
Robert Lowell and the Religious Sublime

As a student in his last year at St. Mark's, Robert Lowell published an interpretation of an allegorical drawing by his friend, Francis Parker, which reveals an early enchantment with religious sublimity. Although the piece in *Vindex* is characterized more by youthful idealism than hermeneutic skill, it is prophetic of the sort of poetry he would soon be writing. Lowell's explication begins with a grand moral pronouncement intended to separate the saints from the fools: "The idea that we wish to make clear is that tremendous labor and great intelligence, if applied toward the advancement of evil or petty ends, are of no avail." He then proceeds to excoriate fourteen types of misguided intellectuals who surround the central figure of "St. Simon, the Stylite, a symbol of true knowledge." The fools are generally pedants and scientists, "men of authority who misuse their power" (129), and no doubt modelled with insubordinate glee after Lowell's teachers.

The young Lowell, full of sanctimonious ambitions, has his eye on the sublime "St. Simon [who] is elevated high above everyone else by comprehension of the true light. The book and the pen symbolize real intellectual attainment, while the plumb line signifies a quite natural feeling of superiority; but more important, his insecurity. From the sublime to the ridiculous is but a step." The sublime from Longinus and Burke to Kant and Harold Bloom has always been a measure of power and has always involved ranking that power according to a hierarchy of values. In Lowell's allegory a plumb line measures what Longinus called *hupsos*, and he borrows an aphorism from Napoleon (originally delivered to his Polish ambassador after his devastating retreat from Moscow in 1812) to expose his fear of falling from *hupsos* to *bathos*. His self-conscious mockery recalls Pope's in *Peri Bathos, or The Art of Sinking*, a satirical take-off of Longinus's *Peri Hupsos*. Around this time, in fact, Lowell was contemplating the way the eighteenth century poet punctured all grand schemes with his rapier wit. He commented on an exam that Pope's "Rape of the Lock" "is never exactly sublime" but "when we remember their dual purpose of sublime and absurd the lines become comparable to the very greatest" (Houghton 2787).

Numerous uncollected poems indicate that Lowell found it prudent to deflate the religious sublimity he simultaneously yearned for. A poem written in 1936 at Harvard, "The Flame-Colored Stain of Lust," mocks the "Antipodean solitude sublime" that "Blankets the ladder to beatitude" as so much candy. It is "mellow taffy" (Houghton

2020), a sweet illusion for the narcissist's palate. Literature and art notes from Harvard reveal that he was absorbing Longinus's definitions of the sublime from his professors, but when he extols religious sublimity he invariably scrutinizes it through Freudian spectacles, excoriating it as illusory, or at least unattainable. In "Great Britain's Trial," for example, he praises "the sublimest Thirteenth Century" because of poets and theologians like Dante and Aquinas who, like St. Simeon, are monuments to divine reason. But in the same breath he imagines their decline into the "Scholastic pedant-parrots" (Houghton 2133) cloistered in the Sorbonne who only adulterate their religious sublimity in facsimiles and commentaries. He would like to be Dante, but suggests that he will only attain the status of parrot (as his *Imitations* would demonstrate years later). "The Cloister," a poem written at Kenyon when Lowell studied Longinus, Burke, Kant and other philosophers on the sublime in the aesthetics course given by John Crowe Ransom (*Philosophies of Beauty* by E. F. Carritt was the text book) again stresses the solipsistic illusions which so easily get confused with religious sublimity. In one version he imagines a Wordsworthian child sampling intimations of Platonic immortality. He is "Bright with the foreknowledge, profound / From sipping his sublimest origin" (Houghton 2049). Then he attacks the idea of divine grace as narcissistic, as the "factitious and fictitious" dispensation of a mind cloistered in womblike ignorance. Here the religious sublime is the product of a "Milk-sop Narcissus' curdling stare." The ascent to an empyrean of sublimity, Lowell concludes, is actually a regression to a blissful immaturity. Lowell would repeat this charge in later uncollected poems about Elizabeth Bishop, Randall Jarrell, and John Berryman. Using Keats's terminology, he accuses them (and accuses himself) of floundering in the egotistical sublime. They are all children, he suggests, seeking that "sublimest origin," that first bliss in the mother's womb or at her breast. Lowell's plumb line falls with a steady thud in all of these poems, and serves to yank the poet all too susceptible to ethereal flights and grand delusions back to earth. Having submitted to a more terrestrial view by the end of his article on St. Simeon, Lowell performs a maneuver that characterizes much of his later work. He confesses that his schemes to attain intellectual and religious sublimity may, indeed, be absurd.

Biographical accounts suggest that Lowell's "real intellectual attainment" as a student was, in fact, modest. "Aside from history, Lowell was a below-average student" (19), Ian Hamilton remarks, although in his last two years at St. Mark's he worked hard at developing the pose of an artist-savant. Good spelling would never be one of his accomplishments, however, and as a result it is difficult to decide whether his St. Simon is the member of the fanatical Jewish group known as the Zealots, who were opposed to the Romans during biblical times, or whether he is St. Simeon, an early anchorite called a "pillar saint" who by penitential custom spent years perched above the desert. Although Parker's drawing definitely puts St. Simon on a pillar, his true identity is withheld. He could be St. Simeon Stylites the Elder, who removed himself to a column in 423 A.D. to escape pestering crowds. He could also be St. Simeon Stylites the Younger (a likely model for the zealous young Lowell), who as a boy lived on top of a variety of pillars before switching permanently to one on the Wonderful

Mountain near Antioch, where he resided for the last forty-five years of his life, preaching and conducting mass from on high.

Lowell may have found a precedent for amalgamating St. Simeon Stylites, Napoleon, and the sublime in *Moby Dick*, a book he was familiar with by the time he and Francis Parker spent a summer of rigorous self-education on Nantucket in 1934. Right after extolling Queequeg as a “noble savage . . . [whose] dilated nostrils snuffed in the sublime life of the worlds,” Melville compares the sailor on the mast-head, vigilantly scouting the sea for whales, to “Saint Stylites, the famous Christian hermit of old times, who built him a lofty stone pillar in the desert and spent the whole latter portion of his life on its summit” (129). A few lines later, Melville compares the mast-head sentinel to “Napoleon; who, upon the top of the column of Vendome, stands with arms folded, some one hundred and fifty feet in the air” (132). By the end of the next paragraph—like Lowell submitting his sublime spirituality to skeptical deflation—Melville stipulates: “For the most part, in this tropic whaling life, a sublime uneventfulness invests you; you hear no news; read no gazettes; extras with startling accounts of commonplaces never delude you into unnecessary excitements” (133).

Thirty years later, Lowell would finish a draft of “Waking Early Sunday Morning” with a similar reflection on the sublime, and *Moby Dick* would play a significant role. His last octet admonishes:

say we fought and trusted in
ourselves to free the earth from sin,
were glad like Ahab to go down
in pride of righteousness, and drown,
that we were faithful to this boast,
our appetite for which we lost
the world, though free of other crime,
in the monotonous sublime.

(Williamson 62)

Lowell characteristically identifies with Ahab’s *hubris* and tragic joy in his lost cause, and partly exonerates his quest for what Melville refers to as the “unimaginable sublimity” (30) of the white whale. Numerous other passages delineate *Moby Dick* according to the sublime paradigm of an awesome but awful phenomenon. Both writers, like Pope, counter sublime pursuits with inevitable disillusionments, with denouements in “the sublime uneventfulness” of the sea.

For Lowell, however, “the monotonous sublime” bears a stridently moral message. In his 1965 interview with A. Alvarez, several months before composing “Waking Early Sunday Morning,” he observed, “what everyone finds wrong with American culture is the monotony of the sublime” (43). Adopting a sober, no-nonsense, British point of view for the moment, he criticizes his home country in a way that implicates his personality and poetic career in larger national faults: “We leap for the sublime. You might almost say American literature and culture begins with *Paradise Lost*. I always think there are two great symbolic figures that stand behind American ambition and culture. One is Milton’s Lucifer and the other is Captain Ahab: those two

sublime ambitions that are doomed and ready, for their idealism, to face any amount of violence” (42). The transformation of Lowell’s concept of the sublime from St. Simeon Stylites’s “true light,” which radiated from the ascetic Christian intellect and transcended the boorish “men of authority who misuse their power” for “the advancement of evil or petty ends,” to a sublime power which pursued tragic, satanic ends with a vengeance, is truly remarkable. What happened during the thirty intervening years to so radically alter Lowell’s viewpoint?

Most of the change can be explained by his growing awareness of the great difference between his private conduct and his public commitments. His psychological aberrations did not square with his liberal ideals. Like Yeats, he meditated on the often startling gap between power and knowledge, passion and conviction, and knew that in his yearning for the sublime he was casting his lot with the Ahabs and Lucifers rather than the Simeons. If “the best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity,” then Lowell in his sublime moods would court the great, impassioned bad men (most frighteningly Mussolini and Hitler) and cast “the ceremony of innocence” to the wind. Because the sublime for Lowell became inextricably linked with history’s terrifying “super men” rather than its cerebral saints, he attacked it even while remaining under its spell. America came to embody his manic personality, and although he tried to abandon the former by living in England and subdue the latter by taking lithium, he fell short in both endeavors. Unable to maintain a steady course, again like Yeats he was forced to embrace vacillation. Toward America’s maniacal sublime he responded with ambivalence, as if he too were caught on a vertiginous gyre spinning between contrary positions. As “Waking Early Sunday Morning” attests, he leaps for the sublime—he exclaims, “O to break loose, like the chinook / salmon”—but he also remonstrates: “Stop, back off” because he knows the tragic and comic consequences of such leaping. The salmon’s “jumping and falling back” parallels his own vacillations. Repressing the sublime with moral injunctions or curing its symptoms with lithium might, in the economy of Lowell’s psyche, only constitute a diminution of power, which is why, when he later tells himself to “sing softer,” he rejoins: “But what if a new / diminuendo brings no true / tenderness, only restlessness, / excess, the hunger for success.” What if depression or the emotional flatness engendered by lithium causes, as many critics complained, a corresponding stylistic flatness? This would call for a new surge toward sublimity.

The psychopathology of the sublime has literary, political, and other correlatives, but since Lowell’s first published reference to the sublime is in a predominantly religious context, it is worthwhile to trace his evolving conception of the religious sublime. A clue to his burgeoning preoccupation with religious sublimity surfaces in his unfinished autobiography written in the mid-1950s. Ian Hamilton records: “The book, he said, would cover his early life up to 1934, the year of his first summer in Nantucket with Frank Parker. Lowell now viewed that summer as ‘a period of enthusiasm’; ‘enthusiasm’ is a word he regularly uses to describe his manic episodes (the term probably derives from his reading in theology, when it would denote extreme religious zealotry)” (226). “Pathological enthusiasm” was another phrase he used to define his mania. In his early writing “enthusiasm” was a virtue rather than a vice.

His "War: A Justification," composed in 1935 with an ingenuous ignorance of European events like Hitler's ascent to power, finds evidence for its argument (as Longinus did in *Peri Hupsos*) among the sublime events and heroic characters of Homeric poetry. Of Ulysses, Lowell writes, "He is by no means perfect, but he radiates life, energy, and enthusiasm" (158). A speech that won Lowell an oratorical contest at Kenyon College in 1940, entitled "Moulding the Golden Spoon," chastised aristocratic students at St. Mark's for not being aristocratic enough, and for approaching such courses as English literature "without enthusiasm or perception" (35). Soon Lowell's attitude toward enthusiasm and, by extension, religious sublimity would alter drastically. As his manic episodes became more brutal and more frequent, he began to identify with religious enthusiasts, but only to confess and condemn what he considered to be at best a tragic flaw and at worst a heinous sin.

Religious enthusiasm (the word's root, *en-theos*, etymologically denotes a spirit or god within the psyche) has enjoyed an uneasy alliance with the sublime throughout its long history. R. A. Knox argues in his lengthy study *Enthusiasm* that "Enthusiasm did not really begin to take shape until the moment when Luther shook up the whole pattern of European theology," and that "Not until the days of the Commonwealth can it be studied in its full context. Then, for a hundred and fifty years, it becomes the major preoccupation of religious minds" (4). The Quakers lit the enthusiastical torch and passed it on to such Methodists as George Whitefield and the Wesleys. Lowell's Ahab in "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket" was in his own way a Quaker enthusiast. Another enthusiast was Lowell's early model, Jonathan Edwards, whose Great Awakening in the middle of the eighteenth century derived inspiration from the impassioned sermons of Whitefield. Samuel Monk in his study of the sublime in eighteenth century aesthetics believes that "The development of the sublime was a sort of Methodist revival in art" and that shortly after Longinus's treatise was popularized in European intellectual circles by Boileau's translation (1674), the literary theorist John Dennis "tried to establish sublime poetry upon enthusiastic emotion" (235). Within the eighteenth century an insipient dialectic was already stirring between classical and romantic, conservative Anglo-Catholic and radical evangelical Protestant, the tribe of Pope and the tribe of Dennis. These contrary factions drew much of their animus from differing attitudes toward sublime enthusiasm. Several centuries later the debate would play itself out with similar vehemence in the career of Robert Lowell.

Although "sublime" and "enthusiasm" were critical terms that emerged in tandem and then proliferated into different fields, the two terms were originally aligned by Longinus when he compared the religious experience of the Pythian priestess conjuring divine power from her oracle to the literary experience of conjuring power from oracular authors: "Inspired by this, even those who are not easily moved by the divine afflatus share the enthusiasm of these others' [the authors'] grandeur" (167). Gods and great poets, for Longinus, imparted authorial sublimity. Edmund Burke, whose famous *Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* was begun during the heyday of religious enthusiasm (in the late 1740s), praised the sort of dark, terrifying passions "roused by a fanatic preacher" (61) and argued against those tenets

of the classical enlightenment which were “in some sort an enemy to all enthusiasms whatever” (60).

The other principal theorist of the sublime in the eighteenth century, and the central figure in Ransom’s course at Kenyon on aesthetics, Immanuel Kant, disagreed. Like Anthony Shaftesbury, who yoked the sublime together with enthusiasm in his “Letter Concerning Enthusiasm,” but warned that they could easily spawn delusion and madness in melancholy temperaments (39), Kant struggled to distinguish the sublime from its fanatical correlates. The sublime, in his Platonic view, depended on the reason’s divine and moral power to reconstitute itself on an inner, transcendental plane after an overwhelming external force threatened it with breakdown and subjugation. St. Simeon Stylites could have been his model for the sublime, since he too stood for ethical and intellectual nobility. Considering Lowell’s own recognition of the close connection between the sublime and the ridiculous (that originates in Longinus [129]), and his later manic-depressive agonies, Kant’s prognosis is sadly prophetic: “If enthusiasm is comparable to *delirium*, fanaticism may be compared to *mania*. Of these the latter is least of all compatible with the sublime, for it is *profoundly ridiculous*” (128).

Most critics of Lowell’s early religious poetry commented on its uneasy marriage of New England Puritanism and Roman Catholicism (which the poet adopted in 1940 and spurned in 1947 shortly after publication of *Land of Unlikeness*). Randall Jarrell, for one, observed: “Lowell reminds one of those heretical enthusiasts, often disciplined and occasionally sanctified or excommunicated, who are more at home in the Church Triumphant than in the church of this world” (22). For Lowell, Catholicism appealed not only because it represented a tradition antithetical to his Puritan heritage and close to the Eliotic principles which his mentors, the Southern Agrarians, espoused, but also because it offered a sane antidote to the *en-theos* or “inner light” which possessed him with such demonic force. To the manic anarchy of the Protestant sublime he would bring the intellectual authority of the Catholic Church, hoping that its long tradition of rational theology and strict ritual would govern the enthusiastic god always threatening to overpower him. As a Catholic in the early 1940s, Lowell fortified himself with the theological writings of Hopkins, Newman, Christopher Dawson, E. I. Watkin, Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gilson, whose *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, *Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas*, and *The Mystical Theology of St. Bernard* proved particularly riveting. In one way or another, all of these writers argued for the logocentric tradition in western metaphysics—the view that truth, reason, divinity, and the word form a unified and privileged order. In *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, Gilson is particularly at pains to show that “theology . . . will long continue to inspire metaphysics” (18) and that “the imagination of the classical metaphysicians was absolutely possessed by the idea of the Biblical Creator-God” (16). He traces the metaphysical suppositions of Leibniz, Kant, Berkeley, as well as Augustine, Aquinas, and other Church Fathers, back to Plato’s conception of divine reason and Aristotle’s notion of the prime mover—the *anima* or soul—insisting that Christians fulfilled or perfected the principles laid down by Greek philosophers. For these thinkers the central, original logos inheres in God the Father, the Word, and the rational mind. Rea-

son as opposed to enthusiasm (which also signifies a god within the psyche) is paramount, as long as it is founded on Christian intuitions. Like Kant, Gilson attempts to yoke rational theologian and rational philosopher. Delimiting his stance, he says: "The content of Christian philosophy is that body of rational truths discovered, explored or simply safeguarded thanks to the help that reason receives from revelation" (35). "Christian revelation," he repeatedly stresses, is "an indispensable auxiliary to reason" (37).

A rational faith whose revealed truths could be ascertained and ritualized under the authoritarian aegis of the Catholic Church appealed to Lowell's need for psychological stability. Without the pillar of the church, his intellectual St. Simeon would come crashing down. His sublimity would be demolished. Lowell's problem, as Hamilton's biography makes clear, was that he devoted himself to austere Catholic disciplines with the manic zeal he associated with enthusiastic Protestants. He became a reasoning fanatic, an Ahab or Lucifer clamoring for the inner light of divine truth with such ferocity that he finally broke down. If he sublimated his anarchic enthusiasms in pursuit of Catholic principles, his repressed passions returned in psychotic form. As Lowell matured, he came to analyze and dramatize his strange blend of Catholic and Protestant enthusiasms in Freudian terms. Just before discussing the sublime with Alvarez, he claims, "Freud is the man who moves me the most. . . . He's a prophet. I think somehow he continues both the Jewish and Christian tradition, and puts it . . . in a much more rational position" (40-41). Catholic rationality receded as the Freudian *logos* advanced. Although Lowell would repudiate both Protestantism and Catholicism in the middle of his life, and sanctify the atheistical Freud as his new religious guide, he would never entirely repudiate the church's seductive rituals and symbols. He would often invoke them nostalgically, elegizing their once potent power to console broken hearts and broken minds.

"Religion," Freud declared in *The Future of an Illusion*, is "the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity; like the obsessional neurosis of children, it arose out of the Oedipus complex, out of the relation to the father" (43). Since Lowell's mother often pretended to be the august martial figure she missed in her naval officer husband (she fancied herself as Napoleon and Alexander when Lowell was a boy), Lowell's ambivalence toward religion has patriarchal as well as matriarchal roots. If Lowell in his teens and twenties was trying to triumph over that introjected image of his Protestant mother and father—his super-ego—hoping somehow to attain the intellectual transcendence of Catholic saintliness, he became ever more suspicious of the religious sublimity he once so enthusiastically embraced. Throughout his life he searched for substitute fathers and mothers who were more sublime than his biological parents. But because his enthusiastic identifications with surrogates pitched him toward the madhouse, he would agree with Freud that "devout believers are safeguarded in a high degree against the risk of certain neurotic illness; their acceptance of the universal neurosis spares them the task of constructing a personal one" (44). The church, however, was only a flimsy safeguard. Freud was right; when Lowell left the Catholic Church, his neurosis became more personal, although it continued to involve bewildering schizophrenic identifications with saints and satans, holy ghosts and unholy

ghouls, democratic leaders like Roosevelt and tyrannical ones like Hitler. To the end of his career, he struggled to purge his hysterical, overbearing mother and outdo his complacent, undistinguished father. "Everything I do," he said in a late sonnet ("Mother, 1972"), "is only (only) a mix of mother and father." Lowell may have rejected Catholicism and theologians like Gilson because their cheerful abstractions reminded him too much of his smiling, platitudinous father. The benign Gilson was devoted to a metaphysically reasoned "Christian optimism"; he believed in the "Christian affirmation of the intrinsic goodness of all there is" (112). To counter the cerebral innocence of Church Fathers Lowell would erect new gods, the Hegelian and Nietzschean supermen of history whose terrifying acts filled him with sublime awe. In *Life Studies*' "91 Revere St." Lowell jokingly mocks his father as "a sublime man" (18), and punctures his mother's "suitably sublimed" (18) conceptions of him with sardonic wit. Having rejected actual father, Judaeo-Christian Father, and sundry Church Fathers, he populates the vacuum with more tantalizing representatives of sublime power. "In our time, God is . . . Benito Mussolini and Hitler," he concludes in the late poem, "Words." His Lucifers, Ahabs, and numerous political tyrants are all avatars of a sublime God whom Lowell, when sufficiently enthused, aspired to become.

The early poem, "Sublime Feriam Sidera Vertice," published in a 1940 issue of the Kenyon College literary magazine, *Hika*, predicted the position that Lowell would take toward the religious sublime. The title ("With my head raised so high then shall I strike the stars," from Horace's dedicatory *Ode*) suggests that Lowell might extol the intellectual transcendence of his earlier hero, St. Simeon. But because the poet now knows that Hitler and Mussolini are ravaging Europe, the sublime transcendence found in the "free" act of contemplation espoused by Kant, Schopenhauer, and Hegel, jars against the terrifying sublime espoused by Burke. In Lowell's poem, God, nature, and humanity orchestrate a power struggle for survival which is as much a parody as an imitation of the sublime paradigm. "Nature charged brute devotions to the soul," Lowell writes, but due to the "satanic partnership" that this godly Nature finds in his early people, he "put out a fall, an Ark, a flood" and then "put them out" by extinguishing them with "Christ Jesus and his golden rule." While the poem lacks stylistic finish, it contains the seeds of his greatest poem, "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket," and intimates his complex drama of empathy and antipathy for the religious sublime.

Lowell's mythological imagination delineates so many correspondences at the end of "Sublime Feriam" that clarity is eclipsed. Through a deft sleight-of-hand, he correlates the crucified Christ with Hobbes's Leviathan (the commonwealth which organically unifies its naturally brutish and warring constituents), Melville's *Moby Dick*, Hegel's State, America, the world at war and his own embattled heart. It is obvious that Lowell has been to school with the New Critics when he writes: "the ship / Of state has learned Christ how to sail on blood. // Great Commonwealth, sail on and on and roll / On blood, on my free blood; my heart misgave, / Confessed itself a slave, / And Hegel proved State an invested soul." Hegel in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* repeatedly insists that through subordination to the divine spirit one achieves freedom, and that in nations freedom is achieved when a people allows

its great leaders, who embody their collective soul, to “sail” them toward their destined ends. “To resist these world-historical individuals is a futile undertaking, for they are irresistibly driven on to fulfill their task” (84). Later he claims, “restrictions are the indispensable conditions of liberation; and society and the state are the only situations in which freedom can be realized” (99). This dialectical situation, at least in Kant’s view, is at the heart of what he calls the dynamical and mathematical sublimities. What originally seems terrifyingly oppressive, whether it be a totalitarian leader, natural upheaval, or cosmic mystery like infinity, in the end is transferred to an inner plane where the powers of the mind triumph. The external power provokes bafflement but ultimately an imaginative conception that engenders a sense of the individual freedom and transcendence. The mind conquers all stupendous adversaries simply by thinking them.

Lowell’s wounded Christ in “Sublime Feriam Sidera Vertice” is both wounded Ahab and wounded whale, both “patron and gaoler of the grave,” and to a certain extent embodies the paradoxical aspects of the religious sublime. He is the apocalyptic terror of the Second Coming, patronizing graves by filling them up, and patronizing the dead by liberating them, like a jailer, into heaven or hell. Christ, Ahab, and Moby Dick are in turn terrifying and terrific as they metamorphose from victimizer to victim. For Lowell they are fit emblems for the tragic relation between the destructiveness of pathological enthusiasm and the sublimities of creative inspiration. His 1963 interview with Alvarez corroborates this dualism, and acts as a prelude to what he said two years later about the violent idealism behind the sublime: “I’m very conscious of belonging to the country I do, which is a very powerful country and, if I have an image of it, it would be one taken from Melville’s *Moby Dick*: the fanatical idealist who brings the world down in ruins through some sort of simplicity of mind. I believe that’s our character and in my own personal character; I reflect that it’s a danger for us. It’s not all in the negative side, but there’s power there and energy and freshness and the possibility of ruin. I’m very aware of that” (35). Lowell’s moral warning against the sublime in his poem comes when he points to the graves that will be filled in its pursuit. Unlike the moralist Kant, Lowell lumps the sublime together with all its perverse correlates—enthusiasm, mania, fanaticism. His attitude toward the religious sublime resembles Nietzsche’s toward God: if God exists he would want to be God. From Lowell’s bifurcated perspective, that makes him both divine Father and Oedipal son, judge and judged, tyrant and tyrannized. As he says in “For Anne Adden 4. Coda”: “On my great days of sickness, I was God— / cry of blood for high blood that gives both tyrant / and tyrannized their short half-holiday.” Psychologizing Hegel, Lowell defines his sublime moment as a divine at-one-ment in which antitheses attain a synthesis through manic, enthusiastic delirium.

As if to stress the psychopathological ramifications of his religious sublime, Lowell ends *Land of Unlikeness* with a reworking of “Sublime Feriam Sidera Vertice,” entitled “Leviathan.” Here the murderousness of the world during the war, and Lowell’s own murderous attitudes toward his father, are sketched allegorically in terms of Cain, Abel, and God. Once again the blood of destruction is juxtaposed with the blood of redemption. The murdered Christ on the cross is the murderous Christ of the Apoc-

alypse; Ahab the monstrous predator is united with Moby Dick the monstrous prey. America and Ahab may enact Christlike paradigms as they combat evil foes and try to purge the world of leviathanic sins; they also threaten to bring “the world down in ruins.” The final lines of “Leviathan” echo the manic imperatives and moral injunctions of the earlier poem, although in the later version Hegel has been oddly metamorphosed into an octopus:

The Ship
Of State is asking Christ to walk on blood:

Great Commonwealth, roll onward, roll
On blood, and when the ocean monsters fling
 Out the satanic sting,
Or like an octopus constrict my soul,
Go down with colors flying for the king.

About a year before this poem appeared, the American “ship of state” threatened to ship Lowell overseas to fight in the Second World War. Although he had praised the “enthusiasm” of war heroes in “War—A Justification,” his newly-acquired Catholicism was repulsed by the terrible bloodshed of civilian bombing. A manic “fire-breathing Catholic C.O.,” as he sarcastically referred to himself a decade later, he engaged in enthusiastic combat with an American President rather than the potentially more destructive combat with the “monsters” abroad (although he had tried to enlist numerous times).

Anthony Hecht rightly pointed out that there was a good deal of self-aggrandizement in Lowell’s “telling off the state and president.” There was also self-aggrandizement in his identifications with Christ, Satan, Ahab, Moby Dick, America, and God. But this is precisely how the sublime works. Thomas Weiskel explains in *The Romantic Sublime* that “the identification which resolves the traumatic disequilibrium of the sublime moment is a metaphorical substitution of a ‘power within’ for the external power,” and this inner god arrives because of the Oedipal struggle with the father. The inner power, as Freud believed, “greatly exceeds the objective occasion or ideal that has been internalized” (96). Weiskel finds in Kant’s contention that a noble war is sublime the sort of pathological symptoms that Lowell underscored as well. Lowell’s terrifying heroes and gods, although they were co-opted to achieve sublime victory over his father and the other father figures he publicly contested (Roosevelt, Johnson), in the end formed a super-ego that terrified him and sent him spinning toward manic-depression.

The antidote of Catholic theology and ritual ultimately succumbed to Lowell’s manic energies. Catholicism, in fact, simply led to another self-aggrandizing entrenchment, an empowering of a newly fortified patriarchal conscience that would judge the self with the same violent, apocalyptic terror it judged nation and world. Robert Fitzgerald could be diagnosing his friend’s early addiction to the religious sublime when he comments: “After his first grave manic attack in 1949, after his first hospitalization, all concerned grew wary on his behalf, or indeed he did himself, of excitements religious, political, or poetic. He could no longer be a Catholic because, as he told me, it set him on fire” (Williamson 48). Although Lowell’s Catholic and Calvinist

penchant for brooding on original sins and identifying with the great sinners of the world filled him with guilt, it also filled him with mischievous sublimity. In his Blakean “marriage of heaven and hell,” Satan became his antithetical god, a messiah who promised deliverance from the more benevolent, weaker gods simulated by his father. “Milton’s Messiah is call’d Satan,” Blake proclaimed, and so it was for Lowell; for both poets Satan embodied the sublime’s exuberant, amoral energies. Perhaps the main reason for his obsession with the Calvinist divine, Jonathan Edwards (he even planned to write his biography early in his career), was due to his fellow New Englander’s enthusiasm for a God whose sublime commingling of horror and majesty made Him, as for Blake, a hybrid of Jehovah and Satan. The odd marriage of Catholicism and Protestantism in Lowell’s poetry derives from this Oedipal dialectic in which the benign, rational God of the Church Fathers spawns its opponent, a Satanic Protestant son whose enthusiasms appear so heroic as they protest against the original *logos* that they exert a sublime appeal. The appeal, however, led to manic delusions in which Lowell actually believed he *was* a god, a holy ghost, a Milton, or a Satan, and the depressions of guilt, which then called for further deliverances into “short half-holidays” of megalomaniac sublimity.

One of Lowell’s greatest dramatizations of the religious sublime and its tragic consequences is, of course, “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket.” The poem owes much to Milton’s “Lycidas” and Melville’s *Moby Dick*, but Lowell’s persona—the megalomaniacal Ahab—is also Milton’s Satan, that “sublime ambition” doomed to die in his violent combat with “IS, the whited monster,” who is a composite of Jehovah and Moby Dick. Ahab’s tragic flaw is the *hubris* that comes from his fanatical enthusiasm, a sin attributed to the Quakers who could quake deliriously when possessed by the inner *theos*. In his historical account of enthusiasm, R. A. Knox reveals: “The Quakers were the first in the field, with their rude challenge to all the institutional churches” (4). The Shakers were implicated too. The Quaker, Ahab, in *Moby Dick* resembles the Edwards-like Father Mapple of the early “Sermon” chapter who “cried out with a heavenly enthusiasm” (57) at Ishmael and the rest of the congregation. Ahab’s divine madness also aligns him with the Shaker in “The Jeroboam’s Story” who fanatically believes he is the archangel Gabriel. In “the preternatural fervors of real delirium” and “gibbering insanity, [he is also heard] pronouncing the White Whale to be no less a being than the Shaker God incarnated” (249, 251). For Ahab too, Moby Dick is a god who inspires him with furious enthusiasms. Like those writers of the eighteenth century who, as Morris records in *The Religious Sublime*, took John Dennis’s lead in praising the Bible as “the ultimate source of sublime poetry” (63) and Milton “for having carried away the Prize of Sublimity from both Ancients and Moderns” (67), and like the Augustans who “increasingly resigned such terms as *inspiration*, *enthusiasm*, and *je-ne-sais-quoi* in favor of Longinian sublimity” (30–31), Melville blends enthusiastical mania with august sublimity in Ahab’s character. Melville, however, is also a critic of sublime enthusiasm, underscoring the hypocrisy that Quakers like Peleg, Bildad, and Ahab represent. “The Ship” chapter ironically points out that the Quaker, “Though refusing, from conscientious scruples, to bear arms against land invaders, yet himself had illimitably invaded the Atlantic and Pacific; and though a sworn foe to human bloodshed, yet had he in his straight-bodied coat, spilled tuns upon tuns

of leviathan gore" (76). In Melville's paradoxical Ahab, Lowell could see his own enthusiasms and sublimities reflected, and in "The Quaker Graveyard" he brilliantly mastered a Longinian rhetoric to embody the dialectic of terrifying power, awed subjugation, and ultimate godly triumph which undergirds the religious sublime.

When Thomas Weiskel conflates Kant's transcendental moral reason with Freud's godlike super-ego, arguing that the "ambiguity of participation in an ideal which is greater than psyche—*beyond* it and at the same time *within*" and that "The sublime moment recapitulates and thereby re-establishes the oedipus complex, whose positive resolution is the basis of culture itself" (93–94), he could be pointing to the poem's web of ambivalent family, religious, and literary correspondences. Lowell's original identification with Ahab, the supposedly pacifist but actually fanatically violent Quaker, arose from his ambivalent stance toward the Second World War. Lowell wavered between enthusiasm and pacifism, and ultimately made his "manic statement" against the president. Identifying with his newly adopted Catholic fathers, his conscientious objection was also partly aimed at the military principles of his father, with whom he was engaged in an ongoing power struggle. A decade earlier the struggle had erupted in actual fisticuffs. Because his father interfered in his engagement to Anne Dick at Harvard, Lowell once wrote in a poem, "I torpedoed my Father to the floor" and then "hummed the adamantine / ore rotundo of *Lycidas* to cool love's quarrels." His "Quaker Graveyard" also employs "*Lycidas*," this time as a model to elegize Warren Winslow, Lowell's cousin whose boat sank from a torpedo explosion during the Second World War. Is Lowell's identification with Winslow also a guilty identification with all the father figures in the poem, toward whom he also harbors parricidal wishes? Weiskel's gloss on a passage in Burke's *Enquiry*, which focuses on a scene in the *Iliad* (another source of Lowell's poem) where Priam supplicates Achilles as a father begging for mercy, is relevant: "Burke's 'terror' is latently associated with the congeries of emotions surrounding murder (insanity, punishment, disaster, and guilt), and the latent reference to 'delight' is to submission to a father figure. I think we may infer that the 'imminent danger' to which we are exposed and from which we are then released in the sublime moment is an unconscious fantasy of parricide" (92). The ambiguities and paradoxes in "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket," in which combative oppositions are unified in a network of identities, is a direct consequence of the religious sublime. Lowell's Catholic sympathy for all victims and his Catholic notions of just and unjust wars, which he stated were behind his conscientious objection, sublime, at least in the artistic moment of the poem, his parricidal wishes.

A series of identifications are traditional in the sort of pastoral elegy Lowell was imitating. Poet, nature, deceased, and Christ (or some other agent of resurrection) typically commingle in a symbolic descent and ascent which trace the emotional rhythm of despair and hope experienced by those who mourn the dead. What distinguishes Lowell's poem is the fact that through its many identifications and equations it deconstructs the Catholic and pagan hierarchies that support the elegy's traditional promise of redemption. "Ask for no Orphean lute / To pluck life back," he says at the beginning, and then when he is about to offer a traditional apotheosis in "Our Lady of Walsingham," he depicts the holy statue as a lifeless imitation of a God who no

longer has the power to redeem the violent world of war. The whole poem is a complicated, symbolist ritual of communion which, in the absence of the Word of a traditionally benevolent God, places all the burden of redemption on the poet's sublime rhetoric. In some ways the poem owes its ideological precepts to Stevens rather than Milton, since he once declared "After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption" (185). Lowell intimated his revisionary sense of communion and redemption in "Sublime Feriam" and "Leviathan," where he states "the ocean monsters fling / Out the Satanic sting." The monsters are the whales trying to shake off the stinging harpoons, the whalemens flinging those harpoons into the whales, as well as the Quakers trying to shake out or exorcise the satanic demons that possess them. "Pity the monsters," Lowell would say in "Florence," when contemplating a similar unity between victor and victim, tyrant and tyrannicide.

The story of *Moby Dick* provided Lowell with another compelling narrative of empathy in which wounded Ahab and wounded whale are more alike than distinct in their terrifying grandeur. With Melville's and Milton's elegiac as well as epic models in mind, Lowell harmonized awesome and awful powers. In the very first lines, natural strife (the sea "breaking violently" and night steaming "into our North Atlantic fleet") is equated with military strife, and shortly afterward Poseidon (the Homeric "earth-shaker"), Jehovah (the "hell-bent deity"), Ahab (as "hell-bent" as his God), and Winslow ("the drowned sailor" violently clutching "the drag-net") coalesce to form a bizarre alliance. Later in the poem the biblical Leviathan representing worldly corruption, Moby Dick, and the Quaker whalers are reconciled in the figure of Jonas Messias, a cross between Jonah and Christ. This typological unity inspired Albert Gelpi to claim: "The hunting of the whale becomes the supreme symbolic enactment, at once grotesque and sublime, of the Incarnation in history" (61). One might expect that the sublime transcendence of bloody historical conflicts would come at Walsingham, but Lowell's early sublime moments are normally patriarchal. Unity with the Catholic Mother may provide a mystic "peace that passeth understanding," as in Eliot's timeless moments. Nevertheless, Lowell searches for a male solution to his male problems. If there is any sublime resolution it comes ambiguously at the end, through an uneasy at-one-ment between Lowell and his numerous father figures, and a difficult recognition that creation is wedded to destruction just as redemption is wedded to crucifixion, mania to despair, poetic survival to ardent competition. He is no doubt recollecting the intensities of his summer of "pathological enthusiasm" on Nantucket with Frank Parker when he struggled to absorb Homer, the Bible, Shakespeare, Blake, Keats, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and to write a long poem called "Jonah." Nantucket is his Blakean Eden of ferociously contending contraries as well as a Darwinian arena of natural genesis and ineluctable death. "Here in Nantucket," he concludes, you can

cast up the time
When the Lord god formed man from the sea's slime
And breathed into his face the breath of life,

And blue-lung'd combers lumbered to the kill.
The Lord survives the rainbow of his will.

This satanic Jehovah is capable of Darwinian survival precisely because he does not relax after he has established his covenant with Noah. Although he promises never to destroy the world again after the flood, he will renege in order to endure. He will destroy, compete, and violate because, according to Lowell, that is necessary for sublime triumphs. Rainbows, after all, are merely beautiful.

Another of the identifications forged in "The Quaker Graveyard" is between "IS, the whited monster" and Jonathan Edwards's tyrannical Calvinist deity popularized in his sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (1741). When Lowell in the third section depicts the naval guns that "rock / Our warships in the hand / Of the great God," he is imagining the sort of violent judgment of worldly evil that Edwards so graphically portrayed. Lowell's fascination with Edwards no doubt arose from his recognition of a fellow enthusiast whose Oedipal obsessions with patriarchal powers led to madness (Edwards was pronounced insane at the end of his life). If Edwards was delivering his apocalyptic judgments on New England through the persona of Jehovah, Lowell followed suit two centuries later. Discussing America's fanatical idealism with Alvarez in the context of his first two books and the war years they reflected, Lowell commented in 1963, "The world seemed apocalyptic at that time, and heroically so. I thought that civilization was going to break down, and instead *I* did" (35). When the *theos* or spirit possessed him, Lowell became the apocalyptic judge whose moral vehemence matched the immoral violence of his adversaries. Although Perry Miller and others have shown that Edwards was more skeptical of the enthusiastic evangelists of the Great Awakening than his critics allowed, his enemies of the time branded him an enthusiastical and satanic madman. Charles Chauncey, who once called Edwards "a visionary enthusiast" (177), led the attack when he aimed his Harvard commencement address in 1742, "Enthusiasm Described and Caution'd Against," at everything Edwards stood for. Like Shaftesbury three decades before, Chauncey distinguished between the genuine sublimity of those enthusiasms which provoked Biblical prophets to testify and the false enthusiasms which inspired pathological fools. The prophets, he claimed, "were under a divine Influence, spake as moved by the HOLY GHOST"; the inner light imposters were mad, bad-tempered fanatics. He railed against the charlatan who "mistakes the workings of his own passions for divine communications, and fancies himself immediately inspired by the SPIRIT OF GOD, when all the while, he is under no other influence than that of an over-heated imagination" (105). As Miller points out, Chauncey deployed the scholastic philosophy of medieval Catholicism and elevated reason over imagination and will in order to dethrone Edwards. Lowell had tried the same strategy to cure his own enthusiasms, but it had backfired.

If in his first collection, *Land of Unlikeness*, Lowell was "consciously a Catholic poet" following the cultural precepts of Christopher Dawson and opposed to the "democratic poets who enthusiastically greet the advent of the slave-society," as Allen Tate claimed in his introduction, his second volume, *Lord Weary's Castle*, was more conscious of the Protestant enthusiasm seething irrepressibly under the tough Cath-

olic vincer. Lowell borrows his first title from St. Bernard's concept of *regio dissimilitudinis*, which Etienne Gilson explained as the land of unlikeness, a waste land in which modern folk wandered aimlessly away from God. "The central point in St. Bernard's doctrine," Gilson pointed out, "is that the Image of God in us can never be lost . . . but the Likeness to God in us can be lost" (51). Although we are "made to the image [of God]—one alone *is* this Image Itself, namely the Word, because the Word alone is an adequate and subsistent expression of the Father" (52). Gilson warned that the root of all evil is *hubris*, and it can prompt human reason to transgress proper (Catholic) limits, "setting itself above God" (57). But this was precisely the Oedipal strategy of Lowell's sublime ambition. Rather than wander hopelessly and pathetically through the Land of Unlikeness with those hollow men (like his father) who "suffer not only the loss of God but also the loss of themselves" (58), he declared his likeness to the God who was more powerful than his father, and soared toward Him in a blaze of manic enthusiasm.

Lowell himself concluded in his middle period that the early Catholic and Protestant confessionality, which mined pagan and Christian symbolism in order to express the melodramas of his family romance, was a kind of smoke screen. The religious sublime in an early poem like "Satan's Confession" would modulate into the quieter, more ironic identifications with Satan in "Skunk Hour." The pilgrim fathers and their descendents, including Lowell's ancestors who threatened to despoil the American wilderness in hopes of turning it into a Christian and commercial paradise, according to Lowell's early mythical method, were all avatars of Satan even though they paradoxically believed that it was a satanic nature and its satanic (Native American) inhabitants they were fighting to redeem. The third part of his elegy, "In Memory of Arthur Winslow," which appears in both *Land of Unlikeness* and *Lord Weary's Castle*, is typical in that it projects family history onto American history in a way that judges both in religious terms and according to his paradigm of the sublime quest. His maternal grandfather was a miner who, according to Lowell, derived religious sanction for his depredations from the antinatural ideology of Puritan fathers like Mather and Edwards. The Winslows married into the Stark family, one of whom was a prominent Revolutionary War general, so Lowell punningly declares: "Then from the train, at dawn, / Leaving Columbus in Ohio, shell / On shell of our stark culture struck the sun / to fill my head with all our fathers won / When Cotton Mather wrestled with the fiends from Hell." The allegorical shells could be many things (bullet shells, shell-like corpses, metals shelled from ore that Winslow mined), but what is important is that they fill Lowell's head with sublime dreams of power, of triumphs over nature and family, of Matherlike sublimations. Mather, in fact, is Satan. His struggle for dominance resembles Lucifer's contentions with the fallen angels in Hell, just as Winslow's mining for gold resembles Mammon's grubbing for gold in the underworld.

"Children of Light," another poem that appears in both *Land of Unlikeness* and *Lord Weary's Castle*, also ironically yokes together America's early Calvinist Fathers with Satan. A child of the Puritan light, Lowell is also a child of the Satanic dark. From his ambivalent Oedipal perspective, he struggles against his fiendish Puritan fathers and identifies with Lucifer, whose name after all means light-bringer. But the

satanic light has led to Cain's wars, like World War II, just as the divine light of Calvin's "night" has both heavenly and hellish origins. Lowell mythologizes his history:

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 unhouseled by Geneva's night,
You planted here the Serpent's seeds of light. . . .

In the end, child and father, Satan and God, white man and red man are one. While Lowell atones for those sublime ambitions in America's feuding fathers by setting them at one with his own, he also judges them. All origins, he implies, presume original sins, and the greater the sin the greater the need for redemption.

When Weiskel applies his Freudian model of the sublime to the sort of mysticism which, for Lowell and many other religious poets, reached its apogee in medieval Catholicism, he concludes: "The sublime moment releases the ego from guilt through an identification with the power by which (in melancholy) it had formerly been punished. Delight is the temporary negation of paralysis, the expulsion of what blocks the mind. Indeed, the affective coincidence of ego and super ego appears to be the foundation of mystic ecstasy—an absorption into a greater power at once beyond and within" (97). Even at the beginning of his career, Lowell treated all such at-one-ments or spiritual marriages between soul and god with irony. His Marxist and Freudian perspectives grounded sublimities in psychological or historical contexts, so that they often appeared to be ludicrous delusions. The early "Cistercians in Germany" in *Land of Unlikeness* sets St. Bernard's mystical rapprochements with God against the brutal historical strife of the Second World War and King Philip's War:

We lift our bloody hands to wizened Bernard,
To Bernard gathering his canticle of flowers,
His soul a bridal chamber fresh with flowers,
And all his body one extatic womb,
And through the trellis peers the sudden Bridegroom.

"At the Indian Killer's Grave" transposes these lines so that Bernard is feminized rather comically into the Virgin Mary. What is noteworthy is that in both cases the sublime mingles with the ridiculous as the mystic's traditional images of sanctity collapse into the profane.

To Lowell's sardonic viewpoint, the super-ego (that composite of all the repressive fathers and mothers of his ancestral and cultural past) resembles the satanic id in its violent depredations. His religious sublime, as a result, arises from the id breaking through the super-ego's repressions and displacing it through the sort of megalomaniac fantasies of godhood that Lucifer and Ahab indulged in. The ego and the super-ego, like the son and the father in Lowell's poems, are characteristically at odds rather than mystically aligned. When Lowell adopts the voice of Jonathan Edwards in "After the Surprising Conversions" to deliver a psychological portrait of the enthusiastic Josiah Hawley (Edwards's suicidal uncle), he portrays his own conflicts. "God / Abandoned

us to Satan," Lowell's persona claims, but that is because Hawley's delirious enthusiasm allows Satan to oust Jehovah from his psyche. The sublimely terrible and newly-empowered id usurps command from the reasonable super-ego: "through that night / He meditated terror, and he seemed / Beyond advice or reason, for he dreamed / That he was called to trumpet Judgement Day / to Concord." The sublime delusion arises from melancholy and returns to it; Hawley finally cuts his throat. Lowell's "Mr. Edwards and the Spider" and, indeed, most of the religious poems in both *Land of Unlikeness* and *Lord Weary's Castle* clamber for and ultimately appropriate the apocalyptic violence associated with Jehovah, and also diagnose the sublime ambition and destructive consequences of this quest as products of those enthusiasts who, as Perry Miller asserts, "mistake some mechanical or psychological disturbance for the voice of God" and believe they are "a moral absolute, freed of restraint, incapable of sin" (143).

Lowell's later poems on Edwards substitute the empathy natural to dramatic monologue with the judicious appraisals more characteristic of elegy. "Jonathan Edwards in Western Massachusetts," for example, elegizes the Puritan's vehement ambition to establish a Promised Land in America and simultaneously elegizes Lowell's early enthusiasms for such doomed projects. He does so winsomely, ironically: "Ah paradise! Edwards, / I would be afraid / to meet you there as a shade. / We move in different circles." Although they pursued the sublimities of paradise, their manic enthusiasms have pitched them, like Satan or Dante, into the circles of hell. For Lowell, as for Blake, heavenly and hellish manias are indistinguishable, although Lowell shows that enthusiasm for the sublime is the tragic hero's undoing. "You stood on stilts in the air, / but fell from your parish. / 'All rising is by a winding stair.'" The Yeatsian echo is matched by a Yeatsian desire for tragic joy and a redemption through artifice: "I love you faded, / old, exiled and afraid / to leave your last flock, a dozen / Houssatonic Indian children // afraid to leave / all your writing, writing, writing. . . ." The late sonnet, "The Worst Sinner, Jonathan Edwards' God," once again conflates sin and virtue so that the Puritan's aspirations for godhood merge with his identifications with Satan. "The blood of the shepherd matched the blood of the wolf," Lowell remarks, reflecting on his own saintly and wolflike enthusiasms too.

The ascetic Catholic intellectual who transcended the temptation of enthusiasm through a reasoned faith, and who early on entered Lowell's pantheon as St. Simeon Stylites, later was submitted to the same Marxist and Freudian deflations as his early Calvinist ancestors. The sublime of religion, to his more disillusioned view, was an opiate made appealing because of material, bodily, and historical exigencies; it was a massive delusion protecting civilization from more painful neuroses. This analysis of the Oedipal and political nature of the religious sublime receives one of its most complex expressions in "Beyond the Alps," versions of which appeared in both *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead*. The second, longer version begins with a quotation from Napoleon, "*Au dela les Alpes est l'Italie,*" and could just as well begin with Napoleon's earlier, "*Du sublime au ridicule il n'y a qu'un pas.*" As Lowell crosses the Alps, those traditional stomping grounds of romantic questors, he ridicules the sublime in both its sacred and secular guises. All members of the family romance are targets for his

satire. Although Rome represents the sublime power of the patriarchal Catholic and Imperial God, Lowell declares: "Much against my will / I left the city of god where it belongs. / There the skirt-mad Mussolini unfurled / the eagle of Caesar. He was one of us / only, pure prose." Ezra Pound, who had tried "to maintain 'the sublime' / In the old sense" ("Hugh Selwyn Mauberley") by advocating racial purifications by authoritarian political gods like Mussolini and Hitler, and by advocating poetic purifications by authorities like himself and T. S. Eliot, is no doubt part of the reason Lowell rejects Rome. A year before 1950, when "Pius XII defined the dogma of Mary's bodily assumption," as the poem's note explains, Lowell underwent a similar assumption during a manic attack. Having abandoned the church, an event the poem represents geographically, and then temporarily rejoined it, Lowell suffered from what Allen Tate called a homicidal bout of "purification mania" (Hamilton 156). Another friend, Robert Fitzgerald, revealed that his return to Catholicism provoked the "strain and exaltation of religious experience . . . when he felt that God spoke through him and his impulses were inspired" (149). This was the period when Lowell entertained the notion that he "was a reincarnation of the Holy Ghost" and that he could paralyze cars by raising his arms in the middle of the highway in Bloomington, Indiana (157). His sublime affliction is what he understandably diagnoses several years later as "an attack of pathological enthusiasm" (157).

No wonder Lowell mocks Mary as a gorgeous, angel-winged jungle bird in "Crossing the Alps" and later links her to Pallas Athena and her Roman double, Minerva, the goddess of purity as well as warfare. She resembles Lowell's mother, whose warlike identifications with Napoleon and hysterical pursuits of purity enter into other poems. The sublime Alpine altitude, symbolic of his mother's "pure mind and murder" and his own homicidal purification mania, is something he obviously wants to put behind him. Mary's assumption into heaven (which correlates with his mother's death in 1954), leaves Lowell to wrestle with various father figures: the Holy Father (Pope Pius), Saint Peter, the Jehovah-like Duce (Mussolini) who "herded his people to the *coup de grace*," and Apollo, god of light, science, and reason. In the second version of the poem, Apollo is introduced after an exiled Ovid appears to denounce the poets and politicians of Rome, "the *black republicans* who tore the tits / and bowels of the Mother Wolf to bits— / Then psychopath and soldier waved the red / of empire over Caesar's salvaged bog." The psychopathic Cal condemns himself here, and condemns his Oedipal conflicts with his various symbolic mothers and fathers which led to his sublime identifications with 'caesars' like Caligula and Mussolini. "Tired of the . . . bleary-eyed ego kicking" in nightmarish historical dramas, he wants to wake with the morning light of Apollo and "plant his heels / on terra firma." While Apollo and Minerva are gods of enlightened civilities like those represented by Paris, the city of Lowell's destination, they never appear in unadulterated redolence. As the black soot is scrubbed from Parisian buildings and the nightmare of history dissolves from Lowell's waking consciousness ("Paris, our black classic, [is] breaking up / like killer kings on an Etruscan cup"), vestiges of murderous power struggles remain, inscribed in lines which imagine their effacement. The eponymous Paris, after all, provoked rather than terminated a war. Apollo's light seems to make history's darkness only more

visible. As Nietzsche speculated, Apollo governs the Dionysian “breakings” of tragedies (“black classics”) by illuminating them.

If there is an overarching rhythm to Lowell’s narratives of religious sublimity, it proceeds from civilized orders breaking up and individual psyches breaking down. For Lowell the powerful influence of his parents and ancestors comprised the sort of awful splendor or terrifying grandeur that characterizes the sublime. Like those scenes of terrible beauty which, according to Kant, “raise the forces of the soul above the height of vulgar commonplace, and discover within us a power of resistance of quite another kind, which gives us courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence” (III), the ominous ghosts of Lowell’s personal and public heritage provided him with plenty of incentive to resist and transcend them. Freudian and Marxist theories of power struggles fascinated Lowell. Rather than personify those agons simply in terms of the dialectical materialism of class struggles or the psychopathology of Oedipal struggles, Lowell often found his most dramatic rhetoric in Catholic and Protestant traditions that both enchanted and frightened him. His essential problem was that he harbored a sublime ambition to play god, and this required the sort of tragic pursuit of power that he found at the heart of American politics. The careers of Milton’s Satan and Melville’s Ahab captured in archetypal form the destiny of his nation which he self-destructively strove to embody. If his original attempt to emulate Jehovah, the angry, jealous god who threatened all with instant damnation, originated in his desire to surpass his kindly weak-willed father, he realized before long that his enthusiasm for sublime power was a species of mania or schizophrenia. Measuring his powers against the omnipotence of Jehovah was a doomed enterprise, although during his manic moments he was convinced he could out-Jehovah Jehovah.

Lowell’s conversion to Catholicism and continued fascination with the Church after his departure from it arose from his personal knowledge of the dangers of Protestant individualism, his recognition of the delusions that solipsistic or egocentric individuals cut off from the authoritarian decrees of the Catholic Church are heir to, and ultimately his attempt to govern his sublime enthusiasms with the ascetic rationality of the Church’s long, prestigious tradition of scholastic philosophy. This sort of sublimation with its necessary regimen of repression proved to be both cure and disease. Lowell seemed destined by his biological and cultural endowments to transform means and ends, however virtuous, into a power struggle for the authoritarian grandeur that mastery and fame traditionally conferred. Although he satirized and condemned the tragic enthusiasm behind his quest for religious sublimity, saturating his poetry with personal and historical examples of the terrible consequences that deluded quests for godhood entail, he could not totally renounce the ecstasy of mania. Whether he was egged on by cohorts amazed by his seemingly superhuman performances, whether he was deliberately delinquent in taking his medication or was incompetent to do so, whether his neurological chemistry could not be totally controlled by lithium—these questions remain. What is more significant is that he wrote moving dramatic lyrics which underscore both the glories and the terrors of the sublime, and which celebrate the religious splendors of sublimity even while revealing

the personal and political tragedies which, as history so amply demonstrates, define its ultimate rhythm.

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