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DANTE "FOLLOWS YOU AROUND, SIR!" –
THE DECONSTRUCTION OF *INFERNO*
IN *OCTOBER FERRY TO GABRIOLA* BY MALCOLM LOWRY

O highest wisdom, how great is the art
You show in heaven, on earth and in this evil place!
Inferno, Canto XIX

The fact that Lowry chose to reach back to the Dantean framework in his *opus magnum* seems paradoxical, when the complete and well-ordered vision in *The Divine Comedy* is juxtaposed with a rather postmodern perspective of *The Voyage... that never ended!*² The choice to follow this particular precursor may be seen as a result of nostalgia for the hierarchical universe, on the part of the author whose own life and creation were so much troubled by the continual resurgence of chaos. The medieval categories of *Inferno*, *Purgatory* and *Paradiso* functioned as an imaginary world where Lowry tried to trace his own path in the works that bear distant but distinct overtones of *Divina Commedia*. The truly religious concern with salvation and damnation as realities is usually reflected in the experience of characters who share certain features of their Dantean predecessors. The male protagonist can be compared to the visitor in *The Divine Comedy*. In his quest for meaning, he is usually accompanied by a female character who plays Beatrice with different effects. Critics have been aware of this paradigm in Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, where the association of Yvonne with light reflects her salvific

¹ Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. C. H. Sisson (Manchester: Carcanet, 1980), p. 79.

² For the analysis of M. Lowry's fiction in terms of evolving narrative see: Sh. E. Grace, *The Voyage that Never Ends: Malcolm Lowry's Fiction* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1982). The author observes that "the early Dantean conception of the sequence has a finality and a naiveté about it which could not possibly have suited Lowry's complex evolving system".

role.³ She often appears clothed in sunlight, and she is borne towards the Pleiades in the moment of death,⁴ both images recalling the celestial radiance of Beatrice. The association is strengthened by her aim; she tries to rescue the Consul from darkness misinterpreted by him as true light.⁵ The female character in *The Forest Path to the Spring* recalls Beatrice because she is an idealized person through whose sensitivity the true understanding of the world is mediated to her quester-husband.⁶ Malcolm Lowry sometimes commented on the Dantean elements in his works. In the famous letter to Jonathan Cape, about *Under the Volcano*, he stressed the importance of "the path theme of Dante".⁷ He also mentioned "the dark wood of Dante", which was alluded to in the name of cantina "El Bosque", and in a real wood near the barranca.⁸ One of the points in a letter to Albert Erskine is that "the celestial scenery" of pine trees and mountain inlet and sea in Dollarton "must be extremely like that in Ravenna" where Dante died and wrote and got the inspiration for the last part of the *Paradiso*.⁹ The landscape of Dollarton called Eridanus surfaces in quite a few parts of Lowry's grand narrative, especially in *The Forest Path to the Spring* that was meant to become a version of *Paradiso*.

The extent and significance of Dante's influence on Lowry's fiction has been a matter of dispute among Lowry critics. To mention just a few opinions: Douglas Day does not find *The Divine Comedy* particularly relevant in his analysis of Lowry's fiction.¹⁰ Carole Slade claims that *Under the Volcano* is the only position that fulfills its role in the planned Dantean trilogy.¹¹ Richard Cross comments on *Paradiso* as the intertext in *The Forest Path to the Spring*.¹² What I would like to prove in this article is that

³ Cf. K. Dorosz, *Malcolm Lowry's Infernal Paradise* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1976) pp. 36-7. The author provides a detailed analysis of light and darkness imagery in *Under the Volcano*, pp. 34-44.

⁴ C. Slade, "Under the Volcano and Dante's *Inferno* I", in B. Wood (ed.), *Malcolm Lowry: The Writer and his Critics*, (Ottawa: Tecumseh Press, 1980), pp. 140-50. The author is rather reluctant to grant the Beatrice status to Yvonne. "While Yvonne's association with the stars and heavens throughout the novel might seem to make her a Beatrice figure in the Dantean context, she is far too human and full-bodied to be comparable to Dante's adored lady ... ability to love is ultimately her salvation, for as she dies from the kicks of the bucking horse which Geoffrey has unleashed she ascends to a Dantean celestial heaven".

⁵ See: K. Dorosz, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-44.

⁶ R. Cross, "Lowry and Columbian Eden", in B. Wood (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 178, 179.

⁷ H. Breit, M. Bonner Lowry (eds.), *The Selected Letters of Malcom Lowry*, (Penguin, 1985), p. 76.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

¹⁰ D. Day, *Malcom Lowry. A Biography* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 322.

¹¹ C. Slade, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

¹² R. Cross, *op. cit.*, pp. 178-81.

Dantean influence is only partly seen in Lowry's conscious use of crucial images from *The Divine Comedy*. The influence is quite persistent though subliminal in the work that was not planned as definitely infernal, purgatorial or paradisaic part, i.e. *October Ferry to Gabriola*. One of the results of Dante's impact on Lowry's imagination is the obsessive recurrence of certain infernal motifs whose source does not manifest itself overtly in the text. Accordingly, I will view the work in question as haunted by the sinister aspects of Dantesque world, and I will see the mutations of Dantean register here in terms of unsettling anxiety rather than harmonious fulfillment.

October Ferry to Gabriola is pervaded with fears that give rise to dislocations in Dante's paradigm. According to Terence Bareham, the destructive fire that tends to obliterate earthly paradise in the book is a distant echo of the fact that Lowry's intended Paradiso, i.e. *In Ballast to the White Sea* was consumed in the conflagration of his first home in Dollarton.¹³ The symbolic disaster of Lowry's Paradiso seems to underlie the main feature of the world in *October Ferry to Gabriola*, which can be called the conflation of heaven and hell. The term is meant as a departure from Terence Bareham's "concatenation of hell and heavens"¹⁴ because it emphasizes the radical fusion of opposite qualities. Dante's worlds with strictly delineated boundaries are now blended in the way that resists separation. The new quality emerges from the conversation that states the theme of the whole work. Relaxing in the bar, Ethan and Jacqueline hear a voice over from the movie screen next door:

"— but are we going to heaven, or hell?"¹⁵
 ... But they are the same place, you see."

As in *Under the Volcano*, "the place" is not to be identified with a particular geographical location. When the Consul says that his hell "is not Mexico but in the heart",¹⁶ he realizes that it is not so much external political determinism but his own choice that destines him for the infernal world and bends his mind towards the abyss. Ethan undergoes ordeals in the private hell of his own mind, when the memory of his past guilt changes into obsession. He blames himself for the suicide of a frustrated friend, Peter Cordwainer, whom he could have helped in the time of need. The sinister consequences of the past reach Ethan through his paranoid interpretation of reality. Disasters and unpleasant incidents that happen to him

¹³ T. Bareham, "After the Volcano: An Assessment of Malcolm Lowry's Posthumous Fiction", in B. Wood (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 236.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

¹⁵ M. Lowry, *October Ferry to Gabriola* (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 17.

¹⁶ M. Lowry, *Under the Volcano* (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 42.

are seen as an expression of divine retribution for the guilt. Since Cordwainer's death Ethan's life has become "a self-inflicted penance", to the point that any associations with the traumatic event tend to disrupt the inward harmony that the character strives painfully to attain.

Thinking about *Inferno* encroaching on the protagonist's consciousness via the self-imposed ordeal, I would like to focus on several manifestations of Dantean intertext in *October Ferry to Gabriola*. They include; fire imagery and other elements of infernal landscape, generated by the image of destructive God; element of the unnatural as a reflection of breach in the moral order in *The Divine Comedy* and Lowry's book; counter parts of Virgil and Beatrice, and the possibility of exodus from the world of conflated domains.

Canto XXVI of *Inferno* unfolds a vision of "thieving flames", which is commented upon by Virgil:

In each fire there is a spirit;
Each one is wrapped in what is burning him.¹⁷

These words could well be applied to Ethan Llewelyn, whose imagination becomes wrapped in the fire imagery in the course of the book. The destructive aspect of fire that haunts him continuously is related to Ethan's growing obsession with his past guilt. He blames himself for the suicide of a frustrated friend, Peter Cordwainer, whom he had not helped in the time of need. During one of the dates with his future wife, Ethan visits the lavatory in the pub, and he comes across a sinister newspaper cutting on the floor. Its trivial content is the advertisement of Mother Gettle's Soup by the Cordwainers' firm

... an advertisement ... could not have struck his
eyes more violently had it been ringed with hellfire.¹⁸

The phrase gains an ominous resonance in the course of the book, when Ethan starts recollecting all the years of his marriage to Jacqueline. He soon faces the ordeal of memories, while thinking about their two houses consumed in the fire. The disasters exacerbate Ethan's "sense of damnation, this time literal, the tangible intangible feeling of punishment".¹⁹ The peculiar interpretation turns Ethan's religious feeling into a paranoid state which makes him think of himself as a plaything in the hands of revengeful deity. Obsessed with the emerging pattern of his destiny he comes to the conclusion that his sanity depends on "deconversion even from any

¹⁷ Dante, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

¹⁸ M. Lowry, *October Ferry...*, p. 48.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

belief in God". His unconscious way of exorcising such a belief is the dream about Lake of Fire. Invoking the apocalyptic image, Lowry also confronts the Dantean vision as one of its compelling interpreters. Standing on the bank of burning Lake Ontario, his main character throws stones at people gesticulating through the flames. Their activity brings to mind the image of Dante's sinners conveying their painful messages to a sympathetic visitor. Unlike Dante, Ethan is not keen on listening to them. His violent response is probably meant to silence them, and to put an end to the dismal influence of infernal vision on his own mind. The dream culminates in an unexpected act of sacrifice on the part of Ethan or Jacqueline (Ethan is not sure). This, however, cannot alter the course of things in the real world. As the dream fades away into oblivion, Ethan and Jacqueline gradually find themselves enclosed in a ring of fire, and they are bound to witness a series of disasters.

Unable to cope with the strain, Ethan clings to the conviction that "some intelligence" is "searching for him personally", and he insists on viewing the fires as a sign of God's presence. The fusion of both is given a bizarre effect in a linguistic dislocation. The first words of the Lord's Prayer are turned into "Our fire which art in Fear".²⁰ Thus the destructive fire which functions as one of the attributes of God in the Bible, Christian tradition and Dantean vision is now located at the centre of the divine image. The concept of God is reduced to a culturally distorted association.

Ethan's paranoid vision of reality affects his married life when Jacqueline breaks down under the strain and falls prey to his misinterpretations. As the smell of the burnt house oppresses them, the couple start seeing their marriage as "aborted in its rebirth". They feel thrown beyond the secure pattern, endangered by chaos and interpenetrating fever of madness which recalls the moods of desperate inmates from Dantesque *Inferno*.

Nightmares of the human mind are juxtaposed with the hellish quality in man-made constructions. Apart from showing Vancouver as the "city of Dantesque horrors",²¹ Lowry uses the image of the city of Dis as an element of Ethan's observations. In *The Divine Comedy* the City of Dis is essentially a place of punishment for violence, blasphemy and waste of property. Its prisoners suffer the agony of flames scattered among incandescent tombs, within the glowing walls. In Lowry's book Ethan gets the first misleading glimpse of the City of Dis during his morning walk in the paradisiac wilderness. The two aluminium retorts of Shellco refinery bring to his mind the twin towers of Chartres Cathedral. The suggestive shape of industrial

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

²¹ M. C. Bradbrook, *Malcolm Lowry: His Art and Early Life, A Study in Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 35.

construction testifies to another cultural dislocation. The apocalyptic city of God which was once recreated in the cathedral stonework is now parodied in the technological meccano.

In the evening the refinery takes on a much more sinister look in the characters' eyes:

... a fiendish lurid light coruscated from the whole refinery, each of whose cylindrical aluminium tanks reflecting the flambeaux in descending degrees of infernal brilliance, in turn sent those reflections wavering deep within the dark stream, ... all the reflections in the water dithered together with the image striking down directly from the fiery torch itself, ...²²

The whole description is clothed in an intensely Dantean imagery. Since the initial letter of the name is omitted, the neon light radiates the word HELL, while all the windows and mirrors of Ethan and Jacqueline's cabin catch the reflection of the "lurid flickering City of Dis" with its bloodshot glare. Lowry's City of Dis seems to be completely dehumanized although it is a man-made structure. It embodies the destructive and unnatural aspects of the technological civilisation. Its noise imitates the clamorous yelling of the damned. Its shape, function and power appear to mock religion, whose traditional paraphernalia, i.e. huge tower bells in the monastery nearby, languish on the ground, tongueless and noiseless. In a sense, Lowry's City of Dis represents the twentieth century answer to the tradition that brought forth both quiet monasteries and Dante's sophisticated system of tortures. The God of this tradition seems silenced by the Shellco refinery.

The City of Dis is yet another manifestation of fire which makes Ethan and Jacqueline recede from the rational reality even further. The relentless succession of elemental disasters with no arsonists involved supports Ethan's interpretation concerning the malign intelligence, and makes him more deeply convinced of his special role in the ordeal. He considers himself the cause of all subsequent fires, identifying with potential arsonists. His feeling of guilt expands and his image of himself undergoes unnatural transformations. When the whole reality is thrown into a disarray, Ethan finds the explanation of his plight in the film about the Wandering Jew and the story about Temple Thurston, the author of the play.

Element of the unnatural is the characteristic of infernal scenery in *The Divine Comedy*. Hell is basically an inversion of the world created by God. Burning rains, rivers of blood, shifting earth are the main elements of the setting for tortures. Amidst such scenery the inmates of Inferno undergo unnatural transformation. They are dismembered, burnt to ashes, drowned in pitch. The images form Dante's comment on sin as the disruptive,

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 158-159.

unnatural factor.²³ Those who destroyed divine harmony of the world by their evil are now forced to suffer in the cycle of endless, physical metamorphoses. They yearn for death during the ordeals. Still, all the transformations only trigger off the successive tortures, so death remains an unattainable dream.

The film about the Wandering Jew uses the same element of the unnatural in the debased form. Ahasuerus can be regarded as a counterpart of the sinners punished for gratuitous violence in hell. In a sense, the Wandering Jew experiences a variety of infernal torments, and yet he is denied the right to die. Ethan rechristens the film, calling it; "Isn't Death Wonderful?", because death is "all the Wanderer's longing, "whenever he tries to be killed without success. The apocryphal tale is a very compelling interpretation of the stereotype of revengeful God. This God sentences a human being to unnatural eternal life in suffering, by his "Thou shall not die" verdict. Dante's *Inferno* seems to be woven around the same idea. Ethan yields to the dismal impact of that image. Consumed by the feeling of guilt, he identifies with Ahasuerus, which is reflected in the question he asks himself:

(had he, Ethan, struck Him? he, Ethan had struck him-)²⁴

The film offers a ready explanation. A revengeful God pursues Ethan, and yet allows him to be unharmed by disasters. As a result, the main character feels suicidal, and yet he has the impression of being denied the right to die, like Ahasuerus, who finally proved "incombustible". The element of the unnatural is explored by Lowry in a variety of ways. Another example of its presence is the story of Temple Thurston. According to the story that Ethan reads this man falls asleep while reading a book, and loses his life in the fire. When the blazing door of his study is forced, firemen come across a burnt body in the unscorched clothes. The cause of conflagration is never discovered. According to an unnatural explanation, Temple Thurston is killed by an intense visualisation of the fire that he read about in the book. Similarly, Ethan is almost destroyed by the thought that he feared fires into existence.

The emphasis on visual experience (as in *The Divine Comedy*) is equally powerful in both Thurston's and Ethan's case. While Jacqueline, implacable, is reading out the passages about Temple Thurston, Ethan desperately craves for disillumination which would free him from the pseudo-religious concepts of God, from "visualizations that are always radiated back" because they

²³ P. Kirkpatrick, *Dante's "Inferno": Difficulty and Dead Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 95-226.

²⁴ M. Lowry, *October Ferry...*, p. 135.

miss the point. Ethan's identifications with the unnatural absence of death, in the case of Ahasuerus, or with the unnatural way of dying, in the case of Thurston are framed by the reality that has been thrown into a disarray. The story of Temple Thurston is a bathetic reduction of meaning in the motif of unnatural suffering. Both the film about the Wandering Jew and the story about Temple Thurston lack any moral or intellectual depth. They happen to be interpreted in the reality that has been described as unnatural in a bathetic, meaningless way. As the thunder comes back to Niagara with redoubled violence, apparitions are seen on neglected graveyards, and a phantom ship is sighted on the lake. The whole series of unnatural events culminates in a strange incident when the housekeeper's setter gives birth to a blue dog, which remains blue under the critical scrutiny of the chief of police. Lowry's way of handling the unnatural elements subverts the serious impact of Dante's ordeals and transformations. The Dantesque element of the unnatural punishment in *Inferno* is thus exposed as a ludicrous accretion to the western concept of reality.

The last fragment of Lowry's dialogue with Dante that I would like to discuss in this article is the role of guides, counterparts of Beatrice and Virgil in Ethan's "infernal paradise".²⁵ Since the main character's world is basically the conflation of heaven and hell, Beatrice/Jacqueline enters the stage very early, bestowing her love on Ethan, healing his sense of isolation, and being with him in the world of "infernal drinkers", in the "ghastly" beer parlours. When Dante loses his way in the forest, Beatrice makes efforts to save him by winning the heavenly court over to his cause. When Ethan develops his morbid delusions, he feels "he simply must tell" Jacqueline "about Peter Cordwainer". Thus she becomes a symbol of security and sanity in Ethan's disturbed image of the world. Dantean Beatrice is a symbol of vision when she finally brings the poet to the discovery of divine radiance. Jacqueline fulfills a similar role for Ethan, making him see the things he had never noticed before he met her. This is enhanced by the motif of blindness in Ethan's life. As a small child, he had developed an eye-disease which was neglected by his father. As a result, he became semi-blind, unable to play games, which set him apart from his schoolmates.

... I never acquired the habit of looking at things.²⁶

he confesses to Jacqueline, and the statement becomes an apt comment on his way of reading reality, which is very often a misinterpretation. Ethan

²⁵ The phrase has been borrowed from the ingenious title: *Malcolm Lowry's Infernal Paradise* by Kristopher Dorosz.

²⁶ M. Lowry, *October Ferry...*, p. 24.

is a lawyer, involved in the complex system of Canadian proceedings. His memory is full of bizarre quotations from the forgotten texts, which he sometimes used in the court to impress people with the feats of casuistry. Due to Jacqueline the beauty of the world is restored or rather revealed to Ethan. She teaches him to distinguish between different kinds of blossoming fruit tress. The spring quality of the image captures her essential features. Jacqueline is a symbol of newness and vitality that awake Ethan's deadened sensibility. Also, she introduces him into the world of poetry because the books he used to study are mostly collections of legal documents with the honourable exception of *Crime and Punishment*.

Although Jacqueline is so similar to Beatrice, she is the inversion of Dante's guide at the same time. Unlike Ethan, she is not religious because she was counselled not to hand herself over to any spiritual power. Ethan is a combination of genuine religious feeling and destructive pseudo-religious stereotypes which haunt his mind incessantly. Jacqueline violently defies his image of revengeful intelligence. Thus, her role may consist in disrupting the fabric of Ethan's dubious beliefs, and thus paradoxically, in bringing him back to the true religious.

The lack of ordered vertical structure in *October Ferry to Gabriola* brings about the lack of a suitable guide who could interpret the fragmented reality. Dante, the master of a coherent framework, chooses Virgil to be his guide through the infernal clefts. Thus he places himself within the philosophical and literary legacy that resists the resurgence of chaos. In Malcolm Lowry's world of conflated domains no one is endowed with the insight that would turn the existing chaos into a meaningful text. Throughout *October Ferry to Gabriola* Ethan Llewelyn experiences surrogates of illumination coming from the debased cultural phenomena. Their impact is mounting confusion with the ensuing disintegration of the main character. The loss of real value is reflected in the powerful role of the trashy narratives of the twentieth century: the film about the Wandering Jew and the play about Temple Thurston. Both of them appeal to the lowest common denominator, showing the world that lacks any genuine depth. The drastic reduction of meaning communicated to the main character by the external reality gains a most powerful expression in the slogans written on the huge road signs. The words: "God is love" are placed side by side with the advertisement of the best cure for sore muscles. Thus, the value of both statements is equated, and Ethan sees the first one as "selling spiritual soup", truth debased by the context. These surrogates of genuine teaching produce the effect of bathos when compared with the scope and profundity of Dante's illumination. Trying to create an overarching explanation of human condition, Lowry ends up bracketing most of his characters interpretations on the grounds of their unavoidable superficiality and incompleteness.

One of the crucial explanations of his plight is actually suggested to Ethan by a friendly grocer, with whom he talks about a relentless plague of fires.

Hmm. It's like the element follows you around, sir
How do you mean it follows you around? ...
You're damn right of course.²⁷

The position of Dante is prominent in the story of Lowry's anxiety of influence. By embarking on the project of creating the twentieth century version of *The Divine Comedy*, Lowry did not only confront Dante as a master of visionary art. In fact, he took up the challenge of the authority who stated the truth of his insight with prophetic insistence. The relation between Dante and Lowry could be aptly illustrated by Harold Bloom's theory of misprision. In his *Anxiety of Influence*²⁸ the Miltonic Satan is the image of a rebel-poet who defies his god-like precursor and chooses hell in order to create his own independent world. Harold Bloom resorts to the Freudian idiom, comparing precursor and ephebe to father and son who act out a family romance.²⁹ Dante and Lowry can easily be seen in these roles. Lowry seems to perceive Dante as a figure that possesses special authority. Yet he is at pains to demonstrate the absurdity of Dantesque well-ordered vision. Intimidated by Dante's clarity, Lowry creates works which make a manifesto of "non serviam", by unleashing the vortex of chaotic and fragmented reality. The book is saturated with elements from the Dantesque register. They are, however, misread, which reveals the logic of *The Divine Comedy* as basically self-defeating.

The dislocations in meaning can be explained by an illuminating distinction between shame and guilt culture.³⁰ As a representative of the latter, Malcolm Lowry feels the overpowering influence of Dante, and yet he is bound to remain estranged from the compelling legacy. Lowry is caught in the sheer impossibility of accepting Dante as a father-figure because he cannot overcome the barrier of cultural otherness. Thus the Dantesque message becomes ultimately ungraspable, and *October Ferry to Gabriola* reveals the guilt resulting from the author's inability to come to terms with the father's enigma. In fact, Dante is as alien as the religious structure that he represents. His vision does not provide the solution amidst the postmodern reality that has become so radically unmoored from any

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

²⁸ H. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 5-35.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

³⁰ E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1971), pp. 28-50.

stable points of reference. Unable to identify with Dante's characters in the hierarchical world of *The Divine Comedy*, Lowry faces the horror of otherness assailing him with unpredictable logic. Besides, he seems to perceive the Dantesque image of God through the scandal of hell. The image that emerges from the reading of *Inferno* exceeds the most violent depictions of the Old Testament God of revenge. It is the God who seems absent and yet the whole machinery for tortures is perpetuated within him. Viewed from this perspective, the Dantesque God makes a rather unacceptable though powerful figure.

October Ferry to Gabriola is a record of the author's struggle with the sinister legacy which transpires through different fragments of reality. Lowry's characters find themselves entangled in Dantesque scenery which oppresses them and makes the interpretative exodus almost impossible.³¹ They are bound to remain in the world of conflated domains whose fragmented structures make it impossible to follow any path with the hope of success. Thus, ironically, the absence of a reliable hierarchy does not lift the sense of closure but makes it even more oppressive. Malcolm Lowry says that his characters "have more trouble getting to Gabriola than K to the castle though Gabriola is not a castellan symbol; it is, finally, the future".³² Sherrill Grace follows the optimistic clue in the author's comment, and she reads the whole novel as a deeply religious text. In the light of her interpretation, Ethan goes through the ordeal to finally attain balance and self unification.³³ She treats Ethan's visit to the Ocean Spray Bar as the descent into hell.³⁴ This is contrasted with the anticipated walk on Gabriola, stars and Moon being the typical symbols of life and hope in Lowry's catalogue of images.³⁵ The vision recalls harmony of Dantesque Paradiso.

The unpublished fragment of the text seems to support this interpretation, since it shows Ethan climbing the hill with the perilous chapel. He is accompanied by a dog on his way up.³⁶ The scene is an exact inversion of the final image in *Under the Volcano*. There are also some other indications in Lowry's documents which make the critics see the ending of *October Ferry* as a victory over destructive powers. Tony Kilgallin quotes

³¹ P. Armour, "The Theme of Exodus in the First Two Cantos of the Purgatorio" in D. Soundings, *Eight Literary and Historical Essays*, ed. D. Nolan (Dublin: Irish Academic Press), pp. 59-92. The author discusses Exodus as a symbol of pilgrimage from the state of sin to grace.

³² Quoted in Sh. E. Grace, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

³⁶ The passage is quoted and analyzed in Sh. E. Grace, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

the author's remark: "whereas before the ferry was a Charon boat proceeding to a kind of hell, now it is another sort of ferry proceeding, as it were toward the Mount of Purgatory".³⁷ Tony Kilgallin sees "the development of the process of redemption" as "the highest accomplishment of the book".³⁸ The redemptive quality is probably partly justified by the author's comment. However, the fact that Lowry associates Gabriola with the purgatorial island does not transform life in obsession and disquiet into life in complete harmony. In the light of his comment the closing episode on the ferry should be preparation for another ordeal, this time purgatorial, and with the hope for the final exodus. Sherrill Grace argues that *The Divine Comedy* provided too constricting framework for the scope and mutability of Lowry's writing process.³⁹ The opinion would enhance my contention that the author was bound to swerve away from Dante's clear-cut categories not to harm his own project.

The world of conflated domains is related to Purgatorio in a revisionary way. Like Dantesque space between hell and heaven, it combines flames of purification and hope for salvation, manifest in the characters' ordeal. Still, the use of the Dantesque label for Gabriola, by way of providing a solution, is undercut by the collapsing of vertical hierarchy. The interpretation that diverges from Lowry's critical comment on his text may be excused by the author's attitude towards his role. Lowry did not believe in the writer's mastery over his creation. His ideas seem to anticipate those of Roland Barthes, who says:

Comme institution l'auteur est mort: sa personne civile, passionnelle, biographique, a disparu; dépossédée, elle n'exerce plus sur son oeuvre la formidable paternité ...⁴⁰

Lowry's fear of being "killed by his own book ... the malign forces it arouses"⁴¹ would point to the awareness of the unmanageable potential of his own text. Thus, the text would not be viewed as an exposition of the author's intentions, but as a record of his anxieties and obsessions that creep into the work without any conscious plan.

The critics often stress Ethan's inability to start his life anew. Only the moment when the ferry is bound for Gabriola for the second time is seen as a sign of reversal.⁴² However, the persistence of Ethan's paranoid

³⁷ A. R. Kilgallin, "The Long Voyage Home: *October Ferry to Gabriola*", in B. Wood (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 224-225.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

³⁹ Sh. E. Grace, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁴⁰ R. Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1973), p. 45.

⁴¹ M. Lowry, "Through the Panama", *Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 1984), p. 36.

⁴² A. R. Kilgallin, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

observations makes it improbable that he may shed them altogether on Gabriola. The fact that he is not able to interpret incoherent reality in a saving way questions the possibility of his final liberation from the world of conflated domains. Even though "the tendency ... is undeniably upward and outward".⁴³ Ethan's exodus is continually frustrated, when compared with the Dantesque visitor's methodical ascent. The initial message about heaven and hell being one place amplifies the tone of uncertainty. After all, Gabriola belongs to the world of conflated domains and partakes of its infernal aspect.

Dantesque legacy seems to lurk underneath the text, as a source of disquiet. When travelling on a ferry, Ethan has a conversation with a Catholic priest who invites him to a chapel on Gabriola. Lowry, who calls the whole chapter "perilous chapel", predicts the menace that the chapel symbolizes through its association with the liminal experience in the Grail legend. The talk with the priest is preceded by the image of nuns whose calm and trust evokes some associations in Ethan's mind. He seems to feel nostalgic for the security guaranteed by the old framework that Dante found so easy to embrace. Still, the impacts of institutionalized religion and of its Dantesque interpretation seem equally remote for the main character.

The priest seems to hit the point when he describes Ethan as a man to whom dogma is inimical in any form. Ethan rejects the fixed categories and chooses the realm of ambiguities, where the word good-bye is echoed as Anglo-Saxon *abye* which means "to atone for". But it also means "to endure". However ambiguities and blurred boundaries cannot possibly form a sequence in the experience that ascends towards illumination. Besides, the misprision of Dantesque tradition seems to be a part of the character's identity, much as he tries to rationalize it away. The ambiguity of *abye* is here counterpointed with the association from the dictionary that would list "abye" next to "the abyss". William H. New sees ambiguity even on the last page that is often viewed as triumphant resolution "When Ethan and Jacqueline finally dock at the island ... it is dark and the stars are out, but "demonic" fires are burning there, too; the island promises to be only another ferryboat continuing the voyage through the Gulf of experience".⁴⁴ Marked with the presence of the perilous chapel, Gabriola lies in immense shadow, not as the promised land but as an enigma to the main character. He reaches it, unaware of the fact that he brings in the perilous chapel of Dantesque poem, latent in his mind.

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⁴³ T. Bareham, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

⁴⁴ W. H. New, "Gabriola: Malcolm Lowry's Floating Island", in B. Wood (ed.) *op. cit.*, p. 233.

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DANTE „CHODZI ZA PANEM KROK W KROK!” –
DEKONSTRUKCJA PIEKŁA
W *OCTOBER FERRY TO GABRIOLA* MALCOLMA LOWRY'EGO

Artykuł jest poświęcony analizie jednego z kluczowych intertekstów w powieści Malcolma Lowry'ego *October Ferry to Gabriola*. Interekstem tym jest *Boska Komedія*, do której nawiązują zarówno infernalne, jak i rajske wymiary świata Lowry'ego. Wpływ Dantego jest wyjaśniany na podstawie teorii Harolda Blooma, zawartej w książce pt. *Anxiety of Influence*. Zakłada ona, że na skutek nieświadomionego wpływu poprzednika twórca dopełnia jego dzieło przez antytezę. Taką antytezą jest wobec świata dantejskiego świat lowryański, gdzie uporządkowana wertykalna struktura trzech osobnych krain ustępuje miejsca rzeczywistości, w której dokonano się nierozzerwalne zespolenie piekła z czyśćcem i niebem, a więc również zatarcie ścieżki prowadzącej z jednego świata do drugiego. Elementy dantejskie są ukazane w powieści Lowry'ego w sposób groteskowy. Miejsce sprawiedliwego, karzącego Boga zajmuje mściwa inteligencja, która wedle paranoidalnych wyobrażeń bohatera wymierza mu karę za przewinienia ludzkości. Widomą oznaką tejże odpiaty są pożary nawiedzające rajska enklawę bohatera. Rosnąca obsesja grzechu i kary sprawia, że bohater odrzuca świat dantejski jako niszczący stereotyp. Możliwość całkowitego wyzwolenia spod jego władzy zostaje jednak zakwestionowana w niejednoznacznych partiach końcowych *October Ferry to Gabriola*. Czy w postmodernistycznej rzeczywistości, bez pomocy przewodników na miarę Wergiliusza czy Beatrycze, w której rolę próbuje wcielić się ukochana bohatera, istnieje duchowe ocalenie? Pytanie w paradoksalny sposób potwierdza siłę dantejskiej wizji, z którą zmagają się Lowry.