

**MALCOLM LOWRY'S  
OCTOBER FERRY TO GABRIOLA:  
BALANCING TIME**

*Keith Harrison*

Just as the malefic sign of Scorpio prefigures the Consul's death in *Under the Volcano*, the astrological sign of Libra, the scales, signifies the Llewelyns' journey towards equilibrium in Malcolm Lowry's later novel, *October Ferry to Gabriola*. Ethan's quest for personal balance involves a retrospective ordering of his past life which, in a series of flashbacks, intrudes on his narrative consciousness: "the glass windows by which they were enclosed were like many-faceted mirrors, reflecting all aspects of his life—their life."<sup>1</sup> The refusal of the past to remain *passed* immeasurably complicates his efforts to find a personal equilibrium:

. . . as abruptly as the machinery of a phonograph with self-changing records clashes into action, it was as though within him a totally different consciousness had taken over . . . It was as if the mind of another person, coexisting with the first but utterly independent of it, had begun to work over much of the same material, but with what a different viewpoint!<sup>2</sup>

Because the material of the past metamorphoses, Ethan's mind is in danger of becoming unbalanced.

The motivation for the Llewelyns' trip to Gabriola Island is the threat of eviction from their wilderness home at Eridanus, a place whose harmony and equilibrium Ethan can communicate only with reference to mystical experience:

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—

---

<sup>1</sup>Malcolm Lowry, "Workding Notes (England)," *October Ferry to Gabriola*, Special Collections, University of British Columbia Library, folder no. 17 - 13.

<sup>2</sup>*October Ferry to Gabriola*, ed. Margerie Lowry (New York and Cleveland: World Publ. Co., 1970), p. 209.

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 . . . (p. 169)

Once when Ethan was absent briefly from Eridanus, "it had not taken long for what had become so precariously balanced within himself to be overpoised again" (p. 185). What gives particular intensity to his fears of eviction now is that "Ethan simply did not believe that the sort of conjunction of favoring yet opposing circumstances which had maintained Eridanus' existence in balance for so long could arise again, or be discovered elsewhere to have arisen" (p. 197). In his consciousness the loss of their home on the beach implies an irretrievable loss of psychological equilibrium because he believes no other conjunction of the stars could be as favourable elsewhere to a condition of balance.

Throughout the day of the journey, October seventh, Ethan's present anxieties about dispossession are exacerbated by memories of a traumatic incident from the past (involuntarily recalled by its anniversary): twenty years ago a student friend, Peter Cordwainer, committed suicide after Ethan had drunkenly "told him to go ahead" (p. 214). Unable to make a balanced assessment of his moral responsibility, Ethan—even twenty years later—oscillates wildly between protestations of innocence and self-condemnation:

"I accused myself, somewhat unnecessarily, they all said. Because the point was I didn't *know*. Or did I? . . ." (p. 215)

Alcohol occludes any simple act of remembrance; Ethan can only furtively guess at what happened: guilt is virtually his only link to the unknowable past. For him there can be no balanced weighing of this crucial past experience, and as a consequence, the present scales of self-judgement are subject to disequilibrium.

During the trip to Gabriola Ethan nearly becomes unbalanced mentally when he sees an advertisement for Mother Gettle's Soup, a product for which Peter Cordwainer's father was the advertising manager:

It must have been there all the time of course, the advertisement staring him in the face; perhaps the mist had obscured it, or the high-piled timber on the open cars trundling by, while now there were some curiously meaningless empty cars that he could see

right over; but it had been in his mind anyhow, all the time, he had been expecting it sometime or another all morning, but not *this* one, not the one with Cordwainer himself on it, not this comparatively rare one, showing a twenty times life-size cartoon of Peter, a lively, handsome, grinning youth of fifteen, gulping a great bowl of steaming soup and saying, "M'mm, Good!" (pp. 208-09)

In his essay "After the *Volcano*," Terence Bareham explains that the "Mother Gettle" leitmotif is a device that Lowry uses so that "past and present can be made to overlap and interact."<sup>3</sup> The recurring advertisements for Mother Gettle's Soup both activate and externalize Ethan's recurrent sense of guilt, and the particular one quoted parodies in its facile glibness Ethan's superficial response to Peter's threats of suicide, "Go ahead." The contrived ecstasy on Peter's bloated face exemplifies the tendency of advertising to exaggerate and distort feelings. The false emotional perspective of the ad reminds Ethan of his confused response to Peter's despair twenty years ago.

In *October Ferry to Gabriola* Lowry connects his protagonist's loss of balance and proportion not only to advertising but also to the mass media itself:

... with *Time* and *Life* on the table with their bouncing advertisements of a bouncing life with Big Cousin that never was on land or sea, or if it was, in his opinion shouldn't be, haunting you each weekend, and criminal slanting of the news, which Jacqueline absorbed with guileless interest, as without knowing it, so increasingly did he, so that their conversation began unconsciously to reflect these opinions, or disgustingly react from them beyond all fairness and judgement . . . (p. 181)

Misjudgment as the inevitable consequence of the media's distortion of life extends to the local newspaper, and Ethan finds himself "reacting mostly to that which aroused his own venom, which, being aimed nowhere, or at an abstraction ended only in poisoning himself" (p. 186). The failure of the media to give a balanced perspective on life has consequences on the level of Ethan's personal equilibrium.

Inferentially, in his mind the city and the media are fused: one is the realization of the grotesque version of society propagated by the other. The city for Ethan has become the embodiment of both

<sup>3</sup>Terence Bareham, "After the *Volcano*: An Assessment of Malcolm Lowry's Posthumous Fiction," *Studies in the Novel*, 6 (1974), 352.

human disorder and cultural disequilibrium. The Hell that was Mexico in *Under the Volcano* is transposed to Vancouver in *October Ferry to Gabriola*:

... soulless Behemoths in the shape of hideous new apartment buildings, yet more deathscapes of the future. No longer was the milk delivered by a wagon and a good-luck white horse but in a vehicle resembling a mechanized death slab. And if there was some economic sense in this change, to regret which was sentimental, the same could scarcely be said of other changes. The fake modern buildings going up everywhere were proving far more deserving of literal cold-blooded condemnation than even were those they replaced. Their roofs leaked, their staircases collapsed, their toilets would not work. And besides a soul-destroying ugliness what these new buildings all had in common, both within and without, was a curious-seeming out-of-dateness. Not in the sense that the steamboat Gothic houses could be said to be out of date. It was that those had the aspect of potential ruins, of a sort of rubble, even before they had been completed. (p. 177)

Living in Vancouver, "It had not taken long for what had become so precariously balanced within himself to be overpoised again" (p. 185). In Ethan's search for a personal equilibrium, Vancouver epitomizes the unbalance that he is struggling against.

The cabin by the sea in the wilderness of British Columbia represents a pastoral counterpoint, a paradisaical alternative, to Vancouver:

How close the stars as they rose over the mountains, and were reflected in the inlet, among the reflections of the pines. Yet of their names, their behavior, it came to him, he still knew nothing. He hadn't even known till Jacqueline told him that Eridanus was also the name of a constellation, far less that it was the river, in Virgil's *Aeneid*, which watered the Elysian Fields of the Earthly Paradise . . . (p. 164)

At Eridanus, Ethan in the pastoral mode of resolving the complex within the simple, discovers an equilibrium by "divesting oneself" (p. 169). When he reads *Time* and *Life* in the city, distortion of judgement occurs; ". . . in the country the magazines simply seemed a welcome weekly joke, to be treated in large with the same amused contempt that intelligent Russians presumably reserved for *Prauda*" (p. 181).

However, not only the threat of eviction but also memories of the past disrupt Ethan's pastoral vision:

... the white light on the sea these early October mornings, the clouds rolling away, the freshness, the newness, the sparkle and cleanliness—A longing for the pure intoxication of sobriety possessed him—

STOP! LOOK! LISTEN!

Mother Gettle's Kettle-Simmered Soup. M'mm, Good! (p. 208)

The opposition between the infernal city and the paradisaical wilderness correlates with Ethan's sense of personal antinomies. The intrusion of Vancouver, the infernal city, upon Eridanus, which has paradisaical connotations of innocence, symbolically conveys Ethan's recurring tendency towards self-condemnation. Corresponding to the opposing ethical absolutes of heaven and hell are Ethan's two opposing notions of his responsibility for Peter's suicide: innocence and guilt ("Murderer!," p. 216). The antiphonal voices of urban and bucolic externalize opposing aspects of his self. Vulnerable to negative incursions of both the city and his consciousness Ethan struggles to retain his personal equilibrium.

The concluding five chapters of *October Ferry to Gabriola*, which narrate the actual voyage to Gabriola Island, give prominence to the quest for transcendence of time through spiritual references. Lowry explores the theme of purgation as an intensification of the search for an equilibrium of self:

The pitching boat, its gunwhale now above, now below, now rolling away from the clanking rising and falling landing stage, was scarcely more than a launch, had no discernible name, and had been newly painted yellow. Mingled with the smell of fresh paint a terrific cleanly harsh smell of salt and fish rose to their nostrils from the harbour. Taking things all in all Ethan reflected that they ought at this point to feel sick but the smell was so violent, as if everything putrefying had been purged out of it by the sea and wind, that instead they were exhilarated. (pp. 285-286)

The pitching boat images Ethan's lack of balance, his compulsive oscillations between feelings of innocence and guilt. The phrase, "a terrific cleanly harsh smell," suggests that his inner torment has led or will lead to some essential purgation of this guilt. However, the concept of regeneration, represented by the fresh paint, is immediately undercut by Ethan's recurring sense of criminality:

Trespassers using this dock—the prisoner in the dock!—do so at their own risk. Smout Gabriola Ferry Ltd. (p. 286)

The sudden shifts of self-condemnation that typify Ethan's consciousness throughout the day continue even during the last ferry ride. The purgatorial theme is furthered through an advertisement for the "Gabriola Convalescent Home" (p. 286). In response to Jacqueline's query, Ethan remarks, "One's glad to know people go there [i.e. to Gabriola Island] to recover from something" (p. 287). This notion, analogous to the hospital in *Lunar Caustic*, offers a literal framework for the idea of regeneration, the recovery of self-mastery.

Gabriola Island itself, "half hidden . . . by a pall of smoke" (p. 298) remains ambiguous, like Ethan's own identity. The source of the fire (infernal or purgatorial?) is not immediately clear, but apparently is caused by "people burning rotten tree stumps off their lands" (p. 298). This regenerative act, with its sense of purification, is like that in "The Forest Path to the Spring" where the narrator hacks out the rotten wood from a salvaged ladder in order to make it useful. Nevertheless, Ethan's sense of damnation persists:

Good-bye! And the echo comes Abye! . . . Was the word in a dictionary? If so, some part of his documental mind informed him, it must be found next to the word "abyss." God help me! (p. 299)

But after a conversation with a priest, his continuing sense of despair receives "a measure of reassurance" (p. 306), and he begins to have "an impression of self-mastery" (p. 307):

. . . for the first time in a long while he felt in tune with his destiny and that of the universe. The feeling was not unlike one of triumph.  
Ouch!

"Hail to the sea gull, in the empyrean!  
Who man's head useth, as a spare latrine."

Lowry, with low humour, ironically derides Ethan's sense of triumph, and indicates his continuing state of disequilibrium.

But the last chapter opens triumphantly with the good news that the squatters at Eridanus will not be immediately evicted. This reprieve does not deter Ethan from his quest for a less vulnerable home, a

new "Paradise" (p. 325), and the name of their friend, Angela d'Arrivee (p. 328), suggests that Gabriola Island might be a paradise regained. However, Lowry's book ends abruptly—before Ethan and his wife set foot upon Gabriola Island—leaving the success of their quest uncertain. The protagonist's life continues to be a precarious balancing act, expressed by the somewhat affirmative oxymoron, the ferry's "protracted chord of mournful triumph" (p. 332).

*Dawson College*