

LOWRY'S FOREST PATH

Echoes of Walden

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FEW MAJOR writers can be so compactly formulated by biography as Thoreau. His life was simple and uneventful. Contemporary undergraduates who get "turned on" by the notion that a man could live alone in the woods for two years get "turned off" by the scarcity of compelling autobiographical material on the escape to Walden Pond. Thoreau's *Journal*, by his own admission, is not autobiography, and only fragments of it have survived for the Walden period. The *Correspondence* yields next to nothing, and supplementary records are scarce. The few pages of objective facts, from sources outside Thoreau's literary texts, are mostly concerned with surface matters: groups who came out for picnics, children to whom he showed wildflowers and woodland creatures, the commercial side of the ice-cutting episode, and so on.

But the chief effect of this prosaic picture, at least for the student of literature, is salutary: to turn the reader *inward* to the text of *Walden* where actuality has been transformed by art. If *Walden* is a masterpiece of literature, it must be (and I quote from Charles R. Anderson)

something quite different from amateur natural history, dated social criticism, or the autobiography of a transcendental crank. Before the mystical world of *Walden* can be distinguished from the literal setting of ponds and woods and township, we must learn to separate the actual Henry Thoreau, citizen of Concord, from the fictive character who is both the persona and that voice that speaks to us in the book.¹

Anderson presents a persuasive case for thinking of *Walden* as a species of poetry rather than prose, if one does not insist on the mechanical distinction of verse as opposed to paragraph form. Wit and metaphor, he writes,

serve Thoreau as the negative and positive means of his quest. These set up the direction of the book and open out its multiple contrasts. Not only are society and

solitude juxtaposed but the civilized and the primitive, complexity and simplicity; also matter and spirit, animal faculties and the higher laws, earth and heaven, nature and God. Man cannot achieve his high aims by rejecting the one and leaping into the other, but must work his way up from the sty of materialism to the perfection he seeks.²

My purpose here is to demonstrate that a later writer — like Thoreau a fugitive from his century and era, but one whose demonic life had nothing in common with Thoreau's sylvan peace — came also to seek transcendence. He came at last to seek it not on the easy-payment plan of addiction — this writer's usual way — but on the Thoreauvian plan: the evocation in art of the *felt* life of spirit and higher laws, earth and heaven, nature and God.

Malcolm Lowry was an alcoholic and a symbolist. His lifelong sense of being haunted, of living perpetually in what he once termed, in the punning manner he learned from his mentor Conrad Aiken, "introverted comas," produced all those Lowrian personae: guilt-ridden John Bunyans who live in hell but aspire to heaven; above all, the Consul of *Under the Volcano*, literature's first character to reflect fully the noblesse-oblige of the addict, the kind of pride that must be asserted to seek in drink a means of transcending the agony of consciousness.

The problem with Lowry is precisely that which Professor Anderson isolates in the case of Thoreau and *Walden*: the need to separate the citizen of Concord from the fictive character who is the persona and voice of the book. In Lowry's case, the need is to separate the man who drove unflinchingly to an alcoholic's early death and the masks which loom as the protagonists of the books.

After *Under the Volcano* (1947), Lowry became obsessed by a subjective aesthetic by which he would return again and again to the writer writing about a writer who is writing a book in which he is the main character. Only once after *Volcano* did one of his works *outgrow* its creator so as to wrench free of autobiographical trappings. That single instance is "The Forest Path to the Spring", a novella which Lowry wrote during the last years, the early 1950's, in the squatter's cottage at Dollarton, near Vancouver, British Columbia, ten miles through deep woods from the nearest tavern. "Forest Path" was originally published in *New World Writing* (Spring, 1961) and reprinted as the final and climactic item in Lowry's only collection of short fiction, *Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*. Both appearances were in 1961, four years after his death.

In "Forest Path", one finds it possible to discern in Malcolm Lowry what Anderson called necessary for an artistic appreciation of *Walden*: the separation

of Lowry, the rootless addict in life, from the fictive persona and voice that speak to us of rebirth through an identification with the cyclical current of nature. For once, Lowry eschews all ambiguity of viewpoint — all those shifting personae of a single story retold *ad nauseum* — for a unity of narrative stance that is absolutely without precedent in his fiction.

Although he employs the “I”, Lowry appears reluctant to limit his narrator to precise identity. He is never given a name. For once, here is no writer writing about the writer writing. To be sure, Lowry reveals that his narrator has been a jazz musician but one who has given up his old life of the night.

[H]ow far away that seemed now, my life in which my only stars were neon lights! I must have stumbled into a thousand alcoholic dawns, but drunk in the rumble seat I passed them by. . . . Never had I really looked at a sunrise till now.

But this *curriculum vita* appears halfway into the story. No disquisition on drink takes over. There is a brief tribute to jazz musicians like Venuti, Satchmo, and the Duke, who have for him “the aspects of a very real glory”, but no detailed digression. Lowry’s thrust at all points is toward *control* of his materials and away from the self-indulgent ruminations that wreck most of his post-*Volcano* work.

WHAT GIVES Lowry control in “Forest Path” is that he has subjected the *felt* life of the protagonist to a *created* structure which elevates it to art. That structure is more than chronology: the cycle of the seasons around which its eight sections swing. What really unifies these sections is that Lowry has waived his usual subjective strategies for those of a kind of narrative pastoral, a poem.

I of course am neither suggesting extraction of the best passages from “Forest Path” for stanzaic rearrangement nor applying to it that hybrid term, “prose poem.” What I am suggesting is a technique for reading this story, one which aligns “The Forest Path to the Spring” to *Walden*.

I have never seen anywhere in Lowry’s voluminous notes or letters a single mention of either Thoreau or *Walden*. There is a reference to Thoreau, not an especially respectful one, midway through Lowry’s last book, *October Ferry to Gabriola*, published in 1970. Their kinship is accidental but pervasive, a matter that goes beyond commonality of circumstances. Certainly Thoreau and Lowry, a century apart, were searching for solitude and rejecting an economy of abundance in favour of a simple natural life. The real theme of the two works is the

search for perfection, for a life of holiness; for a way to endure what Thoreau called his "several more lives" away from Walden Pond and what Lowry feared would be his life after eviction from his forest retreat.

The goals in both works and the journeys towards them are rendered in a deceptively simple series of image-clusters: animal, water, rain, and shelter, the imagery of time, the quest or journey, the self reborn even as the ice thaws and the land becomes green again. Lowry's story is poetic in the same way *Walden* is, and the presence of *another* — wife, helpmate, guide — makes Lowry's counsels more outgoingly human, less cranky, than Thoreau's.

Lowry's novella is dedicated, in fact, "To Margerie, my wife". If Thoreau went to Walden Pond "to transact some private business with the fewest obstacles," Lowry makes it clear that retreat to the Canadian Northwest wilderness could only work as a partnership. Life became "a continual awakening . . . until I knew her I had lived my whole life in darkness."

The couple arrived at Eridanus (Lowry gives Dollarton a name dear to the ancients — Eridanus, river of both Life and of Death) on Labour Day at the beginning of the war, intending to combine a delayed honeymoon with a last summer holiday. For a time, "the garishness and strangeness of . . . the sun . . . to me, long used to the night and sleeping fitfully . . . brought the quality of a nightmare." But metamorphosis soon takes place, a curious giving in to benevolent nature, a sense of their \$12-a-month cabin as part of "eternal flux and change" which on the arms of the tides seemed alternately to lower and elevate "like a strange huge cave where some amphibious animal might have lived." Fall gives way to the first frosts, and they are still there. In an epiphanic moment one winter's night, the poet-persona knows why:

[C]oming across the porch from the woodshed with a lantern in one hand and a load of wood under the other arm, I saw my shadow, gigantic, the logs of wood as big as a coffin, and this shadow seemed for a moment the glowering embodiment of all that threatened us; yes, even a projection of that dark, chaotic side of myself, my ferocious destructive ignorance.

Lowry's real subject in "Forest Path" is the war which Nature wins over nature, the triumph of the discovered correspondence between elemental forces and man's abiding but muted selflessness. Just as Thoreau's arguments against the railroads are among the pretended subjects of *Walden*, Lowry's diatribe against the oil refinery across the bay is a diversionary tactic against another antagonist altogether. Tonally, Thoreau's strategy is directly hortatory: go ye and do likewise. When he lashes out at the railroads, Thoreau explodes into wit and metaphor

that are aimed at the rescue of time from the deception of speed. Men live life too fast, thinking

it is essential that the *Nation* have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph, and ride thirty miles an hour . . . but whether we should live like baboons or like men, is a little uncertain. If we do not get out sleepers, and forge rails, and devote days and nights to the work, but go tinkering upon our *lives* to improve *them*, who will build railroads? And if railroads are not built, how shall we get to Heaven in season? . . . We do not ride upon the railroad; it rides upon us.

From this point in "What I Lived For" to the end of the section, Thoreau opens each paragraph on a cautionary note against being taken in by the lures of technology. The essence of time, he declares, is not changed by the post-office or by the telegraph or by newspapers. Rather "Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains."

Malcolm Lowry's way is more confessional. His entire thrust is summed up by one of Thoreau's rare acknowledgements that his life before Walden had been sham. He went to the woods so as not, "when I came to die, discover that I had not lived." Near the end of "Forest Path" Lowry apologizes for the "mere heroics" and "vain gestures" that have characterized his life. Yet he must "go beyond remorse, beyond even contrition . . . pass beyond the pride I felt in my accomplishment, and to accept myself as a fool again." Eridanus, finally, is out of time altogether. The narrator gladly accepts his previous life as a necessary hell, *felix culpa*. He and his wife have transcended the passions of the moment and the attendant fears — even the hellish fear of losing their house — for "now the joy and happiness of what we had known would go with us whenever we went or God sent us and would not die."

THE REAL ANTAGONIST is the world which Thoreau and Lowry would banish in the interests of discovering the self. The purpose of their experiments is now clear: to withdraw from the life of civilization so that they can merge with the life of nature, to leave the artificial to the real. But the lives at Walden and Eridanus are means not ends. *Walden* and "The Forest Path to the Spring" are the records of quests for the buried life of the soul.

In the midst of writing "Forest Path", Lowry wrote to his agent Harold Matson that his book, as far as he knows, "is the only short novel of its type that brings the kind of majesty reserved for tragedy (God this sounds pompous) to

bear on human integration."³⁸ The last is the important word. Not only is his story a raging toward self-integration but its poetic technique at all points a working toward an integration of man's primal urges and fears. Like Thoreau an inveterate punster, Lowry devotes much of the first section of "Forest Path" to a play on the names of the beach cottages, a practice which he sees as a human rebellion in a day when "streets and houses are mere soulless numbers . . . a survival of some instinct of unique identity in regard to one's home . . . for identity itself." One notes Lowry's ability — it was Thoreau's eminently — to synthesize the mythological and the quotidian. In recalling the legend of Eridanus, Lowry observes that Jupiter had to save the world from Phaethon's "splendid illusion", but made a protective garden of the place where he died. The Shell refinery is emblematic of waste in the guise of industrial progress, but no Jupiter destroys it (although today's ecologists might find a prophetic irony in Lowry's metaphor). Rather, "distant rate-payers" consecrate the refinery as an open cathedral. Later, the poet will reveal that one night the "S" in *Shell* failed to light, leaving it revealed for what it is: *Hell*.

Lowry establishes a series of polarities to warn of man's fate: squatter's shacks on one side of the bay, the refinery on the other; the finding of paradise against the threat of eviction; God's sovereignty against man-made laws; the good fishermen and boatbuilders against the real estate people and the tourists; the achievement of oneness with nature against the false buffers of progress. All are one tension, of course, and Lowry represents their reconciliation in one magnificent metaphor: the daily act of redemption in walking, at dusk, through the forest to the spring for water.

Lowry's handling of the water-rebirth motif is pervasive but never intrusive. The sheer logistics of obtaining water in the wilds — getting a boat, manoeuvring it to a spring, returning a distance of miles to the shack — lead to frustrations and bitter resolves to return to the city. One afternoon late in the fall, everything about the water having gone wrong, the narrator sees a ship's canister on the beach left by the receding tide. They recover it. A light rain begins to fall. Their bitter despair forgotten, she explains with "inexpressible wonder" that "rain itself is water from the sea, raised to heaven by the sun, transformed into clouds and falling again into the sea." He, who has been a ship's fireman, relives the story behind the discarded canister. It does not matter that the story he tells his wife while cleaning the canister is unlikely to have happened. What matters is that they have recharged each other's flagging spirits. One of their boatbuilder

friends then shows them a spring, its running delayed by the long Indian summer, less than a hundred yards from their house.

His first walk down the path to the spring takes the form of a ten-page central section. It is an ode to recovery from life's *sturm-und-drang*, to man's recoil from the dreadful Wendigo, the man-hating spirit of the wilderness. He sees his hatred and suffering as like a forest fire, "a perversion of the movement of the inlet". The fire was his hatred, turning back on himself, self-devouring.

The onset of winter leads to contrasting strategies in *Walden* and "Forest Path". Thoreau's winter by the pond never threatens; it is a time for deeper reflection. "Why is it," he asks, "that a bucket of water soon becomes putrid, but frozen remains sweet forever?" Thoreau's answer is witty, metaphoric: "It is commonly said that this is the difference between the affections and the intellect." Winter at Eridanus shakes all the resolves of Lowry's characters with cosmic terror: "... [W]e would lose all hope... the rending branches, the tumult of the sea, the sound of ruination under the house, so that we clung to one another like two little arboreal animals in some midnight jungle. . . ."

Both winter sojourners conclude their songs on notes of apotheosis. Thoreau bathes his intellect in the *Bhagavad Gita*. He lays down his book, "so remote is its sublimity from our conceptions," and goes to the well for water, finding "the pure Walden water mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges." Lowry's narrator's actual path to the spring is made impassable by winter, but he still walks it in imagination "as if eternally through a series of dissolving dusks".

Nothing in "Forest Path" compares to Thoreau's rejuvenation at the sight of the spring thaw on Walden Pond. He sees man molecularly, as but a mass of thawing clay where "one hillside illustrated the principle of all the operations of Nature. The maker of this earth but patented a leaf. What Champollion will decipher this hieroglyphic for us, that we may turn over a new leaf at last?" But the ecstasy Lowry represents ascends the same pantheistic empyrean. "My God," he asks while looking at the full moon blazing clear of the pines behind the mountain, "why have you given this to us."

Thoreau's great book concludes with a chapter whose main business seems to be a series of exhortations: to explore one's "private sea"; to advance in the direction of dreams; to simplify; to step to the music one hears; to love one's life poor as it is. But the real theme of the chapter — of the whole work — is embodied in a single sentence near the beginning of the chapter: "Our voyaging is only great circle sailing." Thoreau's plea is to transcend human limitations which allow the present to be a mere replay of the past:

[M]ere lapse of time can never make to dawn. The light which puts out our eyes is darkness to us. Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star.

Thoreau's plea for transcendence of time and place is echoed at the end of "Forest Path" by Lowry's rage against giving in to the tyranny of the past:

[It] was my duty to transcend the past in the present. . . . Sometimes I had the feeling I was attacking the past rationally as with a clawbar and hammer, while trying to make it into something else for a supernatural end.

He must transcend the hubris that has enabled him to read mystic portents in every passing moment; must return to a state of acceptance of himself as innocent of such perceptions. The story concludes in a bucolic kaleidoscope — a pastoral celebration — and, at the last, in Thoreau's "great circle sailing" back to the regenerative fount, the forest path to the spring.

NOTES

- ¹ Charles R. Anderson, *The Magic Circle of Walden* (New York, 1968), pp. 10-11.
- ² *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.
- ³ *Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry*. Eds. Harvey Breit and Margerie Lowry (Philadelphia and New York, 1965), p. 266.