Robert Lowell

Life Studies

by Peter Cash

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Robert Lowell (1917-1977)

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SCOPE OF TOPIC

In 1917, T. S. Eliot published *Prufrock and Other Observations*. Ever since 1932, there has been some solid agreement among literary historians – if only for convenience’s sake – that F. R. Leavis (*New Bearings in English Poetry*) was right in claiming that Eliot’s book marked in effect the moment when modern poetry began.

In 1959, Robert Lowell published *Life Studies*. Likewise, critics seem agreed that, if modern poetry has subsequently had a ‘new’ or ‘second’ beginning, then it came with this book. Certainly, it is safe to say that no chronological survey of that century’s poetry can be complete without an account of this book in which Lowell finds in his own mental condition a metaphor for the state of modern America. A turning-point in poetic history, it is also a turning-point in Lowell’s own career.

Lowell’s very earliest triumph *The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket* (1946) was a rhetorical condemnation of Christian hypocrisy; it was a public poem by virtue of its perceived parallel between Quaker whalers of the nineteenth-century (pacificists who killed their fellow creatures in God’s name) and Christian sailors of his own time who fought in the Second World War. By abrupt contrast, the poetry of *Life Studies* is an utterly un-rhetorical expression of a private anguish; it is an essay in the ‘confessional’ mode, an addition to the confessional tradition of American poetry which begins with Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson and ends up with the suicides of John Berryman, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. *Skunk Hour*, the book’s climactic moment, is a poem in which the central ‘I’ is indisputably the troubled poet himself; throughout its eight sestets, colloquial cadences and unobtrusive monosyllables of rhyme admit, control and transform his private problems into the stuff of art.

Lowell’s ground-breaking collection is post-Wordsworthian poetry in almost every sense that one might care to mention. Lowell’s own observation of 1976 –

The thread that strings it together is my autobiography; it is a small-scale *Prelude* written in many different styles and with digressions yet a continuing story

– goes so far as to draw a clear parallel between Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* and *Life Studies*. Even if Lowell has now abandoned ‘the carpentry of definite meter’ (W. C. Williams) for a freer verse which Wordsworth would not have recognised, he could not – in his modus operandi – be a much closer follower of Wordsworthian precepts:

I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings ... it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.

William Wordsworth
Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798)

Remarkably, Lowell’s poems were to do just that: recollect in relative tranquillity the powerful feelings which had overflowed from him ten/twelve/fifteen/thirty-five years earlier. What was more, he would recollect these emotions in a poetic language which did much to recreate their original spontaneity:
I wrote my autobiographical poetry in a style ... that used images and ironic or unusual particulars. When I didn’t have to bang words into rhyme and count, I was more nakedly dependent on rhythm.

The stylistic result was radical: what Allen Tate (31st January, 1958) called ‘a thinking aloud emotional directness’. Even more dramatic and ironic, Wordsworth – in analysing the poetic careers of some of his contemporaries, such as John Clare and Christopher Smart – had already articulated for Lowell the shape of his:

We poets in our youth begin in gladness;  
But thereof come in the end despondency and madness.  
William Wordsworth  
Resolution and Independence (1802)

In Life Studies, Lowell is to be found analysing the formative influences upon his troubled personality. Yet again, he appears to have been siding with Wordsworth who asserted famously that the ‘spots of time’/’moments’ which shape a human identity ‘chiefly seem to have their date in our first childhood’.

It should be added that in 1964 Robert Lowell wrote an ode For the Union Dead. Although that poem falls outside the scope of this study, it stands (for the reasons which Leavis gives) beside Skunk Hour as one of the great poems of any century. See APPENDIX.

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FURTHER READING

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MY LAST AFTERNOON WITH UNCLE DEVEREUX WINSLOW

I feel I could write in as much detail about my uncle Arty, but what would be the significance? Nothing at all ... Whereas all you have to do is put down the names! And it seems significant, illustrative, American etc.

Elizabeth Bishop

It was M. L. Rosenthal – ‘Poetry as Confession’, published in Nation (1959) – who first argued that there was a ‘confessional’ school of American poetry. Without question, the poems in Life Studies are written in this confessional mode.

For these poems, Lowell (who had been drafting his autobiography) takes the radical decision to cut his prose-memoirs into line-lengths; the end-product is an inflected prose which relies for its effects upon its half-rhymes and its rhythms. For such verse, Lowell found a model in the work of his friend Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) who was renowned for ‘her almost devout regard for humble details’ (Ian Hamilton). In the first five poems of Life Studies, which open up to us the Lowell-Winslow family album, he gives verisimilitude to his family history by means of the particular details which he piles up.

The very title of this poem – together with the time (1922) and the place (‘the stone porch of my grandfather’s summer house’) – bravely indicate that we shall be invited to take an interest in the specific case of an individual in whom we cannot possibly have any personal interest. Both in this poem and in the others, Lowell will pile up the traits peculiar to an individual in a serious effort to give us him exactly as he was: the more ‘humble’ the detail, the more convincing the portrait. Allen Tate’s criticism (‘these details are of interest only to you ... and have no literary or public interest’) and Ian Hamilton’s comment (that it never occurred to Lowell ‘that his personal history might not be of considerable public interest’) miss the important point: in this poem, one of Lowell’s aims is to suggest that our personalities are defined/our lives characterised by the trivia with which they are punctuated.

Part I

Nowhere in Life Studies does Hamilton’s later comment apply more accurately: throughout this poem, ‘there is a kind of double vision – the child’s eye view judged and interpreted by the ironical narrator’. For the poet’s recollection of the eponymous afternoon – ‘I won’t go with you. I want to stay with Grandpa!’ – begins with an ironical reflection upon his misbehaviour as a five-year-old; he recalls how proud he was that he put a damper (‘threw cold water’) on his parents’ plans. At the same time as he is describing that Sunday afternoon, he gives an impression of the affluence in which his paternal grandparents (Boston aristocrats) lived; his Grandfather’s farm (named Char-de-sa after his three children) was something of an adventure-playground where a Romanesque ‘alley of poplars paraded from Grandmother’s rose garden’ and where the paths disappeared into endless pine-forests (‘forever pioneering’).

On ‘the stone porch’, itself designed in the Romanesque style, Robert (aged ‘five and a half’) listened to the clumping sound of time passing (‘our Alpine, Edwardian cuckoo-clock’). Reminiscing, Robert (now an ironical forty-one and a half) selects that sinister detail and then adds another: at that time, they were building a bulb-store (‘a root-house’) and he, with his messy little hands, sat on the ‘octagonal red tiles’ of the porch, mixing cool black earth with warm white lime. It is this cool-and-warm mixture (‘black earth and lime’) that becomes a metaphor for the process of life and death with which the poem is concerned.

Part II

Lowell tells us his age on that Sunday afternoon (‘I was five and a half’) in order to grant us the perspective in which he is reviewing it. It is an Olympian perspective: in his ‘formal pearl gray shorts’, he has a ‘perfection’/an ‘Olympian poise’ that permits him to pass infallible judgement on the scene that unrolls before him. The poet reflects ironically upon this false
sense of security which he enjoyed as a small boy; self-important, unsuspecting, his juvenile persona reminds him first of a mannikin in the ‘display windows’ of a Boston store, then of ‘a stuffed toucan’. Only with the passage of years will he be able to appreciate the education which he underwent on that ‘last afternoon’.

**Part III**

Lowell devotes this section of the poem to his ‘Great Aunt Sarah’ (Sarah Stark Winslow, his mother’s maiden aunt). From the start of this portrait, it is apparent that she is a bizarre character, an oddball: on that Sunday afternoon, she was in the billiards-room of the house, which commanded a view of the lake, practising on ‘her dummy piano’ a piano-arrangement from Camille Saint-Saëns opera *Samson and Delilah*. With hindsight, the poet is able to put this dedication to piano-practice into a sardonic context; he relates a story to the effect that Sarah Winslow was a pianist who began ‘in gladness’ out of which came ‘in the end’ the battiness (= ‘madness’) that his two verse-paragraphs depict. Here, it transpires, is a woman who in her day (= ‘forty years earlier, twenty, auburn headed’) was the epitome of female emancipation ... She was beautiful enough to attract millionaires, but ‘jilted an Astor’/ talented enough to be invited to perform at Symphony Hall in Boston, but ‘on the recital day ... failed to appear’.

To a member of her family who is trying to understand his own psychosis, Aunt Sarah’s is a cautionary tale. To Lowell, she is of interest because she embodies an eccentricity that borders on unreliability; she is relevant because she shows that there is a family history of unpredictability.

**Part IV**

Lowell’s strategy has been to trawl through his childhood experiences and see what he comes up with; he has gone in search of lost time and has discovered in this ‘last afternoon’ an emblem of the paradise which he has lost. His method is to gather ‘scattered items of experience’ (Allen Tate) and fashion them into an obituary/this elegy. For its context, Part IV (which Lowell devotes to his portrait of his mother’s brother Devereux Winslow) relies on his awareness (aged ‘five and a half’) that ‘no one had died’ in that Eden which Arthur Winslow’s farm represented: in his short lifetime, ‘only Cinder, our Scottie puppy, paralysed from gobbling toads’ had perished. For this reason, Uncle Devereux’s imminent and untimely death (‘My Uncle was dying at twenty-nine’) is a shock to his system/ to his child’s-eye view of the world.

For this reason, Lowell’s five-year-old self in his sailor-suit (of which a photograph exists) remains the reference-point for the series of observations that structures this life-study. There follows this view of Uncle Devereux through the eyes of a child struggling to make sense (“What in the world was I wishing?”) of a terminally ill twenty-nine year-old. Filtered further through the eyes of the retrospective poet, Devereux Winslow is an icon of human mortality, a *memento mori*; in imaginative effect, he is any man whose closeness to death is perceived by one twenty-five years his junior and not yet fully conscious of his own mortality.

In Part I, Lowell listed the objects that cluttered the stone porch: a cuckoo-clock ‘slung with strangled, wooden game’, a chaise longue, a picture of ‘a pastel-pale Huckleberry Finn’. Just as he itemised the paraphernalia there, Lowell itemises the memorabilia here for the same purpose. Decorating the walls of Uncle Devereux’s cabin by the lake is a vivid gallery of ‘student-posters’ by which trivia his preoccupations can be partly defined: ‘Mr Punch, a water melon in hockey tights’, ‘La Belle France’ (Marianne) and a ‘porcine Edward VII’ representing ‘L’Entente Cordiale’ between France and Britain, a piece of anti-Boer propaganda in which the khaki figures being ambushed ‘on the veldt’ are ‘almost life-size’. From these obscure details, presented at random, we can construct a significant picture of Lowell’s own Uncle Arty. In short, Devereux Winslow saw himself as a vigorous ex-patriate; it is with hindsight that the poet highlights the tragic irony of this perception.
On reflection, Lowell – ‘I cowered in terror’ – can see that he ‘wasn’t a child at all’. He was ‘unseen and all-seeing’: that is, a silent witness to the terrifying cycle of life and death (for which cool black earth and warm white lime are metaphors). Like Agrippina, Nero’s mother, whom he murdered, Little Boy Lowell found himself a helpless witness to the process over which we exercise no control. Given Devereux’s medical condition, this trivial detail –

Near me was the white measuring-door
my Grandfather had pencilled with my Uncle’s heights.
In 1911, he had stopped growing at just six feet

– acquires a tragic poignancy. Simultaneously, the child acquires an adult awareness that the process of growth (in which men take such pride) terminates only in hubristic decay.

In keeping with his robust image of himself, Uncle Devereux (‘just six feet’) dresses as if he is in the prime of life; in his Canadian officer’s ‘severe war-uniform’, he should be a model of sartorial elegance. Unfortunately, his physical appearance creates a lurid contrast. Organised into declarative statements, often assigned lines to themselves, Lowell’s observations illustrate the dehumanising effects of Uncle Devereux’s illness:

He was as brushed as Bayard, our riding horse.
His face was putty.
His blue coat and white trousers
grew sharper and straighter.

His pallor (‘putty’) and his thinness inside his clothes (‘sharper and straighter’) are marks of death; in the end, he cuts a garish figure to which Lowell’s elaborate simile (‘like a ginger snap man in a clothes-press’) does graphic justice. The cancer of his lymphatic system (‘He was dying of the incurable Hodgkin’s disease’) makes him look not only unwell, but also unreal.

DUNBARTON

The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.

L. P. Hartley
The Go-Between (1953)

Throughout the poems, there is a kind of double vision – the child’s-eye view judged and interpreted by the ironical narrator.

Ian Hamilton (1982)

One of Lowell’s most urgent quests in Life Studies is to put his childhood into the critical perspective which his adulthood has brought him. Each of the first four poems in the book – My Last Afternoon, Dunbarton, Grandparents, Commander Lowell – embarks with the ironic benefit of hindsight on a forensic analysis of a formative part of his past existence; in each poem, he visits that foreign country and recollects how differently they did things there. It is in this sense that the poems study life; each mounts a criticism of his life in an endeavour to reconstruct from the fragments of his childhood the sense of personal identity which has troubled him in adulthood.

In Dunbarton, the first of two poems about his maternal grandparents, Lowell retrieves from his juvenile memory the occasions of

our yearly autumn get-aways from Boston
to the family graveyard in Dunbarton.
This morbid idea of a ‘get-away’ indicates the kind of influence to which the six-year-old Robert was subjected. Even at that age, he was being asked to take seriously not only his family’s fascination with its ancestry but also his grandfather’s obsession with death; ‘at the graveyard’ itself, he was required to take note of the Winslows’ burial arrangements with its accompanying iconography (‘a suave Venetian Christ’).

The point about this part of his upbringing is that its emphasis was not healthily upon his future, but morbidly upon the foreign country of the past – of which the moribund condition of the autumnal graveyard is an emblem. Mr Winslow’s idea of a good game –

Grandfather and I
raked leaves from our dead forebears

– is little short of sinister; in this surreptitious way, he teaches his grandson to hero-worship his ancestors and encourages him to live by their anachronistic aristocratic values. He teaches him also to revere Mr Burroughs (a veteran of the American Civil War) and lets him (at the age of six, remember) taste a tumbler of ‘his illegal home-made claret’. The moral of this episode is that Lowell was introduced to adult realities too early for his own good. The result of his accelerated development is that he starts to identify with one of the newts which he has caught; his perception of himself (‘I saw myself as a young newt, neurasthenic, scarlet and wild’) is of an inferior creature existing at the lowest level of creation. On mature reflection, it becomes clear that Robert was the victim of his grandfather’s inadequacy; he was used by a reclusive old man who commandeered his company to compensate for his own discomfort in ‘human society’. No surprise, then, that Robert – his nickname was Cal (short for both Caliban and Caligula) – turned out as he did...

GRANDPARENTS

At the beginning of Grandparents, Lowell writes that they are ‘altogether otherworldly now’. Such a statement is that of an ironical narrator who can interpret the child’s-eye view for us; in this poem, he recalls his grandparents’ vanities and sees with hindsight what anachronistic (‘otherworldly’) figures they were even then; they dwelt in the foreign country of the past. In his nostalgic mind’s-eye, Grandpa – who fancied himself as a disciplinarian – ‘still waves his stick like a policeman’; his grandmother – who saw herself as a stylish dresser – ends up in her lavender veil looking like an Islamic fundamentalist (‘like a Mohammedan’).

Even so, the poem is an elegy in which Lowell recalls their antiquated régime with affection and regrets his loss of them. In particular, he remembers the ‘green shaded’ billiards-room in which he and his grandfather played in a world of their own; with a Proustian touch, he finds in ‘the coffee stain’ on the baize a mnemonic for that experience. From his prose-memoir Lowell converts the verbs into the present tense (‘waves’/‘wears’/‘spider’/‘smut’) in order to imbue each scene with an immediacy which enables him to recover a lost time; at once, this tense captures the ‘emotional directness’ that comes from ‘talking aloud’ (Hamilton).

Lowell puts himself through this therapeutic exercise to try and understand why thirty-five years later (‘half my life-lease later’) he is in a psychotic condition. The elegiac thought –

Never again
to walk there, chalk our cues,
insist on shooting for us both

– that he and his grandfather will ‘never again’ be able to play billiards together is moving; at the same time, the quotation illustrates that the grandfather was reluctant to let the boy mature independently (‘insist on shooting for us both’) and was responsible for arresting his natural development. As a result, Lowell (thirty-five years later) returns to the family farm,
discovers there (of all things) a contemporary copy of the Illustrated London News and still acts like a child; he doodles ‘handlebar mustaches’ on a picture of Czar Nicholas II. As his McLean Hospital psychiatrist reported in 1958, he had remained ‘truly under the domination of childhood fantasies’ – a condition to which the adult is of course confessing by such an ending to his poem.

COMMANDER LOWELL

Commander Lowell is an anti-elegy: rather than an encomium of his late father’s virtues, it is a considered criticism of his malign influence on the development of Robert Traill Spence Junior’s sense of personal identity. It is already evident from the title itself – in which the poet-son substitutes his father’s naval rank for his Christian names (Robert Traill Spence) – that his father’s own sense of identity was never mature nor stable. Consequently, Lowell’s 1982 biographer Ian Hamilton could have been describing this poem alone when he wrote:

Lowell had learned how to give voice to a wide range of the moderate emotions: affection, regret, nostalgia, embarrassment ...

In this poem, the confessional poet confesses that his father was an embarrassment and a failure who could not stand up for himself: “Why doesn’t he fight back?” the ten-year-old Lowell is once said to have asked.

It looks as if Lowell set out to write this poem in rhyming couplets, but relaxed such a rigid scheme when it came under pressure from the memories which he was quarrying from his prose-autobiography; in the event, his combination of couplets, half-rhymes, blank lines and lines of different syllabic lengths creates a tempo which gives this confession of his father’s weaknesses an emotional authenticity; its expressions of affection, regret, nostalgia and acute embarrassment are ‘nakedly dependent on rhythm’ (Lowell).

Throughout the first verse-paragraph, Lowell does not mention his eponymous anti-hero, but concentrates instead on outlining his role in the context of the family. He lets us into the cosy world which he shared with his mother when he was “just ... seven years tall”; significantly, he confesses that, even at that age, he was imagining that he might be Napoleon Bonaparte. He further confesses that he suffered from another disorder: even then, ‘bristling and manic’, he had an obsessive compulsion to commit to memory the names of ‘two hundred French generals ... from Augureau to Vandamme’. Why, he invites us to inquire, would any sane seven-year-old want to do that?

The implication is that such a son needed badly a reliable father whom he could respect, but that he had no such luck; at Mattapoisett, ‘having a naval officer for a father’ brought with it no special distinction. But there was much worse to follow .... Commander Lowell was congenitally unprepossessing, even comical. On the golf-course, he was a fashion-mistake (‘wearing a blue serge jacket’) who four-putted; here, the clumsy monosyllables of the line – ‘and took four shots with his putter to sink his putt’ – are functional in the description of his ineptitude. ‘Poor Father’ .... Lowell’s audible sigh expresses his sympathy for one of Life’s permanent outsiders. For Father in truth was a laughing-stock, a misfit, a social climber who kept falling: even ‘at the Sunday yacht club, he was never one of the crowd’.

The poem is a potted biography of Commander Lowell. In particular, it chronicles the series of jobs through which he ran. When ‘Lever Brothers’ offered him a lucrative job, he resigned his commission, but as a civilian fatuously and incongruously kept his meaningless title; he behaved as if he had been christened ‘Commander’ and could not be parted from his rank. ‘He was soon fired’; his reaction to this calamity and to the others which followed (‘himself his only client’) was an immature and irresponsible complacency ... Fecklessly, he sang in the bath (‘Anchors aweigh’) and ‘bought a smarter car’. While Rome burned, he continued to fiddle over graphs with ‘his ivory Annapolis slide-rule’.

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In three years
he squandered sixty thousand dollars.

Such profligacy is a measure of his poor judgement. In *Terminal Days at Beverly Farms*, Lowell magnifies this aspect of his father's character. He uses quotation-marks to illustrate how this fool and his money were parted. Nautical phrases which his father used to try to dignify his business-dealings thus become euphemisms for sharp practice: by 'buccaneer', we gather that 'the local dealer' in second-hand cars was a crook; by a 'king's ransom', we learn that he charged his father over the odds and took him for both a literal and metaphorical ride in the vehicle.

In the photograph of father-and-son opposite Page 114 of Ian Hamilton's biography, R. T. S. Senior has dressed three-year-old R. T. S. Junior in his own image: that is, in a sailor-suit that complements his own uniform. Given Father's disastrous career, it is unlikely that a son – in dire need of a figure to whom he can look up with pride – is going to appreciate such imagery: most certainly, the boy will be embarrassed; probably, he will be marked for life. At least, this is the conclusion which this confessional poem invites us to draw.

The final verse-paragraph illustrates precisely what a tragic falling-off there has been. For the record, it notes the 'gladness' in which Bob Lowell Snr's life began: after all, he was once an insider 'successful enough to be lost in the mob of ruling-class Bostonians' who at the age of forty (in '1928') still owned a house with a drawing-room 'longitudinal as Versailles'; at the age of 'nineteen' (in 1907) he had been the oldest member of a gunboat's crew on the Yangtze River in China. He peaked early. As a result, he becomes a mythic figure: in his son's mythology, he is a symbol of unrealised potential – in short, a warning to his closest relative that his career too could end in 'despondency' or 'madness' or even early death. Like Robert Lowell Snr, Robert Lowell Jnr died of a heart-attack at the age of sixty.

**TERMINAL DAYS AT BEVERLY FARMS**

In this poem, Lowell enlarges upon his previous depiction of Commander Lowell. As the title-adjective hints, it is a nostalgic memoir of the last days of his father's life; as such, it is less critical of his father's failures to adapt to civilian life and ultimately sympathetic to his mortal condition. Whereas in *Commander Lowell* he 'cringed' with embarrassment at his parents' behaviour, in this poem he gives a more tender account of it. After all, it is a 'life study' of a man who at the age of sixty is already in his dotage/in his 'second childishness'.

Still, Lowell's strategy is to catalogue significant details. For instance, Father –

bronzed, breezy, a shade too ruddy,
swayed as if on deck-duty"

– is not merely described in poetic terms but also identified as a dangerously heavy drinker of whisky ('Bourbon') who has 'had two coronaries'. Wearing a 'cream gabardine dinner-jacket and indigo cummerbund', his 'trim' figure remains dressed for the Captain's Table but is no longer such an uncomplicated figure of fun; in his 'terminal days', he invites not scorn but pathos.

Given his medical history, Father moves to Beverly Farms so that he will have easier access to 'the Boston doctors'. It is more ominous than ironic that the place 'had no sea-view'. More ominous still, all kinds shrub-growth ('sumac') are 'multiplying like cancer' at the edge of his garden: although Father does not die of cancer, the simile is more than effective in suggesting the insidious growth of coronary heart-disease/prematurely senile decay.
In these final days, Father’s ‘best friend’, we’re told, was his Chevrolet car (‘his little black Chevie’). Recounting its purchase, Lowell uses quotation-marks to show how this sad fool and his money were parted. Here, nautical phrases which his father used to try and dignify his business-dealings become euphemisms for sharp practice: by ‘buccaneer’, we gather that ‘the local dealer’ in second-hand cars was a crook; by a ‘king’s ransom’, we understand that he charged his father over the odds and took him for both a literal and metaphorical ride in the vehicle.

Lowell’s confessional candour allows him to admit that his father was never hard-working. In his ‘terminal days’, Father ‘stole off’ to Salem where – fancying himself as something of a naval historian – he used ‘to loaf in the Maritime Museum’. Lowell permits himself a smile at the thought of his father’s superior attitude to ‘the curator’: suspecting that he was a lands lubber, ‘Commander Lowell’ called him ‘the commander of the Swiss Navy’! In retrospect, the adult son can manage an affectionate glance at his father’s frail sense of humour.

Not surprisingly, Father dies an un-heroic death. His life ends in anti-climax/bathos, not with the bang of a cannon, but with a despondent whimper: “I feel awful”. In short, the vast potential of his life has amounted/come down in the end to a banal phrase.

**WAKING IN THE BLUE**

We poets in our youth begin in gladness;  
But thereof come in the end despondency and madness.”

William Wordsworth  
*Resolution and Independence* (1802)

This poem began life under an entirely different title; its first and second drafts were entitled *To Ann Adden* (written during the first week of my voluntary stay at McLean’s Mental Hospital). At the end of January 1958, Lowell (aged 40) had checked himself into McLean’s Hospital outside Boston for extensive psychotherapy; here, he entered a brief affair with a hospital visitor Ann Adden (aged 19). It is following the end of this affair that Lowell excises from his manuscript all references to his lover and instead devotes his attention to a broader analysis of his experience on the psychiatric ward: Bowditch Hall.

In this poem, Lowell’s first aim is to establish an analogical relationship between American society and its citizens and a mental hospital and its inmates; whereas in *Memories of West Street* his metaphor for American society will be a prison, in this poem it is an asylum. This done, his second aim is to account for his own psychotic behaviour; put another way, he tries to understand how a poet who began his career ‘in gladness’ has been reduced to ‘despondency and madness’.

This critical analysis Lowell conducts by reference to the small cast of characters on his ward – which, if not exactly a cross-section of American society, is nevertheless representative of it. Waking up, he mounts an observation of his fellow inmates. The first of the chosen figures – ‘a B. U. sophomore’ – is not even a patient, but a second-year student of Philosophy at Boston University who has a part-time job as a ‘night attendant’. Such a man enables Lowell to make an ironic point: that a student of the meaning of life (‘propped on The Meaning of Meaning’) should find himself in a mental institution. Lowell identifies with his fellow intellectual; this kinship confirms for him his suspicion that academic and lunatic alike belong to an American society on the brink of self-destruction. To reinforce this point, he evokes his own ‘tense’ feelings [his vulnerability, his fear of imminent extinction] by means of an image – ‘as though a harpoon were sparring for the kill’ – which recalls the apocalyptic destruction of the Nantucket whales.
It is significant that Lowell, the liberal intellectual, then proceeds to compose pen-portraits of his fellow inmates – ‘Stanley’ (‘a seal’) and ‘Bobbie’ (‘a sperm whale’) – which recognise that he and they are members of the same species, an endangered species which for all its past accomplishments now flounders on the edge of destruction. Even so, one question continues to perplex him throughout the poem: what am I – former pupil of St Mark’s School and graduate of Harvard University – doing in ‘a house for the mentally ill’? Lowell’s use of parenthesis around that eerie phrase is designed to show that, although his self-awareness has not deserted him, he is not in a position where it will do him any good: ‘What use is my sense of humour?’ He still cannot help feeling out of place and wondering whether his hospitalisation is having its own destabilising/dehumanising effect on him ...

He continues to wonder how much solidarity he can genuinely show with his fellow inmates. Both Stanley (‘once a Harvard all-American fullback’) and Bobbie (‘a replica of Louis XVI’) are regal figures; they are classic examples of able young men who started their lives in a ‘gladness’ out of which came only ‘despondency and madness’. As such, they are parodies of the all-American hero. Although each has lost his mind and subsequently aged, he continues to take an adolescent’s pride in preserving his physical fitness. Stanley, ‘a kingly profile in a crimson golf-cap .... thinks only of his figure, of slimming on sherbet and ginger ale’; in the meantime, Bobbie, a ‘roly-poly’ figure, even more deranged, ‘swashbuckles about in his birthday suit/and horses at chairs’. Lowell can relate to them in that the ‘bravado’ with which they began their lives did not last long; they ‘ossified young’. On the other hand, he can feel superior to them:

Cock of the walk,
I strut in my turtle-necked French sailor’s jersey
before the metal shaving mirrors ....

The bonus for Lowell is that he can transform his oddity into an identity: ‘cock of the walk’, he can parade around the ward and preen himself in its shaving mirrors. Wearing a jersey which Commander Lowell would have admired, he can – for the time being – indulge his delusions of grandeur and get away with his egotistical posturing. For the time being: as he struts up and down, feeling smugly different from the ‘indigenous .... thoroughbred mental cases’ who populate his ward, he sees in the mirrors a vision of the future. Although he will soon go home after three months way, Lowell starts to identify more solidly with such company:

We are all old-timers,
each of us holds a locked razor.

Different though he may still imagine himself, he has to face the chilling fact that he too has been given ‘a locked razor’: that is, a safety-razor from which the blade cannot be extracted. Such a confession permits us to understand that Lowell, in spite of his civilising sense of humour, is no more trusted by the McLean authorities than the ‘old-timers’ [= the long-stay patients whose mental conditions are chronic]. What is more, it states implicitly Lowell’s fear for his own long-term sanity.

HOME AFTER THREE MONTHS AWAY

In Life Studies, Lowell’s primary aim is to investigate the causes of his psychotic behaviour. In December 1957, Lowell suffered a mental break-down and was admitted to the Boston Psychopathic Hospital; in February 1958, he was transferred to McLean’s Sanatorium outside Boston; at the time, his friend Blair Clark wrote that he was suffering from ‘a recurring manic depressive psychosis’. The occasion for this poem is Lowell’s return ‘home after three months away’ on his 41st birthday: 1st March, 1958. This being so, no fewer than three ironies attend the very title: first, it sounds blithely as if Lowell has been ‘away’ on some vacation; second, it hints that he has spent so little time at his grand Boston residence (239
Marlborough Street) that ‘home’ is an inaccurate description; and third, it permits the thought that he is too ill-at-ease to feel at ‘home’ anywhere.

Here, then, is another poem in which Lowell uses ‘images and ironic or unusual particulars’; as usual, it consists of details ‘terribly intimate’ and presented ‘at random’ which ought not to be ‘of literary or public interest’ (Allen Tate) but which Lowell crafts into a confessional statement of wider importance. In this idiom, Lowell’s aim is to depict a domestic interior in which his feeling of dis-ease becomes defined by his relationship with his fourteen-month-old daughter, Harriet. But the opening sentence –

Gone now the baby’s nurse,
a lioness who ruled the roost
and made the Mother cry

– is so obscure that it requires a biographical explanation to reveal its confessional nature. Following Harriet’s birth on 4th January 1957, Elizabeth Hardwick had employed a Scottish nurse who by all accounts had ‘ruled the roost’ in such an autocratic fashion that she reduced her employer to tears. This nurse, however, is not the subject of the sentence; that is Ann Adden, a nineteen-year-old psychiatric nurse whom Lowell had met during his stay in the Boston Psychopathic Hospital and with whom – to Elizabeth’s chagrin – he had a brief affair. On admission to McLean’s Hospital, Lowell was said by his doctors to be ‘under the complete domination of childhood fantasies’; it therefore figures that he (not Harriet) is the ‘baby’ of the first line whom Ann is nursing and that Ann must be the ‘lioness’. In the second draft of Waking in the Blue, actually entitled To Ann Adden, but eventually scrapped, Lowell refers explicitly to her ‘lioness face’: ‘a lioness, then’. Such a confession gives further point to the letter which Elizabeth Hardwick had written to Blair Clark on 4th April, 1954:

He has completely exposed to the world all of our sorrows which should be kept secret .... he has opened the curtain and let everyone look in.

Complete self-exposure (of ‘unusual particulars’ which might not be ‘of public interest’) becomes the specific aim of Home after Three Months Away. What he will expose will be the interior design of his family relationships; he will risk sharing with the public ‘particular’ details of his private life which may embarrass and alienate it. So ‘terribly intimate’ (Tate) are these details that they appear like snapshots from the Lowell family album:

Dimpled with exaltation,
my daughter holds her levee in the tub.

This picture is of Harriet’s bath-time when she is to be imagined sitting ‘in the tub’ as on a throne and receiving visitors like a queen. It is of interest because it asks a question: who is the bigger baby? is it the fourteen-month-old daughter or the forty-one-year-old father who by his own confession is home from a lunatic asylum after ‘thirteen weeks’ of ‘child’s play’? By all accounts, Lowell enjoyed imagining that he was a bear! Lowell is engaged in a self-lacerating exercise in self-definition to which this snapshot contributes because it invites not a contrast between baby and adult, but a comparison. Do we want to know that Baby Harriet

floats my shaving brush
and washcloth in the flush?

Mayn’t Lowell be said here to be literally washing his family’s dirty laundry in public? After all, he is not painting an innocent portrait of a playful father-and-daughter, but explaining the kind of humiliation which he suffers at his baby’s hands. When we know something of his psychotic disorder, we cannot contemplate this ostensibly comical image –

Dearest, I cannot loiter here
in lather like a polar bear
– without an unease which the context supplies: after being ‘away’, is he (‘a polar bear’) now safe to be around children? doesn’t he ‘loiter here’ (an oxymoronic thing to do in one’s own home) only with intent to cause further trouble? after all, wasn’t it only at the end of Waking in the Blue, the preceding poem, where he was allowed access only to ‘a locked razor’?

It becomes clear that Lowell is struggling to come to terms with his recovery. Displaced by a daughter who bosses him about in his own bathroom, he is no longer the centre of attention and, being more of a baby than she is, does not like it: ‘Recuperating, I neither spin nor toil.’ Well again, he is without the sense of identity which his illness conferred on him; he feels unimportant, useless. When he looks down ‘three stories’ on to Marlborough Street, his imagination becomes morbid; he wonders why the ‘choreman’ [= odd-job man] bothered in summer to plant the tulips which have now gone to seed in their ‘coffin’s length of soil’. When Ian Hamilton writes that this poem is ‘redeemed from sentimentality by its sheer technical control’, he means that Lowell’s confession of his inadequacy is controlled by the punctuation of his rhymes; throughout the poem, ‘irregularly placed rhymes’ can be heard ‘struggling towards the regularity, the calm of the ensuing couplets’. Some such thing occurs at the end of the poem where he deploys a bacon-image –

I keep no rank nor station.
Cured, I am frizzled, stale and small

– to illustrate his reduction in status even in his own household. The pun on ‘cured’ explains all: ironically, he has had a recovery and been diminished by it; ‘cured’ of his melodramatic delusions, he finds himself in a ‘frizzled’, shrivelled condition. In short, his illness had been the most important thing about him; without it, he no longer has a sense of identity.

MEMORIES OF WEST STREET AND LEPKE

A conscientious objector against American involvement in the Second World War, Lowell had refused to be drafted into the U S Armed Forces and even made a public ‘declaration’ to this effect; on 13th October 1943, he was duly sentenced by the Southern U. S. District Court in New York to a year-and-a-day in the Federal Correctional Center an Danbury, Connecticut. While he was awaiting his transfer to Danbury, Lowell spent ten days in West Street Jail in New York where a fellow inmate Jim Peck recalls overhearing a memorable conversation between Lowell (‘a fire-breathing Catholic C.O.’) and a gangland killer Czar Lepke, notorious head of Murder Incorporated:

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.” And Lepke burst out laughing. It was kind of ironic.

This irony is the point of this poem; here, it is ironic that both hardened criminal (arsonist, rapist, shootist) and soft liberal (pacifist) belong to an American society on the eve of destruction. Once again, Lowell recollects an episode in his endeavour to understand his psychotic condition; nowhere does he manage more effectively to lay the blame for it at the door of a society which, in its apocalyptic agony, cannot discriminate between good and evil. Given these principles, it is little wonder that America, left to its own atomic devices, stood poised to bring about its own devastation: after all, the ultimate response to Pearl Harbor 1941 was Hiroshima 1946.

Fourteen years after the event, Lowell – nowadays resident in a salubrious area of Boston where even the garbage-man is affluent and votes 'Republican' – reflects on his mid-twenties and asks himself a question: "Ought I to regret my seedtime?" when he sowed his wild oats,
dodged the draft, made his 'manic statement', when the psychiatric difficulties of his later life were germinating. Strangely, the purpose of the poem is not to answer this question, but to give in a series of declarative statements 'nakedly dependent on rhythm' (Lowell's phrase) a summary of the social conditions which upset his sense of identity and which for most of the 1950s have seen him 'tranquilised' both medically and morally.

On this occasion, Lowell's metaphor for the America of the 1950s is a prison in which good, bad and ugly are incarcerated alike. From the comforts of Marlborough Street, he reviews the hardships of West Street and appreciates with hindsight how intolerant and violent the cosmopolitan and religious mix was: Catholic, Jew, Jehovah's Witness. The society of the prison (of America) is one in which criminal and intellectual (he 'yammered metaphysics with Abramovitz') literally rub shoulders. It accommodates all types: when the 'pacifist' and 'vegetarian' Jew Abramovitz tried to convert Bioff and Brown

the Hollywood pimps, to his diet ...
they blew their tops and beat him black and blue.

The problem for the eccentric Lowell ('I was so out of things') is the extent to which he can identify/show solidarity with his 'fellow jailbird'; although he uses this phrase ironically of himself, his 'memories of West Street' are tinged with a feeling that, by his association with his fellow jailbirds, he has been tarred indefinitely for the worse. For instance, the Jehovah's Witness taught him how to make his bed (the 'hospital tuck') and pointed out Czar Lepke,

there piling towels on a rack
or dawdling off to his little segregated cell full
of things forbidden to the common man:
a portable radio, a dresser, two toy American
flags tied together with a ribbon Easter palm.

A brazen attention-seeker, Lowell would look for every opportunity to accentuate his sense of personal difference; unfortunately, his 'memories of West Street' are of a place where he was denied such a distinct identity. There, he was 'the common man' who could only envy Lepke's celebrity and watch vainly while the 'flabby, bald' mass-murderer received all the preferential treatment. Although he was 'in for killing', Lepke – with his 'two toy American flags' and ostentatious religiosity ('a ribbon Easter palm') – was accorded privileges as if he were the true patriot and true believer; 'lobotomized', he didn't even have a conscience to trouble him and had 'lost connections' with the real world. For the principled Lowell, this ironic reversal of fortunes sums up the state of spiritual justice in the USA in 1958 and it leaves on him a permanent mark.

SKUNK HOUR

Robert Lowell published Life Studies in 1959. It is safe to say that no map of that century's poetry can be complete without a survey of this book in which Robert Lowell finds in his own mental condition a metaphor for the state of modern America; Skunk Hour, its climactic moment, is both a personal and a political poem for this precise reason. A turning-point in poetic history, it was also a turning-point in Lowell's own career. His very earliest triumph The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket (1946) was a rhetorical condemnation of Christian hypocrisy; it was a public poem by virtue of its perceived parallel between Quaker whalers of the nineteenth-century (pacifists who killed their fellow creatures in God's name) and Christian sailors of his own time who fought in the Second World War. By abrupt contrast, Skunk Hour – in common with all other poems in the book – is an utterly unrhetorical expression of a private anguish; it is an essay in the 'confessional' mode, an addition to the confessional tradition of American poetry which begins with Walt Whitman and Emily
Dickinson and ends up with the suicides of John Berryman, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. It is a poem in which the central 'I' is indisputably the troubled poet himself; throughout its eight sestets, unobtrusive monosyllables of rhyme admit, control and transform his private problems into the stuff of art.

In *Skunk Hour*, Lowell, a classical scholar, resolves to trust in a grammatical simplicity; he confines himself to concise declarative statements in which the selected details are left to speak without elaboration for the disintegration that they portray. The poem opens with an economical description of Nautilus Island (a seaside-resort off the coast of Castine, Maine) where a reclusive heiress, a Norma Desmond figure, ekes out a 'spartan' existence in cool defiance of the modern world:

> Thirsting for the hierarchic privacy of Queen Victoria’s century, she buys up all the eyesores facing her shore, and lets them fall.

The old lady is foremost among Nautilus Island’s motley crew of inhabitants because her wealth is in ironic contrast to the scene of desolation which she surveys. Yearning for the privacy that the Victorian class-structure would have afforded her, this recluse ‘buys up’ the modern items of real estate that face her cottage and perversely ‘lets them fall’ into disrepair; so far as she is concerned, these tourist-attractions can go to wrack and ruin. In other words, she hankers after a nineteenth-century society in which she would have had a secure sense of identity and would not have seemed so idiosyncratic. Lowell’s lot and hers are identical; subtly, his depiction of this dismal place expands into an attempt to anatomise his personal disintegration. So it is that his plain portrait of Nautilus Island becomes an unnerving self-portrait; slowly, its out-of-season unsightliness starts to mirror his own psychiatric disorder and distress:

> The season’s ill – we’ve lost our summer millionaire, who seemed to leap from an L. L. Bean catalogue. His nine-knot yawl was auctioned off to lobstermen. A red fox stain covers Blue Hill.

For instance, the close-season is ‘ill’. One sure sign of its unhealthiness is that the ‘summer millionaire’ has sold ‘his nine-knot yawl’ to the local lobster-fishermen; another – in the fourth stanza – is that the homosexual decorator, rather than risk becoming destitute, would ‘rather marry’. Ironically, this is a sick and unnatural environment in which the poet-protagonist is entirely at home:

> 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.

His mind – as he gets his vicarious kicks ‘where the graveyard shelves on the town’ – is ‘not right’ or he would not have turned into this peeping-tom (or, in modern parlance, gone ‘dogging’). To hear Lowell read this poem (as I did at Leicester University in 1969) was to hear this sorry transformation articulated, confessed: to suggest an eerie demise, an ill spirit that rolls through all things, the poet born in Boston affected a Deep Southern whine – which sound-recordings fortunately preserve. Lowell’s voyeurism thus becomes symptomatic of a
general rottenness in the United States of America; he performs perverted actions only because he lives in a society which perverts the course of spiritual justice. He contemplates suicide only because he fails in the dark night [= the dark night of the soul] to find a spiritual absolute with which he can identify. At this point of crisis, he echoes both Marlowe’s Mephistophilis in *Doctor Faustus* and Milton’s Satan in *Paradise Lost* Book IV:

> I myself am hell,
> nobody’s here –
> only skunks, that search
> in the moonlight for a bite to eat.
> They march on their soles up Main Street:
> white stripes, moonstruck eyes’ red fire
> under the chalk-dry and spar spire
> of the Trinitarian Church.

Lowell’s bare statement that he himself is hell is a confession that he has failed to survive: that his spirit – along with that of his generation – has perished in its intense loneliness. An apocalyptic note sounds unmistakably clear. In *The Quaker Graveyard*, his was a Protestant hell beneath the waves of the North Atlantic Ocean; in *At the Indian Killer’s Grave*, it was a Catholic hell beneath the black pavements of Boston .... No longer: in this poem, it hath no geographical location. Rather, it is an existentialist hell: that is, a private hell in which there are no values that a free spirit can call its own. In this void, Lowell cannot live with himself.

The skunks enter an empty set (where – it is imaginatively suggested – a Western was being filmed). Now that their hour has come, these foul-smelling animals move up the main street of a frontier-town which the fresh-faced cowboys, ur-heroes of American nationhood, have deserted; with a religious irony, they are inheriting the earth that the pioneers (among them, Lowell’s ancestors) prepared. It is equally ironic that the skunks – as they come to clean up the garbage that has been left to them – ‘march on their soles’ (a pun on the ‘souls’ which they significantly don’t have) and proceed past the Trinitarian Church (a wooden construction where a futile gospel of selflessness is preached).

Lowell’s skunks, then, are moral looters. They have come to scavenge on the squalid remains of a materialistic society which has destroyed itself. It is not the man, but the mother-skunk who survives this apocalypse:

> She jabs her wedge-head in a cup
> of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail,
> and will not scare.

Can it be argued that Lowell’s endeavour to investigate himself – therapeutic though it may be – is an heroic act? I don’t think so. Only this immovable skunk performs heroics here: even though the man tries to intimidate her, she will not budge. At skunk hour, Lowell’s picaresque journey reaches its terminus. He has traversed the country of his mind in search of a holy grail; in its stead, he has found only ‘a cup of sour cream’ into which a repellent animal has wedged her greedy head.
APPENDIX

Robert Lowell
FOR THE UNION DEAD (1964)

Relinquunt Omnia Servare Rem Publicam

The old South Boston Aquarium stands
in a Sahara of snow now. Its broken windows are boarded.
The bronze weathervane cod has lost half its scales.
The airy tanks are dry.

Once my nose crawled like a snail on the glass;
my hand tingled
to burst the bubbles
drifting from the noses of the crowded, compliant fish.

My hand draws back. I often sign still
for the dark downward and vegetating kingdom
of the fish and reptile. One morning last March,
I pressed against the new barbed and galvanized
fence on the Boston Common. Behind their cage,
yellow dinosaur steam-shovels were grunting
as they cropped up tons of mush and grass
to gouge their underworld garage.

Parking spaces luxuriate like civic
sand-piles in the heart of Boston.
a girdle of orange, Puritan-pumpkin colored girders
braces the tingling Statehouse,

shaking over the excavations, as it faces Colonel Shaw
and his bell-cheeked Negro infantry
on St. Gaudens’ shaking Civil War relief,
propped by a plank splint against the garage’s earthquake.

Two months after marching through Boston,
half of the regiment was dead;
at the dedication,
William James could almost hear the bronze Negroes breathe.

Their monument sticks like a fishbone
in the city’s throat.
Its Colonel is a lean
as a compass-needle.

He has an angry wren-like vigilance,
a greyhound’s gentle tautness;
he seems to wince at pleasure,
and suffocate for privacy.

He is out of bounds now. He rejoices in man’s lovely,
peculiar power to choose life and die –
when he leads his black soldiers to death,
he cannot bend his back.
On a thousand small town New England greens
the old white churches hold their air
of sparse, sincere rebellion; frayed flags
quilt the graveyards of the Grand Army of the Republic

The stone statutes of the abstract Union Soldier
grow slimmer and younger each year –
wasp-waisted, they doze over muskets
and muse through their sideburns . . . .

Shaw’s father wanted no monument
except the ditch,
where his son’s body was thrown
and lost with his ‘niggers’.

The ditch is nearer.
There are no statutes for the last war here;
on Boylston Street, a commercial photograph
shows Hiroshima boiling
over a Mosler Safe, the ‘Rock of Ages’
that survived the blast. Space is nearer.
when I crouch to my television set,
the drained faces of Negro school-children rise like balloons.

Colonel Shaw
is riding on his bubble,
he waits
for the blessed break.

The Aquarium is gone. Everywhere,
giant finned cars nose forward like fish;
a savage servility
slides by on grease.

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