CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"A few of Lowell's poems, I believe, will be read as long as men remember
English."

Randall Jarrell.

Robert Lowell is the commanding literary figure of the twentieth century. He
is that rare phenomenon, the man of letters in whose work the image of an age can
be discerned. Every important aspect of the life of our times--political, religious,
philosophical, artistic finds expression in his writings. He is a citizen of the world
commenting on public concerns and actively participating in political events. But at
the same time he is the solitary subjective poet listening to the mumur of his own
voice and pre-occupied with his own personal view of experience.

Poetic imagination is a private capacity of the mind capable of disciplined
reflection. This imagination gives shape to the experience, so that the experience
itself, in all its density and complexity, with whatever tastes, sights, feelings and
textures peculiar to it and the meanings, the insights, reflections, consequences,
emotional, public and spiritual implications, becomes available to the readers. In our
day-to-day lives we have a wide range of experiences:

Experiences from that part of our life which is more or less under our
own control in our personal dealings with objects, people, ideas or
money; experiences from that part of it which is so far beyond human control, that it can only be entrusted to God, Fate or Natural Determinism; and experiences from that part which lies between the two previously mentioned areas in which man does not play the dominant role, but which is very much human territory—that is the area of politics and public events (Edwards 4).

While creating the metaphysical and subjective poems, the poet commonly thinks of himself as being superior to ordinary men. But while imagining public events and public men the poet is usually led to something like a partial identification with ordinary men and their outlook. Hence, the imagination gets socialized and the socializing of imagination is also humanizing.

Robert Lowell was one who not only wrote public poems but also involved himself to an unusual degree in the public events of his time and brought his private life into public view by way of his poems. He was at once the Poet of the "American Empire" and the Champion of "Confessional" poetry. According to W.B. Yeats, "We make out of the quarrels with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrels with ourselves, poetry." Poetry here emerges as felt and authentic experience, verbalizing the self's combat with inner necessity, contingency and circumstance. "The quarrels with others" are of a social and political character, and lead to argument, persuasion and coercion whereas "the quarrels with ourselves" have a metaphysical and existential aspect and find expression in involved and ironic statements. Despite the view that Lowell is an important poet of the "Confessional" group whose engagement is with the chaos and irrationality within oneself, his basic quarrel is with his Puritan "forebears" and his fallen countrymen. More properly, "it was a long desperate quarrel with history" (Maini 1).
The poems chosen for study encompass the public and historical as well as the private and immediate. The uniqueness of these poems lies in the manner the problems of self and the larger concerns of society are closely interwoven. Private resonances and public resonances compete with each other. Hence, in each individual poem chosen for study, the poet is within the poem and is also able to stand outside the poem and view the events objectively.

In *Lord Weary's Castle* Lowell gives a religious frame to this fusion. In *Life Studies* the poetry of self-examination has public meaning. For example, Lowell's explanation of his private terror of madness is also a way of talking about a world gone awry with senseless violence and greed. *For the Union Dead* successfully establishes a context by uniting the individual in his privacy with communal reality. *Near the Ocean* objective prophetic judgements fuse with private realities. In all the chosen poems the private and public agonies are inextricably linked together, one illuminating the other and Lowell exhibits a consistent interest in the passage of events, both public and private and a coincident attempt to find meaning in these events.

Many critics have found in Lowell's poetry signs of duality, which Jay Martin describes as "the analytic faculty of the poet's imagination overhearing the secrets of his personality" (29). In Perloff's words Lowell is "able to stand outside his own history and to evaluate it with some ironic detachment" (48). Steven Gould Axelrod, describing "Lowell's inner-outer view of his past self" in *Life Studies* refers to his use of a narratorial double consciousness; the authorial awareness includes both the consciousness of the remembered child (inside the picture) and that of the remembering adult poet (outside the picture)" (115).
Though Robert Lowell's name is closely associated with the confessional mode of writing, he is not the innovator of the mode. His confessional mode is firmly rooted in tradition.

Archilochus was the earliest poet, or at least the first of those who survive, to let his personality—his sensations, obsessions and the events of his life—be the undisguised and crucial concern of his poems. Archilochus's remarkable keenness for self-exploration and vivid self-realization was probably the quality which made the Greeks set him next to Homer as an original genius and educator. "An early Greek coin bulges with Homer on one side, and Archilochus on the other" (Nietzsche 36).

Archilochus's method of making a mental state or emotion which anybody could feel belong to him alone by rooting it in his somatic life has its most interesting outcome when he tries to express how sexual desire feels in him. In the following fragment he takes the word "desire", and shows the physical weight of its effect on him. By declaring himself pierced by God-inflicted pains, he places his living being between the gods and the bones. He has managed the difficult feat of getting inside himself in a poem, of staking out an area of awareness extending from the omnipotent gods down into his mindless bones:

Here I lie mournful with desire,
feeble in bitterness of the pain gods inflicted on me,
stuck through the bones. (qtd. in Bagg 63)

"Desire" softens his limbs but "love" hits him hard.

Such is the passion for love that has twisted its way beneath my heartstrings and closed deep mist across my eyes stealing the soft heart from inside my body. (qtd. in Bagg 64)

When Archilochus spoke in his own person, defending his private viewpoint, he did so boldly, astringently, often with malice, as though such a foothold were
endangered, and survival required an attacking temper. "I long to fight with thee just as when I am thirsty / I long to drink" (qtd. in Bagg 62).

Archilochus's genius was to use autobiography to make himself as distinct as possible from everybody else. On the other hand, Sappho, just as fervently autobiographical, seems to the reader less isolated, because she discovered poems could be used to unite people delicately and deeply, by generating an emotion which touched each in the same sensitive area. Just as Lowell did a few centuries later, she found even torment could be exhilarating. This is how she describes "sexual torment": Once again Love, the looser of limbs, shakes me, an animal bittersweet, inescapable" (qtd. in Bagg 84). Here she insists as Freud does, that pleasure and displeasure are inseparable (Freud 605-606).

St. Augustine was acutely sensitive to the conflicts and problems of the inner life. In his confession he selected from the "large and boundless chamber" of memory, a handful of experiences which described his journey from "error" to "truth." Robert Phillips rightly calls him, "the progenitor of confessional literature" (3). Santa Teresa's Life of Herself tells of a vital religious experience.

The same Augustinian awareness of human nature permeates Jean Jacques Rousseau's Confessions (1781-1788). The book offers a frank self-revelation and appraisal. Northrop Frye says, "After Rousseau--in fact in Rousseau--the confession flows into the novel, and the mixture produces the fictional autobiography, and kindred types" (307). Confessions legitimised and encouraged the "display of feeling." Confessions found many imitators. It was due to this book that many imaginative writers burrowed in search of their childhood and tried to understand the pattern of the thoughts of their maturity. Poets like Goethe, Tolstoy, Ruskin and Trollope are a few influenced by it. Autobiographical writing became popular when men began to see themselves not as mere atoms in society, but as unique individuals important in
their own right. Autobiography is not a mere recovery of the past, it is an interplay between the past and the present. According to Roy Pascal, the significance of an autobiography "is indeed more the revelation of the present situation than the uncovering of the past" (11). He further adds, "Autobiography means discrimination and selection in the face of the endless complexity of life, selection of facts, distribution of emphasis and choice of expression" (10). Many writers commenced writing about "life," in terms of their own worldly experience, telling the world with disconcerting frankness their history and achievements, trying constantly to prove that with all their imperfections, they were fundamentally honest and good. Lowell said much later:

If a poem is autobiographical—-and this is true of any kind of autobiographical writing and historical writing—-you want the reader to say, this is true . . . And so there was always that standard of truth which you wouldn't ordinarily have in poetry—-the reader was to believe he was getting the real Robert Lowell (Lowell 349).

The nineteenth century Romantics De Quincey, Chateaubriand, and Wordsworth wrote numerous "Confessions". Like Augustine's Confessions, Wordsworth's Prelude displays a structural interplay between the strictly personal and generally cultural levels of significance. The "I" in the Romantic autobiography is the poet himself undergoing a highly personal experience. As Pascal puts it, "Wordsworth is the first autobiographer to realize . . . that the deepest purpose of autobiography is the account of a life as a projection of the real self . . . on the world" (43). Stephen Spender discovers the same quality in Theodore Roethke's highly personal poems. "More than with many poets" Stephen Spender writes, "Theodore Roethke's self, his 'I' and his poetry seemed inseparable. The position of Roethke, which forms so much a subject in his poems" Spender adds, "is that he is to himself inescapable" (3).
Whitman was the first confessional poet that America produced. His verse autobiography has a personal narrative base. Whitman encouraged younger writers to write about what they are and where they have been. He wrote, "I am the man, I suffered, I was there" ("Song of Myself" line 832). The image of the "I" (self) in Lowell's autobiographical poems touches on all previous images of the self in American autobiography. Its sexual power recalls that of Whitman and Miller; the depth of its inner penetration recalls that of Edwards and Roethke; and the breadth of its social and intellectual vision recalls that of Franklin and Adams.

Lowell, the introspective and active, intellectual and instinctive artist and political spokesman, idealist and pragmatist, alienated and engaged, is a hero to the degree that his ambivalence becomes inclusive of the contradictions in present and past American experience. Ambivalence is not only the means to a fuller understanding of past and present, but in Lowell's autobiography the means to individual freedom from the past and the present--and the means, as well, to a powerful expression of the personal desire for autonomy and self-creation (Brown 331).

It was the critic M.L. Rosenthal who referred to Robert Lowell's Life Studies as confessional poetry. He has said that the best confessional poetry is that which rises above subject matter to achieve some sort of victory over pain and defeat, poems which are glosses on the triumph of life. Their conception and emotional drive are inseparable from the poet's artistry. Rosenthal also calls Lowell's confessional poems a culmination of the Romantic and Modern tendency to place the literal self more and more at the centre of the poem (27).

From a broad historical standpoint, the roots of the confessional mode are in the great Romantic lyrics and personal epics--Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" and "The
Prelude" Coleridge's "Dejection Ode," Whitman's "Song of Myself", much of Shelley and Byron, even such heavily mythological works as Keats's "Fall of Hyperion" M.H.Abrams calls them "Greater Romantic Lyrics" and Robert Langbaum describes them as the "poetry of experience." According to Langbaum, the "poetry of experience" involves a character in a dramatic action, a character who has been endowed by the poets with the qualities necessary to make the poem happen to him" (cqd. in Hoffman 689). If a confessional movement is in many ways unthinkable without its Romantic background, there is a considerable gulf between the two, a gulf which is bridged by the peculiarly modern version of the "poetry of experience," which, according to Langbaum, is a continuation of the dramatic impulse evident among the Romantics but only as it passes through the intervening embellishments of Browning (Hoffman 690).

According to William Carlos Williams, "A life that is here and now is timeless. That is the universal I am seeking: to embody that in a new world that is always 'real'" (cqd. in Procopiow 63). Lowell struggles to grasp the 'real' world within his self, and in Hayden Carruth's words, "a man's being fought for, fragment by fragment, there on the page . . ." and "his struggle is a part of ours" (68).

Poets have never avoided writing about politics and public events as subject matter. Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and Milton all found ways to hail or rage against kings and governments through their work. Lowell points out that Alexander the Great, emulated Achilles's noble conduct:

Alexander carried the Iliad with other Greek classics on his own Asian invasion, and mysteriously relived with greater intelligence, though a Macedonian alcoholic, the impulsive brutality and forgiveness of Achilles. General Fuller writes: 'He was both mystical and practical . . . It was in his outlook upon women- -in nearly all ages considered the
legitimate spoil of the soldier—that Alexander stood in a totally different moral world compared with the one inhabited by his contemporaries... Yet, in spite of this extraordinary respect for womanhood, his highest moral virtue is to be discovered in one of the final remarks Arrian makes in *The Anabasis* [:] 'But I do know that to Alexander alone of the kings of old did repentance for his faults come by reason of his noble nature.' It's the same Achilles, imitated by a long line of Plutarchian Greeks, from Themistocles and Socrates of Athens down to Philopomen of Megalopolis. What can Homer teach... the generosity in cruelty? (214).

Yeats, unpolitical as anyone could look in his fluffy neckties, wrote stinging political lines. Auden's "September 1, 1939" is a beautiful muddle of a poem on Europe in the shadow of war. Bertolt Brecht's "To Posterity," about Germany under the Nazis, is clear as a bell:

Truly, the age I live in is bleak.

The guileless word is foolish. A smooth brow

Denotes insensitiveness. The laughing man

Has only not yet received

The dreadful news.

What times are these when a conversation

About trees is almost a crime,

Because it includes a silence about so many misdeeds! (*Modern German Poetry 1910-1960* lines 1-8 p.,227)

For their part, political leaders have courted poets. Some have even been poets. Henry VIII liked to write verse when he wasn’t making life brutish or short for his wives. In "Lady Anne Boleyn" Lowell explored the egomaniacal corruption of
power. Anne Boleyn preserves her human dignity by refusing to let the horror of death reduce her to bitterness.

\[\ldots \text{I hear say I'll not die before noon; I am very sorry therefore,}\
\text{I thought to be dead by this hour and past my pain.}
\text{Her jailer told her beheading was no pain,}
\text{"it is so subtle." ‘I have a little neck(),'}
\text{she said, and put her hands about it laughing. (History lines 6-11 p., 62)}\]

Chairman Mao, when visited by the Muse, commanded the largest audience for poetry in history. Poet Leopold Senghor was the former President of Brazil. John F. Kennedy had genuine affection for the work of Robert Frost, and the poet’s presence at Kennedy’s Inaugural—the poem, flapping in the wintry wind—also served to give a magic power to the occasion, like the blessing of the Gods. The cold wind and the blinding sun rendered his text unreadable, but Frost recited "The Gift Outright" from memory. "The land was ours before we were the land’s / She was our land more than a hundred years / Before we were her people" (lines 1-3). While Frost conveys the idea of the land having an existence long before people inhabited it, the poet Bharathiyar in his poem, "Salutation to Bharat" highlights the gifts of birth, growth and knowledge that the land bestowed on man: "This, this is the land that gave us / birth and suck and the light of knowledge" (lines 10-11 p., 60). Both poets in different ways convey to the reader their "love" of their "land." Robert Frost later sent the President an expanded version of the "dedication" he had written for the occasion, in which he prophesied for America "The glory of a next Augustan age," a "golden age of poetry and power."
The central public principles upon which *Paradise Lost* is based are those of obedience and hierarchy—a meritocratic hierarchy. Thomas R. Edwards raises two pertinent questions: Why in sound hierarchies should there be no temptation in the lower ranks but irresistible temptations in the top echelons? Where exactly in the scale does proper desire to serve become evil desire to serve oneself? (Edwards 36).

The struggle for Power is always among those who are close to the source of Power:

Oh had his powerful destiny ordained
Me some inferior angel, I had stood
Then happy; no unbounded hope had raised
Ambition . . . . (Book IV lines 58-61).

This was so in seventeenth century politics and is true of modern politics. A mediocre common man following a mundane routine does not aspire for absolute power. Proximity to power frightens him; confuses him. But Satan is a participant in power structure. In him there is a yearning for absolute power and authority; this yearning motivates him to rebel against the monarch, God. Satan’s thirst for revolution is in order to reorganize the existing hierarchical order of the heavenly society. In Thomas R. Edwards’s words:

Though the economy of Heaven is hierarchical, Milton took a dim view of fixed hierarchy at the earthly level, in church or state, and Satan is not just a theological token but also an admonitory yet moving individual case, whose error here mirrors a human weakness that is easy to deplore yet hard to disclaim entirely. While his programme is evil—a large qualification, to be sure—his attempt to remake the existing system is not entirely remote from the revolutionary cause Milton gave his best years to (36).
Still anxious about the success of the Puritan cause, still rebellious against Stuart Monarchy, Milton has written a poem in which rebellion against a Monarch is the proof of ultimate Evil.

Milton gives a sympathetic portrayal of Satan's power struggle and the readers of modern day realize that politics, and the politicians have not changed much since Milton's days. Our politician is still one who "subjects himself to anarchy within or lawless passions in him which he serves" and not one "who reigns within himself and rules passions, desires and fears" (Paradise Regained : II Lines 466-467, 471-472). According to Lowell, "Satan is no devil, but a cosmic rebellious Earl of Northumberland, Harry Hotspur, with an intelligence and iron restraint. He is almost early American, the cruel, unconquerable spirit of freedom" (215).

The power poetry has, that the public world does not have, is "staying power." Poetry outlives politics mainly because the language of poets outlives the language of politicians. By its existence it demands generosity and expansiveness. "When power narrows the areas of man's concern," said Kennedy, "poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses" (qtd. in Rosenblatt 34).

The cleansing power, the moral fury and the tragic insight of Yeats are all evident in these lines which Yeats wrote in the poem "Meru," much before the Second World War:

Civilisation is hooped together, brought
Under a rule, under the semblance of peace
By manifold illusion: but man's life is thought,
And he, despite his terror, cannot cease
Ravening through century after century,
Ravening, raging, and uprooting that he may come
into the desolation of reality . . . (Collected Poems lines 1-7
pp.333-34).

Whatever our point of view and whatever Yeats's when he wrote those lines, even so general and undramatized a statement must convince us, not only because the modulation and control of the blank verse are masterly, but also because the statement is true; and events which Yeats did not live to experience have made its truth not less but more apparent. The poem still lives. And through the ages, there has always been a movement between the Poet, the Poem and the People.

Although Plato believed that poetry is dangerous to the harmony of the state he did not favour its complete abolition. In the Laws specially in Books II and VII he says much about the importance of community celebrations during which the citizen will be stimulated to virtue by choric songs. Plato described these songs as a kind of praise and they represented the only kind of poetry which he endorsed. "There will be no objection to a law that the citizens who are departed and have done good and energetic deeds should receive eulogies . . . a man should make a fair ending, then we'll praise him" (qtd. in Hardison 25). Plato's approval of the poetry of "Praise" is by no means casual. Similar statements occur frequently in the Dialogues. In the Republic after calling for the expulsion of poets who lead men to vice, Socrates excepts "hymns to the Gods and praises of famous men" as "the only poetry which ought to be admitted into our state" (qtd. in Hardison 27). In the Protagoras he advises using "the works of great poets" to instruct the young, for "in them are contained many admonitions, and many tales, and praises and encomia of ancient and famous men, which (the student) is required to learn by heart, in order that he may imitate or emulate them, and desire to become like them (qtd. in Hardison 27).
These remarks are far from a full-scale theory of poetry, but they had considerable influence. They suggest that the poetry of praise is of special excellence. More than other types it encourages reverence and patriotism. In addition, Plato touches on two subjects of great importance in late classical and Renaissance poetics. The first is education, or "paideia." The second subject touched on by Plato is "fame."

The "Protagoras" stresses the utility of praise in forming character. The efficacy of the poetry of praise, depends on its ability to arouse "emulation" or "imitation." The incentive that it offers is the prospect of immortality through verse. Plato is sometimes said to be opposed to poetry because of its tendency to stir the emotions. This is true only of emotion that he considered anti-social. The poetry of praise depends on an emotion- -the hunger for fame- -but it uses this emotion to strengthen the state by inculcating virtue. The idea that poets are the special custodians of fame is repeated by Horace, Cicero and a host of other classical writers.

Though "Public Poetry" was born centuries ago it has gone through many changes. The form of "poetry of praise" to "urge a course of action" has been adopted by many twentieth century poets. Bharathiyar sings in adulation of Mahatma Gandhi thus:

How shall we praise you?
as one whose choicest herbs
healed the cobra bite?
As one who held the hill as cover?
You have outlined a plan
that's new, infallible,
to end this raging fever
of dire and dark subjection.
You have firmly rejected,
the violent terrorist's ways;
You've shown the nobler path
Your soldiers should tread
Only Satyagraha can wrest
freedom from slavery
Let all earth forget war
and learn the ways of peace. (lines 17-24, 33-40 pp.76-77)

Written during pre-Independence days, the aim was to make the reader imitate
or emulate Gandhi and instil a desire in the reader to be like Gandhi. Hence in the
Aristotelian sense Bharathiyar's poem is a "poem of praise". Thomas R.Edwards in his
Imagination and Power studies the different forms public poetry takes on from the late
sixteenth century to the late 1960s. He traces the evolution of public poetry thus:

A man who is a poet finds himself writing (for whatever reason) a
poem about men who are not poets but "public men",- kings, soldiers,
politicians- or about the "public conditions" that seem the consequence
of what such men do. But there is also an implicit third party to this
situation, the reader of the poem, who has to serve as representative
of 'ordinary men' in general, that great majority of people who are
neither poets nor public figures. Presumably a poet commonly thinks
of himself as being in some way different from ordinary men, with their
famous incapacity for or indifference to the disciplined reflectiveness of
art. Yet in imagining public events and public men the poetic
imagination, a proud and essentially private capacity of mind, may in
some way be 'socialized' made aware of its connections with a state of
awareness that is much more extensive if less coherent and stable than
the imaginative awareness that creates art. The undertaking of a "public
poem" can lead the poet to a fuller consciousness of what he, as artist,
has in common with the general condition of men in his society; in this
sense the socializing of imagination is also humanizing. But at the same
time, the successful public poem criticizes and chastens the public
awareness of ordinary men by seeing through the habits of rhetoric and
feeling that conceal from us the full complexity of our relation to politics
and power (1).

Lowell’s formative years played a great role in shaping him. Robert Lowell, the
poet who expressed the major tensions—both public and private—of his time with
technical mastery and haunting authenticity was born on March 1, 1917, in Boston,
in a distinguished family. There is a famous folk rhyme about Boston:

Home of the bean and the cod
Where the Lowells talk only to Cabots
And the Cabots talk only to God.

Lowell was always unwilling to acknowledge the historical importance of his heritage,
but his roots were inextricably twined with New England’s. The poet’s father was
Commander Robert T.S. Lowell—his son describes him as a weak fumbling man—a
career Naval Officer, whose assignments necessitated the family’s living in
Philadelphia and Washington D.C. Commander Lowell vacated his position with the
Navy, for a series of stable but disappointing civilian posts. Each new appointment
brought less money than the one before, and finally he became a brokerage house
customer’s son in Boston. Charlotte Winslow Lowell was a domineering mother, who
constantly nagged her ineffectual husband and her son with her ambitions.

Both the Lowells and the Winslows were early Colonists. Lowell’s maternal
ancestor Edward Winslow, a May Flower journey-man was responsible for the
colonists' first treaty with the Massasoit and Wampanoag Indians. His son Edward II, "a mighty Indian killer" was twice elected Governor of Plymouth colony. The poet's mother was related to John Stark, a famous New Hampshire frontiersman. Lowell's paternal ancestors include James Russell Lowell, an internationally famous writer and critic and the famous poet Amy Lowell. Amy's elder brother was President of Harvard University. Although Lowell turned away from his heritage of Puritanism-—largely because he was repelled by what he felt was the high value it placed on the accumulation of money—-he continued to be fascinated by it, and it forms the subject of many of his poems.

He went to Harvard but falling under the influence of the then flourishing Southern Formalist school of poetry, shifted to Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio, where John Crowe Ransom, a leading exponent of that trend was teaching. Lowell graduated in 1940 and that year married the novelist Jean Stafford and Lowell's poems of this period centre on Boston, Catholicism and War. At that time he felt that one must not be swept into a cause. He said:

And one felt that what poetry could do was have nothing to do with causes, that if you-—that might get into what you wrote but you couldn’t do it at all directly; and something like Aristotle's purging by pity and terror, that of going through a catharsis, and that is what was suitable, rather than to persuade people to do anything better or to make the world better. And I think that is the position that is perhaps only intelligible in the thirties, when the danger of being swept into a cause was so great (qtd. in Hamilton 85).

But Lowell was swept into a cause in 1943.

America had entered the war in December 1941. Lowell in that year had registered for the draft and throughout 1942 had attempted to enlist. By March 1943
Lowell was still assuming that he would be accepted for military service. But by September the atrocities committed by the Allies changed his mind. In the Declaration of Personal Responsibility he sent to President Roosevelt he wrote:

In June we heard rumours of the staggering civilian casualties that had resulted from the mining of the Ruhr Dams. Three weeks ago, we read of the razing of Hamburg, where 200,000 non-combatants are reported dead, after an almost apocalyptic series of all out air-raids... And now the Quebec conference confirms our growing suspicions that the bombings of the Dams and Hamburg were not mere isolated acts of military expediency, but marked the inauguration of a new long-term strategy endorsed and co-ordinated by our Chief Executive (qtd. in Hamilton 88).

In October 1943, Lowell was sentenced to a year and a day in a penitentiary at Danbury, Conn., for refusing to comply with Selective Service Act. He served a term of imprisonment for five months. During his term at Danbury, Lowell corrected the galleys of Land of Unlikeliness. In 1944 Land of Unlikeliness was published and it was a considerable critical success. John Frederick Nims expressed interest in the "strange marriage of Catholic belief and New England Puritanism" (264-268). Blackmur wrote, "Lowell is distraught about religion; he does not seem to have decided whether his Roman Catholic belief is the form of a force or the sentiment of a form" (339-352).

Much has been made of Lowell's conversion to Roman Catholicism. But Lowell's background was Episcopalian, and therefore in the Anglo-Catholic tradition. The first R.T.S. Lowell was an Episcopalian clergyman. Lowell's sojourn with Roman Catholicism was a means of offending his family, working free of family tradition and gaining some objectivity towards it, and intensifying his awareness of the Catholicism
within Episcopalianism. He was keenly aware of T.S. Eliot’s conversion to Anglo-Catholicism, and the part it had played in Eliot’s poetry. Allen Tate thought that Lowell’s best poetry was a result of his conversion to Catholicism. In October 1945 Lowell sent the manuscript of Lord Weary’s Castle to Randall Jarrell, who replied: "You write more in the great tradition, the grand style, the real middle of English poetry, than anybody since Yeats" (qtd. in Hamilton 104).

But Lowell drifted away from Jean Stafford and Catholicism and by 1948 his divorce from Jean Stafford and Catholicism was final. In April 1947 he won the Pulitzer Prize, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award. In the space of a few months he had become non-Catholic, the most promising young poet in America, and perhaps the first World War II CO (Conscientious Objector) to be offered a job in the Government. The job was consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress.

In 1949 Lowell married Elizabeth Hardwick. He suffered a series of mental breakdowns which began with his imprisonment as a CO. His Age also was the Age of Freudian theorists and Psycho-analysts. The study of the theories enabled him to acquire a clearer understanding of the warring forces within—the tensions between himself and his family, between himself and his country, between himself and his work. Lowell read, with extreme care, Freud’s The Interpretations of Dreams and the other classics by him. In addition he familiarized himself with Adler, Pfister, Ferenczi, Rank and Wittals. And while he recognized Freud as the greatest of these, he acknowledged the valuable contribution made by his rivals and followers, to the understanding of man and his consciousness.

Anthony Manousos points out that Lowell discovered the psychological anguish or immediate emotion even in classical literature. Lowell felt that Roman literature has a "terrible human frankness that isn’t customary with us—Corrosive attacks on the
establishment, comments on politics and the decay of morals, all felt terribly strongly," and expressed in strong, realistic, language (16).

Alan Williamson observes that in his later works in particular, Lowell's questioning of civilization most closely resembles that of Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents*, and that of the later, radical Freudsians, Herbert Marcuse and Norman O.Brown. Like Freud, Lowell is concerned with the cost of civilization of instinctual satisfaction and even instinctual awareness; with the nature of the almost universal human sense of discontent and incompleteness, the possibilities and the illusions of a remedy. He is obsessed with outbursts of aggression and brutality, with their relation to civilized structures and to man's fundamental, biologically evolved nature; and with the question of whether this essential nature permanently precludes any realization of man's moral ideal of himself. Finally Lowell, like Freud, asks whether the whole project of civilization is worth the cost, being the best of the alternatives, or whether, on the contrary, it is—by an internal necessity—suicidal.

Lowell thinks about these questions not, primarily, as a philosopher, but as a poet in poetry. That is to say, he does his thinking through the picture of environments and epochs that comes to him intuitively, in association and metaphor; through the power and brutality, the discontent, the helpless participation in sweeping historical forces that he knows about concretely and to which he can give a particular artistic shape. His concern is not with the doctrines or truism of metapsychology in themselves, but with the process of their happening in particular experience; in a sense, he vindicates them as imaginable or believable orderings of the confused interaction of the individual consciousness and its world. Hence there is no dividing Lowell into a
"personal" and a "public" poet; he is almost continuously being both (Williamson 3-4).

In 1951 Lowell published a volume of chiefly narrative poems, *Mills of the Kavanaughs*. This slim volume contained seven poems, Lowell's entire output for five years. Most of the poems were failures. After staying for a few years abroad, Lowell settled in Boston in 1954. In 1959 *Life Studies* was published and won the National Book Award. *Life Studies* is generally understood as an Odyssey of self-understanding in which the poet comes to grips with his oppressive past and madness-ridden present.

The process is seen in terms of either heroic (internalized) quest or therapeutic self-analysis; its outcome is a mind gifted with enough inner coherence and tragic awareness to affirm its own troubled continuance. Moreover, that mind does not belong to Lowell alone; Lowell's personal anguish is explicitly bound up with the anguish of his times, so that the capacity of one midcentury poet to endure becomes a model for the midcentury to do likewise (Kramer 80).

In 1960 Lowell and his wife decided to move from Boston to New York. Lowell spent most of 1960 and 1961 writing *Imitations*. *Imitations* was a collection of Drydenesque translations or adaptations from Homer to Pasternak.

Accepting the National Book Award in 1960 Lowell said, "when I finished *Life Studies* I was left hanging on a question mark. I am still hanging there, I don't know whether it is a death rope or a life-line" (qtd. in Axelrod 134). He felt exhausted, he informed M.L. Rosenthal, and realized that the next creative effort would have to be totally different—in style and substance. As the guest of honour, at the Boston Festival of the Arts, held in the Public Gardens in June 1960, Lowell informed an audience of four thousand, including Eleanor Roosevelt, that the artist's work and existence
were inseparable and that the composition of Life Studies had therefore meant having to relive his "sordid past" (qtd. in Heymann 440).

The result of this inner conflicts was For the Union Dead. If Life Studies was passionately, pointedly, even embarrassingly personal, For the Union Dead was a step back into the world, away from the direct, strident statements about his own feelings, away from the abject nagativity with which he regarded every living soul. "Lowell was more interested these days in such sociological tropes as politics and morality, the individual in society, mass culture and intellectual poverty" (Axelrod 134). He embraced Williams’s radical dictum "To write down that which happens at that time-to perfect the ability to record at the moment when the consciousness is enlarged by the sympathies and the unity of understanding which the imagination gives" (Spring and All 216).

The presumption of consensus and homogeneity, of a universal "freedom" available to all in America was shattered in the sixties. The plight of the Blacks in the South and in the ghettos of northern cities did not become prominent, did not enter public consciousness as a potentially tragic rift in American society, until the Civil Rights Movement of the late 1950s, dramatized by the boycotts and marches led by the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., and the several ghetto uprisings and riots in middle sixties. There were also campus anti-war movements, urban movements such as the Black Panthers, its efforts to create a "poor people's movement" and the hippie counter-culture movement of the late sixties. Whatever the lasting effects of the agitations of the sixties- -and it would seem a decade later that they belonged more to a realm of culture than that of politics, resulting more in an enlarged range of choices in life-styles for middle class Americans, than in visible institutional improvements for racial minorities and the poor, or real changes in the relation of competing groups to the centres of power- -whatever the permanent traces, it was
unmistakable then that the cultural and intellectual climate of the country had changed dramatically.

When *For the Union Dead* was published, Robert Lowell told A. Alvarez that American poets had entered into a new cultural situation: "We are free to say what we want to, and somehow what we want to say is the confusion and sadness and incoherence of the human condition" (Alvarez 101). In *For the Union Dead* Lowell exposed the private and public confusion he had undergone firsthand. "Out of the wealth and poverty of his own experience he created his poetry of consciousness" (Axelrod 139).

Beginning in 1965 Lowell entered a new phase of his life and career, writing a poetry more explicitly political than he had ever written before. In part Lowell’s movement to political poetry resulted from a need to discover a new subject matter. Like his incarceration in 1943 and his mental breakdown in 1954, the Vietnam War was a disaster that could be converted into artistic inspiration.

American bombing raids on communist targets in Vietnam had begun in February 1965, and during March, President Johnson stepped up the dispatch of combat troops. In April and May the first anti-war demonstrations were held, both in Washington and in colleges across the country. It was in this atmosphere that Robert Lowell refused a White House Invitation as he did not agree with Johnson’s foreign policies. He wrote:

> We are in danger of imperceptibly becoming an explosive and suddenly chauvinistic nation, and may even be drifting on our way to the last nuclear ruin. I know it is hard for the responsible man to act; it is also painful for the private and irresolute man to dare criticism. At this anguished, delicate and perhaps determining moment, I feel I am
serving you and our country best by not taking part in the White House Festival of the Arts (Hamilton 322).

Six weeks after the festival, President Johnson increased still further the U.S. "presence" in Vietnam, and asked Congress for a further billion dollars so that "all that we have built would not be swept away on the flood of conquest." Lowell kept actively opposing the Vietnam War by engaging in various forms of protest, the most subtle and daring being his poems Near the Ocean and Note Book.

His stormy quarter-century-long marriage to Elizabeth Hardwick finally ended in divorce in 1972. And in 1973 he reorganized and rewrote the Note Book. He now detached the poems dealing with his troubled domestic life and arranged them into a separate sequence and entitled the sequence For Lizzie and Harriet. For Lizzie and Harriet depicts human frailty and desire. And History, another figure that Lowell cut from the Note Book proceeds more or less regularly, from the beginning of human history to the present moment. In the first part of the poem, Lowell meditates on the distant past, the past that occurred before his birth that which he could know only at secondhand. But in the second part of History he enters into his poem as historical object as well as a historian. He ponders over events in his own life as well as events in the history of Western Civilization.

In 1970, Robert Lowell went to England, leaving everything behind. Now in his early fifties, he made the move to accept the posts of Professor of English at the University of Essex and Honorary Visiting Fellow at All Soul's College, Oxford.

Soon after arriving in London he met Caroline Blackwood, thirty nine years old, a gifted writer and mother of three young girls. The progress of their love- -her giving birth to a son, his tormenting decision to divorce Elizabeth Hardwick and marry her- -became the basis for The Dolphin, published in 1973.

Day by Day his last book, was published just a few days before his death.
In "This Golden Summer" he wrote,

"I will leave earth
With my shoes tied,
as if the walk
could cut bare feet" (62).

By early 1977 his marriage to Caroline Blackwood had seemingly reached its end and Lowell was back in Manhattan living with Elizabeth Hardwick. After a strenuous State Department-sponsored tour of the Soviet Union in late June, and before the scheduled beginning of his fall teaching semester at Harvard, he flew to Dublin for a week's visit to Caroline and Sheridan. Returning from this trip on September 12, he seemed tired. He was suffering from continuing physical ailments in the aftermath of congestive heart failure of the previous year. Riding home in a cab from Kennedy Airport, he slumped over in his seat, and when the cab arrived at his door, the driver could not rouse him. The poet's enlarged heart had finally failed him. Lowell died as he lived and wrote, in the midst of a journey through a world of lost connections, moving toward a destination he would never reach. As he desired, he left earth with his "shoes tied."

In the field of poetry, the early twentieth century saw the birth of "Modernism" in America. The homelessness and alienation of the artist from the society he lives in, is the basic premise of Modernism. It is a dominating movement in art and thought. It celebrated aesthetic and intellectual dissent, unbounded innovation and experiment. The great pioneers of the Modernist movement were Yeats, Eliot, Pound, Stevens, William Carlos Williams and Marianne Moore. The Modernist poets cast aside the vestiges of Victorianism, and outworn literary conventions. They energized their poetry by infusing new vigour into diction and rhythm. They disclosed new
possibilities of form, and successfully brought poetry into meaningful relationship with
the actualities of modern life.

The violent disjunctions characteristic of the late twentieth-century life—the
break up of established economic, political and social institutions, and accelerated
separation of the contemporary self from the history of the race, the alienation of the
individual in a cosmos felt to be a field of force rather than a divinely ordered
harmony—all these disruptions were recorded, as though on seismographs, in Eliot’s
The Waste Land (1922), Stevens’s Harmonium (1923), Williams’s Spring and All
(1923) and Pound’s A Draft of XIV Cantos (1925). The late works of these modernists,
Eliot’s Four Quartets, Williams’s Paterson and Stevens’s The Auroras of Autumn are
truly extraordinary achievements in the poetic landscape.

Some contemporary poets who continued the impulses of the modernist
movement are George Oppen, Louis Zukofsky, Kenneth Rexroth and Charles Olson.
John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate and other Fugitive poets were much influenced by
Eliot and his conventional metres and modes of versification, but the tension between
traditional poetics and their content is apparent in their ironic lyrics.

Stanley Kunitz, Richard Eberhart, Theodore Roethke, John Berryman, Robert
Lowell, Karl Shapiro, Randall Jarrell and others who began to write in the 1930s
started seeking their own voices. They tried and discarded models, guides and
influences from the poetic tradition and from modernist writers. They tried to attain
a new imaginative vision, and a new style. They felt confined by poems of symmetry,
intellect, irony and wit. They refused to don the Eliot’s mantle of reticence and wrote
poetry in opposition to Eliot’s aesthetic statement, “Poetry is not a turning loose of
emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality but an
escape from personality.” Their poetry on the other hand, was an expression of
emotion and personality. The two strongest poetic personalities of this group were
Robert Lowell and John Berryman. Both were ambitious, accomplished, dense and idiosyncratic. And they successfully changed the sensibility and extended the possibilities of their art.

Robert Lowell's strong poetic personality was shaped by various influences in his formative years. During his early school days Lowell was fortunate in having Richard Eberhart as one of the English teachers at St. Mark's. Then, just beginning his career as a published poet, Eberhart was intellectually stimulating. Encouraged by Eberhart, Lowell began to write poetry of two distinct kinds: elaborate, formal poems, heavily influenced by Latin models; and free verse inspired by some models he had found in Louis Untermeyer's anthology of Modern poetry. Thus the two poles of his later art appeared at the very outset: poetry conceived as a conventionally formed object and poetry conceived as organically formed self-expression. At Harvard, Lowell's poetry grew more accomplished, and he started searching for a proper mode of artistic expression, and for a teacher or "father" to lead him to that mode. Lowell's quest for a poetic father eventually centred on two men, Allen Tate and William Carlos Williams, each associated with a particular style of artistic expression, one "formal" and the other "free". Lowell has several times listed the poets who most strongly affected him. He told Stanley Kunitz, "The poets who most directly influenced me were Allen Tate, Elizabeth Bishop and William Carlos Williams." In a later, unpublished essay he wrote that he had been "explicitly influenced by Ransom, Tate, Williams, Jarrell, Eliot and Yeats" (qtd. in Axelrod 19). The two poets who appear on every such list are Tate and Williams.

Tate encouraged Lowell's aspirations to be a writer and gave those aspirations direction. He settled Lowell's inner debate between free and formal expression by firmly advocating the latter, for Tate was a committed formalist. Tate argued that poetry, "is the art of apprehending and concentrating our experience in the
mysterious limitations of form" (qtd. in Axelrod 24). But when Lowell developed a
close friendship with William Carlos Williams he broke away from "old arrangements
of the words." Williams believed that since Whitman, an important development had
occurred: the appearance of the "American Idiom" as a unique modern language.
The "American Idiom", Williams said, replaced the "fixed standard foot" with a
"variable foot." He said that free verse need not be formless, but that its form must
result from the poem's organic, internal pressure rather than traditional patterns
externally applied.

Prosodically, Lowell did not specifically adopt Williams's triadic stanza. Rather,
he took from him the idea of freedom: the idea that form is only "an arrangement
of the words for the effect not the arrangement, fixed and unalterable", the idea that
if form is meaning then "the new form is the new meaning."

The 'new form' and the 'new meaning' took shape as *Life Studies*. In the
presentation of closely related autobiographical materials in prose and lyrics, Robert
Lowell was much influenced by Elizabeth Bishop. The prose explorations, "the
autobiographical fragments" of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* ("91 Revere Street"
published in 1959) and Elizabeth Bishop's *Questions of Travel* ("In the Village"
published in 1965)-appeal to the need as Bishop says, "to get things straight and tell
the truth"; they lure readers from the life of the works to the lives of the poets, flirting
with autobiography" (Doreski 85).

And Lowell felt that the best style to tell the truth was none of the poetic styles
in English but something like the prose of Chekov or Flaubert. And Lowell also
realized that prose is less cut off from life than poetry is. Most of Lowell's poems are
born of "direct experience". Lowell made much use of "prose" to express his
experiences. This sense of "direct experience" was more evident in Frost's poems
though Browning was also a gifted poetizer of "direct experience". Lowell said:
I don't know quite how to describe this business of direct experience. With Browning, for instance, for all his gifts—and there is almost nothing Browning couldn't use—you feel there is a glaze between what he writes and what really happened. You feel the people are made up. In Frost you feel that's just what the farmers and so on were like. It has the virtue of a photograph but all the finish of art (71).

Most of Lowell's poems are photographs of experience with the finish of art. And to achieve this effect Lowell often resorted to "prose," because prose writers, with their sympathetic observation of people are able to achieve this kind of fusion—a fusion of realism and imagination. Lowell realized that in a very conventional old fashioned writer or someone who is trying to be realistic but also dramatic and inspired, though he may remain a good poet, "most of that directness and realism would go away" (Seidel 71).

There is a continuity in Lowell's poems. In an interview in 1961, Lowell remarked that T.S. Eliot "has done what he said Shakespeare had done; all his poems are one poem, a form of continuity that has grown and snow-balled" (Seidel 92).

Here Lowell had in mind Eliot's comments on Shakespeare. Eliot argues:

What is the 'whole man' is not simply his greatest or maturest achievement, but the whole pattern formed by the sequence of plays; so that we may say confidently that the full meaning of any one of his plays is not in itself alone, but in that play in the order in which it was written, in its relation to all of Shakespeare's other plays, earlier or later: We must know all of Shakespeare's work in order to know any of it; and that "the whole of Shakespeare's work is ONE poem, and it is the poetry of it in this sense, not the poetry of isolated lines and passages
or the poetry of the single figures which he created, that matters most (193, 204).

Lowell's own oeuvre shows that he is following the examples of Eliot and Shakespeare, that his poetry develops in a steady, organic manner, so that it has not only that unity which is bestowed by a distinctive sensibility, but also something of that quality of aesthetic necessity which we expect to find in individual works of art.

The "individual works of art" discussed in the following chapters do not cover the entire range of Lowell's unique poetic achievements. But the forty odd poems chosen for study do indicate his greatness. They show how Robert Lowell is emotionally disturbed and intellectually excited by the gravity of the challenges of the social problems, the psychic maladjustments, the threat of worn-out beliefs and the fear of total nuclear annihilation and how he employs ideas of his own or of others for the analysis of the maladies and exploration of a cure, and finally transforms them into revealing patterns of poetry.
Works Cited


