

“Those blessed structures”: Robert Lowell’s Architectural Aesthetic

JO GILL, UNIVERSITY OF EXETER

ABSTRACT:

This article reads Robert Lowell’s poetry in terms of its engagement with architecture. It argues that at crucial moments in American history, and in Lowell’s life, the architectural environment of the various places he called home (including Boston, Maine, Ohio, New York, and Kent, England) offered a perspective, a language, and a set of forms through which to negotiate personal, historical, and cultural change. This is a process that he achieved, in part, with reference to the work of other poets including Elizabeth Bishop, Hart Crane and William Carlos Williams. By moving beyond a general reading of place, and towards a specific and granular reading of architectural figuration, I show that Lowell is able to contemplate and eventually to restructure the relationship between tradition and innovation – a process that is vital to his developing poetics.

KEYWORDS:

Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, architecture, modernity, poetics.

This essay complements and develops the work of scholars who have read Lowell’s poetry in relation to space and place: from Hugh Staples’s early account of the significance of the poems’ “actual settings” (16) through Helen Vendler’s 1981 essay on “The Poet and the City” to Michael Thurston’s essay in *American Literary History* on Lowell, monuments, and sites of memorialization.¹ In most previous studies, the focus has been on the symbolic or metaphorical value of locations, statues, and public buildings, particularly as these relate to Lowell’s relationship with the past. Or attention has been drawn to Lowell’s “urban surroundings,” seen as an important but largely non-specific synecdoche for modernity (Thurston 80; Vendler 51, 61). Where architecture is invoked, this tends to be in fairly general terms and taken as a self-explanatory and non-specific signifier for a set of other preoccupations—the conditions of urban life, for example, or the subject’s experience of being out of place. Such approaches are

suggestive and illuminating; but what they do not provide is a granular understanding of how architecture functions in Lowell's poetics. What, specifically, does architecture (its history, form, practices, aesthetics, and affect) offer him? And how does this alter across time and in different cultural contexts? Thurston affirms that "between the early 40s and the early 1960s, Lowell's poems change dramatically" (86). My point is that this change can be traced through his evolving engagement with and mediation of architecture and the built environment.

What I wish to do in this essay is to move beyond a generalized account of the importance of certain spaces, or even individual buildings (the Boston Aquarium in "For the Union Dead," for example) and towards a more focused account of what it was that Lowell drew from architecture. In so doing, I look again at some of the poems that most obviously engage with their immediate architectural context ("Soft Wood," for example (Lowell, *Collected Poems* 370–371)) and I draw attention to often-overlooked allusions to architecture elsewhere in Lowell's oeuvre, for example, in his correspondence. In every case, I am interested in the specificity and the materiality of architecture and in taking this as a starting point for a new understanding of his vision. Lowell was deeply engrossed in his culture and animated by its history. It is surprising in this context that his engagement with contemporary architectural discourse has not previously been given full scholarly consideration. And it is unthinkable that he was not in some way affected, even inspired, by the architectural innovations and debates of the day. This essay seeks to bring the architecture in (and of) Lowell's poetry into view, thereby offering a new reading of his poems and a better sense of the larger interests, and interestedness, of the post-war American lyric.

Lowell rarely explicitly references architecture or architects. This is in spite of his friend Elizabeth Bishop's best and persistent efforts to prompt him in this direction in their copious correspondence; for example, in letters of April 1957 mentioning Isabella Gardner's Van Der Rohe house (Bishop/Lowell, *Words in Air* 202), of May 1960 about a feature on a Beacon Hill house in an architectural magazine (328), of January 1962 on New York architect, Harold Leeds (385) and of January 1965 urging Lowell to see the "Architecture without Architects" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (565). Nevertheless, it is the argument of this essay, firstly, that architecture functions in crucial

ways in his work even as its precise role bends and flexes over time and in different contexts, and second, that when Lowell does reference architecture—for example in an oblique response to a prompt from Bishop that we will return to later—he does so as a way of reflecting on his own evolving poetic vision and writing practice.

Early poems

“The Exile’s Return,” the first poem in Lowell’s first commercially published collection, *Lord Weary’s Castle*, establishes a set of concerns that prove characteristic of his negotiation with architecture and the built environment in the early works (Lowell, *Collected Poems* 9).² This is a poem about possession and dispossession—of physical territory and of cultural capital. It is also a poem about history (or, perhaps, the end of history) which is made apparent or *lisible* to us through architectural detail. The architecture of the German town that provides the setting for “The Exile’s Return” retains the traces of past conflicts and implies that violent change is the order of things. We are in a perpetual present whereby, in lines seven to nine: “The search-guns click and spit and split up timber / And nick the slate roofs on the Holstenwall / Where torn-up tilestones crown the victor.” Time seems suspended. The poem’s intertext, Thomas Mann’s story, “Tonio Kröger” (1903), plays similar games with experience, sequencing, and narrative. So, too, does another, less commonly noted source, the 1920 silent horror film, *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (Dir. Robert Wiene) which is set in the German town of Holstenwall—a name that appears in all three texts. *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* shares some of the same imagery of confusion and violence as the Mann story, expressed visually in the striking, monochromatic, and often distorted architectural designs of the film set and anticipates something similar in Lowell’s poem.³

The only thing that is certain in the environment of Lowell’s poem is that the “gray, sorry and ancestral house,” standing for the power of political and architectural tradition, is already obsolete. It signifies nothing to the “unseasoned liberators” (line 19) who pass it by with barely a glance. The poem recalls Wallace Stevens’s “The Public Square” or “The Common Life,” with their careful contemplation of largely depopulated, yet highly charged architectural spaces (Stevens, *Collected* 91; 204). In his 1947 essay on Stevens, Lowell recognizes and identifies with his “search for forms, myths, or

metaphors that will make the real and the experienced coherent,” his “construction of new and more adequate forms,” and his manipulation of structures, both “loose” and “concrete” (Lowell, *Prose* 12; 13; 14). The flat resignation of the opening line of Lowell’s poem: “There mounts in squalls a sort of rusty mire” gestures (hence “sort of”) towards the kind of incremental decay—again, political and architectural—that facilitates the violent attack of line seven. The rust has already fatally weakened the “pig-iron” of the building’s structuring braces. In other words, this architecture, this town, this culture, is already in an advanced state of degradation. The allusion to braces is the first of many in Lowell’s work to cables, girdles, scaffolding, ties, and other forms of structural support (see, for example, the “girdle of orange, Puritan-pumpkin colored girders” which “braces the tingling Statehouse” in “For the Union Dead” from 1960, the “red tail-ties and girder” of the later poem, “Death and the Bridge,” and the “constructor’s pipes and scaffolding” of the London poem, “Redcliffe Square” [*Collected Poems* 376; 602; 646]). In many of these poems, the alliteration and assonance of the lines (the “girdle” of “girders”) function as structuring devices for the text. In this respect, Lowell draws on the insights and inventiveness of contemporaries such as William Carlos Williams, for example, his “The Yellow Chimney” where:

[...] The silver
rings that
strap the yellow

brick stack at
wide intervals shine
in this amber. (Williams, *Collected II* 87).⁴

In meditating on the visible methods by which architecture maintains its form and coherence, both poets find an analogy for their own practice.

There is an ambivalence here, though, that we see elsewhere in Lowell’s early work—an ambivalence that he begins to untangle in his middle period and comes close to resolving in his late poems. Jay Parini draws attention to Lowell’s “controlled

ambiguities” and although the structuring devices noted above help exert that control, there is something as yet untampered, undecided, or still ambivalent in his vision of architecture (139). In “The Exile’s Return,” the speaker is unsure whether to regret and pay homage to the architecture of the past, represented by the carefully realized thatch, spire, timber, and “gabled street,” or to approve signs of change (the lily-stands and resurgent cathedral, proud on the horizon in the poem’s final four lines). The clipped allusion to Dante’s *Inferno* in the final line, which drops the well-known preamble “Abandon all hope” and leaves us only with “you who enter here” leaves this ambivalence unresolved.⁵ It is precisely this balance, or equilibrium that architecture, at its best, achieves. And it is the “something in between” or the refusal to commit to one value over another that engages Lowell (*Words in Air* 331). As we will see shortly, the structuring devices of architecture (braces, girders, stays) and the structuring devices of poetry, offered him a way of creating meaning, yet leaving its full realization open, suspended, and replete with possibility. He creates a space or void that is, itself, structural in an architectural sense; that is, it provides shape and meaning.⁶

An even earlier poem, “Park Street Cemetery,” the first in the privately published *Land of Unlikeness* (1944), similarly posits the redundancy of old forms—both architectural and social—but also their persistence, apparently against the odds (*Collected Poems* 861). Again, the scene is established by reference to a built environment already in a state of advanced decay (signaled by the “frayed / Cables” that “wreathe [...] the obelisk”). And again, the site is used in order to establish the difference between the standards of the past (evoked by a litany of Old Boston names—“Adams, Otis [...] Revere, Franklin’s mother” whose hold on the land seems perversely to grow stronger as their remains sink deep roots in the cemetery) and those of the present, signified by the anonymous “Easter crowds / On Boston Common or Beacon Hill.”⁷ What Lowell does not mention is that the graves he sees remain because, not in spite, of architectural innovation. The Athenaeum’s architect, Edward Clarke Cabot, won the commission by finding an ingenious way of accommodating the corner of the Granary Burying Ground that jutted into the plot (Shand-Tucci 21).

When this poem is revisited and enlarged in *Lord Weary’s Castle* and retitled as “At the Indian Killer’s Grave,” the architectural emblems including the “baroque / and

prodigal embellishments” and “Frayed cables” (stanza two) remain. This time, though, the poem is more explicit about the material pressures of modernity, or the encroachment of the new (the expansion of the Boston subway) on the relics of the past. It would be easy to read this as a straightforward battle between old and new, the roots and “black stones” of history versus the “screech[ing]” train of progress. However, the poem is more subtle and complex than this in its delineation of a series of compromises. The new subway, in stanza 1, “bends” to accommodate the roots and “well” of history. The buried traces of the past are supplemented, rather than supplanted, by the “buried tracks” of the present (stanza 3). And in the final stanza we find a taut, and necessary, equilibrium between new buildings and old:

All about

The pale, sand-colored, treeless chains
Of T-squared buildings strain
To curb the spreading of the braced terrain [.]

Again, the effect of the rhyme (“chains,” “strain,” “terrain”) is to form a brace for the poem, structuring or securing its meanings. The specific properties of the architecture—the “chains / Of T-squared buildings”—embody the tension, or more properly, the dialectic between past and present, history and progress, natural and built environment that is Lowell’s primary subject (*Collected Poems* 56).

Another important poem, “Children of Light,” from *Land of Unlikeness* (again subsequently revised for *Lord Weary’s Castle*), similarly contemplates the relationship between past and present, old world and new, the secular and the sacred life, as manifested in architectural history. The poem opens with a prayer-like apostrophe which rapidly turns into a critical observation: “Our fathers wrung their bread from stocks and stones.” The allusion suggests “sticks and stones” (an idiom which carries over into the image of the fence posts in the next line and of the “glass houses” later). It also establishes the association between wealth or trade (“stocks”) and real estate (the “stones” used for construction). Lowell confirms the point in a 1967 letter to Japanese scholar, Shozo Tokunaga, where he explicitly draws an analogy with contemporary

architecture: “expensive houses later built by [a] plutocratic civilization with sea views” (Lowell, *Letters* 486). What the poem also tacitly concedes is that material prosperity—the wherewithal to build—derives from the exploitation of others (the “Redman”).⁸

“Children of Light” opens in the distant past with the speaker’s Pilgrim fore “Fathers.” But it rapidly moves into the present with the “pivoting searchlights” that “probe to shock / The riotous glass houses built on rock.”⁹ The image of “searchlights” invokes the war-time context in which the poem was written, while the allusion to “glass houses” suggests both the immediate occasion of writing (according to Lowell’s recollection in a letter to his friend Edmund Wilson of 19 May, 1959, it was first etched onto the glass of Wilson’s windows in Wellfleet, Massachusetts) and denotes one of the distinguishing features of modern architectural innovation—its transparency (Lowell, *Letters* 347). As Adrian Forty notes, new techniques for “fixing large areas of glass [...] were seized upon by modernist architects for their aesthetic significance—in dissolving the wall as an architectural element, and in reversing the traditional relation between exterior and interior” (286).¹⁰ Lowell’s glass houses are simultaneously penetrable (prey to probing searchlights or to stones) and secure (they are, after all, built on rock). The allusion is to Matthew 7:24–27 and the parable of the wise man who built his house on rock: “and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall because it had been founded on the rock.” Lowell evidently identified with the story; he used it in a number of other poems throughout his career including, in this early period, “Between the Porch and the Altar” and later, as we will see, “Water.” Section IV of the former, “At the Altar,” revisits the image of vulnerable houses made of glass. Again, the setting suggests the war-time context and invokes contemporary fascination with, and anxiety about, modern architecture’s extensive use of glass:

The shocked stones
Are falling like a ton of bricks and bones
That snap and splinter and descend in glass. (*Collected Poems* 47)

Repeatedly in this period, through into the poems of *Life Studies* (1959) and even into some of the *Imitations* of 1961, Lowell turns to architectural metaphors to convey his sense, or fear, of the incipient decline in civilized values. His reworking or “imitation” of Hebel’s *Die Vergänglichkeit*, “Sic Transit,” for example, opens with a view of the ruined castle at Rötteln in the state of Baden-Württemberg, South West Germany. The poem’s opening speaker, “THE BOY,” draws explicit comparisons between the sorry plight of the castle, and the fate of the larger nation state:

Now nearly always, Father, when I see
Rötteln Castle stand out like that, I wonder
if our own house will go down that way too.¹¹

The same metaphor of glittering but fragile windows as we saw in “Children of Light” (and see again in later poems such as “Fall 1961”) is evident. The point is to emphasize the vulnerability of the architecture, and the distinction between superficial coherence and underlying disorder:

Our house sits on a hill; it’s like a church;
Its leaded windows glitter; it looks grand.
Father, will our house tumble like the castle?

The tacit subtext here, as indeed in “Children of Light” and “Beyond the Altar,” is the events of Kristallnacht, a violent attack on the Jewish community of Baden-Baden which started on 9 November, 1938. Baden-Baden is in the same state, Baden-Württemberg, as Rötteln Castle. The significance of these images of broken glass as an emblem of the larger destruction of the war in Europe cannot be overlooked.¹²

The caesurae in the lines quoted above, and the plaintive question, imply some tentativeness on the speaker’s behalf. In successive responses, the boy’s father seeks to reassure his son. Nevertheless, images of architectural decay and ruination persist and the father is forced to concede:

Our house is growing dirty;
Night after night, the rain will wash it blacker,
Day by day, the sun will blister away its trim. (*Collected Poems* 223)

Later, “The earth will totter, and make the churches rock” (224) until finally in an apocalyptic vision of the future:

The Belchen will be charred,
and the Blauen . . . just like two old chimneys,
and everything between them will have burned
down to the ground. (225)

The Belchen and Blauen are two mountains near the castle; the aural echo of Bergen-Belsen, the site of a Nazi Prisoner of War and then concentration camp, and the reference to chimneys, which brings to mind gas chambers and funeral pyres, is surely no coincidence in this context.

Another early poem which wrestles with the relationship between the traditions and standards of the past and an uncertain future, as expressed in civic and ecclesiastical architecture, is the rarely discussed “Where the Rainbow Ends,” the final poem in *Lord Weary’s Castle* (1946).¹³ Written in Monteagle, Tennessee, in 1942 when Lowell was staying with Allen Tate (Axelrod 36), the poem looks back to the Boston and Cambridge landscape that Lowell had left some five years earlier for Ohio, Louisiana, and New York City. The poem’s slow and somber opening stanza with its falling rhythms and sustained enjambment take us in the last six lines from “thorn tree” through “deadwood” past the “scythers, Time and Death” across to the first three lines of the next stanza with its allusion to “withered” roots and the “scorched-earth miles” of the banks of Boston’s Charles River (*Collected Poems* 69). This is a dystopian scene; one that invokes the imagined landscape of war-time Europe pictured in the collection’s previous and opening poems (“The Dead in Europe” and “The Exile’s Return,” respectively) and finds troubling continuities between the despoiled Old World and the “scorched-earth” of the new. The apparent hopelessness of this place is embodied, and “ironic[ly]” symbolized,

in stanza two by the rainbow-like arches of the “The Pepperpot”: “The Pepperpot, ironic rainbow, spans / Charles River and its scales of scorched-earth miles.” “The Pepperpot” is the local name given to the Longfellow Bridge (1906) which crosses the river and joins Cambridge and Boston. The irony is that the rainbow, which conventionally signals God’s covenant, here offers no such affirmation. The city, as glimpsed through the arches of the bridge, has not yet been redeemed, or is still “corrupt” in the terms of the Biblical narrative from which the metaphor derives (Genesis 6:12). Laid waste (“scorched-earth”), “withered,” and not yet demonstrably fit for salvation, it awaits some unspecified but dreadful test, hence the metaphor of the “Scales, the pans / Of judgment rising and descending.” The image of vertical heights and depths captures and replicates the view of “my city” when seen from afar with its glinting facades (“Scales”?), its staggered elevations, its towers and set-backs (“rising and descending”).

This scene is striking in its mutability. And as the poem proceeds, the speaker turns as though in desperation, to the stability of ecclesiastical ritual and architecture (entering the chapel, climbing the “the alter steps,” kneeling in prayer). Even here, though, what he finds is that the visual symbols, or the architectural iconography—the high altar, the alter cloth, the image of the eagle (symbol of St John the Evangelist), perhaps carved on the pulpit—no longer represent what they once did; in the terms of W.B. Yeats’s 1919 poem, “The Second Coming,” “the centre cannot hold” (Yeats, *Poems* 246). There is a lesson here, surely, for poetry’s purchase in late modernity.¹⁴ At the end of stanza two of Lowell’s poem, the “Chapel’s sharp-shinned eagle” has lost its grip on its serpent foe, and the “high altar, gold” becomes a site not of prayer but of violence: “The *victim* climbs the altar steps” (emphasis added). Thus Lowell’s speaker returns from the war-time Europe of his imagination to the secure foundation of his home town, but what he finds there is confusion and disorientation. The final lines of the poem represent, perhaps, a triumph of hope over the experience he has portrayed: “Stand and live, / The dove has brought an olive branch to eat.” In “Where the Rainbow Ends,” then, the loosely evoked architecture of Boston and of Cambridge, emblemized by the Pepperpot Bridge that joins the two, provides a setting for and reminder of the high stakes with which Lowell grapples throughout the collection and prompts the question, how do we reconcile the atrocities of the past with the uncertainties of the present? To what extent can the

values on which we once relied (spiritual, political, and aesthetic), in part signified by the architecture of the bridge, the cityscape, and the chapel, serve us in the future?

In each of these early poems, Lowell uses architectural features in order to delineate processes of change—historical, cultural, personal, and finally poetic. Often, as in “The Exile’s Return,” the speaking position is that of the outsider looking in. This sense of being out-of-place or unsettled—the transient rather than the resident—is, of course, the base note of Lowell’s poetry historically and culturally as well as, here, architecturally.¹⁵ For Lowell, architecture provides an important point of comparison and of orientation. In other words, in unfamiliar contexts (historical, topographical, and personal or experiential) it is architecture that provides a touchstone against which he is able to calibrate his own position.

The architecture of home

In one of his few explicit discussions of architecture, the unfinished essay “New England and Further” (drafted between the late 1960s and 1977 and between Boston and New York), Lowell seems even less at home in the supposedly familiar spaces of his upbringing than he does in, say, the Northern Europe of “The Exile’s Return” or, indeed, the New York of some of the later poems to which we will turn shortly:

The little towns, the villages—wooden in every sense—but modest, functional in their way without bragging about it, with every dated, dead, and still breeding bad style of architecture at home. Every bad new style dots up, and every good—nothing unique [...] Lots of inscriptions, older dates than anywhere in America—or at least more dates, and more famous names. A sinking feeling that man here is a transient, a tourist, a caretaker, and not the householder; that man lives in New England as the Venetian now lives in Venice. (Lowell, *Collected Prose* 180)

The allusion to the “bad new style” tacitly registers the significance of modern or “international style” architecture in Massachusetts at this time.¹⁶ Walter Gropius, one of the new style’s pioneers, was appointed to the Harvard Graduate School of Design in

1937 and constructed a “modern” home in Lincoln the following year. As Douglass Shand-Tucci notes, “[t]he modernist century—at least insofar as architecture is concerned—has nowhere been more Modern than in Boston in the years since Gropius’s advent” (235).¹⁷

In this same essay, Lowell pauses to reflect on the power of nostalgia, or the longing for past places, which he sees as a feature of this environment: “[N]ostalgia, maybe something nobler: a longing in New England so strong for what is not that what is not perhaps exists” (180). Lowell himself, though, seems curiously immune to that experience. Or at least, his nostalgia is almost always qualified by consternation. When we look at some of his near-contemporaries, Sylvia Plath in “Ocean 1212-W,” or Donald Hall in his Whitneyville poems, or John Updike talking about Shillington, we see them reflecting on past places with a degree of affection, or at least with the insight born of experience.

Yet, with the exception of a handful of poems written in Maine during Lowell’s middle period (“Water” [*Collected Poems* 321], “The Old Flame” [323] and “Soft Wood” [370]), he recalls his past places with uncertainty, and a mixture of horror and shame. In “Rebellion,” for example, the recollection of the physical, indeed architectural, locations (the slamming “mock / French windows”) of past conflicts and of near patricidal violence is a source of perpetual regret (32). “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux,” from *Life Studies*, comes as close as any Lowell poem to looking back with longing, but cannot forget the evident blemishes of the remembered scene: the “scary stand of virgin pine” in which the grandfather’s farm is situated, the grimy porch screens, the floor tiles, “sweaty with a secret dank, crummy with ant-stale” (*Collected Poems* 163). The poem thus refuses the pull of the past. Its central and closing conceit of the child sitting with one hand on a pile of cool but living black earth, and the other on the hot but inanimate white lime—both, of course, necessary for construction work—presents us with a speaker poised to start building a new future.

Poems of the middle period, from *For the Union Dead* (1964) to *Near the Ocean* (1967), similarly look both ways—to the vernacular architecture of New England and the new architecture of the cities of Boston and New York—as a way of rethinking the state of the nation, recasting the narrative of his own family, and establishing a new, more

intimate and more reflective poetic voice, one that draws on his own experiences and observations of particular places, and particular architectures.

The title poem, “For the Union Dead,” has been seen by many readers as pivotal to the development of Lowell’s poetics. For Ian Hamilton it is the beginning of a new mood (277–278). Conversely, for Albert Gelpi, it marks the end of a previous phase (67). To my mind it represents a crucial turning point in Lowell’s negotiation with the built environment, and thus in the evolution of his architectural imagination. Like the poems we looked at earlier, “The Exile’s Return” and “The Park Street Cemetery,” the poem opens on a scene of decay, with “broken windows” and the damaged (but significantly bronze i.e. non-corrosive) “weathervane cod” (*Collected Poems* 376). The dilapidation of the scene is matched, and expedited, by building development.¹⁸ Operating behind “barbed and galvanized fences” (note that these new barriers, like the bronze weather vane, cannot rust and thus are here to stay), “yellow dinosaur steam shovels” churn up the “mush and grass / to gouge their underworld garage.” There is another glance across to Crane here, specifically to the opening lines of the “Cape Hatteras” section of *The Bridge* where “Imponderable the dinosaur / sinks slow” (71). The metaphor in both cases signals the need to dig back into the past in order to set the foundations for a new style. The paradox by which the new owes its strength to the old, hence the unexpected metaphor of prehistoric steam shovels, reminds us that although the modern seems violent and destructive, so too was the past. Equally, what might look like signs of progress and modernity (TVs and “giant finned cars”) are but a manifestation of ancient evolutionary processes; they “nose forward like fish” as though only now emerging from the primeval swamps.

This is not, though, necessarily or only a nihilistic vision. The present-day scene which Lowell portrays, in what he subsequently described as “most composed poem I’ve ever written” (*Letters* 373), is as rich and compelling as the sights of the now-defunct Boston Aquarium. What he does not tell us, but surely knows, is that the Aquarium which is about to be demolished is soon to be replaced by a new building on Central Wharf (completed in 1969, the New England aquarium succeeds three earlier ones).¹⁹ In this regard, I differ from Alan Williamson who argues that the poem’s “[o]verriding emotional tone is nostalgia: Lowell mourns the loss of curiosity about other living things

that made people want aquariums” (108). The poem, it seems to me, refuses the easy route of simply lamenting what has gone. It offers no necrology. Instead, it finds new ways of thinking and speaking about, or at least gesturing towards, what is to come—in architectural and social terms, and in relation to Lowell’s own evolving poetics.

I referred earlier to Elizabeth Bishop’s tenacity in trying to persuade Lowell to take an interest in architecture. In May 1960, she writes to him about a remodeled Beacon Street house that she had read about in a recent architectural magazine. Lowell does not explicitly respond to the cue. But what he does do in his next letter, written in July 1960, shortly after he had completed “For the Union Dead” and just before his move to New York, is take the model of architecture as a starting point for a meditation on the new style and voice of his poetry. His approach acknowledges the traditions of the past but reworks them for the present: “By the way,” he says, “meter is a puzzle to me now. Metrical verse and unmetrical verse seems almost two different species. [...] I think it’s some architectural, building up effect that makes meter impressive. You have something explicit and hard to do, and your reader can spot this, criticize the difficulties, and enjoy the obvious work. I’m fascinated by something in between [. . .] where meter is kept but its big, applied, laid-on-thick billows disappear” (Bishop/Lowell, *Words* 331). This is a new aesthetic direction; architectural in influence, in effect and in vision.

A number of poems in *For the Union Dead* fix their foundations in the architecture of local, and familiar, communities in order to establish the speaker’s own position in this “in between” space. The first line of the collection’s first poem, “Water,” places its first-person plural voice (“we”) in a “Maine lobster down” and then, in the next stanza, more explicitly still, among the “bleak / white frame houses stuck / like oyster shells / on a hill of rock.” Where the Biblical parable of the house built on rock was used in previous poems in a rhetorical—even stentorian—fashion (see, for example, “Children of Light”), here there is something quietly reassuring about the use of the story. It is an affirmation of stability. In this poem ostensibly about “Water,” it is rock (specifically “granite” in line three) that assumes primary importance. The houses, on a “hill of rock,” provide a model for the speaker and addressee, seen in stanza four “sat on a slab of rock,” itself described further in the next stanza as “only / the usual gray rock” and then in stanza six as “the rock / at our feet.” In his prefatory note to *For the Union*

Dead, Lowell records his debt to various writers including Bishop whose “beautiful, calm story, *In the Village*,” he acknowledges as having provided inspiration for “The Scream” (*Collected Poems* 319). What he does not point out is the debt that “Water” owes to Bishop’s poem, “Song For the Rainy Season,” first drafted in 1956 and published in *The New Yorker* on 8 October, 1960. The poems’ occasions, and addressees are different (Bishop’s is set in Petrópolis, Brazil and addressed with a compelling immediacy to her partner, Lota, while Lowell’s, as above, is set in New England, and addressed, retrospectively, to Bishop). Nevertheless, both share a vision which derives from and speaks through their architectural contexts.²⁰

In *For the Union Dead*, as in some of the later poems of *For Lizzie and Harriet* and *The Dolphin*, Lowell invests in the small-scale, domestic architecture of home, instead of in the monumental, civic, or ecclesiastical architecture that we saw in some of his earlier poems. The resonance is at least as powerful; for what he loses in compass, he gains in concentration. “The Old Flame,” the next in the same collection, uses a similar—if fleetingly glimpsed—setting: “I drove / by our house in Maine.” The addressee this time is the speaker’s “old flame, my wife!” Again, the emphasis is on markers of stability in a time of change. The old house “was still / on top of its hill,” as stanzas one and two explain, albeit now with specific embellishments: “a red ear of Indian maize” painted on the door, a new (“Old Glory”) flag on a pole, and “a new landlord, / a new wife, a new broom!” The house operates in the poem as a metaphor for the changed relationship of speaker and (former) wife. At one and the same time, it is “still” there but demonstrably altered; in stanza seven, “Everything’s changed for the best – .” Where earlier Lowell poems had depicted scenes of architectural and, by extension, civic and personal decay (the ruined castle in “Sic Transit,” and prior to that, the shattered townscape of “The Exile’s Return”), what we find here is hope for the future, manifested in a generous benediction in stanza six: “Health to the new people, / health to their flag, to their old / restored house on the hill!” “The Old Flame” is thus the first of several poems to posit the power of renovation as a counterweight to the at times overwhelming forces of destruction—in both an architectural and, I would argue, a personal sense.

In “Soft Wood,” too, Lowell meditates on the relationship between old and new generations, again as manifested through property—the Maine home referred to in the

poem above, that Lowell and his then wife, Elizabeth Hardwick, had acquired from his cousin, also the poem's dedicatee, Harriet Winslow.²¹ "Soft Wood" opens with an image of creatures out of their natural or home environment (the seals in a pond at the zoo) and then proceeds to contemplate the forces of nature and of time—the wind, the sun, the sea salt, that simultaneously preserve (hence "evergreen") and erode (hence "scouring") the structures of home, or the paint and soft wood of Maine's traditional architecture. Again, there is a trace of the encroaching creatures, the "big moths," mice, and mildew, of Bishop's "Song For the Rainy Season." From here, it is but a short step to considering wider forces of social, political, and economic change. Of the original owners of such homes:

Their square-riggers used to whiten
the four corners of the globe,
but it's no consolation to know
the possessors seldom outlast the possessions,
once warped and mothered by their touch.

The poem is about inheritance—in this case, before its time (Winslow had handed over the house prior to her death) and also about responsibility, and change, and the desire to protect the legacy of the past (architectural, but also familial, and cultural) from the inevitable vicissitudes of time.²²

The emphatic whiteness of the townscape in this poem, coupled with the colonial exploits (and exploitation) of the "square-riggers" out conquering the globe, is surely more than merely descriptive. It reifies the larger cultural change then taking place, represented by the increasing prominence, and urgency, of the civil rights movement's campaign for racial equality. This is a subtext that another slightly later poem with the same setting makes even more explicit. In "Fourth of July in Maine," the second poem in the title sequence from the slightly later collection, *Near the Ocean* (1967), also dedicated to Harriet Winslow, Lowell sets the scene at his town's (note the proprietorial "Our") "Independence / Day Parade." This time, the parade of "Five nations: Dutch, French, Englishmen, / Indians, and we, who held Castine" is met by a new and hitherto

occluded constituency: “Civil Rights clergy face again / the scions of the good old strain.” The tone is self-mocking, to a degree. Nevertheless, the poem shows Lowell acknowledging the justice of the claim against the old “scions” and their descendants. In articulating his position, he draws on the metonym of the Castine house (the one bequeathed by his ancestor), here standing in for the larger forces of colonial expansion that underpin the structures of the modern United States. Political power is expressed through architecture and through the speaking subject’s inheritance from his forebears. In stanza five:

This white Colonial frame house,
Willed downward, Dear, from you to us,
Still matters – the Americas’
Best artifact produced en masse.
The founders’ faith was in decay,
And yet their building seems to say:
‘Every time I take a breath,
My God you are the air I breathe.’

As everything else settles into decline (in stanza six, “New England, everywhere I look, / old letters crumble from the Book”), the area’s architecture stands firm—a version of the house built on rock motif of earlier poems: “Your house, still outwardly in form / lasts.” Yet, as the closing stanzas of the poem concede, change is the order of things. Harriet Winslow’s descendants—including her blue-jeaned, Joan Baez-playing namesake, Lowell’s daughter—do not live in the house, but in the “converted barn.” The relocation marks the passing of the *ancien regime*, and the imminent ascendance of the new as heralded, in the final stanza, by the “sun of freedom” (390).²³

Old England

During this middle period, Lowell’s experience in England—in Essex where he taught at the university, in London and at his third wife, Caroline Blackwood’s ancestral home in Kent—suggested another way of thinking about architectural history at an important time

in his poetic career. At the beginning of his writing life, he wrote about a Europe that he knew only through literature and through the works of history that he had devoured as a child. As Jeffrey Gray has suggested, he was an uncertain traveler (67–8); his letters show that he sought often to calibrate his experience by reference to home (see, for example, an October 1951 letter addressed to his mother, expressing a preference for Amsterdam over Florence: “life is more like it is in America and one feels more in control” (Lowell, *Letters* 176).²⁴ By the late 1960s and into the 1970s, when Lowell had remarried and assumed—for a while at least—the mantle of custodian of a major (Grade I listed, and thus of exceptional historical importance) piece of English architecture, Milgate House, his focus has changed. The comparison with home or with the proclivities of the new world is less pronounced; and in poems like “Domesday Book” he takes the architecture of his new environment on its own terms albeit still as an index of social and personal change. It is significant, in this context, that the poem takes as its central theme the challenges of cataloguing or indexing ownership. Just as William the Conqueror took stock of his newly acquired property in “his Domesday Book,” so Lowell takes stock of his new lands in this poem. And what he finds is that even here, the exigencies of time force change. The ancient architecture of the old world is no less vulnerable than the soft wood shingle of the new (Harriet Winslow’s Castine home); its “beef-red bricks and sky-gray stones” no less likely to be eroded than the slab of Maine rock, breaking away “flake after flake” in “Water.”

Architecture is used in “Domesday Book,” as in other poems, to record and lament historical and social circumstances. The story is one of excess (“the elephantiasis of the great house”), of superabundance, and of waste: “The hectic, seeded rose / climbs a neglected gravel drive.” And it is a story of pragmatism and contingency whereby the old and obsolete (a chilling metaphor, this, as Lowell reaches his later years) is made over for new purposes:

Lathom House, Middleton Manor,
New Hall, Silverton,
Brickling with its crinkled windows
and rose-pink gables

are converted to surgeries, polytechnics,
cells of the understaffed asylum.

Lowell sees in the decaying architecture of old a direct analogy with political, economic and cultural (including spiritual) change:

Will the house for pleasure
Predecease its predecessor,
The cathedral,
Once outshone in art and cost?

The comparison of house and cathedral reminds us of the (wishful) comparison in the much earlier poem, “Sic Transit” (222) where both are shown to be equally at risk. As the next stanza admits, it takes little time for the rot to start: in but “one unattended year – / from something to nothing.” Even here, though, the tone is more rueful than appalled and Lowell is able, in the final stanza of the poem, to see some hope for the future—albeit in the ironic fascination of the next generation with “the outrageous phallic flare / of the splash flowers.” In this respect, he invokes the 1948 version of Williams’s poem, “The Old House,” which similarly traces the decline of a once “sound” house, originally constructed with “four / balanced gables, in a *good* old style,” and now falling into “ugliness.” (*Collected Poems II* 166–167). In both poems, a failing architecture is a metaphor for the uncertainties of poetry in the modern age. And in both, it is the process of observing that architecture, and of recognizing the analogy, that provides a way through—and a realization, in the closing lines of both poems, that with a restored building and a renewed architecture, there may be hope for a new poetry. In Lowell’s case, as we have seen, the house is finally rejuvenated; and in Williams’s it is unexpectedly rescued, “out of the air / out of decay” to become “a house almost gone, shining again” (167).

New York’s “sharper architecture”

In a group of later poems spanning the 1960s through to the mid-1970s, Lowell continues to think in new and different ways about his architectural contexts—free of the rusting cables and decaying piles of his New England ancestry. In the early 1960s, he moved to and fro between Maine and various locations in New York, settling in early 1962 at a West 67th Street apartment (*Letters* 388). Writing to Bishop on 11 September, 1963, having returned to the city from Maine, Lowell observes: “How strange the sticky weather, and all the big architecture and lives seem” (502). The following spring (10 March, 1964), he writes: “It’s an iron-black warm New York morning that reminds me of Europe. [...] I hear the great huffe of nature outside and almost feel I were voyaging off into the Atlantic, till I look up and see the stationary sky-line or little sky-scraper and wooden water towers” (Bishop/Lowell, *Words in Air* 519).

This alertness to the specificities of New York architecture informs a key, if often overlooked, poem from *For the Union Dead*, “New York 1962: Fragment.” Addressed to Elizabeth Hardwick (the subtitle reads “FOR E.H.L”), the appellation “Fragment” is, paradoxically, both misleading (there is nothing fragmentary about this artfully realized poem) and accurate in that the tentativeness, signaled by the apparent disjunction of pastoral elements against an urban architectural skyline, and reified in the structure of the poem, is part of its careful measure. Written at Lowell’s West 67th Street apartment, the voice of the poem is cautious and exploratory, hence the repeated use of conditional verbs (“This might be nature,” “This might be heaven”), ellipses, caesurae, dashes, and the allusion to—if not the use of—“parenthesis” (line 17), which work together to convey uncertainty. The poem opens:

This might be nature – twenty stories high,
two water tanks, tanned shingle, corseted
by stapled pasture wire, while bed to bed,
we two, one cell, here lie
gazing into the ether’s crystal ball [.] (Lowell, *Collected Poems* 372)

The speaker is transfixed by the signal features of New York City architecture—by its elevated perspectives and iconic roof-top “water tanks”—and deeply conscious of his

own place in this environment, even as he gently probes and tests its boundaries. In this respect, he follows Crane, Williams, and Bishop before him (*White Buildings* and *The Bridge*; “The Wanderer: A Rococo Study,” “New England,” and “Perpetuum Mobile,” and “Five Flights Up,” respectively). In a 1964 *New York Times* interview with Stanley Kunitz, which opens with a description of the apartment: “a cooperative duplex [...] with its 20-foot ceiling,” Lowell is clear about the difference that New York, as represented in this poem by its distinctive architecture, has made to his work: “Our move from Boston to New York gave me a tremendous push [...] Boston is all history and recollection; New York is ahead of one” (Kunitz, “Talk” 34).

In “New York: 1962,” the new and manufactured (the 20-story block) and the natural and organic (“water,” “pasture”) are poised in fragile harmony. The image of pasture wire—like the braces and cables of earlier poems—literally and metaphorically ties the two together in a careful equilibrium which is maintained across the rest of the text. Bishop’s “Song For the Rainy Season,” again features. Where Bishop is poised high in her aerie, “beneath the magnetic rock,” in a “private cloud,” overlooking “the waterfalls,” Lowell is suspended “twenty stories high” and surrounded by “water tanks.” Where she sees the promise of redemption in the image of rainbows, he is in search of reassurance through “the ether’s crystal ball.” In both cases, albeit in different settings, it is the distinctive qualities of the architecture that frame and mediate the speaker’s literal and figurative vision.

Steven Axelrod notes that “New York: 1962” “balance[s]” the poems in the first half of *For the Union Dead*, which culminate in the deeply troubled, claustrophobic “Myopia: A Night” (*Life and Art* 142). I would add that the balance, or the search for equilibrium, is also internal to the poem, as figured by its use of binary images (for example, “up, up, up, up and up,” in the elevator versus down to the basement where “termites [are] digging in the underpinning . . . ”); by the movement from the stabilizing present (“we two, one cell, here lie / gazing”) to the future (“gazing into the ether’s crystal ball”) and back to the past (in lines 8 and 9, “Years ago, / we aimed for less”), and by the use of two sets of ellipses (lines 7 and 16) in this opening stanza which leave the line—and the thought—hanging for just a moment before the momentum swings back the other way again. In correspondence with Bishop and others, Lowell had commented on

the space and light of this apartment. On 15 June, 1964, for example, he writes of the view from his window and draws a specific comparison with the architecture of Bishop's Brazil:

What I looked at was the gorgeously rectilinear façade of an old-fashioned yellowish brick abandoned building. [...] It seemed like South America, staid and vibrant sweep through the city. [...] And behind me stretched limitless spaces of glowing, pale, empty sky. (*Words in Air* 541–542).²⁵

Such properties give the poem a suggestiveness and receptivity—visible in the assonance and enjambed free flow of the text—that was absent from the earlier and more constrained Boston poems.

The poem is a meditation on space and time and on subjectivity—refreshed by new perspectives, invigorated by the new architecture of the city (which gives a “tremendous push”), and open to new possibilities. The subsequent revision of this poem as the 11th in the 12-part “New York” sequence in *For Lizzie and Harriet*, replaces the speculative “might” with a definitive “is,” reduces the exaggerated 20 stories to a more manageable 12 and splits the poem in two so that present and future belong, optimistically, in the same section while the past belongs in another (Lowell, *Collected Poems* 623).²⁶ What remains, though, is a clear sense of the resonance of this environment as the locus for personal and poetic transformation.

Other poems in the late, 12-part sequence, “Flight to New York,” collected in *The Dolphin* (1973), continue to test the possibilities of this new architectural landscape. In part five, “New York Again,” the city’s architecture is given coherence by what Rosalind Krauss calls the “aesthetic decree” of the urban grid (50). Lowell finds clarity and reassurance in the familiar setting, hence “New York Again” (my emphasis):

After London, the wind, the eye, my thoughts
Race through New York with gaping coarse-comb teeth,
The simple-minded streets are one-way straight,

No queues for buses and every angle right [.] (Lowell, *Collected Poems*
704)

In part eight, titled simply, “New York” (as though the speaker is now fully reacclimatized) the architecture again signals a new lucidity of vision. Here he finds:

A sharper air and sharper architecture –
The old fashioned fishingtackle-box skyscrapers,
Flesh of glass and ribs of tin . . . derisively
Called *modern* in 1950, and now called modern. (705)

The effect is more than simply physical. Culture, too, is rendered newly comprehensible; it speaks to him in ways that he can hear and understand (“the language of New Yorkers, unlike English, / doesn’t make me fear I’m going deaf. . .”). Again, though, Lowell leaves us with the killer pause, marked by the ellipsis and the en-dash, and with this, an invitation to see beneath the affirmative surface to the possible cracks in the figurative foundations below:

Last night at four or five, whenever I woke up,
I found myself crying – not too heavily.²⁷

The structure, or what we might call the architectonics, of the poem—its use of line and form and devices such as the ellipsis, the assonance, and the internal rhyme (“night,” “five,” “I,” “I,” “my,” “cry”)—consolidates its meaning.²⁸ Architecture (the Neoclassical architecture of high Boston, the vernacular architecture of Maine, and the new high-rises of New York) is more than simply the backdrop, or even a convenient object correlative, for Lowell’s negotiation with public and private history. Architecture’s design, form, function, situation, and use provide Lowell with the impetus, and the techniques, to see, think and respond in new (if, as in the poem above, ambivalent) ways.

“Those blessèd structures”

Several sonnets from the 1973 collection, *History*, discuss the implications of student anti-war (and later anti-Vietnam) protests as seen against the backdrop of old and new campus architecture. The first of these sonnets, the elegy “Randall Jarrell 1. October 1965,” looks back to the time the two poets shared at Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio in the late 1930s “as students waiting for Europe and spring term to end.” The familiar campus landscape and buildings, one of the first in the “Gothic Revival” style (Turner, *Campus* 110), featuring “the tower, / the dorms, the fieldhouse, the Bishop’s palace and chapel – ,” form a still point in a poem otherwise characterized by destruction—both personal (Jarrell’s breakdown) and political (the war in Europe which was then about to start, in which Jarrell was to serve, and on which Lowell now looks back) (*Collected Poems* 110).

The New York poem, “Pacification of Columbia,” takes a related setting (the “Great dome, small domes” of the Columbia University campus) in order to throw into sharp relief the violent disorder of the student demonstration that the poem implicitly describes. I say implicitly, because the demonstration itself is never seen. Instead it is experienced through the distortion of the university’s great buildings and the undermining of their symbolic power:

The destructive element emaciates
Columbia this Mayday afternoon;
the thickened buildings look like painted buildings,
Raphael’s colossal classic sags on the canvas. (546)

In “Small College Riot,” again, social revolution is etched on the architecture of the campus: “The bonfire is eating the green uprooted trees / and bakes cracks in the slabs of the Sixties piazza.” The professors (among whom the speaker counts himself) are in the position of defenders of the traditions of the past and seem vulnerable, nervous, exposed, when sequestered among the architecture of the present: “On a glassed-in corridor, we professors – / fans of the Colosseum – wipe our glasses / primed for the gladiatorial matinee” (550). The new architecture of the modern campus serves as a symbol of generational conflict and change.²⁹

So, too, in the 1967 poem, “Through the Night,” from *Lizzie and Harriet* where, again, the exigencies of history, and of social and generational change, are manifested in the visually striking architecture (610–611). In the first lines of section one (with their echoes of Crane and Carl Sandburg’s attentiveness to the sight and the sound of construction work):³⁰

Two buildings, scaffolds, go up across my street;
one owned by Harvard, the other owned by Harvard;
they keep on hammering from five till five.
Man shouting resounds on the steel ribs –
Thus from a rib of the Ark and in his cups,
Noah harangued a world he said would drown. . . .

The insistent use of binaries (“Two buildings,” two references to Harvard, the “five till five” working day; the reference to Noah with his animals “two of every sort” [Genesis 6:19]) establishes a firm structure or scaffolding for the poem and anticipates the “I” / “you” address of the second and third sections and its two-way interior and exterior perspective. The speaker’s vantage point is a window which, rather like in some of Bishop’s early Paris poems (“Sleeping Standing Up,” or “Sleeping on the Ceiling”) or the New York poem “Love Lies Sleeping,” itself becomes part of the architecture of the poem, providing a frame for its vision. We see this explicitly in section three where “the window frame gradually burns green.” The perspective shifts across the poem’s four sections from the external view and sound of the new building work, to the sight, “While I was looking out a window,” of the lover/addressee; to an internal vision, perhaps constructed in fantasy, of the lover in bed; to the speaker’s own interiority (“my backbone swims in the sperm of gladness”), and finally in the fourth and last section, back through the window to the view of the outside:

Gradually greener in the window frame:
The old oil, unfamiliar here, alive
In a hundred eighteenth-century lawns and landscapes –

The speaker is reminded of the continuity of past and present, reassured that the new buildings of the poem's opening section are but the latest manifestation of centuries of architectural change, and chastened by the insight that what appears novel (in art, architecture, and landscape, as in social custom) soon becomes familiar and then recedes again into unfamiliarity with the passing of time. The final lines of the poem affirm this insight and take us back to the image of the "scaffold" from the building site of section one. Again, the new and old architectures of Cambridge are interchangeable.

There is an uncanny effect here of the kind that Anthony Vidler sees as characteristic of developments in modern architecture. Crucially for our understanding of Lowell's architectural imaginary, this "theme [...] serves to join architectural speculation on the peculiarly unstable nature of 'house and home' to more general reflection on the questions of social and individual estrangement, alienation, exile, and homelessness" (ix). In this poem, the known and unknown, the home and the house, are both present:

I awake to steal back home,
Each house and scaffold, familiar, unfamiliar –
Each shingle-touselled window is sheer face . . .
Blindingly visible breasts freckle to brilliance.

The homonym of "steal" in the fourth line from the end of the poem echoes the "steel ribs" of line four of section one and suggests a complex association of desire, guilt, and punishment—especially when coupled with the still ominous variant "scaffold" instead of "scaffolding" and played out, as in the line immediately before those quoted above, through "one great window, one bright watching eye." We are reminded again of the figure of Noah from section one, and the significance of the parable of "the Ark" as a sign of God's judgment. Throughout the poem, it is the window that offers a common motif both for the architecture of the future and for the architecture of the past (here "shingle-touselled"). It is also the window that provides the common lens or aperture through which the speaker is able to look out and in—in both literal and figurative senses. And in a compelling, if at first opaque, final line which anticipates a key image in

“Epilogue,” the poem to which I turn in my conclusion, it is the quality of the light shining through (or reflected in) the “sheer face” of the window that delivers to the speaker the object of his desire. In other words, architecture and the body are as one (the binary finally unified) in the “brilliance” of the light.

“Return in March,” from the same collection, makes a similar point as though in implicit defense of the new architecture then flourishing at Harvard and across Cambridge and Boston more broadly. Alvar Aalto’s new dormitory at MIT had been built in 1949 and, in the same year, Gropius’s striking Harvard Graduate Center—“one of the first large groups of International Style buildings on an American campus” (Turner, *Campus* 267). Eero Saarinen’s MIT Chapel was completed in 1955 and Le Corbusier’s design for the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts in 1960 while the new Boston City Hall (completed in 1968) was then under construction.

In “Return in March,” Lowell refers to the “Georgian thirties’ Harvard houses” (dormitory buildings around the perimeter of the Harvard campus) and observes that they have “shed their brashness in forty years,” and that “architecture suffers decline with dignity.”³¹ In other words, as architecture is assimilated, and grows into its environment, its apparent “brashness” dissipates. Lowell’s use of emphatically organic metaphors to establish and defend the place of architecture (“Tannish buds and green buds” and “hope [...] in things that spring”) speaks to contemporary debates, and indeed controversy, in Harvard circles about the character of some of the new designs, and the merits of an overarching master plan for the campus versus a more organic, flexible process of evolution. Joseph Hudnut, of Harvard’s School of Design, writing in 1947 urged: “Let’s imagine the university, as the city planners imagine the city, as a growing organism whose form lies partly in the past, partly in the future” (qtd. in Turner, *Campus* 260). The final three lines of the poem turn away from Harvard, towards that city, and show that the process of building is one of perpetual evolution and change. It is kinetic rather than fixed and although the ostensible object here is a “brick chimney,” one cannot help but think of Boston’s Prudential Tower, completed in 1964 or I.M. Pei’s new Hancock Tower, then under construction:

Tonight in the middle of melting Boston,

a brick chimney tapers, and points a ladder
of white smoke into the blue-black sky. (*Collected Poems* 806)

In closing, I turn to “Epilogue,” the final poem in the last collection, *Day by Day*, that Lowell saw into print before his death in New York in 1977. Architecture is not explicitly mentioned in “Epilogue.” But the poem does reflect on Lowell’s life-long search for a form and a voice appropriate to the historical moment and to the articulation of his vision. This is a search that, as I have argued, he pursued—at least in part—with reference to architectural models and analogies and to the light, space, and structuring principles of architecture both old and new. The poem opens with a discussion, and initial rejection, of the kind of scaffolding, or architectonics, that we have previously seen him deploy:

Those blessèd structures, plot and rhyme –
why are they no help to me now
I want to make
something imagined, not recalled?

After a lifetime of relying on the physical, material stability of the rock as foundation or starting point, or the structuring features of braces, stays, and girders, Lowell now seeks something different, something that is not rooted in the real (or “recalled”) but rather, belongs to the world of abstraction, or “something imagined.”

His question in the poem’s first four lines is about how to make something without an appropriate set of techniques; about how to conceive or imagine the new when shackled to the materials and traditions of old. It addresses the relationship between what John Hollander, in his 1996 essay on “The Poetry of Architecture,” calls “figurativeness and literalness [...] imaginativeness and utility” (17). And it places the poet/architect at the heart of this dialectic. How do we conjure meaning (“make / something imagined”) free of the demands of referentiality (“not recalled”) and when the “blessed structures” we may once have relied on are no longer appropriate to the task? The answer lies in that “something in between” (to revert to Lowell’s letter to Bishop of 12 July, 1960 that I

quoted earlier [*Words in Air* 331]). What Lowell does in this poem is occupy that fertile space between the call of the imagination and the building blocks of reference wherein the poem takes shape:

Pray for the grace of accuracy
Vermeer gave to the sun's illumination
Stealing like the tide across a map
To his girl solid with yearning. (*Collected Poems* 838)

His central image, of a painting by Vermeer (specifically, his “Woman in Blue Reading a Letter”), invokes a woman in a particular time and space—hence the metaphors of the sun, the tide, and the map—drawn, as Lowell was in “Through the Night,” to an open window and gaining longed-for, or “yearning,” insight through the careful, architectural manipulation of light.³² The pattern of light and shade in the painting, and in Lowell’s poetic rendering of it, is a manifestation of what Hollander defines as “architectural genius—the ability to conceive new relations between beauty and use and to change forever something—however small—about the nature of the realm of enclosed space” (33).

At the close of his poetic career, then, Lowell is thinking carefully, and in visual and spatial ways, about his own practice, his debt to certain forms and traditions, and his responsibility to his vision. And in thinking this through, he turns in subtle but nevertheless crucial ways to architecture. The poem summons—indeed manifests—the clarity of transparent vision and thought that is one of the key features of modern architectural practice in order to create or to “make,” a new form; one that attends to the real (the “poor passing facts” of line 20) but has found a way of imbuing that reality with the power of imagination, or the “living name” of the final line.

NOTES

The author wishes to thank the Leverhulme Trust whose generous award of a Leverhulme Research Fellowship supported initial research for this article.

1. The larger theoretical context that informs my reading includes work by cultural geographers such as Edward Soja and Doreen Massey which recognizes the inter-relationship of time and space, history and geography—in other words, which invites us to consider Lowell’s historical vision as indivisible from his spatial or, in the terms of this essay, his architectural vision. In short, to think about the experience and representation of time (of history), one must also think about the experience and representation of space and of the built environment which structures that space. See also Wai-chee Dimock for a suggestive discussion of the wider implications of this re-thinking of the nature of time/space coordinates.
2. See Lowell, *Letters* 244–245 for his brief account of the poem’s origins.
3. On *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, one might expect Lowell (“Cal”) to have been intrigued by the Cal/Caligari connection although this isn’t a name he mentions in the explanation he gives to Bishop of his various nicknames (*Words in Air* xvii). In later correspondence relating to Lowell’s translations from Heine, Bishop does mention the film with a familiarity which suggests that the source was known to both of them: “When those dead translations enter the Cabinet of Dr. Cal [sic], they become almost too much alive” (*Words in Air* 326).
4. “The Yellow Chimney” was first published in *The Wedge* (1944). In his Introduction to the collection, Williams draws an important analogy between poetry and “making,” emphasizes the importance of “intrinsic form,” points to the significance of “the environment to which it [the poem] is native” and arrives at his hugely influential point that: “A poem is a small (or large) machine made of words” (Williams, *Collected II* 53).
5. See also “The Dead in Europe” (Lowell, *Collected Poems* 68) and “Spain Lost” (465) for further considerations of this theme. Lowell’s imitation of Hebel, “Sic Transit” (222), similarly maps out a scene of destruction on top of decay with changes to the built environment reifying the collapse of a civilization.
6. For more on the architectural concept of space, see Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture* and Forty 256–275.
7. Several other poems from the same collection including “The Crucifix” (Lowell, *Collected Poems* 50) and “Children of Light” (31) deploy similar metaphors. The latter is reminiscent of Wallace Stevens’s 1921 poem “Palace of the Babies.” Thomas

O'Connor's *Bibles, Brahmins and Bosses: A Short History of Boston* provides a fascinating history of the political context in Boston at this time.

8. There are echoes here of Hart Crane's *The Bridge* (specifically the "Powhatan's Daughter" and "Cape Hatteras" sections). Lowell notes his interest in Crane in his 1961 "Interview with Frederick Seidel": "I think Crane is the great poet of that generation [...] he somehow got New York City; he was at the center of things in the way that no other poet was" (Lowell, *Prose* 261). See also his draft "Words for Hart Crane," enclosed in a 1958 letter to M.L. Rosenthal (Lowell, *Letters* 313).

9. Another poem from this early period, and from *Lord Weary's Castle*, "The Crucifix" (*Collected Poems* 50) also uses images of territory (fields, poles, gates, "our land") and Biblical allusions ("Sodom's knees of sand") to suggest the complex relationship between ownership, power, and a (fragile) moral authority.

10. In the revised version of the poem in *Lord Weary's Castle*, Lowell offers a different metaphor for the apparent sterility of this open space: "candles gutter by an empty altar" (31).

11. See also "Autumn," an imitation of Baudelaire in the same collection: "Winter has entered in my citadel" (237).

12. See Diederik Oostdijk, "Why Holland? Robert Lowell in Amsterdam" for more on Lowell's time in formerly Nazi-occupied territory in the immediate post-war years.

13. Axelrod bucks the trend in *Robert Lowell: Life and Art* and argues for the importance of the poem (53, 73).

14. It is worth reading this poem alongside Wallace Steven's "Mr Burnshaw and the Statue," from "Owl's Clover." See Guy Rotella and Michael North for more on monuments and statuary in modern poetry.

15. As his *Letters* record, Lowell frequently moved house; see 805–806.

16. The "international style" of architecture was delineated in an influential exhibition at New York's recently opened Museum of Modern Art in 1932. The exhibition collected the work of European and American architects of the exciting new style then beginning to emerge; as the curators, Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson explained in their catalogue, characteristics of the new architecture included an "emphasis upon volume – space enclosed by thin planes or surfaces as opposed to the suggestion of mass and

solidity; regularity as opposed to symmetry or other kinds of obvious balance; and lastly, dependence upon the intrinsic elegance of materials, technical perfection, and fine proportions, as opposed to applied ornament. (Hitchcock and Johnson 29)

17. Louis Sullivan, the pioneer of steel-framed buildings (i.e. skyscrapers), was born (1856) and raised in Boston (Shand-Tucci 182). Frank Lloyd Wright spent part of his childhood in the city (190). Sigfried Giedion was a colleague of Gropius at Harvard where he wrote his influential account of modern architecture, *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition* (1941).

18. See Thurston, citing Thomas O'Connor, on the planning considerations behind the development (98).

19. For more on the history of the Boston Aquariums, see: <https://www.neaq.org/about-us/mission-vision>. Accessed 17 May, 2021.

20. As I elaborate in *Modern American Poetry and the Architectural Imagination: The Harmony of Forms* (forthcoming from Oxford UP), Lowell's "Water" enters into a generous conversation with Bishop's "Song For the Rainy Season," developing a shared architectural vocabulary.

21. See William Corbett, "Trailing Robert Lowell to Castine, Maine and Dunbarton, New Hampshire" for a brief but intriguing summary of the setting.

22. See also "The Ruins of Time," originally published as "Four Spanish Sonnets," and arguably a less successful poem that similarly takes mildewed wood ("musty shingles") as an emblem of civic decline: "eroded by the ruin of the age / turning all fair and green things into waste" (Lowell, *Collected Poems* 417). The poem is reworked again as "Spain Lost" in *History* (465).

23. A later sonnet, "Two Walls," from *History*, written as its epigraph notes, in 1968 to commemorate "Martin Luther King's Murder," returns to this question of the relationship between whiteness, history, and property. The poem is allegorical, and arguably rather rhetorical. Certainly, it is caught in an overly symmetrical worldview; nevertheless, it establishes a relationship between architectural and social agency: "Somewhere a white wall faces a white wall, / one wakes the other, the other wakes the first" (*Collected Poems* 566). James Sullivan offers a suggestive reading of Lowell's deployment of

architecture in this poem and in “The Pacification of Columbia” to suggest a “dense and immovable” political authority (206).

24. See also Robert Von Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture, 1945–1980* for more on poets’ travel during this period (62–92).

25. For more on this apartment, see Mariani, *Lost Puritan* 293; 322. The slightly later sonnet, “Dawn,” makes similar use of the view from on high: “Nothing more established, pure and lonely, / than the early Sunday morning in New York – / the sun on high burning, and most cars dead” (Lowell, *Collected Poems* 422). So, too, “The Opposite House” (August 1963) uses the architecture of New York as a catalyst for a meditation on self, time and change (391).

26. In the late nineteenth century, when steel-framed skyscrapers were first built, Boston—unlike New York—put a height limit of 125 feet on such buildings (80 feet in residential districts) (Shand-Tucci 185).

27. Such misgivings are confirmed by the final lines in the 12th and final poem of the sequence, “Christmas” where: “We are at home and warm, / as if we had escaped the gaping jaws – / underneath us like a submarine, / nuclear and protective like a mother, / swims the true shark, the shadow of departure” (Lowell, *Collected Poems* 707).

28. I take the term from John Hollander who defines it thus: “[T]he general term *architectonic*, applied to both poetry and music with regard to the prominence of a work’s structure” (20).

29. See also “Coleridge,” from the same collection: “A newer younger generation faces / the firing squad, then their blood is wiped from the pavement” (Lowell, *Collected Poems* 478). Other poems on campus architecture include “Anne Dick 2. 1936” which refers to the then 20-year old dome of the main building at MIT (designed by Beaux Arts graduate, Welles Bosworth between 1913 and 1916 [Turner, *Campus* 196]): “we gazed through your narrow / bay window at the hideous concrete dome / of M.I.T., its last blanched, hectic glow / sunsetted on the bay of the Esplanade” (*Collected Poems* 510).

30. See, for example, Crane’s New York poem, “Possessions” (*Complete* 18) with its emphatic, clanging construction sounds or any of the poems from Sandburg’s *Chicago Poems*.

31. Turner quotes President Lowell's comments on the difference between his own tenure (1904-1933) and that of his predecessor, President Eliot: "The policy in the past [...] has been very vocational and materialistic. We are now striving to make it more cultural and spiritual" (*Campus* 244).

32. For more on Lowell's engagement with this and other Vermeer paintings, see Deese.

WORKS CITED

Axelrod, Steven Gould. *Robert Lowell: Life and Art*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1978.

Axelrod, Steven Gould and Helen Deese, eds. *Robert Lowell: Essays on the Poetry*.
Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986

Banham, Reyner. *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*. London: Architectural Press, 1960.

Bishop, Elizabeth. *Poems*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011.

Bishop, Elizabeth and Robert Lowell. *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence*. Ed. Thomas Travisano with Saskia Hamilton. London: Faber and Faber, 2008.

Corbett, William. "Trailing Robert Lowell to Castine, Maine and Dunbarton, New Hampshire." *Harvard Review* 3 (1993): 124–26.

Crane, Hart. *The Bridge*. Annotated Edition. Ed. Lawrence Kramer. New York: Fordham UP, 2011.

---. *The Complete Poems of Hart Crane: The Centennial Edition*. Ed. Marc Simon. Intro. Harold Bloom. New York: Liveright, 2001.

Deese, Helen. "Lowell and the Visual Arts." Axelrod and Deese 180–216.

Dimock, Wai-chee. "Non-Newtonian Time: Robert Lowell, Roman History, Vietnam War." *American Literature* 74.4 (2002): 911–931.

Forty, Adrian. *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2000).

Gelpi, Albert. "The Reign of the Kingfisher: Robert Lowell's Prophetic Poetry." Axelrod and Deese 51–69.

Giedion, Sigfried. *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition*. 1941.
5th Edn. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1967.

Gray, Jeffrey. *Mastery's End: Travel and Postwar American Poetry*. Athens and London:

- U Georgia P, 2005.
- Hall, Donald. *Old and New Poems*. New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1990.
- Hamilton, Ian. *Robert Lowell: A Biography*. London: Faber and Faber, 1983.
- Hitchcock, Henry-Russell and Philip Johnson. *The International Style*. 1932. New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1995.
- Krauss, Rosalind. "Grids." *October* 9 (1979): 51–64.
- Kunitz, Stanley. "Talk with Robert Lowell." *New York Times*. 4 Oct. 1964. BR34, 36–9.
- Lowell, Robert. *Collected Poems*. Ed. Frank Bidart and David Gewanter. London: Faber and Faber, 2003.
- . *Collected Prose*. Ed. Robert Giroux. London: Faber and Faber, 1987.
- . *Day by Day*. London: Faber and Faber, 1978.
- . *For Lizzie and Harriet*. London: Faber and Faber, 1973.
- . *For the Union Dead*. London: Faber and Faber, 1985.
- . *The Letters of Robert Lowell*. Ed. Saskia Hamilton. London: Faber and Faber, 2005.
- . *Life Studies*. London: Faber and Faber, 1972.
- . *Lord Weary's Castle*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1946.
- Mariani, Paul. *Lost Puritan: A Life of Robert Lowell*. New York: Norton, 1994.
- Massey, Doreen. "Space-time and the politics of location." *Architecturally Speaking: Practices of Art, Architecture and the Everyday*. London: Routledge, 2000. 49–61.
- North, Michael. *The Final Sculpture: Public Monuments and Modern Poets*. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1985.
- O'Connor, Thomas H. *Bibles, Brahmins and Bosses: A Short History of Boston*. Boston: Boston Public Library / National Endowment for the Humanities, 1976.
- Oostdijk, Diederik. "Why Holland? Robert Lowell in Amsterdam." *Robert Lowell in a New Century: European and American Perspectives*. Ed. Thomas Austenfeld. New York: Camden House, 2019. 105–116.
- Parini, Jay. "Robert Lowell in Retrospect." *Salmagundi* 141/2 (2004): 138–44.
- Plath, Sylvia. *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and Other Prose Writings*. London: Faber and Faber, 1977.
- Rotella, Guy. *Castings: Monuments and Monumentality in Poems by Elizabeth Bishop*,

- Robert Lowell, James Merrill, Derek Walcott and Seamus Heaney*. Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2004.
- Sandburg, Carl. *The Complete Poems of Carl Sandburg*. Intro. Archibald MacLeish. New York: Harcourt, 2003.
- Shand-Tucci, Douglass. *Built in Boston: City and Suburb, 1800 – 2000*. Revd. and Expanded Edn. Amherst: U Massachusetts P, 1999.
- Soja, Edward. *Third Space: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.
- Staples, Hugh. *Robert Lowell: The First Twenty Years*. London: Faber and Faber, 1962.
- Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson. New York: Library of America, 1997.
- Sullivan, James. "Investing the Cultural Capital of Robert Lowell." *Twentieth-Century Literature* 38.2 (1992): 194–213.
- Thurston, Michael. "Robert Lowell's Monumental Vision: History, Form, and the Cultural Work of Postwar American Lyric." *American Literary History* 12.1 & 2 (2000): 79–112.
- Tichi, Cecelia. *Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature, Culture in Modernist America*. Chapel Hill and London: U North Carolina P, 1987.
- Turner, Paul Venable. *Campus: An American Planning Tradition*. New York: Architectural History Foundation / Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1984.
- Updike, John. *Collected Poems: 1953–1993*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995.
- Vendler, Helen. "The Poet and the City: Robert Lowell." *Literature and the American Urban Experience: Essays on Literature and the City*. Eds. Michael C. Jaye and Ann Chalmers Watts. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1981. 51–62.
- Vidler, Anthony. *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992.
- Von Hallberg, Robert. *American Poetry and Culture, 1945–1980*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985.
- Williams, William Carlos. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume I, 1909-1939*. New York: New Directions, 1991.
- . *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume II, 1939-1962*. New York:

New Directions, 1986.

Williamson, Alan. *Pity the Monsters: The Political Vision of Robert Lowell*. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1974.

Yeats, W.B. *Poems of W.B. Yeats: A New Selection*. Ed. A. Norman Jeffares. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984.