Amphibious Creatures : Images of Transcendence in Robert Lowell's Poetry

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"*Sea monsters, upward angel, downward fish.*"[1]

It is not really surprising that the son of a Navy commander who introduced himself as born "under the sign of Pisces, the Fish,"[2] someone who spent his childhood vacations and most of his mature leisure-time near the Atlantic Ocean and was also an eager fisherman, should have made the sea and marine life an important reference in his work. What is more singular is the density and the consistency of the marine element throughout a poetic career perceived in retrospect as "recoiling with satiation and disgust from one style to another, a series of rebuffs" (Lowell, 1977). Far from being discarded or even temporarily interrupted, the marine imagery weaves one dense and coherent web across the poetry. At either extremity of his works, confronted in antithetical prominence, two very astonishing fish motifs stand out. The irreducible opposition induced by an initial reading distracts critical attention from their underlying resemblances.

The first of these mythical marine creatures, the Whale in "The Quaker Graveyard" is a formidable monster intent on wreaking its vengeance on the human race whereas the latter creature, the Dolphin, in the collection bearing the

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1. 'The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket' (10). All references will be to Robert Lowell, *Selected Poem*, Revised Edition, New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1977.
2. Lowell's draft manuscript for an autobiography (Houghton Library), quoted in Ian Hamilton, *Robert Lowell: A Biography*. New York: Random House, 1982, p. 3.

same name, is a friendly and inspiring companion to man. Both are placed in a conflictual relationship with man iconized by one single activity — fishing; moreover, both share the amphibious status, needing air and water for survival, belonging at the same time to land and sea. Whether one chooses to stress the oppositions or the likenesses between them, the two figures remain tantalizingly poised at either end of Lowell's poetic career. A more extensive inquiry is necessary in order to make more explicit the intriguing kinship that seems to connect the two motifs. It will be conducted along two complementary axes: in the paradigmatic dimension, the fish symbolism will be resituated within the larger context of the imaginative construction underpinning Lowell's poetry; in the dynamic dimension, we will trace a series of incidental symbols and mutations on the initial pattern that will help bridge the interval between the Whale symbolism of the first poems and its subsequent transformation into the Dolphin.

Perhaps the clearest if also starkest evocation of Lowell's imaginative universe is contained in "Water," a very strange poem that he composed in connection with intense moments spent in Elizabeth Bishop's company — as if one poet could only appear undisguised to another poet. The two characters in the poem are sitting on "a slab of rock" contemplating the inhabitants of a Maine village "push[ing] off for granite/quarries on the islands" (99), the outlying islands being a mere replication of the rocky mainland with the only difference that they are to be quarried, exploited by men. At the two lovers' feet, the sea, of course, stands as the antagonistic element to both the action of men — it "tears away flake after flake" rather than systematically quarrying the rock structure — and to the solidity of the rock that it drenches and erodes. A major opposition is thus forcefully established and is almost simultaneously neutralized when the lovers observe that, below them, "the sea lapped/ the raw little matchstick/mazes of a weir,/where the fish for bait were trapped." (99) The three descriptors, "raw little matchstick" express the flimsy nature of the weir structure while the end rhyme "trapped" concluding the grammatical unit of the sentence stresses the utilitarian finality assigned to the fish. The sight mobilizes the two characters' attention as the confined activity of the "trapped fish" occupies a middle ground between the inertness of the rock and the relentless fury of the ocean, between the drudgery of the quarry people, reduced metonymically to "hands," and the hazardousness of the woman's mermaid dream of "trying to pull / off the barnacles with your hands"(99). For both the lovers and the quarry hands, everything must be extracted, negotiated at the point of encounter between two elements. It appears in the conclusion of the poem that nothing positive can come from the sea or even exist in the open sea: "In the end, / the water was too cold for us" (100). The

lovers dream instead of a transcendence gained on the wings of poetry: "We wished our two souls might return like gulls to the rock" (100).

A similar construction and a more explicit exploration of the intermediary zone between land and sea is revealed in "Colloquy in Black Rock" from *Lord Weary's Castle*, one of the senses of 'colloquy' being a reference to this exchange between the two elements, their being summoned to engage in conversation. In that poem, the recurrent motif is 'Black Mud' (5) which is perceived as dirt, detritus, and spilled blood but also as a nutritious, fertile element: "O mud / For watermelons gutted to the crust, / Mud for the mole-tide harbor, mud for mouse, / Mud for the armored Diesel fishing tubs" (5). In that last reference we perceive a troubling property of the mudflats: it is their corrupt nature, the ambivalence of their productions that makes them amenable to destruction and regeneration. Defilement calls for cleansing. And indeed immediately after: "In Black Mud / Darts the kingfisher" (5), a divine intervention which it is natural to connect both to Christ as Kingfisher and to the Creator of "The Quaker Graveyard" who "formed man from the sea's slime"(10). As a consequence of this very ambiguous assault and immersion "in Black Mud", "the mud / Flies from his hunching wings and beak" (5), a punning way to present the mud in its ambivalent aspiration to be discarded but also to take wing and fly. In the black mud, the slime, the "slush" of the Quaker graveyard (7), in "the bilge and backwash" (7), in the "brackish reach of shoal off Madaket" (6), we find an image of the mortality of man but also of his potential for regeneration, a contradiction reflected in the conflict of his rock-hard nature with the destructive power of the ocean.

The ambivalent mud medium illustrates the point of convergence between the various forces structuring Lowell's imaginative universe. For the purposes of this study, we will ignore references to the inland scenes and terrestrial creatures. We will take as our starting point the position of the lovers in "Water", sitting on a ledge of rock facing the ocean. The open tumultuous space in front of the couple represents what lies beyond the confines of men's abodes and beyond the reaches of their imagination. It stands for a limitless, unattainable, otherworldly dimension which we take as an image of transcendence. This numinous supra-human world is divided into two contrasted regions the opposition of which cuts across Lowell's entire imaginative world.

In the upper region we find the birds, the surprising dive-bomber image of the kingfisher in 'Colloquy', the "bird priest" of "Falling Asleep," the "terns and seagulls" of "Quaker Graveyard" and later, after a certain period of eclipse in the middle poems, the oriole of "Fall 1961" and the more skittish birds of *History and For Lizzie and Harriet*: quails, warblers or swallows with a "finer body and tinier

brains" (215); all of them are supported or buffeted by the all-powerful, abrasive and cleansing wind of "Soft Wood" with its "scouring effervescence / of something healing, / the illimitable salt" (130). These dense and converging references to the avian world we associate to an image of exalted, inaccessible, incomprehensible, and infinitely powerful transcendence which we oppose to a state of amorphous unthinking material existence represented by the deep sea fish and other creatures of the deep, "the heel-headed dogfish" (6), the crabs (6; 11) sometimes pathetically exposed like the "horseshoe crab" (106), or the "blood-mouthed rainbow trout" (13), all of whom seem to be affected with a kind of deformity or vulnerability which is subsumed and made more explicit at several stages in Lowell's poetic career.

Its first appearance in "The Quaker Graveyard" is perhaps the most troubling but also the most explicit because Arthur Winslow's dead body emerging from the sea — an episode totally invented by Lowell because his cousin actually died in harbour, the victim of an engine-room explosion — takes on the ambiguous appearance of a fish and of a corpse. The dead body is very conspicuously defaced and deformed by its prolonged immersion in the sea — a very gruesome image of death. But it is also powerfully endowed with a sort of resurgent dynamism: "The drowned sailor clutched the drag-net;" "He grappled at the net / With the coiled, hurdling muscles of his thighs" (6). He is a sort of inverted fish intent on being caught by his captors. Instead of bearing witness to the dark abysses, he brings with him a form of illumination: "Light / Flashed from his matted head and marble feet." (6) Death is undoubtedly entrusted with a message for the living — the dead sailor testifies through his putrefaction, like the medieval "gisants", to the inevitability of rebirth. And later he is thrown back into the ocean as a "portent (pitched) at the sea / Where dreadnaughts shall confess / Its hell-bent deity" (6). We will see later that his "hell-bent deity" exactly tallies with the redeeming intent of the "whited monster."

Another probably fuller symbolic explicitation of the fish motif is revealed in the evocation of the Boston Aquarium in "For the Union Dead." In that poem we find a clear opposition between the trapped position of the aquarium fish (a distant evocation of the bait fish in "Water"), attractive to the young child gluing his nose to the glass walls and enviously gazing at "the dark downward and vegetating kingdom / of the fish and reptile" (135), and its generalization in the Boston city scene in the form of "giant finned cars nos[ing] forward like fish" (137). In both instances, marine life represents a regressive inferior state of existence. The young boy's tempting incursion into the lives of the "cowed compliant fish" (135) becomes inadmissible when that form of existence is

extended to the whole community as a spurious imitation, with cars gliding "like fish" (137) and "grease" as a base substitute for seawater. This form of self-destroying aquatic living is also parodically denounced when the patriotic bravado celebrated in Colonel Shaw's monument is seen as "stick[ing] like a fishbone in the city's throat" (136). Opposed to the birds, creatures of the air which represent inaccessible transcendence, the fishes stand for exclusion from, or refusal of, the infinite — two extremes between which Lowell places his amphibious creatures partaking of the two worlds at the same time.

Just as the ambiguous mud is placed between rock and ocean, the amphibious creatures are suspended between inaccessible transcendence and regressive existence. The first premonitions of these hybrid creatures can be found in the diving kingfisher of "Colloquy" and the Black Swan of "In Memory of Arthur Winslow." These partly aquatic, partly terrestrial birds are clearly associated with Christ "walk[ing] on the black water" (5), to "Risen Jesus who walks the waves" (11), or to "the dove of Jesus" (33) and are images of redemption in destruction — a combination that is artisticaliy synthesized in the Whale symbolism of "The Quaker Graveyard."[3] There the ambivalent reference to "IS, the whited monster" (8) corresponds to what we define as immanent transcendence imaging the incarnation of the man-God. In contradistinction to Furia's exclusive association of IS to Christ the Redeemer, we find that the complexity of the associated Biblical and literary references bears out an interpretation of the whale motif as steeped in contradiction, in keeping with the New Critical poetics Lowell tried to emulate at the time. The whale is "Jonas Messias" (9), that is at the same time a victim and a redeemer, a rebel and a savior. In addition, it stands concurrently for the terrifying image of Leviathan as Antichrist, the beast that Christ slays in the Apocalypse, and for Christ the Redeemer emerging in triumph after the Harrowing of Hell. This ambivalence and reversibility of associations underlies the transcendent "lion, lamb, and beast / who fans the furnace-face of IS with wings" (33) and his dreadful message to men whose lives "dance[d] a jig on the sperm-whale's spout" (13).

With the poems of *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead*, we move from an image of fascinating if scourging transcendence to images of seclusion, confinement and reduction (coinciding with his incarceration for civil disobedience and regular periods of recovery in mental hospitals) in which all notion of higher aspirations, outside perspectives or even of an opening on the

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3. Our study relies heavily on Philip Furia's analysis of the "IS, the whited monster" controversy; "'IS, the whited monster': Lowell's Quaker Graveyard Revisited", in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 17 (Winter 1976), pp. 837-854.

outside world is irremediably lost. The visible world is reduced to the four walls of a prison-cell, a bedroom, and even to the restricted space of a bed in "Myopia: a Night" or of cars: "Lights turned down, / (that) lay together, hull to hull" (96) in "Skunk Hour." Former images of transcendence seem to have been transformed into grotesque parodies of their earlier excellence. Fish are trapped as in "Water" or "For the Union Dead"; amphibious creatures like seals are kept "in a barred pond at the zoo" (130) or "swim like poodles through the sheet / of blinding salt" (132). Among other parodically devalued symbols, we find ridiculous birds, the pope's "pet canary ... gorgeous as a jungle bird" (55) in "Beyond the Alps," a "stuffed toucan with a bibulous, multicolored beak" (68) to which the young narrator of "My last Afternoon" associates himself or the stuffed duck "who died dead drunk" (63), that is the gloriously baroque focus of attention in "To Delmore Schwartz." The ocean itself is ridiculously reduced to the dimensions of a bath-tub: as in the scene when the poet's father "soaks, a ramrod, / with the muscle of a seal / in his long tub" (87) or where the poet's daughter plays with her father's toilet bag in her bath (89); meanwhile, the crucial loss of transcendence constitutes the main argument of "The Public Garden": "The fountain's failing waters flash around / the garden. Nothing catches fire" (113). Resuming the Biblical fable the poet finds "Satan triumphant in the garden!" (115) and "hears the voice of Eve, / beseeching freedom from the Garden's / perfect and ponderous bubble"(117). The image of the bubble is taken up in 'Myopia' again in which the poet, parodying the Word, "saw things darkly, / as through an un-washed goldfish globe"(108).

Images of enclosed spaces, of the mythical original garden, of the bubble or of the goldfish globe (a reduction of the aquarium in "For the Union Dead"): all point in the same direction. The poet is imprisoned in his own world, swallowed out of existence just like Jonah, he is *inside the whale* pondering on God's wrath and awaiting His will. This confinement is, nevertheless, only temporary; it precedes a rebirth which is at this stage only vaguely glimpsed. The whale's belly is a place of penance but also of transformation. The poet is buried in order to be reborn, although like the tulips in his lawn he appears indistinguishable from the weeds all around ("Home After Three months Away"). Like the prison inmates among whom he lives, he sees his life transformed into a "locked razor" (88), ready for use or misuse. Progressively in "Man and Wife," the poet is aroused from his Miltown-induced stupor[4] when his wife's "old-fashioned tirade- / loving, rapid, merciless- / breaks like the Atlantic Ocean on [his] head" (93). The

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[4]. *Miltown* is a reference to the powerful tranquilizer with which Lowell was treated during this period.

estranged Jonah seems to have been ejected on the shore. Even in the direst moments of distress the promise of rebirth is not entirely forgotten. So the anguish expressed in "Waking in the Blue": "My heart grows tense / as though a harpoon were sparring for the kill" (87) unmistakably recalls the redeeming power of the wound: "Hide, / Our steel, Jonas Messias, in Thy side."(9) in "The Quaker Graveyard." Although bereft of transcendence, the poet is closer to the amphibious state that we identified precedingly as being associated to immanent transcendence. He sees himself as an amphibious *and* transitional creature like "a young newt, / neurasthenic, scarlet / and wild in the wild coffee-colored water" (73). In his representation of his lifelong inspiration, Ford Madox Ford, he evokes the struggle for survival: "You stood / mumbling, with fish-blue-eyes, / and mouth pushed out / fish-fashion, as if you gagged for air."(59)

Quite significantly, the most striking animal image of the period is an amphibian, the turtle,[5] which represents in a very compressed manner the tenor of the poetry between *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead*. The turtle is an image of a cramped form of existence confined inside a shell, but, like the skunks of "Skunk Hour," it is also an image of the indomitable assertion of life and patient endurance. In "The Neo-classical Urn" (an allusive re-vision of Keats' Grecian Urn), the poet relates how he used to capture turtles that he kept prisoner and forgot in an urn only to find them later dead or moribund. Warned by their "dying smell", he watches "their crippled last survivors pass" (126) — the word "pass" having the two contradictory connotations of movement and death. Associating himself to the stubbornly struggling, martyred creatures, but deprived of the privilege of even moribund survival because he sees himself "stuck on a pole / each hair electrical / with charges, and the juice alive / with ferment" the poet has the impression that his thinking head is reduced to "a turtle shell" (125), an empty container but still rich with a punningly evoked ("pole", "charges", "juice") vital electricity that the remaining turtles appear to be so devoid of: "A turtle's nothing" (126). Again the final impression is ambiguous — life seems to be oozing from putrefaction.

A possible clue is to be found in the pivotal poem "Night Sweat" in which the poet, after wallowing in oceanic sweat throughout the night sees himself as "Poor turtle, tortoise" (134),[6] that is, related to the same animal in its different habitats — both earthbound and amphibious — or, in our reading, bereft of, and

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5. The importance of the turtle symbolism has been underlined by K. Wallingford, *Robert Lowell's Language of the Self*, University of North Carolina Press, 1988, pp. 450-51.

6. To us the reference is unambiguously to the poet and not to his wife who is referred to as "Dear Heart" two lines below.

reinstated into, transcendence — a complex of feelings that we take as the tenor of this stage in Lowell's development. Although the poet cannot hope to "clear / the surface of these troubled waters" (134), he aspires to survival. As he watches the "crippled last survivors pass" in "The Neo-Classical Urn", and if we accept the ambiguity of the concluding line that could potentially refer to the poet or the turtles, it is he who moves away turtle-like from the spectacle of death to "hobble humpbacked through the grizzled grass" (126). Limited aspirations, delusion and frustration, flawed but familiar immanence, is all the transcendence that the poet is left with: "[He] dabbles in the dapple of the day." (134)

After the expulsion from the whale's belly, the poet is left stranded in the vicinity of transcendence, "Near the Ocean," but without the possibility of relating to the great presence beyond. Shore and sea are hopelessly dichotomized: "sand, / Atlantic Ocean, condoms, sand." (154). There is not the least hint of the former productive "colloquy" between water and earth. Instead he seems to inhabit a kind of wasteland; he is lost in the anonymity of flotsam and jetsam, of infertile debris and detritus — sand and condoms rather than fertile mud and organic waste. He consorts with lowly creatures like the "vermin [who] run for their unstopped holes" or "termites" or "creatures of the night" (141), caged animals such as the "lion prowl[ing] his slummy cell" (151) or "guinea-pigs" (148), or helpless creatures like the "one-day kitten on the ground- / deprived, ignorant and blind, / squeaking, tubular, left behind- / dying with its deserter's rich / Welfare lying out of reach" (152). The only amphibian that is left on the scene of his dereliction is the diminutive New England frog who has deserted the liquid element for the woods which are represented as a deserted wasteland: "No dogs / there, horse or hunter, only frogs / chirping from the dark trees and swamps" (154). Even the former terrifying monsters of the deep ("Pity the monsters!" 107) are now reduced to a "Gorgon head, / fished up from the Aegean dead, / with all its stranded snakes uncoiled / here beheaded and despoiled" (153).

From that period of destitution which coincides with the composition of *History* and *For Lizzie and Harriet* dates the poet's fascination for fragments and debris which he calls "the horrifying mortmain of ephemera" (210). This influx of inert objects into the world calls for a God who is a mundane mechanic; hence the poet finds: "There's a pale romance to the watchmaker God / of Descartes and Paley; He drafted and installed / us in the Apparatus" (170). From then on, immanence in its most exhausted and dilapidated form has been raised to transcendental status. Cynicism is the order of the day and the poet becomes the self-ironizing "Nihilist as Hero" who "wants to live in the world as is, and yet gaze the everlasting hills to rubble" (183). The friendly turtle of the preceding

stage, "a god for the out-of-power" (217), is once again a privileged analogue. This time, after "fasting in the bathtub" (218), it is seen blinking in disparagement at the world of humans and returning to the water "like rushing into marriage / swimming in uncontaminated joy" (218), leaving the corruption behind. Yet the state of dereliction in which the world is plunged, the general demise of transcendence, seem to generate a new, inverted form of transcendence: "Before the final coming to rest, comes the rest / of all transcendence in a mode of being, hushing / all becoming" (223). It takes the form of a general fixation or petrification of man's expectation. When transcendence is reduced to the ironically punning "rest", it changes into ice, all-preserving and destructive, "the naught ... no longer asset or disadvantage" (184).

Here we come to the end of a cycle in the development of Lowell's imagery. Paradoxically, the water element is turned into the substance of the rock of *Lord Weary's Castle*, and, as if to reinforce the reversal of the former order, humans are reincarnated as amphibious creatures reconciled with the "three elements, / ledge, water and heaven —" (222) that used to be at war in their lives but retreating into negative transcendence: "their haven / green ice in a greenland never grass" (222). Man, driven away from the mind-distracting trivia of the world, fulfills his longing for transcendence in death, "green ice" the closest thing to the "green pastures" of spiritual rebirth.

A cycle seems to be completed with the inversion of the values posed in Lowell's first books of poetry — the poet shifts from destructive transcendence to the transcendence of destruction. Yet shortly after the publication of the *Notebook* cycle of sonnets comprising both *History* and *For Lizzie and Harriet*, the complexities and the productivity of the original Whale motif are suddenly revived with the publication of *The Dolphin*. Hamilton[7] quotes Raban commenting upon Lowell's obsession with dolphins around the time he was writing the sonnets about his former wife and his new marriage with Caroline Blackwood, but he does not attempt to establish the connection with the poetry he was writing at the time or the poems that preceded *The Dolphin*. Yet the continuity with the former poems is quite clear.

The relationship between fish and fisherman which was first introduced in 'The Quaker Graveyard" in the conflictual mode is now perceived as both fulfilling and destructive in the Heraclitean mode. The harpoon, rod and net, with their dual potentialities as both life-providing and life-killing, can be compared to the Heraclitean image of the Bow: "The Bow has Life for a name while its

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7. Ian Hamilton, Ibid., p. 413.

destination is Death."[8] In "Fishnet" the poet compares himself to the fisherman who finds joy in both knotting and undoing the net that will "hang on the wall when the fish is eaten" (227). This image, vaguely reminiscent of Penelope's making and unmaking of her tapestry in *The Odyssey*, could be seen as an emblem of Lowell's working and reworking of the motifs we have been tracing. "Fishnet" moves toward a newly humorous reconciliation of the old struggle between mortality and transcendence. The fishnet represents a reminder and a trophy of that struggle: "nailed like illegible bronze on the futureless future" (227), it is an artefact of uncertain yet enduring material value. As it appears in the concluding sonnet of the cycle entitled "Dolphin", since the net is an instrument that threatens to ensnare both the fish and the fisherman "caught in its hangman's knot of sinking lines" (246), the relationship established between the potential captives becomes a sort of viable connivance as well as the trap itself: "an eelnet made by man for the eel fighting" (246).

The former hectic quest for the ultimate catch that ended in blood and destruction in the Quakers' style of fishing now gives way to a sudden feeling of relief from all pretension to conquest or triumph. Looking back upon his childhood experiences, the poet humourously remembers his disappointment when having hooked a "big fish": "the line snapped, or my knots pulled-I am free" (242). As the poet's self-made "knots" (as opposed to the reticulations of his art) pulled, he is free to get enmeshed, entangled with his fish, that is absorbed in the Other, as shown in the revealing sonnet entitled "Angling." On the point of finally landing his fish when it opens its mouth to swallow the bait, the fisherman-poet himself is "swallowed alive", while he exclaims: "I am" (238), a more personal form of the verb "be" than the absolute IS of 'Quaker Graveyard'. In fact, the heroic conflict with "IS, the whited monster" finally resolves into the fusion, coalescence and joy of the self merging with its marine counterpart. This ecstatic state does not coincide with the lenitive properties Axelrod finds in concluding that the "dolphin stands for his loving relationship to the universe."[9] As our analysis will have made clear, this late evocation of amphibian imagery is still imbued with the passion and tumult associated with the Whale.

The IS itself loses its oppressive and vindictive transcendence — perhaps in connection with the waning of the omnipotence of the poet's mother, curiously

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[8]. My translation from *Les Penseurs Grecs avant Socrate*, Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1964, p.77.

[9]. Steven Gould Axelrod, *Robert Lowell: Life and Art*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978, p. 216.

mentioned in association with his failing to land the big fish in "Lost Fish."[10] The mermaid and dolphin with which the new transcendence is associated do preserve their amphibious nature, but they are more directly oriented toward the land and the humans. The attractiveness of the mermaid is based on imperfection, or rather ambivalence. She is part-fish and part-woman, perfectly realized in either of her modes of existence yet never totally assignable to one or the other: "Deficiency served her ... Failure keeps snapping up transcendence" (233). Beyond ambivalence, she embodies contradiction: she is a "Rough Slitherer" (234), "She is a baby killer-whale ... warmhearted with an undercoat of ice" (234). Because of her divided nature, she makes it acceptable for other people to live in contradiction and accept their imperfections. The revelation is made in a defiant way: "I am a woman or I am a dolphin, / ... I spout the smarting waters of joy in your face — / rough-weather fish, who cuts your nets and chains" (237). The fisherman's net is broken but his freedom is preserved, while the fish is released from the net in order to shower his captor with kindness.

A new relationship is established between fisherman and fish, because the nature of his quest has changed, or to put it differently, the nature of the fisherman's desire or lack has altered. This is made perfectly clear for the reader by the subtle interlacing of evocations of the poet's former marriage with visions of his recent union with his dolphin-like wife. In one case he relays dead voices (not simply intrusions into marital privacy as irate critics perceived at the time of publication), in the other he evokes a presence. In his memories of his former wife Lizzie, he notes: "We were talking like sisters ... you did not exist" (236), and after failing to encounter the skittish mermaid he expresses himself in similar terms: "I thank the ocean that hides the fearful mermaid — / like God, I almost doubt if you exist" (234). The poet appears to have reached the same conclusion in both cases. The Other has disappeared into non-existence but the effect of this discovery is strikingly different if one examines the two situations separately. In the former case, we have an impression of dissolution of differences ("Like two sisters"), in the latter the doubt about the Other's existence predicates a reinforced self-perception in each of the parties involved. The poet feels like God (a conception clearly highlighted after the Lowellian dash and at the beginning of a line) who can forget about His creation while the mermaid is free to exist without the conscience of having been created, free to roam the seas at will, unmindful of her creator. At the same time the mermaid is also "like God", hidden from her

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[10]. It is tempting, but beyond the scope of this study in the semantics of Lowell's imagery, to convert the main symbols into icons, not so much of his hated and beloved mother but of the poet's relationship with her.

fisherman-lover, and demanding an act of faith to proclaim her existence. The invention of the elusive dolphin motif coincides with a feeling of rebirth in the poet: "I have my round-trip tricket... / After fifty so much joy has come, I hardly want to hide my nakedness — / the shine and stiffness of a new suit, a feeling, / not wholly happy, of being reborn" (243).

The trick-ticket for the poet's evolution has been a change in the poet's perception of transcendence. He has shifted away from the vision of a grandiose but fearful ideal embodied by the Whale to the conception of a humbler and gentler counterpart imaged in the Dolphin, which produces, as Corcoran has perceptively noted, "dissolution of the ego, promises of self-transcendence"[11]. In the give-and-take exchange with the Dolphin which substitutes for the all-or-nothing contract with the Whale, the poet achieves a more tolerant and euphoric conception of himself and of the world. The Dolphin represents understanding not engulfing Otherness and as such ensures the Self's grip upon himself and the world — and probably the end of all transcendence. "Amphibiousness" as described by Seamus Heany in his inspired study of Lowell becomes: "The ability to plunge into the downward reptilian welter of the individual self and raise himself with whatever knowledge he gained there out on the hard ledges of the historical present"[12]. In this latter phase a rebirth process replaces the Apocalyptic pattern of destruction-redemption symbolized by the Whale.

Symbolism in Lowell's poetry is not mere allegory or ornamentation, but the progressive statement of an arduous quest for authenticity and existential balance — in the poet's confrontation with the instability engendered by the perception of himself as neurotic and unbalanced, and the evidence of a world bereft of all transcendence. The amphibious creatures that we have studied in the course of his poetic work represent the poet's various attempts at finding compromises between these two negative certitudes, attempts, so to say, to make sense or "stay afloat" in a confusing universe. We see him passing from the conception of an infinite transcendence to the conception of disruptive immanence and finally discovering in his later poems a more balanced vision of both spirituality and materiality. In the unflagging desire of the poet to keep these two opposites in meaningful confrontation we discover the continuity between Whale and Dolphin.

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11. Neil Corcoran, "Lowell *Retiarius*: Towards *The Dolphin*." In *Robert Lowell*, ed. Harold Bloom. Modern Critical Views, New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987, p. 135.
12. Seamus Heany, "Lowell's Command," in *Salmagundi*, 80, Fall 1988, p. 98.