

The Poetry of Robert Lowell: A Preface

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It would be an exaggeration to say that critics have already exhausted every aspect of Lowell's poetry, so that later critics must search in vain for subjects for their research on Lowell. But Steven Axelrod's *Robert Lowell: A Reference Guide*(1983) proves that a great number of books and articles have been written on Lowell, and that they have ransacked almost all the corners of Lowell's life and poetry. On the other hand, the shelves of Lowell criticism make it clear that the general mystery of Lowell's art—how Lowell manages to transform idiosyncratic personality and private experiences in the super-industrialized society into compelling art, a poetry which strikes deep in such a varied audience—is very hard to penetrate. Unless we can locate clear, coherent, valid principles at the center of his art, all efforts to speak of Lowell in the usual ways—discussions on his alienation from the society, dynamic ambivalence, apostasy, Calvinism, literary inheritance, discovery of "confessional" mode, etc.—may evaporate in time.

The large, lingering mystery of Lowell's poetry has been pondered from several angles. Some critics are intent on recounting Lowell's biographical materials, which provide no complete recipe for successful poetry. Some have discussed the relationship between Lowell's Puritan heritage and his poetry, but they have relatively ignored the impact of modern capitalistic society, founded on Calvinistic principles,¹⁾ on Lowell's consciousness and on the shaping of his poetry. Lowell critics should understand what precisely Puritanism has to do not only with the ideas in the verse but also with the verse itself. Some discussions (especially Axelrod's) stress Lowell's great awakening at the hands of William Carlos Williams,²⁾ whose plain language and open forms taught Lowell the chief stylistic lesson of his career; but this approach cannot resolve the dilemma resulting from the fact that Williams is basically a modernist poet and thus the essence of his poetry has to do with the effacement of the poet-ego and the transcendence of subject-object separations. It leaves unanswered a cardinal question of how Williams's poetics

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- 1) For example, Jerome Mazzaro, "Robert Lowell's Early Politics of Apocalypse," in *Modern American Poetry* ed. J. Mazzaro (New York: David McKay, 1970), pp.321-50. This essay studies the impact of Lowell's early political and religious beliefs on his early poetry. The author exposes the influence on Lowell of such Christian, antidemocratic thinkers as Christopher Dawson and T.S. Eliot who detected in the militarism and materialism of the twentieth century the commencement of an inevitable process leading to apocalypse.
 - 2) Steven G. Axelrod, *Robert Lowell: Life and Art* (Princeton: Princeton Uni. Press, 1978), 86-97.

can work for Lowell, whose poetry demands the presence of an ego, a consciousness, however disintegrated the forms it takes, and for whom permanent barriers between self and world are an overriding theme. Finally, many critics have referred to Lowell as a primary exponent of "confessionalism," and argued its precursors, merits, and pitfalls,³⁾ but they have not paid much attention to the causation of the growth of that mode of poetic expression as an inevitable medium to accommodate the post-modern existential experience. A poetic tradition does not generate spontaneously; there is, I believe, an exact cause, most probably derived from the shift of the relationship between the self and the cultural forces. A simple glance at the history of American poetry will prove it. The objective of my preface is to attempt to explain the inevitability of the emergence of an appropriate poetic medium—in this case, "confessionalism"—to express the shift.

Critics have said much about Lowell's survival urge⁴⁾ in a highly mechanized modern society, and about the therapeutic role of poetry in Lowell's life, and have also said much about his stylistic changes⁵⁾ to survive as a "strong poet," in Harold Bloom's terms. But they have paid little, if any, attention to the fact that the poet's perceptual mode of the world is totally different from that of his predecessors, even from that of the modernists, and that it has undergone change during his lifetime partly because of the particularity of his personality, and partly because of engulfing cultural forces. They have also looked over the fact that these changes are closely related to Lowell's endless stylistic experiment. William Bradford's essay "Morality of Form in the Poetry of Robert Lowell" and Wyatt Prunty's essay "Allegory to Causality: Robert Lowell's Poetic Shift" have played a seminal role in the development of ideas in this preface. Bradford argues that Lowell's formal experiment reflects not only his formal inventiveness but also his understanding of moral experience;⁶⁾ and Prunty asserts that Lowell's poetic style not only reflects his thinking but also is the primary means by which he effects thought.⁷⁾ But neither extends his ideas to deal with the relationship of Lowell's post-modern existential sensibility to the development of confessional mode in his poetry, and with the relation-

3) *ibid*, pp. 84-133. See also Robert Phillips, *The Confessional Poets* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Uni. Press, 1973), pp. 1-17.

4) M.L. Rosenthal, *The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War II* (New York: Oxford Uni. Press, 1967), pp. 26-27, 79. "The mixture of love and loathing, humor and horror, had the impact of a purely personal release...."

5) See. Marjorie Peroff, *The Poetic Art of Robert Lowell* (Ithaca: Cornell Uni. Press, 1973), pp. 80-99. The concern of this book is with form and genre. Chapters on image, theory of imitation, confessional mode, use of syntax, tone, and styles compare Lowell with Berryman and Plath.

6) William Bradford, "The Morality of Form in the Poetry of Robert Lowell," in *Ariel* Vol. 9, no. 1 (June 1978), p. 3.

7) Wyatt Prunty, "Allegory to Causality: Robert Lowell's Poetic Shift," in *Agenda* (Autumn 1980), p. 94.

ship of Lowell's emotional surrender to external social forces to the imaginative passivity in his later poetry.

The rapid development of the modern industrial society and its disastrous result in World War I forced modern thinkers and writers to look into their own unstable personalities, their collective ego diminished in comparison with that of their 19th-century predecessors. This demanded that the modernists—such as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and James Joyce—seek a shelter in a self-sufficient art of self-effacement, an anti-reality, to encounter the chaotic reality by repossessing the ordering power of the creative mind, especially the integrating power of the Metaphysicals, who have been thought to succeed in “yoking together” complex, contradictory experiences by means of such principles as unified sensibility, inclusion, synthesis, and creative imagination, and thus in achieving a “wholeness.” American writers in this period—such as Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Hart Crane, and W.C. Williams—were lucky, I think, to be writing in the wide and deep wake of American Transcendentalism, which, in some degree, could slacken the ruthlessness of the unflinching reality, or provide an imaginative power to face it. Though Frost, Stevens, Crane, and Williams also confronted a world which had lost cultural unity and religious belief, with the possible exception of Williams they would or could not extinguish personality from their poetry in a manner typical of Transcendentalists; rather they pursued a reconciliation with the world through their poetry.

The post-modern American writers' sense of spiritual dislocation was reflected in their responses to World War II, and successive political and cultural situations compelled them from time to time to look back upon the metaphysical inheritance—a belief in God's inscrutable terror and in the “power of blackness” in human mind—from the “destructive vein” of American thinkers and writers from Jonathan Edwards through Hawthorne, Melville, and Emily Dickinson, to Henry Adams and the modernists. They not only experienced a serious crisis of identity in their relation to contemporary society, but also realized, through perceiving several kinds of self-destructive urges in their own personalities, that they themselves were contributing causes of the crisis. The restlessness arising from this realization prevented them from eliminating their own ego from their poetry; it persisted in the presence in their poetry of the poet's deformed ego, which was an exact embodiment of cultural crisis. Feeling the inadequacy of the forms and values inherited from modernism to answer their own experience, a group of American poets—including Roethke, Snodgrass, Ginsberg, Lowell, Berryman, Plath, and Sexton—experimented the “confessional” mode of poetry, which transforms in a plain rather than intricate or sophisticated style what is particular and very often shameful and pathological into something universal and existential. They also attempted to mythologize themselves, not by using the “mythical method” (in Eliot's sense) of universal implications but by using the “confessional” mode. By careful selection from biographical details and occasionally by distortion, these writers have created a private myth speci-

fically calculated to bear the weight of their public vision of chaos. Among them, I believe, Lowell is the most dynamic and fruitful poet, not only suffering the birth throes of a new mode of poetic expression but also representing the full spectrum of it. Lowell's development of the "confessional" style is at once the best comment on the limits of fifties' formalism and a discovery of a definite artistic and philosophical alternative to the modernist's symbolic faith.

In his early career, Lowell, under the tutorage of such New Critics as Allen Tate and J.C. Ransom, learned and practiced their metaphysical dialectic of art and neoformalism. But the poetics primarily based on modernist symbolism, which stresses the imaginative capacity of mind rather than values inherent in experience itself,⁸⁾ was far from being an adequate medium to articulate his dark, self-accusing sensibility obtained in the morally entropic society of the contemporary America. In his earlier books—*Land of Unlikeness*, *Lord Weary's Castle*, and *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*—Lowell began his drama of selfdestruction and rebirth, making their subjects his spiritual repudiation of New England Calvinism and his artistic rejection of New England "genteel" tradition. In his juvenilia, *Land of Unlikeness*, Lowell already demonstrated the essential design of his future works, trying to define his own self through setting himself up as an apostate identity against his ancestral and artistic heritage. But those repudiations themselves caused a new tension; his newly adopted Catholicism and neoformalism in *Lord Weary's Castle* could not resolve the imminent problem engendered by his own existence in the American kind of totalitarian society. The rhetorical upheaval of his early poetry enacted this moral and metaphysical upheaval. Highly formal, tightly structured, and densely symbolic, the poems in this volume apparently come to a dramatic close that rang with the finality described in the world-ordering Catholicism. However, his true self is defined by his combinations of thundering, ironic, impersonal, and baroque styles in a single poem, with which Lowell becomes the colleague of "destructive" American writers—such as Hawthorne, Melville, Hemingway, and others—questing through the jungle of ambiguities and conflicts in metaphysical, religious, and social traditions. It was not surprising that Lowell turned to dramatic monologue in some poems of *Lord Weary's Castle* and in *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* in the manner of Tennyson and Browning; Lowell at this time, like them, was wandering about a profoundly skeptical world with its lost connections between idealism and violence, stuck in a deep familial and artistic dilemma. The modernist aesthetic and New Criticism, both of which stress the autonomy of art, finally betrayed Lowell's dislocated mind. And with this betrayal the travail for the birth of a new poetic tradition began.

In 1950s Lowell experienced "lawlessness" in his personal and in the national life.

8) William C. Williams, "Notes for Lecture at Brandeis Uni.", 1957 (Yale). recit. from Axelrod, p.91. According to Axelrod, Lowell learned from W.C. Williams about the values inherent in experience itself.

Lowell deserted his earlier pursuit for synchronic truth of human life towards diachronic meaning of it. Making classics texts of life, he defined humanity as basically evil, began to understand his Calvinistic heritage as an embodiment of it, and learned to survive human atrocity by transforming it into art. And making Freud and Sartre his "religious" and philosophical teachers,⁹⁾ he made a painful journey in his poetry to his subconscious world to recover his self lost in time. The dominant mood of *Life Studies* was anguish and anxiety, and its subject was sheer, agonized experience, with the poet's personality at the center of his poetry. Lowell desperately attempted to get a balance in his psyche which was, as in the poem "Man and Wife," in a manic violence, barely controlled by his tranquilizers and his wife's "merciless" reasonableness, by tranquilization and reasonableness which defined the Cold War decade of the American fifties. The poetic act—the meandering, nervous, and embarrassing sketch of growing up, social alienation, and his efforts to conceive the relationship between the self and the world—however, played a therapeutic role for the deranged mind, in a sense making his life meaningful. Lowell, in fear of the onslaught of madness, found a primordial life-force in nature, represented by the skunks in "Skunk Hour."

Lowell's stylistic decomposition accompanied his thematic regression. In *Life Studies* Lowell gave up the traditional assumption of art that a work of art should be self-enclosed, self-sustaining, and autonomous, and also threw away his earlier baroque formality, deciding to "walk naked." He realized not only that the modern experience had its *a priori* unfinishability, limitlessness, in nature, but also that it was impossible to substitute the anti-reality of art for the sordid reality with its general values collapsed. At that time, Lowell did not believe that he could create a bearable plane upon which to enact human existence and build a consistent scheme of values compensating for his own painful nihilism, and thus denied the circularity of artistic structure as the principle of his art. Undeniably Williams taught him how to give a form the formless flux of experience by finding the inner form inherent in experience itself. However, Lowell who failed to escape from the "unforgivable landscape" and his own neurotic displaced ego in it, could not accept as his only model Williams's Objectivist poetics which developed into Charles Olson's Projectivism—a poetic theory which locates the sources of personal value and dignity in the fields of energies where subject and object can be seen as interpenetrating each other. Lowell listened to Snodgrass's voice¹⁰⁾ discharging his sense of fate as a man who "cannot help being" and turned to his Baudelairean method of "correspondence" between inner and outer worlds. Lowell's "confessional" style was consummated when he could assimilate these influences with Bishop's naturally developing symbolism and colloquial style into his poetry. With this style which Lowell himself

9) A. Alvarez, "A Talk with Robert Lowell," in *Encounter*, p. 43.

10) Robert Lowell, "No Voices Talk to Me: A Conversation with W.D. Snodgrass," in *Western Humanities Review* Vol. 24 (1970), p. 67.

associated with sanity, he sang the movement of his ill mind back to health in the poems like "Skunk Hour."

When Lowell survived in *Life Studies* his "strange journey...clinging to spars," Lowell seemed to believe that "the City of Man" would suffice and that he was equipped to sing a public ode, to confront all the burning themes of his times; and he plunged again into the public world. In a few best poems of *For the Union Dead*—such as the title poem, "Fall 1961," and "The Mouth of Hudson"—he successfully "talked our extinction to death," in the "confessional" style which he created in the fifties. But Lowell moved progressively away from the simplicity, clarity, naturally developing symbolism, and intensity and lyricism of the open-textured poetry of *Life Studies*—which has been esteemed to express most effectively the existential experience—towards a new formalism. He recognized that he had no control over the reality in which he possessed nothing but the lunatic knowledge of his own mechanization as a conscious element in the modern society. When his own self-consciousness made him feel himself denied the human order by an mechanical order, which Jaspers has called "the preparing power of chaos," what could he do to confirm that he existed in an cosmic order? Lowell wished to retreat to the anti-reality of art and returned to a self-enclosed traditional form, asserting a belief in an imaginative order, however fragile it might be.

If in many poems of *For the Union Dead* Lowell, under an extreme emotional pressure, failed to transform his despair, futility, and guilt into art, Lowell's adoption of trimeter or tetrameter couplet in *Near the Ocean* was an effort to support his own spiritually and artistically helpless self by trying to find an appropriate form in the prearranged poetic traditions. The result was not a resolution but a conflict, between the modern experience which is linear, random, fragmentary, and open-ended in nature and the traditional poetic form which requires shape, form, and enclose. This conflict was deepened when Lowell decided to adopt the fourteen-line "sonnet" form as the container of "history," the total past in the present—the larger past of history, his flashbacks to his own past, and his response to the times. Pound's *Cantos* and Berryman's *Dream songs* provided models for an epic mission to express all the live experience into an artistic form.¹¹⁾ In some degree, the fourteen-line form gave him a freer rhythm, a more open flow of associations, and a technique of sudden alterations in tone and observations. But in the poems written in the form, there was too often the feeling of formal monotony, rhythmic inertia, a tired mechanical repetitiveness, which was a definite emblem of the poet's emotional drainage. Two *Notebook* editions, *History*, and *The Dolphin* lacked a real voice, with the absence of the poet's emotional engagement to his intellectually perceived nihilism. Lowell, with this form, became predictable as he had never been before, and failed to capture "history" in the fourteen-line blank verse, which precluded some inspired madness that has

11) About this, see my dissertation, *Stylistics of Survival in the Poetry of Robert Lowell* (Tulsa: Uni. of Tulsa, 1986), pp.126-131.

struggled against convention in his former works. But his strong will to refuse to be buried in history brought a final spark of vitality in *Day by Day*, however feeble it was. In it Lowell returned not only exclusively internal referents but also to the "confessional" poetry of most painful honesty. Here he looked back on his transformations as a poet and with a profound grief, regretted "the lying art" which could not make him "invincible." Though its tone and rhythm were baffled and exhausted, *Day by Day* in some degree recovered Lowell's earlier symbolic power, with which he was talking about his three decades' career as poet and his anachronistic efforts to allow "Poesy" to assert its excellence.