

## The Mode of Private Vision: A Study of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*

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### 1. Earlier Lowell: *Lord Weary's Castle*

*Life Studies*(1959), coming after *Land of Unlikeness*(1944), *Lord Weary's Castle*(1946), and *Mills of the Kavanaughs*(1951), marks a significant development or change in the poetry of Robert Lowell. So before we discuss *Life Studies*, which is the main subject of this paper, it would be proper to attempt to define what was the characteristic concern of earlier Lowell. For this purpose, we will start, for the span of a few pages, by concentrating on *Lord Weary's Castle*. It seems to embody the greater and surer power of vision and language than the other two.

The general impression of his earlier poems was that of agonized violence and visionary energy directed against the darker aspects of the socio-historical milieu of modern times. Lowell had been a Roman Catholic convert since his graduation from Kenyon College, and its influence had visibly worked into his poetry. He made use of many Biblical themes and images, which added to the texture of his poetry. Lowell's poetry was dramatic and colloquial, ambiguous and paradoxical, but compared with the new poems, his figures and allusions were much denser and his tone more heightened. His rather rigorous iambic pentameters were questioning in grand Apocalyptic terms the contingencies of the moment and the meanings of the particular heritage in which he lived. On the one hand, the poet just survived the great world war with his memory of serving a six-month prison term as a conscientious objector. On the other hand, he was always conscious of his being a Bostonian—his being part of the New England's puritan tradition of which his family was also an important part.

The immediate scenes of his poetic occasion were often ones with which Lowell was personally linked through memory or heritage. But his restless poetic energy was seldom confined by the purely personal; rather, it tended to reach beyond such specificity toward

the general order of things, toward human civilization at large. We find in Lowell a certain atmospheric temper akin to Eliotian generality. It is easy to notice the sceptical mind with a hardy spirit expressing doubt and negation against the status quo borrowing freely from symbols and names of Christian tradition. We also see that elemental images such as earth, air, water, rock, mud, light, and so forth often give color to the Apocalyptic landscape in many poems.

Many critics agree to read his agony and vision as belonging to the poetry of a rebel. Hugh Staples (1962:14), discussing Lowell's early poetry, has this observation:

His landscapes are filled with rubble, sewage and filth—the end products of erosion, corruption and decay. Human success, normal love, conventional beauty have no place in his vision of the modern world. At the outset, Lowell's rebellion is total.

It is significant that the first chapter of his book from which this passage is quoted is titled "A Poetry of Rebellion." Similarly, Alan Williamson's book on Lowell (1974), titled "Pity the Monster," focuses attention on the poet's political vision with chapters like "Lowell and the Discontents of Civilization" and "Vision and Violence."

Randall Jarrell (London 1976:19-20), reviewing *Lord Weary's Castle*, observes with remarkable clarity that "there is one story and one story only" underneath all the poems.

The poems understand the world as a sort of conflict of opposites. In this struggle one opposite is that cake of custom in which all of us lie embedded like lungfish—the stasis or inertia of the stubborn self, the obstinate persistence in evil that is damnation. Into this realm of necessity the poems push everything that is closed, turned inward, incestuous, that blinds: the Old Law, imperialism, militarism, capitalism, Calvinism, Authority, the Father, the "proper Bostonians," the rich who will "do everything for the poor except get off their backs." But struggling within this like leaven, falling to it like light, is everything that is free or open, that grows or is willing to change: here is the generosity or openness or willingness that is itself salvation; here is "accessibility to experience"; this is the realm of freedom, of the Grace that has replaced the Law, of the perfect liberator whom the poet calls Christ.

Later in the same review (London 1976:22), he understands Lowell's Christianity as "a kind of photographic negative of the faith of the usual Catholic convert, who distrusts freedom as much as he needs bondage, and who sees the world as a liberal chaos which can be ordered and redeemed only by that rigid and final Authority to whom men submit without question." The metaphor is appropriate and explains well the kind of liberalism under the tension between the need to rebel and the desire for order. It seems that the

urgent need for order rather than political liberalism per se motivates the cry for liberation from the unproductiveness of the established society.

Lowell finds in his own ancestry the false tradition to be negated, and his own self as part and parcel of that tradition becomes exactly the locus where the rebellion begins. The modern malaise of division of self is characteristically Lowell's.

You damned  
 My arm that cast your house upon your head  
 And broke the chimney flintlock on your skull  
 Last night the moon was full:  
 I dreamed the dead  
 Caught at my knees and fell:  
 And it was well  
 With me, my father...

These lines from "Rebellion" show one of the most violent moments in *Lord Weary's Castle*. The rebellion is self-lacerating and without excusing reserve.

We usually find the religious images more connected with menace than peace even when hope of salvation lingers. So in "Colloquy in Black Rock" which describes an extremely bleak scene where "All discussions/ End in the mud-flat detritus of death," Christ appears in the last stanza to "walk on the black water," and "the blue kingfisher dives on you in fire." The infernal last line of the first poem "The Exile's Return," which reads "...Pleasant enough,/ *Voi ch'entrate* and your life is in your hands," carries this irony so dramatically that the slim expectation of the exile's coming back home becomes overshadowed in black irony by the threat of hell.<sup>(1)</sup> Only at the end of the book are we brought to a rather sudden reconciliation, for the last poem, "Where the Rainbow Ends," ends with these lines:

What can the dove of Jesus give  
 You now but wisdom, exile? Stand and live,  
 The dove has brought an olive branch to eat.

Lowell makes use of the dramatic voice or voices. They are sometimes concrete, sometimes abstract. The dominant voice in *Lord Weary's Castle* comes through the mask of a "high altar" ("Where the Rainbow Ends") to warn the generation of this age of its

(1) "Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate" ("Abandon all hope, ye who enter") is part of the inscription over the gate of hell in Dante's *Inferno*. (Williamson's note)

barrenness. This enhanced voice, which doubts and questions the meaning of existence, help to create a sense of unity from poem to poem.

The depravity of the world "out-Herods Herod" ("The Holy Innocents") and manifests itself in "the waste / Of the great garden rotten to its roots." ("At the Indian Killer's Grave") It is the working of the past as well as the present. There is an urgent need for salvation. This awareness of the fallen world constitutes the content and limit of Lowell's rebellion. Its religious obsession may reflect, as Williamson (1974: 21-22) points out, the ambiguous nature of his early public gestures especially from a political point of view. But the gestures are pervasively serious and earnest as much as they are ambiguous and obsessed. Even the exceptionally calm and objective small piece "In the Cage," which describes the prison experience, transforms a personal predicament into an allusion to the larger human condition with these concluding lines:

It is night,  
And it is vanity, and age  
Blackens the heart of Adam, Fear,  
The yellow chirper, beaks its cage.

"The Dead in Europe" contains these lines: "O Mary, marry earth, sea, air, and fire; / our sacred earth in our day is our curse." The last stanza of "The Drunken Fisherman" begins with "Is there no way to cast my hook / out of this dynamited brook?" Such lines typically reveal the impassioned voice of a doomsday prophet in its extreme which finds the present-day world chaotic and moribund. That voice urges, through earnest prayers rather than ideological programs, to restore order. We may safely say that public gestures in early Lowell were basically metaphysical rather than political.

## 2. The Structural Layout of *Life Studies*

It would not be altogether right to assume that Lowell has discarded his earlier public themes, as critics have tended thus far to assume he has, when he wrote poems for *Life Studies*. The beginning four poems that constitute the first part apparently deal with public themes reminiscent of earlier ones though different in tone and timbre. Nevertheless, taken as a whole, both the subject matter dealt with and the style employed mark a distinctive departure from Lowell's earlier tendencies. Here poems of a personal context take the place of earlier ones motivated by the Catholic framework of thinking. The

grating sense of conflict and rebellion is reduced as Lowell concentrates on the perspective of his private person with more emphasis and endeavours less tortuously towards the acceptance or at least acquiescence of things as they stand. Perhaps this is more apparent than real. Perhaps he can be even more caustic than ever just because the poetic voice has become less emphatic and more down-to-earth. Yet, there is no denying of the change. The earlier declamatory rhetoric yields to the matter-of-fact descriptive observation of details. The rigid formality of rhymes and meters becomes more casual and loose. The general tone has become less heightened, more prosaic. In short, Lowell was, as he himself confirms it, writing his autobiography instead of messages of visionary revelations. The stylistic change has accompanied the thematic change. (London 1976: 268)

There is a carefully-attended symmetry in the arrangement of the book's material, which bears on the shift of general focus. *Life Studies* is given coherence through its structured division into four parts. The four poems of Part One deal with the socio-historical milieu in terms of which the poet is obliged to define and explore his own individual self as he does in the ensuing three parts of prose and poetry. Among these, the first poem, "Beyond the Alps," functions as a kind of prologue as "The Exile's Return" did at the beginning of *Lord Weary's Castle*. The exile in "The Exile's Return" was the result of total negation of the war-ridden contemporary society, and his proper realm of solace would be the religious revelation of God, Christ, the Crucifix, and other holy cognates. The first-person speaker of "Beyond the Alps" may still be understood as an exile since it is equally uncertain whether he can safely find a place to belong to in Paris, the City of Man, where he arrives, as it was in Rome, the City of God, which he left behind. We see in this and the following three poems an unpleasant social context and condition for human activity outside the City of God through evils of economics, politics, militarism, and so forth. Since each poem heavily depends upon the *created* role of the persona, the speaker of the poem naturally tends to yield part of his sense of impasse to the mastermind of the whole poetry, the poet in the abstract. So the "skirt-mad Mussolini," who is not a dramatic persona, and the "mad negro confined at Munich," who is one, are both the denizens of the larger landscape in which the poet himself lives as a compeer. In other words, the lyric self, which is soon to become the center of attention, is not entirely phased out from the world which the dramatic persona creates. It would not be too far-fetched to assume that Part One, with its introductory "Beyond the Alps," in effect bridges *Life Studies* with Lowell's earlier works.

The second part, "91 Revere Street," is a very unusual element to be normally included in a book of poems, for the autobiographical sketch of childhood memory is done in a long prose piece of thirty-five pages, outweighing in bulk any of the remaining parts of the book. Perhaps we can justify the relevance of the prose writing existing side by side with verse sections by turning to the thematic project of the book as a whole. The prose memoirs meant to be after all part of the *plural* project called "life studies."

The memoirs explore in great detail the events and emotions of the Lowell family at 91 Revere Street as they happened to the author as a schoolboy. No terrible things take place. Yet, the child's observant eye minutely takes note of things and persons that surrounds him--parents, friends, home, household objects like furniture, school, and what not. It also informs the reader of those subtle early influences that ought to work on the poet's artistic character in the making. The world of the memoirs is calm and eventless on the surface, but it is far from being sweet and complacent, filled as it is with lingering conflict between father and mother. This conflict was yet to tax the nerves of the poet to be.

Part Three consists of four poems about those poets with whom Lowell bore sympathy. Of these Ford Madox Ford, George Santayana, and Hart Crane were seniors, already dead, and Delmore Schwartz, his contemporary and close friend. The placing of these poems at this specific juncture seems to reflect the poet's awareness of history and destiny behind the private person. He is himself a poet as they were, and is sharing with them a sense of estrangement from the native tradition. So, for example, Lowell presents these lamenting lines of tribute to Ford:

you emerged in your 'worn uniform,  
gilt dragons on the revers of the tunic',  
a Jonah—O divorced, divorced  
from the whale-fat of post-war London! Boomed,  
cut, plucked and booted!

Santayana is described with equal eligiatic sympathy to have been aloof and alienated to the end of his life: "near ninety,/still unbelieving, unconfessed and unreceived, / true to your boyish shyness of the Bride."

In the total plan of the book, Part Three initiates Part Four as Part One does the whole book. The two parts also correspond with each other in their themes in that both present the predicaments with which man has to wrestle in a secular, wayward world

without faith. In the former, however, we have a wider span of geography and history, whereas in the latter are involved only contemporary men of letters with whom Lowell felt personal intimacy. This intricate paralleling in overall structure falls in tune with the general narrowing perspective toward the subjectivity, intensifying the book's theme of autobiographical investigation.

Part Four concentrates on autobiographical materials. This last part bears the title "Life Studies," as does the entire book, and constitutes the highest point of poetic emotion. The first section of this part consists of eleven poems and draws from or bears on the materials in "91 Revere Street." Of these, the first three poems, "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow," "Dunbarton," and "Grandparents" deal with the poet's boyhood relationship with his grandparents; the next four, "Commander Lowell," "Terminal Days at Beverly Farms," "Father's Bedroom," and "For Sale" deal with aspects of his parents' lives; the remaining four, "Sailing Home from Rapallo," "During Fever," "Walking in the Blue," and "Home after Three Months Away" deal with different aspects of his adult experiences ranging from his mother's death to his daughter's sickness. The movement from poem to poem is chronological, beginning with his grandfather and ending with his daughter. Except "Waking in the Blue," whose locale is a Boston mental asylum, all the poems in the first section explore the meanings of relationships with other important members of the family--grandfather, mother, daughter, wife, and others. Together with "91 Revere Street," this section marks the most confessional moment of the book. It is certain that the prose memoirs is prospectively and structurally linked with the first section of the last part. Both deal with the private material--the family; yet, there is a contrast between the child's point of view and that of an adult as a contrast between prose and verse.

Section Two consists of four poems. It unifies the whole poems in the book with its personal, pregnant voice. It is interesting from the structural point of view to note that these four poems which conclude the book corresponds in theme with the other four in the beginning of the book. The hellish situation dramatized earlier in the persons of Marie de Medici, President Eisenhower, or a mad Negro soldier--the situation which has developed into the predicaments of the fellow poets in Part Three--now absorbs and defines the poet's personal experiences and their meaning. Both world and self are out of joint, but the focus is set on the personal and the internal. The structure of the book bears on this principle of self-examination.

### 3. The New Form

*Life Studies* is a study of life in crisis. The records of parenthood, marriage, insanity, deaths, etc., and the investigation of their meaning, are the central concern of the poetic project. The memories and experiences are drawn from the poet's autobiography, and the poems are built upon these hard facts of his life.

We see in his biography that the decade preceding the book's publication was a time of personal crisis. He was divorced from his first wife, Jean Stafford, in 1948 and married Elizabeth Hardwick the next year: His father died in 1950 and his mother 1954. Lowell himself suffered from mental breakdown. ("Waking in the Blue") We also see him renounce his Roman Catholicism. Such critical personal circumstances explain the rather long unproductive interval between *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* and *Life Studies*. After the printing of eight poems in 1953 and 1954 which include "Beyond the Alps," "Inauguration Day: 1953," "A Mad Negro Soldier Confined at Munich," and the pieces dedicated to Ford Madox Ford and George Santayana, there were no further publications until the end of 1958 when *Partisan Review* printed "Memories of West Street and Lepke," "Man and Wife," and "Skunk Hour." (Smith 1974:515)

Apart from the biographical motivation to examine his private life in retrospect, Lowell also had a genuine ambition to innovate in his artistic form. With the apprenticeship under Allen Tate in the 1930's, he had started his creative career in the legacy of the New Criticism. But now Lowell found that strict forms would no longer be the right vehicle for the representation of his altered sense of reality. He now objected to the artificiality of rigorous form. He needed more natural rhythm to convey more truthfully the kind of quotidian motifs he wanted to dramatize. (London: 269-270)

Poets of my generation and particularly younger ones have gotten terribly proficient at these forms. They write a very musical, difficult poem with tremendous skill. Yet the writing seems divorced from culture somehow. It's become too much something specialized that can't handle much experience. It's become a craft, purely a craft, and there must be some breakthrough back into life... I couldn't get my experience into tight metrical forms.

Lowell said this in an interview with Frederick Seidel. We find several loose sonnet forms, as in "Beyond the Alps" and the piece for Hart Crane. Occasional rhymes also occur. But well-defined metrical patterns have become rare. Lowell for the moment wanted to save

the free, descriptive power from the restrictions of traditional forms of prosody.<sup>(2)</sup>

More recently, he confessed that Flaubert had been one source of inspiration for the prose memoirs. "91 Revere Street," and that his avoidance of regular meters was the result of technical meticulousness rather than mere disregard of them. (Lowell 1977: 114)

When I was working on *Life Studies*, I found I had no language or meter that would allow me to approximate what I saw or remembered. Yet in prose I had already found what I wanted, the conventional style of autobiography and reminiscence. So wrote my autobiographical poetry in a style I thought I had discovered in Flaubert, one that used images and ironic or amusing particulars. I did all kinds of tricks with meter and the avoidance of meter. When I didn't have to bang words into rhyme and count, I was more nakedly dependent on rhythm.

It is interesting that when Lowell turned to Flaubert's novels in search of freer medium he found there "images" and "particulars" charged with irony to be usable elements for his poetry. Both the prose memoirs and poems of *Life Studies* are abundant in such images and particulars, and the book as a whole does seem to have succeeded in formal innovation toward novelistic freedom of expression. That Lowell was envious of the potential of the novel becomes more evident from these words of his (London 1976:267):

The ideal modern form seems to be the novel and certain short stories. Maybe Tolstoi would be the perfect example—his work is imagistic, it deals with all experience, and there seems to be no conflict of the form and content. So one thing is to get into poetry that kind of human richness in rather simple descriptive language.

The inclusion of the lengthy prose part and the general structural plan as it stands in the book are the result of this endeavor to reconcile form and content. The poet was making "studies" of his life, spurred by his novelistic inspiration and license. Lowell wanted to effect the "novelistic flow" from the beginning to the end of the book, although "each poem was," as he says, "meant to stand by itself." (Lowell 1977: 114)

Certain dictional characteristics seem to derive from this need for the freer, larger receptivity of the poetic medium. In spite of the so-called "confessional" motif, the dominant tone of expression is more often casual and anecdotal than not. Conversation occurs frequently, and dramatic monologue is the form of a number of poems including "The Banker's Daughter," "A Mad Negro Soldier," "Words for Hart Crane," and "To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage." Names of people and places and incidents that have ex-

(2) This does not hold true for his total oeuvre. His *History* (1967) consists of 368 unrhymed sonnets.

clusive connection to the poet's private life are repeatedly cited. Of this characteristic *mise-en-scene*, Marjorie Perloff (1970: 482) observes:

Names of persons and places, settings, objects, and key incidents in one poem are woven into the total fabric which becomes something like a novel, but a novel conceived in spatial rather than in temporal terms. In weaving together "the vast number of remembered things," Lowell creates what Yeats called "the tradition of myself."

In such realistic vein, colloquialism edges in here and there. The first-person speaker not so much lets loose the charged emotions as he observes his personal context at some distance from the emotions he is feeling. The mood of oppression is pervasive, but then, such a mood is attenuated or made appear less immediate by the pretense of detachment and objectivity coupled with the sense of irony. It is certainly a departure from the more urgent and rhetorical voice in *Lord Weary's Castle*. Lowell's style has come closer to realism.

#### 4. Themes in Detail

The highlight of *Life Studies* is "Life Studies," the fourth and last part, where the growth of the speaker receives intense treatment through reminiscences of his family history up to the present of his adulthood in the company of the insane. The first poem, "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow," considered important and well-made by many critics, illustrates the psychological truth behind the remembered facts of the poet's childhood. This is the longest poem in which materials in "91 Revere Street" are amply called forth to redefine the meaning of defeat and death to the child who "wasn't a child at all."

The beginning of the poem discloses the child's attachment to his grandfather and hatred of his parents.

"I won't go with you. I want to stay with Grandpa!"  
That is how I threw cold water  
on my Mother and Father's  
watery martini pipe dreams at Sunday dinner.

In the prose memoirs, we have already seen how the boy perceived the triangular psychology of the tripartite household authorities: honorable grandfather, weak father, and domineering mother. After long years of marriage, mother suspected that "her husband

was savorless, unmasterful, merely considerate" and that "Father's specialized efficiency lacked utterly the flattering bossiness she so counted on from her father, my Grandfather Winslow." In the prose and elsewhere, the image of father is ironically diminutive. Father is presented as taking delight in inscribing his name, "R. T. S. Lowell—U.S.N." on the garbage cans. In his forties, he grew "myopic," "shy" and "evasive," was deep not with profundity, had "reached his final mental possibilities." The life and death of father are explored later in "Commander Lowell," "Terminal Days at Beverly Farms," "Father's Bedroom," and "For Sale"; Mother's death is followed in "Sailing Home from Rapallo"; Grandfather is figured in "Grandparents."

After a death, what remains are the tangible objects and places which the dead possessed and occupied. In the prose memoirs, the great-great grandfather, Mordecai Myers, is imagined to say at one moment: "My children, my blood, accept graciously the loot of your inheritance. We are all dealers in used furniture." This could be quite Hawthornesque if only there were more gloom.

Let us quote a more typical passage (Lowell 1964: 12~13):

Major Mordecai Myers' portrait has been mislaid past finding, but out of my memories I often come on it in the setting of our Revere Street house, a setting now fixed in the mind, where it survives all the distortions of fantasy, all the blank befogging of forgetfulness. There, the vast number of remembered *things* remains rocklike. Each is in its place, each has its function, its history, its drama. There, all is preserved by that motherly care that one either ignored or resented in his youth. The things and their owners come back urgent with life and meaning—because finished, they are enduring and perfect.

This is very suggestive of Lowell's particular mode of perception. The perspective of time has always been the tendency in his creative thinking. Here, the vestiges of the past and its memory are reified—they stand "rocklike" and "finished." Compare this with the following lines from "My Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow."

All about me  
were the works of my Grandfather's hands:  
snapshots of his Liberty Bell silver mine;  
his high school at Stukkert am Neckar;  
stogie-brown beams; fools'-gold nuggets;  
octagonal red tiles,  
sweaty with a secret dank, crummy with ant-stale;  
a Rocky Mountain chaise longue,  
its legs, shellacked saplings.

A pastel-pale Huckleberry Finn  
 fished with a broom straw in a basin  
 hollowed out of a millstone.

Here we have an excessive inventory of the "remembered things." These things acquire meaning, for the lines quoted above continues like this: "Like my Grandfather, the decor/ was manly, comfortable, overbearing, disproportioned." The "remembered things" are the concrete, tactile reminders by which the past intrudes itself into the present. The poet delights to remember. Such a tendency to make an inventory may enhance the sense of reality by invoking actual persons and places just as a novel would be built upon a network of persons and related places. It also corresponds with Lowell's inclination to historical imagination. Just as historical names and places in Part One allude to the larger social context which the individual finds himself situated, so the things and places affiliated to the memory of the poet's family are indices to the smaller yet more immediate context capable of modifying the formation of an individual character.

Things, constituting the antithesis of spirituality, can be the instrument of spiritual communion through transmission and remembrance. Household objects carry over superfluous meanings as their initial possessors impart the fact of possessing to the next person coming into the possession of them. The short poem, "For Sale," conveys this theme with a bit of sentimentality:

Empty, open, intimate,  
 its town-house furniture  
 had an on tiptoe air  
 of waiting for the mover  
 on the heels of the undertaker.  
 Ready, afraid  
 of living alone till eighty,  
 Mother mooned in a window,  
 as if she had stayed on a train  
 one stop past her destination.

Any inordinate attachment to dead objects might be called fetishism. There is a mild syndrome of fetishism in Lowell. By paying a meticulous attention to dead objects, the poet not only does what he is doing--rousing memory by describing what he sees; he also signals the sick alienated condition of his interiority. In fact, madness is a recurrent motif in Lowell. But the perversion of fetishism could also be an allegory of sick history.

Perloff (1970: 482-3) called this a metonymy:

By presenting his parents in terms of a metonymic series of objects, Lowell creates a devastating image of a tradition gone sour. Father's "rhino" chair and Mother's monogrammed hot water bottle stand metonymically for the materialistic debasement of the American dream, the dream of Mayflower Lowells and Winslows...

The third section of "My Last Afternoon" records the defeat of Aunt Sarah as a potential artist. In "91 Revere Street," she was described as "a beauty too lofty and original ever to marry" and "a prima donna on the piano too high-strung ever to give a public recital." She now "thundered on the keyboard of her dummy piano" "...to spare the nerves on my Grandmother,/ tone-deaf, quick as a cricket." The irony in such phrases as the opening "Up in the air" or "risen like the phoenix" is sad because of its implication of a fallen state which was Aunt Sarah's. The greater defeat is no doubt the death of the child's young uncle, Devereux Winslow. The first part of Section IV portrays the life of the uncle in the vivid imagery of the lake, the boat, the war-uniforms, etc. Then follows the announcement:

My Uncle was dying at twenty-nine.  
 "You are behaving like children,"  
 said my Grandfather,  
 when my Uncle and Aunt left their three baby daughters,  
 and sailed for Europe on a last honeymoon...  
 I cowered in terror...  
 I wasn't a child at all—

The ingeniously ambiguous placing of the grandfather's reproach provokes a sense of pain and relates the child to the fact of death. A child awakened to the paradoxes of life is no longer a child, so the speaker recalls that he was not one; instead, "unseen, and all-seeing, I was Agrippina/ in the Golden House of Nero." The images of earth and lime which the child played with and which conclude the poem work on the theme of death in the poem.

My hands were warm, then cool, on the piles  
 of earth and lime,  
 a black pile and a white pile...  
 Come winter,  
 Uncle Devereux would blend to the one color.

Death takes the lives of every older member of the household; it stalks everywhere with great ease and becomes part of the remembered things. Death sometimes seems trivial and mundane as in the final lines of "Sailing Home from Rapallo," which describes the death of Lowell's mother:

It the grandiloquent lettering on Mother's coffin,  
*Lowell* had been misspelled *LOVEL*.  
 The corpse  
 was wrapped like *panetone* in Italian tinfoil.

The description of father's death is also prosaic and casual. But we do not always have detached understatement. The loss may also provoke a strong nostalgia as in "Grandpa! Have me, hold me, cherish me!" ("Grandparents") Death is after all an impersonal, mechanical process: "*Tockytock, tockytock/* clumped our Alpine, Edwardian cuckoo clock./ slung with strangled, wooden game." ("My Last Afternoon") There is no mystifying. Death as a function of time represents change of generation. Fathers are gone as if displeased with children; the child must stand independent and face the reality: "the nineteenth century, tired of children, is gone./ They're all gone into a world of light; the farm's my own." ("Grandparents")

A large portion of "Home After Three Months Away" carries the tone of tenderness and concern:

After thirteen weeks  
 my child still dabs her cheeks  
 to start me shaving. When  
 we dress her in her sky-blue corduroy,  
 she changes to a boy,  
 and washcloth in the flush...

This must be a genuinely happy moment for the father who has returned "home after three months away" in a mental hospital. But the mood changes. A melancholy allusion to death follows.

Recuperating, I neither spin nor toil.  
 Three stories down below,  
 a choreman tends our coffin's length of soil,  
 and seven horizontal tulips blow.

A moment of elation is crossed by a moment of despondency like Milton's "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso." "The poem ends in great self-pity. The poet likens himself to a burnt fish: "I keep no rank nor station./ Cured, I am frizzled, stale and small."

There runs a deep sense of discomfort and discordance in all of the adult poems. "To Speak of Woe That is in Marriage" is a dramatic monologue by a woman who hates her husband. The sexual life in "Man and Wife" is one of fluctuation and frustration, and the marital relation remains insecure under the shadow of subdued yet potential violence.

All night I've held your hand,  
as if you had  
a fourth time faced the kingdom of the mad--  
its hackneyed speech, its homicidal eye--  
and dragged me home alive...

A state of madness often characterizes the adult experiences. "Waking in the Blue" is a poem based on Lowell's confinement at the Boston mental hospital mentioned above. It may be read as an allegorical representation of the insanity of the inner as well as the outer world. The inmates including the first-person speaker are all highbrow Harvard and Boston University students who ironically read *The Meaning of Meaning*. They are called "these victorious figures of bravado ossified young" or "these thoroughbred mental cases." The observing "I" becomes one of them at the end of the poems "We are all old-timers,/ each of us holds a locked razor." The instrument of potential danger, though locked up, is still here in our hand. We remain powerless, but we are the "thoroughbred mental cases."

With "Memories of West Street and Lepke," the poem which begins the second section of the last part, there occurs a shift in focus. The public themes become more manifest. In the first section of the poem, the author poses himself as a nonchalant college teacher ("book-worming/ in pajamas fresh from the washer each morning") who indulges his late-gotten daughter. "Like the sun she rises in her flame-flamingo infants' wear". But there follows a pejorative allusion to conservative politics:

I hog a whole house on Boston's  
"hardly passionate Marlborough Street,"  
where even the man  
scavenging filth in the back alley trash cans,

has two children, a beach wagon, a helpmate,  
and is a "young Republican."

This reminds us of "Inauguration Day: January 1953", which satirizes Eisenhower's taking over the presidency: "Ice, ice. Our wheels no longer move./ Look, the fixed stars, all just alike/ as lack-land atoms, split apart,/ and the Republic summons Ike,/ the mausoleum in her heart."

The next three paragraphs of "Memories of West Street and Lepke" elaborate on Lowell's West Street Jail experience as "a fire-breathing Catholic C.O." Before the sentence, he was with "a Negro boy with curlicues/ of marijuana in his hair"; after imprisonment, he was one of the inmates which included Abramowitz, "a jaundice-yellow.../and fly-weight pacifist," and "vegetarian." Abramowitz "tried to convert Bioff and Brown," but was beaten "black and blue" by them who were "hairy, muscular, suburban."

This plain story-telling may have been intended as an allegory of the "tranquilized *Fifties*", as the poet labels the decade, when conservative politics of the Cold War period prevailed in America. The climax of the poem is the description of "*Murder Incorporated's* Czar Lepke":

there piling towels on a rack,  
or dawdling off to his little segregated cell full  
of things forbidden the common man:  
a portable radio, a dresser, two toy American  
flags tied together with a ribbon of Easter palm.  
Flabby, bald, lobotomized,  
he drifted in a sheepish calm,  
where no agonizing reappraisal  
jarred his concentration on the electric chair—  
hanging like an oasis in his air  
of lost connections...

These lines should be read, first of all, as a scathing indictment of the American establishment. The petty possessions of the murderer Lepke which include "toy American flags" allude to what the political authority has in its hand, and the allusion is made with great sarcasm. Moreover, they are forbidden access to "the common man." The qualification, "lobotomized," also works in both directions: as Lepke was mercilessly efficient in man-killing, so was the Establishment equally inhuman in exercising their power. Both were blind to the much-needed "agonizing reappraisal" and remained calm. Both were off the

human ground and were "hanging in his air of lost connections." Yet, they turn to the mirage "like an oasis" as if it could be trusted. Thus, the prison with its poet, a Jehovah's Witness pacifist, and a killer, becomes an epitome of this not very sane world. The "tranquilized fifties" do not seem very tranquil except in narcotic sense. We rather get a glimpse of a dried-up world of disintegration where "things fall apart" and "the center cannot hold." (Yeats 1979: 184)

Such public themes in the last part are connected to those in the beginning poems of Part One. For example, we read a dissatisfaction in the poem describing the post-bellum ethos of Catholic Rome.

But who believed this? Who could understand?  
 Pilgrims still kissed Saint Peter's brazen sandal.  
 The Duce's lynched, bare, booted skull still spoke.  
 God herded his people to the *coup de grace*—  
 the costumed Switzers sloped their pikes to push,  
 O Pius, through the monstrous human crush...  
 ("Beyond the Alps")

Lowell turns inward to himself without losing connection with the world. And conversely, he has left Rome and crossed the secular border of the Alps; yet he could look into himself.

The last poem, "Skunk Hour," which concludes *Life Studies*, is an interesting piece composed of eight six-line stanzas. The first four stanzas describe persons who represent in one way or another the degenerate condition of society. They are a wealthy hermit heiress who lives in the memory of past "thirsting for/ the hierarchic privacy/ of Queen Victoria's century," a millionaire standing for the purposelessness of modern affluence, and an effeminate decorator leading a purposeless, inauthentic life.<sup>(3)</sup> The fifth stanza brings the speaker of the poem to the scene of cheapened love.

One dark night  
 my Tudor Ford climbed the hill's skull;  
 I watched for love-cars. Lights turned down,  
 they lay together, hull to hull,  
 where the graveyard shelves on the town...  
 My mind's not right.

(3) Tradition has it that a hermit and heiress with the inherited wealth represents decay. (Smith 1974: 76)

The poet's mind is infected by the sickening scene, for depravity is infectious. The poem goes on:

A car radio bleats,  
 "Love, O careless Love..." I hear  
 my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,  
 as if my hand were at its throat...  
 I myself am hell;  
 nobody's here—

Only skunks, that search  
 in the moonlight for a bite to eat.

In the midst of insanity, the poet is filled, body and soul, with "ill-spirit," and declares, "I myself am hell." He finds himself all alone in this blackened world, himself being the hell. And on to this dark, deserted stage of the mind "marches" a band of skunks like blind impulse. The skunk comes out from nowhere on the scene and is very striking as an image despite its fundamental ambiguity. Is it a sort of *deus ex machina*? The skunk is certainly a lowly, loathsome animal; yet, the poet appears to take pure delight in the animal presence. The skunk may then be the symbol of vital force by which life becomes worth living once more. The overall movement of the book reaches a dark climax at the point where the hell outside becomes the hell inside. Yet, the animation and relief brought about by the troop of marching skunks hold open the possibility of life and light in the affirmative. We might seek a parallel ending in *Lord Weary's Caste*: "What can the dove of Jesus give/ You now but wisdom, exile? Stand and live./ The dove has brought an olive branch to eat."

## 5. Conclusion

Lowell and his colleagues and followers like John Berryman, W. D. Snodgrass, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton are commonly recognized as the confessional school. It generally refers to a mode of writing, a certain temper in the selection of subject matter, and of course, a shared feeling among some distinct talents during the 50's and 60's. *Life Studies* was the spearhead of this mode. Rosenthal (1967: 15) defines the confessional as the poetry in which "the private life of the poet himself, especially under stress of psychological crisis, becomes a major theme." Ralph J. Mills, Jr. (1965: 156) recognizes it as the poetry that deals with "the more intimate aspects of life, areas of experience that

most of us would instinctively keep from public sight."

*Life Studies* is written in such confessional mode par excellence, bringing the intimate aspects of a private life under psychic stress into sustained attention. The confessional subject matter alone would mark Lowell's departure from his earlier, more symbolic poetry. However, in recording the private material, Lowell employed a new style and method. He employed the language of realism—increasing use of colloquial idioms, less dependence on traditional metrics, bold introduction of the prose, meticulous arrangement of the composing pieces, etc. Perloff (1970: 476) cites two cardinal points of Lowell's new achievements: (1) "the romantic mode which projects the poet's "I" in the act of self discovery," and (2) "the Tolstoyan or Chekhovian mode usually called realism." By uniting these two aspects, Lowell could fuse the private and public subject matters into the confessional mode.

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로버트 로우웰의 「인생연구」에 나타난 고백적 태도의 의미

중 권

로버트 로우웰은 존 베리먼, W.D. 스노드그라스, 실비아 플라스, 앤 섀스튼 등의 시인들과 아울러 흔히 고백파라는 이름으로 불리워지고 있다. 이 “고백”이라는 말이 명확한 의미의 내용과 적용의 범위를 가진 개념은 물론 아니다. 문체와 주제의 선택에 일정한 취향을 띠면서 공유한 50년대와 60년대의 한 무리의 시인들을 일컫는 말이요, 그 명칭은 대체로 개별 시인의 뛰어난 재능에 기인한다. 자아의 탐구를 위하여 자신의 경험과 내면을 토로하는 다양한 프로그램은 가지지는 않는다. 랠프 먼즈, M.L. 로젠탈 등이 이러한 “고백적 시”를 규정해 보려고 하였는데, 접근은 각각 약간의 차이를 보이지만 모두 사사로운 생활과 그 경험, 심리적인 위기의식, 고백의 충동 등을 지적하고 있다.

「인생 연구」는 이러한 유포의 선구적인 작품이라는 점과 로우웰의 시적 발전과정에서 세 포용 실현적인 측면이라는 점으로 우리의 주목을 끈다. 이 시집에서 시인은 가정과 주변의 친근한 경험들이 어떻게 한 개인의 정신적 위기에 연루하는가를 고백하고 있다. 그러나, 전통적인 운율의 정형성을 크게 벗어나고 또 일반 시집에서 흔히 접할 수 없는 분량의 산문으로 된 회고 조록을 전체 작품의 중요한 일부로 채택한 이 특이한 시도가 “고백”의 형식이 되고 있지만, 그렇다고 초기시의 보편세계로부터 내면세계로 일관적으로 탈바꿈한 것은 아니다. 일차대전 직후의 엘리엇의 황무지적 비전은 이차대전 직후의 로우웰의 초기 시를 특히 「영주 위어리의 성채」에 비견할 만 한데, 이런 보편적인 테마가 「인생 연구」에서 소멸된 것이 아니라 내면화했다고 보아야 할 것이다. “내 자신이 바로 지옥”이라는 로우웰 자신의 고백은 매우 시사적이다. 마야조리 피델로프는 「인생 연구」의 성파를 낭만적인 자기추구와 체호프적 인간 사설주의의 문체의 결합으로 보았는데, 이 관찰의 설득력은 마르네 면에 있는 세계의 악몽을 해석해 주기 때문일 것이다. 로우웰은 초기의 문체와 상징성 대 경험과 그 질곡의 기억을 고백하지만, 한편으로는, 이런 개인적인 소재들은 불이성적인 현실의 체계를 투영한 것이요 상징한 것이다. 종교적 회의주의의 주요 경제적 자유주의자로서 정신의 전사를 경구하는 시인의 피로공 모두가 「인생 연구」에서 소위 “고백”의 형식으로 형상화되어 있다 하겠다.