The N. York Times Book Review

A noble failure by a corrupted mystic

October Ferry to Gabriola

By Malcolm Lowry. Edited by Margerie Lowry. 395 pp. New York and Cleveland: The World Publishing Company. $6.95.

By MATTHEW CORRIGAN

Malcolm Lowry struggled with this novel the last 10 years of his life, until his death in 1957. He never finished it. What that means for Lowry is something different from what it means for most novelists. What it means—in addition to an impossible unevenness (in which banality stands juxtaposed with the profound) — is that the work lacks the final expurgatory look which was as important for Lowry's writing as the initial inspiration. Lowry had the habit of turning every scrap of experience into a novella, the novella into a "huge and sad" novel, and that in turn into a continuum of novels. "October Ferry to Gabriola" was once a novella; it is the novella-length experience within this maze of prose that the reader should look for. What awaits him is worth the effort: a species of ecstatic, lyrical prose that has all but gone out of existence.

Lowry, in his letters, described "Gabriola" as "an innocent and beautiful story of human longing" turned by his daemon into "one of the most guilt-laden and in places quite Satanically horrendous documents." It was his hope that the novel's lugubriousness would be graced by its comic effects. The formula is a good one for all of Lowry's writing. The preoccupation, always, is terror saved from itself by illumination, the moment possessing the quality of hilaritas, at least in retrospect.

Lowry began "Gabriola" after he finished "Under the Volcano." In aspiration it bears the same relationship to that infernal work as his short masterpiece "Forest Path to the Spring." "Gabriola," to use his own words, became a matter of "rebirth," of "sanity." With most authors such confessions should be taken with a grain of salt, as obiter dicta. Not with Lowry. He was not a writer in any usual sense and he was certainly not the simple novelist he sometimes pretended he was. If anything he was a spoiled mystic who tried to bridge all mystical and esoteric traditions at once. As a writer he remains anomalous, unless lumped in some loose tradition which includes Plotinus, Cabbalism, Boehme, Swedenborg, Blake, Poe, Hesse; visionaries (*Continued on Page 54*)

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Lowry imagined kept the Creator on his toes.

The narrative of "October Ferry to Gabriola" is irrelevant if not also unbelievable. It concerns a semi-retired Canadian lawyer threatened with eviction, a threat Lowry experienced himself and one he had no difficulty seeing as symbolic of larger issues, circa 1950. The novel opens with Ethan Llewelyn and his wife heading for Gabriola, an island off Vancouver. They manage to get within sight of the island by the end of the book. What lies in between is an ocean of consciousness deeper than Virginia Woolf's "To the Lighthouse" (an obvious prototype). The Llewelyns have been evicted from their shore cabin by civic authorities. The newspapers have labelled them squatters and their harmless paradise a public eyesore. Previously the Llewelyns had been burned out of their farmhouse at Niagara, a natural disaster that parallels Ethan's disallusionment with his Toronto law practice. The feeling is that something in the elements as vell as in the plastic age is driving them from a simple, whole-earth existence. Gabriola beckons as a last resort, an isolated place where they can begin again, building their house by hand if necessary.

These are the facts the reader must dig for. Lowry's protagonist moves through a haze of disguises, alter-egos, poltergeists, hermetic correspondences, but each disguise is nothing other than a new level of consciousness, an example of imaginative will at work in a mind that is essentially ascetic to begin with, not a lawyer's by any necessity, but a spiritualist's, a phenomenologist's. There is only one character, finally, and it is Lowry himself.

Lowry's temptation went deeper than alcohol. It was a temptation to rid spirit of body entirely. It is no wonder the novel as form got in his way as it did. In his lucid moments he saw how dishonest the novel could be and consoled himself he was working around that form only to overthrow it; repeatedly, he justified "Gabriola" as a work that moved "vertically" rather than "horizontally." What "Gabriola" achieves is something close to the heart of Lowry's own terror, perhaps just an eyewitness account of that terror rendered poetically, for poetry was always the figure of renewal. There is this simplicity, this grasping, to Lowry the man.

"Gabriola," to the extent it shares this achievement, has nothing to do with fiction. Conflict is not something on the surface of the narrative. It is never dramatized, never fictionalized. It transpires in the mind of the book as in the mind of the author. The work becomes a treatise on writing, specifically on writing at the time Lowry does, with exactly that list of mentors looking over his shoulder, and with what was to him the staggering realization that literature had not yet caught up with the calamity of modern civilization, that it was still in its "Jung and easily Freudened" stages, entertaining the grandest of illusions about the human condition, naming the sickness instead of attacking it.

Lowry's failure is beautifully documented in this work. It is this failure, precisely, that should interest us. It would be a noble failure if only because of its strong sense of necessity. But it goes deeper than that. "October Ferry to Gabriola" depicts the failure not simply of the novel in the modern world but of a certain kind of consciousness. The loss of ours as much as it is Lowry's.

In an age of slick litera successes it is perhaps imp tant to study the failures of preceding age which posse the sensibility of genius. It is way of seeing ourselves to s what choices are available us and never taken; or, taken, misprized by us. The have been sundry alternative and current literature ha selected but a few of them Those choices too will exhaus themselves. Lowry led th novel into an abyss of mystic ism both sacred and profane That his efforts should die there must tell us something about ourselves. ■