Lowell uncollected

by William Logan

On the poetic development of Robert Lowell.

Headstrong, rebellious, unstable, Robert Lowell arrived at Kenyon College by a tortuous route. In 1935 he had taken nothing but English courses his first semester at Harvard, then stopped going to class, having found most of the professors second-rate. He had beaten up one of his friends in private school for liking the wrong poet and, after his first year at Harvard, tried to educate his fiancée by demanding that she mail him an analysis of Troilus and Cressida, which Lowell returned with sarcastic remarks. According to his biographer Ian Hamilton, “If being a good fiancée meant nightly readings from Samson Agonistes, then she was happy to put up with it.” Lowell dropped out sophomore year, having tried to join the literary magazine, where he was humiliated during the interview. He was asked to tack down a carpet, then brusquely dismissed.

The only time the poet took his fiancée to bed, he reassured her that after two visits to a cathouse he knew how whores did it. She tried to follow his instructions, but that was the end of their sexual experiments. His parents objected to the marriage so vehemently that Lowell floored his father with one punch. Mrs. Lowell wanted the boy sent to a mental hospital. Her psychiatrist, the obsessive sonnet writer Merrill Moore, arranged for him to visit the poet Allen Tate in Tennessee instead, hoping the Southerner would offer the young man an informal apprenticeship. Moore also believed that Lowell might find Vanderbilt more suitable than Harvard, so the neophyte poet also sat in on John Crowe Ransom’s classes. Accepting an offer to join the faculty at Kenyon College in Ohio, Ransom suggested that Lowell go with him.

Footloose after spending spring 1937 in Nashville, the Harvard escapee asked if Tate could give him a place to stay. The older poet apologetically demurred, explaining that his house was so packed with visitors Lowell would have to live in a tent. Tate assumed the exiled Bostonian would understand that Old South politesse did not conceal an invitation. Lowell soon returned from the local Sears, Roebuck, however, pitching his new umbrella tent under the lotus tree on Tate’s front lawn.
The Southerner was not long in recognizing the young poet’s oddity as well as his extraordinary gifts, perhaps then more for discussing poems than for writing them. At the end of summer, Lowell followed Ransom to Kenyon. There the young poet at first shared a room with Randall Jarrell in Ransom’s house, later moving to an old cottage on campus, where Peter Taylor was his roommate. During his three years at Kenyon, Lowell joined the campus literary magazine, *Hika*, publishing poems there and in the first issue of the *Kenyon Review*, which Ransom founded. The issue featured only two poets, Lowell and Jarrell. (Both Lowell’s *Kenyon* poems lie among the uncollected work in *Collected Poems*, 2003.)

Lowell’s first book, *Land of Unlikeness* (the title comes from St. Bernard), was published in 1944 in a limited edition of two hundred fifty copies. In the introduction, Tate wrote, “There is no other poetry today quite like this.” Of its twenty poems, Lowell drew about a dozen into *Lord Weary’s Castle* (1946), the trade book two years later that won the Pulitzer Prize. The editors of Lowell’s *Collected Poems* placed *Land of Unlikeness* in an appendix, noting the poems previously published and often radically revised. The editors found “Fishermen” and “Sublime Feriam Sidera Vertice” (later, “Leviathan”) in *Hika*, but by some mishap overlooked five other poems, one of which Lowell had revised for *Land of Unlikeness*. The omission is strange, as in 1980 J. Barton Rollins published an article in *American Literature* that discussed these poems and quoted brief passages. So far as I can tell, since their publication in *Hika* the poems have never been reprinted in full.

Though the order in which Lowell wrote these poems is unknown, the first appeared in the issue of December 1938, three semesters after he arrived. He signed it Robert T. S. Lowell, Jr.

*Lake View*

Blousy and undernourished campers fell
From lake-view clapboards, pegging up canoe
And telescopic rods—ephemeral
Convictions of rusticity. Their new
Car, overstuffed with gaudy children, ploughed
Down a laborious and earthy road.

September, when we fumed, stiff and resigned,
In a cheap rocking chair—since weather-purged
Discarded on the home-made platform, twined
To two plain trees, suspending over gouged,
Concessive shore; our refuse-hearts dined on
Their unattractive trash crammed in a can.
Ah Boreas, cold and water-ruffling wind,
This is no month for love; no confidence
Subsists in the subservient command
Of solitude; your windy airs that dance,
Sterile on the retirement of the world,
Turned the cold shoulder on us, snarled.

This borrows from the world of Boston privilege to which Lowell was born, the world that shows up here and there in the background of *Life Studies*. The poem is grounded, perhaps, not in the summer he’d been dispatched to a camp for troubled children, where he became fixated on snakes, but in the later summer when he served as a very driven and competitive counselor in a New Hampshire camp for the underprivileged, run by his boarding school. The school historian says that, though the camp had clapboard cabins, there was no view of the lakes miles away, whose shores had only tenting platforms. Or perhaps the setting was in Nantucket, where Lowell summered in 1935 and 1936—the island had summer camps, and in 1935 he may have stayed into September.

Lowell’s desire to plunge the ordinary into the roils of myth falls a long way from accomplishment here. The descriptions are timidly approximate (“blowsy and undernourished”); the rhymes sloppy or tinny (*canoe/new, dined on/can*) when not bullied into form (*ploughed/road, world/snarled*), and the desperate neologism (“refuse-hearts”) is wretchedly ambiguous. A dumpy sketch has been made into the opening aria of some obscure Wagnerian opera. When he says the “campers fell/ From” the clapboards, he means “streamed out of”; if the boys were pegging up the canoe and fishing rods, the season must have been over. Lowell, whose spelling was always iffy, may have meant plane trees, not “plain” trees (recall “As a Plane Tree by the Water” in *Lord Weary’s Castle*).
The “weather-purged” rocking chairs have probably been stripped of paint by rain and wind; the “home-made platform,” built into the clumsiest sentence in the poem, must be a ground-level deck. The pretensions of manner and exaggerations of effect (“overstuffed with gaudy children,” “laborious and earthy road”—“earthy road” instead of “dirt road”) show little sign of the talent for concision and sharp-toothed adjectives soon evident in Lowell’s poetry. He rarely wrote phrases more preposterous than “ephemeral/ Convictions of rusticity” and “suspending over gouged,/ Concessive shore.” (“Gouged” is only a whisper of what he later learned to do.) Indeed, he couldn’t resist the apostrophic nod to Boreas, though it’s worth remembering that his chumminess with the Greek gods was affectation before it became necessary art.

The following February, under the name R. T. S. Lowell, he published “Fishermen,” which after a striking revision became “The Drunken Fisherman” in Land of Unlikeness and, with one further touch, in Lord Weary’s Castle. (All three versions are available in Collected Poems.) In the next month’s issue, the most bizarre of Lowell’s early pieces, also under the name R. T. S. Lowell, tried to turn life into wounded allegory, with the staining influence of the Biblical past.

_A Suicidal Fantasy_

Slouching on an elm overhead
The solemn and outraged cat spied
The maimed man stooping with his bag;
Then the apprehensive whiskers bled,
And the foul harpy prophesied
Of Hadies [sic] and the water bog.
And as I spun the borrowed car
From the trestles of my road
Into the deathful water bog
The catapulting sodden fur
In avalanched emotion sprawled
On the memory’s pregnant bag.
But the maimed man skipped abstruse stones
On the concentric turbulence
Of the confounding water bog,
And gathered some solemn pine cones
About the yawning brown entrance
Of his once travailing cat-bag.

Rollins, probably rightly, sees the origin of the poem in the Slough-of-Despond passage of Pilgrim’s Progress. Bunyan’s brief episode passes through annunciation, salvation, and revelation—it’s hard to see the pattern in Lowell’s version, though the description of Christian answers that of a man after wrecking his car in a bog. (The theft might be compared in a sidelong way to the tortured, ingenious translations in Imitations, 1961, two decades later.) If Lowell’s dark night of the soul is not allegory plain, it’s the ghost of an incident decked in allegorical dress. He loved broad strokes; the absurdity, even grandiosity, of the tale did not prevent something more fully developed later. Such transformation informs, say, “Falling Asleep over the Aeneid” and “Skunk Hour,” just as those “apprehensive whiskers” (anxious or just discerning?) recall the many hints in Lowell’s mature poems of the brilliant knuckleballs of Empson’s ambiguities.

The mire that sticks to the youth in Bunyan (in his great phrase, “being all over clammed with it”), usually interpreted as sin, is an opportune symbol for the mud of meaning flung everywhere in Lowell. This hilarious undergraduate exercise in self-inflation is, like Nadar’s gas balloon, almost moving in its genial incompetence. How can a cat be both solemn and enraged? As the speaker drove off the trestles, was he watching a man drown a cat—or is that traumatic memory? Had the slouching cat escaped from the “cat-bag,” or is that a different cat altogether? Was it then or later “sprawled/ On the memory’s pregnant bag”? Two cats? Two bags? The creature is worse than Schrödinger’s beast. (What’s a travelling bag? Probably one figuratively pregnant.) The treed cat hovers over the scene like the mother skunk in “Skunk Hour,” witness and presiding figure, half symbol and halfway to allegory. Half-rhymes are mixed with full, but “road” and “sprawled” can’t be made to rhyme even in the thickest Boston accent. (Recall road/ploughed in “Lake View.”) Worse, the meter has been driven down a log road, the juddering tetrameter breaking down entirely here and there: “And gathered some solemn pine cones/ About the yawning brown entrance.”

There’s a certain rueful pleasure, seeing the crippled lines a magnificent poet wrote when young, especially if the poet was arrogantly confident of powers not yet in his grip. The revised version in Land of Unlikeness, titled “A Suicidal Nightmare,” is both better and worse. It begins,

Tonight and crouching in your jungle-bed,
O tiger of the gutless heart, you spied
The maimed man stooping with his bag;
And there was none to help. Cat, you saw red,
And like a grinning sphinx, you prophesied
Cain’s nine and outcast lives are in the bag.

The cat has become both tiger and sphinx (soon after, a “wooly [sic] lava of abstractions”). The narrative is still murky—the cat seems to have watched the maimed man holding a bag that contained Cain’s nine lives. The cat-drowning is absent in revision, but the maimed man is more clearly a version of the helping hand that in Bunyan emerges from a cloud. Rescued by this chance Christ-like figure, Lowell’s speaker pauses to ask why the bag had broken. The maimed man replies, “‘Brother, I fattened a caged beast on blood/And knowledge had let the cat out of the bag.’” Ouch.

This Freudian cat on the loose is a concatenation, as it were, of ideas then common among undergraduates and not yet fully digested by Lowell. (One of his early unpublished poems mentions Freud disparagingly.) And yet. And yet. The outcast Cain who sidles onstage is much like the Lowell who after slugging his father was conveniently ushered out of Boston. Recall what might be Lowell’s brief “Song of Myself,” the poem in Lord Weary’s Castle titled “Children of Light,” which ends, “And light is where the landless blood of Cain/Is burning, burning the unburied grain.” This was not the last time Lowell looked unhoused, even unhouseled. No record of a boggy accident survives, only of his terrible driving and a 1938 drunken accident on a dead-end street in Cambridge that ruined the face of his fiancée Jean Stafford. Perhaps all that lay behind the poem was the Bunyan passage—that and perhaps a memory of the Cheshire Cat Alice once saw “sitting on a bough.” The editors of the Collected never found the earlier version.

Few poets want to be judged by anything written before the age of majority, Rimbaud remaining a rare exception. Lowell, who turned twenty-two that March, published two poems in the June 1939 issue, still signed R. T. S. Lowell.

A Prelude to Summer
Now that the bushy shadows of warm trees
Cast forth their idleness upon my nature
Saved by the meanness of a country winter,
A stamping ground of high-pitched energies
I speak, quirites, with the biting ease
Of Cato: My austere and frugal leisure,
Turreted can look down upon the falter
Of gasping appetite and always appease
With proper presents. Heavens, how the sun
Wreaks havoc with the artificer!
Hot-footed April! Man dissolves in marrow
And flesh unmans its framework. Join in, pagan Pan,
Ceres (I call on whom I will) ungear
On callow nymphs the Spring’s dismembering harrow!

The opening lines are perhaps the first intimation of Lowell’s later style, rigorous without being curdled, an elegant masonry rather than a pile of bricks.
The Quirites were the body of Roman citizens, the term often used when an orator addressed them—this might have been clearer had Lowell capitalized it. Boxed in by the conventions of the Petrarchan sonnet (whose demands it roughly satisfies), this languorous, humdrum pastoral is transformed by the intervention of Marcus Cato into a set of demands upon the gods. That would almost certainly be Cato the Elder, who ended many speeches, “Carthago delenda est”—not his great-grandson the Younger, rival of Caesar. The Catos would return elsewhere in Lowell’s verse. By “turreted,” he presumably means housed like Montaigne (“austere and frugal leisure” seems right) or imprisoned like Ugolino. Montaigne could at least have observed from a height, and with an ironic distance, the “falter/ Of gasping appetite” with a leisure that can apparently appease something or other (the syntax is cranky) by “proper presents,” whatever those might be. Lowell might have been writing from a Queen Anne cupola, though the Carpenter’s Gothic cottage he occupied at Kenyon had no turret. The college’s Peirce Hall, however, has a dominating tower a hundred feet high.

Is “artificer” Lowell’s hangdog way of shoving onstage his life as a poet, or just his penchant for making things up? His rather emphatic apologia manages to escape apology for calling upon Pan, a Greek god, in this revenant’s dream of the Roman Republic; but how better display the ecdysiastic vision of a pagan campus that, more in Lowell’s day than ours, was overrun with Greeks? (Virtually every Kenyon student then pledged a fraternity.) “Look down upon” lives at the hinge of ambiguity.

The persona is the austere, frugal Roman, perhaps looking down his nose upon the wild abandon of these orgiastic Greeks. How better allow himself the casual superiority and paraded self-satisfaction of a Caligula, probably the main source for his nickname, “Cal.” Recall that the bossy know-it-all, who terrorized not just fiancée but friends by setting them reading curricula, at Harvard first subsisted on a diet of nothing but English courses, bending his education to his will—until a stronger will, perhaps John Crowe Ransom’s at Kenyon, convinced him to buckle down. The attempt to turn spring fever on a college campus into an ecstatic frenzy is even more unsuccessful when you realize the “callow nymphs” had bobbed hair and bobby socks.

“Flesh unmans its framework” prepares the shock diction of Land of Unlikeness and Lord Weary’s Castle. Whatever ground it claims, however, is immediately forfeited by the slack oratorical exclamations (he has Cato to thank for oratory, not slackness), capped by the ludicrous lines “ungear/ On callow nymphs the Spring’s dismembering harrow!” This makes more sense if you know that “ungear,” once common but now dialectical, meant to unharness a mule or other draft animal. The usage may still be heard in rural regions of the United States, including the sylvan Arcadia known as Wall Street. (“We can take a firm’s equity Beta and ungear it to reveal the underlying activity Beta.”)

“Ungear on” is a peculiar
The nymphs have been preparing the soil for planting. Though the syntax is muddled, the poet seems to ask Ceres to unharness them, presumably so they can join the saturnalia—or is it merely the dissolution? “Ungear on” is a peculiar construction for which I find no antecedent. Is the ending instead violent, asking Ceres and Pan to hurl the nymphs beneath that harrow? (At an all-male college, the notion might not have been unwelcome—the harrow looks vengefully sexual.) That would be an act worthy of a latter-day Caligula, especially one who longed for the company of the bobby-soxed nymphs his Catonian austerity and monkish longings demanded he reject. Perhaps Lowell knew that callow once meant land bare of vegetation, so a callow youth is, well, you know.

The other poem he published in the June issue was unusual in not pressing the rhetoric so hard, or so often.

Clouds

“Not any iron in it. Day on day,
Spaces without opposition, no firm
Plastic, palpable as the modeler’s clay,
His definite surface, a life-drawn form,—
Arm’s length off from exhausting respiration—
On which he palms off life’s entelechies.”

Then I stretched on a bed, my stomach drugged
With cigarettes, brute-maddened that the bright
Opposition of a Navajo blanket dragged
Barbarous carnality into a retreat,
Ameliorated by the folding hour . . .
That savage blanket, brandished lust and power.
That experience flashed upon the inner eye,
Importunately delving all grounds of impulse;
And I cried out: “Now it is satiety,
To become fistfuls of ashes; to have no pulse,
Or stringent skeleton. Death is man’s peace
At least an incommensurable release.”

Now open-windowed morning cries aloud,
Ubiquitous birds, the leisured airs of spring;
No smoking byways of the evening cloud
A suffering heart or hamper caroling;
No, not a rack is left, the blanket floats
Gayly [sic] among the silver beams and moats.

When a poet is too young to know better, flailing about in a number of styles, it’s easy to think that nothing will ever come of his failed experiments. The images and rhythms of the three lines beginning “Then I stretched,” however, might almost have leaked from Life Studies twenty years later. They are not a great distance from “Tockytock, tockytock/ clumped our Alpine, Edwardian cuckoo clock,/ slung with strangled, wooden game.” The Navajo blanket lines are the first in Lowell’s published work to render vividly, broodingly, details seen and absorbed—they’re not trying so hard to make poetry that they miss the gravel for the road. Even the brutish abstractions read like an annunciation of style yet ungrasped. The ellipsis that shortly follows is the first sign of a mannerism that became a tic, usually with an anti–Chicago Style four dots.

Beyond that, though, the poetry is the usual hurrah’s nest. “Moats” is likely a typo for “motes”—Hika perhaps could not afford a competent proofreader. (“Gayly,” a form not seen since the sixteenth century, is here probably another example of Lowell’s patrician indifference to spelling.) It’s not clear who speaks in the first stanza, which sounds like a passage lifted from a college term-paper. The phrase “life’s entelechies” might be the worst in Lowell’s poetry at Kenyon—but in his early poems he often sounds like a refugee from a freshman philosophy-course.

The clots of abstraction form Lowell’s point of departure more than his destination—a lot of young poets were writing similar things, and many continued in that vein into their dotage, if they continued at all. Compare, from the February issue of Hika the following year, “And childish peccadillos// Let us laugh out of our didactic house—/ The rident punishment one with reward/ For him bringing lack of manliness to light.” That was written by Peter Taylor, Lowell’s sometime roommate. (The editors had managed to attract poems for that June issue from Randall Jarrell, Richard Eberhart, and W. H. Auden.) Lowell learned to master his taste for the diaphanous divine
by leaving it out.

The clumsy phrasing; the bad pun on “folding,” whether purposeful or accidental; the wayward comma in the last line of the second stanza, making already difficult syntax impossible; the stolid, then bumbling phrasing—all show that Lowell’s ear had not yet been fully trained. Indeed, his Houdini meter, now locked into pentameter, now conveniently escaping it, reveals the strain the poet was willing to place on the poem. Despite the curdled rhetoric, in the early stanzas he proved capable of lines, even if unsatisfactory, no longer trying to out-argue Aquinas or out-Herod Herod. Still, has anyone ever cried out, “Now it is satiety,/ To become fistfuls of ashes; to have no pulse,/ Or stringent skeleton”? And is that “hamper caroling” a singing lunch-basket? No, just Lowell’s clumsy construction, saying the “smoking byways” can’t hinder or restrain the singing. “Cloud” is a verb.

The last of the uncollected poems appeared in the issue of Christmas 1939, a year after the publication of his first; but the poet now called himself simply Robert Lowell.

Cloisters

Felicitous the man of brawn,
Also the man
Leading with words the fascinated crowd,
Self-elevated, trained and his life made;
A saint at least, whose heart and soul have ploughed
Experience in measured lines,
And whose designs
Of windy images, conveyed
To type, are in immortal bronze arrayed.
What if Lucina jerked again
Out of man’s effete womb, some child
Bright with the experience, earnest
From sipping his aetherial origin;
Epicurean and an Hedonist,
Sheepishly he’d dispense
With books and music and the confidence
That bade him furnish sustenance
Flowers and amusement from himself,
Regardless of precarious health.
God of our fathers, what is man;
Whose body is a surly serving man
Indentured for a bread and water board
Unto a soul which can
No servant’s maintenance afford;
He must sustain a mobilizing brain,
Inward consumption; or, at best,
The gamesome, [sic] body muscle-binds his brain?
Spendthrifts have laid up faith in books
Expecting for life spent huge interest,
Life’s suction dessicates [sic] the hung[-]up works.

*Hika’s* editors could not afford a dictionary, either. As with so many of these early poems, Lowell was satisfied only when he brought the argument to a higher plane. Who is that felicitous “man/Leading with words,” equally well-suited (or merely as pleasing) as the “man of brawn”? You might think him a demagogue, an Antony bearing his elegy for Caesar; but his “heart and soul have ploughed/ Experience in measured lines” and his “windy images conveyed/ To type” have been preserved in “immortal bronze”—in other words, he’s a poet. (The idea derives from Horace’s phrase “aere perennius” [“more lasting than bronze”] in Ode III.xxx. Though that seemingly classical cliché may derive from a translation, I’ve found no evidence earlier than a 1760 “memento” honoring a geologist, “inscribed in immortal bronze.”) The argument judges the poet, no less than the warrior, fit to lead. Shelley’s unacknowledged legislator has been acknowledged after all.
Lucina was Juno, or occasionally Diana, in the aspect of the goddess of childbirth. The “effete womb” from which she plucks the new babe may be decadent or merely exhausted; but the child untimely ripped, in this “what-if” fantasy, is born with experience ready-made. (What child, however, was ever jerked from man’s womb? Only a metaphorical child from a metaphorical womb.) What if this tot—the ambiguities are fierce—would “dispense/ With books and music and the confidence/ That bade him furnish sustenance/ Flowers and amusement from himself”? “Sustenance/ Flowers,” though? Could Lowell have meant, not “dispense with,” but “dispense, with . . .,” the paired comma after “sustenance” also missing—so, “dispense . . ./ Flowers and amusement,” not “furnish sustenance/ Flowers”? The question about this Epicurean Hedonist or Hedonistic Epicurean remains unanswered—and has not even been allowed a question mark. This question without a question mark is followed by a question mark a long way from its question.

The result of another dark night of the soul, perhaps, the poem attempts to answer the unanswerable conundrum, more religious than philosophical, about the nature of man. Is this the old mind–body problem, writ in blood? (“The gamesome, [sic] body muscle-binds his brain.”) If so, it collapses into butchered syntax and amateur punctuation—there are a lot more “windy images” than “measured lines.” Roughly, the surly body longs to overthrow the brain it serves for a prisoner’s bread and water, an attack man must resist with “mobilizing brain” and “inward consumption.” That would presumably be the dominion of art and literature—yet those who waste their prodigal lives on books, hoping for compound interest, will be disappointed when life sucks those works dry. There must be something that makes this less than a nihilistic argument. In the appeal to the “God of our fathers,” perhaps the inklings of Lowell’s attraction to the Catholic Church lie embedded. Less than a year later, while studying for his MA at LSU, this “atheistic Calvinist” started receiving instruction in Catholicism; the following spring, rejecting the religion of his Episcopalian parents, he converted.

The poem collapses into the morass of ambiguity, the burden that those who have “laid up faith in books” are fools (“Life’s suction dessicates [sic] the hung-[] up works”). Perhaps we’re all doomed, learned or not—but are those hung-up works books hanging from chains in a medieval library or lambs on meat hooks in an abattoir? The poem’s ending is frustratingly opaque, Lowell’s argument perhaps that, instead of laying poetry aside, what is “laid up” must be brought down, what is “hung up” unhung for “inward consumption,” lest the brain be enslaved by the musclebound body. The consummation consumes all that went before.

Is this the old mind–body problem, writ in blood?

Lowell found his own manner, or
Given only these poems to judge, no one could have predicted how far Lowell’s talent would carry. They’re certainly no worse than other student poems published in Hika during these years—a very low bar, but another reminder that most young poets are perfectly terrible until . . . until suddenly they’re not. Jarrell’s poems in Hika in 1939 and Anthony Hecht’s less than a decade later are even worse. The latter’s sonnet opens with the lines, “Thicker than thieving schemes of death, my blood/ Dashes within its jumping socket; like/ Ten-penny nails my thrusting senses strike/ Toward their home.” After teenage years of mediocre verse, the arrival at twenty of Keats’s “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” was a revelation—and he continued to write wretched verse thereafter. Lowell found his own manner, or the first of his manners, by stumbling over himself.

We should not ignore his dedication or obsessiveness. When he didn’t simply discard this juvenilia, Lowell reworked it into poems of considerable power. “The Drunken Fisherman” in Land of Unlikeness, the almost wholesale recasting, as it were, of “Fishermen” in Hika, turned Robert Greene into John Webster. The opening that began as “We cast along the river, high/ Up to its own nativity” became “Wallowing in this bloody sty,/ I cast for fish that pleased my eye.” The lines

And only trammelled blood-mouthed trout,

That in straw-baskets thrashed about,

Converted wading into wealth:

We drew a currency of health

were quietly, breathtakingly, transformed into

Only the blood-mouthed rainbow trout

Rose to my bait. They flopped about

My canvas creel until the moth

Corrupted its unstable cloth.

The gains in clarity, suggestiveness, and dramatic tension—with a drumbeat tetrameter schooled on grace—have the heart of a Mozart who could write like Beethoven.

The final lines originally read,
Might we progress by flaunting bait?
Will progress further us with fate?
No, death’s enchanting process charms
The fisher, and the dozer storms.

The dozer must be a sleeper, not a bulldozer; but the makeshift ending is flustered and chaotic. The switch in “progress” from verb to noun (the different stress neatly laid into the tetrameter) might have looked cunning to an undergraduate, rather than sidling and weak-minded. The revision was by another imagination altogether:

I will catch Christ with a greased worm,
And when the Prince of Darkness stalks
My bloodstream to its Stygian term . . .

On water the Man-fisher walks.

In that final image, caught by the bait and now fish and Man-fisher both, Christ brings salvation. The idea is almost as remarkable as the execution. Lowell in his ambition has upended the Bible, but he was hardly the first to make Christ a fish. Among early Christians, His symbol was the Ichthys (“fish” in Koine Greek), the acronym of Iesous Christos, Theou Yios, Soter (Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior). The symbol is now seen most commonly on the back of a sedan or suv.

A more astonishing metamorphosis came in the final poem Lowell published in Hika in February 1940, his last semester before he graduated summa cum laude.

Sublime Feriam Sidera Vertice

In compensation for blind circumstance,
Nature charged brute devotions to the soul,
A patriot patrol,
To underwrite human designs, that man’s
Least action seem to take a righteous role.
Finding instead satanic partnership,
Nature put out a fall, an Ark, a Flood,
Like as a common good

Christ Jesus and his golden rule . . . the ship

Of state has learned Christ how to sail on blood.

Great Commonwealth, sail on and on and roll

On blood, on my free blood; my heart misgave,

Confessing itself a slave,

And Hegel proved State an invested soul,

Oh mortmain, patent and gaoler of the grave.

The title is a line from Horace, but “Sublime” for “Sublimi” is sublimely Lowell’s blunder. Such a schoolboy error is understandable; but for Lowell to write, after St. Mark’s, Harvard, and Kenyon, “Has learned Christ how to sail” is almost incomprehensible. The British spelling of “gaoler” is a minor, peacockish dandyism; and “Oh” should of course have been “O.”

Drastically revised, the poem returned in *Land of Unlikeness*:

*Leviathan*

When the ruined farmer knocked out Abel’s brains,

Our Father laid great cities on his soul,

A monolithic mole

To bury man and yet to praise him. Cain’s

Life-blood shall drown the Serpent in his Hole.

When Israel turned from God’s wise fellowship,

He sent us Canaan or Exile, Ark or Flood,

At last, for brotherhood,

Our Savior and His saving Heart. The Ship

Of State is asking Christ to walk on blood:
Great Commonwealth, roll onward, roll

On blood, and when the ocean monsters fling

Out the satanic sting,

Or like an octopus constrict my soul,

Go down with colors flying for the King.

The whole has been transformed—transubstantiated would not be inaccurate. If the final stanza is overdramatic and unconvincing, the clean, razor-sharp lines and savage touches elsewhere (Antony dragged from *Julius Caesar*, Christ walking on blood, and the whale by way of Isaiah and Melville) reveal a poetic mind that has come into its own. This chilling piece of work, the more so because Lowell has kept many of the rhymes or rhyme sounds intact, working gorgeous variations upon the originals, is a tour de force out of—who can say?—the family languor in him, or the devil of ambition. Much of Lowell’s genius can be X-rayed in such revisions. His severe and obsessive rewriting of poems in *Notebook, 1967–68* is never so convincing. A small number show the taint of genius, but the arc light has been extinguished. There he’s revising for revision’s sake—that, or he could no longer stand clear of what he’d written.

A poet like Lowell comes along once in a generation. The muddy waters from which he sprang and the clamor of influence in which he developed derive from cryptic causes. Should the circumstances come round again, the results might be quite different. Lowell might never have escaped the blowsy incompetence of his early work, might never have mastered his influences or bent the language to his design. Great poets, so furious and chancy in their progress, vanish as suddenly as they appear, leaving behind a devastated landscape never the same again.


This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 39 Number 8, on page 4

Copyright © 2021 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com