

*Neville Braybrooke*

ROBERT LOWELL AND THE UNJUST STEWARD:  
A STUDY OF HIS POETRY

WHEN CHRIST TELLS THE STORY of the Unjust Steward to the Pharisees, his words are intended to be two-edged; he is both condemning a double standard of morality and attacking those who are trying to serve God and mammon at the same time. Robert Lowell uses this parable early in his work, when he applies its moral to the first settlers in America who so soon lost their religious, founding zeal; no one is spared, neither his own ancestors, nor the Quakers, Puritans, Calvinists, or Irish immigrants. Boston, the city of his home, is seen as "a new Babylon", a Babel, overshadowed by a Golden Dome, where money talks to money and multiplies the darkness.

*Land of Unlikeness*, his opening collection of poems, rings with this denunciation; the tone is savage, fire-breathing, and apocalyptic. He was twenty-seven at the time, a conscientious objector and a recent Catholic convert. One poem in this book (which was issued in a limited edition of 250 copies) takes its title from the eighth verse of the sixteenth chapter of Saint Luke: "for the children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light". In the three books that have since followed, there are constant returns to this text, which comes from the story of the Unjust Steward; but it is in his first book that the analogy is most keenly pronounced.

"Children of Light" is a ten-line poem in which the irony of the parable is transported across the Atlantic, and in which, paradoxically, the light proves to be darkness, since "the seeds of light" are shown to be those of the Serpent; "the pivoting searchlights", those of war; and the lights on the skyline, those of "burning" wheat-fields. Here is the text, as it was printed in 1944:

Our Fathers wrung their bread from stocks and stones  
And fenced their gardens with the Redman's bones;  
Embarking from the Nether Land of Holland,

Pilgrims unhoueled by Geneva's night,  
 You planted here the Serpent's seeds of light;  
 And here the pivoting searchlights probe to shock  
 The riotous glass houses built on rock,  
 And candles gutter in the hall of mirrors,  
 And light is where the ancient blood of Cain  
 Is burning, burning the unburied grain.

The first fervour of the Pilgrim Fathers has burnt itself out. In Park Street Cemetery (the subject of another early poem), the poet looks at the graves of the Puritan Dracos who left behind them a legacy of greed and hatred, all committed in the name of religion; and in a revised version of the same poem entitled "At the Indian Killer's Grave", he recalls the veterans of King Philip's war who left behind them a trail of blackened villages and slaughtered dead, while (in a phrase of Hawthorne's) the godly helped them with their prayers.

In "Children of Light", written in the middle of a World War, the crimes of the colonist against the Indian ("the Redman's bones") serve only to remind the poet that "the ancient blood of Cain" is still being spilt. As well as the pitched battles being fought both in Europe and the Far East, there are economic battles which are being waged all the time. When the sacked bailiff in the parable cuts a tenant's debt from a hundred quarters of wheat to eighty in order to curry favour for the future, he robs his master of twenty. How much greater is the robbery of farmers who burn the "unburied grain" so as to keep market prices up, irrespective of the starving in their own land.

These landlords are the descendants of the Pilgrims, from whom the Lowells can trace a direct lineage. On the maternal side, too, the poet can claim both a direct descent from Edward Winslow, one of the Founding Fathers, and from Josiah Winslow, the commander-in-chief of the colonial forces in King Philip's war. The poem's opening pun about "Our Fathers" should not be missed; it is a use of irony similar to that employed by Christ in his telling of the story of the Unjust Steward.

This parable has always been one of the most difficult to interpret, and the main problem has been the very stuff on which Lowell has decided to build his poem. Here is the ninth verse in full, in the Douay version: "And the lord commended the unjust steward, forasmuch as he had done wisely: for the children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light." When the master commends the sacked baliff thus, it is as if a modern landowner were to say: "I have been tricked by a shrewd cheat. I am a man of the world and I have to hand the shrewdness to him." The standards belong to those of the worldly-wise, because

both master and bailiff are children of this world. But in the second part of the verse it is Christ speaking; he is expressing regret that the children of light cannot store for heaven with the same sagacity as the children of earth store for this world. The point is perhaps further emphasized by Lowell in a revised version of the poem which appeared in 1946 in *Lord Weary's Castle*, his second book, where the words "candles gutter in a hall of mirrors" have been changed to "candles gutter by an empty altar." The second phrase shows how religious devotions can stale, and ritual become empty.

I have concentrated on "Children of Light" because, although it is the shortest poem that Lowell has so far published, it is one of his most concentrated; every line is packed tight and relates back to experience, and there is a perfect interlocking between his words and the meaning of the Word. Moreover, it is this dragging back to experience which marks the birth of a true poet, because often it is necessary for a poet to undergo, figuratively, a kind of death. Lowell's wife, Elizabeth Hardwick, the critic and novelist, has referred to holy pages, produced in pain. She has quoted Flaubert: "You don't know what it is to stay a whole day with your head in your hands trying to squeeze your unfortunate brain so as to find a word."

That pain is probably something that Lowell has experienced. On occasion the words have clotted and jarred: "Gall, or spiked bone-vat, siphons His bilged blood", occurs in his first book. Or, in his second, there occur lines which end with clumsy, portentous questions: "O Christ, the spiralling years/Slither with child and manger to a ball/Of ice; and what is man?" Indeed, these poems of the 1940s were full of religious imagery, with Christ walking on the River Charles in Boston, or with Our Lady of Walsingham being invoked for his cousin Warren Winslow—lost at sea during the Second World War. By the 1950s this imagery had been dropped.

In 1951 he published a long narrative poem called *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*, running to 38 sixteen-line stanzas. Throughout, the imagery is entirely classical—although an interesting conversion has taken place between the poem as it first appeared in the pages of the *Kenyon Review* and the text as it was printed in book form. All references to the Virgin and Saint Patrick have been dropped in the second version. Nor is there any religious imagery in *Life Studies*, his latest collection, which came out in 1959. Yet in an interview that appeared several months after this volume had been published, Lowell was reported as saying: "In many ways these later poems seem to me more religious than the early."

I believe that the beginning of an explanation for this statement lies in the revised version of *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*. Lowell's poems have a habit of

echoing each other, and these mills are referred to in one of his 1945 poems called "New Year's Day". The Saint Peter's church bell of that poem, which rings in the New Year, is mentioned again in the longer poem as the bell brought by John Adams to this Romish church in "eighteen hundred" and "cast—so the records claim—by Paul Revere." The church in question happens to be Saint Patrick's, one of the oldest Catholic churches in Maine. The change in name is a case of poetic license, justified in 1945 because the poet probably wanted a fisherman saint whose name could be used to add extra point to both his pun about a *parish sea* and his description of *smelt* swimming in the mill-stream.

In contrast, in the first version of *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*, the references to the Virgin and Saint Patrick seemed dragged in; it was as if a Christian theme had been imposed upon a classical one. Later, when the poem appeared in book form, the critics were cautious; to many of them a narrative poem meant either Longfellow or Frost, whereas Lowell was re-telling the myth of Persephone and Pluto, with a number of other classical allusions added. For instance, although there is no scene to parallel Persephone's eating of the pomegranate seeds, Arethusa and Narcissus appear as shadowy figures in the background. The critical caution was probably due in part to bewilderment.

Anne Kavanaugh (Persephone) looks back on her life; she recalls her childhood with Harry Kavanaugh, with whom she was brought up almost as a sister (her own father was an improvident drunkard); then her thoughts turn to marriage, Harry's enlistment in the Navy, and his nervous breakdown, largely brought on by the news of Pearl Harbour in December, 1941. A year later when they are lying in bed on Christmas Day, he hears her murmuring in her dreams of a man whom she adores; he immediately suspects that she has a lover and tries to strangle her. The irony is that her lover is really Harry himself, the young sane Harry with whom she had once walked through the golden-eared corn. In the last third of the poem he attempts to commit suicide, fails, falls into a decline, and finally dies. The five closing verses show Anne trying to come to terms with life.

Some passages read like a psychiatrist's case-book, especially those in which Anne's dreams turn into a nightmare as her husband tries to kill her: "Harry, we are not accountable for dreams", she pleads. Indeed, it may be that the writing itself was a therapy for the poet, because sometimes a poet will not know what he is saying, or trying to work out, until he has said it. Certainly, from *Life Studies* it is quite obvious that there are parts of Lowell in both Anne and Harry Kavanaugh: like her he meditates on the decline of a noble family, and like him he has suffered a mental breakdown. Yet it was not until 1959 that he made a poem out of his stay at

McLean's, a private mental home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In fact, although his early poems were scattered with small autobiographical details about toy soldiers and nursery attics, there was nothing very personal in them; his primary concern was with the story of his ancestors, and not until 1958 did he write his first love poem, "Man and Wife". Then a year later, in "Waking in the Blue", he recorded his experiences at McLean's, "the house for the 'mentally ill'." This transition from *Lord Weary's Castle* to *Life Studies* amounted to a shift from a history of his ancestors to a more immediate record of himself.

In 1943 he was imprisoned for his refusal to enlist in the armed forces; his plea for exemption was that the Allied bombing of open cities was morally indefensible. In *Lord Weary's Castle*, in a short poem of fourteen lines called "In the Cage", he treats this incident from his career with the greatest objectivity; in *Life Studies*, in a poem of four times that length called "Memories of West Street and Lepke", he writes much more fully about the affair:

Ought I to regret my seedtime?  
I was a fire-breathing Catholic C.O.,  
and made my manic statement,  
telling off the state and president, and then  
sat waiting sentence in the bull pen  
beside a Negro boy with curlicues  
of marijuana in his hair.

The apocalyptic battle presented in *Land of Unlikeness* between God and Satan is over; so too is the seedtime presented in *Lord Weary's Castle*, in which he was trying to redeem the greed of the early Lowells and Winslows as well as the rapaciousness of the Puritan Dracos and the whale-hunting Quakers. If in *The Mills of the Kavanaghs* his early blustering music still echoes in the scenes of murder and madness, then in the closing verses, where Anne rows down the river, it changes to a lyrical pianissimo; lines of astonishing beauty follow each other in quick succession, as here in stanza 36 (a "bobber" is a float used in angling):

Now her matches fall  
In dozens by her bobber to expire  
As target-circles on the mirrored fire—  
Escapes of *Kavanaugh*. She sees they hold  
Her mirror to her—just a little cold;  
A ground hog's looking glass. "The day is sharp  
And short, Love, and its sun is like this carp,  
Or goldfish, almost twenty inches long,

Panting, a weak old dog, below a prong  
 Of deadwood fallen from my copper beech;  
 The settling leaves embower its warmth. They reach  
 For my reflection, but it glides through shoal  
 Aground, to where the squirrel held its roots  
 And freehold, Love, unsliding, when our boots  
 Pattered—a life ago once—on its hole.”

This mood of calm is shared by the poet of *Life Studies*, and there is no longer any contrived imagery or orchestration—as in the early work. If there is a fault, it is that sometimes the new rhythms are those of prose. “Whenever he left a job,/he bought a smarter car” are two lines from a poem written about his father. In a chapter of autobiography, written under the title of “91 Revere Street”, and included on another page of *Life Studies* in the American edition, the same sentiment is expressed much more poetically in prose: “Almost immediately he bought a larger and more stylish house; he sold his ascetic stove-black Hudson and bought a plump brown Buick.” But such lapses are rare, and into a wonderfully loose, conversational style (that yet remains poetry) he has now incorporated a masterly sense of precision. Another thought from Flaubert could be applied: “Let me die like a dog rather than hasten the ripening of a sentence by a single second.”

The greater part of *Life Studies* is given over to family portraits of his parents and grandparents. The longest of these is entitled “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow”, and in its fourth part lies an important clue to his whole development:

My Uncle was dying at twenty-nine.  
 “You are behaving like children,”  
 said my Grandfather,  
 when my Uncle and Aunt left their three baby daughters,  
 and sailed for Europe on a last honeymoon . . .  
 I cowered in terror.  
 I wasn’t a child at all —  
 unseen and all-seeing, I was Agrippina  
 in the Golden House of Nero . . .  
 Near me was the white measuring-door  
 my Grandfather had pencilled with my Uncle’s heights.  
 In 1911, he had stopped growing at just six feet.

Notice with what subtle artistry, amid the irony of Grandfather castigating the elders for behaving like children, his grandson suddenly has to bear the burdens of both worlds, child’s and grown-up’s, and yet belong to neither. Notice, too, the

poet's added irony of the growing child contrasted with his uncle who has ceased growing "at just six feet." Lowell has enlarged on the experience that he underwent when he part-cast himself as Anne Kavanaugh; for then, through her, he witnessed the decline of one noble family of Irish Catholics that had emigrated to Maine in the seventeenth century, whereas now, in *Life Studies*, as Agrippina he is the witness of the decline not only of his own family but of a golden age.

Grandfather Arthur Winslow of this last book appeared also in Lowell's first. There, he was pictured "mining in California's golden bays"; a line later revised to read, "Hosing out gold in Colorado's waste." That statement of fact served the poet then as a symbol to suggest his grandfather's pursuit of gold, just as, in another early poem, the Golden Dome of the State House, which towers over Beacon Hill, was introduced to symbolize the Babel that Boston had become. But that symbolism, like the religious imagery, has now gone; both were a necessary stage on the way, though in themselves neither the symbolism of gold for mammon, nor the constant references to God and the saints, made the poems religious. For what makes a poem religious is the morality behind the experience out of which the poet has brought it to light, and in Lowell's poetry this morality unites all his poems from *Land of Unlikeness* to *Life Studies*. Perhaps Henry James best put his finger on it when he wrote of Hawthorne:

It is only in a country where newness and change and brevity of tenure are the common substance of life, that the fact of one's ancestors having lived for a hundred and seventy years in a single spot would become an element of one's morality. It is only the imaginative American that would feel urged to keep reverting to this circumstance, to keep analysing it and cunningly considering it.

Lowell has shown himself to be that kind of American.

Christ's parables are moral tales; some of them are easy and straightforward like that of the Good Samaritan, some of them are subtle and cunning like that of the Unjust Steward. Yet whereas the story of a good Samaritan presents no problems, there is an immediate irony about an unjust steward, since a stewardship pre-supposes a position of trust. A similar conflict in meaning arises too over the title of the Good Thief, whose story is a fact—not a parable. For these paradoxes about a *Good* Thief and an *Unjust* Steward, which are to many no more than incantation, have become in Robert Lowell the foundation upon which his genius is founded.