Odyssey of Self-understanding

Child of my winter, born
when the new soldiers died
On the ice hills, when I was torn.

W. D. Snodgrass

At some point of time after his second volume *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* (1951), Lowell discovered the possibilities inherent in a more transparent style, which found form in his next volume, *Life Studies* and was as Mark Rudman suggests, “a style conceived as the revelation of a world, rather than an end in itself” (53). This third volume of poetry, which appeared in April 1959, became the poetry event of the year and immediately evoked both, critical controversies and acclaim. The critic M. L. Rosenthal who coined the phrase “confessional poetry” for this volume, stated in his influential review that: ‘Lowell “removes the mask”, in *Life Studies*, emerging as neither egotist nor bored family anecdotalist but as “the damned speaking-sensibility of the world”’ (Quoted from Axelrod 102). Rosenthal further explains confessional poetry as: “a poetry of suffering”, which is “unbearable” because the poetry so often projects breakdown and paranoia.... For their problems and confinements in hospitals are quite often the specific subjects of their poems’ (130). The word confessional thus seemed appropriate to Rosenthal, because of the way in which Lowell puts forward:

His private humiliations, sufferings, and psychological problems into the poems of *Life Studies*..... Sexual guilt, alcoholism, repeated confinement in a mental hospital—these are explicit themes of a number of the poems, usually developed in the first person and intended without question to point to the author himself. (26)
Charles Altieri however, sees this volume as representing “the bed-rock zero” of post-modernism where experience of value can replace interpretations of it, and sees confessional poetry in general, “as an attempt to move value problems …. Without reference to philosophical, cultural, or mythic universals” (615-16). *Life Studies*, is generally understood as an odyssey of self-understanding, in which Lowell comes to grips with his “oppressive past” and “madness–ridden present” (Lawrence Kramer 80). The process is some kind of a self-analysis and the result gives the mind an awareness to affirm it own troubled conscience. The anguish of Lowell’s mind however, is not only personal to him but is also bound with the anguish of his times. As a result, the capacity of the poet to endure in these times, becomes the capacity of the reader to do the same.

Lowell’s light and loose style and colloquial language in this volume, give him enough flexibility and freedom to pass judgement on all the circumstances and experiences that have shaped him. While in *Lord Weary’s Castle* Lowell seemed more intense about life than intimate with it, in *Life Studies*, his “cries of defiance and praise ring out to something a little nearer. And as a result the dove of experience has brought him new wisdom, a new olive branch to eat” as Axelrod comments (132). M. L. Rosenthal states that: ‘*Life Studies*, is the volume in which the poet at last “finds himself”’ (Quoted from Bell 40). Lowell confesses that, he had been sullen and truculent, disloyal and cruel towards his father and as an adult “stale and small” (*LS* 56), but in reconstructing his own life in these poems, he is able to show some compassion for the people who were close to him—his family, in retrospect—but no compassion or respect for himself. As Rosenthal rightly suggests, Lowell’s object in *Life Studies* “is to catch himself in the process of becoming himself” (28). After a very long gap, this volume shifts focus from the outer world to the inner one, consequent to which, the subject matter of his poetry undergoes a significant change. Alfred Kazin too, praises Lowell’s attempts at having achieved “freedom from the suffocating traditions of fine style” and for having brought twentieth century poetry back “to its sister, life” (Quoted from Axelrod 102). Lowell himself, had very explicitly stated in an interview, that
while reading his poems he found that he was "simplifying" them. "If I had a Latin quotation I’d translate it to English. If adding a couple of syllables in a line made it clearer, I’d add them ...". (Quoted from Raffel 43) When asked if content had become more important than form he added: "I began to have a certain disrespect for the tight poems. If you could make it easier by adding syllables, why not?" (Quoted from Raffel 43). In another interview in 1961, Lowell had also observed that prose was, "in many ways better off than poetry .... On the whole prose is less cut off from life than poetry is" (Quoted from Raffel 43). Lowell insisted now, on a very simple and transparent style, which could be easily comprehensible to the reader as well, thus conforming to the Poundian insistence on "clarity and precision, upon the prose tradition, in brief, upon efficient writing—even in verse" (377).

*Life Studies* is divided into four sections, the first of which is the shortest and has only four poems. The second section ‘91 Revere Street’, is a prose narrative followed by a third short section of four poems that are Lowell’s homage to four writers. The fourth and the final section, subtitled ‘Life Studies’, again has two parts and forms the most important section of the volume, to which the first three sections form a befitting prologue. As Mark Rudman suggests:

> Part one sets the historical, political, cultural context and framework for the poems; Part two ‘91 Revere Street’ a long prose narrative, provides the family background .... The family drama is enacted in part four, … [in which] he uses the actual details of his social and private life and explores the tabooed realm of feelings towards the family. (54)

The poetic mode that Lowell now adopted however, had been developed over a long period before *Life Studies* appeared. As Rosenthal elaborates:

> …the shock of the autobiographical sections of *Life Studies* did not come together, as it seemed in 1959, from their self-exposing frankness and the humiliating things said by the poet about his family....at first reading they approached direct
experience. Lowell had made a terrifying recovery of his own past, and with it of lost realities of his parents’ and grandparents’ existence and of their surrounding life. This recovery did not happen suddenly. The extraordinary passion of his earlier books is an expression of the search of it, and in Lord Weary’s Castle we find an almost confessional poem like ‘Rebellion’ and ‘family’ poems like ‘In Memory of Arthur Winslow’, ‘Winter in Dunbarton’, and ‘Mary Winslow’.... They are denied the release that would at once have achieved this immediacy and resolved the artificial complexities of the early style....that held the poet himself at arm’s length from its true goal. (31)

‘Beyond the Alps’ (LS 13-14), one of the best poems in the first section, claims that: “religion, is no longer dogma, no longer some all-pervading pillar to which the poet desperately clings, praying loudly for support and comfort. He can be relaxed, now, he can be ironic, he can be everyday conversational and real” (Raffel 45). The title of the poem is derived from the half-line in ‘Falling Asleep over the Aeneid’, in which Lowell enumerates the forces that are at work against Rome. On a train between Rome and Paris, he pictures these forces against the backdrop of a landscape that is at once actual and symbolic. Lowell now adopts worldly assurances for ideas instead of myths, to lend the journey importance and form. The train journey from Rome to Paris thus, is symbolic of the direction and destination of western civilization: “Hurrying to complete its identity in the same up-down motion” (Mazzaro 91). The motion of the train at various mountain peaks imitates the rise and fall of civilizations as an inherent and recurring pattern of history. Wallingford suggests that: “the poet is both on a train, reading a newspaper while making a journey, and outside the train, watching” (16). As Lowell writes:

Reading how even the Swiss had thrown the sponge
In once again and Everest was still
Unsealed, I watched our Paris pullman lunge
Mooning across the fallow Alpine snow.
Lowell leaves “the city of God where it belongs” although, “much against” his “will” for the city of God “belongs” in Rome, which is also the city of Mussolini, and is nothing now but “a center of cultural confusion”. A decade ago Mussolini had evoked the adulation of the masses and now, Lowell writes: “The Duce’s lynched, bare, booted skull still spoke”, as though:

Mussolini’s ghost had been resurrected. The allusion is of the circumstance of Mussolini’s death and revilement: when his body was dis-placed in a pile of bodies, in Milan angry apostates kicked at his face and famous jaw until his features were disfigured,....(Mazzaro Quoted from Bell 42)

The situation only a decade later is one in which, ‘the Pope is too humane behind the scenes with “pet canary” and “electric razor”’ (Bell 42). Raffel returns once again to the image of the moving train, and people disappearing as the train gains momentum, only to reiterate how: “Life changed to landscape”, (LS 13) and the ‘onetime mouth-foaming convert to Catholicism can say to Rome, now, that he has left it “where it belongs”’ (Raffel 45). Just as Roman Catholic dogma stands rejected now, so does classical poetry:

There are no tickets for the altitude
overheld by Hellas ...

Wallingford too is of the opinion that Lowell has now left behind him ‘among other things, the pope, who has just “defined the dogma of Mary’s bodily assumption” into heaven. The “old”, believing Lowell might have accepted this dogma, but the “new”, ironic Lowell has a different perspective’ (16). As the poet says:

The lights of science couldn’t hold a candle
to Mary risen— at one miraculous stroke,
angel-wing’d, gorgeous as a jungle bird!
But who believed this? Who could understand?
'Beyond the Alps', has "a playful grandeur, an Opera buffa humor. The archness of the earlier books is gone. Lowell has entered the fallen world" as Mark Rudman observes (55). Rudman further states, that Lowell has now found a 'form that is intimate and immediate and that does not sacrifice intensity for intimacy. If Rome on the one hand symbolizes religious authorities, church dogma, and the classic world, on the other hand Paris stands for breaking up, earth, landscape, and "pure prose"' (55).

'Beyond the Alps', sets up a dichotomy between the fictive world of imagination and the empirical world of fact, as Mussolini is not the reincarnation of Imperial Rome but, "one of us/ only pure prose". The poem also refers to Lowell’s grand parents, whose "intellectual innocence" he envies:

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

The structure of the poem follows the narrative of a train journey and is epical too, in the fragments that compare “the skirt–mad Mussolini” with “the eagle of Caesar”, even while Lowell is compared to Roman patriots. Although there are epical fragments, woven here and there yet, significantly at the poem’s close where allusions are concentrated, there is no epical parallel. This marks a definite transformation of style into a more free form. This poem too, dwells on Lowell’s most recurrent theme that is, the disintegration of culture: “Now Paris, our black classic, breaking up / like killer kings on a Etruscan cup”. The focus of the poem now shifts from religion to history and men of power:

Much against my will,
I left the City of God where it belongs.
There the skirt–mad Mussolini unfurled.
the eagle of Caesar. He was one of us
only, pure prose ....
The train’s “motion is analogous to Lowell’s consciousness making constant revisions between a known past and an expected and unfolding future”, as Wyatt Prunty suggests (Quoted from Wallingford 16).

Lowell’s focus on history and historical figures carries on in next poem ‘The Banker’s Daughter’ (LS 15-16), as well. Here Lowell catches Marie de Medici, who crossed the Alps and came to Paris as Henry IV’s second wife, in her attempts to rule France after her husband’s assassination by François Ravaillac. The portrait echoes that of Anne Kavanaugh, who too had accepted death but could not see beyond her sensual nature and physical pleasures. In The Seventeenth Century, Jacques Boulenger, describes Marie de Medici as:

Obese, sexual, the low head shaded by the frizzled fair hair, the prominent short-straight eyes, the red and white complexion of a fat overfed woman ... [whose] “chief thought, when the heard of [her husband’s] death, was that now she would be able to spend as freely as she chose (quoted from Mazzaro 93).

Marie de Medici feels that religious tolerance has weakened the power of the throne and has led to her husband’s death but her “worldliness” and her dependence upon her lover Cancino Concini puts forward a “poor substitute” (Mazzaro 93). In this poem as in ‘The Mills of the Kavanaughs’ (MK 75-94), there are recollections of their marriage. Worldly love seems to be the only basis, on which she appeals to her husband for forgiveness and understanding. M.L. Rosenthal believes that: Marie de Medici, “the banker’s daughter”, soliloquizes about “blood and pastime”, about the struggle between monarchy and the “pilfering, pillaging democracies”, in the assassination of her husband (73).

Lowell examines the state of contemporary America in ‘Inauguration Day: January 1953’ (LS 17), the next poem and “brilliantly captures his political awareness and his struggle to address the social in and through the lyric” (Thurston 2). Michael Thurston further states:
In this roughed-up sonnet, Lowell consociates war-hero cum president Dwight Eisenhower, New York’s Peter Stuyvesant statue, and the tomb of another war-hero cum president, Ulysses S. Grant. The landscape is snowy and shifting; indeed, it buries Stuyvesant, New York’s colonial governor. Lowell metonymically transforms Stuyvesant into New York itself, and New York becomes therefore its own threatened monument, .... He then retreats back to the single monument commemorating Grant: his tomb. (Thurston 2)

Lowell identifies Grant with cold Harbor “where Grant sent charge after doomed charge into the heavily fortified confederate positions – a strategy he repented” (Thurston 2). Images of enclosures like snow burials, subway vaults, sword in the groove, suggestive of death and rituals like burial and war, abound in the poem but the poem has an element of fixity that is reflected in Grant’s “sword” and the horseman who is not living but a statue. Lowell poem thus poem “expands from personal anecdotes – What I Did on Inauguration Day – to a very serious inclusiveness” (Edwards 217-220), when he writes: “Our wheels no longer move” (LS 17). It tells about Lowell’s own collapse which is juxtaposed with the “plight” of a nation whose symbols have collapsed. Phrases like “fixed stars” and “our wheels no longer move”, develop a “figure of paralysis” (Thurston 2). Everything in the landscape is either not moving or frozen. Even the stars are fixed as navigational marks but have lost their power of guidance. These fixed stars may also suggest the field of stars in Old Glory, the American flag, which represents human interests. Thurston informs us how:

“Cold Harbor” resonates for Lowell because it pre-figures the calculated slaughter that would typify the Second World War. It was after all, the saturation bombing of civilian targets in German cities that drove Lowell to his conscientious objection to that war... Grant here, is “God of our armies” .... He bears responsibility for the heaps of Union casualties formed that battle, a desperate attempt to end the Civil War. (2)
The horseman whose “sword is in the groove”, now wields a sword, which is incapable of responding to any threat, thereby reinforcing the idea of a nation in paralysis. Eisenhower, who has been called to rule and to take his place someday among the landmarks of the city, analogies the same paralysis for he too was destined to fail as an administrator. The sonnet concludes sardonically: “And the Republic summons Ike,/ The mausoleum is her heart” (LS 17). This conclusion not only threatens the solemnity of the day but also shows a lack of syntactical connection between the last two lines, which reflects Lowell’s own growing political uncertainties.

The next poem, the last in this section, is the monologue of a mad Negro soldier confined at Munich. For the negro, love has dwindled into sex alone and God does not exist. A victim of the chaotic reality around him, he has been alienated from the world not only by his confinement at Munich or his color, but also by the treatment given to him by the other black American inmates: “The boys who floored me, two black maniacs” (LS 18). He comes out as a forceful character and his outburst against the treatment that he has received seems justified. According to Jerome Mazzaro, “The poem is one of most successful of Lowell’s nightmarish monologues” (96). The protagonist in the monologue is a negro soldier seeking human intercourse with the Fraulein, who he finds “stitching outing shirts” in the “colored wards.” Escape from this sordidness for him, lies only in a union with her and he admits rather brashly: “I had her six times in the English Garden” (LS 18). This negro is no epic hero but an animal floored but fighting, a dehumanized machine, a “fancy minnow in the air-conditioned bowl, a slave to habit who cannot see beyond the world of sensation; or, like the switch to some machine”, as Mazzaro suggests (96). Fraulein is the only hope or spark in his life:

Oh mama, mama, like a trolley-pole
sparking at contact, her electric shock—
the power-house!

His girl friend thus, is the powerhouse of his existence. The protagonist can conceive his confinement only as a match, a boxing match in which he has
been floored: “Rounds, rounds! Why punch the clock?” The conflict in the poem lies in his need for love and his helplessness in his confinement. He has succumbed to habit and is now its slave. This sympathetically portrayed character may well be based on one of Lowell’s fellow-inmates in Munich military hospital, where the poet was confined in August 1952.

‘91 Revere Street’, which forms part two of Life Studies, is a polished prose essay that forms a slice of Lowell’s autobiography, which Lowell had been working on ‘literally to “pass the time”’ for he “almost” doubted “if the time would pass at all otherwise”’ (Quoted from Hamilton 226). He had also hoped it to be an act of self-discovery, something that would “supply me with my swaddling clothes, with a sort of immense bandage for my hurt nerves” (Hamilton 226). In a similar vein, Steven Gould Axelrod too describes this prose piece as “Lowell’s complex and beautifully written prose reminiscence of his childhood, and of a family and culture in decline” (104). In this section, Lowell concentrates on family disgraces, tensions and failures and attacks its genteel traditions, its double standards that find their correspondence in social failures and have contributed in their own way towards the shattering of the American dream. Rosenthal however states, that: “Though the house and the adults living and visiting there occupy most of our attention in ‘91 Revere Street’, Lowell himself as a small boy is the central figure” (37). Most of Lowell’s manuscripts are in the form of character sketches and anecdotes from childhood in which, his mother and grandfather are the character most lovingly worried over, along with some other figures also remembered with affection. Lowell’s father however, is mocked at by contrasting his weaknesses with other’s strengths, and this forms a constant. Nevertheless, in a later draft of ‘91 Revere Street’ he writes:

As I try to write my own autobiography, other autobiographies naturally come to my mind. The last autobiography I have looked into was a movie about a bull terrier from Brooklyn. The dog’s name was I think House on Fire. The district he came from was so tough, that smoking had to be permitted in the last there pews at high mass. House on Fire’s mother had
been deserted by his father. House knows that his father is a
great dog in the past world, either a champion fighter or as a
champion in exhibitions. House on Fire keeps saying with his
Brooklyn accent, “I want to be a champ so that I can kill my
father”. In the end there is peace. My own father was a gentle,
faithful and dim man. I don’t know why I was so agin him. I
hope there will be peace. (Quoted from Hamilton 228)

All accountable behaviour in his prose piece, is attributed to his attempt to
achieve a “break through back into life” (Bell 48). The biographical sketches,
which include Commander and Mrs. Lowell’s, are eccentric and motivated by
the oedipal propensities in familial relationships. Lowell has time and again
emphasized this aspect of his childhood, which his mother has done scant little
to help him get out of, thus aggravating his crisis. As Lowell writes:

She ran into my bedroom. She hugged me. She said, ‘Oh
Bobby, its such a comfort to have a man in the house’. ‘I
am not a man’, I said, ‘I am a boy’. (Quoted from Bell 46)

Familial details include the financial and moral decline of his father, Mr. and
Mrs. Lowell’s bedroom clashes, which Robert would witness with great
absorption even while being threatened by signs of his own instability. Vereen
M. Bell is of the opinion that in drawing up these sketches Lowell is:

Vague, ineffectual, uncertain of himself, easily manipulated by
stronger wills, inarticulate; and as the memoir proceeds he
grows less and less conspicuous, as if he were being wished -
or were wishing himself away. (Bell 47)

The last part of the memoir is dominated by Commander Billy
Harness’s presence, which functions as Commander Lowell’s “nautical alter
ego” (Bell 50). Billy Harness’s visits to Lowell’s house disrupt its tense
equilibrium and are more threatening than any open conflicts. For the young
boy, Harness was a “crude and unsentimentalized intrusion of an unregulated
life force” (Bell 50). Commander Billy is outraged to learn that Mrs. Lowell,
in her attempts to be near “the hub of gentility”, has contrived to have her husband transferred to Washington in an inferior position that would require Commander Lowell to sleep at the shipyard each night:

Then Commander Harness would throw up his hands in despair and make a long buffoonish speech. “Would you believe it?” he’d say “De Stahl, the antle slob, would make Bob Lowell sleep seven nights a week and twice on Sundays in that venerable twenty-room pile provided for his third in command at the yard. ‘Bobby my boy’, the Man says, ‘hence forth I wish that you sleep wifless .... Taking hold of the table with both hands, the Commander titled his chain backwards and gaped down at me with sorrowing Gargantuan wonder: “I know why Young Bob is an only child’”. (Quoted from Bell 50-51)

These last words of the memoir create the effect of leaving “Commander Lowell’s son alone out into blank space” (Bell 51). Bell argues further that:

The famous plain surfaces of *Life Studies* are both deceptive and expressive of an attitude of consciousness, and this is nowhere more apparent than in the memoir that disingenuously feigns confinement to the conventional epistemological assumption of prose. (54)

This section then, reveals Lowell’s set of circumstances as well as his own flaws. It would be tempting to draw comparisons between ’91 Revere Street’ and the confessional poet Allan Ginsberg’s prose piece ‘Narrative’ in his work ‘Kaddish’, which is a moving lyrical lament for his recently dead mother. However, Lowell’s poetic skills far outweigh Ginsberg’s, in that, unlike ’91 Revere Street’, ‘Narrative’ is as Rosenthal rightly suggests: “line by line, careless in direction, syntax, and rhythmic movement.” However, Rosenthal argues that:
It can be defended, to a reasonable extent, as deliberately having the quality of a series of memories noted down in haste lest the details be forgotten, or snatched up out of the storehouse of the speaker’s conscious will. (110)

The group of four poems in the next section of *Life Studies*, prepares us for the last section, by establishing Lowell’s kinship to the brilliant but tormented writers Ford Madox Ford, George Santayana, Delmore Schwartz, and Hart Crane. These are writers who have all made major contributions to Lowell’s growth as a poet and have all “endured an exile from society prefiguring his own” (Axelrod 106). This section, which serves an invocation to ‘Life Studies’, marks a sharp contrast between these brilliant writers and the characters in the next section. As Mark Rudman rightly observes:

> The theme of these homages is redemption through writing well, the hazards of the profession, and the strange comforts afforded by it. (55)

Lowell is now engaged in the pursuit of immortality and his perception of salvation has changed. While earlier he had attempted to fuse art and religion into one experience and had even allowed his religious vision to dominate his artistic concerns and craft, he is now concerned with art alone. As a result his poetry now, has moved away from the concerns of his earlier verse and none of these poems are actually connected to any indoctrinated religion.

The first poem of the volume, ‘Ford Madox Ford’ (*LS* 21-22), as Mazzaro states:

> Depicts the idealism of a would-be-writer who sees art only as something “that made the great your equals” and who is not yet fully committed to its truth. This truth is symbolized in Ford. Because of his “breadth of view, immense knowledge of many literatures, and an unwavering loyalty to his great profession”. (Mazzaro 98)
The poems start with a “ball thrown into the air—a momentarily suspended action”, as Rudman suggests (56). He goes on further to suggest that the slow, rising tongue-twisting sounds of the beginning parallel the arc of the “lobbed ball”, which heads towards the cup the moment it “plops”. This motion sets the poem in motion...the pacing of lines not only matches the action but also duplicates the tension and release of the players waiting for the ball to stop’ (56), with bated breath. He describes Ford’s attitude in a dialogue thus:

Lloyd George goads Ford: “Its filthy art, Sir”. Ford “scores” off him again with his retort, “What is art to me and thee?” But it is only momentary victory,- it contains the essence of Ford’s attitude towards authority, an attitude that may have served him for his art but defeated him in his life. “Ford Madox Ford’s friends used to excuse Ford by saying he would condescend to God if given the opportunity.” Not everyone was inclined to forgive him’, which conveys Ford’s attitude towards authority, the attitude that has defeated him in his life. (56)

The poem traces Ford’s disastrous career, his unsuccessful marriages and his bad affairs. He was always in trouble with women.

O Jonah-O divorced, divorced
from the whale-fat of post-war London! Boomed,
cut, plucked and booted! In Provence New York ...
marrying, blowing ... nearly dying

The poet thus attempts to telescope Ford’s life through a chain of mutations that range from:

“blowing” whale like, “nearly dying / at Boulder, when the altitude / pressed the world on your heart”, to floundering like a fish gasping for air out of water “with fish-blue-eyes,/ and mouth pushed out/ fish-fashion,” and then, with no compunction about mixing metaphors, “wheel-horse, O
unforgetting elephant”. No one term is mammoth enough to encompass Ford’s “Falstaffian” presence. (Rudman 57)

In his portrayal of the writer, Lowell tries hard to do justice to all the major and significant events in Ford’s life but apologizes to Ford for selling him “short”:

Fiction! I’m selling short
your lies that made the great your equals. Ford,
you were a kind man and you died in want.

These concluding lines hint at Ford’s incompetence, yet this is the very reason for which Lowell loves him, for Ford, was “a kind man” he says. In this poem “filthy art” forms the clue to the poem. Lowell expresses concern over the circumstances that produced Ford’s The Good Soldier, and recalls the world’s attempts to stifle Ford who was “black-balled for promotion” five times before he was:

mustard gassed voiceless some sevenmiles,
behind the lines at Nancy.

Ford however, left for France and then New York where he started writing for a living. Nevertheless, even though his writings equaled him to Lloyd George, they remained largely unread and afforded him little escape from time into immortality:

But master, mammoth mumbler, tell me why
the bales of you left-over novels buy
less than a bandage for your gouty foot.

Robert Lowell had first met Ford Madox Ford at Allen Tate’s house in Tennessee, in 1937 and recalls the meeting thus:

Ford was wearing a stained robin’s-egg blue pajama top,
reading Theocritus in Greek, and guying me about my
“butterfly existence”, so removed from the labors of the professional writer. I was saying something awkward, green and intense in praise of Williams, and Ford, while agreeing, managed to make me feel that I was far too provincial, genteel and puritanical to understand what I was saying. And why not? Wasn’t I, as Ford assumed, the grandson or something of James Russell Lowell and the cousin of Lawrence Lowell, a young man doomed to trifle with poetry and end up as President of Harvard or ambassador to England? (Quoted from Cooper 13)

Philip Cooper writes about the time when “Lowell had evidently consulted Ford as an oracle” (14) and this incident also finds reference in a poem of his volume *Notebook 1967-68*:

Taking in longhand Ford’s dictation on Provence,
The great Prosateur swallowing his Yorkshire British,
I fishing for what he said each second sentence—
“You have no ear”, he’d say, “for the Lord’s prose,
Shakespeare’s medium: No king, be his cause never so spotless,
Will try it out with all unspotted soldiers.”
I brought him my loaded and overloaded lines.
He said, “You have your butterfly existence:
Half hour of your work, two minutes to love, the rest boredom.
Conrad spent a day finding the mot juste; then killed it.”
In time, he thought, I might live to be an artist.
“Most of them are born to fill the graveyards.”
“If he fails as a writer,” Ford wrote my father, “at least he’ll be Ambassador to England, or President of Harvard.”

(Quoted from Cooper 14)

In view of the considerable influence that Lowell has wielded, Cooper approves of the fact that Lowell’s oracle should have been none other than “the great Prosateur” Ford. (14)
In his next poem ‘For George Santayana’ (LS 23-24), Lowell explores the extent to which a writer should go in pursuit of truth. Jerome Mazzaro talks of Santayana as a man:

who regarded himself as both, “an atheist and a Catholic” [and] rejected, in pursuit of his own orthodoxy, the theology of Catholicism.... Santayana too a “writer in conflict with religious beliefs in pursuit of truth seems justified in thinking of himself as a forerunner of a new orthodoxy”. (99)

The poem opens in Rome in 1952, with Santayana on his deathbed, working on the galley proofs of his last book. His proximity to the church is evident from the walls of the monastery that he has chosen to die in, but despite that, insisting that the Church is “too good to be believed” (LS 23), he seeks immortality through his writings. Resultantly, it is “his pursuit of truth [that has] made him at once an unbeliever and a martyr”, as Rudman suggests.

The next poem of the section ‘To Delmore Schwartz’ (LS 25-26), deals with the “idea of personal sacrifices” and “measures their effect on other writers” (Mazzaro 101). The protagonist of the poem is a man who can do nothing right. Lowell uses himself and Schwartz as an example of men who fail in the basics of self-preservation but ironically enough, deliberate on the fate of writers, households and society. Lowell’s opening line is: “We couldn’t even keep the furnace lit!” (LS 25). This poem is the volume’s first study in “perversity”, and “copeless” heroes as Mazzaro says (101) and was written after the mental breakdown of both writers. Thus, even though the poem is merely a personal anecdote, it makes a desperate plea for understanding.

‘Words for Hart Crane’ (LS 27), “the last of the four poems of this section, answers the questions of the worth of these sacrifices to artistic truth and self-preservation” (Mazzaro 102). The protagonist of the poem is a man who regrets no sacrifice he has made to poetry. The speaking voice is that of Hart Crane’s, who gives an “explanation of his action and of the methods by which he became Catullus redivivus, from his love of Whitman’s poetry to his own homosexuality”. (Mazzaro 102)
All four poems of this section focus on Lowell’s attempts to come to grips with his own art. While newer ideas encroach upon older patterns of ideas, the focus now shifts to exact words, clear communication, love, and the worldly man. As Lowell himself stated in his famous Paris Review interview with Fredrick Seidel:

My last poems don’t use religious imagery, they don’t use symbolism. In many ways they seem to me more religious than the early ones, which are full of symbols and references to Christ and God. Yet I don’t feel my experience changed very much. It seems to me it’s clearer to me now than it was then, but it’s very much the same sort of thing that went into the religious poem—the same sort of struggle, light and darkness, the flux of experience. The mortality seems much the same. (Quoted from Mazzaro 103)

The poems of the last section of Life Studies, give the volume its title and account for the achievement of this book in which, as Rudman rightly perceives: “Lowell does more than project his own personality; he creates the personality that he projects” (60). The narrator in the poems is the real Robert Lowell, whose history corresponds to the “I” in the poems:

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

In his search for a breakthrough back into life, Lowell had finally rejected traditional rhetoric along with his mythic vision, on Randal Jarrell’s advice that his poetry needed spontaneity. Delmore Schwartz too had advocated an openness to direct experience, and it seems as if Lowell had heeded all the advice that his contemporaries and friends had to give him. The poet himself had claimed that hearing “the Beats” read in San Francisco where he was on a reading tour, had actually inspired his second birth as a poet.
These were poets who were writing about their lived experiences and lives, while he himself had been writing poetry that was entirely to the contrary. Through the influence of the Beat group, Lowell thus learnt to write a poem or to begin a poem in the present. ‘Life Studies’ however, begins in his childhood, for he believed in the clarity, awe, amazement and wonder of a child’s questioning vision that had not been confined to conditioned perceptions yet:

What were those sunflowers?
Pumpkins floating shoulder-high?

In this section, dominated by themes of death and madness, the attempt is to convey the poet’s sense of “horror indigenous” (Bell 54) in life, as well as “the breakdown of the old social order represented by Grandfather Winslow and the dissolution of the nuclear family” (Rudman 63), through the recurrent use of images of animals, swords, golf courses, canes and even cars that represent masculine prowess:

I borrowed Grandfather’s cane
carved with the names and altitudes
of Norwegian mountains he had scaled—
more a weapon than a crutch.

(LS 38)

or as in ‘Skunk Hour’:

my Tudor Ford climbed the hill’s skull
I watched for love-cars.

(LS 62)

Life Studies, thus is a volume about “lost connections”, about breaking up, about disorder: “a microscopic portrait of American society in a time of crisis”, as Rudman puts it. It traces four generations of failure in the Winslow family right from the poet’s Great Aunt Sarah to his infant daughter Harriet.
The first poem of the section, ‘My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow’, (LS 31-36), is an introduction to the whole Winslow family and the “dreams which keep them living and useful” (Mazzaro 110). In this poem, Lowell exposes family conflicts that are generally kept under wraps. The poem begins significantly, with Lowell’s rebellion against parental authority as a child: ‘I won’t go with you. I want to stay with Grandpa!’ (LS 31) and hints at familial instability, manifested through an “overbearing” Grandfather, a pathetic Great Aunt Sarah, and an emotionally stunted Uncle Devereux. Uncle Devereux’s death is seen as the first intrusion in the child’s experiences, on account of which the poet sees himself as a child suffering an abrupt metamorphosis:

I cowered in terror.
I wasn’t a child at all—
unseen and all-seeing, I was Agrippina
in the Golden House of Nero....

Similarly, the image of Agrippina not only shows how the child is threatened to terror in the “Golden House”, but also implicates the sinister powers that he himself fears. Lowell thus suggests that the Winslow family’s dreams, which were all part of an Edwardian era, have destroyed them all. Aunt Sarah is destroyed by her dream of becoming a concert pianist, while Devereux is saved from the stock market crash of 1929 by his premature death. As Mazzaro rightly argues:

The Winslows are doomed, and detailing the tension between their childhood dreams and subsequent failures provides the only real interest in their lives. (Mazzaro 110)

Lowell mentions his age in almost every poem of “Life Studies”, in order to place the reader in the midst of time and events as they occurred. Time is thus recorded formally and even accurately, in order to reconnect his past and present through a memory that is bound by time:
I was five and a half.  
My formal pearl gray shorts  
had been worn for three minutes.  

(\textit{LS} 32-33)

As Steven Gould Axelrod explains, “The goal is to find what the now seems to lack, a unified, enduring, and valuable ‘I am’” (118). The search for his own self and identity that started with this volume of poetry, is thus prompted by the poet’s sense of alienation from his environment as well as his own existence. Such a search takes him back in memory to his past, so that this back and forth movement then, becomes the dominant method of the volume. The structure of the poem ‘My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux’, like several others in the volume, therefore oscillates between the two viewpoints of child and adult, which is to be seen as the adult poet’s attempt to enter the imagination of the child. From the vantage position of an adult, Lowell can thus see the child’s transition from innocence to knowledge, conflict and death, and share his perceptions, fantasies and fears, even while remaining relatively detached. The poem opens with random images leading on to the more immediate concern of Uncle Devereux’s death, in which the clock “slung with strangled, wooden game” and the puppy “paralyzed from gobbling toads”, function as “grotesque images of inanition and death reflective of the family members themselves” (Axelrod 118). References to burnt and decaying substances abound in the poem, thus preparing the reader for its denouement in Uncle Devereux’s death, in the last section. These symbols of decay also suggest the physical and moral decay of the Lowell family, which is indeed the dominant concern of the entire volume \textit{Life Studies}. There are moments in the poem when Lowell finds himself, “mixing black earth and lime”, moments when his:

\[
\ldots \text{hands were warm, then cool, on the piles} \\
\text{of earth and lime,} \\
\text{a black pile and a white pile} \\
\]

71
Come Winter,
Uncle Devereux would blend to the one color. (LS 36)

These images of decomposition then reflect the inevitable fate of Uncle Devereux. The poems of this section, which "comprise an elegiac family record" as Alexrod puts it, (120) describe Uncle Devereux, Lowell's grandparents and his parents in the order of their deaths. These poems about his ancestors are followed by poems that deal with his own frequent mental crises and subsequent recovery. All Lowell's ancestors he says, are tired and removed from life and resemble his mother, mooring in a window:

as if she had stayed on a train
one stop past her destination. (LS 48)

'Dunbarton' (LS 37-39), the next poem, records the funeral of Uncle Devereux. The title takes its name from a family plot in Dunbarton, New Hampshire, where the funeral takes place. The vision of the child operates in this poem too and Lowell's grandfather is still seen as an awesome figure of parental authority. Grandfather Winslow who had been disappointed by Devereux's "behaving like a child", had begun to see in the young Lowell, a possible savior of the Winslow tradition and it was this hope that had bound the two in a relationship of "father and son":

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

'Grandparents' (LS 40-41), shows a picture of his grandparents' farm after their death and becomes the focus of a retrospect, in which his grandfather "still" waves his stick "like a policeman" and grandmother "still" wears her "thick lavender mourning". The farm however, seems different now when he can never again cuddle in his grandfather's bed. Grandfather's dominance too, is now transformed into a bonding between the two through an
imaginative recall of his grandfather “dipping sugar for us both” and his insistence on “shooting for both of us”. Grandfather Winslow’s hope of rescuing the Winslow tradition however, has not been realized so that Lowell can now only cry out hopelessly and painfully, in regret and guilt of having failed his ancestor: “Grandpa! Have me, hold me, cherish me!”

‘Commander Lowell’ (LS 42-44), is Lowell’s second attempt after the autobiographical fragment ‘91 Revere Street’, in which he outlines his father’s failure to achieve a higher rank in the navy and his being forced out consequently, by his mother’s demands for a more respectable job. Being an engineer, his father’s interest in ships had been purely academic. His way of substituting naval life for a position with Lever Brother’s Soap, is to sing, “Anchors aweigh” in the bathtub. The poem however, is not only about his father, but is also about mother, father and son and begins with Lowell’s recollection of his childhood. In his father’s absence from home, he had often been left alone to face his mother’s ambitions and longings and these had often crowded his imaginative life with thoughts of high ranking officers and generals:

Her voice was still electric
with a hysterical, unmarried panic,
....
and I ... got two hundred French generals by name,
from A to V— from Augereau to Vandamme.

The child’s subsequent embarrassment at his father’s failure as a naval officer was then, quite understandable:

Having a naval officer
for my father was nothing to shout
about to the summer colony at ‘Matt’.
As Rudman significantly observes: “In a few lines Lowell traces his father’s
decline after he succumbs to his wife’s demands to resign his commission and
shifts from one job to another” (65). His father had:

> With seaman like celerity,
> ... left the Navy,
> and deeded Mother his property.

Thereafter, he kept job-hopping from his first assignment with Lever Brothers
through several others, to the last one at Scudder, Stevens and Clark,
Investment Advisors, where the poet admits caustically, that Commander
Lowell was: “himself his only client” (LS 43). The poem thus sketches
Commander Lowell as a non-serious man who can only retreat into fantasy:

> Night after night,
> *a la clarte d’eserte de sa lampe*,
> he slid his ivory Annapolis slide rule
> across a pad of graphs—
> piker speculations!

The “ivory Annapolis slide rule”, which replaced the “dress sword with gold
braid”, that had been his symbol of manhood earlier, had brought Lowell’s
father to the lowest ebb of his life, and reduced him to “a child allowing
himself to be unmanned by his castrating wife”, as Rudman suggests (65). In
his “civilian life” at “the summer colony at Matt” too, Commander Lowell had
often been an object of ridicule on the golf course when he:

> took four shots with his putter to sink his putt.
> ‘Bob’, they said, ‘golf’s a game you really ought to know how
to play,
> if you play at all’.

Not accepted by the “seadogs” at the yacht club either, Lowell’s father had
finally got “lost/ in the mob of ruling class of Bostonians”. (LS 44) Recalling
the claustrophobic environment at home in his father’s absence, Lowell confesses with remorse:

There were no undesirables or girls in my set,
when I was a boy at Mattapoisett –
only Mother, still her Father’s daughter.

His mother who had substituted reading for passion had ironically enough, turned to: “psychology, which increase[d] her suspicion that her depressed husband ha[d] lost contact with reality and which [gave] her ammunition that contribute[d] to the man’s ongoing emasculation” (Rudman 66). Consequently all that remained of Lowell’s father, was a “disillusioned human shell”, who lived only to “accomplish the dreams of Lowell’s mother” as Mazzaro rightly suggests (112).

As the poem progresses however, there is a slight shift in tone, which is now mercifully, free from irony, as a result of Lowell’s growing consciousness. Himself a man in his forties now, the poet attempts to redeem a father, who had once been mature and responsible:

And once
nineteen, the youngest ensign in his class,
he was ‘the old man’ of gunboat on the Yangtze.

Lowell’s portrait of his father thus culminates in the picture of a man who had, as Hobsbaum rightly observes: “reached his peak too early – like Othello who beat the Turk at Alep[po] – and whose life, thereafter, slid downhill all the way” (83). In *Life Studies*, the disgrace Lowell confesses to mainly is his father’s failure and the failure of the culture to save him as a man and his son from breakdown just as the disgrace while Ginsberg confesses to in ‘Kaddish’: “is not alone his mother’s madness [but] and the pathetic condition to which it reduced every other member of the family.” Rosenthal Believes that: Ginsberg’s success as a confessional poet in this instance: “lies partly in his
refusal to repress the reality which is very important to his experience”. (103), thus underscoring the same honesty of reporting, which marks Lowell’s success as a confessional.

The protagonist of the next poem of the volume ‘Terminal Days at Beverly Farms’ (LS 45-46), is also Mr. Lowell. Lowell details Commander Lowell’s last years at Beverly Farms:

a two minute walk from the station,
half an hour by train from the Boston doctors.

Here Commander Lowell, now thirty years older and still clutching “his ivory slide rule”, carves out a routine in which Lowell recalls how:

Each morning at eight-thirty, inattentive and beaming, loaded with his “calc” and “trig” books, his clipper ship statistics, and his ivory slide-rule, Father stole off with the chevie to loaf in the Maritime Museum at Salem

where he addressed the curator as “the commander of the Swiss Navy”. Irrespective of his coronary problems, he has preserved his interests in naval matters. Having surrendered all his dreams of success to the “Mettapoisetts” of his wife and family, the Commander’s death too ironically enough, takes place at a farm “where they had no sea-view”. His death says Lowell:

was abrupt and unprotesting.
His vision was still twenty-twenty
After a morning of anxious, repetitive smiling, his last words to Mother were:
‘I feel awful’.

76
‘Commander Lowell’, is followed by ‘Father’s Bedroom’ (LS 47), a survey of Commander Lowell’s personal possessions after his death, which include the naval blue-and-white of his room, his chinese sandals, the clear glass of his bed lamp and a copy of Lafeadio Hearn’s *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*, given to him by his grandmother when he was a child. The inscription on the flyleaf reads: “Robbie from Mother”, to which she has later added lines that analogies Commander Lowell’s own life and travels:

‘This book has had hard usage  
On the Yangtze River, China.  
It was left under an open  
porchole in a storm’.

‘For Sale’ (LS 48), is another Commander Lowell poem, which shows his cottage at Beverly Farms where he had spent the last years of his life and which is up for sale now:

Mother mooned in a window,  
as if she had stayed on a train  
one stop past her destination.

In the poem ‘Sailing Home from Rapallo’ (LS 49-50), Lowell writes about the Mettapoisett dream again which ends with the death of his mother. It describes Mrs. Lowell’s death and the homeward journey of her body by water from Rapallo, Italy to the family cemetery, with her son:

Mother travelled first-class in the hold,  
... was like Napoleon’s at the *Invalides* ....

Napoleon’s tomb evokes association with the “Napoleon book”, that had been “the focus of her and her son’s dubiously romantic fantasies” (Bell 60). Images from an Italian landscape dot the poem. The “shoreline of the *Golfo di Genova* .. breaks into flower”, “sea-slids” blast like jack-hammers and Lowell’s mother’s corpse is wrapped in tinfoil like panetone, the festive Italian
dark and hard bread. The name on the Napoleonic coffin too, is misspelled “Lovel”. The heat of the sun that tans the passengers on deck, ironically enough decomposes mother’s ‘tin-foil-wrapped flesh in the hold’ (Bell 60):

While passengers were tanning
on the Mediterranean in deck-chairs,
our family cemetery in Dunbarton
lay under the White Mountains
in the sub-zero weather.

Lowell gives a moving account of this journey by ship to the United States with his mother’s corpse, in an equally powerful prose piece in his Autobiography as well. He reminisces painfully how:

On the Sunday morning when we sailed, the whole shoreline of the Golfo di Genova was breaking into fiery flower.... Mother; permanently sealed in her coffin, lay in the hold. She was solitary, just as formally, when she took her long walks by the Atlantic at Mattapoisett in September... she shone in her bridal tinfoil, and hurried houseward with open arms to her husband lying under the white Mountains. (Quoted from Hamilton 204)

The fact that his mother cannot retaliate against the mis-spelling of her name any more, drives home with chilling force, the futility of human endeavor and vanity in the face of death. Lowell recalls how they had:

mis-spelled mother’s name on her coffin [ a black and gold baroque casket that would have suitable for burying her hero, Napoleon at Les Invalides] as Lowel, while alive Mother had made a point of spelling out her name letter by letter for identification. I could almost hear her voice correcting the workmen. (Quoted from Hamilton 203)
Lowell had at one time in a letter to Blair Clark dated March 11, 1954, himself mis-spelt his mother’s name as “Charlott Winslow”, so that now, spelt in this poem as “lovel”, the name adds another tragic dimension to the irony associated with it.

The next poem ‘During Fever’ (*LS* 51-52), deftly links three generations through the feverish stirring of the poet’s daughter as “she mumbles like her dim-bulb father”. Lowell is thus catapulted into his father’s position now, by recalling how they used to rehearse father’s character and how he was a “dim-bulb” character as a “gem-like undergraduate”, when with his mother. The next few lines describe his mother’s bedroom, which is in sharp contrast with his father’s. It is masterful, with an electric blanket, a hot water bottle reminiscent of a hip-flask and a bed as big as a bathroom, indicative of the sterile relationship between his parents. Lowell goes further on to show how Mrs. Lowell’s father was a ubiquitous presence behind the screen whenever a young man came to court her and in doing so, thereby underscores once again, the idea of generational instability. A victim of her father’s overbearing dream of heirs who would rescue the Winslow tradition, Mrs. Winslow had sadly enough, ended up destroying both, her husband as well as her son. Philip Hobsbaum too, draws attention to the fact that: “Lowell traces a chain of instability through four generations, a bad omen for the infant uneasy during fever. The fever, of course, can be understood on a larger scale, metaphorically” (86). Although the opening lines of the poem, focus on the inability and inadequacies of the past, Lowell is equally concerned with recalling his own inability to live up to what was expected of him.

The next poem is about Lowell’s stay in a mental hospital when the pressure of reality bore down heavily on his world of dreams. ‘Waking in the Blue’ (*LS* 53-54), opens with the poet recalling how:

The night attendant, a B.U. Sophomore,  
rouses from the mare’s-nest of his drowsy head 
propped on *The Meaning of Meaning*,  
He catwalks down our corridor.

79
Embarrassed at disclosing his present location in the asylum, he begins with the most outwardly normal character whose movement in the corridor is marked by a hint of danger as well as caution. The “Azure day” upsets him and the use of ‘words like “maunder” and “petrified” indicate the poet’s depression and terror. In this generally grim prospect, the deserted golf course and the maundering crows only help to underscore the poet’s own isolation:

Absence! My heart grows tense
as though a harpoon were sparring for the kill.

Reminiscent of Moby-Dick and Lowell’s own *Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket*, the poem takes place, as Rudman observes:

before the irregular surface of a mental mirror. And only at the end does [Lowell] come to terrible recognition that other characters in the poem see him as one of them, that he, the observer, is one of the observed. (75)

Among the other inmates at the asylum are also two very well bred St. Mark’s and Harvard poets Bobbie and Stanley. While Stanley, now in his sixties, insanely desires the: “build of a boy in his twenties” and can think:

... only of his figure,
of slimming on sherbet and ginger ale.

For the B. U. Sophomore, reading *The Meaning of Meaning*, “the struggle is with the ghost of non-meaning” says Mazzaro (110). The only signs of normalcy for Stanley are, his golf cap, sherbet and ginger ale, a haircut, his French sailor’s jersey and a New England Breakfast. The marine figures of seals, sperm whales and turtles give an elegiac coloring to the images of Stanley and Bobbie, the high-born New-Englanders with pampered childhoods. As Lowell says:
We are all old-timers,
each of us holds a locked razor.

The “locked razor” implies something in the mind of all of these “old-timers”, which Vereen M. Bell explains as their “suicidal impulse” (62). While for Lowell, it is his inability to live up to past dreams that accounts for his a deep sense of guilt now, for Stanley it is old age and for Bobbie, who “swashbuckles about in his birthday suit”, it is thoughts of aging that have disrupted their dream world. As Hobsbaum sees it: “The atmosphere, in the end, is one of present frustration: we hear of “pinched, indigenous faces”, of shaving mirrors of metal and razors locked. It is a predicament that familiarizes the Lowell persona with the “shaky” future’ (74).

‘Home After Three Months Away’ (LS 55-56), is an account of Lowell’s return after a stay in the mental hospital, which he had begun writing during one of his weekend releases from Mclean’s Hospital. “Dearest, I cannot loiter here” he writes, for his weekend is over and he has to go back to the “house for the mentally ill”, leaving his child behind. The second stanza dwells on his daughter Harriet’s bath:

… my daughter holds her levee in the tub.
Our noses rub,
each of us pats a stringy lock of hair—
they tell me nothing’s gone.
Though I am forty-one,
not forty now, the time I put away
was child’s-play. After thirteen weeks
my child still dabs her cheeks
to start me shaving ..

The poem begins with a reference to “an inimical nurse who tied gobbets of pork-rind on the magnolia tree for the birds” as Hobsbaum explains (87). In the poem, Lowell refers to Ann Adden, who had been a “lioness” to his “St.
Mark’s winged lion”, his muse at the Boston Psychopathic, where they had met first:

Gone now the baby’s nurse,
a lioness who ruled the roost
and made the Mother cry.
She used to tie
gobbets of porkrind in bowknots of gauze—
three months they hung like soggy toast
on our eight foot magnolia tree,

Ann Adden has “gone” now and will not make “the Mother cry”. Hamilton believes that: ‘For a time, Lowell seems to be saying, he himself had been a “baby” and the nurse/ lioness Ann Adden had displaced his real “mother”, Elizabeth Hardwick. It was in the very last version of the poem that Lowell capitalized Harriet’s “mother” into a “Mother” figure’ (256). Lowell is “cured” like lilies but has lost his place in hierarchy, ‘and is “frizzled, stale and small”; a gobbet, in fact’ says Hobsbaum (88). The closing lines says Hamilton, can thus be read as ‘an expression of the cyclical, biochemical onset of “depression”; unscientifically, however, they are pure lament for the surrendered infancy of madness’ (257). Lowell concludes the poem thus:

Recuperating, I neither spin or toil
Three stories down below,
a choreman tends our coffin’s length of soil,
and seven horizontal tulips blow.
Just twelve months ago,
these flowers were pedigreed
imported Dutchman, now no one need
distinguish them from weed.

I keep no rank nor station
Cured, I am frizzled, stale and small.
In an interview with Ian Hamilton, Lowell’s wife Elizabeth Hardwick discloses how amazed she was at Lowell’s “recuperative powers”, which were “almost as much of a jolt as his breakdowns: that is, knowing him in the chains of illness you could, for a time, not imagine him otherwise”. And yet, she says, he always managed to return to life “intact” (257).

All the poems in section one of ‘Life Studies’, articulate Lowell’s burden of a familial history of social tension, defeat, guilt and repression. There are several glimpses of the gradual decline of a glorious Lowell past, into the present ruin. Lowell now feels like a whale pursued by its killers, and this becomes his central symbol for all that is wrong with his personal as well as his national past, as he exclaims in ‘Waking in the Blue’ (*LS* 53-54):

My heart grows tense
as though a harpoon were sparring for the kill.

Referring to the patients in the mental hospital as well as himself and his ancestors as “Mayflower Screwballs”, who are “thorough bred mental cases”, Lowell laments the legacy of failure that Lowell’s own daughter has inherited, for she too has been inadvertently conditioned into a delirium about it.

The second section of ‘Life Studies’, however consists of four poems which are far different from the elegiac family record of the first section. This section describes the breaking-apart of Lowell’s mind and is much more about the present. The closing poems of the volume are, ‘Memories of West Street and Lepke’, ‘Man and Wife’, ‘To Speak of Woe that Is in Marriage’ and ‘Skunk Hour’.

In ‘Memories of West Street and Lepke’ (*LS* 57-58), Lowell recalls the time which he had spent in the West Street Jail in New York city:

I was a fire-breathing Catholic C.O.,
and made my manic statement,
telling off the state and president, …
During this time spent in jail, he meets the eccentric Abramowitz, a “fly-weight pacifist, /So vegetarian, /he wore rope shoes and preferred fallen fruit” ([LS 58]), and also talks about:

Bioff and Brown
the Hollywood pimps …
Hairy, muscular suburban.

There is also the Jehovah’s witness who:

pointed out the T-shirted back
of Murder Incorporated’s Czar Lepke,

The poem shuttles back and forth between a comfortable living in Boston in 1950, the year Lowell spent as a Roman Catholic and his confinement as a conscientious objector in 1944. It begins in the present tense with the poet:

Book-worming
in pajamas fresh from the washer each morning,

Suffocated in the conformity of upper-class Boston’s “hardly passionate Marlborough Street”. Going back in memory to West Street, Lowell zooms in on to his subject and give details of Czar Lepke who was at home wearing a T-shirt “piling towels at the rock”, while Lowell himself was wearing pajamas “fresh from the washer”. Lepke lived in a “segregated cell full / of things forbidden the common man”, while Lowell lived a privileged life on “hardly passionate Marlborough Street”. Through such parallels between the past and a sanitized present, the poet raises some pertinent questions that ask who are: “the mad people, who are the criminals?” To these queries he offers two alternatives – either to retreat into fantasy or to perpetrate violence on the self or the other. As Rudman rightly argues, this “vacillation between pacifism and violence was Lowell’s emotional dilemma” (52). Stephen Yenser puts the poem and the whole volume itself in correct perspective, when he states that
‘Memories of West Street and Lepke’, is itself “an agonizing reappraisal”, as is the whole of Life Studies, but more or less explicit contrast serves almost to link the two men rather than to separate them, while the concentration on death and the “air / of lost connections” are remarkably applicable to the poetry of this volume. (108-109).

Another prominent feature used throughout the poem are the images of clothing, which according to Alan Williamson “denote human absorption in roles” (3). One vital center in his otherwise disturbed life is Lowell’s daughter, who rises “Like the sun” in her “frame-flamingo infants’ wear”(Quoted from Williamson 4). However, aware of his delayed parenthood, he now wonders weather or not to “regret” his “seedtime”, which he had consciously postponed on account of a commitment that engaged his youth:

I was a fire-breathing catholic C.O.,
and made my manic statements ...

This dilemma then, becomes an essential question in the poem. For Lepke is, as the citation from John Foster Dulles would suggest:

a symbol of at least one aspect of American public life. He has organized, bureaucratized, depersonalized individual murderer; America, in the “tranquillized fifties”, has done the same thing with its power to annihilate mankind. Lepke is “lobotomized”, has had certain electrical connections in his brain severed. America, too, has “lost connections”, between its values and its acts, the fiction and the reality of its motives, the news and the appropriate emotional reaction; it too “drifts” towards it fate, unable and unwilling to change. America, too, is “calm”, “tranquillized”, as Lepke is “lobotomized”; but in both cases the calm may be merely the psychological effect of an overwhelming, inescapable fear of execution or nuclear annihilation.... “Lost connections” seem to reflect not only Lepke and official America but on the poet himself. For he too
at the beginning suffers from an inability to connect his inner identity with his social roles, and an inability to go beyond an inclusive defensive irony to the patterned vision of social processes that might allow him to locate himself, and reopen the possibility of political engagement. (Quoted from Williamson 6)

The next two poems of the section are marriage poem. The first of them ‘Man and Wife’ (*LS* 59-60), takes place in the narrowest circle beyond the self. There is a “you” in the poem, by which Lowell can go to the past to recall incidents and moments that were essential to both partners. The poem opens with a reference to the “blossoms on our magnolia”, which are murderous and with Lowell’s being saved the fourth time by his wife, who has brought him back from “the kingdom of the mad” (Yenser 2). As Perloff observes: ‘The “rising sun” of line 2 becomes, in the diseased imagination of the poet who fears passion and vitality, an Indian savage in “war point” who “dyes us red”, the pun on “dyes” intensifying the death-in-life existence of the couple’ (Perloff 1-2). The poet’s state of mind, is thus seen as reflecting the larger American dilemma, a crisis that occurs not only in small towns but can occur in any town. This is traceable to Lowell’s referring to Miltown, rather than ‘the first and most famous of the tranquiliizers that came on the market in fifties, rather than to say, Equanil or Valium, [which] is not coincidental. For one thing, liquids and nasals (“Tamed by Miltown, we lie on Mother’s bed”) point up to speaker’s torpor and lassitude, but, more importantly the name Miltown metonymically suggests such terms as Mill town, mill stone and small town’ (Perloff 1). Thus tranquilized, he lies with his wife and hallucinates about the nuptial bed, which gets transformed into his “mother’s bed” “big-as-a-bathroom”. It is hardly surprising then, that he is unable to make love to his wife before his mother’s looming presence that lies between husband and wife. Lowell’s gaze then shifts from the claustrophobic indoor world and looks out of the window to recollect his first meeting with his wife-to-be Elizabeth Hardwick, at Greenwich Village when she was “still all air and nerve”, while Lowell himself was tranquilized with alcohol:
too boiled and shy
and poker-faced to make a pass

In the beginning the poet shows a dependency on his wife that reenacts the relationship he had shared with his own mother himself. Once again his wife has “dragged” him home alive. As Lowell writes:

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

Twelve years after their marriage there is complete lack of communication between husband and wife so that they no longer even try to touch. “Sleepless” she holds the pillow not him but to the “hollows” of her unsatisfied body. Although Staples calls it a “love poem”, the poem seems more “a record of conjugal humiliation than love” (14). The Atlantic that “breaks” on his head when his wife has turned her “shrill nerve to invective”, is the same Atlantic of the ‘Quaker Graveyard’, that was earlier connected to his mother. Thus, it now performs the function of bringing the two women together. The last line brings us back full circle “to reverberation of the women’s voice: the mother’s voice: the wife’s voice. Back to sea.” (Rudman 83)

The next poem on marriage is a monologue entitled ‘To Speak Of Woe That Is In Marriage’ (*LS* 60), that takes its title from Chaucer’s Prologue to *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*. This is the only poem in this section, in which Lowell speaks through the wife of a lecherous, “hopped-up” drunkard. Placed chronologically after ‘Man and Wife’ (*LS* 59), the poem is related to Lowell’s own marriage:
Experience, though noon anctoitel
Were in this World, is right ynogh for me
To speke of wo that is in mariagie.

(Quoted from Hobsbaum 90)

The setting is similar to that of ‘Man and Wife’, in which the torrid evening invariably results in lust and anger.

The hot night makes us keep our bedroom windows open.
Our magnolia blossoms. Life begins to happen.
My hopped up husband drops his home disputes,
and hits the streets to cruise for prostitutes,
free-lancing out along the razor’s edge.
Oh the monotonous meanness of his lust.

The poem, which is an investigation into traditions that compel the continuance of a loveless marriage, reflects a “conflict in the [mind of a] wife whose husband’s sanity is fragmented” (Mazzaro 117). The suffering of the woman raises the important question of the justification or otherwise, of walking out of such a marriage in which the husband:

Gored by the climacteric of his want,
...stalls above me like an elephant. (LS 60)

Yet all this swaggering, however painful it may be to the wife, does give rise to children after all. This idea gains greater credence through the epigraph which reads:

it is the future generation that presses into being by means of exuberant feelings and supersensible soap bubbles of ours. (LS 60)

The last poem in Life Studies, ‘Skunk Hour’, is reciprocally dedicated to Lowell’s friend, the poet Elizabeth Bishop and is in many ways a response to her poem, ‘The Armadillo’. ‘Skunk Hour’ “received as much critical
attention,... as any poem of a twentieth-century American poet, with the possible exception of T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, says Burton Raffel (56). The poem is set in the Maine seacoast village of Castine and the nearby Nautilus Island and Blue Hill were familiar locales where Lowell had spent the summer of 1957. It begins with an “eccentric heiress” who prefers, “Queen Victoria’s century” to the present, but fails to arrest the social disintegration she sees around her. Her “son’s a bishop”, her “farmer/ is first selectman in our village”. She is called a “hermit heiress”, and she yearns for “hierarchic privacy”. The poem describes other inhabitants too— the late “summer millionaire / who seemed to leap from an L.L. Bean / Catalogue”, the “fairy / decorator” who “brightens his shop for fall” with a fishnet “filled with orange cork”, only to find out that, “there is no money in his work”, and the “summer millionaire”, who has been described here with his “nine-knot yawl”, as if he had never been alive for now, ‘he is lost like Warren Winslow, “dead at sea’”. (Rudman 85)

In the next two stanzas the poem abruptly shifts from the description of a ‘disintegrating town to the “dark night” of personal ordeal’ (Breslin 3). Lowell observes ominously that “the season’s ill”. Although this refers only to seasonal change here, it later implicates a diseased civilization. As Axelrod puts it: ‘this season of human habitation on earth is ill-decadent and debased. And Lowell, his spirit “ill” personifies that disease’ (Axelrod 126). Lowell claims in *Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic* that the very first line of the fifth stanza opens with an ominous statement – “One dark night”. Commenting on this stanza Lowell had stated:

This is a dark night, I hoped my readers would remember John of the Cross’s poem. My night is not gracious, but secular, puritan, and agnostical. An Existential night. Somewhere in my mind was a passage from Sartre or Camus about reaching some point of final darkness where the one free act is suicide. (132)

The poet draws comfort from death on the “hill’s skull” near the graveyard so that the “hill’s skull” becomes his own skull. From here he journeys into the
interiors of his own unconscious. He drives to the local lover’s lane, trying to discover some sense of bonding and closeness to another human being, but exclaims instead: “My mind’s not right” (LS 62). The poet’s persona seems to lose sanity at the depressive prospect that greets him in his search for love. Driving uphill he is harshly drawn to “love-cars”, which soon turn into grounded ships lying “together hull to hull”, as in the graveyard that overlooks the town and the harbor. The lovers in the parked cars too, cannot escape the chill of the graveyard alongside them. The love song that blares from the radio in their car seems to be bleating meaninglessly in this atmosphere of general sterility. Overtaken completely by thoughts of his own death, in such a bleak prospect, he can only cry silently to himself:

I myself am hell,
Nobody’s here –

Rudman explains this as: ‘the key line for our purposes “I myself am hell”. “I myself” – not the “hermit / heiress”, not “our summer millionaire”, not “the fairy / decorator”, not to backtrack through the book, Robbie Stanley, Abramowitz, or Lepke; not even his Uncle or his Aunt or his Father or his Mother; “I myself” – and it is precisely this insight that makes ‘Skunk Hour’ a great poem, and Life Studies a great book rather than a collection of poems’ (Rudman 90). This loneliness is his vision of hell. The closing line of the stanza ends with a dramatic dash not a period, that indicates how Lowell’s power of imagination and insight has now undergone a change, for in the next stanza he writes:

only skunks, that search
in the moonlight for a bite to eat.
They march on their soles up Main Street:
white Stripes, moonstruct eyes’ red fire,

The appearance of skunks, looking for something to eat at a deadly hour, is the only sign of life and therefore survival. Commenting on the skunks, Steven Gould Axelrod states that: “In the modern waste land, devoid of even the hope
of rain, all is abnormality, self-assertion, ugliness, violence, madness, monstrosity .... The skunks are an image of the new world Lowell has entered. He breathes the “rich air”, accommodating himself to this present, this future” (131). To accept the skunks is to accept himself. The last line looks forward to a future so that “the movement in the poem has been from still to will; from regression and stasis, towards hope. The skunks break into the garbage and hurl Lowell out of the past into the anxious present”. (Rudman 92)

Lowell’s ‘Skunk Hour’, was one of the poems assigned for discussion in the Third Programme of the British Broadcasting Corporation, held on July 30, 1962. During the discussion, the Lowell critic M. L. Rosenthal had commented that: “only two [poems] that were genuinely confessional in the special sense we have been developing,... Lowell’s ‘Skunk Hour’ and Sylvia Plath’s ‘Lady Lazarus’ were true examples because they put the speaker himself at the center of the poem in such a way as to make his psychological vulnerability and shame an embodiment of his civilization” (79). ‘Skunk Hour’, represents the poet as “a voyeur, suffering from a sickness of will and spirit that makes him, literally, lower than the skunks that take over the poem” (Rosenthal 79). The other poem discussed by critics were Elizabeth Jenning’s ‘The Night-Mare’, Edwin Brock’s ‘A Last Poem to My Wife’, W.D. Snodgrass’s ‘The Operation’, and Ann Sexton’s ‘Music Swims Back to Me’. Commenting on Sexton’s poem in particular Rosenthal had observed that although:

‘Music Swims Back to Me’, can seriously be conceived as confessional.... [he] would not actually so classify it, for it comes closer to the kind of dramatic monologue with a highly melodic strain that we associate with Horace Gregory’s work than to immediately self-revelatory writing of Lowell. (80)

This power of self-revelation then, becomes the hallmark of Life Studies, its most distinguishing feature. One enduring quality of Life Studies, is that everything in the book is linked to something before or after and this gives the volume a unity and integrity of concern. Lowell has been slotted as a
narrator, a “confessional” poet by several critics, yet his poetry is one of revelation more than confession. When Lowell uses biography, it transcends personal history to include not only the history of the U.S. but the human race itself. His poetry does indeed reach out beyond historical and geographical boundaries to reveal rather than replicate people and locations. Although *Life Studies* begins on a note of disintegration, it ends on an optimistic note that holds forth the promise of new beginnings in the volumes that follow.