

Lauriat Lane, Jr.

Robert Lowell: the Problems and Power of Allusion

Allusions, like symbols, can be divided broadly into explicit and implicit: separated, as Harry Levin says,¹ by an equatorial line past which we can sail on problematically into the conjectural and, finally, the inadmissible. At the same time allusion to some entity otherwise wholly outside the text must be distinguished from reference to a similar entity which is actually presumed present within the world of the text. King Ahab is not present in *Moby Dick*; Captain Ahab is. Neither is present in Robert Lowell's "The Quaker Graveyard at Nantucket," but both are alluded to: one explicitly, one implicitly. The allusions in Lowell's earlier, highly allusive poems such as "The Quaker Graveyard" have been glossed to the point where the reader's problem is not to reap but to winnow.

However, the referential content in Lowell's book, *Life Studies*, and in many subsequent poems, is so circumstantial and the style so direct that possible allusions are more likely to require discovery, juridical as well as analytic—witness Wilbur's, Nims's, and Berryman's well-known critiques of "Skunk Hour" and Lowell's response to their "discoveries."² The very presence of such allusions may often be problematic. The following three examples serve to illustrate both the problem of distinguishing between reference and allusion in poems by Lowell and the further problem of crossing from the explicit to the implicit and on to the conjectural and the inadmissible. They may also show the poetic power gained by affirming and explicating these problematic allusions.

I. Rahvs and Redskins

No one has ever doubted that in line 17 of "Man and Wife" Lowell alludes explicitly and semi-referentially to Philip Rahv and his wife

who, if they do not literally inhabit the present world of the poem, inhabit the literal past of that present. For many critics, such as Marjorie Perloff, this allusion/ reference contributes metonymically, as do many others in the poem, to establishing "the nature of the poem's milieu": "The 'rising sun' of line 2 becomes, in the diseased imagination of the poet who fears passion and vitality, an Indian savage in 'war paint' who 'dyes us red,' the pun on 'dyes' intensifying the death-in-life existence of the couple."³ At least one critic of Lowell, Steven Axelrod—and no doubt many others—has observed the general appropriateness to Lowell's personal and literary situation of Rahv's well-known categories of paleface and redskin.⁴ But has it been noted that in "Man and Wife" the combination of line 17, "outdrank the Rahvs in the heat," with line 2, "the rising sun in war paint dyes us red," constitutes a witty specific allusion to Rahv's essay, an essay which Rahv had gathered into *Image and Idea* at about the time of the scene being recalled by the monologist of the poem? Such an allusion would make Rahv's distinction not just generally pertinent to Lowell, as Axelrod has shown, but specially pertinent to this poem's issues. Man and wife, paleface and redskin—we may even wish to consider the thematic or biographical parallel of the poem's title and subject with Rahv's pair of categories, thus adding one more dimension to those that Perloff has explicated so thoroughly (pp. 82-99). This possible parallel may be further supported by Elizabeth Hardwick's recent "novel," *Sleepless Nights*, and even by the authorial stance of her *A View of My Own*, dedicated, incidentally, to Philip Rahv.

II. Frost at Midwinter

In the second half of "Sailing Home from Rapallo," Lowell contrasts in his mind the actual Italian scene with a mental scene of his family cemetery in Dunbarton, H.H., where Lowell is now buried, in midwinter:

where the burning cold illuminated
 the hewn inscriptions of Mother's relatives:
 twenty or thirty Winslows and Starks.
 Frost had given their names a diamond edge . . . (lines 31-34)

For Perloff these lines illustrate one significant strand of Lowell's "nexus of images": "Not only do winter and summer images regularly alternate in Lowell's poetry, but when the poet wishes to emphasize the isolation and death of the self, he merges the two clusters" (p. 6). Alan Williamson conjectures an implicit allusion: "It is Dante's Hell of ice, reserved for betrayal in intimate relationships; and the implicitly violent imagery of the passage suggests that Lowell holds his mother's Winslow coldness psychologically responsible for hastening his father's death."⁵ The conjectured allusion is certainly helpful, possible, and appropriate to all we know of Lowell's well-stocked poetic imagination. And Jerome Mazzaro has shown the importance of Dante to Lowell's earlier poetry.⁶

But there is another allusion, another literary patron saint, much closer to home; an allusion that works more by metonymy than analogy or allegory. The capitalized frost of "Frost had given their names a diamond edge" directs us explicitly, if conjecturally, to another Frost of New Hampshire, "New Hampshire," and *New Hampshire*, that other Robert who inscribed himself Lowell's "friend in the art."⁷ That also "fatherless" Robert had written of New Hampshire, of the "burning cold" of fire and ice, and in "The Generations of Men" of two young "Starks" whose midsummer future Frost offered to us in terms ironically antithetical to those in which Lowell presents "Mother's relatives." Yet even Frost's young, hopeful couple can ask, "What will we come to/ With all this pride of ancestry, we Yankees?", reply only partly facetiously, "I think we're all mad," but finally affirm, "What counts is the ideals,/ And those will bear some keeping still about." This witty allusion, much like "Frost is in the stubble" in Wallace Stevens' "The Dwarf," clearly adds a significant allusive dimension to the metonymic and allegorical ones provided by previous commentators.

III. The Colonel's Bubble

Thus, allusions and references can be metaphorical or not; the same detail can be both a reference and an allusion, and it can be both literal and metaphorical. In lines 61-64 of "For the Union Dead," the bubble on which Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, or his spirit, rides as "he waits/ for the blessed break" has all these sometimes confusing dimensions, and more. With this poem and its

commentators we are driven back to the world of Lowell's earlier poetry, where our problem is not to establish allusion but somehow to sort out, if we can, differing interpretations of reference and allusion, of metonymy and metaphor.

To judge from the commentators, our first problem is whether Lowell wishes us to "think"—for to "see" too vividly would, I feel, be aesthetically disastrous⁸—Shaw as outside or inside "his bubble." Certain critics have glossed the bubble either as a "political bubble which drifts from the mouth of Leviathan," by the bursting of which Shaw, and Lowell, are to be freed from the state,⁹ or as one the breaking of which "might unveil truth"¹⁰ or bring about "an annihilation of the veil of Maya" and "a bursting of the amnion."¹¹ However, we had better, to avoid compounding confusion, take the preposition "on" straightforwardly if still somewhat grotesquely, and leave the Colonel upon his enigmatic, polysemous bubble. For to have him both inside *and* outside the bubble would surely smash Empsonian ambiguity to chaotic rubble.

The bubble has its literal, contextual origin, of course, in the referential "bubbles/drifting from the noses of the cowed, compliant fish" of the South Boston Aquarium of Lowell's youth, which "my hand tingled/ to burst." Remaining critical opinion has construed the bubble on which the Colonel rides variously as the world, hope, "the absolute zero of outer space," fame, illusion, idealism, the "boiling bubbles" of Hiroshima, and "the precarious ascendancy of a complacent civilization."¹² Some of these are obviously explicit or implicit visual analogies to the bubble's roundness; others are conventional conceptual equivalents for its metaphorical fragility. Although these glosses may not be actually contradictory, some of us find their multiplicity formally and thematically distracting. Others may delight in their potentially deconstructive profusion.

Three possible separate but simultaneous allusions, however, do provide the Coleridgean esemplastic power to fuse these disparate significances into a single, complex, powerful poetic image, whose components need neither distract nor deconstruct. The first allusion, so obvious as to be almost explicit, puts Colonel Shaw in Shakespeare's fourth age of man, "Seeking the bubble reputation/ Even in the cannon's mouth" (*As You Like It*, II. vii. 152-153). The second allusion, to Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*, may be implicit, even conjectural here, but was explicit in the epigraph of " 'To Speak of Woe That Is In Marriage,' " in *Life Studies*. Both allusions to Schopenhauer, interestingly, combine an

obvious literary source with a less obvious philosophical one. The passage from Schopenhauer most apposite to Colonel Shaw's bubble and to the Colonel's entire presence in the poem is as follows:

Ultimately death must triumph, for by birth it has already become our lot; and it plays with its prey only for a while before swallowing it up. However, we continue our life with great interest and much solicitude as long as possible, just as we blow out a soap-bubble as long and as large as possible, although with the perfect certainty that it will burst.¹³

The third and most conjectural allusion is to "Sintram in Fouqué's tale" and, to the best of my knowledge, was first implied by Steven Axelrod (p. 175). It is a visual as well as literary allusion and translates the metaphorical bubble back to the iconographically stylized steed on which Shaw literally, in one sense, rides. For Saint-Gaudens' sculptor's vision of Colonel Shaw, which in turn inspired Lowell's poem, resembles the main figure of Albrecht Dürer's engraving, "The Knight, Death, and Satan."¹⁴ This engraving, in its turn, had inspired Baron Frederic de la Motte Fouqué's *Sintram and His Companions*, especially its final confrontation between the hero and these two other powers, from which the hero emerges chastened but whole. In some 19th-century translations of Fouqué, Dürer's engraving was modified to illustrate Sintram's final encounter with Death and with the Devil.¹⁵

The simultaneity and fusion of these three allusions help us to cope with the image's troubling multiplicity of metaphorical reference and its possible grotesqueness. The conjectural allusion to Fouqué and, by extension, Dürer gives the awkward visual image of the bubble narrative, if fantastic, embodiment and heightens Shaw's existentially authentic fate by its ironic contrast with Sintram's German-Romantic love-honour turmoil. The almost explicit allusion to Jaques' speech fits Colonel Shaw's literal military heroism into the ethical pattern of Shakespeare's more traditional poetic images. It also links Shaw's heroism more unambiguously to Lowell's startlingly metaphorical bubble and ironically parallels Shaw's bubble with the cannon ball's real solidity. The allusion to Schopenhauer combines the differing thematic readings of the bubble's impermanence within a coherent philosophical framework significant in many ways to Lowell's poem and Shaw's fate. The result of this alliance of metaphor and allusion is, as I have already said, a single, complex, powerful poetic image.

NOTES

1. "Symbolism and fiction," *Contexts of Criticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), pp. 205-206.
2. Anthony Ostroff, ed., *The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic* (Boston: Little Brown, 1964), pp. 82-110.
3. *The Poetic Art of Robert Lowell* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), p. 90. Quotations from Lowell not otherwise identified are from *Life Studies* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1959), pp. 78, 87, and *For the Union Dead* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964), pp. 70-72.
4. *Robert Lowell: Life and Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 10-11.
5. *Pity the Monsters: The Political Vision of Robert Lowell* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 74.
6. *The Poetic Themes of Robert Lowell* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965), *passim*.
7. "Robert Frost," *Notebook 1967-68* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), p. 74; also in *Notebook and History*. For "The Generations of Men," see *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1969), pp. 73-80.
8. Paul Ricoeur says: To imagine, then, is not to have a mental picture of something but to display relations in a depicting mode" (*Critical Inquiry*, 5(Autumn 1978), 150).
9. Jay Martin, *Robert Lowell* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1970), p. 38.
10. Patrick Cosgrave, *The Public Poetry of Robert Lowell* (New York: Taplinger, 1972), p. 161.
11. Philip Cooper, *The Autobiographical Myth of Robert Lowell* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1970), pp. 99, 100.
12. Mazzaro, p. 126; Cosgrave, p. 161; Williamson, p. 110; Cooper, p. 99; Axelrod, p. 174; Stephen Yenser, *Circle to Circle: The Poetry of Robert Lowell* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p. 239.
13. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E.F.J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), I, 311. I quote from this authoritative translations, first published in 1958; it may not have been the translation known to Lowell.
14. Conveniently reproduced in Charlotte M. Yonge's introduction to Baron Frederic de la Motte Fouqué, *Sintram and His Companions and Undine* (London: Wells Gardner, Darton, and Co., n.d. [fifth Edition, 1930]).
15. For example, on page 139 of the above edition, "copyright 1896 by Joseph William Darton."