

Trapped Within His Tormented Self :
The Early Poetry of Robert Lowell

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要 約

自己苦悩の窮境：ロバートローウェルの初期の詩

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ロバート・ローウェルは、激しい個人的な感情と経験を詩に表現する必要を心の中で感じていた極端に主題的な立場をとった詩人であった。しかし、教育や文学的鍛錬によって、詩における客観性と非個人性を力説するニュークリティシズム（新批評）の教義を認めるようになった。その結果として、詩人としての生涯の初期にこれらの重圧のもとでローウェルが書いた詩は、過度に損なわれている。その後、米国における〈告白体〉の詩の到来とともに、ローウェルは自由に自伝風の詩を書いたが、心の動揺のために様々な点で抑圧されたものになっている。

We poets in our youth begin in gladness
But thereof comes in the end despondency and madness.

---William Wordsworth

Perhaps it is an indictment of the age we live in that, compared to the poets of the past, the modern poet seems to have missed the element of 'gladness' in his life, and has been mired in 'madness' almost all through his or her life. This seems to have been particularly true of the so-called "confessional" poets like Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath and Ann Sexton, among others, each of whom suffered bouts of some kind of 'madness' most of their lives, and the subject of their poetry was generally related to their searing personal experiences. Such poets have received much critical acclaim and recognition, and Robert Lowell is arguably the most highly regarded among them. He won his first Pulitzer Prize at the age of thirty and went on to win two more before his untimely death at the age of sixty. While he was still alive, Richard Poirier pronounced that "Robert Lowell is, by something like a critical consensus, the greatest American poet of the mid-century, probably the greatest poet now writing in English" (qtd. in Axelrod *The Critical* 1). When Lowell was asked why he thought he was esteemed as a poet by his readers, he said : "It may be that some people have turned to my poems because of the very things that are wrong with me. I mean the difficulty I have with ordinary living, the impracticability, the myopia" (qtd. in Hamilton 309). One obvious implication of this is that the modern reader, because he is similarly situated, can empathize with Lowell's predicament. If this is true then the disturbing possibility emerges that not only life in modern times has drastically changed for the worse but also that the whole idea of the poet and poetic function has undergone unprecedented transformation. A study of Lowell's early poetry would seem to confirm this suspicion.

Though Lowell has been widely regarded as a "confessional" poet *par excellence*, he himself realized before long that this kind of poetry had its limitations. In an interview given in 1961, he remarked :

I feel I haven't gotten down all my experiences, or even perhaps the most important part, but I have said all I have inspiration to say, and more would just dilute. So that you need something more impersonal, and other things being equal, *it's better to get your emotions out in a Macbeth than in a confession* (italics added). Macbeth must have tons of Shakespeare in him. We don't know where, nothing in Shakespeare was remotely like Macbeth, yet he somehow gives the feeling of going to the core of Shakespeare. You have much more freedom that way than you do when you write an autobiographical poem (246).

But at the same time he tried—contradictorily—to justify his kind of autobiographical poetry by

aligning it with history (*pace* Aristotle) :

... If a poem is autobiographical—and this is true of any kind of autobiographical writing—you want the reader to say, This is true. In something like Macaulay's *History of England*, you think you're really getting William III. That's as good as a good plot in a novel. And so there was always that standard of truth which you wouldn't ordinarily have in poetry—the reader has to believe he was getting real Robert Lowell. (256-7)

Two points need to be made here. One is that though Lowell was aware of the higher impersonal kind of poetry as exemplified in Shakespeare, he himself could not write at that level : according to his biographer, Ian Hamilton, in his last volume of poems *Day By Day* "there are moments when Lowell calls into question his whole 'Way of writing' ; he envies the imaginers, the myth-makers, the fabulists or even those 'like Mallarme who had the good fortune / to find a style that made writing impossible'" (471). Secondly, he betrays the doubtful poetic assumption of his generation that it is a legitimate poetic aim on the part of a poet to reveal his *real* self in his poetry. This goes with the presumption that the reader *would* be interested in the *real* self of the poet, in this case, the *real* Robert Lowell.

An examination of his early poems clearly suggests that Lowell's lowering of sights and his absorption in his painful, and often humiliating personal experiences were the results not so much of choice on his part as of the nature of his personality, his family background and the cultural and literary climate of his time. Christopher Lasch has explained that a form of narcissism has pervaded the post-war American society. He argues that as people are "fast losing the sense of historical continuity, the sense of belonging to a succession of generations originating in the past and stretching into the future" (5), they tend to look inwards, become narcissistic and reject all kinds of obligations in personal and social relationships. This resultant celebration of the self is not without danger because it leads to an inability to form and nurture emotional relationships, and to a gnawing awareness of the emptiness and loneliness within. Lasch believes that this phenomenon can go some way to explaining modern man's psychological ills and ailments : his neurosis, schizophrenia and depression. Psychologists and sociologists may or may not agree with Lasch's analysis, methodology or arguments, but I think his general thesis can help us to understand the predicament of Robert Lowell, the man and the poet.

Lowell's prose autobiographical writings (gathered in his *Collected Prose*) make it clear that as a young "romantic boy" (312) he felt cheated and disillusioned as he discovered that neither his famous ancestors nor his parents amounted to much. His dismay started with his parents. Early in life, he started his "adolescent war on [his] parents" (311) because he felt that his father was spineless and his mother domineering, with her false sense of superiority. Unfortunately, it has not been uncommon, at least in the recent American literary history, that the father of a writer was weak and the mother domineering. Ernest Hemingway's parents fit into this description. But this fact did not seem to have the kind of negative effect on him that it had on Lowell. It is interesting that Hemingway muses on this situation through Robert Jordan in *For*

Whom the Bell Tolls. While out on the front, Jordan looked back to his father who, he says, was “just a coward and [that] this was the worst luck any man could have. Because if he wasn’t a coward he would have stood up to that woman and not let her bully him. I wonder what I would have been if he had married a different woman? That’s something you’ll never know,” and he grinned. Maybe the bully in her supplied what was missing in the other” (339). Jordan turned out to be a brave and idealistic soldier. But in the case of Robert Lowell, the antagonism and incompatibility between his parents had a profoundly negative impact on his own life and on his artistic development. His mother did not like her husband’s profession :

My mother hated the Navy, hated naval society, naval pay and the trip-hammer rote of settling and unsettling a house when father was transferred to a new station or a ship. She had been married nine or ten years and still suspected that her husband was savorless, unmasterful, merely considerate. Unmasterful—Father’s specialized efficiency lacked utterly the flattering bossiness she counted on so much from her father, my Grandfather Winslow. (316)

So her husband resigned from the Navy, only to just drift through his life :

In the twenty-two years Father lived after resigning from the Navy, he never again deserted Boston and never became Bostonian. He survived to drift from job to job, to be displaced, to be grimly and literally that old cliché, a fish out of water. He grasped and wheezed with impotent optimism, took on new ideals with each new job, never ingeniously enjoyed his leisure, never even hid his head in the sand. (316)

Consequently, the couple always quarreled and argued, and the young Lowell grew up under the clouds of his parents’ marital discord. But, curiously—and this might be regarded as a symptom of Lowell’s personal malady—far from being distressed as an ordinary child would in such a situation, Lowell seemed to have revelled in his parents’ travails : “All day I used to look forward to the nights when my bedroom walls would once again vibrate, when I would wake with rapture to the rhythm of my parents arguing, arguing one another to exhaustion” (317). In fact, he was “disappointed” on the nights when his parents did not tear each other apart in personal rancour : “I writhed with disappointment on nights when Mother and Father loved harmoniously together like cows...” (318).

It is hard to decide where the blame lay, his upbringing or his personality. In any case, it is clear that his family circumstances did not help. Perhaps they added to his troubles. He came to identify man with weakness and feebleness, and woman with domination and power. So much so that when he went to Brimmer School he wished he was a girl : “I wish I were an older girl. I wrote to Santa Claus for a field hockey-stick” (325). Inevitably, it would seem, he would become, as indeed he did become, a psychological “case.” As a teenager at St Mark’s School, Lowell was not only ungainly in physical appearance, unkempt and uncouth, but he was also mentally disturbed, indulging in violent and maniacal behaviour. His teacher there,

Richard Eberhart who was also a poet wrote a verse play, *The Crystal Sepulchre* in which he presented a tormented schoolboy whose character was based on Robert Lowell. The character was not only tormented but demonic. Lowell's mother quickly saw her son's problem, and enlisted the services of a psychiatrist, Merrill Moore whom she herself had been seeing for her "nerves" (Hamilton 28). Even after he left school and grew up, psychological ailments continued to haunt Lowell throughout his life. He was in and out of mental institutions, causing much humiliation and distress to himself, his family and friends. I would argue that his psychological state can be directly linked to the "narcissism" in his poetic personality. Put simply, despite his considerable poetic gifts, his unstable mind prevented him from distancing himself from his personal experiences for creating poetry. On the contrary, he felt the need and the urge to mainly recreate his personal ordeals in his verse.

Christopher Lasch's related point that such a 'narcissism' is the result of the breakdown of tradition, a disregard of or disenchantment with the past is chillingly confirmed by a look at Lowell's relationship with his own ancestors. He saw himself not only as a victim of his parents' unhappy relationships but also that of *their* forbears. He saw the latter as greedy, exploitive and hypocritical. His great-grandfather, from his mother's side, Mordecai Meyer "was a dark man, a German Jew-no downright Yankee, but maybe such a fellow as Napoleon's mad, pomaded son-of-an-innkeeper-general Junot, DucArbantes ; a man like George III's son, 'Pinny,' the Prince Regent" (310). And this founding father's legacy to his progeny was : "My children, my blood, accept graciously the loot of your inheritance. We are all dealers in used furniture" (344). Marjorie Perloff suggests that by presenting his family in these terms, "Lowell creates a devastating image of tradition gone sour" (98). Axelrod notices a wider implication : "The internal failure of the Lowells coincides with social change. The 'seated and rooted social order' of the Boston of Henry James's youth has given way to the collapsing civilization [which Henry] Adams foresaw in *Education*, and James himself in *The American Scene*. In the boy Lowell's nightmare, the Social Register symbolically yields to the cash register" (*Robert Lowell*, 105-6).105-6

Lowell's early poems grow out of his concern for the crumbling world around him. Given the experiences of his childhood and early manhood, it is not surprising that he sees human life in terms of gloom and despair. In the first instance, instead of expressing his personal experiences in his poetry, he tries to objectify them through religious themes, symbols and imagery. He feels that the part of the problem of the individual and the society is that religious tradition has gone sour in modern times. The title of his first volume of poems, *Land of Unlikeness* (1944) comes from a theological book by Etienne Gilson, in which the author explains that man is unhappy in the modern world because he has alienated himself from God, and because of his impiety :

Man lost his likeness to God in losing his virtues. . .the soul suffers because she no longer knows how to accomplish in joy what before the first transgression she would have done without effort. Such is the condition of those who live in the Land of Unlikeness. They are not happy there. Wandering, hopelessly revolving, in the 'circuit of the impious' those who tried this weary round suffer not only the loss of God but also

the loss of themselves. They dare no longer recognise themselves. (57-58)

These ideas form the basis of the central theme in Lowell's *Land of Unlikeness*, and, as Staples points out, he found a useful precedence in Eliot's handling of religious themes in his poetry: "The Lowell of *Land of Unlikeness* (1944), like Eliot's *The Waste Land* before him, portrays the nightmare of contemporary culture, made specifically vivid by the holocaust of World War II. It records the quest of a Christian or religious security against a background of chaos, disorder and destruction" (22). But, in the case of Lowell, he does not appear to find, nor indeed seek, "religious security" in a world of disorder. Instead, he goes on to indict people for their materialism and greed, and religion is used to put them in sharp relief against the pieties that religious faith instills. In his attempt to project this vision in his poetry, he blends both religious and cultural-social traditions of New England. "Children of Light" castigates Puritan ancestors whose inhuman treatment of the native Indians showed their greed as well as their spiritual bankruptcy. He extends his perspective both backwards and forwards: he goes back to the early history of man and traces the ills of the Puritans back to the crime of Cain, and he sees their continued repercussions through the centuries, and their culmination in World War II.

But Lowell fails to maintain objectivity and soon yields to the urge to personalize this view in, for example, "At the Indian Killer's Grave." This poem is a revised version of "The Park Street Cemetery" and the purpose of the revisions seems to have been to narrow and deepen the focus on his own ancestors rather than on the Puritan forbears in general. The singular noun in the title probably refers to Lowell's maternal ancestor Josiah Winslow (1629-1680) who, as the commander-in-chief of the colonial army, emerges as the "Indian Killer" whose victory over Philip, the King of Wampanoag, had decreed the destruction of the Indians and their national identity. However, Lowell fights shy of being directly personal and mentions only Josiah's uncle and aunt John and Mary Winslow whose cenotaph, among others, is in ruins. One has the suspicion that, though he wants to condemn his ancestor he feels restrained by the demands of poetic impersonality. I suspect that this is symptomatic of the difficulties that Lowell was confronted with at this early stage in his poetic career. The poem's epigraph is taken from Hawthorne's "The Gray Champion," and it refers to the Puritan ancestors of American people in general: these pious people were "the veterans of King Philip's War, who burned villages and slaughtered young and old, with pious fierceness, while the godly souls throughout the land were helping them with prayers." In contrast to Hawthorne's outrage, Lowell's is only muted rage as he looks at the Puritan "heroes'" delapidated and desecrated graves which are seen as their just deserts for the atrocities that they had committed against the Indians. The graveyard where they lie is "rotten to the root," nature around it is exhausted and the surrounding lands give way to the construction of subways and drains. King Philip views all this with a mere grin, as a symbol of the erstwhile conquerors' "earthly defeat ('this people. . .will pass') and eternal damnation ('Your election. . .flutters and claws in the dead hand of time')" (Axelrod, *Robert Lowell*, 71). Lowell counts his Winslow ancestors among these defeated and damned aggressors, and he himself appears in the last section of the poem as a direct inheritor of their sins and punishment. He prays that he himself, despite his sad inheritance, may be spared his an-

cestors' "garden rotten to the root" and may instead be allowed entry into the Garden where he may be received by the Virgin :

John, Matthew, Luke and Mark,
Gospel me to the Garden, let me come
Where Mary twists the warlock with her flowers---
Her soul a bridal chamber fresh with flowers
And her whole body an ecstatic womb
As through the trellis peers the sudden Bridegroom.

Jonathan Raban, though he finds these last lines "extraordinary" in the sense that they are forced, justifies them on the grounds that their "very implausibility becomes a celebration of the miracle of the divine order" (165). I think Philip Hobsbaum is more to the point when he explains that the "note of hope" in Lowell's lines "is glibly achieved" and that, in fact, it conceals "inner tragedy" (21). The "inner tragedy" is, of course, caused by Lowell's recognition that as a descendant of cupidinous and violent forefathers he must share their guilt. This was, consciously or unconsciously, the centre of the poem, but in his attempt to distance himself from his real emotions, he ended up writing a poem in which his focus is blurred and the conclusion is rhetorical and unconvincing.

Lowell did not realize, at this youthful stage of his poetic career, that the precepts of New Criticism that he was espousing and the tenets of 'Modernism' which he was admiring in the poetry of the likes of Eliot and Pound were not conducive to the kind of poetry he was intending to, and in some ways, *had* to write. His poetic personality, it appears, needed to handle deeply personal and autobiographical experiences (which often turned out to be of a violent and disturbing nature). The poetry that he wrote at this time suggests that he was incapable of using the instruments of 'Modernist' poetic theories and practices for transmuting his personal experiences into successful poetry. They proved to be an hindrance rather than a help, without Lowell's realizing it. He, in fact, expressed his gratitude to his youthful mentors Ransom and Tate, who had introduced him to New Criticism, for their advice on how to tame and control his turbulent energies and impulses for poetic purposes. In 1961, he wrote to Ransom :

I often doubt if I would have survived without you. I was so abristle and untamed, nor would any discipline less inspired and kind than yours have held me. (Hamilton 57)

And as late as 1974, on Ransom's death, Lowell declared :

The kind of poet I am was largely determined by the fact that I grew up in the heyday of the New Criticism. From the beginning I was preoccupied with technique, fascinated by the past and tempted by other languages. (Hamilton 57)

But this preoccupation with "technique" served merely to put a lid on his rather restricted, al-

beit intense, autobiographical subjects which alone were the poetic themes available to Lowell. For example, in "In Memory of Arthur Winslow," his grandfather's pursuit of "gold" which had driven him "to the veined and alien West," is used to symbolize the theme of materialism and exploitation in American life and history. But the technical ingenuities that Lowell deploys in order to further distance the essentially familial theme are distracting, and ultimately ineffective. As Yenser remarks, his "preoccupation with verbal patterns at the expense of natural, narrative, and even thematic elements. . . . [and his use of] proverbial phrases, dead metaphors and clichés. . ." (18) stifle his real poetic voice in the poem. Consequently, like many of Lowell's elegies, this poem becomes not a lamentation over but, oddly, a justification of, his grandfather's death and dissolution.

This Easter, Arthur Winslow, five years gone
I came to mourn you, not praise the craft
That netted you a million dollars, late
Hosing out gold in Colorado's waste,
Then lost it all in Boston's real estate.

The poem ends with the section entitled "A Prayer From My Grandfather to Our Lady." It is, significantly, not really a plea for mercy on behalf of his greedy grandfather who finds that "Hell is burned out, heaven's harps are slack." Rather, it is the poet's prayer for his own absolution from his ancestors' sins, a forgiveness that had been denied to his forefathers :

Mother, for those three hundred years or more
Neither our clippers nor our slaves reached
The haven of your peace in this Bay State :
Neither my father nor his father. Beached
On this day flats of fishy estate,
Mother, I implore
Your scorched, blue thunder breasts of love to pour
Buckets of blessing on my burning head

Until I rise like Lazarus from the dead.

It is obvious that the real protagonist in the poem is the poet's own subjective self. Its acute consciousness of its inherited sin drives the poet to impotent rage ("my burning head") on this earth and a prayer for forgiveness in heaven. However, according to the logic of the poem, such forgiveness and mercy are likely to prove as elusive to him as they were to his ancestors. It is equally clear, though apparently it was not so to the poet himself, that his highly subjective feelings and emotions were not amenable to the kind of poetic treatment that the modernists had been advocating.

It is true that in "The Quaker Graveyard at Nantucket" Lowell is more successful in his at-

tempt to write in the impersonal mystic note of T S Eliot. But, despite the general impressiveness of the poem, and the resonance of its lines, the poem as a whole is deeply flawed, and its structure rather shaky. Critics have tended to see it as an elegy in the great tradition of English elegy: "The Quaker Graveyard at Nantucket' is in a central tradition of elegy. It relates not only to 'Lycidas' and 'The Scholar Gypsy' but to Shelley's 'Adonais' and 'The Wreck of Deutschland' by Gerard Manly Hopkins" (Hobsbaum 38). However, the poem is usually seen as centrally Miltonic despite the echoes in it from the other elegies. Hugh Staples was perhaps the first to point out its affinities with "Lycidas: "

The parallels to the situation that occasioned "Lycidas" (the death of a young man to whom the poet has more than a casual yet less than intimate relationship; death by drowning; the unrecovered body) must have suggested themselves; and while at first glance it may seem presumptuous to compare the two elegies, it is clear that Lowell implicitly invites just such a comparison in the poem itself. For example, the inner sections of the poem (as originally printed in *Partisan Review*) contain 194 lines divided, like the 193 lines of "Lycidas," into a loose stanzaic structure of pentameter lines, varied by an occasional trimeter. Similarly, the stanzas vary a good deal in length. Each stanza has its own intricate rhyme scheme, repeated only in two cases (stanzas II and VII in *Lord Weary's Castle version*), yet differing from each other slightly. Like Milton, he continues the elegiac tradition by going beyond his lament to a larger consideration of contemporary and universal issues. (45)

Such technical similarities, however, would seem superficial when one realizes that on the major question of subject matter, the two poems are very different indeed. Lowell's poem has neither Milton's piercing lament over his friend's death which he saw as his personal loss, nor the religious consolation which fortified the poet to face the future with hope, "Tomorrow to fresh woods and pastures new." The theme of Lowell's poem, on the other hand, is, in Marjorie Perloff's words, "violence and destruction" (145). She is right to point out that Lowell adopts only one device used in *Lycidas* whereby Milton, like the classical elegists before him, makes a seeming digression to attack the corrupt clergy; Lowell in his poem makes it a model or precedent for his own onslaught on the Quakers for their exploitation and materialism rather than personal grief. In fact, Lowell's *central* targets are the successors of the Quakers, the likes of Warren Winslow who are found guilty of the slaughter and destruction of World War II. And when he introduces religion, he uses it to intensify such attacks. As he did in his early poems, in the present poem too Lowell sees the history of the American people as a history of sin and wickedness which was the result of their straying away from the path of religious piety. Similarly, he repeats his attempt to provide a religious alternative in "our Lady of Walshingham." But it is equally unconvincing. The affirmation of the last line, "The Lord survives the rainbow of His will" sounds hollow and rhetorical in the context of the poem's emotional tone of violence and rage. Despite all the devices that he deploys, Lowell does not succeed in hiding the urgent (personal) feelings that the poem contains: that the dead who lie in the Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket are damned, and deservedly so.

This being so, I do not think that Lowell was entirely successful in transmuting his personal feelings the way he thought Eliot had transformed *his* "most confessional passages" in *his* poetry :

The quotations [in *Four Quartets*] have other functions beside the capture of a richer and more inspired texture than the poet could sustain on his own. They vary the tone, argue for the continuity of artistic tradition, and make for a semblance of anonymity, so that even the most confessional passages appear impersonal. *Four Quartets* is something of a community product. (47)

Lowell wrote this in 1943 when he was also engaged in writing the elegy. It is, therefore, reasonable to suppose that he himself was grappling with "confessional" themes which he had vainly hoped his artistry would metamorphose into a "community product."

At this stage, however, Lowell was not so much concerned to project "the *real* Robert Lowell" as with his ancestral background which had shaped him. He became more and more obsessed with the idea that he was the inheritor of the sins of his forefathers, and this in turn made him feel bitter, angry and despondent. Both in life (through his conversion to Catholicism) and in his poetry, he sought strength in religion. But poems like "After the Surprising Conversion" and "Mr Edwards and the Spider" make it clear that Lowell was doubtful whether he could get religious forgiveness: the former poem presents a terrifying picture of Calvinistic predestination, according to which inherited sins would lead to eternal punishment, and the latter one shows how even for a good man there is little room for hope and grace. It is perhaps indicative of his psychic state that Lowell's consciousness of inherited sin and the unlikelihood of its ever being forgiven turned him to violence. And when not writing his own poems he expresses his uncontrollably violent feelings through what he himself called "imitations" [not translations] of poems by other poets in different languages (e.g. "The Soldier," "France," "1790").

Lowell moves on, though still retaining the impersonal mythical stance, to more direct themes of violence, anguish, insanity and death in *The Mills of the Kavanaghs*. He called the poem "a symbolic monologue of an insane woman". (Hamilton 126), and the bleak tone of the poem precludes even religious consolation :

Throughout the book, orthodox religious passion is viewed as either deranging ("Thanksgiving's Over") or debilitating (witness Father Turbot in "Mother Marie Therese"). The book is full of truants and delinquents, and there is no reduction in the level of self-loathing, but the Church no longer affords Lowell his symbolic armory; and without it he is—almost literally—unmanned. (Hamilton 182)

The book reveals the unhappy marriage of Ann Kavanaugh and her unsatisfactory relationship

with the Kavanaugh family by which she had been initially adopted and into which she had subsequently married. Hamilton points out that during the period in which the poem was gestated and composed, Lowell himself was undergoing marital problems with his first wife Jean Stafford, resulting in his mental breakdown (182). So it is reasonable to believe that the poet's autobiographical experiences are behind the feelings and torments that are attributed to Ann in the poem. Lowell evidently had much difficulty in impersonalising his subjective emotions. The poem is rhetorical, dense, impenetrably symbolical and not entirely coherent. This may have been partly due to the fact that Lowell was now dealing with much more personal and immediate matters in the poem. The similarities between the Kavanaughs and the different generations of Lowells are apparent: both the Kavanaughs and the Lowells share the same shameful ancestry which had exploited the native Indians—the motto of the Kavanaughs was “cut down, we flourish,” and Harry Kavanaugh was like Lowell's own father, a naval officer who had a disastrous marriage. And what is more painful, Ann, like Lowell himself, emerges as the victim of fits of insanity, black reveries, as one who longed for death. It is not surprising that *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* received generally unfavourable reviews. Even his best friends and admirers felt that Lowell did not succeed in transmuting his deeply personal experiences into achieved poetry. Randall Jarrell, a friend though he was of the poet, put this argument most forcefully in his review of the book:

The Mills of the Kavanaughs does not seem to me to be successful as a unified work of art, a narrative poem that makes the same sort of sense as a story or a novel makes. It is too much a succession of nightmares and daydreams that are half nightmare; one counts with amusement and disbelief the number of times the poem becomes a nightmare-vision or its equivalent. And these are too successfully nightmarish, so that there is a sort of monotonous violence and extremity about the poem, as if it were a piece of music that consisted of nothing but climaxes. The people too often seem to be acting *in the manner* of Robert Lowell, rather than plausibly as people act (or implausibly as real people act). I doubt that many readers will think them real; the husband of the heroine never seems so, and the heroine is first of all a sort of at a symbiotic state of the poet. (You feel, “Yes, Robert Lowell would act like this if he were a girl;” but whoever saw a girl like Robert Lowell? (691-700)

Jarrell's reading of the poem is acute not only because he saw it as an artistic failure (which many other readers did then and subsequently also) but in that he realized, with the benefit of personal acquaintanceship with Lowell, that the poem was written under the pressure of intense personal feelings and experiences from which the poet could not detach himself for the creation of an independent work of art. However, *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* is important because it marks a turning point in Lowell's poetic career: it would seem that the poem made him realise that the urgency of his personal feelings, bordering on despair, demanded a more direct expression in his poems:

Altogether, then, *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* is a confused, self-punishing, bleakly

secular performance—and a crucial one in Lowell's development. But if we can catch his "own" voice—Lowell as Lowell—in the noise of those berating female voices he invents, then it is a voice perilously close to despair. (Hamilton 186)

His "voice [of] despair" which had lain muted and muffled in Lowell's earlier poems, has become more importunate. Though it still remains stifled and wreaks havoc on the poems, in Lowell's succeeding volumes it finds uninhibited self-expression. To bring in Christopher Lasch again, Lowell is the modern American whose acute sensitiveness to the breakdown of all traditional values, spiritual as well as secular, has driven him into a state of neurosis and psychic despair. He has become a "narcissist" who "acts out" in his poetry neurotic impulses and conflicts instead of sublimating them. The emergence, at this point of the "confessional school" of poetry proved to be a godsend to him. In the 1950s and 1960s poets openly wrote about their deeply autobiographical experiences—one might say their *mental* states—and Lowell now felt free to deal with his own experiences more directly in his poetry. And in that poetic climate he won immediate recognition. When he was given the National Book Award for his "confessional" volume *Life Studies* (1959), he explained, in a draft speech, that the new kind of poetry that he and his fellow poets like Ginsberg, Berryman, Corso and Ferlinghetti were writing was an attempt to free themselves from the outdated traditional rules of poetry and metre :

The cooked, marvellously expert and remote, seems constructed as a sort of mechanical or catnip mouse for graduate seminars; the raw, jerry-built and forensically deadly, seem more often like an unscored libretto by some bearded but vegetarian Castro. (Hamilton 277)

The initial results of such freedom for self-expression were remarkable as Lowell's poems like "Man and Wife," "Skunk Hour," and "To Speak of Woe that is Marriage," among others in *Life Studies* make abundantly clear. According to M L Rosenthal, *Life Studies*

is the volume in which the poet at last 'finds himself.' He does so literally, for in most of the poems he himself and his family are at the center, and his object is to catch himself in the process of becoming himself. Equally important, in fact more, he finds himself as a stylist. For the first time he can be casual, simple, direct throughout the poem, and at the same time he can strike home more tellingly whenever he wishes. (28)

Despite his success, however, Lowell was a little uncertain about the new kind of poetry that he had plunged into. At Boston Arts Festival in June 1960, he said : "When I finished *Life Studies* I was left hanging on a question mark. I am still hanging there. I don't know whether it is a death-rope or a life-line" (qtd. in Hamilton 277). Rosenthal also pointed out the potential limitations of this kind of poetry : "To maintain indefinitely the violent pace of *Life Studies* would be to cultivate a poetry that not only repeats itself but also feed on, and encourage, suicidal madness" (76). But he had hoped [in 1967] that Lowell would move on from this "impermanent but indispensable phase" (78). Allen Tate, however, was not so sure. Though he found some poems

in that volume “sharp and even brilliant,” he felt that Lowell’s obsession with extremely personal subject-matter did not augur well for his artistic and poetic present and, by implication, future. He wrote to him :

all the poems about your family, including the one about you and Elizabeth, are definitely bad. . .the poems are composed of unassimilated details, terribly intimate, and coldly noted, which might well have been transferred from the notes from your autobiography without change.

. . .Quite bluntly, these details, presented *in causerie* and at random, are of interest only to you. They are, of course, great interest to me because I am one of your oldest friends. But they have no public or literary interest. (qtd. in Hamilton 237)

More correctly, indeed prophetically, Tate wondered whether “these loose self-centered poems” were not indicative of Lowell’s being “on the brink of another manic episode,” a supposition which Hamilton thinks proved to be “uncannily” right (237-8). Undaunted, or perhaps inevitably, given his personality and background, Lowell went on writing “self-centered” poems. Though he tried, at times, to write impersonal / mythical poems in volumes like *Imitations* (1961), *Phedra* (1961) and *Prometheus Bound* (1969), his central inclination was self-expression, a motivation which became openly insistent in *Notebook 1967-68* (1969) and *Notebook* (1970). The final impression that Lowell’s total output gives is that his poetry grew out of, and fed on, his manic state and his mental tensions and conflicts. This sad and unfortunate poetic tendency culminated in the poems of his last but one volume, *The Dolphin* (1973), in which he used private letters and conversations in such a manner that it caused much pain not only to his friends, relatives and to himself but also to his literary admirers and advisors. Allen Tate’s charge that Lowell’s *Life Studies* poems were “composed of unassimilated details, terribly intimate, and coldly noted” can be applied still more legitimately to the poems in *The Dolphin*. Adrienne Rich, who had been a friend of Lowell’s, was outraged by his use of personal material, involving his ex-wife, their daughter and his new wife, and she questioned Lowell’s very artistry :

What does one say about a poet who, having left his wife and daughter for another marriage, then titles a book with their names, and goes on to appropriate his ex-wife’s letters written under the stress and pain of desolation, into a book nominally addressed to his new wife? If this kind of question has nothing to do with art, we have come far from the best tradition Lowell would like to vindicate-or perhaps it cannot be vindicated. . . .The inclusion of the letter-poems stands as one of the most vindictive and mean acts in the history of English poetry, one for which I can think of no precedent : and the same unproportioned ego that was capable of this act is damagingly at work in all three [*History, For Lizzie and Harriet, The Dolphin*] Lowell’s books. (43).

Apparently, Lowell had been resorting to such invasions of privacy in his earlier writings too.

Hamilton records that Lowell's publisher Robert Giroux had told him that in his "To Speak of Woe that is Marriage," Lowell had "made use of private letters or conversation" (434). That was in *Life Studies* in 1959. Hamilton has gone on to show that in the *Notebook* poems also Lowell freely borrowed, and on occasions bodily lifted, excerpts from privately written memoirs and correspondences. He himself did not think anything wrong with this practice, and in fact he published a short poem, "The Next Dream," which is entirely enclosed within quotation marks, it being a verbatim rendering of Lowell's mother's "note-book written in 1937" (Hamilton 385). What is involved in all this is not only the ethical question about the impropriety of the use of private material but also an aesthetic one of the effect that his "unproportioned ego" had on his artistic creation. In the first place, it (his "unproportioned ego") was the cause as well as the effect of mental illnesses that Lowell suffered from throughout his life. Philip Hobsbaum gives almost a clinical diagnosis of this illness :

Robert Lowell was afflicted with a manic depressive illness, in his time known as cyclothymia. At least from the age of thirty-two, the period of his first hospitalization, he was subject to yearly cycle of moods that reached its crisis each December, or sometimes January. The symptoms included hyperactivity, extreme verbosity, pressure of speech, grandiosity, manipulativeness, euphoria, hypersexuality, threatening behaviour and religiosity. (144)

This had a dire effect on the poetry that he wrote. He became "narcissistic" and *used* poetry for self-expression for therapeutic effects. This resulted in the severe curtailment of his poetic achievement in the sense that he remained a prisoner of his own self and was unable to relate (in his poetry at any rate) his experiences, traumas and psychic bouts to the world outside.

That Lowell was a man of great poetic ability can hardly be disputed. But that ability, though it produced some of the best post-war poems in English (e.g. "For the Union Dead," "Skunk Hour," "Waking Early Sunday Morning," "Mr Edwards and the Spider"), was crippled by his personal make-up and peculiar personality. He ended up by writing poetry the bulk of which is of so personal a nature that even for a basic understanding of it, "footnoting" was required. While reviewing his last volume, *Day By Day* (1977) in *The New York Times Book Review*, Helen Vendler remarked :

There is no denying that these poems...need footnoting. One has to know (from previous works) his reading, his past and present and one has to reconstruct the scenario behind the book—Lowell's life in Kent, his hospitalization in England, his wife's sickness, their temporary stay in Boston, their separation, a reconciliation, a further rupture, a parting in Ireland, Lowell's return to America.

Lowell's poetry circles round his extremely private and alien world, the hallmarks of which are bitterness, acrimonies, violence and depression. It operates within a severely narrow range. Consequently, (one may say, inevitably) there is repetition and "dilution" in his poetry. As I had

noted earlier, Lowell had remarked in 1961 that he had said all he had the inspiration to say about his autobiographical experiences, and that "more would just dilute." The poetry that he wrote during the next sixteen years until his death does not alter the picture much (though he did occasionally produce some remarkable individual poems). He acted and re-enacted his tensions and conflicts with masochistic intensity.

In one of his last poems, poignantly titled "Unwanted," Lowell says, "Alas! I can only tell my story." In the light of his attempt to broaden his vision in his early poems, this admission of failure might be attributed to his "unbearable psychic wound" (Axelrod, *Robert Lowell*, 238) which forced him to write "confessional" rather than achieved subjective poems. One may wonder why was it that Lowell was so handicapped by the personal nature of his subject-matter when throughout the history of literature writers have used personal experiences in their works. Philip Sidney's Muse had advised him to "look into thy heart and write." Succeeding English poets who were more inclined to see life in terms of their own have followed, one way or another, Sidney's Muse's advice. In our times, after the "modernist" revolution in poetry for which he had no taste, Philip Larkin is on record as saying that he felt relieved from the oppression of the contemporary poetic demands on discovering the poetry of Thomas Hardy's poems which gave him the confidence to go no farther than his own life for poetic themes: "When I came to Hardy it was with a sense of relief that I didn't have to jack myself up to a concept of poetry that lay outside my own life—this is perhaps what I felt Yeats was trying to make me do. One could simply relapse back into one's own life and write from it (175).

Lowell's background made that impossible. He was born earlier than Larkin and he grew up during the heyday of the "modernist" poetry and New Criticism. The above discussion would demonstrate that he was more disposed to write more subjectively but felt that he must write "objective" poetry in the "modernist" manner. The influential American poets like Pound and Eliot were the great champions of "impersonality" in poetry. It was they who started the "modernist" revolution in poetry. But Graham Hough thought that this revolution was based on a misconception. The conception was that the unprecedented events of World War I required a new approach to literature, a new subject-matter, a new technique. Hough went on to characterize this new literary revolution as "a revolution of... technique" (78) and declared that these "modernist" writers were "not the transmitters of the most rigorous poetic life of our time. Perhaps the authentic torch has been borne by writers of a more traditional cast—shall we say, by Robert Frost, Robert Graves and E M Forster"? (7). One may add the name of Lawrence in the list who, not only because of his background but also because of deep conviction, had nothing to do with the new literary / critical trends so that he could write out of his own experiences without being too narrowly personal.

Robert Lowell, on the other hand, was hampered by both his upbringing and education which led him to choose the "modernist" rather than the traditional poetic strategies. And it is apparent that his peculiar autobiographical subject-matter refused to be governed by them. What he might have achieved if he had followed the traditional manner is a futile and irrele-

vant speculation. The fact of the matter is that Lowell's subject-matter is unprecedented in literature. He was a typical product of the post-war narcissistic society in America. He, who by his own admission, experienced difficulty "with ordinary living" and who was a victim of his psychic urges which forced him to act out rather than sublimate his deepest feelings and tensions. The need for self-expression left no room for self-examination or self-exploration. This being the case, I think it is right that his poetry should be described as "confessional" rather than autobiographical. However, the word, in this context, should be understood to have no religious connotations because Lowell does not "confess" in the hope of forgiveness. His "confession" is that of a psychiatric patient (in his case, one with potentially impressive poetic gifts) who feels the impulsive need to express himself. We do indeed know "the *real* Robert Lowell" from his poetry, but we remain curiously uninvolved and unscathed. We seldom feel that we are fellow-sufferers with Lowell : we remain only spectators who feel only sympathy for what we are witnessing and watching. Philip Larkin's comments on the other "confessional" American poet Sylvia Plath can also be applied to Lowell : "How valuable they [Plath's poems] are depends on how highly we rank the expression of experience with which we can in no sense identify, and from which we can only turn with shock and sorrow" (281).

As for the "popularity" of Lowell as a poet, the age in which we live can offer the uncomfortable explanation : our age perversely thrives on sickness, violence, disease and death. It is symptomatic of our times that the Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel, who has made the Holocaust his life's preoccupation, feels that the "real" description of horror is far superior to any fictional treatment of it. He had written a review of Jerzy Kosinski's Holocaust book "The Painted Word" for the *New York Times* but changed and wrote a more favourable account after he learnt that it was based on real experiences. He explained what made him give greater credit to the author than he had originally intended to do : "I thought it was fiction," he wrote, "and when he told me it was autobiography, I tore up my review and wrote one a thousand times better" (47).

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