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THE STRUCTURE AND UNITY OF ROBERT LOWELL'S LIFE STUDIES

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OF
ROBERT LOWELL'S LIFE STUDIES

By

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Abstract

The major emphasis of this thesis is a detailed explication and analysis of Robert Lowell's Life Studies. This volume of poetry, while not being ignored by critics, has been subjected to incomplete and often distorted analysis. I have read and analyzed this volume of poetry as if it were one long poem, as Lowell indicated that it should be read.

What my sustained reading has illuminated is something other critics have noticed, commented upon, but consistently failed to elaborate upon in detail: the unity and consistency of the poetry. What structures this vision, this world-view, is a complex symbol system, leitmotifs, verbal echoes and historical and social conceptions.

I have explored the poetic interweaving of the symbolic structures, the historical conceptions that inform the poetry, and, indeed, the very placement of the poems themselves in order to demonstrate that the vision presented in the poetry is a compelling and thoughtful one. So much so that I rank it with those other testaments of our age, The Waste Land and The Cantos. Whatever contributions my thesis has made to knowledge is as yet undetermined. What can be said with some degree of certainty is this: this thesis has extended Lowell scholarship in that many of the alleged mysteries or obscurities in Lowell's verse will, when this thesis is consulted, appear less mysterious, less obscure.

I would like to thank Dr. Norman Shrive for his many useful comments during the preparation of this thesis; Brock University's English Department, who have contributed in no small way to whatever academic credentials I possess; and particularly to my mother, to whom this thesis is dedicated.

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Introduction

Robert Lowell's death in September of 1977 marked the end of a very productive but troubled life; his work at an end, it is now the task of the critics to assess Lowell's position in American poetry. And, indeed, critics have attempted to place Lowell ever since his first volume of poetry, Land of Unlikeness, appeared in 1944.

Although not reaching a large audience, that volume did evoke critical comment. Allen Tate's early comments appear typical:

There is no other poetry today quite like this. T. S. Eliot's recent prediction that we should soon see a return to formal and even intricate metres and stanzas was coming true, before he made it, in the verse of Robert Lowell. 1

Hugh Staples had a consonant opinion, and placed Lowell in the forefront of American poetry: "The Lowell of Land of Unlikeness, like the Eliot of the Waste Land² before him, portrays the nightmare of contemporary culture". This is high praise indeed for a poet only twenty-seven years of age.

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1. Allen Tate, "Land of Unlikeness", cited in Critics on Robert Lowell, Jonathan Price, ed. (University of Miami Press, Coral Gables, 1972), p. 37.
 2. Hugh Staples, "Land of Unlikeness", ibid., p. 38.

Interestingly, both critics admire Lowell for different, though not mutually exclusive, reasons. Tate admires Lowell's style; Staples, Lowell's subject matter, his themes. These two concerns were often in the forefront of Lowell's mind when he set about writing.

Lowell's second volume of poetry, Lord Weary's Castle, traced its genesis to the Second World War and Lowell's perceptions of it.³ In the Paris Review interview conducted by Seidel, Lowell said that Lord Weary's Castle was moving towards "less symbolic imagery".⁴ Although spoken with the benefit of hindsight, his remarks clearly indicated the direction his poetry did indeed take. Both in subject matter and style Lowell was moving in the direction of Life Studies.

Of Lord Weary's Castle Crick writes that the "poems are now more personal, more localized, and more related to specific historical events; and yet, paradoxically, they work with a sharper edge of universality".⁵ Such an evaluation could, with equal justice, be applied to Life Studies.

This movement is even more pronounced in Lowell's third volume of poetry, The Mills of the Kavanaughs. Yenser sees this volume as "a lineal descendant of Lord Weary's Castle".

3. J.F. Crick, Robert Lowell (Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh, 1974), p. 28.

4. Lowell, from the Paris Review, cited in London and Boyers, Robert Lowell (David Lewis, New York, 1970), p.266.

5. Crick, Robert Lowell, p.28.

6. Stephen Yenser, Circle to Circle (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1975), p. 82.

Yenser also sees that this volume expands upon Lowell's "use of personae and his persisting interest in larger canvasses".⁷ To Crick this volume most clearly foreshadows Life Studies. The Mills of the Kavanaughs consists of an idiom that "is not a totally unfamiliar one: a stoic New England dramatic monologue of family and marital quarrels, loneliness, madness and suicide".⁸ This is familiar territory indeed.

What can be gleaned from this brief survey is a gradual departure from the poetic voice heard in 1944. As one moves into Life Studies many of the arguments, both for and against, hinge upon this very matter of style. Although the poetry is moving away from the "twisting" of the initial volume, that is not to deny Life Studies its essential strength and vigour.

Lowell, during the period spanning the publication of The Mills of the Kavanaughs and Life Studies, gathered many awards and accolades. He won the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry, among other awards, and was appointed Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress, all in 1947.⁹ Much happened in his private life as well, events that were to be later transmuted into the poetry of Life Studies. In 1950 his father died, and in 1952, his mother. It is, indeed, almost gratuitous

7. Yenser, Circle to Cricle, p. 83.

8. Crick, Robert Lowell, p. 36.

9. Ibid., p. 12.

to include such events here; they are related in the poetry itself, often with excruciating detail.

Life Studies was, perhaps, difficult to write. But however much critics disagree on certain aspects of Lowell's work, they agree on this point: Life Studies represents a departure, in varying manners, from anything prior to it. Lowell's own comment that Life Studies is a "working away¹⁰ from that compression and pressure" is interesting. It reveals, in rather an off-hand manner, the nature of his craft: "I found that I was simplifying my poems...If adding a couple of¹¹ syllables in a line made it clearer I'd add them...". And further, "I began to have a certain disrespect for the tight forms...That regularity just seemed to ruin the honesty of sentiment, and became rhetorical".¹² This, the, is how Lowell viewed the change of manner and matter in his poetry. And perhaps it begins a schism that has marked Lowell's work after Life Studies. Always struggling with form, he would eventually marry life with visibly conventional forms, often with uncertain victory. The sonnet cycle of Notebook testifies to this.

Life Studies started out as prose, and ended with a prose section bracketed by poetry. Such a change in poetic policy seems typical of a man searching for the workable

10. Seidel interview, cited in London and Boyers, Robert Lowell, p. 268.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., p. 269.

balance: "I seesaw back and forth between something highly metrical and something highly free: there isn't any one way to write"¹³. Harkening to Shelley, even the priests of poetry are hard pressed to speak definitively about their business.

Later interviews granted to such favorites as A. Alvarez do not clarify the issue of "this tricky business". "Inspiration", Lowell has said, "[is] such a tricky word, but we all know poetry isn't a craft that you can just turn on and off"¹⁴. Yet poets have kept "faith with their calling's tricky, specialized, unpopular possibilities for good workmanship"¹⁵. This synthesis seems to be the dominant mode of Life Studies.

Jerome Mazzaro, an early critic of Lowell, has written on every phase of Lowell's career, his first work being The Poetic Themes of Robert Lowell. Being an avowed Catholic critic, Mazzaro sees Life Studies as a depiction of Lowell's loss of faith, his turning away from the Catholic religion. Mazzaro's terminology reflects his Catholic bias, and such terminology can be obfuscatory where it is not misleading. Mazzaro refers to Lowell's admission that Life Studies has dealt away overt religious symbolism. Mazzaro finds that:

The summary is deceptive, for although the morality is the same, religiously Lowell has changed to a position which not only portrays but understands aspects of the active life. The contemplative threads and now the archetypal framework of meditation have been eliminated...But behind this lurks a tendency

13. Seidel, cited in London and Boyers, p. 269.

14. A. Alvarez, "Talk with Robert Lowell", cited in Jerome Mazzaro, Profile of Robert Lowell (Charles Merrill, Columbus, Ohio, 1971), p. 33,

15. Stanley Kunitz, "Talk with Robert Lowell", ibid., p. 53.

to view such diversity [of character] as a lack of spirituality and to picture people in animal images. 16

Although touching upon an admittedly salient feature of Lowell's work, Mazzaro has failed to explore or explicate the full ramifications of this loss of 'spirituality'.

Mazzaro tends to ignore the poetry, denying any poem that is "devoid of religious implication".¹⁷ Such analysis characteristic of Mazzaro. His final judgement is his most telling and revealing:

Nevertheless, in an age which likes to separate its religion from its art, the technical accomplishments of Life Studies may far outweigh the loss of the Christian experience. 18

This is ambivalent criticism. It implies that the age's perverse willfulness is characteristic of the poet as well. Mazzaro is indecisive about the work, as the qualification inherent in the word 'may' makes clear.

Patrick Cosgrave's work The Public Poetry of Robert Lowell establishes, as a critical criterion, this dualism:

"scrutiny in the light of both poetic theory and of the tradition".¹⁹ Criticism is a moral activity; art is judged by certain standards. The demands on the critic, then are great. Young critics fail since they do not have "the ordered experiences of a thorough reading, of a lifetime's study of the past..."²⁰ This failure seems applicable, in Cosgrave's mind, to the poets as well.

16. Jerome Mazzaro, The Poetic Themes of Robert Lowell (University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1956), p. 103.

17. Ibid., p. 109.

18. Ibid., p. 119.

19. Patrick Cosgrave, The Public Poetry of Robert Lowell (Taplinger Publishing Co., New York, 1970), p. 9.

20. Ibid., p. 29.

To Cosgrave, Lowell is a poet who has failed "to penetrate the past". And further, "this failure...is ultimately a failure of resources".²¹ Citing Lowell's failure in both manner and matter, Cosgrave traces it to two separate sources. The first possible source is what Cosgrave calls the "agent of synthesis".²² Going beyond Mazzaro, Cosgrave states that this agent of synthesis is no longer "religion, nor New England, nor historical insight, nor form but Lowell's own uncurbable personality."²³

The second source that contributes to Lowell's alleged failure as a poet is his misuse of literary forms. Cosgrave sees Life Studies possessed of "a symbolism too private, too inexplicable to bear the weight of emphasis he puts on it".²⁴ Such a determination, if one reads Life Studies carefully and thoughtfully, is fallacious and ill-considered.

This alleged privacy is an aspect of personal intervention in poetry:

...I do not believe personal intervention as such to be a bad thing; it will be clear, however, that I take it to represent a decline... The less personality however (in general terms), the more objectivity (artistic, not scholarly) and the better the poem.²⁵

Given the nature of Lowell's poetry and the nature of Cosgrave's critical criterion, it is not surprising that Cosgrave's final judgement is a negative one. Although containing a number of good poems, Life Studies is flawed:

The great hope for Life Studies was, however,

21. Cosgrave, The Public Poetry of Robert Lowell, pp. 30-1.

22. Ibid., p. 110.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid., p. 36.

25. Ibid., p. 118.

that he had cleansed and purified his personality as an instrument of judgment, and might re-assume more directly his public role..., his own personality now less flawed, less chaotic, more integrated, more coherent. 26.

The psychological approach Cosgrave employs is evident here. Cosgrave implicitly denies any moral power to the poetry.

The poetry is dismissed even on artistic grounds. Cosgrave maintains that poetry must have a degree of ambiguity in order to be successful. Lowell's ambiguity becomes²⁷ "evasion" in Cosgrave's estimation. Lowell's ambiguity, as I will demonstrate, serves a distinct purpose, and rarely becomes evasion.

Marjorie Perloff's study, The Poetic Art of Robert Lowell, deals with a central issue: what kind of poetry does Lowell write? Her answer strikes off in a direction quite different from that of the critics previously cited. In her chapter entitled "The Unforgivable Landscape": The Nexus of Images,²⁸ she straightforwardly elucidates what other critics perhaps notice but do not feel compelled to comment upon. This nexus of images is precisely the point. Her analysis is quite accurate when she states that a study of the image patterns reveal "the peculiar consistency of the poet's vision". The image patterns are broken down into three groups: the natural world; the social landscape; the historical landscape where self struggles for identity.

26. Cosgrave, The Public Poetry of Robert Lowell, p. 148.

27. Ibid., p. 113.

28. Marjorie Perloff, The Poetic Art of Robert Lowell (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1973), p. 2.

While her study of the image patterns goes beyond Life Studies itself, she offers profound insights for the reader. Perloff sees in Lowell's poetry an embodiment of the Yeatsian conception of "the tradition of myself".²⁹ Arguing strongly for the craft of the poet, she states

when Lowell's nature imagery is viewed in the context of his treatment of man's social and psychological environment, the originality of his poetry becomes much more apparent.³⁰

A full analysis of the poems reveals just such a "tradition of myself," harrowing and frightening though it may be.

Vivian Smith's work, The Poetry of Robert Lowell, is an excellent primer. As with Perloff's study Smith pursues the stylistic nature of the poetry. She sees this as the essential point of Life Studies since Lowell's thematic pre-occupations, that of "American society, the figures of his family, the problems of self, the fact of death",³¹ remain the same.

Her analysis is predicated upon a structuring device. She cites that each poem has a "highly ordered lapidary verbal structure, a work of intricate contrivance and cunning".³² Smith posits this structuring device as evidence against the excesses of style commonly ascribed to 'confessional verse'.³³ Although dealing with "direct presentation of experience", the poems retain their structure and integrity.

29. Perloff, The Poetic Art of Robert Lowell, p. 93.

30. Ibid., p. 14.

31. Vivian Smith, The Poetry of Robert Lowell (Sydney University Press, Adelaide, 1974), p. 52.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

Smith rates Life Studies highly. By implication she places it within the ambit of Eliot's The Waste Land and Pound's The Cantos. Witness the following:

Life Studies is a consciously and deliberately patterned book full of a multiplicity of authenticating facts which themselves question and criticise the culture they reflect. ³⁴

Smith sees Lowell deftly working the seemingly intractable material of existence and shaping it into a rather remarkable poetic vision.

A far less insightful book is Williamson's Pity the Monsters, an explication of Lowell's political vision.

Williamson defines "political" as something encompassing all of civilization. ³⁵ The thrust of this study is clearly to the works that follow Life Studies. This is the most satisfying "period of Lowell's career—the major phase, if there must be one—begins with For The Union Dead and continues through the latest additions to Notebook." ³⁶ Williamson finds the content of Life Studies tending toward "obsessional thinking". ³⁷

Philip Cooper's work, The Autobiographical Myth of Robert Lowell, follows in Williamson's footsteps. He too sees the works that follow Life Studies as the most significant. He recognizes the value of Life Studies only as it anticipates "the latest volume, the overtly autobiographical Notebook", which, "even more completely than Life Studies opens the way into Lowell's life and work". ³⁸

34. Smith, The Poetry of Robert Lowell, p. 79.

35. Alan Williamson, Pity the Monsters (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1974), p. 4.

36. Ibid., p. 9.

37. Ibid., p. 64.

38. Philip Cooper, The Autobiographical Myth of Robert Lowell (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1970), p. 12.

With the balance so clearly in favour of the later works, this study is of limited value to this thesis.

A book of incomparably greater value is Stephen Yenser's Circle to Circle. To Yenser Life Studies constitutes a coherent whole. This unity has been alluded to by many critics, although they rest their case on a handful of poems. Yenser sees the volume functioning on a disintegration/ re-integration motif. Such a dualism depends upon the situation that Lowell creates in his poems, and "that situation cannot be understood apart from a more detailed examination of these poems".³⁹

Essential to Yenser's critical viewpoint is the conception that poetry moves from one condition of existence to another. The poetry is, in this sense, dramatic. The fault of many critics cited previously is their tendency to judge the volume on just a few poems. Such a procedure violates the poetry itself:

It will not do to see the older Lowell as a hapless victim of a domineering wife, neither will it do to view him as a family liability. The situation is too complex to be reduced to such stock explanations; and what Lowell does is to play one character against the other, letting the real situation emerge in the course of this interplay.⁴⁰

The reader, too, must be sensitive to the interplay of the poetry. The poetry's complexity is illustrated in that every section either anticipates, foreshadows or illuminates other

39. Yenser, Circle to Circle, p. 123.

40. Ibid., p. 150.

sections.

Writing on Lowell one must inevitably come to grips with one 'school' that tends to associate itself with him: the confessional poets. The task is all the more imperative since Life Studies is, at least to Rosenthal, the major document of the movement. The term 'confessional' has a⁴¹ nebulous origin. Crick attributes it to Rosenthal. Rosenthal wrote at least three pieces of criticism on the confessional movement. In the first essay Rosenthal calls⁴² Life Studies the "soul's therapy", and "naked poetry", being,⁴³ at best, "impure art".⁴⁴ Ambivalent though Rosenthal is to the work, he does call it "encompassing art",⁴⁵ although it may not be "great art".⁴⁶

The second essay, "Robert Lowell and the Poetry of Confession", is largely a reworking of the first essay, with some elaborations. Life Studies has gained in stature, Rosenthal now ranking it among the great poetic efforts of the century. Lowell's poetry, far from being merely psychological, carries "the burden of the age" with it.⁴⁷ The poet's life, so much of which is the material of the poetry, now has "profound meaning and worth".⁴⁸ And it is

41. Crick, Robert Lowell, p. 13.

42. M.L. Rosenthal, "Poetry as Confession", cited in Price, p. 71.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid., p. 72.

45. Ibid., p. 75.

46. Ibid.

47. Rosenthal, Robert Lowell, ed. London and Boyers, p. 55.

48. Ibid., p. 56.

through art that these value, and, by extension, ours, become known. While writing about confessional poetry generally, Rosenthal is thinking about Lowell specifically. And throughout Rosenthal's analysis there is a strong suspicion that Lowell not only transcends the poets in the genre, but transcends the genre as well.

This suspicion is given full body in Rosenthal's book length treatment of modern poetry, The New Poets. Rosenthal's definition of modernity is seen as the "centrifugal spin toward suicide of the speaking voice".⁴⁹ Rosenthal posits that the labels used to define Lowell have become a little shopworn:

The term 'confessional poetry' came naturally to my mind when I reviewed Robert Lowell's Life Studies in 1959... Whoever invented it, it was a term both helpful and too limited, and very possibly the conception of a confessional school has by now done a certain amount of damage.⁵⁰

Rosenthal tends to blame the original work, Life Studies, for any errors of judgement on his part. Rosenthal states that "because of the way Lowell brought his private humiliation, sufferings, and psychological problems into the poems of Life Studies, the word 'confessional' seemed appropriate enough".⁵¹

Rosenthal's warning about the danger posed by a label went unheeded by Robert Phillips when he penned his work,

49. M. L. Rosenthal, The New Poets (Oxford University Press, New York, 1967), p. 7.

50. Ibid., p. 25.

51. Ibid., p. 26.

The Confessional Poets. In his introduction Phillips states that confessional poetry can be traced back to Wyatt, which is "pretty far".⁵² Indeed it is. But Phillips gives Lowell the nod as the founding father of this modern fraternity, believing Life Studies is a "direct, easily understood volume."⁵³ To Phillips the dominant mode of Lowell's poetry continued to be the confessional.⁵⁴

Although the major critical works cited in this survey provide a much needed consensus, they tend to do an injustice to individual works that fall under their inspection. And nowhere is this injustice more apparent than in criticism devoted to Life Studies. That complex work, with its self-referential, internal mnemonic structures, is as much an exploration of the mind of the poet as it is an evocation and criticism of the human condition. The ensuing analysis will reveal a poetic testament as profound and applicable, in its own right, as Eliot's The Waste Land or Pound's The Cantos.

52. Robert Phillips, The Confessional Poets (Southern Illinois University Press, Illinois, 1973), p. 4.

53. Ibid., p. 5.

54. Ibid., p. 44.

CHAPTER I

The divisions Lowell imposed upon Life Studies are not without significance. The work is divided into four sections, with the fourth section being divided into two parts. Section i can be seen as a grouping of 'historical' poems, historical in that they reveal the nature and course of history as perceived by the poet. The world's condition, and the poet's place in it, is the subject matter of the first four poems. The poet creates personae that share many of his concerns, many of his fears. In order to establish a working perspective, Lowell telescopes his poems in time. "Beyond the Alps" is very much rooted in the present, although it resonates with past events. "The Banker's Daughter" is set in Renaissance France, but still speaks to modern sensibilities. The third poem, "Inauguration Day: January 1953", is a terse and incisive view of contemporary America. The anchoring poem of the sequence, "A Mad Negro Soldier Confined at Munich", is an harrowing depiction of a man suffering from a psychosis inflicted upon him by one of the great disasters of the century, the Second World War.

I have spoken of these poems as 'historical' pieces. This definition implies more than the mere gathering of

fact and figures. For Lowell history, as it manifests itself in the affairs of men, is a pervasive and violent force. Such a view is not optimistic. Springing directly from this view is Lowell's dire sense of loss, failure, alienation, powerlessness and entrapment in a world not of his making. It is a world indifferent to man.

The first poem of Life Studies sets in motion the themes and motifs alluded to above. The poem begins on a note of failure, a recognition of human fallibility: "Reading how even the Swiss had thrown the sponge/in once again and Everest was still/unscaled..."(p.3). This is the first of many failures, some of a more personal nature. The poet is being swept along in a train, the image of which catches up the metaphor of the journey. This journey is the central pulse of the the volume. All journeys begin somewhere and end somewhere. The poet's journey is multileveled. First, it is a journey through geographical and historic locales, heavy with cultural values. The journey is away from "Bella Roma"(p.3) to "Paris, our dark classic"(p.4). This implies a turning away from one set of values to another. This turning away, which is "much against my will"(p.3), from Rome means many things. Rome is the seat, the very rock, of Catholicism. He is abandoning one world view, one way of understanding the world. But Rome has resonances other than those of religion. It was "There the skirt-mad

Mussolini unfurled/the eagle of Caesar"(p.3). Rome is as readily identified with political leaders as it is with religious leaders, and their lineages are as long. Whatever good came from Rome is balanced by its evil. From Caesar to Mussolini, and, indirectly, to the Pope, one sees the manifest disparity between the ideal and the reality, the appearance and the real. The classical political heritage is undercut with this latter-day Caesar, this "skirt-mad" Mussolini. This is the first intimation of the role of madness, inordinate ~~obsession~~ that plays so dominant a part in Life Studies.

The poet identifies with such figures. For "he was one of us/only pure prose" (p.3). This is the first of many such identifications. A subtle point is being made. The tyrant, the Pope, and the poet are all alike in that they seem isolated figures. They cannot, or will not, lead. The Duce's eloquence is counterpointed to the subtlety of the poet's voice: both are ultimately alike in their failure to lead.

Rome is the cultural locus of the Western world. It has been looked upon as the epitome of the best in the world of art, music and literature. It is not so now. That tradition, like so many others, is passing or is already gone. Lowell feels alienated from the culture that sustained "our grandparents"(p.3). The envy is bittersweet:

I envy the conspicuous

waste of our grandparents on their grand tours—
 long-haired Victorian sages accepted the universe,
 while breezing on their trust funds through the world.

(p.3)

The grandparents are representatives of a seemingly happier time. Here trust funds—the first intimations of the power and influence of money, the cash nexus—support not consumption but waste. The grandparents, in their breezing, betray a stolid, unshakeable confidence in the world. But it is a confidence, a certainty, that modern man cannot share or accept. The universe those sages so readily accepted is now the subject of unrelenting scrutiny. The whole world is now subject to "agonizing reappraisal"(p.86). It is ironic that that the grand tours alluded to above ended in Rome. Lowell's grandtour begins in Rome and exits into life. The movement is in the opposite directions. The envy extended to the Victorians, with their fiscal and philosophical security, is perhaps ironic. Their beliefs and values are no longer possible.

No accepted body of belief, no world-view, is possible now. The poem's title is appended with a footnote detailing its occasion. The year is 1950, and the particular event on the poet's mind is the promulgation of the dogma affirming Mary's bodily assumption into heaven. This note gains particular cogency in the second sonnet of the poem. This sonnet suggests the fallacy of attempting to formulate a

unified world-view. The definition of Mary's bodily assumption, itself an ironic upward movement to heaven when the poet's journey is downward into a private hell, arouses the people to childlike adulation and plaintive crying. To the poet's eye the incarnation of divinity on earth, the penultimate father figure, the Pope, is rendered with comic derision:

The Holy Father dropped his shaving glass,
and listened. His electric razor purred,
his pet canary chirped on his left hand.
(p.4)

The Pope is rendered as vulnerable, human, ordinary. His office is reduced by the ironic pairing of his razor and his pet bird, symbolic of the uneasy alliance between science and faith. And this is given added emphasis with the poet's mock surprise at his vision of the assumption:

The lights of science couldn't hold a candle
to Mary risen-at one miraculous stroke,
angel-wing'd, gorgeous as a jungle bird!

An odd apotheosis indeed-the first of many. The poet's scepticism is not shared by the "monstrous human crush"(p.4). When the poet speaks thus, "But who believed this? Who could understand?"(p.4), he is speaking for a sensibility, a discernment, other than that of the crowd. The rule of superstition has not abated. It, indeed, flourishes: "Pilgrims still kissed Saint Peter's brazen sandal./ The Duce's lynched, bare, booted skull still spoke"(p.4). Such a pairing of the religious and the political, the

crassly secular, illustrates how bankrupt both ideals have become. They are representatives of forces that have failed to lead. This failure, which is at once personal and public, results in barely controlled chaos in the social fabric. The mass of beings crying to "papa" find no solace but the pikes of the Vatican Guard:

God herded his people to the coup de grâce-
the costumed Switzers sloped their pikes to push,
O Pius, through the monstrous human crush...
(p.4)

The undifferentiated mass is likened unto a herd of animals. Lowell often employs animal imagery to signify a human condition or an emotional state. Though the poet's sensibilities differ from the mass, at least in their method of expression, in their teeming, screaming numbers, and in their cry for order, they voice the poet's concern as well. The poet's way is different from theirs. Whereas the multitude surge towards the sanctum, the poet leaves it. Recognizing society for what it is, his journey of discovery takes him away from tradition, from conventions. It is significant that the train moves across "the fallow Alpine snow"(p.4). The notion of bareness, of willful uncultivation, of forced sterility, is bodied forth in "fallow". And it is given added force by the modifier "snow". The cold, static, dead world of the snowbound Alp is a contrast to the world of life, seen as black and rich.

The third sonnet, clearly the most difficult, traces the descending arc of the metaphorical journey, The first

line announces the terminus of this erratic journey: "Our mountain-climbing train had come to earth"(p.4). It is on the earth, the domain of men, that the vexatious poet must now live. This sonnet extends the sense of loss and alienation into the intellectual realm. As the poet looks behind him, he sees a blasted and wasted past, "each backward, wasted Alp, a Parthenon,/fire-branded socket of the Cyclop's eye"(p.4). This is the wanton destruction of the classical past by wily men who seek their freedom. He eschews the values of the classical world, no longer feeling, perhaps, worthy of them.

The evocations of Hellas and Minerva can be seen as specifically poetic ones. Hellas was the home of the Muses; Minerva, the goddess of wisdom and reason. Such high aspirations as Hellas typifies are now denied the poet and his brethren: "There were no tickets for that altitude/once held by Hellas"(p.4). Minerva, though aligned with reason and wisdom, is seen as destructive: "pure mind and murder at the scything prow-"(p.4). And further, her tradition is seen as a "miscarriage of the brain"(p.4). Art and culture offer no retreat, for they offer as much horror and terror as do the political and social worlds.

The inescapable violence of the world is evident in the present as well as the past. The imagistic couplet at the end of the poem does little to ameliorate this pessimistic view: "Now Paris, our dark classic, breaking up/like killer

kings on an Etruscan cup".(p.4). Paris, long the City of Light, becomes our dark classic. The poet leaves a visibly crumbling Rome, the City of God, for an equally unsure life in the City of Man. The tone is , of course, set by the intimations of fracture and collapse, of violence and disintegration. It is a curiously prophetic couplet as well, in that it foreshadows the poet's own breakdown. The man is not distinct from his environment, and that is why the leitmotif of "Life changed into landscape" (p.3) is so important to this poem, and indeed to the entire volume. This landscape is the poet's life. It is a landscape full of insecurity, terror and violence. For the poet this is the world he is hapless enough to be thrust into.

Mazzaro sees this richly textured piece as being held together only by the depiction of the loss of faith.⁵⁵ Staples, who admires the poem, sees the poem in largely static terms, an attempt to create order by arresting the flux of existence.⁵⁶ Both views are far too narrow and limit the poem's power as poetry and statement.

The three poems that follow "Beyond the Alps" extend much of what is covered in the first poem. The ambit of "The Banker's Daughter" depicts the debased view of marriage

55. Mazzaro, The Poetic Themes of Robert Lowell, p. 92.

56. Hugh B. Staples, Robert Lowell: The First Twenty Years (Faber and Faber, London, 1962), p. 72.

when it is politically or financially motivated. The sexual act itself, which is intensely personal, is betrayed by a grotesque fascination with the act itself:

Once this poor country egg from Florence lay
at her accouchment, such a virtuous ton
of woman only women thought her one.
(p.5)

Lowell has a fascination with the physicality of his subjects, which, as the passage indicates, is directly linked with his use of animal imagery. The condition of brooding is wonderfully caught up, both figuratively and literally, in the image of the egg. The irony is implicit. Anything but delicate, there is something oppressive in the woman's bearing. Mutual hatred separates the husband and the wife. As viewed by the husband his wife is little more than a breeding source, "Look, my cow's producing veal"(p.5). The woman reciprocates by draining her husband's treasury, "...wardrobes that dragged the Exchequer to its knees"(p.5). The influence of money, and how it is used to falsify and destroy human relationships, assumes a Poundian force in this context.

The escalation of estrangement becomes more noticeable when the wife's brooding gives way to a more malignant impulse. The sestet of the poem bodies forth the ultimate but not unexpected death of the marriage, and one of its partners. The first tercet of this sestet indicates that sexual estrangement is strong. (This foreshadows the rather

disastrous marriage of Lowell's parents, and his rather ambivalent attitude to his own marriages). The second tercet relates the actual death of the king; a physical condition that matches the spiritual one:

He feared the fate of kings who died in sport...
murder cut him short-
A kitchen-knife honed on a carriage wheel.
(p.5)

The physical death of the king is seen as a form of release for the queen. Her view, much like the world she lives in, is basically cynical and pessimistic. The world the late king has left is that of..."the pilfering, pillaging democracies,/the pin-head priests, the nihilistic grandee"(p.6). The queen feels quite at home in this world where divine intervention is not sought, and where it is not even thought to exist:

There at Saint Denis
the chiselled bolster and Carrara hound
show no emotion as we kiss the ground.
(p.6)

Their pro forma rituals are empty, devoid of meaning and emotion. The rituals do not cloud or sentimentalize the queen's vision. She has seen too deeply into the heart of darkness to waste tears. Her vision is ultimately cynical:

New season cycle to the laughing ring
of scything children; king must follow king
and walk the plank to his immortal leap.
(p.6)

The season's cycle suggests the motif of entrapment in time, and king must follow king in a depressing cycle of death.

The immortal leap into the uncaring, indifferent universe assures not immortality, but death and oblivion.

The pervasiveness of death is again emphasized with "Ring, ring, tired bell, the King of France is dead;/who'll give the lover of the land a bed?"(p.6). It is no wonder that the bells are tired; they weary because of their onerous duty. From this declaration of death one moves to a single declarative sentence, something Lowell uses with telling accuracy, that brings this sense of violent death ominously close: "My son is adding inches in his sleep"(p.6). Conveyed here is an unconscious will to power; the child can barely wait to rule. His fingers, in their nightmare kingdom, "clutch Versailles"(p.6). The queen is helpless: "I rock my nightmare son, and hear him cry/for ball and sceptre; he asks his queen to die..."(p.6).

Cosgrave finds this poem very unsatisfying, calling it "an unclear mixture of the colloquial and the pretentious".⁵⁷ Yet this poem's diction and imagery recall the poems of Yeats, Cosgrave's preferred poet. The alignment between Yeats and Lowell is particularly cogent when one recalls "The Second Coming".

The closing section of the poem is at once an act of forgiveness and rationalization, and both conditions are seen as equally cynical and expedient. Fully committed to

57. Cosgrave, The Public Poetry of Robert Lowell, p. 141.

life, survival, the queen is in the lockstep of time:

By repeated crime
 even a queen survives her little time.
 You too, my husband. How you used to look
 for blood and pastime! If you ever took
 unfair advantage by right of birth,
 pardon the easy virtues of the earth.
 (p.6)

This is cold comfort indeed. The price of survival is high, but she is willing to pay it. The queen is determined to make the centre hold. Her ironic forgiveness is a recognition of the tragic and absurd nature of the world the world which she must live in.

In "Inauguration Day: January 1953" Lowell moves to contemporary times. One must bear in mind that Lowell, by choosing distinct historical epochs, is showing that all ages bear a striking resemblance to each other: human nature is everywhere the same. This poem celebrates the inauguration of Eisenhower, whom Lowell sees as one more non-leader. Although Eisenhower's name is not mentioned until the last two lines of the poem, his place in history has been fixed. The snow, symbolic of death, has buried the world. The age is dying; its cadence is announced as "the subways drummed the vaults"(p.7), a fine evocation of the muffled funeral drums.

America, under the aegis of Eisenhower, is entering into a period of unresolved conflicts and opposites. This is, as Lowell later terms it, "the tranquillized Fifties"(p.85).

The lines "Manhattan's truss of adamant,/ that groaned in ermine, slumped on want"(p.7), allude to at least one conflict: that between wealth and poverty. New York epitomizes the manifest disparity between the haves and the have-nots. There is also a sense of constriction, as though none of this can ever change. The new administration can do no more than all of those who are now past remembering:

God of our armies, who interred
Cold harbour's blue immortals, Grant!
Horseman, your sword is in the groove!
(p.7)

Grant was unable to carry over his martial prowess into the public realm. He ran afoul of Wall Street, one aspect of the pervasive cash nexus, and was discredited and ruined.

There is no sign of renewal, of rebirth. The inauguration summons in an administration that is as lifeless as the season itself: "Ice, ice, our wheels no longer move"(p.7). The wheels of government, of society, are frozen. This is the "Cyclonic zero of the word"(p.7), and here "cyclonic" denotes a process of disintegration, separation. The centre cannot hold: "Look, the fixed stars, all just alike/as lack-land atoms, split apart..."(p.7). Stars and atoms are blown apart, aided, one suspects, by the buried allusion to the atomic bomb. The world and the heavens are blown apart, divided, cast off, and in the throes of entropy. The vision presented is apocalyptic. To Lowell, this is the winter of our discontent, not made glorious by this son of Abilene. This

poem also illustrates the connecting bridges between Europe and America. The Republic summoning Eisenhower is akin to the Roman Republic summoning Caesar, or Mussolini. There exists a certain congruency between the two in Lowell's mind. Such a linkage suggests that America is not unlike Europe, and, by extension, the American Adam is not unlike his European counterpart.

The anchoring poem of this sequence, "A Mad Negro Confined at Munich", embodies the theme of madness, already subtly hinted at in the first poem. It is an harrowing depiction, and its resonances permeate the rest of the volume. Cosgrave considers the poem to be "vulgar and undisciplined".⁵⁸ The language may be vulgar, but that is in keeping with the persona's situation. If the poem appears chaotic, undisciplined, this too suits the occasion. Yenser calls the poem "an energetic if not frenetic conclusion to part one."⁵⁹ The negro soldier seems to suit Lowell's purposes precisely. The soldier is twice victimized. He is black, something that is beyond his control; he is wounded by the war, something equally beyond his control.

The world depicted here is inverted. A "Kraut D.P." (p.8) is the only non-American in a ward filled with displaced black Americans. The D.P. is, moreover, a D.P. in his own land. The inversion takes on subtler shades. The German

58. Cosgrave, The Public Poetry of Robert Lowell, p.141.

59. Yenser, Circle to Circle, p. 129.

"who kneels and bathes my eye"(p.8) is stripped of his assumed Aryan status. He is now a serving boy to a negro soldier. It is a nightmare world made palpably real. And the reality is achieved through the mind of the negro. The poem's arrangement of material, achieving a frightening synthesis, is evidence of a highly charged mind working on the disparate pieces of the world, and making a livable place of it.

The eye is able to perceive the blasted landscape at its most savage. It accepts this landscape as normal and real. Animal imagery abounds. Man being neither animal nor angel partakes of both. Now he is more closely aligned with the lower element. This alignment indicates a spiritual debasement:

In Munich the zoo's rubble fumes with cats;
 hoydens with airguns prowl the Koenigspatz
 and pink the pigeons on the mustard spire,
 Who but my girl-friend set the town on fire?
 (p.8)

Munich is an Inferno. It fumes with cats, and not, as one would suspect, with smoke and fire. Ironically, the predatory cats are free while men are confined. In the negro's mind, the predatory hoydens, tom-boys, ill-defined demi-urges, emulate the soldiers by mercilessly killing the pigeons, the death knell of which is rendered as a metallic 'pink' in the ear. The war goes on.

The mustard spire possibly alludes to the type of gas that was used in the First World War. It would

appear that the memory of that war is still alive in the Second World War. It, the mustard gas, is the same gas that struck Ford and incapacitated him. It is also generically related to the effluence given off by Schwartz's refrigerator. This group of connections is not incidental in Lowell, but all contribute to the over-all mnemonic structure of Life Studies. And when the pattern of these allusions and connections read aright, the consistency and force of the poetic vision becomes known.

The symbolic patterns are quite dense in this poem. The animal pattern indicating a reduced state of man, is the most dominant one. "Lieutenants squawked like chickens" (p.8), while "cathouses"(p.8) talked "cold turkey to my guards"(p.8). This spiritual debasement reaches into even the most private sector of life. The soldier's sex life becomes, in its routine, a prison, a form of punishment: "I chartered an aluminum canoe,/I had her six times in the English Garden"(p.8). Trapped, their names upon a list, a veritable book of the damned, they "file before the clock" (p.8). They are prisoners of time. Their routine is fixed. Like animals in a zoo, they are caged and fed according to rule:

and fancy minnows, slaves of habit, shoot
like starlight through their air-conditioned bowl.
It's time for feeding. (p.8)

This is the ultimate Pavlovian world. Here there is no real

hope or cure. It is merely a place where undesirables are kept: "Each sub-normal boot-/black heart is pulsing to its ant-egg dole" (p.8). Still sub-normal, they pace their lives to the internal clock, the heart. Ultimately they are prisoners of themselves.

This poem functions on a number of levels. It prefigures the later insanity/prison poems of Part iv and it posits, as do the later elegies, that man is caught in time. From this imprisonment there is no escape save death. The reduced image of man foreshadows the image Lowell often anchors each individual section with, and the development logically continues until Lowell himself faces the impoverished world in "Skunk Hour". But Lowell denies the suicidal impulse, the death urge. The figure of the negro illustrates what the poet might become.

This poem does act as a prefiguring of one of the main motifs of the second section of Life Studies: the exile, moreover, the exile lost in his own land. The second section is far too complex to be reduced to one motif, one theme. But it is an avenue worth investigating, for it reveals the complexity of a piece that has confounded many critics.

CHAPTER III

The second section of Life Studies, which Lowell chose to remove from the English edition of the book, has presented difficulties to critics. Hungerford completely misses the point when he describes Lowell's Boston childhood as "charmingly portrayed in his autobiographical prose essay, "91 Revere Street".⁶⁰ It is anything but charming. Cosgrave glosses over this section by comparing its form to that of the novel.⁶¹ Charles Altieri, in his article "Poetry in A Prose World", asserts, somewhat reductively, that this section is a search for a father-figure.⁶² Mazzaro alludes to its lapidarian structure, and leaves it at that.⁶³ Even Staples briefly views it, noting that it tells us more about a "milieu than about the growth of a poet".⁶⁴ Perloff thinks the prose section "stands at the centre of the volume",⁶⁵ and that the text gains immensely when read with the adjacent poems. Yenser sees this second section as a back-drop for

60. E. Hungerford, Poets in Progress (Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Ill., 1967), p. 25.

61. Cosgrave, The Public Poetry of Robert Lowell, p. 131.

62. Charles Altieri, "Poetry in a Prose World", cited in Mazzaro, p. 25.

63. Mazzaro, The Poetic Themes of Robert Lowell, p. 111.

64. Staples, Robert Lowell, p. 75.

65. Perloff, The Poetic Art of Robert Lowell, p. 93.

part IV, with the latter being superior.

Lowell has commented upon this section of his volume as well. In conversation with A. Alvarez, a confessed admirer, he states:

I find it very hard. I like to revise
and when you have something of thirty
or forty pages written as carefully as
a poem-and it was written that carefully-
it's very hard. 67

Few reading "91 Revere Street" can deny its power, its mythic sweep and beauty. There is little that is casual about it. It deviates not at all from the thematic and symbolic threads that weave their way through the other sections of the book. If the first section invoked a sense of history working itself out in time, and as it impinges upon and makes itself felt on individuals, then the second section covers, in like manner, Lowell's own family history. There is now family decay, destruction and alienation.

Indeed, viewed in this manner, Life Studies assumes a pattern that is instrumental in one's understanding of the volume. Lowell is tracing, or reconstructing, his history, which encompasses the milieu of Boston, through genealogical exploration of his past. The depiction is not sentimental, loving or charming. It is often unsentimental, harrowing and cruel. So assiduously does Lowell seek

66, Stephen Yenser, Circle to Circle, p. 129.

67. A. Alvarez, "In Conversation with Robert Lowell", cited in Profile of Robert Lowell, ed., Jerome Mazzaro, p. 37.

faults in his family that one rightly assumes that the author is driven by some anarchic principle, some self-destructive impulse.

"91 Revere Street" is an extended agonizing reappraisal. It is not without significance that Lowell seeks the hidden seeds of destruction in a possible Jewish branch of the family. The figure is admired for its essential ambiguity. The exotic nature of the man appeals to Lowell. For "there was something undecided, Mediterranean, versatile, almost double-faced about his bearing...He was a dark man, a German Jew—no downright Yankee..."(pp. 11.12). Such is Mordecai Myers in the young boy's eyes. Lowell's father has this uncertain quality as well, but with little to redeem him in the son's eyes:

Easy-going, Empire State patricians, these relatives of my Grandfather Lowell seemed to have given my father his character. For he likewise lacked that granite back-countriness which Grandfather Arthur Winslow attributed to his own ancestors...(p.12)

The disparity between the family and the generations is set. The Lowell writing this section realizes that the family members he is writing about survive only in the mind. Or as Lowell puts it, "a setting now fixed in the mind"(p.13). And it is only through this fiction that they can now come back to life and demonstrate their meaning, their value. Lowell sees it in this manner:

There, the vast number of remembered things

remains rocklike. Each is in its place, each has its function, its history, its drama. There, all is preserved by that motherly care that one either ignored or resented in his youth. The things and their owners come back urgent with life and meaning—because finished, they are endurable and perfect. (p.13)

Here, then, is the "myth of myself." It is a key passage containing so many key words. Implicit within this statement is the distancing of Lowell. From these "remembered things" he will reconstruct his life. While not addressing this passage directly, Yenser is nonetheless correct when he says that "what Lowell does is to play one character against the other, letting the real situation emerge in the course of the interplay".⁶⁸

As suggested previously, the father is clearly the figure under scrutiny. Following the leitmotif of life changed into landscape, the father's life, with all its connections, is also being examined. His father has connections with certain values, beliefs and institutions. His father is a naval man, and all military figures retain a certain ambiguity in Lowell's thought. His father is also aligned with the world of finance, although disastrously so. He is also aligned with the world of machinery, of science and technology. The elder Lowell is strongly for the practical side of man.

68. Yenser, Circle to Circle, p. 150.

The ultimate irony exists in the disparity between the elder Lowell's pre-occupations and his utter failure at them. As a military man, investor, technician, the father is a failure.

Given Lowell's sense of historical process, and the role military men play in it, his father fails to live up to any real or imagined mover in history. The stigma of the father's failure is realized quite early in the life of the child: "I was in the third grade...I was afraid Father's leaving the Navy would destroy my standing." (p.13) The disparity between the real and ideal is quite strong:

I was a churlish, disloyal, romantic boy,
quite without hero worship for my father,
whose actuality seemed so inferior to the
photographs in uniform he once mailed to
us from the Golden Gate. (p.13)

Already the father is alienated from the son. This alienation foreshadows his complete removal, both physically and spiritually, from the poet's mind and emotions in the later elegies. It is interesting to note that the method of alienation is through art forms. Father's actuality is less than the artifice. This tension evolves out of Lowell's own artistic impulses, and their focussing on a man so utterly bereft of them.

These alignments are made clear in the following episode. The docile elder Lowell is ordered back to the Naval Yard on Christmas Eve. Assiduously following the

rule book, the much hated Admiral De Stahl demands compliance:

Later that night, I lay in bed and tried to imagine that my father was leading his engineering force on a surprise maneuver through arctic wastes. A forlorn hope!...I imagined Beacon Hill changed to the Snow Queen's Palace, as vast as the North Pole. My father pressed a cold finger to his lips: "hush, hush" and led his surprise squad of sailors around an altar, but the altar was a tremendous cash register, whose roughened nickle surface was cheaply decorated with trowels, pyramids and Arabic swirls. (p.24)

The father is dead to the young boy's mind. Associated with the images of cold and snow, he prefigures the later elegiac motif of blending to one colour. There is a grotesque worship of money. The term worship has been judiciously used, as has altar. It is an ironic worship. The religion is bankrupt, for it never rewards its suppliants. Their coffers will never be so full as to be "unable to shut because choked with greenbacks"(p.24). This reference, in its entirety, tells us as much about the younger Lowell as it does the elder Lowell. The younger Lowell scorns what his father stands for, just as much as he scorns the father himself.

To the younger Lowell the father is fixed in the mind. He belongs to no element. He is the very embodiment of that old adage, a fish out of water:

...he never deserted Boston and never became Bostonian. He survived to drift from job to job, to be displaced, to be grimly and literally that old cliché,

a fish out of water. He gasped and wheezed with impotent optimism. (p. 18)

He is out of 'life'. He is one of the many who undergo a death in life. To return to the dream, one can see this symbolically bodied forth: "hush-hush, hush-hush, whispered the snowflakes as big as street lamps as they broke on father-broke and buried"(p.24). Snow, that agent of death, buries the father. Lowell describes his father as he enters that crucial fourth decade of life: "In his forties, Father's soul went underground"(p. 17). Lacking any internal vision, any private dimension, his father simply faded away.

The father's naval career, his chosen profession, is also a failure. From an undistinguished naval career, he enters an equally bleak civilian life: "Father resigned from the Service in 1927, but he never had a civilian career..."(p.15). His civilian life is marked by the same subterranean quality alluded to previously, with the subtle intimations that the malaise had an early start. As a graduate of Annapolis:

He had reached, perhaps, his final mental possibilities. He was deep-not with profundity, but with the dumb depth of one who trusted to statistics and was dubious of personal experience. (p.17)

His devotion to statistics becomes a misguided faith, elevated into a religion. And all religions need symbolic emblems to sustain them in the hearts and minds of their followers. The father is a "twentieth-century naval

commander interested in steam, radio and 'the fellows', (p.184). This is the trinity he worships. As his outward condition becomes more desperate, he turns to bigger hieratic symbols for comfort:

The advance was never to come...
Almost immediately he bought
a larger and more stylish house;
he sold his ascetic, stove-black
Hudson and bought a plump brown
Buick; later the Buick was exchanged
for a high-toned, as good-as-new
Packard with a custom-designed royal
blue and mahogany body. Without drama,
his earnings more or less decreased
from year to year. (pp. 15-16)

The cars become the elder Lowell's second family, and the one he retreats to in times of stress. The elder Lowell's retreat to horseless carriages is a signal of his alienation from the human realm.

The domestic situation is such that it falls into patterned violence, forays and then retreats. It is, in truth, a war. In its movements the Lowells re-enact the very domestic situation of "The Banker's Daughter":

My parent's confidences and quarrels stopped
each night at ten or eleven o'clock, when
my father would hang up his tuxedo, put on
his commander's uniform, and take a trolley to
the Naval Yard at Charlestown. He had just
broken in a new car...he watched his car, a
Hudson, with informed vigilance, always giving
its engine hair-triggering little tinkering
of adjustment of friendship...He drove with
flawless, almost instrumental, monotony. (pp. 22-23)

This is a depiction of a failure, a life half-lived. The depiction is clinical, at times unfeeling. This very

flatness of tone contributes to the devastating effect of the piece.

His father's ineptitude is grotesquely exposed in the carving episode. Here the simplest of acts, for that man of science, is quite beyond him. When confronted with the prospect of cutting the roast, a manly art, Lowell's father brings his stolid, unimaginative mind to bear on the subject. Attending one "the innumerable small, specialized Boston 'colleges'"(p.34), he acquires the rudiments of the art. And "he worked with all the formal rightness and particular error of some shaky experiment in remote control"(p.34). And the result is catastrophic: the roast, like a medieval malefactor, is subject to "his hewing and hacking"(p.34).

With the disastrous marriage, which is as much the fault of the mother as it of the father, as shall be seen, and a failed career, the father suffers the ultimate reduction as a science worshipper. Forever associated with machines and the nominally scientific culture, Lowell's father is pathetically reduced to the worship of science in the form of a garbage pail. Choosing the terminology of religion carefully, I cite two passages that substantiate the point:

In the apoplectic brick alley, a fire escape stood out against our sooty plank fence. Father believed that churchgoing was undignified for a naval man; his Sunday mornings were given to useful acts such as lettering his three new galvanized

garbage cans: R.T.S. Lowell-U.S.N.
(p.32)

The fine intimations of decay, the sooty planks and the apoplectic alley, accumulate throughout the text. This physical sickness surrounds the spiritual sickness bodied forth in the image of a man worshipping garbage pails. One sees the virtual mechanization of ritual—every Sunday sees the new application of letters—that has come to typify the elder Lowell. This is the ultimate reduction, the ultimate portrayal of a man with "lost connections". The elder Lowell is very much like Lepke in "Memories of West Street and Lepke" in his single-minded obsession.

The second citation is all the more telling since Lowell works his father's spiritual deprivation into myth, the ramifications of which extends beyond the mere fact itself. The scene explicitly depicts the young Lowell's estrangement from any belief, and moreover, foreshadows his eventual commitment to the flux of existence. The scene also punctures his father's religion. Enervated by the very locus of the domestic realm, the dinner, which ironically drains rather than nourishes

...I used to lean forward on my elbows,
support each cheekbone with a thumb, and
make my fingers meet in a clumsily Gothic
arch across my forehead. I would stare
through this arch and try to make life stop.
Out in the alley the sun shone irreverently
on our three garbage cans lettered: R.T.S.
Lowell-U.S.N. (p.45)

Seeking a still point in time, seeking order, the young Lowell finds none. Through the arch of his hands he sees the continual flux of existence. The sun, a symbol of time and process, shines mockingly on any attempts to create order out of life.

Though this section is overtly father-oriented, detailing the failure of leadership, be it domestic, military or political, it is no less scathing in its depiction of the failure of the matriarchal aspect. Lowell's mother is very much the embodiment of the principle of femininity depicted in the poem "The Banker's Daughter". There are no heroes. Keenly attuned to the social environment—something the young Lowell feels an almost primal urge to destroy—she, with her discerning Ptolemaic eye, describes that " 'we are barely perched on the outer rim of the hub of decency.' "(p.15). Aspiring to prominence she falls into the degraded orbit of the mundane. She, too, is a failure, and responds in a not too different manner from that of her husband:

Instead of the dreams, Mother now had the insipid fatigue of keeping house... Mother had impulsively bought the squalid, impractical Revere Street house. Her marriage daily forced her to squander her subconsciously hoarded energies.
(pp. 18-19)

Both parents, in their penchant for living beyond their means, foreshadow the "summer millionaire"(p.89) of "Skunk Hour". The mother has gone underground, although the case is not so forcefully drawn as it is with the father.

How much does a failure to communicate, on any level, contribute to the sepulchral life as it is depicted in Life Studies? The parents do not speak:

"Weelawaugh, we-ee-eeelawaugh, weelawaugh" shrilled my mother's high voice. "But-and, but-and, but-and!", father's low rumble would drone in answer. Though I couldn't be sure that I caught the meaning of the words, I followed the sounds as though they were a movie. (p.19)

Her voice is the imperatively pitched air raid siren; his voice stung into feckless submission by the queen bee mother. Even in their less charged exchanges they "only lowed harmoniously like cows..."(p.19).

Filling the void left by the father, Lowell's mother launches a campaign of self-preservation. Dominion over her husband is obtained through the threat of self-exile (p.16). She knows the virtue of patience: "She was hysterical even in her calm, but like a patient and forbearing strategist, she tried to pretend her neutrality"(p.19). Her grip on life is often viewed as a rear guard action against the encroaching hordes. Father must live at the Naval Yard, away from the family, while "Mother had bravely and stubbornly held on at Revere Street"(p.46). In her private struggle for security, a modicum of respectability, she becomes shrewish and alienated.

Into this vacuum of "lost connections" flows the inimitable Billy "Battleship Bilge" Harkness, the elder

Lowell's classmate at Annapolis. Described as "a rough diamond"(p.32) and "an unusual combination of clashing virtues"(p.33), Harkness emerges, in Lowell's eyes, as "more sympathetic"(p.33) than members of his own family. He is everything that his father is not. Harkness has truly lived the life of the sea: that is his element. He possesses the capacity for levity in the face of danger, which often meant Lowell's mother. He is, moreover, a success. His professionalism, managed even in the smallest matters, is a stark contrast to the elder Lowell's amateurism. For Harkness the Navy has been an experience in the world. Whereas the elder Lowell has been victimized by mindless Prussianism, the Navy for Harkness recalls an heroic, romantic past:

I can hear him boasting in lofty language of how he had stood up for democracy in the days of Lenin and Béla Kun; of how he had "practiced the sport of kings"(i.e. commanded a destroyer) and combed the Mediterranean, Adriatic, and Black Seas like gypsies-seldom knowing what admiral he served under or where his next meal or load of fuel oil was coming from. (p.45)

Although exaggerated, the contrast to his father is nonetheless noted. Billy expresses a braggadoccio that has a primal appeal to the young Lowell.

Half of Billy's charm and appeal is his ability to act. It is of him that his superiors proudly speak: "A mathmaddition with the habit of command"(p.33). The elder Lowell is the very study of amateurism, of dogged but unrewarded persistence. Not so Billy. For "Bilge's

executive genius had given colour and direction to Father's submissive tenacity. He drank like a fish at parties, but was a total abstainer on duty"(p.33). To the young Lowell, seeking connections, Harkness is a model. But Harkness is not without his dangers. His avuncular attitude can suffocate at times:

After the heat and push of Commander Billy, it was pleasant to sit in the shade of the Atkinsons. Cousin Ledyard... was in charge of a big, stately, comfortable but anomalous warship...(p.40)

Life changed into landscape. With Lowell's continual identification of houses, environments and places with people, Cousin Ledyard becomes another lost connection. The entire family becomes representatives from a "dull, bad period"(p.44). All these images are erased by the presence of Billy, so much so that he even blights and roots out the entire family. For "the man who seems in my memory to sit under old Mordecai's portrait is not my father, but Commander Billy-the commander after father had thrown in his commission"(p.45).

And in the centre of everything sits the poet. The young Lowell survives in a world of lost connections, and this but tenuously. He is a victim and a victimizer. What he says of his friends and acquaintances, "people were cyphers to me"(p.13), may well be extended to all his formative relationships. The element of power and control is explicit here. Lowell seems to be discrediting

the state of innocence, or denying it. His relationship with Eric Burckhard is based on the unspoken and virtually inexplicable need to inflict as great a wound on others as has been inflicted upon himself. This need to hurt is a real one. He "admired the Burckhards and felt at home in their house, and these feelings were only intensified when I discovered that my mother was always ill at ease with them"(p.21). They serve not only as the implements of pain but also the recipients. Lowell and Eric suffer a breach in their relationship. The split is never healed, though "we crossed our hearts, mixed spit, mixed blood"(p.22). All reconciliation is impossible. Their ritual becomes mere gesture. Friendship is easily broken, but not so easily mended. This lost connection is permanently severed.

Since buildings, institutions, churches, figure so prominently in Lowell's work as sources of lost connections, it is not surprising that his various schools are indicted. The years spent in Brimmer, curiously afflicted with an Amazonian rule, exists as a negative model: "I wish I were an older girl...to be a boy at Brimmer was to be small, denied and weak"(p.27). The school is visibly seen as an extension of his home life. For "the quality of this regime, an extension of my mother's, shone out in full glory at general assemblies..."(p.27). The various men employed in the school are as cowed and servile as the father is at home.

One young instructor is described as "a submerged young man"(p.26), recalling for Lowell his father's soul going underground. The school is seen as "more constraining and punitive than its predecessors, and I believed the suburban country day schools were flimsily disguised fronts for reformatories."(p.28). These allusions recall the actual prison scenes in "The Mad Negro Soldier Confined at Munich", and foreshadow those in "Waking in the Blue" and "Memories of West Street and Lepke". From an early age the poet has an intuitive grasp of this salient truth: society is one vast prison. Prison images abound in this sequence. The girls of the upper school are attired in their "penal black and white"(p.29). These schools are worse than the prisons. For they partake in the functions of asylums as well. At Brimmer, "favoured lower school teachers were permitted to use us as guinea pigs for mildly radical experiments"(p.25).

At the root of the malaise the young boy suffers under is, as has been suggested, the family. The enervation, which is partially social, partially sexual, that has destroyed the parents' marriage also poisons the son. He, drawing upon history, is very much like "Agrippina, in the Golden House of Nero"(p.63), and this a recurring image in Lowell's poetry. He, too, is in exile in his own home. He, too, is a victim, as well as a victimizer. Against the invidious encroachment of endless parental small talk, the boy's only defence is "stoical repartee"(p.20). By this he is able to stave off "emotional

exhaustion"(p.20). This is his way of surviving a little time. From the men around he perceives only one real possibility: "men between the ages of six and sixty did nothing but meet new challenges, take on heavier responsibilities, and lose all freedom to explode "(p.28). He is trapped in time.

As he recalls his past, even the most anecdotal inclusion is highly structured and charged:

...I bloodied Bulldog Binney's nose...
 then I bloodied Dopey Don Parker's nose;
 then I stood in the centre of a sundial
 tulip bed and pelted a little enemy ring
 of third graders with wet fertilizer.
 (p.31)

This passage bodies forth a real sense of being besieged, of being surrounded, oppressed, not so much by third graders as by, metaphorically, the world. He is in time, the flower bed of tulips being a sundial, and rails against the mad shadows that afflict him. He also drew blood, tasted experience.

One of the themes of Life Studies is this very potentiality for destructiveness and self-destructiveness, the fruits of which every man carries with him. Lowell comes to see himself as a source of this self-destructive potential. But often the boy is cited, with all the good intentions a mother can summon, as the reason for a particular course of action. The father's resignation from the Navy, seen as the first step to ingominy, is done to secure the "son's survival and education on a single continent"(p.20). But the poet makes a very subtle equation, and a more damning one.

The poet sees himself in a world given over to decay, where even "our gold National Eagle stooped forward, plastered and doddering." (p.43) betrays this malaise. But it is Billy who delivers the second and most telling part of the equation. He looks at the young poet and gives this damning verdict: "I know why young Bob is an only child" (p.46). However tenuous the marriage was before the son's arrival, his birth undoubtedly exacerbated the tensions in the marriage. He has, as has been suggested, been used as a counter in the mother's power play with her husband. To his father he is "the first coupon from the bond of matrimony" (p.33). A cruel pun. Throughout his youth the boy feels a powerful, unconscious, inarticulate urge to destroy. It is with this exquisite sense of guilt that he listens to Billy's verdict, and stands, in his own mind, justly accused and condemned.

Many sections of Life Studies end with a depiction of the poet or one of his masks in a state of emotional reduction. This section is but one example of that tendency. Read carefully, with an ear for the mnemonic nuances that shape the piece, that last line is a devastating, uncompromising depiction. Yenser suggests that this section lacks depth, serving only as a backdrop for the later sections. Mazzaro, too, favours the later sections

69. Yenser, Circle to Circle, p. 129.

of Life Studies.⁷⁰ He terms it an autobiographical fragment, which suggests that it is separate from the rest of the volume. Staples misses much of the piece when he states that this section is a "long prose essay" that is "charming, urbane and incisive".⁷¹ This section is perhaps the bleakest one of the book. If anything is valued in this section it is the role of art and artifices. These help the boy to fashion a livable world. The value of art is taken up and explored in the third section of Life Studies, and it is to this section I now turn.

70. Mazzaro, The Poetic Themes of Robert Lowell, p. 112.

71. Staples, Robert Lowell, p. 74.

CHAPTER III

Part III of Life Studies is constituted of four poems dedicated to artists. Coming after the intense "91 Revere Street" and before the elegiac poems, these poems seem out of place, incongruous. They are neither. The first two sections I have dealt with suggest the multifaceted nature of the entire volume. "Beyond the Alps" suggests, among other breakdowns, that of the cultural past.

What role, then, does the artist play? These poems celebrate the artist, flawed though he may be, and extol his craft, uncertain though it may be. The artists chosen are not random selections. The four writers can be seen as exiles; whether by choice or chance they are alienated men. Although alienated from society they speak to it, and for it. They are the victims, this fraternity of the flawed, of life. And they are the recipients of affection and sympathy in a book that is not generous with those sentiments. These authors are also prisoners. They are the prisoners of bad sales, solicitous nuns or an indifferent public. Their lives bear out that grim adage that four walls do not a prison make.

If the artist is alienated, exiled, and victimized, it is by choice as much as by chance. This is the hard and

high price his calling demands. The theme of 'sickness' re-emerges quite forcefully in this section. If the artist is sick, and here I insist upon a complete definition that includes physical as well as a mental malaise, it is because he sees too deeply, too far. He has listened too intently to the still sad music of humanity, and the allusion is a cogent one, as shall be seen. Yenser has treated of this section very well, calling the sketches a "composite picture of the writer as hero"⁷². It would also be noteworthy to comment on the inescapable autobiographical element in this section, which functions on a subtle level.

In the first poem "Ford Madox Ford" the writer is associated with a line of figures who have undergone some form of separation from society. The most compelling figure is that of Jonah:

...you emerged in your "worn uniform
gilt dragons on the revers of the tunic",
O Jonah, O divorced, divorced
from the whale-fat of post-war London! Boomed,
cut, plucked and booted! (p.49)

The disintegration of society is wonderfully caught up in the image of the beached whale. The writer is exiled from a happier time, a time of playing golf with Lloyd George. The war victimized, as did his superior officers, "Ford, five times black-balled for promotion"(p.49). The war itself inflicted a physical injury, "then mustard gassed voiceless some five miles/behind the lines at Nancy or Belleau

72. Yenser, Circle to Circle, p. 130.

Wood. ... (p.49). Ford suffers both the spiritual and the physical wound. But if Europe ill-treated him, in America,

Nearly dying at Boulder, when the altitude
pressed the world on your heart,
and your audience, almost football-size,
shrank to a dozen... (pp.49-50)

The prophetic, concerned voice falls on deaf ears on both continents.

Ford's greatest work, The Good Soldier, is seen as his testament; but it is ignored:

Was it war, the sport of kings, that your Good Soldier,
the best French novel in the language, taught
those Georgian Whig magnificoes at Oxford,
at Oxford decimated on the Somme? (p.49)

The question is left unanswered. There is irony in Lowell's portrayal of Ford as "voiceless" (p.49), "Mumbling" (p.50), and as "master, mammoth mumbler" (p.50). Leaving one's work to do one's talking is a risky business, however ("...tell me why/the bales of your left-over novels buy/less than a bandage for your gouty foot") (p.50). The artist is indeed impoverished. The lack of reward is an indictment against a society that fails, in this very particular manner, to respond to an artist. For Ford "writing turned your pockets inside out" (p.50). The artist stands alone and unrewarded.

While the portrayal of Ford seems at times unflattering, particularly in the abundant use of aquatic imagery, the figure that emerges is sympathetic. The artist lives

in his work, and it is hoped that this work will eventually transcend his life and become constellated beyond the ravages of time:

I'm selling short
your lies that made the great your equals. Ford,
you were a kind man and you died in want. (p.50)

Artists at least act, even if they do 'lie'. If an artist fails because of the perversity of others, it does not diminish the artist's efforts, his values. Sympathy is extended to the fellow wounded. Ford's wit and honesty are appreciated, that which "cut the puffing statesman down to size"(p.49). This sense of honesty, commitment, comes to characterize all the artists under examination in this section. Artists are, despite the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, stubbornly true to their cause:

I hear you huffing at your old Brevoort,
Timon and Falstaff, while you leap the board
for publishers...(p.50)

Artists never surrender, never give ground.

Some of the very qualities attributed to Ford are also attributed to George Santayana in the poem "For George Santayana". He too is an alienated figure, but one seeking solitude:

In the heydays of 'forty-five'
bus-loads of souvenir-deranged
G.I.'s and officer-professors of philosophy
came crashing through your cell...(p.51)

The vision of hurley-burley society, dedicated to non-essentials, such as souvenirs, bursting into the locus of contemplation, the cell, bodies forth the rupture of the

privacy that creative men oftentimes need. The creative and thinking man earns Lowell's respect:

free-thinking Catholic infidel,
stray spirit, who'd found
the Church too good to be believed. (p.51)

A full gloss on Santayana's beliefs and how they opposed orthodoxy would be out of place here. But note how succinctly the position Santayana took is alluded to in that engaging epithet, "free-thinking Catholic infidel". Paradoxically, within and without the pale, Santayana comes to represent the best mind at work in a belief system under attack.

Santayana is a hero amidst the collapsing beliefs adumbrated in "Beyond the Alps". Lowell stands among "Circus and Mithraic Temple"(p.51), which bodies forth the ruined state of much of Western culture. Santayana, cared for in a place that is a locus of meditation as well as a place of confinement, never, even in his advanced years, loses his sense of humour. And since his humour embodies so much of his philosophy, his way of life, he can justly say "There is no God and Mary is His Mother"(p.51). There is a serious note here, a note of conciliation on the part of Santayana. He has not thrown off the mantle of Catholicism entirely, but his life of Reason prevents him from following it blindly, syncophantically.

Perhaps the most triumphant movement of this "stray spirit"(p.51) occurs in his death:

Lying outside the consecrated ground

forever now, you smile
 like Ser Brunetto running for the green
 cloth at Verona— not like one
 who loses, but like one who'd won...
 (p. 51)

He has attained inner peace. Lowell admires Santayana's healthy spirit of defiance. For a man who is seeking a cure, an answer, for his lost connections, such victories of others are important. Lowell admires Santayana's uncompromising honesty:

...when you died
 near ninety,
 still unbelieving, unconfessed, unreceived,
 true to your boyish shyness of the Bride. (p.51)

Santayana, for all his years, has kept his purity, his seriousness, his integrity.

Lowell's last iconographic look at Santayana is an evocation of the conciliation of opposites that has come to characterize Santayana's life:

Old trooper, I see your child's red crayon pass,
 bleeding deletions on the galleys you hold
 under your throbbing magnifying glass,...(p.52)

Although old, he still pursues his work with youthful enthusiasm. This pertinacity, even while the blood is symbolically ebbing away, is admired by Lowell, and it is admirable in its own right. The apotheosis of Santayana takes place in the

...worn arena, where the whirling sand
 and broken-hearted lions lick your hand
 refined by bile as yellow as a lump of gold.
 (p.52)

In the worn arena of the world, Santayana stands resplendent with personal glory and victory. The enemies he faced in

life will, in time, come to value the life of their
 opponent. The lion among the Christians will win.⁷³

"To Delmore Schwartz" is a complement to the other two poems while being different from them. If Santayana's retreat was into the life of Reason and discourse, and Ford's retreat into the obscurity of the unread, then Schwartz's habitat lies in the environs of alcohol and madness. The poem commences with a rather jovial but telling acknowledgement of failure:

We couldn't even keep the furnace lit!
 Even when we had disconnected it,
 the antiquated
 refrigerator gurgled mustard gas
 through your mustard-yellow house,
 and spoiled our long maneuvered visit
 from T.S. Eliot's brother, Henry Ware...
(p. 53)

A study of ineptitude, the passage gains force with the cross-reference to mustard gas. This is the same gas that silenced Ford and drapes itself on the Munich spires. The associative connection is again made between the poet and war. The influence of the war, which has spoiled more than the planned visit, permeates the entire volume. The recalcitrant freezer is but one machine which rebels against man's

73. Newton Stallnecht, George Santayana (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1971), pp. 8-12. Santayana is treated with such respect since his life has many parallels with Lowell's. Santayana felt himself an exile from religion, and felt ill at ease in the New England environment, where he lived as a student and teacher. He, too, had sincere misgivings about America, and spoke of it in a "harsh spirit of denunciation".

tenuous dominion over his technological world.

The endemic violence of the world is personalized in the multifaceted image of the duck which "craned towards Harvard"(p.53). It serves as a symbol for lost innocence. The duck is

...your first kill; you had rushed it home,
pickled in a tin wastebasket of rum-
it looked through us, as if it'd died dead drunk.
(p.53)

The peculiarly alcoholic ambience is noted as well. This is particularly telling since alcohol was a contributing factor to Schwartz's death, as well as having a strong hold on Lowell. The duck becomes a symbol of themselves, "...Rabelaisian, lubricious, drugged."(p.53). This is a reduced state of existence, likened unto a form of death.

The poets have a shared disdain of the outside world. Such a retreat as they share "cooled our universal angst for a moment,..."(p.53). Captured here is the more serious undercurrent of the piece. Escape from the universal angst is not possible in any real sense. The best one can hope for is temporary surcease from the flux of existence. The poets can indulge in a contempt of the world: "we drank and eyed/the chicken-hearted shadows of the world."(p.53). But with this contempt comes, at first, a seemingly flippant acknowledgement of thefraternity to which they belong. They are "undersea fellows, nobly mad/we talked away our friends"(p.53). This conception of the artist as mad, albeit nobly mad, has been suggested before. Here the artist is

nobly mad, perhaps a romantic idealization exaggerated for effect. Yet it is a contrast to the not so nobly mad negro confined in a ward, whose depiction is harrowing and unromantic. But the invocation of the kindred spirits is a telling one. For " 'Let Joyce and Freud,/the Masters of Joy,/be our guests here.' "(p. 53). This curious collation of art, Joyce and all he represents to the world of art, and Freud, and all he represents to the world of psychology, is an interesting one.

The seeming flippancy of associating the artist with madness, particularly with so visible a target as Freud, gives way to a weightier treatment of the conception in literary terms. If Joyce and Freud are invited into the smoke-filled room, they fall under the aegis of Coleridge, the patron of the group. And it is not the youthful, vibrant Coleridge of so much promise and potential. Rather the vision is of "...the paranoid,/inert gaze of Coleridge, back/from Malta—his eyes lost in flesh, lips baked black." (pp. 53-54). This is the Coleridge of excessive doses of laudanum, and it further substantiates the image of the drugged duck as a symbol of the human condition.

More pertinent to the context of the poem, yet resonating with the above, is the misquotation of Wordsworth:

You said:
 'We poets in our youth begin in sadness;
 thereof in the end come despondency and madness;...'
 (p. 54)

Yet the passage is still an apt one, and a telling one. The seriousness of the point is evident when viewed in the literary context established in the poem itself. Wordsworth's poem, from which the misquotation is taken, "Resolution and Independence", is, among other things, a study of a man with an unsettled mind. Perhaps the poet can never achieve the quietism of the leech gatherer, although he may come to understand it. The sadness which, to paraphrase Auden, hurts poets into poetry is a demanding taskmaster. The fruits of the poet's labours can be despondency and madness. The former condition permeates Life Studies, while the latter condition is explored and averted. The fraternity of Wordsworth and Coleridge seems to counterpoint the fraternity of Lowell and Schwartz. But it is with the Romantic poets, who are repeatedly evoked in the third section of Life Studies, that the idea of the poet as 'sick' is seriously entertained. The emphasis placed on the artist as outcast is certainly strong in this period. It is significant that Wordsworth should be specifically summoned in this poem. The internal vision of the poet is best demonstrated in that uneven poem, The Prelude, which bears the significant sub-title, The Growth of A Poet's Mind.

The retreat of Lowell and Schwartz is, however, a temporary one. The shift of focus in the poem's last movement to the Charles River suggests the intervention of time into

the reveries of the mind. The duck's foot is stuck "...like a candle"(p.54) in a recently slain bottle of gin, but candles must eventually go out. A subtle note of tragedy is struck here. If alcohol and youthful rebellion are escapes or means of coping, then they also, if pursued too avidly, can lead to self-destruction.

And nowhere is this potentiality for self-destruction stronger than in "Words for Hart Crane". Crane is held in high esteem by Lowell, both as a man and a poet. In this poem the poet is seen as alienated, ignored and perhaps vilified:

'When the Pulitzers showered on some dope
or screw who flushed our dry mouths out with soap,
few people would consider why I took
to stalking sailors, and scattered Uncle Sam's
phoney gold-plated laurels to the birds.

A homosexual outcast, the poet is ignored by award committees. In defiance however, the poet himself scorns such things, rejecting their way of showing favour. Crane, living out on the razor's edge, seems unwilling to sell out.⁷⁴ Like Santayana before him, Crane has a certain integrity and honesty.

Crane represents, as do the other authors commemorated here, the literary tradition and heritage that Lowell cleaves to. When all the other values and beliefs are under attack

74. Herbert Leibowitz, Hart Crane (Columbia University Press, New York, 1968), p.2. Interestingly, Lowell's identification with Crane evolves in part, perhaps, from their similar family situations. That Crane suffered under an obdurate and censorious father who scorned poetry as much as he loved money must have appealed to Lowell.

or already dismissed, the literary tradition proves, by its tenacity, the most worthy. Again, the cost of survival is high. The poet must, at times, play a role, strike a pose:

'I, Catullus redivivus, once the brage
of the Village and Paris, used to play my role
of homosexual...' (p.55)

But this is surface. The sub-stratum of being misunderstood is the more important one, for "few people would consider why I took/to stalking sailors..." (p.55). And is this not the ultimate prison, the prison of self?

Crane, as an artist, saw America as a land of 'lost connections'. And he attempted, in his poem The Bridge, to immerse himself in the American milieu, experience it, and give it form. Is Lowell doing much differently in Life Studies? However much Lowell admires Crane for his defiance and commitment, and his plea for commitment in return, ("Who asks for me, the Shelley of my age,/must lay his heart out for my bed and board" (p.55)), the poem ends on a tragic note. Dying young, Crane shares a fate that linked many romantic poets. The poem itself is short and intense, much like the life it depicts.

If the third section of the volume is a composite picture of the artist, what image then emerges? The artist is a hero; his heroism emerging out of his struggle with life. Alienated, ostracized, anathematized, cut-off, globally-shunted, he still speaks the hard-edged truths. Denied

to him are the heights of Hellas, and for him only "Paris, our black classic". Irrevocably committed to life, he survives his little time. He attempts to forge the 'lost connections' into a livable matrix once again. He survives against all odds, and those odds are great; and plagued by inner torment, doubt, neglect and fear, he survives.

This section is strategically placed as well, for in its depiction of tormented men who achieve a sense of thier own identity, it recalls the strong poetic impulse felt by the young boy in "91 Revere Street". The third section deals not only sympathy but forgiveness. And this is a remarkable change from the second section, and prepares, perhaps, for the subtle forgiveness extended to the parents in the later poems.

CHAPTER IV

Part IV, "Life Studies" proper, proves to be an ironic title, for do not the poems centre on dying? The title also bodies forth an artistic principle as well. The pictorial quality of many of these poems makes some appear to be the written equivalents of photographs; they seem like still lifes.

They are also, in their specificity of time and place, mnemonic signatures. They are pictures located in time and place, not yet past remembering. And in the centre of these still points sits the poet, his one hand on a pile of black earth and his other on a pile of lime. With these materials, and shaping power of memory, the poet will reconstruct his past.

I cannot agree with critics who find this section of poetry unexciting or tired. Mazzaro states that these poems provide little "illumination".⁷⁵ But it is in this section more than any other that the structuring device of Section ii is most in evidence:

There, in memory the vast number of remembered
things remain rocklike...the things and
their owners come back urgent with life

75. Mazzaro, The Poetic Themes of Robert Lowell, p.111.

and meaning-because finished, they are
endurable and perfect. (p.13)

How cogently do the terms "rocklike and finished" come to characterize the first movement of Section IV. Surely, these poems, built upon a lapidarian structuring device, are hard. Sculptured or painted, depicting the characters in their most revealing and telling poses, they are also 'finished'. This finishing evokes a sense of finality as well as completeness, for one need only note the tone of finality explicit within the titles of the poems themselves: "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow" and "Terminal Days at Beverly Farms".

The ambit of the poetry has been staked out before. The sense of failure, futility, alienation and death is again brought to the foreground, and now in a very personal context. In "My Last Afternoon With Uncle Devereux Winslow" a note of youthful rebellion and defiance is struck: "I won't go with you. I want to stay with Grandpa!"(p.59). The exclusion of the parents, a process begun in section II, is boldly stated here. If Section II was a protracted, almost clinical, view of the entire family in decline, then section IV bears witness to its ultimate death. As in section II there is an emphasis on place, and appropriately the locales seem deathly pale.

The seemingly Edenic surroundings are treasured for their human associations. For "Fontainebleau, Mattapoissette, Puget Sound.../Nowhere was anywhere after a summer/ at my

Grandfather's farm"(p.59). But the vision is not child-like or innocent, for it draws its poignancy from the adult sensibility that informs the reveries. And that awareness is predicated upon the knowledge that death and time have dominion:

One afternoon in 1922,
I sat on the stone porch, looking through
screen~~s~~ as black-grained as drifting coal.
Tockytoc, tockytoc
clumped our Alpine, Edwardian cuckoo clock,
slung with strangled, wooden game.(pp.59-60)

The clock, significantly Edwardian, ticks out the time. The transitoriness of temporal things can nowhere be better symbolized than with a clock from that brief, almost invisible period, the Edwardian Age. The "clump" is itself a resonating knell, both grating and persistent. The world is already punctured with symbolic death in the slain game that adorn the clock; time and death are one. The refrain of the clock resonates throughout this sequence.

The motif of life changed into landscape surfaces once again. A series of impressions, involving all the senses, comes to define the grandfather:

snapshots of his Liberty Bell silver mine;...
stogie-brown beams; fool's~~s~~-gold nuggets;
octagonal red tiles,
sweaty with a secret dank, crummy with ant-stale;...
(p.60)

This collation of material is perhaps purposely repugnant, or as the poet says:

Like my Grandfather, the décor

was manly, comfortable,
 overbearing, disproportioned.
 (p.60)

Therein lie many of the sentiments, the antimonies, the ambiguities that the poet has yet to resolve in memory.

The Proustian, indeed Joycean, time-shift functions to structure the recollections of this sequence. It accents the nostalgic and melancholic mood of the piece. The associative nature of the time-shift allows for the free flow of the real with wished-for or imagined. The shift is announced with "What were those flowers? Pumpkins floating shoulder-high?"(p.60). This is palpably felt past time, replete with images of fecundity and life:

It was sunset, Sadie and Nellie
 bearing pitchers of ice-tea,
 oranges, lemons, mint, and peppermints,
 and the jug of shandygaff,...
 (p.60)

Like the Hyacinth girl, these bearers of libation are a contrast to the farm itself. The farm is described as "Diamond-pointed, athirst..."(p.59). An almost perfect place, at least in the human domain, it harbours the seeds of death:

No one had died there in my lifetime...
 Only Cinder, our Scottie puppy
 paralyzed from gobbling toads.
 I sat mixing black earth and lime. (p.60)

This is the exception that proves, sadly, to be the rule.

The second movement of the poem is textured much like a photograph, a technique, with its predilections for significant and meaningful detail, that comes to characterize

the entire section. The movement begins with a depiction of Lowell in temporary state of perfection:

My perfection was the Olympian
poise of my models in the imperishable autumn
display windows
of Rogers Peet's boys' store below the State House
in Boston...(p.61)

This is an ironic stance. Hardly imperishable, the autumn, like the millionaire in "Skunk Hour", is imminently perishable. Nothing remains permanent or new, even "My formal pearl gray shorts/had been worn for three minutes "(p.61). The poet sees time passing; his inward clock tolling out the minutes.

The third movement depicts, with remarkable concision and precision, one of the minor failures of the Lowell menagerie, his great aunt Sarah. She is associated with the cultural life. She may have once possessed some talent, "Forty years earlier,/twenty, auburn headed,/grasshopper notes of genius!"(p.62), but now she is fixed in time. Her place in time seems forever like "...the doldrums of the sunset hour,...(p.61) or the "morning"(p.62), and if one employs the motif of life changed into landscape, the piano takes on added significance. The silence implicit within "dummy" is associated with the piano where she beats out, with some intensity, purely imaginative airs. The dummy may also signify a mannequin, implying that Sarah lives a half life.

She is associated with static images:

Each morning she practiced
on the grand piano at Symphony Hall,
deathlike in the off-season summer—
(p.62)

A vision of unfulfilled promise, of failure, she bears a striking resemblance to artists generally.

The fourth section is informed with a generalized and prophetic awareness of death in the world, and its specific embodiment in a loved one, Uncle Devereux, who died an early death. The poet is caught in the conflux of wind and water, the agents of change:

A fluff of the west wind puffing
my blouse, kiting me over our seven chimneys,
troubling the waters...(p.62)

The flux of time is the poet's element, but his subject matter is, literally, more earthbound. With the omniscient and transformational eye, he sees death's dominion:

...my uncle's duck blind
floated in a barrage of smoke-clouds.
Double-barrelled shotguns
stuck out like bundles of baby crow-bars.
A single sculler in a camouflaged kayak
was quacking to the decoys... (p.62)

The martial terminology foreshadows the emergence of Uncle Devereux at his prime as an officer: "...wearing his severe/war-uniform of a volunteer Canadian officer"(p, 63). The permeating influence of death is felt. Uncle Devereux's posters recall a seemingly happier time. But "Daylight from the doorway riddled his student posters...(p.63). The posters seem already shot through with death, and of all

the posters the last is the most telling and prophetic: "The finest poster was two or three young men in khaki kilts/being bushwhacked on the veldt—"(p.63). The unsuspecting ducks, blind to their untimely death, are here equated with the equally hapless soldiers, and both image groups foreshadow Devereux's death.

From this lyric and symbolic evocation, Lowell moves, as he often does to achieve effect, to paralyzing litotes: "My uncle was dying at twenty-nine" (p.63). Uncle Devereux decides on a second honeymoon, which provokes a thunderous response from the grandfather: "'You are behaving like children'"(p.63). Caught between two powerful influences, both of which are feared, admired and loved by the boy, the young Lowell is cowed. He feels an exile, even in his own home:

I wasn't a child at all—
unseen and all-seeing, I was Agrippina
in the Golden House of Nero... (p.63)

Here one of the main motifs of "91 Revere Street" is given an emotional and historical context. The context is an apt one, and a powerful one.

The last movement is an integration of the death into a symbol cluster that informs the complete elegy. Contrasted to this moment of ossification, perfect and enduring stasis, the vitality of "My hands were warm then cool, on the piles/ of earth and lime, a black pile and a white pile...."(p.64), exists.

But the landscape itself is given over to death:

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.
(p.64)

This passage is redolent with allusions to death: the traditional six feet allotted to the dead; the white door, which here becomes the measure of all men. The 'lost connections' are here given poetic depth and beauty. Under the poet's bemired hands, which smell of mortality, Uncle Devereux is fashioned: he is "...animated, hierarchical, / like a ginger snap man in a clothes-press" (p.64). He is fragile, vulnerable, limited, human. The ultimate symbolic movement is bodied forth in the last two lines: "Come winter, / Uncle Devereux would blend to the one color" (p.64).

The poem "Dunbarton" details the influence on the boy of the Grandfather, the history of the Lowell family, and a concomitant sense of duty. Dunbarton houses the family graveyard, and becomes a place of special pride and longing. The 'lost connection' of the uncle is temporarily mended by the grandfather, who is already filling the emotional and physical vacancy left by the father:

When Uncle Devereux died,
Daddy was still on sea-duty in the Pacific;
it seemed spontaneous and proper
for Mr. MacDonald, the farmer,
Karl, the chauffeur, and even my Grandmother
to say, "your Father." They meant my Grandfather.
(p.65)

The spiritual and emotional distance between the father and

son is pointedly underlined by the father's physical displacement, for the father it is a case of being out of sight, out of mind. To the young Lowell, the grandfather was "... my Father, I was his son "(p.65), and such commitments cut across ordinary ties of blood. It does not matter that the object of the young boy's passion must one day pass into one color, the intimations of which are inevitably permeating the actions of both.

The season is Indian summer, the penultimate season of death. The two children, for the grandfather seems childlike in his pleasures, seem oblivious to time. They prefer their "...fogbound solitudes/sweeter than human society."(p.65), for here they are free. His grandfather, in his driving ability, is the "...admiral at the helm"(p.65). It is a vision that establishes a style and integrity quite opposed to the monotony of the father's ability. The grandfather is the boy's hero, and their activities together are very much the activities of a father and son, and are, indeed, slightly puerile: "We stopped at the Priscilla in Nashua/for brownies and rootbeer,/and later 'pumped ship' together..."(p.65). Their eventual goal is not life, for they go to the "family graveyard at Dunbarton"(p.65).

At Dunbarton, veneration of the dead becomes quiet ritual, a warding off of nature:

Grandfather and I
raked leaves from our dead forebears,
defied the dank weather
with "dragon" bonfires.

(p.66)

The eye, however, cannot but see that time and death cannot be held at arm's length. For just "like the ever-blackening wine-dark coat/in our portrait of Edward Winslow.." (p.66), time and death spread like a miasmic mist into their world. As is suggested by the grandfather's ability to drive, history is rendered in private acts, meaningful acts. History also exists in the totems that the grandfather possesses, but these totems are ambiguous. The cane is just such an emblem:

I borrowed Grandfather's cane
carved with the names and altitudes
of Norwegian mountains he had scaled-
more a weapon than a crutch.
I lanced it in the fauve ooze for newts.
(p.66)

Can the young man whose failings have been so mercilessly detailed in Section II, ever hope to emulate his mountain-scaling, heroic grandfather? The challenge his grandfather presents is a terrifying one, and one that the boy does not feel he can take up. As he lances the ooze for newts, he sees himself as a newt. He is the victim of the cane's thrusts, not the wielder of them. The reptilian reduction is in keeping with the other metamorphoses that come to structure the book, particularly the latter sections. The reduction is seen as enervating to the boy: "I saw myself as a young newt,/neurasthenic, scarlet/and wild in the wild coffee-colored water" (p.66). The boy feels, in his heart, that he too is unable to 'explode', and against the man the boy

feels helpless, weak and feckless. The last movement of the poem is at once touching and unhealthy. Yet the image presented conveys the nature of their relationship quite admirably:

In the mornings I cuddled like a paramour
in my Grandfather's bed
while he scouted about the chattering greenwood stove.
(p.67)

This dependence, perhaps troublesome enough, has a sexual nature that makes it all the more repugnant.

In "Grandparents" Lowell leaves the world of those forebearers who are "...altogether otherworldly now,..."(p.68). Much is lost to the poet, however. Lost to him is that sense of authority, both fearful and loving: "...Grandpa still waves his stick/like a policeman,..."(p.68). Gone, too, are the individualistic and idiosyncratic tastes of his grandmother, "...like a Mohammedan, still wears her thick/lavender mourning and touring veil..."(p.68). All this color is to be replaced by the dull sameness of the modern age. For all its seeming stolidity, "...the formidable/Ancien Régime still keeps nature at a distance "(p.68), Death does come. For Lowell, the death of his grandparents is coterminous with his own world-weariness. The entropic world, too, is counting out its petty pace:

Then the dry road dust rises to whiten
the fatigued elm leaves—
the nineteenth century, tired of children, is gone.
(p.68)

The dust rises like a funeral pall to cover nature. The fires lit in Dunbarton do not ward off the night. The world-weariness here foreshadows the growing sickness and decay that Lowell sees in both society and nature.

In the conflict between the past and present, the poet can announce an empty victory: "the farm's my own"(p.68), and in its repetition it seems bitter gall indeed. The victor suffers total deprivation from his environment; of what value is the farm without those who made it a "place"? The subtle alienation from nature begins. The poet alienates himself: "I keep indoors, and spoil another season."(p.68). And this prison, complete with its own torture devices ("I hear the rattley little country gramophone/racking its five foot horn: 'O Summer Time!' p.68), is momentarily preferable to the outside world. The associative value of the farm, seen in purely human terms, makes it preferable:

Five
green-shaded light bulbs spider the billiards-
table;
no field is greener than its cloth. (p.68)

Such artifacts now recall the first love the poet ever had, the grandfather. His supplication to the grandfather takes the form of a parody of the wedding vow: "Grandpa! Have me, hold me, cherish me!"(p.69). The plea causes tears, (and they are rare in this volume, occurring again only at the death of his mother: "Tears smut my fingers"(p.69)). The weight of the dead seems a cumbersome burden. It is, however, partially removed by the defiant act, however ridiculous it appears, of defacing a magazine: "disloyal still,/ I doodle

handlebar/mustaches on the last Russian Czar."(p.69). His new found freedom is spent in mocking an age that left the stage of history accompanied by gunfire. The grandparents too have left the stage; they have passed into one color. He remains not only churlish and disloyal, but, moreover, "alone"(p.68). And this alienation may prove to be his only true inheritance.

The poet now moves to his own family, particularly his father: "Commander Lowell" provides little that is new, but imagistically bodies forth that which is familiar. The poem achieves remarkable thematic and symbolic concision. It is a poem unrelenting in its self-defeating postures, its sense of self-loathing and ill-concealed hatred. Beneath the surface lies the undefined, slightly loathsome sexual confusion witnessed in Section II. The mother is "still her Father's daughter./Her voice was still electric/with a hysterical, unmarried panic..."(p.70). She suffers from sexual estrangement, for "...Mother dragged to bed alone,/read Menninger,..."(p.71). Alienated from her husband, she "...grew more and more suspicious,..."(p.72). These intimations of jealousy are not without foundation, but they are mis-directed. Her husband, too unimaginative to take a mistress, spends his nights with a slide rule, an emblem of the scientific culture he is married to. His devotion to and love of science is a tragic misalliance.

The theme of the father's amateurishness emerges once again. While at times comic, (he "took four shots with his putter to sink his putt" p.71), it is at other times laden

with tragic consequences. Consider the misuse of the family finances:

...he slid his ivory Annapolis slide rule
across a pad of graphs—
piker speculations! In three years
he squandered sixty thousand dollars.
(p.72)

As a result of these piker speculations he sinks into himself, an echo of his former self persists only. The world he enters is a solipsistic one. The boom of his voice singing "Anchors aweigh"(p.71) in the bathtub is reduced to a mere hum. As his aspirations sink so does his self-esteem.

The poet is "bristling and manic"(p.70), and to avoid the inevitable exhaustion of home life, he "skulks in the attic"(p.70), recalling a less enlightened time when the undesirable was kept from public view. As a nuclear family they have been irrevocably split apart. The mother drags herself to bed; the father retreats to his graphs and lamp; the poet flees to the attic to memorize the names of two hundred French generals in order to "...to dope myself asleep..." (p.70). The poem refocuses the thematic concerns of Section II, and foreshadows the manic times in the later poems.

The focus of the entire sequence is itself narrowing. The movement begins in the historical poems, then moves to the family history in the second section. It then moves to the family-historical poems in the beginning of the fourth section. The focus finally settles on the poet himself,

his family and lost connections.

The poem "Terminal Days at Beverly Farms" puts 'finished' to the large scale portraits. Paralelling as it does the elder generation, it is an interesting poem which further details the entropic world suggested in the previous poems, and its imagery is most profound and telling in that respect. At Beverly Farms the boulder which "...bulked in the garden's centre-"(p.73) indicates that mortality is fixed in the world. Their house has no "seaview" (p.73), turning away, as it does, from the outside world. Outside their prison:

...sky-blue tracks of the commuter's railroad shone
like a double-barrelled shotgun
through the scarlet late August sumac,
multiplying like cancer
at their garden's border. (p.73)

The imagistic pattern is self-explanatory. Rich with death imagery, particularly in the metallic references and the seasonal allusions, it suggests the earth is suffused with death and sickness.

The discrepancy between the reality and the illusion also figures prominently in this poem, and is nowhere more evident than in the depiction of the father. Even in the grip of death, "...his newly dieted figure was vitally trim."(p.73), and "Father's death was abrupt and unprotesting./His vision was still twenty-twenty"(p.73). The flatness of tone is suggestive. His father is, before Lowell's eyes, fading to one colour, but there is not passionate outburst, no plaintive cry. There is only declarative statement. The elder

Lowell undergoes a transformation as well: life changed into landscape, and it is a landscape populated not by people but by things, objects. In preparation for his death, the elder Lowell buys a new car, and it arrives "...without chrome"(p.74). It is a landscape of cars; and it is by a car that he is mourned, "...his best friend... his little black Chevie,..."(p.74). These affectionate diminutives suggest a sexual alignment. And indeed the Chevie is something he frequently "stole off with"(p.74) to go to secret haunts. As suggested previously, the mother's suspicions are not so much erroneous as mis-directed.

The final measure of the man is his utter unimaginative surrender to death: it is met with three words: "'I feel awful'"(p.74). The words are unheroic. There is no raging at the dying of the light, for such a stand would be entirely uncharacteristic of him. His father has faded to one colour, but in Lowell's mind and emotions the father's spiritual death occurred long before the physical fact. If sympathy is evoked, it is only in an indirect manner, and occurs in "Father's Bedroom".

This poem, "Father's Bedroom", achieves final detachment, rendering the life of the father through his attachment to things. The poem achieves some understanding of the father. Since the poem stresses things, a kimono, a lamp and a book, it is with this last item that poem survives. Often associated with "trig" and "calc" books, the bibles of the scientific cult, this book, Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan

(p.75), gives the elder Lowell and added, heretofore, unexplored dimension. The eye is focussed on this volume: "its warped olive cover/was punished like a rhinoceros hide"(p.75). The book is something that has survived, but shows the signs of wear. The eye is then drawn to the seemingly innocuous comment on the flyleaf: "Robbie from Mohter"(p.75). This is a declaration of love from someone who felt strongly about the father, and even the diminutive "Robbie" is telling. It suggests that the now defeated man was once a boy for whom much was hoped. This is a love that persists through time and events, for:

Years later in the same hand:
 "This book has had hard usage
 on the Yangtze River, China.
 It was left under an open
 porthole in a storm". (p.75)

Because of the associative quality of the book, is it unfair to extend the hard usage suffered by the book to the father? I think not. Lowell has progressed since his first tacit acknowledgement of his father's spiritual isolation in "91 Revere Street": "At each stage of his life, he was to be forlornly fatherless"(p.17). Detachment here then assumes the force of statement, indirectly uttered but spoken nonetheless.

The poem that follows, "For Sale", is so direct in its appeal as to deny any charge of obscurity or evasion on the poet's part. Indeed, its imagistic presence is astounding. It, too, captures the thematic and symbolic motifs and weaves together these strains, achieving a gem-like purity

of expression. The house is:

Empty, open, intimate,
its town-house furniture
had an on tiptoe air
of waiting for the mover
on the heels of the undertaker.
(p.76)

If one recalls how tenaciously the mother faught to establish her domain, her territory, which was defined in terms of houses and furniture, then the vision of her in this last house is all the more pathetic. For in this never ending movement she sits forlornly husbandless:

Ready, afraid
of living alone till eighty,
Mother mooned in a window,
as if she had stayed on a train
one stop past her destination. (p.76)

She is ready, of necessity rather than choice, to move; but she is afraid. She now presented with the very real prospect of living alone, although one suspects that she did as much even when her husband was living. With the passing of the furniture, which seemed transformed into joyful children waiting for a picnic, she has nothing to grasp for. Everything she loved has deserted her, and she wished an early death.

"Sailing Home from Rapallo" measures just how much is lost to the mother, and inspires the second and last flow of tears. A fellow exile now, Lowell feels compassion for her, the measure of which is taken in considered tears:

Your nurse could only speak Italian,
but after twenty minutes I could imagine your final
and tears ran down my cheeks. (p.77) week,

This sympathy is rare in Lowell's poetry; later poems will demonstrate more contempt for people than sympathy.

Meditatively, the poet fixes the family history within the constellation of world history, and by doing so achieves a vision of America as seen through the family and his experience.

The impoverishment of America, intellectually, spiritually and emotionally, is made apparent in the polarity struck between it and Europe. Looking back at Europe, the poet saw "...the whole shoreline of the Golfo di Genova/ was breaking into fiery flower"(p.77). It is early spring, the season of life and renewal. The world is either sun, ("...the passengers were tanning/on the Mediterranean in deck-chairs..." p.77), or cold, ("...our family cemetery in Dunbarton/ lay under the White Mountains/in the sub-zero weather." (p.77).) Dunbarton is an ironic contrast to the flowering world of Europe. The only bloom in Dunbarton is a "fence of iron spear-hafts/black-bordered its mostly Colonial grave-slates."(p.77) In America even the "...soil was changing to stone...(p.77). The stasis, the pervading sub-zero cold of "Inauguration Day: January 1953", is again felt.

Of his own family Lowell's view is equally negative. There has been a curse upon both his houses. The father is associated with the "'unhistoric' soul"(p.78), and against him are arrayed "twenty or thirty Winslows and Starks"(p.78). Even in the permanence of the grave social rank and status are kept. When, despairingly, Lowell meditates on his

isolation in America, he is careful to mention rank. If his father is reduced, his mother also undergoes a reduction:

In the grandiloquent lettering on Mother's coffin,
Lowell had been misspelled LOVEL.
 The corpse
 was wrapped like panetone in Italian tinfoil.
 (p.78)

The ultimate reduction is seen as an indignity to the family name, which is cruelly misspelled.

Section II illustrated that though the parents are flawed, the child is equally culpable. And this is bodied forth in the poem "During Fever", for here the sense of inherited failure is compounded. Feeling themselves as a latter-day family of Ushers, they move in a blighted world:

All night the crib creaks;
 home from the healthy country to the sick city,
 my daughter in fever
 flounders in her chicken-colored sleeping bag.
 "Sorry," she mumbles like her dim-bulb father, "sorry."
 (p.79)

The crib creak ominously recalls the rocking of the nightmare son in the poem "The Banker's Daughter". In the urban setting, this unreal and sick city, both parent and child are rendered helpless. The sickness of the world seems directly related to the child's sickness. Her "sorry" begs a question: sorry for what? Is she sorry for being alive, for being a nuisance? Is it the inner promptings of primal guilt?

The answer may lie in what appears to be Lowell's own

sense of guilt, primal and ingrained: "part criminal and yet a Phi Bete,..."(p.79). Why criminal? The answer seems to lie in the conspiratorial links sustained between himself and his mother:

Often with unadulterated joy,
Mother, we bent by the fire
rehashing Father's character-
(p.79)

Character analysis in Lowell's work often serves as murder by proxy. Allied with this guilt is the conception of the child as a prisoner of marriage.

The poet does tacitly acknowledge the life-denying influence of the mother figure: "Mother, your master-bedroom/looked away from the ocean."(p.79). She turns away from life, and from the symbol of life, the ocean. She, too, has failed to make, as Lowell must make, an agonizing re-appraisal of life. Her resemblance to her husband is made even clearer in this poem: "Born ten years and yet an aeon/too early for the twenties..."(p.80), she too is out of time. Her old-world orientation is further highlighted by the scathing indictment that rounds out the poem:

Terrible that old life of decency
without unseemly intimacy
or quarrels, when the unemancipated woman
still had her Freudian papá and maids!
(p.80)

This is the world that she is arrested in, stopped in her mind as an edenic existence.

These musings, occasioned by the daughter's fever, sustain the ambivalent feelings Lowell has to the family,

even his own. His own complicity is explored as well, and he is not merely satisfied to blame one party. His sense of impotence at the time of his daughter's sickness echoes his helplessness and impotence during his youth, under the tutelage of his parents.

This motif of victim-victimizer emerges in the poem "Waking in the Blue", which presents the reader with a 'prison' poem. Its ancestry can be traced back to "A Mad Negro Soldier Confined at Munich" and some sections from the third section of Life Studies. Those poems suggest what the poet himself might become. Like the personae of those poems Lowell is in an institution. But Lowell differs from the mad negro in this manner: Lowell is crudely defiant, whereas the negro seems lost to his environment. Lowell sees himself as the "Cock of the walk,..."(p.82), which, although it is a posture, suggests a sense of superiority over the other inmates, and it is a way of surviving a little time. But it cannot disguise the feeling that "My heart grows tense/as though a harpoon were sparring for the kill "(p.81). His grasp on his own position, which he announces in a straightforward manner as "(This is the house for the 'mentally ill')"(p.81), gives him a decided edge over his deluded brothers. They suffer under their delusions, failing to recognize themselves for what they are, failing to make their own agonizing re-appraisals.

The poet grins at Stanley, "...now sunk in his sixties..."

(p.81), an image of the living dead. Stanley was "...once a Harvard all-American fullback,"and "still hoarding the build of a boy in his twenties,"(p.81), and he recalls Lowell's father and uncle, who also harbour this disparity between appearance and reality. Stanley is in training for game that will never come. Lowell refuses to become a figure like these men. The other inmates shock and disgust: "Bobbie", "redolent and roly-poly as a sperm whale/as he swashbuckles about in his birthday suit..."(p.82). The mixture of animal imagery, physical distortion, and age disparity suggests a case of arrested development. Lowell suggests as much, and more, in his concise line: "These victorious figures of bravado ossified young"(p.82). There is a strong element of contempt here, and little sympathy. He does not want to become like them, but association with them offers the strong possibility that he might just do so.

There is an element of self-saving grace in his definition of his fellow inmates as "...thoroughbred mental cases,/twice my age and half my weight"(p.82). These thoroughbreds have been raised from youth to be as they are now. Although helpless, these inmates foreshadow Czar Lepke, a violent man made helpless. As Lowell fails to identify with the inmates at McLean's, he makes a perverse but telling association with Czar Lepke. There seems, in this poem, as well as in "A Mad Negro Soldier Confined at Munich", a sense that death is the only way out of prison, any prison. And despite

their apparent commonality, "We are all old-timers,/each of us holds a locked razor,"(p.82), the poet must deny their way. There must be an alternative to death as a means of escape.

Release from McLean's does not assure freedom, for there is still the prison of self. "Home After Three Months Away" is an attempt by the poet to establish, or re-establish, those 'lost connections'. This poem is far more than a tender and affectionate lyric for Lowell's daughter, as Staples suggests.⁷⁶ The poem's intentions are otherwise. With the oblique reference to Shakespeare's exiled king, Richard the Second, "Is Richard now himself again?"(p.83), and the not totally convincing assurances that "...nothing's gone"(p.83), the utter desolation and alienation of the latter part of the poem is foreshadowed. And the vision presented is decidedly bleak and apocalyptic.

The poet feels a sense of helplessness, impotence, for "Recuperating, I neither spin nor toil,"(p.84). The voice only relates what it sees, and it cannot act on what it sees. The poet sees the world given over to death and decay:

Three stories down below,
a choreman tends our coffin's length of soil,
and seven horizontal tulips blow.
Just twelve months ago,
those flowers were pedigreed
imported Dutchmen; now no one need
distinguish them from weed.

The coffin's length of soil resurrects the Funbarton motif and significantly extends it to all of New England. The

76. Staples, Robert Lowell, p. 14.

tulips, which suggests the generation theme that is so important to Lowell, are now horizontal, already dead. They have suffered a reduction. They were once pedigreed, pure, like the founding Dutch explorers they symbolize. A historical myth is being worked out here. The Stuyvesants, among the first settlers of New York, no longer embody any historical value.

The tulips are caught up in and destroyed by the season that has come to characterize America: winter. There is no summer, no time of luxuriant life. The flowers, and, by extension, the people, are "Bushed by the late spring snow,/ they cannot meet/another year's snowballing enervation." (p.84). The theme of enervation, alluded to previously, is given a universal application. The late spring gives way to immediate winter. And like the flowers in their insensate struggle, Lowell cannot seem to face another year. The snowballing is wonderfully evocative of something ominously out of control.

The last lines are separated from the rest of the poem, suggesting that poet's alienation from his environment, and recalls the imagistic evocation of the last two lines in "Beyond the Alps". These lines also foreshadow the condition of the poet in "Skunk Hour". The lines "I keep no rank nor station./Cured, I am frizzled, stale and small " (p.84) cover familiar territory in Lowell's poetry. "Without rank" is suggestive of many things. It suggests his alienation from the military side of his family, its heroes and losers.

It also suggest the ironic advance of democracy; in making everything equal it can destroy the individual. "N^o station" invokes a particularly naval motif. Lowell sees himself cut off from life, from the sea where watchful stations are kept. The "Cured" is certainly ironic. The institutions for the insane are places to keep those unfit for society. A cure seems ephemeral. Institutions are, in truth, as the abundant animal imagery suggests, human zoos. The "frizzled" suggests a larger context. It literally means 'burned off', but it has symbolic value here. Lowell has been shriven. Many, if not all, of the cultural values are lost to Lowell, and the process continues. "Stale" suggests the dryness and dessication of the man and the world he lives in. Like the land on which he lives all men are "athirst", and cannot find water. The "small" conveys a sense of man's conception of himself. God has been replaced by an indifferent universe, and he feels further reduced in the face of this knowledge.

The last movement of Life Studies, the second section of part IV, recalls, in its concerns and thematic patterns, the first section of Life Studies. The terrifying pattern adumbrated in Section I has been fleshed out in the second and third sections, and is now given full body in this section. Although free, and this must be considered as totally relative, he is, in his routine, suffering from imprisonment. As if under house arrest, "Only teaching on Tuesdays, book-worming/ in pajamas fresh from the washer each morning,..." (p.85),

suggests his physical incarceration years previously. The illusion of freedom is but one illusion. The quality of American life, in this the most promising of decades, is another:

where even the man
scavenging filth in the back alley trash cans,
has two children, a beach wagon, a helpmate,
and is a 'young Republican'. (p.85)

The disparity between the vision and the reality is apparent. Maintaining things, commercial things, the man is reduced, by overspending, to scavenging in garbage pails for sustenance. The image has resonances throughout the entire volume. Perhaps Lowell sees America as a series of triumphs of form over substance, all of which are hollow.

There is another disparity, and this one involves the poet himself: "I have a nine months' daughter,/young enough to be my granddaughter" (p.85). The family unit is re-establishing itself along familiar lines. The father-figure, by implication, is the less important biological tie; the real emotional connection exists between 'grandfather' and the 'granddaughter'. This sense of temporal dysfunction in the poet is carried over, by memory, into the first 'agonizing reappraisal' of the poem, the substance of which is made clear in the second stanza: "These are the tranquillized Fifties,/and I am forty. Ought I to regret my seed-time?" (p.85). He does not feel a part of the tranquillized age, the age of indifference, political entrenchment, Cold War. He is forty, a dangerous age in Life Studies. It is

a time for perspective; a time to fight the narcotic of indifference and lethargy; it is a time to act. But when the poet reflects upon his most significant acts of rebellion, they are rendered in a comic tone:

I was a fire-breathing Catholic C.O.,
and made my manic statement,
telling off the state and president,... (p.85)

There is much of the sound and fury signifying nothing in such an admission. If this is his seedtime, then he may as well reject it; but if he does so his life becomes meaningless.

The vision of his past is unsentimental, for there are no happy times. The prison roof is compared to "my school soccer court"(p.85) (but any nostalgic appeal is undercut internally when we recall that games were perceived as power struggles in "91 Revere Street"). His estrangement from man and nature is wonderfully caught up in the conjugal like-visits made to the "Hudson River once a day"... (p.85) through the "sooty clothesline entanglements"(p.86), which here assumes the function of the lattice work of bars. Unable to communicate meaningfully with his fellow inmates ("I yammered metaphysics with Abramowitz" (p.86)), he is alone.

Declaring himself "so out of things"(p.86), he is drawn to a man with a single-minded pre-occupation, Czar Lepke. This figure, the head of Murder Incorporated— itself a surreal American institution— undergoes an ironic apotheosis. With an eye to "Inauguration Day: January 1953", it is

Lepke and not Eisenhower that comes to typify America in the Tranquillized Fifties:

...T-shirted...
 ...dawdling off to his little segregated cell full of things forbidden the common man:
 a portable radio, a dresser, two toy American flags tied together with a ribbon of Easter Palm.
 (p.86)

Lepke is defined by the Americana that surrounds him, the things of life. His cell is segregated, cut off from the rest of the prisoners. The radio, which in Lepke's lobotomized condition, is a non-connection to the outside world. The dresser is a domestic touch that adds poignancy to the imprisoned condition of man. The two flags are plastic and crass, much like the greater commercial world that gave them birth. The Easter Palm ironically suggests the resurrection and life that is denied to Lepke.

But this 'hero' is seen, as so many of the heroes in Life Studies are, as victimized:

Flabby, bald, lobotomized—
 he drifted into a sheepish calm,
 where no agonizing reappraisal
 jarred his concentration on the electric chair—
 hanging like an oasis in his air
 of lost connections... (p.86)

A sardonic identification is made. As Lowell was subject to mildly radical experiments in school, Lepke embodies the ultimate dehumanization: lobotomy. Lepke, the head of Murder Incorporated, now concentrates entirely on his own death, a death that is as selfish as it is non-redemptive. Lowell is staring, perhaps, at the man he could become. Lepke is caved-

in, gone "underground", and this possibility seems quite real to Lowell. Lowell has one advantage, however; he is still capable of agonizing reappraisals.

The lost connection of marriage has been suggested previously. But now, like the other themes in the earlier parts of Life Studies, it finds a personal embodiment in Lowell's life. The two poems under examination, "Man and Wife" and 'To Speak of Woe That is in Marriage', can be dealt with as a single unit. These poems are a direct descendant of "The Banker's Daughter", and I draw the two together so as to highlight the contrasting views presented in them. The first poem is an aubade, a morning song, that also shares something with the marriage vows. The second poem, which takes its title from the "Wife of Bath's Prologue", is a serenade, an evening song.

"Man and Wife" seems ambivalent in its view of marriage. The opening movement is not peaceful or optimistic: "Tamed by Miltown, we lie on Mother's bed;/the rising sun in war paint dyes us red"(p.87). The violence of the imagery suggests the inherent potentiality for violence within the marriage itself. The use of mild drugs, Miltown, suggests their way of coping, artificial though it may be. But there is hope, or intimations of hope, in marriage:

All night I've held your hand,
as if you had
a fourth time faced the kingdom of the mad-
its hackneyed speech, its homicidal eye-
and dragged me home alive...(p.87)

The night is the most dangerous time for the poet, for that is the time when the illusions one clings to seem to be at their most ephemeral. His wife serves to remind him of his past ineptitude, his own sense of unworth: "I...too boiled and shy/and poker-faced to make a pass,..."(p.87). Although some relief from living totally alone is provided by marriage, there is also a persisting element of danger.

Sexual estrangement is one of these dangers. It is dangerous because of the potentiality for self-imprisonment and frustration: "Now twelve years later, you turn your back"(p.87). The intimations of alienation are very subtle. Marriage can inflict a degree of enervation that even destroys sleep, and prompts child-like regression: "Sleepless, you hold/your pillow to your hollows like a child(p.87).

The poet feels drenched in the emotional milieu he lives in, and feels powerless to alter or control it. If marriage has the potentiality to drag him back from the kingdom of the mad, it also has the power to suffocate with care: "your old-fashioned tirade-/loving, rapid, merciless-/breaks like the Atlantic Ocean on my head"(p.87). One has the distinct impression that this scenario occurs nightly.

This feeling of sameness, repetitiveness, occurs in the nightmarish serenade, 'To Speak of Woe That is in Marriage'. This marriage is marked, at least from the woman's point of view, by brutal excess. This poem parallels the previous poem in more than its dramatic situation, its themes: "My hopped up husband drops his home disputes,/and hits

the streets to cruise for prostitutes..."(p.88). Far from sedate or tranquillized the husband still partakes in the chemotherapeutic nature of the Fifties. The dropping of the home disputes suggests the regularized routine, itself a way of escaping an exhausting marriage, of the poet's parents. The manic tension of "This screwball might kill his wife..."(p.88), invokes the situation in the poem "The Banker's Daughter", as does her reactions, "My only thought is how to keep alive"(p.88). Marriage is a power struggle where there is no clear winner, and quite a few losers.

In the lines "Oh the monotonous meanness of his lust.../ It's the injustice...he is so unjust--"(p.88), Lowell is depicting the debasement of sex into mechanical lust. Even Marriage, the ultimately shared human experience, seems, in the end, incapable of providing people with human knowledge: "What makes him tick?"(p.88), and it is a question whose application goes beyond the specific poem and text.

The crude but effective animal imagery which ends the poem brilliantly catches up this view of debased sex, and debased life: "Gored by the climacteric of his want,/he stalls above me like an elephant"(p.88). The key 'transformation' word is "climacteric". Meaning a critical period of great change, it conveys the image of man reduced to his basic impulse. "Gored", a strong verb, is highly suggestive of the power of the male, and the pain inflicted upon the female by his unthinking, oppressive lust. The lumbering

oppression of his elephantine moves create a suffocating atmosphere. There is no escape: "each night now I tie/ ten dollars and his car key to my thigh..."(p.88). The open ended nature of the reflection, through the use of the ellipsis marks, suggests that it is an unrealized and unrealizable alternative.

In "Skunk Hour" the mask is dropped. Although the poem resembles "A Mad Negro Soldier Confined at Munich", the personal poetic voice intensifies the poem's power. "Skunk Hour" anchors the entire sequence. The poem has been much anthologized, much commented upon. As interesting as the poem is by itself, its full texture is revealed only when read as an ~~anchor~~⁷⁷ to the rest of the poems. Or as John Berryman so characteristically puts it, a "very good poem, incidentally, and gets better, explored". "Skunk Hour" is journey's end. Lowell has detailed the 'lost connections' of his condition, his history, his family. What then remains? What takes the place of that which has been lost?

The answer lies in this "morose private meditation" and ⁷⁸ "dramatic monologue", as Richard Wilbur calls the poem. From the seemingly detached observations of the first four stanzas, one moves into the private realm of the poet's mind. The vision presented, supported by a dense network of self-referential allusions and literary echoes, has a coherency

77. John Berryman, "Despondency and Madness" cited in A. Ostroff. The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic (Little, Brown, Boston, 1964), p. 101.

78. Richard Wilbur, "On Robert Lowell's 'Skunk Hour'", Ibid., p. 86.

of design. This is an important point to remember if one is not to dismiss the poem as the incoherent ramblings of a deranged mind. Ehrenpreis, in his perceptive and sympathetic essay, "The Age of Lowell", states that "the course of his life became the analogue of the life of his era; the sufferings of the poet became a mirror of the sufferings of whole classes and nations.⁷⁹ The poem is a legend for the strategy-in-depth analysis of the world in Life Studies. A sustained analysis of this poem will conclude the thesis, and, justly, be its conclusion.

The poem begins with a hierarchical figure struggling to maintain herself. One need only recall the great number of such paradigms in Life Studies — the Pope, the grandparents, governments, society — to see that to question one is to question them all. The first stanza is redolent with the many themes and structuring motifs that permeate Life Studies: "Nautilus Island's hermit/heiress still lives through winter in her Spartan cottage..."(p.89). The suggestion of a rather surprising permanence is sustained by her living through winter. Lowell's use of seasons is important, for there seem only to be two dominant seasons: winter and summer. There is, in the pertinacity of the heiress, something unnatural, unwholesome, and in her wealth and acquisitiveness, something decidedly rotten. Money, in Lowell's mythology, is a present and pernicious source of decay, rot and evil. The

79. Irvin Ehrenpreis, "The Age of Lowell", cited in London and Boyers. p.174.

heiress, already suggestive of wealth, lives, however, in self-imposed, reduced circumstances. Her Spartan cottage seems in its rudeness and bareness just adequate. The figure of the heiress is evocative of other female figures in Lowell's poetry whose homes become emblems of their emotional states. In the two lines cited Lowell has dramatically sustained the leitmotif of life changed into landscape. The seemingly incautious inclusion of a line can have a devastating effect: and such a line is "her sheep still graze above the sea "(p.89). The sheep suggest the limits of her physical domain, but they also have a symbolic value as well. Her son is a bishop, and "her farmer/is first selectman in our village."(p.89). The image of the sheep becomes extended. The riches gained by the heiress may well have come from the fleecing of the sheep; her power, by way of the son and selectman, by fleecing the people. Both religion and money impoverish, if unfairly used, the very people they are suppose to help. The last line of the stanza comes as no surprise: "She's in her dotage" (p.89). She is the last vestige of the Victorian era invoked in "Beyond the Alps", and the era she represents is in visible decay. Their "conspicuous waste" now takes on added meaning and force.

Age has its privileges, and one of them seems to be rapacity:

Thirsting for
the hierarchic privacy
of Queen Victoria's century

she buys up all
 the eyesores facing her shore
 and lets them fall.

"Thirsting", the resonances of which permeate the text, for blood as much as privacy, she tolls the death knell for "her shore". The precise touch of irony, buying up only to let fall, is a fine nuance, however grim it is. She is a stark contrast to the poet who will, from this dessicated landscape, find something to shore up his ruin. Under the woman's tutelage there is no improvement. Money could ameliorate the social condition; but the decay is so endemic, so epidemic, so entrenched, as to poison and waste the land beyond redemption. Her thirsting is an agent of ossification and death, and everything is turning to stone. More like Medusa than Victoria, she turns to stone everything she gazes upon.

The third stanza begins with what must be considered an axiom: "The season's ill-"(p.89). The season is late fall. The season of ripeness is leaning towards death, but the ripeness is not all here. For the emphasis is on death and not life. With the "summer millionaire"(p.89) there are intimations of the falsity and transitoriness of the outside commercial world, and he "...seemed to leap from an L.L Bean/catalogue."(p.89). To have this half-life leaping from the pages of a mail-order catalogue reinforces his

one-dimensionality. The millionaire's boat, the nautical equivalent to the elder Lowell's car, is, however, put to good use: it is "...auctioned off to lobstermen."(p.89). Such a gesture suggests, however tacitly, that despite all the tawdriness of the outside world, top heavy with decay, life does go on. Men still go down to the sea in ships. They provide an arena for the poet, the arena of life and action. The last line emphasizes these intimations of life-affirmation: "A red fox stain covers Blue Hill."(p.89). Red is a colour associated with autumn, and may well be employed here to indicate the change of season. The stain and the fishermen, one natural and the other social, establish a tenuous dynamic that still throbs on despite the inanition of society.

The decay in society is seen as ineluctable, without the promise of revival. This decay is focussed on "...our fairy/decorator..."(p.89). Here the sexual impulse is again discoloured, suspect. His attempts to brighten up an obviously failing enterprise seem quite wrong: "his fishnet's filled with orange cork,/orange,his cobbler's bench and awl;..."(p.89). This shop seems only to be a badly mis-managed hobby, again recalling the theme of amateurishness that characterized Lowell's father's efforts. The decorator's perversity is revealed in his ultimate desire: "there is no money in his work,/he'd rather marry" (p.89). This is a dangerous, potentially self-destructive act. He would not

not marry for love, his sexual proclivities would preclude such a thing. The direct motive for wedlock is financial security, the ultimate delusion. This is the ultimate impoverishment between man and woman, satisfying neither and destroying both.

Lowell has moved from a general condition to a specific theme. This is his world. It is 'we' who have lost our 'summer millionaire', 'our' village has a selectman. This is a version of Paris, our black classic. It may not be the Paris, but it is dark. And into this darkness the poet now turns.

In the opening line of the fifth stanza "One dark night" (p.90), the meditative voice asserts itself. This is the dark night of the soul. The hoped-for salvation of the individual has been intimated, but the rite of passage is a terrible one. The world the poet sees about him is in love with death, and the poet himself seems headed for a non-redemptive death: "my Tudor Ford climbed the hill's skull..." (p.90). The allusion is of course to Christ's crucifixion on Golgotha, the Hill of Skulls, but the poet's journey may end in self-destruction only. Death so pervades the mind that he invests ordinary life with monstrous vision:

I watched for love-cars. Lights turned down,
they lay together, hull to hull,
where the graveyard shelves on the town... p.90)

This is his own embodiment of life changed into landscape. The voyeuristic mind transforms the cars into people. They lie together, itself suggestive of sexual union, but this union is

confused. They are also seen as beached ships, suggesting decay in a naval graveyard. The terror of this vision is announced by that paralyzing understatement "My mind's not right" (p.90). This is the internal analog to the season's illness. In the dark night a period of insanity sets in.

The urge for death is strong. The car radio, bleating like a sheep, calls out an ironic tune, " 'Love, O careless love' " (p.90). It trails off only to be replaced by the inner music of madness and death: "I hear/my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,/as if my hand were at its throat..." (p.90). The spirit seems not only depressed, ill, but hopelessly disintegrated. The emphasis on each blood cell, as if the body were one vast prison with each 'cell' crying out for release. Cast off from every source of succour and help, the man stands naked and alone. He is, through design and accident, Satan's heir: "I myself am Hell;/nobody's here-" (p.90). This admission, in a sequence rife with prison motifs, is the ultimate form of incarceration. This Satan stares at no earthly paradise about to be befouled, but at an earthly hell.

But it is at this point that a form of intervention takes place. Nature, in the form of one of its lesser avatars, asserts itself: "only skunks, that search/in the moonlight for a bite to eat." (p.90). But why skunks? Berryman is quite correct when he states that the skunks are

outcasts.⁸⁰ One outcast can identify with another. The animal 103
asserts pure life, action, process over essence. Into this
dessicated world, "Main Street"(p.90) as it is allegorized
here, the skunks "march on their soles"(p.90). Purposeful,
armed, and determined, they are the new order. Their
"white stripes"(p.90) and "moonstruck eyes' red fire"(p.90)
are banners flying in defiance of the "chalk-dry and spar
spire/of the Trinitarian Church."(p.90). Lowell was later
to dismiss the skunks as "both quixotic and barbarously
absurd".⁸¹ Like latter-day Goths in the ruins of America,
they may have been invested with too much symbolic weight
by the poet. The desperation of the poet, as it manifests
itself in the almost unconquerable suicidal impulse, needed
a grotesque anodyne: thus the skunks. Outcasts can survive
on their own terms, and can be victorious.

This identification is made in the last stanza, which
depicts ritualized re-birth through affirmative action. The
existential thrust, the preference of process over essence,
is bodied forth in the image of the skunk foraging. The
poet has once again faced the kingdom of the mad, and he
drags himself back alive: "I stand on top/of our back steps
and breathe the rich air-"(p.90).. He is newly inspired.
The world now assumes new meaning for the poet. The poet
sees a "mother skunk with her column of kittens swills the

80. Berryman, "Despondency and Madness", cited in Ostroff,
p. 124.

81. Robert Lowell, "On 'Skunk Hour'", cited in Ostroff,
p. 107.

garbage/pail."(p.90). This is a rich line. Lowell has tossed much into the garbage pails, those receptacles of worn-out ideas and beliefs. Now he too must swill those pails to find sustenance. The largest garbage pail is the world itself.

The defiance and forcefulness of the act of the skunk appeals to the poet: "She jabs her wedge-head in a cup/of sour cream..."(p.90). The force of the jab, nothing equivocal or ambivalent here, foreshadows the lack of fear shown by the skunk in the last line:"...and will not scare."(p.90). The last sentiment strongly suggests the poet's deep affinity with his timely avatar. No longer feeling beaten or drenched, he will now face life. He has chosen life and denied the suicidal impulse.

The poet has journeyed through the land of lost connections. He has subjected himself to agonizing reappraisals. He has come through, and can say, along with Eliot, with these fragments I have shored against my ruin.

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