

Miming the Poem: Influence and Imitation in Robert Lowell's Poetic

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Everything great molds us from the moment we become aware of it.
- Goethe

Introduction

Christopher Ricks, echoing William Blake's declaration that "opposition is true friendship," argues that Robert Lowell can be most clearly read as writing "under the sign" of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, albeit with certain departures.¹ And while this is most certainly true, a few of Lowell's influences were much more particular and much more exacting. Echoing, then, Ricks's recent book *True Friendship* – the outcome of the 2010 Anthony Hecht Lectures in the Humanities – this thesis examines the role of Modernity and the New Critics in the development of Robert Lowell's poetic. Lowell's own, oft-repeated comment that "[t]he kind of poet I am was largely determined by the fact that I grew up in the heyday of the New Criticism"² is here taken seriously. Arguing that Lowell's connections to the poets of the Southern Renaissance have been unduly overlooked in regards to their poetic influence, I develop the thesis by elucidating the influence in three primary areas: Lowell's use of religious themes as metaphysical grounding, his conceptual understanding of tension as rhetorical grounding, and his use of metaphor as extensional resolution, as a way of resolving the tension that gives poetry its meaning. Certainly other themes could be put forth—his regional awareness and his sense of puritan guilt come to mind most quickly—but in these three particularly, the evidences of New Critical theory and poetry can be seen in Lowell's work.

The methodology for such a study develops quite naturally then, even if it develops in complexity. Each of the later, literary chapters, will present a thematic consideration (religion, tension, and metaphor), a New Critical theorist or poet against which to examine Lowell's imitative borrowings (John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren), and a specific chronological progression in the Lowell oeuvre (*Land of Unlikeness*, "For the Union Dead," and

¹ Ricks, Christopher, *True Friendship: Geoffrey Hill, Anthony Hecht, and Robert Lowell Under the Sign of Eliot and Pound* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2010), 3.

² Hamilton, Ian *Robert Lowell: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1982), 57.

History). While this study leaves out an enormously important aspect in the development of Lowell's poetic—the publication of *Life Studies* and his so-called “confessional” style—it does so intentionally, as *Life Studies* represents something of an anomaly in the Lowell canon, arising as a point of departure from his earlier poetry and a reaction point for his latter poetry, yet, also, because of the lack of a coherent articulation of Lowell's poetic *in toto*. This study proceeds from the assumption that only by understanding Lowell's perspectives across his career can the anomalous presentation of his most “confessional” poems be resolved, and, in doing so, provide a foundation for a more holistic conception of Lowell's poetic yet to be decisively elucidated.

In order to ground such an argument, clearing a bit of critical space first becomes necessary, primarily by responding to the claims put forth in Harold Bloom's definitive study, *The Anxiety of Influence*, and historical notions regarding influence and imitation more broadly.³ In responding to Bloom, I account for the disparity between influence as anxiety and the reality of influence as seen in the aesthetic experience embodied in specific poems. Thus, the first chapter develops, primarily, as a polemic against Bloom's conceptions as primary critical lens and asserts a theory of imitation as necessarily belonging to the evaluation of Lowell's poems. Alongside Bloom's theory regarding the motivations and intentions of the poet, this argument proceeds under the persuasion that, for Lowell, influence can be more clearly seen in the work of the poem itself and, thusly, best examined in light of a poetic theory of imitation based on the New Critical conception of the poem as independent art object. In so doing, the literary evaluations that take place in the latter chapters avoid the two most common errors in a study of this kind: that is, committing the intentional fallacy and reading Lowell anachronistically. By reading Lowell as being necessarily and thoroughly influenced through the impactful shadow of

³ Gregory Jay even notes the imperitive of Bloom: “Discussions of poetic influence today cannot evade the speculations of Harold Bloom” (68). For responses to his work, see Frank Lentricchia's *After the New Criticism*, Geoffrey Hartman's *Criticism in the Wilderness*, and Paul Bove's *Destructive Poetics*.

the New Critics, his poetic, even if it is bound within the necessities of a modern sense of self-making, can be seen as embodying an essentially *mimetic* theoretical frame.

Chapter 1: The Aesthetics of Imitation: Influence in the New Critical School

Few critical laurels are so enviously sought as the announcement of a poet's style as being, however far the comment may extend, *inimitable*. Though the remark is more kindly meant than it is critically useful, it does, in fact, prove a common conception about the modern poet: to be inimitable is to be great; to have imitated is to be indebted. Thus, when Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* was published in 1973, influence was, to a great extent, publicly heralded as one of the most important themes undergirding the Romantic poets. For though the Romantic poets' conception of genius and the origins of poetry preclude any ability to account for influence in the life of the poet or in the presentation of the poem, their poems certainly show an indebtedness that creates a rather immense anxiety. This anxiety finds its parallel among the contemporary poets, especially those who regarded the infamous shadow of the High Modern poets looming large across their poetry.⁴ In fact, in a vein of critics who remark upon the role of influence and the burgeoning shadow of modernity, Bloom's study still remains one of the most important.⁵ As a result, in evaluating the role of influence in a poet like Robert Lowell, little can be said without first clearing some space into which a critical evaluation can be asserted. Primarily, then, I will attempt to do so by examining Bloom's conception in light of his biases and his own critical indebtedness,⁶ and I will show this criticism to be insufficient in the case of Lowell's poetry as a result of a large, interconnected reality: namely, that Bloom's

⁴ Bloom himself shares a story in the introduction to Robert Penn Warren's *Collected Poems*, in which Warren, rather exuberantly, writes to Bloom to express his appreciation of the book, as he believed it perfectly described his own relation to T. S. Eliot's poetry. Robert Lowell's own reaction, we will see, was quite different.

⁵ In the forward to Gian Biagio Conte's *The Rhetoric of Imitation: Genre and Poetic Memory in Virgil and Other Latin Poets*, Charles Segal notes the particular impact of Bloom's study, as he sees its emergence as a reassertion of an essentially "personalizing, psychological view" of influence, doing so "under the sign of language rather than that of personality." It is precisely to this aspect of Bloom that I am responding.

⁶ Though Bloom's argument is largely built on other theorists, his immediate predecessors were the New Critics with whom he was in consistent contact as a former Graduate student. Frank Lentricchia writes that "[e]ver since the publication . . . of his first book, Harold Bloom has been preoccupied with the task of defining a revisionist poetics against the New-Critical position" (319).

conception of what he calls a *practical* criticism is more nearly a criticism susceptible to what W. C. Wimsatt and Michael Beardsley have called the “Intentional Fallacy,” and, further, this criticism is not sufficient to account for influence in poems primarily conceived as organized, closed loci of aesthetic experience. As such, any account of influence in the poetic of Lowell necessarily approaches his poetry with an awareness of the propensity of poets at the time to conceive of poetry and criticism under the auspicious philosophical framing of the New Critical School. Particularly, the New Critical notion that poems exist as autonomous, unique loci of experience (e.g. John Crowe Ransom’s analogy for poetry as “the world’s body” or Cleanth Brooks’s as “a well-wrought urn”), facilitates a notion of influence more nearly seen as being exhibited through the more concrete, particular, and classical commonplace for the poet: formal or thematic *imitation*.

In order to clarify such claims as they revolve around particular terms associated so deeply with Bloom’s theoretical perspectives, examining the role of influence becomes necessary. Bloom’s earliest work, and arguably his most important, is, essentially, an argument for poetic theory that distinguishes between poets as being either “strong” or “weak” depending on their ability to misread and imaginatively produce their own poetry. Succinctly, Bloom argues that “strong poets make [poetic] history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves.”⁷ Further, he asserts, “Weaker talents idealize; figures of capable imagination appropriate for themselves. But nothing is got for nothing, and self-appropriation involves the immense anxieties of indebtedness, for what strong maker desires the realization that he has failed to create himself?”⁸ Taking these two comments in conjunction, Bloom’s primary critical concept is built on two essential foundations: one, that the strong and weak poet

⁷ Bloom, Harold, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997), 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

alike are under influence, and the strong is only able to assert his strength by *misprision*, or misreading his predecessor; two, all influence, including that influence incurred in the process of misreading, is a source of anxiety. Such a theory of poetic influence seems to mandate, as Paul de Man so essentializes Modernity, that poets be ever involved in a “ruthless forgetting,”⁹ that they must be ever asserting their *difference* from their poetic influencers and from literary history. Undoubtedly, these conceptions have much to bear on any argument concerning influence in the poetic of Robert Lowell, yet their relation must first be seen in relation to Bloom. In order to more clearly elucidate these claims, Bloom’s own influencers must be seen as providing the necessary groundwork for a conception of poetic influence largely hindered by the bounds of intention; in doing so, I briefly turn to sketch the conceptions of W. Jackson Bate and his definitive study *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet*, before looking to Friedrich Nietzsche’s influence in *The Genealogy of Morals*, and Freud’s theory of “The Family Romance.”¹⁰

Bate’s Theoretical “Melancholy”

Bate’s study, one of the most influential in its subject, is primarily concerned with the larger, more social aspects of Modernity and its engendering of a “melancholy.” Bloom himself notes Bate’s influence as he writes that “[t]he modern poet . . . is the inheritor of a melancholy engendered in the mind of the Enlightenment by its skepticism of its own double heritage of imaginative wealth, from the ancients and from the Renaissance masters.”¹¹ Here, Bloom

⁹ The phrase is ultimately Nietzsche’s, but de Man popularized the phrase in his essay “Literary History and Literary Modernity,” in which he asserts that “Nietzsche’s ruthless forgetting, the blindness with which he throws himself into an action lightened of all previous experience, captures the authentic spirit of modernity. It is the tone of Rimbaud when he declares that he has no antecedents whatever in the history of France, that all one has to expect from poets is ‘*du nouveau*’ and that one must be ‘absolutely modern.’”

¹⁰ Aside from informing Bloom’s theoretical conceptions more directly, each of these theorists had an enormous impact on the culture more widely at the time, their work occurring, variously, in many of the New Critics works’ themselves.

¹¹ Bloom, *Anxiety*, 8.

characterizes Bate's theory of melancholy as being essentially derived from an awareness of contingency, of indebtedness.¹² Bate's premise is entirely predicated on a belief about personal autonomy and the nature of the human being as a free agent; specifically, Bate projects his argument, at least initially, through a quote from the eighty-sixth of Samuel Johnson's *Rambler* essays, in which Johnson remarks, "It is, indeed, always *dangerous* to be placed in a state of unavoidable comparison with excellence, and the danger is still greater when that excellence is consecrated by death . . . He that succeeds a celebrated writer, has the same difficulties to encounter."¹³ Johnson's remark ultimately leads Bate to conclude much the same, only with more implications for the time contemporaneous to Bate's writing. In its truest sense, Bate argues, the word "dangerous" from Johnson's quote has implications far beyond the mere possibility of harm: "In its original, rather ominous sense, it means 'having lost one's freedom,' having become 'dominated' and turned into the position of a household thrall: being placed in jeopardy, subjected to the tyranny of something outside one's own control as a free agent."¹⁴ Quite obviously, the critique Bate here has for such a concept of influential binding is one of infringed freedom, and, as such, the critique is as much a philosophical stance on the nature of *human* autonomy as it is a defense or rumination on *artistic* autonomy.

In this study, a thoroughgoing critique of Bate's understanding of human freedom would roam too far afield. Rather, I propose only to critique his notion of anxiety as belonging to artistic presentation as a whole. In doing so, we are able to keep the poetry of Lowell at the forefront. Ultimately, Bate's theoretical conception permanently taints the idea of influence as being in any way helpful to the poet; it is, rather, a problem to be overcome. As Bate himself

¹² Importantly, Bate's theory of "melancholy" is tied to a sense of the poet as worrier rather than, as in Bloom, the poet as warrior. In Bloom's conception, as found in the antithetical philosophy of Nietzsche or the autonomously willed psychology of Freud, the poet must be active in overcoming the influence with which he is faced.

¹³ Bate, W. Jackson, *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1979), 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

notes, “Direct imitation is obviously not the answer . . . But attempting . . . to proceed differently for the sake of mere difference is even less satisfactory.”¹⁵ Direct imitation, as Bate calls it, seems to implicate a theoretical intentionality on the part of the poet, yet it seems difficult for a reader to even note such an occurrence in a poet’s writing. Bate himself recognizes this difficulty, and prescribes a solution in a rather lengthy section of his study. Bate argues that, while the poet may be “self-revealing enough,” the anxiety that he may feel is often handled privately or expressed “only indirectly.” Any analysis of such anxiety, then, is seen only “when we look between the lines, or follow closely the life of writer after writer, or weigh the context of self-defensive manifestoes or fatalistic excuses . . . and, above all, when we note the nagging apprehension . . . that the poet is somehow becoming increasingly powerless to attain . . . the scope and power of the earlier poetry that he so deeply admires.”¹⁶ Bate’s theory is primarily an assertion of existential angst, and an argument that where such angst exists, it will be shown, however implicitly, in the poet’s artistic endeavors, as in his life. Such a theoretical conceit follows naturally with Bloom’s, relying, as it does, on the availability of authorial intention in poetic presentation. Any critique of Lowell’s poetry, then, would be one primarily concerned with his ability to actualize and transcend the historical forms and themes with which he was endowed. But before elucidating this more decisively, it remains necessary to examine the second of Bloom’s primary influencers: Nietzsche and his conception of “willing.”

Nietzsche’s Philosophical “Willing”

While Bate’s theory of melancholy is largely concerned with the occurrence of anxiety, Nietzsche’s understanding of humanity provides the foundation for the basis of this anxiety. Yet, as a result of the numerous, antithetical arguments surrounding Nietzsche’s conception of the

¹⁵ Bate, *Burden*, 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

will, providing a brief sketch of Nietzsche's thought, much more an accurate critique of it is quite nearly an impossibility. But, in examining Bloom's theory of anxiety, accounting for Nietzsche's conception of the will remains a necessity, as it is this sense of the will which provides the basis for the anxiety Bloom believes to be essential to imitation. In Bloom's introduction to his thesis, he acknowledges that "Nietzsche and Freud are . . . the prime influences upon the theory of influence presented in this book,"¹⁷ so it is no surprise, then, to find Nietzsche's conception of morality and influence as a foundational element in his argument. Like the other two theorists who so inform Bloom's writing, Nietzsche's position is one that Bloom, fulfilling his own thesis, misreads. Nietzsche is useful to Bloom, as the German philosopher is "the prophet of the antithetical, and his *Genealogy of Morals* is the profoundest study available to me of the revisionary and ascetic strains in the aesthetic temperament."¹⁸ This acknowledgment primarily accounts for Bloom's indebtedness in a negative sense. That is, Nietzsche presents Bloom with a philosophical starting point regarding *opposition* and *revision*, a revision characterized "by the poet's desire to discover an original relation to truth and thus to open the tradition and its texts to his own experience."¹⁹ Bloom must be quick to exert his departure, though, as "the theory of influence expounded . . . is un-Nietzschean in its deliberate literalism, and in its Viconian insistence that priority in divination is crucial for every strong poet, lest he dwindle merely into a latecomer."²⁰ Here, Bloom echoes a type of Romantic creation out of genius, perhaps a more particularized, intentional assertion of a willful, yet spontaneous overflow of emotion. Nevertheless, Bloom still believes that any borrowings—including those that would mark Lowell's poems—engender an anxiety born of indebtedness.

¹⁷ Bloom, *Anxiety*, 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁹ Jean-Pierre Mileur, *Literary Revisionism and the Burden of Modernity*, (Berkeley: U of California P, 1985), 5.

²⁰ Bloom, *Anxiety*, 8.

Yet, as is perhaps the case in the poetry of Lowell, the anxiety that Bloom believes to be inherent in any awareness of influence seems not to be universal. Bloom writes in the later chapter on *Tessera*²¹ that Nietzsche, “like Emerson, is one of the great deniers of anxiety-as-influence.”²² Further, Nietzsche’s claims for influence were always colored by the fact of his own indebtedness to Goethe and Schopenhauer, and “Nietzsche, as he always insisted, was the heir of Goethe in his strangely optimistic refusal to regard the poetical past as primarily an obstacle to fresh creation . . . Nietzsche owed as much to Goethe and Schopenhauer as Emerson did to Wordsworth and Coleridge, but Nietzsche, like Emerson, did not feel the chill of being darkened by a precursor’s shadow. ‘Influence,’ to Nietzsche, meant vitalization.”²³ Bloom sees Nietzsche as an oddity, as is his conception of “vitalization.” Bloom does make a chronological distinction though; he argues that “influence, and more precisely poetic influence, has been more of a blight than a blessing, from the Enlightenment until this moment. Where it has vitalized, it has operated as misprision, as deliberate, even perverse revisionism.”²⁴ Although the decaying interest in influence seems to coincide with an increasing interest in the individual, in the genius’s ability to “divine,” Bloom demurs to theorize on the conceptual changes in favor of accounting for the “misprision” he finds so apparent in post-Enlightenment literature.

But in Nietzsche, Bloom finds a possible account for the vitalization the German philosopher seems to experience. In Nietzsche’s preface to his rather large work, where he distinguishes his purpose in examining the basis of morality, Nietzsche admits a particular “scruple”: “Because of a scruple particular to me that I am loath to admit to . . . a scruple that

²¹ In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom puts forth a pattern of influence as exhibiting anxiety. The pattern follows the poet through *Clinamen* (the act of poetic misprision), *Tessera* (the antithetical stance against the predecessor), *Kenosis* (discontinuity with the predecessor), *Daemonization* (the antithetical poetics akin to a “counter-sublime”), *Askesis* (the full purging of the predecessor and a kind of solipsism), and *Apophrades* (the “return of the dead”). The “strong” poet is one who is ever involved in this pattern, always progressing.

²² Bloom, *Anxiety*, 50.

²³ *Ibid.*, 50.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

entered my life so early, so uninvited, so irresistibly, so much in conflict with my environment, age, precedents, and descent that I might almost have the right to call it my ‘*a priori*’—my curiosity as well as my suspicions were bound to halt . . . at the question of where our good and evil really *originated*.”²⁵ Nietzsche’s problem is defining an essential difference between things as they exist for the man under influence and things for the man who may overcome them, the genius, the willful. The genius is not, however, completely free from influence; he is merely able to overcome this influence. It is in this sense, Bloom claims, that “[t]he genius is *strong*, his age is *weak*.”²⁶

Ultimately, though, Nietzsche argues that the willing of man is essential to humanity. The will cannot withstand a vacuum; it must, in fact, will *something*. Nietzsche elaborates, “*That the ascetic ideal has meant so many things to man . . . is an expression of the basic fact of the human will, its horror vacui [horror of a vacuum]: it needs a goal—and it will rather will nothingness than not will.*”²⁷ Nietzsche’s conception of the will, like Bloom’s, is one predicated on and primarily concerned with action. Both of the theorists, it seems, would conceive of Lowell’s borrowings as a lack of human willing; his willingness to imitate becomes an exercise in tedious repetition. For Bloom, then, it is action against one’s forebears that becomes necessary as a defense, while, for Nietzsche, it is action itself. But both of these understandings directly correlate to a larger theoretical conception of influence as it specifically resides over an assumption of basic human need for self-assertion, an assertion found most clearly articulated, Bloom believes, in an elaborate analogy provided by Freud’s theory of the family romance.

Freud’s Psychological “Misreading”

²⁵ Nietzsche, Friederich, “On the Genealogy of Morals,” *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, Trans. and Ed. Walter Kaufman, (New York: The Modern Library, 1992), 452.

²⁶ Bloom, *Anxiety*, 51.

²⁷ Nietzsche, “Genealogy,” 533.

As in the theoretical conceptions of Bate and Nietzsche, so too in Freud does Bloom find an affirmation of influence producing anxiety. What Freud uniquely provides Bloom is an analogy for poetic relationships, an analogy developed in Freud's 1909 essay, "Family Romances." In this essay, the social implications of influence—though not perhaps as explicitly elucidated as in his mimetic theories in *Totem and Taboo*)—are given voice in the context of familial rejection. Freud's relation to Bloom's theory is made explicit by the critic himself as he relates that his entire theoretical concept is an exploration of "intra-poetic relationships" as being analogous to "parallels of family romance."²⁸ Bloom is quick to note, though, that while he does "employ these parallels, [he does] so as a deliberate revisionist of some of the Freudian influences,"²⁹ his revisions being largely a result of his attempt at providing a more "practical" criticism. Thus Freud's theory becomes helpful for its "investigations of the mechanisms of defense and their ambivalent functionings," providing for Bloom, "the clearest analogues I have found for the revisionary ratios that govern intra-poetic relationships."³⁰ The primary analogue, akin to that of Nietzsche, is one of *willing*. As with Bate and Nietzsche, Freud's theory helps to formulate Bloom's by announcing opposition as a point of individual freedom. Through the announcement of an individual's difference comes his independence and his subsequent greatness.

Thus, Freud's formulation of "family romances" ultimately concerns opposition and its role in the development, psychologically, of the individual; as such, it provides a one-to-one ratio of individual rebellion but within the context of a larger, "familial" situation, a context specifically relatable to poetic influence. But Freud is careful to assert an even larger context for such an argument, concluding that "the whole progress of society rests upon the opposition

²⁸ Bloom, *Anxiety*, 8.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 8.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 8.

between successive generations.”³¹ The essential thesis of Freud’s essay, this notion of universal “opposition,” creates a poetic principle (as Bloom imagines it) based on continual rupture with the past, if not merely a continual misreading of it to create a fictional alternative. The fiction of the family romance is predicated on a fundamental desire for this assertion; Nietzsche states it rather bluntly: “When one hasn’t had a good father, it is necessary to invent one.”³² The position of a child necessitates a father figure against which to assert his self. In Bloom’s conception, then, Lowell’s poetic development rests upon his ability to assert his difference from his influencers as a way of gaining poetic freedom.

Like Nietzsche and Bate, in fact, Freud vaunts assertion against one’s influencers as the only way toward freedom and maturity. He notes, beginning his commentary on the family romance, that “[t]he freeing of an individual . . . from the authority of his parents is one of the most necessary . . . results brought about by the course of his development.”³³ Such a conception of the poet, then, enacts a kind of maturing into freedom. Freud makes this maturation a necessary one, arguing that “[i]t is quite essential that liberation should occur . . . Indeed, the whole progress of society rests upon the opposition between successive generations.”³⁴ By making freedom a part of breaking, each successive generation must, in fact, reject the previous in order to assert an individuality capable of such a freedom, creating an ever revolving process of asserting and begetting.

Yet, importantly, the break is not total in Freud’s theory. For him, each instance in the family romance is marked not by complete rejection, but by revaluation through fiction—hence Bloom’s concept of misreading. Freud sees this, again, as something arising naturally through

³¹ Freud, Sigmund, *Collected Papers*, Vol. 5. Ed. James Strachey, (New York: Basic Books, 1959), 74.

³² Bloom, *Anxiety*, 56.

³³ Freud, “Family,” 74.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 74.

progressive maturation: “For a small child his parents are at first the only authority and the source of all belief,” yet, as the child begins to mature, “the child’s imagination becomes engaged in the task of getting free from the parents of whom he now has such a low opinion and replacing them by others, occupying, as a rule, a higher social station.”³⁵ In the process of asserting difference, the imagination of the child posits *better* models, and, in so doing, creates a new image of himself, though none of these are seen as antagonistic toward the “parents.” Freud quickly qualifies that “[i]f anyone is inclined to . . . dispute the possibility of such things, he should observe that these works of fiction, which seem so full of hostility, are none of them really so badly intended, and that they still preserve, under a slight disguise, the child’s original affection for his parents.”³⁶ In Bloom’s analogy, the aggressive assertion of the mature poet is one built out of a respect for the previous generation; it is simply a necessity. In holding to the vestiges of the previous model, though, the break is certainly not total, for the new, phantom models are “equipped with attributes that are derived entirely from real recollections of the actual and humble ones; so that in fact the child is not getting rid of his father but exalting him.”³⁷ Thus, in Freud’s thought as in Nietzsche’s or Bate’s, *overcoming* influence is the primary goal.

Bloom’s “Practical Criticism”

In asserting a theory of influence in relation to Lowell, then, the critique of Bloom and his personal trio of influencers must necessarily be one of poetic insufficiency. For while Bloom claims ultimately to be concerned with a “practical criticism,” his methodology for evaluation or critical consideration—as with Bate, Nietzsche, or Freud’s theories—is more nearly a literary psychologizing of specific *poets’* interrelationships, rather than intra-*poetic* relationships. By concerning himself largely with “anxiety as poetic principle,” Bloom is subject only to an

³⁵ Freud, “Family,” 74-76.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.

expressive theoretical perception of criticism and unable to account for influence as existing in poems without an attendance to anxiety. What is being asserted here is not—and it is important to make a distinction, as Wimsatt and Beardsley themselves do—that the expression or intentions of the author are not of concern. Rather, only that, as the New Critics themselves would argue, these considerations are secondary to the poem or art-object itself; that is, what I am highlighting here is a point of emphasis on aesthetic perception.³⁸ And only by perceiving of influence in this way—as being necessarily tied to poems themselves—can one read a New Critical poet on his own ground, avoiding the anachronistic tendencies of reading for a poet’s intentions or thoughts in retrospect. Yet in furthering this consideration, it remains necessary to elucidate the primary understanding of the poem by the New Critics. By doing so, we are able to account aesthetically for the influence more readily apparent.

New Critical Conception of Autonomous Art Object

In attempting to develop an understanding of the New Critic’s relation to aesthetic evaluation, we must first address the New Critic’s understanding of poetry itself; in so doing, we will be able to address the possibilities of accounting for influence in the work of the poetry itself. In such an examination, a number of assertions must be made: first, that the New Critics conceived of a poem as an “independent,” “self-sustaining” object; second, that this object arose generatively out of the experience of the poet, and, thirdly, this object provides a *unique* form of knowledge representative of specific experience. Each of these conceptions have become, in many ways, assimilated into common theoretical practice in the Twentieth century, but the way

³⁸ Claudi Guillen, in his study *Literature as System* notes the importance of these aesthetic encounters: “The single poem or novel acts upon the reader as a unit, of course, on an aesthetic level; and no genuine literary critic will fail to observe with attention how the singularity of this experience reflects the poet’s earlier attempt to shape and unify a complex of forms” (4). In this way especially, the New Critical perception of art object may still account for the poet’s interaction with the experience of the poem, wedding, much more deftly than Bloom, the aesthetic aspects of the work with its intentional, purposeful aspects.

in which these things work in concert to provide for an understanding of influence based on imitation needs to be further clarified. The first and most important nuances that will help us in gaining this clarity are those pointed to by William Handy in his thorough study *Kant and the Southern New Critics*.

In Handy's study, New Critical theory is examined in relation to Kant and his conception of the "generative idea." Handy illumines this principle in his preface to the study, writing, "The critical theory of John Crowe Ransom, and of his followers Allen Tate and Cleanth Brooks, shows the direct influence of the Kantian generative idea. Each begins with an assumption which is the ground of his theory and practice—the assumption that the work of art is, from first to last, the celebration of man's qualitative experience."³⁹ By building their poetic theory on such a foundation, the individual experience of the poet becomes of preeminent concern, especially as this experience relates to the universal elements of poetic practice. In turning to these elements of experience, each of the poets must look to the theme and language of poetry to convey these unique experiences in their particularity. Handy makes such particularity a necessity of the poet's invention: "To establish his critical principles he must force thinking to turn upon itself to reveal the fact of a cognition which can apprehend and organize into effective symbols that aspect of experience which is qualitative."⁴⁰ In essence, New Critical theory posits a poetic principle of cognition based on qualitative experience; in other words, the poem places its reader in a unique cognitive position, making him capable of comprehending qualitative experience through the apt use of "effective symbols."

Such an expansive thesis ultimately falls to the New Critical theorists' position *against* logical forms of knowledge, i.e. scientific knowledge. Handy emphasizes that the New Critics

³⁹ Handy, William J., *Kant and the Southern New Critics*, (Austin: U of Texas P, 1963), ix.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, ix.

make this a point of assumption, arriving at their conclusions through negative argumentation:

“Although the basic assumption of this criticism is the uniqueness and particularity of qualitative experience, the Southern New Critic seldom begins the explanation of his theory at this point.

Rather, he wishes to show how he arrived at the necessity of his assumption . . . by revealing the inadequacy of the logical concept to represent all aspects of human experience.”⁴¹ By merely

focusing on the inadequacy of the logical concept, the New Critic narrows theoretical possibilities, focusing on particularities rather than the abstractions of scientific knowledge. In a

lengthy, yet helpful section, Handy clarifies such a position: “*The very core of the artistic intention is concretion, which is a ‘growing together’ intention, not an intention to abstract.*”⁴²

In this one, foundational principle, the roles of experience and knowledge combine in the necessity of considering the poem as self-sufficient.⁴³ This self-sufficiency ultimately finds itself

in the structure, the arrangement of the poetic images. Ransom qualifies this structure as the

actuality of poetic knowledge, where he notes, “Poetry is the kind of knowledge by which we

must know what we have arranged that we shall not know otherwise.”⁴⁴ The structure of a poem,

then, is one that is bound to present this experience in a way directly correlative to its lived

experience, in all its complexity and tension.

⁴¹ Handy, *Kant*, ix. Where Handy speaks of the “Southern New Critic,” he is focusing particularly on John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, and Allen Tate. The term is largely coterminous with the phrase “New Critics,” though each of the New Critics differed in nuanced ways. In each of these instances, I have attempted to clarify each of the critics’ distinctions.

⁴² Handy believes this to be the foundational element of the New Critical conception of poetry and poetic evaluation. He continues by noting, “Every aspect of their poetic theory and critical practice derives, directly or indirectly, from this source principal. It explains why they believe poetry to be a separate and distinct form of knowledge; it determines the role they assign to the moral and practical content of the poem; it relates directly to their belief that the poem must be considered as an objective cognition; it provides a basis for their theory of the structure of the poem; and it conditions the manner in which they approach the poem in their critical practices” (34).

⁴³ In fact, the entire value of literature for a “Kantian” New Critic is the precise knowledge of the poem. Handy relates this rather aptly: “For the Kantian . . . significance in literature does not mean formal significance any more than it does social significance. It means that the significance of literature resides in its being a unique form of knowledge, separate and distinct from scientific knowledge, from ethical knowledge, and from practical knowledge in what it seeks to formulate, but equally as important as these to man’s complete knowledge of his experience” (29). The combination of the form and experience create such knowledge.

⁴⁴ Ransom, John Crowe, *The World’s Body*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1968), x.

Obviously such a conception of poetry necessitates a peculiar criticism, and the New Critics were quick to recognize this. Malcolm Cowley delineates Ransom's particular call to action: "He [Ransom] called for an 'ontological' criticism that seemed to imply that critics should not concern themselves with the source of a work or with its moral or social effect, but should confine their discussion to the work as a separate entity with its own laws of being."⁴⁵ These "laws of being" are largely based in the *generative* nature of the poem, its *ontology*. In focusing on the origin of the poem itself, the critic largely ignores the imaginative source; his focus is not on the experience *of the poet*, but the *experience itself*.⁴⁶ As such, the poem becomes a type of incarnation for the experience, it takes on a "texture": "Thus ontological criticism requires an examination of the literary product as a unique language—one which transmits not only a logical account of its object, but also an 'existing thing' or 'texture' knowledge."⁴⁷ This 'texture' supersedes any purely logical account of reality or experience, as it presents abstractions bodily.

These claims are themselves somewhat abstract precisely because they fall outside the poetic symbol capable of giving them grounding in aesthetic form. The intention of the poetic symbol is, then, "not a logical representation of 'existing things' merely, but at once both a 'logical' representation and a 'thing' or 'bodiness' representation."⁴⁸ The poetic symbol becomes both physical and metaphysical; they are "vital presences." Handy elucidates this term in his extensive clarification of the poetic body. He argues that "[t]o say that meanings are embodied in literature is to suggest that they are not directly offered as they are in logical discourse, that they are vital presences invested with body." Yet, unsurprisingly, this body is still "concrete . . . a

⁴⁵ Cowley, Malcolm, *The Literary Situation*, (New York: Viking, 1954), 12.

⁴⁶ See page 129 in Ransom's *The World's Body* for his broader perspective on ontological criticism.

⁴⁷ Handy, *Kant*, 25-26.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

particular.” And in this particularity, we perceive the poem in its “immediacy.” The poem “is a sense presentation, rich in qualitative meaning.” Thus, the poetic body is not “a pictorial duplication,” but a “special symbol which adequately represents their full unabstracted particularity.”⁴⁹ The sensical immediacy of the poem is the New Critical concern; in all its fullness, the poem presents itself though objects combined, not in pictorial reproduction, but in symbol, embodying the abstract.

In theorizing this body, though, little has been said about the kinds of poems that are, in reality, presentable. In Ransom’s *The World’s Body*, he expounds some of the nuances of such poetry. Unsurprisingly, as the cognitive aspect of the poetic presentation is of primary concern, the theme is active: “The kind of poetry which interests us is not the act of a child . . . but the act of an adult mind.”⁵⁰ It is not the poetry of the Romantics, “heart’s-desire poetry”; it is not the poetry that “denies the real world by idealizing it: the act of a sick mind.”⁵¹ Rather, for the poet concerned with cognitive presentation, the poem must have the “body and solid substance of the world. It seems to have retired into the fullness of memory, but out of this we construct the fullness of poetry, which is counterpart to the world’s fullness.”⁵² It does not want to improve or idealize the world; it “only wants to realize the world, to see it better.”⁵³

Ransom further distinguishes these types of poems in his discussion of Platonist poetry and metaphysical poetry. In distinguishing between the two, Ransom relies on the substance of images, not as they relate to ideas, but as metaphysical presentations. He writes that “Platonists practice their bogus poetry in order to show that an image will prove an idea, but the literature

⁴⁹ Handy, *Kant*, 43.

⁵⁰ Ransom, *World’s*, viii.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, ix.

⁵² *Ibid.*, x.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, x.

which succeeds in this delicate mission does not contain real images but illustrations.”⁵⁴ The poems are not physical images of abstract realities; they are the physical manifestation of an actuality. They are, for all intents and purposes, incarnations. In this way, the poetry that succeeds directly correlates to a metaphysical reality, an idea proved in things.⁵⁵ This is the poetry that is “most original and exciting, and intellectually perhaps the most seasoned.”⁵⁶

Ransom finds the cognitive, intellectual aspects of a metaphysical poem to be its most strikingly poetic, and it is in this poetry, in the metaphysical and the metaphoric, that Lowell finds such great impetus.

Ransom argues that in such poetry, the line between the metaphysical and the metaphorical is blurred; the two are mutually dependent on one another. He argues that the metaphor, extending itself logically into a conceit, is simply “developed so literally that it must be meant, or predicated so baldly that nothing else can be meant.”⁵⁷ Rather than an overweening, example-driven simile (something seemingly relegated to Ransom’s distinctions between images and illustrations), the metaphor provides spectacularly the “texture” of the knowable experience. “Specifically,” Ransom claims, “the miraculism arises when the poet discovers by analogy an identity between objects which is partial, though it should be considerable, and proceeds to an

⁵⁴ Ransom, *World's*, 128.

⁵⁵ The distinction between image and illustration responds to the Romanticism inherent in the term “image.” In *Romantic Image*, Frank Kermode writes of the Romantic conception as “Image as a radiant truth out of space and time” (2). Ransom clarifies a specific understanding of metaphysical poetry where he writes, “the meaning of metaphysical which was common in Dryden’s time, having come down from the Middle Ages thorough Shakespeare, was simply: supernatural; *miraculous*” (133). In this sense, the poem presenting not illustrations but images, necessarily performs a miraculous act, a kind of substitutionary function while maintaining absolute physical integrity or meaning as formal presentation. Cleanth Brooks, in *The Well-Wrought Urn*, takes up a similar position, arguing against the tendency to react against the miraculous: “We live in an age in which miracles of all kinds are suspect, including the kind of miracle of which the poet speaks . . . We had better not ignore it, or try to ‘reduce’ it to a level that distorts it. We had better begin with it, by making the closest possible examination of what the poem says as a poem” (xi).

⁵⁶ Ransom, *World's*, 135.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 137.

identification which is complete.”⁵⁸ The completion of the metaphorical linking concretizes, or, to some extent, makes literal the inference, granting the poem an air of metaphysical meaning, if not in actuality. Ransom demurs to be too specific in its actuality:

The predication of Metaphysical Poetry is true enough. It is not true like history, but no poetry is true in that sense, and only a part of science. It is true in the pragmatic sense in which some of the generalizations of science are true: it accomplishes precisely the sort of representation that it means to. It suggests to us that the object is perceptually or physically remarkable, and we had better attend to it.⁵⁹

All of metaphysical poetry is, seemingly, an attendance to the physically remarkable, the tactile presentation of the ideally situated. And in giving poetry a “body,” the poem becomes a locus of experience, a touchstone against which to mark the otherwise unknowable in such exactness.

In fact, it is with this rich particularity that Brooks writes against the concept that a poem can precisely communicate “something.” He only answers holistically: “‘What does the poem communicate?’ is badly asked. It is not that the poem communicates nothing. Precisely the contrary. The poem communicates so much and communicates it so richly and with such delicate qualifications that the thing communicated is mauled and distorted if we attempt to convey it by any vehicle less subtle than that of the poem itself.”⁶⁰ To present a poem in any form less than its full poetic presentation is to distort the experience, to mar the body. In fact, it ruins the possibility of communication at all: “the poem is not only the linguistic vehicle which conveys the thing communicated most ‘poetically,’ but that it is also the sole linguistic vehicle which conveys the things communicated accurately. In fact, if we are to speak exactly, the poem itself

⁵⁸ Ransom, *World's*, 139.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁶⁰ Brooks, *Well-Wrought*, 73.

is the *only* medium that communicates the particular ‘what’ that is communicated.”⁶¹ Only by understanding the poem in this way, as being necessarily concrete, fully unique, and wholly unified can a theory now be put forth of imitation in the New Critical schema, and in so doing, present a theory of influence that can account for the aesthetic aspect of Lowell’s poems.

Miming the Poem

That imitation is the work of the poet was, for centuries, a commonplace.⁶² Most often, the imitation was of nature, its forms and figures, yet the possibilities of poetic miming are much more diverse, and its definition varying in regard to various objects and persons. It may, as Richard McKeon argues, “be defined relative to the objects imitated or to the persons involved in the imitation . . . If imitation is defined relative to an object of imitation, the proper object of imitation may be conceived to be a transcendent value which determines and controls all things including actions and arts . . . If imitation is defined relative to the persons involved in the imitation, the emphasis may fall on the skill of the artist or on the nature and sensibility of the audience.”⁶³ In looking to imitation in the New Critical conception, the relation of imitation is undoubtedly to the object and its interaction with the metaphysical values of specific experience.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Brooks, *Well-Wrought*, 74.

⁶² Thomas Greene, in his well-remembered study *The Light in Troy*, notes that, particularly during the Renaissance era, “imitation of models was a precept and an activity which during that era embraced not only literature but pedagogy, grammar, rhetoric, esthetics, the visual arts, music, historiography, politics, and philosophy. It was central and pervasive” (1). For further discussion of the term’s use in history, see Göran Sörbom’s, *Mimesis and Art: Studies in the Origin and Early Development of an Aesthetic Vocabulary*, (Stockholm: Svenska Bokförlaget, 1966). And for a more complete view, see Richard McKeon, *Thought, Action, and Passion*, (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1954).

⁶³ McKeon, *Mimesis*, 138-139.

⁶⁴ It may be helpful to further note the possibilities of meaning of the term in regards to fundamental poetic theory. McKeon elucidates four particularities: “The four aspects of poetry that have determined the broad meanings of ‘imitation,’ . . . are (1) poetry considered as a mirror or embodiment of ‘values’; (2) poetry considered as an object constituted by the productive, imaginative, or linguistic art of the poet; (3) poetry considered as a means by which a state of mind or emotion is conveyed from poetry to audience; and (4) poetry considered as a state of mind or emotional attitude and reaction” (173). In the New Critical vein, the second of these considerations is the primary one of interest, with the others playing only minor roles in the constitution of the term.

In Ransom's conception, imitation is helpful because of its reality and its cognitive foundation. Arguing for such a perspective, he writes, "The identification of art with mimesis, the imitation of nature, was so fixed that the Greeks could not quite admit architecture into the company of the fine arts; on the ground that it was too industrial, not wanting simply to imitate nature, which would be to respect it, but to improve upon nature and use it."⁶⁵ By avoiding this "utility" in art, the Greeks focused on the aesthetic aspects of the piece, its cognitive value. In fact, such a quality, for Ransom, sustains the art piece's value: "An imitation is better than its original in one thing only: not being actual, it cannot be used, it can only be known. Art exists for knowledge, but nature is an object both to knowledge and to use."⁶⁶ An imitation contains an intention, primarily, one dedicated to knowledge. As such, for Ransom, "it is probably the best foundation for any aesthetic."⁶⁷

But the exact nature of imitation is difficult to discern in Ransom's formation of the term. His descriptions occasionally drift into the abstract: "Mimesis is as much a passion as science is; perhaps it would be more dignified to say, as normal and as human. It aims at a kind of cognition which is unknown to pure science and which grows increasingly difficult for us in practical life. It wants to recover its individuals, abandoned in science, in business, and affairs."⁶⁸ In the truest sense, Ransom seems to believe, mimesis is the natural aim of a unique cognitive representation; it is the impulse to articulate experience. And, in this sense, it portrays man at his most human: "The photograph is a mechanical imitation but not a psychological one. It was obtained by the adjustment of the camera and the pressing of the button, actions so characterless that they indicate no attitude necessarily, no love; but the painting reveals the arduous pains of the artist . . .

⁶⁵ Ransom, *World's*, 195.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 196-97.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 206.

. they give the painting its human value.”⁶⁹ In imitation, perhaps more so than in any other aspect of New Critical theory, human intention and personality bloom most fully. The poet grants perspective to the metaphysical presentation, colors the images, draws the metaphors.

Thus, in reading the poetry of Robert Lowell and examining the role of his influencers, one sees his influence as being necessarily tied to the poems which he wrote. For, as we have seen in recounting the theory of influence propagated by Bloom, a theory of influence tied with anxiety is one only accountable only where such anxiety becomes apparent in poetry, or, even less likely, in the cultural artifacts tied to the poet. And while such anxiety may have occurred in the Romantic poets through to the poets of the current day, any poetic examinations based on it as a foundation are doomed to only assert their position negatively, largely ignoring the aesthetic aspect of the poem. And to ignore the aesthetic aspect of the poem is to ignore at least a part of the meaning of the poem itself. By examining Lowell’s poems in concert with those written by his influencers, that is, by examining them in light of a theory based on imitation, the aesthetic aspect of a poem, its actual import and texture can be evaluated. Thus, in turning to examine Lowell’s thematic use of religion as metaphysical grounding, his rhetorical use of tension as linguistic grounding, or his use of metaphor as extensional resolution, we are able to examine the poet on his own ground, in his *poems*.

⁶⁹ Ransom, *World’s*, 209.

Chapter 2: Those Blessed Structures: Religion and Metaphysical Theme

In the introduction to the 1944 publication of Robert Lowell's first group of poems, *Land of Unlikeness*, Allen Tate remarked that the collection contained two primary types of poems. The first, according to Tate, was a type of "Christian symbolism . . . intellectualized and frequently given a satirical direction; it points to the disappearance of the Christian experience from the modern world, and stands, perhaps, for the poet's own effort to recover it," while the second type of poems were "richer in immediate experience than the explicitly religious poems."⁷⁰ The thematic disparity was somewhat troubling to Tate, though he ultimately attributed it to the poet's inexperience rather than any problematic revelation of Lowell's poetic sensibilities.⁷¹ And so, while we are here concerned with the thematic presentations of religious experience which continued, throughout Lowell's life, to be relevant to his poetic as a whole, we do well to recognize their immaturity as well. For in spite of their immaturity in aesthetic presentation, the religious themes which Lowell so quickly actualized are seen as clear presentations of the generative experience which binds them. Lowell's religious poems in *Land of Unlikeness*, then, point to the way in which he conceived of metaphysical presentations as being very nearly like those of both Ransom and Tate. Lowell's early poems, then, become the exploration of a young poet between the community of faith and the immediacy of his own personal experience.

⁷⁰Lowell, Robert, *Collected Poems*, Eds. Frank Bidart and David Gewanter (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 859. All further citations of Lowell's poems will be delineated in text.

⁷¹ In fact, this first collection has largely been ignored as it certainly represents Lowell at his most immature. Adam Kirsch sees this first collection as such when he writes, "Because he [Lowell] never republished this volume, choosing instead to cannibalize several of its poems for *Lord Weary's Castle*, it is best read as a rough draft for its triumphant successor" (4-5). Frank Bidart and David Gewanter – the editors of Lowell's *Collected Poems* – take a similar view, placing the collection as an appendix in the otherwise chronologically arranged anthology. However, as I am here commenting on the role of influence and religion in Lowell's work, I offer an exposition of some of its poems to highlight themes which, throughout his work, remained subtly, yet vitally important.

Theoretically, though, Lowell's conceptions of the metaphysical seem to be based out of his understanding of Tate's stance toward religion, and though the New Critics often asserted their opinions regarding religion rather aggressively, Tate's contribution to *I'll Take My Stand*, "Remarks on Southern Religion," was one of the strongest. In the piece, Tate unsurprisingly struck out at prevailing, "Modern" sensibilities, primarily the tendency to ignore the simplicity and viability of local religious experience. It was in response to this tendency that Tate wrote what are some of his most remembered, oft-repeated words: "How may the Southerner take hold of his tradition? The answer is, by violence."⁷² Tate believed that such a reactionary, primarily political stand would "re-establish a private, self-contained, and essentially spiritual life."⁷³ For Tate, religion was necessarily experiential, personal, the very themes that would play in Lowell's poetic throughout his life, yet, importantly, Tate recognized that "any discussion of religion is a piece of violence, a betrayal of the religious essence undertaken for its own good, or for the good of those who live by it."⁷⁴ For Lowell, however, very little was personal, and the very nature of the religion he so aggressively espoused provided a pure emphasis for public representation. Thus, even in the most intimate of experiences, including religious, Lowell derived only experience, the generating fabric of the poems that would craft his first collection.

In a 1938 review of Ransom's *The World Body*, Lowell's poetic debt becomes clearly substantiated as he clarifies the metaphysical realities that underlie experience and, more specifically, the aesthetic experience of the poem. "Proudly we declare that common and quotidian experience is beneath the grace of art," claims Lowell, for "[i]f the tears seem to have a cosmic importance, blotting out all else, becoming a flood which destroys the whole world,

⁷² Tate, Allen, "Remarks on the Southern Religion," *I'll Take My Stand*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2006), 174.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 156.

destroying last the lovers themselves, such poetry substantiates its hypothesis. It preserves the richness of particulars and can, as in the great religions, make explicit the most supernatural reality, God.”⁷⁵ Lowell’s especially important parsing reveals one of his few explicit statements regarding his own poetic, regardless of his youth, for although one is left to discern the particularities of Lowell’s distinction between common, quotidian experience and the rich particulars appropriate to a poetry of cosmic significance, surely his religious sentiments bleed through as the most significant aspect of this poetic; his stance is precisely as Ransom outlined in *The World’s Body*: metaphysical.

In Lowell’s poetry, the metaphysical elements of his poetic are most nearly seen in a language reminiscent of the incarnation; the embodiment of an otherwise unknowable. As Lowell put it, “Reason permeates faith . . . The Incarnation is only a probability, under examination it becomes more probable, after a while you believe . . . the point is the religious coincidences are all in favor of the Incarnation. Science, medical practice, psychology, etc. These are ultimately irrelevant.”⁷⁶ Here, Lowell’s Thomistic faith also betrays the New Critical sensibilities that formed the theoretical background for his early poems. He decries the sciences and replaces them with the incarnation. In this state of mind, in the winter of 1942-1943, Lowell writes the poems that would be collected in *Land of Unlikeness* while living with Tate.

The collection’s name is taken from French theologian Etienne Gilson’s book on St. Bernard (though the phrase ultimately belongs with St. Augustine), and the theme of the work is invariably tied to Lowell’s curious title; Gilson’s writing clarifies the typological interest of Lowell’s collection: “Man lost his likeness to God in losing his virtues . . . the soul suffers, because she no longer knows how to accomplish in joy what before the first transgression she

⁷⁵ Hamilton, *Robert*, 59.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 81.

would have done without effort. Such is the condition of those who live in the Land of Unlikeness. They are not happy there. Wandering, hopelessly revolving.”⁷⁷ Such a place is one of darkness, for “those who tread this wary round suffer not only the loss of God but also the loss of themselves . . . For when the soul has lost its likeness to God it is no longer like itself.”⁷⁸ Such a theme is clearly, deeply religious. Lowell himself casts these poems in a light so bright that they bear a religious curiosity; he writes to Charlotte Lowell: “All of them are cries for us to recover our ancient freedom and dignity, to be Christians and build a Christian society. I think of Blake’s hymn: ‘I shall not cease from mental fight / Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand / Till we have built Jerusalem / In England’s green and pleasant land.’”⁷⁹ Lowell’s language echoes the biblical story of Nehemiah, yet, unlike the Old Testament prophet, Lowell’s aggressive zeal for the rebuilding of Jerusalem seems not the result of a terrible grief at its fall, but the desire for swift action on the part of a religious neophyte.

Thus, in his 1942 poem, “On the Eve of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception,” Lowell’s violent images are those of Christ’s incarnation, mixed with the Greek classics and the Roman wars. In this poem, Lowell focuses ultimately on man in his violence and crudity, and, in doing so, he prefigures the type of experience driven poetry that would mark his career. Even the peaceful Mary is seen attributing to such violence: “Mother of God, whose burly love / Turns swords to plowshares, come, improve / On the big wars” (1-3). She is peaceful, life-bringing, yet the speaker calls for her to “improve on the big wars,” those Modern inventions without honor. The speaker further implores Mary and notes the peculiarity of violence amidst the religious:

Oh, if soldiers mind you well

⁷⁷ Etienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard*, trans. A. H. C. Downes, (New York: Scribner’s, 1936), 63.

⁷⁸ Hamilton, *Robert*, 36.

⁷⁹ Robert Lowell, *The Letters of Robert Lowell*, Ed. Saskia Hamilton, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 36-37.

They shall find you are their belle
 And belly too;
 Christ's bread and beauty came by you,
 Celestial Hoyden, when our Lord
 Gave up the weary Ghost and died,
 You shook a sword
 From his torn side.
 Over the seas and far away
 They feast the fair and bloody day
 When mankind's Mother,
 Jesus' Mother, like another
 Nimrod danced on Satan's head.
 The old Snake lopes to his shelled hole;
 Man eats the Dead
 From pole to pole. (25-40)

In these poems, his tone is remarkable; it is callous, cold, eccentric to say the least. Rather than a movement toward experience, Lowell is withdrawing from it. Jerome Mazzaro sees this as one of the “more over indications of the contemplative directions of Lowell's verse”;⁸⁰ it is a move toward mystical union rather than experiential action. Certainly the formal structure of the poem, borrowed heavily if not clumsily from Tate, and the awkward images are presentments of a novice poet formally constrained and imaginatively preoccupied.

⁸⁰ Jerome Mazzaro, *The Poetic Themes of Robert Lowell*, (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1965), 33.

The poems are violent searches, attempts at attenuating the legacy of his place and patriarchy among the Boston elite and the violent, mysterious nature of Christianity, a genuine representation of metaphysically-minded faith. R. P. Blackmur's review of these poems – unlike the overly kind remarks Lowell received from most of his friends – attempts to comprehend the raw energy that Lowell harnesses to write these sacred themes: “Lowell is distraught about religion; he does not seem to have decided whether his Roman Catholic belief is the form of a force or the sentiment of a form. The result appears to be that in dealing with men his faith compels him to be fractiously vindictive, and in dealing with faith his experience compels him to be nearly blasphemous.”⁸¹ The energy that Lowell extends in these early pieces is the expression of his violence, for Lowell's wrestling with matters of faith is in seeming conflict with his regional and familial heritage: “What is thought of as Boston in him fights with what is thought of as Catholic; and the fight produces not a tension but a gritting. It is not the violence, the rage, the denial of this world that grits, but the failure of these to find in verse a tension of necessity.”⁸² Though Blackmur finds no necessary “tension” in the poems, Lowell's productions cannot be said to be whole rejections of this world; they are wrestlings with the tension of a faith that affirms the transcendence of the metaphysical poets and the imminence of the imagists.

But Lowell's searches were certainly violent and impatient. They were, in many ways, responses to the kind of poems Allen Tate would write of his own religious struggles. Tate's religious notions emerge, unlike Lowell's, cautiously, as exhibited by their place in his early, 1927 poem, “Causerie.” The piece's mixture of popular culture (the epigram is a brief snippet from the *New York Times*), classical allusions, and religious questioning sound the note that Lowell would himself produce in his youth. Setting his poem's tenor with his assertion that

⁸¹ R. P. Blackmur, “Notes on Eleven Poets,” *The Kenyon Review* 7.2 (1945): 348.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 348.

“death is ‘morality touched with emotion’” (27), Tate’s lines quickly descend to a religious low-tone, an under-light to his grand questions: “For miracles are faint / And resurrection is our weakest clause of religion” (45-46). Tate still positions himself at a distance from the religion that Lowell had so aggressively embraced, yet Tate’s further statements clarify his thinking:

I have known men in my youth who foundered on
 This point of doctrine: John Ransom, boasting hardy
 Entelechies yet botched in the head, lacking grace;
 Warren thirsty in Kentucky, his hair in the rain, asleep;
 None so unbaptized as Edmund Wilson the unwearied,
 That sly parody of the devil. They lacked doctrine;
 They waited. I, who watched out the first crisis
 With them, wait:

For the incredible image. (47-55)

All of the men, desiring doctrine, betray the protestant proclivity for thematic dogma, rather than the religious vision desired by Tate. Ransom’s braggadocio regarding religious, experiential certainty is, for Tate, a pitiable state, lacking the merciful finality of a coup-de-grâce. For, as Ransom himself wrote in his religious treatise *God Without Thunder*, “Religion enlarges the God and limits man, telling the believer incessantly to remember his limits and be content with his existing condition.”⁸³ Any conception of a graceful redemption through something so tenuous as the resurrection would be equally as tenuous for such a public representation of faith. Certainly such thoughts would give pause to a man so cautious as Tate; indeed, he would himself not

⁸³ John Crowe Ransom, *God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy*, (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1965), 116.

convert to Catholicism until 1951, and yet his religious sentiments expose the swiftness of Lowell's admissions, for where the cautious Tate lingers, the impetuous Lowell barges in.

Tate, recognizing the precarious nature of his position, writes such themes subtly; in his first "Sonnets at Christmas," Tate presents two, fourteen-line stanzas which equally present a type of latent guilt, one which anesthetizes, removes him from the possibility of remission. He writes that, during Christmas, "bells of paper white and red, / Figured with boys and girls spilt from a sled, / Ring out the silence I am nurtured by" (12-14). Yet this silence, a world without the forgiveness offered by Christ, does little to assuage personal guilt. The second of the sonnets presents this private fault:

When I was ten I told a stinking lie
 That got a black boy whipped; but now at last
 The going years, caught in an after-glow,
 Reverse like balls englished upon green baize –
 Let them return, let the round trumpets blow
 The ancient crackle of the Christ's deep gaze. (17-22)

Tate's unusual simile, his desiring time to be caught back like billiard balls is a skill neither he nor any man may possess. The violence here is Tate's own, while the sacred Christ, more human than divine, hangs separately in the air, the piercing cry of the trumpet, for though Christ's presence would bring the ability of personal forgiveness, it would also bring the crash of a much larger guilt.

The ten-year lapse between his first group of sonnets and his second grouping does little to assuage Tate's personal doubt. In his "More Sonnets at Christmas," the passing of time has

seen fit to leave him only “dismayed / By mummy Christ, head crammed between his knees” (7-8), though his later lines, at first, seem more assertive:

Give me this day a faith not personal
 As follows: The American people fully armed
 With assurance policies, righteous and harmed,
 Battle the world of which they're not at all. (29-32)

William Doreski, in his well-researched *The Years of Our Friendship*, reads these lines as a harsh, yet genuine plea for a faith “rooted in the social order rather than the isolate self” (53), yet Tate’s tone seems to be a bit less sure. If his plea in “Remarks on Southern Religion” was, as it seems, for a religious sentiment that was both personal and self-contained, his commentary here is a larger one; Tate, recognizing what he believed to be the inability to discuss such religious matters without damaging the sentiments which undergird them, presents in the poem the very literal representation of the violent act itself.

The overlap between the early religious work of Tate and Lowell finds even more specific instances in their mutual, violent representations of Christ. In Lowell’s poem “Christ for Sale,” Christological representation takes an irreverent turn: “In Greenwich Village, Christ the Drunkard brews / Gall, or spiked bone-vat, siphons His bilged blood / Into weak brain-pans and unseasons wood (1-3). Lowell’s language borders on the blasphemous. He compares the saving blood of Christ to alcohol, and later in the poem, a mere dye, making the atoning blood of Christ a mere commodity. He even further questions, “Drying upon the crooked nails of time, / Dirty Saint Frances, where is Jesus’ blood, / Salvation’s only Fountainhead and Flood?” (7-9). While Tate’s words question, unsure of the nature of a belief he cannot himself believe in, Lowell’s are hardened scoldings, antagonistic reproaches for a world in tumult.

The interplay between violence and the sacred, then, is not limited to the personal for Lowell; he projects religious representations of violence apparent in a range of social settings. War, especially, infiltrates Lowell's images. In "Christmas Eve in the Time of War," Lowell attempts to balance thematic considerations as varied as capitalism, war, religion, and classical figures and themes, a precarious position that seems to grind any sense of poetic movement to a slackened, difficult pace. His second stanza hangs at the edge of this slow progress:

A blizzard soaps our dirty linen, all
 The crowsfoot feathers mousing Mars' brass hat
 Whiten to angels' wings, but the War's snowfall
 Has coffered the good-humored plutocrat
 Who rattled down his brass like cannon balls
 To keep the puppets dancing for the state. (10-15)

The slow, repetitive pace of the early lines of his stanza does little to meld the confusion of his themes to the singularity of his lyrical syntax. In the introduction to the collection, Tate noted Lowell's formal and rhythmic considerations, tying them, peculiarly, to his religious sensibilities: "Lowell is consciously a Catholic poet, and it is possible to see a close connection between his style and the formal pattern. The style is bold and powerful, and the symbolic language often has the effect of being *willed* . . . and the willed effect is strengthened by the formal stanzas" (*Collected* 859). Willed though Lowell's language may be in this stanza, especially the hard, end-stopped rhymes "defiled" and "child" ending the poem with a sense of false finality, the formal aspects of the poem seem in conflict with the religious spirit of the piece.

But this conflict is nowhere seen more clearly than in the final poem of the collection, in which the war Lowell so despises is portrayed in concert with the religious sentiment of a crusader. His opening stanza presents an ultimate guilt: “When the ruined farmer knocked out Abel’s brains, / Our Father laid great cities on his soul” (1-2). Yet, says Lowell, God’s kindness is great, for he sent us “for brotherhood, / Our Savior and His saving Heart.” (8-9). The poem shifts from a personal act of violence and guilt, to the guilt of a nation – “When Israel turned from God’s wise fellowship, / He sent us Canaan or Exile, Ark or Flood” (6-7) – to the personal peace offered by Christ. The final stanza of the poem loses some of the forward motion of the piece, curiously returning to a national image that seems unclear: “Great Commonwealth, roll onward, roll / On blood . . . Go down with colors flying for the King” (11-15). The ambiguous ending here confuses the religious and the political; it is part of a group of poems that are, as Paul Mariani has noted, “prophetic in the style of Jeremiah and the Old Testament prophets,”⁸⁴ relating judgment to an entire nation. Yet Lowell’s intentions for “The Ship / Of State” are caught, pinned between the salvific blood of Christ and the life-ending sacrifice for country.

A more complete melding of Lowell’s themes of religion and warfare occurs in his “The Bomber,” meshing, as it does, the linguistic turnings stylized for the violent images of modern warfare and the repetitive, nuanced end-lines of the three stanzas which follow W. B. Yeats in their simple religiosity. The questioning speaker of the poem presents a spiritual actualization of death that appears genuine: “How can frail wings and clay / Beat down the biting dust / *When Christ gives up the ghost?*” (26-28). The delicate plane wings and the pilot Adam lost in modern warfare shrink impotently against the ravishing bite of an inevitable, timeless death; in this place, Lowell’s tenor becomes the subtle objectivity that reigns in his seeming exuberance. The final stanza of the poem presents a deeply felt concern:

⁸⁴ Mariani, *Puritan*, 103.

Bomber like a god
 You nosed about the clouds
 And warred on the wormy sod;
 And your thunderbolts fast as light
 Blitzed a wake of shrouds.
 O godly Bomber, and most
 A god when cascading tons
 Baptized the infidel Huns
 For the Holy Ghost,
 Did you know the name of flight
 When you blasted the bloody sweat
 And made the noonday night:
 When God and Satan met
And Christ gave up the ghost? (29-42).

Where Lowell is often excited, he is here more subtle; his themes are not, as in some pieces, at odds, and his Catholicism seems, most importantly, genuine. The Bomber's mortality is repeatedly highlighted, his finitude jealously guarded by war juxtaposed with the infinite Christ sacrificing his own mortality; the Bomber is responsible for blasting "the bloody sweat" from Christ's brow in the garden of Gethsemane, for causing darkness over the earth as Christ hung on the cross. Here, Lowell's representation of moral culpability brandishes an unassuming authenticity.

But the genuine nature of both Tate and Lowell's utilization of faith has been criticized, with Lowell certainly taking the worst of it. Adam Kirsch writes that Lowell essentially uses "the

timeless myths of Christianity to enforce an ironic contempt for the travails of the present . . . his poems more often read like parodies of the religious verse of the Renaissance, right down to its tropes and forms, than genuine successors; and his judgmental Catholicism seems like a corresponding parody, a trying on of an essentially foreign worldview.”⁸⁵ In many of the poems, Kirsch’s criticism rings true; the youthful Lowell has not acclimatized to the depth of a vast religious system. Yet, as with his poem, “The Bomber,” so too does Lowell’s “The Crucifix” seem to present a genuine article of faith. In the poem, one of Lowell’s most surreal in the collection, the images seem, plausibly, sincere:

It’s time: the worldly angels strip to tease
 And wring out bread and butter from their eyes,
 To wipe away the past’s idolatries;

 Our Captain warns us till we run upon
 Our father Adam. Adam, if the land
 Becomes the incarnation of the hand
 That builds Jerusalem out of clay, how can
 War ever change our new man into old man?
 Get out from under my feet, old man. Let me pass;
 On Ninth Street through the Hallowe’ en’s soaped glass
 I picked at an old Bone on two crossed sticks
 And found, to *Via et Vita et Veritas*,
 A stray dog’s signpost is a crucifix. (5-19)

⁸⁵ Adam Kirsch, *The Wounded Surgeon: Confession and Transformation in Six American Poets*, (New York: Norton, 2005), 5.

Are these lines, as Kirsch has posited, mere borrowings of “the names and properties of Christian tradition in order to put them at the service of his own, essentially heretical art?”⁸⁶ They seem not to be. Not here, at least. When Lowell puts forth his question “how can War ever change our new man into old man?” his question is in the “our” of the universal; his thoughts are still the broader contextual ones of the faith, the church. When Lowell revises this poem for republication in his later collection *Lord Weary’s Castle*, one of only a handful which he permitted to be republished, the line is changed to read “how can War ever change my old into new man?” The line, aside from being reversed, is now a personal inquisition. The “our” of the faith had turned to the “my” of immediate experience, the presentation of the time-oriented, personal experience of the poet.

Thus, *Land of Unlikeness* served as one of Lowell’s closest attempts to attenuate a religious tradition into the stuff of art, one put forth under the sauspices of his emerging poetic sensibilities inevitably shaped by his Southern mentors and his curious interaction with the Catholic Church. In his last collection, *Day by Day*, Lowell’s questioning in his final poem, “Epilogue,” presents a question elucidating his early poetic: “Those blessed structures, plot and rhyme - / why are they no help to me now / I want to make / something imagined, not recalled?” (1-3). In his first collection, Lowell’s poems were undoubtedly a thing recalled, the presentations of a metaphysical poetry arising, however ineptly, out of the poet’s own experience. They are, though imaginatively concocted and abstractly conceived, the poems arriving “generatively out of the poet’s experience.” In embodying these experiences in all their violence, Lowell, in many ways, prefigures the later poems that he would collect in his *History*. Yet, before looking to those poems, we must first examine one of Lowell’s most famous poems, “For the Union Dead,” and his presentation of tension.

⁸⁶ Kirsch, *Wounded*, 8.

Chapter 3: Extensive Vocabulary: Toward a Rhetoric of Tension

Tension, in the work of Robert Lowell, occurs naturally in the context of his themes and structures. The poetic quality evidences, like his other borrowings, an imitation of Allen Tate's poems particularly, yet rather than making any explicit statement of this poetic occurrence, Lowell's work exhibits this miming. In no poem is this more clearly seen than his only occasional poem, "For the Union Dead." And though many critics may have made connections between this poem and Tate's most well-known poem, "Ode to the Confederate Dead," few have examined the work in relation to Tate's conception of tension, complex as it is.⁸⁷ Unsurprisingly perhaps, in both of these poems, Lowell and Tate focus on similar thematic concerns—both poems are public ruminations on war and modernity—and they are mutually dependent on tension to maintain their often tenuous presentations. Yet, in Lowell's poem especially, the tension which it embodies carries a weight of meaning as thematically important as it is formal. For while the New Critics ultimately conceive of tension as the locus of poetic meaning—as Tate so emphasizes it in his important essay "Tension in Poetry"—in Lowell's poem, this tension functions as a means of embodying the experiential aspect of a distant history, prefiguring the later poems of Lowell's career and particularizing the most public of his poems.

In no criticism is tension more important or emphasized than that of the New Critics, despite its various definitions and uses, and though Ransom, Warren, Brooks, and Richards all highlighted the term in their various works,⁸⁸ Tate's "Tension in Poetry" would most fully describe its importance. In the essay, Tate describes tension not as a mere sidelight or tangential

⁸⁷ William Doeski has noted nearly fifty discussions regarding Lowell's poem, with a number of them noting comparisons with Tate's work. Jerome Mazzaro has even argued that "[t]he tensions of [Lowell's] poem remain identical with those of Tate's poem except for Lowell's own voice and two new elements." I hope, however, that my distinction in regards to the *tension* and its reliance on *extension* and *intension* in both the poems will be helpful in elucidating the nuances of both works.

⁸⁸Most importantly in Ransom's *The World Body* and Warren and Brooks's *The Well Wrought Urn*. Richards's *The Principles of Literary Criticism* and his *Practical Criticism* also have important, though brief statements on tension.

poetic quality, but the primary means of determining poetic worth. He begins the essay by remarking on this element: “Many poems that we ordinarily think of as good poetry—and some, besides, that we neglect—have certain common features that will allow us to invent, for their sharper apprehension, the name of a single quality. I shall call this quality tension.”⁸⁹ Certainly the primacy of such a quality was not lost on Tate’s disciple, as Lowell would even remark on its importance. Tate’s definition is helpful, as it distinguishes his formulation from that of other of the New Critics. He writes

I am using the term [tension] not as a general metaphor, but as a special one, derived from lopping the prefixes off the logical terms *extension* and *intension*. What I am saying, of course, is that the meaning of poetry is its ‘tension,’ the full organized body of all the extension and intension that we can find in it. The remotest figurative significance that we can derive does not invalidate the extensions of the literal statement. Or we may begin with the literal statement and by stages develop the complications of metaphor: at every stage we may pause to state the meaning so far apprehended, and at every stage the meaning will be coherent.⁹⁰

Here, Tate is explicit by making tension the informative, defining aspect of the *meaning* of poetry, its epistemological aspect.⁹¹ In this sense, Tate is evaluating “tension” as existing on a continuum, with poles marked by “extensional” and “intensional” production. Tate’s view of tension is much like that of Ransom’s conception of poetry as the “world’s body”; for Tate,

⁸⁹ Allen Tate, “Tension in Poetry,” *Allen Tate: Essays of Four Decades*, (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1968): 56.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁹¹ Handy ties this to the presentational element of the poem. He argues, “when language is used to communicate the object itself rather than information about it, the intention is to seek presentational effects. The literary artist strives for a fullness or plurality of meaning which he knows the object exhibits before it has been reduced to a general concept” (35). In this sense, the presentational elements (metaphors, poetic symbols, etc.) are expressly concerned with the creation of this tension, of creating the *plurality* of meaning, rather than reducing it to a *simple* concept.

tension is the encapsulation of the poem itself. It is a kind of linguistic barrier in the midst of which plays the two extremes of poetic statement: extension (the “remotest figurative significance,” the *play* of the language used) and intension (the language at its most defined, literal meaning and intention).

Tate ties both of these poles, through definitional and illustrative analysis, to the metaphysical poets and the Symbolists. He writes that each of these “schools” of poetry emphasizes a particular pole, though they may attempt to occupy the entirety of the continuum: “The metaphysical poet as a rationalist begins at or near the extensive or denoting end of the line; the romantic or Symbolist poet at the other, intensive end; and each by a straining feat of the imagination tries to push his meanings as far as he can towards the opposite end, so as to occupy the entire scale.”⁹² By so emphasizing these elements of tension, so too, does Lowell emphasize his conception of an ever more experience-driven poetry, something founded, as well, in his conception of the role of logic in the poetic work. Elucidating this conception, Tate outlines two fallacies inevitably associated with his continuous notion of tensional meaning. One is the “fallacy of communication . . . a poetry that communicates the affective state, which . . . results from the irresponsible denotations of words.” The second and associated fallacy Tate calls, “the fallacy of mere denotation . . . the poetry which contradicts our most developed human insights insofar as it fails to use and direct the rich connotation with which language has been informed by experience.”⁹³ Tate’s call, here, is not to moderation, a tempered, balanced approach to poetic creation, but to a unified complexity brought about through a continuous, perhaps punctuated, presentation of both intensional and extensional images and forms.

⁹² Tate, “Tension,” 67.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 64.

Tate's poetic valuation is inevitably tied to his conception of humanity as well, something that informs not only the kind of tension found in Tate's "Ode," but particularly the humanity found in Lowell's response. Tate argues that by embodying tension into poems, the poet is realistically presenting human existence, as well as ontological realities. He clarifies by noting, "It is easy enough to say . . . that good poetry is a unity of all the meanings from the furthest extremes of intension and extension. Yet our recognition of the action of this unified meaning is the gift of experience, of culture, of, if you will, our humanism."⁹⁴ Tate recognizes the difficulty in establishing logically, even assenting notionally to such a unity. David Miller, in his important study *The Net of Hephaestus*, argues that "Allen Tate sees the function of poetry as one of annealing the disparities of existence. He recognizes the multiplicity of man, of man's environment, and of the perception of that environment . . . Tate conceives of our natural mode of perception as a tendency to divide, to see things as opposites."⁹⁵ Certainly Tate's desire for unity is understandable in light of such a conception of human instincts, even if he does question the ability to conceive of these things as being truly unified. He is "caught between the unitive vision which he desires and the divisive vision which all men possess."⁹⁶ And while Tate's vision is ultimately one formulated around his conception of the unity between form and content, the unity of tension which he desires is one which allows him to formulate this particular element of a poem as its primary poetic expression, meaning, and depth. Thus, when Lowell attempts to unify through poetic presentation the disparities of the Civil Rights movement, the Civil War, and the actual, lived experience of the Boston cityscape, his reliance on poetic conveyance is wholly situated on the poem's tension.

⁹⁴ Tate, "Tension," 63.

⁹⁵ David M. Miller, *The Net of Hephaestus: A Study of Modern Criticism and Metaphysical Metaphor*, (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), 71.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

“For the Union Dead” is itself a self-conscious attempt on Lowell’s part to break with a number of other poems that present the subject; as such, his formal and thematic considerations are, to some extent, reactions. Written for the occasion of Boston Public Garden Festival, the poem is about the 54th Negro regiment who fought under Colonel Robert Shaw and whose ranks were famously decimated in an assault on Fort Wagner, South Carolina. In the park where Lowell read the poem, there is a monument erected to the men, a bronze bas-relief, dedicated in 1897 and commemorated with a poem read by Lowell’s distant relative, James Russell Lowell. Robert Lowell had many reasons, then, to avoid a repetition of themes that had so well been expounded upon.⁹⁷ His comments before reading the poem can easily be seen as a direct response to Tate’s poem, as can the obvious allusion in the title: “My poem, *The Union Dead*, is about childhood memories, the evisceration of our modern cities, civil rights, nuclear warfare and more particularly, Colonel Robert Shaw and his negro regiment, the Massachusetts 54th. I brought in early personal memories because I wanted to avoid the fixed, brazen tone of the set-piece and official ode.”⁹⁸ Certainly Lowell is here alluding to Tate’s well-known poem, attempting to distance his poem—one that would become one of his most commented upon—from his forbear’s.⁹⁹

Thematically, Lowell’s poem differentiates itself, primarily, through the racial tension which it embodies. In a letter to the editors of *The Village Voice* in November of 1964, Lowell remarks on the particularity of the racial aspect of the poem: “In my poem “[For] the Union Dead” I lament the loss of the old Abolitionist spirit; the terrible injustice, in the past and in the present, of the American treatment of the Negro is of the greatest urgency to me as a man and as

⁹⁷ Stephen Axelrod notes fourteen such poems, by poets like Emerson, Paul Dunbar, and John Berryman.

⁹⁸ Doeski, *Shifting Colors*, 109.

⁹⁹ Tate describes his purpose in titling his poem as an “Ode,” as he writes in “Narcissus as Narcissus,” “I suppose in so calling it I intended an irony: the scene of the poem is not a public celebration, it is a lone man by a gate” (602). That Lowell would so self-consciously avoid calling his own, very public poem an ode is itself an irony.

a writer.”¹⁰⁰ Though the racial aspect of the poem is certainly its most important, a number of other themes develop: “the historical conversation between past and present, the violence of modern life and the dignity of Shaw’s enterprise—the ironic awareness that Shaw’s battle remains unconcluded.”¹⁰¹ Like Tate’s poem before, Lowell’s poem develops a tension between the dead and the living, yet, in Lowell’s poem, the circumstances which surround the speaker, far from having changed, are much the same; in spite of Colonel Shaw’s sacrifice along with his men, the plight of the Negro in Lowell’s day is still one marked by violence and subjugation.

Thus, when presenting the poem for inclusion in an anthology titled *This is my Best*—in which poets were, as the title suggests, to submit their best poem—Lowell wrote an introductory statement that exhibits the potential import of the piece, as well as its embodiment of tension. The poem, he writes, was brought together from three “incoherent sketches”: “One was about an aquarium, one about a parking lot, one about a Boston club.” These sketches, Lowell felt, were best presented in a kind of “free verse,” “learned from . . . William Carlos Williams.” Lowell’s poem is one that he believed “may be about a child maturing into courage and terror. My lines are on the dry and angry side, but the fish and steamshovels are Tahitian. In 1959 I had a message. Since the blacks have perhaps found their “break,” but the landscape remains.”¹⁰² With the advantage of time and distance, Lowell recognized a few things about the poem that, it seems, had shifted in importance. As African-Americans had since, “perhaps found their break,” the poem’s concrete images become more memorable, and now Lowell’s statement regarding what the poem is “about,” is only a possibility—“the poem may be about a child maturing.”

¹⁰⁰ Lowell, *Letters*, 254. It is important to note that, in the context of the letter, Lowell was defending himself against a rather harsh condemnation of his play *Benito Cereno*, a dramatization of the novella by Herman Melville. The end of the play ends with the killing of slaves on a mutinied ship. His comments regarding “For the Union Dead,” irrespective of his commentary on his play, seem to hold true regardless.

¹⁰¹ Doreski, *Shifting Colors*, 105.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 94-95.

Along with these changes in perspective, it seems Lowell is still in the business of distancing his poem from Tate's by noting an indebtedness to Williams, while ignoring Tate, and remarking his dislike for the poet having to give "ambitious interpretations" of his own work, an obvious reference to Tate's essay.¹⁰³ But the various themes and images in the poem utilize the same tension that allowed for Tate's poem and its concrete presentation of experience to cohere.

The tension found in the racial aspect of the poem begins to be wed to the more general history of the theme even in the poem's epigraph. Beginning his poem, Lowell reproduces the Latin inscription on the bas-relief of the memorial, with one minor change. Augustus Saint Gaudens inscribed the piece with the phrase "*Omnia relinquit servare rempublicam,*" while Lowell changes the Latin to "*Relinquunt Omnia Servare Rem Publicam,*" effectively changing the translation from "He relinquished everything to serve the Republic," to the plural, "they."¹⁰⁴ Lowell's change is clearly one of inclusion and emphasis, noting, particularly, the sacrifice of all of the men, white and black alike. Lowell elucidates the sacrifice of these men in two unique ways: through the experiential concretization of the current civil-rights situation and through surreal Boston imagery. In this way, especially, Lowell departs from the past poems which had been written on the subject.

In the first lines of the poem, then, Lowell distances himself from previous poems and focuses, as opposed to the Southern imagery of Tate, on the cityscape that was a part of his upbringing. The first two stanzas—the poem is in 17 quatrains—recount the imagery of the

¹⁰³ Tate's essay "Narcissus as Narcissus" is a commentary on his "Ode." He claims, rather than a definitive "meaning" for the piece, that he sets out only to remark on the origins of the piece, which he does in extensive detail.

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Travisano, among others, notes this in a number of criticisms of the piece. Travisano's discussion occurs in his *Midcentury Quartet*, page 253.

Aquarium that had played in an earlier draft poem;¹⁰⁵ he writes the particularities of the contemporary scene and remembers his own childhood experiences there:

The old South Boston Aquarium stands
 in a Sahara of snow now. Its broken windows are boarded.
 The bronze weathervane cod has lost half its scales.
 The airy tanks are dry.
 Once my nose crawled like a snail on the glass;
 my hand tingled
 to burst the bubbles
 drifting from the noses of the cowed, compliant fish. (1-8)

In the first stanza, the image is concrete, public, while in the second, the images are private, memories of a childhood upbringing as a Boston Brahmin. Thomas Travisano, though he tends to overemphasize the personal nature of Lowell's experiences, rightfully notes Lowell's attempts to objectify the experience he is here describing: "The texture of the poem fluctuates between graphic, hypercharged super-realism and a curiously distanced, dreamlike reverie. It alludes to Lowell's childhood . . . and a 'cowed,' childlike confusion . . . But perhaps most tellingly, Lowell objectifies the process of loss by his persistent attention to visual objects."¹⁰⁶ While Travisano's language may overreach, Lowell indeed attenuated his experiences through the utilization of visual objects.

Though Lowell was loath to make comments regarding his own sense of poetic tension, he did make a few comments regarding the poem's unique sense of language and visual presentation. In a letter to Richard Tillinghast in 1969, Lowell intimated that the poem was "a

¹⁰⁵ In *Shifting Colors*, Doreski highlights a number of the draft poems from the Houghton Collection at Harvard in his chapter on the poem. See pages 96-109.

¹⁰⁶ Travisano, *Midcentury*, 253.

public ‘ode’ tho [sic] autobiographically truth,” in which he was “trying to give the ‘free verse’ of *Life Studies* greater resonance and rhetoric (sound effects, history).”¹⁰⁷ The formal devices are certainly of interest, and, unsurprisingly, these are the very qualities Tate remarked on in a letter to Lowell. In response, Lowell was clearly happy: “Really I’m awfully glad I’ve at last written something that pleases you. The ‘Union Dead’ poem took all winter and I suppose is the most composed poem I’ve ever written.”¹⁰⁸ The composition of the piece highlights particularly its similarity with Tate’s, and its compositional elements are largely tied to its sense of tension, building around Lowell’s projections of contemporary images and historical themes.

But this indebtedness is not, as Jerome Mazzaro has suggested, as simple as their basic tensions. Lowell’s imagery specifically, his concretization as a means of extending his tension across Tate’s continuum, highlights this reality. In the third and fourth stanzas of the piece, Lowell’s personal imagery once again highlights the particularity of experience, though it emphasizes the public nature of these realities:

My hand draws back. I often sign still
 for the dark downward and vegetating kingdom
 of the fish and reptile. One morning last March,
 I pressed against the new barbed and galvanized
 fence on the Boston Common. Behind their cage,
 yellow dinosaur steamshovels were grunting
 as they cropped up tons of mush and grass
 to gouge their underworld garage. (9-16)

¹⁰⁷ Lowell, *Letters*, 519.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 373.

Lowell's description includes strong particulars—"One morning last March"—yet his imagery of the "yellow dinosaur steamshovels" building their "underworld garage" is that of the public, the Boston atmosphere, evidencing especially the generative nature of the poem that so essentializes New Critical theory.

Even as Lowell transitions to his primary theme of the Negro regiment, the language is not that of the remembered, perhaps idealized past, but that of the particular, concrete memorial. His description particularly highlights the ability of the modern workaday world to influence these past images:

A girdle of orange, Puritan-pumpkin colored girders
braces the tingling Statehouse,
shaking over the excavations, as it faces Colonel Shaw
and his bell-cheeked Negro infantry
on St. Gaudens' shaking Civil War relief,
propped by a plank splint against the garage's earthquake. (19-24)

Rather than ruminate on their heroic acts, Lowell immortalizes their likeness in the memorial. Even after noting their sacrifice, Lowell remarks that "at the dedication, / William James could almost hear the bronze Negroes breathing" (27-28). The historical aspects were subjugated to the personal remembrances, the public objects. William Doeski writes that "[f]or Lowell, naked historicism was unacceptable; only through its personal dimensions could the intellectual experience of history be authenticated and only through the language of the sense could it be adequately conveyed."¹⁰⁹ Although Doeski might overstate Lowell's rejection of non-personal dimensions of experience, Lowell's language was certainly that of sense, primarily that of sight.

¹⁰⁹ Doeski, *Shifting Colors*, 103.

Lowell himself draws out a distinction on this point by noting the difference in desire between generations. In one of the latter stanzas of the poem, he writes of the modern necessity, if not merely the implications, of the monument:

Shaw's father wanted no monument
except the ditch,
where his son's body was thrown
and lost with his "niggers."

The ditch is nearer. (49-53)

While Shaw's father may not have desired any concrete remembrance of his son, Lowell seems to suggest, the ditch—its literal, concrete state—is much “nearer” than any remembrance. Similarly, in the lines that follow, Lowell writes of the “last war,” and a “commercial photograph” which “shows Hiroshima boiling / over a Mosler safe, the ‘Rock of Ages’ / that survived the blast. Space is nearer” (56-58). This excoriating image, at once, makes Christianity somehow implicit in the war, yet, again, Lowell highlights the nearness of a particular over the ethereal intellectualization of war.

Only by particularizing the poem, by bringing it near, can Lowell exonerate himself from the implicit misery of such a modern existence, for when he crouches to his “television set, / the drained faces of Negro school-children rise like balloons” (59-60). Lowell, perhaps alluding to the irony of the still-plagued plight of the Negroes in the modern world, and these without a memorial of their action, ultimately concentrates on their image and his experience of it. Doreski writes that “[l]ike Tate, Lowell sees the moral ambiguity and the lack of persistent values have driven individuals into themselves,” yet “‘For the Union Dead’ goes much further than Tate’s

poem in excoriating the present and finds even less comfort in the past.”¹¹⁰ While Lowell may indeed go further in his criticism of the “modern,” his method is one derived from a perspective of tension decidedly New Critical in its origin.

Though the thematic overlap between the two poems certainly qualifies their enjoyment of critical comparison among a number of theorists, the tension of Lowell’s poem seems to grant it as unique a status as Tate’s, a remarkable achievement since Tate’s poem is largely considered to be his best, and among the best produced by the New Critics as poets. In evaluating the influence of the New Critics over Lowell’s poetry, then, few aesthetic qualities are more clearly and widely represented than his appreciation for tension and its grounding in the concrete, its seeming ability to give body to abstract experience. As in the poems of Tate, Lowell seeks to ground his poetic subjects in visible, physical experience, and in “For the Union Dead,” he is able to move beyond the personal imagery of private experience like that of *Life Studies* to the public images of a shared history, the same experience that finds its fullest articulation in the metaphors that comprise one of the most overlooked collections of Lowell’s poetry: *History*.

¹¹⁰ Doreski, *Friendship*, 141 and 145.

Chapter 4: Liberties Taken: Metaphor and History

Much like Lowell's attention to tension, his utilization of metaphors in his poetry is a simultaneous attempt to embody or actualize personal experience in concrete particulars and to allude to and enforce the metaphysical reality that he undoubtedly affirms. In no group of poems is this more easily seen than in his later collection, *History*.¹¹¹ The entirety of the collection is comprised of very public poems, dominated by their recollections of Lowell's past and influential in his philosophy and aesthetics. Like Lowell's understanding of tension, his utilization of metaphor is largely related to his conceptualization of the poetic device as translated through the minor conflicts and theoretical perspectives related to the New Critics and their immediate predecessors. An implicit part of a poem's tension, metaphor is often seen by the New Critics as the *primary* way of embodying tension in a poem. Thus, the device has been seen as *the* defining aspect of poetic language itself, and the device that prompts a "tactile" view of the poem. As is most clearly seen in Cleanth Brook's metaphor for poetry as a "well wrought urn," the New Critics ultimately conceive of poems in their greatest possible unity; as such, their view of metaphor has most often been taken to be one of *fusion*. That is, rather than focusing on the linguistic, interactive aspect of the metaphor—as I. A. Richards proposes—or the more acutely tensive, paradox enabling perspective of metaphor—like that held by M. C. Beardsley—New Critics like Ransom, Warren, and Tate held to what has been labeled the "fusion view" of metaphor. In this view, the concrete and the abstract are taken to be, in a unique, poetic way, literal. Such a conception allows for the view to be seen as joining abstract concepts to

¹¹¹ *History*, as a collection, first appeared in 1973, though it is ultimately a part of earlier efforts. Many of the poems were contained in his *Notebook 1967-1968* and his much larger *Notebook*. The latter was sectioned, along with some new poems, into *History* (the more public, historical pieces), *For Lizzie and Harriet* (sonnets about his family), and *The Dolphin* (containing a number of intensely personal poems regarding the dissolution of his marriage). All of the poems in this chapter are from his *Collected Poems*, ordered and taken from his last corrections as written in the second edition of *History*.

universally concrete symbols. Following this conception of metaphor, Lowell utilizes metaphors in *History* as a means of concretizing the abstract principles of a history with which he was unable to experience in any immediate way.

In *The Well Wrought Urn*, Brooks devotes an entire chapter to elucidating the exact claims which a metaphor extends over the poem. The chapter develops as an extended contemplation of a metaphor in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and clarifies, specifically, the nature of metaphor and its relation to ambiguity. Brooks's argument develops rhetorically, yet emphatically, as he writes, "Macbeth compares the pity for his victim-to-be, Duncan, to 'a naked new-born babe, / Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim . . . The comparison is odd, to say the least. Is the babe natural or supernatural—an ordinary helpless baby . . . Or is it some infant Hercules . . . hardly the typical pitiable object?"¹¹² Brooks's questioning continues to develop the potential ambiguities of the lines, but he does make an important distinction: "Shakespeare seems bent upon having it both ways . . . bent upon having the best of both worlds; for he proceeds to give us the option."¹¹³ Rather than dwelling on the precise nature of the metaphor, Brooks seems, eventually, content with its ambiguity. Notably, however, this ambiguity is not confusion or even nonsense; it is concrete, complex, and inevitably tied to the meaning of the poem, for only when the "symbol merges all the contradictory elements of the symbol,"¹¹⁴ is there a definitive unity in the piece.

Throughout *History*, this poetic unity is repeatedly highlighted, and in Brooks and Warren's seminal textbook, *Understanding Poetry*, this poetic unity is stressed in the context of imagery and repeatedly highlighted as a primary means of designating strong poetry. Such a conception of metaphor is inevitably tied with their belief that a poem does have an inherent

¹¹² Brooks, *Well-Wrought*, 29.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 48-49.

“meaning”: “Poems . . . are not merely pleasant nonsense . . . But poems characteristically express their meanings not through abstractions but through concrete particulars.”¹¹⁵ In utilizing the tensive qualities of metaphor, the poet is able to achieve a greater sense of particularity, even in the face of seeming disparity. But Brooks and Warren are quick to note some errors in regards to metaphorical thinking. The authors give Samuel Johnson’s dictum regarding metaphor—that a “good metaphor must ‘both illustrate and ennoble the subject’”—but are quick to note its shortcomings: “this formula oversimplifies in two very serious ways. First, to say that a comparison *illustrates* suggests that it provides an alternate description, one that is simpler, more familiar, easier to grasp . . . In like manner, to say that the function of a comparison is to *decorate* involves a partial falsification.”¹¹⁶ Ultimately, both of these conceptions are tied to the authors’ belief that metaphors are *unique* in their presentation; they are *meaning-laden*.

Brooks and Warren argue that rather than illustrating a point, a metaphor may be the *only* way to communicate said point. They argue that “in poetry, comparisons often offer the only means by which the author can describe for us the object of the situation he wishes to describe. Good comparisons may on occasion have to be intricate and difficult. One function of metaphor is to discover truth—not merely illustrate truth in the sense of simplifying it.”¹¹⁷ This perspective, once again, highlights the nature of a poem as a unique artifact, singular in potential experience. In this sense, any imagery which is seen as “decorative,” is patently mistaken, for it is more nearly and essentially “structural, part of the primary statement and no ornamental

¹¹⁵ Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1960), 268.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 269-270.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 269-270.

accessory.”¹¹⁸ Only in this sense, can metaphor be seen as being necessarily tied to Tate’s—and effectively, Lowell’s—sense of tension.

The first poem of Lowell’s collection—titled, aptly, “History”—elucidates the ways in which he understood history in linearity and presence, apart from any metaphorical implication. In the poem, he conceives of history in imagistic notions: “History has to live with what was here, / clutching and close to fumbling all we had” (1-2). Lowell’s metaphorical understanding of history as a *living* thing, in some ways takes on literal possibilities, as it “clutches” and nearly “fumbles” in actuality. The ending lines echo such a theme:

As in our Bibles, white-faced, predatory,
 the beautiful, mist-drunken hunter’s moon ascends—
 a child could give it a face: two holes, two holes,
 my eyes, my mouth, between them a skull’s no-nose—
 O there’s a terrifying innocence in my face
 drenched with the silver salvage of the mornfrost. (9-14)

In many of the poems in the collection, most, in fact, the subject often takes on a personae, as does history in this poem. To say that “there’s a terrifying innocence in my face,” seems to portray history, once again, as a living, tangible reality. Given a body, as the moon might be given a face, history is still terribly passive; the last two lines seem to emphasize not the “terrifying innocence,” but its “drenching.” The metaphorical extension of the poem is what emphasizes the passive, yet present nature of history in Lowell’s recounting; it is the point of unity for the piece.

In Warren, the theme of history is writ large in his collection *Eleven Poems on the Same Theme*, but none of them is more metaphorically centered than his early, critically-lauded poem,

¹¹⁸ Brooks and Warren, *Understanding*, 270.

“Bearded Oaks.” The collection in which it occurs is devoted essentially to self-knowledge, especially as it applies to its impossibility in light of original sin.¹¹⁹ The poems often serve, as does “Bearded Oaks,” as images embodying the possibilities and implications of such knowledge in light of man’s fall.¹²⁰ The entirety of the poem utilizes light and dark images to present the possibilities of man’s knowledge. Throughout, the light is often presented as being “layered” and always “above” the lovers who lie below the oaks. Under these trees, “the scene, / Recessed, awaits the positive night” (3-4). The darkness here is inverted into a positive sense, rather than the positive presence of light. The speaker recounts that “we are, as light withdraws, / Twin atolls on a shelf of shade” (11-12). In this rather odd image, the population of this poem is sustained by, held up by the darkness, much like the coral underbelly of an atoll.

Such an odd, difficult image is complicated further by the continuing implications of the darkness. In two of the more remarkable stanzas from the poem, light and darkness still do battle:

The storm of noon above us rolled,
 Of light the fury, furious gold,
 The long drab troubling us, the depth:
 Dark is unrocking, unrippling still.
 Passion and slaughter, ruth, decay
 Descend, minutely whispering down,
 Silted down swaying streams, to lay
 Foundation for our voicelessness. (17-24)

¹¹⁹ A. L. Clements, “Sacramental Vision,” *Robert Penn Warren: Critical Perspectives*, Ed. Neil Nakadate. (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1981), 302-320.

¹²⁰ George Garrett sees this poem as a near perfection of the New Critical spirit, believing it “is a really marvelous example of Marvell translated into twentieth-century English” (225-26). Though Warren would eventually turn away from poetry so precisely in the vein of Donne, here he exemplifies the New Critical aspect with precision and beauty.

Here, light is, at once, part of the storm, part of the fury, yet it is also a “furious gold.” The latter images of the darkness seem to qualify these reactions as being, ultimately, a result of forces outside of the speaker’s control. The darkness descends along with the negatives of decay and slaughter, laying the “foundation for our voicelessness.” Such a conception of original sin is one ultimately constructed out of a sense of helplessness, of passivity. Here, Warren’s analysis is based in his conception of the human condition, and, as John Bradbury has noted, “Warren’s analysis of the human condition has always leaned heavily on Ransom’s dualism.”¹²¹ Such a dualism causes, as in the speaker here, a helplessness or incompatibility. It is in this state that the speaker wonders, “If hope is hopeless, then fearless fear, / And history is thus undone” (27-28). This realization is only possible in a conception of time that is inevitably fleeting. The final lines portray it thusly:

We live in time so little time
 And we learn all so painfully,
 That we may spare this hour’s term
 To practice for eternity. (37-40)

As time is so brief, and in spite of the fact that our existence may be so clouded with the pain of sin, Warren’s speaker believes that we can justify our brief pain when counted against the enormity of timelessness. Thus history becomes a mere passing fact, inarticulable in light of our sinful state.

For Lowell, on the other hand, a reliance on metaphor for poetic quality wraps round his reliance on the metaphysical, and, aside from Lowell’s early work, no poems are more explicitly religious, more metaphysically figured than those in *History*. Though these are often less devout, their figuring of religious imagery is inevitably tied conceptually to Lowell’s sense of historic

¹²¹ John Bradbury, *The Fugitives: A Critical Account*, (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1958), 173.

reality. In “King David Old,” the imagery of the body is once again invoked in terms assistive to a concrete understanding of historical reality. The poem begins with David lying ill in his old age: “Two or three times a night, and for a month, / we wrang the night-sweat from his shirt and sheets” (1-2). Staying within the concrete realm of description, the next lines assert, though it may be historical, images which devolve into the metaphorical symbols which elevate the poem. The speakers—in this case, presumably a chorus—call on the person of Abishag:

on the fortieth day, we brought him Abishag,
and he recovered, and he knew her not—
cool through the hottest summer day, and moist;
a rankness more savage than all the flowers,
as if her urine caused the vegetation,
Jerusalem leaping from the golden dew; (3-8)

Here, especially, there is a disparity in the imagery. On the one hand, Abishag, a woman known for her beauty,¹²² is pictured as life-giving, yet, on the other, repeated imagery of impotence and the utilization of “urine” seem to highlight a sense of ugliness.

King David’s inability to function in the capacity of king is further highlighted in two specific metaphors that mark his flagging virility, if not merely the consequences of his passing. The piece takes on the tone of narrative in its description: “but later, the Monarch’s well-beloved shaft / lay quaking in place” (9-10). The phrase remains ambiguous. Is the “shaft” a reference to his lineage, perhaps the young Solomon? Is it a reference to his weapons of war? Or even a more

¹²² Abishag is listed in I Kings as a woman of Shunem who was extremely beautiful. She was brought in as a companion to the king in his old age and was known to sleep next to him to keep him warm, though the writer of I Kings is clear to note that “the king knew her not” (I Kings 1:4, KJV). There is some speculation as to her being the subject of the Song of Songs as well.

lackluster phrase demarcating his impotence? The later lines pick up on this ambiguity as they proclaim a rather ugly reality after the king's passing:

lay quaking in place; men thought the world was flat,
 yet half the world was hanging on each breast,
 as two spent swimmers that did cling together—
 Sion had come to Israel, if they had held. . . .

This clinch is quickly broken, they were glad to break. (10-14)

Two images are given in quick succession: one, the strong metaphor of the earth as a globe comprised of two breasts, and the latter, weaker simile of two swimmers clinging together. In this sense, the latter lines, and specifically the metaphors, clarify the earlier imagery of the king's "shaft," though not in the sense of verbal qualification, but in merging the various possibilities of the first. The "shaft" is, simultaneously, a reference to his lack of virility, the inability of his lineage to keep the kingdom together, and the impossibility of strong military action to provide against the break between the northern and southern kingdoms.

In "Solomon's Wisdom," the very themes continue to be developed, though they are now far from public; rather, they focus only on the experiential exactitudes of the wise son. Like many of the poems in *History*, "Solomon's Wisdom" is, seemingly, narrated by Solomon himself. Beginning the poem in quotation marks, Lowell writes in a style reminiscent of Solomon's proverbs, marked by their rhetorical questioning and juxtapositional framing. Striking with the tone of the Kohelet of Ecclesiastes, Solomon questions, "Can I go on keeping a hundred wives at fifty, / still scorning my aging and dispirited life / what I loved with wild idealism young?" (1-3). While the first lines announce the thematic presence of the poem, the

latter provide the complicating realities which the speaker is to face. His questioning becomes proverbial statement:

God only deals a king one hand to gamble,
his people chosen for him and means to lie.
I shiver up vertical like a baby pigeon,
palate-sprung for the worm, senility. (4-7)

As in his earlier poem, Lowell here utilizes metaphors complex in their possibility and nuanced in their development. The king is pressed into a “gamble” of one hand; there are no retakes, no re-deals. His chips are limited and he is forced into a bluff. Yet this abruptly transitions into the metaphorical presence of a king as “baby pigeon,” growing senile with old age.

Ultimately, the latter of these two metaphors seems to gain the most preeminence in the last lines of the poem, unresolved though they may be. Taking up the war-imagery of his father, Solomon here is forced to violence: “I strap the gross artillery to my back, / lash on destroying what I lurch against, / not with anger, but unwieldy feet” (8-10). Again the metaphor is one grounded in necessity. Like the “unwieldy feet,” Solomon repeatedly recounts his lack of aptitude for such a task:

ballooning like a spotted, warty, blow-rib toad,
King Solomon croaking, *This too is vanity;*
her lips are a scarlet thread, her breasts are towers—
hymns of the terrible organ in decay.’ (11-14)

As with many of Lowell’s poems, particularly those in *History*, the final metaphors serve, like the traditional formal resolve of the last sestet, as clarifying agents to the earlier complications. The terrible brevity of the body, its transitory, disparate nature in comparison with the

immaterial, immortal soul is here highlighted against the kingdom of Israel, complicating, yet ultimately relying on, the very theme of Ecclesiastes.

Many of the poems in *History* center on religious themes, as well as historical ones, and in Lowell's "Watchmaker God," those religious themes come to bear in one of the more famous metaphorically significant phrases of religious statement in the Eighteenth century. The poem, whose title alludes to English theologian William Paley's famous *apologia* for the existence of God,¹²³ is one of Lowell's strongest statements on theology outside of his early work, though it certainly bears the devotional distance engendered by the deist theme. Beginning with a rather objective tone, the early images are those relating particularly to something often seen at odds with theological assertion: science. The first lines read rather slowly, rhetorically: "Say life is the one-way trip, the one-way flight, / say this without hysterical undertones— / then you could say you stood in the cold light of science" (1-3). The tone of the speaker is a sure, distanced one. The "cold light of science" is the imperative reality that all that exists is physical, that this life, the life of a particular subject in the flesh, is the end and aim of existence. Lowell's imperative to "say this without hysterical undertones" insinuates rather clearly the strongest reaction to such a bleak reality.

The completion of the poem answers such a bleak conception with, perhaps, an even bleaker one. Still focusing on the problem of man's seemingly lonely existence in the universe, the speaker ruminates on the possible existence of meaning external to tangible, earthly experience:

Strange, life is both the fire and the fuel; and we,
the animals and objects, must be here

¹²³ Paley's argument is a teleological one. He asserts, to put it very simply, that apparent design implies an intelligent designer. The argument appears in his 1802 treatise, *Natural Theology*.

without striking a spark of evidence
 that anything that ever stopped living
 ever falls back to living when life stops. (5-9)

Paralleling the early metaphor of life possibly existing as a “one-way trip,” these lines elucidate the particularities of existence, yet only assert their ultimate meaninglessness. No concrete existence, no vision or sound ever exists as a “spark of evidence” that anything beyond them is plausible. Yet, here, Lowell’s speaker asserts that “[t]here’s a pale romance to the watchmaker God / of Descartes and Paley; He drafted and installed / us in the Apparatus” (10-12). While the speaker acknowledges a “romance” about such a theory, it is ultimately a “pale” one, the individuals who exist in such a world are mere draftees and “installed” cogs. The God of such a world is one not very close, and one who offers very little personal comfort: “He loved to tinker; / but having perfected what He had to do, / stood off shrouded in his loneliness” (12-14). By ruminating on God as watchmaker, the metaphorical implications of such a deistic reality highlight the personal and experiential consolation that can be seemingly found in metaphysical reality. By uniting such disparate images as clocks and human experience, the speaker is able to see the poverty of such a theological perspective, never mind the natural implications.

In one of Warren’s early poems, similar themes of history and influence take place in an extended dialogue under the guise of a speaker conversing with dead poets. Titled “To Certain Old Masters,”¹²⁴ Warren’s speaker seeks to differentiate himself from the poets whose books line his walls. The speaker recounts of the masters that he has “read you and read you, my betters, / Vivisected every page” (1-2). The lines portray rather duplicitous images of the masters; the speaker believes them to be his “betters,” yet he “vivisects” their work, prods their work in the light of pure calculation for poetic instruction. Curiously, Warren here uses “vivisect” rather than

¹²⁴ All of Warren’s poems are taken from his *Collected Poems*. The poems will be marked with line numbers in-text.

his earlier stages as a poet, it nonetheless proves his metaphorical reliance in giving any poetic quality to a piece.

Lowell's poems, similarly, rely on the quality of metaphor and on resolution in religious, metaphysical, and more classical senses as well; Lowell was, after all, primarily a student of the classics. In his poem "Helen,"¹²⁵ the mythological status of the beauty becomes not an allegorical representation, but a physical manifestation of disparate themes. Lowell begins the poem with the metaphor that binds the poem: "I am the azure! come from the underworld" (1). The complex metaphor, perhaps an allusion to Virgil's recounting of the Aeneid, places Helen as the resurrected embodiment of beauty, the presentation of the spoils of a war well-founded. The metaphorical presentations take an increasingly violent, war-centered perspective as Helen purports that "once more I see our galleys bleed with dawn, / lancing on muffled oarlocks into Troy" (3-4). Following his metaphorical embodiment of Helen in the color azure, the ships sailing to war are those that "bleed with dawn," colored with the rising sun, the same ships "lancing" into Troy. The imagery is tied to visible colorations and metaphorical, violent images.

Surprisingly, perhaps, the violent images become most prominent in the piece, even as the latter lines portray the indulgence of Helen's ultimate responsibility for the bloodletting that occurs around her, often for her. Though Helen ultimately portrays her actions in positive terms—"My loving hands recall the absent kings, / (I used to run my fingers through their beards)" (5-6)—her actions are more accurately portrayed ironically, in her recounting of moves more nearly like those of war:

Agamemnon drowned in Clytemnestra's bath, Ulysses,
the great gulf boiling sternward from his keel. . . .

¹²⁵ The poem is ultimately an imitation of Paul Valéry's poem of the same name. Lowell's version appeared first in his collection *Imitations*, though the version in *History* occurs with a number of revisions. The metaphors are almost wholly of Lowell's own invention, surely of his own emphasis in comparison with the French original.

I hear the military trumpets, all their brass,
 blasting the rhythm to the frantic oars,
 the rowers' metronome enchains the sea. (7-11)

Helen, recounting the violent drowning of Agamemnon and the eventual loss of Odysseus¹²⁶, recounts the images in negative, perhaps violent ways. Interestingly, Helen's metaphorical portrayal of the "rowers' metronome" *enchaining* the sea seems to relate to her own metaphorical presence as *being* the azure, as having an actual kinship to the natural. In this sense, Helen herself is captive by the men's monotonous rowing, their aggression. In the final three lines, this aggression is again found as being distinctly in the realm of men, elucidated in coloration: "High on beaked vermillion prows, the gods, / their fixed archaic smiles smarting with salt, / reach out carved, indulgent arms to me" (12-14). Again the use of coloration—here, the "vermillion prows"—clarifies points in relation to the metaphor utilized in the first line. As Helen is first personified as *being* color, the later points of coloration and their relation to violence are themselves accusations of Helen's implicit guilt in the causation of violence. Only in this sense is the final irony of the gods' "indulgent arms" fully realized.

Not all of the poems in the collection are, however, quite so public. In "Reading Myself," Lowell portrays himself in autobiographical terms more nearly like his earlier poems in *Life Studies* or even in his simultaneously published *Dolphin*. In this poem, Lowell develops an extended parallel for his own writing, something he speaks of in no humble terms as he describes his efforts and response: "Like Thousands, I took just pride and more than just, / struck matches that brought my blood to a boil; I memorized the tricks to set the river on fire" (1-3). Though initially an arrogant statement, Lowell tempers the assertion through his initial comparison—

¹²⁶ Ulysses is the Latinized form of Odysseus. Lowell often reverted to the Latin versions of the classics, translating many of them on his own.

“Like thousands”—and through his following line, where he acknowledges that he “somehow never wrote something to go back to” (4). This initial rumination gives way to his further notions of grandeur, however morbid: Can I suppose I am finished with wax flowers / and have earned my grass on the minor slopes of Parnassus” (5-6). Though this presentation of his Lowell’s bears the morbidity of grave-flowers, his space is on the “minor slopes” of the poetic home of the muses.

In this particular place in the poem, Lowell builds his rather extended metaphor in such a way that it, like the other images before it, portray a kind of poetic humility, if not merely an acknowledgement of his reliance on others. His image is that of the bee:

No honeycomb is built without a bee
 adding circle to circle, cell to cell,
 the wax and honey of a mausoleum—
 this round dome proves its maker is alive;
 the corpse of the insect lives embalmed in honey,
 prays that its perishable work live long
 enough for the sweet-tooth bear to desecrate—
 this open book . . . my open coffin. (7-14)

Like many of the other poems in *History*, even the more personal poem takes on a resolution in the final lines in an otherwise ambiguous metaphor. In fact, in this metaphor, Lowell provides one of his most clear representations of his personal poetic heritage, as well as his poetic indebtedness. Though the poem explicitly only relegates the work of the individual cell to a singular bee, the implications of such a conception—that of a honey-filled hive—are surely clear in their reliance on a grouping.

Irrespective of the personal nature of the latter of these poems from Lowell, the metaphorical thrust of *History* is one that focuses on a resolution of public history to more personal experience. The concrete images, even in their most ambiguous metaphorical state, provide in some sense a locus of experience otherwise unaccountable. In this collection, then, Lowell achieves some of his greatest poetry, as, even at the most distanced poems from his own personal experience, he is still able to figure the otherwise unknowable: history itself. Even the most disparate pieces became, for Lowell, the most intimate, the embodied realities of the history he so closely felt.

Conclusion

Throughout Lowell's career, then, his poems were those comprised out of his experience. Even those whose subjects and themes seemed so distanced from a white, Boston-bred male—the feminine poems of *Land of Unlikeness*, the ethnic preoccupations and civil rights concerns of “For the Union Dead,” and the distant ruminations on past wars, kings, and despots in *History*—become instances of personal interaction. His poems are the tactile imitations of the varying, diverse realities which faced his forebears and took their shape in the poems of Ransom, Lowell, and Warren. Thus, to read Lowell's borrowings, his theoretical conceptions or tangible copyings, as instances for anxiety is to miss their import. Lowell's imitations are the representation of a shapely reality: the form and function of *poems*. His mimicry of the metaphysical, tensive, and metaphorical aspects of his influencers' poems does not, as Bloom would have it, reduce Lowell to an acquiescent copier, but mark him as a reformer, a fully capable figure.

Yet there is much not said here. Lowell's poetic, in the fullest sense, is yet to be so decisively elucidated. Lowell's most confessional poems—those marked by his familial revelations and intimate disclosures—are here not given the thoughtful engagement they deserve and require. Any such evaluation of these poems will, though, focus especially on Lowell's conception of the poem as an independent object, arising from experience and subject to evaluation on its own terms; in this way, any future evaluation must take into account that other classical poetic element here, largely, ignored: the imagination. That Lowell was concerned with the imagination in his poetic presentations is certainly granted, yet the fullest implications of this concern are, unfortunately, still submerged in the poetry he so artfully conceived. Thus, in this thesis, I cannot claim to have elucidated fully Lowell's sense of poetic value, only to have given

his poetry its freedom once more, a freedom to be seen as it is: a poetry influenced and a poetry imagined.

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