CHAPTER III

PRIVATE EXPERIENCES WITH PUBLIC SIGNIFICANCE

"The truth is that the political poem comes out of the deepest privacy" -

Robert Bly.

"... the important events of history are the events of inner history" -

Lilian Robinson.

Life Studies is the prime example of confessional poetry. But the main concern of this volume is the sundering of the modern world. The "sundering" occurs at four levels. At the first level there is the disintegration of the old order of culture in both the realms, religious and political. The second level is the decay of the love relationships and familial connections and this decay is the main concern of the prose of part two. The severing of the ordinary bonds of love and the destruction of cultural values lead to the third level, the isolation and the alienation of the individual artist which is the focal point of the poems in part three. At the fourth level the individual himself breaks up owing to his alienation and the poems of part three and four explore "this breaking up and the resultant insanity." According to Eagleton, "every writer is individually placed in society, responding to a general history from his own particular standpoint making sense of it in his own concrete terms" (8). Lowell responds to and makes sense of history through his own autobiography. The poems in LS are personal and autobiographical. But when the poet gathers the deepest
truths embedded in his experienced self, they get modified by the ideas, opinions prevalent among the general public at the time he is writing his poems, and thus the poems become relevant to the modern world. The accomplishment of LS is that it is able to invest private experiences with public meaning.

Sylvia Plath, often called Lowell's disciple in the "Confessional School" was in fact well aware of the limitations of the purely personal poem. She said, "I think that personal experience is very important, but certainly it should not be a kind of shut-box and mirror-looking narcissistic experience. I believe it should be relevant, and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau . . . (169,170).

It is not just that Lowell reveals the connections between his personal experience and the "larger things," it's that the revelation implies an analysis of those larger things, suggests a set of values that, if shared by a convinced audience, might change the way things happen, might even make things happen. The best poems in LS insist on a connection between what Lowell knows and does not know about himself, the sources of his fears and weaknesses of the world that he and his readers inhabit. The connection is politically significant, if we understand that individually we are not only the victims of our environment, but its shapers. If this were not the case, the poems of LS must surely be dismissed as ego-centric, self-indulgent, irrelevant—merely confessional. All confessional poems seek consolation from the readers. Freud had said, that what all men—the "wildest revolutionaries no less than the most virtuous believers"—are really after is consolation.

But Lowell did not seek consolation in solitude and retreat, but in a deep involvement with the affairs of the world around him. To read Lowell with no sense of the complexities of the present century, the bombs waiting beside the rockets, the hundreds of millions staring into the temporary shelter of their television sets, the
decline of the West, the starving millions of Asia and Africa, is perfectly possible and may even be a profitable experience. But Lowell’s deeply felt human values, his inexhaustibleness and his terrible relevance do not reveal themselves under such circumstances. Though in LS, Lowell adopts a confessional mode, his driving force is his political, public distress—poetry and rhetoric, though fine, are secondary. And there can be no question of his rootedness in the moral, political, historical circumstances of our time and place, of our past and present. Hence with Lowell the practical distinction between the personal and the public, the private and the political does not hold good. According to Jarrell, “his own existence seems to him in some sense as terrible as the public world—his private world hangs over him as the public world hangs over others—he does not forsake the headlined world for the refuge of one’s private joys and decencies, the shaky garden of the heart...” (332-333).

The “shaky garden” of Lowell’s heart fuses well with the “headlined world” in “Beyond the Alps,” the first poem in LS. "Beyond the Alps" will be important in American literary history for its rejection of the ideals of a previous generation. But it is an equally important turning point in Lowell’s own career, "for it is pregnant with the themes and images of the later political poetry; the theatricality and the sexual bases of the drive-to-power even in idealists; the ease with which even "pure mind" becomes a tool of an irrational impulse to kill; the moral claims to be made for warm unintelligent animality whether that of the common man or that of a tyrant" (Williamson 95).

The title "Beyond the Alps" recalls the celebrated simile in Pope’s Essay on Criticism comparing the Alps to the challenge that art sets before the ambition of genius; "Hills peep over hills, and Alps on Alps arise." The formal frame of the poem is a common train journey from Rome to Paris, but the object presented is a
miraculous one; the bodily assumption of the Virgin, proclaimed as the dogma in the year 1950.

In form, the poem may also be called a miniature decasyllabic sonnet sequence. The rhyme scheme is different for each of the three stanzas; in the third stanza the final couplet is detached; ababcdceefg-hh.

Reading how even the Swiss had thrown the sponge
in once again and Everest was still
unscaled, I watched our Paris Pullman lunge
mooning across the fallow Alpine snow. (55)

The poet is both on a train reading how the Swiss have failed in their attempts to scale the Everest and outside the train watching the "Paris Pullman lunge mooning across the fallow Alpine snow." At a literal level, the movement of the poem reflects the jolting progress of the Express from Rome to Paris as it climbs the Alps. Figuratively, the mountains whether the Himalayas or the Alps, are symbols of human aspirations and religious ideals. But Lowell does not aspire for religious ideals. Instead secular artistic thirst possesses him.

While writing the earlier volumes, he was obsessed with Catholicism and the Augustinian idea of the modern world as a "land of unlikeness" a land in which human beings have lost their likeness to God and therefore have become alienated from themselves as well. This estrangement, Lowell believed, was ultimately responsible for the collapse of civilization, embodied in the mass destruction of the Second World War. During this period Lowell's religious perspective was close to that of T.S. Eliot whose poetics also influenced him greatly. But now along with Catholicism, T.S. Eliot and his religious perspective also stand rejected. Bruce Bawer notes that "the train trip in other words is in part a metaphor for Lowell's pilgrimage from the poetics of LWC to that of LS; from tradition and authority to individualism;
freedom, imagination and flux" (170). Looked at from this perspective, the movement of the poem from Rome to Paris symbolizes Lowell's farewell to a type of poetry that is rooted in tradition, formed by the amalgamating mind and founded upon the notion of the poet as an impersonal authority who speaks as if from a mountain top. The poem is quite formal in construction like the later LS poems. Hence "Beyond the Alps" is Lowell's good-bye to old conventions launched as it were in the old conventional style.

Lowell signals his departure for the interior world of the imagination with the phrase: "Life changed to landscape." As the train surges forward, Rome recedes-- -Lowell calls Rome the City of God, recalling Saint Augustine's masterpiece The City of God which espoused a religious philosophy of predestination. Lowell has exchanged his belief in predestination for an existentialist's attitude. "There the skirt-mad Mussolini unfurled the eagle of Caesar/ He was one of us only, pure prose." Lowell focusses on the "skirt mad" Mussolini, the man who thinks he can build up a great civilization by aesthetic trappings, that by holding up Caesar's eagle he can be Caesar. Mussolini is crude, unimaginative "pure prose."

... I envy the conspicuous

waste of our grandparents on their grand tours -

long-haired Victorian sages bought the universe,

while breezing on their trust funds through the world. (55)

Lowell was born into a family that belonged and still belongs to America's upper middle class, a New England family of governors, factory-owners, scientists, politicians, poets etc., one of the strongholds of the "American" ideals of "liberty and equality", conservative or moderately liberal. Lowell was from the beginning out of touch with material reality, with the lower classes and hard day-to-day manual work. He was brought up with books, middle class moral and behavioural standards and
given a typical middle class education finishing at Harvard and Kenyon in the mid and late 30s.

Against all this he revolted quite early. His middle class surroundings, polished but superficial, sent him in search of various compensations. The most important was an interest in "Poetry" and a heavy leaning towards orthodox religion. At this point of time, disillusioned with religion, he uses poetry to express his revolt against his ancestors. The "conspicuous waste of our grandparents" and the ignorance and indifference they exhibited to the real issues of their time anger the poet considerably. Cushioned by their inherited wealth, "trust funds" they were impervious to the agonies of the world.

"When the Vatican made Mary's Assumption dogma/the crowds at San Pietro screamed Papa;" The elevation of the bodily assumption of the Virgin to the status of dogma in 1950 seemed a gratuitous slap in the face of rationalism; for the event in question is not only irrational, like all miracles, but uncanonical and of little consequence theologically. But behind the blind gestures of worship and self-abnegation that tradition can still compel, it is the voice of Mussolini, of secular politics manipulating pump that really speaks. "Pilgrims still kissed Saint Peter's brazen sandal / The Duce's lynched, bare, booted skull still spoke."

Lowell imagines Mary as a brilliantly coloured jungle bird and then raises these questions: "Who could believe this? Who could understand?" The dogma is deliberately made corporeal, mocking it by turning it into a strictly terrestrial secular phenomenon. The poet succeeds in fusing Mary's ascent with the attempted ascent of Mount Everest, and both prove to be problematical. The closing lines of this stanza make Staples observe that "people remain what they have always been, idolaters of power, worshippers of mere fetishes, whether religious like St. Peter's brazen sandal or secular like the "martyred" Mussolini's relics" (70). "The lights of science couldn't
hold a candle / to Mary risen - at one miraculous stroke, / angel wing'd, gorgeous as
a jungle-bird!"

According to Williamson, "the similarity of the Guards' pikes to mountain-
climbing equipment suggests a less obvious connection between the inert mass of the
mountain, which the climbers traverse, and the submissive masses of humanity, whose
dulled, deprived and war-ridden lives bear the burden of all achieved cultures and
empires" (93).

Finally, the poet ponders over the world of classical antiquity. There again he finds
only contradictions, disparity between ideals and behaviour. Lowell basically differs
from other poets like Stevens, Yeats, Rilke and Ezra Pound in whose poems a
predilection for the past is very much evident. According to Hofmannsthal, "this
preference has to do with the poetic imagination, which is "conservative" because the
past is less abstract than the future" (qtd. in Hamburger 111). But in Lowell's lines,
the past is made to sound as bad and murderous as the present. The ravages of the
Greek and Roman empires are as terrible as the ruinous state of post-World War
Europe. The poet finds Ulysses to be a man like Mussolini, power-thirsty bringing
destruction to his own men. By fusing Mussolini, Pope and Ulysses together, Lowell
is able to show that the Greek and the Roman civilizations and our present civilization
exhibit the same kind of destructive violence.

The morning sun, Apollo, transforms each of the bleak moon-lit peaks of Alps
into a Parthenon, the sacred temple of Greek Goddess Minerva who was the Goddess
of both Wisdom and War. Minerva was "Parthenos" or Virgin born miraculously
without a mother. Shelley describes the War Goddess thus: "... From his awful head
/ whom Jove brought forth, in war like armour drest, / Golden, all radiant." But the
train cannot carry Lowell to the heights once held by Hellas, because
There were no tickets for that altitude
once held by Hellas, when the Goddess stood,
prince, pope, philosopher and golden bough,
pure mind and murder at the scything prow -
Minerva, the miscarriage of the brain. (56)

Williamson points out that,
the "altitude" represented by this vision, like that of Everest, cannot be
reached by buying a ticket, or by the mechanical conjuring tricks
Mussolini and Pope Pius employ; but Lowell, by now, questions the
desirability of reaching it at all. The height of Hellas, or of the
Renaissance, produced Machiavelli's prince, Cesare Borgia, and the
venal, simoniac popes, as easily as Plato; and the Golden Bough,
Aeneas's ticket to the supernatural, gave him both an assurance of
immortality and divine order and the mission to create civilization by
war (93-94).

Does Lowell here allude to the fact that behind America's greatness also lies many
great wars fought with Aeneas-like zeal? In a recent book A Country Made by War
Geoffrey Perret points out the war-prone tendencies of American civilization- -The
American Revolution, the war of 1812, the Civil War, the Spanish - American War,
the Mexican War, World War I, World War II, Korea and Vietnam- -a remarkable
record for a politically stable country that considers itself peace-loving. The final
chapter of this book is aptly titled as "Tomorrow Began Yesterday." The history of
yesterday was a record of wars, so would be tomorrow's. When the "Pure Mind;'
intelligence and wisdom misjudge events, "murder at the scything prow" results. "Now
Paris, our black classic, breaking up / like killer kings on an Etruscan cup" (56). The
concluding imagist couplet is worthy of Pound. Lowell's use of "Etruscan" recalls Milton's description of Satan who

. . . stood and called

His legions, angel forms, who lay entranced,

Thick as autumnal leaves that strew the brooks

In Vallombrosa, where the Etrurian shades

High over-arched embower; (PL 1 300-4)

Lowell is also a fallen angel, fallen from Rome's religious grace. But an impending Armageddon threatens his chosen city Paris too. It is "breaking up." Like his earlier poem "The Exile's Return" where the "lily-stands burgeon the risen Rhineland" or the later poem "Fall 1961" where his one "point of rest is the orange and black Oriole's swinging nest" Lowell ends "Beyond the Alps" on a note of affirmation, Paris is still a classic, "Black" though it may be, refining itself constantly and enduring.

In "Beyond the Alps," the real events of the real world (the Papal decree that Mary never died but, like Christ, went to Heaven whole, the failure of the Swiss to climb Mount Everest) and the personal events (grand parents breezing on their trust funds through the world), fuse together well. But Lowell's world does not offer him the security his father's, his grand father's world offered. "My father began to receive his first quarterly payments from the Mason-Myers Julian-James Trust Fund, sums 'not grand enough to corrupt us," Mother explained, "but sufficient to prevent Daddy from being entirely at the mercy of his salary" (LS 21).

But Lowell's world is one where everyone lives with the threat of nuclear holocaust and hence "no securities in life." The poem merits an extensive treatment, because it is simultaneously public and private both in what it says and in the way it says it.
In "Beyond the Alps" Lowell's imagination centred on Mussolini, the Fascist dictator, Italian Prime Minister and a military hero. In the next poem "Inauguration Day; January 1953," he shifts his focus on to Dwight D. Eisenhower, the 34th president of the U.S., the supreme commander of the Allied forces and also a military hero. Military splendour had always fascinated Lowell. In "91, Revere Street" his autobiographical memoir he writes that even as a child, "My real 'love' as Mother used to insist to all new visitors, was toy soldiers... I enjoyed being allowed to draw Father's blunt dress sword, and I was proud of our Major Marocoi" (LS 22-23). In "Commander Lowell" he wrote:

And I, bristling and manic,
sulked in the attic,
and got two hundred
French generals by name,
from A to V - from Augereau to Vandamme.
I used to dope myself asleep,
naming those unpronounceables like sheep. (76)

But the adult Lowell realized that military grandeur always went hand in hand with senseless destruction and violence, and that military heroes do not become good heads of state. Mussolini's Fascist slogan was "Believe, Obey and Combat" whereas Eisenhower's democratic slogan was, "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity." The ideologies they represented were opposites, but both engineered military feats that resulted in the loss of innocent lives and neither was a good administrator.

On November 4, 1952 Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower was elected U.S. President, but Lowell's sympathies were with the Democratic nominee Adlai E. Stevenson. Though Stevenson waged a vigorous campaign and his speeches were widely applauded for their thoughtful eloquence and wit, there were strong
undercurrents of anti-intellectualism in the country and the popular appeal of war-time hero general Dwight D. Eisenhower proved irresistible to the public. Disappointed, Lowell wrote to Allen Tate on November 5, 1952: "Ike is a sort of symbol to me of America's unintelligent side - all fitness, muscles, smiles and banality. And Stevenson was so terribly better than one had a right to expect. We too feel too hurt to laugh" (qtd. in Hamilton 197). Feeling too hurt to laugh, Lowell wrote these lines expressing his discontent over the choice "and the Republic summons Ike, / the mausoleum in her heart" (57) in "Inauguration Day: January 1953." In the poem, Lowell pessimistically compares Eisenhower's future Presidency to the misguided leadership of such military heroes as Stuyvesant and Grant:

The snow had buried Stuyvesant.

The subways drummed the vaults. I heard
the El's green girders charge on Third,
Manhattan's truss of adamant,
that groaned in emline, slumped on want . . . . (57)

The verse form is that of a Petrarchan sonnet, and in Hart Crane style, demanding extremely close attention, because it relies on metaphors that are concerned not with logic but with the associative significance of words. The statue of Peter Stuyvesant, the founder of New York, is symbolically buried under the snow for the occasion. Manhattan island, the centre of New York's social and commercial life is seen 'trussed' between the subways beneath it and the 'El' or elevated railway overhead; Cold Harbour was where Grant gained victory over Lee at the end of the Civil War. He was elected as the 18th President of the United States. But during Grant's two terms as President, scandals obscured the positive aspects of his presidency.

Yes, nothing could matter more than who is in the White House . . . I wish Stevenson had been elected. May be he would have done nothing
(I don't believe this) but at least he would have registered what he was doing. I can't imagine him not losing a night's sleep over Hiroshima even if he did drop the bomb. I think he might not have (37-38).

Grant's statue is lifeless; his sword permanently fixed in its groove. "... Grant! / Horseman, your sword is in the groove" (57). Here Lowell echoes Yeats's lines from "under Ben Bulben." "Cast a cold eye / On life, on death / Horseman, pass by:" (lines 93-95 p., 401). But Lowell's "Horseman" is an immobile equestrian statue. What Wallace Stevens says about the statue of Andrew Jackson in his essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" is applicable to Grant's statue. According to Stevens, "the statue is deadening rather than inspiring because it is neither of imagination nor of reality" (qtd. in North 263). Even the stars are "fixed" and lifeless: "Look, the fixed stars, all just alike / as lack-land atoms, split apart." According to Thomas R. Edwards:

The splitting of the fixed stars is a rich image: fixed stars are navigational marks, which at this Ultima thule of dead winter lose their power of guidance; they suggest the field of stars in the American flag, regular but characterless representations of human interests and purposes that strain against the political abstractions holding them together, as they strained when North fought South, as the City now strains at its truss; ... The public situation of January 1953 is in the poem - Eisenhower, the Korean War, the inner divisiveness of the McCarthy era, and so on. (218-219).

The country gets what she wants, (she has elected Eisenhower) and what she deserves. Lowell examines the event not as an outsider but as a participant, as a concerned citizen of the country.
Prior to his victory, Eisenhower had criticized the unpopular Korean war and announced his intention to visit Korea, if elected. In the song Lowell wrote immediately after Eisenhower's victory he said:

My ghosts have told me something new
I'm marching to Korea;
I cannot tell you what I'll do
Crusading's the idea

Yankee Doodle keep it up etc. (qtd. in Hamilton 197)

Later in "Memories of West Street and Lepke" Lowell talks about Eisenhower's America which has given up its ideals for material prosperity. He wrote:

where even the man
scavenging filth in the back alley trash cans,
has two children, a beach wagon, a helpmate,
and is a "Young Republican." (91)

George W. Nitchie is of the opinion that, "in Lowell's poems, both political and personal events take on the same patterns, become aspects of the same historically and morally conditioned forces" (119). Thus "Inauguration Day: January 1953" is political, in the recognizable sense of the word; so too, though in a perspective of fictional history, is "Endecott and the Red Cross" (from The Old Glory); and "Commander Lowell: 1887-1950", a later poem in LS is almost embarrassingly personal, summarizing much of the prose reminiscences of "91, Revere Street". But they all interlock in the fable of failure that all three present. Endecott puts it succinctly, if in an explicitly political context:

I now understand statecraft:

a statesman can either work
with merciless efficiency,
and leave a desert,

or he can work in a hit and miss fashion,

and leave a cess-pool. (The Old Glory p., 41)

Many commentators on "Inauguration Day" have noticed the Grant-Eisenhower parallel: two military men whose peace time Presidencies led the country into mediocrity and general decline.

Eisenhower's first inauguration suggests Grant, the other soldier-president, whose merciless efficiency carried the Wilderness Campaign through, but lost seven thousand men in an hour at Cold Harbor and whose hit-and-miss administration of affairs led to public scandal and private bankruptcy. And Commander Lowell, evidently incapable of merciless efficiency, hits and misses his way out of the Navy, through a descending series of jobs, and into the "piker speculation" that squanders sixty thousand dollars in three years; his legacy is not exactly a cesspool, but it is the unstable compound of affection and contempt that in LS marks Lowell's feeling for his father (Nitchie 120).

What happened to Endecott, to Grant and to Lowell's father evidently is of the same generic sort, and its particular sort does not admit of an easy division between the political and the non-political:

... With seamanlike celerity,

Father left the Navy, and deeded Mother his property.

He was soon fired. Year after year,

he still hummed "Anchors aweigh" in the tub -

whenever he left a job,

he bought a smarter car.
Night after night,

*a la clarte deserte de sa lampe,*

he slid his ivory Annapolis slide rule

across a pad of graphs -

piker speculations! In three years

he squandered sixty thousand dollars. (77)

Thomas R. Edwards, views "Inauguration Day: 1953," as imagistically built upon

'enclosures'- -burial by snow, the subway's vaults, the truss of the El, the interred union dead, the sword in the groove- -foreshadowing the "mausoleum" of the last line" (217). Eddins observes that Lowell carries on the tradition of Yeats as exhibited in "Easter 1916," "Parnell's funeral" and other poems which found historical human destiny to be immanent in the crisis of the state, thus making these crises a crucial focus for any poet with aspirations to centrality (41).

Just as Yeats immortalized the Irish fighters for freedom in "Easter 1916," so also Lowell has immortalized the American military heroes- -the snow had buried Stuyvesant / Cold Harbor's blue immortals, Grant! / and the Republic Summons Ike,"

Owing to Lowell's and Yeats's verses MacDonagh and MacBride, Connolly and Pearse, Ike, Grant and Stuyvesant, all have become part of literature and their names shall stand "to times in hope." MacDonagh and MacBride / And Connolly and Pearse / Now and in time to be," ("Easter 1916" lines 75-77).

In "Inauguration Day: January 1953" Lowell was the deeply disappointed intellectual standing in the snow covered, "disappointed" New York (New York went solidly for Adlai Stevenson). In the poem, "A Mad Negro Soldier Confined at Munich" he is a mad negro soldier imprisoned in the historical Munich. Of Auden, Lowell wrote, "He is historical now as
Munich. Munich was the scene of the notorious Beerhall Putsch when Hitler gained the leadership of the Nazi party and later in 1938 the scene of Sudeten Czechoslovakia's betrayal when Chamberlain and Daladier met Hitler to celebrate the triumph of appeasement. Later in "Munich 1938," a poem in Notebook 1967-68 Lowell wrote,

Hitler, Mussolini, Daladier, Chamberlain,
that historic confrontation of the great -
Voluble on one thing, they hated war -
each lost there pushing the war ahead twelve months (lines 1-4 p., 25)

His imagination descends from the lofty realms of great men and cataclysmic events of "Inauguration Day" to the "confined" world of the "mad negro soldier" in "A Mad Negro Soldier Confined at Munich." In "Art and Evil" Lowell quotes Rimbaud's lines from "A Season in Hell" where Rimbaud says that "With a convict's vision I saw the blue sky and blossoming labour of the country side." Lowell sees the world with a confined "black" soldier's vision (135).

Jane McCabe in her thesis discusses the significance of the blackness of the soldier. She considers, the "blackness" to be "central" to the poem's meaning. The soldier's race is obviously an alienating factor that further extends the isolation of his madness. He is a soldier, in a war about racism, fighting on the side that found it evil, yet in his own country he has surely suffered discrimination and in defeated Germany is confined to the "Colored Wards." She remarks, "the poem can only intend indictment of the alliance which in the midst of moral rhetoric about democracy and moral outrage about Nazi racism, would still inflict the barbarism of prejudice on its own members" (135).
The situation here is similar to the pre-independence days in India, when the Indians protested against the second class citizenship that was accorded to them by the British, yet would treat a section of their own countrymen as "untouchables."

In 1963, in his famous speech "I have a dream", Martin Luther King said, "Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand, signed the Emancipation Proclamation... One hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land" (385).

His alienation is witnessed not only by his confinement following the Second World War and not only by his colour, but also and most poignantly, by the drubbing given to him by two other black American inmates. That insanity is the nature of the environment as well as the state of his mind is indicated by his claim that he receives attention from those with whom he was supposed to be at war, "A Krant DP" and a "Fraulein." Analyst and philosopher Erich Fromm also feels that "Society" is the patient that must be cured. Fromm maintains that nations possess an innate social character to which their citizens must conform. He does not agree that man is trapped in Freudian sexual dilemmas, for if the institutions that man creates can be changed for the better, there is hope that the state of man can be changed as well (Great Events 58).

The soldier's insanity offers him a clear vision of the inhumanity of the society he lives in and ironically provides him with a chance to rebel against its strictures.

"A Mad Negro Soldier confined at Munich", the Browningesque dramatic monologue has six regular four line stanzas closely rhymed and in the traditional iambic pentameter metrical pattern. The theme of the poem is the tragedy of war. Though the poem talks about an unknown American soldier who has lost his mind owing to the tragedy of war, it was inspired by Lowell's own sojourn in a Munich jail,
following a severe mental breakdown he suffered, while participating in a seminar on American studies at Salzburg. The American soldier is Lowell himself.

The mad soldier dwells on sensual thoughts with unrestrained abandon, signalling the breakdown of societal censors in his mind. The soldier's obsessive pleasure in a German Fraulein being stalked by lieutenants of the "colored wards" and in his own relations with her in the prohibited English garden, "I had her six times in the English Garden," exhibits that "breakdown." "And it is impossible not to associate the 'subnormality of the boot-black heart' as well as 'slaves of habit' with racial as well as mental oppression" (McCabe 136).

The mad negro is speaking from a void of isolation; he and his fellow prisoners are like fish, "fancy minnows" in a tank, the outside world wholly dissolved. But as Jonathan Raban observes:

For Lowell, no such dissolution, or mad objectivity, is possible—though its distant presence is constantly being hinted at. The tragic predicament of the negro soldier and the tragic force of his writing are opposites in kind, though mutually complementary. The world is there to be reckoned with, not moved away like a stone in front of a cave, or a tomb (22-23).

In "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow" Lowell moves from the tragic predicament of the alienated black soldier to the tragic predicament of his uncle, who faces imminent death due to the "incurable Hodgkin's disease." He also reckons with and comes to terms with the world of his ancestors. Painful though the recollections of his ancestor's death are, he does not push them away like a stone in front of a cave or a tomb, but faces them unflinchingly.

Lowell confronts his ancestors directly as Yeats does in the following lines of the poem "Are you Content":
I call on those that call me son,

Grandson, great grandson,

On uncles, aunts, great-uncles or great aunts,

To judge what I have done

Have I, that put it into words,

Spoilt what old bones have sent?

Eyes spiritualised by death can judge,

I cannot, but I am not content. (lines 1-8 pp. 370-371)

"My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow" shows clearly that Lowell is not content with his lineage and his ancestors. He rebels against the misshaping of individual lives and energies by families, class codes and ultimately civilization itself. Though he continually rejects his ancestors, he never gets to be free of the illusion of superiority deriving from his family background—"There are no Mayflower / screwballs in the Catholic Church."

The pressures of racial discrimination and irrational military duties pushed a sane individual to the brink of madness in "A Mad Negro Soldier Confined at Munich." The pressures of patriarchy are equally harmful as is shown in "My Last Afternoon." When he describes his powerful domineering grandfather and his ways, he is also making a critical statement about the destructive demands of our patriarchal society.

"My Last Afternoon" demonstrates most of the qualities quintessential to Lowell’s confessional poetry and gives a description of Lowell’s childhood stay at his grandfather’s house when he first acquired knowledge of "death".

In "Composition" Kamala Das writes on the same theme:

Before the red house that had stood for innocence crumbled and the old woman died
The tragedy of life
is not death but growth
the child growing into adult (Collected Poems p.111)

"My Last Afternoon" describes the child's transition from innocence to terrified knowledge of conflict and death, the painful growth of the child Lowell growing into the adult Lowell. The poem is frankly autobiographical with real life characters and elements of plot maintaining a factuality throughout specifying names, dates and places.

1922: the stone porch of my Grandfather's summer house

I

"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. (66)

The poet's mother and father and their authority are rejected by young Bob in the very first line of this poem. The forty year old poet is laughing at his father and mother though he knows their influence is a limitation he can never fully overcome.

"Tocky tock, tocky tock / Clumped our Alpine, Edwardian Cuckoo clock, / slunk with strangled, wooden game."

In the lines quoted above George McFadden observes a comic foreboding appropriate to grandfather and his power to dominate. "The clock is slung with strangled wooden game. Grandfather's children Charlotte, Devereux and Sarah are like those wooden figures, Edwardian objects belonging to a Victorian parent surviving mechanically" (98).
And Lowell’s dual theme of the connections between the past and the present gains force from his use of a narratorial double consciousness; the authorial awareness includes both the consciousness of the remembered child and that of the remembering adult poet. "Tocky tock, tocky tock clumped our Alpine, Edwardian cuckoo clock," the childlike mimicry contrasts with the adult knowledge capable of identifying the clock as Alpine and Edwardian. "Like my Grandfather, the decor / was manly, comfortable, / overbearing, disproportioned." Lowell recalls the decor of his grandfather’s house-- its social and cultural exhibits-- the snapshots of his Liberty Bell silver mine; the photos of his school at "Stuttgart am Neckar," Like most wealthy Americans of his generation and social class, Lowell’s grandfather was educated in Germany. His "overbearing" grandfather belonged to the "long haired Victorian sages" who breezed on their trust funds through the world.

The image of the child Lowell sitting on the stone porch and touching the cold black earth and the warm pile of lime left by the farmer cementing a root house under the hill, binds the whole poem together. The image of the conflation of life (the earth) and its irredeemable decay (as lime devours corpses) portrays the mutability of man. The details of the origin of the name of the farm in the satirically capitalized "Social Register" indicates pretentiousness. The unsettling recollection of the puppy’s gruesome death, "paralysed from gobbling toads," points to the close proximity between life and death, black earth and lime.

Mark Rudman points out that the whole poem is scaled to the child’s perceptions:

The connection between the perceptions is not at all forced and the recognition of mortality at the end has evolved--literally--out of substance--"earth and lime." Lowell has followed the trail of his own imagination through his perception of these details and his attention to
these subtle and unconscious signs of anxiety and terror in the child (63).

A young child’s first exposure to the knowledge of death gets expressed in Hopkins’s “Spring and Fall” and John Crowe Ransom’s “Janet Waking.”

Old chucky, Old chucky! she cried.
Running across the world upon the grass
To chucky’s house, and listening. But alas,
Her chucky had died. (Norton Anthology lines 9-12 p.,475)

Hopkins’s Margaret is as desolate as Ransom’s Janet:

Margaret, are you grieving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?
Leaves, like the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?
Ah! as the heart grows older
It will come to such sights colder
By and by, nor spare a sigh
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;
And yet you will weep and know why. (Norton Anthology lines 3-9 p., 105)

Margaret grieves over “Goldengrove unleaving” in Hopkins’s “Spring and Fall” and the child Lowell “weeps and knows” death when he learns his uncle is dying.

My Uncle was dying at twenty-nine.
"You are behaving like children,"
said my Grandfather,
when my Uncle and Aunt left their
three baby daughters,
and sailed for Europe on a last honeymoon... (70)

Grandfather's dictatorial tone indicates his "overbearing" attitude to his disobedient dying son. Consideration is a virtue that Grandfather does not possess, "I Cowered in terror. / I wasn't a child at all - / unseen and all-seeing, I was Agrippina / in the Golden House of Nero... (70). Staples observes that the classical reference here makes plain that Lowell is chronicling not only the death of a single household, but that of a gilded age as well (80). But why does the child Lowell imagine himself to be Agrippina threatened by her son Nero? Williamson's answer is that it is Lowell's way of saying that the elders whom he has considered omnipotent, force death into his world by their own helplessness in the face of it (70).

Winslow and by extension, his farm, defines place, establishes order but also imposes it on those that come within his domain. His measuring of his son's consecutive heights seems as clearly an act of willed control as of concrete observation.

Lowell recalls, "Near me was the white measuring-door / my Grandfather had pencilled with my Uncle's heights" (70). / and "... All about me / were the works of my Grandfather's hands" (66-67).

The poem "Dunbarton" pursues more closely Lowell's attachment to his grandfather. "He was my Father / I was his son" (72). "Dunbarton" set in the family graveyard enables Lowell to particularize his reflections on the present and the past and to relate himself actively to the continuity between the living and the dead. "Dunbarton" as Staples points out, "stands for family history, for tradition, and of course, the permanence of the grave" (73). And according to Vivian Smith:

The poem pinpoints four small specific moments that evoke the closeness and the quality of unforced acceptance of their relationship:
the drive to Dunbarton with the grandfather looking like an admiral:
the raking up of leaves from the graves and lighting a bonfire to defy
the weather; Lowell's stabbing with his grandfather's cane for the newts
with which he identifies himself; and finally his memory of cuddling 'like
a paramour' in his grandfather's bed (59).

Grandfather's cane stands as a symbol for the oppressive patriarchal authority and
physical power.

I borrowed Grandfather's cane

carved with the names and altitudes

Of Norwegian mountains he had scaled -
more a weapon than a crutch.

... I saw myself as a young newt,
neurasthenic, scarlet

and wild in the wild coffee-colored water. (73)

Arthur Winslow's authoritarian nature is never forgotten. As an adult visiting the
family farm which he now owns, Lowell observes, "... Grandpa still waves his stick
/ like a policeman; ... Even at noon here the formidable / Ancien Regime still keeps
nature at a distance" (74). Philip Green in The Pursuit of Inequality comments on
patriarchy:

"Patriarchy" turns out to be, not a natural inevitability, but the hope of
ideologues who are afraid of change and who want to persuade the
rest of us that the privileges they enjoy are "necessary." But the absurd
society is not that in which the best men do not lead (or represent or
administer) but that in which they do: in which half of the available
talent, and importantly different kinds of value articulation, remain
unexpressed. Amidst all the talk of stagnation and even decay in advanced Capitalist societies, not least of them the United States, one of the most obvious causes of all is hardly ever spoken of: that barriers of race, class and sex repress the productive skills of a major portion of the human race (161-162).

Grandfather’s omniscient, patriarchal dominance shapes the poem "Dunbarton". According to Barbara Bellow Watson, "Literature teaches that power is relative and confused; that power is everywhere in a variety of forms and degrees; that all our formulations about power are too simple" (qtd. in Newton 14). Grandfather’s influence is one such form of power dominance and the way women are dominated by men and approached with complaint and condescension is another form of power dominance. The husband Lowell in “Man and Wife” adopts such a tone of complaint and condescension while addressing his wife, Elizabeth Hardwick:

you were in your twenties, and I,

once hand on glass

and heart in mouth,

outdrank the Rahvs in the heat

of Greenwich Village, fainting at your feet -

too boiled and shy

and poker-faced to make a pass,

while the shrill verve

of your invective scorched the traditional South.

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. (93)

The poem "Man and Wife" begins in the present and presents an archetypal situation: husband and wife face the beginning of another day not after a happy night of love, but after sleepless hours of argument, hysteria, and anxiety, made bearable only by tranquilizers. Though similar in form, "Man and Wife" differs tonally from William Carlos Williams's "Asphodel" where Williams regales his wife with memories of their life together and assertions of abiding love, all as their "eyes fill / with tears", though both the poems as Axelrod points out are "confessions" (96).

The magnolias in blossom are murderous and the poet has been saved for the fourth time by his wife, who has brought him back from "the kingdom of the mad." Saved by his wife, and tamed by "Miltown", he still resents his wife's "loving" but "merciless" rebukes. Even when he recollects the past, and remembers the time when he "outdrank the Rahvs" (Philip Rahv was the editor of Partisan Review) and fainted at the feet of his future wife, Elizabeth Hardwick, he does not fail to mention that "the shrill verve of her invective scorched the traditional south." As McCabe rightly points out, the world expects women to have "responsible love," whereas men are "free to play or free to slack / shift / past the reach of ridicule," (65) and in the companion piece "To Speak of Woe That is in Marriage" the "hopped up husband drops his home disputes and hits the streets to cruise for prostitutes." Elizabeth Hardwick played the role the world expected her to, and was Lowell's anchor through his attacks of madness and affairs with other women.

"Responsible" her love has been, "Satisfied" it is not. "Sleepless," she holds her pillow to her "hollows like a child." He merely "holds her hand" in "The Man and Wife" but in "To Speak of Woe That is in Marriage," he stalls over her like an elephant, gored by the "climacteric of his want."
According to Vivian Smith,

The superb final image "Gored by the climacteric of his want / he stalls above me like an elephant" suggests the clumsy brutality of the husband's love making, while 'stalls' suggests both his awkward positioning for the act of love and his failure to give his wife sexual satisfaction. 'Elephant' combines a phallic suggestion with the sense of heavy awkwardness. It is a poem of a woman's radical dissatisfaction with her lot, where all respect and concern between the couple have disappeared (75).

Anne Sexton's Poem "Man and Wife" also speaks of the woes of marriage where the most essential ingredient "love" in marriage is not present.

_To speke of Wo_

_that is in marriage . . ._

_We are not lovers._

_We do not even know each other._

_We look alike_

_but we have nothing to say._

_We are like pigeons . . . (lines 1-5)_

In Anne Sexton's poem, women are "pigeons" and in Kamala Das's "trained circus dogs":

_Here in my husband's home, I am a trained circus dog_

_Jumping my routine hoops each day. (Collected Poems 1 p.,59)_

"To Speak of Woe that is in Marriage" an inner Catullian monologue intensely expressing "hate" takes its title from Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" -the wife resentfully reflecting on her husband's infidelities.

"Experience, though noon auctoritee"
Were in this world, is right ynough for me

To speke of Wo that is in mariagge: (lines 1-3)

The Wife of Bath is the remarkable culmination of many centuries of an antifeminism, that was particularly nurtured by the medieval church. In their eagerness to exalt the spiritual ideal of chastity, certain theologians developed an idea of womankind that was nothing less than monstrous. According to these, insatiable lecherousness and indomitable shrewishness (plus a host of attendant vices) were characteristic of women.

The picture that we get about the status of women in India in the earlier centuries is very much the same:

In India the low esteem in which women were held was exacerbated by the belief that the spiritual needs of women were nonexistent. While the laws of Manu— not entirely unrepresentative of other religious treatises—comprehensively contemplated the lifelong mental, verbal and bodily acts of males; their likely effect on men’s transmigration; and their possible states of reincarnation, women were totally ignored. Their spiritual and mental needs were of no account. Their minds and souls were non-entities; unworthy of consideration (Carroll 25).

Tamil tradition tells of three literary academies (Sangam) which met at Madurai. The earliest of these was attended by gods and legendary sages, and all its works have perished. Of the second, there survives only the early Tamil grammar, Tolkappiyam. The poets of the Third Sangam, on the other hand, wrote the "Eight Anthologies" (Ettutogoi), which are the greatest monument of ancient Tamil literature, as well as a number of later works.
And this quotation from the "Eight Anthologies" is the plaint of a neglected wife:

My garment smells of ghee and frying curry,
and is stained with dirt and lampblack.
My shoulders stink with the sweat of the child
Whom I carry upon them and feed at my breast.
I cannot face my lord, who, in gay attire,
rides in his car to the street of the harlots. (qtd. in Basham 468)

The Greek poets of the Seventh century B.C. did not have much respect for women either- -Hipponax, the short, thin, lame and deformed Greek poet could not attract any woman and avenged himself on the whole sex by writing a terrible satire "A woman gives a man two days of pleasure, the day he marries and the day he carries out her corpse" (qtd. in Chaitanya 27). Another Greek poet of the same era, Semonides, swore that no husband ever passed through a day without a word of censure from his wife (qtd. in Chaitanya 25).

The world's approach to women hasn't changed much over the centuries. Here is Lowell complaining about his wife's nagging-. . . . . your old fashioned tirade-

- / loving, rapid, merciless-" and his mother's frustrated self.

Her voice was still electric

with a hysterical, unmarried panic,

When she read to me from the Napoleon book (76).

In the poem "Das ewig Weibliche" from Notebook 1967-68 Lowell calls women

"wasp, bee and swallow."

Serfs with a finer body and tinier brain -

who asks the swallows to do drudgery,

clean, cook, pick up their ton of dust per diem?
Knock on their homes, they go up tight with fear,
fasting about all morning past their young,
small as wasps fuming in their ash leaf ball. (lines 1-5 p.,130)

Lowell's women are small and diminutive. McCabe notes that it is not that his women are simplified, it is that they are diminished. And consequently, the language in the poem about women tends to be flat, dull and unengaging (11). "Oh, my Petite" (93).

Even W.B. Yeats considered women hysterical. "I have heard that hysterical woman say / They are sick of the palette and fiddle bow." The bitterness visible in "Lapis Lazuli" is present in Wallace Stevens's lines too which hold his wife "responsible" for the estrangement between them.

Your yes her no, your no her yes. The words

Make little difference, for being wrong

And wronging her, if only as she thinks,

You never can be right . . .

That you are innocent

And love her still, still leaves you in the wrong . . . (Opus Posthumous 30-31)

The Wife, the lover, the woman can only wail in protest. "This screw ball might kill his wife, / then take the pledge. / Oh the monotonous meanness of his lust . . . ./ It's the injustice . . . he is so unjust" . . . (94). The "injustice" of the male dominated world, ("he's so unjust") drives women to the brink of despair. But many women like the "lover" in Anne Sexton's "For My Lover Returning to His Wife" face the injustice boldly.

Let's face it. I have been momentary

A luxury . . .

Climb her like a monument, step after step
As for me, I am a water colour

I wash off. (The Complete Poems lines 12-16 p., 188) "To Speak of Woe" can be compared to Ibsen's Ghosts. Mrs. Alving had put up with the profligacy of her husband for the sake of tradition only to have her son suffer. Now the wife is putting up with the profligacy and insanity of her husband and suffers. According to Mazzaro "the poem seems to ask under what conditions is a woman justified in walking out, as Ibsen's Nora did"? (117) Lowell leaves the ultimate answer to the conscience of his audience. Will the wife always remain a sacrifice to his lust or walk out as Nora did in Ibsen's Doll's House?

Lowell gives a more complete rendering of married life than any modern poet other than Frost. At times, one wonders whether it is worth it. But Lowell accepts woman as the "monster loved for what you are" (155) and prays for the "Warmth to live, / and face the household fire" (149).

Lowell's serious problems with his parents led to tempestuous marriages which were characterized by infidelity, alcoholism, violence and mental breakdown. Lowell was divorced twice. He felt women were important as support system but did not respect them, and was more interested in friendships with men who devoted themselves to poetry. He depended on women to care for him, to provide a stable world and to make his existence possible. "Cured I am frizzled, stale and small." It is his wife who pulled him out of the "Kingdom of the Mad," and gave him the warmth of a home to recuperate. Recuperating, "I neither spin nor toil." But he always behaved atrociously, then felt remorseful and finally wrote poems to exorcise his guilt. The poet saw love as a struggle of clashing wills in which man either maintains a precarious dominance or is overcome by humiliating defeat (Meyers 3).
The "Clash of Wills," and the resulting dominance of man over the woman leads to "loss of will and reason" of the woman. Here is Kamala Das speaking of Woe in her marriage:

... you called me wife
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason . . .

(The Old Playhouse and Other Poems p.,1)

"Waking in the Blue" talks of the time when Lowell lost his "Will and Reason." Lowell's repeated respites in mental hospitals, his perpetual struggle to stay sane provided substance for many poems. His three months' stay during 1954 at McLean's became the focus of "Waking in the Blue." Again the stress is on the public as well as personal wounds.

Like the speaker in the above mentioned poem accepting the role of being the obedient "Wife," "breaking saccharine into tea," or "offering vitamins at the right moments" the inmates at McLean's "Stanley," (Harvard all - American fullback) and "Bobbie," (Porcellian'29) accept their roles, and spend their days, swashbuckling in birthday suits and "slimming on sherbet and gingerale." If the wife's insanity was due to the monstrous ego" of the husband, their insanity was, according to Williamson, the result of an intense early narcissism, tied to achievements whose value does not carry very far beyond the confines of Harvard or of adolescence (75).

The world the poem describes is the bedroom-bathroom-corridor world of Bowditch Hall at fashionable McLean's sanatorium outside Boston. In these fifty lines of sustained colloquy he carries on with himself, he completely identifies himself with Bobby" and "Stanley," both of them Harvard graduates. The strain of staying at the
top, to remain first among equals ("Porcellian" is the most exclusive of final clubs at Harvard. Harvard itself is the oldest and one of the foremost U.S. educational institutions) has taken its toll and shattered them completely. Lowell is like them—a leading intellectual, and member of a distinguished Boston family searching like the B.U. Sophomore attendant (Lowell at the time of his mental illness was a member of the English faculty at B.U.) for "Meaning of Meaning." Lowell’s parents were from distinguished New England families, James Russell Lowell was his great grand uncle and Amy, Percival, and Abbott Lawrence Lowell were his distant cousins. The family and the society expected much from him.—The weight of the expectations, both familial and societal caused his mental breakdowns.

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.

Azure day
makes my agonized blue window bleaker.

Crows maundrel on the petrified fairway.

Absence! My heart grows tense
as though a harpoon were sparring for the kill
(This is the house for the "mentally ill.") (87)

Confined within the asylum, Lowell is able to see the "azure day" only through his "blue window." Prisoners and mental patients lose touch with the outside world and very often only the window is the link to the wide open world. In his autobiography, Jawaharlal Nehru wrote of his experiences in Naini prison:

In the daytime that wall even encroached on the sky and only allowed a glimpse of a narrow - bounded portion. With a wistful eye I looked,
"Upon that little tent of blue which prisoners call the sky, And at every
drifting cloud that went with sails of silver by" (218).

Perloff views the poem from Laingian perspective. R.D. Laing was noted for his view
that psychosis is a kind of healing process- -a sane response to insane environment.
Laing also agreed with the anthropologist Gregory Bateson that stressful and
contradictory situations or "double binds" especially within the family, could lead to
schizophrenia as a kind of defence of the self (qtd. in Perloff 169).

In this poem Lowell presents a cast of characters at once individual and typical.
The basic tension in the poem is between "Mayflower screw balls" and their Roman
Catholic attendants, between a Boston Brahmin tradition gone sour and the new
conformist Irish-Catholic bourgeoisie, between Harvard and Boston universities. One
wonders who is "saner"? Stanley, the one-time athlete "now sunk in his sixties," who
wears his crimson golf cap to bed and "thinks only of his figure" or the night attendant
whose mind is so overwhelmed by the subtle semantics of Ogden and Richards that
it has become a "mare's nest?" Or again, who is more ridiculous? Bobbie, once a
member of Harvard's elite Porcellian club, who looks like Louis XVI "without the wigs"
and "horses at chairs" or the solemn Catholic attendants with their "crew haircut" and
no nonsense "twinkle"? The poet himself identifies with Stanley and Bobbie, it is no
coincidence that he eats "a hearty New England breakfast" and struts about like a
proud cock. Like Stanley and Bobbie he is a "thoroughbred"- -of such pure and
unmixed stock that he can, ironically, no longer cope with ordinary reality. And Lowell
certainly was a "thoroughbred." "The Lowells talk to the Cabots / And the Cabots talk
only to God" (Cf.Introduction 16).

Thoreau realizing the societal pressures on individuals voiced his doubts: "Why
should we be in such desperate haste to succeed and in such desperate enterprises?
If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a
different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away" ("Walden" 1031). And that is exactly what Stanley, Bobbie and Lowell failed to do. And Lowell pays the price for his failure.

I strut in my turtle-necked French sailor's jersey
before the metal shaving mirrors,
and see the shaky future grow familiar
in the pinched, indigenous faces
of these thoroughbred mental cases,
twice my age and half my weight. (88)

During March of 1958 Lowell was allowed to spend the weekends at home, and by March 15, he was well enough to begin the now familiar round of repairing and explaining. Elizabeth Hardwick, as usual exhibiting "responsible love" made him comfortable and wrote on March 2, 1958 (March 1 was his forty-first birth day)
"yesterday, Saturday was his birth day and we went to the movies in the afternoon, bathed baby Harriet, . . ." (qtd. in Hamilton 253).

Three months, three months!
Is Richard now himself again?
Dimpled with exaltation,
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 . . . (89)

The nuclear family (the forgiving wife, the loving daughter) save him but he keeps no rank or station cured, he is frizzled, stale and small.
Enjoying the luxury of living at home after three months' long confinement at McLean's and idly watching the withered tulips "imported Dutchmen" the poet starts reminiscing. Memories of his imprisonment as conscientious objector of World War II flood his poetic being (They are not spontaneous overflow of feelings recollected in tranquility. They are the recollections of a troubled mind recalling unpleasant experiences of prison life. The mind's tranquility is only due to the tranquillizers, the new miracle drug of the fifties.) and the poem that sprang out of these recollections was "Memories of West Street and Lepke."

... Ought I to regret my seed time?
I was a fire breathing Catholic C.O.,
and made my manic statement,
telling off the state and president, and then
sat waiting sentence in the bull pen
beside a Negro boy with curlicues
of marijuana in his hair. (91)

C.G. Jung says, "I do not forget that my voice is but one voice, my experience a mere drop in the sea, my knowledge no greater than the visual field in a microscope, my mind's eye a mirror that reflects a small corner of the world and my ideas—-a subjective confession" (qtd. in Meek 54). Lowell's experiences in jail might have been a drop in the sea, his visual field limited to New York's tough West Street Jail but definitely his poetic voice was a powerful one. Later he raised his lone voice of protest against Mr. Johnson's Vietnam policy and refused to participate in President Johnson's White House festival. Dwight MacDonald wrote of that refusal, "Rarely has one person's statement of his moral unease about his Government's behavior had such public resonance" (qtd. in Axelrod 182). The need to create a sense of urgency is a common attribute that politics and poetry share. Poets and politicians are alike in the frantic force of their opinions. When either speaks his mind, he is like the Ancient Mariner; he seizes the public by the collar as if to say "Accept my perspective
and be converted." With that frantic sense of urgency Lowell made his "manic statement telling off the state and president" (34).

In his "manic statement" he said:

It is a fundamental principle of our American Democracy, one that distinguishes it from the demagoguery and herd hypnosis of the totalitarian tyrannies, that with us each individual citizen is called upon to make voluntary and responsible decisions on issues which concern the national welfare. I therefore realize that I am under the heavy obligation of assenting to the prudence and justice of our present objectives before I have the right to accept service in our armed forces. No matter how expedient I might find it to entrust my moral responsibility to the State, I realize that it is not permissible under a form of government which derives its sanctions from the rational assent of the governed (qtd. in Hamilton 89).

The "manic statement" resulted in his imprisonment when he was young. An echo of Thoreau can be discerned in Lowell's outburst of protest. Thoreau in Civil Disobedience laments the resignation of man's conscience to legislators. Making a steady appeal to higher laws he warns:

There will never be a really free and enlightened state, until the state comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly. I please myself with imagining a state at last which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor (243).

When the state refused to give importance to Lowell's opinions, he did not resign his conscience to legislators, but chose to go to jail.

The fire for fair justice that burned in him during his "seed time" never died down. The question, 'Ought I to regret my seed time?' is partly a rhetorical
self-indulgence, for the poem with its oddly comfortable Boston setting, only half-heartedly considers such a regret a possibility. Apart from criticising President Johnson in a Cold War symposium of the sixties, Lowell continuously chose positions similar to those of his "seed time." And Lowell’s response to Cassius Clay’s unwillingness to serve during the Vietnam war was, "Refusal to report to the army is certainly the most effective way a young man can protest an unjust war" (qtd. in Fein 75). A fire-breathing Catholic C.O. making a manic statement was able to identify himself with the fire-breathing Cassius Clay.

Like W.D. Snodgrass in "Heart’s Needle," Lowell sensitively brings together a troubled world, a self in turmoil, and the "saving" image of the growing daughter.

... When you come you bring
an egg dyed lavender
We shout along our bank to hear
Our voices returning from the hills to meet us. (Heart’s Needle pt.6 lines 5-8 p.49)

Lowell’s nine year old daughter was the revitalising force in his life.

In "Home After Three Months Away" Lowell was recuperating "I neither spin nor toil" but now he has recovered well enough to teach on "Tuesdays" and the rest of the time is spent in "book worming" in fresh laundered pajamas. The age is tranquillized by prosperity just as Lowell was tranquillized by "Miltown." Both the nation and the poet are complacent; they have lost their vitality. They can only look back and boast of the vigour they had in their "seed time." The scavenger’s wealth becomes a metaphor for the nation’s wealth and materialistic attitude:

Strolling, I yammered metaphysics with Abramowitz,
a jaundice-yellow ("It’s really tan")
and fly-weight pacifist,
so vegetarian,
he wore rope shoes and preferred fallen fruit.
He tried to convert Bioff and Brown, the Hollywood pimps, to his diet.

Hairy, muscular, suburban,

wearing chocolate double-breasted suits,

they blew their tops and beat him black and blue. (91-92)

The recollections of the prisoners' interaction with each other reveal the ethical contradictoriness of our society which punishes the aggressive conformist (Bioff and Brown) for his acquisitiveness while bearing down on the eccentric (Abramowitz) for his dislike of force, but allows the persecution of the eccentric by the conformist to go on in prison just as it does elsewhere. Lowell was sentenced for protesting against the allies taking the offensive on various fighting fronts, and for adopting ruthless tactics. Ernst Oscar Hapf, a Nazi, who tried to bomb the German consulate was also sentenced along with him. Society punishes both the man who protests against violence and the man who advocates violent measures, revealing the "ethical contradictoriness" of our society.

I was so out of things, I'd never heard

of the Jehovah's Witnesses. (92)

Lowell meets "Jehovah's Witness" in the prison. The Jehovah’s Witnesses, founded by Charles Taze Russell Centre their beliefs on millennial expectations and are known for their defiance of the state, especially in refusing to show allegiance to a sovereign other than Jehovah by not saluting the flag and by rejecting military service. "'Are you a C.O.?' I asked a fellow jailbird. / 'No' he answered, "I'm a J.W.""

A fellow inmate of Lowell's in West Street jail, in an interview with Ian Hamilton recollected this incident: "Lowell was in a cell next to Lepke, you know. Murder Incorporated, and Lepke says to him: "I'm in for killing, What are you in for?" 'Oh, I'm in for refusing to kill!' And Lepke burst out laughing. It was kind of ironic" (qtd. in Hamilton 91).
The real power of money and violence cutting across all claims of value and principle in American life becomes very clear. Though condemned to die, Lepke is still "Czar," still "segregated" enjoying privileges that are forbidden to the "common man." Further, these things are exactly what the conventionally respectable desire: the American way of life, an unexamined jumble of consumer goods, piety, patriotism. "A portable radio, a dresser, two toy American / flags tied together with a ribbon of Easter palm" (91). Lepke has organized, bureaucratized, depersonalized individual murder; America in the "tranquilized 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" toward its fate, unable and unwilling to change. The concluding phrase, "lost connections" seems to reflect not only on Lepke and official America, but on the poet himself. For he too suffers from an inability "to connect his inner identity with his social roles" (Williamson 82).

The "electric chair" i.e. death becomes an "oasis," an escape from the pressures of life. Both Freud and Marcuse predicted a resurgence of the death instinct in very advanced civilizations. Lepke is fascinated by "electric chair" and the nation by "nuclear bomb." Both the electric chair and nuclear bomb offer an escape route from "agonizing reappraisal." It was John Foster Dulles, Eisenhower's Secretary of state who used this phrase with reference to the nation's foreign policy. The phrase also applies to the decade when under the influence of Senator Joseph McCarthy, many men were forced to betray former political passions, to undergo some "agonizing reappraisal."

The phrase irks the critic Williamson. He feels that "rightly considered the phrase "agonizing reappraisal" was as grotesque when spoken by Dulles as when applied to Lepke" (82).
The diction of "Memories of West Street and Lepke" is concrete, particular, informal and colloquial. Persons, places and dates are designated with documentary precision; the poet is "forty" he only teaches on "Tuesdays," he lives on "Boston's / hardly passionate Marlborough street," in his youth, he was a "Catholic C.O." and served a one year sentence at the West Street Jail in Manhattan, where he came into contact with a Jehovah's Witness, a pacifist named Abramowitz, the "Hollywood pimps" Bioff and Brown, and finally the famous gangster Lepke. And with respect to its syntax "Memories of West Street" could be turned into prose with almost no alterations or additions.

In his Paris Review interview (1961) with Frederick Seidel, Lowell observed that, "Prose is in many ways better-off than poetry. On the whole prose is less cut-off from life than poetry is" (55). Again writing in 1964, Lowell explains his approach in Life Studies, "I felt that the best style for poetry was none of the many poetic styles in English but something like the prose of Chekhov or Flaubert . . ." (qtd. in Raffel 95).

As with the prose of Chekhov or Flaubert, in the poem "Skunk Hour," what seemingly direct and apparent in the surface turns out to have resonances deep, mysterious and puzzling in a new way. The reader is very much puzzled as he goes rough "Skunk Hour."

Castine in Maine is a quiet New England Village with graceful white framehouses, replete with churches and spires. A greenish bronze statue of a musketeering revolutionary soldier stands in the village square. And Blue Hill looms magnificent in the distance, across the bay.

Philip Booth recollecting Lowell's stay in Castine writes that,

Cal has always been well here, that he has written well here that he is generally happy here and that "Skunk Hour" is about more than a man named Lowell or a town named Castine. How possibly say to the Boston ladies or anybody else local that Cal's poems (as Stevens says
of his "Comedian ...") "make / Of his own fate an instance of all fate"
(204).

His fate in "The Skunk Hour" is the fate of his nation. In an interview with Alvarez
Lowell said, "The opening's sort of cotton-nosed, it's supposed to let you sink into the
poem and then it tenses up. I don't know whether it works or not. You dawdle in
the first part and suddenly get caught in the poem" (81).

As the reader slowly sinks into the poem, he gets introduced to three
representative figures of the modern world and the fascination material wealth has for
them. The hermit heiress with her inherited wealth represents decaying tradition; the
summer millionaire represents the get-rich-quick world of modern affluence; the
decorator dependent on the fluctuation of fashion and taste for his livelihood and
using the objects of genuine trades (fish net, cobbler's bench) as part of trendy decor.

Nautilus Island's hermit
heirress still lives through winter in her Spartan cottage;
her sheep still graze above the sea.
Her son's a bishop. Her farmer
is first selectman in our village;
she's in her dotage.

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

The season's ill -
We've lost our summer millionaire,
who seemed to leap from an LL. Bean
catalogue. His nine-knot yawl
was auctioned off to lobstersmen.
A red fox stain covers Blue Hill.
And now our fairy
decorator brightens his shop for fall;
his fish net's filled with orange cork,
orange, his cobbler's bench and awl;
there is no money in his work,
he'd rather marry. (95)

Lowell later remarked of these stanzas, "Sterility howls through the scenery, but I try
to give a tone of tolerance, humor and randomness to the sad prospect" (107). But
what the scenery depicts is the collapse of the social structure, the collapse is
inevitable as the country that had "lost its connections" followed a set of values which
gave enormous importance to an individual's material wealth either inherited, or
earned. This acquisitive nature incapacitates an individual from loving himself and
others and when the sensitive mind goes through an "agonizing reappraisal" truth is
realized, "My mind's not right," The season is also ill. And Lowell, his spirit ill, "my
ill-spirit sobs in each cell" personifies the decadent and ailing civilization. The
incapacity to be at peace with themselves and with the world at large and the failure
to interact and develop satisfying relationships with people have made them self-
centred and alienated. They are all "ill", and their "money" does not have curative
powers. Lowell himself, like the town inhabitants, is isolated and demented as the
heiress, as fallen as the ruined millionaire and as loveless and artistically failed as the
decorator. In the early draft of the poem, he applied the line "there's no money in this
work" to himself. And again in his Time magazine interview he identified himself with
the decorator and said, "There's poetry all over the place, the world is swimming with
it... but it's almost pointless--there's no money in it..." (67).

The poet is silent about the heiress, the millionaire and the homosexual after
the first four stanzas. As the background is now firmly in place, Lowell excludes these
three characters and introduces his main character, his own sick self. It was Holderlin, who raised the simple and mysterious question, "Is getting well an art / or art a way to get well?" (qtd. in Bayley 33). By the end of the poem Lowell gets well enough to face the harsh world, thanks to his poetic art. The following two stanzas describe the emotional crisis of the protagonist.

One dark night,

my Tudor Ford climbed the hill's skull;

I watched for love-cars. Lights turned down,

they lay together, hull to hull,

where the graveyard shelves on the town . . .

My mind's not right.

A car radio bleats,

"Love, O careless Love . . ." I hear

my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,

as if my hand were at its throat . . .

I myself am hell;

nobody's here - (95-96)

Talking of these two stanzas, Lowell said,

Then all come alive in stanzas V and VI. This is the 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 Existentialist 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 (107).

And according to John Frederick Nims, "One of the great poems of western culture begins

"en una noche oscura . . ."
"One dark night..." How consciously the American poet echoes the "Noche oscura" of St. John of the Cross we cannot be sure: but we do know that the muse of the unconscious—perhaps the only Muse—caught the echo and permitted it" (93). St. John's poem, also in the first person, describes how a girl ("ei alma") steals forth one dark night for an ecstatic meeting with her Lover:

I gave all I own,
gave all, in air from the cedars softly blown.

... Quite out of self suspended—
my forehead on the lover's own reclined.
And that way the world ended
With all my cases untwined
among the lilies falling and out of mind. (qtd. in Nims 93)

"Such sweetness of passionate self-surrender is what the Puritan on his island psyche can never manage; his own dark night is a ghastly burlesque of the Spanish adventure, though he too finds release and reconciliation, among the skunks if not among the lilies" (Nims 93).

The poet drives about on a dark night, in his Tudor Ford ("two-door model") hoping to catch glimpses of lovers. The name "Tudor" identifies the driver ironically with the Tudor pageantries of the past. Alice Hall makes an observation here: "Tudor Ford" is non-ironic evocation of a particular individual from Lowell's favourite period of literary history: English dramatist John Ford. The playwright was born during the Tudor period; quite literally he was a "Tudor Ford" (73.74). John Ford's tragedies are insistently grim: murder, suicide, mutilation, torture, usurpation, lovesickness illegitimacy, adultery and incest are rampant. Of particular relevance to "Skunk Hour", it is as a direct result of such individual and societal mayhem that depression and insanity are frequently suffered by Ford's characters—states of mind which would be all too familiar to a poet whose psychotic behaviour resulted in his being
institutionalized virtually on an annual basis. His car goes up the "hill's skull." Nims points out that the most famous hill in our tradition was named for a skull, Calvary from Latin "Calvaria" (93). His attention is caught by the "lover-cars" which "lay together." Love is debased to the mechanical as in the seduction scene of "The Waste Land."

Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass;

Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over. (lines 251-252)

The mechanical nature of "Lover-cars" anticipates the "giant-finned cars" and "Yellow dinosaur steamshovels" of "For the Union Dead." In Lowell's Waste Land, "A car radio bleats, / "Love O careless love . . ." (96). "Careless love," which the goatlike metal voice is bleating, is about seduction, pregnancy, desertion, and violence:

When I wore my apron low . . .
you'd follow me through rain and snow.

Now my apron strings won't pin . . .
you pass my door and won't come in.

Now you see what careless love will do . . .

Make you kill yourself and your sweetheart too. (qtd. in Nims 94).

The poet's "ill-spirit" responds to this song with murderous violence. "As if my hand were at its throat." "I myself am hell"--these words are spoken by Lucifer in Book IV of Paradise Lost as he makes his way towards the Garden of Eden for his "dire attempt" on Adam and Eve.

Me miserable! Which way shall I fly
Infinite wrath and infinite despair?

Which way I fly is Hell: myself am Hell;

And in the lowest deep a lower deep
Still threatening to devour me opens wide.

To which the Hell I suffer seems a Heaven. (lines 73-78)
In these three poems "Skunk Hour," "Paradise Lost," and "The Love song of J. Alfred Prufrock" "hell" is described as an internal condition and the characters Lowell, Satan and Prufrock carry hell within themselves.

The Hell within him, for within him Hell
He brings, and round about him, nor from Hell
One step no more than from himself can fly
By change of place. (PL IV lines 20-23)

T.S. Eliot also has his protagonist "Prufrock" reveal that he suffers a hell within himself.

I have measured out my life with coffee spoons; (line 51)

... I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas. (lines 73-74)

... I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me. (lines 124-125)

Lowell's "I myself am hell" also echoes Marlowe's Mephistopheles. Mephistopheles explains in Dr. Faustus that for the damned, "Where we are is Hell." Axelrod observes, "Lowell in his terrible isolation--from God, from divinely ordained standards of conduct, from his fellow human beings and even from his own sane self--he experiences the full terrors of an unsheltered existence" (129).

"nobody's here"- -In St. John's "Noche oscura" also, the emptiness is only apparent. "Where there wanted one / I knew - how well I knew: - / in a place where no one was in view" (qtd. in Nims 95). But in "Skunk Hour" there is the saving presence of the little animals, skunks.

As Lowell himself admits "Skunk Hour" is indebted to both Camus and Sartre. Camus tells us that the important thing . . . is not to be cured, but to live with one's ailments (qtd. in Axelrod 130). Sartre observes that "at a certain moment an
individual, in his very deepest and most intimate conditioning by the family can fulfill a historical role" (qtd. in Fein 92). The concluding stanzas of "Skunk Hour" conform to both these dicta.

only skunks, that search
in the moonlight for a bite to eat.
They march on their soles up Main Street:
white stripes, moonstruck eyes' red fire
under the chalk-dry and spar spire
of the Trinitarian Church. I stand on top
of our back steps and breathe the rich air -
a mother skunk with her column
of kittens swills the garbage pail.
She jabs her wedge-head in a cup
of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail,
and will not scare. (96)

The skunk is a small, attractive black and white creature affectionate and tame. But it has a great capacity for stinking when cornered. So the "Skunk" is an outcast like a mental patient. John Berryman emphasizes the same truth: "The skunk is an outcast: this is the basis of the metaphor, and how a mental patient feels" (99). But the skunks have a strong will to live. Their steadfast ransacking of the garbage pails helps in their survival. The poet like them endures, he does not annihilate himself, he somehow gets on, through tenacity, and hope and courage. By the end of the poem, Lowell pauses on his "back steps" and breathes the "rich air." But here "rich" does not connote decadent wealth of the millionaire or the heiress or the decorator. He is rich, because he has confronted hell and come to terms with the modern anxieties. His poetic art has saved him and he can now look forward to a future "rich" in creative output.
Sandra M. Gilbert sees similarities between "Skunk Hour" and "Young Goodman Brown." Just like Brown, the poet "thinking that he lives in an ordinary town, in the fact-littered centre of his own age, he goes out into the forests of America and finds not only his contemporary anxieties, not only his community, but himself more truly and more strange" (79).

"Skunk Hour" is dedicated to Elizabeth Bishop, because according to Lowell, "re-reading her suggested a way of breaking through the shell of my old manner. Her rhythms, idiom, images and stanza structure seemed to belong to a later century. "Skunk Hour" is modelled on Miss Bishop's "The Armadillo," a much better poem and one I had heard her read and had later carried around with" (109). Both "Skunk Hour" and "Armadillo" use short line stanzas, start with drifting description and end with a single animal.

"The Armadillo"

For Robert Lowell

This is the time of year
When almost every night
the frail, illegal fire balloons appear.
Climbing the mountain height,
rising toward a saint
still honored in these parts,
the paper chambers flush and fill with light
that comes and goes, like hearts. (lines 1-8)

... a glistening armadillo left the scene,
rose-flecked, head down, tail down. (Norton Anthology lines 31-32 pp.824-825)
She jabs her wedge-head in a cup
of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail,
and will not scare. ("skunk Hour")

Axelrod calls "Skunk Hour" an autobiographical rendering of Lowell's own "feelings of lovelessness and balked lust" (127). The idea of a vehicle (Tudor Ford) specially designed for "country squires" also suggests that "Skunk Hour" is autobiographical. "Skunk Hour" reportedly is set in Castine, Maine, the site of Lowell's country home, and a self-appointed country-squire identity - surely a manifestation of his Boston Brahmin background - was one of the most salient features of Lowell's personality. Lowell's wife Elizabeth Hardwick has remarked that "all the people mentioned in 'Skunk Hour' were 'living,' more or less as Lowell sees them, in Castine that summer" (qtd. in Hamilton 267).

Like Milton's Satan who revolts the reader, yet rouses his grudging admiration, Lowell's "skunks," evoke revulsion on one side but are endearing in their ideal maternal care. Skunks (individuals) with indomitable will to survive, a lovelessness and yet a capacity for caring can be identified in society.

Lowell's rebellion in LS is familial and social; he rebels against Grandfather, Mother and Father and against Social norms. He emerges as the Quixotic skunk itself refusing to be scared. Like Sisyphus, Lowell consents to Earthly Existence, being a futile labour whose only reward is consciousness itself. Lowell has said of his ending: "Out of this comes the march and affirmation, an ambiguous one, of my skunks in the last two stanzas. The skunks are both Quixotic and barbarously absurd, hence the tone of amusement and defiance" (107). Lowell also called "Skunk Hour" the "anchor poem" of LS (108).

Most of these LS poems are history-imprisoned poems. Though history, both public and private is naturally the subject of most of these poems, history here is not a chronicle of grandeur, or even of grandeur diminished, but a compendium of trivial details and tedious repetitions. Where Pound and Eliot weave entrancing webs of
quotations, or at least shore fragments of the Western mind against their ruins, Lowell shores his New England up with sandbags full of facts, names, dates.

*LS* is about the process of life—because "Life" is never complete; it continues. Both poetry and politics also depend on the continuity of living, on the fact that no matter how heated the single moment, the realization of that moment is of necessity incomplete. The art of politics seems to dance between acting as if every issue were the end of the earth and simultaneously acknowledging that tomorrow will hold up a dozen fresh crucial issues. Poems imply this same incompleteness. Unlike prose, the place that a poem aims and arrives at is less important to the success of the poem than the ideas and images it uses to make the journey. By those ideas and images, the poet holds the reader to the process, by which he suggests that the poem pauses more than finishes and that the end is somewhere in the middle.

The ideas and images present in *LS* make the reader understand the ambiguities and complexities of the life process, both at the personal and the political level much better.
Works cited


