

The Morality of Form in the Poetry of Robert Lowell

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THAT Robert Lowell was always interested in formal experiment we may argue from the evidence of the poems. What I would like to suggest here is that this interest is not only a reflection of formal inventiveness, but of the integrity of the moral experience explored. Thus the knotted and syntactically confusing forms of the early poems tell us a great deal about the quality of the religious vision involved; the free verse looseness of *Life Studies* reflects the poet's attempt to free himself from rigid moral categories; and the fragmentary, casual structure of *Notebook* enacts, as it were, the moral, political and cultural fragmentation that is the book's theme. Lowell's achievement has been to articulate a sense of moral and political confusion, and to render that confusion as a richness and complexity of immediately-felt experience, creating poetry out of chaos without imposing an artificial notion of order. Of course, the earlier poems do attempt to impose a Catholic view of civilisation upon disorder, and the poems from *Notebook* onwards do seem to have come dangerously close to disintegration in their attempt to render the absence of such holistic structures. But I would want to claim that these particular failures merely serve to emphasize the nature of Lowell's real accomplishment, which we may see most acutely in the poet's response to form in certain poems from *Life Studies*, from *For The Union Dead* and *Near The Ocean*.

That certain of the poems in Part Three of *Life Studies* were "originally written in prose" and then "put into verse"¹ would hardly surprise many readers. In "My Last Afternoon With Uncle Devereux Winslow," for instance,

whole passages have a leisurely, discursive quality that lacks even the normal tension of well-written prose:

I was five and a half.
 My formal pearly grey shorts
 had been worn for three minutes.
 My perfection was the Olympian
 poise of my models in the imperishable autumn
 display windows
 of Rogers Peet's boys' store below the State House
 in Boston. Distorted drops of water
 pinpricked my face in the basin's mirror.
 I was a stuffed toucan
 with a bibulous, multicoloured beak.

It is a flat, prosaic language, lacking the syntactical complexity and energy of the earlier poems, just as it lacks their damaging ambiguity. The poetic effect — if it can be said to generate one — stems from the occasional use of internal rhyme and from the random accumulation of assorted information: almost a collage of the poet's memories of childhood. Unfortunately, this collage does not create any continuous tension, so that even when — as at the end of "My Last Afternoon With Uncle Devereux Winslow" — figurative language suggests an organising metaphor for the whole experience described in the poem, so slackly has the poem worked towards its conclusion that we cannot feel that any true knowledge, any living sense of experience, has been transmitted. Not only does there appear to be no poetic logic behind the choice of line lengths, or behind the random selection of detail presumably intended to be representative of whatever effect the poems are working towards; not only does the technique fail utterly to generate any sense of moral urgency or significance; but the very flatness of the language leaves one with a strong suspicion that Lowell has merely sought to make verses out of his prose material simply in order to have sufficient poems to fill a volume.

The interesting point about *Life Studies*, however, is not that Lowell seems to have made public his own worksheets, but that out of these experiments, perhaps because of them, he has been able to write a handful of what I judge

to be his finest poems. There seems to me to be no doubt that with "Waking In The Blue," "Memories Of West Street And Lepke," "Man And Wife" and "To Speak Of The Woe That Is In Marriage" Lowell established himself as the major American poet writing in English since the war, and that this achievement has come — at least in part — out of the conflict between formalism and free verse: a technical conflict reflecting the moral consciousness.

In a poem such as "Waking In The Blue," one has the direct evocation of time and place that is characteristic of the best of Lowell. Like all great lyric poets, he is at his best when isolating the particularity of some momentary experience, whatever the wider significances of that experience may be. To achieve this, Lowell enters directly into the situations being evoked:

The night attendant, a B.U. sophomore,
rouses from the mare's-nest of his drowsy head
propped on *The Meaning of Meaning*.

He brings life and startling reality into these situations in his highly charged emotional language:

Azure day
makes my agonized blue window bleaker.
Crows maunder on the petrified fairway.
Absence. My heart grows tense
as though a harpoon were sparring for the kill.
(This is the house for the "mentally ill.")

Coming after the combined effect of "agonized," "bleaker," "maunder," "petrified," "Absence!" "My heart grows tense" and "sparring for the kill," the impact of the last line is immeasurably increased by the dead-fall of the rhyme, a rhyme which becomes almost a technical moral judgment in the way that it disturbs our consciousness after the almost prosaic "(This is the house for the . . .)" After the "drowsy" opening, with what we can now see as an ironic play on "*The Meaning of Meaning*," the rhyme serves to change completely the course of our moral thinking, awakening us to the fact that language is being used to force home some significant judgment.

But what is that judgment? And is it possible to generalise from the achievement of "Waking In The Blue"? The judgment is, I believe, a matter of the value of a particular use of language, and in the poems we are discussing the moral effect of that use is common. Just as in "Waking In The Blue," the effect of the language is to generate a sense of a life lived. In "Memories Of West Street And Lepke," for instance, the opening lines —

Only teaching on Tuesdays, book-worming
in pyjamas fresh from the washer each morning,
I hog a whole house on Boston's
"hardly passionate Marlborough Street,"
where even the man
scavenging filth in the back alley trash cans,
has two children, a beach wagon, a helpmate,
and is a "young Republican"

— despite their highly personal particularity to one life, do create a sense of human significance that is relevant to the political context Lowell has been increasingly concerned with. In other words, by organising the details of one life, Lowell is able to give a sense of life as it is lived now in major urban conurbations throughout the world. What he is doing, in fact, is to give significance to human experience by giving it to the experience of one particular human. In these poems of Lowell's, so powerful are the particular details, so emotionally and morally pregnant the epiphanies evoked, that the very intensity of the poetic rendering becomes a moral judgment. In Leavis's sense, writing as serious as this is moral by definition. It is moral in the way that technique, such as rhyme, is used for emphasis:

no agonizing reappraisal
jarred his concentration on the electric chair —
hanging like an oasis in his air
of lost connections

It is moral in its enriching use of ambiguities such as "jarred" and "lost connections;" and above all it is moral in the way that the language does not indulge in the rhetorical generalisations that characterised Lowell's earlier

poems of denunciation. Language as controlled as that in the best poems of *Life Studies* is, of itself, a moral value: as an articulation of both irony and forgiving despair, the very fact of the language, of the poem, becomes an act of ordered response to extremes of experience.

"To Speak Of The Woe That Is In Marriage" perhaps best illustrates what I am trying to say. With its use of rhyme — "disputes/prostitutes" — the poem achieves a slightly humorous irony that remains short of bitterness, even in the choice of words such as "Screwball". All the indignation is salved by a tender affection that is obvious in the possessiveness of the line: "This Screwball might kill his wife, then take the pledge." And again, "swaggering home at five" retains a despairing affection that makes the poem far more powerful than any "old-fashioned tirade" could possibly be, an affection of beautifully poised ridicule that finally stumbles into horror in the last lines of the poem:

Gored by the climacteric of his want,
he stalls above me like an elephant.

This is a use of absurdist humour deeply moving in its figuration of the ludicrous "woe that is in marriage." The poem, I believe, illustrates Lowell's finest qualities, and in the very opening lines —

The hot night makes us keep our bedroom windows open.
Our magnolia blossoms. Life begins to happen

— the nature of Lowell's achievement may be seen pulsating with the energy of his poetic line. In many of Lowell's best poems we really do feel that "Life begins to happen," and it is a "life" that is centrally significant to the cultural, psychological and political consciousness of our time, as can be seen in the volumes *For The Union Dead* and *Near The Ocean*.

When Lowell says "Remember" —

Remember? We sat on a slab of rock.
From this distance in time
it seems the color
of iris, rotting and turning purpler
("Water")

and

My old flame, my wife!
Remember our lists of birds?
(“The Old Flame”)

— his recollection could be that of sentimentality, or the more profound Platonic *Recollection* which, as Richard Kuhns says,

. . . makes recollections into a commonly available cosmos, much as the contemplation described by Plato opens up the eternal realm of forms to the individual mind. Plato was the first to state this power of art: it is an instrument of reconciliation, uniting the individual in his privacy with communal reality Art establishes the reality of the past by enabling the individual to internalize and discover as his own all that other persons have undergone and witnessed. The work of art is the embodiment of the awareness of others, once but private recollections, now public legacy. The shareability of art works establishes a set of public entities, a related order of events for everyone to encounter and to know.²

The process by which “private recollections” become “public legacy” is a subject for an essay in philosophy, not literary criticism, and all that I can do here is assert and attempt to illustrate my belief that this is in fact what happens in *For The Union Dead*. *For The Union Dead* establishes a community of response in its recollections of a particular experience, and even where that experience is perhaps sentimental — as in “New York 1962: “Fragment” — so powerful is the overall impression of an “unforgivable landscape” (“The Mouth of the Hudson”) impinging upon one consciousness that we are prepared to accept sentimentality as part of what Kuhns calls elsewhere the “structure of experience.”

In discussing *Life Studies*, I noted that part of the technique seemed to be the accumulation of detail, detail presumably intended to have significance for the total meaning of particular poems. *For The Union Dead* similarly accumulates detail, its significance being the sense of a total culture:

Across the river,
ledges of suburban factories tan

in the sulphur-yellow sun
of the unforgivable landscape.
("The Mouth of the Hudson")

With exact particularity, this is the landscape of Maine:

It was a Maine lobster town —
each morning boatloads of hands
pushed off for granite
quarries on the islands,
and left dozens of bleak
white frame houses stuck
like oyster shells
on a hill of rock
("Water")

And of the Hudson:

The ice ticks seaward like a clock.
A Negro toasts
wheat-seeds over the coke-fumes
of a punctured barrel.
Chemical air
sweeps in from New Jersey,
and smells of coffee.
("The Mouth of the Hudson")

Of the parks of America's great cities:

Out on the street,
two cops on horseback clop through the April rain
to check the parking meter violations —
their oilskins yellow as forsythia.
("The Drinker")

Of the architectural inhumanity of Washington —

The stiff spokes of this wheel
touch the sore spots of the earth
("July in Washington")

— where the "elect . . . come . . . bright as dimes/and die
dishevelled and soft." There is even the conscious pres-
ence of the Continent to America's south, with all its
concealed threat to political stability:

In my room at the Hotel Continental
a thousand miles from nowhere,
I heard
the bulky, beefy breathing of the herds.
("Buenos Aires")

In almost every poem, America and the perceiving 'I' meet,
the sensibility of the poet expressed in the quality of that
meeting:

Now the midwinter grind
 is on me, New York
 drills through my nerves,
 as I walk
 the chewed-up streets.

(“Middle Age”)

It is the sense of place that is quite overwhelming in Lowell’s poetry; but more than that, in the careful choice of detail to create that sense, it is a moral response far more subtle and deeply pondered than the denunciations of, say, Boston in *Lord Weary’s Castle*. Perhaps “The Mouth of the Hudson” can illustrate what I mean.

In this poem, we are actually presented with the “unforgivable landscape,” for it is out of the particular details that the impression of an “unforgivable” landscape arises — a landscape that is not only “unforgivable” because of its physical ugliness, but also morally “unforgivable.” The “condemned freight-trains” “jolt and jar/and junk” the “single man” who “stands like a bird-watcher” in this waste that has turned even the air “Chemical” with “coke-fumes . . . smells of coffee” and “sulphur.” In what is almost a gesture of despair,

His eyes drop,
 and he drifts with the wild ice
 ticking seaward down the Hudson,
 like the blank sides of a jig-saw puzzle.

Both literally and figuratively “He has trouble with his balance,” unable to “discover America” in the simple mathematical calculation of the nation’s totality, and dissolved almost into the blankness of the inexplicable “jig-saw puzzle.” Like the Negro toasting his “wheat-seeds over the coke-fumes/of a punctured barrel,” he is helpless before the movement of ice and “Chemical air,” his existence flatly reduced to little more than an element in the “unforgivable landscape” that is destroying him.

A major achievement of *For The Union Dead* lies simply in its successful “recollection” of significant detail, the moral judgment of that detail being implicit in its very selection. In the title-poem, the most important poem in

the collection, the poet's intelligence is operating much more explicitly. "For The Union Dead" works through a process of historical and emotional juxtaposition. The poet's memory of his own childhood —

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.

— is measured against the adult consciousness:

My hand draws back. I often sigh still
for the dark downward and vegetating kingdom
of the fish and reptile,

and contemporary reality:

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.

Similarly, the tragic waste of the Civil War —

Two months after marching through Boston,
half the regiment was dead;
at the dedication,
William James could almost hear the bronze Negroes
breathe.

— is heightened by the political problems of the present:

Their monument sticks like a fishbone
in the city's throat,

a situation in which the Colonel who "rejoices in man's lovely, /peculiar power to choose life and die" and "cannot bend his back" is as much of an inconvenience dead and honoured as he would have been alive.

But even the monument, "propped by a plank splint against the garage's earthquake," has no permanence, for however indestructible the form — which it is not in any case — it is still subject to the vagaries of changing historical interpretation, an interpretation that increases in sentimentality as it moves further away from the truth:

The stone statues of the abstract Union Soldier
grow slimmer and younger each year —
wasp-wasted, they doze over muskets
and muse through their sideburns

In the final stanzas of the poem, the moral significance of all of this is brought together in a complex of historical and emotional reference. Now, in contemporary Boston, "The ditch is nearer" — an echo of the "yellow dinosaur steamshovels" of the earlier stanzas — and the manner in which we abuse the monuments of war in our frantic obsession with material wealth is emphasised in a startling image:

on Boyleston Street, a commercial photograph
shows Hiroshima boiling
over a Mosler Safe, the 'Rock of Ages'
that survived the blast.

This image suggests Lowell's basic pessimism in the face of history. In a society which cannot make the necessary connections between the dead Negro soldiers of the Civil War and the "drained faces of Negro school-children" that the poet sees on his television screen, "The ditch" really is nearer:

The Aquarium is gone. Everywhere,
giant finned cars nose forward like fish;
a savage servility
slides by on grease.

It is a "ditch" that has strong echoes of Yeats's beast. The recurring imagery of the Aquarium and the "dark downward and vegetating kingdom/of the fish and reptile" certainly works towards an atmosphere of corruption and almost Surreal nightmare. But it is a nightmare that is perfectly and brilliantly under control, and this must, I think, be a major factor in the poem's moral achievement. The spare, elegant movement of the stanzas, the clear, accurate descriptiveness of the language, the variation of line lengths between stanzas — all these enable the poet to use images and juxtapositions, such as the "Hiroshima" and "Mosler Safe" contrast, that might otherwise have the rhetorical violence of Lowell's earlier poems. Form is perfectly suited to enact the meaning, as in this:

Their monument sticks like a fishbone
in the city's throat.
Its Colonel is as lean
as a compass-needle,

where the variation from a previously long line abruptly describes the "lean" Colonel and the enjambment "fishbone in the city's throat" forces home the metaphor; and this:

When I crouch to my television set,
the drained faces of Negro school-children rise like balloons,

with its rising, upward movement towards the abrupt, figurative significance of the final stanza. It is a form whose very gracefulness is almost representative of New England liberalism, and by virtue of its quiet arrangement of horror, articulates a vision of contemporary American society that has the breadth of a much larger-scale work.

If the form of *For The Union Dead* arises out of Lowell's experiments in *Life Studies*, that of the most powerful poems in *Near The Ocean* most certainly does not. As Lowell himself said:

. . . Marvell's eight-line stanza . . . hummed in my mind
summer till fall . . . all summer, as I say, the steady,
hypnotic couplet beat followed me like a dog.³

Marvell, in fact, is the model for the most important poems in the volume, "Waking Early Sunday Morning," "Fourth of July in Maine" and "Near The Ocean," and it is a model that should be no surprise when one thinks of Lowell's New England and Harvard background.

Each of these three poems testifies to the fundamental pessimism of Lowell's vision of reality. In "Waking Early Sunday Morning," it is the "bone-crushing waterfall" of a positivist reality that the creative urge must reckon with. And yet, in the world Lowell sees of "Wars" and "chance/assassinations," what can be achieved by creativity?

Sing softer! But what if a new
diminuendo brings no true
tenderness, only restlessness,
excess, the hunger for success.

Each day God "shines through darker glass," and the recognition of political realities — "Hammering military splendor/top-heavy Goliath in full armor" — seems to lead inevitably to the pessimism of the final stanza:

Pity the planet, all joy gone
from this sweet volcanic cone.

In "Fourth of July in Maine," the political nature of despair is widened into personal anguish, an anguish — "We turn/our backs, and feel the whiskey burn" — that recognises the loss of a pastoral, Eden-like innocence:

Far off that time of gentleness,
when man, still licensed to increase,
unfallen and unmated, heard
only the uncreated Word.

This is an innocence whose very vulnerability is highlighted in the description of the poet's daughter's guinea pigs:

few animals will let them live,
and only a vegetarian God
could look on them and call them good.

And finally, in "Near The Ocean" itself, a highly Freudian perception of the nature of human love is expressed in the "Monster" and "Betrayals!" where themes of the legends of Perseus and the Gorgon, and Clytemnestra, Aegisthus and Orestes, suggest a view of sexual relations that is subsequently enacted throughout time in the rising hysteria of:

Is it this shore? Their eyes worn white
as moons from hitting bottom? Night,
the sandfleas scissoring their feet,
and sandbed cooling to concrete,
one borrowed blanket, lights of cars
shining down at them like stars? . . .
Sand built the lost Atlantis . . . sand,
Atlantic ocean, condoms, sand.

Thus is a vision of our "monotonous sublime" that is despairing indeed. And yet this is not all that Lowell has known and articulated. In these poems, perhaps for the first time in his work, there is a warm and positive generosity towards experience, a tone which probably represents the only hope we have.

In "Waking Early Sunday Morning," for instance, despite the overwhelming nature of determinist reality there is the passionate recognition of the moments of stillness —

no rainbow smashing a dry fly
in the white run is free as I

— of hope,

O that the spirit could remain
tinged but untarnished by its strain!

— and of creativity,

O to break loose. All life's grandeur
is something with a girl in summer

And in the final stanza, the despair itself is warm and pitying:

Pity the planet, all joy gone
from this sweet volcanic cone.

In its very celebration — “joy” and “sweet” — this note asserts the significance of momentary human creativity. Again, in “Fourth of July in Maine,” whatever the nature of political life, the older, liberal values are still recollected:

This white Colonial frame house,
willed downward, Dear, from you to us,
still matters.

And “If memory is genius,” we are free to hope for something permanent and valuable in the process of generation, the Yeatsian assertion of value:

Blue-ribboned, blue-jeaned, named for you,
our daughter cartwheels on the blue,
may your proportion strengthen her
to live through the millennial year
Two Thousand, and like you possess
friends, independence, and a house,
herself God's plenty, mistress of
your tireless sedentary love.

Even “Near The Ocean,” the most pessimistic of all three of these poems, is only pessimistic in so far as it recognises the pain of true knowledge. The poem accepts the nature of human love, or at least a highly Freudian conception of that nature, but yet asserts, in its final stanza, that love, regardless, has a positive significance, and that “A hand, your hand,” may be the only real way to establish some kind of order in a politically and morally chaotic world:

Sleep, sleep. The ocean, grinding stones,
 can only speak the present tense;
 nothing will age, nothing will last,
 or take corruption from the past.
 A hand, your hand then! I'm afraid
 to touch the crisp hair on your head —
 Monster loved for what you are,
 till time, that buries us, lay bare.

Reality, "loved for what you are," is perhaps the most positive, certainly the most tender line this poet of contemporary *angst* ever wrote.

If *For The Union Dead* establishes a context by "uniting the individual in his privacy with communal reality," *Near The Ocean* shows the poet sufficiently distanced from his own private realities to turn the process of *Recollection* into an objective, prophetic judgment. Love and knowledge have been earned at enormous cost, as we see from the volumes prior to *Near The Ocean*, but given the fact of this knowledge, the poet's sense of his own responsibility now encourages him to seek some more generally public statement. And it is the nature of Lowell's form that enables him to achieve the necessary objectivity to make this statement.

The poems discussed from *Near The Ocean* "sing of peace/and preach despair" ("Waking Early Sunday Morning"), and this is the key to Lowell's achievement. It is in the content of the poems that he preached despair, the despair being the recognition of realities. It is in the form that he "sings."

Lowell's use of form in these poems is, of itself, a positive value. Given all the despair of the political and psychological vision, the very fact that a major poet chose to write in such a traditionally poetic form — especially after all the developments of *Life Studies* and *For The Union Dead* — asserts a belief in at least one kind of order. It is an order as fragile as the form of the poems themselves; but equally, just as the liberal and pastoral values mourned in "Waking Early Sunday Morning" and "Fourth of July in Maine" are a permanent measure of what man can

achieve, so the grace and dignity of Lowell's verse reminds us that such order is possible. The poems are resonant with the constant music of rhyme and assonance — "stone/bone" "begun/run" "Fierce/fireless" "fall/small/small" —, with the dead-fall of beautifully modulated line endings — "give/us this day the warmth to live" — and with the "steady, hypnotic" beat of Marvell's couplet, that "beat" which had "hummed in my mind summer till fall." We can see, I believe, in the very quality of Lowell's poetic texture his belief that "You've got to remain complicatedly civilised and organised to keep your humanity under the pressures of our various governments."⁴ It is that "complicatedly civilised and organised . . . humanity" that I find in Lowell's poems, a humanity tentatively and beautifully rendered in the technical organisation.

NOTES

¹Review 8 (August 1963), 37.

²Richard Kuhns, *Structures of Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 111.

³Review 26 (Summer 1971), 12.

⁴Review 8 (August 1963), 40.