The Confessional Poetry of Robert Lowell: Artistry or Accuracy?

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Abstract: *The "grace of accuracy" ("Epilogue" Day by Day 127) serves as a credo for Robert Lowell's art and for confessional poetry in general; it is the art of describing experiences in words, it is the artist's reward 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 by-word for limp infatuation, and hence restored his position as an avant-garde poet of the twentieth century American poetry. Poetry, for him, serves simultaneously as a snapshot of life and an interpretation of that picture – a record of fact and a figurative design laden with significance. This paper deals with Lowell's encountering the paradoxical dilemma of self and self-representation in his confessional poems through which he created his poetic identity and wheedlingly added a feather in the artistry of poetry* per se.

A few months before his death, Robert Lowell assesses his own canon of works by saying: "the thread that strings it together is my autobiography, it is a small-scale *Prelude*" ("After Enjoying" 114). But what makes him the pre-eminent American poet of the twentieth century is something deeper than autobiography.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. In a comprehensive interview given to the *Paris Review* two years after the publication of *Life Studies*, he said:

> 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. So there's a lot of artistry, I hope, in the poems . . . the reader was to believe he was getting the *real* Robert Lowell. (*Collected Prose* 246)

Hence the poetry of 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).

Robert Lowell's long effort at self-interpretation, rather than only a Freudian therapeutic project, demonstrates his commitment to memory and his struggle to preserve it. During his poetic career, Lowell would recognize repeatedly the force of memory in his poetry and in his life. His poems are found to weave as well as illuminate a multifaceted matrix of the personal, the familial, and occasionally the medical. Lowell's biographers and critics, hence, have argued that his personal and

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familial details provide the potency and energy for the poet's stylistic accomplishments. While Doreski construes that Lowell attempts to "move [his] poetry as close as possible to his experience" for aesthetic development (xix), Yezzi considers that such employment of apparently personal details within the poem produces authenticity and "inject[s] new life" into the poem (17-19), allowing Lowell's commentary to possess an air of authority and verisimilitude. Indeed, what gives the poems of *Life Studies* and *Day by Day* their enduring value is predominantly their honesty about Lowell's personal past where the poet's experiences are not merely revealed but shaped, through rhetoric and rhythm and tone, into works of art.

This obviously suggests his writing process, a recent concept of autobiographical act, through which the original experiences are transformed into art via imagination. Memory is "an imaginative reconstruction, or construction, built out of the relation of our attitude towards a whole active mass of organized past reactions or experience" (Bartlett 213). Moreover, 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 institutionregulating 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). Hence, the label is, at its best, problematic, and although still used loosely by some general commentators, has been widely discredited by critics and scholars. For example, Elizabeth Bishop's distaste for lyric verse which "deals with the facts and intimate mental and physical experiences of the poet's own life" is clear in an early letter to Lowell when she writes "this suffering business . . . is so inevitable there's no use talking about it, and that in itself it has no value, anyway" (Bishop 170-71). Her professional nonchalance speaks for one principle at work, the integrity of art, in my reading of Lowell's autobiographical poetry. Jeffrey Gray assures this integrity of art while writing autobiographical poems in "Memory and Imagination in *Day by Day*" saying that the "poet and reader realize

that memory never did exist apart from imagination, and that paralysis of art by fact was a fear, never a reality" (Axelrod, *The Critical Response* 232).

The opening of "Memories of West Street and Lepke" (*Life Studies*) 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.

The poem was conceived in a robust Lowellian coupling of art with life; Wordsworth is its godfather, in his frequent references to the creative crux that challenges him to fill the shifting "vacancy" caused by gaps in memory, so as to integrate at least two different selves. For example, Wordsworth meditates in *The Prelude* Book II (1805-6 version):

> Of all mankind, who does not sometimes wish
> For things which cannot be, who would not give,
> If so he might, to duty and to truth
> The eagerness of infantine desire?
> A tranquillizing spirit presses now
> On my corporeal frame: so wide appears
> The vacancy between me and those days
> Which yet have such self-presence in my mind,
> That, sometimes, when I think of it, I seem
> Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself
> And of some other Being. (28-33)

"Memories of West Street and Lepke" is a complex narrative poem that returns to the past to join past, present, and future, and in so doing, creates a vacancy between poet and the persona. The poem illustrates, as Wordsworth puts it, the "eagerness of infantine desire" giving way to, but not being overcome by, the more mature pensiveness, or "tranquillizing spirit" of adulthood. Lowell's work subjects both selves to some criticism, and probably has that Book II passage, in general and in some details, among its memories. Lowell's poem views public activity from high moral ground commanding long ranging perspectives. But the vantage point has first to be built by selection of the fictive plot from documentary-seeming autobiographical memories used for meditative self-examination. Lowell converted to Roman

Catholicism in 1940 with the zeal that is supposed to fire all converts; but this burned itself out and by 1946, the year after he tried to murder his wife Jean Stafford, he was apostate and in the throes of divorce. He registered for the draft after America entered World War II in December 1941, received his call-up notice in July 1943, expected to be rejected because of poor sight, but learned he was to be inducted on 8 September. On 7 September, he sent an open letter to President Roosevelt, with a "Declaration of Personal Responsibility" attached of about one thousand words, was arraigned on 13 October and sentenced to a year and a day for refusing the draft, not for conscientious objection as the poem claims. He spent a few days in a cell next to Czar Louis Lepke in New York's West Street Jail before being moved to a correctional center at Danbury, Connecticut for five months. Finally, it is after Lowell's mother's death in 1954, his doctors suggested that as a therapeutic measure he write down what he could remember of his childhood (Wallingford 12); so Lowell began writing a series of prose reminiscences which would eventually become the basis for *Life Studies*.There is much to deprecate and enjoy among the story's ironies.

> These are the tranquillized *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 insertion of the word "manic" gives the impression to the reader that his "Declaration of Personal Responsibility" was composed while he was suffering from madness. But neither Hamilton's nor Mariani's biographies on Lowell give any proof that the poet experienced any symptom of mania at that time. Moreover, Lowell was not, in actual sense, a C.O., because the C.O. position was legal since it meant a person refused to serve in any war for reasons of conscience and was eligible for alternative service in civilian public service camps. Most strikingly, Lowell's politely written official letter could scarcely be called a "telling off" of the President.

An American whose family traditions, like your own, have always found their fulfilment in maintaining, through responsible participation in both the civil and the military services, our country's freedom and honor.

> I have the honor, Sir, to inscribe myself, with sincerest loyalty and respect, your fellow-citizen,
> Robert Traill Spence Lowell, Jr. (*Collected Prose* 368)

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.

However, "Memories of West Street and Lepke" freely travels through time and space. Without a change in tone, one 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)

Here, 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 reveal feelings of responsibility for the imprisonment but to call attention to Lowell's observed hypocrisy of the justice system during the 1950s. Rejection to massacre for one's country is thought more of a crime than cold-blooded murder, established by the luxuries Lepke is provided that the speaker is refused. According to Hamilton's 1980 talk with Jim Peck, a long time anti-war 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 not difficult to envision Lowell saying such a thing, keenly conscious of the ironies and paradoxes of state statute. 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 organized, bureaucratized, depersonalized individual murder; America, in the "tranquillised Fifties," has done the same thing with its power to annihilate mankind.

Similarly, "Man and Wife" challenges the confessional label by presenting an allegedly pragmatic description tied with persistent shift from beginning to end. 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 categorized as a confessional poem (Travisano 57). However, "Man and Wife" shifts both temporally and spatially from start to end. In the outset of the poem, the reader comes across the couple in the bedroom, lying in a condition of drug-induced stillness as life continues 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 background are vigorously colored by the sifter of tranquilized numbness through which the poet sees them. The opening lines, which in effect, if not purposefully 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 a sign that something has occurred to alter the force of the relationship from one of closeness to antagonism.

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 and 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 savior 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 atyour 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 recollects the night, so unlike the "homicidal" one, when he first met her. Again the focus is on setting rather than on emotion. The landscape is absolutely contradictory to that of Marlborough Street: it is the roaring, boiling intoxicating, left-wing Greenwich Village of Philip Rahv, the editor of *Partisan Review*. Lowell ironically calls to mind his ex-self, "hand on glass/and heart in mouth," longing to drink to the brim the Rahvs and "fainting" in front of his would be wife, the Southernfemale intellectual whose "shrill invective" criticizes the traditional values 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 poemthe wife is seen turning back, "Sleepless" in the bed . The first water-image in the poem, the imagery of the sea-wave breaking against the speaker's head, marks a turn-off point. The revitalizing water awakens the poet from his Miltown-induced indolence, a lethargy in which he envies the Thyrsus-like bed-post, and carries him back to reality. Moreover, the resentment of the external atmosphere in the opening of the poem is clearly 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 introduces, in place of himself as the "I," a "she" first person speaker in "To Speak of Woe That is in Marriage," hence opposing Middlebrook's claim 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" (qtd. in 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 uphold 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).

In "Shifting Colors" in the third section of the "Day by Day" sequence, Lowell regrets his "description without significance,/transcribed verbatim by my eye" and

longs for something higher: "I would write only in response to the gods" (*Day by Day* 119-20). In the poem, we see the conflict between imagination and memory, between creation and description, between the painting and the photograph, all of these framed by the anxiety of representation. The poem opens with the aged pastoral poet (Lowell's self-image) fishing "until the clouds turn blue,/weary of self-torture, ready to paint/ lilacs or confuse a thousand leaves,/as landscapists must" (119). The speaker is trying to respond to the phenomenal world with a visual artist's trained eye, although the pun in "landscapists" alerts us to look out for rhetorical escapism. He sees and transcribes natural facts into words, confusing the facts with metaphor just as the landscape painter must confuse (or muddle) the leaves.

> I seek leave unimpassioned by my body,
> I am too weak to strain to remember, or give
> recollection the eye of a microscope. I see
> horse and meadow, duck and pond,
> universal consolatory
> description without significance,
> transcribed verbatim by my eye. (*Day by Day* 119-20)

Is seeing truly ("I see"), but without feeling ("I seek . . . too weak to strain"), a failure of the imagination ("description without significance")? Moreover, "transcribed verbatim" implies a question that worries the speaker in "Epilogue" – the idea that the writing is mere reproduction and yet the consciousness that it is not possible to transcribe verbatim. Can we say "what happened?"We can only "pray for the grace of accuracy." By way of an answer, "Shifting Colors" offers the conundrum that closes the poem:

> This is not the directness that catches
> everything on the run and then expires –
> I would write only in response to the gods,
> like Mallarme who had the good fortune
> to find a style that made writing impossible. (*Day by Day* 119-20)

"This" we must take to mean this writing, "without significance," the writing a poet must do who has neither the strength to remember nor the capacity to represent what is before him, but insists on mediation, indirectness, on not merely recording. The ageless "white horse" in the second stanza may seem to objectify feeling, even unspecified emotion, but it is not merely an emblem. The painter or poet of the first order respects the material existence of other forms of being, aware that existence in form itself is significant. In total abasement, he "shifts" his colors, deserts his old standards of realism, the image, actual human speech, and surrenders to the abstract enemy.

"Shifting Colors" – its title refers to changing aesthetic allegiances in the wavering persona. The "I" admits a yearning to shift the direction, burden and responsibility of his writing. However, unable to settle on an explanation of the best way of writing, but certain in his rejection of what has been tried and found wanting, the poet opts for writing "in response to the gods/like Mallarmé . . ." Stephane Mallarmé, the French Symbolist, was probably the immediate precursor for the notion of fictive impersonality pursued in poetic practice by Eliot and Pound. This was systematically and theatrically

advanced by Eliot as the cherished idea of separation between "the man who suffers and the mind which creates" and the transfiguration of personality on the page through writing. Mallarmé's "Devant le papier, l'artiste se fait" (faced with his writing paper, the artist manufactures himself) would be a rhetorical anathema to this "I," the *real* Robert Lowell, verse autobiographer (*Correspondence* 1.59). But Lowell admits the fact of his "verse autobiography" saying that "My verse autobiography sometimes fictionalizes plot and particular" ("Note," *Selected Poems* vii) and "there's no truth in this processing of words" ("Ten Minutes," *Day by Day* 108). The feigned inability, or unwillingness, of the poet's mind to separate fact from fiction, or myth ("sometimes fictionalizes"), is at the center of the self-restorative hope Lowell has for creating his poetic identity. He returns frequently to his family tale to form a poetic identity to more than divulge a personal life, to present an order and meaning in a fictive life not accessible in the inevitably wobbly and imperfect raw material that has existed.

Mallarmé, as Lowell would have known, was pointing to the disjunction between language and the apparent experience it signifies: "languages are imperfect because multiple; the supreme language is missing" (*Selected Prose, Poems, Essays and Letters* 38). As if in response to the critical theorists who claim that language can only defer expression of experience, Lowell's stylistic "shifts" reverse the process and incessantly bring his poetry into the present and establish the "endurance of art."

> We are poor passing facts,
> warned by that to give
> each figure in the photograph
> his living name. ("Epilogue," *Day by Day* 127)

Poetry thus serves simultaneously as a photograph of life and an interpretation of that photograph – a record and a figurative design laden with meaning.

Though the work of Robert Lowell is frequently labeled as confessional, the realism contained within the poems is no more than a crafty reproduction of reality for the intent of aesthetic effect. In Adam Kirsch's view, "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 experiences are not simply revealed but shaped, through rhetoric, rhythm, symbol and tone, into works of art.Throughout the later poems of Lowell, there is a great deal of tinkering with reality, resulting in an artistic accomplishment that is often mistaken for a form of revelation, but is really an incredible accomplishment of creativity and invention. Since Lowell's "best poetry is personal, not in the way of a diary entry, but in the way of a work of art," it expresses him essentially but indirectly, in the mode of artistic self-criticism, not self-analysis (Kirsch 60). Obviously, the Romantic miasma created by too close connection between Lowell's art and life makes it difficult for the reader to see the art clearly. 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" (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 the hope that "the reader was to believe he was getting the real Robert Lowell."

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