

THE EDGE OF ETERNITY

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MALCOLM LOWRY'S "Forest Path to the Spring"¹ is a story without a plot but rich in detail. Thirty thousand words in length, it revolves around Lowry's life with his wife Margerie at Dollarton (Eridanus), British Columbia — a rich shoreland of ocean tides, wind and fog, dripping pines and rugged mountains, an Eden-like motif which recurs throughout his other work. Eridanus appears as a kind of distant *paradiso* in Lowry's three major novels — *Under the Volcano* (1947), *Dark As the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid* (1968), and *October Ferry to Gabriola* (1970). The importance of Eridanus in all these works hinges on its mystical associations for Lowry, and in fact "The Forest Path to the Spring" is perhaps best understood as the unfolding of a mystical experience. Such an approach explains its lack of plot, provides important keys to its wealth of imagery and symbolism, and accounts for one of the major themes in the rest of his works.

A close reading of "The Forest Path" reveals a subtle relationship between "the forest path" and "the spring". Each evening, the narrator tells us, he went through the forest to the spring for water, "walking as if eternally through a series of dissolving dusks down the path". And, while the canister was filling, he "watched the gulls coming up the inlet or gazed up the trunks of the trees to the highest pinnacles of the smallest branches trembling like a moonsail, and breathed the scents of evening". His habit at the spring was total involvement with his surroundings. But one evening he finds himself filling the canister without looking at or smelling anything: from that moment "very different seemed the journey back". First the canister became heavy; then he began to have doubts, fears, and feelings of insecurity about the future; finally he began to dread the chore. The daily walk became terrifying because of thoughts of the past and future — thoughts which began to arise at exactly that moment he failed to surrender himself to experience at the spring.

It seems clear that the spring is a symbol for the present and the path to and from it is a symbol for the past and future. Life in the present is destroyed by

dwelling in the past or future. As he says of the ladder which forms part of *the path*: "this vermiculated old ladder, stinking with teredos and sea-worms, washed down from the sawmill, this sodden snag, half awash when I first saw it, is the past, up and down which one's mind every night meaninglessly climbs!" Later he notes of his experience on the path: "This much I understood, and had understood that as a man I had become tyrannized by the past, and that it was my duty to transcend it in the present".

The quality of the present moment in which the narrator "transcends" his past is revealed in the meaning of the spring. Just as the spring is "a source of water, a source of supply", where the water of life perpetually bubbles forth, the present moment is the instant of real life, the only place where living occurs. It is a moment sandwiched between those past and future times which can tyrannize over it. Life in that moment is life "between the times" or, as the narrator describes their life at Eridanus, "an intermezzo". The decision to live in this present is therefore synonymous with the decision which comes when they "saw spring. And that I think was when we really decided to stay". The narrator makes this clear when he says, speaking of the water source, "it is a nuisance, but not insignificant that I have to use the same word for this as for the season".

In conventional fiction we usually find a sequential time-structure which arranges and unifies the story around a chronology. "The Forest Path" lacks such a chronology, so that the story seems to brim with unassimilated imagery. But rather than lacking *any* time-structure "The Forest Path" displays an organization around the present moment, and it is *this* organization, enhanced by the mystical qualities of that moment, which finally unifies the story.

In mystical traditions, Eastern and Western, eternity is met in the present, in the *eternal now*. The now has no duration, no beginning, no ending; put another way, its beginning and ending correspond. Too small to grasp, too fleeting to be "timed", the present moment is the inlet to the time-less. This is the world of "The Forest Path". Like Thoreau, who lived at Walden in "the nick of time . . . the meeting of two eternities, the past and future, which is precisely the present moment,"² Lowry's narrator writes that "sometimes we could scarcely see beyond the porch, so that it had been like living at the edge of eternity".

To the extent that sequential time is imaged by a line, present time is imaged by a point. But since the present moment is itself *timeless*, it is a point *apart from* the line of sequential time. From the standpoint of the timeless, all time is equally "now", which is to say that sequential time bends around the point called "now" as a circle bends around a centre. The image of circle-and-centre is a suggestive one, indicating that sequential time of before-and-after is less important for the mystic than cyclical time. Indeed, cyclical time is a "reflection" of eternal time — a circle which, symbolically, has no end or beginning. This approach goes back at least to Bonaventura, who found the whole temporal world to contain

traces (*vestigia*) of the eternal. It was Bonaventura, too, who came up with the inspired idea of God as a circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. If there is a medieval analogue to "The Forest Path to the Spring" it is Bonaventura's *Mind's Road to God*.

In "The Forest Path" many important images centre on the cycle of life: the cycle of the tides in the inlet, the rising and setting of the sun, the daily walk to the spring, the circling constellations, and the perpetual march of the seasons. Yet in every cycle there is a moment of rebirth or renewal, a reflection of the renewal taking place every moment: "the swim at high tide [suggesting baptism], and love at high tide [the very act of creation]", the brilliant disc of the sun seen through the fog, the fiery disc of the rising moon turning the pines into a vision of a burning windjammer, the replenishing of the water supply each day at the spring, and the arrival of the season of new life — spring. The passage of cyclical time becomes, for the narrator and his wife, another form of the death and renewal that is part of every moment of time — the continual death of the past and birth of the future in the undivided now.

THIS CIRCLE-CENTRE PATTERN recurs through several other layers of imagery. The symbolic present moment is the spring, a *place*, and the temporal circle-centre is thus repeated in the spatial organization of Eridanus. The whole world of the story — the world of nearby Vancouver, the ranges of the Rockies and Cascades and Cordilleras, the distant European war-scape, even the wheeling constellations — is treated as a vast circle whose centre is Eridanus. Yet, in a very real sense, Eridanus is a place which, like the present moment, is impossible to locate, for it is not even on the map, as people from the city complain. It is not a real "place". At the same time Eridanus, like the present moment which is all moments, is everywhere. It is a shack on the beach; it is a collection of shacks with strange names; it is "two hamlets, like interpenetrating dimensions," and it is "yet another town, or sort of town, by the sawmill round the northward point". Moreover, it is a sunken ship from the other side of the world with a strange, exotic cargo; it is the whole inlet beside which they live; and it is a constellation "dark and wandering beneath Orion". *Dark and wandering*: mysterious and placeless. In the streets of the nearby city "streets and houses are mere soulless numbers" — a collection of distinct, identifiable, numbered places — whereas Eridanus is ubiquitous, nowhere and everywhere, a part of the ebb and flow of the inlet, a part of the rising and setting stars. Even its population is in flux, consisting of people who come only in summer and fishermen who come only in winter. Like the *now* which is timeless and therefore every-time, Eridanus is placeless and therefore capable of being

anyplace and everyplace — an infinite “here” which is eternally “now,” the still point of the turning world.

The basic structure of circle-and-centre — of the measured, numbered city and Eridanus; of “civilization, creator of deathscapes”, and the “holophrastic brilliance” of Wywurk, Doo-Drop-Inn, High-Doubt, and Dunwoiken — functions at a new level of symbolic meaning. Just as the death and renewal of the present moment, the “now”, finds its echo in the cycle of time, so too does the image of the still point of the “here” find its traces in the things of the surrounding world. The typical image of the still point is the brilliant light in the midst of darkness. The night is full of such lights “like a great Catherine wheel”, but there are also the lights in Quaggan’s and Kristbjorg’s shacks reminding the narrator of the Isle of Delight “where an absolute stillness reigns”, the “blazing gold” of the rising moon against the blackness, the gleaming white lighthouse on the point, and the brilliant vision when “the struggling sunlight turned a patch of black water into boiling diamonds”. One of the most beautiful images in this sequence occurs when the narrator writes that “sometimes too, on the seaboard of the night, a ship would stand drawn, like a jeweled dagger, from the dark scabbard of the town”; and again, in an image that links the eternal now with the still point, “in the morning when one got up to make the coffee, with the sun blazing through the windows . . . it was like standing in the middle of a diamond”.

Eridanus is the temporal and spatial centre of the universe, but at a higher level of meaning it is the spiritual centre too. At one point the narrator writes that “we too had grown unselfish, or at least different, away from the tenets of the selfish world”. If there is such a quality as ec-centricity, it is man lost in the tangles of egoism, man confusing his “mask” (*persona*) or “role” with his true spiritual centre. “The Forest Path” portrays a place where the false persona-lity, erected to perform the fragmenting work of the city, is finally stripped away, where the original innocence of Paradise — “something that man had lost” — is recovered. By the act of “renouncing the world altogether” the false values of egoistic man are stripped away and the inner spiritual “I” is recovered.

Both wealth and poverty are things of the selfish ego: they are conditions which man loves or hates because they enhance or destroy the private “image” he has of himself, or the public “image” he wishes to present to the world. But an “image” of the self is not the real self, and when the dwellers at Eridanus discover their still point and decide to stay, they simultaneously discover their real selves. From that point forward neither wealth nor poverty is of concern. They can live with nothing because they have everything; in losing themselves they have found them-Selves. Egoistic man in the city divides off his world into numbered lots, fenced and labelled, effectively isolating him from a world which then confronts him as an alien reality. But at the still point, where consciousness is spiritual rather than egoistic, there is no circle to divide and no reason to try,

for the spirit “possesses” all things. The spiritual centre in man is the integrating perceiver of the world, giving itself to the universe and, in turn, finding the universe giving itself to him.

The spiritual integrity of life at Eridanus is portrayed through numerous images of reflection, refraction, and sympathetic correspondence, suggesting the harmony of the inner and outer worlds. The inner world is an abyss reflecting the world, like the dark water of the inlet reflecting the universe in “an inverse moonlight geometry, beyond our conscious knowledge”. Like Emerson who sometimes saw the world as the externalization of the Soul, the narrator (following Ortega) suggests the world is a “fiction” made up by man as he goes along. At first there is a symphony in the air — “the thrilling diatonic notes of a foghorn in the mist, as if some great symphony had just begun” — but it soon becomes the “singing” of their lives at Eridanus, and finally bubbles out of the depths of his own spirit. The young lovers in their boat discover that the objective world revolves around their own subjective states, as when they notice that “these great peaks . . . seemed to move along with us . . . a whole mountainside or ridge of pines detaching themselves and moving as we rowed”. “When they spoke of damming the inlet . . . cutting it off from the cleansing sea altogether, it was as if for a moment the sources of my own life trembled and agonized and dried up within me”. Eventually, having completely escaped from the circle of the ego to a spiritual centre, the narrator discovers that mystical illumination in which the centre expands to encompass the whole world:

The experience seemed to be associated with light, even a blinding light, as when years afterwards recalling it 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.

There is one image in the story which links together all these levels of meaning: the image of the Tao, or the “way” of all things. Set forth in the ancient Chinese Book of Changes, the *I Ching*, and Lao Tzu’s philosophical poem, the *Tao Te Ching*, the concept of the Tao is symbolized by a perfect circle divided into the *yang* and *yin*, the bright and the dark. Originally signifying the sunlit and shaded sides of a mountain, *yang* and *yin* came to represent interrelated opposites: hot and cold, strength and weakness, active and passive, positive and negative, male and female, good and evil, life and death. Sometimes described as two fishes in eternal intercourse, the diagram of the Tao is so constructed as to suggest that each of these opposites grows out of the other, or is defined by its opposite. Moreover, the *yang-yin* symbol suggests rotation in the same way that a photograph of a galaxy clearly reveals motion in the far-flung trailing stars. This rotary motion implies that the universe is not an absolute dualism of oppo-

sites but rather a unified process resulting from continual interaction, from each polarity continually yielding to — or dying to — its opposite. Together *yang* and *yin* evolve a unity — the seamless robe of nature, the everlasting flux, the ebb and flow of life.

The yang-yin Tao symbol may be regarded as an extension of the circle image which we have used as a metaphor for the structure of “The Forest Path to the Spring”. If the circle of the Tao is visualized in rotation, the exact centre not only remains motionless, but also rides on the point where *yang* meets *yin* in perfect harmony. In terms of time, the still point at the centre is the everlasting “now” containing *yang* and *yin* in equal measure — a single birth-death process in which the moment is always being created and destroyed. In terms of space, the still point is the infinite “here” which focusses every “there”; and since this “here” rests where *yang* meets *yin*, Eridanus is inevitably a place where the bliss of heaven is forever threatened by the tides of hell (The oil refinery across the inlet, with its missing S, is symbolically called HELL); where the possession of the All is threatened by the shadow of eviction; where the life-giving inlet is “known as the River of Death and the River of Life”. And, in terms of man himself, the still point is that inner “I” which unifies the perceived universe within itself; and because that “I” stands where *yang* meets *yin*, the spirit of man must continually face “the fearful wrath . . . sweeping the world” and, above all, “those nameless somnambulisms, guilts, ghouls of past delirium, wounds to other souls and lives, ghosts of actions approximating to murder . . . betrayals of self . . . ready to leap out and . . . to destroy us, and our happiness”. Life at the still point may bring the mystical identification of bliss, but even that experience can be terrifying: “in my agonized confusion of mind, my hatred and suffering *were* the forest fire itself, the destroyer, which is here, there, all about”.

This total fusion of opposites at the still point is conveyed by dozens of images and symbols. The narrator tells us that “a tide which to all appearances is coming in may be doing so only at the surface, that beneath it is already going out”, that “here in the inlet there was neither sea nor river, but something compounded of both”, and that this is “the Tao . . . something so still, so changeless, and yet reaching everywhere, and in no danger of being exhausted”. At this still point, be it “now” or “here” or “I”, all things are joined together:

It was there that our life had come into being and for all its strangeness and conflict, a pang of sadness struck us now. Longing and hope fulfilled, loss and rediscovery, failure and accomplishment, sorrow and joy seemed annealed in one profound emotion.

It is out of this rich texture of experience at Eridanus, experience which is fused at the still point, that true creativity arises, the symphony of life which in turn a focus of death and rebirth — “my whole intention seemed to be to die

through it, without dying of course, that I might become reborn". And when the little shack on the beach burns down carrying into ashes the score of this symphony, it is reborn as the opera which is called *The Forest Path to the Spring*; and the narrator tells us that "the fire was [both] a dramatic incident and our own life, with its withdrawals and returns, what I had learned of nature, and the tides and sunrises I tried to express".

It is highly significant that music forms so large a part of the narrator's consciousness, that he writes first a symphony and then an opera, and that he feels their life at Eridanus to be "a kind of singing". In music more than any other of the arts a fundamental truth is imaged forth about reality as a whole. As the narrator puts it, "in some composers I seem to hear the very underlying beat and rhythm of the universe itself". The very sounding and silencing of musical notes captures directly the fundamental living/dying rhythm of existence, for no other art form captures change as completely as music does. Indeed, music only exists as change: as moving melody and harmony.

Yet music — even though it is constant change, indeed, *because* it constantly changes — presents us with an image of time itself, and especially that *time now* which encompasses eternity. Victor Zuckerkandl has noted that

. . . hearing a melody is hearing, having heard, and being about to hear, *all at once*. . . Every melody declares to us that the past can be there without being remembered, the future without being foreknown. . . What a melody is on a small scale, the total course of a musical work is on a large scale — a whole that unfolds in time and is so constituted that, though its individual members appear one after another, the whole, in order to be present, does not have to wait for member to be added to member, but is, so to speak, *always already there*.³

Music, then, is the appropriate vehicle of expression for a life existing simultaneously in the temporal world of constant change and the still point of the eternal now.

The "singing" life captured in the narrator's opera turns out to be a "strange magnificent honeymoon that had become one's whole life". The symbol is not entirely strange, however, when the honeymoon is understood as a withdrawal from the demands of time and place and the individual ego, and a discovery of the union of opposites in the "here" and "now". Yet this life, they discover, is not built by clinging to their own past, nor to the luxuries of things, nor to the selfish ego, nor even to one another. And it is not even built out of clinging to the still point: "one could not make a moment permanent, and perhaps the attempt to try was some form of evil". It is built out of totally yielding to the "eternal flux and flow". The narrator and his wife come to realize that the person they each loved ten years ago is not the same person today. Only the past is stable and secure, and the past is dead. The present is the changing frontier,

the point of rebirth. Life has its final meaning “here” and “now,” “on the very windrow of existence” — on the edge of a sunlit fog, at the edge of eternity.

“The Forest Path to the Spring” was intended to be the final piece in a cycle of six or seven books which Lowry called *The Journey That Never Ends*. *Under the Volcano*, *Dark As the Grave*, and *October Ferry to Gabriola* were to have their places in the cycle. Lowry did not live to complete this task, nor did he see more than *Volcano* into print. But the place of “The Forest Path” at the end, and the recurrence of Eridanus as a powerful motif throughout the books we have, indicate that *The Journey* was an exploration into that eternal moment which is *now*, that infinite place which is *here*, that unknowable but knowing *I* who is the spirit of man. Perhaps Lowry’s failure to complete his *Journey* is itself symbolic of the voyage that can have no ending, precisely because every now is a new beginning.

NOTES

- ¹ The final story in *Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1961), pp. 215-283.
- ² *The Portable Thoreau*, ed. Carl Bode (New York: Viking Press, 1947), p. 272.
- ³ Victor Zuckerkandl, *Sound and Symbol: Music and the External World*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 235-237. Italics added.

TWO POEMS

Joyce Carol Oates

AFTER SUNSET

Broken walls of waves
said to be the Atlantic
sweep toward us

Wave upon wave
so much is breaking
so much is happening