Intermental Pastoral: Formal and Spiritual Renaissances in Malcolm Lowry’s “The Forest Path to the Spring”

Xavier Le Brun
The connection between man and nature, the inscription of subjectivity into the rhythms of the cosmos, is one of the prominent features of Malcolm Lowry’s “The Forest Path to the Spring,” a novella published posthumously in the 1961 collection *Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*, and which has been described as the “culmination of Malcolm Lowry’s moral and spiritual trajectory” (Foxcroft, “Zapotecs” 82). In Lowry’s fiction, “[c]ity spaces . . . act to dislocate the human subject” (Lane and Mota, Introduction 4) and what “The Forest Path” offers, according to Richard Lane and Miguel Mota, is “[r]elief from such a dark world,” relief found in “self-reflective musings on natural spaces, such as the seascapes and forests of British Columbia” (Lane and Mota, Introduction 4).

While the opposition between nature and city is frequently observed, and Lowry’s “eco-critical awareness” (Lane and Mota, Introduction 4) as readily commented upon,¹ “The Forest Path” is seldom referred to as a pastoral text. Richard Costa compares it to Thoreau’s *Walden* and calls it “a kind of narrative pastoral, a poem” (63), while for Gordon Bowker, a “tru[e] sense of the pastoral life pervades” Lowry’s text (12). Still, neither go as far as probing into the actual connection of the novella with the pastoral mode. It could be argued, however,

---

¹ Gordon Bowker, for instance, observes that with the stories of *Hear Us O Lord*, Lowry “had turned environmentalist. Few writers of fiction offer as pronounced a Green message as Lowry does with this collection” (9).
that Lowry’s text is indeed an example of pastoral literature, reaching back to the classical foundations set by Theocritus and Virgil, but also to the early modern pastorals of Spenser, Marvell or Shakespeare, when, according to Terry Gifford, “the term pastoral came to refer to any literature that described the countryside in contrast to the court or the city” and “[t]heme rather than form came to define the pastoral mode” (19). The early evolution of the pastoral from an autonomous genre, defined by its formal characteristics, to a more pliable mode, interlacing a set of thematic concerns, has resulted in numerous combinations, with the pastoral indiscriminately embracing genres as diverse as the eclogue (modelled after Virgil’s Eclogues), epic poetry (Spenser’s The Fairie Queen, Milton’s Paradise Lost) or pastoral drama (Shakespeare’s As You Like It or The Winter’s Tale).

Reviving these models, “either consciously or implicitly,” to use Gifford’s phrase (18), Lowry accommodates the pastoral to yet another genre, the short story. More than that, the author of Under the Volcano is bending influences from the past to his own purpose, so that instead of borrowing pastoral tropes, “The Forest Path to the Spring” evinces a renewal of the mode, a new pastoral configuration, setting the stage for its protagonist’s more intimate rebirth. At the heart of these interconnected processes is the influence of the narrator’s wife, through whose eyes her husband learns to see the natural world. In “The Forest Path,” love is no longer what the pastoral hero strives to obtain or consummate, like Marlowe’s “Passionate Shepherd,” “asking the beloved to join him in a world . . . full of rustic pleasures” (Huth 53). Instead, the couple itself comes to occupy the role of the pastoral subject, substituting the we for the I and the communality of shared modes of thought for the solitary contemplation of nature.

“The Forest Path” as Pastoral

“The Forest Path to the Spring” tells of a former jazz musician and his wife’s retreat into the wilderness of British Columbia, a little distance away from an unnamed and threatening city—Lowry’s fictionalised version of Vancouver. Initially planned to last for the duration of their honeymoon, the sojourn mysteriously expands, in a fairy-tale-like compression of time, until “many years have passed” (Lowry 271) and the narrator and his wife, as if they had followed in the footsteps of Hans Castorp from Thomas Mann’s Magic Mountain, no longer contemplate the idea of ever leaving what has

2. According to Terry Gifford, “[p]astoral as a genre is really confined to two foundational texts that established the essential features of pastoral conventions and to which later writers refer back,” Theocritus’ Idylls and Virgil’s Eclogues (18).
become their home. Although elements of the fairy-tale are indeed present, including as pastiche, pastoral features are more distinct, and “The Forest Path” abounds with indirect, sometimes playful references to the tropes of the genre. Lowry’s Arcadia is called Eridanus, a name which finds its origins in classical mythology, as it refers both to a watercourse (the River Po) and to the constellation Eridanus, itself described by the narrator as a heavenly river mirroring its terrestrial equivalent (225-26). The hamlet of Eridanus is peopled not by youthful shepherds engaged in amorous pursuits, but by middle-aged fishermen, and “[w]ith the exception of those who were married, there never were any women” (245). Marital love thus predominates and is exalted throughout the story, dedicated to Lowry’s wife Margerie. The couple’s wedded bliss also serves the pastoral ideal of a simplified life in close contact with nature. Living conditions in Eridanus are difficult, and even occasionally appear insurmountable: “to live here meant accepting the terms of the most abject poverty,” the narrator observes (231). But for all these hardships, the couple clearly revel in the humility of what they see as their “primitive existence” (251), deriving from it, and from all the practical issues they are successively faced with, “much profound happiness” (251).

Eridanus as such only amounts to a handful of squatter’s shacks, built on government land, and the opposition between nature and city, which so strongly imbues the pastoral mode, crystallises around the threats emanating from the city authorities, who dream of converting the settlement into “hotels” and “[a]utocamps for the better class” (274). Theirs is thus “a condemned community, perpetually under the shadow of eviction” (225)—or at least Lowry’s narrator fantasises that it is. Civilisation is branded as a “creator of deathscapes” (276), spreading evermore in the direction of Eridanus, although, by the narrator’s own admission, the mountains and the stars remain immune to its depredations (276). On the other hand, it could be argued that the natural setting, which in the pastoral entails “the acceptance of a degree of artifice”  

3. For instance with the story the narrator and his wife make up about the path to the spring becoming “shorter and shorter until [he] should disappear altogether one evening, when coming back with the water” (Lowry 269).  
4. The settlement in the story derives its name neither from the constellation nor the river, but from a “wrecked steamer” that “lay round the point beyond the lighthouse” (Lowry 225). To add to the carefully-wrought web of echoes spun by Lowry and linking the river with the heavens above, the steamer is said to have belonged to “the defunct Astra line” (225; emphasis added).  
5. It is worth noting that early modern eclogues, such as Jacopo Sannazaro’s Eclogae piscatoriae (1526) and Phineas Fletcher’s Piscatorie Eclogues (1633), had already substituted fishermen for Theocritus’ and Virgil’s shepherds. The author is grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers of this article for drawing his attention on these precedents.
(Gifford 18), is largely constructed by Lowry’s narrator, who never ceases to project his own subjectivity upon the outer world.6

Yet pastoral is not only about place, or geography: it is a chronotope, in Bakhtin’s sense, evidencing “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships . . . artistically expressed in literature” (Imagination 84). And what characterizes pastoral time is its being limited to that of a mere sojourn. The landscape of Arcadia, the locus amoenus, is a place to rest temporarily, so that Terry Gifford observes that “[r]etreat and return is the essential pastoral momentum” (18). Accordingly, life in Eridanus is conceived of as an intermission, or an “intermezzo” (Lowry 230), to use the narrator’s word, much as the forest of Arden, in As You Like It, is a place of temporary exile for the Duke and his court. The protagonist of the pastoral is a visitor, a passer-by in a world of pleasures he ultimately doesn’t belong to. As Kimberly Huth remarks about Calidore, from Book VI of Spenser’s Faerie Queene, he “cannot belong to pastoral life; he cannot ‘lose himself’ and his identity as a knight during his sojourn and assume the role of shepherd” (67). And neither do Lowry’s protagonists become fishermen. They at first do “not see Eridanus as a place to live” (Lowry 230), but arrive one day, “thinking it would be both [their] honeymoon and [their] first and last summer holiday together” (226). It is only in the following spring that they buy and repair a house of their own, and decide to stay. Still, the possibility of eviction, as well as the war—when they first settle, the Second World War has recently begun—prevent them from envisioning their presence as definite and durable. Somehow, the couple never cease to be the vacationers they arrived as. “Strange magnificent honeymoon that had become one’s whole life” (275), the narrator ponders toward the end of the story.

Another distinctive feature of the pastoral, according to Gifford, is the presence of “real transferable learning about inner nature from dealing with and observing outer nature” (18). In “The Forest Path,” the narrator indeed learns much about himself and his past through his encounters with the natural world. One of the central episodes of the novella has him facing a mountain lion on the path to a nearby spring, a chance event which he progressively comes to understand as a symbolical confrontation with his inner demons (Lowry 263-64). In keeping with Gifford’s definition, this “learning about inner nature” is thought of as “transferable”: for the narrator, who has turned from jazz to composing classical music, his “new vocation” is “involved with using that past—for this was the underlying meaning of my symphony, even

6. That is what Mathieu Duplay shows in his article on writing the landscape in “The Forest Path”: “Frappé par l’ impersonnalité de la nature, il [le narrateur] décrit pourtant un paysage saturé de subjectivité; le tableau du monde devient l’expression du sentiment intime, l’ évocation de l’universel prend peu à peu toutes les couleurs du fantasme” (174).
my opera . . . —with turning it into use for others” (279). A principle which he also finds encapsulated in “the Montaigne-like belief . . . that the experience of one happy man might be useful” (281).

But where “The Forest Path” differs from the canons of pastoral literature—and radically renews them—is in its insistence on *shared* modes of consciousness and awareness to the environment as the basis for such “transferable learning.” Instead of staging another “[i]ndividual epiphan[y] of retreat into the wilderness” (Gifford 24), such as those which, according to Gifford, “are the core of American nature writing following the model of Walden” (24), Lowry foregrounds a dual experience, the husband and wife’s common reaction to their environment, so that the interplay between human subject and nature becomes a triangular, rather than a binary, relation. This manifests, for instance, in the narrator’s reiterated comments about his wife teaching him to observe the natural world, to relate to his surroundings. “How much I owed to her!” he exclaims, as he remembers that “[his] wife taught [him] to know the stars in their courses and seasons, and to know their names” (Lowry 246). She opens his eyes to such simple things as raindrops (239-40) or the advent of spring (247). “[T]hrough her I myself became susceptible to these moods and changes and currents of nature,” he confesses at some point (247). The narrator’s wife thus acts as a mediator. In the words of John Ming Chen and Yuhua Ji, she “is instrumental in constructing a new aesthetics . . . enabling him to discover the symmetry of nature’s design and its beauty” (25). In so doing, she initiates the pastoral; she renders possible the shift in focus whereby the autobiographical musings of her husband become attuned to this distinctive mode.

Even when her influence is not explicitly pointed to, the presence of the narrator’s wife can be felt in his discourse. Most of his interactions with the outer world are not simply *his* but involve the couple as a protagonist. “We” is often substituted for “I.” At times, the narrator even corrects himself and shifts back to the first-person plural pronoun. For instance, about his musical compositions, he observes, “and I—and *we*—had happiness in their execution” (Lowry 281; emphasis added). This use of epanorthosis, the figure of speech whereby a choice of word is emphatically altered so as to adhere more closely to the speaker’s meaning, testifies to a new sense of identity: the pastoral subject is no longer isolated, it has become “we,” or “us,” a plural self, born out of a symbiotic relationship.

**Lowry’s “Social Mind”**

How should this dual form of consciousness be understood, and how is it connected with the pastoral? In his 2010 study, *Social Minds in the*
Novel, Alan Palmer develops a set of ideas that can help us answer at least the first of these questions. Palmer situates his work as part of the cognitive approaches to literature. Along with other critics such as David Herman or Lisa Zunshine, he is interested in the study of fictional minds (specifically in the novel) but differentiates himself from the narratological perspective of Dorrit Cohn (Transparent Minds), Mieke Bal (Narratology) or David Lodge (Consciousness and the Novel), in which mind is identified with inner discourse (Palmer 8). This, he calls the “internalist” perspective, a term borrowed form philosopher Brian Cantwell Smith (8). At the other end of the spectrum is of course the “externalist” viewpoint, which sees the mind as “social, embodied, engaged” (8). In other words, the mind is not simply inside, it is revealed in all sorts of situations that cause the subject to express or betray their thoughts. What Palmer stresses is the way thought processes are never completely self-contained, but instead inhabit the world, allowing various agents to keep track of one another’s motives or emotions through their mutual interactions. In the words of David Herman, “in contexts of everyday interaction another’s I-originarity is not locked away inaccessibly in some inner recess of the self, but rather spread out across the elements of a given social encounter and situated within that encounter’s spatial environment and temporal flow” (Introduction, 10-11).

Another related concept is that of “intermental thought,” or collective thinking:

Such thinking is joint, group, [or] shared . . . as opposed to intramental, or individual or private thought. It is also known as socially distributed, situated, or extended cognition, and also as intersubjectivity. Intermental thought is a crucially important component of fictional narrative because, just as in real life, where much of our thinking is done in groups, much of the mental functioning that occurs in novels is done by large organizations, small groups, work colleagues, friends, families, couples, and other intermental units. (Palmer 41)

In “The Forest Path to the Spring,” the narrator and his wife are shown to form such an “intermental unit” or “social mind.” Their communal way of dealing with the world, and coping with sometimes difficult circumstances, exemplifies Palmer’s idea that “mind can be socially distributed: one mind corresponding to more than one brain” (52). As remarked earlier, the narrator learns about nature through his wife, in a way that enlarges his own individual perspective. However, as Lowry makes clear, this is not simply a case of one mind acquiring some degree of exterior knowledge; what is at work is mind sharing, the formation of a genuine “intermental unit.” The narrator’s reaction after his wife has told him about the formation of raindrops is quite telling: “I listened, moved, and innocently as if I had never seen such a thing before,
and indeed it seemed I never had” (Lowry 239). “Did I know this?” he goes on to ask. “I suppose so, something like it . . . . Yet what she said was uttered with such inexpressible wonder I repeat that, watching, and listening to her, it was like the first time I’d witnessed the common occurrence of rain falling into the sea” (239-40). It is significant that nothing new is learned, that no actual knowledge is passed on. The narrator already knew about the natural phenomenon that is being described to him. What his wife introduces him to are not facts, but her own “wonder.” She offers him the world, as seen through her eyes.

This “mind sharing” is especially manifest whenever the couple engage in shared moments of vision, although other senses or dimensions of being tend to be involved as well. Toward the end of the story, the two characters happen to walk by the house they had first occupied on arriving in Eridanus. Their early memories of the place are revived and the process of remembering, embedded in the present moment, is experienced as listening to an inner music:

As the mist rolled up toward us, beginning to envelop us, the sun still trying to maintain itself like a platinum disc, it was as if the essence of a kind of music that had forever receded there, that seemed evoked from the comments of my wife as she looked through this window, . . . while she was making the coffee, talking to herself partly for my benefit, describing the day to me, as if I had been like a blind man recovering his sight to whom she had to teach again the beauties and oddities of the world, as if it became unlocked, began to play, to our inner ear, not music but having the effect of music, not sentimental at all, but fresh and innocent, and only moving because it was so happy, or because happiness is moving; or it was like a whispering of the ghosts of ourselves. (274-75)

Following immediately is the remembrance of his wife’s comments, “as she looked through this window,” dealing mainly with the natural world around them, the “[w]hite frost on the porch and all the roofs,” the sunrise and mist, the “golden eyes under the window” or the local fauna of racoons, seagulls and loons, not forgetting their own cat (275). First-person plural pronouns abound, denoting shared perception. Along the same line, the narrator mentions “our inner ear,” pointing to a single—metaphorical—organ as one of the sources of the couple’s dual cognition. As evidenced in this passage, even complex thought processes like memory are joint: the “music,” coming from the past, plays for both of them, so that the two characters are shown to relate to the world as one mind, with its different strata of perception, emotion and reminiscence. The result is an elaborate dialogue between past and present,

7. Vision, indeed, is central in Lowry’s texts, in which “the main action tends to be sheer seeings: terrible encounters with the visible, as Conrad might put it” (Corrigan 424).
between inner and outer nature, with at its core the words of the narrator’s wife at the window, providing him with the vision he lacks. Synaesthesia seems to be the connecting thread here, uniting all the different layers of the “intermental unit.” The small talk is converted to images—“the beauties and oddities of the world”—for the narrator’s benefit. This oral description is also evocative of the ghostly music or whispering, that is itself revealed to be an emotion: their mutual happiness, impregnating both the past and the present. Through these successive conversions of one sense (or feeling, or cognitive process) into another, the “social mind” is allowed to operate. In other words, synaesthesia serves the same purpose in Lowry’s “extended cognition” as the nervous system, coordinating information and providing coherence at the intra-, but also in this case, the intermental level.

In this extract, the social mind is engrossed with “outer nature,” both remembered and observed in the present. Simultaneously, the couple learn about their inner nature as they explore the foundations of their happiness. This chiasmic interplay, bearing upon the connected minds of two individuals, illustrates how the pastoral, in “The Forest Path,” is first and foremost an “intermental pastoral.” As the mode is traditionally caught between solitude and community—staging as it does an individual’s connection with self and nature, as well as their integration within a small group of like-minded souls—Lowry’s take on the pastoral, steering away from any bilateral transaction with the world and simultaneously opening new intersubjective pathways to follow through, is nothing short of a formal renaissance. As hinted at already, this renewal is matched by the spiritual rebirth of Lowry’s protagonists. The encounter with the mountain lion (262-64)—although a chance meeting—retrospectively appears as one of the steps taken by the narrator in his “quest for atonement with phantoms of the past and for psychogeographic harmony with terrestrial and celestial realms of existence” (Foxcroft, *Kaleidoscopic Vision* 193). Another stage in this process is reached when the two characters overcome the shock of their house being destroyed in a fire:

I remembered the time when, homeless, having lost everything we had in the world, we had been drawn, not many weeks after the fire, to the still malodorous ruin of that house, before dawn, 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, diving off the blackened posts into the natural swimming pool of our old living room and frightening away I have no doubt the devil himself, who, the enemy of all humor in the face of disaster, as of all human delight, . . . wants nothing so much as that man shall believe himself unfriended by any higher power than he. (Lowry 280)
Contrary to the episode of the mountain lion, which the narrator faces alone, rebirth here is the outcome of a communal process involving a shared meal and bathing together. These two activities, associated with a renewal of the self, are of course highly symbolical, as they respectively evoke Communion and baptism. Still, what is most effective in chasing away the devil are not the “sacraments” themselves, but the sheer enjoyment of life which they betray—the “humor in the face of disaster.” Once again, the mechanisms of the pastoral imbue the narrative, as the fresh life the couple inaugurate upon the ashes of the old comes with a new degree of “learning about inner nature,” itself derived from “outer nature.” Indeed, it is only by confronting themselves with the elements—fire first, then water, both implying a form of purification—that the couple are able to transcend the loss of their house and to be reborn. The energy needed, they draw from the sun itself. Additionally, the space they occupy, the “malodorous” or “haunted ruin” of the house, with its living room turned swimming pool, becomes the pastoral locus par excellence as it blurs the distinction between inner and outer, between human creation and natural setting.

In this extract as elsewhere in “The Forest Path,” the pronoun “we” predominates, discreetly but consistently signaling joint cognition—the narrator and his wife’s dual thinking and feeling, as well as their intermental bond with their environment. It is striking to notice, however, that for all the insistence placed by Lowry on shared thought processes, polyphony is carefully kept at arm’s length: only the narrator’s voice is heard, as his wife’s is filtered through his own. Unlike Dostoevsky—as read by Bakhtin—, Lowry does not combine but merges, and the “we” of his pastoral subject remains contingent on a mouthpiece, a spokesperson who levels rather than highlights differences.

THE INTERMENTAL COMMUNITY

Another crucial dimension of the pastoral present in “The Forest Path,” and which also yields itself to an analysis based on Palmer’s “externalist” perspective, is the notion of community. Kimberly Huth notes in this regard that “[c]ritics such as Paul Alpers and Nancy Lindheim have revised the traditional view of pastoral as characterized mainly by the tensions between the court

8. Bakhtin has defined polyphony as the coexistence, within a novel, of “[a] plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses” (Problems 6; emphasis is Bakhtin’s). In Dostoevsky’s works, for instance, what we find is never “a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event” (Problems 6; Bakhtin’s emphasis).
and the country landscape to emphasize instead the community of shepherds interacting in this rural setting and the ethos of those characters” (44). As mentioned already, such community is an integral part of Lowry’s narrative, although the shepherds have been replaced by fishermen and boatbuilders. In a manner that is characteristic of the pastoral, this community is both present and absent, leaving the protagonists enough space for (shared) solitude and connection with nature. Accordingly, the narrator describes it in terms that almost equate it with a non-entity:

Not that we had any neighbors to speak of. For the greater part of the year we were often almost alone in Eridanus. My wife and myself, a Manx boatbuilder named Quaggan and occasionally some of Quaggan’s sons, a Dane, Nicolai Kristbjorg, and a Channel Islander called Mauger, who had a fishing boat, Sunrise, were usually the sole inhabitants, and once we were quite alone the whole winter. (Lowry 216)

The presence of the community is so diffuse, so unobtrusive, that its members are barely considered as “neighbors.” A slight contrast is thus established between the narrator’s pretense that they were “almost alone” and the enumeration which follows, identifying three other named inhabitants. Yet, for all this inconspicuousness, the community does exist, united by a common ethos which has to do with unselfishness. Indeed, according to the narrator, “nearly all was unselfishness in our little settlement. Like benevolent mountain lions, I had discovered, our neighbors would wait all day, only to perform an unselfish act, to help us in some way, or bring a gift. A smile, a wave of the hand, a cheery greeting was a matter of great importance here too” (244).

As a matter of course, the narrator and his wife progressively emulate this mode of being and a transmission takes place, representing yet another crux of the pastoral mode, which Huth isolates in her article on invitation and belonging in early modern pastoral literature: “Pastoral is not simply a literary form of place or of ethos but more accurately a mode through which the values of that place and the aspects of that ethos are communicated from one individual to another” (67). Consequently, “an even more fundamental difference” than the contrast between nature and city, is the difference “between the individual who inhabits the pastoral world and its values and the one whose access to both is mediated by another’s offer of inclusion” (67). The presence of the community, with its well-defined ethos, thus inevitably raises the question of belonging and inclusion: are the narrator and his wife part of the group they strive to emulate the values of? Or, to put it another way, are they given access to the pastoral world by its inhabitants?

In Eridanus, the question of inclusion, and the frontier between insiders and outsiders, is materialised very concretely, as the narrator soon finds out:
“Eventually I realized that the hamlet was really two hamlets, that it was divided almost precisely into the houses with names, and the houses without names, though these two hamlets, like interpenetrating dimensions, were in the same place” (Lowry 220). The two different sorts of houses are of course occupied by two different kinds of people. Those with names “belonged to people who just came to Eridanus for the week end in summer, or for a summer holiday of a week or two. They were . . . mostly town-dwellers earning good salaries but not sufficient to afford summer houses at one of the settlements further up the inlet” (221). On the other hand, those “who lived for the most part in the houses without names, were all, with one exception, deep-sea fishermen who had been here many many years before the summer people came, and who had their houses here by some kind of ‘foreshore rights’ allowed to fishermen” (221). Summer people and fishermen thus form two spatially commingled yet distinct groups, of which only the latter can be said to amount to a genuine (pastoral) community, as the vacationers are “town-dwellers” by definition and reside outside of Eridanus for most of the year.

Yet, in keeping with the pastoral ethos of selflessness, no antagonism exists between the two groups: unbeknownst to the summer people, the fishermen protect their houses “as their own” (225) during the winter storms, “not asking or expecting thanks” (225), while the vacationers, some of whom “happened to have been fishermen themselves” (225), are also careful to see that no damage is done to the fishermen’s shacks during their time away at sea. There is thus a reversibility of the inside/outside frontier and individuals navigate between the two Eridanuses, sometimes preserving the ethos of the original community although, strictly speaking, they are no longer part of it. Nevertheless, the distinction remains, and the narrator observes about the fishermen, of whom Quaggan, the Manx boatbuilder, generally “seemed to be the father or grandfather” (221), that “in the way of Celts, it was a little like a big family the entrance to which, for an outsider, I was to find by no means easy” (221).

When the couple arrive in Eridanus one summer, they are “strangers from the cities” (226), and they themselves do not plan on staying. When eventually they do, buying and repairing a house, and then rebuilding it after the fire, they come to occupy a liminal position on the threshold of the pastoral world: neither summer people nor fishermen, they have lost their identity as town-dwellers while remaining on the margins of the “big family” of more permanent inhabitants. As Kimberly Huth has determined in the case of Virgil’s first eclogue, Marlowe’s “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love,” or Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, the answer to this conundrum is invitation:
as it is extended from one person to another, the invitation highlights the community of pastoral that exists amidst the material aspects of rural life. It acts as the first step in extending that community to others who may be passing through the pastoral world by offering to visitors not only a comfortable place to rest but also fellowship and belonging. The pastoral landscape is often imagined as an ideal world of respite from the corruption of the court or city, but it is actually the invitation that creates the ideality of that world, which is only recognizable through interactions with other people in the landscape. (44-45)

The invitation makes the pastoral; it reveals the ethos underlying the landscape. Drawing on speech act theory, Huth analyses invitation as having “performative properties”: “The literary shepherds who issue and receive such invitations use them to constitute their own identities as pastoral citizens” (48). Can traces of this speech act be found in “The Forest Path”? As it turns out, the couple is never explicitly invited to stay—that is, verbally invited. In Lowry’s narrative, invitation does away with words and takes the form of a praxis. One of the early difficulties faced by the narrator and his wife is the lack of easily accessible drinking water. The problem, which almost causes them to renounce living in Eridanus, is solved when Kristbjorg, one of the fishermen, helps them locate a spring near their house (Lowry 240-41). By doing so, Kristbjorg technically allows them to stay. This inaugural gesture, all the more symbolic as it has to do with water, the very source of life, being bestowed upon the newcomers, is reproduced under various circumstances throughout the novella. When their second house burns down, the couple rebuild it “with the help of Quaggan, Kristbjorg, and Mauger, out of driftwood and wood from the sawmill at Eridanus Port” (270). Once again, this action has a highly symbolic meaning: after providing them with water, the community anchors the couple in the pastoral world and—quite literally—lays the foundations of their new life: “taking time from their own work, and accepting no money for it, Quaggan and Kristbjorg and Mauger had helped us . . . though all old men, with the cruel work of putting in our foundations, in fact supplied half the foundations themselves” (272).

The inclusion of Lowry’s protagonists within the community can also be read in the light of Palmer’s externalist approach to mind. For the couple is not the only “intermental unit” in “The Forest Path”: the “big family” which at first seems to the narrator so difficult to gain access to is shown to form a similar, if slightly larger, “social mind.” Values are shared, even a way to look at the world, so that the narrator soon has the impression of partaking into a communal vision that exceeds his own personal mind:

in the morning when one got up to make the coffee, with the sun blazing through the windows so that it was like standing in the middle of a diamond . . . I began to
see these intermediate rocks as with Quaggan’s eyes, the eyes of a Celt, as presences themselves, standing round like Renan’s immutable witnesses that have no death, each bearing the name of a divinity. (236)

The animist worldview, identified with a mythicised celticness itself derived from Renan’s “La poésie des races celtiques” (1854), allows the narrator to transcend his own subjectivity. Not only does he experience the nonhuman world as endowed with a life of its own, in an instance of Wordsworthian panpsychism, but seeing his environment “as with Quaggan’s eyes” he pushes back the limits of his own thought to share in the mind of the pastoral community. This “extended cognition” also describes the way the ethos of selflessness prevailing in Eridanus unites its inhabitants, who come to deal with the world, and with each other’s property, as if they were a single individual:

we too had grown unselfish, or at least different, away from the tenets of the selfish world. Eternally we watched Quaggan’s float to see that it was safe and if it broke away without his knowledge, or when he was in the city, we brought it back, no matter how bad the weather, honestly hoping he would not know it was us, yet proud that it had been ourselves, for had it not been, it would have been someone else. (Lowry 245)

What is valued, maybe more than the gesture itself, is the anonymity attached to it: Quaggan need not know who performed the action, only that his float was taken care of by the community. The members themselves are almost interchangeable—or rather, they act in the name of a larger whole which smooths out individual motives while preserving their sense of pride. On a similar occasion, as a storm is brewing over the mountains, the narrator encounters “[o]ne of Quaggan’s sons . . . running on the path” (265): “maybe his boat, or more likely Kristbjorg’s, who was in the city, was dragging its anchor, and I said to give me a shout if he wanted any help” (265). The indetermination of the partitive structure “one of Quaggan’s sons” is another sign that individual identity is incidental to the workings of the intermental unit. Correspondingly, the recipient of the action (himself or, “more likely,” Kristbjorg) remains unknown and only the diligence and goodwill stand out, largely detached from their subjective context.

Taking part in this communal functioning whereby one social mind, distributed across several individuals, indifferently ensures the safety of everyone’s belongings, the couple become genuine members of the pastoral community. Such functioning, more than any occupation or social status,

9. See Dombrowski. “[P]anpsychism explains abstract material beings in terms of more concrete sentient instances of becoming” (38).
testifies to their place within it. It is also proof that Quaggan, Kristbjorg, and Mauger’s help was indeed a form of invitation, as it provided them with the material means to live in Eridanus while introducing them to the ethos of selfless cooperation that characterises its community. Emphasising a form of extended cognition as the guiding principle of his pastoral world, Malcolm Lowry yet again chooses to renew this classical mode through a refined and innovative treatment of intersubjectivity: not only has the pastoral subject become “we” instead of “I,” but a new light is cast on the larger sphere of the rustic community, allowing identity to be further questioned and redefined in communal terms. Like the circles formed by raindrops falling into the inlet, human subjects expand and dissolve as “[e]ach is interlocked with other circles falling about it” (282).

Bearing all this in mind, one could argue that “The Forest Path” stands as the exemplar of what Terry Gifford calls the “post-pastoral”: “The post-pastoral is unlike terms such as ‘postmodernism,’ ‘postcolonial,’ or ‘posthuman.’ ‘Post-’ here does not mean ‘after,’ but ‘reaching beyond’ the limitations of pastoral while being recognizably in the pastoral tradition. It is not temporal but conceptual and therefore can refer to a work in any time period” (26). Accordingly, “[t]he post-pastoral is really best used to describe works that successfully suggest a collapse of the human/nature divide while being aware of the problematics involved” (26). Lowry’s intermental pastoral, with its emphasis on social mind, its triangular relation between inner and outer nature, but also its acceptance of the fleeting nature of such arrangement, certainly fits the description.

Xavier Le Brun
Université d’Angers
WORKS CITED


Bien que “The Forest Path to the Spring”—qui met en scène la découverte par deux époux d’une forme d’harmonie, précaire mais néanmoins puissante, au cœur de la nature canadienne—soit en de nombreux points conforme aux topoï de la pastorale, le récit insiste également sur des modes partagés de conscience et d’ouverture à l’environnement naturel—et en particulier sur des moments de vision commune—au travers desquels s’opère la jonction entre le for intérieur et le monde extérieur. Tandis que le narrateur anonyme et son épouse contemplent avec émerveillement le paysage qui les environne, leurs regards respectifs se fondent en un acte de perception complexe où trouvent à s’abolir les différences entre le moi et le monde, le sujet et l’objet. Ainsi que nous entendons le démontrer, cette conscience duelle peut se lire, à travers le prisme des études littéraires cognitives, comme un exemple de « pensée intermentale » (Palmer). De ce point de vue, “The Forest Path to the Spring” se distingue radicalement de la pastorale entendue comme récit de l’« épiphanie solitaire d’une retraite isolée » (Gifford), et ce afin de mettre en avant un sujet collectif ou trans-personnel, ancré dans le monde naturel.