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Robert Lowell's "common novel plot": Names, Naming, and Polyphony in *The Dolphin*

Even before its publication in 1973, Robert Lowell's *The Dolphin* was a controversial collection, and it has continued to be a focus of debate. The book's subject matter is not the issue, since it is, as Lowell himself notes, "the common novel plot" of "one man, two women."¹ Essentially the poems record Lowell's difficult transition from one marriage to another, from marriage to Elizabeth Hardwick (called "Lizzie" in the poems) to Caroline Blackwood. The criticism, which, as the Hamilton and Mariani biographies reveal, enveloped friend and foe alike, polarized around two related issues. The first entailed the use of names of actual people (Caroline, Lizzie, and daughter Harriet). Not only were Lowell's, Hardwick's, and Blackwood's friends and acquaintances privy to this marital drama, now the wider reading audience was allowed a window into the houses and bedrooms of the unofficial Poet Laureate.

In an era before *A Current Affair* or *Hard Copy*, such exhibitionism seemed a gross violation of an individual's right to privacy. To other readers, the fact that Lowell would quote (apparently verbatim or with minor changes) from private conversations and letters between the two women and himself without their prior knowledge or approval was an even more grievous violation of artistic and moral integrity. An anguished Elizabeth Bishop wrote Lowell after reading the poems in manuscript and asked, "but these letters—aren't you violating a trust? IF you were given permission—IF you hadn't changed them . . . etc. *But art just isn't worth*

*that much. . . . It is not being 'gentle' to use personal, tragic, anguished letters that way—it's cruel" (qtd. in Hamilton 423). Stanley Kunitz called some passages "too ugly, for being too cruel, too intimately cruel" (qtd. in Hamilton 422), while W. H. Auden threatened to refuse to speak to Lowell (Hamilton 425). After *The Dolphin* was published, along with *For Lizzie and Harriet* and *History* in 1973, Adrienne Rich, once a friend of Lowell's, would write the following:*

Finally, what does one say about a poet who, having left his wife and daughter for another marriage, then titles a book with their names, and goes on to appropriate his ex-wife's letters written under the stress and pain of desertion, into a book of poems nominally addressed to the new wife? . . . The inclusion of the letter poems stands as one of the most vindictive and mean-spirited acts in the history of poetry, one for which I can think of no precedent: and the same unproportioned ego that was capable of this act is damagingly at work in all three of Lowell's books. (Qtd. in Hamilton 433)

Later criticism tends to focus less on the personal elements and more on the artistic merits of the volume. Steven Gould Axelrod and Vereen Bell, for instance, largely treat "Lizzie" and "Caroline" as textual characters with origins in the extratextual. "Lowell's marital affairs are more pretext (pre-text) than text," Axelrod writes, "the real text is his mind in the act of grasping at the bare events and turning back upon itself, converting them and itself to fiction" (215). Bell says that "the Lowell who writes poems has, because of the way they are written, the same fictional status as his two other fictional characters. It is forgivable that we do not always see this distinction between writer and maker, but not to see it is to miss the point" (203). Implicit in this approach is the New Critical notion that the poet and the speaker of the poem are never one and the same; thus the poet's literary creations and his or her models are similarly distinct, despite Lowell's use of his models' actual words. Because of the framing convention of art, we can discuss "Lizzie" without worrying about Elizabeth Hardwick, at least from these critics' and Lowell's perspective. In a letter written before *The Dolphin* was published, Lowell writes of changes he has made to the manuscript:

The terrible thing isn't the mixing of fact and fiction, but the wife pleading with her husband to return—this backed by 'documents.' . . .

Now the book must still be painful to Lizzie, and won't satisfy Elizabeth [Bishop]. As Caroline says, it can't be otherwise with the book's donee. However, even fairly small changes make Lizzie less a documented presence. A distinct, even idiosyncratic voice isn't the same as someone, almost fixed as non-fictional evidence, that you could call on the phone. She dims slightly and Caroline and I somewhat lengthen. (Qtd. in Hamilton 426)

Lowell's third person depiction of "the wife" and "her husband" and his defensive distinction between an "idiosyncratic" voice and someone "that you could call on the phone" demonstrate the separation, however narrow, Lowell saw between his life and art; hence his justification for publishing *The Dolphin*. As much as he drew on his life for his material, Lowell seems to have had few real misgivings about his method:

Conscience incurable

convinces me I am not writing my life;
 life never assures which part of ourself is life.
 Ours was never a book, though sparks of it
 spotted the page with superficial burns:
 the fiction I colored with first-hand evidence,
 letters and talk I marketed as fiction—(D 59)

But despite the changes in manuscript and Lowell's confidence, readers continue to express a lingering unease with Lowell's methods. John A. Ward, in an article entitled "'Not Avoiding Injury': Robert Lowell," asks ". . . does he [Lowell] affirm or violate the integrity of his former and current loves by treating them in detail and by name in his verse?" (138). Whereas in the earlier confessional volumes, *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead*, Lowell had "managed to describe [his marriage] in detail without naming," the names used in *The Dolphin* are an unwarranted invasion of privacy, a sign that Lowell's ability to believe in what he was doing was failing. Ward's comment is insightful:

. . . when Lowell names in *The Dolphin* he shows us that he has lost confidence in the subtle, intimate, trusting pull of the beloved to help him out of mania into life and writing; the old intimacy and implication are gone, replaced by a sometimes coarse candour. The familiar shape of affirmation in the sequence of poems is still there, but it is wholly unconvincing. Lowell goes beyond the boundaries of the confidentiality

and transformation so carefully established in *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead* and uses names because the authenticity of erotic and loving experience is beginning to escape him, or has become too fragile or ironic to capture in verse. (140)

I think this is a just and subtle reading of *The Dolphin*, but I would argue that Lowell's attempt at transformation fails in other ways as well, ways that are of less interest to Ward and that have to do with Lowell's quoting from and naming of Elizabeth Hardwick. First, one more comment by Ward:

. . . Elizabeth Hardwick, Harriet Lowell and Caroline Blackwood must have felt exposed and knew that their experience and remarks were forever to be part of a public record, a record that sometimes abused them and left them no recourse but silence. (140)

It is this last point that I wish to consider in reading *The Dolphin* as a polyphonic poem. Drawing upon recent advances in quotation theory, I will argue that, far from having no recourse but silence, the voices of Lizzie, Caroline and Harriet talk back to Lowell's voice: however much Lowell's dominant voice seeks to inscribe his master narrative, we can discern a distinct and alternate narrative through these other voices. Finally, I believe that the naming is important in that it strengthens the independence of these voices in a way that is not possible with indirect characterization. In effect, Lowell lives by the sword and dies by the sword of naming.

It is true that in *The Dolphin* the impulse to autobiographical confession begun with *Life Studies* breaks new ground with the naming and direct quotations, as Ward asserts (139). However, I would like to link the confessional impulse with another poetic strategy, which might help explain Lowell's use of naming and quotation. Lowell learned much about the juxtaposition of one voice with another in the years leading up to the publication of *The Dolphin* through his interest in drama. In the 1960s and early 1970s, Lowell turned to the drama as a sister art, writing *The Old Glory* trilogy and producing translations (or imitations) of *Prometheus Bound*, *Phaedra*, and *The Oresteia*. For *Prometheus Bound*, he worked closely with director Jonathan Miller, *The Old Glory* won five Obie awards for the 1964-65 season, and Robert Brustein hailed Lowell

as a "brilliant new dramatist" (*Old Glory* 218) as Lowell's plays were staged on both sides of the Atlantic. To an interviewer Lowell said that, while writing plays, "I found it a great relief to have a plot and people who weren't me at all," and that he could "say things that were personal that I couldn't say in a confessional poem" (Alvarez 76). As he noted of confessional poetry to Ian Hamilton, "That vein of silver [eventually] gives out" (Lowell, "Conversation" 269). The drama also allowed Lowell to move in the direction of an increasingly public and polyphonic voice, something he felt necessary in the politicized 1960s.

But Lowell realized he lacked the invention—all his plays are translations or reworkings of short stories—and the objectivity required for original work on the stage. Never particularly comfortable with the medium, Lowell would write: "I now feel double-faced, looking on plays as some barbarian Gaul or Goth might have first looked on Rome, his shaggy head full of moral disgust, plunder, and adaptation" ("Poets" 177-78). Plunder and adapt he did, and the following comment to an interviewer gives us some idea of his direction:

You know, I find fragments more interesting than whole plays. Plots are boring anyway. We all hate the sort of play where one thing leads to another and everything is drawn tight. . . .

[R]ecently I read *Macbeth*, skipping all the places where he or his wife don't speak. What I found was that it would have made a great poem, one of the greatest, with all those plot elements removed. (Gilman 120)

This comment was made in 1968, one of the years named in Lowell's first collection of sonnets, *Notebook 1967-68* (pub. 1969). It is my contention that Lowell creates his own series of "fragments" in *Notebook 1967-68* and again in the expanded version, *Notebook* (1970). In both volumes Lowell quotes directly from a myriad of sources, some identifiable, some not. What he seeks is a collision of voices, his own interacting with others, and others interacting with each other. Ultimately Lowell uses these voices to create a dramatization of his life and circumstances; the dramatic voices are a means of debating the choices available to him as he goes through a mid-life crisis, as he watches the 1968 Presidential elections unfold, and as he decides whether or not to continue in his marriage to Elizabeth Hardwick.² That process of dramatization is continued in *The Dolphin*, but it is intensified there

because, while the *Notebook* poems included political, social, as well as personal debates about choices, *The Dolphin's* voices concentrate on the choice he must make in his marriage. Thus the poems in *The Dolphin*, with their quotations, are like the "poem" *Macbeth*: the bridging plot is removed, and what is left are the voices. These voices are mostly Lowell's, Hardwick's, and Caroline's, although Harriet is also quoted and there are occasional other voices as well. The voices not Lowell's own are signalled by quotation marks or the quoted lines are in italics; sometimes both are used as in the following, where Lowell quotes Caroline quoting from *Macbeth*: "If it were done, twere well it were done quickly— / to quote a bromide, your vacillation / is acne" (D 53). The length of the quotations varies, ranging from half a line to whole sonnets. Context usually indicates who is speaking when Lowell does not tell the reader through the title or by other means.

Quotation theory allows us to take a dispassionate look at the interactions among these voices in *The Dolphin*, and to draw different conclusions than have previous commentators and Lowell's immediate audience. Mikhail Bakhtin's distinction between monologic poetry and polyphonic prose is a useful place to begin, since I believe that the voices in *The Dolphin* are essentially polyphonic and that this is a departure from the monologic confessional volumes that precede *Notebook 1967-68*, despite Lowell's use of quotations in those early volumes. The novelist, Bakhtin argues, exploits the polyphony of alien meanings inherent in the prose word, turning such diversity to advantage, as he or she uses the various accents, characteristic speech patterns and the "social heteroglossia embedded in words" (*Dialogic* 298) to animate the novel's different characters. Rather than expressing him- or herself, the novelist "exhibits" the discourses available to him or her through prose's polyphony: "The author does not speak in a given language (from which he distances himself to a greater or lesser degree), but he speaks, as it were, *through* language, a language that has somehow more or less materialized, become objectivized, that he merely ventriloquates" (299).

In contrast, the poet, according to Bakhtin, works to rid language of "the intentions and accents of other people [by] destroying all traces of social heteroglossia and diversity of language" (298). Any diversity must be subordinate to the overpowering will to expression of the poet's intention: the "natural dialogization of the word" is suspended, its alien

utterances suppressed. Such is the nature of poetic language that "Each word must express the poet's *meaning* directly and without mediation," Bakhtin argues, with the result that "*Everything that enters the work must immerse itself in Lethe, and forget its previous life in any other contexts: language may remember only its life in poetic contexts*" (297, Bakhtin's emphasis). Even when the poet uses other voices, Bakhtin writes of those discourses that

no socially typical linguistic face (the possible personality of the narrator) need peek out from behind them. Everywhere there is only one face—the linguistic face of the author, answering for every word as if it were his own. No matter how multiple and varied . . . one language, one conceptual horizon, is sufficient to them all. (297)

However, Bakhtin's distinction between the monologic lyric and dialogic novel is largely qualified by his assertion that "in an era when the novel reigns supreme, almost all the remaining genres are to a greater or lesser extent 'novelized'" (*Dialogic* 5). These newly novelized genres, including poetry,

become more free and flexible, their language renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and the 'novelistic' layers of literary language, they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally—this is the most important thing—the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the opened present). (7)

This last quality is especially evident in the *Notebook* volumes and *The Dolphin*.

Before he experimented with polyphony in *Notebook* 1967-68, Lowell's lyric voice was essentially monologic. Although Lowell sometimes incorporated other voices or wrote dramatic monologues, Bakhtin's objection is apposite: "Everywhere there is only one face—the linguistic face of the author, answering for every word as if it were his own." As Axelrod notes, the dramatic voices in *Life Studies* "lack the power Lowell admired in Frost of getting within a character's skin and language" (103). But after Lowell's experiments with the theatre, the dramatic voices in *Notebook* 1967-68 and the volumes through to *The*

Dolphin are largely independent of Lowell's own. As suggested earlier, the voices present Lowell with choices he must make in his life, and the choice in *The Dolphin* is between Lizzie and Caroline.

Still, Calvin Bedient argues that Lowell's experiment with a novelized poetry is a failure:

That Lowell was both personally and poetically outrageous enough to compose whole poems from Elizabeth Hardwick's private letters to him may suggest a downright eagerness to violate what Bakhtin calls the "unitary and indisputable discourse" of poetry (*Dialogic*] 286); but Hardwick's words enter Lowell's volumes as depicted things, like the words of a character in an epistolary novel (Lowell's shamefaced "plot"), and I think Lowell begrudged every line lost to the language of others, even Hardwick's. (139)

I am not so sure. Lowell may have begrudged those lines, and he may have intended that they serve his need, but these other voices have a habit of resisting Lowell's intention. Take the following, from "Letter," in which Lowell quotes from one of Elizabeth Hardwick's epistles:

"In London last month I encountered only
exhausted traffic and exhausting men—
the taxi driver might kill us, but at least he cared."
Cold summer London, your purer cold is Maine,
where each empty sweater and hollow bookcase hurts,
every pretext for their service gone.
We wanted to be buried together in Maine . . .
you didn't, "impractical, cold, out of touch."
The terrible postcards you bought and stamped for me
go off to Harriet, the Horseguards, the Lifeguards,
The Lord Mayor's Chariot, Queen Bess who could not bear—
true as anything else to fling a child . . .
I shout into the air, my voice comes back—
nothing reaches your black silhouette. (*D* 23)

Lowell's intention is that Lizzie's words should reflect unfavourably on her: she complains about traffic and "exhausting men," the half line "but at least he cared" has the bathos of the abandoned lover. Lizzie is the one who refuses to be buried with Lowell; she buys "terrible postcards" (cliché-ridden) for Harriet; and the last two lines, culminating with "your

black silhouette," complete the picture of a rejected wife deaf to the pleadings for release from the husband who has found happiness elsewhere.

Small wonder that Bishop and Rich found Lowell's use of Hardwick's letters cruel and mean-spirited. But we should take a second look at Lowell's attempted appropriation of Hardwick's voice. One word that is repeated in this sonnet is "cold," which Lowell attempts to associate with Lizzie: "Cold summer London, your purer cold is Maine." There are "empty sweater[s]" in Maine, and Lizzie refuses to be buried with Lowell in Maine: "impractical, cold, out of touch." Yet the rhythm and substance of the lines in which Lizzie speaks are far from cold; in fact, it is Lowell's lines that are decidedly cool, even detached. "But at least he cared" has passion in its pain, while "Cold summer London, your purer cold is Maine" immediately following it is analytical, aloof. Instead of agreeing with Lowell about the "terrible postcards" in judging Lizzie's character (you are what you buy), we should notice the next few words: "you bought and stamped for me." Who comes across as generous and thoughtful here? Not only does Lizzie buy Lowell postcards so he can play the dutiful father, she even stamps them for him. Lowell's word "fling" in the line "true as anything else to fling a child" gets tangled up entirely in those "alien value judgments and accents" Bakhtin says surround words (*Dialogic* 276). "Fling" in other contexts means to cast aside or discard; it can also mean a brief period of indulging one's impulses, such as a sexual tryst. Inadvertently the sonnet says something other than what the dominant discourse would like it to say, and Lizzie's quoted voice has much to do with that change.

Other sonnets are equally powerful records of Lizzie's voice:

". . . That new creature,
when I hear her name, I have to laugh.
You left two houses and two thousand books,
a workbarn by the ocean, and two slaves
to kneel and wait upon you hand and foot—
tell us why in the name of Jesus." ("Voices" 23)

"I love you, Darling, there's a black black void,
as black as night without you. I long to see
your face and hear your voice, and take your hand—" ("In the Mail" 41)

"You're not under inspection, just missed. . . .
I wait for your letters, tremble when I get none,
more when I do. Nothing new to say." ("Foxfur" 69)

"I got the letter
this morning, the letter you wrote me Saturday.
I thought my heart would break a thousand times,
but I would rather have read it a thousand times
than the detached unreal ones you wrote before—" ("Records" 31)

Ward says that his "first reaction was shock at the trivial and conventional tones of these complaints, as if the language of the abandoned wife was too familiar to admit of poetry." He says his second reaction was his "suspicion that by including this material Lowell was trivialising the person he had offended, turning her into a stock character but pretending to protect her integrity by seeming to quote her" (141). There is something in this, certainly. However, Ward's later comment is problematic, as he discusses the last sonnet quoted above, "Records":

. . . the nature of her words makes it easy for us to dismiss her. The casual quality of the woman's language, the repetitiveness and exaggeration, make the poem's statements seem deliberately trite in tone and commonplace in content . . . her heart seems to break a thousand times, but rather than not read his letter she'll have it break a thousand times. (143)

But is this entirely so? Subversively, does casting Lizzie in the role of the conventional abandoned wife not also deny Lowell anything but the conventional role of the philandering husband in the "common novel plot"? I think Ward is right when he argues that Lowell fails to create a grand and rejuvenating passion out of his relationship with Caroline that justifies his invasion of Elizabeth Hardwick's privacy in *The Dolphin*, but it is partly the language Lizzie uses that anchors the volume in the "common novel plot" and not in the transformative metaphor of Caroline-as-dolphin-as-savior, as Lowell may have wanted. Marie Maclean's observation is important here:

The problem in the use of quotation is that while it is a means of asserting textual power (one only quotes what one wants to), it involves

the loss of textual control as the voice of the original speaker can still be heard even when its values are being questioned. (135)

In *Changing Voices: The Modern Quoting Poem*, Leonard Diepeveen explores at length the subversiveness of quotations within quoting poems. He argues that a quotation's "exact texture" introduces a "profound disruption" in the borrowing poem (4). As a result, "quotation injects competing strategies into a single text, and often these strategies do not resolve as much as they subvert the quoting text" (18). This is especially evident when the quotation is lengthy, as in *The Dolphin*, because

The more extensive the quotation becomes, the more readers look for the poetic voice in the quotation itself, and less in the relation of the quotation to the rest of the poem. The quoted voice stays long enough to acquire complexity and establish several characteristics within itself, and so its texture can neither be easily written over by a single strategy, nor subordinated to another voice. (105)

Lowell would appropriate Lizzie's voice for his purpose of reducing her to a stock character, but he doesn't succeed. The triteness Ward sees has a curious power as it accumulates in the volume. There is a kind of authenticity in that voice, too pained to grope for metaphor, too hurt and too unself-conscious to seek originality of expression. In times of stress and distress we fall back on the formulas that come to mind first, and these clichés, ironically, become more moving than the fancy-dress and calculating metaphors Lowell employs. Lowell may deliberately choose conventional language for Lizzie, but the result is a loss of control, as Maclean says, and this loss has unpredictable consequences. As it turns out, Lizzie's voice, because of the alien texture of the quotations, becomes a powerful contrast to Lowell's own. David Lodge notes that

A corollary of Bakhtin's insight is that language which in itself is flat, banal, clichéd and generally automatized can become vividly expressive when mimicked, heightened, stylized, parodied and played off against other kinds of language in the polyphonic discourse of the novel. (93)

Conventionally, we expect heightened language in a sonnet sequence, but when contrasted in this context with the "generally automatized" language Lizzie uses, Lowell's tropes seem strained and worked-up, while Lizzie's

flatter, less demonstrably figurative speech becomes "vividly expressive": "tell us why in the name of Jesus."

But this observation does not apply only to Lizzie's words, as in the examples above. Take the following poem, where Lowell anguishes over the difficult choices he faces:

From the dismay of my old world to the blank
 new—water-torture of vacillation!
 The true snakepit isn't monodrama Medea,
 the gorgon arousing the serpents in her hair;
 it's a room to walk with no one else, to walk,
 take thought, unthink the thought and listen for nothing:
 "She loves me too much to have my welfare at heart . . .
they just aren't up to your coming home
three weeks, then leaving for a year. They just aren't.
They can't stand much more of anything,
they are so tired and hurt and worn. They go on,
knowing your real sickness is a fretful
deafness to little children . . . and suspect
it's impossible for anyone to help you." ("Pointing the Horns of the
 Dilemma" 42)

This is an interesting and complex poem, in terms of the kinds of voices used, and it is a refinement of the polyphonic lyric and Lowell's attempt to control the quoted word. Lowell acknowledges that facing the invective of his wife ("monodrama Medea" is probably Lizzie, the "Monster loved for what you are" of *Near the Ocean*) is far easier than the "water torture of vacillation" he is subject to when alone, where he can only "take thought, unthink the thought and listen for nothing." But he does in fact listen, at first to himself: "She loves me too much to have my welfare at heart." Bluff, defensive, even self-deceiving, Lowell here tries to convince himself that whatever Lizzie wants him to do is for her sake and is not in his best interest. As if in response are the italicized words, almost certainly paraphrased from a mutual friend; because they are in italics and enclosed within the same quotation marks, they seem to emanate from Lowell's own memory and echo in his mind. The contrasts between the voices demonstrate the dynamics of the polyphonic lyric: we see the reflective, vacillating Lowell; then his self-quotation, the attempt to convince himself of Lizzie's selfish interest and thereby resolve his

vacillation; and finally the echoing voice describing Lizzie's private agony and pain. Lowell's language is again figurative: the difficulty of choosing is "water-torture," the adversarial woman is "monodrama Medea, / the gorgon arousing the serpents in her hair." In direct contrast is the unadorned prose of the italicized portion: "*they are so tired and hurt and worn.*" Again, this italicized portion seems more honest, direct, and uncluttered by the strategies of self-deception that the figurative language encourages (the rejected wife as virago). The one false note in the italicized portion is the closest that section comes to what is conventionally deemed 'poetic': Lowell's "real sickness" is described as "a fretful / deafness to little children." This seems to me to be another evasion on Lowell's part; by focussing on the children, and by using the weakly censorious "fretful" ("frightful" would have been more appropriate), Lowell evades censure for his actions toward Lizzie and Harriet. The line stands out for its "poetic" qualities that ring false in the context of the italicized passage. Notable is the assonance of short e's and i's ("fretful deafness to little children") and consonance of f's, l's, d's and t's ("*fretful deafness to little children*"). Conspicuously melodic in a context that is otherwise unremarkable, these combinations of words sound hollow, suggesting an evasion on Lowell's part. We should note again that these words, because in italics, are depicted not as a direct quotation, *per se*, but as a quotation recalled as it echoes in Lowell's mind. This leaves the quotation vulnerable to changes, such as Lowell appears to make to limit the damage; nonetheless, the language itself holds him accountable.

Even some of the most damaging poems, from Lizzie's perspective, are less grievous when reexamined. Take, for example, "During a Transatlantic Call":

*We can't swing New York on Harry Truman incomes—
the bright lights dragging like a ball and chain,
the Liberal ruined by the Liberal school.
This was the price of your manic flight to London—
the closed provincial metropolis, never
an asylum for the mercurial American mind. . . .
They say fear of death is a child's remembrance
of the first desertion. My daughter knows no love
that doesn't bind her with presents, letters, visits,
things outward and visible. . . . I've closed my mind*

so long, I want to keep it closed, perhaps—
 I have no faith in my right to will transcendence,
 when a house goes, the species is extinct. . . .
 They tell me to stop, they mustn't lose my money. (*D* 47)

The two italicized lines are supposed to be Lizzie's voice on the telephone from New York, as she demands more income support. She is represented here, through these one-line excerpts from her conversation with Lowell, as the stereotypical ex-wife, ever asking for more of her husband's money, exacting financial revenge, the "price" of his desertion. However, from another perspective, what the italicized lines do, in Diepeveen's terms, is "ensure that readers are aware of two struggling forces: the quotation's previous existence and something of the quoting poet's hold over the quotation" (50). The quotation's distinct texture subverts Lowell's intended purpose and loosens his hold—and his control—over Hardwick's words. Furthermore, Bakhtin reminds us that reported speech is not the same as direct speech. Hence, Bakhtin writes, quoting Leo Spitzer:

When we reproduce in our own speech a portion of our partner's utterance, then by virtue of the very change in speakers a change in tone inevitably occurs: *the words of "the other person" always sound on our lips like something alien to us, and often have an intonation of ridicule, exaggeration, or mockery.* (*Problems* 194)

Isolated, out of context, and made prominent by the device of italics—often used for emphasis (as in Spitzer's quotation), but in the sonnet apparently to denote reported speech—Lizzie's lines do sound exaggerated, and as readers we can't help resenting the hidden polemic in Lowell's appropriation of Lizzie's voice here. "Any sly and ill-disposed polemicist," Bakhtin says, "knows very well which dialogizing backdrop he should bring to bear on the accurately quoted words of his opponent, in order to distort their sense. By manipulating the effects of context, it is very easy to emphasize the brute materiality of another's words" (*Dialogic* 340). The sensitive reader will have already discounted the shrillness of the italics, knowing that context is all important. Without knowing the rest of the conversation on the phone, how can we judge these two statements? Moreover, the language used in the sonnet rebounds on Lowell in other ways. The "bright lights dragging like a ball

and chain" initially seem to be connected with Lizzie's impoverishment: she is attracted to the "bright lights" despite her less-than-adequate income, and thus restricted, she demands more money from Lowell. ("Swing" is especially damaging here, with its overtones of both "manage" and "be up-to-date.") But "like a ball and chain" is a simile most often used to denote an unsatisfactory state of marriage. So, instead of reflecting on Lizzie, this simile betrays Lowell's discontent with his marriage. Lizzie and Harriet's financial drain on Lowell is his ball and chain. It is not surprising that the reported speech quoted in italics is particularly malicious and exaggerated.

A second point is that the whole sonnet betrays Lowell's anxiety over money and finances. Despite his attempt to make it seem that money is Lizzie's preoccupation, the sonnet intimates that it is Lowell's anxiety as well. Behind this sonnet is the question of what will happen to Harriet, and Lowell's answer takes the form which emphasizes his financial worries. "They say fear of death is a child's remembrance / of the first desertion." Who is "they" here? Are they child psychologists Lowell has been reading, generalized and casual "experts" (as in "They say it's going to be a cold winter"), or, more likely, complicated fears disguised as casual knowledge? In any event, the remark precipitates as if in answer a defensive rejoinder about Harriet knowing "no love / that doesn't bind her with presents, letters, visits, / things outward and visible," things which are concrete and tangible evidence that Lowell has not deserted her. However, the lines also suggest strongly their opposite: that desertion is in fact more about those things inward and invisible, which Lowell does not want to face: "I've closed my mind / so long, I want to keep it closed, perhaps—." When in the final line the outward and visible is again in the foreground ("They tell me to stop, they mustn't lose my money"), the petulance of the remark confirms our sense that the inward and invisible is sadly amiss in Lowell's relationship with his daughter.

I want to return to the debate over naming as my final point. Bakhtin argues that in monologic poetry, "*Everything that enters the work must immerse itself in Lethe, and forget its previous life in any other contexts . . .*" (*Dialogic* 297). But in naming, and in quoting from known sources, Lowell forfeits the right or the ability to make language forget its previous contexts. Since Lizzie *is* in many senses Elizabeth Hardwick, and since her words are, in many cases, Hardwick's own, Lowell by

necessity must embrace polyphony and risk the loss of control this entails. Had he created characters that stood for himself and the two women, and had he invented the letters, he would have been better able to structure the reader's response to the "common novel plot." However, these letters and conversations are not a poetic creation; they have resonances and contexts beyond his narrative. For one, we can check the original contexts of the letters and compare them with the poems, noting where Lowell changes the material for his own purposes, and noting also what he has left out. Furthermore, the naming of Hardwick and Blackwood leads us naturally to the Hamilton and Mariani biographies, where Hardwick is portrayed sympathetically as a long-suffering, patient, and understanding woman, a portrait which comes through only in part in *The Dolphin*, at least as Lowell attempts to portray her. This is the extra-literary baggage that Lowell's naming carries and that he then cannot control. He recognizes this, in a small way, in the poem "Draw," from the sequence "Doubt":

Should revelation be sealed like private letters,
till all the beneficiaries are dead,
and our proper names become improper Lives? (*D* 42)

Clearly Lowell thought not, although the last line indicates that he worried about how he would be depicted, and even if biography had a place in the interpretation of poetry. "Improper Lives" carries the connotation of both "inappropriate lives" (the poet lives in his work) and "unseemly lives" (Lowell's personal life was in turmoil). In other words, it suggests that readers in the future will be more concerned with the poet's life (which is improper) than with his work (the proper focus of the reader). Nonetheless, Lowell chose to use "proper" names—personal names, suitable names, and names as props. Whether or not Lowell was justified in the name of art in invading Hardwick's and Blackwood's privacy is a matter of debate; personally, I am inclined to agree with Elizabeth Bishop that Lowell violated a trust when he used the women's letters and conversations in his poetry. In Lowell's defence, it may be argued that by naming and by quoting Lowell wanted to create an authentic drama of voices, and in this he succeeded. Less successful, precisely because of his naming and quoting, is his attempt to control

those voices. Lizzie in particular rises from the "common novel plot" to challenge the role Lowell assigns her, and it is her voice that we listen to by the end of the volume. By reading *The Dolphin* as a polyphonic poem we can recover Lizzie's voice from the "deliberately trite" tone Lowell gives her, and find a subversive authenticity that resists assimilation into Lowell's larger agenda.

NOTES

1. *The Dolphin* 48; hereafter *D*.
2. In "Notebook 1967-68: Writing the Process Poem," Alex Calder demonstrates how Lowell's preoccupation with his fiftieth birthday led him to write a poem that eventually became the sequence "Half a Century Gone" in *Notebook 1967-68*. Calder goes on to argue that Lowell's intense concern with the passage of time permeates *Notebook 1967-68*. In *Robert Lowell's Language of the Self*, Katharine Wallingford notes that Lowell "defined himself personally and poetically through his relations with writers, living and dead" (96). This self-fashioning in the *Notebook* volumes is achieved primarily through debate, I would argue, and the many quoted voices in the poems provide Lowell with options to explore as he ponders his life at 50.

For more information on the influence of the drama on Lowell's sonnets, see my forthcoming article in *Twentieth Century Literature* entitled "Drama and Dramatic Strategies in Robert Lowell's *Notebook 1967-68*."

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