Malcolm Lowry writes a short story called "The Forest Path to the Spring" in which he creates a narrator who closely resembles Malcolm Lowry and who creates a work of art called *The Forest Path to the Spring*, which, like the story, uses as its raw materials the actual experiences of the narrator, which are highly similar to the experiences of Malcolm Lowry—also exemplify the interpenetration of art and life typical of Lowry and of the story's manifestation of Neo-Platonic theory. It is worth noting in passing, however, that unlike virtually all of Lowry's other fiction, "Path" is told in the first person by an unnamed narrator. While Lowry's other stand-ins to some extent more closely resemble Lowry (in their obsessive—and generally unsuccessful—attempts to establish a stable identity, especially one that will be separate from the works they are writing, and a stable relationship with the world around them, but with internal and external 'realities' as well as 'writer' and 'written' frequently becoming hopelessly entangled), all of them are given names. One plausible explanation is that in writing about figures who essentially share his own predicament—especially those for whom the interpenetration of art and life threatens to become overwhelming—Lowry chose to distance himself from them by giving them names and writing of them in the third person, although he was likely attempting to resolve these problems in his life by rendering them into fiction.<sup>7</sup> By the same token, since "Path" represents "what Lowry hoped would be the pattern of

his own life" (McCarthy 176), he chose an anonymous first person alter ego. I will return to the notion of identity later; for the time being, it suffices to note that the "Quaker Oats Box" sense generated by "Path" (and other fictions by Lowry) can also be seen as a Neo-Platonic emanation.

Moreover, the sense of emanation goes well beyond this individual story. If one accepts, as most critics do, that the overall shape of Lowry's work (his "macro-text," as Elsa Linguanti has called it [209]) was to resemble that of Dante's *Commedia*, with *Volcano* as the *Inferno*, *Lunar Caustic* as the *Purgatorio*, and "Forest Path" as the *Paradiso*, it is easy to accept Sherrill Grace's view that "*Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place* is a miniature 'Voyage That Never Ends,' a paradigm or reflection of Lowry's great masterwork" (99). Further, "Path" itself embodies this same structure: the inferno is there, generally associated with the city (the narrator comes to Eridanus "almost from the underworld" [227]), and there are a number of images of cleansing and purgation (for example, the "oil slick" and "reeking slime" of their first day there are cleansed by the tide [228-29], the waterfall "was pure again" after the tide went out [239], and after a swim the narrator feels "baptized afresh" [273]). What he must purge or cleanse himself of or transcend is "that dark chaotic side of myself, my ferocious destructive ignorance" (234), which expresses itself most pointedly in his murderous hatred of mankind for creating ugliness and the hell of war (244-45). Thus "The Forest Past to the Spring" does not merely recount the discovery of an edenic paradise, it is above all a *quest* narrative: the word "spring" appears some thirty-five times, as befits one of its most obvious symbols, but the word "path" is by my count the most frequently used noun in the story.<sup>8</sup> "I had become tyrannized by the past," says the narrator, and it is his "duty to transcend it in the present" (283).

Needless to say, for a literary text to manifest such metaphysical themes, it must make extensive use of symbolism. Moreover, in order to highlight the Neo-Platonic aspects, symbolism works best when used self-consciously: a symbol uses a physical object to point the reader's attention toward the unseen world, but drawing attention to symbolizing itself makes the reader aware of the *act* of pointing, and not merely of that which is pointed at: aware, that is, of the two entire *worlds* that a symbol embraces, and of the interpenetration of those worlds—or, in Neo-Platonic terms, aware of the successive stages of emanation and of emanation itself, though by pointing away from the physical world, symbolism per se would in Neo-Platonic

terms be most closely associated with aspiration. Again, it comes as no surprise not only that symbols abound in the story, but also that the narrator explicitly and self-referentially talks of both symbols and reflections (the former is stronger, while the latter corresponds roughly to what C. S. Pierce would call icon and index, but the terms overlap and interpenetrate to some extent). "Reflection" (as indicated earlier) embraces both interpenetration and emanation (reflecting *back* where a symbol points *away*). In addition to the ten or so seemingly casual uses of the term, the narrator also on occasion uses it more pointedly, as in the following passage where the quasi-symbolic reflections are at once a representation of a higher order and an image of the interpenetration of the physical and spiritual worlds:

It was not merely that the sunlight came in [the window], but the very movement and rhythm of the sea, in which the reflections of trees and mountains and sun were counter-reflected and multi-reflected in shimmering movement within. As if part of nature, the very living and moving and breathing reflection of nature itself had been captured. (276)

Symbolism, however, while explicitly joining the two worlds, also acknowledges their separation. Thus a lighthouse is both a physical object and "the highest symbol of civilization" (280). Similarly, the lion is "a mere lion," but at the same time is also "the embodiment . . . of those nameless somnambulisms, guilts, ghouls of past delirium, wounds to other souls and lives, ghosts of actions approximating to murder, even if not my own actions in this life, betrayals of self and I know not what" (266). Explicit as the lion's import is, though, an earlier passage concerning the squatters' shacks demonstrates an even stronger resonance between overt symbolism and Neo-Platonism:

why had these shacks come to represent something to me of an indefinable goodness, even a kind of greatness? And some shadow of the truth that was later to come to me, seemed to steal over my soul, the feeling of something that man had lost, of which these shacks and cabins . . . were the helpless yet stalwart symbol, of man's hunger and need for beauty, for the stars and the sunrise. (233-34)

While a full discussion of the story's imagery and symbolism is obviously beyond the scope of this paper, the major patterns of imagery are entirely congruent with Neo-Platonic theory, in particular those of interpenetration, of the fusion of opposites, and those of circularity and cyclicity, of unity and wholeness—and of course these image patterns also interpenetrate. The spring is "a source of water, a source of supply" says the narrator,



and obviously it represents a good deal more. “[I]t is a nuisance,” he continues, “but not insignificant, that I have to use the same word for this as for the season” (257)—and the seasons in the story come exactly one full circle. By the same token, the name of the submerged canoe, *Intermezzo*, points to this period in their lives as an intermezzo, the boat named *Sunrise* points to the story’s many sunrises and their symbolic import, and Eridanus is “a ship and the name of our hamlet and seaport, and inlet, and also a constellation. . . . [D]id the confusion come from pinning the labels of one dimension on another? Or were they inextricable?” (258) This interpenetration is, if anything, even more explicit in an earlier passage in the same vein: “Eventually I realized that the hamlet was really two hamlets . . . though these two hamlets, like interpenetrating dimensions, were in the same place, and there was yet another town . . . by the sawmill round the northward point sharing our name Eridanus, as did the inlet itself” (221). Everything, it seems, is somehow a part of everything else.

Furthermore, in Neo-Platonic thought beauty stems not primarily from symmetry—the relation of the parts to one another—but from harmony and unity: their relation to the whole (I.6.2). Coupling this harmony with a transcendent awareness of its emanation from a higher ordering principle, the narrator relates the reflection-laden image of

the moon reflected in the half-moonlit clouds in the water down there, and behind, in the same translunar depths, the reflection of the struts and cross-braces of our simple-minded pier . . . disposed sub-aqueously in some ancient complex harmony of architectural beauty, an inverse moonlight geometry, beyond our conscious knowledge. (256)

While the resonance of much of “Path” with Neo-Platonism is frequently compelling, many of the story’s images are not unique to Neo-Platonism: a number overlap or interpenetrate with other traditions, and some are largely outside it. For example, there is a thread of explicitly Christian imagery that runs throughout the story: there are a dozen or so references to heaven and paradise (hardly surprising, considering the theme, but only three direct references to hell), more than half a dozen to “cathedral” (especially the “gothic” variety, as previously noted), as well as to churches, spires, monastic cells, prayers, hymns, baptism, the bible, and God. The “votive candle” (227) of the refinery has ironic overtones, with the “S” missing from the “Shell” sign linking it with the infernal.

Indeed, images of fire are at least as prevalent as explicitly Christian

images, from the blazing windjammer (259) to the murderous, destroying forest fire, symbol of the narrator's murderous hatred ("in my agonized confusion of mind, my hatred and suffering *were* the forest fire itself, the destroyer, which is here, there, all about" [245]) to the fire that destroyed their house—which also takes on overtones of purging, and of the phoenix and transcendence: they rebuild their house "on the same spot as the old house, using the burned posts for part of our foundations that now, being charred, were not susceptible to rot" (274), notes the narrator, and remembers the day when he and his wife

had been drawn . . . to the still malodorous ruin of that house . . . and watching the sun rise, had seemed to draw strength out of the sunrise itself for the decision once more to stay, to rebuild that haunted ruin we loved so much that we created our most jubilant memory that very day, when careless of its charred and tragic smell we wonderfully picnicked within it. (283)

Another frequent fire image is the narrator's use of the word "blaze" or "blazing," usually referring to the sun, occasionally to the stars or ships, thus suggesting both the celestial source of perfection (the soul's true home) and the journey towards it.

"Blaze" also suggests another connection: with "gloomy old [Blaise] Pascal." In the passage in which he quotes Pascal, the narrator appears to denigrate him:

'He no longer loves the person whom he loved ten years ago. . . . I quite believe it. She is no longer the same, nor is he. He was young, and she also: she is quite different. He would perhaps love her yet, if she were what she was then.' So gloomy profound old Pascal, the unselfish helper of my youth in other ways, had once seemed to threaten our future age.

But the narrator demurs: "And yet not so. Surely I loved her now much more. I had more years to love with. Why should I expect her to be the same? Though she was the same in a way, just as this spring was the same, and not the same, as the springs of years ago" (281). He then goes on (in a passage quoted earlier [110]) to reflect on cyclical death and rebirth, with regard to both the seasons and human lives. As noted earlier, there are many images of cyclicity and flux in the story, and at one point the narrator explicitly links the concept with the Tao and with their lives: "within the inlet itself the tides and currents in that sea returned, became remote, and becoming remote, like that which is called the Tao, returned again as we ourselves had done" (286).<sup>9</sup> But the context of the quotation from Pascal (it is #123 of his

*Pensées*) makes it clear that he too is in fact talking about immutability, change, and return: he and the narrator do not really disagree.<sup>10</sup> *Pensée* #121 states that “Nature always begins the same things again, the years, the days, the hours . . . . Thus is made a kind of infinity and eternity,” and #129 holds that “Our nature consists in motion; complete rest is death.” Compare this with an earlier passage from “Path”: the apparent upthrusting of pines as seen from a moving rowboat “seemed a reminder of duality, of opposing motions born of the motion of the earth, a symbol even while an illusion, of nature’s intolerance of inertia” (230-31). The passage earlier acknowledges that the reference is to Wordsworth (it is from the *Prelude*), and serves as a reminder of the affinity between the Romantics and Neo-Platonism, which Epstein (speaking more widely of the Cabbala) underscores:

By the mid-eighteenth century, German Pietism . . . reached men like Swedenborg, who entirely reconstructed an already reconstructed Cabbalistic system in conformity with his own very personal visions of heaven and hell. Blake, his natural successor, introduced a new literature of vision and prophecy, and the now totally unrecognizable Cabbala was fully assimilated into the mainstream of romanticism. (35)

While the last few paragraphs point to ways in which the imagery of “Path” overlaps with that of other systems—and as I have tried to indicate, Neo-Platonism, the Cabbala, and romanticism are to some extent intertwined—its Neo-Platonism can also emerge in virtually pristine form. Near the end, the essence of the story’s Neo-Platonism, both in terms of explicating its theory and manifesting its quest, emerges in one remarkable sentence: balanced around colons, the Neo-Platonic emanations, verbal and “real,” spread like ripples on water:

If we had progressed, I thought, it was as if to a region where such words as spring, water, houses, trees, vines, laurels, mountains, wolves, bay, roses, beach, islands, forest, tides and deer and snow and fire, had realized their true being, or had their source: and as these words on a page once stood merely to what they symbolized, so did the reality we knew now stand to something else beyond that symbolized or reflected: it was as if we were clothed in the kind of reality which before we saw only at a distance, or to translate it into terms of my own vocation, it was as if we lived in a medium to which that in which our old lives moved, happy though they were, was like simply the bald verbal inspiration to the music we had achieved. (284)

In Neo-Platonic terms, then, McCarthy is slightly beside the point when he comments, “the description of a realm where words attain ‘their true being’ seems at first to imply a movement beyond appearances to true reality. But

when Lowry tells us that *that* reality ‘symbolized or reflected’ a still greater reality, we are once again caught up in the proliferation of symbols and levels of reality that characterizes Lowry’s darkest visions” (207-08). The passage does indeed point to a “greater reality,” specifically, from *ho logos* (“the Word”) to *ho nous* (the repository for the platonic ideals): not a “proliferation” into a “forest of symbols,” but an *integration* into (or aspiration towards) the *ideal* of “forest,” if you will.

Ultimately, integration proves to be the central principle of the story, and the many instances and forms of interpenetration detailed above can be seen as manifestations of it. Not only does “Path” point out the integration of the physical and spiritual worlds, the narrator’s descriptions and explicit comments also point to the integration and harmony of the natural world itself (the cycles of the seasons, and of life, death, and rebirth; plants and animals; sun, moon, and stars; and ultimately earth, air, fire, and water) and his growing sense of integration and harmony with that world (not to mention his sense of integration and harmony with his wife, and the integrating power of love in general). Everything is connected with and part of everything else, as is typical of Lowry’s fiction, but here the sense is one of attaining an almost mystical unity, rather than arriving at a metaphysical abyss. Furthermore, the story itself achieves an integration and coming together of diverse philosophical and metaphysical strands: Neo-Platonism (the dominant pattern, which provides the unifying force for the others), Taoism, and Christianity, as well as the Romantics (Wordsworth and Coleridge), Swedenborg, and Pascal.

Two other writers are also integrated into the theme of “Path,” however: Montaigne and Ortega. Each merits only a brief mention in the story, though both references touch on the theme of integration, and also identity. “[N]ow the joy and happiness of what we had known would go with us wherever we went or God sent us and would not die,” comments the narrator, “I cannot really well express what I mean but merely set this down in the Montaigne-like belief . . . that the experience of one happy man might be useful” (285). Useful to whom, precisely? To the reader, ostensibly, but also to the writer.<sup>11</sup> To some extent the story may reflect a romanticised view of the life Lowry and his wife lived; to a much greater extent, it likely reflects (as McCarthy and Day, among others, note) the way Lowry *wanted* his life to be. “Ortega has it that a man’s life is like a fiction that he makes up as he goes along. He becomes an engineer and converts it into reality”

(271). While the fear of *being written* was to haunt Lowry for much of his life, along with the concomitant fear of being unable to escape from his own fictions (especially *Volcano*), the narrator of “Path” clearly attains what Lowry’s other protagonists and alter egos never fully achieve: a stable sense of his identity. He is at one with the natural world, in friendly harmony with his neighbours, and part of a loving union with his wife. Moreover, he has come to grips with his past and transcended it, discovering himself and meaning in his life’s work: “Here [in his music] was the beginning of an honesty, a sort of truthfulness to truth, where there had been nothing before but truthfulness to dishonesty and self-evasion and to thoughts and phrases and even melodies that were not my own” (270-71; much has been made of Lowry’s fears that he was essentially a plagiarist).

Why and how the narrator of “Path” achieves what Lowry’s other protagonists cannot warrants further examination. One of the central problems for Lowry (as McCarthy accurately notes) was that “writing was both his life and a threat to his life: although he seems to have assumed that he could discover or define his identity only through writing, he also feared that the process of composition would leave him without any identity apart from the work” (6). Moreover, “Lowry himself appears to have found it difficult to maintain his own identity apart from the increasingly convoluted fictions that he attempted to write after *Under the Volcano*” (8)—or in other words, the loss of self in that which defines self. Beyond the works themselves (though in Lowry’s case, embedded in them also), identity hinges on the establishment of a stable relationship with the external world (or more precisely between the internal and external worlds) and a stable relationship with other people. McCarthy notes that even in his early writings “Lowry was intrigued by the way questions of identity hinge on a character’s response to external reality,” and that all of his early works “focus on artist figures whose attempts to come to terms with their identity depend on their sympathetic identification with other people” (15). With regard to the latter, the Consul pays the price for his alienation from others (as do other protagonists), but there is danger in the obverse as well: identifying too closely with another (especially another author) risks a concomitant loss of one’s own identity, a problem that is compounded when the “other” is a fictional self/not-self, particularly when one fears that one is “being written” but attempts to achieve a sense of identity by putting oneself into words—creating a character who is quite literally “being written” (and who might well be

an author also, creating a similar character in a similar predicament).

More important, though, for the problem of identity is the disastrous interpenetration of (and inability to distinguish between) internal and external reality. Thus for the protagonists of a number of works, including *Volcano*, there are “constantly proliferating symbolic meanings and numerous unstable correspondences between self and world,” so that these characters “often fail to recognize any clear distinction between what [they] see when [they] look inside and outside [themselves]” (McCarthy 38).

Similarly, “Reading the symbols of the outside world, the Consul inevitably discovers some relationship to his own situation; but since he cannot control the multitude of meanings engendered, in part, by his readings, the correspondences that he finds between himself and the world ultimately undermine his sense of his own identity”: “[u]nable to find any meaning in the outside world except that which he places on it [the Consul] is eventually unable to discover any significance in his own existence,” because “he can never find any stable reality upon which to base a secure sense of his own identity” (McCarthy 45, 59, 61). The irony is that the Consul, in seeking his identity by attempting to find “a sense of oneness with others and with the universe itself”<sup>12</sup> finds the opposite: “[f]or the Consul, however, this simultaneous involvement with, and isolation from, the world tends to result not in coherence and significance but in the fragmentation and dissolution of the self” (McCarthy 65, 97). McCarthy explains this failure of integration as follows:

[T]he Consul would seem to be employing the Hermetic doctrine of correspondences between the spiritual and material worlds ('as above, so below'), which Lowry might have derived from Swedenborg [McCarthy here cites Ackerley and Clipper 30-31, 59]. This doctrine assumes the possibility of our rising above nature into a harmonious relationship with the spiritual universe. There are indications that this is what the Consul seeks through his mystic studies . . . . The result, however, is precisely the opposite, at least in part because he often reads correspondences backward, seeing the universe in terms of himself rather than assimilating his own situation to the larger patterns of the cosmos. (57-58)

This view has merit, not least because it affirms something of the Neo-Platonist view that informs “Path.”<sup>13</sup> But the Consul, like Lowry himself, not only sees the universe in terms of himself, he also sees himself in terms of the universe, through the synchronistic view that everything is a part of everything else. The Consul’s problem (and perhaps Lowry’s as well) was in creating an *unstable* set of correspondences: the reflections back and forth

between self and cosmos multiply significances, acting like reflecting mirrors. There is a sense in which the spinning of the Consul's mind acts centrifugally, spinning significance everywhere. What Lowry uses and portrays in "Path," on the other hand, is the *centripetal* force of Neo-Platonism to create a *stable* set of correspondences: to *integrate* cosmos and consciousness. Lowry himself echoes this view in an oft-quoted letter to Harold Matson: "So far as I know this ["Path"] is the only short novel of its type that brings the kind of majesty usually reserved for tragedy (God this sounds pompous) to bear on human integration and all that kind of thing" (*Selected Letters* 266). The key, as McCarthy indicates, is that the narrator of "Path," unlike the Consul, is able (in Dr. Vigil's words) "to throw away [his] mind" (McCarthy 59 *et passim*). This does not mean, of course, that one must become insensible, but that one must relinquish one's position as a *creator* of meaning to accept the position of *perceiver*: meaning radiates from one source only, and while it is embodied in the individual and in the physical world, it is the task of the individual to perceive the traces of emanation and work back to the source: this is precisely Neo-Platonic aspiration, which holds the promise of stability and integration—and of identity, of knowing who one is, where one has come from, and where one is going, leading to (or resulting from) a stable relationship with the external world and with other people. In having his narrator follow this Neo-Platonic path, Lowry indeed succeeds in creating a "Volcano in reverse" (*Selected Letters* 338).

McCarthy mentions Yeats's "The Choice" in connection with Lowry (33), and also notes that he is hardly the first to do so; the aptness of the poem is striking. However the irony, too, is profound, even for this profoundly ironic man: for all his "raging in the dark," Lowry only rarely achieved "perfection of the work"—and that work was largely a (self)portrait of one who so raged—yet in one transcendent and lyric work he was also able to portray the "heavenly mansion" that he was never able to inhabit for long in life.

#### NOTE

- 1 While Durrant modestly notes that his article on "Through the Panama" "is meant as a mere footnote to such studies as Perle Epstein's of the influence of the Cabbala, and as a suggestion for possible further investigation" (13)—and the present article is certainly intended to continue that investigation—it seems to me that exploring Neo-Platonic elements in Lowry's other fiction still remains a potentially fertile field of inquiry. Without meaning to circumscribe such scholarly efforts, I would point to *October Ferry*, with its connection with the events of "Path," its paralleling of mental journeying and a journey

- over water, and its preoccupation with the themes of the expulsion from paradise and death in life (and rebirth), as a promising place to start.
- 2 See, for example, "For the Consul, and at times for Lowry, everything is to be found everywhere, and nothing is devoid of personal and cosmic significance" or "[Lowry believed] that everything somehow relates to everything else" (McCarthy 7, 159).
  - 3 The source for Lowry's knowledge of Neo-Platonism, as Perle Epstein has conclusively demonstrated, is the library of Charles Stansfeld Jones ("Frater Achad"): in it Lowry found a "convenient combination of Neoplatonism, pantheism, Orphism, Indian mysticism, and general occultism" (14). Which specific texts Lowry used is not crucial to the argument of this paper (though the writings of Thomas Taylor the Neoplatonist, as Durrant suggests, likely remains as good a guess as any); as Epstein makes clear, though, the Cabbala incorporates much of Neo-Platonism, so it is not always clear whether Lowry was using the Cabbala or purely Neo-Platonist sources. Lowry tended to read omnivorously, and take what he read (or misread) and incorporate it, *mutatis mutandis*, into his own vision. Because Taylor does not, however, follow Plotinus' textual divisions, in which each of the nine tractates that compose each of his six enneads is further divided into numbered sections, I have elected to use Stephen MacKenna's eminently readable translation, though a number of others exist, and follow the conventional system of reference that Wallis and most others use (ennead/tractate/section). Epstein, of course, provides a thorough treatment of the influence on *Under the Volcano* of Lowry's reading of occult and especially cabbalistic works, but see also W. H. New, "Lowry's Reading" and "Lowry, the Cabbala, and Charles Jones."
  - 4 Because the Penguin reprint is so much more widely available than the original hard-cover, page references will be to the reprint; the pagination is in any event fairly close, with the story in the original Lippincott edition occupying 215-83, and in the Penguin 216-87.
  - 5 The theosophical Swedenborg was also an important figure in the history of Neo-Platonism. As Epstein notes, his views on the "correspondences between the spiritual and sensuous worlds" (to which the passage quoted from "Path" alludes) played a significant role in the dissemination of Neo-Platonic thought (8), and she observes that Lowry read and was influenced by his *Heaven and Its Wonders, and Hell* (220).
  - 6 Lines 37-49 of Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" also resonate strongly with Neo-Platonism, as they speak of a state of transcendent awareness in which "with an eye made quiet by the power / Of harmony . . . / We see into the life of things."
  - 7 McCarthy quotes a 1949 letter from Lowry to Frank Taylor in which he "described the theme of *Dark as the Grave* as 'the identification of a creator with his creation,' [and] ominously added that 'since the philosophical implications might prove fatal to myself, I have to preserve a certain detachment'" (141-42, quoting *Selected Letters* 180).
  - 8 See Sherrill Grace (*Voyage* 114-16) for a useful discussion of the quest theme, and especially the cabbalistic and occult significance of "path" on which Lowry drew.
  - 9 See Barry Wood, "The Edge of Eternity: Lowry's 'Forest Path to the Spring'" for a cogent account of the story's Taoist connections.
  - 10 The "unselfish helper of my youth" might well have been the Pascal who wrote "The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know" (#277), but a close reading of the *Pensées* reveals that this pious and profound thinker was also a mystic who shared many of the ideas of Neo-Platonism. He writes, for example, that even in the smallest part of a mite one can see "an infinity of universes, each of which has its firmament, its planets, its



earth, in the same proportion as in the visible world” and “[s]ince everything . . . is held together by a natural though imperceptible chain . . . I hold it equally impossible to know the parts without knowing the whole, and to know the whole without knowing the parts in detail” (#72). Epstein in fact lists the *Pensées* among the occult works read by Lowry (220), and they reflect virtually all of Epstein’s “basic premises of occultism” (12).

- 11 For a theoretical analysis of the ontological status and interrelations between “addresser” and “addressee” in “Path,” see Peter Dickinson, “‘I Am Not I’ . . .” 50-53.
- 12 Cf. Beebe, talking of Baudelaire and the “forest of symbols”: “there is no separation, ideally, between self and cosmos” (131; qtd. in McCarthy 97).
- 13 Ackerley and Clipper (30-31) suggest that Lowry might have derived it from Swedenborg, whom he almost certainly read, though it could also have been from the Cabbala or other occult writers; nonetheless, the view itself, as Epstein (8, 14, 220 *et passim*) notes, is derived directly or indirectly from the Neo-Platonists.

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