

## Form and Continuity: Lovell's latest problems

Alan Wall

Robert Lowell was born in Boston in 1917. He was descended from early New England colonists, and after a childhood on Beacon Hill, he went to St. Mark's School and then on to Harvard, where he matriculated, but transferred after a year to Kenyon College. There he majored in classics and became a pupil of John Crowe Ransom. In 1940 he became a Catholic convert. Although Lowell attempted to enlist in the navy after the beginning of World War II he later protested against the Allied bombing of the civilian population of European cities and as a result of his failure to obey the Selective Service Act he was sentenced to a year and a day in a Federal prison. He was released after five months and in the following year, 1944, there appeared his first book of poems, *Land of Unlikeness*.

Since that time Lowell's status as a poet and a public spokesman (the two became undistinguishable) has never ceased to grow. Lowell has acquired an extraordinary power as the private man made public, the tormented citizen whose personal struggles and griefs seem fatally enmeshed with the course of twentieth century history. When the poet turned down L. B. Johnson's White House invitation as a protest against American policy in S.E. Asia it was not only the President who expressed concern. Lowell has made himself into an archetype, living through the contradictions inherent in his society, torn between the need for a domestic and artistic privacy, and the forces that impel him to a public commitment.

The first twenty years of his poetic career document an extended struggle out of obscurity. The conflict between his patrician inheritance of political responsibility and his own insistence upon literary craftsmanship resulted in a formalised convolution of metre and rhyme apparently locked in mortal combat with a relentless rhetoric. Lowell's Catholicism was, poetically, the adoption of an idealist referential, an ordered scheme of significance which existed over and against the world, yet which could be brought into a fraught tension with existing reality. The technique results in a verbal and symbolic clutter, and often involves a foisting onto the empirically-given of a vast, cabbala-like series of symbolic significances and allusions. Meaning has to be rescued from a reality which won't house it, and the poet's celebrated formal strength becomes a shoring-up of gratuitous actualities in strict literary structure. So much of the strain of the early work is a result of the 'actual' being bullied into aesthetic correspondence, the artist then

functioning as a kind of private imperialist, annexing disconnected fragments into the unity of his literary empire.

As Lowell moved into the Fifties he proceeded to 'regenerate and demystify his own literary career'.<sup>1</sup> *Life Studies* appeared in 1959 and marked the distance he had travelled. At the end of the poem *My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow* the poet brings to a single focusing point the conflicts he has set up:

He was animated, hierarchical,  
like a ginger snap man in a clothes-press.  
He was dying of the incurable Hodgkin's disease . . .  
My hands were warm, then cool, on the piles  
of earth and lime,  
a black pile and a white pile . . .  
Come winter,  
Uncle Devereux would blend to the one colour.

The homely, domestic simile puts us at our ease demonstrating the poet's proximity both to his subject and to us, and the flat, matter-of-fact statement in the next line comes not so much as a shock, more as an importantly modifying addition. This is the way it was—no point in engaging in either morbidity or flippancy. The personal experience of the conflict between life and lifelessness which then follows is easily symbolic, a quotidian significance, no less powerful for being unemphatic. The casual tone of 'Come winter' is then ideally suited to that final conditional statement. Lowell was coming to terms with his ancestry and early experience, and in the act of doing so his language became unclotted, an accurate, conversational mode for a free-ranging enquiry.

Lowell has always insisted upon the essential unity of his work. Of late this insistence has taken on a new edge since his latest works are series of sonnets which the poet tells us should be read as one poem. The attempt to produce this kind of 'continuous poem' began with *Notebook*, but the poet has since revised that work into *History* and *For Lizzie and Harriet*. Another volume, *The Dolphin*, was issued simultaneously. I intend to deal with *History* and *The Dolphin*, and hope to show by an examination of these 'poems' the kind of problem which Lowell has set himself in attempting to produce a continuous, unified poem which can connect the disparate elements of contemporary experience, without jettisoning a formal, controlling vision.

In *History* the mythic claims of *Notebook* have been enlarged and made more overt. We are presented with an enormous, though loose, poetic structure, which attempts to lay hold upon a historical and mythical horizontal extending back to Genesis and forward to the present day, whilst focusing microscopically upon details within that pattern. Philip Cooper in his informative but often uncritical book, *The Autobiographical Myth of Robert Lowell*, has said that the task of *Notebook* was to 'rescue love from the horrifying mortmain of eph-

<sup>1</sup>Gabriel Pearson: *Lowell's Marble Meanings*, collected in *The Survival of Poetry*, edited by Martin Dodsworth, Faber and Faber, 1970. One of the best pieces of criticism on Lowell yet to emerge.

mera'. It would appear from *History* that Cooper considerably underestimated Lowell's ambitions, for here, with eighty new poems and extensive corrections to the old ones, Lowell hopes that he has 'cut the waste marble from the figure'—and the figure which emerges seems to be laying as much claim to an extensive historical validity as, say, Pound's *Cantos*.

There is, however, a more recent poet who looms behind Lowell's latest enterprise, and that is John Berryman; for the major problem which the former poet has had to face in his work since *Notebook* hinges on the relationship between form and continuity. It is a problem Berryman tried to solve in his *Dream Songs*. Lowell in fact reviewed Berryman's *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* for the *Harvard Advocate* and said that he thought it 'one of the glories of the age'. He said there that he thought poetry should be capable not only of handling ephemera deftly with well-directed tweezers, but also of following 'the plot'. This is something which he credits both Berryman and himself with having, in some degree, achieved :

John, we used the language as if we made it.  
Luck threw up the coin, and the plot swallowed,  
monster yawning for its mess of potage.

Berryman's plot was focused through 'Henry', the humorous, often melodramatic protagonist of his songs, who could not escape a hostile and dispiriting world of abundant duties and superfluous wives even by dying. 'Henry' is in fact dangerously close to Berryman and at times the two become indistinguishable. Still, the distancing does produce humorous effects—it is noticeable that one seldom chuckles whilst reading Lowell. The latter's focus is very evidently himself, and his plot is not so much historical process or evolution—rather the recurrence of tragedy and frustration within 'the historical pattern'. *History* is a peculiarly static book, despite a chronology stretching from the Garden of Eden to Northern Ireland.

The very first poem in the book demonstrates this. It is called *History*, and it could operate as adequately as a conclusion as it does in its function as introduction. In other words, *History* as a whole leads back to this point rather than away from it :

History has to live with what was here,  
clutching and close to fumbling all we had—  
it is so dull and gruesome how we die,  
unlike writing, life never finishes.  
Abel was finished; death is not remote,  
a flash-in-the-pan electrifies the skeptic,  
his cows crowding like skulls against high-voltage wire,  
his baby crying all night like a new machine.

The skill that is evident here is a mastery of a particular kind of tone, an ease of reference which suggests that nothing is to be excluded from the 'myth-kitty'. The cluster of images which connects death, electricity, skulls and new machines focuses upon the threatening ambiguity within history which links increased capacity for production with increasing

de-humanisation, and the baby 'crying all night like a new machine' casually conjures an image of reification which unites man's genetic creativity with that wider, more frightening kind. The last two lines of the poem :

O there's a terrifying innocence in my face  
drenched with the silver salvage of the mornfrost',

point up the ambiguity of survival in that use of the word 'salvage'. The 'terrifying innocence' makes the grand endeavour possible. Abel is as contemporary as Lowell's experience is historical. This effortless relationship with the past becomes more and more evident as one reads on, and a suspicion starts to nag as one becomes involved in this poetic panorama : is there not a kind of promiscuity at work here, a too-ready collocation of images and periods? The vaguest of overall plots and a recurrent fourteen-line form are not in themselves powerful enough to convince the reader that there is a valid unity here, either poetic or historical. What gives *History* the unity which it has is Lowell's ventriloquism and the cultural mobility which allows him to exercise it.

Lowell's technique is ultimately syncretistic : beneath the ventriloquism and the vast range of reference one single, unchanging vision is presented again and again in the guise of a mythic pattern in which empirical fact finds its identity. Take, for instance, the poem *Old Wanderer* :

A nomad in many cities, yet closer than I  
to the grace of 19th century Europe,  
to the title of the intellectuals  
boiling in Dostoyevsky's Petersburg—  
. . . Like Marx you like to splatter the Liberal Weeklies  
with gibing multilingual communiqués  
shooting like Italians all the birds that fly.  
You voice your mother's anxious maternal warnings,  
but it's no use humoring anyone who says  
we'll sleep better under a red counterpane than a green'.

Here the casual, cultured references—'grace of 19th century Europe', 'Dostoyevsky's Petersburg', 'Like Marx', 'like Italians', combined with the half-humorous invocation of the figure of the Wandering Jew, serve to obfuscate or displace the implicit assumption of the value (or inevitability) of historical stasis embodied in those final lines.

Lowell's style has undergone several radical changes, but *History* makes it clear that his fundamental preoccupations have not really changed. The central question which the poet asks in *History* (and one could have said the same of *The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket*) occurs in the poem *Our Fathers* :

Was the snake in the garden, an agent provocateur?  
Is the Lord increased by desolation?

The poet may no longer subscribe to Catholicism, but his basic concerns are no more 'secularised' now than they ever were. Since the time of *Lord Weary's Castle*, however, the gods have come down to earth, and in his later work he rubs shoulders with them, not even separated by a

change of rhetorical tone. This has been described as a form of poetic democratisation—Lowell's farewell to his forebears as he makes his culturally overloaded journey from the allusive land of the Boston patricians to the market place. In fact, Lowell has made for himself a poetic career out of that extended farewell itself. The serpent in the garden remains an obsessive image; man's fall from grace is still the recurrent plot. One remembers Norman Mailer's description of Lowell in *The Armies of the Night*, where he described the poet as having come from a tradition in which man was, quite simply, not good enough for God. Lowell is aware of his inability to work within that 'secularised' American tradition represented by William Carlos Williams. The latter poet attempted (particularly in *Paterson*, which unfortunately deteriorated as it progressed) to create an authentically American poetry of the twentieth century, which did not need to invoke a European tradition to give it form. In the poem *In the American Grain* Lowell points to the gap between himself and Williams, using the serpent image once again :

Bill Williams made less than band-aids on his writing,  
he could never write the King's English of 'The New Yorker'.  
I am not William Carlos Williams. He  
knew the germ on every flower, and saw  
the snake is a petty, rather pathetic creature.

Williams was, after all, a doctor, more preoccupied in his daily life with the cure of disease than with manifestations of Original Sin. There is a note of self-accusation in that poem, *In the American Grain*, as though Lowell were aware of how precariously justified is his cultured isolation.

The mention of Williams raises another point about *History*. The last hundred pages of the book are liberally sprinkled with well-known figures whom Lowell has in fact known, however briefly. At times here the poet falls into a trap which he has created for himself since *Life Studies*: an apparent conviction that certain experiences, events or acquaintances are important simply because they are his or have happened to him. The reply might be made that by that comment I demonstrate my ignorance of the nature of an 'autobiographical myth'. But the end of the poem *Louis Macneice 1907-63* should demonstrate my point. After an apparently random collection of impressions there is this conclusion :

A month from his death, we talked by Epstein's bust  
of Eliot; Macneice said, 'It is better  
to die at fifty than lose our pleasure in fear'.

Does anything (could anything?) sustain that platitude but the fact that it is Macneice who is talking to Lowell, and that they are conversing in the same arena where Epstein and Eliot moved? The unashamed élitism of Lowell's use of figures from contemporary literary mythology shows the danger of the poet's ghetto mentality which produced some of the worst poems in Berryman's *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* (for instance, the elegy on Sylvia Plath). Another, much better poem, which suffers from the same kind of fault is the one written after Berryman's death :

Your Northwest and my New England are hay and ice;  
winter in England's still green out of season,  
here the night comes by four. *When will I see you,*  
*John?*

That change of tone in the third line to the causal, intimate question which has suddenly become loaded with the unanswered regret of irreparable loss is the later Lowell at his best. We also see his expertise at creating those partly visual, partly more widely-allusive images in the line :

Brushbeard, the Victorians waking looked like you. . . .

but the end of the poem reaches too assertively for a rhetorical flourish after the modest impressionism which has preceded it :

One year of wild not drinking, three or four books . . .  
Student in essence, once razor-cheeked like Joyce,  
jamming your seat in the crew race, bleeding your ass—  
suicide, the inalienable right of man.

That last descriptive claim is surely unearned in the context: we are being coaxed by a subtle sort of allusion to contemporary letters, rather than led to a justified conclusion by the poet's rigorous insistence. The demand upon our sympathy for the literary crew is made *a priori*, and we are expected to give it without question. I do not wish to sound churlish about this. The last period of Berryman's life, and the way he chose to terminate it, are a very moving and frightening part of recent literary history. But the popularisation of that mischievous term, 'extremism',<sup>2</sup> has led to a reverence for a group of writers which is thought (often wrongly) to be important simply becomes the lives of its members are seen as an epic of articulate torment. In Charles Tomlinson's fine short poem about this ethic, *Against Extremity*, he makes it clear that this writing is for him a kind of poetic blackmail :

The time's  
Spoiled children threaten what they will do,  
And those they cannot shake by petulance  
They'll bribe out of their wits by show.

The 'extremism' which is evident in *History* serves to vitiate rather than heighten this attempt at an epic of contemporary historical experience. The personal anguish is too often an intrusion, not the vicarious recreation of historical emotion it is meant to be. The nostalgia of the work is certainly a striving after totality, but Lowell's chosen universe of historical, mythic and literary event has to be pounded into shape and the chronology of loss which results is too often 'personal' in the pejorative sense.

In comparison with *History*, *The Dolphin* is both more modest and more unified. Drawing its resources from the most personal, and presumably most painful, areas in the poet's life, the book does not employ ventriloquism so much as skilful transcription, and the wife's letters to

<sup>2</sup>The term is used by A. Alvarez, for Alvarez it is (or was) a term of approbation, signifying a transcendence of that 'gentility principle' he saw vitiating English poetry. The splendid vagueness of the word has been an open invitation to muddle-headed rhetoric ever since.

the poet are magnificently handled. It is interesting that at this stage in his career Lowell should have divided his latest work up into three books. *History* is obviously 'public', whilst *The Dolphin* and *For Lizzie and Harriet* concern, much more directly, the poet's private life, yet what can this distinction mean for Lowell now? There is obviously no distinction in terms of an official treatment, though the subjects of the two smaller books are handled on the whole with more tenderness and respect than many in *History*. *The Dolphin* gains by being a book in itself since it comes much closer to being 'one poem' than does *History*. But a definite change has come about since Gabriel Pearson claimed that in using his own life as materials Lowell was not making his poetry more personal, but depersonalising his own life. This is not true of *The Dolphin*, and in an odd way one feels more distant from this poetry than from the poetry in *Life Studies*. By writing a poetry so searingly personal, so openly confessional, Lowell puts the onus on the reader to stand back—to try his own hand at depersonalising.

The first poem in *The Dolphin* concludes with one of those oxymorons which characterise so much of Lowell's work :

. . . the net will hang on the wall when the fish are eaten,  
nailed like illegible bronze on the futureless future.

The central poetic knot in so much of Lowell's later work is an ambiguity rich in possibility, but often open-ended to the extent of being irresponsible. Does the term 'futureless future' signify a future of pure chronology with no hope and no progression, or the illusion that we have a future at all? As the poem says,

The line must terminate

yet obviously to continue to work is to pledge oneself to a future, no matter how short-term it may be. Yet development, the transformation of the future into the present tense, is often portrayed as an automatic process, out of the poet's control :

For one who has always loved snakes, it is no loss  
to change nature. My fall was elsewhere—

That casual displacement of significance—'My fall was elsewhere'—is reminiscent of Eliot's insistence upon the irreparable split between world and meaning, and often results in the same under-valuation of the actual. The world we live in is so often a repetitious place that the enervated mind is tempted to regard history as a masquerade, disguising stasis, a pantomime being replayed time and again, with different costumes, but the same plot :

Nature, like philosophers, has one plot,  
only good for repeating what it does well :  
life emerges from wood and life from life.

The sense of life as repetition is heightened by Lowell's own use of repetition time and again, not so much as a device for emphasis, more as a casual trick :

Like this, like this . . .  
Examining and then examining . . .  
Climbing from chair to chair to chair . . .

The habit is often an annoying one, a seemingly unjustified idiosyncrasy. Yet the repetitions have a significance, pointing as they do to a central characteristic of these latest books: the granting of equal value to all objects, experiences, memories, provided that they have passed through the poet's mind at some point. The structuring is almost purely formal, an arbitrary aesthetic discrimination (even that word sounds too heavily prescriptive). Lowell occupies a cluttered landscape in which he finds it difficult to discover central meanings other than death, decay, and the passing of love. *Things* then become important insofar as they comfort, setting the see-saw mind at ease.

Lowell in fact has a mania for the specific and indulges in a 'wide-eyed presentation of actualities'.<sup>3</sup> The poem *July-August* shows this indulgence at its most frantic:

In hospital I read the news to sleep :  
the Fourth of July, Bastille Day, the 16th  
your Birthday . . . my two month bankholiday.  
August is summer lost in England . . .  
. . . From Brighton to Folkestone, the heads lie prone,  
the patients mend, the doctors die in peace,  
plucking the transient artificial flower—  
the father fails to mail a single lobster  
or salty nude to prove his pilgrimage.  
I have no one to stamp my letters . . . I love you,  
a shattered lens to burn the clinging smoke.

The poem is placed in time and place, the chronicle of turbulence amongst the ephemera is signed and dated like a postcard. Yet there is a curious lack of specific weight in many of those lines:

From Brighton to Folkestone, the heads lie prone,  
the patients mend, the doctors die in peace,  
plucking the transient artificial flower . . .

The four definite articles lay claim to an impersonality, and here the connection with Eliot is obvious. The latter poet describing an experience which occurred on a similar coastline writes:

On Margate Sands.  
I can connect  
Nothing with nothing.  
The broken finger nails of dirty hands.  
My people humble people who expect  
Nothing.

Without raising the question of the relative success of these two passages, it is surely evident that the synecdoche in the fourth line of the second passage has the same kind of effect as that of Lowell's 'the heads lie prone'. The vast majority of the people in both landscapes suffer from a disqualifying homogeneity: they have a formidable amount in common. 'The transient artificial flower' implies a sameness of loss and,

<sup>3</sup>Adorno's phrase, describing Walter Benjamin. Although I feel that the phrase was originally mis-directed in its use, I find it appropriate here.



more subtly, a common failure of vision. The last image of Lowell's poem :

I love you,  
a shattered lens to burn the clinging smoke

is a confusion (effectively a shattered lens itself) and it enacts a falling-away from the specificity of time and place, a grateful acknowledgement of the centrality of personal relationship. When, in another poem, Lowell writes 'Surely good writers write all possible wrong' the pun in the centre of that line signifies the distance travelled between Lowell and Shelley in terms of the 'public responsibility' of the poet.

In attempting to create for himself a continuous poetic form, Lowell raises the same kind of difficult cultural questions which Eliot raised in attempting to re-create a verse drama. Most obviously, he runs the danger of substituting for poetic unity the fake synthesis of a recurrent formal unit married to an often automatic rhetoric, which has a tendency to slip into the merely tangential or surrealist. This is, of course, to be hyper-critical, for the problem of form and continuity which he faces cannot be answered by poetry alone. It relates to the larger referentials of historical process—the problematical relationship between the significance of the present and a possible future which will not be futureless, which will be more than a clinical chronology in which only the directly personal claims our respectful handling. These are questions which Lowell attempts to deal with poetically, and if the future often appears in his poetry as no more than a grim rhetorical device, that is surely the result of a quality of experience shared by many. It seems to me that Lowell's work from *Notebook* onwards has been an unconscious admission of the enforced discontinuity of contemporary individual experience. The roll-call of privileged moments in his sonnets has a staccato quality. The events and experiences are glued together by a repetitive formal structure, and the insistence upon the heroic continuance of the individual sensibility. The strengths and weaknesses of this kind of sensibility are evident, and that loaded adjective, 'individual', is surely ripe now, if it ever was, for a full evaluation—hopefully of the transformative kind.