INVENTARIO DI OGNI SINGOLA COMMEDIA
INTERVENTI DI PANTALONE

TITOLO: IL VECCHIO BIZZARRO

ATTO	NUMERO SCENE	INTERVIENE SCENE NUMERO	MONOLOGO	* SCENA NUM.	SCENE A SOGGETTO	NUMERO INTERVENTI
PRIMO	16	2, 3, 7, 8 9, 10, 14, 15, 16	2	0	0	9
SECONDO	20	3, 4, 10 11, 12, 13	0	0	0	6
TERZO	28	7, 8, 9, 10 11, 16, 17, 18	0	0	0	8
QUARTO	0	0	0	0	0	0
QUINTO	0	0	0	0	0	0
TOTALE	47	23	2	0	0	23

* PRESENTE MA NON PARLA
__ – MONOLOGO

ROBERT LOWELL'S DEBT TO ELIZABETH BISHOP

JOAN F. McMURRAY

DR. JOAN F. McMURRAY is an associate professor in the English Department. She holds a M.A. from Vanderbilt University and a Ph. D. from the University of Rochester where she specialized in Renaissance literature with a dissertation on John Fletcher's Sources in Cervantes. She has taught courses in composition, literary criticism, and literature. From 1986 to 1989 she was chair of the English Department and is presently giving graduate and undergraduate courses in grammar, literature, and Shakespeare. Her current research is devoted to the Spanish influence on English drama during the Tudor and Stuart periods. Her interest in Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop grew from her summer at Rice University as a fellow in a seminar on "The Form and Self in Poetry: Sonnets of Shakespeare and Robert Lowell."

The modern American poets Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell differ radically in technique and subject matter but for at least the last twenty-five years of their lives they acknowledged admiration for each other's work. The exact moment when the admiration actually developed into a recognizable literary influence is impossible to determine, but as early as 1956 Lowell used the main character and situation from Bishop's short story "In the Village" for his poem "The Scream." About seven years later in the volume *History* (1973) Lowell dedicated four sonnets to Bishop and in them acknowledged the value of her friendship and the uniqueness of her art. Of particular value is Lowell's recognition of Bishop's ability to "Make the casual perfect" —a phrase which might be used to describe the new confessional aspects of Lowell's own work in *Life Studies*..[1] Lowell stated publicly that Bishop along with Allen Tate and William Carlos Williams had profound influence on the poems in *Life Studies* and described Bishop as bridge between Tate's formalism and Williams' informal art.[2] In other statements Lowell alluded to the specific qualities which he consciously imitated in Bishop's poems. In a critical essay on "Shunk Hour" in *Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic* he pointed to strong

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[1]Robert Lowell, *History* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1973) p. 198.

[2]Stanley Kunitz, "Talk with Robert Lowell," *Profile of Robert Lowell*, compiled by Jerome Massaro (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publish Co., 1971), p. 37.

technical and artistic connections between his poem and Bishop's "The Armadillo."

> The dedication [of "Shunk Hour"] is to Elizabeth Bishop because re-reading her suggested a way of breaking through the shell of my old manner. Her rhythms, idiom, images, and stanza structure seemed to belong to a later century. "Shunk Hour" and "The Armadillo" use short stanzas, start with drifting description and end with a single animal.[3]

This paper defines in precise terms the similarities in form alluded to in Lowell's statement and also finds significant parallels between the themes of the two poems. It seems clear, now tha the canon of Lowell can be studied in its entirety, that Bishop's influence was significant at this point in Lowell's development.

My analysis of poetic structures include rhyme, stanza divisions, meter, rhetorical devices, and syntax, all of which work to establish the specific structural features of any given poem. The structure is, of course, one of several important ways a poem can convey meaning.

In "Skunk Hour" strong internal unity within each of the eight sestets in achieved through rhyme and syntax.[4] It is almost as if the reader is being invited to consider each stanza as a separate unit before he places it in the context of the poem as a whole. Only between VI and VII is there a grammatical dependence where the sentence beginning "nobody's here—" is completed in VII with "only skunks, that search/in the moonlight for a bite to eat." This pattern results in structural formality. Working agains this formality —and serving the idea of a the superficial character of an ordered society— are meter and line lengths, both of which are irregular. The

[3] Anthony Ostroff, ed.,*The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1964), p. 109. Any discussion of "Skunk Hour" written after the four essays by Richard Wilbur, John Frederick Nims, John Berryman, and Lowell in this volume are naturally influenced by them. My discussion is no exception, but I acknowledge specific sources only when quoting directly from one of the essays.

[4] Robert Lowell, *Life Studies* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1968), pp. 88-89. Subsequent references are cited in the text, and a copy of the poem is in the appendix.

longest line has sixteen (16) syllables and the shortest three, and no single metrical foot is used frequently enough to establish a dominant rhythm. This is Lowell's way of counter-balancing the stabilizing influence of his stanzas and rhyme and this his means of suggesting that something isn't quite right and preparing us for the important revelation in stanza V—"My mind's not right."

The same internal tension between form and content exists in "The Armadillo," but it is achieved in a different way.[5] The ten quatrains are regular in rhyme and meter. Four iambic feet in each line show that the 19th-century tradition of the lyrical ballad is still effective in modern poetry, and the reminder of Romantic poetry is ironically appropriate since the world which Bishop comments upon demonstrates the reverse of pantheistic harmony. If the meter establishes the sense of harmony, it is the syntax that gives us the tension: the grammatical units work against formal stanza division and weaken the closed unity of the quatrain stanzas. The final stanza, however, is dramatically different in that it contains five apostrophes and stands syntactically as a unit. In this final passage the *persona* (discussed below) expresses directly his/her emotional response to the events previously recorded. In all syntax and rhetoric serve the themes in the poem and give emphasis to the moment of revelation at the conclusion.

"Skunk Hour" and "The Armadillo" have a technical excellence or perfection which makes readers accept at least superficially that the poetic worlds they are entering have formality and order; however, at the same time there are conflicting elements present which threaten the strength of this order. Tension, paradox, and illogical situations are, as will be seen later, important aspects of the themes of both poems.

The poems are also similar in that they have I narrators whose identities are delayed for the sake of suspense and/or tension. The I-narrator in"Skunk Hour" speaks in the first part of the poem to someone who is revisiting Nautilus Island after

[5] Elizabeth Bishop, *The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969), pp. 122-123. References to the poem are cited in the text, and a copy is in the appendix.

many years' absense while the narrator in "The Armadillo" seems to be a spokesman fo his community who explains local customs to a stranger. Each poem begins with a neutral, objective description of the exterior world, but as the narrator becomes engaged in his own account of his world, he confesses his emotional responses. Both poets withhold the identities of their narrators for dramatic purposes.

In "Shunk Hour" the narrator remains in the background until the poen is half over (V), and the revelation that there is an I-narrator who "watched for love-cars" at this advanced point in the poem's development forces the reader to reconsider the first four sections in light of the narrator's relation to them. Once this is done the reader discovers reasons for mental illness which the narrator later confesses and, by extension, reasons for a general psychic disorder in modern man. The reader thus comes to understand that each episode is meant to represent general troubles in the modern world. The setting for the poem is Nautilus Island and the focus on a hermit heiress, a dead millionaire, and a homosexual decorator, all of whom are described in the first third of the poem (stanza I-V). The description of the community and its citizen reveals that personal relationships have no solid base, that the economic structure is founded on financial hypocrisy, and that the individuals strive on greed and deception. The people and the society explain the blend of "reason" and "madness" which characterizes the narrator. The world has been and still could be the scene of pastoral harmony. "Sheep still graze above the sea"—but it has lost contact with nature and natural order. The heiress who is in her "dotag" has no reason to be a hermit, and though she has money and connections with the political and religious forces in the world, she lacks active commitment and energy. Her preference for privacy leads her into acts to excessive greed, and her wealth is put to no useful purpose: "she buys up all/the eyesores facing her shore,/and lets them fall." The heiress is an effective symbol for the inertia of political structures and religion in the modern world. Her potential to make positive contributions has been destroyed by her selfish desire for privacy. She is one of several good reasons for the despondency of the sensitive narrator.

Lowell's next character is a millionaire-sportsman who vacations on Na'utilus Island and who, by his dress, appears to have leapt from and L.L. Bean catalogue. He dies and his death is lamented in the village because he won't be around this season the spend money. The millionaire's financial position is obviously insecure since his "nine-knot yawl" is auctioned off, presumedly to pay his debts. The yawl falls into the hands of lobstermen who are more fitting owners since the boat will be put to some useful purpose. The millionaire episode adds still another "stain" to the modern world by revealing the superficiality its economic structure and sporting figures. The reader is even better prepared for the narrator's psychic insecurity which is stated outright later.

In the final descriptive section the poet presents a homosexual decorator and he calls to question the individual's professional and sexual identity. The decorator is a pseudo-artist who changes practical things —a fishnet, a bench, and an awl— into artificial display pieces. Since business is poor this season, and note this is the second financial disappointment in the poem, he contemplates a marriage and marriage would, of course, forces him to sacrifice his natural sexual identity as a homosexual.

After this third descriptive passage, the time and place shift to "one dark night" on "the Hill's skull," and the narrator suddenly becomes more subjective and active. In his search from creative energy, he resembles two heroic characters from sixteenth-century tragedy, Shakespeare's Hamlet and Marlowe's Faustus, both of who die admirable deaths while searching for unattainable goals. Our modern narrator's journey, however, is a drive to a local graveyard, a favorite spot for young lovers. The Tudor Ford he drives is, of course, a pun, and the pun and the allusion carry the reader back to the Renaissance. Like a perverse, small-town peeping Tom —and officious Polonious— he spies on but does not participate in lovemaking which seems to take place between machines rather than people ("love cars... they lay together, hull to hull/Love, careless Love..."). The activities and setting point to death not life, and the reader is not surprised when the narrator recognizes his failure and in Miltonic despair contemplates suicide — "I hear/my ill-spirit sob in each blood

cell,/as if my hand were at its throat.../I myself am hell." The only signs of vital energy —inertia's opposite— are skunks whose organized search for food can hardly restore his psychic disorder. Lowell has written in a critical essay that his skunks are an ambiguous way of making an affirmation and that they are "quixotic and barbarously absurd."[6] As images they are both "amusing and defiant." The narrator identifies with and even envies the skunks as they walk with apparent confidence on their physical *soles* while he, concerned with vital, life-sustaining values, rambles through the darkness. The pun on *sole* again takes the reader back to Faustus in Marlowe's play, who sells his soul to Mephistopheles for ephemeral powers over the material and spiritual universe. But in Lowell's poem the word is reduced to a pun; and even if the narrator had a soul, it would hardly be recognized or valued in the world depicted in the poem. The skunks, however, have courage and energy which the narrator has failed to find any other place. They walk defiantly down Main Street —associated with the heiress's civic-minded farmer— and under the chalk-dry spire of the Trinitarian Church— associated with her bishop son.

In the final section the narrator has moved from the graveyard to the back steps of his home. In another humiliating reduction of the traditional 16th century hero, our modern narrator has to slip in through the back door. From his stance on the back stoop, he witnesses and identities with (note again his vicarious means of participation) a mothe skunk who is fearlessly searching for food in garbage pails. Her greed takes us back to the heiress's lust for property, but in comparison the skunk's physical need is more admirable that the heiress's isolated desire for seclusion. Her hunger is real, her generation will survive as long as she has the energy and courage to jab "her wedgehead in a cup/of sour cream...". Ironically she is the only successful figure in the poem.

The contrast between the first and last sections of the poem is important. Stanzas I-VI deal with human affairs and through the figures of the heiress, homosexual, millionaire, bishop, and narrator suggest inertia, impotence, and despair.

[6]Ostroff, pp. 107-108.

On the positive side are stanzas VII and VIII where a mother skunk with her children asserts herself in a dramatic and determined march through the community until she satisifies her desire for food. The poem ends a pessimistic affirmation of physical survival in the animal world.

Bishop, like Lowell, uses an I-narrator to present a setting and situation which has hidden, unexpected meaning in "The Armadillo." The poem is a good example of the "control and exploring quality" Lowell admired in Bishop's art.[7] The structure and objectivity of manner give the exterior appearance of logic, but the exterior appearance is one of the poem's most effective ironies. The main theme concerns wanton, illogical destruction in a world that is potentially peaceful and harmonious; but it is not until the final stanza that Bishop conveys her message, and she does this —like Lowell in "Skunk Hour"— through revelation of ther narrator's feelings. The poem should in fact be read with an eye on the final stanza which has the narrator's intense reaction to the events described in the earlier sections. All four lines are italicized:

> Too pretty, dreamlike mimicry!
> O falling fire and piercing cry and panic, and a weak mailed fist clenched ignorant against the sky!

In this stanza the narrator responds to the previous episodes, episodes which he has presented with apparent objectivity until this moment. The *weak mailed fist* is an effective image for man's inability to understand the pattern of the universe but the *clenched* gesture communicates his persistence in resisting meaningless destruction. When read with the last stanza in mind, "The Armadillo" becomes an allegorical account of the narrator's futile search for a logical pattern for events in nature, society, and the universe. At the beginning, the narrator views with awe a spectacular celebration. He naively expects to discover in this event some moral or divine law which he can understand. Since the event is unusually beautiful, he assumes it to be an analogy for natural, social,

[7]Thomas Parkinson, ed., *Robert Lowell: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, New York: Prentice Hall, 1968) pp. 19-20.

and perhaps even spiritual order. In this aspect the poem bears strong similarities to the group of poems which came from the early 19th-century ballad tradition. In recording this beautiful occurrence, the narrator apparently does not attempt to influence his auditor, but the beauty of the poem inspires and imaginative response in the reader and encourages him to search for a meaning far deeper than those represented by the events, words, images, and figures of speech.

The first five stanzas are restricted to activities in the sky. The narrator appears to be spokesman for society, and he speaks without prejudice to a stranger about an annual saint's day celebration, a celebration which he recognizes a being illegal but refuses to condemn directly. Imagery communicates the narrator's real attitude. A simile —"paper chambers flush and fill with light/that comes and goes, like hearts"— transmits the idea that his previous love attachmens have been ephemeral. Balloons that rise toward the heavens and are like stars or planets remind him of "Venus going down, or Mars" and appear to be his way of stating the conflicting effects of the celebration. Venus represents love and procreation while Mars stands for war and the shedding of blood. The powerful force which moves the balloons can neither be seen nor predicted. When lifted high, they "forsake" the world; but when they come near, they are dangerous. Through imagery and movement the narrator suggests an activity of a powerful, absolute force which is invisible and unpredictable. Paradoxically this force gives pain and pleasure. The paradox of experience and hence the nature of the being which is in control is illustrated in the movement of the balloons and the unseen force which governs them. The egg simile —"It splattered like an egg of fire/against the cliff behind the house."— restates the paradox. The egg connotes new life, but in the poem it contains fire which demolishes the home of animals—homes where the process of procreation since "ancient" times has taken place.

The same paradox is contained in the flight of the owls, the armadillo, and the short-eared rabbit in that each appears to experience the same terror and admiration which has been represented in earlier passages. The owls in flight are beautiful in color and motion, but they shriek as they leave

their ancient home. The glistening armadillo appears heroic, a stuning knight in "rose-flecked" armor, exept that in flight he puts his head and tail down. The rabbit —"short-eared, to our surprise"— has a soft appealing texture, but he becomes an object of terror by the fire, an "intangible ash/with fixed, ignited eyes." The word *surprise* is an effective and ironic understatement of the narrator's feelings; he and *we* are more than surprised by events which manifest illogical destruction of natural life. As a modern allegory the poem records events which awaken a moral consciousness, but these events finally leave the narrator and certainly the reader with a moral and spiritual frustration forcefully represented by the "weak mailed first/clenched ignorant against the sky."

The comparison of the two poems has brought into focus a significant number of stylistic characteristics which link the work of Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop. As was noted earlier, Lowell expressed his esteem for Bishop's art in his own verse, in critical essays, and in public interview. "Skunk Hour" is his artistic tribute to her work in that it contains a conscious imitation of the formal structure, mixtures of styles and symbolism in "The Armadillo."