

The Art of Robert Lowell

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The generation of poets to which Robert Lowell belongs was dominated by the literary theory and practice of T. S. Eliot. Lowell's birth in the same year (1917) in which Eliot's first major collection, *Prufrock and Other Observations*, was published, is the first of many coincidences in the poets' lives. Like Eliot thirty years before, Lowell was born into a highly distinguished New England family conspicuous in public service and cultural pursuits. It was said of Boston, in those days, that

The Lowells talk only to Cabots
And the Cabots talk only to God.

And if Lowell's father was rather less than the noblest of his kind, this made his parents more anxious to aspire to familial expectations. The poet who was to write bitter verse on the subject as a man, was depressed in childhood by the ostentatious emblems of patriarchy at home, the watered-down Unitarian religion of puritan moralism at church, and his parents' yearning for success in the world at large.

His passage through life proved, in the long run, to be more erratic than Eliot's. Yet this early environment and such characteristics and landmarks on Lowell's subsequent journey as his rootlessness—moving to the South, then to New York, and eventually to Europe and England—his conversion to Catholicism, his unhappy married life, bear striking resemblance to Eliot's biography. However, the most important similarity between the poets is the character of the world view which Lowell's experiences shaped for him, and to which his poems give voice. Like Eliot's thesis in *The Waste Land*, Lowell's is largely a despairing analysis. Indeed, as we survey his work as a whole, Lowell's pessimism was evidently even more radical than that of the poet of the "hollow men". For Eliot's nihilism came to be modified by the muted hope of a Christianity appropriated in middle age. Lowell's vision, on the other hand, became darker as it developed. While Eliot's faith persisted through the latter part of his life, Lowell's communion in the Catholic Church provided only a brief solace; and in the poem "Beyond the Alps", with its geographical conceit of a journey from Rome, across the mountains, to the subjected plains of France, he gives memorable

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expression to the discarding of his metaphysical inclinations: "our mountain-climbing train had come to earth". The very transience of Lowell's Roman sojourn intensified his acute sense of the hopelessness of modern existence.

So similarities to Eliot's biography are most evident early in Lowell's life, and it is in our reading of his first poems that we notice most strongly his debt to Eliot's work and his aspiration to his example: "ah Tom", he wrote in later reflection on this early influence, "one muse, one music, had one your luck".¹ These first poems speak of the desire of a suffering personality to escape, through art, from itself. Paradoxically, they reveal an essentially cerebral mask; they are allusive works, complex in reference, highly wrought in expression and arrangement. Style and subject-matter conspire to conceal the experiencing self and disclose the tutored artist—nothing could be further removed from "confessional verse". And nowhere is this technique for impersonality more finely registered than in "The Quaker Graveyard at Nantucket", a mannered construct, self-consciously and conspicuously embroidered with classical and theological erudition. It was provoked, certainly, by the personal occasion of the death of a cousin—"for Warren Winslow, dead at sea"—but like Milton's elegy "Lycidas", "The Quaker Graveyard" develops beyond the private domain to a riveting denunciation of the contemporary world. Containing his wrath about the American puritan and materialist legacy within a referential and measured diction, Lowell is careful—as were Eliot and the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century—to animate his learned verse with concealed rhymes and an insistent, idiosyncratic rhythm:

All you recovered from Poseidon died
With you, my cousin, and the harrowed brine
Is fruitless on the blue beard of the god,
Stretching beyond us to the castles in Spain,
Nantucket's westward haven. To Cape Cod
Guns, cradled on the tide,
Blast the eelgrass about a waterclock
Of bilge and backwash, roil and salt and sand
Lashing earth's scaffold, rock
Our warships in the hand
Of the great God, where time's contrition blues
Whatever it was these Quaker sailors lost
In the mad scramble of their lives.

Professor Bayley contends that these words "lie about helplessly

1 In the poem "T. S. Eliot".

turgid and swollen”²; I find them imaginatively vital, invigoratingly arrogant.

“The Quaker Graveyard” epitomizes the first “period” of Lowell’s poetic career when, as I have suggested, connexions with Eliot’s manner and matter are easily established. But it is the second of Lowell’s three periods which is currently his most celebrated—though usually, as I will argue, for the wrong reason—and this development is defined by the *Life Studies* collection. In this autobiographical sequence Lowell now appears to be reacting against the precepts and example of Eliot and, thus, of his own early poems. We should remember, however, that reaction and innovation in any art can be as potent an example of an influence as discipleship itself—one recalls Stravinsky in composition, or Diaghilev on ballet: “what we need now is . . . dancers who know all the technique of the school but have freed themselves from it.”³ In putting the precepts of the seventeenth- and twentieth-century metaphysical schools so deliberately behind him in *Life Studies*, Lowell, by that sheer deliberateness, demonstrates the power of the influence he would discard. William Blake was not the only poet to have realized that “without contraries is no progression”.⁴

In *Life Studies* Lowell wilfully eschews the sinuous, allusive intricacy of his first works—the manner is customarily spare and forthright; where it is descriptive it is usually satirical (a strident cruelty is often present), rather than merely evocative; where it is ideological, Lowell turns from his earlier fascination with the formulae of philosophy and theology—as in these exquisite lines from “Our Lady of Walsingham”:

As before,
This face, for centuries a memory,
Non est species, neque decor,
Expressionless, expresses God: it goes
Past castled Sion

—to the vagaries of passionate speech and colloquial diction:

I was a fire-breathing Catholic C.O.
 (“Memories of West Street and Lepke”)

Many readers, assiduous in the modern pursuit of the artist at the expense of the art, adore the ostensibly direct, unacademic

2 In Jonathan Raban’s “Introduction”, *Robert Lowell’s Poems*, London 1974, p. 23.

3 In Richard Buckle, *Diaghilev*, London 1979, p. 292.

4 “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell”, plate 3.

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diction of *Life Studies* and, with the subject-matter of the collection as their evidence, delight in convicting Lowell of composing "confessional verse". Yet we do not need to indulge special pleading to acquit the poet from the charge that he has been saved from Art, in these poems, by the grace of narcissism. For *Life Studies*, in spite of superficial appearances to the contrary, is neither stylistically unsophisticated, nor thematically limited to self-examination.

The opening lines of "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow" provide an appropriate introduction to the persuasion of these poems:

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

Here is the characteristic prevalence of the first person pronoun, and the colloquial directness of throwing "cold water" on plans. Thematically, here, the aura is conjured up of wealth and ease, touched by debility (the martinis are "watery") which characterizes the Lowell microcosm. And, most obviously, the disjunction between parents and child is established here: a motif of emotional disease which is to be developed later in the poem, and a foretaste of the theme of personal conflict which runs through the sequence as a whole.

The first verse paragraph concludes with a method of adjectival cataloguing in which objective, imagistic description

Diamond-pointed, athirst and Norman
its alley of poplars

modulates to private, subjective judgement:

a scarey stand of virgin pine

—"scarey" being perfectly applied in a poem of childhood reminiscence. This technique of Lowell's is used with considerable skill throughout *Life Studies*, we find it again a few lines later in this poem:

Like my grandfather, the décor
was manly, comfortable,
overbearing, disproportioned

—which indicates, in a small way, that in Lowell's second period, the poet is not simply rejecting a highly-conscious adroitness of expression in his work for a rough-hewn "spontaneity" of utterance to accompany personal intimations, but is replacing one set of skills with another.

Similarly premeditated is the large design of the poem. Notice how, after the brief introductory anecdote, the poet moves in an orderly fashion from an expansive landscape, indoors, and then to vignettes of the moribund ritual of this "summer house"—a disconcerting title, suggesting its vitality is confined to a season. Then follow details, apparently innocent, but indicating a twee pretentiousness, of the origin of the farm's name in the satirically capitalized "Social Register"; and the unsettling recollection of the puppy's gruesome death, "paralysed from gobbling toads". Living and dying enjoy a precarious proximity here, and the opening section concludes with the second statement of a type of refrain for the poem:

I sat mixing black earth and lime

—an emblem of the conflation of life (the earth) and its irredeemable decay (as lime devours corpses).

So the stage is set, in this way, for the portraits which ensue; the disposition of observation, followed by criticism, has also been established, and the whole is discovered within a framework which resists over-indulgence in these facts of life by recalling, with unostentatious regularity and through the filter of symbolism, the most daunting fact of all: the mutability of man, bound, as he is, to the relentless process of the seasons—

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 colour.

The first portrait is of Lowell's infant self:

I was five and a half.
My formal pearl grey shorts
had been worn for three minutes.

This intricate detailing of appearance conforms again to that discipline of description as the handmaid of criticism and satire which I have outlined. The bland opening line is followed by a subtle evocation of lifeless formality, succeeded by an astutely intruded technique for objectification:

My perfection was the Olympian
poise of my models in the imperishable autumn
display windows
of Roger Peet's boys' store below the State House
in Boston.

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The "Olympian poise" of the mannequins transfigures their Boston ordinarieness (while simultaneously mocking their archness) and provides an external focus for the poet's portrayal of himself. Indeed, the fantastic comedy of the closing lines of this brief segment entirely liberates the portrait from self-pity and indulgence:

I was a stuffed toucan
with a bibulous, multicoloured beak.

Next, self-satire gives place to the satire of another. Great Aunt Sarah, the concert artist *manquée*, is at first the subject of a lampoon based on humorous paradox and over-statement: she "thunders" on a dummy piano; she rises phoenix-like, but (with Lowell's natural taste for the bathos) from a "bed of troublesome snacks and Tauchnitz classics". However, in a reminiscence of her youth, bathos is replaced by pathos:

Each morning she practised
on the grand piano at Symphony Hall,
deathlike in the off-season summer—
its naked Greek statues draped with purple
like the saints in Holy Week.

In this chilling image, Lowell develops his theme of unseasonal activity—the right time and the right place constantly elude the family. Aunt Sarah, now resurrected daily to absurd gestures towards self-fulfilment, inexplicably disdained, a generation ago, the elevation of a pianistic apotheosis which her veritable passion-tide of musical preparation had anticipated:

On the recital day, she failed to appear.

Such a journalistic close to this carefully formed epiphany lends support to the contention that it is not the least of Lowell's virtues as a poet that he never over-indulges a mood, however tempting to superfluous amplification its original exposition might be.

Finally, we come to Uncle Devereux himself. If Lowell's self-portrait was satirical and his description of Aunt Sarah balanced satire and pathos, this portrayal inclines to sympathy. Yet the dignity of detachment is maintained—again, details of the man's environment precede what Auden called "the essential human element".⁵ The poet chooses to focus on the dated posters which decorate his uncle's shooting cabin. The atmosphere is one of uncompromising masculinity—the ghost of Hemingway beckons—and the most striking poetry is reserved for "the finest poster":

5 In the poem "The Model".

two or three young men in khaki kilts
being bushwhacked on the veldt.

Such a phrase as this last demands to be savoured aloud.

Uncle Devereux, "dying of the incurable Hodgkin's disease" at the untimely age of twenty-nine, suffers also from the Lowell complaint of being sadly at odds with his surroundings. But the pathos is implied, not asserted—our sympathy is invited, not insisted upon—as Lowell concludes with his last image of his relative: a calm catalogue, closing with an incisive observation which, falling just short of whimsy, preserves a tasteful distance.

He was brushed as Bayard, our riding horse.
His face was putty.
His blue coat and white trousers
grew sharper and straighter.
His coat was a blue jay's tail,
his trousers were solid cream from the top of the bottle.
He was animated, hierarchical,
like a ginger-snap man in a clothes-press.

While all of the poems in the *Life Studies* collection articulate Lowell's personality—even when he is writing of others, such as Aunt Sarah and Uncle Devereux, we learn about him as he responds to them—a number are given over to the poet as dominant persona. It is in these works where Lowell's art attains a unique perfection as he transforms this intensely personal material into poetry.

"Memories of West Street and Lepke", for example, is a reminiscence about Lowell's imprisonment as a conscientious objector in 1943. He served five months of a year's sentence in New York's West Street Jail. But the poem does not begin with "memories". Rather, in a clever stroke in the opening lines, Lowell introduces the conceit of a metaphorical confinement in the present, by which he is to interpret his literal imprisonment in the past. In this ingenious way, yet another method for objectification has been appropriated:

Only teaching on Tuesdays, book-worming
in pyjamas fresh from the washer each morning,
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'.
I have a nine months' daughter,
young enough to be my granddaughter.
Like the sun she rises in her flame-flamingo infants' wear.

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These are the tranquilized *Fifties*
and I am forty.

Lowell's detention in the respectable conformity of Boston is suffocating him. A poetry of violent contrasts is used to convey the extremity of his position, his intense dislike for the community and the life he leads. The phrase "hardly passionate Marlborough Street" adapts William James's sentence—"Marlborough is hardly a passionate street"—given by the philosopher as an example of understatement.⁶ To offset this bland indictment, Lowell works marvellously with low-life verbs—"I hog a whole house"; his neighbour is a refined "young Republican", but is seen "scavenging".

Once again we have the theme of the persona at odds with his environment, which includes his immediate surroundings and family: Lowell has a daughter of nine months whose father could be half his years—and, perhaps, should be—and she threateningly dazzles his fragile middle age as she rises in her garish hot-pink outfit.

As we move from this unsettling present to the past, imagining that in his "memories" Lowell will find consolation for his present distress, we discover, however, that he is a man for no season. For during the war he was again at a remove from the *status quo*, "telling off the state and president"—and here is a gathering of poetic strength in the manner of description the poet employs to evoke his quasi-heroic youth. This is a language of dramatic over-statement—he was "fire-breathing" then, he made a "manic statement"—as Lowell views with a wry detachment the professional agitator's exaggerated sense of self-importance. Add to this the idealist's reduction to the enforced company of a petty criminal—

a negro boy with curlicues
of marijuana in his hair

—and you might conclude that the personal anecdote is being applied to an incisive judgement against a society which imprisons the pacific with the vicious.

But the achievement of the poem is no more limited to mere societal polemic than it is to personal portraiture. For Lowell's social analysis and his private anxiety are consumed in an essentially comic vision. It is a "black" comedy, to be sure, where

6 See Steven Axelrod, *Robert Lowell: Life and Art*, Princeton 1978, p. 122.

sharp and shocking contrast is the principal method of humour. The fate of the "jaundice-yellow" Abramowitz, a pacifist-vegetarian-philosopher at the hands of the Hollywood pimps, Bioff and Brown, is given stylized exaggeration through a kaleidoscope of clashing colours, set against a backdrop of "bleaching khaki tenements":

they blew their tops and beat him black and blue.

The percussive alliteration of the names Bioff and Brown with their actions and the colours which their brutality produces indicates that the colloquial diction of this line is not as free of a concentration of style as it initially appears—there is the punning also on blew/blue. Nonetheless, the familiarity of the language shows that Lowell appreciates the refreshment of a relaxation of manner, even as he knows how to prevent colloquialism in poetry stooping to banality. It is not too much to claim that this is a Shakespearean quality in his work—one recalls the nurse's speech in *Romeo and Juliet*, the classic example of the "relaxed style".

The comic dimension of Lowell's vision is extended further in the quip which opens his final verse paragraph:

I was so out of things, I'd never heard
of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

'Are you a C.O.?' I asked a fellow jailbird.
'No,' he answered, 'I'm a J.W.'

This prisoner is essentially benevolent; he teaches Lowell "the hospital 'tuck' ", a way of folding linen, but is present chiefly in order to fulfil the dramatic role of pointing out the figure who is to unite the perceptions that have gone before and triumphantly perfect Lowell's striving for an objective correlative for his emotions. This portrait of Lepke, the doyen of murderers, is arguably the most brilliant moment in Lowell's poetry. We expect, at first, that Lepke will be lined up with the negro boy and the Hollywood pimps, against Lowell, Abramowitz and the Jehovah's Witness. But as Lowell contemplates Lepke—notice the alliteration of their names—from the disadvantaged point of the "tranquillized *Fifties*", the poet realizes his spiritual community with the villain, rather than his apparent opposition to him. For Lepke, like Lowell, flourished in a rebellious past before society rendered him incapable of independent activity:

Flabby, bald, lobotomized,
he drifted in a sheepish calm.

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Similarly Lowell, who has had his seedtime too, has been lobotomized by the society of the present decade. He consummates his identification of his condition today with Lepke's yesterday in a ringing phrase which inverts the catchcry of John Foster Dulles—"an agonizing reappraisal"—by which that statesman attempted to stir America out of the moral torpor to which she succumbed in the "fifties". By applying this formerly era-bound term to Lepke's condition in the 'forties—

no agonizing reappraisal
jarred his concentration on the electric chair

—Lowell links their fates across the decades. Through the symbolic filter of Lepke's irreversible lobotomy our dislocated poet identifies himself with that despair of human existence which, finding no object worth its constancy, yearns only for release from its bondage,

hanging like an oasis in his air
of lost connections . . .

The final poem in *Life Studies* is, appropriately enough, about the hour of death. In "Skunk Hour", Lowell communicates his personal apprehension of purposelessness in the midst of universal despair. Each human figure in its doom-laden tableau is fatuous and self-deluding, diverting himself from his desperate condition by perverting the true nature of the world.

The first portrait, of the hermit heiress, is a congeries of contradiction. Her cottage is Spartan, but she is wealthy; her son is a bishop, yet her aspirations are self-centred; she has unrivalled status in local society, but thirsts for privacy—an heiress, her inheritance is loneliness and self-indulgence.

The second figure, a millionaire for the summer, belongs to Lowell's populous company of men out of season:

The season's ill—
we've lost our summer millionaire,
who seemed to leap from an L. L. Bean
catalogue.

You will see in *The New Yorker*, to this day, smart advertisements for the Bean summer collection, designed to create the appearance of magnitude, for the season, in the sophisticated watering-places of New England.

His nine-knot yawl
was auctioned off to lobstermen.

As Lowell cynically details the bankruptcy—financial and moral—of this *parvenu*, Australian readers might recall Barry Humph-

ries' image of "the Porsche-driven desperates of Portsea".⁷ The stanza concludes with a colourful, but grotesque, epitome of the evil diversions of the wealthy which violate the world of nature—a blood "red fox stain covers Blue Hill".

In the third portrait, satire almost extends itself to pathos:

And now our fairy
decorator brightens his shop for fall,
his fishnet's filled with orange cork,
orange, his cobbler's bench and awl,
there is no money in his work,
he'd rather marry.

Lowell's acute sense of colour is again put to thematic use as the inappropriateness of orange (deliberately repeated, and placed at the beginning of a line for additional emphasis) to the items it is inflicted upon indicates how the decorator's sensibility is an assault on naturalness. "Fall", of course, has a number of grim connotations apart from its seasonal reference, and a merciless rhyme scheme which sets "fairy" in relation to "marry" highlights the unhappy paradox of this perversity.

The second half of the poem goes beyond these exempla whose purpose has been to set the stage for the entrance of a fourth unnatural being—it is the poet himself:

One dark night,
my Tudor Ford climbed the hill's skull,
I watched for love-cars.

At the end of his extensive *Life Studies*, Lowell presents himself as a voyeur. But, as always, he is careful to objectify his self-portrait by a concentration of style and a magnanimity of reference. There is, for example, the play with "Tudor"—a pun (in American pronunciation) on "two-door", and the implication of vain ostentation in its anachronistic conjunction with "Ford". Moreover, the phrase "dark night" is meant to recall, Lowell has told us, the dark night of the soul in the writings of St John of the Cross.⁸

In his mystical plan, St John sets forth the dark night as a discipline of spiritual pilgrimage through sin and suffering which must be undertaken before the dawning of God's love. It is, in

7 "The Getting of Ignorance", *Bulletin*, 20 August 1977, p. 41.

8 Lowell has written: "My night is not gracious, but secular, puritan, and agnostic. An Existential night. Somewhere in my mind was a passage from Sartre or Camus about reaching some point of final darkness where the one free act is suicide." (Axelrod, *op. cit.*, p. 127)

other words, an analogue for the Christian's endurance of earthly existence. But like Eliot in his use of pastiche, Lowell borrows this famous concept in order to turn it to his own, darker purpose. He contrasts St John's dark night which leads to spiritual light, with the darkness of contemporary soullessness which yields no illumination. The Christian moves through the valley of the shadow of death to the Resurrection; as Lowell envisages them, he and his personae remain in the void.

The damning vision of the lovers amongst the gravestones, the object of the persona's perverse attention, displays the lustful lovelessness of modern passion. The cars' headlights are, of course, "turned down" in this nightmare world, and the clandestine coupling of their occupants is set to music from a car radio feebly serenading a "love" that couldn't care less:

'Love, O careless Love . . .'

Writing of "Skunk Hour", Lowell remarked that "sterility howls through the scenery".⁹

However, the poet is the dominant personality in these lines, and he is not exempt from daunting self-criticism—"my mind's not right":

I hear
my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,
as if my hand were at its throat.

The only escape from the trauma of perverted existence is the ultimate perversion of self-destruction. Like Mephistophilis in *Dr Faustus* or Satan in *Paradise Lost*, Lowell confronts himself as the incarnation of evil:

I myself am hell

—which, in relation to the portraits of the others in "Skunk Hour", is to be coupled with the existentialist theory that Hell is other people. Thus, with his faith in himself destroyed *and* his community with others disappointed—"nobody's here"—Lowell remains without God or hope in the world.

With the human order annihilated, skunks are free to consume its detritus. This is "skunk hour" indeed, as these creatures—unattractive in their name, repellent in their notorious smell—march in triumph, as a kind of nocturnal occupation army, "up Main Street". Their dominion supersedes the futility of man's aspirations, as their "moonstruck eyes", burning with a diabolical "red fire", ignore the chalk-dry spire of the Trinitarian Church.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 125.

In his dedication to the poem, "For Elizabeth Bishop", Lowell means us to recall that poetess' image of the armadillo—a harmless and rather pathetic creature, as she describes it—which is yet intended by her as an emblem of the possibility of survival. Her armadillo flees for its life from a holocaust—so, Elizabeth Bishop suggests, might human beings, bowed but not beaten, preserve themselves from eternal destruction. But Lowell would have us set his skunks in contrast to her armadillo. Recalling the existentialists' hopelessness, he relates it to his concluding image: "out of this comes the march and affirmation, an ambiguous one, of my skunks".¹⁰ It is "ambiguous" because an affirmation is usually a hopeful sign. But an affirmation in the context of despair—like Molly's reminiscence of affirmation in *Ulysses* ("yes I said yes I will Yes") in the wake of what we know of her subsequent life with Bloom, or the distant sound of rain-bringing Oriental thunder mocking the parched desert of Occidental civilization in *The Waste Land*—is essentially absurd, even "barbarously absurd", as Lowell remarks of his skunks' affirmation in the same passage.

Lachrymose humanists, however, recoiling in horror from this existentialist *dies irae*, have been known to perform an act of extraordinary literary perversion and interpret the closing lines of "Skunk Hour" as wonderfully hopeful, foolishly embracing the skunks for what Mr Raban has called, in a preposterous analysis, "their gravely secure domestic life [which] is to be both loved and envied."¹¹

Neither the weight of all that has preceded the skunks' introduction as emissaries of utter despair, nor the *locus* in which they are placed, nor the terms in which they are described, will support the astonishing contention that Lowell intends us to admire them for the high seriousness of their cohesive home life. For the character of the skunks' business, which confers a logic on their presence in the poem, is incontrovertibly established in a number of threateningly active verbs—"march", "swills", "jabs"—perfectly invoking a sense of the unassailable victory of bestiality, and the total superannuation of the fury and the mire of human veins:

a mother skunk with her column of kittens swills the garbage pail
 She jabs her wedge head in a cup
 of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail,
 and will not scare.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 130.

11 *Op. cit.*, p. 171.

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In Lowell's second period, defined by *Life Studies*, we observe that the external myths of his earlier work—Greek, Roman, Christian—are replaced by a folklore of himself. His detailing of his family and their circumstances has the dimensions of a saga, and his revelations about his life, and his craft, in the midst of this vast catalogue of information and in the context of a poetry which embraces civilization itself, conforms to a well-established precedent of authorial intrusion in epic. Certainly the manner of *Life Studies* is more personal, significantly less elevated, than that of his earlier work—no one would claim that this is a “high style”—but it is a mistake to conclude, on the other hand, that Lowell has accomplished in *Life Studies* what Bultmann achieved in modern theology: the poet is not a demythologizer in his second period—rather he disestablishes former mythologies to replace them with a world-picture, shot through with self-caricature and criticism indeed, but constantly extending itself beyond these limited perspectives to reveal, as mythologists and epic poets do, something larger and more intense than life.

The third period of Lowell's poetic career belongs to his last years. It may be reckoned to have begun in 1960 with the appearance of “For the Union Dead” and to have concluded with the collection *Day by Day*, published in 1977, the year of his death.

As we read these poems from the artist's maturity we are conscious that Lowell is integrating enthusiasms and preoccupations from his earlier work. The collection *Notebook*, for example, is in touch with the spirit of *Life Studies*, while in other poems there appears Lowell's familiarity with the mythologies which influenced his earliest poetry—as in these lines from “Tenth Muse”:

I like to imagine it must have been simpler
in the days of Lot,
or when Greek and Roman picturebook
gods sat combing their golden beards,
each on his private hill or mountain.

But I suppose even God was born
too late to trust the old religion—
all those settings out
that never left the ground,
beginning in wisdom, dying in doubt.

What is different here, however, is that Lowell is introducing these old presences in order, with elegant wit and a certain wist-

fulness, to pronounce their insufficiency, as his tenth muse supersedes the classical nine.

Yet, in a number of the most distinguished of his last poems there may be observed a pronounced return to the erudite, adorned language of such works as "The Quaker Graveyard". Many readers have noted similarities between "Waking Early Sunday Morning" and that poem: its stylized opening gesture, for instance, and its concentration on the sea:

O to break loose, like the chinook
salmon jumping and falling back.

There is a similar regretting of the true God, in a poetry rich in Biblical allusion:

When will we see Him face to face?
Each day, He shines through darker glass,

and an Eliotesque worrying of language:

Sing softer! But what if new
diminuendo brings no true
tenderness, only restlessness,
excess, the hunger for success,
sanity of self deception,
fixed and kicked by reckless caution.

Noteworthy too, in this poem, and a feature of many of Lowell's last poems, is his celebration of the animal kingdom—sea creatures, in particular. The salmon in "Waking Early Sunday Morning", the seals in "Soft Wood" and in the poem called after them, the dolphin in "Dolphin", which Lowell chooses as a type of his poetic inspiration, all appear in sharp contrast to the skunks of *Life Studies*.

Then, in the prodigious output of this third period we notice Lowell's cultivation of a public voice. The America he observes so incisively is delineated in several poems—it was a technique practised in *Life Studies*, and brought to perfection now as a stateliness and sensitivity is added to, and often replaces, cynicism and bitterness. "Fourth of July in Maine", for example, is to be praised for its measured elaboration of local detail mixed with affectionate address to the poet's cousin, Harriet Winslow. And "For the Union Dead", regarded by Lowell as his "best poem"¹² and, in a sense, the text for his third period, is appreciated for an indignation that is never strident, as the superlative worthiness of "Colonel Shaw/and his bell-cheeked Negro in-

12 In Axelrod, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

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fantry" is set against the "savage servility" of the modern age which, finding his monument and the ideal it embodies embarrassing, "slides by on grease". This is a work which seems to fulfil all our expectations in a poem—there is a sustained purposefulness of utterance, a variegated (but never superfluous) imagery, a conscious carefulness of diction that is yet preserved from preciosity, a personal intimacy and a public concern, a humanness that is not ignorant of transcendence.

As his readers come to enjoy Lowell's poetry as a whole and become more familiar with his most recent work, I believe that they will judge those poems belonging to the period of composition initiated by "For the Union Dead" as the quintessence of his art.