

Robert Lowell's "Benign Possession" in Revisiting Traditions

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Abstract

Robert Lowell's poetry is saturated in intertextuality and returns frequently to contemporary and past authors of many nationalities for deep infusions of strength in poetry that is neither a recapitulation nor a replica, but something new — a new incarnation in an enriched context. Lowell's experimental attitude towards poetry, seen in his constant revision of various forms of tradition, establishes his professionalism as well as his aspiration to create a distinct position in the literary world. It likewise suggests the lineaments of Lowell, the composite figure of various traditions, whose inner eye looks toward British and European literature while being consciously stimulated by interior matters. Lowell's imagination treats all of time, place, and person as fluid for his poetry, and recognizes no borders. The capacious cosmopolitanism of Ezra Pound and the Anglo-Americanism of T. S. Eliot were authoritative standards of the high modern poetry that Lowell respected throughout his working life and the two remain in view as separate cases of influence. This paper discusses various influences on Robert Lowell and his poetry as an amalgamation of various traditions which serve to identify his cosmopolitanism.

Keywords: Tradition; Influence; Imitation; Cosmopolitanism; Intertextuality; Revision

Robert Lowell's impulsive absorption of varied traditions steers most of his oeuvre. Lowell's poetry often dramatizes his poetic "I" in the role of a full-time, professional poet equal with the best, yet one who expands that conception by taking from other writers, living and dead, with eager hands until he grows to be not a poet

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but the poet, a construction that includes as it transcends all preceding poets, assimilating them, their words and works into his own unprecedented poetic authority (Walcott “On Robert Lowell” 28). The enduring values of Lowell’s poetry rest upon his “benign possession” of the works of his predecessors and contemporaries. His self-conscious treatment of previous literary works displays the power of literature to change under the pressure of a vision that makes them new by seeing them as if for the first time. In fact, the *New Critical* incentive would be sufficient for a quality in Robert Lowell that is noted by many critics, and for which they claimed that “Lowell writes poetry to *get even*.” For Lowell, “competition is the sole inspiration” which guides him to possess an “astonishing ambition, a willingness to learn what past poetry was and to compete with it on its own terms” (Jarrell *The Third Book of Criticism* 333). It is the very basic instinct through which he endeavors to exhume “the highest conception of the poet’s task” (Axelrod *Essays on the Poetry* 53). Moreover, the sheer quantity and variety of intertextuality in Lowell’s poetry counters Bloom’s theory that belated poets feel threatened by, and then in maturity outgrow, their father’s influence. Hate, envy and fear are not detected much in Lowell’s treatment of precursors, whom he celebrates in early and late poems while bidding to outdo them.

All of Lowell’s work shows interest in continuity with Western canonical writers while it hungers for a domestic difference. He nourishes this particular aspect, following such learned literary mentors as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Allen Tate, and John Crowe Ransom. Lowell and these teachers were what nowadays some slur as WASPs (notwithstanding the periods Lowell and Tate spent as Catholics). Yet, although he had a contrariety of feelings about his New England legacy, Lowell tried more persistently than any of the others to accumulate a mixed poetic world revised from both the European and American traditions – without ever declaring definitively which qualities he wanted to revise from each tradition and which he was discarding. Moreover, Pound was an ingenious and inspirational figure for Lowell, although no other poet inhabited his cultural imagination as Eliot, and a strong personal and professional relationship grew between them when Eliot, as director of Faber and Faber, published Lowell’s *Poems 1938-49* (1950) in Britain. But Lowell was a postmodern poet, in the simplest sense of literary history, who wished to be not just after, but well after Pound and Eliot, responding to but not dominated by their influence.

The European influence of original translation and literary imitation motivated Lowell to publish all his dramatic works, four lyric collections, and many single poems in which he imaginatively remodels others’ finished texts by speculative rewriting. This line of work was significant in regenerating Lowell’s output throughout his life, even though it usually brought him more adverse criticism than appreciation, especially from those who thought that the only way to show respect for an original was in a close translation accurately rendered. Lowell repudiates adverse reaction in advance through self-conscious and highly directive editorial

apparatus (prefaces, headnotes, epigraphs, endnotes) openly declaring both his sources and the new vision in his revision. In fact, he was schooled in types of poetry created out of recreation by Tate and Pound, who approached their translations primarily as poetic masters of their own language, not as linguists or scholars. Tate's emphasis on "recreation of style" in "Translation or Imitation" is central in Lowell's adaptations, imitations, and translations which follow the Classical and English Augustan mode of compositions within the prerogative of an individual talent (Tate 198).

Rewriting Originals: Lowell's Revisionary Impulse

Lowell thought, with Pound, that the quality of literature of a particular time is correlated with the quality of its translations: "A great age of literature is perhaps always a great age of translations; or follows it" (Pound 232). Attitudes of critics in post-World War I America to imitative examples and styles of creative writing were influenced, for and against, by the poems Pound wrote between 1917 and 1920, particularly *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, which caused a great deal of offence even though Pound tried to make clear there never was any question of "translation" (Davie 71). Lowell did not develop the courage of Pound's convictions until he published *Imitations* (1961), but vacillated before and after that. There is edgy hostility in Lowell's frequent editorial protestation, perhaps anticipating charges of plagiarism, that he rewrites originals in his own way to make imaginative new poems. He mentions in *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946), "When I use the word *after* below the title of a poem, what follows is not a translation but an imitation which should be read as though it were an original poem" ("Note" to *Lord Weary's Castle*). But his authorial reluctance to discriminate does not settle critical ambivalence (or drive out honest confusion) about his intentions with this kind of revisionary activity. The "Appendix" in *Day by Day* (1977) claims generic coherence in its title "Translations." Yet the first poem "Rabbit, Weasel, and Cat" bears the legend "(Adapted from La Fontaine)," and the second, "George III" has the Headnote "(This too is perhaps a translation, because I owe so much to Sherwin's brilliant *Uncorking Old Sherry*, a life of Richard Brinsley Sheridan – R.L.)." Of the three poems in "Appendix," only the third, "Arethusa to Lycotas," is correctly credited as a translation ("Propertius," Book IV, 3). In fact, Lowell's apologies, slippery vocabulary, and misleading presentation of the status of his "Appendix" might shake confidence in the integrity of his close work with other authors, distract from his achievements, and seem to present a classic case study for the influence theorists.

Indeed, Lowell's free adaptations are a conscious form of creative renewal, celebrate the past in modernizing it, are collaborative, not subservient, and welcome, not fight

¹ The seemingly arbitrary assortment in "Appendix" holds thematic interest for Lowell's oeuvre. La Fontaine's alternation of line lengths begins a loosening of the poetic line which leads to the *vers libre* of nineteenth-century France so admired by Eliot and which Lowell came to favor.

back, many authors in different literary periods. The compelling values of his practice are dramatized and corroborated in the cartoon images of two starkly contrasting national leaders (George III and Nixon) juxtaposed in “George III.” Those who respect the past, like George III, can reject the idea of linear history as time (“how modern George is”), and since they are connected to, yet not browbeaten by the past (“unable to hear/ his drab tapes play back his own voice”), remain free to reverse it, as George did by anachronistically playing back his tapes (Day by Day 135). Lowell reverses and honors his sources by rewriting and redirecting past literatures. All senses of reverse are appropriate somewhere in his revisionary practice. He changes meaning to its opposite, redirects the past as an inevitable part of the present, brings the future forward, and claims his own creative originality in re-versing. While “George III” is a satirical elegy for George III, Nixon and the United States Constitution, it is also one of Lowell’s many celebrations of the language of poetry as he reverses both biography and constitutional history.

Lowell as a Cosmopolitan Figure of Tradition

Lowell’s ambition as a poet is explicitly defined when the poems of *Lord Weary’s Castle* are read in full context, where the poet displays and distinguishes himself as a cosmopolitan figure of tradition among many international poets. The collection quickly raises the question of the different cultural layers in Lowell’s consciousness and his friendly relation to literatures of many Western nationalities. “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket” (*Lord Weary’s Castle* 10) places a tradition with a complex pedigree running directly through Milton in the way of exploring an American, particularly New England Puritan, experience. For the young Lowell, Milton, a source of his “piratical” energy, helped him “develop his distinctive persona and tone, one that could sound at once authoritative and iconoclastic” (Burt 337). The poem, in parallel with “Lycidas,” makes cogent revisions of past poetic conventions in a manifold allusive combination of formal features. The work’s length, the complexity of its loose, rhymed verse paragraph structure, and elegiac genre, assimilate Milton’s English, Italian, and Classical influences for pastoral lament, those succeeding commemorations of marine tragedies and dead poets indebted to Milton – “Adonais” (1821), Shelley’s poem on Keats’ death, “Thyrsis” (1866), Mathew Arnold’s monody on the death of Arthur Hugh Clough, Hopkin’s “The Wreck of the Deutschland” (1877), and hazily but indisputably, much English nineteenth-century literature.

“Mr. Edwards and the Spider” (*Lord Weary’s Castle* 58-59), which was first printed in *Kenyon Review* VIII (Winter 1946), is another composition in which the poet’s vaunting intellectual ambition is revealed in deep cultural scholarship, and which combines new with old worlds, although with less aggressive attitude than the longer poem. Lowell uses an intricate variation of the formal unity of the Spenserian stanza, “one of the most remarkably original metrical innovations in the history of English verse,” both for sharply drawn description and narrative snapshots, and to

build up expressively rich emotional effects (Preminger 266). It provides a link to Spenser through Donne, whose use of reiterated rhymes in the stanzaic structure smoothed the verse order illustrated in "A Nocturnall Upon St. Lucies Day"; and hook up a tie with the English Romantics, whose elevated estimation of the stanza as a principle vehicle is represented by Byron's "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage," Keats' "Eve of St. Agnes," and Shelley's "Adonais." Poets have seldom written in the stanza since the middle of the nineteenth century; Lowell's use provides a rare case in the twentieth century and is emblematic of his view of himself as an innovative American poet already equal in stature to such as Spenser, Donne, and the Romantics (Preminger 266-67).

However, in opposition to the Americanism advocated by Whitman and Williams (I am "a United Stateser" was one of William's artistic battle cries), Lowell keeps his American poetry open to interpenetration by previously ascendant cultures. His pervasive propensity to think and create in revision, along with the salience of intertextuality in the book, are obtruded in authorial instruction ("When I use the word *after* below the title of a poem, what follows is not a translation but an imitation which should be read as though it were an original poem") and information given in the introductory headnote and individual epigraphs. Lowell identifies his source for the volumes title (the traditional Scottish ballad "Lamkin," the moral tale of a house of ingratitude, crime and punishment) and literary and pictorial influences that inspired about a quarter of the poems. The multi-cultural spread in his ambition and revision is readily apparent from even a few poems, such as "War (After Rimbaud)," "The Ghost (After Sextus Propertius)," "The Shako (After Rilke)." But his direction on how to read an imitation "as though it were an original poem" puts an erudite demand on general readers as if they were all part of his classically educated literary circle and privy to his ambitious mind. He first asks them to conceive his understanding of two genres (after meaning "not a translation but an imitation"), and then encourages them to be literary critics. His audience is to have enough sophisticated knowledge of his original's reputation, and precedent of imitations of it (such as Pound's *Homage to Sextus Propertius*) to share Lowell's confidence in his originality. Readers must be innocent of preconceptions about the work called to mind to avoid obstruction in reading his "original English poem."

Tradition and Its Continuance

One of Eliot's earliest and most widely known statements of poetic principle fills in some theoretical foundation for Lowell's use of prior poetry. Eliot's whole thinking and feeling about writing poetry, and his practice of creating it, mature early, give

² *Lord Weary's Castle* vii. Lowell begins a practice of identifying some, but not all, sources which is a familiar feature of later books; except that by 1973 he probably felt that his widespread revision of others was well enough known and from then on he omitted directive editorial comment from his collections.

³ "The Blind Leading the Blind" in *Lord Weary's Castle* 63 is added to those poems "after," since it is inspired by Breughel's painting *Das Gleichnis der Blinden* (1568) – rendering Matthew XV 14 – and indebted to Auden's "Musee des Beaux Arts" ("In Breughel's Icarus, for instance") in Auden's *Selected Poems*.

weight throughout to “stealing” from previous writers and remain true to his early discourse in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”:

And the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence ... This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his own contemporaneity. (Selected Essays 14)

One of Eliot’s points is that the living poet achieves “his complete meaning” by setting himself among “the dead” writers for “[h]is significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists” (15). We might call to mind Yeats, Crane, Stevens, Pound, Eliot, Auden, among those who also practice what Eliot preaches in his two discriminating propositions above. Whereas Yeats, Crane, and Stevens have usually escaped serious censure for their learned intertextuality, Pound was vilified for disrespecting the dead poet in *Homage to Sextus Propertius* (finished in 1917, partly published in 1919) and Eliot is not universally admired for a different kind of so-called over-familiarity with the tradition. He has been most frequently criticized, even among those who hold a high opinion of his art, for the fact that so much of his poetic verbal stock is host to the ghosts of dead and living writers. Conrad Aiken, in his first sympathetic review of *The Waste Land*, complained in vexation that Eliot created “a literature of literature’ ... a kind of parasitic growth on literature, a sort of mistletoe” (91). In America, the cultural and literary learning supporting Eliot’s creative work has had a deleterious effect on some American poets, who feel intimidated by the worst kind of aggressive conservatism in modern poetics, as they see it. For instance, Williams felt acute creative anxiety and paralysis as an American before Eliot’s abstract sense of culture; Karl Shapiro believed Eliot’s elite bookishness was so stultifying to native development it needed to be opposed outright (Shapiro “T. S. Eliot: The Death of Literary Judgement” 35-60).

Jarrell was alert to the extent and value of the claim Lowell makes on a full cultural heritage in his “contemporaneity” when he commends his “thoroughly historical mind. It is literary and traditional as well; he can use the past so effectively because he thinks so much as it did” (Jarrell *Poetry and the Age* 214). Steven Gould Axelrod views:

From the beginning of his career, Lowell sought to create his poetic identity out of an involvement with history. His development as an artist in the shadow of the Modernist giants only confirmed his historicism, his sense that, as T.S. Eliot put it, in penetrating the life of another age “one is penetrating the life of one’s own.” (Essays on Poetry 18)

Lowell speaks in an open manner to those men and women who helped him to define himself, personally and poetically – the writers, and especially poets, living and

dead, who helped him in immeasurable ways throughout his life (Clark 10). Some of these writers he knew personally, while others wrote poems through which he could enter into dialogue with them, with Sappho and Milton and Coleridge, and thus come to know them, and thus come to know himself. *Imitations*, in which Lowell reworks, rather than just translates, the great European poets, from Homer to the present, can be viewed as an effort to fuse with and join the great tradition of his poetic ancestors. He talks to the dead poets, and they talk back to him, and some of their fruitful dialogues are represented in these poems. In the essay “*Imitations: Translation as Personal Mode*,” Ben Belitt says that “translation may serve the translator as a form of surrogate identity” (117), and Jay Martin clarifies how the poet creates that identity: “[i]n *Imitations*, a single mode of the imagination predominates: the poet confronts and understands himself through engagement with all that is not-the-self” (Martin 24).

However, contrary to Eliot in his earlier years, Lowell’s statements on literary principles in the 1940s were sparse, although he imitates, whether consciously or not, Eliot’s practice of defending his own poetics in critical appreciation of others. His commendation of one feature of *Four Quartets* in a 1943 review endorses the values seen in *Lord Weary’s Castle* when it appeared three years later.

The quotations have other functions besides the capture of a richer and more inspired texture than the poet could sustain on his own. They vary the tone, argue for the continuity of artistic tradition, and make for a semblance of anonymity, so that even the most confessional passages appear impersonal. *Four Quartets* is something of a community product. (Sewanee Review 51: 434)

Capturing “a richer and more inspired texture than the poet could sustain on his own” shows Lowell in 1943 thinking mostly of craft and technique, more timid about freedom with sources than he is in the *Lord Weary’s Castle* headnote, and less sure on the matters of principle and practice from which subsequently he never deviates in his poetry. He may have drawn early encouragement from Eliot’s mischievous dicta on thefts by good and bad poets.

Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it is torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion. A good poet will usually borrow from authors remote in time, or alien in language, or diverse in interest. (“Philip Massinger” Selected Essays 206)

Lowell was not bound to Eliot’s alternatives; he never thought of himself as just a good poet, but only as equal with the best, and we can admire the bare-faced cheek when he revises Eliot to best him, as he responds to a question on the frequency with which he makes a poem “after” someone, “that every writer has to be a thief. He has

to be childishly ambitious and even say to himself, like Racine, what would Sophocles think of this?" (Meyers 30)

Tradition and Influence

Many conventionally allusive modern writers are silent, evasive, or deliberately deceptive regarding some or all of the sources that have helped them most. It is assumed that Vladimir Nabokov vehemently refuses to own reading of much Freud and Joyce when several of his novels are full of allusions to their works. But Lowell is in diverse and honorable company regarding the contribution of his poetic ancestors. Though he does not openly honor Milton or Spenser, he expects some readers to feel the value of thefts behind "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket" and "Mr Edwards and the Spider" to comprehend the force of his poetic statements as an immensely ambitious poet, and at the same time, to enhance his fiercely independent status. In fact, Lowell grapples with a self-contradictory and impossible demand on himself by electing to profess the power of his own poetic mind through reversing Milton's "Lycidas" in the twentieth century context. Yet it has been argued that "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket" and Lowell's other poems in Lord Weary's *Castle* experience the "intertextuality" and "influence" on which they depend as usurpation and imposition, strongly verifying Milton, in Bloom's terms, as Lowell's "giant inhibiting precursor." That postulate has some value, but seems too easy and simple to remain unqualified in the face of the ensuing objections to influence theory, particularly to the small room it leaves for the active and positive choices generated in Lowell's cognitive processes of revision. Even so, one might suspect an underlying "anxiety" about influence of others, and a struggle to "overcome" it, lurking under Lowell's pedagogic editorial tone in the *Lord Weary's Castle* headnote. Every "belated" poet is after his "precursors" in the most obvious way, since he revises in an inevitable and endless cycle where the old becomes new and the new becomes old. So influence is inescapable when the "belated" poet rereads literature for (as he goes after, in search of) its new meaning and value to him. He then shows his originality by revising in his current work congenial materials and features found in earlier writers (a community which comes to include his own past poetic self or selves). Influence theory asserts that "precursors" have exhausted all the possibilities of writing great original poems (a claim impossible to prove beyond reasonable doubt) and that they leave an ever-diminishing legacy of "strong" imaginative possibilities. But instead of seeing his intrinsic position as a "belated" poet inevitably "burdened" with creative impoverishment, Lowell adopts aggressive tactics – not the "defensive tactics" the theory prescribes – that encourage definitions of his original work against the achievements of a whole library of predecessors. Then what might be the reason that impedes him from not giving his models in English open credit similar to that

⁴Bloom's theories do not submit themselves to brief summaries or extraction of representative phrases, but in this paragraph the attention to his concepts is highlighted through the quotation of some of his keywords.

given to foreign writers. As he writes with so much at his fingertips, he has the confidence to follow the custom of his “strong precursors.” In his best poems and “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket,” for instance, which repays its thefts with interest, and “Ulysses and Circe” in *Day by Day* – he does not search for originality. One side effect of Lowell’s headnote stimulates us to think about what Milton did to create “an original English poem” and what the “belated” poet has done that is similar and different in “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket.” The work of past poets forms part of the *lingua franca* of poetry, serving as a medium between different religions, nations, continents, languages, and times, that inspires Lowell to write and rewrite his own poetic origin and personality, genealogy, and heritage.

Imitations: A New Vision in Revision

Donald Carne-Ross has said of *Imitations* that the poems create a “probing encounter between two linguistic and cultural mediums” that gives us “the uniquely liberating experience of living within two areas of reality, two systems of reference” (169). Lowell’s interest in the cultural parallels gives him a distinct poetical platform to share experiences and revise. However, *Imitations* is Lowell’s most publicly conspicuous assertion of ambition and most visibly concentrated, concrete insistence on the values in Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” of “the timeless as well as the temporal together” which makes “a writer traditional” and at the same time “most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.” Lowell again contributes to the category of perplexity as he demurs about the kind of work he has done, but insists on his poetic originality: “I believe that poetic translation – I would call it an imitation—must be expert and inspired, and needs at least as much technique, luck and rightness of hand as an original poem.” Through “as an original poem” he distances himself from non-poet academic translators, such as those he baits and bludgeons (his words) for their failed attempts to render Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* into English (*Collected Prose* 152-60). Lowell’s revisions in this collection are part of a self-conscious program to secure his own value for posterity. In the preface, Lowell acknowledges his “reckless [ness]” with “literal meaning” in the interests of “get[ting] the tone” of the originals and making “alive English” out of them (*Imitations* xi); he shows a fundamental distinction in his attitude between the revision by imitation of foreign poems in contemporary English idioms that enrich literature in English, which is how the English Augustans understood the practice, and the complete re-envisioning of a poem like “Lycidas” in “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket” (*Lord Weary’s Castle* 8), which absorbs over three hundred more years of culture and experience than were available to Milton.

Lowell rewrote sixty-three poems of eighteen European poets in *Imitations*, from Homer to Boris Pasternak (none of whom wrote in English), of different temperaments and periods, to suggest his indifference to originality as well as his claim on prominence in such company. In a characteristic inspiration of book design,

Lowell frames his poems within the ancient epic device of the voyage of self-discovery, creative self-improvement, and self-advancement. His first and last verse lines are, “Sing for me, Muse, the mania of Achilles” and “miraculously multiplied by its mania to return,” linking Homer to Rilke in repetitions with disparity, in a pattern which accumulates equivalences and also implies relationships that these authors create in other poems in and outside the book. The meaning of the arrangement of poems thus implicitly expands the material in the book and increases exponentially Lowell’s strength and status as a contemporary figure (“miraculously multiplied” and “miraculously multiplied by his mania [for poetry]”) *Imitations* freely renders models and sanctions thought derived from tradition, in Lowell’s unique voice.⁵ Although he succeeds in remaking most of his originals into contemporary poems, some revisions fail because they become too “Lowellian” in the restricted sense, most often seen in his earliest poems, of their self-conscious stretch for modern idiom. Baudelaire’s “The Swan,” for example, suggests a lampoon, with thick strokes and lapses of skill, as that in the penultimate stanza.

I think of people who have lost the luck
they never find again, and waste their powers,
like wolf-nurses giving grief a tit to suck,
or public orphans drying up like flowers ... (*Imitations* 59)

The first simile is related to the original meaning—“Et tettent la Douleur comme une bonne louve” which is literally, sucking on grief like a she-wolf—but insistence on “tit” reveals “linguistic and poetic insensitivity,” in Geoffrey Hill’s phrase (“Robert Lowell: ‘Contrasts and Repetitions’” 190). In this instance, Lowell heavy-handedly departs from his sure touch with wit, his aptitude for setting phrases in movable type, for hinting rather than asserting, which is particularly effective when applied to the perilous state of existence that lurks behind many of his lines. But the line reflects Lowell’s youthful fascination with sound over sense, with menace too knowingly indicated.

Basically, all translations and imitations are considered as a form of homage to the traditions that support the present. Yet in presenting the collection to the public, Lowell seems to court critical hostility through the bold solipsism of his “Introduction” which speaks grandly of “my originals,” “my Baudelaires,” “my licenses have been many,” “my Montales,” explaining his hope “for a whole, to make a single volume, a small anthology of European poetry [which does] what my authors might have done if they were writing their poems now and in America” (“Introduction” to *Imitations* xi-iv). But in the oxymoronic possessive “my Baudelaires,” he does no more, perhaps, honestly express a truism: all serious poets yearn for the ideal state that would be uniquely circumscribed by their self-authoring, self-aggrandising originality, but each finds his or her own voice only through others.

⁵ “The Killing of Lykaon” *Imitations* 1-2, “Pigeons” *Imitations* 149.

As a result, many critics tried to refute the concept of “contemporaneity” supporting the anthology with examples of whole or parts of poems thought to be offending because they introduced negative aesthetic effects alien to the text. A composite review would find all original authors compromised by, as one critic put it, “egregious distortions” (Simon 134). The temptation to score limited points was not entirely resisted. Norma Procopiow thought that “The Voyage,” one “Lowell Baudelaire” dedicated to Eliot, “contains stanzas so reminiscent of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and *The Waste Land* that they seem parodic” (97).

[I] magination wakes from its drugged dream,
sees only ledges in the morning light.
What dragged these patients from their German spas?
Shall we throw them in chains, or in the sea?
Sailors discovering new Americas,
who drown in a mirage of agony!

The worn-out sponge, who scuffles through our slums
sees whiskey, paradise and liberty
wherever oil-lamps shine in furnished rooms—
we see Blue Grottoes, Caesar and Capri. (*Imitations* 66)

Procopiow presents her term depreciatively, without reflecting whether any part of the parodist’s art, and any degree of distortion, could be appropriate. She might have added that the “Unreal City” passage in *The Waste Land* begins and ends with allusions to Baudelaire (as Eliot notes in his comments on lines 60 and 76) as part of the poem’s purpose in speaking in a composite of tongues, before wondering if this is relevant to *Imitations*. Lowell’s practice of showing intimacy through his lines with the voices of great literary predecessors is central to his knowing, understanding, and writing in the multi-racial language of poetry. But Lowell is not atypical in this, which is clarified through the examples of Derek Walcott, who applauds himself as “the mulatto of style” (*The Fortunate Traveller* 8) – a Caribbean multi-lingual, multi-cultural, postcolonial, direct heir and mimic of Joyce, as he shows in Ormeros – and Berryman echoing Yeats in his boast, “— I am a monoglot of English/ (American version) and, say pieces from/ a baker’s dozen others: where’s the bread” (“Dream Song #48” 52)?

Walcott responds tenderly to the “sunlit sanity” of *Imitations* in his 1984 commemoration of Lowell’s career; he is fascinated with the book and comes back to it several times in his essay, rejecting, incidentally, the most common attacks on Lowell for violating the past (the well informed 1968 review of John Simon, “Abuse of Privilege: Lowell as Translator,” convicts as charged in his title, with some heavy prosecutions: “an act of poetic vandalism”: “At what point does an act of “imitation” become an immoral act?”) (Simon 137). Walcott describes Lowell’s poetry as a kind of international community where exchange is free and poems are the opposite of property. In eulogizing “his openness to receive influences,” Bedient talks of Walcott

too, illustrating temperamental similarity and their shared possession and dispossession, neither inside nor outside the European and American traditions, but each one creating his own.

In taking on the voices of poets he loved and unashamedly envied, he could, in rewriting them, inhabit each statue down the pantheon of the dead and move his hand in theirs. It was high fun. But it is also benign possession. He did it with living poets too: Montale, Ungaretti. He becomes Sappho, Rilke, Pasternak, and writes some of his finest poetry through them, especially Rilke. His imitation of “Orpheus and Eurydice,” [sic, “Orpheus and Eurydice and Hermes”] to me, is more electric than its original. This shocks scholars. They think that Lowell thought himself superior to these poets. He was only doing what was a convention for the Elizabethans, often improving certain lines by imitation, heightening his own gift. ... He had the honesty to know his own greatness, to make the great his colleagues (Walcott *New York Review of Books* 31: 28-9)

He shows some of Lowell’s tendency to slide among terms, moving easily between “rewriting,” “possession,” “writes through,” “imitation.” Walcott has a remarkable “possession” of Eliot’s “historical sense” (“a feeling that the whole of literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence” (Eliot *Selected Essays* 14). Lowell imitates the Elizabethans as he realizes what imitation can do, giving Rilke simultaneous existence with poets and musicians back to the Hellenistic age – those who have taken the Orpheus and Eurydice theme to characterize the image of the poet who communicates what is silent and unites what is divided — thus demonstrating, as Eliot says, “his own contemporaneity.”

Walcott’s “high fun” connects Lowell once again through echoes of “Lycidas” (“What could the Muse herself that Orpheus bore”) to the earlier poetic self of “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket” (“ask for no Orphean lute/ To pluck life back”). “Orpheus, Eurydice and Hermes,” more electric than Rilke’s original, begins in imitation and finds variance and supplementation, justifying Lowell’s term “my Rilke” as both descriptive and possessive, a free re-vision in his American voice, as we see in this

“The mature Walcott speaks in Lowell’s Youthful *Lord Weary’s Castle* voice in his poem “Old New England,” part of the first section “North” of *The Fortunate Traveller*, when Walcott follows in his precursor’s footsteps through poetic geography mapped by the American. Calvin Bedient sees the poem as a prime example of Walcott’s debt to Lowell and his new found desire (in 1981, four years after Lowell’s death) to speak as a sort of self-naturalized U.S. citizen. Walcott echoes “The Quaker Graveyard” in an obvious similarity of subject matter and renewal of its attitude recoiling from human brutality and the violence of the war, this time the Vietnam conflict.

Black clippers, tarred with whales’ blood, fold their sails
Entering New Bedford, New London, New Haven.
A white church spire whistles into space
Like a swordfish, a rocket pierces heaven
As the thawed springs in icy chevrons race
Down hillsides and Old Glories flail
The crosses of green farm boys back from Nam. (*The Fortunate Traveller* 3)

segment from the first half of the poem.

It was as though his intelligence were cut in two.
His outlook worried like a dog behind him,
now diving ahead, now romping back,
now yawning on its haunches at an elbow of the road.
What he had heard breathed myrrh behind him,
and often it seemed to reach back to them
those two others
on oath to follow behind to the finish.
Then again there was nothing behind him,
only the backring of his heel,
and the currents of air in his blue cloak.
He said to himself, "For all that, they are there."
He spoke aloud and heard his own voice die. (*Imitations* 101)

The last line is one of those Lowell statements replete with significance for his writing. When one poet sees what he can take from others, he blesses himself in their voices to keep his own voice alive; just the thought of his breath dying appalls him.

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