

# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ROBERT LOWELL'S *LIFE STUDIES*

Robert KUNTZ

In 1947, Robert Lowell received the Pulitzer Prize for his book of poems, *Lord Weary's Castle*. This award, often considered America's highest literary recognition, came when Lowell was just twenty-nine years old and after the publication of only two books. The award is even more significant when we realize that during the same decade Stephen Vincent Benet, Karl Shapiro, Robert Frost, and W. H. Auden received the same award.

Today, no one could possibly think that the award was given prematurely. Robert Lowell is quite probably America's foremost poet. His work since *Lord Weary's Castle* has won acclaim and has caused him to be called "the father of Confessional Poetry." He has written a play, done a translation of Racine's *Phaedra* and published five more books of poetry since that award. Yet, with all this to his credit, it seems appropriate to ask "What does one do after the Pulitzer Prize?" What, for example, is the significance of a later book like *Life Studies*?

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of *Life Studies* is the prose section of the book, "91 Revere Street." In this section, Lowell painfully sets down in prose what he has heretofore only hinted at in his poetry. At first, we are surprised to find a long prose section in the middle of a book of poems. But, a careful reading of "91 Revere Street" shows us that this is Lowell's childhood autobiography, a story of Puritan ethics, family traditions, and New England discipline. It sets the tone of the entire book. It is the voice of Lowell's youth speaking to us. For this book, more than any other, is the beginning of Lowell's attempt to exorcise the memories of his past.

From "91 Revere Street" we learn of the Lowell family's historical

traditions which extend back to the colonization of America, of the naval career of his father, and of his disciplinarian mother. This, then, is Lowell exposing his most painful psychological memories to us; pointing to the demons and spirits that have always inhabited his life. This section of *Life Studies* is reinforced by the final section, Part IV, which concludes with Lowell's most widely anthologized poem, "Skunk Hour."

Part IV includes the poems "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow," "Grandparents," "Commander Lowell," "Waking in the Blue," and "Memories of West Street and Lepke." It is, in fact, a poetic autobiography of Lowell's childhood, the death of his mother, his recovery from a mental breakdown, his time spent in jail as a conscientious objector, and his unsuccessful marriage. It is, then, these memories that Lowell hopes to exorcise by excruciatingly putting them into words, by putting them not only in prose, but, in poetry.

Lowell was raised in the protestant atmosphere of New England. But, at the age of twenty-three, he converted to Catholicism, in what many critics feel was his first attempt at freeing himself from his past. Yet, this conversion alone was not enough. The publication of *Life Studies* nearly twenty years after this conversion finds Lowell still possessed by his history. But now, it is a history whose faults he can accept objectively while still recognizing the need to expel the memory of them. Lowell's concern with the individual's place in history has led him to more neutral ground from which he can view the faults of his ancestors, of himself, and of all men with new insight. To say that he is bitter about his Puritanical past would not be unfair, but we must also say that with *Life Studies* Lowell has begun the arduous task of expelling his past and, at the same time, re-examining it for signs of continuity.

Thus, in order for us to find this continuity we must view *Life Studies* in a larger context. We must, in fact, view the entire book as a whole, with one major ongoing theme, Lowell's search for the individual's place in history and, thus, his own place. *Life Studies*, then, is Robert Lowell's epic poem.

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The poem has several of those characteristics that we usually associate with epic poetry. It begins *in media res*, contains the exaggeration of minor events to near heroic proportions, projects unrelated historical characters upon a common scene, and has a tendency to become serio-comic and almost burlesque at times, especially in the "91 Revere Street" section.

In Part I, Lowell gives us four poems which reflect the environment, times, and religion of the poet. This section begins in the middle of Lowell's life, in what he will later call "the tranquillized Fifties." The first poem, "Beyond the Alps," immediately indicates the direction Lowell will take in this book. It deals with the history of Rome, the city of God, of Mussolini, and, now, Pope Pius XII. Lowell is keenly aware of the cultural importance of Rome and he feels a kind of cultural guilt for the way his, and our, ancestors have destroyed civilization. He is concerned with the individual's place in this civilization, with Mussolini's place, with the Pope's place, with his own place.

In two other poems from this section, "Inauguration Day: January, 1953" and "A Mad Negro Soldier Confined at Munich," Lowell examines two unlikely topics, the inauguration of President Eisenhower and the feelings of a "seemingly" mad soldier. Lowell uses these topics as a means of examining more closely the world and environment he lives in. It is a world full of the cyclonic zeros of Wall Street and bloody battles like Cold Harbor. But, it is also the world of the individual, of a mad soldier in Germany or a new President. All of these things are a part of the history Lowell has begun to examine in terms of *his* ancestors.

From Part I, Lowell takes us back to the world of 91 Revere Street, to the true beginning of this epic and of his life. It is here that we experience the serio-comic world of Commander Billy Harkness, a classmate of Lowell's father. Harkness is the hard-drinking sailor who seems strangely lost in the Lowell world of tradition and decorum. He is the one part of Lowell's life from which Lowell himself seems to draw strength. Lowell goes so far as to admit that he was without envy for

his father. He says: "I was a churlish, disloyal, romantic boy, and quite without hero worship for my father. . ." Much of his hero worship and envy Lowell gives, instead, to Commander Billy.

In "91 Revere Street" the stories of naval glory and hero worship that Lowell's father and Commander Billy like to retell are repeated so often that Lowell, as a child, can almost tell them all himself. But what is significant about this section of *Life Studies* is the accuracy with which Lowell is able to recall these events and the way he presents them to us in their own serio-comic way. Each of the events he describes is so deeply imbedded in his memory that it has become nearly impossible to expel it. So, in his attempt to understand it better, by writing about it, Lowell emphasizes what he now realizes are the burlesque attributes of it: Commander Billy drinking himself into a stupor or the family garbage cans which have been carefully lettered: R. T. S. Lowell U. S. N. Undoubtedly, Lowell does not wish to exorcise these serio-comic moments of his life. Rather, he hopes to use them to help himself understand the more bitter memories.

In Part III of *Life Studies*, Lowell gives us four poems, "Ford Maddox Ford," "For George Santayana," "To Delmore Schwartz," and "Words for Hart Crane." These four historical literary figures are, thus, projected onto a common scene. It is difficult to determine Lowell's exact intention by placing these poems between the 91 Revere Street section and Part IV of the book. To say that they are a bridge between the two sections would be the easiest explanation. But, no bridge is needed here. Parts II and IV of *Life Studies* are too much alike to require any further bond. Instead, I feel that this third section is more closely related to the first section of the book. If that first section does reflect the environment, times, and religion of the poet, then it is section III that shows how these elements have affected four of its participants. Ford Maddox Ford, George Santayana, Delmore Schwartz, and Hart Crane are all recognized writers. Yet, none of them ever achieved the greatness for which they *may* have been destined. They are all individuals who have search for their own place in history and whom

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history has influenced in different ways, by death on the battlefield for Ford Maddox Ford, by suicide for Hart Crane. And though none are household names, Lowell recognizes the greatness of each one's place in history.

But, finally, it is Section IV, the only section Lowell has titled, that shows the magnitude of this book. He has called it "Part IV - Life Studies" and it is from this section that the book takes its title. The poems in this section are, I feel, Lowell's best. They are the expression of the confessional poet at his finest, revealing his agony and suffering, sharing his brief moments of peace. They show us Lowell's life as he objectively attempts to see it in view of his traditional past and aware of his historical presence.

Often, Lowell feels pangs of sympathy and nostalgia for his ancestors as in the poem "Grandparents" when he exclaims, "Grandpa! Have me, hold me, cherish me!" or, again, in "Dunbarton":

In the mornings I cuddled like a paramour  
in my Grandfather's bed,  
while he scouted about the chattering greenwood stove.

But, more often it is those bitter moments that he writes about. Lowell realizes that the long Winslow family line from which he descends is in its final death gasps. They are a line of aristocratic failures, reveling in the accomplishments of ancestors. Jerome Mazzaro, in his book, *The Poetic Themes of Robert Lowell* (University of Michigan Press, 1965), says: "As a family, the Winslows are doomed, and detailing the tension between their childhood dreams and subsequent failures provides the only real interest in their lives." (P. 110) These "subsequent failures" are a vital part of Lowell family history and there are many examples in *Life Studies*.

In "Commander Lowell," Robert Lowell states that "Having a naval officer / for my Father was nothing to shout / about. . ." And, indeed, there is a strong feeling of impotence about Lowell's father. Lowell feels at once sad for him and, also, guilty, but never ashamed. He feels

the sadness when his father is forced to leave job after job and he feels the guilt for scrutinizing his father's peculiarities with his mother. Lowell seems to sum up his father's life when he says that his father's last words were: "I feel awful." These words are ironic in their simplicity. Lowell's father's life has been a chain of "subsequent failures." His father, who has always been a sailor at heart, dies completely out of his element. He dies, not at sea, but at home and feeling "awful." Later, when he writes a poem like "Skunk Hour" Lowell, too, will express this feeling. In his own poetic style he will, say, "I myself am Hell" and from this we can understand his expression of "feeling awful."

Lowell's father's life seems to us to be divided into two parts, his twentythree years as a naval officer and the remaining years as a "civilian." But, Lowell's own life is less neatly separated. There are years of fame, of depression, of imprisonment, of sanity. Yet, for Lowell, it may be appropriate to say that all these years are blurred together. Just as in the poem "A Mad Negro Soldier Confined at Munich" it is impossible to tell the sane from the insane, the years of being *in prison* from the years of imprisonment. This is, in fact, one of the values of *Life Studies* to Lowell himself. Each poem focuses on a distinct aspect of his life. He forces himself to set down each aspect in exacting detail and, so, to sort out each aspect in his own mind.

This technique of categorically presenting exacting details, of presenting "facts" in a flat, understated tone has led one critic, William J. Martz, to view some of the poems in the fourth part of *Life Studies* as "a failure of language." But, this is not true. The understatement in this verse is quite intentional and necessary. Rather than being "a failure of language," it is a triumph of Lowell's imagination that he is able to give us those precise details, those exact facts, we need to understand his parents as he has begun to understand them. For example, in the poem "Father's Bedroom" Lowell gives us those details about his father's room which will help us understand the kind of man he was by showing us what possessions he kept and valued. He says:

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In my Father's bedroom:  
blue threads as thin  
as pen-writing on the bedspread,  
blue dots on the curtains,  
a blue kimono,  
Chinese sandals with blue plush straps.  
The broad-planked floor  
had a sandpapered neatness.

Or, again, in "Terminal Days at Beverly Farms"

Father had had two coronaries.  
He still treasured underhand economies,  
but his best friend was his little black Chevie,  
garaged like a sacrificial steer  
with gilded hooves, . . .

Each morning at eight-thirty,  
inattentive and beaming,  
loaded with his "calc" and "trig" books  
his clipper ship statistics,  
and his ivory slide rule,  
Father stole off with the Chevie  
to loaf in the Maritime Museum at Salem.  
He called the curator  
"the commander of the Swiss Navy."

Whether it is the sandpapered neatness of his father's bedroom floor or the fact that he carried "calc" and "trig" books needlessly to the Maritime Museum, all these details, given to us in a flat, understated way contribute to the historical perspective through which Lowell is now seeing his parents.

Lowell concludes *Life Studies* with five poems that take us from his mental breakdown, through recovery, to his five months spent in jail, and, finally, to his unsuccessful marriage. It is by talking about these delicate subjects that Lowell is able to begin to understand them. By

realizing that madness surrounds all of us, it is easier to put his own mental breakdown into perspective. Remembering, for example, that while in prison as a conscientious objector to the war, he was denied the privilege of a radio while a known murderer, Louis Lepke, was given one, is enough to help convince Lowell that he is not insane. But finally, it is the image of the skunk that Lowell chooses for his own image in the concluding poem, "Skunk Hour." Unable, perhaps, to change the individuals place in history, he is now able, at least, to recognize his own. In this poem, when he says "The season's ill-" or "My mind's not right." or "A red fox stain covers Blue Hill" we know he means that things aren't right in the world. But, like the skunk, Robert Lowell drops his tail "and will not scare."

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This essay attempts to show the importance of Robert Lowell's fourth book of poetry, *Life Studies*. It compares *Life Studies* to the traditional characteristics of epic poetry and shows that, in many ways, *Life Studies* represents Lowell's epic poem. But, more importantly, it shows how Lowell uses *Life Studies* as a means of exorcising the memories of his past from his poetry.

### The Seduction Theme — Holy and Secular Interpretation through Ethical and Logical Development in *Measure for Measure*

SHIOZO TAKAHASHI

Shakespeare shows us various seduction scenes and themes of seduction in such plays as *Richard III*, *Julius Caesar*, *Othello* and *Measure for Measure*. Seduction themes in seduction scenes are many: 1. relative aspect of the seducer and the seducee in ethical and logical development, 2. self-contradiction or conflict shown consciously or unconsciously, 3. turning point which develops the plot, 4. anticipation of characters concerned or of the audience, 5. psychological approach and rhetoric equivocation, etc. Here in *Measure for Measure* some surveys are taken through the ethical and logical development shown in Isabella and Angelo.