

Robert Lowell's *Skunk Hour*: A Reading

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In "The Epistemology of Metaphor", Paul de Man declares figurative language a "recognised source of embarrassment"¹ for philosophy, historiography and literary analysis. With regard to literary analysis, this is no overstatement and the embarrassment is all too frequently avoided by calling nearly every figure a symbol. This is a particular failing in the analysis of poems. A forced or careless "symbolic" interpretation leads to a distortion of meaning and this must lead to an invalid notion both of the poem's method and its achievement. To read all literary figure as symbol is to misread.

The poem probably the most abused by so-called "symbolic" interpretation, that is, seeing symbols where there are not any, is Robert Lowell's "Skunk Hour". Again and again this poem is interpreted to suggest a causal connexion between the corruption and decadence of America and the unhinging of the sensitive poet's mind. If all the figures are read as supposedly symbolic, the poem is distorted to mean something like this: the hermit heiress is a "symbol" of the decadence of American aristocracy; the millionaire is a "symbol" of corrupt American materialism; the fairy decorator is a "symbol" of corrupt American love (since it is supposed he will marry for money); all three are "symbols" of a corrupt, rotting modern America. The meaning then has to be that modern Americans are decadent, corrupt in money-making and corrupt in love and all this plunges the sensitive young poet into despair—until some "symbolic" skunks pass by. Although they live on the garbage of corrupt modern American civilization (a fact the symbolic interpretation omits), skunks are vital, innocent and indomitable—and are "symbols" of vitality that restores the poet to vitality. Of course, this absurdly bloated interpretation is my own; and it neglects all sorts of details in every stanza; it neglects the ludicrousness of skunkery solving the poet's cultural despair, and it neglects the role of perception in the poem.

Other interpretations stop just short of this thoroughgoing absurdity and change their method of reading the figurative language of the poem. They read literary figures that are patently the

1 *Critical Inquiry* V (No. 1, Autumn, 1978), p. 13.

same as different from one another. No less a perceptive Lowell critic than S. G. Axelrod sees the skunks as both a symbol and image—as “a symbol of survival” and “an image of the new world Lowell has entered, and an image of Lowell himself, having entered.” This symbol or image of indomitable skunkery triumphs, says Axelrod, in the face of “the rotting of a whole social structure.”² This surely lends a certain bathos to the ending. Hugh Staples, in his fine study, *Robert Lowell, the First Twenty Years*,³ also reads similar figures as different—as either symbol or image. He sees the heiress, the millionaire and the decorator as quite symbolic but the skunks as an image. One cannot properly interpret this poem by an inconsistent reading which when it starts to lead to a patent over-interpretation then retreats from “symbol” to talk of “image”.

These are only two samples of readings that do not settle on just what kind of figures the heiress, millionaire, decorator and skunks are. Small wonder they come to very different conclusions⁴ about what Lowell means, and in spite of his own remarks on the poem’s meaning and on the skunks themselves. Lowell says of the poem as a whole: “This is the dark night. I hoped my readers would remember John of the Cross’s poem. My night is not gracious, but secular, puritan, and agnostical. An Existential night. Somewhere in my mind was a passage from Sartre or

2 *Robert Lowell, Life and Art* (Princeton, 1978), pp. 131, 125.

3 *Robert Lowell, the First Twenty Years* (London, 1962), p. 83. Staples says “[Lowell’s] purpose in introducing the elderly eccentric, the ruined millionaire and the ‘fairy decorator’ . . . is at first unclear, until we see that they too are a part of the failing New England tradition; each of them is in some way a symbol of artificiality, loss and perversion.” The skunks Staples calls “images of foulness and decay”.

4 Axelrod concludes: “As a literary confession ‘Skunk Hour’ relieves the poet’s subjective burden and restores the connection between self and world. The poem proves, as Lowell hoped it would, not a ‘deathrope’ but a ‘lifeline’” (*Robert Lowell, Life and Art* (Princeton, 1978), p. 132). Staples’s conclusion is very different: “This, the last poem in the volume, is about a journey too. As in ‘Beyond the Alps’ the return to actuality remains fraught with danger” (*Robert Lowell, The First Twenty Years* (London, 1962), p. 83). Barry Spurr who sees the poem albeit consistently as a series of emblems has an even more despairing interpretation. See his very detailed analysis, “The Art of Robert Lowell”, *Sydney Studies in English*, VII (1981-2), 69-84. Spurr’s un-American interpretation does not benefit from local skunk knowledge: he does not take into consideration the popularity and delightfulness of skunks. They are only “repellent in their notorious smell” when scared (p. 80). Lowell’s poetic skunks have the good grace not to be scared and not to smell, a precarious situation, but one not to let go unappreciated.

Camus about reaching some point of final darkness where the one free act is suicide".⁵ As for the skunks, he says he modelled them on Elizabeth Bishop's poem "The Armadillo" in which the armadillo is shown as a doughty survivor. Lowell claims the skunks are "an affirmation" although an "ambiguous" one. They are "both quixotic and barbarously absurd, hence the tone of amusement and defiance".⁶

These are overwhelming tips to the reading of the poem and one is obliged to respect them. But they tell nothing of how the meaning was achieved. To read the poem as a series of "images" functioning metonymically (that is, as a concrete sample of their meaning) and not symbolically not only leads to the meaning Lowell suggested but shows how its meaning was achieved.

What are the various concrete details of "Skunk Hour", from the heiress to the skunks, but the indicators of the emotional tone of the poem's perceiving mind? The poem opens with a series of details (all within the same plane of meaning) that assume a background not in the poem, the end of the holiday season when summer resorts shut down the way East coast North American resorts do—suddenly—leaving behind a few often eccentric permanent residents, and the workforce of teenagers or college students who stay on to clean up before going, after their summer romances, on their separate ways. The concrete details in the poem are no objective sketch of the situation that I've outlined above: they are carefully selected details to suggest the cheerless void, the toneless emptiness at the end of the holiday season. This "sad prospect",⁷ to use Lowell's own phrase, serves as a prelude to the middle part of the poem when the perceiving mind suddenly becomes unhinged. "You dawdle in the first part," says Lowell, "and suddenly get caught in the poem".⁸

The hermit heiress is no conceptual symbol of decaying American aristocracy. She is sketched with almost random details ("Her son's a bishop. Her farmer/is first selectman in our village"—ll. 4-5) which show that the poem's perceiving mind is thoughtful, almost absently mulling over ("dawdling over") this unsociable eccentric he does not know, but who is as left behind as he feels after the season. Presumably he is looking at the eyeglasses she has bought and let collapse, and at her spartan cottage,

5 Quoted by Axelrod, p. 127.

6 Quoted by Axelrod, p. 130.

7 Quoted by Axelrod, p. 125.

8 Quoted by Axelrod, p. 126.

visual details that accord with the depressing shutting-down of the holiday season and the loneliness it engenders. In fact the perceiving mind sees the season as "ill"—and actually misses the summer millionaire with all that the reference to the L. L. Bean catalogue suggests, a jovial, expensive, neat blandness, a shallow panache that is nevertheless zestful. The summer millionaire has regrettably gone away, perhaps permanently, for he—unkindest cut of all—has sold his boat. The summer millionaire is no "symbol" of something conceptual, such as corrupt materialism, nor is there any evidence to suggest he is "ruined" as Staples suggests.⁹ His going prompts a sense of lost zest, of regret. The stanza ends ominously with the perceiving mind seeing early autumn as a *stain* on the hill.¹⁰ After so jaundiced, so sick a view of what is usually seen as so dazzling, the turning of the leaves, the perceiving mind next mulls over another left-over (the fairy decorator) and views him rather dimly too. He attributes to him what the perceiving mind cannot really know: that the decorator would marry for money rather than continue unprofitable decorating. A sour surmise and a prelude to some low scavenging done in the middle of the poem which is an apt contrast to the plucky scavengers at the poem's end. All these details function not symbolically but metonymically to suggest an emotional tone vaguely sour, lonely, aimless, regretful, and in keeping with what Lowell said about trying to "give a tone of tolerance, humour and randomness to the sad prospect"¹¹ which is only a prospect and not a whole cultural critique in a few stanzas.

The details of the first stanzas are *concrete tokens* of loss, loneliness, bemused regret felt by the perceiving mind. They do not "symbolize" or suggest abstract concepts such as decayed aristocracy, capitalistic and amatory corruption. They are details that set a scene and suggest a mood which becomes more ominous. Even the pace and sounds of the early stanzas suggest this reading. Take just the first three lines as a sample: "Nautilus Island's hermit/heiress still lives through winter in her spartan

9 Staples, p. 83.

10 I would not belabour the red fox stain on Blue Hill if it were not for the fact that students frequently think it refers "symbolically" to the brutality of fox-hunting. Autumn leaves can be gold-red, almost the colour of red fox fur, and to perceive this glorious colour as a stain is to perceive "ill"—again a fitting preparation for the shock that the poet receives about himself and which he gives the reader in the middle stanzas.

11 Quoted in Axelrod, p. 125.

cottage;/her sheep still graze above the sea". The pace is unhurried, almost aimless in this longish sentence; there are no resonant sounds. In fact, the paucity of nasal consonants and the careful separation of what few consonants there are from other sounds that could cause them to resonate, give a consistent shallowness of affect to the whole first stanza, a tonelessness that almost stops the first stanza dead with no carry-over in interest or vitality to the second stanza, an effect surely intentional.

After the end-of-season aimless and toneless languor is established in the poem, the mood changes and the scene changes, which is to say, the perceiving mind's mood changes and the scene he dwells on changes. In stanza 5, the lines become tight and relentless:

One dark night,
my Tudor Ford climbed the hill's skull,
I watched for love-cars. Lights turned down,
they lay together, hull to hull,
where the graveyard shelves on the town . . .

This is no "symbol" of young America's mindless lust that is supposed to unhinge the sensitive poet. Recognizing that he is doing something sick, pervertedly watching those young couples that have found summer romances, and seeing with an almost necrophiliac association of love and death, the poem's perceiving mind declares: "My mind's not right". There is no hint that the previous five stanzas of scenes have actually *caused* this. Nor have the sudden sounds of "'Love O careless Love . . .'" (l. 32) caused the crisis. All that goes before the lines, "I hear/my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell", is a setting for the discovery of desolation, the sudden terrifying sensation of one's own emptiness, aloneness. "'Love, O careless Love'" is probably also harmless summer "love" or silly summer love at the worst, but the perceiving mind cannot think so and an amazing number of critics cannot either. What is more important, I think, is that the *hearing* of this popular song with its loose beat, makes him *hear* his own beat, tense, relentless, increasingly frantic. (He *hears* his "ill-spirit sob in each blood cell". This culminates in the insight—plain and agonizingly unequivocal—"I myself am hell . . ." (l. 35). There are undertones of references at this point that Axelrod explores,¹² but which I do not wish to explore nor argue

12 Axelrod leaves out the poem's perceiving mind and so I cannot agree with all that he says. For instance, he says: "The observations in stanza three that the 'season's ill' might have referred innocently to

with, as my aim now is to show how the skunks function.

At this point of utter desolation, the perceiving mind sees yet another scene: skunks, career scavengers, not slinking in alleys, but marching up Main Street. The beat is not a fully regular marching beat, but it is regular enough to suggest, as the marching beat does, that it will go on and on with some regularity. A confident beat for some confident skunks. They do not intend, it seems, to be interrupted. They go on to the garbage pail of the speaker's house and although he is presumably out on his back porch, they are unafraid of him (and are also therefore not foul-smelling).

The skunks function—neither as symbols of filth and decay nor of human vitality, nor of domestic security; they are a metonym or a concrete sample of creaturely indomitability and are perceived as such. The mention of the chalk-dry, spar-spired Trinitarian Church, is also a metonym, a concrete sample of an imposing, irrelevant, spiritual dessication and one the skunks in cheerful presumption do well, it seems, to ignore. Unassisted, “quixotic” and “barbarously absurd,”¹³ as Lowell says, their mere creatureliness is victorious. The reader experiences this meaning of the skunks because the poem's perceiving mind does. The mind is not “sick” any longer; it is being healed. By the poem's end the perceiving mind can see wholesomely and truly; it is in an “adamic”¹⁴ state (albeit a weak and precarious one). The garbage-laden air smells rich to the perceiver, not nauseating, and the skunks are seen as foraging confidently, single-mindedly, not a little daringly as they go right up to the speaker's garbage pail. It is the *seeing* of the skunks in a certain way that is the final meaning of the poem.

Lowell calls the skunks “an affirmation”, and placed where they are in the poem, this is so. But he also says the skunks are an “ambiguous”¹⁵ affirmation. I would say a tentative affirmation and perhaps not strong enough, considering the experiences

13 Quoted by Axelrod, p. 130.

14 Marghanita Laski, *Everyday Ecstasy* (London, 1980), p. 17.

15 Quoted by Axelrod, p. 130.

seasonal change, but by stanza six its full implication is manifest: this season of human habitation on earth is ill—decadent and debased” (p. 126). This leads him to a distortion of the poem's meaning. Nevertheless he does explore what I think are probably valid, if somewhat exhausting, depth charges Lowell sends down—to John of the Cross, Marlowe, Milton, Hopkins, Hawthorne, Eliot, William James, Sartre, Camus and the Bible.

SYDNEY STUDIES

of the middle part of the poem. Nevertheless one does more justice to the very details of the poem, its consistency of figure, its unity and to the role of the poet's persona; and one avoids imparting irrelevant casual connections and cultural statements, if the details are taken as concrete examples, functioning metonymically and not as symbols. And one remains closer to all that Lowell himself has said about the poem's meaning.