

Lowell's Tropes of Falling, Rising, Standing: A Response to Frank J. Kearful*

HENRY HART

Frank Kearful has written an insightful essay on some of Lowell's fundamental preoccupations in *Lord Weary's Castle*. I was impressed by the critic's investigation of Lowell's poetics—of his tropes, metrical patterns, rhymes, and allusions. I was also impressed by the way he explained Lowell's idiosyncratic Christianity. Lowell's religious beliefs were always eccentric (he once called himself a "Christian atheist" [Mariani 359]), and Kearful helps us understand how he expressed those beliefs in one of his most overtly religious books. Since the critical consensus has been that Lowell's dense, forbidding style in *Lord Weary's Castle* was a mistake, and that the freer, more accessible, more overtly autobiographical style of *Life Studies* was a correction, it's noble of Kearful to pay tribute to the book that launched Lowell's career. In my opinion, *Lord Weary's Castle* is Lowell's most consistently accomplished book. All his other books, including *Land of Unlikeness*, which was published in a limited edition shortly before *Lord Weary's Castle*, contain masterful poems, but no book is as consistently brilliant as *Lord Weary's Castle*.

As a response to Kearful's essay, I'd like to make a number of comments that point to ways his discussions might be expanded. Since Lowell studied under and was deeply influenced by the Southern Agrarians John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate, it would be interesting to explore how Lowell's obsession with 'standing' and taking ideo-

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logical 'stands' was guided by that famous Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), which contained contributions from Ransom and Tate. Lowell in *Lord Weary's Castle* (and in his other books) wrestled with the proper stands that he and other citizens should take toward various religious, political, aesthetic, and personal issues. He often asked himself what his proper stance should be toward America's Puritan heritage, toward World War II and other wars, toward formal poetry, toward his family, toward his marriages, and then delineated his complicated stances in his poems. Torn by different impulses, he found it nearly impossible to take a firm, unambiguous stand on anything. His tempestuous mind was destined to fluctuate dialectically between opposed factions. As his friend Robert Frost would say, his poems were "momentary stay[s] against confusion" (Parini 324). They were orderly—and sometimes disorderly—expressions of the disorder that he found raging inside and outside himself. His bipolar disorder, which was cyclic in nature, determined that his life would be a series of manic highs and depressive lows, and that his stands would only be momentary still-points in an ongoing cycle.

Lowell's complex stances are evident in "The Exile's Return," which Kearful helpfully illuminates at the beginning of his essay. As in many of his other poems about World War II, Lowell takes an ambivalent stand vis-à-vis his country's effort to defeat Nazi Germany. He tends to envision enemies as one, and he does so here. War corrupts victor and victim, winner and loser, he implies. "[T]orn-up tilestones crown the victor" (3, l. 9), he writes, and they crown the victim as well. As Kearful points out, Lowell felt like an enemy and exile in his own country after taking a stand against the U.S. government's policy of indiscriminate bombing of German cities. He served time in jail, as his poem "Memories of West Street and Lepke" in *Life Studies* attests, for making his "manic statement" (79, l. 15) and "telling off" (l. 16) President Roosevelt. But it's also important to recognize that in his saner moments before publishing his "manic statement" and refusing to fight, Lowell tried to enlist numerous times.

Lowell's ambivalence toward the war effort resembled Thomas Mann's, which Kearful explains in his analysis of the poem's many allusions to the German author's novella *Tonio Kröger*. Lowell was also of two minds about the peace and restoration efforts in Germany that followed the defeat of Hitler's Nazis. In his discussion of the "lily-stands" (3, l. 21) that "Burgeon the risen Rhineland" (l. 22) and the "rough / Cathedral [that] lifts its eye" (ll. 22-23) at the end of the poem, Kearful is right to underscore the lilies' Christian associations with fertility and resurrection, and to connect the cathedral with Yeats's prophecy in "The Second Coming" that Christianity in the new millennium will be born again as an apocalyptic beast. "Burgeon" means "to bud or sprout" (*OED* "burgeon" *v.* 1. *intr.*) and "to shoot out, put forth as buds" (*v.* 2. *trans.*), and this sprouting and shooting out would seem wholly auspicious after the collapse of Germany if it weren't for Lowell's tendency to view rising as simply a stage in a cycle that leads ineluctably to falling. When Lowell describes "the unseasoned liberators roll[ing] / Into the Market Square" (3, ll. 19-20), he is both celebrating the Allied liberators who find new life flourishing and grimly intimating that the lilies of peace produce the seeds of future wars. Everything in Lowell's poetry, whether good or bad, rolls with the seasons. In Lowell's double perspective, "lily-stands" could also refer to market stands—like hot-dog stands—that turn religious symbols (the lilies) into profitable commodities. According to Lowell, his Agrarian mentors, and their sometime champion Ezra Pound, the roots of war are entangled in capitalist commerce. Surveying the ruins of one war with a cold, prophetic eye, Lowell sees signs of hopeful restoration as well as signs that the old commercial, militaristic culture has not ended, that it is simply beginning a new revolution on the historical cycle. His reference to Dante's *Inferno* at the end of the poem confirms his view that hell and heaven, like death and new life, are merely stages in a perpetual dialectic. "Much difficult journeying lies ahead" (35), as Kearful asserts.

In many of his early and late poems, Lowell inveighed against the capitalist's unbridled lust for money and the many evils it caused. He

criticized capitalism from a Christian point of view, and he also criticized Christianity for condoning and sanctioning capitalism. So Kearful is astute to emphasize in his analysis of the poem "Mother and Son" that commerce and Christianity have often been incestuous bedfellows: "The dangling of the golden watch-chain on the Holy Book symbolizes emblematically the liaison of Calvinism and commerce that fostered the rise of the same New England mercantile class whose destruction the son fantasized in 'Rebellion'" (39). Lowell's judgmental perspective is Catholic in the sense that it is universal. He finds Calvinism and commerce flourishing in ruined Germany as well as prosperous America, and he judges both countries harshly. He places traditional enemies in the scales and finds that their vices are about equal.

Kearful investigates Lowell's references to Judgment Day in the third section of his essay. His close reading of "The Dead in Europe" shows how Lowell invokes Christian expectations of redemption and salvation only to deny or parody them. Once again, Lowell judges victors and victims to be more alike than unlike. The horrific realities of war, he contends, degrade and dehumanize all sides. In the midst of extreme savagery, Christian calls for peace and order are largely futile. They "proved [in]sufficient in the most recent European war to preserve the unity of Christian Europe, much less the lives of those who 'fell down'" and are "'married / Under the rubble'" (45), Kearful declares. The marriage Lowell depicts is a grotesque facsimile of the apocalyptic marriage that St. John envisioned in the Book of Revelation, which Kearful quotes: "And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev 21:2; Kearful 47). Although Kearful notes that this "mystic bridal theme takes on personalized form" (47) in Lowell's poem "Where the Rainbow Ends," he might expand on this by saying something about Lowell's tormented marriage to Jean Stafford. Lowell dedicated *Lord Weary's Castle* to Stafford, and in a number of the poems he refers to his and Stafford's marital agony.

During his manic periods, Lowell liked to play the role of Jehovah at the Last Judgment, just as he liked to play the roles of all patriarchal strongmen—from Hitler to Napoleon to Caligula. In his poems, however, he tended to highlight the painful consequences of his manic pursuits and otherworldly ideals. If he entertained the possibility of a mystic marriage as an orthodox Christian might, he typically juxtaposed the apocalyptic ideal against the painful realities of his own marriage. The zealous pursuit of a marriage between heaven and earth usually leads to historical tragedies, he implies, just as his own marriages inevitably succumbed to divorces, separations, and chronic anguish.

So where does Lowell's rainbow—symbol of God's promise not to destroy humanity after the flood—end? Lowell ends his most ambitious poem in *Lord Weary's Castle*, "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket," which is also about World War II and his New England heritage, with the ambiguous line: "The Lord survives the rainbow of His will" (14, l. VII.17). In the Darwinian world of wars and struggles for survival, according to Lowell, God survives as an enduring symbol of power and mystery. He also survives his will or covenant—his promise not to destroy the world again—and oversees history's innumerable wars. Kearful is right to stress the auspicious end of "Where the Rainbow Ends" by noting: "the olive branch symbolizes a peace to be struck, in a newly found spirit of wisdom, between the poet and the Boston / New England culture he had excoriated throughout *Lord Weary's Castle*" (50). The last sentence of the poem is: "Stand and live, / The dove has brought an olive branch to eat" (69, ll. 29-30). If this is Eucharistic and desirable, it is also slightly repugnant. Who, after all, would want to eat an olive branch? Olives are obviously more palatable than the branches that produce them. The olive branch might represent peace, but from Lowell's typological perspective the branch also evokes the Tree of Knowledge and the "tree" or cross on which Christ was crucified. The fall and the crucifixion initiated redemptions and resurrections, but even as Lowell accentuates the latter he grimly bears witness to the former. These Christian tropes and their secular

versions in Lowell's later poetry, as Kearful argues, "affirm capacities of human endurance" (51). They affirm the capacity (or at least the struggle) to cope with the cyclical nature of life, which in Lowell's case was made more difficult by the cyclical nature of his manic-depression. When Kearful points out that Lowell had the last sentence of "Where the Rainbow Ends" chiseled on his father's gravestone (51), however, it is hard to read this directive as anything but wishful-thinking and ironic. Lowell, who generally despised his father, knew very well that as a corpse in a coffin his father could neither stand, live, nor eat.

At the end of his essay Kearful acknowledges that Lowell's Catholicism waned after the publication of *Lord Weary's Castle*. It might be more accurate to say that Lowell's Christianity, which was always highly personal and idiosyncratic, became less overt and more secularized. As it became less of an obsession, his poems became less packed with Christian symbols and references to Christian scriptures and rituals. But he constantly addressed Christian issues in his later poetry, usually in a sardonic, subversive way. With this in mind, I'm skeptical of Kearful's claim that in the *Life Studies* poem "Skunk Hour" Lowell "records no quasi-mystical experience" (51), and that in other poems he entirely repudiates mystical or other aspects of Christianity. "Skunk Hour," as Kearful probably knows, alludes to St. John of the Cross's famous mystical treatise *The Dark Night*. As in so many of his earlier and later poems, Lowell writes a kind of parody of the mystic's archetypal journey through a crucifying, purgatorial 'dark night of the soul' toward divine love and transcendental union—or communion—with God. In fact, in "Skunk Hour" Lowell composes a kind of minimalist *Waste Land* that, like Eliot's poem, records an excruciating journey that ends with oblique references to mystical transcendence. *The Waste Land's* final words—"Shantih shantih shantih"—refer to the sense of transcendental peace that mystics experience during union with the divine. In the more overtly Christian poetry that Eliot published after *The Waste Land*, he often made direct allusions to the Christian mystics who provided a way to escape or heal

his marital woes. Likewise, Lowell transcends his various romantic troubles during his "[o]ne dark night" (84, l. 25) when he stands "on top" (l. 43) of his back steps and witnesses what he considers to be a heroic skunk thriving in a waste land.

Just as Eliot's persona suffers from a troubled marriage and is on a quest for a Holy Grail—for a sacred union or communion to replace the profane and agonizing union with his wife—Lowell searches for grail-like signs of divine love and mystical union on a local Golgotha near his vacation home in Maine. Unfortunately, on "the hill's skull" (84, l. 26; Golgotha derives from an Aramaic word meaning "place of skull"), he finds only profane "love-cars" (l. 27) that remind him of his problematic marriage. The lovers on the funereal hill have sex in their cars and listen to popular songs on the radio about "careless Love" (l. 32) that will "Make you kill yourself and your sweetheart too" (cf. "Careless Love"). Although Kearful contends that "Lowell no longer proclaims 'I breathe the ether of my marriage feast'" (Kearful 51), as he does in "Where the Rainbow Ends," Lowell *does* breathe a kind of repellent "ether" at a waste-land version of the mystical marriage feast. This is the "ether" (the gas sprayed or that can be sprayed) by the skunk who "jabs her wedge-head in a cup / of sour cream" (84, ll. 46-47). Coming after the early stanzas that dramatize a sterile society in which people are isolated, dead, and unmarried (things are so bad in the Maine town that the destitute gay decorator would "rather marry" [83, l. 24] than keep working at his impecunious job), the "mother skunk with her column of kittens" (84, l. 45) appears to be the only hero in a landscape populated by dysfunctional humans. The mother skunk represents the questor who has found a grail of fertile sexuality and sustaining food in the human waste land. She has taken a strong stand and "will not scare" (l. 48). She may be a humorous parody of the Christian questor who searches for the grail that Christ used at the Last Supper and that initiated the ritual of Eucharist, but to Lowell's disillusioned psyche she still represents an ideal of tenacity and productivity.

Lowell's comment in the last stanza of "Skunk Hour"—"I stand on top / of our back steps and breathe the rich air" (ll. 43-44)—is as ironic as many of his other comments in the poem. He may be standing, but he has fallen a long way if he can only find examples of Christian heroism, the Holy Grail, and mystical union in a skunk swilling sour cream from a cup discarded in the garbage. Some of his other major poems produce their dramatic and often sardonic effects by juxtaposing political and religious ideals against the repugnant realities from which they rise and to which they fall. As Kearful asserts, Lowell praises the capacity to stand in the middle of this cycle of rising and falling. He struggles to take a stand for his principles at the "still point of the turning world" (9, l. II.16), as Eliot would say in *Four Quartets*. But, as Kearful makes abundantly clear, Lowell repeatedly failed to maintain his stance, his balance, and repeatedly fell. Luckily, he was able to recuperate long enough from his manic ascents and depressive falls to write enduring poems about the turning world to which he was, for better or worse, inextricably wedded.

College of William and Mary
Williamsburg, VA

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