

Of Woman, Water, and the New  
Perseus: A Reading of Robert  
Lowell's *Selected Poems* (1976)

"One man, two women," Lowell says almost jokingly at one point in *The Dolphin* (1973), trying to put at a distance the dilemma of his own personal situation. He is between marriages, and his position, is in fact, a difficult one. "My eyes have seen what my hand did": he is largely at fault; everyone is hurt; and he is at a loss for meaning or reason in what has happened. Yet Lowell makes poetry out of the situation; his intimate and often embarrassing account becomes the vulnerable and public writing for which he is famous. Earlier in his career it had been his religious crisis, mental illness, political dissent, moral guilt and family problems which had filled his poems; and many readers wish to, or choose to, resist him on the grounds of his being depressing. But what the thirty years work in his *Selected Poems* shows is that his poetry has a unique truth in its insight into human fear and love, a truth that goes beyond Lowell's own individual case and disturbs us—as it ought to disturb us—with the sense that it is representatively modern.

Why this should be so is partly to be explained in terms which *The Dolphin* provides more clearly than any of Lowell's earlier writing. The "one man, two women" situation is right on

the surface, and at the front of the poetry. But the fact is that this situation belongs deep within Lowell's imagination, experience and creativity. Two female presences pervade the whole of his work, and the tension in him towards them lies at the heart of his sense of reality. At times unconsciously and at other times indirectly, they make for a pattern that repeats itself again and again as the creative and energising structure of his writing.

*The Dolphin* also clearly links this drama with the sea. Lowell speaks of the women in his poems as if they are creatures of the sea. The world of the dolphin and mermaid allows him to move between the intimately personal and the mythic or legendary with ease and assurance. The sea provides a true home for his imagination, especially the Atlantic Ocean which serves Lowell in so many ways in his life and poetry. In *The Dolphin* it is the vital element for his imagination and characters; it is also a great stage spread out between England and America on which the drama acts itself out in an almost-Racinian form. Elsewhere in Lowell the Atlantic intensifies the "death by water" motif which he takes over from Romantic and American poetry. Generally, it may be said that an "oceanic feeling" flows through his best work, having its origins in myth and its effects in the many forms Lowell has found for it in the various phases of his career.

## I

"I have seen the Gorgon," Lowell exclaims in one of his poems, and it seems a true insight for a poet who has looked at and recorded so many of the personal traumas of modern living. In ancient Greek legend, we recall, the sight of the Gorgon turned men to stone until Perseus, averting his gaze by looking in the mirror of his shield, slew her by cutting off her head. Lowell, however, is standing before Benvenuto Cellini's famous statue of Perseus in Florence, and the point he makes is not what might be expected from such a statement. Indeed, he has an opposite experience, a sympathetic experience, one where the irony does not escape him of the Gorgon herself, so to speak, now turned to stone.

The main feeling of his poem "Florence" is close to a conversion experience. So far from drawing away in horror at the monster and being glad at Perseus triumphantly holding up the head of the Gorgon he has slain, Lowell sees that his feelings are deeply bound up with the Medusa. She challenges the world of

Florence for him: "Oh Florence, Florence, patroness / of the lovely tyrannicides!" he cries, but recognizes as he does so the claim on the side of the Gorgon.

Pity the monsters!  
Pity the monsters!  
Perhaps, one always took the wrong side—  
Ah, to have known, to have loved  
too many Davids and Judiths!  
My heart bleeds black blood for the monster.  
I have seen the Gorgon.  
The erotic terror  
of her helpless, big bosomed body  
lay like slop.  
Wall-eyed, staring the despot to stone,  
her severed head swung  
like a lantern in the victor's hand.

What Benvenuto Cellini and Lowell see are two different things. Lowell, for his part, is seized by the pathos of the event. Something great is lost to life for him in the Medusa's death. It is too easy he feels to side with the human heroes against the monsters. Instead, he is transfixed by the phenomenon of her form. He partly sees, he partly interprets. His verse is like "her severed head": it seems cut off, swinging, unsupported by the life of which it was once a part. Yet Lowell has an intuition of "her erotic terror" outlasting her death, her huge sensuous feminine energy like the ocean in the way it "lay like slop." Earlier in the poem Lowell had used the same pattern and association of images in a seemingly gratuitous comment on life in Florence:

How vulnerable the horseshoe crabs  
dredging the bottom like flat-irons  
in their antique armor,  
with their swordgrass backbone tails,  
made for a child to grab  
and throw strangling ashore!

The Gorgon and the horseshoe crabs belong to the underside of Florence. The triumphalist, mostly male and paranoid stance of the Renaissance has another story to tell; and it is to this other story—of woman and of water—that Lowell in his poetry will turn.

When Lowell comes back to the Gorgon later in his writing in "Near the Ocean," it is with a more pressing—albeit cryptic—sense of what the Gorgon's presence means in life. This time

he sees the "gorgon head, / fished up from the Aegean dead, / with all its stranded snakes uncoiled, / here beheaded and despoiled" as something from an ancient sense of order and nature which the modern world of the twentieth century has lost. The experience of love is portrayed in this poem as a series of futile and illicit affairs, which take place *near* the ocean but not *of* it. Modern sexuality lacks an oceanic feeling in Lowell's view; it needs a sea change.

The frightening sexuality of male-female confrontation in ancient Greek tragedy and legend—of Perseus' encounter with the Gorgon, or Orestes before his mother Clytemnestra—is lost now to life except for a few vestigial moments in the theater. Something heroic, primitive and fearful has been purged from Western consciousness along with the dismissal of the female powers and presences of ancient cultures. Lowell wants to relearn what the ocean can teach in this regard. He wants the ocean like a great maternal presence to take him and teach him its grim and timeless lesson.

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

To love what he fears and to fear what he loves is the lesson of the Monster embedded in the memory of the ocean.

But Perseus did not only slay the Gorgon: he rescued Andromeda as well; and Lowell's poetry is remarkable in the way it follows the same path. Images of fear of woman and images of rescue or release through woman flow through his work. These are the two female presences in his writing which become part of his experience and principles of his poetic form. Fear balances love, and punishment is set off against salvation. Regardless of the subtle shifts and intricacies of meaning Lowell explores within the pattern, its structure does not vary. Lowell himself as the new Perseus is distinct in stance from his ancient Greek prototype. He does not go looking for the Medusa: she comes to him; she is part of his world, his environment, his psyche. He finds the monstrous as often as not in himself: "My mind's not right . . . I myself am hell." And equally he does not often save his

Andromeda: he needs her to save him. Female saving figures rise up in his poems as sheer acts of grace: "Oh my *Petite*, / clearest of all God's creatures, still all air and nerve" and "Like the sun she rises in her flame-flamingo infants' wear." Lowell's poems have a general—and we might say dialectical—movement from the one state of the woman to the other. He himself is the register of the process and its tension.

In Lowell's early poetry up to the 1950's he did not find a role for himself as the Perseus figure of his poems, even though in "Between the Porch and the Altar" in *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946) there is a strong suggestion of how his future poetry was to develop. The female polarity of his early poetry, however, is clearly present, too strong at times to be integral with the poetry. The Our Lady of Walsingham section of "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket" has troubled many readers who have not grasped the way it belongs to a larger principle of form in Lowell's work. In his middle period from *Life Studies* (1959) through *Near the Ocean* (1967) Lowell brought himself so forcefully into play in his poems that the structure of his writing has often been lost on the reader, and the conflict of the female forces which was determining his suffering let go unnoticed. In "Skunk Hour" the presences of "Nautilus Island's hermit heiress" and the "mother skunk" are so right and natural in their roles as to seem inevitable and part of a world of fact. In Lowell's late and more discursive poetry since *Notebook* (1969), he has been opening out his interests to include more of life than his self-dramatizing ego and the dualism of female forces. Yet the interplay of mother and daughter in *For Lizzie and Harriet* (1973) and the overt tension of *The Dolphin* (1973) suggest the hold which the pattern has on him. When combined with his "oceanic feeling" the pattern of female forces in Lowell has a dynamism which reaches back to myth at the same time as it attacks the reader with its excess particularity.

## II

The Atlantic Ocean is the great subject of "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket," the most celebrated of Lowell's early poems. He is writing an elegy for his cousin "Warren Winslow, dead at sea," and more generally for the many other New England sailors who have been destroyed by the sea. He feels the pathos of their experience, but is severe in his sense of man—

Christian man especially—presuming to conquer the ocean and “have dominion” there. The Atlantic passes pitiless judgment on them, the ocean responding to their assault with its own even deeper rage and agony.

A brackish reach of shoal off Madaket—  
The sea was still breaking violently and night  
Had steamed into our North Atlantic Fleet

The scene has an intensity like an encounter with the Gorgon. The “drowned sailor” with “his matted head and marble feet” seems caught up in an event of mythic proportions.

The corpse was bloodless, a botch of reds and whites,  
Its open, staring eyes  
Were lustreless dead-lights  
Or cabin-windows on a stranded hulk  
Heavy with sand.

Equally, the attack of the New England Quaker fleet on the whale is like Perseus’ savaging of the Medusa. “Sailor,” Lowell asks rhetorically, “will your sword / Whistle and fall and sink into the fat?” The superstition and fear which the Christian sailors project onto the “whited monster”—as a symbol of all they fear in the ocean—makes a traumatic ritual of their slaughter.

The death-lance churns into the sanctuary, tears  
The gun-blue swingle, heaving like a flail,  
And hacks the coiling life out: it works and drags  
And rips the sperm-whale’s midriff into rags,  
Gobbets of blubber spill to wind and weather,  
Sailor, and gulls go round the stoven timbers  
Where the morning stars sing out together  
And thunder shakes the white surf and dismembers  
The red flag hammered in the mast-head.

But another voice begins to be heard in the poem above all the agony. “*Clamavimus*, O depths.” The sea-gulls “wail for water” like a lost child for its mother; they wail “for the deep where the high tide / Mutter to its hurt self, mutters and ebbs.” Some suggestion of a mother’s presence is felt, deep within the ebbing dragging rhythm of the waves.

Waves wallow in their wash, go out and out,  
Leave only the death-rattle of the crabs,

The beach increasing, its enormous snout  
Sucking the ocean’s side.

The ocean behaves like a mother in search of its child. But instead of the ritual of nature there is the ritual of history with the sailors slaughtering the whale.

Ocean, whale and man lead only to agony in their encounters with one another. The male gods—Christian and pagan—appealed to at the edges of the experience are mere projections of the egos involved in the conflict. Lowell feels he must postulate a female force as an alternative to the terrifying anger of the ocean. His *Our Lady of Walsingham* appears in the poem as if by miracle. Without explanation, or defense of her being what she is, but demonstrating by the calmness of the poetry her peace and salvation in history, Lowell posits her as a release from the traumas of human experience and death.

It is in the final stanza of the poem that Lowell brings the two reaches of his perception together. The Atlantic is itself, and in being so it contains the contradictory range of experience which Lowell has thrown up dramatically within the poem. The mythic, sexual and dynamic nature of the water is felt:

a gaff  
Bobs on the untimely stroke  
Of the greased wash exploding on a shoal-bell  
In the old mouth of the Atlantic.

The ocean like a Great and Terrible Mother devours and converts human life into its own terms of ambiguity:

It’s well;  
Atlantic, you are fouled with the blue sailors,  
Sea-monsters, upward angel, downward fish:  
Unmarried and corroding, spare of flesh  
Mart once of supercilious, wing’d clippers,  
Atlantic, where your bell-trap guts its spoil  
You could cut the brackish winds with a knife  
Here in Nantucket

It is as if the poem with its recognition of the killing and caring in life is sharing in the larger process of the world’s creation, from “the time / When the Lord God formed man from the sea’s slime / And breathed into his face the breath of life, / And blue-lung’d combers lumbered to the kill.”

Elsewhere in Lowell's early poetry he gives a powerful sense of where his work is leading. In "Between the Porch and the Altar" he moves close—as far as the dramatic monologue tradition will take him—to the world of personal experience. He sets off a son's neurotic fears of maternal woman ("the painted dragon, a mother and a wife / With flat glass eyes pushed at him on a stick") against its opposite in an illicit release into lust and its attendant guilt. Between these two extremes there is an ineffectual male, unable as the inheritor of New England Puritanism to stand the heat of the encounter. Much of this situation from the 1940's in Lowell's poetry will repeat itself in *The Dolphin* in the early 1970's but in more mature, personal and affecting terms.

Lowell's early period is also important for the discovery of the Winslow family, Lowell's relations on his mother's side. The deaths of Arthur and Mary Winslow, his grandparents, and the way Lowell's poetry introduces a "death by water" motif in each case, prefigure his central imaginative concerns in *Life Studies*. Something profoundly beautiful and true occurs for Lowell in this scene of a New England tradition that is dying. It is through people whom he—in his complex way—loves that he is able to tell the story, and he finds the mood for his poems best in the silent presence of the ocean as an elegiac witness.

When in *Life Studies* Lowell tells of his mother's death in "Sailing Home from Rapallo," he has the Atlantic surrounding and supporting both the ship and the poetry. His Uncle Devereux "dying at twenty-nine . . . of the incurable Hodgkin's disease" makes a final gesture at life: he "sailed for Europe on a last honeymoon" across the Atlantic where as with Arthur Winslow "the wide waters and their voyager are one." And Lowell's sharp animus against his father—Commander Lowell the one professional sailor in the family—lies partly in his father's lack of any real oceanic feeling: "'Anchors a weigh,' Daddy boomed in the bathtub, / 'Anchors aweigh' ". In his "abrupt and unprotesting" death, Lowell's poetry kills off the father in a way that has resonated throughout modern poetry, precisely because it taps a deep-seated and unconscious energy in Lowell and in the contemporary cultural imagination.

### III

*Life Studies* (1959), Lowell's major achievement, begins with a poem of considerable historic importance. "Beyond the Alps"

tells of Lowell in 1950 leaving Rome for Paris by train. It points up his withdrawal from the Catholic faith, and touches on an end to the American romance with Europe. "Our mountain-climbing train had come to earth" is a line that suggests much more than it says. At mid-century, the day of western demythologization is at hand. Lowell makes it seem as if it is his own personal crisis. "Beyond the Alps" brings Lowell out to the front of the poem: his droll self-deprecating irony eases him into the poetry; and marks a technical breakthrough beyond Browning and Eliot for the dramatic monologue. But the substantial issue is what Lowell sees in Rome. He was there when "Pius XII defined the dogma of Mary's bodily assumption." In one way it was a climax of spirituality for the Roman Catholic Church; in another way, as we now know in retrospect, it was the beginning of the church's own contemporary crisis.

Rome, as Lowell sees it, is a city of two driving pietisms: "Pilgrims still kissed Saint Peter's brazen sandal. / The Duce's lynched, bare, booted skull still spoke." The Pope and Mussolini dominate the popular feeling. Something crude in all the "monstrous human crush" impells Lowell to leave; something peculiarly Roman to which Americans, whether the "long-haired Victorian sages" who are "breezing on their trust funds through the world" in the nineteenth century or himself now "the bleary-eyed ego kicking in my berth," do not belong. Lowell is sharp and satirical at Rome, yet not without sympathy.

He is also leaving, he feels, the world of the two feminine powers—Mary and Minerva. "Mary risen—at one miraculous stroke, / angel-wing'd, gorgeous as a jungle bird!" Lowell notes in a tone that detaches him from what it celebrates. And Minerva, the goddess of the culture that lies behind Mussolini: "pure mind and murder at the scything prow— / Minerva, the miscarriage of the brain." Yet Paris where he is heading has no security; he sees it "breaking up / like killer kings on an Etruscan cup." The problem shifts into other cultural and secular terms.

The later poems in *Life Studies* show how Mary and Minerva stay with Lowell, and how deeply the "killer kings" have penetrated his own psyche and experience. "Skunk Hour" is the clearest case in point. It centers round Lowell's own traumatic situation but its environment is defined by two female forces and the sea. The beginning of the poem is presided over by the almost mythical presence of "Nautilus Island's hermit heiress" who "buys up all / the eyesores facing her shore, / and lets them

fall." She censors the world she in large part helps to create—a New England Kali. Lowell sets her world in ironic profile but since he belongs to it himself he acts out internally the drama of its self-censoring sickness: "My mind's not right . . . I myself am hell." In spite of all the artistic and detaching ironies he can muster, his mood is so dark that salvation can only suggest itself to him in the form of the skunks "that search / in the moonlight for a bite to eat." The poem's conclusion is beautifully understated.

But the mother skunk "with her column of kittens" belongs to the same order as Our Lady of Walsingham. It was there that "the penitents took off their shoes / And then walked barefoot the remaining mile"; and the skunks repeat the ritual of salvation.

They march on their soles up Main Street:  
white stripes, moonstruck eyes' red fire  
under the chalk-dry and spar spire  
of the Trinitarian Church.

Lowell responds almost happily:

I stand on top  
of our back steps and breathe the rich air—

The comedy—hardly a divine comedy—belongs to the world and mood of which it is a part. All that Lowell can claim from the mother skunk who "jabs her wedge-head in a cup / of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail, / and will not scare" is a lesson in survival.

Other poems in *Life Studies* work in different ways but present worlds that are equally savage and fearful. The "tranquillised" beginnings of "Man and Wife" and "Memories of West Street and Lepke" break open under the stress of memory and experience. Such salvation as "Memories of West Street and Lepke" holds is in the fragile but beautiful image of Lowell's daughter, "young enough to be my granddaughter. / Like the sun she rises in her flame-flamingo infants' wear." She recalls the Virgin Mary "risen . . . gorgeous as a jungle bird." Czar Lepke, with whom the poem ends, of *Murder Incorporated* fame is a throwback to the Mussolini and Minerva world of Rome. He, too, has undergone a miscarriage of the brain. But his case is pathetic. He has been lobotomised, and is now waiting on the

electric chair. The murderer is now the victim. Punishment grows to a crescendo in him and to an unstatable conclusion for Lowell in his poem.

"Man and Wife" has several roles for the wife. She saves the poet through a hellish night "on Mother's bed."

All night I've held your hand,  
as if you had  
a fourth time faced the kingdom of the mad—  
its hackneyed speech, its homicidal eye—  
and dragged me home alive . . . Oh my *Petite*

She is also the goddess figure of a courtly love scene as played by the abject poet when "the shrill verve / of your invective scorched the traditional South"; it is the high point of her own career in the poem. For then comes a turn for her as well as him:

Now twelve years later, you turn your back.  
Sleepless, you hold  
your pillow to your hollows like a child;  
your old-fashioned tirade—  
loving, rapid, merciless—  
breaks like the Atlantic Ocean on my head.

Both now suffer; and it is an image of the Atlantic Ocean which Lowell uses to enforce the sense of their human condition. It is a leap, imaginatively, which his poetry as a whole has prepared the reader for and justifies. The Atlantic has stood like a Greek chorus at the edges of the *Life Studies* poems waiting for the human dramas to resolve themselves in their own terms. Now at a time of crisis it leaps back into Lowell's consciousness.

Later in the 1960's Lowell seems to be moving towards an integration of the human and sea worlds in his poetry. "For the Union Dead" and "Waking Early Sunday Morning" are two poems of social prophecy, but at key points Lowell measures American values in terms of images and principles drawn from the sea. The change in Boston in the first poem from 1860 to 1960 is a case in point. "The old South Boston Aquarium," Lowell says, "stands / in a Sahara of snow now"; the sea has become an aquarium, and the city-desert is overwhelming them both. The poet himself may "sigh still / for the dark downward and vegetating kingdom / of the fish and reptile," but Boston has surrendered its past to the new urban blight of the parking station. The monument to Colonel Shaw and his Civil War

Negro infantry “sticks like a fishbone / in the city’s throat.” The sea world and its moral role affronts the city with its memory, but it too is finally converted into a triumph of the automobile: “The Aquarium is gone. Everywhere, / giant finned cars nose forward like fish.” Lowell’s irony is intense.

In “Waking Early Sunday Morning” it is the image of the chinook salmon that brilliantly breaks out of the dream-like subconscious to be a symbol of release—social, sexual and political—within the poem’s general depression. It is the image which Norman Mailer in *The Armies of the Night* found incantatory: “O to break loose, like the chinook / salmon jumping and falling back, / nosing up to the impossible / stone and bone-crushing waterfall—”. It became for him a symbol of the heroic Dissent of the 1960’s. Lowell for his part proceeds to set it off against the crude realities of American political power as exercised in the Presidency.

O to break loose. All life’s grandeur  
is something with a girl in summer . . .  
elated as the President  
girdled by his establishment  
this Sunday morning, free to chaff  
his own thoughts with his bear-cuffed staff,  
swimming nude, unbuttoned, sick  
of his ghost-written rhetoric!

It is a brilliant vignette, but one that owes its power to Lowell’s working through the terms of his basic imagination. The Gorgon, Andromeda and a new kind of Perseus are bound up together in a common and contemporary struggle.

#### IV

A new and more personal voice is heard from Lowell in the 1960’s alongside the dramatic and the prophetic. In poems such as “Water” and “Soft Wood” there is a mood approaching the lyrical in which Lowell is examining love. The sea is used to draw out and define the reality of love—and its limits. “Water” is a beautiful poem which takes the Maine sea coast as its setting. The ocean has placed severe limits on the life that can be lived there; yet the ocean sustains what it allows to exist.

It was a Maine lobster town—  
each morning boatloads of hands  
pushed off for granite  
quarries on the islands,

and left dozens of bleak  
white frame houses stuck  
like oyster shells  
on a hill of rock,

and below us, the sea lapped  
the raw little match-stick  
mazes of a weir,  
where the fish for bait were trapped.

Two lovers, man and woman, enter the scene and wish to merge with it. They dream how they might be creatures of the ocean: but while the sea inspires their feeling it resists their fantasy.

We wished our two souls  
might return like gulls  
to the rock. In the end,  
the water was too cold for us.

A much larger version of this poem occurs in “Soft Wood” where the Maine coastline becomes a kind of paradise, sensuously and joyfully created by Lowell:

After two years away, one must get used  
to the painted soft wood staying bright and clean,  
to the air blasting an all-white wall whiter,  
as it blows through curtain and screen  
touched with salt and evergreen.

The green juniper berry spills crystal-clear gin,  
and even the hot water in the bathtub  
is more than water  
and rich with the scouring effervescence  
of something healing,  
the illimitable salt.

But thoughts of the soft wood of the houses lead to thoughts of the soft wood of the flesh; and the poem becomes a meditation on mortality, ending as do so many of Lowell’s poems in the opposite way that it began. “Harriet Winslow, who owned this house,” and who “was more to me than my mother” is dying in Washington, “knowing / each drug that numbs alerts another

nerve to pain." The poem deals in opposite emotions; it is only the sea world that allows Lowell to move from one to the other, and still stay whole.

The more discursive openness of Lowell's later poetry to things and people outside himself is also matched by a growth in the poet's understanding of himself. Both of these elements may be seen in his studies of Coleridge, who appears first in "To Delmore Schwartz" in *Life Studies* and then twice in *History* some dozen or more years later. At first he is drawn into the classic role-play pattern of a Lowell poem. The situation is a Harvard drawing room in Cambridge where Schwartz and Lowell self-consciously act out a black comedy of themselves as poets:

We drank and eyed  
the chicken-hearted shadows of the world.  
Underseas fellows, nobly mad,  
we talked away our friends. "Let Joyce and Freud,  
the Masters of Joy,  
be our guests here," you said. The room was filled  
with cigarette smoke circling the paranoid,  
inert gaze of Coleridge, back  
from Malta—his eyes lost in flesh, lips baked and black.  
Your tiger kitten, *Oranges*,  
cartwheeled for joy in a ball of snarls.

The Gorgon-like presence of Coleridge is set off against the playful kitten, *Oranges*. But when later Lowell returns to Coleridge in *History* there is a change not so much in Coleridge himself as in the way Lowell is seeing him. The perspective is wider and more reflexive. Coleridge is compared with Richard II but the issue is why this should appeal to Lowell.

Coleridge wasn't flatter-blinded by  
his kinship with Richard II . . . a *feminine friendism*,  
the constant overflow of imagination  
proportioned to his dwindling will to act.  
Richard unkinged saw shipwreck in the mirror,  
not the king; womanlike, he feared  
he must see himself more frequently to exist,  
the white glittering inertia of the iceberg.

Three things seem to be flowing together here for Lowell: a richer psychological probing of people; a recognition of the "feminine," even in men; and an "underseas" perspective. The

iceberg is a more chilling phenomenon than "the whited monster" of the Quaker sailors; while externalised here in Richard's temperament as seen by Coleridge, it is something which Lowell fears as belonging to his own moral disposition.

The third study of Coleridge needs to be quoted in full since Lowell juxtaposes his own situation with that of the Romantic poet, and finds here a complex structure for his most mature feelings.

Coleridge stands, he flamed for the one friend . . .  
This shower is warm, I almost breathe-in the rain  
horseclopping from fire escape to skylight  
down to a dungeon courtyard. In April, New York  
has a smell and taste of life. For whom . . . what?  
A newer younger generation faces  
the firing squad, then their blood is wiped from the pavement . . .  
Coleridge's laudanum and brandy,  
his alderman's stroll to positive negation—  
his passive courage is paralysis,  
standing him upright like tenpins for the strike,  
only kept standing by a hundred scared habits . . .  
a large soft-textured plant with pith within,  
power without strength, an involuntary imposter.

The descent to the dungeon courtyard recalls the tragic moment of Shakespeare's Richard II. Here, the conditions are modern and the scene less heroic, but the moral and political issues are in their own way just as challenging. What to do? Coleridge hardly offers a model. But Lowell cannot seem to get round him. The paradoxes are so forceful as to seem to apply to Lowell himself as some kind of generally observed moral truth. Fire, blood, flame, shower, breath, rain—the images are at once sensuous and personal. A rich "smell and taste of life" comes into the poem.

The pattern of the sonnet is also instructive. A salute to something transcendent is followed by a critical application to the here and now, and ending with a balanced and sombre assessment of its subject. When Lowell turns finally in *The Dolphin* to consider his own actions, he may vary the pattern somewhat but he does not go outside the structure of this positive-negative process leading to a resolution, which is his ultimate adaptation of the myth structure at the base of his imagination and experience.

In "Fishnet," the opening poem, Lowell begins with a salute to the one friend—his wife, dolphin, muse—with whom he has shared, so to speak, a mutual flame.



Any clear thing that blinds us with surprise,  
your wandering silences and bright trouvaillies,  
dolphin let loose to catch the flashing fish . . . .

Blinding with surprise is a superb transformation of the eye imagery Lowell has used so much in his poetry. The dolphin, also, unlike the chinook salmon is liberated, and responds to the liberation. The "flashing fish" is an image of the surrealist imagery in which his own poetry abounds. It is a generous tribute. But then comes the turn. The negative is now himself, the poet trapped in his own role and achievement as a public figure. Lowell uses a kind of humor here in which we are hardly meant to see the joke.

Poets die adolescents, their beat embalms them,  
the archetypal voices sing offkey;  
the old actor cannot read his friends,  
and nevertheless he reads himself aloud,  
genius hums the auditorium dead.

But with this resignation that amuses him Lowell exhausts the emotional aspects of his ego, and concludes with a rare observation on the value of his poetic career.

Yet my heart rises, I know I've gladdened a lifetime  
knotting, undoing a fishnet of tarred rope;  
the net will hang on the wall when the fish are eaten  
nailed like illegible bronze on the futureless future

He resists false hopes of immortality, but feels secure in claiming the gifts which the sea has given him.

There is much drama but little dramatization in *The Dolphin*; for Lowell has found a way of moving through the events and distress of a collapsing marriage with a strange equanimity of tone. If it approaches humor, it does so in the spiritual sense of knowing that the forces of salvation in life are at least as great as those of punishment and damnation.

When I was troubled in mind, you made for my body  
caught in its hangman's-knot of sinking lines

and

"I spout the smarting waters of joy in your face—  
rough-weather fish, who cuts your nets and chains."

and it lies, too, in Lowell's respect for the endeavours of his art: ". . . this book, half fiction, / an eelnet made by man for the eel fighting." His craft transcends his case, but stands itself in need of some outside power of inspiration.

My Dolphin, you only guide me by surprise,  
captive as Racine, the man of craft,  
drawn through his maze of iron composition  
by the incomparable wandering voice of Phèdre.

Lowell's reach into myth, his pitiless self-judgment and his openness to the feminine in life are all qualities which belong to his mature stance.

I am waiting like an angler with practice and courage  
the time to cast is now, and the mouth open,  
the huge smile, head and shoulders of the dolphin—  
I am swallowed up alive . . . I am.

What this means is something more than the biographical meaning. It is self-knowledge achieved at the expense of self.