The Human Body as Metaphor in Robert Lowell's Poetry: "Lord Weary's Castle" to "For the Union Dead"

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THE HUMAN BODY AS METAPHOR IN ROBERT LOWELL'S POETRY:
LORD WEARY'S CASTLE TO FOR THE UNION DEAD

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this analysis is to closely examine the human body as metaphor in Robert Lowell's poetry: Lord Weary's Castle to For the Union Dead. Of principal concern will be an investigation of the implicit connections between the whole body and its parts as well as the correlation of the self with detached body parts. In contemplating the various functions Lowell accords to body parts, I will attempt to elucidate the poet's ambivalent view of himself, which in turn is determined by his ambivalent attitude towards power.

Because Lowell systematically dissects the human body, special accent is thus placed upon the individual part that, although severed, speaks eloquently for the distorted whole. Certain body parts consistently function as synecdoches for the poet's and characters' selves. Examples include the powerful arm/hand in Lord Weary's Castle that determines an individual's capacity for action. Heads and/or skulls, on the other hand, are indicative of a character's disinclination to act. The duplicitous nature of whole bodies as well as armless torsos in Life Studies will also be examined. Of central focus in my discussion of For the Union Dead will be the theme of the dispersed, incapacitated ego as dramatized by dysfunctional body parts.
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Arguing that the most effective method of understanding the self is by examining the particular metaphors that are used to represent it, James Olney in his book, *Metaphors of Self*, furnishes an appropriate starting-point for an analysis of the human body as metaphor of the self in some poems by Robert Lowell. An appealing study of the concept of self, Olney's book opens with a chapter on the theory of autobiography in which he contends, in a circular manner, that although "a sense of the subjective self must always be prior to a sense of the objective world . . . the metaphor and the metaphorizing" created by the self simultaneously defines the creative self it emanates from.

Singling out artists, Olney exhibits that their creations (expressed as works of art) are concrete extensions of themselves. The artist in bodying "his meaning forth . . . bodies himself as he is at that moment, in expressive images or in imagistic metaphors." The implications of the phrase "bodying forth" deserve closer analysis if the artist or poet in question chooses to convey selfhood through the use of the metaphor of the human body. Though to body oneself forth simply denotes self-expression, the human body as metaphor or as "a bridge that bears [a poet's] own form and image" is a highly accessible one for Lowell's particular concerns. While the body as metaphor, which is expressive of man's most basic elements, is usually
expressive of the bond existing between self and others, Lowell's use of this metaphor illuminates the self's estrangement from others. In addition, the internal fractured state of the alienated ego surfaces as another interest of the poet's. Finally, the body as metaphor (according to Olney and Lowell) supports the contention that metaphor invariably says very little about what the world is, or is like, but a great deal about what I am, or am like, and about what I am becoming; and in the end it connects me more nearly with the deep reaches of myself than with an objective universe.

For a more thorough analysis of a poet's "metaphor of the self at the summary moment of composition," however, it would be useful to draw attention to one type of metaphor that functions as a mediator between "microcosm and macrocosm," namely, synecdoche. In his discussion of synecdoche in his book, A Grammar of Motives, Kenneth Burke defines it as

... part for the whole, whole for part, container for the contained, sign for the thing signified, material for the thing made ... genus for species, species for genus, etc. All such con-
versions imply an integral relationship of convertibility, between the
two terms. 7

An investigation of the parts of the human body as a synecdoche for the whole body and therefore for the self, would illuminate a discussion of the body as metaphor. In a lucid study of the poetry of Robert Lowell (1917–1977), the critic Marjorie Perloff is attentive to the poet’s recurrent emphasis on the appendages of the human body as his method of identifying the self. Her observation warrants consideration not only of the implicit connections between body parts and the whole body, but also of the correlation of the self with detached body parts. Moreover, attention must be given to the various functions Lowell accords to body parts. They reveal the poet’s ambivalent view of himself, which in turn is determined by his ambivalent attitude towards the power ascribed to his own body (and its parts) as well as those of his characters.

In the examples I have selected for examination from Lord Weary’s Castle (1946), Life Studies (1959), and For the Union Dead (1964), it becomes unmistakably evident that certain body parts consistently function as synecdoches of the poet’s and characters’ selves. Also apparent is that Lowell depicts himself and others in terms of his/their capacity to act. The most prevalent body part chosen to evoke the power to act is the arm and/or hand as will be
demonstrated by instances throughout Lord Weary's Castle. As instruments of power and will, they seem to be autonomous; acting, as it were, of their own accord, it is as though they possessed unencumbered minds of their own. Often poised to strike, "the hand [and arm] is given the conventional connotations of authority, possessiveness, and control." Conversely, armlessness signifies impotence or an inability to act. Characters who seem as motionless as props will be a central focus in my discussion of Life Studies. In addition, instances where the head and/or skull boldly signify impotence will be scrutinized. The progression from ineffectuality in the whole body moves toward a powerlessness distinct in individual body parts; it is this theme that abounds throughout For the Union Dead and the one I will emphasize.

At once with the first poem in Lord Weary's Castle, "The Exile's Return," "the grimly anticipatory lines adapted from Dante's Inferno:" "Pleasant enough, / Voil ch'en-trate, and your life is in your hands" imply that the making of one's life is solely reliant on hands. Functioning as directors or holders of the exile's fate, they unrestrainedly buoy him upon his apocalyptic course. His life or his entire self is contained in or embodied by his hands, which support him in his commitment to unleash his pent-up fury. As such, an identification of his self with his hands is established and, insofar as the power to act is principally lo-
cated in his hands, the exile's self is consequently defined in terms of his capacity to act.

In a different poem, however, Lowell questions the outcome of this identification. The poem "Colloquy in Black Rock," for example, exhibits his ambivalence toward his powerful hand, which in overexerting its strength, is finally rendered ineffectual. Compelled to act upon his fitful heart's demands, it "furiously charg[es] and discharg[es] energy" only to accomplish nothing: "All discussions / End in the mud-flat detritus of death." His hand, compared to a "cymbal" (capable only, as that instrument is, of producing crashing and grating sounds) is an extension of the unnerving, cacophonous riot sabotaging his spirit. Implicit is the question of whether the energy expended perpetuates or alleviates the poet's plight: does it advance or block his quest for salvation? Action here seems to sap its source: the body, a "stunned machine" that is "rattled screw and footloose," is reduced to the likes of scrap metal.

A poem in which arms boldly implement a forceful act is a poem that provides ammunition for Lowell's increasing ambivalence towards power. "Christmas Eve Under Hooker's Statue" is a poem wherein the "man of war" appears as ominous as "the ancient speckled serpent" inside "the summer's garden." The crucial image affiliated with Hooker is his "gauntlets," the armored hands which, like the iron hands
of a despot, fearlessly crush "the long horn of plenty." Demolished in the hands of this militarist, the "horn," a symbol of the American dream, breaks "like glass." The hands forever fixed in this violent gesture echo the fixity of Hooker's dauntless self-assertion over the lives of men he fought; the hands in the act of destroying reflect the murderous hostility indulged in by people in combat. The consequences of this act of outright subjugation, however, breed doubt in the poet's mind. Specifically, war is power gone awry because it effects the deaths of irreplaceable nations. Lowell's condemnation of the brutal hands (or act) can be inferred by the image of "Hooker's heels / Kicking at nothing" with its implication that Hooker's aggressive exploits amounted to meaninglessness.

The most illuminating instance in which Lowell's ambivalence towards power finds unparalleled expression is in the poem "Rebellion." Before examining its relevant import, however, it may help to briefly consider Lowell's early supposition that strength is hoarded inside arms. As a child estranged in Brimmer Grade School where "eight upper grades were all-girl," he defensively sought self-preservation through provocative, rebellious means. "Establish[ing] his own local tyranny by regularly bloodying the noses of schoolroom rivals . . . or by spraying enemy third-graders with wet fertilizer," Lowell wrote "Arms-
of-the-Law, a Horrid Spoof." I quote it in its entirety because of its suggestive implications; in addition, in naming his character "Arms," Lowell (who soon nicknamed himself "Cal" after Caligula and Caliban) further substantiates the argument that he used the arm as synecdoche for the whole individual:

Arms-of-the-Law was a horrid spoof most of the time, but an all-right guy on the 29th of February. He was also a Bostonian, an Irish policeman and a bear. I wish you could hear Arms talking big about his mansion with a mansard roof on Commonwealth Avenue. He really and truly lived in a calcified tooth, which the neighbors mistook for a sugar-loaf. The room he like better than all other rooms in the whole world was a mushy brown abscess called "my cave." Arms like sleep better than liquor or living. He also like to take Sunday afternoon tours with Father on the Fenway in the Old Hudson. Arms thought belly-aching at Father's driving was more
fun than a barrel of monkeys.
The blood that Arms' heart beat
up was the tobacco-colored juice
of a squashed grasshopper in a lawn-
mower.13

As a self-portrait, this spoof is the earliest indication of the intimate connection Lowell establishes between his self and arms, an association which reaffirms the identification of the poet-speaker's self with his hands in "The Exile's Return." This union is further cemented by its occurrence in "Rebellion" in the image of the poet's arm unabashedly asserting his obstreperous self-will.

From the beginning Lowell's relationship with his "self-effacing, quiet, unselfish"14 father was a stormy one characterized by the poet's uncomplying behavior:

His father had gone to St. Mark's: Lowell was enrolled there and forced to go, but he performed badly. His father was an engineer: Lowell would be a poet. His father had attended Harvard: Robert rejected Harvard and followed the poet Ransom to Kenyon. His father was a career naval officer: Robert became

...
a conscientious objector. His fa-
ther was mild-mannered: Robert was
bumptious, demanding, unruly.\textsuperscript{15}

Culminating the poet's repeated rebellious outbursts in a crisis which "was precipitated by his abrupt declaration that he was going to leave Harvard and elope with Anne Dick,"\textsuperscript{16} Lowell knocked his father down. A "gesture of physical violence that would haunt the poet for the rest of his life,"\textsuperscript{17} it first "break[s] to the surface"\textsuperscript{18} in "Rebellion," one of the few poems in Lord Weary's Castle that centers on an episode from the poet's own life. As such, it is, therefore, noteworthy in that Lowell principally focuses on the action done by his arm in the depiction of himself.

Like so many of the poems in this volume, "Reb-
bellion" "bears an almost Biblical weight"\textsuperscript{19} wherein the poet's deed registers "on an apocalyptic scale."\textsuperscript{20} As an extension from his uncompromising nature, his arm's willful attack on his father's vulnerable head dramatizes the poet's condemnation of the pernicious activities perpetuated by his "New England Puritan and mercantile for-
bears."\textsuperscript{21} Consequently, it is undoubtedly ironic that the poet's rage is expressed through a murderous act, which is as malevolent as the acts of destruction found reprehensible by the poet.

His arm, which "broke the chimney flintlock on
his father's skull," assumes the role of aggressor against victim. The arm here functions almost as a weapon; indeed, it is attached to a "clubbed flintlock." In addition, "arm" as noun significantly parallels "arm" as verb in the line, "None could arm / Or put to sea." The latter usage refers to the incompetent "mighty merchants" and, by implication, to the inadequacy of his father who failed in his career as naval officer. Although Lowell crucially distances himself from those merchants and his father through a combative display of prowess, he nonetheless associates himself by this verbal echo with the kind of militarist he criticized in "Christmas Eve Under Hooker's Statue."

This surprising connection activates the poet's ambivalence: he feels torn between exercising power over an ineffectual father and guilt at having done so. Ostensibly siding with his greedy ancestors, the poet, "who is after all a descendant of the guilty Pilgrims," owns up to his own "culpability." (Indeed, Lowell originally thought to call "Rebellion" "The Seed of Cain" or "The Blood of Abel" because he emotionally identified himself with Cain. Significant, it is Lowell, not his father, who, in a figurative sense, feels prompted to "damn" his "arm that cast the house upon his father's head."

Counterbalancing the poet's flinty arm is the
image of Commander Lowell's enfeebled head. As a synecdoche, the head and/or skull in Lowell's poetry represents the kind of debility characteristic of wholly inert bodies. Whereas life or motion resides in hands or arms, death or stasis is embodied by the head or skull. Except for the powerful suggestiveness latent in the image of the "furnace-face of IS" in "where the Rainbow Ends," Lowell shockingly deprives the head of its majesty, undercutting its customary position as the seat of intellectual power.

An evocative example of the head as passive victim is the chilling reference made to King Philip's head in "At the Indian Killer's Grave." In the desolate garden of the cemetery, the head of this authority figure "grins on the platter," foils in pantomime. (Pantomime is appropriate here because, as an art form of stunted action or of gestures which simulate action, it is illustrative of the head's disinclination to act.) The graphic image of this decapitated head on a plate recalls St. John the Baptist, an association which is strengthened by the fact that both men died martyr-like deaths. A noteworthy parallelism also exists between Commander Lowell's head, which is a portent of "the world that spreads in pain" and of guilt for the poet and Philip's decomposing head (actually on exhibition at Plymouth for many years after his death), which ominous-
ly "deliver[s] judgment on New England past and present," whispering to the "spare-ribbed persons of the dead . . . 'But, Sirs, the trollop dances on your skulls / And breaks the hollow noddle like an egg," the last phrase also illustrating the head's fragility. Once again, a body part eloquently speaks for the whole self; in this case, King Philip's severed head marks his status as victim. Yet in decreeing death and destruction specifically on the heads of Pilgrims, his head irrepressibly prophecies similar fates to his killers, which ironically accords it some potency.

Like other body parts, the image of the debilitated head offers another opportunity to scrutinize the poet's ambivalence towards power, which becomes especially apparent when the poet's role in this poem is viewed in comparison with his role in "Rebellion." Killer-like in intent, the poet in "Rebellion" condemned the pitiable impotence of his father's head. Curiously enough, however, Lowell chastised himself for harming his father via his powerful arm. The poet's rebuke towards his action amplifies in "At the Indian Killer's Grave" to a severe reprobation of his ancestors "who burned [Indian] villages and slaughtered young and old, with pious fierceness." His role here as infuriated accuser, who "castigates the Pilgrims, whose inhumane religion and cruel politics were . . . responsible for the death of
the Indian King Philip,\textsuperscript{28} expresses a contempt which may be also directed against himself because he "clubbed" his father's brain. In addition, a further indication that Lowell appears at odds with himself can be gleaned from his horror at the ravages of war (i.e., Hooker in the Civil War and the Indians and colonialists in King Philip's War) and from his profound mistrust of his own proclivity toward violent acts, both of which contrast with his adamant excoriation of catatonic impotence.

Though heads and skulls exemplify acute inertia, the armless torso also evolves as a synecdoche indicative of the body's incapacity to act. As a prelude to examining examples of the latter which abound throughout \textit{Life Studies}, it would be pertinent to call attention to Lowell's earliest portrayal of such powerlessness as illustrated in "Concord," particularly in the image of "spindly arms" as the intermediate stage between images of strong arms and armless torsos. The question addressed to the Unitarian Church cross, "How can your whited spindly arms transfix / Mammon's unbridled industry . . . " expresses awareness of impotence overcome by power; offsetting the barren cross is the image of proliferation: Concord's flourishing industry. Lowell's ambivalence is evident in the dichotomy of action ("unbridled industry") and its war-
like conquest over inaction (symbolized by "spindly arms"). Faced with an empty, disabled cross, the poet feels exasperated about the paralytic state of Christianity. Though stultified, the crucifix motions toward an otherworldly plane of existence, forecasting the inaccessible, remote state of the ideal represented in the statues of Colonel Shaw, his infantry, and the Union soldiers described by Lowell in "For the Union Dead."

In contrast to the crucifix in "Concord" and the ideal represented by Shaw in "For the Union Dead," which attain otherworldliness, are characters who live inside their own worlds, wholeheartedly devoted to mindless inactivity. Opposing the will and self-determination conducive to action on the part of able-bodied, potent individuals is the uneager, self-withdrawn disposition of characters peopling Life Studies. They neither budge nor lift a single finger unless to do so pertains exclusively to the maintenance of their physical fitness, hygiene, and/or diet; in addition, some characters focus their attention solely on objects instead of on themselves. Yet their sound health is ironically undercut by an undeniable weakness if one considers the synecdoche that appropriately represents their lack of impetus: the armless torso. With this dichotomy in mind, the poet's ambivalence towards power can be plainly discerned in the implicit conflict between the strength of physical
health and the handicap of torpor. More specifically, Lowell portrays seemingly healthy bodies only to mockingly suggest their actual (or internal) incapacitated state: physical strength is often undermined by mental (or spiritual) decrepitude. In addition, the various types of clothing curiously parodies the amorphousness peculiar to each "naked psyche."29

Confirming the duplicitous nature of the characters described above is Stanley in "Waking in the Blue," for example. In this poem, in which even crows idly wander like hospital patients, the metaphor of the human body is once again disclosed as the dominant one depicting the selves of characters. While the invincible arm and/or hand stemmed from an individual's bellicosity in Lord Weary's Castle, arms which have figuratively atrophied are suitably identified by the mentally imbalanced characters in Life Studies. Stanley's body, in particular, "still hoarding the build of a boy in his twenties," is exaggeratedly depicted as a "ramrod / with the muscle of a seal." Suggestive of a limbless torso, this image implicitly signifies the baselessness of such superficial power. Because of the superfluity of his muscularity, Stanley appears helplessly submerged in self-absorbed lethargy. His stodginess, which is as inflexible as the "vaguely urinous" "long tub" wherein he lolls,
is intentionally echoed by his intractable, one-dimensional mind.

Obsessed as he is with his body ("think[ing]" about it instead of acting with it), Stanley feels dictated to by his self-imposed demands to "slim... on sherbet and ginger ale." Rather than engage in worthwhile activity, his sole inclination is to remain shut inside a private world wherein his bull-headed mind, in effect, "soak[s]" in luxurious self-subsistence. "More cut off from words than a seal," it is as though his very body is an impenetrable barrier to language itself.

Equally oblivious to the world at large is another mentally ill patient, "Bobbie." "The hooded night lights" that "bring" him "out" immediately set him apart as though he were a predator surreptitiously prowling "Bowditch Hall," though a noisy stalker at that. Likened to another bulky marine mammal, his body is reduced to an inflated torso. Indeed, his gargantuan size burlesques the minimal amount of power accorded him. "Redolent and roly-poly as a sperm whale," his slick body is seemingly "torpedo-shaped" (the hyphenated word used by The American Heritage Dictionary in its definition of "seal"). Only willing to detonate inanimate objects on contact, he whiles away the hours by "swashbuckl[ing] about" and "hors[ing] at chairs." His mind, on the other hand, is all too tame or slow to sense the decline of his "future." Interestingly enough, his
corpulent body acts like a weapon (thereby recalling the assailing arm in *Lord Weary's Castle*); nevertheless, Lowell characterizes "Bobbie" as a bully in order to accentuate the purposelessness of his boyish tactics.30

In addition, Lowell uses royalty or symbols expressive of its notoriety only to divulge an individual's unseemly, if not clownish, characteristics and behavior. Like Stanley's "kingly granite profile" that is belittled by his well-worn "golf-cap," "Bobbie" is depicted as a naked and insane "replica of Louis XVI," the ineffectual king who "lack[ing] the will to carry through a consistent policy of reform,"31 had been executed in 1793. Enhancing this telling connection is the fact that he is "without the wig," thus bereft of the Samson-like strength Lowell ascribes to hair. (Consider the "hairy[and] muscular" Bi-off and Brown in "Memories of West Street and Lepke" who violently beat up "fly-weight pacifist" Abramowitz.)

Stressing a portion of the head (which is itself a part) is indicative of the poet's progressing tendency to pare the human body down until it deteriorates. Moreover, "Bobbie" appears doubly vulnerable as he swaggers about "in his birthday suit." His nudity, a metaphor analogous to that of the armless torso, recalls Stanley's bathing body.

Further evidence of the ambiguity present in superficial prowess that masks extensive inferiority is Lowell's conscious use of another irony. For the most
part, previous to being incarcerated in an asylum or prison where they aimlessly "drift" about among "lost connections," characters lived auspicious pasts or possessed sturdy attachments of some kind to the outside world. "Bobbie," for instance, who formerly had ties with Harvard University through having been a member of the oldest and most prestigious social club ("Porcellian"), certainly deviated from an organization requiring decorum as his present lack of grace testifies. Likewise, Stanley, intent on keeping as lean as he was forty years ago as a "Harvard all-American fullback," appears interminably ignorant of his illness, which in turn defines the magnitude of his impotence.

Analogously, the character Lepke in the poem, "Memories of West Street and Lepke," possesses a title that evokes his position as a powerful leader of a Mafia-like syndicate prior to his prison sentence. The label "Murder Incorporated" affixed to him indicates that he was in charge of an entire corporation, a seemingly lucrative enterprise which promoted the exhibition of violent power at any cost. (Implicit is the poet's recognition that the abuse of power demands retribution.) The title "Czar" additionally designates his former authoritative function. Although this imperial title reflects his previous role as sovereign killer, its purpose in this particular instance is understandably ironic; i. e., it reminds the reader of the discrepancy existing between Lepke's past and present roles. Hence the pitiable stature
of this man, who having once menacingly terrorized many people, no longer poses a threat to anyone: the one-time leader choicelessly submits to the custody of penitentiary law.

Indicative of Lepke's precarious and unquestionably weak condition is the phrase describing his inert body: "Flabby, bald, lobotomized." These three words effectively reinforce each other's associations with impotence. Linking him with the stoutness peculiar to Stanley and "Bobbie," Lepke's flabbiness dramatizes the clogged frame of his mind and his slothful disposition. Similarly, his head, like the head as victim in Lord Weary's Castle, symbolizes languor. His "lobotomized" brain, expressive of his numb sensibility, is the internal version of his head's baldness that connotes vulnerability. Specifically, his nerveless brain is comparable to his hairless head, both of which foreshadow the imminent electrocution of his body. Moreover, his inoperative mental faculties, suggestive of nonrationality, strengthen the correlation existing between him and other characters' animal-like qualities. Additionally symptomatic of Lepke's defenselessness is his "T shirted back." Clad merely in a T-shirt, his back (which should be a symbol of stability) appears susceptible to injury or attack; as a synecdoche, his back suggests the spinelessness of his character. "Drift[ing] in a sheepish calm," he plays the coward who "certainly resembles the infantile types in the sanitorium."32 Consequently, this connection authenticates the indisputable
distance between his past ferocity and present infirmity.

The process of distancing the self from the world, in particular, signifies passivity and impotence resultant from inactivity. This debility is unlike the power implicit in action that, according to my examples from *Lord Weary's Castle*, was exercised between people. Indeed, the theme of the self's disengagement from people in this volume develops into the theme of severance within the self depicted in *For the Union Dead*. Excluded from society as mentally ill patients and convicted criminals are, Lepke affords another example of a person who retreats inside himself. Even inside "West Street Jail," his alienation is noticeable in that he frequents "his little segregated cell." Reduced to "stupefied complacency," he vegetates inside a world "full of things forbidden the common man."

Self-estrangement is not, however, solely experienced inside a mental institution or in a prison. Lowell's own father, as depicted in the poem "Commander Lowell," is a case in point. "At the Sunday yacht club," for instance, "he was never one of the crowd［；］" unlike the clubmembers' common interest in "sailing," Commander Lowell's "training was engineering!" Evidence of his restless, independent nature can be garnered from the poet's indelible emphasis on his father's readiness to leave situations---even to the point of dying an "abrupt and unprotesting" death.

Unlike other characters in this volume, Commander Lowell
outwardly rejects any solid connections he had in the past. "With seamanlike celerity, / [he] left the Navy," to pursue job after job only to resign from all duties, thus proving "he wasn't at all 'serious'." His appointed position at "Scudder, Stevens, and Clark, Investment Advisors," his "last employer," ludicrously affirms his lack of aspiration and undesirous attempt to work with others: he was "himself his only client." Likewise, his desiccated marriage reveals his incompatibility with his wife who sluggishly "dragged to bed alone, / [to] read Menninger," while he "defiant ly" "squandered" "night after night" by "sliding" his ivory Annapolis slide ruler / across a pad of graphs."

During his terminal days at Beverly Farms (in the poem so titled), he contentedly preferred the reliable companionship of his "best friend," "his little black Chevie." His consistent absorption into objects echoes similar interests that preoccupied the insular minds of Stanley, "Bobbie," and Lepke.

Like Stanley, Commander Lowell's detachment from others as well as his deceptively strong body promoted his indolence: left entirely to himself, he does absolutely nothing of any value. Lowell once again portrays lethargy by depicting a character inside a bathtub. Wasting "year after year" in the tub, Commander Lowell is immune to his failure to hold a job. Self-indulgent, he appears almost to perversely celebrate his inadequacies by "boom[ing]" or
"humm[ing] 'Anchors aweigh,!' thereby announcing his shiftlessness and appropriately matching Stanley who bathes inside a world exempt from language.

In addition, in the account about his family in "91 Revere Street," his son also remembers his father's Sunday mornings, for example, which "were given to useful acts such as lettering his new galvanized garbage cans: R. T. S. Lowell—U.S.N." (p.32). Such laziness finds expression in the poem "Commander Lowell" wherein his father's minimal activities consist of shuttling to places of confinement (namely, the museum and golf course) only to fritter away each day. "Loaf[ing] in the Maritime Museum at Salem," he resembles the phlegmatic Lepke who "dawdl[ed] off to his . . . cell." Pokingly taking "four shots with his putter to sink his putt," the "inattentive" Commander Lowell substantiates his son's claim that he "liv[ed] in the fool's paradise of habitual retarding and retarded do-nothing inertia" ("91 Revere Street," p.19).

Commander Lowell's fervorless disposition, like those of other characters', markedly contrasts with his energetic physical features. As before, this contradiction importantly stresses the ambiguity latent in Lowell's perspective of the human body. Unflaggingly smiling "his oval Lowell smile . . . on all," Commander Lowell masks his inner malaise. Consider too the morning of his death, the duration of which he spent disregarding his "awful" "feel[ings]" by
"anxious, repetitive smiling."

Not only does the shallowness of Commander Lowell's smile mock his actual unease, but his physical fitness, like Stanley's, is belittled when set against his actual enervation. His "ruddy" complexion, for instance, derived its "bronzed, breezy . . . and beaming" glow not from good health but from an overindulgence in Bourbon old fashioned. Like Lepke, his head is significantly "hairless" and therefore vulnerable. Moreover, his "newly dieted figure" ("newly" because he "had had two coronaries"), which "was vitally trim" and his perfect twenty-twenty vision belie his internal defects.

That the facade of a robust body and sound health also veils the poet's own "frizzled, stale, and small" condition is yet another accurate indication of the fundamental incongruity typical to human bodies in Life Studies. On the other hand, the poet is somewhat atypical because he is not debarred from feeling and/or thinking even though "his physical fitness is as illusory as" other characters'. While the aforementioned characters exclusively engross themselves in bathing, toying or puttering around, the poet is all too intimate with his pain.

Consider, for example, Lowell's perception of himself in "Waking in the Blue." This man who, in writing about himself as a child, had referred to himself as a "stuffed toucan," evolves, in this poem, into a two hundred pound
"Cock of the walk" "strut[ting]" down corridors "at McLean's." Although an overweight body signifies impotence as in the cases of "Bobbie" and Lepke, this attribute, in the case of Lowell, is countervailed by the animal he chose to portray himself. Unlike the unwieldy, squatty size of a "seal" or the massiveness of a "sperm whale," Lowell is the full-fledged rooster on the watch, "lording it over the hospital's old-timers."35 Neither sedate like Stanley nor intrusive like "Bobbie," Lowell, chock-full of pride, conducts himself with an alacrity and smugness that ironically belies his role as mental patient. Eating "a hearty New England breakfast," he starkly opposes the somnolent Stanley whose diet is characterized by self-denial. Interestingly enough, Lowell is set apart (psychologically) from others because he is depicted (and identified) as one who engages in normal, everyday routines such as eating and shaving. He does not flounder in self-absorption; on the contrary, he acts upon his somatic needs. Nevertheless, he holds "a locked razor" (the objective correlative of the patients' inertia), which inevitably links him with the others.

Also illustrative of his outgoing personality is his role in the poem, "Memories of West Street and Lepke," which recalls his imprisonment for a refusal to act (he was a W.W.II conscientious objector). Though he confesses having been "so out of things," he does not dissolve into men-
ational tasks or into the world of knickknacks like the isolated persona of Lepke does. Seeking instead to communicate with other prisoners, he "yammer[s] metaphysics with Abramowitz" and learns the "hospital tuck" from "a fellow jailbird," thus clearly transcending Lepke's immobile mindset.

Nevertheless, upon notice of the "shaky future[s]" of himself and other "victorious figures of bravado ossified young" in the former poem, Lowell's "self-confidence . . . rapidly evaporates." The fragility he sees in others is directly echoed by the disquiet within him; his own heart edges near collapse as it "grows tense / as though a harpoon were sparring for the kill." Implicit in this image is that his heart is like a vulnerable aquatic mammal, which recalls the equally weak bodies of Stanley and "Bobbie" who are victims of the same internal hunt. This comparison also recalls an element of martyrdom tacitly expressed in the description of the harpooned whale in *Lord Weary's Castle* ("The Quaker Graveyard at Nantucket," parts IV and V). In particular, the image of "the turntail whale, / Spouting out blood and water as it rolls" illustrates the depletion of energy in an otherwise forceful body. The poet's body, by analogy, suffers from an internal bleeding of his emotions.

Eventually out of the hospital, Lowell, in the poem "Home After Three Months Away," is portrayed as a "re-cuperating" man who ironically appears more sickly than ever. Like the "pedigreed" "tulips" on his lawn, this "thoroughbred
mental case," in a sense, turns to "weed;" his inactive, timid state outside of the hospital, therefore, mirrors the characters' inert conditions inside the hospital (and prison). Lowell even resembles his unsuccessful father by "keep[ing] no rank nor station." As expected, however, the poet concentrates on an exterior feature of his body in order to depict his omnipresent ambivalent view of himself. Specifically, the ordinary event of shaving acquires significance when the poet and his daughter "pat" each other's "stringy lock of hair." (Patting itself is important because the act of touching another human being is rarely depicted in Life Studies.) Though "stringy" might suggest flimsiness, the phrase, "they tell me nothing's gone," which immediately follows, establishes, by implication, a vitality left untouched by the poet's time away.

Nevertheless, Lowell's perception of himself in this poem is the first indication of his growing disinclination to make any contact whatsoever with the world. His self's disengagement from others develops into a disintegration of his self, a theme which abounds throughout For the Union Dead. The poet is identified with detached, dysfunctional body parts, which collectively dramatize the dispersion of his ego. Instead of possessing a self which is reflected in terms of his capacity to act, he is reduced to fragments, all of which have degenerated into gross inefficiency. More specifically, it is "not action,
but the impact of that action on the perceiving sensibility . . . [which] is the main thrust."37 Crippled by a loss of a "unified, enduring, and valuable"38 self, Lowell ultimately experiences a state of selflessness very similar to that of death.

The first of these fragments to receive attention here is the head, which is a crucial metaphor for the poet's disintegrating spirit. Before examining its function in "The Neo-Classical Urn," the backlog of images of heads as victims merits emphasis. First appearing in Lord Weary's Castle in the image of his father's "clubbed" "skull" in "Rebellion," the head is identified with Commander Lowell's cowering attitude toward his son's impudence. Testifying to the head's role as martyr is the image of the criminal's decaying "skull" in "France."

The hanged criminal calls out to his avengers, "The blood of Abel crying from the dead / Sticks to my blackened skull and eyes." The unexpected allusion to Abel, mankind's first murder victim, implies that something like the mark of Cain is being described. The criminal's "skull" affords another example of the abuse of power diminished to a sterility similar to Lepke's "lobotomized" brain. Also noteworthy is the derisively grinning head of Indian King Philip which, in wreaking damnation on his killers' heads, is comparable to the fascist leader Mussolini's "lynched, bare, booted skull" which "still spoke" in "Be-
"yond the Alps," the poem opening the Life Studies volume. Yet both heads, though remonstrative in their self-assertion, are nevertheless dead. Occurring in the volume For the Union Dead is the image of the decapitated monster's head in "Florence." Specifically, the "Gorgon's" severed head, like King Philip's head, could still wreak vengeance by "staring the despot to stone." The poem concludes with an arresting image of her head that "swung / like a lantern in the victor's hand." (Swinging is appropriate here as a metaphor of the oscillation prone to powerful figures in Lowell's poetry.) Her headless, "helpless, big bosomed body," on the other hand, is as powerless as the armless torsos of Life Studies; like them, her bulging body "lay like slop."

The poet's surfeit of flesh (as depicted in Life Studies), on the other hand, effected his "frizzled, stale, and small" body, which foreshadows the loss of his body's weight in For the Union Dead. Now "fragile, / a feather," his body's dwindling weight signifies dwindling strength.

His brittle cranium, for instance, as described in "The Neo-Classical Urn," is seemingly immaterial. "Stuck on a pole," it is bereft of its former "grace . . . cere-bation [and] . . . free will." Subsequently, Lowell's "poor head" is affiliated with his unresponsive father's "skull," which Lowell callously "clubbed" in "Rebellion."
A mere "skinny shell," his defunct head dramatizes the poet's ubiquitous ambivalence towards power. Tension, in particular, is activated by his contention that both frailty (in For the Union Dead) and flabbiness (in Life Studies) signify inaction. His body, "a pole," feebly "hobble[s]" as do the last surviving turtles or "nothings" as he terms them, being "replicas of his own disintegration."39 In addition, his role as the ostentatious "Cock of the walk" in "Waking in the Blue" starkly opposes the "turtle shell" identifying him in "The Neo-Classical Urn," which recalls the cloistered personages of Life Studies. This retreat inside himself forecasts his refusal to see and hesitation to touch in other poems in this volume.

Another malfunctioning body part, his nearsighted eyes, is identified with the poet's atrophying self. As a synecdoche, the eyes' blurred vision signifies Lowell's indistinct ego-boundaries. According to Irvin Ehrenpreis, the poem "Eye and Tooth" depends on a "brilliant use of the eye-I pun . . . . The dominating metaphor is, so to speak, 'I've got something in my I and can't get it out.'"40 The stanza opening this poem calls attention to Lowell's waning eyesight that "exposes his fragile position"41:

My whole eye was sunset red,
the old cut cornea throbbed,
I saw things darkly, 
as through an unwashed goldfish globe.

"Sunset" is by no means incidental; it appropriately describes the poet's dim-sighted perspective, now splotched like a bloodshot horizon.

It becomes apparent that his "old cut cornea" "was assaulted, not by a physical mote but by the vision of something ugly or disquieting."42 The exceptionally attentive child Lowell who was "unseen and all-seeing" like "Agrippina / in the Golden House of Nero" later insists: "Young, my eyes began to fail."

Nothing can dislodge
the house with my first tooth
........................................
No ease for the boy at the keyhole,
his telescope,
when the women's white bodies flashed
in the bathroom.

Clouded by the past, his bleary eye unceasingly burns without alleviation:

No ease from the eye
of the sharp-shinned hawk . . .
........................................
Nothing! No oil
for the eye, nothing to pour
on those waters or flames.

Losing hold of himself, Lowell becomes expectantly otiose. Living exclusively in the present, he stalls in bed "all day" and "chain-smoke[es] through the night." Like the insipid figures in *Life Studies*, Lowell dissolves into inertia and boredom ("I am tired. Everyone's tired of my turmoil.") because those states afford an attractive retreat from his irremediable condition. It becomes evident, therefore, that the poet's defective vision, a metaphor of his dispersed ego, promotes sluggish impotence and, by extension, an indefinite concept of his self.

Subsequently, it is not surprising that the "befogged" poet in "Myopia: A Night" feels "no need to see." Mere seclusion in his "dull and alien room, / [his] cell of learning" where his solitude is intensified by "hearing / the lonely metal [radiator] breathe / and gurgle like the sick" offers little respite. Specifically, the activity of seeing appears utterly pointless if "all's / ramshackle, streaky, [and] weird." Keeping in mind the "characteristic pun"43 in the phrase, "The things of the eye are done," it becomes apparent that the poet feels nearly dead. On the other hand, a ghost of his self ostensibly lives
on in his grueling insomnia. His sober wakefulness ironically thwarts activity and despite his desire to close his needless eyes, he "breathe[s] and cannot sleep."

Constrained inside a world where "familiar faces blur," the nearsighted poet appears disassociated from his past, exemplifying the fact that his subject matter in this volume increasingly moves "away from the family and even deeper into the individual psyche, or deeper into the 'dark / unconscious bowels of the nerves.'" Incapacitated, the poet fails to connect with people or maintain a continuity of selfhood.

As a dysfunctional body part that effects the poet's disengagement from others, his eyes can be likened to another synecdoche of his dispersed ego, namely, his hands. For the sake of contrast, the function of the child Lowell's "precociously tragic hands" in the poem, "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux," merits observation. Keeping one hand "cool on a pile / of black earth, [and] the other warm / on a pile of lime," the child possesses a keen, tactile grasp of life's interconnectedness that enables him to perceive the metaphysical in the physical. The bond between life ("earth") and death ("lime") is repeated by the association of himself with his uncle who "was dying of the incurable Hodgkin's disease." This particular ex-
ample attests to Perloff's contention that "the larger significance of hands in Lowell's poetry is that of contact and communication—the touch that relates one person to another."\(^{46}\)

Conversely, when hands do not touch, there is alienation, isolation, or withdrawal into the self.\(^{47}\) But the self the poet's hand withdraws into is itself dissected into a head that no longer "purposeful\(^{ly}\)" thinks and eyes that refuse to see: an abyss is in the making. The self's dissemination is made explicit in the theme of mutilation. Early on (in "The Quaker Graveyard at Nantucket"), it surfaces as the image of his drowned cousin's corpse which "was bloodless, a botch of reds and whites." Occurring much later in the opening poem of *For the Union Dead*, "Water," mutilation is expressed by "the commonplace synecdoche for workers, 'hands,' [which] acquires a macabre quality in the phrase "boatloads of hands,"\(^{48}\) suggestive of lobster pincers. This example is the first indication that Lowell chooses the idle hand, in bold contrast to his thrusting, combative arm/hand in *Lord Weary's Castle*, to express a broken identity.

Embodying the motif of a "withdrawing hand [that] measures [a person's] retreat into himself"\(^{49}\) is the poet's alter ego, the deranged tyrant, Caligula. His name ("Little Boots"), which fuses protection and
pettiness as one, qualifies Caligula as another powerful person towards whom Lowell felt ambivalent. Although the "emperor's insanity and penchant for decapitation (which extended even to statues of the Roman gods whose heads he replaced with sculpted models of his own)" were enticing to the schoolboy Lowell, the adult poet uses images which "stress [his] hideousness," the most odious of which is his hands which "no hand will hold."

The blunt itemization of the emperor's cadaverous features lucidly divulges Caligula's "thin" potency. The catalogue begins with the juxtaposition of his hairless, marbly head with his hairy body, which vividly demonstrates Lowell's ambivalence towards the vicious leader. In addition, his eyes are "hollow" as are his "temples," features nearly identical to the poet's dull eyes and vacuous, shell-like skull. Caligula's "hands that leave / a clammy snail's trail on [his] soggy sleeve . . ." also broadcast his repellent nature. Moreover, the former Roman ruler is reduced to a "small thing," thereby recalling the impotence of another one-time leader, namely, Czar Lepke. Furthermore, Caligula is thoroughly stripped down to an image of emasculation and self-absorption in his appropriately cold bath where his hands "rolled [his] genitals / until they shrank to marbles." Os-
tensibly measuring his self-worship as does the thumb-sucking the poet alludes to, Caligula's hands flaunt his extreme isolation. Unlike Lowell, Caligula's reasons for retreat inside himself are based on pride instead of fear and self-love instead of self-deprecation. When the emperor does touch someone, he prefers to destroy him. His "regal / hand," for example, which metaphorically accepted the poet's hand only to blatantly "bend [his] wrist, / and tear the tendons with [his] strangler's twist," imparts his unswayable spitefulness. Prone to such barbarity, his ruthless hand recalls the vengeful arm/hand conspicuous throughout Lord Weary's Castle.

Equally repulsive is the editor's hand which momentarily "caressed" the poet's hand in "The Severed Head." "Settl[ing] like a toad," the former's hand "lay clammy, comfortable, helpless, and at rest." Counterbalancing this image of inertia is the terror seething beneath the immobile surface: "his veins seemed pulsing to explode." As is often the case with characters in Lowell's works, the action implemented is of an intemperate nature. Specifically, the editor convulsively tears the poet's manuscript "to pieces" and, as if self-absorbed, "cut[s] out squares of paper . . . and formed the figure of his wife: / Square head, square feet, square hands, square breasts, square / back."
At variance with the mutilation effected by Caligula's and the editor's hands is the tentative and nearly paralyzed poet's hand, itself seemingly mutilated. Almost as a corollary to his incurable myopia, "there's no hand / to take [him] home." The stability the feverish poet osmotically received by clutching his wife's hand in "Man and Wife" transforms into a total loss of vitality felt by the anxious poet in "Child's Song." A distressing sequel to the former, "Child's Song" depicts the hungering poet who, managing to touch his wife's hand, discerns that their "fingers" inescapably "knot." This juncture foreshadows the interlocked embrace of sexual intercourse between his wife and himself that Lowell describes in Notebook 1967-68: "a net trapped in the arms of another net." In another scene in bed, depicted in "The Flaw," the poet "nostalgically remembers a former love affair when" 52 "fingertips once touched [his] fingertip / and set [them] tingling through a thousand threads," yet as through a porous net, "summer slips / between our fingers into nothingness." Depleted of constancy, the past indubitably sinks into a kind of extinction like "the child who died" inside the poet "soaking in night sweat."

Exemplifying the significant role hands have for Lowell is his choice of them as the main body part identifying him as a child. The superbly integrated
poem, "For the Union Dead," in particular, opens with a poignant reference to his hand that in youth "tingled / to burst the bubbles / drifting from the noses of the cowed, compliant fish." Instead of "cupping a soft palm to each hard breast" of the "hundred marble goddesses" in "Buenos Aires" to reap sustenance, his adult hand here "draws back." His retreating hand is similar to the present state of mankind, which flinches from the ideal past represented by Colonel Shaw and his infantry. Remembering how he wished to pop the bubbles, the adult poet feels beset by the strain of wanting: he "often sigh[s] still / for the dark downward, and vegetating kingdom / of the fish and reptile." Like his myopic eyes that eventually disassociated him from the past, his adult hand "measure[s] the gulf between past and present." The withdrawal of his hand signifies the desuetude of his present self.

The vacillation characteristic of his hand is also illustrative of Lowell's ineluctable conclusion that nothing is impervious to change. Even the monument itself is not too rigid because it progressively loses contact with modern-day Boston. First compared to a "fishbone," the statue metaphorically resembles a foreign object obstructing the "city's throat;" Boston appears unable to swallow or appropriate the truths the monument stands for. "Fishbone" may also suggest
that only a skeletal remnant of the ideal tauntingly survives to mock inert Boston.

Most important, however, is the recurrent emphasis placed on skinniness in Lowell's description of St. Gaudens' relief especially if seen over against the frail, incompetent body of the poet in this volume and his use of flabbiness as symbol of powerlessness in the previous volume. "Like a fishbone," Shaw, "lean / as a compass-needle," who "has an angry wrenlike vigilance, / [and] a greyhound's gentle tautness," is an individual representative of "the stone statues of the abstract Union Soldier." The latter being "wasp-waisted," "grow slimmer and younger each year" and taper into a state as "bodiless" as the poet's in "The Flaw." Both the Union Soldier statues and Shaw seem irrelevant, being "out of bounds," out of touch with the present as the poet is distanced from the past.

How incongruous the ideal may be is further exhibited by the sheer discrepancy existing between Shaw, for instance, and "the drained faces of Negro school-children" that recall "the pinched, indigenous faces" of the patients in "Waking in the Blue" whose futures appeared equally "shaky." But the monument is also alarmingly "shaking" because it is "propped by a plank splint against the garage's earthquake." This attribute elucidates Lowell's ambivalence towards
Shaw himself who, although fighting for the just cause of freedom, simultaneously inverts his purpose by the suicides his willful drive effected. Nevertheless, by "riding on his bubble" (also evocative of tremulousness), Shaw seems to float. Even before "the blessed break," he is otherworldly, and more definitely so than the children's faces that "rise like balloons." In addition, the process of the distancing of Shaw from this world parallels the poet's withdrawing hand.

Unlike Shaw's body, however, the poet's and the observer's bodies personify man's inconsequential efforts to attain or absorb the ideal. Instead of freely standing erect, thus assimilating the boldness of Shaw, the body "drains" and "crouches": "The ditch is nearer." With the cumbersomeness of servitude, his body sags as does his unprovoked, subdued hand, recalling "the downward glide / and bias of existing [that] wrings [the poet] dry" in "Night Sweat." It is, however, appropriate that the poem closing the volume that focused on the dispersed ego should communicate dispersion on multiple levels. Specifically, separation occurs in the characters who contrast with each other; the "bell-cheeked Negro infantry" and the emaciated "Negro school-children" afford one example. There is a discontinuity between people who represent the past (Shaw) and those who live stifled in the present (the poet). Also note-
worthy is that Lowell depicts the statues in terms of body parts, which implicitly suggests his role in the poem as a person devoid of unity. Lowell's marred perspective parallels his impotent hand that mocks the potential it had for blossoming forth life in "The Exile's Return." Lowell's ambivalence towards power, in part, is transformed into his relinquishment of the power to act, to construct, to connect. The only connection, however painful, occurs between the concurrent breakdown of the poet's body parts and his blurred dimensions of his ego.

It is, therefore, predictable that the volumes following For the Union Dead, for the most part, concentrate on public personages. The human body as metaphor of the self appears less necessary in his later poetry because the poet's self, as a survival tactic, reaches outward. Rather than use bodies and body parts, the poet uses deeds, events and/or consequences of them to identify with public personalities.

Through his treatment of the subject of corporeality, on the other hand, Lowell could base a subject as abstract as power on the tangible image of the human body. Systematically dissecting human bodies, thereby placing accent on the part, that although severed, speaks eloquently for the whole, Lowell chooses the human body as metaphor as the most effective method
of understanding the changing self. Certain body parts
(as synecdoches of the self) merit observation in that
they identify an individual's psyche, which, according
to Lowell, is defined in terms of one's capacity to act.
Expressing their capacity or disinclination to act, bod­
ies and body parts, to some extent, elucidate the poet's
ambivalence towards power. That he accords different
functions to the same body part implicitly expresses his
ambivalence towards power, which determines his ambival­
ent view of himself.

One example includes the arms and/or hands
that are mobile, autonomous, and self-assertive in Lord
Weary's Castle, which dramatically change into the weak­
willed, static, self-denying hands in For the Union Dead.
The vulnerability Lowell accords to heads and/or skulls
remains consistent throughout all three volumes. The
stagnating armless torsos of Life Studies foreshadow
the disabled body disseminated throughout For the Union
Dead. It becomes apparent, therefore, that the human
body, as an ever-changing entity, presents a substantial
reservoir of parts to signify potency and impotency of
the self.

Moreover, the human body as metaphor of the
active or passive self is appropriate as the most per­
sonal kind of metaphor available to the father of con­
fessional poetry. As a person who himself experienced
numerous nervous breakdowns and broken marriages, Robert Lowell was predictably attracted to themes expressive of disengagement, whether it occurred in the self distanced from others, the self distanced from the past, or as severance within the self. The metaphor of the human body lends credence to Lowell's ambivalent world view, which was characterized by anguish directed towards himself and influential people in his life. The images of the human body and its parts in Lowell's works, as extensions of his creative self, seem ultimately more expressive than actual bodies are.
Notes


2 Olney, p. 47.

3 Olney, p. 47.

4 Olney, p. 32.

5 Olney, p. 35.


7 Burke, pp. 507-508.


10 Perloff, p. 19.


12 Hamilton, p. 15.

13 Hamilton, pp. 15-16.

Notes to pages 10-14

15 Martin, p. 470.


17 Rollins, p. 71.

18 Rollins, p. 71.


20 Kalstone, p. 46.

21 Kalstone, p. 46.

22 Yenser, p. 74.

23 Yenser, p. 74.


26 Axelrod, paraphrase from pp. 70-71.

27 Axelrod, p. 71.

28 Perloff, p. 34.
29 Axelrod, p. 140.

30 Stephen Yenser is also attentive to the boyish characteristics of "Bobbie" on page 156.


33 Rosenthal, p. 57.

34 Perloff, p. 171.

35 Perloff, p. 174.

36 Perloff, p. 32.

37 Perloff, p. 116.

38 Axelrod, p. 114.


40 Perloff, p. 31.

41 Kalstone, p. 59.

42 Perloff, p. 32.

43 Yenser, p. 222.
44 Yenser, p. 200.


46 Perloff, p. 29.

47 Perloff, p. 29.

48 Yenser, p. 206. I suggested lobster pincers especially because, as Yenser also contends, this passage ("boatloads of hands") follows the reference to the lobster fishing (in "Water").

49 Perloff, p. 30.

50 Yenser, p. 227.

51 Bobbitt, p. 312.

52 Perloff, p. 30.

53 Perloff, p. 30.
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