

Robert Lowell's Artistry in Life Studies: The "grace of accuracy"

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Abstract

The "grace of accuracy" ("Epilogue" Day by Day 16) serves as a credo for Robert Lowell's art and for confessional poetry in general; it is the artist's gift of love—both to the art and to the fact. The cardinal force behind this artistic intention in writing even the most confessional of poems of Life Studies is Lowell's formal mastery of New Criticism stimulated by T.S. Eliot. Tellingly, Lowell broke away from the culpability of making confessional poetry a byword for limp infatuation, and thus restored his position as an *avant-garde* poet of the twentieth century American poetry. This paper deals with Lowell's encountering the problem of self and self-representation, especially focusing on his groundbreaking piece Life Studies, to establish the fact that with such paradoxical dilemma he in fact wheedlingly added a feather in the artistry of poetry *per se*.

The "thread that strings" all of Robert Lowell's work, and makes him the pre-eminent American poet born in the twentieth century, is something deeper than autobiography, "a small-scale Prelude" (Lowell "After Enjoying" 114). It is the artistic personality that is exposed in his rhythms and his metaphors, his language and his thought. Even when he seems most directly confessional it is Lowell's artistry—which is also to say, his artificiality—that makes him a great poet. Lowell himself acknowledged that even the effect of total honesty in Life Studies is just that—an effect, based on deliberate manipulation. As he told in a comprehensive interview given to Paris Review two years after the publication of Life Studies, "You leave out a lot, and emphasise this and not that. Your actual experience is a complete flux. I've invented facts and changed things, and the whole balance of the poem was something invented ... the reader was to believe he was getting the *real* Robert Lowell" (Kirsch 34). Hence the poetry of Robert Lowell "is the result not of accuracy but the illusion of accuracy," poems intended to mimic reality for the purpose of some type of unearthing (Bidart 234-238). Lowell's poems are not "intended to be revelatory but to be exploratory," and poems such as "Memories of West Street and Lepke," "Man and Wife," and "To Speak of Woe That is in Marriage" exemplify the artistry of Robert Lowell that is commonly mistaken for confession (Travisano 44). These poems not only challenge the confessional label through movement but also through the artistry employed, illustrated through the changing voice and illusion of autobiographical representation. At the same time, the primary motive for treating private subjects in these poems is more to cause an aesthetic effect than to evoke ethical or therapeutic effect; "Life Studies just takes a new approach to his old goal of creating a self sufficient work of art (Kirsch 34)."

Confessional poetry, as defined by Diane Middlebrook, has clearly identified characteristics and a distinctive voice that is understood to be the voice of the poet himself:

[Confessional poetry] investigates the pressures on the family as an institution regulating middle-class private life, primarily through the mother. Its principle themes are divorce, sexual infidelity, childhood neglect, and the mental disorders that follow from deep emotional wounds received early in life. A confessional poem contains the first-person speaker, "I", and always seems to refer to a real person in whose actual life real episodes have occurred that cause actual pain, all represented in the poem. (Travisano 39-40)

While Lowell's poems frequently deal with such subject matter, the first person "I" is not necessarily representative of Lowell himself. The inspiration drawn from real life events creates "the illusion that the poem is not art but a report on life, that the reader is getting 'the real Robert Lowell'" (Bidart 234-238).

The opening of "Memories of West Street and Lepke" seems to be a direct depiction of the genuine daily life of Robert Lowell. Beginning the poem with the illusion of a commentary on the actual life of the poet himself allows Lowell to lay the foundation for regression into a half-invented past, without compromising the

appearance of truth, in order to explore a simulated personal history in relationship to the larger political and social movements of the time. Lowell's poetic material here is less a return to the past to remember what happened in search of time lost, or to a familiar location to restore the person the subject had been when there previously, than a discursive and symbolic narrative of now created as the speaking "I" revises conscious and unconscious matter in his present perspective. Recalling and imagining are both voluntary and involuntary, conjoint creative activities which support the poet's representation, or making out to be, of that past to fit into the narrative, or "plot." In the same way "Memories of West Street and Lepke" mingles the imagined with the remembered, as Lowell exercises his prerogative to create and revise meanings. In fact, the poem helps Lowell to create a mythic tale of himself—a tale based on a significant real life gesture, of a romantic figure who, though closely identified through the Lowell-dynasty with the ruling establishment, comes to mean much more to "the average American" than any remote figurehead.

These are the tranquilized *Fifties*,
and I am forty. Ought I to regret my seedtime?
I was a fire-breathing Catholic C.O.,
and made my manic statement,
telling off the state and president, and then
sat waiting sentence in the bull pen
beside a Negro boy with curlicues
of marijuana in his hair. (12-19)

Lowell's use of "manic" invites the reading that his "Declaration of Personal Responsibility" was written while he was under the influence of madness, even though neither Hamilton's nor Mariani's biographies on Lowell provide any evidence that the poet experienced the characteristic signs of mania at that time. In addition, Lowell was not, strictly speaking, a C.O., because C.O. status was a legal definition that meant a person refused, for reasons of conscience, to serve in any war and was eligible for alternative service in civilian public service camps. And finally, one would hardly call Lowell's politely formal letter a "telling off" of the president. The association of mania and Lowell's refusal to join World War II, in a subtle descriptive context, suggest a contented caress attained at some cost to richness of feeling and recollection. At the same time, it creates a vacancy between the poet and the persona and engages imagination to play in the plot. The placement of seemingly personal details within the poem creates verisimilitude and "inject new life" into the poem, allowing Lowell's commentary to possess an air of authority and authenticity (Yezzi 17-19).

The poem "Memories of West Street and Lepke" fluidly moves not only through time but also space. Without a tonal shift, the reader moves out of the time spent "waiting sentence in the bull pen" into the midst of the prison sentence itself" (17).

I was so out of things, I'd never heard
of the Jehovah's Witness.
"Are you a C.O.?" I asked a fellow jailbird.
"No," he answered, "I'm a J.W."
He taught me the "hospital tuck,"
and pointed out the T-shirted back
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: (36-45)

Realism, provided through dialogue, disguises the social commentary contained within the lines of the poem as confession. Because of Lowell's careful representation of reality in the beginning of the poem, subsequent presentation of events is perceived as truth. The focus of the poem is not to confide feelings of responsibility for the imprisonment but to call attention to Lowell's perceived hypocrisy of the justice system during 1950s. Refusal to kill for one's country is considered more of a crime than cold-blooded murder, evidenced by the luxuries Lepke is afforded that the speaker is denied. According to Hamilton's 1980 conversation with Jim Peck, a long time antiwar activist, "Lowell was in a cell next to Lepke, you know, Murder Incorporated, and Lepke says to him: 'I'm in for killing. What are you in for?' 'Oh, I'm in for refusing to kill'" (Hamilton 91). It is easy to imagine Lowell saying such a thing, acutely aware of the ironies and contradictions of state power. Lepke and the *Fifties* President Eisenhower, both Chief Executives, share an identity, a symbol of at least one aspect of American public life. Lepke has organised, bureaucratized, depersonalised individual murder; America, in the "tranquillised Fifties," has done the same thing with its power to annihilate mankind.

Like "Memories of West Street and Lepke," "Man and Wife" challenges the confessional label through the presentation of an allegedly realistic account coupled with unrelenting motion from start to finish. Because "the confessional model carries strong connotations of hierarchy and stasis," the action taking place within the poem should be fixed in time and space in order to accurately be categorised as a confessional poem (Travisano 57). However, "Man and Wife" shifts both temporally and spatially from beginning to end. In the opening of the poem, the reader finds the couple in the bedroom, lying in a state of drug-induced motionlessness as life goes on around them. The action taking place between the couple is conveyed through the world around them, and the harsh description of the external world reflects the battle occurring internally between the two characters of the poem. Although the mode of the poem is essentially realistic, there are a number of local metaphors to intensify the external and internal effects. The setting and the landscape are vividly coloured by the filter of tranquilized derangement through which the poet sees them. The initial lines, which in effect, if not in intention parody Donne's "The Sunne Rising," owe much of their power to just this kind of distortion:

Tamed by *Miltown*, we lie on Mother's bed;
 the rising sun in war paint dyes us red;
 in broad daylight her gilded bed-posts shine,
 abandoned, almost Dionysian.
 At last the trees are green on Marlborough Street,
 blossoms on our magnolia ignite
 the morning with their murderous five days' white. (1-7)

The sun is dressed for battle, and the white of the magnolia blossoms have lost their innocence, paralleling the hostility and loss of love present in the bedroom scene and intensifying the death-in-life existence of the couple. But the condition which causes the poet to see the sun as a feared savage and the white magnolia blossoms as "murderous" is defined by a larger metonymic sequence of alliterating nouns: "Miltown," "Mother's bed," "Marlborough Street," "our magnolia." In fact, the external movement in the beginning of the poem gives the reader an indication that something has occurred to change the dynamic of the relationship from one of intimacy to hostility.

The poem continues to move, although the focus of the action shifts from the external world to the internal mind of the speaker.

All night I've held your hand,
 as if you had
 a forth time faced the kingdom of the mad-
 its hackneyed speech, its homicidal eye-
 and dragged me home alive ... (8-12)

The speaker realizes that she has saved him from himself but seems to have no emotional response to her sacrifice. Despite the fact that the couple is physically close, they are holding hands, there is an emotional distance between them which seems to be the result of the man's repeated episodes of madness. His acknowledgment of her as his saviour does not elicit a response of remorse or guilt but propels him back in time through "the partial recovery of a half-forgotten memory" (Travisano 51):

you were in your twenties, and I,
 once hand on glass
 and heart in mouth,
 outdrank the Rahvs in the heat
 of Greenwich Village, fainting at your feet— (14-18)

The introduction of the memory not only provides further evidence that a drastic change has occurred within the relationship but also serves "as [a] window onto wide-ranging moments across times, cultures, and versions of the self" (Travisano 58). The speaker now recalls the night, so different from the "homicidal" one, when he first met her. Again the focus is on setting rather than on emotion. The scene is diametrically opposed to that of Marlborough Street: it is the noisy, hot alcoholic, left-wing Greenwich Village of Philip Rahv, the editor of *Partisan Review*. The poet wryly recalls his former self, "hand on glass/and heart in mouth," trying to outdrink the Rahvs and "fainting" at the feet of his future wife, the Southern born lady intellectual whose "shrill invective" denounced the traditionalism of the Old South. The flashback allows the reader to see the man in another place and time when he was on the verge of falling in love, as opposed to, the verge of insanity.

The reader is thrust out of the memory when the man was “too boiled and shy/and poker-faced to make a pass” into his present state of despair (19-20). The promise of what the relationship might hold, as conveyed through the memory, is lost, and the implied war suggested through the images of nature in the beginning of the poem is confirmed:

Now twelve years later, you turn your back.
Sleepless, you hold
your pillow to your hollows like a child;
your old fashioned tirade—
loving, rapid, merciless—
breaks like the Atlantic Ocean on my head. (23-28)

The turn in the final section evokes a paradox. The speaker in the opening of the poem is seen “All night” holding hands of his “*Petite*,” but as he retreats to the same sequence at the end of the poem the wife is seen turning back, “Sleepless” in the bed. The first water-image in the poem, the imagery of the ocean-wave breaking against the speaker’s head, marks a turning point. The life-giving water rouses the poet from his Milton-induced lethargy, a lethargy in which he envies the Thyrsus-like bed-post, and brings him back to reality. Moreover, the hostility of the external environment in the beginning of the poem is explicitly stated in the return to the bedroom scene. The return to the present completes the movement of the poem, resulting in a revelation of the larger thematic significance that is the human experience.

In addition to the artistic technique of the manipulation of time and realistic detail, Lowell offers further support of perceived authenticity masking artistry through the management of voice. Lowell presents, instead of himself as the “I,” a female first person speaker in “To Speak of Woe That is in Marriage,” thus contradicting Middlebrook’s assertion that a confessional poem “contains” the poet as the “real person in whose actual life real episodes have occurred that cause actual pain, all represented in the poem” (Travisano 39-40). It should be noted that Lowell had written occasional poems spoken by an assumed feminine persona. Marie de Medici in “The Banker’s Daughter” and the beleaguered woman in “To Speak of Woe That is in Marriage” are two examples from *Life Studies*. Albeit according to this description of the term confessionalism, “To Speak of Woe That is in Marriage” may not fit into the criteria of a confessional poem since the “I” of the poem is clearly not Lowell, and hence the implied pain as a result of what is occurring in the poem does not belong to Lowell, yet the subject of the poem seems to conform to Middlebrook’s criteria for a confessional work where the use of a female speaker illustrates artistry in action as Lowell utilizes experimentation of voice to move away from the “public, prophetic stance” of his early writing (Hendley 89-91).

“To Speak of Woe That is in Marriage” does not rely on the “incorporation of guilty personal detail for emotional effect” but rather provides details of a dysfunctional marriage in order to provide commentary on the destructive nature of personal relationships. Lowell’s examination of domestic relationships through the voice of a woman is a technique of invention that allows to safely upholding the idea that “men’s and women’s roles and prerogatives are radically different,” criticizing the reality of gender roles in the 1950s and 1960s (Hendley 112-113). The handling of voice serves as a medium for social commentary and allows Lowell to project his “illusion of honesty with seriousness and responsibility” (Yezzi 20-21)

Although the work of Robert Lowell is often categorised as confessional, the realism contained within the poems is no more than an artful simulation of reality for the purpose of aesthetic effect. As Adam Kirsch views, “just as Marx was not a Marxist, so Lowell was not a confessional poet” (33). What gives the poems of *Life Studies* their enduring value is not their honesty about Lowell’s personal life, but their artistic form; the poet’s experience are not simply revealed but shaped, through rhythm, symbol and tone, into works of art. Throughout the later poems of Robert Lowell, there’s a good deal of tinkering with fact, resulting in an artistic feat that is often mistaken for a form of disclosure but is really an incredible accomplishment of creativity and invention. If his poetry is seen today as only about Robert Lowell, or primarily about Lowell writing poetry, it is partly Lowell’s fault for subverting our readings, seeming to minimize the part imagination plays in the tension of his work’s dynamic energies, with pre-emptive strikes such as, “My verse autobiography sometimes fictionalizes plot and particular” (Headnote to *Selected Poems*:1976), “I want to make/something imagined, not recalled” (“Epilogue” *Day by Day* 127), and the “jumble” that gives “my simple autobiography a plot” (“Unwanted” *Day by Day* 121). Yet we need to remember also the shrewd dissimulation in a hope that “the reader was to believe he was getting the real Robert Lowell.”

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