CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

"The province of art is all life, all feeling, all
observation, all vision... It is all experience".

Henry James.

Like other practiced writers, Robert Lowell was able to use most of his interests
and experiences in his poetry. However, if we compare him with his peers of the
early and middle twentieth century we see that he was able to do this rather more
than the others. That is because he never stopped "living" and never stopped giving
shape to his "living."

The few individual poems discussed so far, attempt to show something of the
range and quality of Robert Lowell's poetic achievement. His fame as a confessional
poet obscures the fact that he does not confine himself to purely personal subjects,
but links an understanding of the self to an understanding of politics and history. This
brief study has tried to indicate how skilfully he interweaves the two elements, the
personal and the public, in individual poems.

American poetry since the second World War has been extraordinarily various.
Schools, Movements and Ideologies have not only proliferated but fragmented in the
last few decades, with a restlessness born of a nagging dissatisfaction with the reigning
modes of verse. The ongoing battle between modernism and romanticism subsumes
a host of allied quarrels in the period— the Academic versus the Beat, the Establishment versus the Underground, the Conservative versus the Liberal. Van Wyck Brooks lambasted American culture for failing to achieve an organic conception of the whole and for being so divided (82). Brooks argued that,

American literature drifts chaotically between two extremes—the extremes, simply put, of understanding experience intellectually and understanding it through the emotions. Brooks applied to these extremes his celebrated labels "highbrow" and "low brow", and termed the failure of our writers to synthesize the two. According to him there is "a deadlock in the American mind" (86).

The kind of dualism may have originated, as Edwin Fussell has suggested, in America’s divided loyalties between Cold War and Western Frontier; it may have originated in class difference. Whatever its source, some version of the high brow-low brow dualism is discernible (3-25). Philip Rahv argued that American literature composes itself into a debate between "palefaces" and "redskins" (166). The "palefaces" (Henry James, T.S. Eliot and Allen Tate would belong to this party) produce a patrician art which is intellectual, symbolic, cosmopolitan, disciplined, cultured. The "red skins" (Walt Whitman and William Carlos Williams would tend to belong here) produce a plebeian art which is emotional, naturalistic, nativist, energetic, in some sense uncultured.

Seen from individual critical perspectives, this dichotomy, or a closely related one, has been variously termed "genteel" and "barbaric" (Santayana), "genteel" and "Indian" (Lawrence), "mythic" and "Adamic" (Pearce), and, in an appropriation of Emerson’s terms, "the poetry of memory" and "the poetry of hope" (R.W.B. Lewis) (qtd. in Axelrod 10).
All such formulations attest to a basic bifurcation in American literature between writers who experience primarily with the head and those who experience primarily with the blood. This dualism appears within Lowell's poetic career as well, as he felt himself caught between two competing kinds of poetry whose extreme forms he called (echoing Levi-Strauss) "cooked" and "raw." On "cooked" and "raw" Lowell went on to explain:

The cooked, marvelously expert, often seems laboriously concocted to be tested and digested by a graduate seminar. The raw, huge blood-dripping gobbets of unseasoned experience are dished up for midnight listeners (clearly the Beat poets, are in mind here). There is a poetry that can only be studied, and a poetry that can only be declaimed, a poetry of pedantry, and a poetry of scandal (qtd. in Axelrod 253).

Lowell's poems are both "cooked" and "raw." He is a "pale-faced" "red skinned" gentleman. His poems are akin to Wordsworth's "nature" in "Tintern Abbey." They are "felt in the blood," "felt along the heart" and pass "even into the purer mind." Lowell consistently exhibits the unified central vision of what Emerson termed "the complete man" among partial men. "He stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the common wealth" (Emerson 336). Lowell deserves to be called the "complete man," not only because he realizes that the "pains" of society and "pains" of self are inextricably linked together, but also because he successfully fuses them to form harmonious wholes. Hence one can safely assert that the poems which contain both the "personal" and the "public" aspects co-existing peacefully within, are "complete" poems.

The personal, confessional mode of Robert Lowell's poems has influenced many later American, British, Indian poets and still continues to wield its influence.
Because confessional poetry places the poet's suffering at the centre of concern, it is often understood as just another bypath of Romanticism. But the centrality of the traditional Romantic poet to his poem implies a high valuation of his individual being and of human individuality as such. But the confessional poet has less self esteem. Clinically fascinated by the symptoms of his own psychosis, he has little urge to moralise his condition or to move it toward resolution. At his best, he takes us to a point just this side of madness and engages us in the dense macabre of voyeurism turned inward. At its edges, confessional poems blur into autobiographical poetry.

W.D. Snodgrass, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Clayton Eshleman, Sandra Hochman, Stanley Plumly, Marvin Bell and William Heyen are all confessional, autobiographical poets. The earlier confessional poets like Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell, John Berryman and Robert Lowell are usually referred to as "Middle Generation Poets." Bruce Bawer observes that the middle generation poets were disabled by emotions upon which they could muse eternally and with great eloquence, but which they were powerless to control (4). That is the ultimate irony of their lives: the very conditions which so tragically crippled them as men also provided their poetry with its greatest beauty and strength. Most of their poems were unmistakably autobiographical and they were all obsessed with their art. They took poetry as seriously as life, and their lives in the fullest sense, were dedicated to it. Their anxieties were related to this dedication. Those anxieties are largely responsible for the power and freshness of some of the Middle Generation's finest works. Berryman's "Dream Songs" is one such fine work. John Berryman in his "Dream Songs" presents a meditation on American literary and cultural history, through the dreams of a character called Henry. Many of the details of Henry's character and life reflect those of Berryman himself, including the profound impact of a father's suicide and the difficulties in overcoming alcoholism. W.D. Snodgrass, Lowell's pupil in the
Iowa poetry workshop, was credited by the master with crystallizing self-exposure as a poetic subject. The poems Snodgrass wrote in that workshop were published as *Heart’s Needle* (1959) in the same year as *Life Studies*, and they were as critically successful as they proved influential. Here in ten lyrics that make up the title sequence, Snodgrass details with excruciating candour a father’s relation to his three-years old daughter while he is in the process of divorcing and remarrying.

Sylvia Plath also studied with Robert Lowell and has clear affinities with the confessional school of poetry, though she often distances herself from her personal subject matter by assuming a sharply ironic tone. She acknowledged his influence openly:

> I’ve been very excited by what I feel is the new breakthrough that came with say, Robert Lowell’s *Life studies*. This intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal emotional experience which I feel has been partly taboo. Robert Lowell’s poems about his experiences in a mental hospital, for example, interest me very much” (qtd. in Alvarez 62).

Plath though much influenced by Lowell is more hysterical in her approach to death. She overcomes terror and fear through her hysterical approach whereas Lowell’s “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow” exhibiting central tensions between childhood and mature perceptions of death instilled by enervating things and the true death of the body still retains the tone of alarm and dread. In “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow” Lowell deals with “two kinds of death.” The child sees physical death and the older poet sees the death caused by materialism, and disheartening family eccentricities. The child Lowell scoops the elemental symbols of “life” and “death” at the very beginning of the poem. “One of my hands was cool on a pile of black earth, the other warm on a pile of lime.” Aunt Sarah, once bringing her piano career to the pitch of a Symphony Hall recital, for which she “failed to appear,”
now plays on a soundless dummy piano in deference to Grandmother Winslow’s nerves, certainly carrying even this exercise to a resounding futility.

That is the "death-in-life" portrait Lowell successfully portrays. In the final section this artificial death is confronted by real things. After a sunlit glimpse of Boer war-recruiting-posters of Young Men bushwhacked on the Veldt ("They were almost life-size . . .") we learn: "My Uncle was dying at twenty-nine." Uncle Devereux’s imminent demise from Hodgkin’s disease brings death into Grandfather Winslow’s house and mind, and with it the younger Winslow’s sudden reaching for life, but the patriarch welcomes neither. When the Devereux Winslows sailed for Europe on a last honeymoon leaving their baby daughters behind, Grandfather accuses them of "behaving like children," as if only a child could selfishly grasp the sweetness or finality of life. - At the end of the poem, Devereux stands with putty face and solid cream trousers and blue coat, while the child Lowell’s hands and the mature Lowell’s mind sift the piles of earth and lime. "Come Winter / Uncle Devereux would blend to the one color."

The "self" in Lowell’s poem is a "Child" coming to terms with reality and death. But the "self" in Sylvia Plath’s "Lady Lazarus" faces death boldly.

Dying

Is an art, like everything else.

I do it exceptionally well. (lines 43-45)

Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air. (lines 81-83)
According to Robert Bagg,

Sylvia Plath becomes so menacing by taking literally the cliche that a poet is immortal in his works. After death she knows she will be found nowhere else. What Sylvia does is to accept utterly this convention and speak in the poem with the peremptory malice of an avenging voice even from the dead. She mocks the reader's curiosity about her death and then she counterattacks the male sensibility which must read her (33).

Whether writing about tulips and elm trees, her experiences as a daughter and a wife, or her suicide attempts there is an undertone of terror in her poems. Lowell's poem "Suicide" exhibits the same kind of "terror":

*Sometimes in dreams*

*my hair came out in tufts*

*from my scalp,*

*I saw it lying there*

*loose on my pillow like flax.*

*Sometimes in dreams*

*my teeth get loose in my mouth . . .*

*Tinker, Tailor, Sailor,*

*they were cherry stones,*

*as I spat them out. (Day by Day lines 6-15 p.,15)*

Like Lowell, her teacher, she links her personal madness to public dementia and invokes Dachau and Hiroshima as measures of her mind. When Lowell introduced her in the American edition of Ariel he wrote," Everything in these poems is personal, confessional, felt, but the manner of feeling is controlled hallucination, the
autobiography of a fever . . . . This poetry and life are not a career; they tell that life, even when disciplined, is simply not worth it" (qtd. in Ratner 57).

Even in a very personal poem like "Lady Lazarus" she gives a larger resonance to her own suffering. With its "Herr Doktor" "Herr Enemy," "Lady Lazarus" also contains reference to the Nazis. "... my skin / Bright as a Nazi lampshade." Here she alludes to the true fact that in the Nazi death camps, the skins of victims were sometimes used to make lampshades. Plath saw herself as a political person, if not a political writer. Though she was gentle, she identified with the cruelties done to the Jews and often created a Jewish persona for a self whose immediate enemies (father, husband etc.) she saw as Nazis. Anyone whose subject is suffering has a ready-made modern example of hell on earth in the Concentration Camps. And what matters in them is not so much the physical torture- -since sadism is general and perennial- -but the way modern, as it were industrial, techniques can be used to destroy utterly the human identity. Individual suffering can be heroic provided it leaves the person who suffers a sense of his own individuality- -provided that is, there is an illusion of choice remaining to him. But when suffering is mass- produced, men and women become as equal and identityless as objects on an assembly line, and nothing remains- -certainly no values, no humanity. This anonymity of pain, which makes all dignity impossible, was Sylvia Plath's subject.

The language of Lowell's "Thanks giving's Over" influenced Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" considerably.

You are a bastard, Michael, aren't you? Nein

Michael It's no more valentines

("Thanksgiving's Over")

They always knew it was you.

Daddy, daddy. You bastard, I'm through. ("Daddy")
Both Lowell and Plath transcend the painful experiences through poetry, (the early death of Plath's father, death of Lowell's uncle. Plath's unhappy marriage to Ted Hughes, Lowell's frequent trips to the mental asylums etc. etc.) and both achieve a universality in their verse. Lowell and Plath discovered ways to enlarge the scope of the confessional poem to encompass their individual concerns; in the process of demonstrating the breadth of the confessional mode, they escape the limitations of the mode itself. "Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath combine the confessional mode and poetic craft with the imaginative powers which have always defined the artist" (Cloud 182).

Anne Sexton was the student of both Lowell and Snodgrass and more committed to the confessional idiom than either. Sylvia Plath said, "... the poetess Anne Sexton, writes also about her experiences as a mother, as a mother who's had a nervous breakdown, as an extremely emotional and feeling young woman. And her poems are wonderfully craftsman like poems, and yet they have a kind of emotional and psychological depth which I think is something perhaps quite new and exciting. (qtd. in Alvarez 62).

Largely, as a direct result of Robert Lowell's example, American poetry moved towards an acceptance of the dramatic monologue as the predominant poetic mode. But it is a dramatic monologue in which the "persona" is not treated dramatically as a mask, that is in the manner of Browning's Dramatis personae, but is perfected lyrically, as in Whitman's "Song of Myself," and in Pound's "Pisan Cantos." In other words, although the poem's style and method is unmistakably dramatic, the "persona" is naked ego involved in a very personal world with particular, private experiences.

Following Lowell's footsteps Anne Sexton's poems are mostly formally organized dramatic narratives. In a poem such as "Flight" for instance, the narrative
structure is extremely simple and describes a woman driving through Boston to the airport and back again through Boston; but the subject of the poem is revealed through the state of mind of the woman, the sudden and desperate need for love and the despair when that need is frustrated. The return journey is marked by a sense of almost cosmic desolation and the realization that there is no escape, that flight from the self and the world that self creates is only illusory:

I drove past the eye and ear infirmaries,
past the office buildings lined up like dentures,
and along Storrow Drive the street lights
sucked in all the insects who had nowhere else to go.

("Flight" lines 50-54 pp.86-87)

The same cosmic desolation was found in Lowell's "Skunk Hour." The pangs of emotional loneliness are terrible:

I myself am hell;

Nobody's here - (96)

Anne Sexton like Lowell, has a remarkable sense of particularities, a fine awareness of the detail that will bring the whole scene vividly before the eyes and that, at the same time, will be psychologically telling and exact. This ability to realize complex landscapes of mind in visually concrete terms is one of the main sources of her poetic strength inherited from Lowell.

In Anne Sexton's "The Operation", she uses all her imaginative resources to create a statement of disturbing, even terrifying beauty. The poem is straightforwardly narrative in structure, beginning with a description of her visit to the doctor's and his diagnosis that she is suffering from hereditary cancer of the womb, which killed her mother the previous year:

I come to this White Office, its sterile sheet,
its hard tablet, its stirrups, to hold my breath

While I, who must, allow the glove its oily rape,

to hear the almost mighty doctor over me equate

my ills with hers

and decide to operate. ("The Operation" lines 4-9 p.,56)

The description is almost horrifyingly precise and apart from the image of the
glove, almost clinical.

The same horrifying precision, was evident in Lowell's "Waking in the Blue":

After a hearty New England breakfast,

I weigh two hundred pounds

this morning. Cock of the walk,

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, indigeneous faces

of these thoroughbred mental cases,

twice my age and half my weight

We are all old-timers

each of us holds a locked razor. (88)

The "locked razors," "the metal shaving mirrors" the "glove" the "sterile sheet" are the
concrete details that make the hospital scenes vivid. The "complex land scape of the
mind," familiarizes itself with the "shaky future" in Lowell's case, "the inevitability of
surgery" in Anne Sexton's case.

One of the finest tributes to Lowell as a poet, and mentor is paid by Anne
Sexton in her reminiscences:
I miss Lowell as all apprentices miss their first real master. He is a modest man and an incisive critic. He helped me to distrust the easy musical phrase and look for the frankness of ordinary speech. If you have enough natural energy he can show you how to chain it in. he didn't teach me what to put into a poem, but what to leave out. What he taught me was taste. Perhaps that's the only thing a poet can be taught (178-79).

According to A.R. Jones,

Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton are all extremely traditional poets. Not, of course in the sense that they see tradition as an unchanging force to which they should submit themselves- -in this sense tradition is a dead hand- -but in the sense that they see the tradition of poetry as a living and growing force which must be constantly extended in order to be kept vitally alive (29).

Lowell's influence is not limited to poetry alone; his prose memoirs "91, Revere Street" have had considerable influence on Elizabeth Bishop's prose memoirs, "The country Mouse." By presenting closely related materials in both prose and lyrics, Lowell and Bishop challenge their readers to assume appropriate attitudes towards divergent genres, some of which remain critically ill-defined; poet's memoirs, lyric autobiography, American autobiography, memories of childhood. Lowell's prose memoirs depend upon Lowell's fictionalization of familial situations as it outlines one small branch of the Lowell-Winslow-Stark family tree. "The Country Mouse" is a memoir Bishop fashioned in the style of "91, Revere Street." Bishop reexperiences the pain of being without a loving mother and forced to live with her grand parents in her memoirs. "Grandma and I sat opposite each other on the two green seats, nibbling soda crackers for ours [breakfast], and studying each other in the strong dust-
filled sunlight" (15). Bishop derives her self-awareness from the loss of her mother and Lowell derived his own burgeoning self-awareness from his rejection of a failed father.

In the twenty-two years Father lived after he resigned from Navy, he never again deserted Boston and never became Bostonian, he survived to drift from job to job to be displaced, to be grimly and literally that old cliche, a fish out of water. He gasped and wheezed with impotent optimism (LS 17-18).

"To fill a Gap / Insert the Thing that caused it", counsels Emily Dickinson because "you cannot plug a sepulchre with Air." For writers of autobiography the deadly "Thing" that often causes the "gap" is the lost child self, the sense of one's origins. Talking about one's origins, confessing publicly the most secret details of oneself has been and is a painful experience to all writers and to quote the poet Theodore Weiss, "yet I have wished to dip into the special wells of feeling my parents sprang in me, the first wells and in some ways the deepest and purest" (287). Theodore Weiss one of the many living poets, writing in the confessional tradition of Lowell, Plath and Sexton, delves deep into his inner springs. Weiss portrays the agony of the realization of truth that however close an individual may be to a loved one the death of the loved one teaches us that we can only remain as separate entities. Lowell and Weiss accept the inevitability of death of their family members and relive the painful experience of the acceptance in their poems. "The Death of Fathers" is one such poem of "acceptance":

I gripping his arm,
summon all my strength
("Am I not your son?"
Surely I can reach him,
haul him back) to learn -

as I shout "Father!"

over the growing chasm,

his breath slammed shut,

a wall instantly gone up -

the lesson never learned. ("The Death of Fathers" lines 91-100 pp.281-82)

Lowell writes,

Father's death was abrupt and unprotesting.

His vision was still twenty-twenty.

After a morning of anxious, repetitive smiling,

his last words to Mother were:

"I feel awful." (80)

From the above lines we learn the truth that, as we receive life and living from our fathers, so we receive and are instructed in death through them.

Emily Dickinson's letter she wrote after her father's death, exhibited the same kind of pain as was experienced by Lowell and Weiss:

The last Afternoon that my Father lived, though with no premonition-
-I preferred to be with him, and invented an absence for Mother,

Vinnie being asleep. He seemed peculiarly pleased as I oftenest stayed

with myself, and remarked as the Afternoon withdrew, "he would like

it to not end" (qtd. in Sewall 56).

The image of the dead in Stanley Spencer's "Judgement Day" painting inspired

Stephen Dobyn to write "Cemetery Nights." The subject of the poem is the belief in

the futility of communication.

and in someone's yard a dog barks
first to see if some animal as dumb as he is
will wake from sleep and perhaps bark back. ("Cemetery Nights"
lines 26-28)

Stephen Dobyns interpreting his own poem, remarks, "By Communication I
mean not only a consciously intended verbal exchange of ideas or feelings but also
an openness to the possibility of that exchange" (43). That verbal exchange was
totally absent between grandfather Lowell and grandchild in Lowell's Cemetery poem,
"Dunbarton."

My Grandfather found
his grand child's fogbound solitudes
sweeter than human society. (72)

Proust, who perfected the personal novel into a great form of art, went to the
extent of proclaiming that "each of us only knows himself alone and no two human
beings ever communicate" (qtd. in Peyre 199).

Lowell's influence could be discerned in many other established modern poets.
Sandra Hochman (Born 1936) finds autobiography her essential subject and her
poems evoke childhood loneliness, motherhood and relationships with husbands and
lovers in a tone of shared intimacy. In "Palm Song" she observes "I pay attention to
life that is interior, / I seek perfection" (12) and in "Women", "Women are often found
dead at the tops of / Their lovers" (26), and in "I Want to Tell You," "I want to tell
you what it feels like not to touch / It's terrible . . ." (34). Lowell's biographer Ian
Hamilton reports that in 1961 Lowell had had a short lived affair with the then young
poet Sandra Hochman (284).

Clayton Eshleman (born 1935) describes himself as a "poet of raw and brutal
self-revelation," echoing Lowell's line "Words meat-hooked from the living steer." His
most powerful book to date, Coils, is a rare document combining his own sense of
the mythic self with the autobiographical Clayton Eshleman from Indiana, U.S.A. His poems are filled with a sensuousness that transcends the most painful moments. His ability to describe the textures of a world seen as a thrillingly beautiful place, surfaces as magic moments which almost deny the purposes of the poems and yet gives the poet precisely what he is looking for— the poetry of existence.

Stanley Plumly’s (born 1939) poetry is also impressive for its technical precision and polish but most compelling for its autobiographical content. He focusses on the memory of an alcoholic-father, a much put-upon mother, and a series of failed marriages, and he attempts to confront his own psychological character through the remembrance of things past.

And whosoever be reborn in sons
so shall they be also reborn . . .

And you, my anonymous father,
be with me when I wake. (qtd. in Contemporary Poets 1193)

Plumly discovers perpetuity and new life in identification with the dead, especially the father, both as person and archetype. In Out-of-the-Body Travel (1977), his finest collection of poems, Plumly focusses almost entirely on the two parental figures and seems to distill a kind of resolution when he invokes his father and says, "Be with Me when I Wake." This continuing saga of Plumly’s emotional life is too poised to be credited with confessional passion, but it is more solidly crafted for its emotional awareness, and control.

Marvin Bell (born 1916) is also an autobiographical poet pre-occupied with sonship and family, but he brings to these themes a greater range of tone than Plumly.

The death of the father is my shepherd
he maketh Me, three versions of wanting.
He giveth back my shadow: he restores.
He pays out and pays out the darkness.
How much does it cost to keep silence? (qtd. in Contemporary Poets 85)

William Heyen (born 1940) likes to probe the jarring elements of his life, not in some psychic frenzy, but in the hope they will settle into harmony. His Long Island Light may be compared to Whitman’s ever expanding Leaves of Grass. These poems about his life as husband and father in his "second home", upstate Brockport, N.Y., add a maturity and a progression which suggest that Heyen may even have the resources to enlarge this ambitious collection. This is evident in "The Traffic" from Long Island Light:

Red lights pulse and weave in
toward an accident ahead.
Trying to leave Smithtown,
I’m stopped dead,
here, where Whitman trooped
to tally the eighth-month flowers’ bloom.
Diesels jam their bumpers together in a long line,
gas and rubber heat wafts in like soup.

... on the pavement, and time’s itself again.
Pressed against the porch of Whitman’s school,
the Dairy Freeze is booming, winks
its windows tinted green and cool. (32)

But Heyen imaginatively lives through the holocaust in his Swastika Poems. He scratches through personal scar tissue and imagines the Nazi uncles he never knew,
remembers the painted Swastika, that appeared one day on his boyhood home. permits himself full realization of the Holocaust as he walks the streets of modern Hanover with his wife and visits the concentration camp at Bergen Belsen.

Lowell successfully placed the poet's personality at the centre of his art. And as is seen from the above discussion of the living poets and their work, Lowell's influence is still prevalent.

To give a poetic shape to inner turmoils is indeed difficult. But it is equally difficult to give a shape to the turmoils of the society. It is easy to write a letter to the editor filled with opinions about disarmament, the war in Central America or U.S. investment in South Africa, yet so difficult to write a poem that adequately reflects one's concern for these matters.

Lowell was successful in not only giving shape to his inner turmoils but also to the turmoils of society. He was extremely worried about the escalating arms build-up in his country and in the whole world.

To-day many contemporary writers voice their fears about nuclear arsenal. But Lowell voiced his fears nearly three decades ago in "Fall 1961." Lowell wrote this poem during Kennedy's presidency.

At the very end of Eisenhower's presidency and the beginning of Kennedy's, a good deal of National attention focussed on armaments. Kennedy's first defence budget was epoch-making. When Eisenhower left office in January 1961, he predicted a $1.5 billion surplus for fiscal 1962. Seven months later, Kennedy announced a planned $5.3 billion deficit, mainly owing to his proposals for increased national security and the space programme. The deficit turned out to be $6.3 billion. The Geneva Agreements against nuclear testing expired in 1961, and the testing resumed. At the beginning of September, Kennedy announced that the Soviets had exploded
the first atom bomb since 1958. A few days later, they exploded another, and by the end of the month the total was up to fifteen. Robert Lowell then wrote:

Back and forth, back and forth

goesthe tock, tock, tock

of the orange, bland, ambassadorial

face of the moon

on the grandfather clock.

All autumn, the chafe and jar

of nuclear war;

we have talked our extinction to death.

I swim like a minnow

behind my studio window. (105)

Like any number of Americans, Lowell was feeling that time was tediously running out on the chance for negotiating an end to the arms race. The Cold War seems to have ended now. But the world still is gripped by the fear of war and uncertainty resulting from the fear of ultimate nuclear annihilation.

The Iraq-Kuwait crisis which arose in August 1990 is as serious as the one which faced the world in 1939. When Hitler invaded Poland on 1st September 1939 the Second World War began. When Auden heard the news in the "neutral air" of New York, (for the U.S.A. did not enter the war until December 1941.) he wrote the poem "1st September 1939." This poem represents the mood of resignation that the world is experiencing today. Auden wrote, "Defenseless under the night / Our world in stupor lies"; (lines 89-90, p.,89).

Of Hitler, Lowell wrote:

Hitler had fingertips of apprehension,
"Who knows how long I'll live? Let us have war.

We are the barbarians, the world is near the end." (163)

We still live in a world impoverished by preparations for the ultimate war. With threats of nuclear weapons presently stock-piled, Psychologists, Social Workers and Philosophers are telling us that, the prospect of a nuclear catastrophe has immeasurably affected human perceptions even in small children.

Marvin Bell points out that the writer is still against murder. Donne says, "No man is an island. Each death diminishes me" (qtd. in Bell 188). The writings of the Nuclear Age reflect the agonies of the poets. Following Lowell's footsteps many writers have given shape to their fears and anxieties. And like Lowell the "inward" poets Denise Levertov and Galway Kinnell have written great public poems.

According to Galway Kinnell poetry itself is political. In an interview with Kate Daniels he said,

I agree with Carolyn Forche about poetry being political. Poetry is always some kind of affirmation of consciousness, so it is an act of life. Even a poem which is despairing can further and increase life if it lives, if it affirms. King Lear would be an example of this: What a desolate play! Yet it increases life. I think of some of Berryman's most despairing Dream Songs: "Age and the death..." Do you know that one? It's probably a poem of the most total despair I've ever met, and yet I live more on account of knowing that poem (295).

Kinnell like Lowell has broken with traditional form and espouses free verse as the only possible medium for an American poet. His poems have the intuitive immediacy of entrance into pre-birth and subhuman organic nature as in the poem "Under the Maud Moon."
It is all over, little one,
the flipping
and overleaping,
the watery
somersaulting alone in the oneness
under the hill, under
the old, lonely belly button pushing forth again
in remembrance, all over,
the drifting there furled like a flower, pressing
a knee down the slippery
walls, sculpting the whole world, hearing
a few cries from without not even as promises,
the stream
of Omphalos blood humming all over you. *(The Book of Nightmares p.,7)*

From Omphalos blood to the twentieth century violence, the distance is not too far
for Kinnell. In the poem "The Dead shall be Raised Incorruptible," he says,

> In the twentieth century of my trespass on earth,
> having exterminated one million heathens,
> heretics, Jews, Moslems, witches, mystical seekers,
> black men, Asians and Christian brothers,
> everyone of them for his own good,
> A whole continent of red men for
> living in community. *(Selected Poems p.,108)*

Galway Kinnell's "The Fundamental Project of Technology" like Robert Lowell's "For
the Union Dead" laments the numbing effect the nuclear age produces on human
consciousness. The poem so effectively brings out the horrors of the Nuclear Age that Jim Schley has included this in his anthology entitled *writing in a Nuclear Age*.

Under glass, glass dishes which changed
in color; pieces of transformed beer bottles;
a household iron; bundles of wire become solid
lumps of iron; a pair of pliers; a ring of skull-
bone fused to the inside of a helmet; a pair of
eyeglasses taken off the eyes of an eyewitness, without glass,
Which vanished, when a white flash sparkled  (lines 1-7 p.40)

Kinnell wrote this poem envisioning the white light which would be the last glimpse of the World as it gets destroyed by the nuclear bombs.

A flash! A white flash, sparkled!  - Tatsuichiro Akitzuki.

Here, as McLeish does in "Ars Poetica" Kinnell makes the objects speak for themselves. The poet and the reader are the willing listeners. They are, with one exception, objects that are made by one or another heat process--cooking, forging, smelting--and hence have a high degree of heat resistance. And that also becomes true of the skull bone which is the most heat-resistant part in the human body.

Now the poet and the reader can imagine the heat that transforms, melts or otherwise alters glass, wire, helmet metal, and human bone. The unifying element here is the "heat" (The heat of the nuclear holocaust). The items thus unified immediately evoke deep images of an instant holocaust. Lowell also used the word "boiling" to evoke the same image of holocaust.

on Boylston Street, a commercial photograph
shows Hiroshima boiling
over a Mosler Safe, the "Rock of Ages"
that survived the blast.  (136)
"Mosler safe" like the "glass, wire, helmet metal, human bone" is a relic that could resist heat; "Mosler safe" and "human bone" succeed in surviving the blast! "Nuclear heat" pervades Denise Levertov's poem too:

Men are willing to observe
the writhing, the bubbling flesh and
swift but protracted charring of bone
while the subject pigs, placed in cages designed for this,
don't pass out but continue to scream as they turn to cinder.
The Pentagon wants to know
something a child could tell it:
it hurts to burn, and even a match
can make you scream, pigs or people,
even the smallest common flame can kill you.

This plutonic calefaction is redundant. ("Watching Dark Circle"
lines 1-11 p., 46)

Denise Levertov (born 1923) is an important and established poet of the 1960s and 1970s whose poems are widely admired and anthologized, whose poetic theories are quoted by fellow practitioners, and whose teachings have influenced many beginners. She is an extremely fine craftsman, and her greatest talent is surely her profound understanding of her medium of language as a sign system that is not only private and public but also aural and visual.

Denise Levertov like Robert Lowell considers William Carlos Williams as her true mentor. She also learned to depend upon the red wheel barrow, to search for no "ideas" but "things." In the poems of Here and Now and Overland to the islands she discovers poetry in the intense perception of the immediate--Ralph Mills describes her verse as "poetry of the immediate" (176-196)--and she has rejected traditional
poetic forms in favor of "free Verse," of a line scored to reveal the process of the poet thinking and perceiving. The occasions of these finely realized songs are various: scenes of city life, events in human lives, perceptions of natural images, scenes of life in Mexico and thoughts on love and marriage. Levertov considers her poetry as "organic poetry." According to her "organic poetry" having freed itself from imposed forms, voluntarily places itself under other laws: the variable, unpredictable, but nonetheless strict laws of "inscape" discovered by "instress." Levertov uses Hopkins's term "inscape" to mean the intrinsic form of an experience, intellectual, emotional or sensory; "instress" is the apperception of "inscape." Thus form is discovered in the experience, and "content and form are in a dynamic state of interaction" (qtd. in American Poets since World War II p., 6).

And the Years of Vietnam turned Levertov into a political activist. She participated in anti-war rallies and demonstrations. She began to write political poetry, believing that "We need poems of the spirit, to inform us of the essential, to help us "live" the "revolution."" Her volume of poems titled as Relearning the Alphabet contains many poems on social themes; the war, the Detroit riots, Biafra and war resisters.

Denise Levertov and Kinnell, as Lowell did earlier, keep pointing out that the final "ditch is nearer."

Again and again, until the day flashes and no one lives
to look back and say a flash, a white flash sparkled.

("The Fundamental Project of Technology" lines 48-49).

The world of 1980s is even more complicated than Lowell's world of 1960s and 1970s.

Owing to the rapid progress in science, it is now possible for the first time in history for an enemy half way around the world to take aim at your heart- -and you will be dead in thirty minutes. Or he can shoot you from beneath the sea- -and your
life expectancy is even less. Of course, you can do the same thing to him, and that fact gives rise to an uneasy stalemate. Uneasy, because science and technology are not static in themselves; only the people behind them can make them static by refusing to proceed with research and development. Unless all possible antagonists in this dangerous world agree, with iron-clad guarantees, to halt military technology in its tracks, none of them can safely do so.

In *Power and Madness* published in 1989, Edward Rhodes argues that without intending the United States has created a nuclear arsenal, Command-and-Control structure and decision making progress that, like Dr. Strangelove's mechanical device, threaten to place nuclear decisions beyond rational control during a Soviet-American conflict (1).

Robert Bly analyzes the reasons as to why only few American poems penetrated to any reality in American political life:

One reason is that political concerns and inward concerns have always been regarded in our tradition as opposites, even incompatibles. But it is clear that many of the events that create our foreign relations and our domestic relations come from more or less hidden impulses in the American psyche. The poet's main job is to penetrate that husk around the American psyche, and since that "psyche" is inside him too, the writing of political poetry is like the writing of personal poetry, a sudden drive by the poet inward. When a poet succeeds in driving part way inward, he often develops new energy that carries him on through the polished husk of the inner psyche that deflects most citizens or poets. Once inside the psyche, he can speak of inward and political things with the same assurance (line 131-32).
Thinking of the rarity of the political poet in the United States another image comes to Bly's mind. He imagines,

American poets inside a sphere, like those sad men in Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights. The clear glass is the limit of the ego. American poets float inside it. Around the poet, there are worlds of energy, but the poets are unable to describe them in words, because the poets are unable to get out of their own egos (134).

Lowell was not confined by his ego though he was a great inward poet who wrote great public poems. Apart from the fusion of the inwardness and the political vision his sensibility also never deserted him. In this he is like the Austrian Franz Jagerstatter, whose life ended thirty years ago, during the Second World War. Jagerstatter was a farmer, with the equivalent of a high school education, but he possessed a remarkable intelligence. He decided that the Nazis were incompatible with the best he had seen or read of life, and made this decision before the Nazis took over in Austria; he cast the only "no" ballot in his village against the Anchluss. Jagerstatter's firm opposition to the Nazi regime is particularly interesting because he did not act out a doctrinaire position of a closely knit group, like the Jehovah's Witnesses, nor was he a member of a group being systematically wiped out, like the Jews: he simply made up his mind on a specific political situation relying on his own judgement and what he was able to piece together from the Bible, and using information available to everyone.

When drafted by the Nazis after the Anchluss he refused to serve. The military judges sympathised, but told him they would have to cut off his head if he did not change his mind. All persons in authority who interviewed Jagerstatter, including the bishops of the Austrian Catholic Church, psychiatrists, lawyers and judges, told him that his sensibility was advising him wrongly. He was not responsible for acts he might take on as a soldier: that was the responsibility of the legal government. They told
him that he should turn his sensibility to the precarious situation of his family. He was advised, in effect, not to be serious. It was recommended that he be a Christian in regard to his domestic life, but not to his political life. By study Jagerstatter had increased the range of his sensibility, and now this sensibility looked on acts he would have to take under orders by the government with the same calm penetration with which it would look on wasting time, or deciding on the quality of a book. He had extended his awareness farther than society wanted him to, and everyone he met, with the exception of a single parish priest, tried to drive it back again. Jagerstatter, however, refused to change his mind, would not enter the army despite disturbed appeals by the authorities, and was executed. Lowell displayed the same kind of sensibility.

Though Lowell did not have to face a firing squad like Jagerstatter, he willingly faced imprisonment and the wrath of the White House owing to his strong convictions. Denise Levertov notes that the political poetry of contemporary America is more often written by active participants in political and social struggle than it was in the past (174). She also observes that the world-famous Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet, who spent more than seventeen years of his life in jail as a political prisoner, wrote a number of powerful poems in his confinement, poems which notably combine the context of oppression with the unquenchable love of life that characterized him. And a young Mexican American, Jimmy Santiago Baca, whose first book was also written in jail, presents another example of a poetry of direct personal experience which is both political and lyrical (169).

This direct personal political experience is what makes Lowell an even greater poet than W.B. Yeats.

Yeats was one who proved that politics is not outside the individual but it is a part of the inner life. Hence the personal confessional poems that deal with the
inner life of the self can easily interpret experiences of public and political nature. Both confessional mode of poetry and the public mode operate on the assumption that there are no taboos in art. ART should do whatever ART can do.

The confessional poetry dealt with the inner world which was always understood to be a complex one. As Rousseau probed deep into his mind, the contradictions of his self became clear to him and he took the view that they were an essential part of his self. Sincerity to Rousseau meant being true to one’s inner most nature of the self. In the very opening paragraph of The Confessions, Rousseau proclaims his complex uniqueness: "I am not made like any of those I have seen; I venture to believe that I am not made like any of those that are in existence. If I am not better, at least I am different" (1).

The public world was less complicated than the inner world till about a hundred years ago. As MacLeish points out, "the poetry of Greece moved more easily in the world of politics, human and divine, in the world of heroic actions, in the world of war, than in the inward world which Sappho knew" (115). But to-day the public world has become an extremely complex one, and the poetry seems to prefer to stay indoors. MacLeish drives home this truth when he says,

Our dreams are public. Even our terrors are public. And nevertheless we won't have our poetry out of doors. The world outside has grown grittier and uglier and noisier and more and more complicated in the last hundred years. There was never a public world which needed meanings as much as ours or needed more urgently the kind of meanings poetry is able to discover (117-118).

W.B. Yeats's "Easter 1916" gives the kind of "meanings" the world needs badly today.
The British government had already in 1914, decided to give home rule to Ireland but had deferred its implementation until the war against Germany should be over. But there were strong reasons for doubting whether the Government would, or could, when the time came, use the necessary military force to put this policy into effect, against very substantial armed resistance in the Northern countries of Ireland. The Easter Rising of 1916 in Dublin was organized by the movement for Irish Independence. The rebellion was crushed, and sixteen of its leaders were shot. The countess Markiewicz was also among those sentenced to death, but her sentence was commuted to life imprisonment and she was released in 1917.

Yeats like everyone else, misunderstood it. He called the insurrectionists political innocents who would pay for their innocence with their lives. But when they did pay with their lives he saw that it was this they had intended from the beginning. He saw too what they had done: they had changed everything. In "September 1913" he lamented,

What need you, being come to sense,
But fumble in a greasy till
And add the half-pence to the pence
And prayer to shivering prayer, until
You have dried the marrow from the bone?
For men were born to pray and save:
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,

It's with O' Leary in the grave. (Collected Poems lines 1-8 pp. 120-21)

The Ireland of "September 1913" - the Ireland of the little people with their hands in the greasy tills - is changed - changed utterly. But it was not ConMarkiewicz and MacDonagh and Pearse and Connolly and MacBride who had changed everything but the poem itself which five months after that tragic Easter gave their deaths their
meaning. "The meaning is in terms of human life, human history- -the tragedy of the heart ‘with one purpose alone’ which, like a stone, troubles the human stream" (MacLeish 44). It was Maud Gonne who dragged W.B. Yeats into nine years of political agitation which included the presidency of the Wolfe Tone Association and even membership in the secret and subversive Irish Republican Brotherhood.

And Maud Gonne recognized the relationship between Yeats’s work and its political consequences when she wrote,

Without Yeats there would have been no literary revival in Ireland. Without the inspiration of that Revival and the glorification of beauty and heroic virtue, I doubt if there would have been an Easter Week. They were poets and writers who led Irish youth to die, that Ireland might live; and because of them and their writings, when they were crushed by the brute force of England, the people did not yield as they did after the Fenian Rising (27).

Yeats’s reactions to the event were complex: he was deeply moved by the resurgence of a romantic nationalism which he had considered moribund, but on the human level he mourned the waste of life and promise. He acknowledged that their ethic of blood sacrifice had contributed to Civil War brutalities, and had permanently inflamed the temper of public life in Ireland. He accused himself of creating the climate in which that ethic had developed in the poem "The Man and the Echo."

Did that play of mine send out

Certain men the English shot? (lines 11-12)

In the poem "Easter 1916" he raises the question:

Was it needless death after all?

For England may keep faith

For all that is done and said. (lines 67-69)
His question was not so much a criticism of the patriots, but a comment on the political situation. O’ Brien suggests that the heroes of the Rising were both socially and politically antipathetic to Yeats, ignoring the poet’s friendship with Pearse and MacDonagh. Yeats certainly had his differences with Sinn Fein, but Sinn Fein had nothing to do with the Rising. Patrick McCartan, an IRB man says,

Those of us who were capable of understanding Yeats’s work were then and continued to be his ardent admirers. We knew of course he was not working in our ranks but realized that in his own field he was working on parallel lines and doing well work none of us were capable of even attempting (qtd. in Cullingford 87).

And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?
I write it out in a Verse -
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born. (lines 72-80)

According to Thomas R. Edwards,

a poet can only “write it out in a verse,” claiming no status for himself except that of the humble and in a way mechanical craft of the man who sits and puts down words so that they come out in verses. . . .

Yeats’s poet-self is helpless when he tries to connect public events and the aesthetic and moral values that are his own major concerns. . . .
The beauty that is born represents not escape from public terror into
aesthetic order but a way of preserving the force of terror while giving it the status of an object being contemplated and known with some of the disinterested concern that one brings to work of art or (more accurately) that works of art enforce upon us. But such disinterest has a place in political contemplation too (195-196).

And for Yeats, the Easter Rising was not some remote event known only from its confused edges or from reading the newspapers: it was an action done by friends and acquaintances. Yeats had not taken the revolutionaries seriously before the event; he and his friends had regarded them as unrealistic fanatics.

The description of the speaker’s conviction before the Easter Rising—"Being certain that they and I / But lived where motley is worn" (lines 13-14) is almost confessional. He confesses to having misjudged his friends; he had no respect for them. The poem thus records the change in the speaker’s judgement, not only of the rebels, but of the world that he and they inhabited. Their deaths have compelled him to abandon his sense of that world as a trivial one in which only comic roles were available, and to make a sudden and radical adjustment of his sense of what being human can mean.

What voice more sweet than hers
When, young and beautiful,
She rode to harriers? (lines 21-23)

Yeats first met the Gore-Booth sisters in 1894. He stayed at Lissadell, their late Georgian grey granite house that looks out over Sligo bay, and as he wrote to his sister Lily, enjoyed himself greatly. "They are delightful people... All the while I was at Lissadell, I was busy telling stories, old Irish stories... Miss Eva Gore Booth shows some promise as a writer of verse. Her work is very formless as yet but it is full of very telling little phrases. Lissadell is an exceedingly impressive house inside with a
great sitting room as high as a church and all things in good taste ..." (qtd. in Jeffares 191).

Later Constance Markievicz who married a Polish count was the life and soul of the rebellion. Indeed with MaudGonne and Eva Gore-Booth, she held office in the Republican Brotherhood as a commander. But Yeats is not very appreciative of their restlessness. There seems to be an inexplicable ambivalence in Yeats's attitude to certain aspects of the Irish Freedom Movement. Poet and Patriot though he was, he felt that the rebels, and the Gore-Booth women were indulging in untimely and inexperienced sentimental gestures of revolt, gravely jeopardizing the prospects of a peaceful resolution of a vital national issue which did not brook any compromise. And Yeats does not hide his deep contempt for Mac Bride, who had taken away MaudGonne from him. He is a "Vainglorious lout." In "Easter 1916" Yeats constructs tragic vision out of experience that was close enough to himself to be called personal; his Irish concerns and loyalties make him speak like a man and not like a cultural theorist.

Yeats's political poem helps us understand Lowell's. Both can rage in a language at once harshly modern and traditionally splendid, and make it an instrument with which to invade the political mysteries.

Richard Ellmann comments that "Yeats's political poems . . . are always complicated by his being above politics" (143-44).

But Lowell is very much "in" politics. In "Memories of West Street and Lepke" Lowell the son of a naval officer and the descendant of an old American family noted for its dedication to public and military service, examines his experience as a conscientious objector during World War II. He recollects that emotional event from the strangely tranquil vantage point of the following decade.
Twice Lowell had volunteered for service but twice was rejected for nearsightedness. By the time he was finally called up, America was halfway through the war; and Lowell found himself opposed both to saturation bombing, which especially meant the killing of civilians, and to the demand for unconditional surrender. He refused to appear for induction in September, 1943; and he even failed to appear for arraignment. Finally, in October, the New York Times, in an article headed "A Boston Lowell is a Draft Dodger," reported that Lowell had pleaded guilty of violating the Selective Service Act (29).

A month before, in a letter to President Roosevelt, Lowell announced his intention to refuse military service, contending, according to the Times report of October 2, 1943 "that the Allies were fighting as ruthlessly as their opponents" (8). Denied the status of a conscientious objector, Lowell received a year and a day for refusing to be inducted.

"Memories of West Street and Lepke" starts on a confessional note. Lowell's daughter rises like the sun "in her flame-flamingo infant's wear." 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.

"Ought I to regret my seedtime?" is the essential question of the poem, which echoes Blake's "Proverb of Hell", "In seed time learn, in harvest teach, in winter enjoy." In the 1960s the poet was to win fame by criticizing President Johnson about the barbarities of Vietnam War. He did learn in his seed time.

The poet lived with gangsters and outcasts in the prison. He made courageous decisions and he investigated them. As Fein rightly observes, "The poet is a Prometheus chained to himself" (78). In 1967 Lowell participated in an act of political protest, the March on the Pentagon. The poem dwells on the poet's ability to survive his humiliations and feels a decent compassion for all participants.
Whether as a political protestor or as a conscientious objector, Lowell's direct participation in the events he shapes up as poems later, gives an aura of "experienced truth" that Yeats's poem lacks. Whereas Yeats could only comment on political prisoners, Lowell dared to be one himself. Both the men were Poets and Patriots. But Lowell was also an active rebel.

Lowell traversed the "whole scale of experience" and told "how it was with him." Whether public or personal, he was able to write poems only about recalled events; experiences imagined constantly eluded him. He wrote about what he lived through (autobiographical) or what the world lived through (historical, political and public). What he wrote were only "snapshots" and not "painted pictures." He longed for a painter's vision but was endowed only with a photographer's lens. Unable to achieve his desire he gave shape to his longing in "Epilogue", the last poem of Day By Day sequence.

I want to make
something imagined, not recalled? (lines 3-4)

... The painter's vision is not a lens,
It trembles to caress the light
But sometimes everything I write
With the threadbare art of my eye
seems a snapshot, (lines 6-10)

... We are poor passing facts,
warned by that to give
each figure in the photograph
his living name. (lines 20-23 p., 127)
Lowell will never be a mere photograph bearing a "living name." His name will live forever because Lowell was a "POET" in the Emersonian sense:

All men live by truth, and stand in need of expression. In love, in art, in avarice, in politics, in labor, in games we study to utter our painful secret. The man is only half himself, and the other half is his expression (336).

Lowell expressed the painful secrets of his own self and the world at large in his poems. What he said of Hopkins stands as testimonial to his own art:

"His life was a continuous substantial progress toward perfection. He believed this, he lived this, this is what he wrote" (168).

It is time the discussion on Lowell came to a necessary conclusion with a short examination of "The March" published in Notebook 1967-68.

The character of Lowell's poetry always remained "experiential." "Experience" to him meant the sum of the relations and interactions between psyche and environment. A good personal poem comes alive when the poet succeeds in carrying over some of his own psychic life into the poem, and entangling it in his language. Similarly, a good political poem captures the psychic life of the nation. In "The March" he captures the psychic life of America and also his own war-obsessed existence. Lowell's chief antiwar activity in 1967 was his participation in the October "March" on the Pentagon, along with perhaps 100,000 people including such "notables" as Denise Levertov, Allen Ginsberg, Paul Goodman and Norman Mailer. In his book *Armies of the Night*, Mailer gives a detailed account of this event, and the event was the source of inspiration for Lowell's poem "The March." Again this is a poem of "felt" experience with political, public relevance. The poet is within and without. He wryly mocks his activist self, the bespectacled, aging, nervous man of letters, playing Union Recruit in his first engagement not yet sure that Bull Run will be a defeat but vaguely
hopeful that defeats may feel more glorious than victories. The act of protesting tires him; aching arches, timid heart, uneasy boredom with self-congratulating speeches, the final tottering flight from brutal violence. Lowell's political vision in the completed poem is essentially inward. He aims neither to score partisan points, nor to advertise himself, but to explore moral ambiguity in himself, and implicitly in his culture. The poem manages to show the poet seeing himself from outside (his public impotence) and the inner feeling of the occasion (the rage against the all powerful state). The poems narrate his diffidence and self-doubt, even while in the process of a heroic act:

Under the too white mammoreal Lincoln Memorial,
the too tall mammoreal Washington Obelisk,
gazing into the too long reflecting pool,
the reddish trees, the withering autumn sky,
the remorseless, amplified harangues for peace-lovely, to lock arms, to march absurdly locked
(unlocking to keep my wet glasses from slipping)
to see the cigarette match quaking in my fingers,
then to step off like green Union Army recruits
for the first Bull Run, sped by photographers,
the notables, the girls . . . fear, glory, chaos, rout . . .
our green army staggered out on the miles-long green fields
met by the other army, the Martian, the ape, the hero,
his new-fangled rifle, his green new steel helmet. (180)

II
Where two or three were flung together, or fifty,
mostly white-haired, or bald, or women . . . sadly
unfit to follow their dream, I sat in the sunset
shade of their Bastille, the Pentagon,
nursing leg-and arch-cramps, my cowardly,
foolhardy heart; and heard, alas, more speeches,
though the words took heart now to show how weak
we were, and right. An MP sergeant kept
repeating, "March slowly through them. Don't even brush
anyone sitting down." They tiptoed through us
in single file, and then their second wave
trampled us flat and back. Health to those who held,
health to the green steel head . . . to the kind hands
that helped me stagger to my feet, and flee. (181)

There is no gainsaying the fact that Robert Lowell is a poet of unquestionable
stature in twentieth century American Poetry. He adorned whatever he took up for
poetic treatment. He transmuted the ordinary experiences of mankind which almost
go unnoticed by us into universal experiences of lasting significance. Poets, the world
over, have never been able to outgrow the 'anxiety of influence' Lowell has exerted
on them.

It is no wonder that an Indian student living so far away from Lowell's native
country with no access- -on account of the cultural chasm that divides- -to the
incidents he participated in, does feel drawn, in a great measure to his poems as
works of towering literary art which pose and present a dazzling variety of problems
which become an indivisible part of his emotional set up. And that, however, is no
mean achievement. Probably a similar sentiment prompted Elizabeth Bishop to make
the following observation:
Somehow or other, in the middle of our worst century so far, we have produced a magnificent poet, a poet whose burning and cutting as acid verse defines the age we live in.
Works cited


