

# 'La Ballade des pendus' of François Villon and Robert Lowell: A Study in Rhetorical Criticism

Villon's 'La Ballade des pendus' has received the highest praise, being classified as 'perhaps the most intensely dramatic of all French medieval poems'<sup>1</sup> and even as 'one of the most moving of all lyric poems to have been written in the French language.'<sup>2</sup> The poetic worth of Villon's poem derives in part from its unique construction, which makes it particularly fit for rhetorical analysis. Specifically, a close and concentrated study of the speaker, addressee, and their interrelation uncovers much of the richness of the mediaeval ballad that has been overlooked by other critical methods.<sup>3</sup>

Villon's 'La Ballade des pendus' (or, to give its former title, 'L'Épitaphe de Villon') attracted the attention of the contemporary American poet Robert Lowell, who attempted two renditions: one translation, 'Villon's Epitaph,' and also a radical adaptation which points to Villon as its obvious source of inspiration. In line with this original source of inspiration, Lowell's two translations also merit close rhetorical examination.

In an article entitled 'Voice and address,'<sup>4</sup> Craig La Driere states that in the analysis of a literary composition the most important thing to determine is the voice or voices speaking as well as the nature of the address (that is, the specific direction to a hearer). A poem then may well be complex in terms of voice and addressee or grammatical second person. Indeed, La Driere finds three types of addressees: somebody or thing or abstraction, or even oneself; anybody; everybody. One may want to distinguish further and speak of the external versus the internal rhetorical situation. In external rhetoric, one considers the relation of the author of a work with his public readers or listeners, as the case may be. Internal rhetoric concerns the speaker and the addressee *within* the work. Naturally, there may be a fusion between

1 John Fox, *The Poetry of Villon* (London: Thomas Nelson 1962) xx

2 *Ibid.*, 28

3 Professor Nathan Edelman was the first to make known in detail some of the richness and complexity of Villon's 'La Ballade des Pendus.' See his 'Explication Principale: "L'Épitaphe Villon"' in *Explication de texte 1*, 2nd ed., Jean Sareil (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall 1970) 3-11.

4 *Dictionary of World Literature*, ed. Joseph Shipley (New York: Philosophical Library 1953) 441-4

internal and external rhetoric at some point; for example, the addressee may be or become the reader. It is in these terms that I shall initiate my study of Villon's 'La Ballade des pendus':

Frères humains qui après nous vivez,  
N'ayez les cuers contre nous endurcis,  
Car, se pitié de nous povres avez,  
Dieu en aura plus tost de vous mercis.  
Vous nous voiez cy attachez cinq, six:  
Quant de la char, que trop avons nourrie,  
Elle est pieça devorée et pourrie,  
Et nous, les os, devenons cendre et pouldre.  
De nostre mal personne ne s'en rie;  
Mais priez Dieu que tous nous vueille absouldre!

Se freres vous clamons, pas n'en devez  
Avoir desdaing, quoy que fusmes occis  
Par justice. Toutesfois, vous sçavez  
Que tous hommes n'ont pas bons sens rassis;  
Excusez nous, puis que sommes transsis,  
Envers le fils de la Vierge Marie,  
Que sa grace ne soit pour nous tarie,  
Nous preservant de l'infemale fouldre.  
Nous sommes mors, ame ne nous harie;  
Mais priez Dieu que tous nous vueille absouldre!

La pluye nous a debuez et lavez,  
Et le soleil dessechiez et noircis;  
Pies, corbeaulx, nous ont les yeux cavez,  
Et arrachié la barbe et les sourcis.  
Jamais nul temps nous ne sommes assis;  
Puis ça, puis la, comme le vent varie,  
A son plaisir sans cesser nous charie,  
Plus becquetez d'oiseaulx que dez a couldre.  
Ne soiez donc de nostre confrairie;  
Mais priez Dieu que tous nous vueille absouldre!

Prince Jhesus, qui sur tous a maistrie,  
Garde d'Enfer n'ait de nous seigneurie:  
A luy n'ayons que faire ne que souldre.  
Hommes, icy n'a point de mocquerie;  
Mais priez Dieu que tous nous vueille absouldre!<sup>5</sup>

5 All quotations from Villon's poetry are taken from *François Villon, Oeuvres: Edition critique avec notices et glossaire*, ed. Louis Thuasne, 1 (Paris: Picard 1923).

Within the rhetorical framework, one must be first of all aware not to commit the facile biographical fallacy by including the real Villon among the speakers. As Italo Siciliano remarked, with reference to the original title of Villon's poem:

Marot, suivant son habitude, compléta de son chef la rubrique: 'L'építaphe en forme de ballade que feit V. pour luy et pour ses compaignons, s'attendant estre pendu avec eulx.' Cette précision historique, tout à fait fantaisiste, a été longtemps acceptée sans discussion et a contribué à la légende de 'l'âme double': qu'on y pense, en effet, en même temps Villon écrit le tétrastique facétieux de la ballade tragique! ... cause occasionnelle de la composition de la fameuse ballade.<sup>6</sup>

Now whereas Siciliano takes the voice in Villon's ballad to be plural, David Kuhn asserts: 'dans la fiction du poème, un pendu parle pour tous les "freres humains".'<sup>7</sup> Perhaps here Kuhn was guided by the poem's iconographic tradition and the famous woodcut, attached to the poem from the very beginning, which showed but one hanged victim on the Parisian gibbet. But the truth of the matter is that the very identity of the voice in 'La Ballade des pendus' is somewhat vague, for it is not at all clear whether the voice is singular and therefore speaking for the hanged group, or whether the voice is choral, i.e., the group itself is speaking<sup>8</sup> – a good number of other poems written with first person speakers presents the same rhetorical problem. Neither is the definite number of the hanged given; there may be five or six. This vagueness, however, is not due to lack of self-awareness on the part of the voice; indeed, the decay of the hanged bodies is poignantly portrayed. What is more, in spite of a sinful past and the present need for supplication, the voice has a certain superior intelligence in comparison with the addressee. The imprecision concerning the five or six bodies is a way by which the voice mocks the addressee: *Vous nous voiez cy attachez cinq, six?* Presuma-

6 *François Villon et les thèmes poétiques au moyen âge* (Paris: Colin 1934) 278 n1. That most hilarious quatrain reads as follows:

Je suis François, dont il me poise,  
Né de Paris empres Pontoise,  
et de la corde d'une toise  
Sçaura mon col que mon cul poise.

7 *La Poétique de François Villon* (Paris: Armand Colin 1967) 454

8 Louis Thuasne goes even further afield: Villon 'les prie d'intercéder pour lui et ses compaignons de potence auprès de la Vierge Marie et de son fils' (*Villon, Œuvres* 165). But Villon simply wrote, 'Excusez nous ... Envers le fils de la Vierge Marie.'

bly, the inaccurate perception of the spectators is due to their 'cuers endurecis'; even literally, the heart may determine vision.

If we conveniently refer to a plural identity in the voice and then put aside the question of the exact number of speakers, we are still left with a problem, for the nature of the speakers' existence is intriguing. Put another way, when in poetry the body-soul entity is used variously as a voice, great difficulties often occur with reference to the exact nature of the speaker. Who is the speaker in George Herbert's 'Church-monuments'?

While that my soul repairs to her devotion,  
Here I intombe my flesh... (lines 1-2)

The voice in Villon's ballad is a super-identity, sometimes speaking as a body, sometimes as a soul, and sometimes as a unity of the two. Thus the speakers as bodies declare 'Et nous, les os'; as souls, they state, 'puis que sommes transis' (passés, partis, morts); as corporate entities, they address the spectators as 'freres.'<sup>9</sup> The super-identity reacts in three ways: physically, mentally, and spiritually. Accordingly the speakers complain that they cannot sit; they ask for pity, they beg for human prayers and divine protection.

The correspondent states of the speakers' bodies and souls give them a further unity. Both the bodies and souls have a quasi activity: the bodies becoming 'cendre et pouldre' and the souls being 'transis.' Both as well are subject to hostile exterior activity: the body to living and non-living forces in nature (the buffeting of wind and the pecking of birds), and the soul to the thunder from hell. In this regard, the poem, whose partial subject is decay and death, achieves an effect, nearly a counter-effect, of striking movement and activity, physical and otherwise. Molested relentlessly by nature, the speakers ask that no man molest them. But indeed, they are maltreated by man and nature alike, and their attitude to God is one of fearful anguish. Expressed in another manner, 'povres' (line 3) and 'mal' (line 9) are polysemous and span all three levels of awareness, from the physical to the mental and spiritual.

The identification of the addressee also merits the closest attention and, as well, involves some finely nuanced distinctions. In the octave of the first three stanzas, the addressee merely consists of those who look, the spectators: 'Vous nous voiez.' But in each stanza, the penultimate and last or

9 Overlooking the concept of super-identity, Siciliano remains confused about the nature of the voice in the poem: 'Ils prient pour leur âme, s'ils sont en train de devenir "cendre et poudre?" Que peuvent-ils, désormais? S'il est vrai qu'ils en sont déjà là le sort de leur âme n'est-il pas décidé? Non, ce ne sont plus des squelettes. Avec la voix, ils ont trouvé, ils ont repris leur corps' (p 278).

refrain lines, which constitute a syntactic unit, contain an evolving addressee. Villon's craftsmanship in this instance is best seen with a brief reference to possible technical uses of the refrain in general. In treating a particular development of the refrain toward the end of the thirteenth century, Paul Zumthor described one type as

d'ordre purement rythmique et syntaxique, spécialement dans ce que l'on a appelé les 'chansons avec des refrains,' ainsi *Qui veut amors maintenir*, de Moniot de Paris, ou la pastourelle de Guillaume le Vinier *En mi mai quant s'est la saison partie*, affectée d'une ritournelle intérieure à la strophe, sans rapport syntaxique ni sémantique avec le contexte.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, one may immediately think of Baudelaire's *Harmonie du Soir*,<sup>11</sup> where the stanzaic position of the refrain varies, or 'La Balcon,' where each stanza (save for the last, somewhat) is bracketed by identical refrains. Certainly an easier type of refrain is one in which poets achieve variation in meaning by avoiding word-for-word repetition, by changing one or more words in each refrain. But a more challenging poetic feat is to effect semantic change in identical refrains or, paradoxically speaking, to effect a non-repetitiveness in repetition. In Villon's refrain specifically, 'tous nous' accumulates meaning until, by line 35, it includes the hanged, the spectators, and mankind in general. This triple reference is to be found in the previous refrains but at various emerging levels, ranging from suggestion to secondary to primary and surface meaning. Specifically, only the spectators are exhorted, are spoken *to* in the first three stanzas; those same spectators, along with others, are spoken *about* in the epithet 'tous nous.'

Another way of analyzing this epithet lies in considering its components individually. In the first three stanzas, save for the refrains, 'nous' is utilized exclusively to refer to the hanged; the spectators are indicated by 'vous' (see esp. lines 1-5, 11, 13, 15, 19, and 29). The sole use of 'tous' is logically distributed, alluding to all mankind - 'tous homes' (line 14), an instance which quietly contributes to the evolving semantic amplification of 'tous nous.' But with the closing of the poem, the pronominal components of the refrain epithet 'tous nous' are linearly separated and appear in order of occurrence in the first two lines of the envoi. The result is that 'tous,' having progressed from an intensifier to a pronoun with independent status, means all mankind, while 'nous' primarily refers to the hanged and secondarily includes the immediate spectators. Yet 'tous' and 'nous,' the separated epithetical components, are magnetically thrown together; they are both in

<sup>10</sup> *Langues et techniques Poétiques à l'époque romane: XIe-XIIIe siècles* (Paris: Klincksieck 1963) 175

inverted or displaced prepositional phrases found in parallel location before 'seigneurie' and 'maistrie,' which are rhyming synonyms. The linear fractionalization of the pronominal construct, then, is partly a semantic illusion. This very poetic structure contributes deep meaning to the last line where the epithet is found intact once more. Opposed to its previous occurrences, the 'tous nous' in the last refrain embraces the hanged, the spectators, and mankind *all as primary references*.<sup>11</sup>

The superficially simple envoi contains two addressees. First Jesus is appropriately addressed, appropriately for He too was hanged directly and unjustly 'Par justice' and indirectly by all men. Secondly, instead of 'Freres humains,' 'Hommes' are addressed, a much wider nomination emphasizing the primordial existence of man as man. Likewise, the personalized 'De *nostre* mal personne ne s'en rie' has been transformed into a non-egocentric and therefore more inclusive avowal: 'icy n'a point de mocquerie.' Briefly, in the penultimate line, the voice addresses mankind in general – in effect, all who read the poem as well. In the addressee situation, then, there has been a transition from the oral world to the oral plus visual, from spectators to readers. Or more technically, the addressees of internal and external rhetoric are fused. Summarily, then, the addressee or second person, constant for the first three stanzas, is extended in the envoi both vertically (Jesus, a heavenly addressee) and horizontally (all mankind). By contrast, the 'tous nous,' in its potential as a first, second, *and* third person referent, semantically evolves with each refrain.

However essential is the investigation of the identity of the poem's personal referents, the question of their relation is just as critical. Basically the reaction of the voice to the addressee is twofold: to ask and to offer help. The request for help is both negative ('personne ne s'en rie,' 'pas n'en devez/Avoir desdaing,' etc.) and positive 'Excusez nous .../Que sa grace ne soit pour nous tarie,' a declaration which semantically is a shadow of the refrain). By contrast, counsel is the type of help which voice extends to the audience ('se pitié de nous povres avez,/Dieu en aura plus tost de vous mercis'; 'Ne soiez donc de nostre confrarie'). The refrain mediates between a request and proffered aid, for the addressee is urged to pray for itself as well.

The poem's rhetorical situation, therefore, does not involve a sheerly inferior speaker and a superior hearer. Part of the poem's uniqueness consists

11 For professor Edelman, on the other hand, though the personal reference in the refrains is progressively clarified (p 10), it remains essentially the same (p 5). Cf. the general remarks by David Kuhn, 'Le sens progressivement élargi du mot "tous" dans le refrain' (*La Poétique de François Villon* [Paris: Armand Colin 1967] 455), and Le Gentil, 'une seule et même prière et doit alors nous unir *tous*, puisque *tous*, au moment de mourir, nous avons également besoin que Dieu nous veuille absoudre' (*Villon* [Paris: Hatier 1967] 73).

in the fact that, despite the utterly desolate condition of the speakers, they are far from being abstractions of servility. The three differences between the voice and the addressee – physical, mental, and spiritual – are technically modulated in such a way by Villon that extreme interpersonal contrasts are subdued. The former state of the speakers' overfed and therefore soft flesh jars with their present disintegration into hard dry material ('cendre et pouldre'). The parallel to this is the description of the spectators' psyche as a solidification ('cuers endurcis'). Later, the speakers, whose souls have departed, merely and ironically use 'ame' to refer to spectators alive with body and soul.

But even more irony is found in the superficial comradeship of the following affirmation:

Toutesfois, vous sçavez

Que tous hommes n'ont pas bon sens rassis

Do the spectators *know*? According to strict logic, Villon's universal statement is a sophistical one, being either distributed or undistributed. It may mean *no* man has good judgement, or *some* men have no good judgement. Guided by this rhetorical strategy of irony, Villon put this logically ambiguous statement after the hanged say they were killed 'Par justice.' Now if all men lack judgement, the hanged were not killed by justice but by injustice. And on the other hand, the hanged have judgement where the spectators do not, for implicitly throughout the poem they are asked to have good judgement. But overriding all judgements is the Final and just Judgement which occasions the real fear of the hanged (lines 15–18) and which also occasions the request of man's prayers that God judge 'tous nous' with pity.

All these attitudes entertained by the voice are gnominically found in the initial appellation 'Freres humains.' On the simple descriptive level, the spectators are brothers insofar as they are part of humanity. The crux, though, is whether the 'Freres humains' is a simple vocative or whether in fact it also contains a submerged imperative: that is, 'soyez frères humains' and become pitiful. We must note that line 3 reads, 'Car, se pitie ... avez.' The dual interpretation of 'Freres humains,' then, is not merely a speculative or capricious one, but is even further realized in the poem. The beginning of stanza two, 'Se vous clamons frères,' may mean either 'Etant donné que nous vous appelons frères' or 'Si nous vous appelons frères encore une fois.' Stanza three, moreover, does not even begin with any fraternal address, and, in fact, punfully ends, 'Ne soiez donc de nostre confrairie.'<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Various critics have missed the subtleties in the relations between the voice and addressee. Siciliano simply stressed the contriteness and humility of the condemned (p 278). Mrs Grace

On the rhetorical level, therefore, 'freres' is not initially a *fait accompli*, for one of the rhetorical ends of the poem is that the spectators become brothers. In that light, the poem's four stanzas constitute a piece of deliberative rhetoric<sup>13</sup> which attempts to persuade the spectators to render sympathy. Villon shrewdly turned *petitio principii* into a bold and successfully disarming tactic: dramatically, the vocative which inaugurates the poem and which is voiced by the *hanged* should be one of the conclusions or resolutions of the *spectators*. The adjectives 'humains' reinforces, perhaps over-determines, the ambiguity of 'freres.' Whether it be in mediaeval Latin, English, or French, 'humain' had two meanings: having the characteristics of man, and benevolent.<sup>14</sup> Now in one sense, the soul-less *hanged* are humane, not human. 'Cuer [human] ... *endurcis* [inhumane]' is syntactically divided or separated epithet co-extensive with its inherent terminological split.

The range of elements in Villon's thirty-five-line poem comprises a striking catalogue: life and death; a cosmology extending from hell to earth to heaven; a temporality embracing the past, present, and future; the realm of the physical, mental, and spiritual; the definite and concrete, the indefinite and abstract; the five to six *hanged*, the presumably greater number of spectators, and eventually all mankind; the world of the inanimate, the animate, the rational, and the super-rational; the egocentric (rather than egoistical) and allocentric; tones of fear, pity, sympathy, irony, contriteness, fraternal love; description, invocation, exhortation. This impressive scope is moulded, subtilized, dramatized, and intensified by an intricate rhetorical structure.

Lowell's imitation, 'Villon's Epitaph' is an interesting rendering of the original poem:

Frank countered, 'Villon reveals no contriteness. Once more in the clutches of the law and this time surely condemned to death, the poet shows humility and fear of punishment, he asks his fellow men for their pity and their prayers, he begs Jesus for absolution, he vividly paints a horrible picture of the hangman's victims. But does he repent? His only excuse is the morally feeble "tous les hommes n'ont pas bons sens rassis." This is hardly a *mea culpa*, a recognition of personal guilt' (The Impenitence of François Villon' *Romantic Review* 37 (1946) 229-30). Mrs Franks' observations were easily demolished by John Fox (*The Poetry of Villon* 32) who pointed out that the real subject of the poem is not repentance as such but the request of prayerful succour, and that at any event the demand for absolution necessitates repentance. Fox's reading, though limited, pointed in the right direction.

- 13 Aristotle divided rhetoric into three species: the judicial or forensic; the epideictic or oratory of praise and dispraise; and the deliberative or political, which advocates a plan or action to be adopted. See *Rhetoric* 1358b.
- 14 Whereas modern French retains the double meaning, modern English from about 1700 has distinguished orthographically between *human* (characteristic of mankind) and *humane* (benevolent).

Villon's Epitaph

'Oh brothers, you live after us,  
because we shared your revenue.  
God may have mercy upon you,  
if you have mercy upon us.  
Five, six – you see us tied up here,  
the flesh we overfed hangs here,  
our carrion rots through skin and shirt,  
and we, the bones, have changed to dirt.  
Do not laugh at our misery:  
pray God to save your souls and ours!

We hang in chains to satisfy  
your justice and your violence,  
brother humans – surely, you see  
that all men cannot have good sense!  
Here no man may look down on us –  
Oh Child of Mary, pity us,  
forgive our crimes – if dying well  
saved even the poor thief from hell,  
the blood of Christ will not run dry:  
pray God to save your souls and ours!

The rain has soaked and washed us bare,  
the sun has burned us black. Magpies  
and crows have chiselled out our eyes,  
have jerked away our beards and hair.  
Our bodies have no time to rest:  
our chains clank north, south, east and west,  
now here, now there, to the winds' dance –  
more beaks of birds than knives in France!  
Do not join our fraternity:  
pray God to save your souls and ours!

Prince Jesus, king of earth and air,  
preserve our bodies from hell's powers –  
we have no debts or business there.  
We were not hanged to make you laugh.  
Villon, who wrote our epitaph,  
prays God to save your souls and ours!<sup>15</sup>

15 Robert Lowell, *Imitations* (New York: Noonday Press 1961) 23–4

Lowell somewhat flattens out the chronological progression which dramatizes the opening of Villon's own poem: past/present (line 1); present/future (duplicated in lines 2 and 3); a remoter future (line 4). Neither is 'Oh brothers' as lexically rich as 'Freres humains.' Lowell also avoids the significance of 'cuers endurcis,' which he does not translate; but he gains by using fiscal diction as a substitute. 'Revenue' anticipates the financial references in line 33, all of which contrasts with Villon's 'soudre' that is imagistically isolated in this regard. In this initial stanza, however, Lowell's most welcome change occurs with 'hangs' (line 6) which, more strikingly than the parenthetical 'Quant de la,' binds 'flesh' in predication. 'Hangs' is appropriate also for the physical state of the hanged before they arrived at the scaffold: living overfed flesh 'hangs.' Lowell, though, disregards the suggestiveness of 'pieça' (long ago), an adverb that, through its similarity to 'piecette,' deftly introduces hints of the latter word into the moving story about disintegration.

In the second stanza the English imitation directly conflates the spectators and judges whereas in the indirection and subtlety of Villon, there is at least a partial distinction between the spectators and those who dispatched the hanged 'Par justice.' For 'vous sçavez,' Lowell employs 'you see,' which as an ocular word enhances the spectacular vertical pun in line 15 – the descending notion in 'look down' contrasts with the physically elevated position of the hanged above the on-lookers. But whereas Villon indirectly asks pity of Christ, the American poet engages an elaborate addressee and in doing so, bypasses the punful complexity of 'ame' as a referent to a whole person, *body* and soul. Furthermore, Lowell's 'hell' falls short, perhaps, of the meteorological epithet 'L'infemale foudre,' which accords poetically with the climatological torment of the corpses.

Villon's third stanza also stands apart from its subsequent rendering. Lowell's 'beards and hair' contrasts with the more specific 'barbe et les sourcis,' 'sourcis' being poetically apt as a preparation for the miniature thimble allusion; again 'knives' lacks the fineness of 'dez a couldre.' Differing from the original, Lowell hints at the cross in 'Our chains clank north, south, east and west.' But in doing so, the modern version simplifies the fittingly complicated and inverted syntax which Villon utilizes in lines 26–8 to 'imitate' the twisting motion of the wind.

In the envoi Lowell fails to emulate Villon's rhymes, whose subtlety may be conveniently discovered in the context of William Wimsatt's essay, 'One Relation of Rhyme to Reason.'<sup>16</sup> Wimsatt assails narrow judgements about rhyme which 'can spring only from a limited view of rhyme as a form of

16 William Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon* (Louisville: University of Kentucky Press 1954) 153–66

phonetic accuracy, complexity, and variety – in other words, from a failure to connect rhyme and reason.<sup>17</sup> ‘Rhyme,’ Wimsatt readily grants,

is commonly recognized as a binder in verse structure. But where there is need for binding there must be some difference or separation between the things to be bound. If they are already close together, it is supererogatory to emphasize this by the maneuver of rhyme. So we may say that the greater the difference in meaning between rhyme words the more marked and the more appropriate will be the binding effect.<sup>18</sup>

Now, although ‘*Les deux mots, seigneurie, maistrerie* avaient d’ailleurs une grande affinité de sens et s’employaient souvent l’un pour l’autre,’<sup>19</sup> the two words create a field of fine tension for they relate differently to Christ: *maistrerie* being one of His attributes whereas *seigneurie*, being a notional pun on *Seigneur*,<sup>20</sup> is identical with Him; in a sense, the two synonyms differ as *avoir* and *être*. Contrasting with these nuanced distinctions are *souldre* and *absouldre*, which in themselves are antonymous and yet identical in root and rhyme. Briefly, then, in the conclusion of his poem, Villon shows himself as a virtuoso in rhyme.

‘Hell’s powers’ (line 32) does not have the semantic range of ‘*Enfer*,’ which may mean eternal punishment, the demonic forces operating in hell and earth, and hell as a place. Accordingly, ‘*ici*,’ though primarily an expletive, may certainly be considered in terms of its spatial overtones; in other words, the penultimate line may be considered as a generalizing indication or as a *localized* exhortation. Lowell’s imitation does not have this polysemy nor the profundity of the mediaeval poet’s penultimate line. By nature of its firmness, ‘*icy n’a point de mocquerie*’ is also a type of subdued imperative addressed simply to men.<sup>21</sup> By the end of his poem, Villon, as opposed to Lowell, has succeeded in displaying and rallying behind the human condition; ‘*Vous nous voiez*’ have been extended into ‘*Hommes*.’

Perhaps the most drastic change presented by Lowell is located in overall internal rhetoric. From the beginning, the French poet’s ‘*tous nous*’ is spelled out as ‘*yours and ours*,’ thus eliminating a dramatic evolution and

17. *Ibid.*, 163

18. *Ibid.*, 164

19. Thuasne, *Villon, Œuvres* III 602

20. The rhetorical term ‘notation’ denotes a verbal punning based on a word’s own components.

21. With respect to penultimate lines, we may note a subtle progression from the subjunctive of line 9 to the indicative or subjunctive of ‘*harie*’ (pointed out by Kuhn, p 455), to the imperative of line 29, to the indicative-imperative of line 34.

extension of a pronominal ambiguity.<sup>22</sup> That is to say, in 'La Ballade,' 'tous nous' incorporates references to the first (the hanged), second (the spectator), and third person (all mankind), which come variously to the fore in the first three refrains and, in the fourth, are all primary denotations. Yet Lowell introduces a wonderful complexity of his own. As the last two lines of the poem indicate, Villon is not one of the speakers, as he is referred to in the third person. However, since the whole poem is in quotation marks, the fictional scene makes us understand that the envoi is not the creation of the hanged but rather of Villon himself. *Within* the fiction of Lowell's poem, therefore, we have a complication in the speaker: Villon as writer of the epitaph employs the hanged as his own persona and voice. This very use of quotation, of typography, so highlighted in McLuhan's theoretics, reveals 'Villon's Epitaph' as a specific product of the twentieth century and its hyper-awareness of the demarcation between visuality and aurality. Yet another capital distinction must be made. Throughout the major part of Villon's lyric, the speakers directly implore the spectators to pray ('priez Dieu'). But in the beginning of the envoi, the speakers pray directly to Christ. Their subsequent entreaty for man to pray takes on all the more force for they are now eliciting a mimesis – 'priez, priez comme nous les pendus venons de faire' (lines 31–3). Again, this charitable entreaty (lines 34–5), following hard upon a charitable prayer (lines 31–3), shades off into a prayer itself. By contrast, Lowell drops such an imperative attempt to persuade via mimesis; his envoi ends disarmingly with an indicative: 'Villon ... prays God to save your souls and ours.'

'France' is an adaptation in the most radical sense of the word. Notwithstanding lines 1 and 10 and also the general indebtedness of lines two to seven to the third stanza of 'La Ballade des Pendus,' Lowell writes an imposingly independent poem:

France

(From the gibbet)

My human brothers who live after me,  
See how I hang. My bones eat through the skin

22 Considered as a whole, Villon's envoi deserves as much attention as the widely quoted third stanza. The consummate art of the refrain and the pronominal fractionalization in the first two lines of the envoi, though, depend for poetic force upon the entire poem. As such, the envoi defies Matthew Arnold's use of touchstones or isolated lines as a comparative means to evaluate all poetry. (See Arnold's last important pronouncements on poetics, contained in his essay 'The Study of Poetry,' published in 1880.)

And flesh they carried here upon the chin  
 And liping clutch of their cupidity;  
 Now here, now there, the starling and the sea  
 Gull splinter the groined eyeballs of my sin,  
 Brothers, more beaks of birds than needles in  
 The fathoms of the Bayeux Tapestry:  
 'God wills it, wills it, wills it: it is blood.'  
 My brothers, if I call you brothers, see:  
 The blood of Abel crying from the dead  
 Sticks to my blackened skull and eyes. What good  
 Are *lebensraum* and bread to Abel dead  
 And rotten on the cross-beams of the tree?<sup>23</sup>

This sonnet, with a Petrarchan rhyme-scheme marking its octet, has an interesting logical organization. The initial request is that human brothers see *physically*; then follows a series of pictorial exempla. In the second major direct address, humans are asked to see in a *visionary* way; then follow two exempla based chiefly on biblical typology. The diptych structure of the poem is not a rigid one: iconic imagery typical of the Old Testament spans both sections; the ninth line which syntactically belongs to the preceding verses belongs ideologically more so to the subsequent ones, etc. Lowell's artistic avoidance of exclusive compartmentalization recalls the logical scheme of 'La Ballade des pendus.' There, cutting across the relatively egocentric first two stanzas and the last two allocentric ones is a pattern in which stanzas one and three are typified by physical detail spelled out in exempla whereas stanzas two and four are characterized relatively by a number of spiritual notes expressed in exhortatory form.

Lowell's speaker, unambiguously in the first person singular, is dramatically given to tropical expression.<sup>24</sup> 'Bones' are personified – they *eat* through the skin and flesh which they *carried* upon the chin and upon the

23 Robert Lowell, *Lord Weary's Castle and the Mills of the Kavanaughs* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World 1946)

24 Incidentally, this predilection for tropical discourse is also quite noticeable in Lowell's adaptation, *Racine's Phèdre* (London: Faber and Faber 1961). The famous 'C'est Vénus toute entière à sa proie attachée' becomes 'naked Venus was clawing down her victim'; Lowell's Phèdre comments in striking personification and simile: 'Rebellion, sick with wrongs./now like a sea-beast, lifts its slimy prongs,/its muck, its jelly' (II.v.584ff); Thésée's declaration is quite un-Racinian: 'wave on wave/of roaring nothingness shall be his grave' (IV.II.1044ff). (Because Lowell's text, which is not linearly numbered, offers a rendering for every speech but not for every line in the original, I have linearly situated the adapted passages in terms of the French play.) Cf. also the renditions of I.I.8ff; I.I.52ff; I.III.269ff; II.II.524ff; II.V.670ff; III.III.869ff; IV.II.1114ff, and V.VI.1498ff. Understandably, Lowell did not even attempt to translate 'Le jour n'est pas plus pur que le fond de mon cœur.'

lips. The epithet 'clutching lips' is reversed into a superb metaphor featured in an appropriate labial or 'lipping' action kinesthetically 'imitated' by a succession of labial and explosive consonants: *And lipping clutch of their cupidity.*' In line with the marine aura of sea gull and fathom or nautical measure of six feet, Lowell employs the starling. A second meaning of starling (the enclosure of close piling, as around the pier of a bridge), though not syntactically fitted into the poem, lends an appropriate marine connotation to the starling as bird.

One of the most noteworthy instances of artistry in 'France' centres around the expression 'sea gull.' The visually acute Lowell, writing five centuries after the invention of the printing press, typographically mirrors his thought by 'splintering' sea gull into two lines, thereby visualizing the disjunction semantically conveyed in 'Now here, now there.' 'Groined' or vaulted puns on the anatomical groin, whose erotic connotations are intensified with the sexual hint in 'eyeballs.' By this verbal sleight-of-hand Lowell effects a shuttling of sin from an ocular to a genital location. In 'groined,' furthermore, we have a type of intersection or vault where lateral internal rhymes partially dovetail: Gull splinter the groined eyeballs of my sin.' The heavy ellipsis or 'splintered' syntax of line 7 thrusts brothers and birds into an oppositional relationship and establishes a semantic association between them; indeed, both the brothers and birds have tormented the condemned man.

That bloody succession to Edward (c. 1002–60), the last Anglo-Saxon king of England, is the subject of the famous Bayeux Tapestry.<sup>25</sup> By mentioning it, Lowell extends the social and brotherly injustice of his poem to political and international levels. The marvelous tricolon that follows is a linguistic curiosity: 'God wills it' (massacre, *bleeding*). The fourth 'it' hovers between being an expletive and a pronominal referent, a hovering partially mirrored in the metonymic double-sidedness of 'blood.' Destruction of life is described by a series of 'splinterings': elliptical syntax, the dichotomizing semantics of metonymy, and the dislocated, unusual use of four pronouns before their referent. The fourth pronoun itself has a double or split linguistic function in pointing back to the three previous 'its' and forward to 'blood.'

The conditional 'if' underlines the use of 'brothers' as an indication of both consanguine and amical relationship. Be as it may, the term is an ironical misnomer for killers, fratricidal or not. The exhortation for them to *see* is issued jarringly and ironically from a sightless speaker. Furthermore, the speaker does not even have eyes (line 6); thus 'eyes' in line 12 is a metonymic substitution of the contained for the container, for the eyesockets of the

25 For the intriguing history of this tapestry, see Frank Stenton et al, *The Bayeux Tapestry: A Comprehensive Survey*, (London: Phaidon Press 1957, rev. ed. 1965).

speaker contain the blood of Abel. Through such Christian references as blood, bread, cross, and tree, the speaker is allied with Christ, who was also killed by his brothers. There is an added connection between Abel's crying from the dead (Genesis 4.10), the lamenting abandoned Christ, and the speaker who forsakenly 'cries' the poem itself. The Shakespearean trick of tightening and binding a poetic line via a linearly polarized tension is duplicated in line 13 (*leben* and dead). Here Lowell's protagonist is placed in a modern context, for *lebensraum* (an area necessary for the life of an individual or state) was a concept fully advertized and exploited in Nazi propaganda. No bread can profit the rotting corpse, whose death lies within the scheme of a blood-exacting God. Along with Verdi's Iago, he could well say, 'Credo in un dio crudel' (*Otello* II. ii).

Much of 'France's' power arises from the implications of its panhistorical scope, extending from Genesis through the New Testament and up to the mediaeval period and on to the twentieth century. Again, because of the resonant references in the Bayeux Tapestry, *lebensraum*, and the poem's title and date which point to a contemporary 'France' ravaged by world war, the biblical familial fratricide initiates a continuum which includes international fratricide – murder among the brotherhood of nations. The overt subject of the poem then is a mock brotherhood, a fratricide not only familial or international but *familial* and international; mankind is one family. The primary identification of the speaker is twentieth-century France, a modern type of Abel, Christ, and mediaeval embattled nation; the fact, however, that the fault of cupidity (line 4) is attached to the personification of modern France distinguishes it from its biblical types, Abel and Christ. The primary addressee consists of modern Cains – other twentieth-century nations, including the persecutor Germany.

In another and rather oblique sense, the subject of the poem is alienation, both outer and inner. The enemy is other, the speaker is alone – even his own body seems hostile. Lowell has pushed T.S. Eliot's famous dissociation of sensibility into a dissociation of physicality itself: 'My bones eat through the skin.' The speaker's integral identity is reduced to a cry, a cry seemingly opposed by the forces of nature (line 5–7), his own body (line 2–4), cruel mankind, and an abandoning God. Via the particular focus wrought by rhetorical criticism, a multitude of nuances and complexities in 'La Ballade des pendus' is brought clearly into view – the evasive and many-sided nature of the voice; the identity of the addressee and, in the refrain, its development into a first person referent; and, most significantly, the intricate relation between the voice and addressee within the framework of persuasion.

Indeed, the detailed study of translation is of utmost importance in what may be called comparative poetics, dealing in part with the radical untranslatability of any poem. The tools of such a comparative poetics are necessar-

ily multiple: to name a few, phonology, morphology, lexicography, and the indispensable higher level criticism, including rhetorical.

It is Lowell's 'France,' at any rate, that serves as a spectacular and highly precious *mise-en-relief* for the structures used by Villon. Contrary to the simple diction of 'La Ballade des pendus,' the verbal world of 'France' is one of density and tropical complexity. The two poems, verbally so distinct, highlight the differences of each other in the sense that extremes are the best points of reference for their mutual orientation. This is all the more so true since in 'France,' despite its undeniable autonomy, exactly half of the fourteen lines are traceable to 'La Ballade des pendus.' Nevertheless all the lines in Lowell's sonnet take on an extraordinary new nature and definition, and to an extent require a new critical approach. One might nearly say that in 'France' the identity of the voice devolves from the intricacy of its tropes and figurative language. Such distinctive poetry offers a reading experience which stands off entirely from the type we have in reading 'La Ballade des pendus,' whose richness derives centrally from its internal rhetoric or voice-addressee situation. Surely there is ample evidence of figurative language in Villon's work, but nevertheless it owes much of its life to the multi-dimensional and dramatic structure of its voice and addressee. Due to this fact, the following line, which out of context is banal in its meaning and diction, is actually replete with irony and verbal resonance: 'N'ayez les cuers contre nous endurcis.' In other words, there tends to be a reflexive and centripetal movement actuated by tropical intricacy whereby the tropes themselves lie at the core of interest. This is typified in Lowell's 'France.' On the other hand, in certain poetry of relatively simple language there tends to be an extensive and centrifugal movement moving out from the diction toward its informing principles: the voice and addressee. This is typified in Villon's 'La Ballade des pendus.'

*Outremont, Quebec*