

Lilies and an Olive Branch: On Robert Lowell's *Lord Weary's Castle**

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I am pleased that Henry Hart found much to praise in my "'Stand and Live': Tropes of Falling, Rising, Standing in Robert Lowell's *Lord Weary's Castle*," and I find most of his suggestions for modification or elaboration of points I made persuasive. I will focus here on a few things I view differently, beginning with lilies, about which I have something to add myself.

In my commentary on "lily-stands" in "The Exile's Return," the opening poem in *Lord Weary's Castle*, I mention that the angel Gabriel is frequently represented holding a standing lily when he appears before the Virgin Mary at the Annunciation. A fascinating example in the National Gallery in London that I might have cited is Fra Filippo Lippi's "The Annunciation," which portrays Gabriel holding a lily in his left hand that rests upon his left knee as he genuflects. The stalk of the lily extends upward above his halo, while his right hand points to an urn from which another lily rises. This additional lily grows out of earth visible at the top of the rounded, bulging urn with its womblike suggestions. The visual attention that Fra Filippo Lippi gives to Gabriel's hands in connection with lilies, one holding a lily, the other directed toward a growing lily, complements Lowell's rhyming of "lily-stands" and "in your hands."

*Reference: Frank J. Kearful, "'Stand and live': Tropes of Falling, Rising, Standing in Robert Lowell's *Lord Weary's Castle*," *Connotations* 17.1 (2007/2008): 29-60; Henry Hart, "Lowell's Tropes of Falling, Rising, Standing: A Response to Frank J. Kearful," *Connotations* 19.1-3 (2009/2010): 45-52.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debkearful01701.htm>>.

Inge Leimberg has set me going on a more secular association of “lily-stands” in conjunction with “Lili Marleen,” the German love song that Lale Andersen made popular in World War II, and that Marlene Dietrich (once a Blue Angel) also made her own as “Lily Marlene.” Each stanza ends with a wish-fulfillment projection of Lily standing alongside a returning soldier (compare the exile’s return to war-torn Lübeck in “The Exile’s Return”). Lily and the soldier stand by a lamppost that stands. In one English translation the first stanza reads: “In front of the barracks, / In front of the main gate, / Stood a lamppost, / And it still stands there, / And if we should see each other there again, / By the lamppost we’ll stand, / As before, Lily Marlene.” Lily standing by the lamppost remains the song’s central image.

But now to lily-stands and my disagreement with Hart. I maintain that “The Exile’s Return” encourages us to take lily-stands in the standard horticultural sense of “stand,” as a group or growth of tall plants or trees. As for trees, try Lowell’s “a scary stand of virgin pine,” with its scrambled echoes of the Virgin Mary and lily-stands, in “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux” (*Life Studies*, 1959). Lowell’s lily-stands ought to be no more difficult imagining than Wordsworth’s “crowd, a host of golden daffodils.”

Hart is more interested, however, in capitalism than in horticulture. My essay identifies critical linkings in *Lord Weary’s Castle* of modern capitalism and a debased Christianity historically stemming from New England Calvinism. I find too crass, however, Hart’s use of lily-stands—conjuring up hot-dog stands and markets and hence capitalist commerce—to back his argument that Lowell is incessantly ambivalent, perhaps no more so than when he seems to take a stand. I find it difficult, on the basis of lily-stands, to agree that Lowell “finds Calvinism and commerce flourishing in ruined Germany” (48). Hart’s assertion that when Lowell describes “the unseasoned liberators roll[ing] / Into the Market Square,” 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” (47) is a bit of special plead-

ing. I find no evidence in the poem (or in history) that life in Lübeck in 1945 was in any manner, shape, or form “flourishing.” On the capitulation and occupation of Lübeck, see the diary of British occupation officer Arthur Geoffrey Dickens cited in my essay, *Lübeck 1945*. Moreover, at the close of “The Exile’s Return” the poem’s gaze turns from northern, Protestant Lübeck southwest to the Catholic Rhineland, and by implication toward Cologne Cathedral, as “lily-stands / Burgeon the risen Rhineland, and a rough / Cathedral lifts its eye.” At war’s end little in Cologne other than the Cathedral was left standing—one sortie over Cologne became known as “the night of the thousand bombers”—and long after the war the *Trümmerfrauen* (the “rubble women”) were still at work clearing the rubble. The poem’s vision of the risen Rhineland is spiritual rather than economic, its Catholic and Marian redemptive promise a reflection of Lowell’s ardent religious convictions. Lowell himself had turned away from his northern, New England Protestant heritage to become a Roman Catholic while living in the South, and was officially received into the Roman Catholic Church at a chapel on the Louisiana State University campus on March 29, 1941.

I also disagree with Hart about the religious thrust of “The Dead in Europe,” a later poem in *Lord Weary’s Castle* that responds to Allied fire-bombing of civilians during the war. Hart contends that Lowell “invokes Christian expectations of redemption and salvation only to deny or parody them” (48). Lowell had grounded his conscientious objection to military service not on a priori pacifism but on Christian theological distinctions between a just and unjust war that his intensive religious reading provided him. After the fire-bombing of Hamburg in August, 1943, the war as conducted by the Allies could no longer be called a just war. I do point to how the poem’s chorus of the dead bewails the bitter fact that Christianity was of no avail in forestalling the undoing of Christian Europe. Hart quotes me on this, but glosses over everything else I say about the outrage at Allied fire-bombing of civilians that the poem voices. Its fervent Marianism and highly wrought rhetoric may not be to everyone’s theological or liter-

ary taste, but I find it impossible to construe as denial or parody the pleas to Mary by the fire-bombed dead to rescue them on "Rising-day."

Speaking for all those with delicate stomachs, Hart responds to my reading of the ending of "Where the Rainbow Ends": "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" (49). OK, skip the wood and concentrate on the olives. And when you eat a bowl of cereal, skip the bowl. Hart continues: "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" (49). Before he "intimates grimly," now he "bears witness grimly," in both instances in contradistinction to what he apparently accentuates. Actually, I have no a priori quarrel with a use of Christian typology to gloss tropes in *Lord Weary's Castle*, and in fact I do so myself, beginning with the title page illustration of Abel's falling to the ground, struck down by Cain. The injunction "Stand and live" is, I point out, a biblical topos employed by Jesus, while "The dove has brought an olive branch to eat" responds to the dire biblical allusions to hunger, eating, trees and wood which dominate stanza one and carry on into stanza two. Two are precisely relevant for the ending of the poem: "The worms will eat the deadwood to the foot / of Ararat" and "The wild ingrafted olive and the root // Are withered."

Later Hart remarks: "When Kearful points out that Lowell had the last sentence of 'Where the Rainbow Ends' chiseled on his father's gravestone, 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" (50). Lowell, to be sure, was no dummy, and neither is Hart. Whether Lowell chose the inscription in order to mock Christian wishful thinking and bid ironic farewell to his "gener-

ally despised" father, thus killing two birds with one gravestone, is another matter. My "Connecting Rooms: Entering 'Father's Bedroom' in Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*," *Partial Answers* 6:1 (2008): 111-34 offers a different view of Lowell's complex emotional response to his father's death.

Where I think that Hart really goes overboard is in treating the ambivalence that he seems to find everywhere in Lowell's poetry as a direct and predetermined product of a bipolar disorder. As I see it, a certain ambivalence, conveyed through irony and at times ambiguity, imbues many of Lowell's poems, lending the best of them an emotional, moral, and intellectual complexity. This no doubt has something to do with Lowell's temperament, but also with his assimilation of New Critical dicta about irony, ambiguity, and paradox that he grew up on as an aspiring poet. In any event, I would stress the artfully rhetorical rather than the compulsively pathological in Lowell's poetic ambivalence. I am not convinced that a psychologically driven ambivalence, a being at cross-purposes, is the determining feature of Lowell's poetics.

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