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THE INMOST WORLD OF SELF: A STUDY OF ROBERT
LOWELL'S "SKUNK HOUR"



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ABSTRACT:

The early twentieth century America presents a picture of poet activity directed towards the achievement of a poetic utterance that can make it felt without having recourse to mere stylistic devices. Among those participating in it, Robert Lowell stands out by virtue of his preoccupation with the aesthetic and philosophical problems such as those of moral ambiguity and existential anguish. As a history-conscious American as evidenced by his tendency to project his family or personal history into public history, Lowell shows a sharp awareness of the disjunction in man's consciousness traceable to the tension between the literal and the literary in so far as they are concerned with reality. His distinctiveness lies in his being able to function as a poetic conscience

though tortured by an imagination that has to contend with unprecedented aspects of human history as an age marked by loss of faith, man's acquisition of weapons capable of annihilating the entire human race, gradual deterioration of traditional, moral and ethical values, and a view of cosmos as a meaningful inanity.

KEYWORDS

"Skunk Hour", aesthetic and philosophical problems, ethical values.

INTRODUCTION :

Lowell, indeed, has been remarkably successful in releasing poetry from the shackles of the so called tradition of fine style and bringing it closer to life, which will be regarded as a notable service rendered to twentieth century poetry. This is all the more remarkable because Lowell without experiencing any profound psychological change was able to give up formalism and evolved a poetic style that exemplifies a perfect integration of form with matter. Moreover, the integration was achieved through his own personality rather than any system of faith and judgement. This has been possible for him because he has at no time regarded religion (an amalgam of Puritanism and Catholicism) as an inviolable moral code. Indeed, his religious poetry exemplifies the success of his technique rather than that of his belief or perception. What he, as a poet, sought in religion is a *spiritus mundi* for his symbols and in New England an experience confirming his guilt-complex experiences. There is an intermingling of fantasy and reality in his poems suggestive of his awareness of the consequences of the failures of forefathers--failures exemplified by conflicts, evasions, fears, and guilt. It is, therefore, small wonder that the poet cannot possibly trust himself unequivocally the rhythms of history which estranges him not only from his ancestors but even from his past. The fantasies of heroism which he indulges in seem a desperate search for what could possibly compensate for his incapacity for dealing with reality. He, thus, becomes not an outcast, but a guilty witness of the very life of generations of his ancestors.

In his search for an appropriate poetic style, which would be at once expressive and controlled, led to the realization that "the best style for poetry was none of the many styles in English, but something like the prose of Chekhov or Flaubert" (108) as expressed in "On Skunk Hour" by Lowell.

Regarding himself in the dual aspects of his being a blood relation of the dead forebears as well as a member of the fraternity of poets, Lowell uses the family album and the poet's gallery as objective correlatives for his anguish. Seeking, as he does, a virtual reincarnation of his experience in his poetry, he has necessarily to bring his anguish into the open, as it were, which explains the unrelieved darkness expressed in absurdist terms. Indeed, the concluding poem of his masterpiece *Life Studies*, "Skunk Hour" is predicated on what Lowell himself calls "an existentialist night" (132) in his essay "On 'Skunk Hour'," informed by the proposition about "reaching some point of final darkness where the one free act is suicide" (131 & 132). In other words "Skunk Hour" climaxes Lowell's projection of the night of his soul, a night that is not gracious, but secular, puritan, and agnostically confirming that the whole sequence which began as "external and calm, even (in Lowell's term) 'gentle' concludes as a tortured and brutal journey to the interior" (44) as expressed by Ian Hamilton in his *The Modern Poets*.

The poem as Lowell himself observes in his "On 'Skunk Hour'," "not entirely independent, but the anchor poem in the sequence" (132). It, indeed, defines the terminal point reached by self-exploration—a journey expressive of the maelstrom of existence with which he had to contend for his very survival. His own situation as poet seems paralleled by that of skunks which search "in the moon light" (38) (the traditional light for the insane and their exploits) for "a bite to eat" (38) and survive when chancing upon it in the "garbage pail (45) which "will not scare" (48). "Skunk Hour" is dedicated to Elizabeth Bishop whose poem "The Armadillo" is dedicated to Lowell who acknowledges that the re-reading of the poem "The Armadillo" "suggested a way of breaking through the shell of myoid manner," (133) which means both his technique of composition and manner of apprehending reality. Considered from this standpoint, the poem represents a triumph of his resourcefulness as poet and as man, having been able to achieve a breakthrough to the desired form and style as well as an awareness of the

possibility of survival if he could live "within the truth of his frightening yet life-giving reality" (63) as specified by Fein in his Robert Lowell. The poem does reflect the situation of his embattled self considered from these two standpoints—a situation marked by his intense struggle to survive with all its existential and experiential implications. This is implied by the deliberate use of a flat diction, irregular rhythm in the opening stanzas emphasizing, as it were, the prosiness of the contemplated experience. But as the poem develops through the remaining stanzas, there is an attempt to schematize each stanza as a variation on the first by using intricate patterns of rhyme and partial rhyme, and by introducing the exemplars of the decadent and perverted New England tradition—an eccentric, a bankrupt millionaire, and a decorator who are all obviously residents of Castine, Maine. It is remarkable that from a quiet beginning marked by a neutral tone, even the first stanza suddenly erupts into a sense of bewilderment and horror which deepen as the poem progresses. The projected landscape seems enveloped in a lurid light ("A red fox stain covers Blue Hill" (18)) imaging the furnace of the poet's mind. Dwelling on prurient clandestine affairs in a metaphor yoking love and death, "I watched for love-cars. Lights turned down, /They lay together, hull to hull,/ Where the graveyard shalves on the town..." (27-29). The poet confronts the reader with his deranged mind expressed in a matter-of-fact tone: "My mind's not right" (31). This is followed by a vivid portrayal of the full horror of his state:

*I hear
My ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,
As if my hands were at its throat...
I myself am hell. (32-35)*

Which is Faustian in its implication mirrors the tormented soul thrust into abyss of purgatorial existence. In this state, the poet finds him alone: "Nobody's here-/Only skunks, that search/In the moonlight for a bite to eat" (36-38), which are identifiable with the contemptible go-getters, social climbers, and "lost souls" who

*march on their soles up Main Street:
white stripes, moonstruck eyes' red fire
under the chalk-dry and spar spire
of the Trinitarian Church. (38-41)*

The concluding stanza appropriately relies on a pattern of images emphasizing the sordid, the disgusting, and the foul and decaying which spell out the reality which matters to him—a reality projected in terms of a naturalistic vision:

*I stand on top
of our back steps and breathe the rich air-
a mother skunk with her column of kittens swills the garbage pail.
She jabs her wedge-head in a cup
of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail,
and will not scare. (43-48)*

The poem starts with a startling description of the cultural milieu exemplified by a "hermit/heiress" (1 & 2) (an image of futility, and sterility) striving in vain to realize "the hierarchic privacy/of Queen Victoria's Century" (8 & 9); a bankrupt millionaire whose "nine-knot yawl/was auctioned off to lobstermen" (16 & 17) and a homosexual decorator, who thinks of marriage as an answer to his declining business. Thus in the first part, it is a life which has broken down as evidenced by displacement and distortion of social order, decaying affluence, sterile pursuits and invasion of the human domain by the non-human which foreshadows the projection of skunks in the second half. The impression produced is one of sickness of the soul, which lends credence to what follows namely the personal break-down of the protagonist "in the midst of the general break-down-an ill-spirit a broad in an ill-season" (58) as expressed by Crick in his Robert Lowell. It is veritably the dark night of the soul during which the protagonist spies on lovers:

*One dark night,
My Tudor Ford climbed the hill's skull;
I watched for lover-cars. Light turn down, (25-27)*

.....

*A car radio bleats,
"Lone, O careless love..." (31-32)*

only to find himself peering into the hellish depths of total disintegration, and experiencing tormenting loneliness and thoughts of suicide. It may thus be seen that at the heart of the poem is a vision of anguish, spiritual torment of a kind of world weariness, and more importantly a striving for a dying into life. The poem represents a rare complex of cross references and correspondences suggestive of the poet's desperate need of self-definition and self-realization-a need expressed as a direct confession. The poem juxta-poses the natural with the unnatural or the artificial (skunks search for food with the heiress' thirsting for privacy), the supersession of the heiress by her bishop-son and her tenant farmer with the swilling of the garbage pail by the mother skunk for her kittens. This is suggestive of the possibility of a new life and the rejection of the consolations of the church, despite the enveloping gloom and an ambiguous affirmation. "Skunk Hour" fulfills the criteria set down by T.S. Eliot, Selected Essays, for poetry; the poem is "an expression of significant emotion, emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet" (59). Indeed "Skunk Hour" emerges from the documentation of all the other poems and "91 Revere Street" of Life Studies and points to what Lowell attempts in his next works in style and content.

"Skunk Hour" represents an extremely moving collage of impressions, responses and reactions projected through an acute sense of contexts including the social, cultural, familial, literary and religious calculated to bring out the drama of self-exploration and self-definition enacted through a movement from the out to the inmost world of the self.

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