

Robert Lowell's "Confessional" Image of an Age: Theme and Language in Poetic Form

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IT HAS BEEN frequently noted in praise of Robert Lowell that he offers us an image of an age, a picture of the intellectual at mid-century, comparable to the noted images of earlier years supplied by T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden.¹ Unlike Eliot and Auden, Lowell composed that image, where he did so, in one of his most effective books, *Life Studies* (1959), out of quite ordinary and highly personal details. The general nature of the "confessional" mode introduced in that volume hardly needs further explication, but, because on the surface Lowell seems so close to the verse of popular magazines, much of which is distinctly personal, casual, and timely, the details of a technique which raises Lowell's created image of the age above so many superficially similar efforts call for comment. Thus I want to offer here a brief analysis of how, in the seemingly casual "confessions" of the pair of poems which open Section ii of the last part of *Life Studies*, Lowell's personal images of an age are incorporated in a particularly reverberant structure of thematic and linguistic textures. The age for Lowell (the "tranquillized fifties") ricochets through the verbal web of these poems connecting a time of the century with a time of life, an editor and a pacifist, a townhouse and a jail, all through imagistic and auditory echoes deceptively disguised by the low poetic profile of these pieces.

Part IV, Section ii of *Life Studies* begins with two poems, "Memories of West Street and Lepke" (hereafter abbreviated as "Memories") and "Man and Wife," which take up the life of the poet after he has returned to his Marlborough Street townhouse from a three-month sojourn at the mental hospital. These two poems, unlike Lowell's historical poems, deal with the time

(the late Fifties) in which they were written and define this time largely in contrast, not with distant ages, but with the decade just past. They share a narrative structure in which the poet, having established a present in Boston in the 1950's, remembers a scene in the 1940's in lower Manhattan where a futile passionate gesture was made.² There are, of course, many differences between the poems: Lowell's wife (Elizabeth Hardwick) does not appear in "Memories" but is central to the second poem. The New York section of "Memories" is much further developed, forty lines as against nine in "Man and Wife," which returns to the present in Boston while the first poem does not. The characters involved in the Forties sections are radically different: inmates of the West Street Jail in "Memories" as opposed to the select intellectual company of "Man and Wife" (Elizabeth Hardwick, a novelist, and the Philip Rahvs, the editor of *The Partisan Review* and his wife). Yet, despite these differences, the structural and thematic similarities, to be pointed out below, do reverberate from poem to poem enriching each one with echoes of the other and adding to the particular story being told a sense of shared temporal context.

The controlling poetic device by which the times are expressed is contrast, and Lowell states the bald facts — with enforcing alliteration — in the second stanza of "Memories," "These are the tranquillized *Fifties*, / and I am forty." Since Lowell was born in 1917, not 1910, the actual juxtapositions of his personal decades with those of the century were never as neat as this phrase would imply, yet as a linguistic structure which links phonetically two contrasting periods in personal and calendar times, this is very effective.³ It paves the way for the juxtapositions of Lowell's passionate and public years (his "seedtime") in the Forties when he was not yet forty, but young, daring, and perhaps foolish, with the more settled and stolid years of conservative domesticity (despite the "Dionysian" bed-posts) in the next decade.

Both poems start in the unnaturally tranquil Fifties, when the anxieties of foreign wars — both cold and hot — and domestic witchhunting were brushed aside in forced complacency. The Fifties were for Lowell, as they were for many, a period in which sustained and purposeful movement was impossible. The third

poem in *Life Studies*, "Inauguration Day: January 1953," suggests this feeling in the line "Ice, ice [Ike, Ike]. Our wheels no longer move." The unnatural political tranquillity of the decade is reflected in an unnaturally easy personal existence for the author at this time of his life. In "Memories" he has an unusually light work load ("Only teaching Tuesdays") and can loll about the house during the day still in pyjamas.⁴ In "Man and Wife" he is still in bed in the daytime and, in this poem, actually drugged by Miltown, the Wallace Drug Company's brand of Meprobamate introduced in 1955 as an anxiety suppressant.

The contrasts which both poems share between the complacent Fifties and the earlier decade are: (1) a tranquillized "fortyish" present against a passionate though ineffectual young manhood; (2) Boston against New York, Marlborough Street ("hardly passionate") against Greenwich Village, passionately dialectical though often "just talk." (West Street, at least in the euphemisms of real estate advertising, would be considered "West Village."); (3) a private family situation in a comfortable home (though Elizabeth Hardwick was a *second* wife and his daughter unusually young to be the offspring of a man of forty) against a public situation. There is considerable difference between both the locus and the cast of characters for the Forties sections of the two poems, yet, especially in contrast with these same aspects in the Fifties, there are interesting parallels. In "Memories," of course, Lowell is in a prison. In "Man and Wife" it is tempting to think of his drinking bout as taking place in a Village bar, though this is not specified. In either case you have a locus appropriate to the kind of public rhetoric ("Yammer[ing] metaphysics," or "scorch[ing] the traditional South") which went on at the time and which is curtailed for the intimate conversations — certainly no less impassioned — which take place in the highly domestic settings of the Fifties. As far as the characters go, there seems little connection between the persons who occupy the Forties sections of the two poems, yet the fact that they serve similar structural functions suggests illuminating comparisons. Abramowitz, for example, the "fly-weight pacifist" with whom Lowell "yammerged metaphysics" in the West Street Jail, might be contrasted with Philip Rahv who "yammerged" through many radical

journals, particularly his own *Partisan Review*. Lowell himself might be considered to be lobotomized like Lepke when he passes out at Elizabeth Hardwick's feet, a tangential thematic connection strengthened, as will be suggested below, by a phonetic repetition.

The Forties/Fifties contrasts are more developed in "Memories," the poem which introduces this last subsection of *Life Studies* and which is more directly concerned with the poet's decades. The contrasts established in his first poem, however, seem to offer their colours to the contexts in which Lowell considers his relationship with Elizabeth Hardwick in "Man and Wife." We should note: (1) the juxtaposition of the "young Republican," actually a back-alley scavenger, with the odd assortment of non-conservative types, some passionately devout like Abramowitz the pacifist and the Jehovah's Witness, others criminal like the pimps and Lepke, but in any case hardly forming for Lowell the select cadre of like-minded protestors which his daring anti-war stand might ideally have brought him; (2) the juxtaposition of fire imagery, where the "fire" Lowell breathed in the Forties against the military establishment becomes, in the Fifties, the artificial colour ("flame-flamingo") of his daughter's pyjamas. (In what we assume was a much more effective diatribe of the Forties, mentioned in "Man and Wife," Elizabeth Hardwick *scorched* the traditional South.); (3) the juxtaposition of images connected with laundering where, in Boston, Lowell enjoys the private luxuries of "pyjamas fresh from the washer each morning" while his memories of the jail include a view of "sooty clothesline entanglements" and an institutional wash distributed by the "trusty," Lepke.

Something of the importance which this structure of connections between the two decades holds for the poet is hinted at by the image of a man who has lost such connections. In "Memories" the last line ("of lost connections"), emphasized by its terminal position and the rather heavy enjambment with which it is set off, describes the state in which the crime-czar, Louis Lepke, drifts. Lepke, tranquillized by the violent intrusion of a lobotomy, not by a Fifties drug, is not anguished like Lowell by memories,

but the haunting "connections" which Lepke has lost are the very things out of which the poet makes his poems.⁵

The relations discussed so far have been largely ideational. A set of characteristics ascribed to the Forties is contrasted with a set of characteristics ascribed to the Fifties, and these contrasts (such as public vs. domestic, passionate vs. tranquillized) are deployed so that often surprising and enlightening connections may be made among the items collected on one or the other side (as, it was suggested, one might connect Abramowitz and Philip Rahv). However, there are also many more purely linguistic (in this case, phonetic and syntactic) linkages operating. Many of these linkages support the basic contrast of decades (as "These are the tranquillized *Fifties*, / and I am forty"), though others establish complementary sound-sense structures. Verbal devices are so frequent and intricate in these poems that mention of just a few must, for brevity, suggest the texture of the whole. One might, for example, note the identical syntactic patterns with which Lowell establishes the context of domestic Fifties action in "Memories" and "Man and Wife." Both poems start with a participial phrase introducing the somewhat artificial circumstances under which the action of the one-syllable main verb is carried out. Both these verbs ("hog" and "lie" — abed late) have the connotation of something a good Puritan Bostonian would not do. In both poems the first line of the second stanza, which in each case marks a major movement (into the past in "Memories" and back to the present in "Man and Wife") is phonetically connected to the opening line of the poem. This is especially effective in "Man and Wife" where the dominant "t," "l," "n," and "ow" sounds of "Tamed by Miltown" are repeated in "Now twelve years later." The continuity of present action in "Man and Wife" is strengthened by this phonetic recall since the second half of the line which begins the new stanza extends the action begun with the poem's opening line ("... we lie on Mother's bed"; "... you turn your back.").

Finally, we might consider a phrase which due to its strongly alliterative character, tends to stick in the memory and to associate itself with other passages in which the context and any hint of a repetition of the same sounds are recalled. The phrase I have

in mind is that by which Lepke is described in "Memories," "Flabby, bald, lobotomized." Interestingly the connections which this phrase draws to it make rather imprecise matches, as in the poet's "lobotomized" state, suggested by the alliterating "t's" and "b's," when he passed out in front of his wife-to-be "too boiled and shy / and poker-faced to make a pass." But the connection *is*, I think, made and the sense of a desperate gesture of the Forties being turned off by something less social and "Republican" than Miltown is reinforced by analogy. I feel a connection might also be made between the phrase "Flabby, bald, lobotomized" and the phrase in "Man and Wife," "loving, rapid, merciless." Both phrases contain three adjectives of which the last has more syllables than either previous adjective, both phrases make up one line of verse, and both phrases modify the subject of the last main verb of their respective poems. ("Flabby, bald, lobotomized, / he drifted . . ." and "your old-fashioned tirade — / loving, rapid, merciless — / breaks . . ."). I would not hold that the echoes connect Lepke and Elizabeth Hardwick, but that they testify to a common way of viewing action. In this their force is rather syntactic than thematic. These modifying phrases significantly occur in the concluding sentence of their respective poems where, in leaving us, the author gives us a sense of how things are, a sense of how, in the "age of Lowell," a subject acts. In each case Lowell, as poet, sees his subject, ("he" [Lepke] or the "tirade" of Elizabeth Hardwick) as specifically and multiply qualified, and this qualification is important enough so that these adjectives take to themselves one line of the verse. Of course the characterization is vastly different: rapid would hardly apply to anything Lepke would do and Elizabeth Hardwick is certainly not flabby. Yet when an actant, especially in this crucial terminal position, is so carefully characterized in so similar a manner (even down to the fact that in each case the last of the three adjectives — "lobotomized" and "merciless" — is crucial, unexpected, and harshly qualifying of the other two) surely a typical manner of perception is being suggested.

From another of the *Life Studies* poems, "Waking in the Blue," two portraits of Lowell's fellow inmates at the mental hospital, Stanley, former Harvard all-American fullback "now sunk in his

sixties," and Bobbie, "Porcellian '29 . . . redolent and roly-poly as a sperm whale," again recall the lobotomized Lepke as men of a different generation from Lowell's who have outlived an illustrious past (membership in Harvard's Porcellian Club and in Murder Incorporated both involve a rare combination of personal accomplishment and genetic endowment) with which they have lost any meaningful connection.

Topicality in a casual style is not hard to attain (though it is probably easier now than it was before *Life Studies* was published): the poetry columns in the local press flaunt these qualities — usually to the exclusion of any others. Lowell's accomplishment was to find in his own particular experience a number of details which capture a sense of the age without being hackneyed symbols for it *and* — where his imitators fail — to incorporate these images in a dense web of semantic and phonetic reverberations. Even the famous reference to the tranquillizer Miltown in the first line of "Man and Wife," though by itself a cliché for an era commonly labelled "tranquillized," becomes, in the very special uses Lowell makes of it in carefully controlled references to other tranquillized situations and in its repeated alliterative pattern, a fresh and unique poetic device.

"Memories of West Street and Lepke" and "Man and Wife" form no history book and Robert Lowell, even among intellectuals, is no Everyman, yet these two poems, in addition to the more direct and specific message of each one, evoke a striking image of the Americans whose passionate years were spent in the struggles just prior to mid-century.⁶ They do this without the elaborate and impersonal mythical paraphernalia of poems like "The Waste Land" and hence may at first seem flat, yet, as I hope to have shown, the same basic poetic techniques of thematic and linguistic connections complexly operate to fashion a memorable *poetic* image of an age.

NOTES

¹ For example consider this comment on *Life Studies* in Irvin Ehrenpreis' "The Age of Lowell," "... he now found it possible not only to treat himself as part of history but to treat history as part of himself. The course of his life became the analogue of the life of his era; the sufferings of the poet became a mirror of the sufferings of whole classes and na-

- tions." Reprinted in *Robert Lowell: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Thomas Parkinson (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 89.
- 2 Marjorie Perloff interestingly links the structure of remembrance in these poems to M. H. Abrams' description of the romantic lyric. *The Poetic Art of Robert Lowell* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), pp. 82-85.
 - 3 In another of the *Life Studies* poems, "During Fever," a related comment on the meshing or failure to mesh of a personal history with the character of the decades in which it is lived may be seen in Lowell's lines on his mother, "Born ten years and yet an aeon / too early for the twenties."
 - 4 It would be interesting to find out whether historical fact or the desire for an effective alliteration determined the choice of the day on which Lowell says he taught.
 - 5 Alan Williamson offers a sensitive and detailed analysis of "Memories of West Street and Lepke" stressing the poet's problems in finding the proper political (in Williamson's very broad sense) connections with his times. I find I can agree with all that Williamson said of the poem and I feel that it is an interesting point, that as tightly structured a poem as this one can sustain without contradiction both Williamson's benignly Freudian reading and my own — arrived at before I came to his book. Actually I would guess that Williamson's reading, which takes Lepke's "lost connections" as analogous to Lowell's lost political and social connections, is probably closer to what the poet originally had in mind and is a "host" to my "parasitic" metapoetic reading. See *Pity the Monsters: The Political Vision of Robert Lowell* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 78-84. In *The Poetic Themes of Robert Lowell*, Jerome Mazzaro emphasizes Lepke's connection with the "lobotomized" states experienced by Lowell and his father in those moments when social confinement crushed their dreams (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1965), pp. 115-16. See also John Crick whose less detailed view of the Lepke section agrees more or less with Williamson's. *Robert Lowell* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1974), pp. 55-57.
 - 6 Alfred Kazin stressed "Lowell had an extreme sense of society," saying in 1978 much the same thing that Ehrenpreis and others had said earlier. See Alfred Kazin in *Esquire*, January 1978, p. 20 and note 1 above.