

MALCOLM LOWRY: THE MAN AND HIS WORK

*Edited by George Woodcock
Canadian Literature Series*

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THE WRITER AS CONSCIOUSNESS

A View of "October Ferry to Gabriola"

Matthew Corrigan

THERE IS LITTLE EVIDENCE that Lowry could have turned the unfinished manuscript of *October Ferry to Gabriola* into as fine a novel as *Under the Volcano*. Lowry was simply not of a mind to finish things the last ten years of his life. There is not the same urgency in *Gabriola* as in the great novel. *Volcano*'s faults are justified by the character's propulsion toward self-destruction, a propulsion that will probably read to a later age as clearly as Ahab's does to our own, despite some of the same kinds of language excess. We never doubt the seriousness of Geoffrey Firmin's katabasis. *Gabriola* has the same seriousness but the action is missing to anneal the whole, the action-toward-death. *Gabriola* represents the volcanic state of mind drawn out to a fine tremor of existence: given the option of joy over the earlier novel's imperative of despair. We know Dante's paradise is duller than his inferno and we know why it has to be so. Religion and art do not overlap without some loss of nerve. This is not to say that *Gabriola* doesn't work. It does work but it works as something different from what it pretends to be.

Because he laboured on it painstakingly for the last ten years of his life, *Gabriola* manages to survey beautifully that period of Lowry's creativity, a period that represents in many ways his conversion back to life. If there are any doubts after reading the letters and short stories that it was a fertile period, *Gabriola* puts these to rest. As a piece of writing it achieves moments of lyric and philosophic grace that equal anything written in the twentieth century; moments that spring from such a quietness of spirit (a *quietus*, even) that it is difficult to peruse them in the context of a work that describes itself on the surface as a novel.

The infernal and paradisiacal (Eridanus) poles that divided and ruled Lowry's

thinking are felt once again, though the pull is positive throughout, inclining finally toward a synthesis of salvation, even of grace. The theme is dispossession, eviction. Ethan and Jacqueline Llewelyn are under edict of eviction from their squatter's shack at Eridanus, on the north shore of Burrard Inlet, opposite Vancouver. They have shared two years of extraordinary, primitive joy: a joy based on the near totality of their rebellion against a polluted, plastic age (the year is 1949); based on a simple return to nature and a learning to love the elements of that nature; but based also on an Ockham balance achieved between reality and fear, of which fear Llewelyn has the usual Lowry inheritance.

For the first time they had both acquired, though they didn't know it then, a complete faith in their environment, without that environment ever seeming too secure. This was a gift of grace, finally a damnation, and a paradox in itself all at once: for it didn't need to seem secure for them to have faith in its security. Or the little house itself didn't need to. The very immediacy of the eternities by which they were surrounded and nursed; antiquity of mountains, forest, and sea, conspired on every hand to reassure and protect them, as with the qualities of their own seeming permanence . . . Eridanus *was*.

Essentially the novel takes place in Llewelyn's consciousness, though of such a symbiotic and cosmic nature is that consciousness that it tends to become whatever it considers or momentarily takes cognizance of. The book is this consciousness in the state of becoming. Present action takes place on a bus from Victoria to Nanaimo, where the Llewelyns board a ferry for Gabriola Island. They have heard of a sea-captain's house for sale on the island and they are journeying to inspect it. Should the house be unsuitable there is a tract of land they can buy running down to the sea, and Llewelyn is prepared, as before, to build a house with his own hands. Present experiences tend to be few and far between — an incident in a Nanaimo tavern, something seen from the window of a bus — experiences which propel Llewelyn back into his past. The trip is laced with minute correspondences which secure the past in a state of webbed terror. Most of the time we are delving so deeply into the past that its own past becomes significant. The past within the past is explored in depth, so that everything gives way to and becomes part of everything else: a single continuum of consciousness in which time is technically suspended.

The ferry is actually taken but returns because of a sick passenger. The whole trip (Eridanus: Vancouver: Victoria: Nanaimo) seems to enact a geographic flirtation with Eridanus, as though something in the elements refused to let them travel far from home; at several junctures they find themselves pointed home-

ward, the significance of which does not escape Llewelyn. The book ends with the travellers once again ferrying across the strait to Gabriola. Instead of taking us to the island, however, Lowry lets Llewelyn envision their new life there, a vision very close structurally to the one at the end of *Volcano*, where Firmin imagines a similar Canadian paradise. This sudden projection forward optimistically at the end presages an escape for the Llewelyns from the past that has terrorized them. At least this seems to be Lowry's intention. When the ferry returns to discharge its sick passenger the evening newspapers are taken on board. As the ferry approaches Gabriola they read that city council has reprieved the squatters at Eridanus. They are free to return from exile. Since they are already on their way, the prospect of a more permanent home on the island takes on a new significance. It is as though they have eased clear of their own doom, have escaped the punishment that has been threatening throughout. Salvation is felt as a moment of release that comes when least expected in the throes of an ordeal; it is something to remain humble about, for it retains as its present heritage the remembrance of what it is like to suffer in exile. Such is the Lowry synthesis. We glimpse it partially in "Forest Path to the Spring" and in *Dark as the Grave*; in *Gabriola* it is given its longest moment. What is amazing is that it thrusts through the unfinished manuscript with the clarity and consonance of a single state of mind, suggesting that all of Lowry's later work was reaching toward this conclusion. Surprisingly, his plan for a continuum of works scanning the upsweep of the *Divine Comedy* becomes a reality with this book.

THAT ETHAN LLEWELYN is a forty-year-old retired criminal lawyer is almost irrelevant to the book. Why he has given up his Toronto law practice to settle in a west coast shack is never explained. The book in fact is about Lowry's life at Dollarton, British Columbia: his struggle with actual and spiritual eviction, with alcohol, with guilt, with God. At times Lowry manages to objectify his ordeal, to disguise it in the fear or thought of an Ethan Llewelyn, as when Llewelyn is riddled with guilt about not defending a fifteen-year-old boy sentenced to be hanged, a cowardice he connects with an earlier incident at university when he failed to prevent a young friend from hanging himself. Llewelyn is every bit as infirm as Geoffrey Firmin, with occasionally some of the same insight into the mystery of that infirmity. What is most unfinished in this book concerns Llewelyn the lawyer and the reasons for his retreat. Lowry's working notes indicate some

of the things he intended to add to facilitate our believing in his character on objective as well as personal grounds. Evidently, we were to be shown how Llewelyn had defended a man he believed innocent, only to learn he was a murderer. Thus his disillusionment and his retreat from civilization. That the book works as well as it does despite its factual imperfections and its structural imbalance indicates, I think, the degree to which Lowry was no mean characterizer, and no ordinary novelist. Finally, it doesn't matter who Llewelyn is trying to be; he is the Lowry persona — he could be no other. The book is the mind of the author at work phenomenologically on the raw substance of experience, narrowed as that experience was through his choice of life-style, through his consciously cultivating one species of suffering, through his latent Manicheism.

Llewelyn's external world makes a bizarre kind of sense. It is constantly telling him something about himself, pumping him with information to help overthrow the fear that the world has gone mad. There are few inert or isolated facts. Films that Llewelyn sees become more real than life itself. He becomes the "Wandering Jew" in a film of that title. He suffers that becoming. Nothing exists for him without prehension, without intentionality. The mountains spining British Columbia are one geologically with the infernal Ixtaccihuatl and Popocatepetl of *Volcano*. In his drunkenness Llewelyn is capable of merging consciousness with Noah, Swedenborg, Edgar Allan Poe, Geoffrey Firmin, and others. The ghost of Poe is omnipresent throughout. Llewelyn looks like Poe physically (to say nothing of the spiritual resemblance). As a student he attended Poe's alma mater. The day of his bus trip, aside from its being the day on which his student friend hanged himself twenty years before, is the hundredth anniversary of Poe's death.

Everything is connected with everything for those with pure vision. The men's section of a bar in Nanaimo (which has "an ugliness the world had not thought of before") seems to take on the "perfect outward expression of his own inner soul, of what it meant, of what it did, even of what awful things could happen in it." Words overheard are "addressed mysteriously to Ethan himself; and moreover . . . every phrase [has] another meaning, perhaps many meanings, intended for his ears alone." Llewelyn has been introduced to the Cabbala by Jacqueline's father, a "white magician" with sundry occult powers, and that too gets drawn into the overall flow of consciousness.

In fact he could sum up no better their life on the beach than to say it had been, in a manner, *his* cabbala, in the sense that, if he was not mistaken, that system might be regarded on one plane as a means less of accumulating than of divesting oneself — by arrangement, balancing them against their opposites — of unbalanced

ideas: the mind, finally transcending both aspects, regains its lost equilibrium, or for the first time truly discovered it; not unlike, Ethan sometimes supposed, the modern process of psychoanalysis.

When things are going well there is this perfect symbiosis between man and environment, between self and God. Their shack, unlike their other two houses (both of which burned to the ground mysteriously), means more than the usual abode: "they wear it like a shell," they "love it like a sentient being." Eridanus exemplifies a religious wholeness; and love is the cement that secures it fast. Eviction, or its threat, is thus taken as symptomatic of some overlooked and unconfessed evil. Llewelyn has no difficulty screening his past for the appropriate evidence. He sees himself responsible for his friend's suicide; he sees himself a failure as a lawyer who might plead eloquently for the abolition of capital punishment, and for the life of a boy murderer. There is even the fear that he has become too possessive for Eridanus. Guilt is never that simple or unilateral, however. Llewelyn has the added torment of terrible visions — visions of chaos and not of some principle of good controlling the reeling world. His greatest despair comes when under the influence of alcohol.

Significantly, Llewelyn cannot avoid peering into such depths. He needs a sense of hell in his life almost in order to keep his joy sensibly bound. Once he envisions this hell it is enough. An inverse spirit resembling hope begins to point him in the opposite direction and he sees with cleared vision.

What was important was that he was now convinced there must be some complete triumphant counterpart, hitherto based on hearsay or taken on trust, of that experience he had had, or almost had: as there must be of that abyssal region, some spiritual region maybe of unborn divine thoughts beyond our knowledge . . .

Mightn't he equally well consider that he'd been vouchsafed, was so being vouchsafed, a glimpse into the very workings of creation itself? — indeed with this cognition Ethan seemed to see before his eyes whole universes eternally condensing and re-condensing themselves out of the "immaterial" into the "material", and as the continued visualization of their Creator, being radiated back again. While meantime here on earth the "material" was only cognizable through the mind of man! What was real, what imaginary? Yes, but couldn't the meaning, the message, for *them*, be simply that there *had* been a message at all? Yes, could he not just as well tell himself, as Cyprian of Antioch, that here God had beaten the devil at his own game, that magic was checkmated by miracle! Ethan drank half another beer. Gone was his fright. In its stead was awe. In the beginning was the word. But what unpronouncable Name had visualized the Word?

The only drama is that between present and past consciousness; the only action

the will of the moment grappling with a mute past, not so that it can strike out in pure action, but rather so that it can enlarge upon itself, so that it can know itself. The process is self-defeating because of its intoxication, its solipsism. Few prose writers of the modern period have tried (have tormented) the moment of consciousness as Lowry does in this work. What he seems to be emphasizing is the compulsion of modern man to rework past consciousness; suggesting that if man is to constitute himself as a free individual he must first make sense of the nightmare of his past. The posture of Lowry's later work is *retrospective* in this sense. Terror is something experienced when one realizes the significance of the past, when one sees the connection; it does not consist of any present threat. Since all of this ratiocination is intended as a kind of reparation for the future, the present moment tends to be overlooked, if not also to be underlived. There is almost no active present tense in this work.

The fact is Lowry came to think this way as a writer. It represents a dangerously close perspective for a writer to have unless he is a phenomenologist and his subject, quite unabashedly, is the reduction of consciousness. Dangerous because you can't locate the infinite in the general labyrinth of human mind except in terms of a general intentional structure. The result at best is but a frenetic scaffolding that gives the sense of the impending event but never the spectacle itself. The prose takes on the tortured shape of the quest in its circumlocution. The shape of *Gabriola* is that of a vortex out of which something material is about to be hurled. Often nothing is hurled clear; no meaning is adduced and past consciousness is swept into present.

Lowry's is the problem of the poet turned mystic, a problem of learning to face the fact that everything that comes from his creative unconscious is part of everything else in the order of creation, and must be attended to, must be set down in chiselled stone prose, if the final balance is to be maintained. Editing, or what for the average novelist amounts to an ordinary task, is lost sight of in Lowry's later work. Certain parts of *Gabriola* give the feeling that at some later rereading the author would have trimmed or deleted them. Yet the same pieces show us something of the difficulty of doing this for Lowry, because in some way they control parts of the larger whole; they give the feeling of belonging. There is a strange logic behind the excess (the plethora) of this manuscript, a logic akin to that of dreams. It defies ordinary daylight understanding yet demands our attention. I am thinking of the way a person we know reveals himself or herself totally in a dream, becoming through word or deed a full being and doing so in terms that seem totally appropriate to that person; so that on awakening we think,

"Yes, that is exactly what she would say, how she would act." Though nothing of the sort had taken place or would ever take place in real life the dream had effected the imaginative leap that life was too shy or slow to make. The ontological accuracy of the thing strikes us. It is the same with the manuscript of *Gabriola*. Lowry was right, finally, to believe in his continuum of works as he did, to respect the presence of every wandering beggar that passed through his consciousness, lest the indigent turn out to be Christ in disguise. Reading Lowry, if one does it properly, requires more than the usual suspension of disbelief. If the writing works for us, it does so not because it is fiction on its way to becoming a novel, but because it entails a vision of a higher order of creative existence altogether than we ordinarily get in modern literature. It would be difficult to imagine a later age making anything like a fair assessment of our own without such a testament, bleak and solemn as it tends to be.

(1971)

