



Jan Vermeer Van Delft, *The Artist in His Studio*

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# “Day by Day”: Lowell’s Poetics of Imitation

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“YOU DIDN’T WRITE, you rewrote,” Lowell quoted Jarrell saying of himself in “Randall Jarrell” (*History*). From his student days at Kenyon, Lowell saw his practice at poetry as one of repetition, revision, imitation — of himself and other artists. He valued the process of redoing perhaps more highly than the spontaneous scribble of inspiration; an apprentice to the past, he subscribed to Eliot’s dictum that permanent art was a synthesis of “tradition and the individual talent.” His shapes of change generally served to comment upon his models, even when the model was himself. In the simplest of examples, his revisions were efforts at modernization. His early poem “The Cities’ Summer Death,” published in 1939 in *Kenyon Review*, became the more discursive, colloquially effective “Death from Cancer” which appeared in *Lord Weary’s Castle* (1946). And even the late confessional piece “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow” (*Life Studies*, 1959) has its seeds in the 1939 composition. But beyond his impulse to contemporize and de-symbolize diction, Lowell rewrote to create an ironic locus from which to re-evaluate the past.

Toward the end of his career Lowell rode the proverbial seesaw, alternating between two polar modes, each a return to a former mode. The unrhymed sonnets of *Notebook* (1969) and *History* (1973) recalled his formal, difficult *Land of Unlikeness* (1944) and *Lord Weary’s Castle*. The loose, diary-like pieces in *Day by Day* (1977) seemed a continuation of *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead* (1964). Between these axes Lowell sought a balance level in *The Dolphin* (1973), merging the symbolic with the literal; the experiment stirred much critical controversy.

It would be hard to tell which direction he would have taken, had he lived, after *Day by Day*. His was never a steady course from impersonal rhetoric to personal utterance.

Despite critics' surprise at *Day by Day*, this volume imitates his earlier work. Its elegiac tone, its wistfulness for old friendships, its continuing search for consummate love, all are reiterated in a style which bemoans its own inadequacy — an *attitudinal* carryover from former volumes. Poems such as "Milgate" and "Ear of Corn" imitate Lowell's earlier practice of converting a natural setting within a specified time and place into an immutable human value. On a larger scale, the thematic format of *Day by Day* seems a facsimile of *Life Studies*. It is divided into three parts, with the final part itself entitled "Day by Day"; *Life Studies* has four parts, the last of which is entitled "Life Studies." In both volumes these constitute the most personal sections; in both volumes the earlier sections are devoted to memoirs of literary figures and reflections on historical events. Their similarity even pertains to a transition in prosodic structure: in its closing section each volume moves toward a looser line. "Ulysses and Circe," the first poem in *Day by Day*, uses a mythopoeic model. Its diction is dignified, it contains classical tropes, and its narrative allusions suggest the archetypal quest. Ulysses is on a voyage in which he is "seeking the unpeopled world beyond the sun, / lost in the uproarious rudeness of a great wind." Finally, with regard to the persona in both *Life Studies* and *Day by Day*, he is dramatized as one who cannot separate his personal experiences from historical events. Thus, the closing sections of both volumes record in more or less chronological order the interaction between Lowell's experience and the sequence of public happenings. Because so much of *Day by Day* does seem like Lowell repeating Lowell, the volume became the subject of more critical detraction than Lowell had ordinarily received. However, if its structure is perceived as intentional regression, then its function as animation becomes its achievement.

Lowell had a habit of rehearsing his preoccupations: the fear of mental illness, the inaccessibility of true religious faith, the disappointment with America, family, self. He had not lost the habit by *Day by Day*; in fact, he had intensified it. But interest-

ingly, Lowell's habitual sense of entrapment in confrontation with composition becomes his successful entry into new structures. I will attempt in the second part of this paper to illustrate how the prosodic elements in the poem "Epilogue" resolve his final dilemma with imitative form.

In his evaluative ambivalence toward himself and others, Lowell was unsparing. In this last volume the frequency of critical statements is high. He says in "Unwanted": "One thing is certain — compared with my wives, Mother was stupid." Indeed, the lack of family solidarity vaguely suggested in *Life Studies* is strongly stressed in *Day by Day*. In the same poem, "Unwanted," he says of Merrill Moore, the psychiatrist-poet:

Did he become mother's lover  
and prey  
by rescuing her from me?  
When I was in college he said, 'You know  
you were an unwanted child?'

And in the piece "To Mother" his atavistic regrets fall on himself:

It has taken me the time since you died  
to discover you are as human as I am . . . [Lowell's ellipses]  
if I am.

A third marriage and the recent birth of a son have done little to expel the misgivings. In "Departure" he concludes that "For me, neither boy / nor woman was a help." Readers familiar with *Land of Unlikeness* and *Lord Weary's Castle* know that Lowell's debate with religion was also a prominent theme. In those texts he argued that the Calvinist heritage had crippled his ancestors. *Life Studies* revealed that his own parents had fared little better with this legacy. Lowell's courtship with Catholicism provided a temporary solution for him, but in *Day by Day* it is apparent that Lowell's last years were marked by an absence of any kind of faith and a longing to recapture it. Allusions to religion or afterlife are despairing or absurd:

. . . our old New England hope of heaven  
made unsentimental by our certainty of hell    ("Fetus")

heaven is a big house  
 with lots of water and flowers —  
 you go in in a trunk. . . . (“In the Ward”)

Lowell’s inability to find peace or happiness in his last years generated a nearly constant depression, compounded by an intensified fear of madness. Several poems are about his hospitalization during breakdown. In “Visitors” he must leave his books and learning behind. Even his intellectual crutches are taken from him; the attendant tells him: “Where are you going, Professor, / you won’t need your Dante.” In “Notice” he asks: “These days of only poems and depressions / what can I do with them?” Nonetheless, such recognition drives him more compulsively to his one outlet, poetry. Writing, he tries to believe, will spare him from the abyss. In “Thanks-Offering” he speaks of the “unshakable terror that made me write.” He asks: “Is getting well ever an art / or art a way to get well?” But references to the craft of composition merely concretize pain in the printed word, an unsure palliative. He notes in the piece “In the Ward”: “It’s an illusion death or technique / can wring the truth from us like water.” Nowhere is he more trapped than when writing:

there’s no truth in this processing of words —  
 the dull, instinctive glow inside me  
 refuels itself, and only blackens  
 such bits of paper brought to feed it. . . . (“Ten Minutes”)

Lowell is definite about the ways in which his craft has foundered. And his examples in these poems are supported by imitations from his earlier styles. He reintroduces the heavily symbolic mode of early volumes as well as the mimetic, realistic style of *Life Studies*. *Day by Day* is a parodic presentation of what he fears may be a poetics of failure. But he continues to create, although the product is “description without significance, / transcribed verbatim by my eye.” This type of self-criticism is, of course, unduly harsh. *Day by Day* is its own poetic triumph. Its structure is a new vessel for expression. It not only imitates, destroys, then builds on the fragments of his former poetry; its process of imitation now extends to painting — particularly, the realism of Vermeer.

Throughout his career Lowell had always shown a predilection for painting as an aesthetic norm and model for poetry. His preference for the Flemish genre painters stemmed from several causes. First, he liked to identify with them as groundbreakers who had transformed Gothic austerity (Van Eyck) to a realistic depiction of life (Vermeer). At the climax of the Flemish movement — which spanned nearly two centuries — painters like Vermeer had evolved a style which recorded with objective scrutiny, and an overriding literalism, life undiminished by ritual or convention. Lowell felt that these painters were "literary," that their paintings could be easily read. Vermeer took into account the normal process of seeing and presented nothing in his paintings that deviated from ordinary perception. But beyond that (and this was Lowell's other reason for wishing to imitate Vermeer), Vermeer used a screening process of normal vision in subordinating details to a basic psychological theme. The painter knew how to find an element in space which could be moulded and heightened by a sense of presence.

Lowell's challenge was to reconcile his poems' broken phraseology, which came from his inner turmoil, with the sense of finish or roundedness he found in Vermeer's paintings. He also observed that although Vermeer was concerned with elaborate presentation of details, he was even more concerned to capture a total luminous representation of a scene. In "Epilogue" Lowell attempted to imitate this; more than focusing on details, he worked toward a total effect. The painting referred to in "Epilogue" is Vermeer's *The Artist in His Studio*. Art historians have labelled this painting Vermeer's self-portrait, indeed his *only* one. It depicts Vermeer working in his studio, but shown from rear view. That is, the emphasis is on his *function* rather than his features. In a sense, "Epilogue" is Lowell's self-portrait as artist.

Prior to *Day by Day* Lowell had made passing mention of painters in his verse. In *History* he compared Van Gogh's "imperfection" to the language of art ("Last Things, Black Pines at 4 a.m.") and Albert Ryder's "repainting" to his own practice of revision ("To Elizabeth Bishop"). In "Rembrandt," whose "faces crack," Lowell wishes his poetic portraits "could crack

and breathe!" But in none of these poems does he fuse his dramatization of experience with his attempt to emulate the painters. The poems are about his effort to emulate them. In *The Dolphin* his references to painters operate in the same way. In "Flight" he speaks of the skyline in New York City "flying like Feininger's skyscraper yachts." And in "Mermaid Emerging" he compares the dolphin's leaps to a Degas ("Degas's snubnosed dancer swings on high"). But in *Day by Day* he comes the closest to imitating in language a painterly technique he had so much admired.

## II

With the exception of a few translations in the Appendix, "Epilogue" is the last poem in *Day by Day*. Although it may not have been the last poem Lowell wrote, its order of appearance in this volume distinguishes it as a kind of farewell statement. Indeed, when critics review *Day by Day* they generally refer to "Epilogue" as Lowell's poetic apologia. The poem is quoted here in its entirety:

Those blessed structures, plot and rhyme —  
 why are they no help to me now  
 I want to make  
 something imagined, not recalled?  
 I hear the noise of my own voice:  
*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,  
 lurid, rapid, garish, grouped,  
 heightened from life,  
 yet paralyzed by fact.  
 All's misalliance.  
 Yet why not say what happened?  
 Pray for the grace of accuracy  
 Vermeer gave to the sun's illumination  
 stealing like the tide across a map  
 to his girl solid with yearning.

We are poor passing facts,  
 warned by that to give  
 each figure in the photograph  
 his living name.

("Epilogue" from *Day By Day* by Robert Lowell. Copyright © 1977 by Robert Lowell. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc.)

The complaint, Lowell's customary approach to a theme, here becomes one about form. His efforts to achieve a painter's freedom and spontaneity have resulted in static constructions — snapshots rather than paintings. Or so the surface meaning suggests. But the phonetic and syntactic patterns suggest something different: a dialectic about the form of the poem itself. Frustration becomes determination, which becomes resignation; resignation becomes resolution. This is done through shift of mood in the order of its seven sentences: interrogative, declarative, declarative, declarative, interrogative, imperative, declarative. The imperative sentence beginning "Pray for the grace of accuracy / Vermeer . . ." emerges with a conviction not evident in earlier passages. But it is not sustained. The poem closes with a declarative statement of resolution: "We are poor passing facts. . . ." The attempt to imitate Vermeer seems to have failed; he can only draw on a technical resort: "to give / each figure in the photograph / his living name."

Syntactic order and parts of speech underscore this dialectic about technique. Verbs are used as past participles with adjectival rather than predicate force; this is especially significant in the modifiers for "snapshot" ("grouped, heightened," "paralyzed"). This reduces the quality of vibrance and action ordinarily associated with verbs. On the other hand, the most empathetic, sensuous verbals are used in reference to painting ("trembles," "caress"). A similar pattern occurs in the use of nouns. Lowell uses few concrete nouns and, when he does so, they refer to Vermeer's painting ("sun's," "map," "tide," "girl"). When speaking of his own creative ordeal, Lowell employs more remote abstract nouns ("structures," "plot," "facts," "figure"). The deadness of the abstract words functions as contrast to the vitality inherent in the concrete ones.

The syntax is as dialectically determined as the parts of speech. In sentences referring to Vermeer and parenthetically, to the "painter's vision," syntax is simple, accretive, paratactic. The other lines contain more complex patterns, characterized by non-restrictive modifiers. The most pronounced examples of this are the modifiers for "snapshot":

lurid, rapid, garish, grouped,  
heightened from life,  
yet paralyzed by fact.

The grammatical structure has a formal duality, a dramatization of antithetical kinds of creativity. Lowell's last resort is to name. Caught in the clutch of time, he fixes the poem in the present tense and centres on the temporal adverb "now." Yet he knows that to make "something imagined, not recalled" is to be liberated from time. Thus, he produces no rooted sense of space or time in his lines on Vermeer.

The sound structure of "Epilogue" provides equally interesting evidence of the poet's dilemma. An inventory of its vowel patterns reveals that the tense, back vowel sound  $\bar{a}$  appears most frequently, and figures predominantly in words which focus on the poet's self scrutiny ("why," "I," "my eye," "heightened," "paralyzed," "misalliance," "sometimes"). Tense back vowels, as opposed to lax front vowels, convey a more solemn mood to the text. This emotive power of vowels is a phenomenon requiring the analysis of a professional psycholinguist, which I cannot provide, but I believe that some elementary observations may be permitted regarding vocalic placement in the poem. The poem has few lax front vowels; the low frequency of lax front vowels is largely confined to unstressed syllables in parts of speech having relative insignificance (articles, prepositions). As for the tense back vowels, it has been argued by psycholinguists that the  $\bar{a}$  sound conveys the most ominous emotional properties in comparison with other vowel articulations. This derives from the closeness in acoustical frequency of the vowel's formants. In "Epilogue," although  $\bar{a}$  appears infrequently, it does so in strategic expressions: "All's misalliance," and "warned by that."

There are several phonetic climaxes in the poem which semantically pertain to the manner in which Lowell fears he is writing. The first climax comes with the word "snapshot" in line 10. Here it is positioned as a terminal word, abruptly concluding a barrage of images. Its terse quality is reinforced by the slow pacing of the line preceding it. Line 9 is not only longer, but it must be read slowly because of its stop consonants (d, b, t):

with the threadbare art of my eye (line 9)  
seems a snapshot . . . (line 10)

The second climax is reached in line 14, which completes the references to "snapshot":

All's misalliance. (line 14)

Line 14 sounds like noise, or a bag of cacophony. This is due to the prevalence of short vowels ("misalliance" which carry little weight, leaving the consonantal aggregate to dominate sound.

A more subtle example of Lowell's technique with sound structure appears in the semantic device of echoing fricatives. The poet states that he would rather make something "imagined" than "recalled." He says:

I hear the noise of my own voice. . . . (line 5)

Semantically, the line itself is suggestive of an echo; and phonetically, this is actualized in the movement from a voiced fricative (z), the echo sound, to a voiceless fricative (s). Then, in the next two lines (6, 7), Lowell states his aspirations regarding artistic perception:

The painter's vision is not a lens,  
it trembles to caress the light.

Here he repeats the pattern of line 5: the movement from voiced fricative (z) and (ʒ) to the voiceless fricative (s). The duplication in these lines of the earlier line seems further proof of his inability to summon forth a "vision." This understated mode may be found in another passage:

seems a snapshot,  
lurid, rapid, garish, grouped. . . .

where the adjective string, both in its succession and symmetry, resembles the deadness and uniformity of snapshots. The released and unreleased dental stops simulate, in meaning, the click of a camera; in sound, they simulate Lowell's restrictive feeling about writing. Also, the word "fact," which appears twice in the poem (once in plural), is said to paralyze his imagination. The sound structure enforces this meaning, since the words appear after released diphthongs ("heightened," "paralyzed") only to be closed again on the word "fact."

The effect of "Epilogue" is a death-in-life dramatization of the poet's struggle. Even the vertical strategy of the poem underscores this. The last line, "his living name," is an iambic dimeter with the tense back vowel sound *ei*. It is in slant rhyme with the first line of the poem, "Those blessed structures, plot and rhyme." In effect, the poet has called on — imitated — his former tools and used them in ironic reversal. In this context, the pun embedded in "his living name" comes to signify the poet's wish for immortality. Interestingly, the liquids and nasals in this line provide an auditory pleasure that is absent in the earlier ominous line: "All's misalliance." Thus, the linguistic elements function to reveal that the poet's struggle is a success after all. As Vermeer fills out a bare pedestrian scene of the painter at work (in effect a snapshot of his studio), so Lowell in his contemplation of himself at his craft has created in the richness of sound and composition a work of art.