

# Robert Lowell: Payment Gat He Nane

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Thomas Vogler

thy mind  
Shall be a mansion for all lovely form,  
Thy memory be as a dwelling-place  
For all sweet sounds and harmonies  
—Wordsworth

Children, the raging memory drools  
Over the glory of past pools  
—Lowell

The place to begin is with the *Aeneid*. Not because Lowell started reading the classics after his second year at Harvard, or because his poems are full of classical allusions and “imitations” of Vergil, although these facts are part of the picture. The reason for my starting there is that Vergil, in creating Aeneas, is so remarkably close to Lowell’s own position both as man in history and as artist. Much of the Vergilian melancholy is due to his feeling of the movement of Roman history: the loss of the heroic past and the stature of the early Romans, the growing complexity and importance of the state and the law, limiting the scope of individual action and importance. The *Aeneid* itself is almost an example, a commissioned panegyric which manages, because of Vergil’s greatness, not to be only that. One could elaborate more, but the point should be clear to a reader of Lowell who has experienced his nostalgia for the old order—the period of this country’s greatness, and his own family’s. Vergil was in the same kind of transitional state that Lowell is in, with the melancholy feeling that history is over, that we are marking time waiting for some new development which may or may not be desirable—the end of everything, or a totally new beginning. This spirit was common in England in the nineteenth century, while America was still potentially a new world. It has hit America even harder in the twentieth century, because we are so close to our own “heroic” past, so aware of the nature of the change without being able to understand it. In the twenties Hart Crane set out to become the “Vergil of the new world,” only to learn that the world was no longer new and to become, ironically, even more Vergilian in the process of discovery. In many ways, Lowell begins *Life Studies* (1959) at a point Crane reached only in “The Tunnel” section of *The Bridge*: the explicit recognition that an older mode of vision produced only illusion or madness. But even before *Life Studies*, with its major change in direction, he had struck the note of experience as a diminished thing—first, as a spiritual phenomenon, where the failure or

inability of man's soul to resemble God is stressed (*Land of Unlikeness*), but increasingly in *Lord Weary's Castle* and *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*, as an historical and imaginative failure to discover a way of coping with day-to-day experience. The head-quotes to *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* suggest the basic attitude:

“Ah, love let us be true  
To one another! for the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams . . .”  
(Dover Beach)

“Morals are the memory of success that no  
longer succeeds.”  
(In the American Grain)

It is a peculiar combination of a state, a point in history, and an *awareness* of that state. “Before us” is a land of dreams, as incomprehensible as the figures on Aeneas' shield were to him. Behind, and available only as a bitter memory, is the success that failed. It is the dilemma of “no longer and not yet.”

It must be emphasized that this is a crisis of attitude, of the spirit, in which what is needed is not action, not a doing, but the very basis of action itself, a sustaining attitude of mind. In Aeneas' famous speech to his men (I, 11. 198-207), the physical crisis is over; the storm is over, the men are grouped on shore, and Aeneas is urging them to take heart. The only danger now is one of despondency and despair. In Vergil's Homeric source (*Odyssey*, 12) Odysseus is speaking to his men just before they encounter Skyla and Kharybdis; he assigns the tiller to one, oars to the others, and takes up his armour and two spears even though Kirke had told him that fighting was useless. The whole emphasis is on getting through one more adventure alive. Aeneas, past the state of physical danger, has a different problem and a different need:

*Forsan et haec olim meminisse juvabit*  
(Some day perhaps remembering this too will be a pleasure)

The key words are “remembering” and “pleasure”; and the only hope for Aeneas, who has lost a world into the past, is to find a way of remembering with pleasure. His position is comparable to Vergil's, and the solution is the same. Or, rather, Vergil gives to Aeneas the solution he is trying to work out for himself in the poem, which must memorialize the history of Rome and in so doing be a source of pleasure, both preserving the memory and giving it form. Ideally the loss will be replaced by a gain, for the memory can become more pure, more permanent, somehow better than the original experience itself. It will be memory embodied in and preserved through art:

The sufferings of the Trojans, as Aeneas sees them in Carthage, have become fixed in art, literally: they are paintings. And it is here first, Vergil tells us, that Aeneas began to hope for a kind of salvation.

Here he can look back on his own losses, and see them as made beautiful and given universal meaning because universal art has transfigured them . . . The images in Carthage make Aeneas feel Priam's death not less deeply, but more. At the same time they are a redemption of past suffering, partly because they remove one element of the nightmare: final obscurity and namelessness, partly because they mean that we have found a form in which we can see suffering itself clearly. The brightness of the image and the power of pleasurable vision it confers, consoles for the pain of what it represents.<sup>1</sup>

Parry's apt description of Aeneas before the images in Carthage is closely paralleled by Lowell's description of his hope for the potential of art:

Major Mordecai Myer's portrait has been mislaid past finding, but out of my memories I often come on it in the setting of our Revere Street house, a setting now fixed in the mind, where it survives all the distortions of fantasy, all the blank befogging of forgetfulness. There, the vast number of remembered *things* remains rocklike. Each is in its place, each has its function, its history, its drama. There, all is preserved by that motherly care that one either ignored or resented in his youth. The things and their owners come back urgent with life and meaning—because finished, they are enduring and perfect.<sup>2</sup>

It is no accident that the portrait is "mislaid past finding," and that the pictures in Carthage are not to be found either. In both cases the authors are introducing ideal examples of the kind of work they are trying to create. Vergil is giving Aeneas precisely the kind of consolation he himself needs as a man, and is at the same time trying to convince himself of the nature and value of art. This is not "art" in a loose sense, but a precisely defined, functional art: monumental and public, dealing with people and actions in the past, preserving our memory of them and, most important of all, ordering our emotions towards them. The real lesson Aeneas must learn is to accept time and the loss it brings, preserving the past in memory (private, emotional), while establishing a continuity between past and future by founding a new Troy in the state of Rome (public, artistic). The values which are minimized in this system are the personal, emotional and temporal; those which are maximized are the public, ordered and eternal. Palinurus is overjoyed to learn that the loss of his body, his physical existence in time, is not annihilation in this world, but a giving up of one mode of existence for another:

"But hear! Note well! Be solaced, injured soul!  
A nearby people, frightened by signs from heaven  
all up and down their land, will bury your bones,  
raise you a mound, do office for the dead,  
and name that spot 'Palinurus' for all time."  
These words resolved his care; for a time he ceased  
to grieve, in joy that earth should bear his name.<sup>3</sup>

Palinurus, like Lowell's Colonel Shaw, gave up his life for the public good ("*Relinquant omnia servare rem publicam.*") and for that sacrifice received his memorial. He had direct assurance that the sacrifice was worth his while; but the poem, by less direct and miraculous means, must succeed in giving those who go on living the same assurance. Palinurus is a purely symbolic instance, the single sacrificial death, the perfect Roman reward. But can Aeneas, can Vergil, move from his case to theirs? "Someday perhaps these things too will be pleasant to think back on" is the lesson they must learn, and it is a present-tense lesson, to bear suffering *now* because of the anticipation of a *future* resolution; to be confident that experience will become memory, and memory will be good because controlled, ordered, finished, perfected. More generally, the incoherence of present experience can only be borne if there is some assurance that, at some point, it will become ordered as we or others look back; if we have faith that it has an intellectual and moral structure that will endure and be recognized.

Much of the structure of the *Aeneid* can be seen as a poetic confirmation of the validity and dependability of this system. The trick is to show that it works emotionally, in the present tense, as in the famous *lacrimae rerum* passage:

"What place, Achates, now," he said,  
"what land does not know all we suffered?  
See: Priam! Here too the brave have their reward!  
The world has tears; man's lot does touch the heart.  
Put off your fears: our story will save us yet!"

Aeneas is looking at the series of frescoes depicting the Trojan war, whose fame had already gone round the world. If it works so quickly for the dead Trojans, it will surely work for me muses Aeneas—and the reader, holding the *Aeneid* in hand, is in fact in the presence of Aeneas' monument. If suffering is embodied in art, the tears we weep become purified, depersonalized, tears in the nature of things rather than tears for a personal loss.

Even more touching for Vergil, because their service is so slight that they verge on anonymity, are the rewards of Nisus and Euryalus. They staked their lives on the system, undertaking a dangerous mission from which they would return famous for success or from which they would never return:

O blessed pair! If power lies in my song,  
no day shall steal you from the hearts of men,  
long as Capitol Rock shall house the sons  
of Aeneas, and Father Rome shall rule the world.

This is not so much a boast as a pledge, a dedication of his art as "service" to them as well as to the state. Everyone is dependent upon the poetic monument, in one of its forms, for a survival-in-transcendence, a continuity of existence. I hope it is clear that by calling Vergil's structure a "system" I am not belittling it in any way, but rather calling attention to his careful attempts to show us that it works and how it works. Aeneas must have the certainty of memorialization, which brings order and perspective, as adequate recompense for his experience

of life, which is confused and painful. What we do *not* see, however, is that it works for Vergil in the writing of his poem, the encounter with his own experience, and this is the peculiarly modern question, the need which causes the modern poet to enter his poem in some recognizable way.<sup>4</sup>

Wordsworth confirms his own version of the memorialization of experience in *Tintern Abbey*, discovering that recollection in tranquility is “adequate recompense” for the loss of the earlier self and its experience. But Wordsworth kept asking the question, even after 1798 and *Tintern Abbey*, still looking for new poetic confirmations. It is as if the poet must *be* Aeneas to know that the system really works, and to show that it works:

And when they dragged your retching flesh,  
Your trembling hands that night through Baltimore—  
That last night on the ballot rounds, did you  
Shaking, did you deny the ticket, Poe?<sup>5</sup>

After all was said done, Crane is asking, were *you* satisfied, did it work for *you*? It is not enough to create an Aeneas out of one’s own mind and need, and to show that it worked for him. The poet must become Aeneas, the center of the work, and satisfy himself. And not only himself, for then poetry might be a private illusion. “Sure a poet is a sage;/A humanist, physician to all men,” exclaimed Keats (*Fall of Hyperion*) in his attempt to convince himself that poetry was a good thing and that he was a poet. Vergil is as close to being a sage, humanist and physician to all men as any poet; he has fulfilled Nisus’ and Euryalus’ expectation of reward. But what of Euryalus’ mother?

half mad, she ran toward walls  
and battle line, heedless of men, of spears,  
of danger, and filled all heaven with her cries:  
“Do I see you thus, Euryalus? Thus you ease  
the last days of my life? Heartless, to leave  
me alone, to go and face dangers so great  
and give your mother no chance for one last word!  
In a foreign land you lie a feast for dogs  
and Latin birds. Your mother, I never led  
your funeral, closed your eyes, or washed your wounds,  
or covered you with the coat that, night and day,  
I hurried to finish weaving, to calm my cares.  
Where shall I turn? What spot now holds your body,  
your poor, torn flesh? Is this all you bring back,  
son, to your mother?”

Her pathos is not only that she must go on living after losing her only son, but that she is denied even her pitiful rites of memorializing—closing the eyes, washing, wrapping, burying—the ritual gestures that would bring some comfort and order to the experience. Instead, the body is lost and mutilated, like the life and experience itself, until Vergil resurrects them in their eternal place in the *Aeneid*.

It is a superb gesture; Vergil is giving Euryalus more than she could ever have given him. But he is giving her nothing. Her words ring out in the *Aeneid* as those of his father do in Lowell's *Terminal Days at Beverly Farms*: "I feel awful." We hear her cries across the same gap that separates Lowell's father from him and from us, for theirs is suffering that art must include but cannot transform.

But perhaps this is only a time problem. If the mother were in a position to read the poem, to know the future reward as Palinurus does, the poem might work its effect. This is a very simple-minded way to put it, but such a question might well have been in Vergil's mind as he finished the end of Book Six. There the sweeping survey of Roman history, which for Aeneas is in the future, firing his soul with love of fame to come, is for Vergil's audience in the past, assuring them by a different logic of the certainty of their own future fame. After this heroic cavalcade files past, Aeneas asks only one question: who is the anonymous young man who walks in darkness? Anchises answers tearfully:

Seek not to know your people's vastest grief!  
The world will see him—only that, for Fate  
will grant no more. . . .  
Poor boy! If you should break the bars of fate,  
you'll be Marcellus. Bring lilies! Fill my hands!  
I'll scatter scarlet blooms: so much, at least,  
I'll give a grandson's ghost, and do my office,  
though vain.

The man described, Marcellus, was the son of Octavia, sister of Augustus, who adopted him in 25 B.C. He married Julia, the Emperor's daughter, and died at the age of 20 in 23 B.C. There is a legend that Octavia fainted from grief when she heard Vergil read these lines (Donatus, *Life of Vergil*, 32). The inclusion of Marcellus is a puzzling gesture, the most direct and open contact between the poem about an epic past and the 'now' that the poem was to have significance for. Did Vergil hope to do for Octavia what he could not do for Euryalus' mother? If so, did he fail, because Octavia was shattered rather than soothed by the inclusion? Or was the failure Octavia's, a lacking of the appropriate aesthetic response? These are silly questions if literal answers are looked for, but serious ones if they help illuminate this passage as a crisis in the poem. "Fate," according to Anchises, has given Marcellus nothing but a promise which was taken away, leaving suffering, emptiness and bewilderment. What can the poet do, except rehearse the misery in light of what could have been yet never will be? Aeneas' tears before the frescoes of Troy are for the mixed glory and tragedy of the Trojans and their fate. The Marcellus episode suggests the possibility that the Trojans were not made perfect in art, but were fulfilled in life itself. Their "fate" had meaning for them *then*, and they did not need to anticipate looking back with pleasure to make experience bearable. The poet cannot give his subject an order or significance it did not already have in potential, for fate—or life—must itself be meaningful before art can be meaningful. To look back on Marcellus is to lose him, because he was not fulfilled in life. There is nothing art can do in this case but offer lilies "all to no purpose" as symbols of mourning for a missed life. In

the one place where the *Aeneid* might have had direct or personal emotional relevance to its intended audience, the poet admits that he can do nothing. I am, no doubt, exaggerating the significance of this passage for a reading of the *Aeneid*. But the point that will emerge, from a close reading of Lowell, is that he is looking for precisely this kind of problematic contact between art in all its forms and life. Lowell's poetry is an ongoing test of the possibilities of art as memory—not *Mneme*, the cosmic memory associated with Calliope the muse of epic poetry, but the personal memory of a real past. Vergil has Anchises tell Aeneas: "My son, do not probe into the sorrows of your kin." But that is precisely the area of probing that Lowell is growing towards in his earlier poetry and totally involved with in *Life Studies*.

What is lost or rejected in such poetry is the possibility of inspired vision or revealed truth, either of history in epic or of God in religious poetry. Lowell's word for this new poetry is "prose," because it must speak the language of comprehensible reality.<sup>6</sup> Frost's poetry can be "prose" in this sense ("In Frost you feel that's just what the farmers and so on were like. It has the virtue of a photograph but all the finish of art.") while Ford's prose can be "poetry." In the *Paris Review* interview, he says of modern poets:

Yet the writing seems divorced from culture somehow. It's become too much something specialized that can't handle much experience. It's become a craft, purely a craft, and there must be some breakthrough back into life . . . prose is less cut off from life than poetry is.

One way of describing Lowell's goal would be as the attempt to achieve, in "prose," the same kind of effect Vergil was striving for in another realm: the redemption of suffering through art. Vergil's art had to be as grand and monumental as the Roman state, the *imperium* of his art as controlling and powerful as the *imperium* of the state. He was trying to capture the public past as history for the public audience, and the sacrifice he makes as poet is much like that Aeneas makes; he submits to the epic form, the epic voice, as Aeneas submits to the role of public servant. It is a willing submission, as Aeneas' is, because the rewards are there to be had. What Parry calls Vergil's "private voice of regret" is as much for what he is giving up as for what Aeneas must give up.

Before starting on *Life Studies*, and before beginning his prose autobiography, Lowell had begun moving towards the central concerns of that book, as well as towards the centralized consciousness that unifies it. The title of *Lord Wearie's Castle* comes, as he tells us, from an old ballad:

It's Lambkin was a mason good  
As ever built wi' stane:  
He built Lord Wearie's castle  
But payment gat he nane . . .

The art of the mason here reminds us of Lowell's comment on poetry as "craft, purely a craft," which clearly included his early, highly crafted, even overwrought lyrics. The title suggests that for all the skill and labor that went into the crafting

of such lyrics, there was no “payment,” and it announces the lack of payment of the artist as a theme of the volume. Euryalus’ mother had cried “Is this all I get?” after having hoped for more. Aeneas is taught not to ask that question, rather to trust and hope in the certainty the future will bring; to affirm life, in other words, as having an order that will emerge and that will justify any sacrifices he may have to make. The real sacrifice, of course, is to live in suffering, to affirm life by continuing it and to trust that the order is there. Most of the poems in *Lord Weary’s Castle* are the voices in monologue of masons like Lambkin, innocents who have trusted life and the importance of doing, of making, and are facing time’s betrayal of their trust. Others are speakers contemplating the betrayal, unable any longer to “breeze on their trust funds through the world” because, like Eliot’s monologuists, they know too much and not enough.

The range of monuments or “castles” included is enormous, for a “castle” in this sense is anything done or created in expectation of payment. In a pair of poems near the center of the book, two speakers contemplate the twin debacles time has brought to the careers of Christ and Augustus in a rendering to each of his due. In Christ’s poem, *The Crucifix*, the speaker is walking down Ninth Street while the world is still celebrating Hallowe’en, “we are sinking,” and the prophets are still thundering desolation and the return to clay. At the end, “A stray dog’s signpost is a crucifix.” In *Dea Roma* the possibilities of the Eternal City have been squandered through the centuries. Even the secular possibilities of Augustus’ reign have come to nothing. “Brutus bled his forty-six per cent/ For *Pax Romana*” to no avail, and the anonymous “human torches” have long been extinguished. A modern Peter is still banking his catch in the Celestial City, but we now see that sewers as well as roads led to Rome, and the final image is one of a polluted commerciality. The same note is struck in *At the Indian Killer’s Grave*, where we are reminded that “the poor dead cannot see Easter crowds/ On Boston Common or the Beacon Hill/ Where strangers hold the golden statehouse dome/ For good and always.” Death is an engraver, hacking his “laugh” in the sandstone of all monuments. In *At a Bible House*, Lowell recalls an old Mennonite or Doukabor, “God-rooted, hard,” who is “wise above/ Man’s wisdom with the food/ Squeezed from three thousand years’/ Standing.” But now he is bed-ridden and gone in the kidneys, for “It is all/ A moment.” His lifetime of sacrifice, control and painfully achieved wisdom has been in vain:

neither good  
Nor evil, hopes nor fears,  
Repulsion nor desire,  
Earth, water, air or fire  
Will serve to stay the fall.

In *Children of Light* the heroic efforts of our Fathers, who “wrung their bread from stocks and stones/ And fenced their gardens with the Redman’s bones” have come to nought; now “candles gutter by an empty altar.” Whether it is the religious light of *Children of Light* driving the pilgrims to kill and rob for destiny as Augustus had before, or the secular light of the French Revolution in *Rebellion*, the story is the same. People die and kill for principles and ideals of order, but

their actions and sacrifices only augment the evil they are struggling against:

And I have sealed  
An everlasting pact  
With Dives to contract  
The world that spreads in pain;  
But the world spread  
When the clubbed flintlock broke my father's brain.

Time, the ironic protagonist, is the only winner in this violent game.

In *Exile's Return*, the first poem in the volume, the "castle" of European civilization has been torn down once more, this time by World War II.

But already lily-stands  
Burgeon the risen Rhineland, and a rough  
Cathedral lifts its eye. Pleasant enough,  
*Voi ch'entrate*, and your life is in your hands.

Pleasant enough, to contemplate the resurrection of cultural monuments, habits, and attitudes. But not enough, if the resurrection is only another step in an endless cycle of building up and tearing down. It is not enough, if the works of days and hands are but the construction of another Babel. What the volume does, following this introductory poem, is to trace the Exile's steps through the confusions and darkness of the modern world, seen against the background of the past, ranging all the way back to frontier America, Europe, and the classical world. The quotation from Dante is no casual thing, for this is the Exile's time and point of entry. The voice we hear throughout is that of the modern exile, looking at the detritus of a fallen world. He is lost in a dark wood, and he must go through a realm of darkness before he can come out. The volume is no less than an attempt to re-enact Dante's trip through hell under the guidance of Vergil. The unity of the volume is not dependent, as Dante's was, on a recognizable single character, but rather on a mobile center of consciousness. The organization is closer to Eliot's *Waste Land* or to Hart Crane's *Bridge*, than it is to more conventional modes of narrative or epic. Lowell does not need to invent an other-worldly Inferno as metaphor for this world; he simply discovers that the *status post mortuum* in the Inferno is a continuation and clarification of what the sinners already had here. The last poem in the volume is some indication of what we may expect to find in this Exile's tour through hell. *Where the Rainbow Ends* is the perfect concluding title for such a work, as "Atlantis" was for Crane's *Bridge*. Perfect, that is, if it ends in a pot of gold or a promise. But it may be, as the poem hints, an "ironic rainbow," a betrayed promise, or only the illusion of a promise. As the sky descends "black and white,/ Not blue, on Boston" the poet is still "a red arrow on this graph/ Of Revelations." It is very difficult to tell which way the arrow is pointing, even though the way the speaker wants it to point is clear.

If we attempt to follow the course of the Exile through the book, the outcome is not so clear as the final title would suggest. By "course" I do not

mean to suggest anything so ordered as the progression in Dante's work, or even so progressively-structured a movement as we find in *Life Studies*. The structure is more the repeated thrust and counter-thrust of dialectically opposed attitudes than the linear arrangement of an argument. In talking about it, however, one must isolate the elements somewhat arbitrarily, take them apart and put them back together. Each poem contains the full set of contradictory attitudes, themes and Words. The Exile is confronting them, the world in his hands, trying to find a pattern; he internalizes Dante. Unless we imagine that Dante was literally led by Vergil, we must imagine that he conceived the totality of alternatives, then made his work, like that of God, as all-inclusive and orderly as possible. But he had the answer, from reason and revelation, before he started writing. Lowell has several answers or possibilities which the volume confronts in different contexts. The final answer, it becomes increasingly clear, must be found in himself, in his own state of trust or faith. As soon as he is satisfied he will be satisfied, in the necessarily circular logic of the argument.

Although the logic is circular, the movement is pendulum-like, between two modes of consciousness-in-time. If in secular time, or linear time, there are no dividends that repay investment, the alternative is a reaction away from the temporal towards some teleological conception which justifies suffering in the present, whether it be self-sacrifice or the victimization of others. The pattern is Vergilian, except where for Aeneas the telos is the Roman Empire as brought about by fate, for Lowell it is God's plan reflected in the poet's life and works. But what is God's plan, and can it justify the slaughter of Indians or the Quakers' rape of nature? The Romans had the same *kind* of argument as they killed Christians, and the French as they killed each other. "While we live, we live to/ Snuff the smoke of victims" (*New Year's Day*), and we must somehow convince ourselves that they did not die in vain, that their sacrifice is part of some ultimately benign cosmic plan.

In *Colloquy In Black Rock* the poet is contemplating the Hungarian Catholic defense-plant workers as they celebrate the feast of Corpus Christi at St. Stephen's Church in Bridgeport. What the mind must encompass here is a multiple-vision of life dominated by death. In a church named after the first Saint to imitate Christ's sacrifice of the body, St. Stephen Protomartyr, the workers celebrate and renew Christ's sacrifice of his body and blood; but there is no difference between this ritual and their daily work, the manufacture of destructive weapons to harvest more blood from victims of the plan. "Christ walks on the black water" in all of this, but he can only be called "*Stupor Mundi*," the amazement of the world.<sup>7</sup> Staples calls this climax an "almost unbearable perception of the Holy Spirit," which is partly right and partly wrong.<sup>8</sup> It is unbearable, without more, but it is not "perception" in the fullest sense of the word, for then it would be bearable. It leaves all perception in the mind of God, as the voice from the whirlwind in *Job*. It is to lead, by way of the "deaf and dumb/ Breadline for children" (*Thanksgiving's Over*) to the "who could believe this, who could understand?" reaction to the Pope's missal in *Beyond the Alps*.

It is easy to say, "God wills it, wills it, wills it: it is blood," as the voice does in *France (from the gibbet)*. But this time we are looking at God's plan through the eyes of Abel, the first 'victim,' who has been re-incarnated and re-

sacrificed in the blood-bath of the Revolution. "My human brothers who live after me,/ See how I hang," he exclaims, and goes on to ask:

What good  
Are *lebensraum* and bread to Abel dead  
And rotten on the cross-beams of the tree?

The appeal to the not-understood telos (Vergil's "Fate" in its causal form) is easier for the Romans, the pilgrims, the Quakers, the defense-plant workers, the victors-in-the-present, than it is for their victims. But it still may be the only answer possible.

However, it is an answer that becomes less and less bearable for Lowell in *Lord Weary's Castle*, less and less adequate as his "payment." In *The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket* he focuses directly on the elegiac problem. All the victims of life are embodied in one, Warren Winslow, who died in a time of war at sea. The Christian poet's job, as Christian and poet, is to find meaning in his death, some hope for him and for those who will follow him. The first five sections expand the image of death at sea to include all life. "We are poured out like water," leaving behind nothing except a name "blocked in yellow chalk" or a marker in a graveyard. The poet has "no Orphean lute/ To pluck life back." The mariners, perhaps, had "fabled news/ Of IS, the whited monster," but it led them to destruction. The only news the poet has is still the eternal message of the lost and disfigured body in death. Ironically, in a poem dealing with death at sea, and re-creating the futile voyage of the Pequod—named after a slaughtered Indian tribe—the poem is headed by a quotation from Genesis:

Let man have dominion over the fishes of the sea and the fowls of the  
air and the beasts and the whole earth, and every creeping creature  
that moveth upon the earth.

Man has no dominion now, physical or intellectual. In section VI, the poet turns to Our Lady of Walsingham, where penitents took off their shoes and walked the last mile barefoot and submissive in spirit. The section is strikingly and significantly in the past tense. The acknowledgment of original sin as the only way to understand the failure of the promise in Genesis adds nothing comprehensible to the *Stupor Mundi* of *Colloquy*:

As before,  
This face, for centuries a memory,  
*Non est species, neque decor*,  
Expressionless, expresses God: it goes  
Past castled Sion. She knows what God knows,  
Not Calvary's Cross nor crib at Bethlehem  
Now, and the world shall come to Walsingham.

The change to the future at the end suggests that once more we must submit to the incomprehensible. But now, in the present, we can only see it "As before

. . . for centuries a memory,” as the answer that is no answer, the truth that is not human. “The Lord survives the rainbow of His will” is the concluding line of the poem. Power, mystery, destruction, with the rainbow pointing vaguely to promises which we can never see come true—an uneasy resting-place, but the only one available. Characteristically, it is the sudden ending of an otherwise hopeless poem. It is not led up to, or arrived at in any structural way; it simply appears with its message like Job’s voice from the whirlwind. Until then we too must wait in discomfort, watching other hopes and promises fail, nevertheless trusting that this one will be kept.

Meanwhile, while we wait, we re-enact again and again the futile pattern of history as a fall. One of the poems that comes closest to catching the center of consciousness in the volume, the voice of the Exile looking for a Word, is *The Drunken Fisherman*. In technique it is still steeped in the intricacies of Lowell’s earlier work, but in focus it looks forward to the more directly personal voice of *Life Studies*. After a lifetime of fishing for truth, the Fisherman is still “Wallowing in this bloody sty.” Noah’s rainbow prophecy is no better than “Jehovah’s bow,” or the pagan notion of a pot of gold. After a life of effort, he has nothing to comfort him, nothing to stay or prop him. His calendar tells only the secular day, not the final Day; his only bait is whiskey, the distortion of consciousness which appears in other places as dreams, visions, insanity—in *Life Studies* as tranquilizers, Miltown; he is plagued by gnats, uncomfortable, impotent, and he asks: “Are these fit terms/ To mete the worm whose molten rage/ Boils in the belly of old age?” Nothing of this world can measure the worm of death. But it was not always this way. “Once fishing was a rabbit’s foot—” and “Life danced a jig on the sperm-whale’s spout—.” Once he was young, trusting, lucky, and fertile; but now he is the aged fisher-king, not so sure that what he had was good, if it led to this:

The fisher’s fluent and obscene  
Catches kept his conscience clean.  
Children, the raging memory drools  
Over the glory of past pools.

He has been fishing, it turns out, in himself, and now he has become “the pot-hole of old age.” It is the circularity again, of confidence being easy when you have it, impossible when you don’t. If what life has is in him only, then it *was* “fluent and obscene.” In the last stanza he wonders if there is a way to cast his hook “Out of this dynamited brook” that his life has become. The only answer is to try, once more, for Christ; and the poem suggests, ambiguously, that he may by fishing in himself for Christ be caught by Him:

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.

One could argue forever about whether that last line is “hopeful” or not. What is

significant, however, is that its ambiguity remains the ambiguity of life; the language and experience are recognizable and human.

The alternative to human language and vision is suggested in the volume, but always as a drastic and uncertain possibility. In *As a Plane Tree by the Water* the poet, in the “planned/ Babel of Boston,” recalls

the eyes of Bernadette  
Who saw Our Lady standing in the cave  
At Massabielle, saw her so squarely that  
Her vision put out reason’s eyes.

To escape the Babel by losing one’s reason is a constant possibility. But it is to become inscrutable, to ‘die’ out of this world and the possibility of making sense of it while in it. When Lowell thinks of such visions, he thinks of death, as in *After the Surprising Conversions*. In that poem, a man of “more than common understanding,” concerned for his soul but not daring to hope for heaven, undergoes the experience:

Once we saw him sitting late  
Behind his attic window by a light,  
That guttered on his Bible; through that night  
He meditated terror, and he seemed  
Beyond advice or reason, for he dreamed  
That he was called to trumpet Judgment Day  
To Concord. In the latter part of May  
He cut his throat.

The townsfolk take it to be the devil’s work, though the gentleman thought it God’s. The point, again, is that there is no way to *know*. We are left, like the multitude, with the voice of death calling at broad noon:

“My friend,  
Cut your own throat. Cut your own throat. Now! Now!”  
September twenty-second, Sir, the bough  
Cracks with the unpicked apples, and at dawn  
The small-mouth bass breaks water, gorged with spawn.

The implications of the last two lines seem obvious. To “trumpet Judgment Day,” whether it be madness or divine vision, is to give up concern for this life for speculations on the next (“We thought we could not rest/ Till we had done with life.”). But this life is still here, with real apples to be picked in repetition of the fall, and real fish, reproducing, waiting to be caught. Fishing for the Word must begin with them, not with the Leviathan of ultimate truth which only God can draw out with a hook.<sup>9</sup>

What is not so obvious are the implications of these last lines for the poet in the exercise of his craft. To enter the other world of ultimate vision is to forego human wisdom for the fearful, uncertain vision of the mystic; to “see God’s

foot on the treadle” like Pip in *Moby Dick*; to perceive the ultimate truth directly, and yet not to know whether it is truth or a distortion of the human faculties. The danger is in losing this world, and the possibilities of human life, by doing something against nature—a prideful and illusory assumption of God-like vision. This is a humanistic sin (cutting oneself off from the possibility of discovering meaning in the things of this world), a poetic mistake (taking the apocalyptic, visionary mode, rather than looking for meanings in experience), and a religious sin (denying and perverting one’s faculties, rejecting the world God created for man). For all these reasons, then, Lowell wants to keep alive Ishmael’s confidence that there are meanings behind and commensurate with the world of appearances:

And some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher, except to sell by the cartload, as they do hills about Boston, to fill up some morass in the Milky Way. (*Moby Dick*, XCIX)

But this point, too, is only a possibility that Lowell is exploring. At other times, in other poems, there are other possibilities. In *To Peter Taylor on the Feast of the Epiphany* Lowell envisions himself as waiting in darkness for another epiphany, another direct appearance of God, one that will be manifest to our “fear” and our “hunger” as Christ’s birth was to the Magi, when “wisdom trailed a star into a stall/ And knelt in sacred terror to confer/ Its fabulous gold and frankincense and myrrh.” The Magi, in their wisdom, hunger and fear, found God in human form, miraculous yet recognizable. The new fear, the new hunger, can be met only by an epiphany of the Apocalypse:

Peter, the war has taught me to revere  
The rulers of this darkness, for I fear  
That only Armageddon will suffice  
To turn the hero skating on thin ice  
When Whore and Beast and Dragon rise for air  
From allegoric waters.

The “thin ice” here is the remnant of his conscious experience held in memory, and nothing less than the apocalypse itself, the final uncovering of the Judgment Day, can save him from falling through into the watery, ambiguous sea grave of the Quakers. In *Christmas Eve Under Hooker’s Statue*, even though in a spiritual “blackout” in a time of war, he can see himself as waiting “Till Christ again turn wanderer and child.” All wars are boyish, said Melville—but so is belief in Christmas as the season of Santa Claus. The Exile’s “gift” as a boy was the apple of sin tucked into his Christmas stocking. Now he can only be saved by Christ. But we don’t have Christ “again,” we have only the symbol, the memory, which is as helpless in our present reality as our memory of Thoreau now that Walden Pond is fished-out. The poet is lost in the dilemma of no longer and not yet, with the earlier human symbol of God not relevant to a world of “unbridled industry,” either as sustaining belief or the poet’s vision. The illustration at the

front of *Land of Unlikeness* was of a cross, with a gargoyle in place of Christ's body. If Christ returns, he cannot come as he came before, for his first coming has failed, or we have failed in our loss of faith in it. Lowell combines the contemporary inadequacy in Eliot (*Journey of the Magi*) with Yeats' anticipation of a more violent revelation in *The Second Coming*.

Still another approach to the problem of the poet caught between this world and the next is worked out in *Between the Porch and the Altar*. The poem moves back in time to the youth of the son, suggesting the "innocence" of the pre-Christian world with its ignorance of original sin. For a time, "he thinks the past/ Is settled," that "It is honest to hold fast/ Merely to what one sees with one's own eyes." His mother's body, "big as life," is animated only by a "human mover," and she need not symbolize or suggest anything. In the background is "her father's portrait" as an example of "what one sees with one's own eyes." In other words, the symbolic or allegorical possibilities of the 'realistic' painting are to be ignored in this return to the innocent eye of youth. The father is not to suggest The Father. The watch-chain is not time or eternity, even though it is resting on the Bible. The chain is like "A little golden snake that mouths a hook," but this is not God conquering the devil or an intimation of the fall. As a schoolboy, none of these possibilities was noted. The "hand,/ Lifted" was a sign of benediction, a motion "to stand." But the Exile now is not a schoolboy, or Adam in the garden. He is Adam trying to discard his "sense of endless woes" through altered vision, trying to avoid rather than submit to the real though incomprehensible judgment of the lifted hand. The situation here is deliberately paralleled with Adam's soliloquy in *Paradise Lost* (Bk. 10: 720 ff.) after the oracular judgment which he cannot understand, to which he can only submit.

In the next section, "Adam and Eve," the innocence of this direct vision is followed by a re-enactment of the fall, as the child's Christmas with an apple in the stocking is followed by the man's with a stone in *Christmas Eve*. The inevitability of the movement here is the crucial factor; whether in spite of, or because of the innocence, the earlier state is followed like childhood by a state of self-conscious confusion and maturity. The attempt to return to the child's view, or to prolong it, is wrong in both human and religious terms.

While eyeing the minuteman statue "with an awed contempt," ignoring the past with its warning and seeing only "the puritanical façade/ Of the white church," named for Patrick who cleared the serpents from Ireland, the speaker and his mistress lose their apples and their false—because self-conscious—innocence:

Your market-basket rolls  
With all its baking apples in the lake.  
You watch the whorish slither of a snake  
That chokes a duckling. When we try to kiss,  
Our eyes are slits and cringing, and we hiss;  
Scales glitter on our bodies as we fall.

This is not the original human fall from the garden; it is the added humiliation given those angels already exiled from heaven into hell, who try nevertheless to

taste the fruit of the forbidden tree, to commit the sin which only the truly innocent can commit:

greedily they pluck'd  
The Fruitage fair to sight, like that which grew  
Near that bituminous Lake where *Sodom* flam'd;  
This more delusive, not the touch, but taste  
Deceiv'd; they fondly thinking to allay  
Thir appetite with gust, instead of Fruit  
Chew'd bitter Ashes, which th' offended taste  
With spattering noise rejected: oft they assay'd,  
Hunger and thirst constraining, drugg'd as oft,  
With hatefullest disrelish, writh'd thir jaws  
With soot and cinders fill'd; so oft they fell  
Into the same illusion, not as Man  
Whom they triumph'd, once lapst. (Bk 10: 560-72)

The parallelism with Book X of *Paradise Lost* is crucial here, both in terms of technique and for the point of the poem. Milton is counterpointing the judgment of Adam and Eve with the Judgment of Satan and his minions: two orders of evil, or sin, neither of which fully understands its verdict as delivered by the "Oracle." Because he does not understand the Oracle, Satan happily returns to hell, where his anticipated triumph is "A dismal universal hiss, the sound/ Of public scorn." The irony is the poet's way of suggesting Satan's larger punishment and its cause. Adam, in his soliloquy, is able to submit even though he cannot understand the terms of his judgment. As in *To Peter Taylor*, Lowell is dealing here with a contrast in scale, and in levels of consciousness. The human scale is based on Adam, and developed in a drama of sin, submission, and promised redemption. The coming of Christ was to be the confirmation of that promise, as was the Roman Empire the confirmation of Aeneas' promise—but at this state, initial consciousness of sin (in the religious view) or of the ravages of time (secular view) must be met by uncomprehending submission.

The only other reaction is the perpetual repetition of the fall, the "same illusion" in Milton's view, into which man lapsed only once, but which Satan must continually re-enact. This is the non-human drama for Milton: a greater-than-human sin because knowing and conscious, requiring punishment on a larger scale. Satan knows that, even if forgiven, he would sin again.

What the Exile is doing then, in sections I and II of this poem, is repeating the fallen Angels' sin, not Adam's. A fixing on the pleasures of this earth, but instead of fruit finding the bitter ashes of reality. The implicit question is, can the forgiveness that was available to Adam be available to one who presumably knows the wiles of Eve and the serpent yet still sins? The Sophocles quotation ("Never to have lived is best") both echoes Adam's soliloquy on the verbal level, and reminds us of Oedipus' knowledge of the oracle, his ironic punishment and exile. Oedipus knew, like Satan, like Lowell, yet could still not avoid trying to escape his fate. For the schoolboy, the hand was raised in benediction; but for

the *pretend*-schoolboy, the gesture has other implications. St. Patrick, that “Colonial from Rome,”

Had magicked the charmed serpents from their home,  
As though he were the Piper. Will his breath  
Scorch the red dragon of my nerves to death?

It is a striking effect. The childish story of St. Patrick, the ease and magic of piping away “charmed” serpents. His is the past of the minuteman statue which now “melts upon his pedestal.” There is no charming away of the serpents, no minuteman who does not sleep—and stories or images of such figures are charming if they come from innocence, dangerous if they are the delusions of those who should know better. The tune St. Patrick piped is no longer effective, and the Irish exiles have failed to find what they sought in the new world; the story, and the church itself are only a “façade” behind which the new sinner and his conscious sin (“red dragon of my nerves”) must await a new judgment. The allusion to the “Red Dragon” of the Apocalypse is a premonition of what this judgment may be. Not exile from the garden, not the flood, but the apocalyptic fire of total destruction.

In Section III, “Katherine’s Dream” the same situation is seen from the mistress’s point of view. As marriage was part of the original plot of sin, adultery seems inevitably to fit the second, the plot Lowell is developing here. The mistress is hung-over with drink and consciousness of sin. She wants to go in like the “forgiven couples” who can go securely afterwards to dinner and their nights. Her relation to them is like the Exile’s to the penitents in “Our Lady of Walsingham.” The ritual of confession, penitence and forgiveness is near—it can be seen, understood—yet it is inaccessible, it cannot be “understood” at all. Even desiring to go in, attempting “To cry and ask God’s pardon of our sin” is not enough. Katherine’s “dream” of forgiveness ends with her running in circles until she drops before the “padlocked bulkhead” of St. Patrick’s Church, which will not open for her as it did for the others.

In the last section, “At the Altar,” the self-consciousness which has been the problem of the poem is dealt with in a terrifying directness. The Exile and his mistress are in a nightclub featuring an ice-skating floorshow, which is a metaphor for him and his actions as a poet. His searching has been a showy, dangerous thing, a “whirl/ Of Easter eggs,” leading to the punning attempt at self-definition:

I am a fallen Christmas tree. Our car  
Races through seven red-lights—then the road  
Is unpatrolled and empty, and a load  
Of ply-wood with a tail-light makes us slow.

The Christmas tree, which combines the pagan’s confidence of the return of light with the Christian’s celebration of Christ’s message of rebirth, is “lit up” but “fallen.” It is a perfect image of the Exile’s conscious mind which has made a gaudy but perverted show of the traditional symbols. He switches from the lights

on the Christmas tree to the street-lights, racing knowingly through the seven deadly sins. There is nothing to stop him, inside or out; the road is unpatrolled. Time is "escalating," as is his sin. The "Gothic church" is collapsing, as it did in the War (*Exile's Return*) and shall on the Day; so it is suddenly the Day of Judgment. The mass turns out to be *his* (and man's) funeral mass; the priest mumbles the words and sprinkles the holy water, but there is no effect. The Mass must give way to the *Dies Irae*, the day when God shall come to judge the world with fire. That Day is here now:

Here the Lord  
Is Lucifer in harness: hand on sword,  
He watches me for Mother, and will turn  
The bier and baby-carriage where I burn.

The "baby-carriage" is the wheeled dolly on which a coffin rests in the modern funeral; this, and the sprinkling of holy water on the corpse confirm that it is a funeral Mass. The point of the grotesque image goes deeper, bringing us back to the false innocence of the beginning section. He had chosen to see only a "mother and a wife," only a "human mover," hoping to use the services of the church in spite of the knowingness of his sins. Now, he is caught like the sinners in Dante's hell, in an ironic repetition of the pseudo-innocence which was his sin on earth; he is minded for "Mother" by Lucifer. More directly, Lowell seems to have had Canto XXVII of *The Inferno* in his mind while writing this section. Guido's sins, like the Exile's, are not of the lion but of the fox—sins of fraud and guile, not of passion. Guido became a Franciscan to save his soul, but afterwards gave evil counsel to Boniface VIII. At his judgment St. Francis comes, but is as helpless as the "priest who mumbles through his Mass/ And sprinkles holy water" at the Exile's funeral. The Black Angel takes Guido, because "he cannot be resolved who repents not, nor can there be repenting and willing at once, for the contradiction does not permit it." If this were as far as the poem goes, it would be little more than the tortured elaboration of a theological paradox. There is, however, one more aspect of the final image which places the poem solidly and significantly in the human and artistic center of the volume.

Guido's voice is a flickering flame, and Guido *is* that flame. The "confused" sound of his voice reminds Dante of the ironic story of Perillus:

As the Sicilian bull which bellowed for the first time—and it was just  
—with the cry of him who had shaped it with his file used to bellow  
with the voice of the victim, so that, though it was of brass, it yet  
seemed pierced with pain; thus, having at first no course or outlet in  
the fire, the doleful words were transformed into its language.<sup>10</sup>

Behind the animal-sounds, a human voice; within the artifice of the bull, a human victimized by his own cunning and skill, whose torture is to demonstrate his machine in action. Beneath the skill of Lowell's witty surface in his poem is the same human voice: the artist caught in his own skill, hiding behind it, suffering because he has it. There is a sinister progression from the innocent artist Lamb-

kin, who got no payment, to Perillus, Guido, and the Exile, whose payment is ironically their own skill turned upon themselves. We may *see* only the “brass” exterior, hear only the voice “transformed” by art—but inside is a human soul in agony.

It is very hard to find a way out of Lord Weary’s Castle once you are in it. Natural vision will not help, nor will history. Madness, ecstatic vision and death are ways out, but there is no certainty in them. Job-like submission to the mystery leads to tranquility, but how can one *will* submission? It was “prevenient grace” which allowed Adam to submit in Milton. Lacking that, or its psychological equivalent in an unqualified faith, the mind is helpless.

This psychic helplessness is isolated in *The Slough of Despond*, one of the most economical and finely focused pieces in the volume. In it, Lowell is pursuing the implications of his own spiritual state and that of the world in the same way, but he has found a much tighter structure. The basis of the poem is the sharing of a critical moment, between Lowell’s Exile, Bunyan’s Pilgrim, Dante on Friday evening, and Christ facing his own death on that same Friday evening. Behind these Christian parallels is the cyclical death in sunset and winter of Phoebus Apollo, the god of truth and poetry linking man with Olympus; and, from the same mythical time, the story of Theseus, who rolled away the stone and took the sword, proving himself as son and heir to Aegeus, earning the weapon which would assure his glorious future. What the Exile shares with all these literary, legendary, or mythical figures, is the recognition in himself of spiritual stagnation and loss of faith and confidence. They are therefore possible models for recovery, both spiritual and poetic.

The first stanza begins with the coming of darkness and the loss of confidence. The light of truth is gone; nothing can be seen clearly in this uncertain, deceptively reflected light. The physical world offers no help. Its condition, reflecting the spiritual condition of the world, is rotten with decay. The only light is cynical and human, looking for something it knows it will not find, believing that Apollo’s death is final. Narcissus (“our fool”) points up the danger of human-oriented vision in this context: if the world mirrors back only the human form—be it beautiful or ugly—the mind will seek to embrace that form and die in the attempt.

The “slow/ And brutal push” is the attempt to live without the light that has gone out. It is Christian in his swamp, Dante struggling to climb the hill, Lowell writing his poetry, writing *this* poem:

At last I struck the tree  
Whose dead and purple arms, entwined  
With sterile thorns said: “Go!  
Pluck me up by the roots and shoulder me;  
The watchman’s eyes are blind.”

The message of the “dead and purple arms” here is like that of Keats’ urn; it is not in the words themselves, but in the vehicle or manner of speaking. The arms suggest a protective embrace, an attitude or state of mind that will sustain the Exile. But they are dead arms, and entwined with “sterile thorns.” The tree is

the tree of death, of the crucifixion, without the triumph of Resurrection which can only come after the acceptance of death. "The watchman's eyes are blind" here because there are no signs at this stage, only a blind faith in the efficacy of the sacrifice. "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me." (Luke 9:23) At this point, the crisis is defined, and the solution is clear. Theseus had to remove the stone to get his sword; the stone had to be rolled away before the disciples could learn that Christ was resurrected:

My arms swung like an axe.  
And with my tingling sword I lopped the knot:  
The labyrinthine East was mine  
But for the asking. Lax  
And limp, the creepers caught me by the foot,  
And then I toed their line;

In a moment, there is time for vision and revision. The poem which set out to describe the attainment of faith, the confidence in salvation, turns out to be about the state of mind that seeks and fails to find what it seeks.

In *Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian is told that the nature of his experience of the slough will reflect his attitude towards it: "you shall find it deeper or shallower as you believe in the king of the place." The Exile says, "I walk upon the flood," but instead of Christ's spiritual triumph over the elements, the Exile feels "how the weary waters swell." The promise of "dominion" in Genesis is contingent upon man's spiritual attitude; only the Noahs can be saved from the chaotic disorder of the modern world, or the Ishmaels and Ancient Mariners who return with stories that mean everything and nothing. Christian's faith, even in the slough of despond, led him eventually to find the celestial city. Seeking to find God without faith is like building a tower to heaven or like writing this poem. "The tree is down in blood!" anticipates the end of the Christian era in the blood-bath of the apocalypse. Instead of doves, symbolizing the holy spirit and bringing olive branches of peace, the poem is answered by the "bats of Babel." Instead of the Son of God, the sunset of the poem is followed by the "sun of hell."

The pattern is complete. A poem which began with uncertain faith as the condition of man in the modern world, has failed to achieve the unity with God which is the only answer. The defeat is based on still another discovery of the true nature and inaccessibility of faith to one in the fallen state. A world not unified by a poetry of faith is a world *already* destroyed. Prophecy of apocalypse and description of what *is* merge into a single description. Lowell's region of Limbo has moved beyond Dante's little region in hell illuminated by the light of human wisdom. It has become all hell, and that secular light, which can see only itself and not the light of God, is indeed the "rising sun of hell."

Knowing all this, and saying it, does not prevent attempts to escape, to discover some "Orphean lute/ To pluck life back." The "labyrinthine East" is always there "But for the asking," and Lowell is paradoxically as romantic as Conrad's Lord Jim, fleeing his collapsed dreams ever eastward in hopes of finding them embodied in a reality—a way of life, a mode of vision. The last full-scale

attempt to condition his will to submission is another parody of the elegiac form, *The Death of the Sheriff*. In this poem he has moved from an imitation of the Christian elegy (in *Quaker Graveyard*) back to the classical epic elegy of Vergil's *Aeneid*. This time the subject of the elegy is even more clearly defined as the living, those who must go on with life in the presence of madness and death. The blending of classical and Christian myths and personages, of the modern state and the Roman state, of the problems of poet as Christian and poet as man, is one of the most complete Lowell has achieved.

The figure of the "homicidal sheriff" combines, in a dead-and-being-buried past, a number of implications. He represents Priam, as the epigraph suggests, and therefore one who has died in service to the old gods and the dying historical order. But this is a thoroughly modern version of Priam, a man the "State" had put away because of madness, defining him as irrelevant and dangerous to its purposes—a man who then took the significant Lowell alternative of suicide. In a very suggestive way, the sheriff embodies a set of alternatives the poet has himself been facing throughout the volume. The death of the sheriff is the death of a man, and with him of a way of living and a way of seeing—the death of a vision that fights oblivion and holocaust with outdated weapons, whether they be the church, meditative religious poetry, or the dubious epic dignity of human action. The madness and suicide of the sheriff suggest a move we have seen hinted at again and again in the volume, a shift of vision from the human scale to a seeing *sub species aeternitatis*. The consequences of such a vision, which sees the present as apocalypse, is nihilism or participation in the destruction. For Lowell, participation tends with knowing irony towards the self-destruction of an Ishmael rather than the heroic violence of an Ahab. Writing is for him a substitute for suicide and violence as Ishmael's voyage, including the narration of the voyage in endless repetition, is an alternative to suicide or to Ahab's self-destructive commitment to ultimate truth. The *tabula rasa* of the sheriff's soul is the blank page on which he will write his life-poem, and the poet too is beginning with a blank page; not the blank page of innocence, but the blank page of experience with no certainties. If everything is to be seen only in the glare of the last Day, then only apocalyptic poetry is relevant; such poetry is possible only through a mental state akin to madness; the strain of such a state leads even the gentleman of more than common understanding to "Trumpet Judgment Day" and die.

The sheriff has just died as the poem begins, and is being buried at its end. The Exile, in elegiac fashion, is trying to solve the problem of his own mortality by finding a way of seeing or making meaningful the death of the sheriff. This is the inner form, or psychological function, of all elegy. The Vergilian context is established by the quotation from the *Aeneid* (II, 506):

*"forsitan et Priami fuerint quae fata, requiras?"*  
(Perhaps you may ask about Priam's fate?)

In Vergil, the line appears in the middle of a description of the destruction of Troy. It is a sudden shift of focus, and a critical moment, so the details are important: "The old king threw his armor, long unused,/ on his shaking shoulders—useless gesture!—bound/ his sword at his waist, and rushed to fight and die."

Priam is a parody of his former vigorous self, and his contemplated gesture is suicidal. At this point Hecuba, who is huddling with her daughters at the altar, sees Priam in the armour of his youth and exclaims:

What dreadful madness, my poor lad,  
led you to wear those weapons? Where will you charge?  
This is no hour for help like yours, no time  
for such defense—no, even were Hector here.  
Come, stand by me; this altar shall shield us all,  
or you will die with us.

Priam joins the others at the altar, which proves as futile a gesture for those there as his picking up arms. He sees his son Polites, wounded by Pyrrhus, die before his eyes. In rage, invoking heaven to “pay the price,” he flings his spear feebly at Pyrrhus who then easily kills him. “So Priam died. . . . On the Strand his vast frame lies,/ head torn from shoulders, a corpse without a name.” This leaves Aeneas completely alone, “the one man left of my party,” and it is at this point that Helen appears, Aeneas attempts revenge on her body, and Venus appears to dissuade him.

With this background in mind, it is possible to begin to see what Lowell is doing in the first section of the poem. Ironically, the epigraph for this section is Christ’s warning to Mary Magdalene, “*Noli me tangere.*”

Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God and your God. (John 20)

The irony is in the contrast, between Priam’s mutilated body, lost without a name, leaving Aeneas alone with the memory, and the disciples before whom Christ appears with the certainty of his name and of his resurrection—the ‘gift’ of saving belief for them. There is one disciple, however, who will not believe, whose ‘gift’ must be more substantial. After saying “Touch me not” to Mary, Christ says to doubting Thomas, “. . . reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing. . . . because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.”

If we try to separate the speaker in Lowell’s poem from the writer, we have a complicated situation. The writer is suggesting his role as that of Vergil and John. Vergil led Aeneas to secure faith; John is describing the confirmation of faith in the disciples and his readers, writing “that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.” The moments alluded to in the quotations share a crucial denominator: Aeneas has lost Priam and Troy, the disciples have lost Christ. Venus appears to guide Aeneas, Christ appears to guide the disciples. The poem begins, then, with a strong anticipation of epiphany. The speaker of the poem is another mask of the Exile, this time identifying himself with Aeneas, his crumbling world with the collapse of Troy. More particularly, the sheriff (his uncle, who has just died

in the madhouse) is seen as Priam; his death triggers the crisis for the Exile, as Priam's for Aeneas and Christ's for the disciples.

In the first stanza the undertaker "who collects antiques" is ironically collecting one in the sheriff. We have a glimpse of the sheriff in his madness, looking through bars at windmills (recalling the Quixotic efforts of Priam), homicidal, howling for weeks. Like Priam, he was driven mad by the destruction of his society and family, "Until an ordered darkness left his soul/ A *tabula rasa*." As Priam, in the folly of his rage, took up the arms of his youth, this modern sheriff reverted to the frontier, laying "his notched/ Revolver on the table for the guest," the Angel of death. Now as he is hauled away for burial, his mother stands—like Hecuba clinging to the altar—singing *O Rock of Ages* and there is a strangely archaic vision, remote and abstract, of the sheriff's ascent:

as the light  
Wanderers show a man with a white cane  
Who comes to take the coffin his wain,  
The thirsty Dipper on the arc of night.

He is raised, not by Angels of the Lord, but in the mythical pagan form of constellations, "the tap/ Of the blind stars descending to the west." This belief is as cumbersome and awkward as the primitive "wain" and the stars, in addition to being blind, are declining. The effect is similar to that in stanzas two and three of Eliot's *Sweeney Among the Nightingales*, and to the contrast between the mythical background and the squalid foreground in *Apeneck Sweeney*. Soon we will not even be able to see the sketchy constellation of the sheriff.

If we move now from the complexities of this elaborate and allusive background, to the two cousins and lovers in the foreground, they stand out in a stark simplicity:

We park and stare. . . .

We kiss. . . .

Night draws us closer in its bearskin wrap  
And our loved sightless smother feels the tap  
Of the blind stars descending to the west  
To lay the Devil in the pit our hands  
Are draining like a windmill. Who'll atone  
For the unsearchable quicksilver heart  
Where spiders stare their eyes out at their own  
Spitting and knotted likeness? We must start. . . .

In part, this is clearly a rewriting of "Dover Beach," except that the love-relationship is not enough here; it is perfunctory and incestuous. It is a blind, "sightless smother" which can only "feel" the tug of the archaic idea of rebirth. What the lovers "stare" at in their parked car, is "their own/ Spitting and knotted likeness," is the death itself, *their* death in the sheriff's.<sup>11</sup>

In this context, the lovers “must start,” like Aeneas, to discover a new context for life. The second section, “The Portrait,” is an attempt to push the Aeneas-resemblance to an identity, to achieve the attitude of resignation and confident submission that enabled Aeneas to survive his voyage, to conquer Latium and assure the future of the Empire. Lowell is trying to condense the education of Aeneas into one poem of 60 lines, so we must again establish the relevant background.

Behind the section, as the portrait of his dead Uncle is behind the speaker, is the continuation of the *Aeneid* from the point where Aeneas is left the only survivor of his party. At that point, while Aeneas is wandering through the burning city, Helen appears:

Helen! I saw her lighted by the flames  
as I searched the ruins, looking everywhere. . . .  
hated, she'd sought asylum at the altar.  
Flame burst in my heart as anger cried, 'Revenge,  
for a country lost! Penalty, for her crimes!  
. . . Although men win no fame or glory  
for woman punished (such victory earns no praise),  
still to have stamped out sin, and made it pay  
due price is good; good, too, to fill the heart  
with vengeful flame and vindicate the dead.  
Such the wild thoughts that swept my heart along.

Aeneas is still in the primitive world of Priam, the world of instinct and quick personal revenge. It is the world of Lambkin in the ballad too, for he took up a sharp knife and slew Lord Weary's child and wife, in revenge for Lord Weary's refusal to pay for his castle. On a larger scale, the city of Troy itself represents this world. Priam's father, Laomedon, had hired Poseidon to build Troy and then refused payment. Poseidon's revenge was to send a sea serpent against the city, which appeased the serpent by sacrificing maidens to it. His final revenge, now in progress, is the total destruction of the city.

In the first stanza of “The Portrait” section, the Aeneas-speaker is caught in this world of appeasement and revenge. The whiskey in his brain simulates Aeneas' mad fury. The picture of Poseidon “on the panel where/ He forks the blocks of Troy into the air” echoes the vision Venus gives to Aeneas of Poseidon at work destroying the city. The speaker's “bile/ Rises.” With his Uncle's file, he is scraping a *Parmachenie Belle* trout fly. This is one of the more complicated fishing images in the book, suggesting both appeasement (offering the sea-monster a ‘maiden’) and control or revenge (drawing the sea-monster out with a hook).

The next stanza indicates that the speaker is conscious of his position in the context described above:

I try the barb upon a pencilled line  
Of Vergil. Nothing underneath the sun  
Has bettered, Uncle, since the scaffolds flamed  
On butchered Troy until Aeneas shamed

White Helen on her hams by Vesta's shrine.  
All that the Greeks have won  
I'll cancel with a sidestroke of my sword;  
Now I can let my father, wife and son  
Banquet Apollo for Laomedon:  
Helen will satiate the fire, my Lord.

One stroke of his sword, taken in revenge, will cancel the gains of civilized control over the passions. If he could find her, a Helen, he could satiate his instinctive fire for action:

I search the starlight . . . Helen will appear,  
*Pura per noctem in luce* . . . I am chilled,  
I drop the barbless fly into my purse  
Beside his nickel shield. It is God's curse,  
God's, that has purpled Lucifer with fear  
And burning. God has willed;  
I lift the window.

These lines contain the entire 'action' of the poem. In his disordered state, he is waiting for Helen to appear, to re-enact the ancient psychological ritual of appeasement. He is trapped in it, the whole world is, nothing has changed. He is searching the starlight, for this is a ritual of great antiquity, like the stellar resurrection of the dead alluded to in section one. While he waits for Helen to "sate the fire," his soul and the world hang in balance. Fire is destructive passion for Vergil, whether it be the passion of Paris for Helen, of Aeneas for Dido, or of Aeneas for revenge on Helen. The Exile has his own 'bad' sexual relationship, as had Paris and Helen. What he would do if Helen appeared is ambiguous; it is not clear whether she would be the object of revenge, as she almost was for Aeneas, or of desire, as she was for Paris. What is clear, is that she would "sate" the fire burning in him by indulging it—and in so doing he would be no different from Priam or Paris. We know, from Vergil, that this is the wrong psychology for survival, that the passions must be controlled. Venus makes the point clear to Aeneas at the moment in the *Aeneid* which parallels Lowell's poem:

when—never before so clear for eye to see—  
a vision shone through darkness, pure and bright:  
my loving mother, goddess confessed, her form  
and stature as in heaven. She seized my hand  
and held me hard; her sweet lips spoke to me:  
'My son, what pain has roused such unchecked wrath?  
Are you mad, or have you lost all thought of me?  
No blame to Helen of Sparta's hated face;  
no, nor to Paris: gods, the pitiless gods,  
threw down the might and golden towers of Troy.

While he waits for Helen, the Exile remembers the words announcing Venus's appearance:

*Pura per noctem in luce . . . I am chilled*

Memory of her appearance chills the speaker. The fire is not "satiated," but repressed or extinguished, as it was for Aeneas. The speaker echoes Venus's words to Aeneas, "It is God's curse,/ God's . . . God has willed." In one line, Lowell has tried to capture the whole movement of the *Aeneid*, and like Vergil he has tried to show it happening inside a hero's mind. It is also similar to Milton's focusing of the essential action of *Paradise Lost* in Adam's soliloquy and subsequent submission.

What all these works have in common, as well as John 20, is the appearance, or manifestation of a non-terrestrial being, like the voice out of the whirlwind in Job. What is *missing* in the Exile's experience is precisely this kind of manifestation. He searches the starlight, he is ready for vision, he has read the books, he knows how it is supposed to happen—but it doesn't happen quite that way. What happens is simply more of the poem itself, highly self-conscious, intricate, knowing, allusive and artificial. Instead of Venus herself appearing, or the Virgin Mother Mary, Lowell simply remembers how Vergil did it in his poem for Aeneas, and he does it the same way. Only Lowell can do it in a much shorter space, condensing the whole experience into one psychic moment which *doesn't happen*. The ellipsis between "*Pura per noctem in luce*" and "I am chilled" is the blank space where it should have happened but didn't. We have followed the mind of the speaker, through his words, up to the point where the vision should have happened, on the level of intense introspection and heightened verbal awareness. But this level is not transcended, the speaker is not made aware of anything that was not already in his mind. The experience in the poem is literary, allusive, second-hand—one is tempted to say not authentic, or to say that the poem has failed to communicate the epiphany. Both attitudes are wrong. The poem traces accurately the genuine experience of the Exile and the poet confronting a non-viable model or form of experience. Nothing has come from the stars, from outside the introspective consciousness; no increments of reality have been gained, no new truths discovered, no faiths confirmed:

I lift the window. Digging has begun,  
The hill road sparkles, and the mourners' cars  
Wheel with the whited sepulchres of stars  
To light the worldly dead-march of the sun.

The speaker lifts the window, turns his mind from itself to the world, where the sheriff's grave is being dug. He can see the mourners' cars, and can think of them in relation to Dante:

. . . I saw through a round opening some of the fair things that  
Heaven bears; and thence we came forth to see again the stars.

Lowell can parody the pattern of Dante's *Inferno* in an endless variety of ways. But he can never find that point of vision, that "round opening" through which he can see directly the "fair things" in the stars. In effect, it comes closer to the conclusion of Eliot's *Preludes*:

The worlds revolve like ancient women  
Gathering fuel in vacant lots.

In Lowell's "bright world," all that is illuminated is "the worldly dead-march of the sun," the light that puts out the stars. To complete the Lowell-Eliot-Dante-Vergil continuity, the concluding lines also allude to Vergil, at a point where Vergil himself is deliberately making a contrast between Homer's rosy-fingered dawn of promise, and his own dawn of renewed efforts and suffering: "And now to wretched man the Dawn brought light/ and life—another day of work and woe." (11:182-3) Like Lambkin, Aeneas got no payment for imposing the form of Empire on the world: like Aeneas, the Exile has no payment for shaping his experience into the parodic form of the poem.

If a form so highly wrought, so complex and intricate as this poem, patterned after all the right models, remains only a form, then the very possibilities of literary form are called into doubt. In Melville's *Mardi*, the philosopher Babbalanja (babble-on-you) refers incessantly to his store of "Bardianna," which consists of Melville's paraphrase of all the great thoughts of the Western world. He has the words, but can only repeat them. In Chapter 175, his largest effusion of "Bardianna" (largely a repeat of Pascal), he is finally stopped by Media, who says:

. . . I do not observe, O sage, that for all these things you yourself are practically the better or wiser. You live not up to Bardianna's main thought. Where he stands, he stands immovable, but you are a dogvane. How is this?

Babbalanja's only answer is "Gogle-goggle, fogle-fi, fogle-fogle-orum!", the mad voice within him spouting demonic utterances that are beyond reason and beyond form. "Mad, mad again," cries Yoomy. It is a sad moment in the novel when Babbalanja settles for life on the island of Serenia, where the "old truths" of religion and poetry and history are magically embodied. Such translations and stale pseudo-embodiments are too easy, too certain for the skilled artist. They are brass bulls in which he becomes caught, lost and destroyed. They are like the Pope's pronouncement of the dogma of Mary's bodily assumption in *Beyond the Alps*, spoken in the wrong language. In that poem Mussolini is closer to the "pure prose" of modern life than the Pope, who has a safe electric razor. Without his poetry of faith, the inmates in the asylum must shave with locked blades to protect them from the insistent summons of death: "Cut your own throat. Cut your own throat. Now! Now!" (*After the Surprising Conversions*).

It is important to keep the words of Bardianna in memory, even if they are not alive as a new poem should be alive. Lowell is a transition poet in *Lord*

*Weary's Castle*, as were Crane and Eliot, the Romantics, Milton, Dante and Vergil—poets seeking to establish a relationship or life-line between their own works and the “Bardianna” of the past. There is an inevitable focus in such poets on two kinds of ordering, or two levels, going on in their poems. One is the gate of ivory, the conscious artistry of the work, and the other is the humble gate of horn, through which the other, the true state of being must come. In Lowell, the formal ordering moves from madness and disorder to epiphany, then to the calm of a resigned submission to the gods. But there is no “experience” in the poem on this level—it is a form in and of itself; it is the wished-for reality rather than what actually happens. The other ordering is the deliberately artificial way the pattern is embodied in a poem conscious of its artificiality, a poem in which deliberate rhetoric and bookishness point to the pattern as Pattern. Behind both of these orderings is a mind conscious of itself as being full of doubts, uncertainties, steeped in seductive forms which describe a way out of the uncertainty yet do not work. On what might be called its operative level the poem is neither a verse meditation in which the lyric voice achieves the calm of submission, nor an ironic debunking of Christian and pagan myths. It is the mind or consciousness of the Exile confronting both these possibilities or tendencies and achieving neither as the final union between form and experience. He ends where he began, with the *tabula rasa* of the sheriff, locked in the madhouse of his own mind, faced with the alternatives of a State he cannot serve, a futile rebellion, or self-destruction.

In poem after poem in *Lord Weary's Castle* the Exile is undergoing the same ordeal. The dramatic monologue can be seen as a trying out of psychological form in a way comparable to “The Quaker Graveyard” as a trying out of the form of the Christian elegy. But because the poem looks like a dramatic monologue does not mean that it is, in the protective sense that Browning meant when he described his *Dramatic Lyrics* as “so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine.” Nor does the formal similarity of a poem to the Christian elegy mean that the poem is an elegy. In most cases, the poems in the volume work in something like the complicated way I have attempted to describe in “The Death of the Sheriff.” The final effect is like that which Langbaum attributes to Eliot, who constructed with “a *collage* of voices the dramatic monologue of a modern consciousness that is also a cultural memory.”<sup>12</sup> The sense of unity one finds in the poems, and in the volume, is much like the unity of *The Waste Land*, with its hypothetical center of consciousness. The tension, between the continuity of the center and the disjunction of the various voices and forms it tries on, is perhaps the most important element to recognize in a reading of Lowell's poetry. In the earlier poems the various voices and forms tended to come from the classic poets, and to suggest a tone of certainty, both in psychological and poetic form:

I won't say the Catholicism gave me subject matter, but it gave me some kind of form, and I could begin a poem and build it to a climax. It was quite different from what I'd been doing earlier.

My last poems don't use religious imagery, they don't use symbolism.

In many ways they seem to me more religious than the early ones, which are full of symbols and references to Christ and God. I'm sure the symbols and the Catholic framework didn't make the poems religious experiences. Yet I don't feel my experience changed very much.<sup>13</sup>

Lowell refers to the classics as "some sort of yardstick for English" in much the same way as he refers to Catholicism as "some kind of form."

The tendency is manifest in Lowell's *Imitations* also, a book "written from time to time when I was unable to do anything of my own."<sup>14</sup> In his Introduction to *Imitations*, Lowell points out that the book "should be first read as a sequence, one voice running through many personalities, contrasts and repetitions." The search for form in this volume has moved away from the psychic formalism of the Catholic faith; but it continues, in the absence of Lowell's "own" form, to explore successful poems in other languages and other times. "All my originals are important poems" is a crucial claim in the Introduction. They are there, they work, they must be gone through—not simply translated, but explored in the hopes of discovering one's own form. "I have been almost as free as the authors themselves in finding ways to make them ring right for me." It is interesting to note that Lowell's first sustained work was "a huge epic on the First Crusade, all written out in a clumsy longhand on lined paper." From the beginning, he has combined the high seriousness of the greatest poets with a consciousness of a lack of form, a lack of something like the form of the epic or the lines on the paper that will sustain and give shape to his personal voice.

The change in *Life Studies* is a radical change, then, but still a continuation of the same search. The pattern Lowell is trying out in that volume is the shape latent in his own personal experience and reminiscences. It is no accident that he was writing a prose autobiography during the germination of *Life Studies*. If "the continuity with his ordinary self and his poetic self" could not be achieved through imitation, perhaps it could be discovered by starting with the "ordinary self" and looking for form within it. In this volume he moves much closer to the Romantic mode of lyric, only to discover the ambivalence and uncertainty that the Romantics, especially Crane, had discovered before him:

I don't think a personal history can go on forever, unless you're Walt Whitman and have a way with you. I feel I've done enough personal poetry. . . . I've said all I really have much inspiration to say, and more would just dilute. So that you need something more impersonal, and other things being equal it's better to get your emotions out in a Macbeth than in a confession.<sup>15</sup>

Lowell's confessional mode has continued off and on since *Life Studies*, as has the imitative mode. What unifies the later work is the continuation of the search for a union of the ordinary self and the poetic self: ". . . all his works are one poem, a form of continuity that has grown and snowballed." The words are Lowell's own, referring to Eliot; but Eliot, borrowing from Keats, was speaking of Shakespeare. As Lowell turns them back on Eliot, we must turn them back on him if we are fully to appreciate his significance as a poet.

If we look back at *Lord Weary's Castle* as a whole now, after looking inside of some of its poems, we can see that its total form is like that of individual poems in it, and its continuity—although more deliberately organized—is like the continuity of Lowell's poetic development. The first and last poems suggest the formal pattern of Dante's *Inferno*. The Exile enters the fallen world, seen as hell, and emerges "Where the Rainbow Ends." He is guided by Vergil's concept of poetry as Dante was guided by Vergil, and he encounters or re-creates a variety of convincing human voices, speaking in ignorance of their misery. Working against this suggestion of a formal, literary pattern however, is the fact that Lowell's rainbow ends as a real rainbow does, in a place that can never be found in this world. Against the legendary pot of gold, or the Biblical promise of God, is placed the futility of trying to go to the place "Where the Rainbow Ends." The "Stand and live" of the final poem has not progressed from the "Your life is in your hands" of the first. It is tempting to turn Lowell's tribute to Sylvia Plath back on himself when he says, in spite of her "appalling and triumphant fulfillment" as an artist, that "This poetry and life are not a career; they tell that life, even when disciplined, is simply not worth it."<sup>16</sup>

The end is not the conclusion of an artistic form, or of a spiritual journey, because—although riddled with allusions to literary and spiritual patterns or structures—it is not a structure in the conventional sense. It is a *situation*, endlessly repeated:

In Boston serpents whistle at the cold.  
The victim climbs the altar steps and sings:  
"Hosannah to the lion, lamb, and beast  
Who fans the furnace-face of IS with wings:  
I breathe the ether of my marriage feast."

The "victim" at the altar is the one who embraces faith, without knowing whether it be in lion, lamb or beast. The idea of the marriage, the venerable metaphor for man's spiritual union with God, is an "ether" which numbs his human consciousness, making him the victim. His face is fanned, as was Dante's at the crucial point in Cocytus, by monstrous wings; but he doesn't know if they are Satan's or the Holy Spirit's. In any case, Boston is Cocytus, the frigid center of a world seen as hell. The poet is in the magic place—if he keeps going, the world may turn upside-down, becoming a place which permits movement towards redemption rather than remaining the static hell, where the poet is caught in his endlessly repetitive situation, his endless and cyclical poem:

At the high altar, gold  
And a fair cloth. I kneel and the wings beat  
My fair cheek. What can the dove of Jesus give  
You now but wisdom, exile? Stand and live,  
The dove has brought an olive branch to eat.

The olive suggests again God's gift of land after the scourge of water, the end of Noah's voyage rather than the end of Ahab's, redemption rather than destruc-

tion. But one doesn't *eat* olive branches, especially symbolic ones.<sup>17</sup> If the marriage feast is an olive branch, which can be ingested only as a consciousness-stupefying "ether," then we have not moved beyond the *Stupor Mundi* of the "Colloquy in Black Rock," or the drunkenness of the fisherman.

*Lord Weary's Castle* is a book strewn with corpses. Some of them dead, but unaccounted for—unavenged, unjustified, unresurrected. Some of them living, but in the face of Eternity only experiencing the living death of their predecessors in *The Waste Land*. The corpses stand, symbolically, for fragmented experience, waiting to be resurrected into credible artistic form in the confident anticipation of the ultimate Resurrection into their eternal form. The living in this respect are no better than the dead, no closer to a realization in their own lives, or in their consciousness of a future state, of the ultimate form. The poems are a series of metaphorical tomb-stones, hovering over the experience they suggest, trying to celebrate and memorialize, to give form to, that experience. As tomb-stones, they announce that life has happened. They speak in the "prose" of reality (Born . . . Died . . .) and are fabricated in a medium, like marble, that will speak long after the body has decayed into unrecognizable form. As good tomb-stones, they should also contain the confident "poetry" of faith, some Biblical quotation or indication of future peace and reward. The volume itself should be the same kind of memorial on an even larger scale—a larger message of hope, a "comedy" in Dante's sense of the term, or a "temple" in Herbert's sense of the physical and spiritual unity of his lyrics. Instead, it is "Lord Weary's Castle," built on credit which cannot be made good.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Adam Parry. "The Two Voices of Virgil's Aeneid." *Arion* 2, no. 4 (Winter, 1963).

<sup>2</sup> *Life Studies* (Random House, N.Y., 1959), p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> All quotations of Vergil are from Frank O. Copley's translation (N.Y., Bobbs-Merrill, 1965).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hermann Broch's *Death of Vergil*, where Vergil's is the central consciousness, arguing for the destruction of the Aeneid because he has failed to make it relate to "life."

<sup>5</sup> *The Bridge*, "The Tunnel."

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Lowell's remarks on prose in "The Art of Poetry III: Robert Lowell", *Paris Review* (vol. 25, 1961) 59-95, and in "Prose Genius in Verse," *Kenyon Review*, XV (1953), 619-625.

<sup>7</sup> This was also a name for Frederick II, which brings in the secular realm and the Holy Roman Empire, paralleling once again the fate of the Church and of the State.

<sup>8</sup> Hugh Staples, *Robert Lowell: The First Twenty Years* (N.Y., Farrar, Strauss & Cudahy, 1962), p. 43.

<sup>9</sup> The fishing motif is a dominant one in *Lord Weary's Castle*, as shaving is in *Life Studies*. It is a metaphoric attempt to exercise the dominion promised man over Nature in *Genesis*. Lowell plays infinite variations on it: the secular/hypocritical fishing of the Quakers, which is ultimately self-destructive; Christ, the fisher of men; modern man, fishing in Thoreau's "fished-out" pond; the Exile, making a *Parmachenie Belle* trout fly; the Exile as drunken fisherman who turns out to be the sterile fisher-king who must die. Lurking in the background is the great fisher-God in Job who makes ridicu-

lous man's efforts at comprehension, the *contre-temps* of Jonah who refused to speak and was himself caught, and the inexorability of fate, "braining perch/ Against a bucket" in *Charles the Fifth*.

<sup>10</sup> *Inferno*, XXVII, tr. J. D. Sinclair (Oxford, N.Y., 1961).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. "Mr. Edwards and the black spider." The "spitting" is the noise the spider makes on a hot brick, and the soul in hell. To stare at a spider is to contemplate "the Black Widow, death," with its hourglass image of an eternity of suffering at the hands of God.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience* (N.Y., Norton, 1957), p. 77.

<sup>13</sup> *The Paris Review*, "The Art of Poetry III: Robert Lowell" (Vol. 25, Winter-Spring, 1961) pp. 85, 75.

<sup>14</sup> *Imitations* (N.Y., Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1961), Introduction, p. xii.

<sup>15</sup> *The Paris Review*, p. 71.

<sup>16</sup> *The New York Review*, May 12, 1966, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. "The whirl of easter eggs" in "At the Altar," and the skunks eating garbage in "Skunk Hour." The poet must find a symbol that can be eaten for his sacrament of reality, even if it turns out to be garbage rather than wafer.

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## P U R G A T O R Y

In his portrait, mostly known from frontispiece,  
Dante's too identifiable—  
behind him, more or less his height, though less,  
a tower tapering to a palm's breadth point,  
a snakewalk of receding galleries . . .  
Purgatory and a slice of Europe,  
less like the fact, more like the builder's model.  
It leans and prays the builder for support,  
insurance never offered this side of heaven.  
The last fifty years stand up like that,  
people crowd the galleries to flee  
the second death, they cry out manfully,  
for many are women and children, but the maker  
can't lift his painted hand to stop the crash.

Robert Lowell