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THE LANGUAGE OF THE SELF IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT LOWELL

Rice University

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PH.D.  1984

300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106

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THE LANGUAGE OF THE SELF
IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT LOWELL

by

KATHARINE T. WALLINGFORD

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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HOUSTON, TEXAS

MAY, 1984
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1984
ABSTRACT

THE LANGUAGE OF THE SELF

IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT LOWELL

by

KATHARINE T. WALLINGFORD

Robert Lowell inherited from the New England Puritans not only his habit of obsessive self-examination, not only his fascination with the process of that self-examination, but also his awareness of the significance of language in that process. This trinity of concerns forms the basis as well of the process of psychoanalysis, with which Lowell was familiar through his active participation in the culture of his time, and more personally through the tragedy of his manic-depressive illness. Although Lowell was never psychoanalyzed, he spent many years in psychotherapy, often with therapists who were psychoanalytically inclined; and since he believed firmly in the identity of self and language—"one life, one writing"—he was uniquely situated to write a poetry of self-examination using the methods of psychoanalysis:

Association. Free association enables the subject to sneak through the bars of repression and gain access to the unconscious. Lowell's poems often work through a chain of association of images and ideas which have meaning not in themselves but in their relation to one another.
Memory. Lowell uses his memory to look back into
the past in the hope of better understanding the present.
Life Studies, where the process is most evident, began as
an exercise at the behest of his psychiatrists, and he used
this technique effectively throughout his career.

Repetition. Critics of psychoanalysis see the process
as one in which the patient is trapped in an endless series
of futile iterations, and some of Lowell's poetry reflects
this stifling repetition. But the positive aspect of
repetition--"working through" a painful situation until it
is mastered--appears in Lowell's poetry as well.

Relation. Contemporary psychoanalysts stress the fact
that the search for one's individual identity is not a
solitary activity, but rather one which takes place in
dialogue, through language. In his poetry, Lowell attempts
to define himself through discourse with the "other."

Through his poetry of self-examination, Lowell finds
no absolutes or certainty, but rather tentative, day-by-day
answers to the questions of our common existence: "How will
the hands be strong? How will the heart endure?"
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have a cloud of witnesses to thank: Kristin Aaker, Roy Bird, Susan Clark, Irvin Cohen, Jim Covington, Terry Doody, Dennis Huston, Walter Isle, David Minter, Meredith Skura, Janis Steinfeld, Susan Wood, and especially Monroe Spears.

I would also like to thank Jack Tapers and Alma Tapers, who were the first to teach me about language and about love; and Rufus Wallingford, Halley Wallingford and John Wallingford, who supported me in all senses of the word, and made me laugh.
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O Sir, now do I feel myself inwrapped
On a sudden into the labyrinths
And blind beholdings of the subtle mind:
Which way to loose myself, which way to end
I know not. . . . ¹

All my poems are written for catharsis; none can
heal melancholia or arthritis. ²
INTRODUCTION

A POETRY OF SELF-EXAMINATION

Robert Lowell's friend Blair Clark, writing of the close friendship among himself, Lowell, and Frank Parker at prep school, describes their association as a "mini-phalanx that [Lowell] was head of--and there were only three members. But it had a definite moral function and he was unquestionably the leader." As a basis for their association, the three friends pledged themselves to a regimen of unmerciful self-scrutiny: "What do you do with yourself, how do you make yourself better?"³ This commitment to self-examination, which characterized Lowell throughout his life, proved to be a driving force behind his plays and more particularly his poetry. Readers of American history and literature are not unfamiliar with this penchant for self-scrutiny: Franklin in his Autobiography systematically examines his faults and describes his attempts to convert them into virtues,⁴ and Emerson in his journals analyzes his shortcomings and declares that it is "our duty to aim at change, at improvement, at perfection. It is our duty to be discontented."⁵ But we encounter this habit of self-examination in its purest, most extreme form in two complex systems of thought, widely
separated in time and intention but united by their dependence on and commitment to a program of rigorous self-examination: New England Puritanism, and its twentieth-century secular cousin, psychoanalysis. Robert Lowell's poetry embodies the spirit and the process of both.

Historically, both Puritanism and psychoanalysis have stressed not only the habit of self-examination, but also a concern with the process of that self-examination, and an acute awareness of the significance of language in the process. In *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*, Perry Miller explains how the "doctrine of regeneration caused the founders of New England to become experts in psychological dissection": the Puritans were required constantly "to cast up their accounts" as they searched their souls for evidence of the workings of God's grace. Puritan leaders like Thomas Hooker struggled to convey to their people the proper methods for self-examination: like the customs officer who unlocks every chest and "romages every corner," the subject must consider "all the secret conveyances, cunning contrivements, all bordering circumstances that attend the thing, the consequences of it, the nature of the causes that work it, the several occasions and provocations that lead to it, together with the end and issue that in reason is like to come of it." In *Symbolism and American Literature*,
Charles Feidelson, Jr. argues that this "Puritan obsession with 'method' was not simply a love of logical form but more fundamentally an intense concern with thought, language and reality," and both his book and The New England Mind, through their extensive discussions of Puritan rhetorical theory and practice, emphasize the Puritan awareness of the significance of language in the process of self-examination.

Herbert Leibowitz, discussing Lowell's early poetry, says that "Lowell's ambivalent attitude toward the Puritans is central to an understanding of his poetry. Although he repudiates them intellectually, he is at home with their buffetings and morbidity. From them he takes or rather corroborates the habit of self-examination." Lowell was no undiscriminating admirer of the Puritans; on the contrary, he castigated them for their cruelty and greed in Lord Weary's Castle. But he was interested in their habit of searching the events of history for clues to the meaning of their own lives. Miller tells us that the Puritans "universalized their own neurasthenia," and throughout Lowell's career he would use history in a similar manner, juxtaposing self and history in ways which illuminated both. And perhaps because of his own habits of mind, he was fascinated by the Puritan penchant for obsessive introspection. Later he would adapt Hawthorne's short story, "Endecott and the Red Cross," for the stage,
producing what Ian Hamilton calls a "drama of Puritan self-
scrutiny," but in the early years of his career he was
particularly drawn to the puzzling figure of Jonathan
Edwards.

During a year that Lowell spent with Allen Tate before
going to Kenyon College, he "was going to do a biography of
Jonathan Edwards"; he "was heaping up books" on his subject,
"and taking notes, and getting more and more numb on the
subject," until finally he "stuck." We can assume that
Lowell knew Edwards's "Personal Narrative," as well as this
statement of intention from the "Resolutions": "Resolved,
constantly, with the utmost niceness and diligence, and the
strictest scrutiny, to be looking into the state of my
soul." Lowell was to write three substantial poems about
Edwards, "Mr. Edwards and the Spider" (LWC 64), "After the
Surprising Conversions" (LWC 66), and the later "Jonathan
Edwards in Western Massachusetts" (FTUD 40). Alan
Williamson, in his thorough discussion of "Mr. Edwards and
the Spider," reminds us of the feeling of utter helplessness
with which the Puritans lived: they believed that they
were saved or damned according to the will of God, and
their earnest self-scrutiny, though necessary, could not
change their fate. In retrospect, we see that Lowell too
was condemned to the hell of his manic-depressive illness
and that he, like the Puritans, faced his fate with courage,
and did not flinch from confronting the central questions
of life: "Your lacerations tell the losing game / You play against a sickness past your cure. / How will the hands be strong? How will the heart endure?" ("Mr. Edwards and the Spider").

Like Puritanism, psychoanalysis provides a process for seeking answers to these questions. The Puritans, of course, found their answers in God, but they conducted the search for these answers within their own souls. Miller quotes the Puritan leader Samuel Willard as saying, "[o]f all knowledge, that which concerns our selves is the most profitable,"¹⁵ and this succinct statement illustrates the close connection between Puritanism and psychoanalysis. Robert Waelder refers to "the categorical imperative of ceaseless self-exploration which provides [the] moral mainspring [of psychoanalysis],"¹⁶ and Freud himself imagined saying to the ego, "[t]urn your eyes inward, look into your own depths, learn first to know yourself."¹⁷ Stanley Leavy, discussing why and how psychoanalysis works, questions Freud's libido theory which posits a release of energy in the lifting of repression, and argues instead that "the curative factor of the psychoanalytic dialogue is to be found in greater and deeper self-knowledge, realizing more and more who this is living this life in this world."¹⁸ As we have seen from Blair Clark's description of the prep school "mini-phalanx," Lowell was predisposed to this sort of rigorous self-scrutiny, and we can well
understand why he was fascinated when he encountered
similar habits of mind in the writings of Jonathan Edwards
and of Sigmund Freud.

Lowell knew Freud's work as early as 1953; he "had
been reading--rather 'gulping'--Freud: 'I am a slavish
convert,' he wrote to [Elizabeth] Hardwick."\textsuperscript{19} To Allen
Tate he bragged in December, 1953, that he had "been read-
ing . . . all Freud,"\textsuperscript{20} and years later he gave a perhaps
more realistic account in a letter to Alan Williamson:

When I was at Iowa--'50 or later in '52--I
read 2/3 of Freud, like reading Tolstoy. .
. . Life Studies is full of him; a replace-
ment to the Christian church, more intimate
but without boundaries or credo, or
philosophy. . . . I picked up Freud from
reading, talk (I knew about his way of
thinking vividly from Delmore Schwartz
before I read a word).\textsuperscript{21}

In \textit{Life Studies}, in "To Delmore Schwartz (Cambridge 1946),"
Lowell made gentle fun of the two young, intense poets,
"[u]nderseas fellows, nobly mad," who "talked away our
friends. 'Let Joyce and Freud, / the Masters of Joy, /
be our guests here,' you said" (53). Although he loved the
bilingual pun on "Freud" and "Joy," he knew well the irony
of the pun, and used the character of Freud in a more
somber way in "Death and the Bridge" (\textsuperscript{N} 141; \textsuperscript{H} 205). This
meditation on a macabre "landscape" by Frank Parker serves
as the frontispiece for \textit{Notebook}. In the picture, against
the background of "the eternal, provincial / city Dante saw
as Florence and hell," a skeleton is borne on the back of a horse across a "bridge of red railtie girders." "We will follow our skeletons on the girder, / out of life and Boston," the poet predicts, "singing with Freud: / 'God's ways are dark and very seldom pleasant.'" "God's ways are dark" indeed in Lowell's last poetic treatment of Freud. In "Three Freuds" (DBD 112), the poet, entering a mental hospital as a patient, notices the "bearded marble bust" of the hospital's founder and the "live patient" plucking up "coleslaw in his hands." Both look to the poet like Freud, and none of the three can help him; when he emerges from the hospital, "it may seem too late."

Lowell took seriously Freud's influence on the culture in general and on himself in particular. "Freud seems the only religious teacher," he said in an interview in 1965. "I have by no means a technical understanding of Freud, but he's very much part of my life." He told the interviewer that Freud "provides the conditions that one must think in," and insisted that the "two thinkers, non-fictional thinkers, who influence and are never out of one's mind are Marx and Freud." But it was through his manic-depressive illness that he felt most acutely the influence of Freud, and that influence was more one of method or process than of theory. Although Lowell was in psychotherapy time and again throughout his life, he was never psychoanalyzed in an orthodox Freudian manner. But the influence of
psychoanalysis is pervasive, and its techniques have been widely adapted by psychiatrists practicing other types of therapy. Thanks in large part to Ian Hamilton's biography, we are able to trace in rough outline the progression of Lowell's attitudes toward and experiences with psychotherapy. If we can accept as accurate the portrayal of Lowell in Jean Stafford's autobiographical short story, "An Influx of Poets," the young Lowell during the time of his marriage to Stafford expressed a "diehard repudiation of psychiatry as poppycock, a Viennese chicanery devised to bilk idle women and hypochondriacal men." 23 Lowell knew at least one psychiatrist early in his life: "Dr. Merrill Moore, the family psychiatrist" ("Unwanted," DBD 121), who was consulted by Lowell's mother as early as 1935, when Lowell was in prep school at St. Mark's. The young poet had been showing troublesome symptoms, and, as Hamilton tells us,

Merrill Moore was thought to be the right man to opine on Lowell because he was himself a literary poet of some reputation. He had been a fringe member of the Southern "Fugitive" group led by John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate and was famous for writing only -- but voluminously -- in sonnet form. One of his books was called simply M because it contained one thousand sonnets. . . . [F]rom Charlotte's point of view he offered a perhaps unique combination of medical and literary know-how. She herself had been seeing him about her own "nerves" and had left Moore in little doubt that her mental balance depended largely on the balance of her errant son. 24
Mrs. Lowell's relationship with Moore was to be long and problematic—she was at various times his patient, employee, and friend—and it is not clear whether Moore ever thought of Lowell as a patient rather than as the troubled son of Charlotte Lowell. But in any event, the following year, he helped to change the course of Lowell's life. By that time Lowell was a student at Harvard, where he had written some poems and fallen in love. After a series of arguments with his parents about his desire to marry, Lowell hit his father and knocked him to the ground—an event which was later to figure largely in his poetry.25 "Charlotte's first outraged reaction was to contact Merrill Moore in order to have Lowell committed to an institution," but Moore "is to be given credit for taking a placatory line." He acted as mediator between Lowell and his parents:

Moore suggested that Lowell be put in touch with Ford Madox Ford, who was at Harvard on his way to visit Moore's friend Allen Tate in Tennessee. The idea was that Lowell should meet a "real writer," and if Ford agreed to help, perhaps some arrangement could be arrived at by which Lowell could be separated from his parents without abandoning his academic prospects or his ambitions as a poet. Such an arrangement would also entail a separation from Anne Dick.26

The plan worked, and in the spring of 1937 Lowell headed South to Tate and Ransom, and thence to Kenyon, the classics, Randall Jarrell and Peter Taylor, and the real beginning of his poetic career.
Moore continued to serve as "sturdy go-between" in the years to come, involving himself again and again in Lowell's life: acting as his guardian for a brief period in 1939, fetching him from Chicago to Boston after the first terrible manic attack in 1949, and year after year attempting to explain Lowell to his mother, or his mother to Lowell, or either of them to Elizabeth Hardwick, who married the poet in 1949. It appears that Moore's motives were not unmixed with respect to Lowell. During his guardianship in 1939, according to Hamilton, "Moore's main interest . . . seems to have been to impress Charlotte Lowell with his astute handling of a tricky situation: thus to Charlotte he represents Lowell as volatile and in need of sensitive manipulation." And in 1953 he wrote "an odd letter to Elizabeth Hardwick, suggesting that he and Charlotte might collaborate in writing 'a book about Bobby, titled background of a poet, dealing with his early life up to the day he left Boston to go south." Besides raising troublesome questions about exploitation and professional ethics, the proposal establishes Moore without question as a member of the Charlotte Lowell camp in the ongoing adversary relation between son and mother: "Bobby" was the son the family wanted, while Lowell always called himself "Cal."

Aside from the fact that it was Moore who directed Lowell to the South and to Tate in 1937, his influence on
the poet is problematic. Certainly the reader who learns of Moore's book of a thousand sonnets (he actually wrote many more than that) thinks immediately of Lowell's years-long obsession with the sonnet form, and wonders if there is any connection between the two. Probably not: the Lowell who absorbed not only Milton and Eliot but also Homer and Virgil had far more rigorous poetic masters. But it is tempting to speculate on the habits of mind which impelled both Moore and Lowell to write the kind of poetry they did; and, indeed, we will indulge in that speculation with respect to Lowell later in this chapter. For the present, let us confine ourselves to noticing what we will call a coincidence. Keeping in mind Lowell's Notebook, consider Moore's "Statement" at the beginning of M, in which he describes his book:

The very nature of the work is paradoxical; although the individual units are compressed, the scheme itself is expansive. Since it reflects the casual and contradictory elements of life, it is impromptu, informal, even haphazard. It is not a fusion but a diffusion; not fixed, but untameable, unpredictable, explosive.

The sonnets themselves fall into two natural divisions: those presenting the outer experiences, autobiography of the flesh, and those reflecting the inner events, the autobiography of the spirit.

The autobiographical sonnets of Notebook cannot be separated into categories: for Lowell, inner and outer experiences often merge; but in all other respects, Moore's description of his own book describes Lowell's as well.
Lowell himself was ambivalent about Moore, and in his last volume of poems took a more charitable view of the doctor than one might expect. In "Unwanted" (DBD 122), he describes him in these terms:

Dr. Merrill Moore, the family psychiatrist, had unpresentable red smudge eyebrows, and no infirmity for tact -- in his conversation or letters, each phrase a new paragraph, implausible as the million sonnets he rhymed into his dictaphone, or dashed on windshield writing-pads, while waiting out a stoplight -- scattered pearls, some true. Dead he is still a mystery, once a crutch to writers in crisis. I am two-tongued, I will not admit his Tennessee rattling saved my life.

Up to this point the doctor is presented as an amiable eccentric, but the next lines raise disturbing questions:

Did he become mother's lover and prey by rescuing her from me? He was thirteen years her junior . . . When I was in college, he said, "You know you were an unwanted child?" Was he striking my parents to help me? (Lowell's ellipsis)

Lowell gives us no answers to the questions raised in "Unwanted," and, indeed, the question of Moore's influence on Lowell diminishes to insignificance when considered against the tumultuous background of the cycles of mania and depression which racked Lowell's life. In the beginning, after the first hospitalizations, Lowell lost his scorn for
psychiatry and hoped forlornly that psychotherapy would cure him. In 1958, he wrote a letter to his "[d]earest Cousin Harriet" which wrings the heart of a reader who knows the history of his life:

The future is much less alarming than might have been feared. I have a very good doctor whom I'll be seeing regularly. We both feel and think that these attacks can be permanently cured by therapy. Elizabeth and I have good times ahead, and little Harriet will never see the shadow that has darkened us and gone. I don't think this is whistling in the dark; we have a great store of sympathy and much has been learned.31

But the shadow was to return again and again; Lowell was to see hospitals and doctors for the rest of his life. Although Lowell had several "brushes with analysts"—his therapist for several years in the sixties was more "analytically inclined" than his former therapists—"he had never 'gone into analysis.' The probability is that even had he wished to be analyzed, it would have been hard to find someone willing to accept a patient with his history of psychotic illness."32

But Lowell continued to read and to think about Freud. In 1965, he told an interviewer:

I get a funny thing from psycho-analysis. I mean Freud is the man who moves me most: and his case histories, and the book on dreams, read almost like a late Russian novel to me . . . . There is something rather beautiful and intricate about Freud that seems to have gone out of psycho-analysis; it's become a way of looking at things.33
It is impossible and unnecessary to know to what extent Lowell integrated his readings about analysis and his own experiences with psychotherapy; certainly "Three Freuds" indicates a despairing view of the ability of psychotherapy to help him. But it is clear that, when he began taking lithium in 1967, he immediately placed all his hope in that newly-discovered drug. Writing to Alan Williamson (in the letter quoted earlier), the poet had this to say: "I have never taken [Freud] as gospel, been psychoanalyzed, suffered an emotional or intellectual transference in therapy—my own decisive trouble was, as with all manics, a salt deficiency." In a review of Sylvia Plath's Collected Poems, Helen Vendler confirms Lowell's late rejection of psychotherapy:

We are more conscious now of the physiological causes of (and remedies for) depression, thanks to poets like Lowell, who have expressed considerable irony about the sedulous efforts of therapists to ascribe to environmental causes what turns out to be a lack of lithium.34

But lithium too would prove no panacea; although it acted initially to moderate the course of Lowell's illness, he was never to be "cured," never to be free from the threat of mania and its aftermath, crippling depression.

How, then, did Robert Lowell bear the life he was given to live? As he quoted George Santayana as saying, "I have enjoyed writing about my life more than living it."35 After his mother's death in 1954, Lowell's doctors
suggested as a therapeutic measure that he write down what he could remember of his childhood; so Lowell began writing a series of "prose reminiscences" which would eventually become the basis for Life Studies. Events encouraged him:

A further spur to autobiography came . . . when Peter Taylor published his own autobiographical study, "1939." For Lowell, the coincidence was disturbing. What was this life that others found so fascinating, that Merrill Moore had wanted to "write up," that doctors were urging him to "probe," that his best friend had turned into fiction, and that had now--with his mother's death--been finally delivered into his own keeping.36

Lowell had specific results in mind when he undertook the project: he "felt that when his autobiography was completed, he would perhaps find that he had 'found myself.' 'I also hope that the result will supply me with my swaddling clothes, with a sort of immense bandage for my hurt nerves.'"37 Of course Lowell is not the first poet to seek relief from "hurt nerves" through his art, and philosophers, psychoanalysts and literary critics have joined in explaining how, in Ernst Kris's words, "[a]esthetic creation . . . may be looked on as a type of problem-solving behavior."38 Meredith Skura elaborates:

analysts still start with a theory about fiction based on one particular view of human existence--Freud's view that man must cope with wishes (and fears) in a world that denies them relief. . . . Every fiction we make . . . is a more nourishing substitute for reality, an alternative world in which we work out our quarrel with the "reality principle."39
We need not examine theories of sublimation or catharsis in order to agree with Philip Rieff that, "[h]aving shaped and ordered aesthetically his psychic burden, the artist has already acted therapeutically upon himself"\textsuperscript{40}--or to agree with the analysts Skura cites that "literature is therapy, and good literature is better therapy."\textsuperscript{41} If these theories of art as therapy (among many other things, of course) are relevant to all writers, they are summed up and embodied in Robert Lowell and his poetry; because of a unique coincidence of temperament and circumstance, he spent his life writing poems that explore the question, "Is getting well ever an art, / or art a way to get well?" ("Unwanted," \textit{DBD} 121).

"Lowell's habits of mind are intrinsically psychological," Alan Williamson tells us; "he is intensely self-observant, and always inclined to connect conscious thought processes with the dreamlike, the infantile, the anatomical."\textsuperscript{42} Speaking of \textit{Life Studies}, he says,

\begin{quote}
if any one structure of thought has replaced Catholicism as Lowell's source of methods and values, it is psychoanalysis; his goal is self-understanding, and his principal techniques--the resurrection of early memories, the unsparing objectivity about present behavior, and the increased conscious awareness of interpersonal dynamics--are all common features of the analytic experience.\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

Although Williamson goes on to say parenthetically that "there is a more direct dependence on specific Freudian
insights in many individual poems," his emphasis is on the analytic experience—the methods and techniques of analyzing rather than what one may learn as a result of the process. Skura makes the same distinction in *The Literary Use of the Psychoanalytic Process*:

My emphasis on process draws attention to psychoanalysis as a method rather than as a body of knowledge, as a way of interpreting rather than as a specific product or interpretation. I am interested in psychoanalysis not so much for what it reveals about human nature, or even about the particular human being presently on the couch, but for the way in which it reveals anything at all. A sensitivity to the delicate changes in consciousness taking place moment by moment in the actual process of an analytic hour can lead to a renewed awareness of the possibilities of language and narrative—an awareness that will increase our range of discriminations rather than reduce them to a fixed pattern, as the theory tends to do. The dynamic movement of the process brings us closer to what goes on in literature than the theory, with its rigid hypostatizations, can ever come.44

In suggesting that we may learn something about how literature works by looking at how psychoanalysis works, Skura is directing her remarks to people who read stories and poems; and Hans Loewald explains how the same process extends to encompass those who write the stories and poems:

Language, in its most specific function in analysis, as interpretation, is thus a creative act similar to that in poetry, where language is found for phenomena, contexts, connexions, experiences not previously known and speakable. New phenomena and new experiences are made available as a result of reorganization of material according to hitherto unknown principles, contexts, and connexions.45
So criticism is like psychoanalysis in some important ways, and psychoanalysis is like writing, and they are all best understood as processes rather than as fixed systems. We must be careful not to force these comparisons too far, be careful, in Skura's words, to "increase our range of discriminations rather than reduce them to a fixed pattern."

Nevertheless, critics have always been fascinated by the interplay between a writer--here, Lowell--writing his poems, and a reader / writer--myself--writing about Lowell writing, and a reader--you--reading this chapter and continuing the expansion of the process. Here we are adding another dimension, that of psychoanalysis, and those of us who are readers and writers but have had no direct experience with psychoanalysis need not wonder whether its techniques, as used by Lowell in his poetry, bear any relation to our own lives. For, in the words of Claude Lévi-Strauss, "there is no essential difference between states of mental health and mental illness; . . . the passage from one to the other involves at most a modification in certain general operations which everyone may see in himself." 46

We are all inhabitants, as Rieff reminds us, of "that populous world, made up entirely of latent and manifest patients, in which we all live." 47

Psychoanalysis, or self-examination of any sort, implies a splitting of the "self" into that part which is to examine, and that part which is to be examined; in
Otto Fenichel's words, the ego is split into "an observing and an experiencing part so that the former can judge the irrational character of the latter." Fenichel's "experiencing part," in an analysis, is "irrational" because it has been set free from the control of the rational, and allowed--indeed, encouraged--to roam freely. The subject is encouraged, in Freud's words, to say "everything that comes into his head," without censorship of any kind. Skura describes the process of psychoanalysis as one in which "one part of the mind is freely associating" while the other part, the "observer," often "draws on the resources of logic and secondary process thinking discarded by free association, but its role is not to provide authoritative interpretations. . . . Instead it provides new perspectives, finds new relationships, reorganizes figure and ground, and changes emphasis." She associates this characteristic of the psychoanalytic process with literature: the "resemblance between psychoanalysis and literature lies in their dynamic interaction: the interaction between the free-ranging play of mind and the organizing response to it, and the continuing play which they contradict or confirm." Again, Skura is talking about critical activity, the reading of literature; and, again, we may extend her remarks to apply to the writing of literature as well. May Sarton says that "a writer not only feels but watches himself feeling," and Kris applies
this same concept to artists:

The process [of artistic creation] involves a continued interplay between creation and criticism, manifested in the painter's alternation of working on the canvas and stepping back to observe the effect. We may speak here of a shift in psychic level, consisting in the fluctuation of functional regression and control.53

Although Kris is speaking of artistic creation in a spatial medium—painting—many critics have found in Lowell's poetry signs of a similar duality, which Jay Martin describes as "the analytic faculty of the poet's imagination overhearing the secrets of his personality."54 Several critics discuss this quality of double perspective in terms of a dichotomy between "inside" and "outside."

Marjorie Perloff says that Lowell is "able to stand outside his own history and to evaluate it with some ironic detachment,"55 and we can agree with Robert Hass that Lowell is "outside the picture" in "Waking Early Sunday Morning" (NTO 13) but "in it" in "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket" (LWC 14).56 Gabriel Pearson, discussing Lowell's use of the old South Boston Aquarium in "For the Union Dead" (FTUD 70), tells us that "Lowell sees himself simultaneously on both sides of the glass at once, within and without, feeling over its surfaces and seeing himself as so feeling from the other side."57 Steven Axelrod, describing "Lowell's inner-outer view of his past self" in Life Studies, refers to "his use of a narratorial
double-consciousness; the authorial awareness includes both the consciousness of the remembered child [inside the picture] and that of the remembering adult poet [outside the picture]."58 Hamilton records a similar view of the prose reminiscences upon which "91 Revere Street" and some of the poems in Life Studies are based: "[t]hroughout there is a kind of double vision: the child's-eye view judged and interpreted by the ironical narrator, with a good deal of adult invention around the edges."59

Lowell's "double vision" is not confined to the early work. John Simon, chastising Lowell for his Imitations, complains that he has botched the translation of Rilke's "Orpheus, Eurydice and Hermes" (100). In the original poem, Rilke has Orpheus's senses "cleft in two," his sight running ahead of him, and his hearing "trailing backward toward her whom he must not look at."60 Perhaps because he is aware of his own divided ego, Lowell changes the sense of the lines: "It was as though his intelligence were cut in two. / His outlook worried like a dog behind him, now diving ahead, now romping back, / now yawning on its haunches at an elbow of the road." The Rilke imitation teaches us that the observing ego can be playful as well as serious, can participate actively rather than merely attend. But its more common guise is that of the serious, rational observer, as in this description by John Crick of the two elements in Notebook: "the shaping
surface, with its uncompromising pattern of fourteen lines, its rational, objective observer, and its world of ideas and things; and the subconscious drama welling up, the experiencing sub-world." And Alan Williamson gives us yet another sort of observing ego when he points out, in the late poems, the "curious, joyful feeling of being—not in the ordinary sense—beside himself, beside his own life." 

Does this split in the ego of the poet, as we encounter it in Lowell's poetry, serve an aesthetic or a more personal purpose? Does it shape and form raw material into art, or does it act to further the poet's self-knowledge? To pose the questions in this either-or form is to understand the futility of trying to answer them: it is impossible to separate the strands of self-examination from the strands of art in Lowell's poetry, and, indeed, their interdependence fortified both his life and his writing. The splitting of the ego into two parts, then, has itself a dual function: it permits the rational "observing ego" to observe the experiencing self, and to shape the materials of the experience into art. Each function enters into and affects the other. Meredith Skura, in a passage quoted earlier (on page 19), describes how the observing ego "provides new perspectives, finds new relationships, re-organizes figure and ground, and changes emphasis"; in Lowell's poem, "Beyond the Alps" (LS 3), we can ourselves
observe the observing ego as it performs these tasks.

"Beyond the Alps" begins Life Studies, and the name of the volume is instructive. The study of a life is a process; as the poem makes clear, it is the life of Robert Lowell—the experiencing self—that is being studied, and the observer self of Robert Lowell does the studying. The poem begins, as Irwin Ehrenpreis tells us, "with what look like random associations suggesting the real flow of a unique consciousness." The poet is both on a train, reading a newspaper while making a journey, and outside the train, watching:

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

Wyatt Prunty tells us that the train's "motion is analogous to Lowell's consciousness making constant revisions between a known past and an expected and unfolding future." The poet is making a journey through time and space from the Rome of his early Roman Catholicism to Paris, "our black classic," where he will have need of the new perspectives and new relationships which the observing ego can discern. "Life changed to landscape," he tells us. "Much against my will / I left the City of God where it belongs." Behind him he has left, among other things, the Pope, who has just "defined the dogma of Mary's bodily assumption" into heaven. The "old," believing Lowell might
have accepted this dogma, but the "new," ironic Lowell has a different perspective:

The lights of science couldn't hold a candle to Mary risen--at one miraculous stroke, angel-wing'd, gorgeous as a jungle bird! But who believed this? Who could understand?

Reorganizing figure and ground in a literal way, the observing Lowell tells us that "[o]ur mountain-climbing train had come to earth"; changing emphasis, no longer aspiring to unreachable heights, he says in a wry voice: "There were no tickets to that altitude / once held by Hellas."
The poet who, in the early lines of the poem, had watched the train lunge forward, now turns around and watches, from a different perspective, "each backward, wasted Alp."
And meanwhile, what of the experiencing self? "Tired of the querulous hush-hush of the wheels, / the bleary-eyed ego kicking in my berth / lay still." The ego is observing itself, and out of this process poetry is being written.

The bleary-eyed ego, the experiencing self sleeping in Lowell's berth, has direct access to his unconscious through dreams. In dreams, as we know, repression may be lifted and forgotten truths emerge; psychoanalysis, through the process of free association, enables the subject to tap his unconscious while he is awake, in Stanley Leavy's words to "disclose unconscious mental content, which has the power so long as it remains undisclosed of binding the patient-to-be in constraints."65 (26) Robert Waelder
explains that the "analysand is urged to abandon the ordinary habit of goal-directed thought, and instead to permit everything freely to enter his mind and to verbalize it as soon as it appears." As a result of this process, "the unconscious begins to express itself" (238-239). 66 Frederick Crews shows us how closely this process approximates that of the artist, who "provisionally relaxes the censorship regnant in waking life, forgoes some of his society's characteristic defenses, and allows the repressed a measure of representation, though . . . only in disguised and compromised form." 67

In order to talk about the mind and its "contents," we use what Skura calls "the most basic metaphors of [Freud's] system, the ones that take the mind to be a space, ideas to be things, and emotions to be substances which can be dammed up or can overflow." 68 Lowell uses these metaphors to great effect. "From now on, my mind's autumn!" he translates from Baudelaire. "I must take / the field and dress my beds with spade and rake / and restore order to my flooded grounds" ("The Ruined Garden," I 52). The mind as ruined garden becomes, in "Waking Early Sunday Morning," the mind as cluttered woodshed: "put old clothes on, and explore / the corners of the woodshed for / its dregs and dreck" (NTO 13). In a letter to Harriet Winslow, the mind becomes "my study" (a wonderful pun), and Lowell uses other metaphors for the activity of the mind in exploring itself:
I have been thinking a lot about people and moments in the past. A lot is lost, and a lot was never seen or understood. . . . Still it's fascinating to see what one can fish up, clear up, and write down--it's like cleaning my study, like going perhaps to some chiropractor, who leaves me with all my original bones jumbled back in a new and sounder structure.69

The chiropractor, if he is not a psychiatrist, must surely be a relative of the observing, organizing part of the ego, who "provides new perspectives, finds new relationships, reorganizes figure and ground, and changes emphasis" (see p. 19). Lowell has been "thinking," he says; it's fascinating to see what one can "fish up, clear up, write down." Besides indicating that for Lowell self-examination and writing are parts of the same process, his statement suggests another useful metaphor. When Lowell speaks of seeing what he can "fish up," or when Freudians refer to the emotions as substances which can be dammed up or can overflow, they are using the common metaphor of the unconscious as a body of water.

"Children, the raging memory drools / Over the glory of past pools," Lowell says in "The Drunken Fisherman" (LOU; LWC 37), and throughout his career he identified both with the fisherman on the bank and the creatures beneath the water. We have already noticed that, in "For the Union Dead" (FTUD 70), "Lowell sees himself simultaneously on both sides of the glass at once, within and without" (see p. 20), and the poet admits in that poem that "I often sigh
still / for the dark downward and vegetating kingdom of the fish and reptile. " Gabriel Pearson has described Lowell as "seeming always submarine, as if he was looking out at the world through the windows of a fishtank," and, indeed, Lowell seems always to have had ready access to some submarine world. A surrealistic prose piece that he wrote while a student at Harvard begins with the words, "[s]ometimes, when we are in disorder, every pinprick and blade of grass magnifies"; from there he moves through a series of associations to a "grass tide":

The sea lay grass green and ever so serene. Sharks' fins ripped the ripe slick. . . . Whales spouted, and their flat tails flopped and towered, making me conscious of umbrageous trunks surrounding the sea; a Nether World or antideluvian scene; shimmer of shiners, floating logs and submerged shadows.  

The reader will have noticed that the creatures who live in Lowell's seas are often dark and threatening. From the bloodless corpse and mutilated whale of "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket" (LWC 14) through the murderous shark circling "visibly behind the window" at the end of "Ulysses and Circe" (DBD 3), Lowell dredges up the monsters who live in the unconscious.

If we apprehend the mind as a space, the unconscious as a sea, and ideas as things like monsters, how do we talk about the conscious mind, that part of the mind-space which is not the sea? Freud said that "in psycho-analysis we take spatial ways of looking at things seriously. For us
the ego is really something superficial and the id something deeper--looked at from outside, of course. The ego lies between reality and the id.\textsuperscript{72} Gabriel Pearson has used these related metaphors to talk about Lowell's poetry:

A Lowell poem . . . never looks other than fragile, friable, only just mastering the pulls and pressures that threaten to dis-integrate it. Freud's view of the ego as a hard won layer of self that achieves enough stability to curb--and yet be fed and thick-ened by--the importunate, blind drives of the id and that copes and transacts with external reality seems apposite.\textsuperscript{73}

Particularly in the early poems, we get a sense of "the process of formalization by metaphor: the disturbing object becoming still as it becomes impersonal, yet suffused with a violent--almost a caricatural--emotionalism, as the buried feelings assume control over reality."\textsuperscript{74} M. L. Rosenthal, observing this kind of suffused emotionalism, has associated it with T. S. Eliot's discussion of the lack, in \textit{Hamlet}, of an objective correlative, his reference to the "intense feeling, ecstatic or terrible, without an object or exceeding its object," which "is something which every person of sensibility has known."\textsuperscript{75} Hans Loewald explains this disparity between feeling and object when he tells us that our "present, current experiences have intensity and depth to the extent to which they are in communication (interplay) with the unconscious, infantile experiences
representing the indestructable matrix of all subsequent experiences." 76 Skura explains the power of fantasy in similar terms: the fantasy, which may exist, of course, in the form of a poem, "does not replace adult experience but instead brings the intensities of childhood experience to bear on current adult life." 77

The infantile experience of such great intensity to which Skura and Loewald refer will often have been an experience of conflict, of unfulfilled desire. Waelder tells us that analysis "tries to inch backward from the conflicts of the present to the childhood experiences to which they are related":

[Psychoanalysis] tries to undo the repressions and thereby to restore to consciousness the full conflict as it had probably been conscious, if only for a fleeting moment, and as it would be conscious had the individual not been un-willing or unable to face up to it, and not tried to escape from it by repression. 78

Fenichel gives the orthodox Freudian view as he describes the conflict as one between id and ego:

Thus we have . . . first a defense of the ego against an instinct, then a conflict between the instinct striving for discharge and the defensive forces of the ego, then a state of damming up, and finally the neurotic symptoms which are distorted discharges as a consequence of the state of damming up—a compromise between the opposing forces. The symptom is the only step in this development that becomes manifest; the conflict, its history, and the 79 significance of the symptoms are unconscious.

And, finally, Philip Rieff translates the conflict into the wider terms of Civilization and Its Discontents:
[Freud] conceives of the self . . . as the subject of a struggle between two objective forces—unregenerate instincts and overbearing culture. Between these two forces there may be compromise but no resolution. Since the individual can neither extirpate his instincts nor wholly reject the demands of society, his character expresses the way in which he organizes and appeases the conflict between the two. 80

Lowell, like the rest of us, must have had buried conflicts whose energy and intensity was transferred to and evoked by experiences in his adult life. Here we are not concerned with what those experiences, infantile or adult, may have been, but rather with the way in which Lowell used the feelings evoked by these experiences in his poetry. Conflict of which he was conscious seemed rather to fuel his energy than to drain it. In a wonderful reminiscence written after Lowell's death, his friend Peter Taylor demonstrates how Lowell seemed to thrive on contradiction and conflict:

once he had participated in something, he was never willing to give up his part in it—not even old opinions that no longer suited him. In a sense, he was a Roman Catholic to the end, and would say so, though he would also almost simultaneously declare that he was in no sense a believer. He would boast at times that he had never lost a friend. He never even wanted to give up a marriage entirely. 81

"A poem needs to include a man's contradictions," Lowell said, and the ability to hold two contradictory opinions at once, to be on both sides of a conflict simultaneously, is a salient feature of his poetry. 82 Alan Williamson,
discussing the many ways in which Lowell was "self-divided," insists that "one will not understand the whole man, or the whole achievement, if one excludes either side of the dialectic." \(^{83}\) Philip Cooper, in *The Autobiographical Myth of Robert Lowell*, sees the foundation of Lowell's poetry as a conflict between oppositions held in suspension and never resolved; \(^{84}\) and Stephen Yenser explains that, "in terms of poetic method, the difference is between one which synthesizes or unites contraries and one which analyzes or insists upon distinctions." \(^{85}\) Speaking of *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*, Yenser refers to "Lowell's increased tendency to contradict himself, to get the process of thought rather than its product into the poetry," \(^{86}\) and Robert Fein, in a remark that seems particularly apt for our study of psychoanalytic techniques in Lowell's poetry, says that *Notebook* and *History* "seem to be hoping that turmoil will reveal something significant--some keys if not the key--if one only persists in writing about unresolvable tendencies and mixed feelings." \(^{87}\)

Lowell's use of conflict in his poetry has a public dimension as well. Axelrod says that "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket" *(LWC 14)* "is a field of conflict between opposing forces within the poet's psyche, and by extension within the collective psyche of our civilization," \(^{88}\) and Randall Jarrell, in his fine early essay, expands the concept to *Lord Weary's Castle* as a whole:
Underneath all these poems "there is one story and one story only". . . . The poems understand the world as a sort of conflict of opposites. In this struggle one opposite is that cake of custom in which all of us lie embedded like lungfish—the stasis or inertia of the stubborn self, the obstinate persistence in evil that is damnation. Into this realm of necessity the poems push everything that is closed, turned inward, incestuous, that blinds or binds. . . . But struggling within this like leaven, falling to it like light, is everything that is free or open, that grows or is willing to change.89

When Jarrell sees, in Lord Weary's Castle, "the world as a sort of conflict of opposites," he is surely describing the struggle within the smaller world of the poet himself as well; and although Jarrell sees a movement in the poems toward a resolution on one side or the other of the conflict, within the poet himself it is not the resolution but the struggle itself, the process of examination of self and world, that gives such energy to the poetry.

Hayden Carruth said it best: "a man's being, fought for, fragment by fragment, there on the page: this we can recognize."90 "One life, one writing," Lowell said in "Night Sweat" (FTUD 68; N 175), and it is hard to read the poetry because it was hard to live the life. "Looking over my Selected Poems, about thirty years of writing," Lowell said, "my impression is that the thread that strings it together is my autobiography, it is a small-scale Prelude, written in many different styles and with digressions, yet a continuing story—still wayfaring."91 This element of
process—"a continuing story—still wayfaring"—has struck reader after reader: Rosenthal: "his object is to catch himself in the process of becoming himself";\textsuperscript{92} Neil Corcoran: "poetry as process, not realization";\textsuperscript{93} Pearson: the "materials of his own life are there to be made over to art. Interest focuses on that process, not on the life itself";\textsuperscript{94} and the list goes on.

Lowell's poetry of process, as we have seen, was inextricably bound up with the process of self-examination, and in this process he used techniques commonly used in psychoanalysis and other types of psychotherapy. In the following chapters we will consider, through close readings of the poetry, Lowell's use of specific techniques of psychoanalysis: free association, the use of memory to probe the past, repetition or "working-through," and deliberate concentration on the relation between the poet and the "other" to whom he addresses himself. Of course to divide the psychoanalytic process into components for the purpose of discussion is to falsify the way it works, since its essence is the free flow of ideas and associations in no logical order and with no clear demarcation between specific techniques; but even Freud realized that "[w]e have no way of conveying knowledge of a complicated set of simultaneous events except by describing them successively; and thus it happens that all our
accounts are at fault to begin with owing to one-sided simplification and must wait till they can be supplemented, built on to, and so set right."
NOTES


9 A list of Robert Lowell's books of poetry can be found at the beginning of the Bibliography. When a poem is cited in the text, the name of the volume is abbreviated.

10 Miller, p. 7.


15. Miller, p. 50.


20. Robert Lowell, letter to Allen Tate, dated December 2, 1953, now in the Tate Collection, Princeton University Library. Used by permission of Princeton University Library.

21. Robert Lowell, letter to Alan Williamson dated September 23, 1974. I would like to thank Mr. Williamson for sending me a copy of this letter and permitting me to
quote sections of it. Since Lowell's spelling and punctuation were often erratic, and since I quote his letters for their sense rather than for felicity of expression, I have here and throughout "corrected" his spelling and punctuation in the letters.


23 Jean Stafford, "An Influx of Poets," The New Yorker, November 6, 1978, p. 44.

24 Hamilton, p. 28.

25 See Chapter Three, pp. 143-165.

26 Hamilton, p. 42.

27 Hamilton, p. 47.

28 Hamilton, p. 66.

29 Hamilton, p. 200.


32 Hamilton, pp. 284, 358.

33 Alvarez, p. 40; 43.


35 Hamilton, p. 472.
36 Hamilton, p. 221.

37 Hamilton, p. 226.


41 Skura, p. 63.

42 Williamson, pp. 5-6.

43 Williamson, p. 68.

44 Skura, p. 5.


47 Rieff, p. x.


50 Skura, pp. 203-204.

51 Skura, p. 208.

52 May Sarton, *Mrs. Stevens hears the mermaids singing*

53 Kris, p. 253.


Waelder, pp. 238-239.


Skura, p. 21.


Hamilton, p. 417.

Hamilton, pp. 36-37.


Pearson, pp. 30-31.

Williamson, Pity the Monsters, p. 56.


Loewald, p. 30.

Skura, p. 73.

Waelder, pp. 213-214.

Fenichel, p. 20.

Rieff, p. 28.


86 Yenser, p. 83.


88 Axelrod, p. 54. Compare Perry Miller's remark that the Puritans "universalized their own neurasthenia" (see p. 3).


92 Rosenthal, p. 28.

94 Pearson, p. 4.

CHAPTER ONE

A POETRY OF ASSOCIATION

In a letter he wrote in 1949 to George Santayana in Rome, Robert Lowell describes a process of thought which sounds remarkably like the psychoanalytic technique of free association:

Dear Mr. Santayana:

I was just nodding and I saw an image of a fat, yellowish dog receding down the center of a country road--the center was grass and the ruts clam-shells; so much for flux.

I had hoped to send you a book of my poems as a sort of Christmas present; but no. One thing written brings up another--somewhat as the dog-image. Should one shut these things out? It seems safer to let them come, take one's time, to be helpless.

Vocation is love, I think: for beauty, or the Muse, or what you wish. . . . Now at 31 it's just there--I can't send it away for long or find alternatives. There's the power side, the making side, the craft one learns. But now I am struck by the other, the powerless--powerless, when it does not come; most of all powerless, when it does, like the dog taking you God knows where! 1

When Lowell pays attention to images which pop into his mind unbidden like the yellow dog, when he determines not to "shut these things out" but to "let them come," when he asserts his willingness to follow along as the dog takes him "God knows where," he might well be describing what Jacques Lacan has called "the forced labour of this discourse
without escape, on which the psychologist (not without humor) and the therapist (not without cunning) have bestowed the name of 'free association.'"² Free association is a "forced labour" indeed, because in order to sneak through the bars of repression and gain access to the unconscious, a subject must be willing, in Freud's words, to "entirely renounce any critical selection . . . and say whatever comes into his head,"³ to follow his associations wherever they lead, no matter how unpleasant such a process may be.

In the Introduction, we have discussed Lowell's life-long determination not to flinch from "the pain and jolt of seeing things as they are," and his willingness to follow the yellow dog of his associations is a form of this rigorous honesty. He seems always to have been willing to submit himself to the uncontrolled flow of associational thinking. Ian Hamilton quotes a prose piece which Lowell wrote while a student at Harvard (see Introduction, p. 27); the prose has, in Hamilton's words, "a sharp, surrealistic power which derives from feverishly intent scrutiny":

Sometimes, when we are in disorder, every pin-prick and scraping blade of grass magnifies. A pebble rolls into the Rock of Gibraltar. I got a sunstroke regarding the gardener mow the lawn. He dumped matted green grass into a canvas bag and emptied the bag into a rut pond behind a clump of shrubbery . . . . I watched him dump grass on the surface where there ought to have been frogs. I smelled the odor of dried verdure in my sleep; tons of it, wet
and lifeless, floating and stifling. At
morning the grass tide rose up gruesome.
The sea lay grass green and ever so serene.
Sharks' fins ripped the ripe slick. The fish
rhythmically approximated each others' courses
and crossed at intervals. The water was toothed
with their tusks. Oil dripped from the tusks.
Short cropped grass drooped over their round
eyes.4

The prose piece continues for several paragraphs, its power
issuing "from feverishly intent scrutiny" and from Lowell's
apparent submission to the associational flow.

Throughout his career, Lowell would make poetry out of
this free associational process, not necessarily with any
conscious therapeutic intention, but rather because, as the
prose piece and the letter to Santayana demonstrate, it was
natural for him to think in this way. Meanwhile, other
poets were using free association more self-consciously.
Lowell wrote his letter to Santayana before the poet's
notable reading tour in California,5 when he was exposed to
Allen Ginsberg and other members of the celebrated Beat
school. Unlike Lowell, these poets used free association
as a deliberate means of writing poetry; indeed, "Ginsberg's
theory of composition . . . is built on the Freudian idea
of revealing the unconscious self through the technique of
association."6 Ginsberg names Blake and Whitman among his
predecessors, but the "biggest influence," he said, was
"Kerouac's prose."7 Jack Kerouac's prose, with its echoes
of William Carlos Williams, both describes and at times
demonstrates a technique based not on "'selectivity of
expression' but following free deviation (association) of mind."\(^8\) This method of writing relies heavily upon habits of mind of the sort which Lowell reveals in his prose piece and in his letter, upon a willingness to concentrate on the yellow dog and to follow it, to begin, in Kerouac's inimitable words, "not from preconceived idea of what to say about image but from jewel center of interest in subject of image at moment of writing, and write outwards swimming in sea of language to peripheral release and exhaustion."\(^9\)

The Beat poets were not the only writers who deliberately and self-consciously focused their attention on psychoanalytic methods such as free association. Surrealism may be said to have begun with this experience of André Breton:

It was in 1919, in complete solitude and at the approach of sleep, that my attention was arrested by sentences, more or less complete, which became perceptible to my mind without my being able to discover (even by meticulous analysis) any possible previous volitional effort. One evening in particular, as I was about to fall asleep, I became aware of a sentence articulated clearly. . . . I am unable to remember the exact sentence, but it ran something like this: "A man is cut in half by the window." What made it clearer was the fact that it was accompanied by a feeble visual representation of a man in the process of walking, but cloven, at half its height, by a window perpendicular to the axis of his body. . . . Preoccupied as I still was with Freud, and familiar with his methods of investigation, which I had practiced during the war, I resolved to obtain for myself what one seeks to obtain from patients, namely a monologue poured out as rapidly as possible, over which the subject's critical faculty has no control--the subject himself throwing reticence to the winds--and which as much as possible represents "spoken thought."\(^10\)
Stanley Leavy quotes Freud and Breuer as saying that in
the freely associating subject we see "the establishment of
a psychical state which, in its distribution of psychical
energy . . . bears some analogy to the state before falling
asleep,\textsuperscript{11} and the reader will have noticed that Breton,
like Lowell in his letter to Santayana, is reporting an
occurrence that took place as he was on the verge of
sleep. Both Breton and Lowell report images which spring
into the mind unbidden, and both commit themselves to
following the image along the path of associations. This
experience led Breton to define surrealism in 1924 as the
"dictation of thought in the absence of all control exer-
cised by reason and outside all aesthetic or mere moral
preoccupations"; surrealism "rests in the belief in the
superior reality of certain forms of association neglected
heretofore"--which is to say, in free association rather
than reason or logic. And the aim of surrealism is to
unite exterior reality with that interior reality which we
apprehend through free association.\textsuperscript{13}

Lowell was no surrealist; he was a careful craftsman
and a tireless, even obsessive reviser, while the
surrealists prided themselves on their spontaneity, and
made a point of not revising their work (or at least pro-
fessed not to revise--one wonders if they didn't sneak in a
change now and then to heighten an effect). But Lowell's
willingness to follow the yellow dog into his unconscious led him from time to time to write poetry which he himself described as surrealistic in the "Afterthought" to Notebook 1967-68:

I lean heavily to the rational, but am devoted to surrealism. A surrealist might not say, "The man entered a house," but "The man entered a police-whistle," or . . . . make some bent generalization: "Weak wills command the gods." Or more subtly, words that seem right, though loosely in touch with reason: "Saved by my anger from cruelty." Surrealism can degenerate into meaningless clinical hallucination, or worse into rhetorical machinery, yet it is a natural way to write our fictions.

The reader of Notebook, particularly if she tries to read the volume as a whole rather than to browse haphazardly among the individual sonnets, may well become impatient; some of the less successful poems indeed seem to "degenerate into meaningless clinical hallucinations, or worse into rhetorical machinery." For the most part, however, whatever Lowell is doing, it seems to work. In the "Afterthought" to the revised Notebook, Lowell changed the word "surrealism" to "unrealism," and counterbalanced his warning about its dangers with the affirmation that "the true unreal is about something, and eats from the abundance of reality." Alan Williamson describes how the successful surrealistic poems work in Notebook:

Lowell's surrealistic poems turn . . . to the unruliness of the moment, showing us how many separate strands of sensation it contains, how weirdly the mind shuttles between them and its
own equally abrupt and mysterious patterns of fantasy-thought. Lowell struggles . . . to deliver the feeling, if not the literal contents, of a basic mind-flux.13

The poems show us, in other words, how free association feels.

Consider "Long Summer 3" (25), the third in a sequence of fifteen sonnets. Lowell begins by evoking in the reader the feeling of the state he describes:

Months of it, and the inarticulate mist so thick we turned invisible to one another across the room;

Months of what? The preceding poem, ending with the image of a discarded boiled lobster and its "two burnt-out, pinhead, black and popping eyes," gives us no help. We are bewildered, in a fog, anxious. We are cut off from the poet, "invisible to one another / across the room" of the poem. And we are inarticulate: the words "inarticulate mist so thick" are hard to say because we falter and trip over the "s" and "t" sounds which are jammed together.

... the floor, aslant, shot hulling through thunderheads, gun-cotton dipped in pitch,

And what now? The syntax has dissolved and the enjambment hurls us forward, but where are we?

Salmon-glow . . .

Explosions from guns? Hell?

Salmon-glow as the early lighted moon
Not hell, but instead a respite from anxiety: a calm, lovely moment. But it cannot last.
Salmon-glow as the early lighted moon,
snuffed by the malodorous and frosted murk --
not now!

Please not now. Not the anxiety, the uncertainty, the fear.

. . . Earth's solid and the sky is light,
yet even on the steadiest day, dead noon,
the sun stockstill like Joshua's in midfield,
I have to brace my hand against a wall
to keep myself from swaying --

A moment of reflection, as the subject steps back from the
pure flow of association, and rationally and coolly
assesses his situation. The conclusion is not encouraging:
although the physical world is stable and filled with
light, the interior world threatens, and the subject
totters. He is afraid. But free association is a "forced
labour," and writer and reader have determined to submit
themselves to it, to follow wherever the images lead.

. . . swaying wall,
straitjacket, hypodermic, helmeted
doctors, one crowd, white-smocked, in panic, hit,
stop, bury the runner on the cleated field.

Panic, indeed, as the images come so fast they blur into
one another, threatening, pressing in, faster and faster,
hospital, helmets, a wall of white, the quarterback about
to be overwhelmed, the patient about to be subdued by
force, terror, "in panic, hit, / stop." The moment and the
momentum stop, the patient is knocked out, the runner is
buried forever on the cleated field.

Although poems like "Long Summer 3" abound in Notebook,
Lowell's penchant for building poems like boats swept along
on a sea of association is evident from the time of his earliest volumes. Alan Williamson points out that "[i]n terms of the surrealists' ideal of a direct renditon of the flow of thought, conscious and unconscious, Lord Weary's Castle often succeeds brilliantly, where the later, 'confessional' writing often chooses to view psychological processes more remotely, in rational afterthought."¹⁴ Robert Hass, writing about "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket," elaborates on this paradox:

I still find myself blinking incredulously when I read . . . that those early poems "clearly reflect the dictates of the new criticism," while the later ones are "less consciously wrought and extremely intimate." This is the view in which it is "more intimate" and "less conscious" to say "my mind's not right" than to image the moment when

The death-lance churs into the sanctuary, tears
The gun-blue swingle, heaving like a flail,
An [sic] hacks the coiling life out . .
which is to get things appallingly wrong.¹⁵

A poem like "The Quaker Graveyard" is more "intimate" than many of the Life Studies poems in part because the speaker seems rather to have immersed himself in a flow of association than to have arranged images according to an aesthetic or rational order—and this despite the fact that the early poems are more formal, bound by traditional meter and rhyme.

Williamson argues that "[i]ambic meters and rhyme, in Lowell, tend to produce, not neat rational statements, but a kind of trance," and he mentions the "intensity" with
which symbols "arrive" in such poetry. The images in the early poems are charged with an energy that is often lacking in the poems of Life Studies. Compare, for example, images from "Mother and Son," in Lord Weary's Castle (47), with images from "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow" (LS 59). The poet begins "Mother and Son" with a matter-of-fact statement describing the plight of an adult male still in thrall to his mother: "Meeting his mother makes him lose ten years, / Or is it twenty?" He is a boy again.

... It is honest to hold fast
Merely to what one sees with one's own eyes
When the red velvet curves and haunches rise
To blot him from the pretty driftwood fire's
Façade of welcome.

The red velvet curves and haunches are simultaneously seductive and repellent, and the image intervenes between the boy and the fire which promises but cannot deliver light and warmth. "Nothing shames / Him more than this uncoiling, counterfeit / Body presented as an idol"--and then, another terrible image:

... It
Is something in a circus, big as life,
The painted dragon, a mother and a wife
With flat glass eyes pushed at him on a stick;
The human mover crawls to make them click.

A familiar child's push-toy appears to him as something gigantic and grotesque, and the implacable stresses in the penultimate line reinforce the threatening effect of the "flat glass eyes," pushing towards him.
With these images, effective and frightening, compare two from "Uncle Devereux Winslow," in which the poet recalls impressions of himself as a small boy, "five and a half," spending an afternoon at the family farm with his uncle, who "was dying of the incurable Hodgkin's disease."

No one had died there in my lifetime . . .
Only Cinder, our Scottie puppy
paralysed from gobbling toads.
I sat mixing black earth and lime.

(Lowell's ellipsis)

Here the adult speaker is not involved, not, to borrow Hass's phrase, "in the picture"; the paralysed dog seems almost comic, evoking no emotion either in the reader or in the small boy who sits mixing earth and lime. At the very end of the poem, Lowell returns to the image of the boy:

My hands were warm, then cool, on the piles
of earth and lime,
a black pile and a white pile . . . .
Come winter,
Uncle Devereux would blend to the one color.

(Lowell's ellipsis)

We apprehend no intensity here, no element of submission to the flux of free association.

In the introductory chapter we have discussed the splitting of the ego in psychoanalysis into two parts, a rational, observing half whose job it is to oversee and to comment on the experiencing half as the latter freely associates; and by applying this concept to Lowell's poetry we can see that some of the poetry evokes the rational,
observing part of the self, while other poems evoke the freely associating part. Williamson says that *Lord Weary's Castle* and *Life Studies* "divide Lowell's world between them, for the one has only the barest points of reference in an unmythologized reality, while the other, despite its 'confessional' content, has almost no element of recaptured mental flux or free association." 17 Although we can agree with Williamson that the "ultimately greater achievement of the more recent books is to unify the two realms," 18 Lowell would continue after *Life Studies* to write poems that seem pure free association. He himself said that in one group of poems in *For the Union Dead* he wrote "surrealism about [his] life," 19 and he was no doubt referring, among other poems, to "The Severed Head" (52), which Steven Axelrod describes as a "surrealist dream": 20

Shoes off and necktie, hunting the desired butterfly here and there without success, I let nostalgia drown me, I was tired of pencilling the darker passages, and let my ponderous Bible strike the floor.

The reader of this poem, like the poet, had better take off shoes and necktie and surrender to the flow of association; if we try to read conscientiously and to pencil the darker passages we are doomed to failure.

My house was changing to a lost address, the nameplate fell like a horse-shoe from the door, where someone, hitting nails into a board, had set his scaffolding. I heard him pour mortar to seal the outlets, as I snored, watching the knobbed, brown wooden chandelier, slicing the silence on a single cord.
A strange thing is happening, at least to this reader. I apprehend the flow of association here—fear of loss of identity, then fear of an ominous "someone" who is walling up the room, sealing it off, imprisoning the speaker. And I am prepared to participate in this poem, to immerse myself in it as I have done in other poems of free association, but instead I am outside, watching an interesting but unreal progression of images. The effect is like that of reading Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado."

... What
I imagined was a spider crab, my small chance of surviving in this room. Its shut windows had sunken into solid wall. I nursed my last clear breath of oxygen, there, waiting for the chandelier to fall, tentacles clawing from my jugular.

Now "The Cask of Amontillado" has evolved into "The Pit and the Pendulum." And next, a Poe-like alter ego:

... Then
a man came toward me with a manuscript, scratching in last revisions with a pen that left no markings on the page, yet dripped a red ink dribble on us, as he pressed the little strip of plastic tubing clipped to feed it from his heart. His hand caressed my hand a moment, settled like a toad.

I am filled with admiration for the poet who created this image, this perfect representation of the alter ego of a poet who wrote and wrote and wrote and could not stop, whose writing was his life. But again, the effect is one of distance rather than of participation, and the effect continues.
The poet describes the bizarre appearance of the alter ego, the way in which he "shook his page, / tore it to pieces, and began to twist / and trample on the mangle in his rage." The rage gives way to a more moderate emotion: "Sometimes I ask myself, if I exist,' / he grumbled," and we are momentarily puzzled, because alter egos should rage or threaten, not question or grumble like ordinary people. Is there irony here, an element of self-parody? In any event, the moment does not last long.

... I saw a sheet of glass had fallen inches from us, and just missed halving our bodies, and behind it grass-green water flushed the glass, and fast fish stirred and pant ed, ocean butterflies.

Pure surrealism, like Breton's image of "a man in the process of walking, but cloven, at half its height, by a window perpendicular to the axis of his body."

... Then I heard my friend unclasp a rusty pocket-knife. He cut out squares of paper, made a stack, and formed the figure of his former wife: Square head, square feet, square hands, square breasts, square back.

What is going on here? What kind of poetry is this, and how do we respond to it?

He left me. When the light began to fail I read my Bible till the page turned black. The pitying, brute, doughlike face of Jael watched me with sad inertia, as I read-- Jael hammering and hammering her nail through Sisera's idolatrous, nailed head.

And now, finally, the poem begins to impinge on the reader;
perhaps the pentameter and rhyme have had a cumulative effect, or perhaps the appearance of Jael reminds us of the murderous Clytemnestras and Judiths who abound in Lowell's poetry, and thus gives a wider frame of reference than do the earlier, dreamlike images. At any rate, the last line is chilling:

Her folded dress lay underneath my head.

Reading that last line, we get a sense of immediacy which is lacking in the curiously detached quality of the earlier images, and we may be reminded again of the split ego with its observing half and its experiencing half. Additionally, we might remember our discussion in the introductory chapter of what T. S. Eliot described as "the intense feeling, ecstatic or terrible, without an object or exceeding its object." We explained the phenomenon in terms of the intensity and energy of unconscious memories, which may be evoked at any time, and this concept, too, helps us to understand the difference between the poetry in which we feel great energy and intensity, and that to which we react as observers. Without offering a judgment on the relative merits of the two kinds of poetry, we can nevertheless agree that our own experience as readers reading the poetry may often reflect that of the poet in writing it.
Meredith Skura offers another explanation for the disparity between the two kinds of poetry we have been considering, when she contrasts surrealism with the dream, that most famous of all windows into the unconscious:

there is a connection between dreams and certain kinds of literature that insist, like the dream, on a gap between what the text seems to mean and the deeper meaning it seems to imply. I am not referring to what might seem to be an obvious parallel in the works of the symbolists or surrealists, who claimed to write directly from "the unconscious." The surrealists' famous "chance encounter" of a sewing machine and an umbrella is far too disjointed; we stop expecting it to make sense and so we lose the special tension between the promise of sense and the muteness of events, which characterizes dreams.21

Of course we could discuss all good poetry in terms of "a gap between what the text seems to mean and the deeper meaning it seems to imply," but in much of Lowell's poetry in particular we encounter "the special tension between the promise of sense and the muteness of events, which characterizes dreams." In his poetry, as in dreams, the real power lies in the tension between the "facts" we are given and the tantalizing "meaning" which seems to lie just beyond our apprehension. Robert Pinsky has said that "[n]early every sonnet [in History] seems to have a phrase that means a little more than anything the reader can put his finger on, or something a little different,"22 and the same is true of poetry throughout Lowell's career.

Dreams, too, "always seem to mean more than the
wakened dreamer can discern," Skura tells us, and they are characterized by the kind of associational structure we encounter in "surrealistic" poems like "The Severed Head"—which, in fact, sounds like an account of a dream. Lowell wrote poems about dreams as early as "A Suicidal Nightmare" in Land of Unlikeness and "Katherine's Dream," the third poem of "Between the Porch and the Altar" (LWC 49). In The Mills of the Kavanaughs, "Falling Asleep Over the Aeneid" (101) and "Thanksgiving's Over" (116) both record dreams whose bizarre images rival those of "The Severed Head," and the title poem of the volume reads like the free association of a psychoanalytic patient whose thoughts flow back and forth between present and past, between dream and immediate sensory reality. In The Mills of the Kavanaughs, as well as in many of the dream poems in Notebook and History, Lowell describes dreams from the perspective of more-or-less well defined characters, as in a Browning-like dramatic monologue; but in other of the later dream poems, such as "Draw" (D 42) and "Suicide" (DBD 15), he speaks in a voice which sounds much more personal.

Freely associating subjects often recount dreams, and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish a Lowell dream poem from a poem based on free association. But of course it is unnecessary to do so: both kinds of poems grow out of similar processes, and work in similar ways. Both offer
access to the unconscious, and represent its truths not through reason and logic but rather through a chain of association of images. Freud, in the "Revision of the Theory of Dreams," explains how the process works in dreams:

The latent dream thoughts are . . . transformed into a collection of sensory images and visual scenes. It is as they travel on this course that what seems to us so novel and so strange occurs to them. All the linguistic instruments by which we express the subtler relations of thought—the conjunctions and prepositions, the changes in declension and conjugation—are dropped, because there are no means of representing them; just as in a primitive language without any grammar, only the raw material of thought is expressed and abstract terms are taken back to the concrete ones that are at their basis.24

Freud's description of the means of representation in dreams applies as well to free association, and Lionel Trilling explains how this mode of representation is related to art—in particular, for our purposes, to poetry:

the unconscious mind works without the syntactical conjunctions which are logic's essence. It recognizes no because, no therefore, no but; such ideas as similarity, agreement, and community are expressed in dreams imagistically by compressing the elements into a unity. The unconscious mind in its struggle with the conscious always turns from the general to the concrete and finds the tangible trifle more congenial than the large abstraction. Freud discovered in the very organization of the mind those mechanisms by which art makes its effects, such devices as the condensations of meanings and the displacement of accent.25

In dreams and in free association and in poetry, then,
truth may be represented by means of a series of images. But what takes the place of the missing conjunctions? How is one image related to another?

In a psycho-analysis one learns to interpret propinquity in time as representing connection in subject-matter. . . . Two thoughts which occur in immediate sequence without any apparent connection are in fact part of a single unity which has yet to be discovered; in just the same way, if I write an "a" and a "b" in succession, they have to be pronounced as a single syllable "ab." 26

The "a" and the "b," in other words, make meaning not in themselves but in their relation to one another, in their association. By using the letter "a" and the letter "b" as his examples, Freud has made it easy for us to see the link here to contemporary linguistic theory, according to which the sign confers meaning not in itself but through its relation to other signs. But Freud extends the concept beyond linguistics (to the extent that any concept can be extended "beyond linguistics"), quoting the philosopher Friedrich Schiller with approval: "Looked at in isolation, a thought may seem very trivial or very fantastic; but it may be made important by another thought that comes after it, and in conjunction with other thoughts that may seem equally absurd, it turns out to form a most effective link." 27

Robert Lowell, more even than the rest of us, seemed automatically to think in relational and associational terms. Jay Martin quotes one of Lowell's students as
remembering that "[h]e would describe a phrase in terms of another phrase, another poet, a group of people, a feeling, a myth, a novel, a philosophy, a country. . . . He would compare and contrast, describe." And John McCormick, referring to Lowell as "a first-rate teacher who enjoys teaching," said that his method was "to circle in upon his man like a dog upon a bird; he came to Crane by way of Tate, Emerson, Dante, and Vergil." In his letter to Santayana, who had apparently been having trouble reading modern poets like Eliot and Pound, Lowell advised that "it might be profitable to go into illogical associative structures," and his advice is helpful to readers of his own poetry as well. Robert Hass, writing about "The Quaker Graveyard," has said that "[s]urrealism . . . is syntax: not weird images but the way the mind connects them," and Marjorie Perloff says that the syntactic structure of "Memories of West Street and Lepke" (LS 85) implies "that only by viewing the self in terms of its surroundings, companions, and habitual actions can the poet come to grips with the world he inhabits."

Let us consider, then, a recurrent image in Lowell's poetry---looking not at what the image might "mean" in a particular poem, but rather at what we might learn from its association with other images, just as a freely associating subject might seek the meaning of a recurrent image not in
isolation but in the company it keeps. The image is that of a turtle, and it appears first in For the Union Dead, in "The Neo- Classical Urn" (47).  

I rub my head and find a turtle shell stuck on a pole, each hair electrical with charges, and the juice alive with ferment. Bubbles drive the motor, always purposeful . . . Poor head! (Lowell's ellipsis)

The poet's own head reminds him of a turtle shell, which contains and confines within it the turmoil of ceaseless energy: poor head! He feels pity for his own manic self, now and in the past. "How its skinny shell once hummed, / as I sprinted down the colonnade / of bleaching pines . . . Rest! / I could not rest." He remembers how he ran past the "cast stone statue of a nymph, / her soaring armpits and her one bare breast," and finally "stooped to snatch / the painted turtles on dead logs."

In that season of joy, my turtle catch was thirty-three dropped splashing in our garden urn, like money in the bank, the plop and splash of turtle on turtle, fed raw gobs of hash . . . (Lowell's ellipsis)

Childhood cruelty, and a curious apostrophe:

Oh new-classical white urn, Oh nymph, Oh lute! The boy was pitiless who strummed their elegy, for as the month wore on, the turtles rose, and popped up dead on the stale scummed surface--limp wrinkled heads and legs withdrawn
in pain . . .
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
. . . Turtles! I rub my skull,
that turtle shell,
and breathe their dying smell,
still watch their crippled last survivors pass,
and hobble humpbacked through the grizzled grass.

The poet identifies not only with the pitiless boy who made music out of the turtles' suffering, but also with the tormented victims in whose pain he finds a reflection of his own.

In "The Neo-Classical Urn," the turtles act as the nexus of a group of diverse images and states of feelings; Philip Cooper, discussing "Night Sweat" (FTUD 68; N 175), quotes a passage from Jung and C. Kerenyi in which forms of several of these same images are connected. The tortoise is one of the oldest animals known to mythology, Kerenyi tells us, and "is one of the shapes of Apollo . . . . Hermes makes it into a lyre. . . . For the Greeks the birth of the divine child, in his capacity as Eros Proteurhythmos, signified the rhythmic-musical quality of the world . . . the connection of water, child, and music" (Cooper's ellipses).33 Into images of turtles, water, child, and music/poetry in "The Neo-Classical Urn," Lowell has infused elements of pain and eroticism, and he uses the same combination in "Night Sweat." In the first half of the poem, images of water and the child evoke the pain of living and writing:
my life's fever is soaking in night sweat --
one life, one writing! But the downward glide
and bias of existing wrings us dry --
always inside me is the child who died,
always inside me is his will to die --
one universe, one body . . . in this urn
the animal night sweats of the spirit burn.

But in the second half of the poem, Lowell uses the same
conjunction of images to evoke the feeling of relief from
pain:

I dabble in the dapple of the day,
a heap of wet clothes, seamy, shivering,
I see my flesh and bedding washed with light,
my child exploding into dynamite,
my wife . . . your lightness alters everything.
(Lowell's ellipsis)

The wife, whose "lightness alters everything," now becomes
associated with the image of the turtle:

Poor turtle, tortoise, if I cannot clear
the surface of these troubled waters here,
absolve me, help me, Dear Heart, as you bear
this world's dead weight and cycle on your back.

Cooper quotes Kerenyi as saying that the Hindus "say that
the world rests on the back of a tortoise," and the Italian
word tartaruga "keeps alive a designation dating from late
antiquity, according to which the tortoise holds up the
lowest layer of the universe, namely Tartarus." Here it is
the wife, "[p]oor turtle, tortoise," who bears the heavy
burden. The poet, himself also a "[p]oor turtle, tortoise,"
is aware that he may fail to "clear / the surface of these
troubled waters here"; he is totally dependent on her
strength.
Lowell was to repeat the association of turtle and wife in "Shadow" (DBD 116), where he states matter-of-factly that "[a] man without a wife / is like a turtle without a shell"; but in other poems he associates the turtle with more ominous images. In "The Opposite House" (NTO 31), the poet looks out his window at the house across the street and sees a "stringy policeman," who is "crooked / in the doorway, one hand on his revolver":

\[\text{... A red light}
\text{whirls on the roof of an armed car,}
\text{plodding slower than a turtle.}
\text{Deterrent terror!}
\text{Viva la muerte!}\]

The turtle appears in an equally unpleasant context in "Long Summer 4" (N 24), in which, Marjorie Perloff complains, Lowell "omits the very connectives we need in order to understand the poem."34 But the reader who is receptive to Lowell's associational method needs no connectives here: the image of the "turtle the deft hand tips on its back with a stick" acts to evoke the feeling of helplessness associated with the turtles dropped into the neo-classical urn, and Lowell in "Long Summer 4" accepts responsibility for all his acts of cruelty, for "all the ill I do and will"—a wonderful pun.

Although the association of the turtle with guilt and terror reaches its apex in "Turtle," in Day by Day (see Chapter Two, pp. 90-91), the wider range of associations which links the turtle not only to cruelty and helplessness
but also to wife and child, to love and pity, culminates in companion poems in Notebook (242). 35 Lowell included "Bringing a Turtle Home" and "Returning Turtle" in a small group of poems he recorded for Harvard, and it is easy to see why he liked them; these two poems include the same conjunction of images with which we are familiar—turtle, child, water, wife—but the feelings evoked by the images are softer, more muted than those evoked by the other poems we have discussed. The tone is one of calm affection, first established when Lowell announces on the taped recording that the poems grew out of a trip which he took with his daughter Harriet.

On a torrent highway, we spotted a domed stone, a painted turtle turned to stone by fear. I picked it up. The turtle had come a long walk, 200 millenia understudy to dinosaurs, then their survivor. A god for the out-of-power. . . . (Lowell's ellipsis)

The words, "torrent highway," call to mind both the illusory pools of liquid which a driver sees forever just ahead of him as he travels on a hot day, and also the stream of traffic which threatens the turtle. The poet's capture of the turtle here is not cruelty, as in the early poems, but kindness: it is a rescue. The turtle has come a long way both in space and in time, and the fact of his survival, compared to the demise of the dinosaurs, makes him "a god for the out-of-power," an inspiration. "We have our faster gods," the poet tells us, but they are poor creatures
who "give a bad past and worse future to men." The turtle, by contrast, counts for something here and now, and the poet acknowledges its worth in a tender, unselfconscious lullaby:

Goodnight, little Boy, little Soldier, live, 
a toy to your friend, a stone of stumbling to gods -- sandpaper Turtle, scratching your pail for water.

Although the sight and sound of the turtle scratching its pail for water evokes the feeling of helplessness with which we are familiar from earlier turtle poems, the attitude of the poet toward the turtle seems to be one of respect and affection rather than pity, and in the next poem affection develops into admiration. The turtle makes a mess in the bathtub, and he smells bad. But, nevertheless:

He was so beautiful when we flipped him over; greens, reds, yellows, fringe of the shadowy savage, the last Sioux grown old and wise, saying with weariness, "Why doesn't the Great White Father put his red children on wheels, and move us as he will?"

Lowell associates the beautiful turtle with the Sioux, who are threatened with extinction, and thus makes his readers think of cruelty and genocide, but of dignity and serenity as well. He makes us think about power and its uses, including the power of the poet who, despite W. H. Auden's disclaimer, can indeed make something happen or fail to happen. He has the power, for example, to decide the fate of a turtle.
We drove to the Orland River, and watched the turtle rush for water like rushing into marriage, swimming his uncontaminated joy, lovely the flies that fed that sleazy surface, a turtle looking back at us, and blinking.

A father and his child, water, marriage, loveliness, freedom—and a turtle.

The image of that turtle looking back at us and blinking is unforgettable, and its power derives from the fact that it acts here, as in other poems, as the nexus of a group of images which converge around it; its meaning derives from its associations. So, in free association, does the subject find meaning in the relation of one thought to another, one image to another. Stanley Leavy, discussing Freud's comparison of psychoanalysis to archeology, refers to the "unearthing of the artifact according to modern methods, by which its surroundings are given as much importance as the object itself," and insists that "found objects are themselves more than merely indexical; they are truly symbolic, and may be even syntactic. The arrangement of found objects may itself be interpretable as giving a statement."36 Philip Rieff has said that psychoanalysis is "a method of interpretation which has restored the importance of detail itself" and Robert Lowell's poems are full of details, of "found objects" whose arrangement is all-important. Helen Vendler says that the "self, in Lowell's poetry, is defined by the data he moves among; the data are his cloak, his ambiance,
he is constituted by them"; and Gabriel Pearson explains the importance of such "data":

Pleasure in reading him is partly that of recognition, of being shown the artifacts and objects—many of them dishevelled, casual, almost nameless—of our common environment. . . . we should notice how far these objects are re-apprehended and, as it were, redeemed for attention, by being locked and cemented into larger structures. They are never really innocent, autarchic objects like Williams's red wheelbarrow. They are there because they serve a significance or are at least apt for some design.

Lowell's use of detail, of "the horrifying mortmain of / ephemera: keys, drift, sea-urchin shells" (N 21; FL&H 13), links him to Proust and to writers of "realism" like Tolstoy. Roman Jakobson has said that all discourse falls somewhere between the two poles of metaphor and metonymy, which he associates with fundamental unconscious mechanisms described by Freud in The Interpretation of Dreams. Jakobson associates poetry primarily with metaphor, and prose with metonymy, which is based on the principle of contiguity. "Following the path of contiguous relationships, the realist author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the character to the setting in place and time." Lowell uses metonymy often and effectively in his poems, and as he "metonymically digresses" he does something very much like what happens in free association. Jack Kerouac, whose Beat manifesto was based on the principles of free association, announces
as the first of his Essentials of Spontaneous Prose the following: "SET-UP. The object is set before the mind, either in reality, as in sketching (before a landscape or teacup or old face) or is set in the memory wherein it becomes the sketching from memory of a definite image-object."42 But the object itself is only the beginning; its importance lies in where it leads.43 The psychoanalyst Theodor Reik offers an example of his own free association, then makes this comment:

These are my thoughts as I should tell them to a person in the room to whom I have to report them the moment they occur. It is clear that most of them are determined by the objects I see; the connections between them seem to be made only by the sight of the objects and by thoughts of the persons they remind me of.44

Lowell's poems abound in examples of this sort of process. An oak ceiling leads to thoughts of middle age, of Shelley, and ignominy (N 131; H 118); and "Cousin Belle's half-sofa" and the "small portrait of Cousin Cassie" evoke both his childhood and the more recent past in "Off Central Park" (DBD 44). In "Myopia: A Night" (FTUD 31), Lowell is explicit about the role of visible objects in setting off a flow of associations. This poem, like "Eye and Tooth" (FTUD 18; see Chapter Two, pp. 92-94), is based on an extended pun on "I" and "eye," and Lowell makes clear the fact that what the eye sees may well lead one to investigate what the I feels. He begins the poem in that state of consciousness which we remember as one
particularly conducive to free association: the state just before falling asleep.

   Bed, glasses off, and all's
   ramshackle, streaky, weird
   for the near-sighted, just
   a foot away.
   The light's
   still on an instant. Here
   are the blurred titles, here
   the books are blue hills, browns,
   greens, fields, or color.
   This
   is the departure strip,
   the dream-road. Whoever built it
   left numbers, words and arrows.
   He had to leave in a hurry.

For this myopic poet, the blur of books dissolves into a
country scene of hills and fields, "the departure strip, /
the dream-road" which he must travel, complete with
"numbers, words and arrows" to point the way. Where does
the road lead? As Stephen Yenser suggests, it leads
directly to the study in which Lowell wrote his poems as a
young man.

   I see
   a dull and alien room,
   my cell of learning,
   white, brightened by white pipes,
   ramrods of steam . . . (Lowell's ellipsis)

He sees the room clearly: the pipes, the steam; and the
sight evokes the memory of a sound:

   . . . I hear
   the lonely metal breathe
   and gurgle like the sick.

This sound is unpleasant; this memory is going to be too
painful, and for once Lowell turns back and refuses to
follow the path of associations.

And yet my eyes avoid
that room. No need to see.
No need to know I hoped
its blank, foregoing whiteness
would burn away the blur,
as my five senses clenched
their teeth, thought stitched to thought,
as through a needle's eye . . . (Lowell's ellipsis)

Here past and present merge as the poet tries to shut out
the memory of that "blank, foregoing whiteness" which he
hoped might "burn away the blur" of approaching mania,
that terrible condition in which the mind is bombarded by
more sensation than it can accommodate, when associations
succeed one another so quickly and so intensely that the
mind feels stretched to the breaking point, painfully
elongated as though forced through the tiny aperture of a
needle's eye.

I see the morning star.

Here, in a bedroom, looking through a window, he sees a
star, the morning star: Lucifer, before the Fall.

Think of him in the Garden,
that seed of wisdom, Eve's
seducer, stuffed with man's
corruption, stuffed with triumph:
Satan triumphant in
the Garden! In a moment,
all that blinding brightness
changed into a serpent,
lay grovelling on its gut.

Satan is larger than life like a young poet whose works
have been roundly applauded, or like a manic patient proud
of his sexual prowess, "stuffed" with man's corruption and
with triumph, imbued with "blinding brightness" which never lasts, which always turns, "in a moment," into dust. And here? Now?

What has disturbed this household?  
Only a foot away,  
the familiar faces blur.  
At fifty we're so fragile,  
a feather . . . (Lowell's ellipsis)

Past and present, people and things, sickness and health, life and death, all combine and co-exist. As Lowell's many ellipses demonstrate, thoughts fade in and out, come and go. "We're so fragile." But, at least for now, we survive:

The things of the eye are done.  
On the illuminated black dial,  
green ciphers of a new moon --  
one, two, three, four, five, six!  
I breathe and cannot sleep.  
Then morning comes,  
saying, "This was a night."

In "Myopia: A Night," Lowell's willingness to follow the path of his associations is compromised by his fear of where he might be led—or by his desire to create a particular poem. In other poems, he seems willing to submit to the process, but, for whatever reasons, what he sees leads nowhere. In "Shifting Colors" (DBD 119), he sees ducks, bluebells, a goose, a cuckoo, but remains unmoved:

... I see  
horse and meadow, duck and pond,  
universal, consolatory,  
description without significance  
transcribed verbatim by my eye.
In "Hawthorne" (FTUD 38), a picture of that admired author leads the poet to imagine for him a similar dissatisfaction:

> Leave him alone for a moment or two, and you'll see him with his head bent down, brooding, brooding, eyes fixed on some chip, some stone, some common plant, the commonest thing, as if it were the clue. The disturbed eyes rise, furtive, foiled, dissatisfied from meditation on the true and insignificant.

But for the most part, Lowell believed wholeheartedly in the efficacy of the associational process, whether set into motion by the sight of an actual, tangible object, or by an image like that with which we began this chapter, the image of the yellow dog disappearing down the road. Writing about the composition of "Skunk Hour" (LS 89), Lowell said that he "was haunted by the image of a blue china doorknob. I never used the doorknob or knew what it meant, yet somehow it started the current of images in my opening stanzas." Louis Simpson says that Lowell in this passage is describing "a process of evoking the unconscious." The blue china doorknob "is like the image a therapist chooses from his patient's speech as he associates freely, in order to pursue it and see where it leads. It is a thread into the unconscious; tugged at, it brings other images in its train."

Although Lowell's interest in the associational process may well have derived in part from his experiences
with psychotherapy and his general knowledge of psycho-
analysis, his public remarks on the process invariably
dealt not with psychoanalysis but with poetry:

Almost the whole problem of writing poetry is
to bring it back to what you really feel, and
that takes an awful lot of maneuvering. You
may feel the doorknob more strongly than some
big personal event, and the doorknob will open
into something that you can use as your own
. . . . Some little image, some detail you've
noticed -- you're writing about a little
country shop, just describing it, and your
poem ends up with an existentialist account of
your experience. But it's the shop that
started it off. You didn't know why it meant
a lot to you. Often images and often the
sense of the beginning and end of a poem are
all you have -- some journey to be gone through
between those things: you know that, but you
don't know the details. 48

In a poem which he wrote for Elizabeth Bishop (N 235; H 198),
Lowell created an image to stand for the poet on his
journey through the poem:

Have you seen an inchworm crawl on a leaf,
cling to the very end, revolve in air,
feeling for something to reach to something? Do
you still hang your words in air, ten years
unfinished, glued to your notice board, with gaps
or empties for the unimaginable phrase --
unerring Muse who makes the casual perfect?

Even though he may have to grope his way along the path of
associations, the poet nevertheless has faith that the blue
doorknob will "open into something" that he can use. He
has only to follow:

Aroused, then sleeping, caught adrift . . . the voice
singing to me in French, "O mon avril."
Not mine.
A large pileated bird flies up, dropping excretions like a frightened snake, its Easter feathers; its earwax-yellow spoonbill angrily hitting from side to side to blaze a broad passage through the Great Northern Jungle -- the lizard tyrants were killed to a man by this bird, man's forerunner. . . .

Much like the yellow dog at the beginning of this chapter, this large pileated bird blazes "a broad passage" through which the poet can follow:

... I pick up stones, and hope to snatch its crest, its crown, at last, and cross the perilous passage, sound in mind and body . . .

Only by following the bird, with its earwax-yellow spoonbill, can he cross "the perilous passage" and emerge, "sound in mind and body," able to write a passage of his own about the journey to be gone through between the beginning and the end of the poem and the life.

often reaching the passage, seeing my thoughts stream on the water, as if I were cleaning fish. ("Bird," N 99; H 25)
NOTES

1 Robert Lowell, letter to George Santayana dated January 5, [1949], now in the Santayana Collection, Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas, Austin. Used with permission.


5 Hamilton, p. 231.


9 Kerouac, p. 73.


12 Breton, pp. 116, 122.

14 Williamson, p. 8.


16 Williamson, p. 11.

17 Williamson, p. 57.

18 Williamson, p. 58.


23 Skura, p. 137.


26 Sigmund Freud, "The Interpretation of Dreams" (1900), 4:247.

27 Leavy, p. 17.


32. I discuss several turtle poems in Chapter Two, pages 90–91.


34. Perloff, p. 127.

35. The poems, slightly revised, also appear in FL&H (41); I used the N version.

36. Leavy, pp. 89–90.


42 Kerouac, p. 72.

43 Compare the "composition of place," the first step in the process of meditation prescribed by Ignatius Loyola and widely practiced in the Renaissance. The subject begins by meditating on an object or on a specific memory; from there he moves into the meditation itself. In Louis Martz's The Poetry of Meditation, which describes poetry based on this process, the frontispiece shows a Hamlet-like youth gazing at a skull. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962 (rev. ed.).


CHAPTER TWO

A POETRY OF MEMORY

The large pileated bird that we left Lowell pursuing at the end of the last chapter appears in another poem by Lowell as well. In "The Mills of the Kavaughns" (TMOK 81), in the midst of a long reverie in which she follows the path of associations from present to past and back again, Anne Kavanaugh remembers an incident from her childhood. She and her husband, then "[a] boy and girl a-Maying in the blue," follow the path made by their excited setter:

... the children rush
Hurrahing, where no marsh or scrubby field
Or sorry clump of virgin pine will yield
A moment's covert to the half-extinct
And pileated bird they trail with linked
Fingers and little burlap sacks of salt.
The bird, a wise old uncle, knows what fault
Or whimsy guides the children when they halt
For sling-stones. Too distinguished to exalt,
It drops and cruises ...

..... ..... ..... ..... ..... ..... ..... ..... ..... ..... ..... ..... .....
Now it is lifting, now it clears the mill,
And, tired with child's play, sails beyond beyond.

There are no limits on this dignified and pileated bird, and its ability to sail "beyond beyond" acts in the poem as a contrast to Kavanaugh's inability to break loose from her past. In Chapter Four we will discuss in detail the process by which Anne attempts to understand and to come to terms with her unsatisfactory life, but the process seems largely unavailing; although she remembers her childhood
vividly, she is not able to use her memories to make sense of the present.

Robert Lowell, on the other hand, used his memories to great effect. Hospitalized in 1949 after the first severe attack of his manic-depressive illness, he wrote his mother that he was "beginning to really learn something from the psycho-therapy," and added a postscript: "P. S. I've been trying to understand my first six or seven years, and have many questions to ask you."¹ We hear these lines with interest but without surprise, since even a casual reader of Life Studies can tell that the poet in this volume engages in the psychoanalytic technique of inquiry into the past in order to learn more about the present. Lowell used his remembered past in varying ways throughout his career. In some poems, such as the early "Buttercups" (LWC 24), he remembers the time "[w]hen we were children" without speculating on the difference between past and present, but more often he contrasts the two. Sometimes, as in "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow" (LS 59), he sets the poem wholly in the past, with the contrast arising merely by implication: the adult poet looks at the six-year-old subject of the poem and realizes a truth he could not have known earlier, that he "wasn't a child at all"; instead, he was "Agrippina / in the Golden House of Nero." Most often, however, Lowell sets the poem
in the present, then explicitly connects the present with the past. In "Christmas Eve in the Time of War" (LOU), he begins with the contrast, "Tonight a blackout. Twenty years ago / I strung my stocking on the tree"; he uses the past here to emphasize the horror of the present. In "Homecoming" (DBD 11, cf. PTUD 34), when he realizes that the "boys in [his] old gang" are "bald like baby birds," he mourns his lost youth. But Lowell uses the past most frequently in his poems as a means of understanding the present. Of Life Studies, Marjorie Perloff has written that "the typical lyric begins in a moment of crisis in the present, moves backward into a closely related past, and then returns to the present with renewed insight";2 and what is true of Life Studies is true of Lowell's whole career.

When Perloff says that Lowell "moves backward into a closely related past," and when Herbert Leibowitz speaks of "the adult retracing the pathways of his childhood" in "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow,"3 these critics echo Lowell himself, in "The Withdrawal" (DBD 72): "When I look back, I see a collapsing / accordion of my receding houses, / and myself receding / to a boy of twenty-five or thirty." And both poet and critics sound uncannily like Freud, in one of the first formulations of what would become standard psychoanalytic method: "If a pathological idea . . . can be traced back to its elements
in the patient's mental life from which it originated, it simultaneously crumbles away and the patient is freed from it." Moving back, retracing, receding, tracing back: these are the operative verbs. Robert Waelder adds another: rolling back. Elaborating on the process of psychoanalysis, Waelder describes it as "the psychoanalytic therapy of the neuroses which tries to cure them by rolling the neurotic process back along the road of its development. Psychoanalysis tries to undo the repression of the present and past and to restore the conflicts, present and past, to consciousness."

A poet who traces back or rolls back his life along the road of its development must necessarily be writing autobiography, and, indeed, Lowell himself described his Selected Poems as "autobiography . . . a small-scale Prelude." Roy Pascal, in Design and Truth in Autobiography, confirms the therapeutic nature of that elusive genre when he describes it as "an interplay, a collusion, between past and present; its significance is indeed more the revelation of the present situation than the uncovering of the past." The agent of this uncovering of the past is, of course, memory, and James Olney describes its function:

It is through the operation of memory, which draws all the significant past up into the focus of the present, that the autobiographer and the poet succeed in universalizing their experience and their meaning. Each of them discovers, in fact, by looking through the glass of memory, a meaning in his experience
which was not there before and which exists now only as a present creation. A psychoanalyst would approve Olney's formulation; in psychoanalysis, it is precisely "by looking through the glass of memory" that one is enabled to find "a meaning in his experience which was not there before." Philip Rieff says that Freud defines sickness as "the failure to become emancipated from one's past," and only through memory can we connect what Otto Fenichel calls the "disturbing residues of the past" to our present feelings and reactions. Rieff pinpoints the "peculiar and central place" of memory in psychoanalysis: "It is constraining, since by remembering our bondages to the past we appreciate their enormity; but it is also, Freud believed, liberating, since by remembering we understand the terrors and pleasures of the past and move toward mastering them."

Robert Lowell knew well his "bondages to the past," and he appreciated and acknowledged the importance of memory—the process of remembering—in his own life. "Children, the raging memory drools / Over the glory of past pools," he declaims in his first volume of poetry ("The Drunken Fisherman," LOU, LWC 37). By the time he wrote Life Studies, Lowell was using memory deliberately as a therapeutic instrument, and in his next volume, For the Union Dead, he addressed himself again and again to the question of the puzzling nature of memory itself. "Both
fascinated and imprisoned by memories," John Crick says of the poet in this volume, "he seeks freedom through deliberate appropriations of them, and throughout the book weaves patterns of recollection."\textsuperscript{12} The first four poems in \textit{For the Union Dead} treat memory explicitly. In the first poem, "Water" (3), the poet addresses a woman with whom he has shared an experience in the past. "Remember?" he asks. "We sat on a slab of rock. / From this distance in time, / it seems the color / of iris, rotting and turning purpler." But the poet's memory errs: "it was only / the usual gray rock / turning the usual green / when drenched by the sea."

This knowledge of the distorting properties of memory hovers in the background throughout the rest of the volume, even when, as in the next poem, the poet expresses no doubts as to the accuracy of his recollections. The remembered past in "The Old Flame" (5) is unpleasant: the poet and his wife were "quivering and fierce"; they lay "awake all night. / In one bed and apart," and listened to the snow-plow "groaning up hill." But now "[e]verything's changed for the best"—visiting the house in which the two had lived, the poet finds a "new landlord, / a new wife, a new broom." The house has been "swept bare, / furnished, garnished and aired." The reader may join the poet in wishing "[h]ealth to the new people," but her enthusiasm is tempered by the knowledge that the man and his "old flame"
have not shared in the general good fortune. Both Lowell and Jean Stafford knew hard times between the past of this poem and the present of its writing. And Lowell reflects that fact by ending the poem on a melancholy note addressed to his "[p]oor ghost, old love."

The intrusion of the past on the present takes concrete form in the next poem, "Middle Age" (7). Lowell sets the scene, describing the "midwinter grind" of New York which "drills through [his] nerves" as he walks "the chewed-up streets." The dental imagery is unobtrusive enough to be effective and chilling, and thus to prepare the reader for the ominous next lines. "At forty-five, / what next, what next?" the poet asks. "At every corner, / I meet my Father, / my age, still alive." To come face to face with the father is terrifying, the more so since the poet at this stage of life has no answer to his own question. He has only the excruciating memory of the father in whose "dinosaur / death steps" he must walk. As though personal memories have become too painful, Lowell eschews autobiography in the next poem, "The Scream" (8), which explores the way in which an uncomfortable memory acts upon a child. He bases the poem on "In the Village," a short story by Elizabeth Bishop in which a young girl's life is colored by the memory of her deranged mother's scream. Bishop begins her story with these words:
A scream, the echo of a scream, hangs over that Nova Scotia village. No one hears it; it hangs there forever, a slight stain in those pure blue skies, . . . too dark, too blue, so that they seem to keep on darkening over the woods and waters as well as the sky. The scream hangs like that, unheard, in memory—in the past, in the present, and those years between. 13

The echo of a scream, hanging in memory, a slight stain in the sky, darkening over the woods and waters—this thinning echo becomes for Lowell a metaphor for memory itself.

In "The Scream," Lowell imagines memory as an echo thinning away, finally, to nothing, but much more often in For the Union Dead he insists upon its persistence. He plays with the notion of the instability of memory, the way remembered objects seem to change shape with the passage of time, as when, in "For the Union Dead" (70), "[t]he stone statues of the abstract Union Soldier / grow slimmer and younger each year." In that poem, as in "The Public Garden" (26) and "Returning" (34), the remembered past is superior to the present. Usually, however, the memories themselves are disappointing at best, and, at their worst, crippling. Lowell was taught that he must use his memory to explore the past in order better to understand the present, and in For the Union Dead he accepts the unpleasant truth that the darkening stain of memory colors the past with pain and grief. Later he will admit, "I return then, but not to what I wanted" ("Searchings 1," N 35).

Sometimes the memories cause pain because they reveal
qualities in the young child that the remembering adult finds abhorrent. In "Florence" (FTUD 13), the poet remembers "[h]ow vulnerable the horseshoe crabs," which were "made for a child to grab / and throw strangling ashore!" Similarly, in "The Neo-Classical Urn" (47), Lowell rubs his head and feels "a turtle shell," which he associates with memories of an early cruelty: he remembers "the plop and splash / of turtle on turtle" as he dropped the helpless creatures into a garden urn. In "Dunbarton," in Life Studies (65), the poet had recalled a similar incident from his childhood: catching and imprisoning newts in a tobacco tin, he saw himself "as a young newt, / neurasthenic, scarlet / and wild in the coffee-colored water"; in "The Neo-Classical Urn" he identifies himself not only with the turtles confined in the urn but also with their unfeeling captor: Lowell himself as a child. The garden urn is transmuted, in "Night Sweat" (FTUD 68; N67-68 103; N 175), into the urn of the body, a container for memories: "always inside me is the child who died."14

Later, in Day by Day ("Turtle," 98), he will give the hapless turtles their revenge. "I pray for memory," he begins, and remembering, identifies himself with "an old turtle, / absentminded, inelastic, / . . . / no longer able to hiss or lift / a useless shield against the killer." Emphasizing the false sense of security a turtle or a poet feels inside his shell, Lowell gives an admiring and
appealing description, reminiscent of his portrait of the skunks at the end of "Skunk Hour" (LS 89), of the courage and naïveté of a turtle or a man: "Turtles age, but wade out amorously, / half-frozen fossils, yet knight-errant / in a fools-dream of armor." In "Long Summer 4" (N 25), Lowell had used the figure of a turtle to underline his sense of human vulnerability enclosed within a shell of seeming imperviousness:

... I flame for the one friend--
is it always the same child or animal
impregnable in shell or coat of thorns,
only kept standing by a hundred scared habits--
turtle the deft hand tips on its back with a stick?

The feeling of helplessness implicit in this passage is raised to another power at the end of "Turtle." His memory triggered by the sight of three snapping turtles in his bedroom, Lowell remembers the turtles he caught as a child, and, acknowledging "the rawness that let us meet as animals," imagines a horrible, compensatory scenario:

... Too many pictures
have screamed from the reel ... in the rerun,
the snapper holds on till sunset--
in the awful instantness of retrospect,
its beak
works me underwater drowning by my neck,
as it claws away pieces of my flesh
to make me small enough to swallow.
(Lowell's ellipsis)

Memory itself has become the old turtle that the poet prayed for at the beginning of the poem—a creature often attractive and appealing, but liable, "in the awful instantness of retrospect," to swallow us alive.
"The Turtle" represents one of Lowell's last and best attempts to teach us how memory works, but his most extensive and thorough treatment of the subject came, not surprisingly, in *For the Union Dead*. In "Eye and Tooth" (18), he dramatizes the complicated nature of the process of memory, the shadowy filter through which the poet sees the past. Irvin Ehrenpreis describes the poem in these words:

The poem depends on a brilliant use of the eye-I pun. Treating vision as memory or id, Lowell presents the voyeur poet's eye as an unwreckable showcase of displeasing memories that both shape and torment the person. The dominating metaphor is, so to speak, "I've got something in my I and can't get it out."15

The poem begins with a juxtaposition of the eye and the I:

My whole eye was sunset red,  
the old cut cornea throbbed,  
I saw things darkly,  
as through an unwashed goldfish globe.

As the rest of the poem will make clear, the "old cut cornea" represents among other things, in Stephen Yenser's words, "the flaw in man's nature, original sin, which '[n]othing can dislodge.'"16 "My eyes throb," the poet complains in the fourth stanza. "Nothing can dislodge / the house with my first tooth / noosed in a knot to the doorknob." Apparently remembering an incident from his childhood, Lowell here represents this memory of an unpleasant experience as a tangible, physical object in his eye (I).
The association of memory with sin begins in the next stanzas, which, as several critics have noticed, are closely related to a prose passage in Lowell's essay on William Carlos Williams in the Hudson Review:

An image held my mind . . . --an old fashioned New England cottage freshly painted white. I saw a shaggy, triangular shade on the house, trees, a hedge, or their shadows, the blotch of decay. The house . . . came from the time when I was a child, still unable to read and living in the small town of Barnstable on Cape Cod. Inside the house was a birdbook with an old stiff and steely engraving of a sharp-skinned hawk. The hawk’s legs had a reddish brown buffalo fuzz on them; behind was the blue sky, bare and abstracted from the world."17

In his description of the triangular shade on the house, the shadows, "the blotch of decay," we may perhaps sense a similarity to the darkening stain of memory Lowell adapted from Elizabeth Bishop in "The Scream." In any event, the poet in "Eye and Tooth" juxtaposes the memory of the triangular blotch with the remembered image of the hawk, whose cold eye seemed to pronounce judgment on the small boy:

Nothing can dislodge the triangular blotch of rot on the red roof, a cedar hedge, or the shade of a hedge.

No ease from the eye of the sharp-skinned hawk in the birdbook there, with reddish brown buffalo hair on its shanks, one ascetic talon clasping the abstract imperial sky. It says: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.
The eye is both judge and instrument of punishment, the superego made concrete. And the eye is the instrument of the crime as well:

No ease for the boy at the keyhole, his telescope,
when the women's white bodies flashed
in the bathroom. Young, my eyes began to fail.

No ease for the boy, no ease from the eye, no ease, now, for the man whose eyes are full of memories.

Nothing! No oil
for the eye, nothing to pour
on those waters or flames.
I am tired. Everyone's tired of my turmoil.

To surrender to memories can be exhausting, draining, both for the poet and for his readers. Robert Fein explores this aspect of memory when he discusses "Eye and Tooth" and several other poems in For the Union Dead:

These poems show us that the poem that springs from a painful memory does not necessarily offer the poet a release. Indeed, the overwrought memory can be a stumbling block in the way of recovery from the past. Memory can be freedom, but it can also be oppression. If remembering the past allows a person to understand and assuage that past, it is also true that one can become fascinated and obsessed with such memories, which then undercut his ability to release himself from the past.18

The reader may have noticed that the poems in which memory acts most painfully upon Lowell are those in which he remembers an experience from early childhood. Psychoanalysis has always stressed the importance of very early memories, and Lowell's poetry reflects his knowledge of that fact. He sometimes looks back to his adolescence and
young manhood—Stanley Leavy has said that "we never get to the remote past in any significant way . . . otherwise than by repeated forays into the recent past"—but primarily Lowell emphasizes memories of early childhood.\textsuperscript{19} He relies not only on his own past, but, particularly in the first half of his career (through \textit{Imitations}, 1961), he shows intense interest in the early lives of other characters in his poems.

In "Mr. Edwards and the Spider" \textit{(LWC 64)}, Lowell speaks in the voice of Jonathan Edwards, who paints a terrifying and explicit picture of "the Black Widow, death." Lowell composed this poem from the prose writings of Edwards himself, and, as Alan Williamson has pointed out,\textsuperscript{20} extracted an incident from Edwards' adulthood and transferred it to the Puritan's childhood: "As a small boy / On Windsor Marsh, I saw the spider die / When thrown into the bowels of fierce fire." In the poem, as in "Eye and Tooth," Lowell juxtaposes images of judgment, sin and guilt with a childhood memory; and both poems end in hell. The poet in "Eye and Tooth" who has "nothing to pour / on these waters or flames" is a modern, secularized version of Josiah Hawley, whom Edwards entreats to "picture yourself cast / Into a brick-kiln" where "the blaze / Is eternal, infinite."

Childhood memories play an important part in several of the poems in \textit{The Mills of the Kavanaghs}. In the title
poem (81), as we have seen, Anne Kavannah's dreamlike meditation shifts back and forth from past to present as she tries to make sense of her life. The old man in "Falling Asleep Over the Aeneid" (101) dreams first that he is attending the funeral of Pallas, but at the end of the poem, the body of Pallas merges into that of "Uncle Charles," who died when the old man was a child. "Eighty years," he exclaims. "It all comes back." Gazing at the body in the coffin, he discovers the terrifying fact of his own mortality. The persona of Lowell's adaptation of Werfel's "The Fat Man in the Mirror" (114) experiences a similar jolt when he confronts his unpleasant reflection in the mirror. Conflating past and present like the old man who fell asleep over the Aeneid, he contrasts "this pursey terror" with his childhood: "The forenoon was blue / In the mad King's zoo / Nurse was swinging me so high, so high!"

Lowell's adaptation of the Werfel poem foreshadows his practice in Imitations, and two of the Rimbaud poems in that volume demonstrate Lowell's continued interest in the effect of childhood memories upon the adult. Before the text of "Nostalgia" (74), Lowell inserts a note: "An autobiographical poem: Rimbaud remembers the small boy in a rowboat under the old walls of Charleville. His mother and sisters are on the bank. His father has just deserted them." By beginning the poem with the line "The sucking
river was the child's salt tears," Lowell emphasizes both the distance between and the identity of the suffering child and the remembering adult. Ehrenpreis, referring to "The Poet at Seven" (77), describes this quality of dual perspective as a "double image," and likens the young Rimbaud to the young Lowell of "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow" (LS 59). Indeed, Ehrenpreis suggests that Rimbaud brings out in Lowell "attitudes toward childhood and corrupted innocence that remind us at once of Life Studies." 21

The childhood poems of Life Studies began as a series of prose reminiscences which Lowell wrote at the behest of his doctors, beginning in 1954 or early 1955. Writing to Peter Taylor, whose autobiographical story "1939" had just been published, Lowell revealed how complicated was the mix of psychotherapy and artistic ambition:

I have been trying to do the same sort of thing myself with scenes from my childhood with my grandfather, old Aunt Sarah, Cousin Belle, etc. I want to invent and forget a lot but at the same time have the historian's wonderful advantage--the reader must always be forced to say "This is tops, but even if it weren't it's true." 22

Lowell wants to have his cake and eat it too: he wants to "invent . . . a lot," yet have the reader acknowledge the result as not only "tops," but "true." But the fascinating part of this statement for a reader interested in Lowell's life as well as his work is the offhand admission that he
wants to "forget a lot." Gabriel Pearson says bluntly that the poetry in *Life Studies* "is designed to keep the past past and the dead dead," and it seems clear that Lowell hoped through writing down these memories to exorcise some of his demons. But at first glance it appears that the artistic rather than the therapeutic purpose predominates in these poems. Except for an occasional exclamation such as "Grandpa! have me, hold me, cherish me!" ("Grandparents," 68), the agitation and suppressed emotion of earlier volumes has given way to what Pearson calls a "poker-faced numbness"—no catharsis here, but rather a carefully controlled recitation of remembered events and impressions overlaid with invention.  

However, memory can be therapeutic without having any cathartic effect. Rieff tells us that

> Freud . . . came increasingly to play down the role of emotional catharsis as such and to consider therapy a purely recollective act. What cures the patient, he thought, is not the expressing of suppressed emotions . . . but the act of dealing with the forgotten past, the repressed emotions, while in conscious control of and thereby superior to them.

This explanation, besides reminding us of Wordsworth's remark that the origin of poetry is emotion recollected in tranquillity, describes what happens in many of the poems in *Life Studies*. Remembering is the first step in understanding—one must remember before one can forget—and Lowell in his family poems and in "91 Revere Street" shows
us his first conscious attempts at this process. The title of the volume is wonderful, for the life studied is, of course, that of Robert Lowell himself: a child who had certain experiences and grew up to remember and to write about them; the writing is the studying. But others' lives impinge on that of the poet, and they too must be studied. Stanley Leavy explains:

The status of a memory (conscious or unconscious) is double; it notes an event and denotes or connotes an experience. To the extent that we trace a present state to past experiences as necessary antecedents, we simultaneously implicate the correlative events as causally efficient. Without those events, these experiences (past and present) would not have come into being. Since the events in question are usually childhood events, they are for the most part . . . consequences of parental action. 25

Readers of Life Studies feel they know Lowell's parents well; other than Lowell himself, the ineffectual Bob and the domineering and possessive Charlotte are the main "characters" in the book. And the poet makes it easy to feel the effect they had upon the young Robert. In "91 Revere Street" he puts us inside the skin of the boy listening to the "weelawaugh" and "but-and" of his parents' quarrels (19). We applaud when he responds to his mother's smothering, "Oh Bobby, it's such a comfort to have a man in the house," with "I am not a man . . . I am a boy" (24). And we understand why Lowell closes his recital with the picture of himself as a small boy listening and learning as Commander Harkness, gaping down at him "with sorrowing
Gargantuan wonder," exclaims, "I know why young Bob is an only child" (46).

Lowell's concentration on experiences of childhood reminds us of a similar emphasis in the poetry of others. Philip Rieff has said that "Freud's belief in the continued existence of the past, and in the perennial hazards of its revival, links him with the Romantic poets, for whom the whole of experience, and especially childhood, survives in a mental underworld."26 Although Lowell recognized such a likeness when he called his **Selected Poems** "autobiography . . . a small-scale Prelude," he cautioned that the poems do not tell a story of "the growth of a poet's mind."27

Wordsworth indeed foreshadowed the kind of autobiographical tracing back or rolling back that we have been considering:

> Thus far, O Friend, have we, though leaving much Unvisited, endeavor'd to retrace My life through its first years, and measured back The way I travell'd . . . .28

Of course Wordsworth predates Freud by a hundred years. He writes with no conscious awareness of the existence of the unconscious. But Richard J. Onorato, writing on "Tintern Abbey" at the beginning of his discussion of **The Prelude**, in an assertion that is equally applicable to the long work, suggests that "this tendency to move away from the present moment towards feelings and thoughts that are deeper and prior to it can also be seen as expressive of strong and unrealized preconscious wishes that bear upon
the present occasion while remaining apart from and at variance with Wordsworth's apparent conscious intentions." 29

We must be careful not to claim too close a kinship between Wordsworth and Robert Lowell, but the two share at least a predilection for exploring their individual pasts with the intention of better understanding the present.

In the course of their explorations of the past, both poets revert again and again to the metaphor of the journey. Onorato says that

the journey metaphor suggests . . . that one goes toward the eternal and the infinite, as for instance in the Christian pilgrimage of life, through death to eternal life. But there is also very strongly the suggestion of "returning" in that journey "home" to the place one left or of returning to the condition that obtained before the search or journey began. 30

Any reader can recognize the embodiment of this statement in poetry from "The child is father of the man" to "In my beginning is my end," and Jacques Lacan asserts its truth for psychoanalysis and for life when he says that "the real is that which always comes back to the same place." 31 Throughout his career, Lowell concurred. The sense of his poetry as a return to the past is most evident in Life Studies, where the poet returns both in time and in space to the places whence he came. In "Home after Three Months Away" (83), he describes his return from "Boweditch Hall at McLean's," where he had been hospitalized during one of his attacks of mania ("Waking in the Blue," 81). The poet
mixes irony ("Is Richard now himself again?") with affection for his daughter Harriet: "Dearest, I cannot loiter here / in lather like a polar bear." But the primary effect of the poem is one of exhaustion: the "seven horizontal tulips" he sees below his window in "our coffin's length of soil" cannot "meet / another year's snowballing enervation." The poet himself keeps "no rank nor station. / Cured, I am frizzled, stale and small." Here the joy of homecoming is a limited one, and the reader's sense of exhaustion and enervation is reinforced by Ian Hamilton's poignant revelation that Lowell wrote this poem on a furlough from McLean's; he was "home," but only for a weekend. 32 Similarly, at the end of "Skunk Hour" (89), the poet returns from his "[o]ne dark night" to stand on his back porch and breathe the "rich air" of the skunks, leaving the reader to agree with Lowell's later comment that his "affirmation" of the skunks is "an ambiguous one." 33

Lowell's conviction that we are always in some sense going back to where we came from is not confined to Life Studies. In the title poem in For the Union Dead (70), he returns to the "old South Boston Aquarium," and admits, in a haunting phrase, that "I often sigh still / for the dark downward and vegetating kingdom / of the fish and reptile." He treats the theme explicitly in the same volume in the poem, "Returning" (34), which he says in a Note (1) was
suggested by Giuseppe Ungaretti's "Canzone." Stephen Yensen has pointed out that the poet here is "returning" after the "dark night" of the preceding poem, "Myopia: a Night." Again the poet is ambivalent about his return. He brags that "the dogs still know me by my smell," but, all the same, it's "rather a dead town / after my twenty year's mirage." We are conditioned by now to recognize the cycle of a voyage into mania followed by the enervation which accompanies homecoming:

Long awash,
breaking myself against the surf,
touching bottom, rushed
by the green go-light
of those nervous waters, I found
my exhaustion, the light of the world.

"Nothing is deader than this small town main street," he continues. The "venerable elm sickens" and "no leaf / is born." Helen Vendler tells us that Ungaretti describes in his "Canzone" an immobile Hades where no leaf is born or falls, nothing wakes or slumbers, and there is neither light nor shadow, nor past nor future. This is, says Ungaretti, "the crossing over, with sensual experience exhausted, of the threshold of another experience . . . the Pascalian knowing of being out of the null. Horrid consciousness. Its odyssey always has as its point of departure the past, always returns to conclude itself in the past."35

Lowell, too, returns to conclude in the past.

But I remember its former fertility, how everything came out clearly in the hour of credulity and young summer, when this street was already somewhat overshaded, and here at the altar of surrender,
I met you,  
the death of thirst in my brief flesh.

The poet, having returned at the beginning of the poem to a place, a "sheltered little resort" which he finds changed, now returns in memory to an earlier, happier time. The "you" whom he meets is undeniably a girl—"All life's grandeur / is something with a girl in summer" he will say later ("Waking Early Sunday Morning," NTO 13). But, as Yenser convincingly argues, Lowell may refer also to Christ (or, as I prefer, to Mary); in either case the reference is to Lowell's conversion to Catholicism. The next lines sustain this interpretation. "That was the first growth," Lowell says; "more and more it grew green, and gave too much shelter." But the possessive smothering of girl or church is part of the past; and "now at my homecoming, / . . . / I am a foot taller than when I left."

The poet ends with his usual feeling of malaise:

Yet sometimes I catch my vague mind circling with a glazed eye for a name without a face, or a face without a name, and at every step, I startle them. They start up, dog-eared, bald as baby birds.

The words, "bald as baby birds," refer back to the "bald-headed" members of the poet's old "gang" with whom he began the poem: figures from the past who keep popping up in his memory. And the vague mind, "circling" without rest "for a name without a face, or a face without a name"—what is it searching for? Perhaps here is a confirmation of Yenser's
suggestion that the poet is remembering his brief immersion in the comfortable security of belief in God; the poet sounds here like the loving father in "Harriet 1" (N67-68 3; N 21; retitled "Harriet, born January 4, 1957," FLAH 13), who, detailing the child's successive attempts to characterize God, ends in an automobile, headlights probing the fog, searching for a "face, clock-white, still friendly to the earth." The "vague mind" searches the past for it knows not what.

Lowell rewrote "Returning" for Day by Day, transposing it into the leaner, more fluid "Homecoming" (11). He begins the poem with the statement, "[w]hat was is"; since there is no comma between the two verbs, the reader is free to turn the statement into an ironic question designed to demonstrate the fact that in the moment of reading (or writing), the past is already changing to the present. But since we know that this poem is a revision of "Returning," we interpret the words instead to mean that the poet has come "home" to a place which has remained unchanged. This interpretation in its turn must be revised, because Lowell immediately undercuts his assertion by giving an example of radical change: "the boys in my old gang / are senior partners." So the reader tries again: she assumes (with an implied comma between the verbs) that "what was is" not in the reality of the homecoming (which is no reality, of course, but rather the reality of the poem in which we
choose to believe), but in the poet's memory. But in fact his memories have also changed since the time of the writing of "Returning." The "you" whom he meets "in the hour of credulity" is purely secular here; there is no suggestion of God or Catholicism, but rather a girl who shares "the nights we made it / on our Vesuvio martinis / with no vermouth but vodka / to sweeten the dry gin."

Despite the first line, the poet here, as in "Returning," senses a change, a decline in fertility and health. He uses clean, sparse lines to emphasize his point: "things gone wrong / clothe summer / in gold leaf." In this dry time he searches for what he no longer has:

    Sometimes
    I catch my mind
    circling for you with glazed eye --
    my lost love hunting
    your lost face.

He has come home, but he cannot find what he is seeking, cannot reclaim the past: "it's a town for the young, /
they break themselves against the surf. / No dog knows my smell."

    In this poem, Lowell's attitude toward homecoming is
not ambivalent but decisively negative. One can go home
again but to no avail: he remembers and learns nothing
useful, nothing that can help him understand his present.
Nevertheless, it is necessary to return, to come back, to
go home—as he tells us in "Pigeons" (I 149). Although
Lowell arranged his Imitations in chronological order from
Homer through Pasternak, he placed Rilke's "Pigeons" at the end of the volume, apart from the other Rilke poems; perhaps emphasizing by its position the poet's intention to return from his voyage into the poetic territory of others and to come home to his own individual work. He begins with this passage:

The same old flights, the same old homecomings, dozens of each per day, but at last the pigeon gets clear of the pigeon-house . . .
What is home but a feeling of homesickness for the flight's last moment of fluttering terror? (Lowell's ellipsis)

The reader feels trapped in the first two lines, unable to break out of the rigid three-stress meter, unable to break out of the unending cycle of flights and returns. Here homecoming is not a willed act, not a deliberate return through memory to the time and place of one's origin, but rather a compulsive gesture. "Home" is no refuge here, no source of strength, but rather a stifling, closed-in situation or condition; then, when "at last the pigeon gets clear of the pigeon-house," the dactyls speed us along into flights of freedom. As the next line makes clear, even a "moment of fluttering terror" is better than the constraints of "home." Throughout the poem, home retains its connotations of limitation and suppression, while flight means liberation and energy. Nevertheless, the pigeon and the person always return.
Over non-existence arches the all-being--thence the ball thrown almost out of bounds stings the hand with the momentum of its drop--body and gravity, miraculously multiplied by its mania to return.

Yenser tells us that Lowell used "imaginative license" in translating these lines, and points out that the last words, "mania to return," echo the imaginatively rendered "mania of Achilles" in the first line of the first poem in the volume. Clearly, he says, "Lowell intends 'to return' us to the volume's initial line." Although this "connection of end and beginning," as Yenser calls it, may remind us of Lacan's statement that the real is that which always comes back to the same place, we sense in this poem no therapeutic benefit in a return through memory to one's home, but rather compulsive cycles of flight and return which resemble the stifling compulsion to repeat which Freud described, and which we will discuss in the next chapter.

In the face of these conflicting poetic statements about the nature of going home, can we draw any conclusions about the efficacy of memory? In Robert Lowell's life of mania and depression, was the return through memory to his origins and his past of use to him? He addresses this question obliquely in a pair of poems, carefully placed in his career: "The Exile's Return," the first poem in Lord Weary's Castle (9), and "Ulysses and Circe," the first poem in Day by Day (3). "The Exile's Return" was written in
1946, before there is any reason to suppose that Lowell had any but the most general kind of knowledge about psychoanalysis; he certainly did not intend in any conscious way that his exile should represent a man returning through memory to his origins. But in light of what he does with this same theme in "Ulysses and Circe," which Ian Hamilton calls a "rewriting of 'Exile's Return'," we are justified in noticing how neatly the poem fits into the category of homecoming poems we have been discussing.

Richard Onorato, speaking of the journey metaphor, says that the "epic sense of journey, derived by Wordsworth from Milton, has its most precise analogue in The Odyssey," and Robert Lowell, who was profoundly influenced by Milton, was especially interested in Ulysses. "The Exile's Return," according to Hugh Staples, "is the theme of the Odyssey with an unhappy ending: here the return is not to Ithaca but to a Land of Unlikeness." Elaborating on Staples' discovery that Lowell has put into his poem "nearly all of the imagery and even the exact phraseology of the opening pages of [Thomas Mann's] Tonio Kröger, Philip Cooper has this to say:

"The Exile's Return" fables again the disappointment, dispossession, disinheritance a man finds when he tries to recover the lost promises of childhood. Tonio Kröger . . . tries to go home again as a grown man and finds himself mistaken for a criminal.

It is not surprising that Robert Lowell, at the time of
writing this poem, should feel kinship to Tonio Kröger, who was mistaken for a criminal; Lowell himself had just been released from prison, where he had served time as a conscientious objector during World War II. He had come "home," and his feelings were ambivalent. As he was to do so often throughout his career, Lowell in this poem incorporates his own history into that of the world at large: the returning prisoner is the returning American soldier is the returning German exile. And all of these in turn are the poet, though this particular patrician poet would never make explicit such a Whitmanesque identity.

The exile returns, in Staples' words, to a "Land of Unlikeness." Nothing is as it was, the war has changed everything, and the country is harsh and unwelcoming:

... A bell
Grumbles when the reverberations strip
The thatching from its spire,
The search-guns click and spit and split up timber
And nick the slate roofs on the Holstenwall
Where torn-up tilestones crown the victor. . . .

The reader reading these lines enacts the experience of the exile who expects a smooth welcome home and instead is obstructed at every turn. What Harvey Gross, speaking of another Lowell poem, calls "a splutter of consonants" here causes the reader to pause after the many words which end in "k" or "p" or "t" sounds. The meter, too, obstructs the reader. Gross has said that the "striking feature of the metric of Lord Weary's Castle is its overwhelming
physicality. Lines clang and grind; the movement stops
dead and resumes with a shudder; stress jams against stress
until lines break under the tension."42 In these lines
the movement stops dead after "grumbles"; stress jams
against stress in "The search-guns click and spit and
split up timber / And nick the slate roofs on the
Holstenwall." By the time the reader reaches the "gray,
sorry and ancestral house / Where the dynamited walnut
tree / Shadows a squat, old, wind-torn gate" (stress
jamming against stress again), she is exhausted. But there
is some cause for hope:

. . . already lily-stands
Burgeon the risen Rhineland, and a rough
Cathedral lifts its eye. Pleasant enough,
Voi ch'entrate, and your life is in your hands.

The words flow more smoothly here, and the Lowell of 1946
would have considered the cathedral a welcome and welcoming
sight. Staples considers the ending a "calm, understated
promise of renascence" until undercut by "the ominous
Dantean overtones of the last line."43 Of "Voi ch'entrate"
he tells us, this "is, of course, part of the inscription
over the Gate of Hell, as described by Dante in Inferno,
III, 9. The full phrase is . . . 'Abandon all hope, ye
who enter.'"44 Randall Jarrell says flatly that this is
an "unhappy ending"; the "menacing Voi ch-entrate . . .
transforms the exile's old home into a place where even
hope must be abandoned."45 But I am not convinced. For a
reader who knows that Lowell has thirty years after the
date of this poem in which to write poetry, and that the
subject of his poetry was so often to be the person of
Robert Lowell himself, the last words are wonderful. "Your
life is in your hands," he tells the exile who has re-
turned to his "gray, sorry and ancestral house"—the exile
who is, of course, among others, himself. The place that
the exile comes home to may be "pleasant enough" or it may
be hell. The poet will make his own life by writing about
it, and much of what he writes will be the product of
memories of his own ancestral house.

On his return to the United States from England in the
fall of 1973, Lowell "wrote nine poems in a relaxed, al-
most meandering free verse. . . . They were . . . about
returning from exile (indeed, one of them was a rewriting
of a poem from Lord Weary's Castle called 'Exile's Return');
the poet sees himself as Ulysses 'circling' the geography
of the life he left behind."46 The poem that would become
"Ulysses and Circe" was to be included, eventually, in
Day by Day. This last volume of Lowell's poetry, which
Helen Vendler reviewed under the heading, "The Poetry of
Autobiography," was in itself a kind of return, a re-
capitulation of lifelong concerns.47 In this book, in
Hamilton's words, Lowell "seems intent on some final
settlement with the obsessions of a lifetime."48 He surveys
his old friends and his former wives, and makes a kind of
peace with his parents. But the abstract idea of home-
coming or returning as a useful therapeutic tool, he seems
finally to have rejected—or, perhaps, dismissed as no
longer necessary. We have discussed the poem, "Homecoming"
(11), in which the poet returns to a place of his youth,
only to find that "[n]o dog knows my smell." In "Home"
(113), the term itself takes on a terrible and ironic mean-
ing: the mental hospital where the poet, "a thorazined
fixture / in the immovable square-cushioned chairs," is
confined.

"Ulysses and Circe" was originally entitled "Ulysses,
Circe, Penelope," and the situation of the poet-voyager
after his return to Ithaca constitutes one-third of the
poem. In the next-to-last section, immediately before
the return, Lowell has Ulysses address Circe in words which
look back to the earlier "Returning":

"Long awash and often touching bottom
by the sea's great green go-light
I found my exhaustion
the light of the world.

We have already discussed Lowell's association of home with
the enervation that follows a voyage into mania. In this
poem, however, enervation becomes energy. The first lines
of the last section are ominous:

Ulysses circles--
neither his son's weakness,
nor passion for his wife,
which might have helped her, held him.
Walking "from Long Wharf home," he remembers: the past, "twenty years ago, / . . . when he enticed Penelope / to dance herself to coma in his arms," and contrasts it with the present:

... Today his house is more convivial and condescending; she is at home, well furnished with her entourage, her son, her son's friends, her lovers--

He "enters the house," but "mistakes / a daughter for her mother." "It is not surprising," we are told. Ulysses is allowed inside his home for the space of eight lines, then ejected by the suitors.

He is outdoors; his uninvited hands are raw, they say I love you through the locked window. At forty, she is still the best bosom in the room. He looks at her, she looks at him admiring her, then turns to the suitors--... .

Like the young boy at the keyhole in "Eye and Tooth," Ulysses is reduced to the status of observer, peering at women's bodies from an outside vantage point. But he is not helpless: "he circles visibly behind the window," waiting, as Helen Vendler tells us, for the moment when he will murder the suitors, and perhaps Penelope as well. The poet-traveler has gone "ten years fro and ten years to," and to what purpose? There is nothing left at home for him--no solace, no self-knowledge. He is left in limbo, circling, alone.
From the evidence of these poems, we may conclude that Lowell, by the end of his life, had found it either impossible or unnecessary to continue the process of scrutinizing his past in the hope of learning something of value about the present. Although many of the poems in *Day by Day* deal with the past, the tone is more likely to be one of casual reminiscence than intense concentration, and Lowell admits in "Jean Stafford, a Letter" (29), that his "memory economizes so prodigally / I know I have suffered theft." The poems, "To Mother" (78), and "Robert T. S. Lowell" (80), although they touch upon the past, are firmly grounded in the present and in the accommodation Lowell seems finally to have made with his dead parents. Unlike the stereotype of the man who lives more and more in his memory as he gets older, Lowell seems to live more and more in the present, in the freshness of "The Day" (53):

'It's amazing
the day is still here .
like lightning on an open field,
terra firma and transient
swimming in variation,
fresh as when man first broke
like the crocus all over the earth.'

But the past still impinges: "From a train, we saw cows /
. . . / They were child's daubs in a book / I read before I could read." The poet remembers his childhood and, indeed, some Eden of oneness with the world, of baby still
securely bound to mother, of lover united with lover:

They fly by like a train window:
flash-in-the-pan moments
of the Great Day,
the dies illa,
when we lived momently
together forever
in love with our nature--

Lowell ends the poem with these superb, untranslatable lines:

as if in the end,
in the marriage with nothingness,
we could ever escape
being absolutely safe.

From time to time throughout his career, as in "The Day," Lowell identifies his own childhood, as it exists in his memory, with the beginning of humankind. Sometimes he stresses the sinister aspects of Eden, as in "Christmas Eve Under Hooker's Statue" (LWC 23): "Twenty years ago / I hung my stocking on the tree, and hell's / Serpent entwined the apple in the toe / To sting the child with knowledge." Sometimes he revels in the memory of a more pleasant Eden; in "The Public Garden" (FTUD 26), he puts into the speaker's mouth (with minor changes) lines he originally gave to Anne Kavanaugh in "The Mills of the Kavanaughhs":

Remember summer? Bubbles filled the foundation, and we splashed. We drowned in Eden, while Jehovah's grass-green lyre was rustling all about us in the leaves that gurgled by us, turning upside down . . .

(Lowell's ellipsis)

And sometimes he merges his own childhood into classical history. In the "Mother and Son" poem in "Between the
Porch and the Altar" (LWC 47), the poet as an adult confronts his mother, who makes him "lose ten years, / Or is it twenty?"

. . . the son retires
Into the sack and selfhood of the boy
Who clawed through fallen houses of his Troy,
Homely and human only when the flames
Crackle in recollection. . . .

Although the theory is now discredited, the idea of a relationship between the childhood of an individual and the early periods of human history was developed early in the history of psychoanalysis. In Larry David Nachman's discussion of Freudian theory and method in "Psychoanalysis and Social Theory," he gives a concise account of Karl Abraham's theory, later adopted by Freud; Abraham, Nachman says:

turned to the embryological discovery that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, that the developing embryo passes through the varying stages of evolution. He asserted that in the same way the psychological development of the individual recapitulated the stages of human history. The earliest period of human history corresponded to the early stages of childhood.

Lowell turns this theory into poetry in History; in this volume, the history of the world and the history of Robert Lowell are inseparable. In "Our Fathers" (26), after identifying the "tyrannosaur" with "the neanderthal, first anthropoid to laugh," Lowell has this to say about humankind and himself:
we lack staying power, though we will to live. Abel learned this falling among the jellied creepers and morning-glories of the saurian sunset. But was there some shining, grasping hand to guide me when I breathed through gills, and walked on fins through Eden . . . ?

Lowell makes no distinction between his individual past and that of humankind, between what he remembers of his childhood and what we know of the "saurian sunset," the dawn of history. In "In Genesis" (26; compare "Out of the Picture," N 256), the poem which immediately precedes "Our Fathers" in History, Lowell shows how closely he must have been reading Freud's speculations about what he "would come to call the 'archaic heritage,' the notion that Freud stubbornly maintained . . . that there existed biologically inherited memories."51 Unlike Jung's notion of the collective unconscious, Freud's "archaic heritage" was grounded in biology rather than myth and religion. From the time of Totem and Taboo through Moses andMonotheism Freud developed his theory:

what may be operative in an individual's psychical life may include not only what he has experienced himself but also things that were innately present in him at his birth, elements with a phylogenetic origin. . . . The archaic heritage of human beings comprises not only dispositions but also subject-matter--memory traces of the experience of earlier generations.52

To account for the origin of guilt, Freud posited a primal crime which each person throughout history "remembers"; in Nachman's concise account, he refers to the "now familiar
account of the primal horde and the primal slaying":

[originally, the human being had no organized social life, and lived in family hordes dominated by the fierce rule of the father, who owned all the goods and monopolized all the women. His sons one day banded together and slew him.]

Then they ate him—the origin, according to Freud, of the "totem meal" which is a "repetition and commemoration" of the "grisly meal of the patricides who fed on their father's corpse." With Freud's account, compare Lowell's:

... Orpheus in Genesis hacked words from brute sound, and taught men English, plucked all the flowers, deflowered all the girls with the overemphasis of a father. He used too many words, his sons killed him, dancing with grateful gaiety around the cookout. ("In Genesis," H 26)

Followers of Harold Bloom and The Anxiety of Influence could have a lot of fun with this poem, as Lowell must certainly have had in naming as our common ancestor Orpheus, who "hacked words from brute sound," but then "used too many words" and was killed for it.

Lowell was fascinated with history and with his place in it—with his story. In The Psychoanalytic Dialogue, Stanley Leavy devotes considerable attention to the relationship between psychoanalysis and history, the ways in which psychoanalysis "makes history":

it is impossible to exaggerate the importance of the ideas of history and prehistory for psychoanalysis. That which has been lived in the person's past—the past that can be made present at will—and of unconscious memory—
the past that can be inferred and constructed out of preconscious elements. Such an identity—the lived past with its historical-psychoanalytic recall—is a presupposition of our work.

There is, of course, a great difference "between personal history and the history of societies": "In psychoanalysis all is 'subjective' . . . what counts is the uniquely private slant on the events being narrated, and what counts least is whether or not anyone else's view of them would concur." From the beginning of his life to the end, Robert Lowell was conscientiously writing his own version of his own history. From his experience, he knew that the past "is alive in every act of intending and meaning." And, of course, in every act of writing: even more than other poets, he was a self-conscious writer—supremely conscious of his self, living in history, remembering history, writing and making history. Leavy's description of psychoanalysis helps us to understand what Lowell was doing in his poetry and in his life:

The past begins now and is always becoming. Even the moment of capture of the experience when it becomes "lived" is the moment of its recall from memory. . . . the analytic process is one in which new history is being made, a very different form of history in some respects, because as a deliberately enhanced self-consciousness it includes its own critical versions. The history of the analysis is an important part of the patient's current history, and not as merely a parallel to the rest of his experience but as it reflects and modifies it.
Lowell knew that the past cannot be pinned down, that "personal history always changes, an experience of the past acquires new contextual experience with the advance of personal history. A present experience reveals something about the past that was hitherto unknown." "The past changes more than the present," Lowell says in "To Frank Parker" (DBD 91); and his teaching and writing show that he meant to include the literary past as well as his own personal history. Like T. S. Eliot in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," he was convinced that the literature of the present enters into and alters the order of literature as a whole.

In a classic aphorism written to Wilhelm Fliess, Leavy tells us, Freud said that happiness "is the deferred fulfillment of a prehistoric wish." The "heavy word in the aphorism," says Leavy, is "prehistoric":

The wish that comes to fulfillment with happiness for its consequence (Freud leaves out here what he already knew quite well, that unhappiness has the same origin) originates in a period of life that is analogous to the prehistoric period in the life of humanity, the period from which we have only nonliterary remains, when the event has not yet been immortalized in the word. History is verbal.

Lowell not only tried to remember experiences from his childhood that would help him to understand himself, but, as Hamilton records, he sought to recapture imaginatively a time prior to infancy: "When I was three or four years
old I first began to think about the time before I was born." In "Unwanted" (DBD 121), the poet lying "alone here tonight on Antabuse" muses over his life:

causes for my misadventure, considered
for forty years too obvious to name,
come jumbling out
to give my simple autobiography a plot.

"When I was three months," he tells us, "I rocked back and forth howling / for weeks, for weeks each hour"—but is this behavior a cause or a symptom? His mother told him that while she was pregnant she walked the "desperate" Staten Island beaches, saying "I wish I were dead, I wish I were dead," and Lowell is not sure what to make of this information.

Unforgiveable for a mother to tell her child—but you wanted me to share your good fortune, perhaps, by recapturing the disgust of those walks; your credulity assumed we survived, while weaklings fell with the dead and dying.

Here the adult Lowell is reflecting on a piece of information he received earlier in his life about something that happened before he was born. And the same is true of the most startling revelation he makes in this poem. Speaking of "Dr. Merrill Moore, the family psychiatrist," Lowell tells us: "When I was in college, he said, 'You know / you were an unwanted child?!'" What effect does such knowledge have upon the adult poet?

Was he striking my parents to help me?
I shook him off the scent by pretending
anyone is unwanted in a medical sense—
lust our only father . . . and yet
in that world where an only child
was a scandal--
unwanted before I am? (Lowell's ellipsis)

Lowell has no answers to the questions he puts in this
poem; he has returned in imagination to a time before he
was born, and has learned nothing which leads to certainty.
He ends with more questions. "Is the one unpardonable sin /
our fear of not being wanted?" "Is getting well ever an
art, / or art a way to get well?"

Lowell spent the last summer of his life in Castine,
Maine, where he had spent many summers earlier in his life.
He was writing a series of essays on New England writers,
and in one of them he had this to say about Santayana,
whom he admired:

He had spent a lifetime trying to drive back the
New England he had been born to, its fashions,
its morals, its reigning minds. They were too
hateful, and in a way too cherished, for him
to quite deny their existence. He said "I have
enjoyed writing about my life more than living
it." 58

So, too, of course, Robert Lowell. At the end of the summer
he made a quick trip to Ireland, and then flew back to New
York. He died in a taxicab, on his way home.
NOTES


11 Rieff, p. 334.


19 Leavy, p. 102.


21 Ehrenpreis, pp. 181-182.

22 Hamilton, p. 222.


24 Rieff, p. 40.
25 Leavy, p. 113.

26 Rieff, p. 41.


32 Hamilton, pp. 253-255.


34 Yenser, p. 222.


36 Yenser, p. 223.

37 Yenser, p. 170.

38 Hamilton, p. 38.

39 Onorato, p. 18.

40 Hugh B. Staples, Robert Lowell: The First Twenty Years (London: Faber, 1962), p. 34.


Staples, p. 34.

Staples, p. 94.


Hamilton, p. 436.

Richard Fein also considers *Day by Day* a return, pp. 174-175.

Hamilton, p. 470.

Vendler, p. 137.


Nachman, p. 73.


Nachman, p. 69.

Nachman, p. 72.

The discussion in this paragraph draws on and quotes from Leavy, pp. 86-117.
56 Leavy, pp. 86-87.

57 Hamilton, p. 8.
CHAPTER THREE

A POETRY OF REPETITION

Lowell returned "home" again and again, in his poetry and in his life, and as we have seen, his poems reflect his own ambivalence about these repeated homecomings. And Lowell's ambivalence, in its turn, echoes that of Freud, who never reconciled the two mutually exclusive views he maintained with respect to the function of repetition in psychoanalysis and in life. Freud saw repetition both as a terrible compulsion which drives many people to reenact painful experiences over and over again, and also as a therapeutic "working-through" by means of which we can make sense of and come to terms with our experience. Freud began his series of conflicting statements in "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through," where he discussed for the first time what he described as a "compulsion to repeat" which afflicted each one of his psychoanalytic patients: confronted with a demand by the doctor that he dredge up memories from the past, the patient "does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it."¹ For instance, Freud said, "the patient does not say that he used to be defiant and critical towards his
parents' authority; instead, he behaves in that way to the doctor." The patient is said to be "acting out" an earlier conflict whose existence he has repressed.

By the time of the "Essay on the Uncanny," Freud no longer confined the concept of the repetition compulsion to the psychoanalytic situation, but posited its universality: "it is possible to recognize the dominance in the unconscious mind of a 'compulsion to repeat' proceeding from the instinctual impulses and probably inherent in the very nature of the instincts."² Or, as J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis explain,

the compulsion to repeat is an ungovernable process originating in the unconscious. As a result of its action, the subject deliberately places himself in distressing situations, thereby repeating an old experience, but he does not recall this prototype; on the contrary, he has the strong impression that the situation is fully determined by the circumstances of the moment.³

This aspect of repetition—the Freudian notion of an individual trapped in endless cycles of seemingly meaningless repetitive acts—has often been discussed in relation to literature. John Irwin, for example, in Doubling and Incest, Repetition and Revenge, looks at the character of Faulkner's Quentin Compson as one whose tragedy might have been averted had he been able to break out of the stifling cycle of the repetition compulsion into meaningful action.⁴

Lowell's poetry appears at first glance to be well suited to an approach like that of Irwin. One may see Lowell,
like Quentin Compson, as the son of an ineffectual father in whose "dinosaur / death-steps" he is compelled to walk ("Middle Age," _FTUD_ 7). And one may examine patterns of repetition in Lowell's work as a whole, in individual volumes, and within individual poems. Stephen Yenser sees a circular structure in _Lord Weary's Castle, Life Studies_, and _For the Union Dead_, calling the first of those volumes a "latent autobiography, in which the poet's experience is figured as a circle whose end is in its beginning." Both Yenser and Alan Williamson point to the repetitive structure of the "Between the Porch and the Altar" sequence in _Lord Weary's Castle_ (47). In "Mother and Son," the first poem of the sequence, an adult man confronts his mother, an event which makes him "lose ten years, / Or is it twenty?" As he reverts to a childlike state, he associates time with the figure of a serpent which, as Williamson reminds us, "is cyclical and endlessly repetitive." The poet struggles with his "awareness that the guilt and suffering of his childhood persist, and tend to repeat themselves in some form." (Compare Freud: "a thing which has not been understood inevitably reappears; like an unlaid ghost, it cannot rest until the mystery has been solved and the spell broken.")

In the second poem, the speaker reveals himself as an adulterer, who "taste[s] my wife / And children while I hold your hands." He and his lover merely repeat an old pattern:
they are "Adam and Eve," and when they "try to kiss, / Our eyes are slits and cringing, and we hiss; / Scales glitter on our bodies as we fall." The "Eve" of the poem presents her point of view in the third segment, "Katherine's Dream." After her father reproaches her as a "kept woman," she walks "through snow into St. Patrick's yard," where the "good people go / Inside by twos to the confessor." She is alone.

Where are you? You were with me and are gone.
All the forgiven couples hurry on
To dinner and their nights, and none will stop.
I run about in circles till I drop. . . .

These circles prefigure the ending of the final poem, "At the Altar," which ends in a Blakean dénouement that Williamson calls the "repetitive circles" of the "bier and baby-carriage where I burn."\(^8\)

Lowell perceived "repetitive circles" in history as early as the time of his valedictory address at St. Mark's, when he declaimed that "the world will revert to its unwearied cycles of retrogression, advance and repetition."\(^9\) Randall Jarrell, in "From the Kingdom of Necessity," says that Lowell himself "seems to be condemned both to read history and to repeat it." He constantly plays the present off against the past in his poetry, and "it is the fundamental likeness of the past and present, and not their disparity, which is insisted upon."\(^10\) Yenser would agree; referring to "Lowell's most characteristic stance, a die-hard antimeiliorism," he cites such lines as "[n]othing
underneath the sun / Has bettered, Uncle, since the scaffolds flamed / On butchered Troy" ("The Death of the Sheriff," LWC 71).¹¹ For Lowell, butchered Troy still exists in other forms; the destruction and violence continue: ":again and then again . . . the year is born / To ice and death" (Lowell's ellipsis) ("New Year's Day," LWC 13).

In his fine essay on "The Quaker Graveyard at Nantucket," Robert Hass discusses "this hopelessly repeated unravelling into violence" that "is both the poem's theme and the source of its momentum. Hell is repetition, and the structure of anger is repetition."¹² For Lowell, because of the cycles of his manic-depressive illness, hell was indeed repetition. John Berryman, who knew a thing or two about mental illness himself, speculated that Lowell's famous "Skunk Hour" (LS 89) was about "the approach of a crisis of mental disorder for the 'I' of the poem," and pointed out that "[o]ne of the poem's desperate points is [the skunks'] cyclical approach, each night; as episodes of mental illness are feared to recur." The "Hour," he said, is "nightly, expanding again into a dreaded recurrence."¹³ And despite his admiration for the marauding skunks, Lowell admitted that "Berryman comes too close for comfort" in his analysis of the poem.¹⁴

The poet Robert Lowell, who concurred in his friends' perception of "Skunk Hour" as a poem based on a "dreaded
recurrance," incorporated a similar kind of recurrence in the process of writing his poetry. Another friend, Stanley Kunitz, once said that Lowell was "a revisionist by nature . . . forever tinkering with his old lives, rewriting his own poems, revamping his syntax and periodically re-ordering his existence." 

Lowell himself acknowledged his mania for that disguised form of repetition that we call revision: "sometimes there are as many as thirty versions of one poem, and I usually make more changes between magazine publication and book publication. And even when it's in a book, I want to change it again." 

Revision becomes obsession, and often the changes result in inferior poetry. The lovely "Water" (FTUD 3) is written in a relaxed stanzaic form which both visually and aurally reflects the poet's mood of leisurely reminiscence. As he looks back on an experience with a woman in "a Maine lobster town," the poet realizes that his memory deceives him:

Remember? We sat on a slab of rock.  
From this distance in time  
it seems the color  
of iris, rotting and turning purpler,  
but it was only  
the usual gray rock  
turning the usual green  
when drenched by the sea.  

He realizes further that the remembered experience itself was unsatisfying:

We wished our two souls  
might return like gulls
to the rock. In the end, the water was too cold for us.

But despite the unhappy outcome of the event itself, and despite the seemingly unpleasant knowledge of an erring memory, the poet's tone is one of tranquility and ease.

For Notebook (234), Lowell revised the poem, making the incident and its circumstances more specific. In this volume, it is one of "Four Poems for Elizabeth Bishop," entitled "Water 1948," and it begins with the town name, "Stonington." By this revision he not only destroys the floating, timeless quality of the original, but he crams the words of the poem into the form of a sonnet, with the effect of destroying the relaxed, leisurely pace. Then for History (196), he retains all the revisions of the Notebook version and compounds them by putting most of the poem in the present tense, thus rendering his dramatized meditation on the distorting elements of memory virtually unintelligible. For the reader, the effect of reading the three poems in chronological order is one of an increasingly desperate attempt to come to terms with the memory of an unpleasant experience—and the repetition accomplishes nothing except to render the experience itself more and more distasteful, and seriously to weaken the poetry.

Notebook and History contain many examples of what looks to the reader like obsessive repetition. The sheer number of sonnets is overwhelming. A poet who writes an
entire book of sonnets (Notebook 1967-68), revises the book thoroughly not once but twice (Notebook and History), extracts certain sonnets in order to publish them in a separate volume (For Lizzie and Harriet), then finally writes a book made up completely of totally new sonnets (The Dolphin)--such a poet is trapped, in Robert Fein's words, in "some terrible reiteration." And within the sonnets, Lowell's method of revision seems peculiar: he has a disconcerting habit of lifting words, images, whole lines and groups of lines, and placing them intact in a new and often totally different context in another sonnet. This habit begins very early: he lifts the image of the "sudden Bridegroom" out of a poem in his first volume of poetry ("Cistercians in Germany," LOU) and incorporates it in "At the Indian Killer's Grave" in his next volume (LWC 60). But the habit is most prevalent in the volumes of sonnets.

Consider the following progression of sonnets. "Roulette" (N1967-68 90; N 151) is a cynical commentary on history and politics: since the time of Plato's Republic, which "never was, / except in the sky-ether of Plato's thought," people have made plans for Utopias which fail "before the blueprint dries." And "still" it continues. "[N]ew establishments / will serve the people, the people people serve" (or, in other words, the system serves only those already in power). In an unrelated poem called
"Dalliance" (N1967-68 91), the speaker is a lover caught between the attraction of the beloved and the fear of being caught at his dalliance: "This flower I take away and wear with fear; / who ever noticed?" He has deep doubts about this affair, as his literary allusions prove. "Othello never caught / Cassio reeking Desdemona's musk," he says; and refers to the "Macbeth murk of Manhattan." He sounds like the Shakespeare of the sonnets, expressing his disgust at the reluctant sexuality provoked in him by the Dark Lady. "Is it a hobby like heroin or birds?" the lover asks. Then, borrowing from Moby-Dick, the speaker ends with the image of himself "[s]et at the helm, facing a pot of coals, / the sleet and wind spinning me ninety degrees," and exhorts himself:

I must not give me up then to the fire, lest it invert my fire; it blinded me; so did it me; there's wisdom that is woe but there is a woe that is madness.

Though the poetry here is mediocre, the allusion to Melville is apt. In the scene from which Lowell takes these lines, Ishmael is at the tiller of the Pequod. Staring into the strangely hypnotic flames of the try-works, he has become confused and turned himself around, "fronting the ship's stern" so that he almost turns the ship into the wind and causes it to capsize. "Give not thyself up, then, to fire, lest it invert thee, deaden thee; as for the time it did me," he warns the reader. "There is a wisdom that is woe; but
there is a woe that is madness"\textsuperscript{18}--an appropriate warning, in Lowell's formulation, to a man lured by the flame of illicit love. But in the \textit{Notebook} version of "Dalliance" (152), the lover vanishes after seven lines, to be replaced by "Herman Melville," who has "dragged back to Manhattan"--but since that novelist eschews mention of sexual passion in his novels, the reader has trouble understanding what Herman Melville has to do with the lover's unwilling attraction to a woman; the repetition of the \textit{Moby-Dick} allusion seems to make no sense when it is attached to the person of Melville rather than to the lover.

Finally, in \textit{History}, Lowell combines the first two-thirds of "Roulette" with the \textit{Moby-Dick} reference at the end of "Dalliance," retaining the figure of Melville and deleting the entire poet-lover sequence in "Dalliance." The result is "The Republic" (41), a meditation on the futility of Utopian planning from Plato through the American Transcendentalists. The \textit{Moby-Dick} allusion here acts as a subtle reminder of Melville's attacks on dreamy transcendentalists in "The Mast-Head" chapter and elsewhere in the novel. And the reader who has followed the progression of poems which ends in "The Republic" has received an object lesson in the nature of one kind of repetition: like visions of utopia, it shows up again and again but seems to accomplish nothing.

Not all repetition, however, is self-defeating and
futile. Although Freud described the terrible "compulsion to repeat" and its firm hold on the psyche, he recognized a positive aspect of repetition as well. In "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," he tells the story of a small boy who invented a game which he played repeatedly. Holding a reel tied to a piece of string, he would throw the reel over the side of his cot, uttering a sound which Freud interpreted as the German "fort," or "gone." "He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful 'da' ['there']. This, then was the complete game—disappearance and return." The interpretation of the game was, for Freud, "obvious": since the child is in distress whenever his mother leaves him, he compensates for the loss by "himself staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach." Such games come naturally to children: through their play they "make themselves masters of the situation," passing over "from the passivity of the experience to the activity of the game." Otto Fenichel describes a similar process in the life of an adult, when he refers to

irritations that everyone experiences after little traumata, like a sudden fright or some smaller accident. The person feels irritated for a certain time, cannot concentrate because inwardly he is still concerned about the event and has no energy free for attention in other directions. He repeats the event in his thoughts and feelings a few times—and after a short while his mental stability is re-established.
We are all familiar with this process; our urgent need to talk about a traumatic experience and our need to replay the scene in our thoughts are, in Fenichel's words, "attempts at a belated mastery" of the event.

Freud's discussion of the therapeutic aspect of repetition in psychoanalysis is confusing, but Edward Bibrungr has attempted to clarify its use by dividing the term, "repetition compulsion," into two parts: (1) "the repetitive or reproductive tendency," and (2) the restitutive one." Freud "originally used the term repetition compulsion now in the one sense, sometimes in the other." What Bibrungr calls the "repetitive" tendency is the negative aspect of the compulsion to repeat; it is "a property of the instinctual drives of the id." The "restitutive" tendency, on the other hand, "is a function of the ego," and, as such, results in what he calls "working-off mechanisms," those therapeutic repetitions by which we are enabled to master a previously threatening situation.21 Although the working-off mechanisms are related to the process of "working through" which Freud discusses in "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through," the two are not identical. Laplanche and Pontalis admit that this essay "leaves us in considerable doubt as to what Freud means exactly by working-through," since "he makes scarcely an attempt to correlate the concept of working-through with those of remembering and repeating." All the same,
it would seem that in his opinion working-through is a third term in which the other two are combined. And it is true that working-through is undoubtedly a repetition, albeit one modified by interpretation and—for this reason—liable to facilitate the subject’s freeing himself from repetition mechanisms.\textsuperscript{22}

Lowell, like many poets, uses his poetry as a means of working through, and his poetic style itself mirrors that psychoanalytic process. Consider the similarity between the following two quotations, one a description by a literary critic of Lowell's style in the early \textit{Land of Unlikeness}, the other a description by a psychiatrist of the process of working through:

\begin{quote}
Repetition is the basis of his style: repeated symbols . . . parallelism, formal recurrence, lack of transitions, and repeated assonantal and alliterative sound devices all suggest astonished concentration on the same matter, taken up from different aspects.\textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
a chronic process of working through . . . shows the patient again and again the same conflicts and his usual way of reacting to them but from new angles and in new connections.\textsuperscript{24} (emphasis added in both quotations)
\end{quote}

A working-through, then, is a series of repetitions with a difference. The verb "repeat" loses its sense of "to do again" and gradually becomes "to say" or "to tell." Each time the poet "repeats" the original traumatic occurrence, it loses some of its power over him, so that each repetition is slightly different from those that came before. Stanley Leavy discusses the way this repetition works in psycho-analysis:
the past of which I claim to be fully conscious, which therefore has undergone only the interpretation of articulation itself, may shift in its articulation in successive narrations. I use different words to tell it, and in so doing I tell a different tale. . . . It is the same event, having happened thus and so and may be subject to external confirmation as having taken place, but it is in each of the two narratives a different experience of the narrator and therefore a different past.25

J. Hillis Miller, eschewing psychoanalytic language, applies a similar concept of repetition-as-difference to literature in *Fiction and Repetition*, a study of several nineteenth- and twentieth-century English novels. He bases his approach on Gilles Deleuze's two alternative theories of repetition in Western culture: "Platonic" repetition "is grounded in a solid archetypal model which is untouched by the effect of repetition," while

[t]he other, Nietzschean mode of repetition posits a world based on difference. Each thing, this other theory would assume, is unique, intrinsically different from every other thing. . . . It seems that X repeats Y, but in fact it does not, or at least not in the firmly anchored way of the first sort of repetition.26

Miller cautions his readers that these two types of repetition, which appear to be mutually exclusive, in fact coexist in all literature. So, too, as we separate the negative and positive aspects of the repetition compulsion and apply them one at a time to literature, must we remember that, in fact, the distinction is not so simple: the passage from one to the other may be so gradual as to be
undetectable.

When Robert Lowell says, in "For John Berryman I" (H 203), "I feel I know what you have worked through, you / Know what I have worked through," he acknowledges his kinship with that other disturbed poet and sometime friend who shared Lowell's early hopes that "despondency and madness" might be cured by working through painful memories. In a series of poems, Lowell works through and comes to terms with a disturbing incident of his late adolescence: the time when the young Lowell, then a student at Harvard, struck his father and knocked him down in an argument over a girl, Anne Dick, whom he wanted to marry. Despite a later apology, Lowell apparently could not forget the blow, coupling it in his mind with the "invisible / coronary" (N1967-68 37; N 68; H 114) which ultimately killed his father. With typical Lowellian ambivalence, he felt both pride and guilt after this archetypal act of rebellion.

Lowell's first treatment of this incident, "Rebellion," must be read in the context in which it appears, in Lord Weary's Castle (35). Throughout this volume, Lowell sounds like an Old Testament prophet, castigating his people for their transgressions and predicting imminent apocalypse. In a striking conflation of history, he abolishes the distinction between past and present, equating the sins of Adam and Cain with those of his New England forebears and with
the sins of the present as well; he sees World War II as a "furnace of affliction" in which people fall down "hugger-mugger in the jellied fire" ("War [After Rimbaud]" 42; "The Dead in Europe" 74). Since he tacitly adopts Max Weber's theory of the malignant bond between Calvinism and capitalism, he equates what he sees as commercial and mercantile sins with religious and historical offenses like the massacre of King Philip and his Indians by the Puritans. The young Lowell traced his aristocratic New England lineage back to those hoary sinners whom he scolds in Lord Weary's Castle. In leaving Harvard for Kenyon, in joining the Roman Catholic Church, and in becoming a conscientious objector in World War II, he had announced his rejection of the traditions of New England and his family; in Lord Weary's Castle, he acts out this youthful rebellion.

The poem "Rebellion" might well puzzle a reader accustomed only to the Lowell of Life Studies and later volumes. Its central act of rebellion, seemingly so well suited to an open, confessional treatment, is here presented in a vague dreamlike manner: Hugh Staples, who was writing before biographical material and other versions of the poem clarified our knowledge of the incident, calls the poem an "enigmatic nightmare-vision of patricide" which is "an expression of psychological hostility towards the father-figure as a symbol of authority."28 Staples's description
captures the tone of the poem: it is not the personal confession of an individual act of rebellion but rather a stylized formal presentation of archetypal revolt. The beginning lines, the most explicit of the poem, must be approached by way of the poems which immediately precede it in Lord Weary's Castle, two sonnets and a ten-line poem, all sculpted with Lowellian severity. In "Salem," borrowing the concept of declension from those late Puritan divines who bemoaned the decline in morals and accomplishments since the time of the Pilgrims, Lowell contrasts the present, when "Charon's raft / Dumps its damned goods into the harbor-bed," with the past, when the men "quartered the Leviathan's fat flanks / And fought the British lion to his knees" (32). Even the past is corrupt in "Concord," where the tourists in the "[t]en thousand Fords . . . idle here in search / Of a tradition" see only "[t]he ruined bridge and Walden's fished-out perch"; the past of "King Philip and his scream" has yielded to the present of "Mammon's unbridled industry" (33). Lowell's denunciatory energies culminate in "Children of Light." The Pilgrims, who "planted here the Serpent's seeds of light," preceded the later Puritans, who "fenced their gardens with the Redman's bones." Now, in this wartime year, "probing searchlights probe to shock / The riotous glass houses built on rock," and "light is where the landless blood of Cain / Is burning, burning the unburied grain" (34). 29
Confronted with all this horror, what can a person do, how must he act? Or, as Lowell asks through the mouth of Jonathan Edwards, "How will the hands be strong? How will the heart endure?" ("Mr. Edwards and the Spider," LWC 58). He can write poetry, of course, and define the terms of the problem. Or he can rebel, and in one symbolic act take his stand against the evils of the time. "There was rebellion, father," he begins, and the words establish a tone of detached and impersonal reverie. Lowell had begun "Children of Light" with the words, "Our fathers," and the "father" of "Rebellion" seems to be another such generic term: it carries with it resonances of religion and myth as well as psychology. The word "rebellion," coming as it does after the preceding poems of religious and political corruption, seems also to be a general term which might encompass any number of specialized acts of revolt, personal or political. The clause in which it appears reinforces the unspecific nature of the word: not "I rebelled," but "There was rebellion." The reader expects, not the act of an individual son rebelling against an individual father, but a symbolic act of rebellion.30

The next words and lines, however, appear to counteract this assumption:

There was rebellion, father, when the mock French windows slammed and you hove backward, rammed Into your heirlooms, screens, a glass-cased clock, The highboy quaking to its toes. You damned
My arm that cast your house upon your head
And broke the chimney flintlock on your skull.

Despite the use of iambic pentameter and of rhyme (the last
two quoted lines are the beginning of an abba sequence), the
enjambed lines and the irregular placement of caesurae
destroy the formal, ritualistic tone which the reader might
have expected to follow from the first four words. And
surely no poet would place an act of purely symbolic
rebellion in a room with "mock / French windows," a "glass-
cased clock," and an anthropomorphized highboy; the details
seem to narrow the focus of the poem to a specific action in
a specific place at a specific time. Of course we need not
choose one version over another, need not opt for auto-
biography at the expense of symbolism or vice versa. But to
structure the discussion in these terms is to emphasize the
pressures and oppositions within the poem: the young poet,
who later will write painfully "open" poetry, is here
 guarded and indirect. In this first working-through of a
painful memory, he is trying to hold the experience at arm's
length, to generalize it and to describe it without emotion.

But the feeling he is attempting to deny, in the manner
of any repressed emotion, simply becomes stronger and
pushes out against the walls of the poem, threatening to
break out altogether in these first lines. The verbs are
violent: "slammed" and "hove" and "rammed" and "damned";
they spur the reader forward, as do the caesurae placed so near the ends of lines. The momentum, however, crashes to a halt at each "k" sound (I count nine in six lines), and the result is an impression of frustration and tension despite the seemingly cathartic content of the words. In fact, the act of the reader in pronouncing the "k" sounds duplicates the act of the poet in trying unsuccessfully to hide his emotion: the "stops" or "plosives," says John Frederick Nims, "cut off the air for a moment, let pressure build up behind the barrier of lips or tongue, then release it with a tiny explosion."\(^{31}\)

The explosive quality of these first lines strikes the reader as an appropriate response to the vehement denunciations of the preceding poems: this act of rebellion will suffice to dissociate the speaker from the evils of past and present (though, as we shall see, he is not unaware of the irony attendant upon the use of violence as a corrective to violence). Of course, the speaker is striking out not only at his father, but at all the father represents; as Staples says, "the identification of the father with the heirlooms makes it clear that the murder is a rejection of tradition as well."\(^{32}\)

Staples's assumption that the act described here is a murder points up the fact that, despite the use of detail which seems to pin down the action to a specific time and place, the reader has trouble figuring out exactly what has
happened in these six lines. Indeed, through the first four lines, we could easily assume that it is the father who is rebelling against an as-yet-unknown something—perhaps the materialism which resulted in heirlooms and highboys. In the fifth line we learn that the speaker's "arm" has "cast your house upon your head" (with echoes, as Stephen Yenser reminds us, of the "riotous glass houses" of "Children of Light") and "broke the chimney flintlock on your skull."

There is no "I struck my father" directness here, but rather a deliberate vagueness. Did the son hit the father with the flintlock (which no doubt hangs over the mantle as a reminder of Indian-killing ancestors)? Did the son push the father into the furniture with such violence that the flintlock fell on his head? To pose the questions is to point out the absurdity of trying to answer them: the poet is not confessing a specific act but rather presenting a generalized scene of rebellion.

The next lines are tied to the preceding section by Lowell's rhyme scheme, but in other respects they signal a change: the shorter lines look different on the page, the meter becomes more rhythmic and hypnotic, more formal.

Last night the moon was full:
I dreamed the dead
Caught at my knees and fell:
And it was well
With me, my father. . . .

These lines would make a wonderful painting: the full moon,
the pleading, contorted faces of the dying (done in reds and yellows), and the speaker (all pale blues and greys) walking serenely untouched through the turmoil and anguish. The reader adopts the speaker's perspective. All feeling of violence has been drained from the poem now: no slamming and damming, no harsh consonants, but rather a calm, fluid recital culminating in the chilling "it was well / With me, my father."

Lowell accomplishes a lot in these extraordinary lines. He achieves a detached, heartless impassivity or numbness which might be considered the negative counterpart to the equally calm and detached but beneficent Lady of Walsingham in "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket" (LWC 14). The lines "it was well / With me, my father" create an effect opposite to that of a similar clause in T. S. Eliot's "Little Gidding," another poem about violence and detachment published only a few years before "Rebellion": "And all shall be well and / All manner of things shall be well." Both poets evoke detachment and stillness but to opposite ends. (Eliot's lines are adapted from Dame Juliana of Norwich, a fourteenth-century mystic who would have appreciated "Our Lady of Walsingham.") The "me" of these lines is no person, but a representation of man's insensitivity to the suffering of others; his use of "my father" identifies him with the hypocritical churchmen of past and present who preach religion but cause war and destruction.
Again linking church and capitalism, Lowell spells out the punishment visited on these sinners, using a meter which rushes the reader along: apocalypse comes quickly. "Then / Behemoth and Leviathan / Devoured our mighty merchants. None could arm / Or put to sea." After the universal punishment has been administered, Lowell contracts the focus of the poem to his single representative speaker.

. . . O father, on my farm
I added field to field
And I have sealed
An everlasting pact
With Dives to contract
The world that spreads in pain.

Identified with the "mighty merchants" of the preceding lines by his greed in adding "field to field," the speaker knows that he too deserves punishment: the Westminster Confession, that "comprehensive . . . outline of the Calvinist faith," warns that "Thou shalt not add house to house and field to field." This sinner has made a pact not with the devil but with Dives, the archetypal rich man often identified with that rich man at whose gates Lazarus, in the Bible story, sat and begged; the story's moral is that Lazarus will end up in heaven and the rich man in hell, and the chasm between them will be unbridgeable.

The nature of the "everlasting pact" is ambiguous: if the world is spreading "in pain," it seems that an agreement to "contract" it would result in good, but the sense of the lines requires a different interpretation. Randall Jarrell
is helpful on this point when he describes Lord Weary's Castle in these terms (although I have quoted from this essay in the introductory chapter, I quote again for the sheer pleasure of the prose):

The poems understand the world as a conflict of opposites. In this struggle one opposite is that cake of custom in which all of us lie embedded like lungfish--the stasis or inertia of the stubborn self, the obstinate persistence in evil that is damnation. Into this realm of necessity the poems push everything that is closed, turned inward, incestuous, that blinds or binds: the Old Law, imperialism, militarism, capitalism, Calvinism, Authority, the Father, the "proper Bostonians," the rich who will "do everything for the poor except get off their backs." But struggling within this like leaven, falling to it like light, is everything that is free or open, that grows or is willing to change: . . . this is the realm of freedom.

Jarrell uses "Rebellion" to demonstrate "how explicitly . . . it seems to formulate the world in the terms that I have used"; contrasting the lines we have discussed with the last two lines of the poem, he says:

In "Rebellion" the son seals "an everlasting pact / With Dives to contract / The world that spreads in pain"; but at last he rebels against his father and his father's New England commercial theocracy, and "the world spread / When the clubbed flintlock broke my father's brain."36

Jarrell, in other words, sees the act of rebellion, the son's violence against the father, as a liberating act which gives access to the "realm of freedom"; the rebellion acts as an antidote to the hypocrisy, corruption and violence of past and present.
Such an interpretation, while clearly true, contains only part of the truth. The young man who writes this poem is trying to come to terms with an actual incident in his life, and it is not surprising to find the poem reflecting the ambivalence of his own feelings. The pride and sense of release he feels are inextricably bound up with a sense of guilt. Richard Fein discusses the irony of the conscientious objector's use of violence against his own father, and throughout the poem Lowell takes pains to identify the speaker with the forces of evil he denounces in Lord Weary's Castle. In his first volume of poetry, Land of Unlikeliness, he had followed "Children of Light" (almost identical to the Lord Weary's Castle version) with the poem "Leviathan"; its action begins "When the ruined farmer knocked out Abel's brains." Steven Gould Axelrod tells us that "the manuscript versions of 'Rebellion' are addressed by a Cain-figure to the 'Brother' he has murdered." In the published poem, having identified the speaker as a farmer ("on my farm / I added field to field"), Lowell further associates him with Cain and his murderous act by the "pain" / "brain" rhyme at the end, which imitates the "Cain" / grain" rhyme at the end of "Children of Light."

In "Rebellion," then, Lowell transmutes his youthful act of violence against his father into archetypal rebellion, neither wholly condoning nor wholly condemning the act. For whatever reason, he does not return to the incident in
his poetry until Notebook 1967-68 (37), over twenty years later. By this time he has perfected his so-called "confessional" style, and, despite his remark that the volume "is not my diary, my confession" (159), nevertheless he describes the experience in a straightforward manner totally different from that of "Rebellion." Again we must approach the poem in its context. The "Charles River" sequence, in which the poem appears as number three of seven poems, is a microcosm of that conglomeration of sonnets called Notebook 1967-68. Although all these poems have fourteen lines, the meter varies considerably: Lowell says that "[m]y meter, fourteen line unrhymed blank verse sections... often corrupts to the freedom of prose" (160), and an assiduous reader will find more deviation from than adherence to strict blank verse. The infinite variations in meter reflect the encyclopedic range of subject matter: in the seven "Charles River" poems, Lowell refers among other things to the present, the past, his parents, his first love, M.I.T., Harvard, industrial pollution, the Anschluss, Nero, Christ, Claude Lorrain, miscellaneous Greeks, aqueducts and arches, a snow-yellow knife with eleven blades, and plowshares beaten down to swords. He conflates the particular and the general, the fresh and the hackneyed, the present and the past into an amalgam of poetry which ranges in quality from outstanding to awful.
In the first "Charles River" poem, Lowell sets his scene: a short-skirted girl and her long-haired escort are walking at night where "[t]he sycamores throw shadows on the Charles"; the reader familiar with photographs of the poet in his later years immediately reads him into the character of the long-haired escort. Since Lowell spent only a short time at Harvard as a student and a much longer time teaching there part-time later in his life, the reader assumes from his reference to that Cambridge river and from his use of the present tense that the sonnet is set in the present, in the poet's adulthood. In the poem, Lowell associates the river with his own blood which, "in workaday times," flows with "overfevered zeal." But this frenzied, solitary "pounding and pumping" gives way, "tonight," to a lovely, idyllic moment of immersion in a magic river: "our blood," he says,

... brings us here tonight, and ties our hands—
if we leaned forward, and should dip a finger
into this river's momentary black flow,
the infinite small stars would break like fish.

In the next poem, the poet and his lover have followed the "big town river" out into the country, to "snow-topped rural roads" which "might easily have been the world's top." Lowell describes the setting precisely: the snow, the cold, the ski guide with "his unerring legs ten inches thick in wool"; following him, the poet; after the poet, the woman—picted in terms which alert us to the poet's psychological state: "You trail me, / Woman, so small, if one could trust
the appearance, / I might be in trouble with the law."
Read in isolation, this description, with its conditional clause, seems insignificant: a man is looking at a woman who is so far away that she seems particularly small and young and vulnerable. But the mere fact of the poet's seeing her in these terms indicates some degree of hidden uncertainty about the relationship; for "might," we can read at least some element of "should."

The poem ends, then, with an element of implicit guilt, and more particularly with the two words, "the law." It is not surprising to find that the next poem begins with a reference to the poet's father, and relates an act of rebellion against that traditional figure of authority. Lowell approaches this second working-through of his act of rebellion not by way of a series of scathing denunciations of past and present corruption and violence, but rather through two lyrical expressions of sensuous (and, by extension, sexual) pleasure tinged with guilt. Lowell begins by setting up the situation:

My father's letter to your father, saying tersely and much too stiffly that he knew you'd been going to my college rooms alone--
I can still almost crackle that slight note in my hand.

Lowell packs a lot into these lines. He sets up his cast of characters, capturing the essence of the stuffy, repressive father, and identifying himself as the aggrieved lover. The "you" to whom the poem is addressed is associated, by the
poem's context, with the woman of the preceding poems, so that present and past begin to merge. By his use of the physical object, the letter which the poet can "still almost crackle" in his hand, Lowell adds to the impression that past and present are one: memory is a powerful, sensuous process here. And the "crackle" of the letter infuses the poem with such immediacy that the reader, even without the benefit of knowledge gleaned from later versions of the poem, assumes that this letter had its genesis in fact.

The next lines, by their use of detail, reinforce our sense that the poet is describing an actual occurrence.

I see your outraged father; you, his outraged daughter;
myself brooding in fire and a dark quiet
on the abandoned steps of the Harvard Fieldhouse,
calming my hot nerves and enflaming my mind's nomad quicksilver by reading Lycidas—
Then punctiliously handing the letter to my father.

The speaker, whose vivid memory sees the other actors and himself, arranges them for us like the characters in a play, and even injects an element of suspense. If we did not know the ending of this play, we would assume from these lines that the "outraged daughter" will be the active heroine, while the self-indulgent speaker merely sits and broods on his "mind's / nomad quicksilver" (whatever that means—Lowell is at his most annoying in phrases like this one. But at least it gives us insight into this character who thinks in such silly terms).
Despite the effective use of details like "the Harvard Fieldhouse" and "Lycidas," the poem is less concrete and specific than it appears. The reader has to work to figure out how the letter got into the speaker's hands (let's see ... the speaker's father sent the letter to the woman's father, who gave it to her, who gave it to the speaker?); and the speaker's action in "punctiliously handing the letter to my father," while easy to visualize, is hard to locate in space: where is this action taking place? The poet, holding this painful incident at arm's length and, as it were, watching himself reenact it, is beginning to blur the details. The next four words are straightforward enough.

I knocked him down. He half-reclined on the carpet; Mother called from the top of the carpeted stairs--our glass door locking behind me, no cover; you idling in your station wagon, no retreat.

This "confession," if such it is, seems peculiarly undramatic and anticlimactic; the energy of the poem is concentrated in the first nine lines, but rather than evoking a cathartic release of tension when the speaker knocks his father down, the poet evokes instead a feeling of increased tension and frustration. The father, "half-reclined on the carpet," is down but not out; the mother holds the high ground at the top of the stairs; the lover blocks his would-be ignominious exit. The speaker has broken through not into liberation but into a trap--"no cover," "no retreat."
The frustration continues in the next poem, the fourth of the sequence. Referring to the dates, respectively, of the incident in the preceding poem, the death of his father, and the death of his mother, the poet wonders

If the clock had stopped in 1936
for them, or again in '50 and '54--
they are not dead, and not until death parts us,
will I stop sucking my blood from their hurt.

These garbled lines, with the conditional clause never resolved, reflect the extent to which the poet's act of violence against his father has become associated in his mind with the deaths of both parents. His life and theirs, his pain and theirs will be entwined until his own death releases them all. The life his parents might have led haunts the poet, for "often the old grow still more beautiful"; and he attributes his father's death at least in part to his own act of violence. "I struck my father; later my apology / hardly scratched the surface of his invisible / coronary . . . never to be effaced" (Lowell's ellipsis).

The words, "I struck my father," more formal than the purely descriptive "I knocked him down" of the preceding poem, indicate an effort by the poet to imbue the act with significance, perhaps to confess it formally and thereby absolve himself. But no such relief is forthcoming, either in these lines or in the remaining three poems of the "Charles River" sequence. Through this second working-through of that painful memory, the poet has achieved no sense of belated
mastery (to use Fenichel's term), but rather deepened his feeling of conflict and guilt.

In the revisions he makes for Notebook only a year or so later, however, Lowell begins to make his peace with this experience. The first three poems of "Charles River" survive virtually untouched; the earlier account of the time "I knocked him down" is repeated word for word: no change here, merely a repetition. But between this third poem and the fourth, Lowell inserts a new poem, the origins of which we recognize immediately:

There was rebellion, Father, when the door slammed . . .
front doors were glass then . . . and you hove backward rammed
into the heirlooms, screens, the sun-disk clock,
the highboy quaking to its toes . . . father,
I do not know how to unsay I knocked you down.
(Lowell's ellipsis)

Although these first lines echo much of the language of the earlier "Rebellion," nevertheless their effect is very different. The reader of "Rebellion" read it in a context of religious and political apocalypse, and apprehended the act of rebellion as an impersonal revolt against the violence and corruption of present and past. But in the Notebook version the reader is prepared by the preceding poems for a personal expression, a comment on the incident of the letter that the poet has just described. He is clearly addressing his own "Father" here--no religious overtones as in "Rebellion"--and the tone is casual. The ellipses produce
an impression of spontaneity: "front doors were glass then" sounds like an afterthought, an explanation one might insert if one were speaking.

Addressing his father in a conversational tone, Lowell makes a crucial statement: "I do not know how to unsay I knocked you down." Not "I do not know how to take back the fact that I knocked you down," but "I do not know how to unsay"—he equates the speech with the action. By referring in this way to the speech (read: writing) rather than to the physical act which prompted the speech, Lowell is indicating his own need to work through this experience, to repeat it until he masters it; the saying will suffice to counteract the doing. We know from the context that the poet here is rebelling not against the violence and corruption of Lord Weary's Castle, but rather against the stifling repression he feels in the presence of his family. The next lines emphasize this closed-in feeling.

I've breathed the seclusion of your glass-tight den, card laid by a card until the pack was used, old Helios turning the arid plants to blondes, woman's life sentence on each step misplaced.

The seclusion, the goldfish bowl quality, the endless cycles of solitaire, the faded plants, the mother lying in wait to pounce on a misstep—Lowell here details the bottled-up existence he hoped to break out of through his rebellion.

Did he succeed? The next lines are problematic.
I have blown moondust in the mouth of the rich; you then, further from death than I am, knew the student ageless in a green cloud of hash, her pad, three boxbeds half a foot off floor--far as her young breasts half a foot away.

In an "Afterthought" to Notebook, Lowell said that he was "devoted to unreality," and then defined the term:
"Unreality can degenerate into meaningless clinical hallucinations or rhetorical machinery, but the true unreal is about something, and eats from the abundance of reality" (262) (See Chapter One, p. 48). Although it is tempting to condemn the lines as "meaningless clinical hallucinations," perhaps, on the other hand, they are "about something." Perhaps to blow moondust in the mouth of the rich is to rebel in a gentle, whimsical manner—or perhaps it is to smoke pot, or hashish. Perhaps to smoke is in itself to rebel. Perhaps in this passage the present and the past, the near and the far, the father and the son, the student of the 30's and the student of the 60's become one; and perhaps this pleasant union indicates an empathic identification, a coming to terms with the father. If such is the case, then the working-through is working.

In History, once again Lowell works through his rebellious act in a new context. While "Rebellion" had been broadly historical and allusive, and the Notebook poems closely personal, the relevant poems in History occupy a middle ground. History aspires to the chronological,
and the poems with which we are concerned follow a group of poems set in and entitled "1930's," and only loosely related to one another. The last of the 1930's poems, and the one immediately preceding the "Father's letter" poem, deals with sublime concerns: the permanence of nature and art and the impermanence of humankind. In this version of the "Father's letter" poem, Lowell pins down the incident by name and date: the poem is entitled "Anne Dick 1. 1936" (112). This specificity, juxtaposed as it is with the philosophical nature of the preceding poem, acts to diminish the emotional importance of the described incident. Lowell makes only minor revisions in the poem itself, toning down its dramatic quality in favor of straightforward narrative, and clarifying obscure points. The tone is direct and matter-of-fact, as though the poet had mastered the experience and was accordingly free to treat it as he chose: the telling has become less an emotional and more an aesthetic undertaking.

To follow "Anne Dick 1. 1936," Lowell chooses a poem which was sixth in the Notebook "Charles River" sequence (fifth in the Notebook 1967-68 version), and entitles it "Anne Dick 2. 1936." Reverting to the global perspective of the last 1930's poem, he bemoans the aridity of the present, when "[t]he blood of our spirit dries in veins of brickdust," and ends with a reference to the "lost" Christ, "our only
king without a sword, / turning the word forgiveness to a sword." Suddenly reducing the scope as he did before in "Anne Dick 1," he next repeats the poem—now called "Father"—"There was rebellion, Father." This time through, the italicized forgiveness in the last line of the preceding poem reverberates through the lines, and changes the reader's perspective accordingly. "Father, forgive me / my injuries," he had said in "Middle Age" (FTUD 7), "as I forgive / those I / have injured!"

Again, Lowell has made few changes from the Notebook version, and most of those have the effect of making the poem appear less spontaneous, more polished. He changes "I do not know how to unsay I knocked you down" to the less effective "I haven't lost heart to say I knocked you down" (Lowell's emphasis), as though to dramatize the diminished significance both the act itself and the retelling of it have for him—since the memory has lost its power over him, he must italicize the words in order to get any impact. That the memory of his rebellious act has been neutralized and rendered harmless is evident from the poems which follow "Father." In "Mother and Father 1," Lowell changes "If the clock had stopped in 1936" to the watered-down "Though the clock half-stopped in 1936"; the dramatic "I struck my father" gives way to the matter-of-fact "I hit my father," and the resulting "invisible / coronary" seems commonplace
rather than a matter charged with importance. This conversational, matter-of-fact tone continues in the next five poems, in which Lowell makes his peace with both mother and father.

Lowell was to have an opportunity to revise these poems twice more, for *Selected Poems* and the revised edition of a year later, but he made no significant changes, merely inserting an additional poem into the sequence and returning to the Notebook version of "Mother and Father I." In other poems which we will discuss in the next chapter, Lowell deals more fully with his relation to his parents, but from the evidence of these poems we can consider his working-through of this particular act of rebellion a success. He seems to have mastered the situation, and thus been enabled to reach a kind of rapprochement with his parents. His habit of revision—"forever tinkering with his old lives" and "revising his own poems"—in this case, at least, served him well.
NOTES


2 Sigmund Freud, "Essay on the Uncanny" (1919), 17:238.


4 John T. Irwin, Doubling and Incest / Repetition and Revenge (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1975).


7 Sigmund Freud, "Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy" (1909), 10:122.

8 Williamson, p. 54.


11 Yenser, p. 312.


19 Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920), 18:15,17.


22 Laplanche and Pontalis, p. 488.


24 Fenichel, p. 32.


29 Robert Hass says of this poem that its "stresses falling like chains clanking" seem "to accuse not only the fathers but the culture that produced meter and rhyme." "One Body: Some Notes on Form," *Antaeus* No. 30/31 (Spring 1978), p. 338.


32 Staples, p. 17.

33 Yenser, pp. 73-74.


36 Jarrell, pp. 188-190.

37 Fein, p. 91.

CHAPTER FOUR

A POETRY OF RELATION

In "John Berryman I" (N 203), Robert Lowell addresses himself to his friend and fellow poet in these words:

I feel I know what you have worked through, you know what I have worked through—we are words.
John, we used the language as if we made it.

The community which Lowell establishes here depends partly on the existence of shared suffering, since Berryman had endured much the same sort of mental and emotional anguish as had Lowell himself. But the more profound basis of the community, its raison d'être as well as the medium through which it exists—that agency through which we as readers are also brought into the community—is, of course, the medium of language; and, as Jacques Lacan has said of the significance of language in another context, "that this is self-evident is no excuse for our neglecting it."¹ In earlier versions of the poem (N 1967-68 151; N 255), in place of the emphatic "we are words," Lowell had used the construction, "these are words," which carries with it the implication that "these are (merely) words"—useful, perhaps, but ultimately ineffectual in bridging the gap between individuals, much less in relieving the suffering of another. But "we are words" makes another poem altogether. In the Introduction we have discussed the fact that, for Lowell,
poetry and self-examination are parts of the same process, and "we are words" confirms Lowell's sense of the close connection between self and language. In "Our Afterlife II" (DBD 23), which is addressed to his friend Peter Taylor, he makes much the same point:

My thinking is talking to you--
last night I fainted at dinner
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
The room turned upside-down,
I was my interrupted sentence,
a misdirection tumbled back alive
on a low, cooling black table.

Poems like these to Berryman and Taylor remind us that when we speak of Lowell's lifelong commitment to the process of self-examination, we must not fail to consider the paradoxical and rather startling fact that his search into the most private recesses of the self is not a solitary activity, but rather one which takes place in dialogue, through language. No matter how isolated a poet working on a poem may feel, the writing of a poem, or for that matter any act of aesthetic creation, is aimed at an audience, and to that extent can be conceived of as an act of community, an act of relation to someone outside the self. Furthermore, at least since the time of M. L. Rosenthal's The New Poets, we have been accustomed to think of Lowell as a "confessional" poet, and Lowell himself has said that "there is some connection" between "confessions to one's analyst" and "a confessional poem that's a work of art." Provided
we do not use the term reductively, we can usefully look at much of Lowell's poetry as confessional in the sense that it implies a listener from whom something more is demanded than the mere aesthetic or emotional appreciation of an audience, and Lacan has helped us to understand the nature of that something more: "I identify myself in language," Lacan asserts; "the function of language is not to inform but to evoke. What I seek in speech is the response of the other." In other words, we define ourselves in relation to others, and we do so through language, which, "before signifying something, signifies for someone." A "person's assurance of existing can only be gained through the Other's recognition of him/her," and the same is true whether the person seeks such assurance through psychoanalysis, through poetry, or through some less structured, more informal process.

D. W. Winnicott, Hans Loewald, Lacan and many others have demonstrated the extent to which a child gradually develops his own identity through an infinite series of exchanges with others, and the process continues throughout our lives. Contemporary psychoanalysts place a great deal of emphasis on this developmental process:

Many analysts . . . are coming to see the exchanges in the psychoanalytic process as the most important part of psychoanalysis, whether their interest is expressed in the continental terms of discourse with the "other" or in terms of the transference and countertransference that Freud first described.
Transference is that mysterious process by which emotions from the subject's childhood are evoked by the presence of the analyst and experienced with their original intensity, and Freud believed that the transference "is everywhere the true vehicle of therapeutic influence." The transference can involve either positive or negative emotions (Lacan, in his inimitable manner, has said that "the positive transference is when you have a soft spot for the individual concerned ... and the negative transference is when you have to keep your eye on him"). Contemporary analysts, however, have tended to emphasize the positive aspects of the relationship between therapist and patient. The "transference effect" is "love," says Lacan, and he adds that to "love is, essentially, to wish to be loved." We know now that love and its counterpart, the wish to be loved, derive, at least in part, from those childhood exchanges through which the child begins to develop his identity; and the analytic process reproduces those same conditions. It revives the old desires as well as the old anxieties, "based as they are on infinite longings for help, caring, and love, and the existential certainty of their not being gratified."

Stanley Leavy explains how the process works:

The significant elements of the past, those which dominate the significance of subsequent events, are experiences of past exchanges, interactions of desire, all of which either took place in dialogues, real or imaginary, or at very least are only recoverable as dialogues. The transference, the source of the unconscious memories recoverable in
psychoanalysis, is the heir of all previous dialogues, which the analytic method actively collects.\textsuperscript{16}

But transference, and the primacy of dialogue, are not confined to psychoanalysis. "You must not suppose," Freud cautions us, "that the phenomenon of transference . . . is created by psycho-analytic influence. Transference arises spontaneously in all human relationships just as it does between the patient and the physician."\textsuperscript{17} Loewald and Lacan concur,\textsuperscript{18} and Leavy describes how transference works in "friendly conversation":

At the same time I must address not only this hearer personally before me, and presumably known to me, but also other persons associated with my hearer in my own mind. . . . They are not just lay figures who can stand for anyone at all; they are real persons--living or dead--with whom I have conversed in the past or with whom I propose to speak in the future.

The upshot of this line of thinking is the realization that even the most ordinary conversation admits the presence in imagination--conscious or unconscious--of more than the two actually visible in the audible dialogue. In psychoanalytic terms, then, it is clear that transference is a property of all dialogue.\textsuperscript{19}

Thus despite Lowell's insistence that he was never psychoanalyzed, never "suffered an emotional or intellectual transference in therapy,"\textsuperscript{20} we are justified in looking at his poetry as a series of encounters or dialogues through which he uses the methods of psychoanalysis to search for answers to the sorts of questions one asks in psychoanalysis. In these poems, he not only seeks self-knowledge through relation with another, but through concentration on the
nature of the relation itself.

Before he was ready to write the personal, confessional poetry of Life Studies, Lowell published The Mills of the Kavanaughs, a book in which the protagonist of every poem identifies himself or herself through relation to another. The aging nun in "Mother Marie Therese" (106) lives entirely through her memories of her "Mother," long ago dead at sea, and the speaker in "Her Dead Brother" (104) is obsessed by incestuous love for the brother whom she has "saved" in the "ice-house" of her mind. In "David and Bathsheba in the Public Garden" (110), the identities of the two characters are so interrelated that, as Randall Jarrell says, "you can't tell David from Bathsheba without a program." (He adds that "they both (like the majority of Mr. Lowell's characters) talk just like Mr. Lowell"—of which, more later). 21 Lacan has given the name "mirror phase" to that period of time when the young child is learning to define himself as an entity apart from others, with the recognition of his reflection in a mirror acting partially as symbol and partially as cause; 22 and Lowell has David and Bathsheba lie by the pool in Boston's Public Garden, "[d]rinking our likeness from the water"—only one of many times he uses mirror imagery in the volume. 23

In "Thanksgiving's Over" (116), the guilt-ridden husband dreams a long dialogue between himself and his insane wife, who has died in an asylum. He realizes that the bars
which "caged her window . . . mirrored mine: / My window's
window"—leaving us to wonder who is sane, who insane, who
is caged, who free? "The Fat Man in the Mirror (after
Werfel)" (114) raises much the same sort of question:

What's filling up the mirror? O, it is not I;
Hair-belly like a beaver's house? An old dog's eye?
The forenoon was blue
In the mad king's zoo
Nurse was swinging me so high, so high!

An old fat man observes himself in a mirror, and as his
"eye" confronts his "I," he cannot bear the identity that he
recognizes there. He retreats to memories of childhood,
moments of pleasure and terror which cannot be separated
from one another. He "serves / Time before the mirror," and
finally succumbs to a nightmare montage in which childhood
longings merge with adult desire, childhood guilt with adult
denial:

Nurse, Nurse, it rises on me . . . O, it starts to
roll,
My apples, O are ashes in the meerschaum bowl . . .
If you'd only come,
If you'd only come,
Darling, if . . . The apples that I stole,
While Nurse and I were swinging in the Old One's
eye . . .

Only a fat man with his beaver on his eye
Only a fat man,
Only a fat man
Bursts the mirror. O, it is not I! (Lowell's ellipsis)

In "Falling Asleep Over the Aeneid" (101), another old
man seeks his identity by coming face to face with images of
himself, but this old man does not shrink from what he
encounters. Lowell tells us that the old man "forgets to go
to morning service. He falls asleep, while reading Vergil, and dreams that he is Aeneas at the funeral of Pallas, an Italian prince." Richard Fein has pointed out the connection between Lowell and this old man "who has been puzzled all his life by a relationship to a family, a history, and a literature that honors war," and, initially, the old man identifies himself wholly with the great Aeneas: "I stand up and heil the thousand men, / Who carry Pallas to the bird-priest." Almost immediately he shifts his attention, and communicates intimately with the dead Pallas:

I greet the body, lip to lip. I hold
The sword that Dido used. It tries to speak,
A bird with Dido's sworded breast. Its beak
Clangs and ejaculates the Punic word
I hear the bird-priest chirping like a bird.
I groan a little. "Who am I, and why?"
It asks, a boy's face, though its arrow-eye
Is working from its socket. . . .

This enigmatic passage could stand as the epitome of what Stephen Yenser has called "Lowell's Ovidian attitude" in this poem, in which referents are ambiguous and figures and objects merge into one another. Aeneas and the dead Pallas face each other, "lip to lip." Aeneas holds the "sword that Dido used," in which is reflected the face of Pallas--the "It" which "tries to speak." Its question, "Who am I, and why?" is the subject of the poem. The old man, as Aeneas, gazes at the funeral pyre; then his identity shifts again. Finally, he wakes from sleep, but not into lucid reality; instead, "Mother's great-aunt, who died when I was eight; / Stands by
our parlour sabre." She admonishes the old man-child to put up his Vergil and honor the Sabbath, and immediately eighty years disappear: "It all comes back." He is present at the funeral of his Uncle Charles, a hero so glorious that Phillips Brooks and General Grant pay their respects at his coffin. But Uncle Charles is no Aeneas: "my aunt / . . . tells her English maid / To clip his yellow nostril hairs, and fold / His colors on him."

... It is I. I hold
His sword to keep from falling, for the dust
On the stuffed birds is breathless, for the bust
Of young Augustus weighs on Vergil's shelf:
It scowls into my glasses at itself.

The old man, staring into the face of his long-dead uncle, sees not only his own mortality but also the identity of that self which emerges only after the excessive expectations of family and tradition have been burned away. There is wonderful ambiguity in the figure of the old man holding on to his ancestor's sword "to keep from falling," and the large public questions about war and history remain unresolved. But the old man himself, even if only for the moment, has achieved a measure of self-knowledge. The young Augustus, on the other hand, has it all ahead of him. His bust "weighs on Vergil's shelf: / It scowls into my glasses at itself."

Robert Hass has said that "[a]ll the new thinking is about loss. / In this it resembles all the old thinking," and Robert Fein correctly describes The Mills of the...
Kavanaughs as a book "about people who can confess and explore a loss in their lives at their leisure or in terms of some permanent setting to their lives."27 The characters in these Browning-esque poems are searching for a way to make sense out of loss, and their search is epitomized in that of Anne Kavanaugh, in the title poem. In his introductory note to "The Mills of the Kavanaughs," Lowell says that "[m]ost of the poem is a revery of her childhood and marriage, and is addressed to her dead husband," and we may read the poem in addition as Anne's extended attempt, through discourse with another, to try to understand herself. Although she addresses herself primarily to Harry, her dead husband, Lowell sets up a relationship between Anne and another presence at the very beginning of the poem:

The Douay Bible on the garden chair
Facing the lady playing solitaire
In blue-jeans and a sealskin toque from Bath
Is Sol, her dummy.

Hugh Staples was probably the first to point out the extent to which The Mills of the Kavanaughs represented Lowell's break with Roman Catholicism, and he finds it significant that the Bible here is not only a "dummy" but is "Sol,"
not the partner but the imaginary opponent of a person playing solitaire.28 But during the course of the poem the adversarial relation between the two turns into a relation of cooperation and community, and although it would be both fanciful and discourteous to identify "Sol, her dummy" with
the figure of a psychoanalyst, nevertheless the two play
similar roles. Anthony Wilden, in his excellent introduction
to Lacan's work, explains a concept which can be helpful to
us here:

Distinguishing the Other . . . from the other (or
present counterpart) is methodologically useful.
The analyst may be viewed as the "neutral" other
who is constituted as the Other by the subject
(who is not talking to him) on the basis of the
original or primordial constitution of the
subject by Otherness. This is why self-analysis
absolutely requires another to whom the subject's
discourse is apparently addressed—just as
Fleiss served this function in Freud's self-
analysis. 29

We must be careful not to force a ridiculous comparison
here, but it is nonetheless true that as Anne freely
associates from reverie to fantasy to memory throughout this
long poem, she returns again and again to the reality of
the cards which she holds in her hands and the Bible which
faces her across the table, and their physical presence,
like that of a therapist or any friendly "other," causes
her either to stop and reflect on what has gone before, or
to change the direction of her associations.

The structure of the poem itself reinforces our im-
pression of interrelated subjects acting one upon the other,
as Lowell gives words now to the narrator, now to Anne, in
a seemingly random, conversational order. The narrator
begins by describing those elements of the setting which
will be important as starting points for Anne's associations.
Down the hill from the garden in which she sits is "a
ruined burlap mill," which will act to remind her of the history of Harry's family: the glory of their beginnings, their commercial exploitation of the environment, their cruelty to the Indians, their subsequent decline (readers of Lord Weary's Castle may recognize this combination of elements from the earlier volume, in which Lowell's own ancestors were characterized in much the same way). Near the ruined mill stands a statue of Persephone, who will figure largely in Anne's fantasies; Staples has pointed out that Anne is "ambivalent in all things, and for such a divided nature, Persephone, herself subjected to an alternating cycle of life and death, identified with the recurring seasons, is a fitting symbol."\(^30\) (Again, the reader familiar with Lowell's biography may think of the cycles of mania and morbid depression which had already, at the time of the writing of this poem, begun to affect the poet).

Near where Anne sits is her husband's grave, and it is this physical object and the associations to which it leads that form the bulk of the poem, and to which the poem will return at its end.

The lady drops her cards. She kneels to furl Her husband's flag, and thinks his mound and stone Are like a buried bed. "This is the throne They must have willed us. Harry, not a thing Was missing: we were children of a king.

But the family declined quickly; they lost much of their land, including the "spawning ponds" which Anne remembers
vividly.

"Love, is it trespassing to call them ours?
They are now. Once I trespassed--picking flowers
For keepsakes of my journey, once I bent
Above your well, where lawn and battlement
Were trembling, yet without a flaw to mar
Their sweet surrender. Ripples seemed to star
My face, the rocks, the bottom of the well.

In the mirror-like surface of the well, she can see the
"lawn and battlement" clearly, but her own face--her own
identity--is not yet clear. She remembers Harry's mother,
who adopted her as a child, and an incident from childhood
when she was allowed to "lop / At pigeons with my lilli-
putian crop, / And pester squirrels." (The young Lowell
tortured turtles, and later wrote poems about them.)

The narrator breaks into Anne's reverie.

The lady sees the statues in the pool.
She dreams and thinks, "My husband was a fool
To run out from the Navy when disgrace
Still wanted zeal to look him in the face."
She wonders why her fancy makes her look
Across the table, where the open Book
Forgets the ease and honor of its shelf
To tell her that her gambling with herself
Is love of self. She pauses, drops the deck,
And feels her husband's fingers touch her neck.
She thinks of Daphne . . .

Within the course of a few lines, Anne "sees" and "dreams"
and "wonders" and "pauses" and "feels" and "thinks"--
activities common in patients in analysis and in other people
engaged in other kinds of self-examination--and the "open
Book" which is "[a]cross the table" talks back to her.

She hears another voice.
The leaves, sun's yellow, listen, Love, they fall.
She hears her husband, and she tries to call
Him, then remembers. Burning stubble roars
About the garden. . . .

The burning stubble of Indian wars, of destroyed land, of
Persephone's hell, of her own death-in-life--this is what
Anne is struggling against, and trying to understand. She
would like to be able to write her life down in a contained
and orderly fashion:

. . . Columns fill the life
Insurance calendar on which she scores.
The lady laughs. She shakes her parasol.
The table rattles, and she chews her pearled,
Once telescopic pencil, till its knife
Snaps open. "Sol," she whispers, laughing, "Sol,
If you will help me, I will win the world."

As the rest of this very long poem proves, "Sol" cannot help
Anne enough for her to "win the world." But for the reader
of the poem, no such resolution is necessary: just as much
of the energy of Robert Lowell's poetry derives from his
struggle to understand himself, so does our interest in
"The Mills of the Kavanaughs" depend upon the process of
Anne's self-examination, and the extent to which that
process incorporates an "other."

Anne interests us too, of course, because she reminds
us of Robert Lowell. Randall Jarrell says that Anne "is
first of all a sort of symbiotic state of the poet. (You
feel, 'Yes, Robert Lowell would act like this if he were a
girl'; but whoever saw a girl like Robert Lowell?)" 31 We
can see "The Mills of the Kavanaughs" as a practice field
upon which Lowell could experiment with poems about self-examination, without having to commit himself to the personal voice which would emerge in *Life Studies*. Wyatt Prunty says that the "real action" of the poem is "Anne's unraveling of the meaning of events," and adds that this "representing of self, established through the connexity [sic] of time, is what Lowell matures as his method in *Life Studies*."

In the Introduction we have discussed the extent to which, for Lowell, poetry and self-examination are interrelated parts of the same process. And in *Life Studies* as well as in his other volumes, we can see that, like Anne Kavanaugh, he addresses himself to an "other" who serves a complicated combination of functions.

Richard Tillinghast reports that he once asked Lowell about the identity of the "you" in Lowell's poem, "The Lesson" (*FTUD* 15). Lowell replied, "You, I've never quite known... I felt a tremor of addressing someone loved, a close friend, myself, a girl." As Lacan, Leavy, and others have taught us, this indeterminate "you" includes within it an infinite number of people—"real persons—living or dead" (see pp. 171-173). These are the people through whom, as through an analyst, the poet seeks to establish his identity. Leavy says that all the desires of a patient in analysis are embodied in "the want for something from the analyst," and that "[w]hatever else this want comprises, it is a desire for full recognition—recognition of oneself as
one knows oneself, and as one does not know oneself, but hopes to know."34 And Robert Lowell, through his poetry, seeks precisely this sort of recognition.

Sometimes this dependence of the poet on others for his own sense of identity is stifling and imprisoning:

Somewhere a white wall faces a white wall, one wakes the other, the other wakes the first, each burning with the other's borrowed splendor—the walls, awake, are forced to go on talking, their color looks much alike, two shadings of white, each living in the shadow of the other. How fine our distinctions when we cannot choose!

... At this point of civilization, this point of the world, the only satisfactory companion we can imagine is death—this morning, skin lumping in my throat,

I lie here, heavily breathing, the soul of New York. ("Two Walls," H 169; N 146)

Alan Williamson calls this poem, subtitled in History "1968, Martin Luther King's Murder," the "emotional nadir" of Notebook. He sees the two walls, "forced to keep on talking," as a portrayal among other things of an unsatisfactory marriage, and he finds in the poem psychological, political and metaphysical despair: "all definition, whether of the self or anything else, is relative (i.e., by relation). But if there are only the Two, and they never merge in the One, then all relation goes in a circle; real choice becomes impossible, and identities and values have no basis except in an infinite regression."35 Such thinking issues in the "chronic pessimism" that Vereen Bell finds in Lowell's work,36 and certainly a reader can find many poems
which present a grim picture of reality.

But in the Introduction we have discussed the fact that, for Lowell, poetry was the means of bearing his life, of bearing reality, however terrible; and, as we have seen, this process of examining the self and of writing the poetry evokes the presence of others. Ian Hamilton speaks of the "unbending intimacy between the poet and his addressee" in Notebook, and this intimacy, whether between Lowell and an indeterminate "you" or between the poet and a specific named person, pervades the entire body of his work. The poems in Life Studies, however, require that we distinguish between the "you" to whom a Lowell poem is addressed, and the "character" in the poem in relation to whom the poet identifies himself, even though the two cannot be entirely separated. Jay Martin describes Life Studies in these terms: "[r]eviving Henry James's concept of autobiography in A Small Boy and Others, [Lowell] first gives an account of the solitary 'small boy,' then of the 'others' through whom he further defines himself and grows to manhood." Although Lowell concentrates in Life Studies on the relation between himself and important others, the intimacy of address which Hamilton sees in Notebook is almost wholly lacking. In the Introduction and in Chapter Two we have discussed the splitting of the poet's ego into an experiencing half and an observing half, and noticed how Lowell seems sometimes "in the picture" of a poem, and at
other times "outside the picture," observing and commenting on it. In *Life Studies* we encounter the observing, reasoning Lowell trying to portray and to understand the nature of his relations (in at least two senses of the word), but only occasionally allowing the experiencing self to speak out of its need for connection with and recognition by the "other."

Aside from Lowell himself, the main "relations" in *Life Studies* are those figures through whom the small child usually begins to form his own identity, his mother and father. The adult poet coolly describes Father, retired from the Navy and fired from his job, humming "Anchors Aweigh" in the bathtub ("Commander Lowell" 70), or mumbling "yes, yes, yes" to Mother's demands ("91 Revere Street" 19). Father himself is defined largely in relation to Mother: Lowell begins "Commander Lowell" not with a description of Father but with a paragraph devoted to Mother and her son—a characterization in itself, much like the picture in "During Fever" (79) of Mother and Son "rehashing Father's character" as he tiptoes down the stairs to chain the door. The relation between Father and Mother, who dominates the household, then drags to bed alone to read Menninger ("Commander Lowell"), and the relation of each to the child who "used to sit through the Sunday dinners absorbing cold and anxiety from the table" ("91 Revere Street" 43), are of paramount importance to the adult poet of *Life Studies*. He
knows that their relation has shaped his life, and through most of the volume he keeps the emotions associated with that knowledge under tight control; he observes rather than experiences. Only after his mother's death (in the roughly chronological Part Four of this autobiographical volume) does he feel able to address her directly: "Your nurse could only speak Italian, / but after twenty minutes I could imagine your final week, / and tears ran down my cheeks."

This intimacy lasts only long enough to be immediately undercut by irony: "Mother travelled first-class in the hold" in her "Risorgimento black and gold casket" ("Sailing Home from Rapallo" 77). The mixture of tones in these lines is effective: the moment of lived experience, of empathic identification, followed by the flash of sarcasm—of course Charlotte Lowell, who had worried that their Revere Street home was "barely perched on the outer rim of the hub of decency" ("91 Revere Street" 15), must travel first class on her final journey across the Atlantic.

When the poet Robert Lowell addresses himself explicitly to his dead mother in a poem which he writes for an audience to read, he is demonstrating the truth of Leavy's assertion that transference is a property of all dialogue (see p. 173). He is allowing into the open a range of emotions which derive from early childhood through the present, and rather than recollecting these emotions in
tranquillity, he is experiencing them as he addresses both his mother and his readers. But we must not perceive the reader's role as passive; we are not mere overhearers of a son's poignant expression of grief. Rather, we are the "other" to whom he can express, in words, his love and anger, and thus learn better how to understand himself. And our role is the same whether the experiencing part of the poet's ego is addressing a specific "other" through us, or whether the observing part is describing and commenting and trying to understand. Audience and specific addressee merge to form an "other," a wall against which the poet can bounce his words. In "During Fever," the poem which follows "Sailing Home from Rapallo," Lowell addresses his mother (and us) again, in another complicated combination of tone and underlying emotion:

Mother, Mother!
as a gemlike undergraduate,
part criminal and yet a Phi Bet,
I used to barge home late.
Always by the bannister
my milk-tooth mug of milk
was waiting for me on a plate
of Triskits.

This memory evokes tenderness and affection in the poet almost in spite of himself, but as in the preceding poem, the tenderness is undercut by his awareness of the implications of Mother's habitual gesture. Milk and Triskits! Even the proper name is ludicrous.
Often with unadulterated joy, Mother, we bent by the fire
rehashing Father's character—
when he thought we were asleep,
he'd tiptoe down the stairs
and chain the door.

Lowell's brilliant use of "unadulterated joy" underscores
the conspiratorial pride of Mother and Son, tinged as it is
with guilt, pity and contempt for Father, that necessary
third party to whom they feel superior.

Lowell did not confine his concentration on the re-
lation between himself and his parents to Life Studies. In
Chapter Three we have discussed in detail the series of poems
in which Lowell works through the memory of a traumatic
adolescent experience in which he struck his father and
knocked him down. These poems appear in Lord Weary's Castle,
Notebook and History, and other volumes include other poems
in which Lowell seeks to come to terms with his parents. In
"Middle Age" (FTUD 7), at the age of forty-five, he is
terrified because he is still confronted by an "other" to
whom he cannot relate: "At every corner, / I meet my
Father, / my age, still alive." But he can blurt out, with
typical Lowellian Christian overtones, words of entreaty:

Father, forgive me
my injuries,
as I forgive
those I
have injured!

In History, linked by proximity to the poems about his
adolescent rebellion, Lowell confesses anxiety about his
lack of an independent sense of self: "now more than before fearing everything I do / is only (only) a mix of mother and father" ("Mother, 1972" 115). But because he has concentrated on the nature of his relation to his parents and has tried to understand it, he is able to take positive steps toward establishing his own identity, acknowledging the crucial importance of the relation but moving beyond it to encounter the parents in a relation of equality: "Mother and Father, I try to receive you / as if you were I, as if I were you, / trying to laugh at my old neroveracking jokes" ("Returning" 115).

In "Father in a Dream" (116), Lowell imagines the sort of dialogue he has been seeking throughout his life: he and his father are alone together at a table at "a sort of Harvard of the arts" (I quote from the Notebook version, 129, because I like it better). His father's hair has "grown richer." The two are united by circumstance and age:

We were joined in the arts, though old. Then I, "I have never loved you so much in all our lives." And he, "Doesn't it begin at the beginning?"

Love begins at the beginning, and self grows out of that love, and new generations repeat the process. Both in Life Studies and in Day by Day, Lowell associates the relationship between himself and his parents with that between himself and his children. "During Fever" (LS 79), the poem in which Mother and Son rendezvous over the Triskits, begins with the image of "my daughter in fever,"
floundering "in her chicken-colored sleeping bag." She is half asleep. "'Sorry,' she mumbles like her dim-bulb father, 'sorry.'" The dim-bulb father--the poet--prepares the way for that other Father who appears in the next section of the poem, tiptoeing down the stairs so as not to disturb the conspirators. That same Father appears in a dialogue between a character called "Son" and one called "Father" in "Robert T. S. Lowell" (DBD 80). Son complains that "I futilely wished / to meet you at my age; / the date never came off." But Father replies, "You had your chance to meet me." Father diagnoses his own failure in life, correctly attributing it at least in part to yet another generation of relations: "I lay / in the lee of my terrible elders; / the age had a largeness I lacked." He ends the poem by cautioning Son:

You think that having
your two children on the same floor this fall,
one questioning, one climbing and breaking,
is like living on a drum
or warship--it can't be that,
it's your life, and dated like mine.

The "questioning" child to which Father refers is Harriet, Lowell's beloved daughter, and the poet knows that she too faces the prospect of being defined in relation to her parents: in "Words of a Young Girl" (N 146; "Harriet's Dream," FL&H 27), the child complains, "We met a couple, not people, / squares asking Father whether he was his name-- / none ever said that I was Harriet." Throughout his career
Lowell wrote loving poems to and about Harriet. In "Home After Three Months Away" (LS 83), the poet returns from a hospital stay to a renewed sense of the relation between child and father:

... After thirteen weeks
my child still dabs her cheeks
to start me shaving. When
we dress her in sky-blue corduroy,
she changes to a boy,
and floats my shaving brush
and washcloth in the flush... .
Dearest, I cannot loiter here
in lather like a polar bear. (Lowell's ellipsis)

The tenderness he feels for the young child is combined in later years with that sense of fleeting time, that ache of anxiety with which parents face the uncertainty of their children's futures: "Child of ten, three quarters animal,
/ three years from Juliet, half Juliet, / already ripened
for the night on stage." Then the lovely, haunting question:
"beautiful petals, what shall we hope for" ("Harriet,"
FLH 15; "Harriet 4," N 22).

Harriet was named for Lowell's older cousin, Harriet Winslow, for whom he felt deep affection. After her death, he addresses her with gentle humor in "Fourth of July in Maine" (NTO 21):

Dear Cousin, life is much the same,
though only fossils know your name
here since you left this solitude,
gone, as the Christians say, for good.

She left her mark on the "cousins kept up with, nipped,
corrected, / kindly, majorfully directed," and Lowell
acknowledges her influence in "Soft Wood" (FTUD 63):
"Harriet Winslow, who owned this house, / was more to me
than my mother." Although Lowell exaggerates here, probably
out of love and his acute awareness of Cousin Harriet's
painful illness, he is profoundly conscious of his relation
to those family members like Cousin Harriet whose influence
mediated and moderated that of his parents. The reader of
Life Studies meets Great Aunt Sarah, thundering "on the
keyboard of her dummy piano," and poor Uncle Devereux, dying
at twenty-nine "of the incurable Hodgkin's disease" ("My
Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow," LS 59). She
meets great-great-Grandfather Mordecai Myers, "poor sheep-
dog in wolf's clothing" ("91 Revere Street" 12), whom the
young Robert Lowell romanticizes in an effort to compensate
for a prosaic and ineffectual father. And most importantly
she meets Grandfather, "manly, comfortable, / overbearing,
disproportioned" like the decor of his farmhouse ("My Last
Afternoon"). "My Grandfather found / his grandchild's fog-
bound solitudes / sweeter than human society," and of course
the child returned Grandfather's love. In "Dunbarton" (LS
65), Lowell recaptures the feeling of camaraderie between
the two:

He was my Father. I was his son.
On our yearly autumn get-aways from Boston
to the family graveyard in Dunbarton,
he took the wheel himself--
like an admiral at the helm.
Freed from Karl and chuckling over the gas he was saving,
he let his motor roller-coaster
out of control down each hill.
We stopped at the Priscilla in Nashua
for brownies and root-beer,
and later "pumped ship" together in the Indian
Summer. . . .
(Lowell's ellipsis)

In the next poem, "Grandparents" (68), he remembers a
similar instance. "Back here alone" at his dead grand-
parents' farmhouse, he gazes at the billiards-table "where
Grandpa, dipping sugar for us both, / once spilled his demi-
tasse." The memory becomes so intense that, for a moment,
Lowell allows his cool concentration on the relationship of
child and grandfather to give way to a cry of emotion:

Never again
to walk there, chalk our cues,
insist on shooting for us both.
Grandpa! Have me, hold me, cherish me!

Grandfather Winslow appears in Lord Weary's Castle as
well as in Life Studies. In "Death from Cancer," the first
of the four sections of "In Memory of Arthur Winslow" (25),
the young poet urges his grandfather, dying in Boston, to
share his apocalyptic vision:

Grandfather Winslow, look, the swanboats coast
That island in the Public Gardens . . .
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
. . . and the ghost
Of risen Jesus walks the waves to run
Arthur upon a trumpeting black swan
Beyond Charles River to the Acheron
Where the wide waters and their voyager are one.

In these lines, which effectively unite pagan and Christian
imagery, Lowell envisions for his grandfather an experience
of ultimate union with the Other, but Grandfather does not fare so well in other sections of the poem. In the third part, "Five Years Later," Lowell makes it clear that he "came to mourn you, not to praise the craft / That netted you a million dollars." Throughout Lord Weary's Castle, Lowell associates his own forebears, "half-forgotten Starks and Winslows," ("At the Indian Killer's Grave" 60), with the Puritans, whose cruelty and greed belied their protestations of piety. In later volumes, too, he complains about his relatives, those "late people," who "won't stay gone" ("Those Older 1," N 123; H 201). "I have had them fifty years," he grumbles ("Those Older 3," N 124; "Those Older 2," H 201). In "Revenants" (H 97; N 179), he explains the reason for his dissatisfaction with these "others":

They come back sometimes, I know they do,

... When I meet them covertly, I think I know their names:
Cousin So, Ancestral Mother-in-Law So. . .
I cannot laugh them into laughing back. (Lowell's ellipsis)

Since "Ancestral Mother-in-Law So" will not cooperate with Lowell's efforts to evoke a response from her, since our kin will not suffice to confer that recognition of self which we all seek, Lowell reaches out to others beyond the family. He talks to "Jonathan Edwards in Western Massachusetts" (FTUD 40):
I love you faded,
old, exiled and afraid
to leave your last flock, a dozen
Houssatonic Indian children;

afraid to leave
all your writing, writing, writing,
denying the Freedom of the Will.
You were afraid to be president

of Princeton, and wrote:
"My defects are well known;
I have a constitution
peculiarly unhappy:

flaccid solids,
vapid, sizzy, scarce fluids,
causing a childish weakness,
a low tide of spirits.

Lowell identifies with the old man, with his "writing,
writing, writing," his "constitution / peculiarly unhappy,"
his "low tide of spirits." He identifies himself, too,
with the hated and feared and pitied Caligula ("Caligula,"
PTUD 49; "Caligula 2," H 48):

My namesake, Little Boots, Caligula,
you disappoint me. Tell me what I saw
to make me like you when we met at school?
I took your name--poor odd-ball, poor spoiled fool,
my prince, young innocent and bowdlerized!
Your true face sneers at me, mean, thin, agonized,
the rusty Roman medal where I see
my lowest depths of possibility.

Like the young child who learns about his otherness by look-
ing in a mirror, Lowell peers into Caligula's mean and
agonized "true face" and sees his own "lowest depths of
possibility." But from more contemporary historical figures,
Lowell seeks, and sometimes finds, more positive reassurance.
Brooding in his "workroom" after Robert Kennedy's murder,
he remembers the time when, "like a prince, you daily left
your tower / to walk through dirt in your best cloth." He
admits that "I miss / you, you out of Plutarch," and wonders,
"[w]hat can I catch from you now?" ("R.F.K.,” N 197; "For

Lowell speaks nakedly and unashamedly to Kennedy, and
to Eugene McCarthy: "I love you so," he confesses to the
defeated presidential candidate in "For Eugene McCarthy"
(N 204; H 175). And he speaks in an equally open manner to
those other men and women who helped him to define himself,
personally and poetically—the writers, and especially poets,
living and dead, who helped him in immeasurable ways through-
out his life.41 Some of these writers he knew personally,
while others wrote poems through which he could enter into
dialogue with them, with Sappho and Milton and Coleridge,
and thus come to know them, and thus come to know himself.42

In Life Studies, that quintessential volume about the self
in the process of defining itself through others, Lowell
devotes Part Three to four poems about writers. In "Ford
Madox Ford" (49), he pays tribute to the "master, mammoth
mumbler" who took the young Robert Lowell to Tennessee in
1937 to stay with Allen Tate (see Introduction, p. 8). He
wonders why "the bales of your left-over novels buy / less
than a bandage for your gouty foot," and ends the poem with
a brief, poignant eulogy: "Ford, / you were a kind man and
you died in want."
In the second poem, "For George Santayana" (51), he talks to the old philosopher who has just died in Rome. 43

There at the monastery hospital, you wished those geese-girl sisters wouldn't bother their heads and yours by praying for your soul: "There is no God and Mary is His Mother."

Lowell loves this kind of wry doubletalk full of doubt and truth and adapts it to his own use again and again in writing his poetry. He admires Santayana, and feels a kinship with him:

Old trooper, I see your child's red crayon pass, bleeding deletions on the galleys you hold under your throbbing magnifying glass, that worn arena, where the whirling sand and broken-hearted lions lick your hand refined by bile as yellow as a lump of gold.

Lowell identifies with the writer's struggles in "that worn arena," and perhaps envies his present state of rest. In lines from Dante that haunted him so much that he translated and used them at least four times, he envisions the old philosopher smiling and triumphant (see also "Brunetto Latini," NTO 75; "Winter," N 233; "Dante 1," H 56):

Lying outside the consecrated ground forever now, you smile like Ser Brunetto running for the green cloth at Verona--not like one who loses, but like one who'd won . . .

(Lowell's ellipsis)

From a poem of admiration and respect for the "old trooper," Lowell proceeds to a remembrance addressed "To Delmore Schwartz" (53), the friend and fellow poet with whom he lived for a time at Harvard. Delmore and Robert
muddle their way through the poem, watched over by a stuffed duck—"Rabelaisian, lubracious, drugged"—which "cooled our universal / **Angst** a moment, Delmore." But **angst** wins out in the end. Delmore misquotes Wordsworth: "**We poets in our youth begin in sadness; / thereof in the end come despondency and madness.**"

The Charles River was turning silver. In the ebb-light of morning, we stuck the duck -'s web-foot, like a candle, in a quart of gin we'd killed.

This somber mood evolves into a darker one of bitterness and rage in "Words for Hart Crane" (55). Lowell puts words in Crane's mouth:

> Because I knew my Whitman like a book, stranger in America, tell my country: I, *Catullus redivivus*, once the rage of the Village and Paris, used to play my role of homosexual, wolfing the stray lambs who hungered by the Place de la Concorde. My profit was a pocket with a hole.

Lowell has Crane define himself as "*Catullus redivivus*" and as "the Shelley of [his] age," and Lowell, too, associates himself with "Our Dead Poets" (H 137; compare "Nostalgie de la Boue," N 177):

> Their lines string out from nowhere, stretch to sorrow, ........................... Sometimes for days I only hear your voices, the sun of summer will not adorn you again with her garment of new leaves and flowers.

Lowell talks to the dead poets, and they talk back to him, and some of their most fruitful dialogues grow into Lowell's
translations or "imitations" of others' poems. As early as Lord Weary's Castle, Lowell published adaptations from Villon, Rimbaud, Valéry and Rilke, and the appendix to Day by Day consists of three translations—the last few pages of the last published volume by Robert Lowell. In between, of course, comes Imitations. In an essay called "Imitations: Translation as Personal Mode," Ben Belitt says that "translation may serve the translator as a form of surrogate identity," and Jay Martin explains how the poet forges that identity: "[i]n Imitations, a single mode of the imagination predominates: the poet confronts and understands himself through engagement with all that is not-the-self."  

In the first of three "Letters to Anaktoria" of Sappho (3), Lowell offers a case study of the process which Martin describes. An introductory note tells us that the "man or hero loves Anaktoria," to whom the letter is addressed:

I set that man above the gods and heroes—
all day, he sits before you face to face,
like a cardplayer. Your elbow brushes his elbow—
if you should speak, he hears.

The touched heart madly stirs,
your laughter is water hurrying over pebbles—
every gesture is a proclamation,
every sound is speech . . . (Lowell's ellipsis)

Modern words like "interaction" can only demean the complex emotional mutuality Sappho and Lowell demonstrate here. Their dialogue, across the centuries, results in our own experience of the perfect communication between the lovers. But
communication has a dark side as well. We learn from the introductory note that, after the hero loves Anaktoria, he loves Sappho; but "in the end, he withdraws or dies."

Anaktoria gives this news to Sappho, and Sappho replies:

Refining fire purifies my flesh!
I hear you: a hollowness in my ears
thunders and stuns me. I cannot speak.
I cannot see.

I shiver. A dead whiteness spreads over
my body, trickling pinpricks of sweat.
I am greener than the greenest green grass--
I die!

Sappho and Lowell here testify both to the potential destructive power of language and to the dangers of allowing oneself to be defined totally by another. To give too much power to the "other" is to face "the dissolution of ourselves into others, / like a wedding party approaching the window" ("The Landlord," Pasternak, 146).

Unlike Pasternak, who uses mirror imagery to illustrate loss of identity, Rilke gazes at his "Self-Portrait" (99) and sees his emerging self: "[o]ut of this distant and disordered thing / something in earnest labors to unroll."46 Of course we know that it is Robert Lowell in collaboration with Pasternak and Rilke who write these poems, and in two elegies for Théophile Gautier, the collaborative process extends still further. In his adaptation of Victor Hugo's "A Théophile Gautier" ("At Gautier's Grave" 44; H 89), Hugo, himself close to death, hears the voice of the dead Gautier, and replies, "Yes, I listen: the great wind dies away, / I
feel the summit's sinister cold breath, / I hurry."
Mallarmé, too, in "Toast funèbre" ("At Gautier's Grave" 92), honors Gautier and seeks communication with him: "Thinking of you, I call on you: Remain--." But there is no response. Only "miserly silence and the massive night."

Near the end of Imitations, Lowell again adapts a poet's address to another poet, in this case Pasternak's tribute, "To Anna Akmatova" (133). He pays her the ultimate compliment: "[i]n all our affairs, your lines throb / with the high charge of the world. Each wire is a conductor."

Pasternak feels compelled to write, to try to connect with this dynamic "other":

It seems I am choosing words that will stand, and you are in them, but if I blunder, it doesn't matter-- I must persist in my errors.

Lowell, too, as we know, was compelled to write and rewrite, again and again. He continued his translations in Near the Ocean, adapting poetry from Horace, Juvenal, Dante, Quevado and Góngora, often choosing lines which directly address either the reader or a specific person. From Horace he translates part of an Ode addressed to "[m]y first friend, and my best, O Pompey" (45), and in "Brunetto Latini," from the fifteenth canto of the Inferno (75), he gives us a dialogue between Dante and his "Master" which ends with the image he had used in the Santayana poem: "he seemed one of those / who run for the green cloth through the green
field / at Verona . . . and seemed more like the one / who
wins the roll of cloth than those who lose" (Lowell's
ellipsis).

Lowell did not confine his dialogues between poets to
his translations. In "Louisiana State University in 1940"
(DBD 25), he talks to Robert Penn Warren, "an old master
still engaging the dazzled disciple." He talks to John
Berryman, in the words with which we began this chapter,
and admits after Berryman's death:

To my surprise, John,
I pray to not for you,
think of you, not myself,
smile and fall asleep.
("For John Berryman," DBD 27)

History, in particular, abounds in conversations between
Lowell and other poets and prose writers. He talks to Allen
Tate, to Robert Frost, Theodore Roethke, Delmore Schwartz,
Mary McCarthy, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich. And many of the
poets talk back to him. "Don't you loathe to be compared
to your relatives?" T. S. Eliot asks ("T. S. Eliot" 140; N
119). "Horizontal on a deckchair in the ward," Ezra Pound
complains that, with Eliot dead, "[w]ho's left alive to
understand my jokes?" ("Ezra Pound" 140; N 119). And
Elizabeth Bishop, caught in "the worst situation I've ever /
had to cope with," expresses her sense of the mutuality of
their relationship: "That is what I feel I'm waiting for:
/ a faintest glimmer I am going to get out / somehow alive
from this. Your last letter helped" ("For Elizabeth Bishop 3.
Like Elizabeth Bishop, many of the writers and artists that Lowell knew were his friends as well, and Lowell had a great capacity for friendship. A reader of Hamilton's biography is struck not only by Lowell's love for his friends and his unselfconscious expressions of concern for them, but also by the tenacious loyalty with which his friends reciprocated his love. Blair Clark and Frank Parker, members with Lowell of the "mini-phalanx" devoted to "unmerciful self-scrutiny" at prep school (see the Introduction, p. 1), remained his lifelong friends, and, indeed, Blair Clark emerges as one of the heroes of Hamilton's biography, quietly rescuing Lowell time after time from one or another complication arising from his mania. The young Lowell persuaded Parker that the latter was to be an artist, and the poet continued to talk to the artist in his poetry throughout his life. In "For Frank Parker 1" and "2" (H 110-111; "Nantucket: 1935," N 48), he remembers an early trip to Nantucket when a classmate was killed, and in "To Frank Parker" (DBD 91) he explains the importance the two friends have had for each other:

We looked in the face of the other
for what we were.
Once in the common record heat
of June in Massachusetts,
we sat by the school pool
talking out the soul-lit night
and listened to the annual
unsuffering voice of the tree frogs,
green, aimless and wakened:
"I want to write." "I want to paint."

When Lowell remembers the time, "[f]orty years ago,"
that the two young friends "looked in the face of the other
/ for what we were," he is reminding us once again that
people define themselves not in isolation but through others,
that a "person's assurance of existing can only be gained
through the Other's recognition of him/her" (see p. 171).
Friends won't leave us alone; like analysts and therapists,
they demand that we ask the hard questions about our lives.
Randall Jarrell, "Child Randall," comes back from the dead
to appear to Lowell in a dream: "They come this path, old
friends, old buffs of death. / Tonight it's Randall," asking,
demanding, "tell me, / Cal, why did we live? Why do we
die?" ("Randall Jarrell 2," H 126; N 50; "Randall Jarrell,"
H 135; N 115). Peter Taylor, too, like Jarrell a friend
dating from the years at Kenyon, appears again and again in
Lowell's poetry, and causes the poet to speculate on his own
life and his relation to the world around him. As early as
Lord Weary's Castle, he uses Taylor as a sounding board for
his apocalyptic castigation of contemporary society: war
and commercialism combine to make a world so wicked, "Peter
... I fear / That only Armageddon will suffice" ("To Peter
Taylor on the Feast of the Epiphany" 52). In "For Peter
Taylor 1" and "2" in History (119-120; compare "Joy," N 246), he reminisces about the Kenyon years, and comments on the ambivalence of their relationship: "Love teases. We're one still, shakier, wilder-- / stuck in one room again, we want to fight." But by the time of Day by Day, Lowell is ready to acknowledge how profoundly this friendship has affected his life. In "Our Afterlife I (For Peter Taylor)" (21), he talks about their mutual development:

...This is riches:
the eminence not to be envied,
the account accumulating layer and angle,
face and profile,
50 years of snapshots,
the ladder of ripening likeness.

Then in "Our Afterlife II" (23), he more dramatically describes how his own identity is bound up with that of his friend:

Leaving a taxi at Victoria,
I saw my own face
in sharper focus and smaller
watching me from a puddle
or something I held--your face
on the cover of your Collected Stories
seamed with dread and smiling--

The self which Lowell sees reflected clearly in the puddle merges into that of his friend, and Taylor's face in turn enables Lowell to define himself, with a wonderfully ironic pun on his illness: "old short-haired poet / of the first Depression, / now back in currency."

At the beginning of this chapter, we discussed Lowell's statement in this poem that "[m]y thinking is talking to
you," and his perception of himself as "my interrupted sentence"—both examples of Lowell's awareness of the extent to which the self is defined through discourse with another. Later in the poem, still talking to Taylor, he emphasizes another aspect of relationship: "[o]ur loyalty to one another sticks like love . . . " (Lowell's ellipsis). Because he speaks matter-of-factly rather than sentimentally, Lowell gets our attention. We recall his reply to Tillinghast's question about the identity of an indeterminate "you" in a poem: "You, I've never quite known . . . I felt a tremor of addressing someone loved, a close friend, myself, a girl" (see p. 183). And this remark, in turn, reminds us that we must not fail to examine how Lowell, in his poetry, defines himself through relationship with women. In Chapter Three we have discussed the "Charles River" sequence of poems in Notebook (66), in which Lowell merges his recollection of an old romance with a love affair in the present. Anne Dick, one subject of these poems, was Lowell's fiancée when he was a student at Harvard, and his desire to marry her led to that climactic moment when he hit his father and knocked him down. In this act of rebellion and in the poetry he writes about it, Lowell demonstrates the fact that concentration on relation to a woman as "other" is a critical aspect of this poet's search for self-knowledge.

The reader of Hamilton's biography of Lowell soon learns that one of the first indications of an incipient
manic attack was the poet's singleminded attachment to a young woman. He wrote a lot of poems to and about women, asking questions about what they had to do with him. In "Mexico," a sonnet sequence in Notebook and For Lizzie and Harriet, he details an idyllic affair with a young woman, the two of them "knotted together in innocence and guile" ("Mexico 2," N 101). Alan Williamson describes how the intensity of these love poems, so firmly grounded in the geography and history of Mexico, issues in an experience of transcendence, and although we must be careful not to make a facile and false equation between sex and self-knowledge, Lowell clearly sees this romantic interlude as having important consequences for himself. In "Mexico 11" (N 106; compare "Mexico 10," FL&H 34), toward the end of the series of poems, he moves beyond the immediate experience in Mexico, but continues to convey feelings of tenderness and desire:

"Poor Child, you were kissed so much you thought you were walked on; / yet you wait in my doorway with bluebells in your hair." He projects himself into the mind of the beloved:

Those other yous, you think, are they meaningless in toto, test-rockfalls you crudely approached and coarsely conquered, leaving no juice in the flaw, mind lodged in mind? Those others, those yous . . . a child wants everything-- things! A child, though earnest, is not quite mortal. (Lowell's ellipsis)
"Those other yous"—those others whom you know (and the biblical usage works beautifully here), for good or for ill—"[t]hose others, those yous": Lowell, through the young woman, is confirming our sense that we are who we are through others. Further, by merging the experience of adult sexual desire with the child's more diffused perception ("A child wants everything"), he illustrates an elemental fact: in the child's wanting, and the concomitant not-getting, is born adult desire. As the adult continues the child's attempts to satisfy his desires (in the largest sense), "[l]ove blots the categories," and the intensity of the child's emotion suffuses the adult. Thus, transference. And thus, with luck, at least the possibility of greater insight into the self.

In Chapter Two we have discussed Lowell's poem, "The Old Flame" (FTUD 5), which is addressed to Jean Stafford, "[m]y old flame, my [first] wife!" Both Stafford and Lady Caroline Blackwood, his third wife—the "dolphin" of the volume by that name—figure importantly in Lowell's poetry. But the reader of Lowell's biography and of his poems finds out quickly that Elizabeth Hardwick, his second wife, was pre-eminent both in the life and in the poetry. We first encounter this wife, lying with Lowell in "Mother's bed" ("Man and Wife," LS 87); and the anxiety which the reader feels in discussing a living person in such an intimate situation mirrors the uncertainty and unease felt by readers
of Lowell's poetry since the time of the publication of *Life Studies*. We know that a character in a poem is not the same thing as that character's counterpart in real life, but Lowell himself encourages us to blur that distinction. And to fail to discuss this element of Lowell's poetry, this poetry in which it is impossible to separate the life and the work, would be to distort our study of the way in which Lowell uses concentration on relation to another as a means of understanding himself.

Discussing the poems in *Notebook*, Alan Williamson says that "the descriptions of married life . . . are almost unremittingly painful." Nevertheless, he says,

> there is a kind of back-handed, existential praise of marriage . . . the one encounter so unremitting that it breaks down all our normal and solipsistic ways of conceiving our relationships . . . and forces us to acknowledge the person as beyond all our frames of reference, an other and the Other.48

It is appropriate, of course, that we first meet this man and wife in "Mother's bed." Williamson, commenting on "Ulysses and Nausicaa" (N 71), has this to say about marriage:

> [It] expresses longings that are more ultimate, more dangerous (perhaps because, in Freudian terms, they are more directly related to the original longings of childhood), hence may be the true journey into the unconscious, the true opportunity for the death and rebirth of the self.49

Whether we speak in terms of death and rebirth of the self, of disintegration and reintegration of the ego, or in more general terms of painful feelings that may evolve into more
pleasant ones, we can see that Lowell's marriage poems embrace the entire range of possibilities, and provide us with an encyclopedia of the ways in which spouses learn about themselves through each other.

Ambivalence imbues these poems. In "Obit" (FL&H 48; N 261), Lowell talks about the death of the body, the death of love, the death of a marriage:

Our love will not come back on fortune's wheel--
in the end it gets us. . . .

Before the final coming to rest, comes the rest
of all transcendence in a mode of being, hushing all becoming. I'm for and with myself in my otherness,
in the eternal return of earth's fairer children,
the lily, the rose, the sun on brick at dusk,
the loved, the lover, and their fear of life,
their unconquered flux, insensate oneness, painful
"It was. . . ."

We can read this poem, as Williamson does, as one in which a "darker unity succeeds in abolishing the sense of self-
division into an 'I' and an 'other.'" But in addition, it seems to me, we must acknowledge the fact that Lowell, in this lovely poem, expresses a sense of being "for and with myself in my otherness"--his own identity as a separate individual paradoxically confirmed through this experience of oneness with the world. The poet cannot decide to what extent this feeling of oneness encompasses the wife: "old wives; / I could live such a too long time with mine." He ends, as so often, with a question: "After loving you so much, can I forget / you for eternity, and have no other choice?"
Lowell's ambivalence about marriage continued throughout his poetic career: his last volume of poems, *Day by Day*, begins with a poem in which the wandering Ulysses returns home to an inaccessible Penelope (see Chapter Two, p. 113), but closes with an adaptation from Propertius in which the young Arethusa pleads longingly for her husband's return from war. In some poems, the negative aspects of the marriage relation take precedence. In "To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage" (*LS* 88), Lowell projects his own self-disgust onto the persona of the wife, and in the controversial letters in *Dolphin* he shows his contempt for her—or at least his insensitivity—by reprinting the wife's personal and revealing letters as poetry for the public to read. "[T]orn darlings, professional sparring partners" ("Half a Century Gone 2," *N* 258), the two often cannot communicate: "I shout into the air, my voice comes back—/nothing reaches your black silhouette" ("Letter," *D* 23). But more often than not, the poems testify to the deep bond between husband and wife, and to their mutual interdependence.

At the very end of *For the Union Dead*, just before the final (title) poem, Lowell gives us a sense of this interdependence in a series of three poems. The last of the three, "Night Sweat" (68), we have discussed in Chapter One: the agony of the poet in the first half of the poem is relieved in the second half by "my wife," whose "lightness alters everything." In "New York 1962: Fragment (for
E.H.L.)" (65; see "The Picture," N 194; "The Picture" and "Same Picture," FL&H 29), the husband and wife, fused into one entity, "one cell here, lie / gazing into the ether's crystal ball." And in "The Flaw" (66), Lowell sees, as he thinks, their future:

Old wives and husbands! Look, their gravestones wait in couples with the names and half the date—one future and one freedom. In a flash, I see us whiten into skeletons, our eager, sharpened cries, a pair of stones, cutting like shark-fins through the boundless wash.

Two walking cobwebs, almost bodiless, crossed paths here once, kept house, and lay in beds. Your fingertips once touched my fingertips and set us tingling through a thousand threads. Poor pulsing Fête Champêtre! The summer slips between our fingers into nothingness.

Lowell ends "The Flaw" with a question: "Dear Figure curving like a questionmark / how will you hear my answer in the dark?" In other stanzas of the poem, he has been dealing with large issues—love, free will, life, death, God—and, knowing Lowell, we feel sure that he will have no final or absolute "answer" on any of these matters. But it is significant that he addresses these issues in a love poem, and that whatever tentative answers he may arrive at he finds through talking to his wife.

Lowell knows well the importance of language in their relationship. In "Man and Wife," after he pays tribute to this dauntless woman "as if you had / a fourth time faced the kingdom of the mad— / . . . and dragged me home alive," he ends the poem with words about the power of her words:
your old-fashioned tirade—
loving, rapid, merciless—
breaks like the Atlantic Ocean on my head.

Words can hurt, of course—this tirade is "merciless"—and
words act as the cause as well as the medium of quarrels:

Old campaigner, we could surrender something,
not talking for a victory but survival;
quarrels seldom come from the first cause,
some small passage in our cups at dinner
rouses the Dr. Johnson in a wife—

Even though they may quarrel, they must talk to survive, and
poor communication is better than none at all:

a monologuist tries to think on his feet
while talking, maybe finds fine things, yet fails—
still, it's a privilege to earn the bullring.

Husband and wife are alone together, holding on precariously
to their relation, and by their tenacity achieving, at least
for the moment, a partial victory:

We meet face to face in the 6 p.m. hour,
nursing two inches of family Bourbon
through two separate half-hours of television news,
heaven pumped in heartbeats to my head,
the red cherry rolling in the tumbler of sugared spirits

in the days of the freeze, we see a minor sun. . . .

In For Lizzie and Harriet, this poem is called "No
Hearing 1. The Dialogue" (43; "The Dialogue," N 96), and
the contradiction between the two halves of the title pre-
pares us for the end of this marriage. But by the time of
Day by Day, the poet is insisting that "[o]ur light intimacy
of reference is unbroken" ("Off Central Park [For E.H.]" 44).
In "Home" (113), a harrowing poem which takes place in the
poet's "home," a mental hospital, he explains more fully how
important this "intimacy of reference" has been to him. The poem begins in a hell of non-communication, a place where people talk past each other to a void.

Our ears put us in touch with things unheard of—
the trouble is the patients are tediously themselves, fussing, confiding . . . committed voluntaries, immune to the outsider's horror.
The painter who burned both hands after trying to kill her baby, says,
"Is there no one in Northampton who goes to the Continent in the winter?"
The alcoholic convert keeps smiling,
"Thank you, Professor, for saving my life; you taught me homosexuality is a heinous crime."
I hadn't. I am a thorazined fixture
in the immovable square-cushioned chairs we preoccupy for seconds like migrant birds.

By the end of the poem, since he cannot find any "other"
with whom to talk, he is reduced to imagining a dialogue:

I cannot sit or stand two minutes,
yet walk imagining a dialogue
between the devil and myself,
not knowing which is which or worse,
saying,
as one would instinctively say Hail Mary,
I wish I could die.
Less than ever I expect to be alive
six months from now—
1976,
a date I dare not affix to my grave.

In his despair, he grasps at a memory, and ends the poem with these crucial lines:

The Queen of Heaven, I miss her,
we were divorced. She never doubted
the divided, stricken soul
could call her Maria,
and rob the devil with a word.

The Queen of Heaven is Mary, of course, and a reference to the early enthusiastic Roman Catholicism which Lowell later
professed to abandon. 52 But I am convinced that the Queen of Heaven is also Elizabeth Hardwick, that steadfast wife who "never doubted / the divided, stricken soul" could "rob the devil with a word," with his many words, with his poetry. 53

Reviewing Eliot's "Four Quartets" in 1943, Lowell remarked that his "own feeling is that union with God is somewhere in sight in all poetry, though it is usually rudimentary and misunderstood." 54 Lowell's early poetry certainly reflects this "feeling," particularly in lines like these from "A Prayer for my Grandfather to Our Lady" (LWC 28), the last section of "In Memory of Arthur Winslow":

O Mother, I implore
Your scorched, blue thunderbreasts of love to pour
Buckets of blessings on my burning head
Until I rise like Lazarus from the dead.

Our sophisticated sensibilities may balk at these lines, but Lowell is showing us something important here. As Bruce Michelson points out, "the central, grotesque metaphor ... struggles to blend the mercy of the Virgin" with "the lost breast of the mother." 55 In "Death from Cancer," the first in this series of poems, we have seen Lowell's vision of ultimate union, as Grandfather Winslow is carried "[b]eyond Charles River to the Acheron / Where the wide waters and their voyager are one." And if we can get beyond the improbability of blue thunderbreasts and buckets of blessings, we can see that Michelson is correct in apprehending the
desire for a similar experience here: Lowell sees Grandfather as an individual divorced from that which can authenticate and confirm his own sense of self, and so he does what he can to remedy the situation: he writes a poem, and puts words in Grandfather's mouth.

In the wonderful reminiscence which he wrote after Lowell's death, his friend Peter Taylor wrote that Lowell "was searching for a oneness in himself and a oneness in the world." He conducted that search, as we know, through his poetry, and because of the nature of his mind and the circumstance of his illness, he used the methods of psychoanalysis as he searched. Such a search is never concluded, of course; Lowell knew that. But he lived his life, and he wrote his poetry, and much of the time he continued to believe that out there somewhere, "behind the next crook in the road or growth / of fog" there must be "a face, clock-white, still friendly to the earth" ("Harriet 1," N 21; FLH 13)--God, perhaps, or Lowell's wife, or a friend, maybe a therapist, or a lover--a face, an "other" through whom he might finally achieve that ultimate goal: "recognition of oneself as one knows oneself, and as one does not know oneself, but hopes to know" (see p. 13). But we who know Lowell know better--no ultimate answers for him. Instead there is the search itself, the "unmerciful self-scrutiny," the struggle. He cannot always sustain his belief that there are meaningful others out there:
Belief in God is an inclination to listen, but as we grow older and our freedom hardens, we hardly even want to hear ourselves . . . the silent universe our auditor -- I am to myself, and my trouble sings. (FL&H 44)

But even as he describes his ultimate aloneness, as he insists that I am to myself, he belies his own words. For his trouble sings. And as it sings it reaches out, as it does through all his poetry: in Lacan's words, "the function of language is not to inform but to evoke. What I seek in speech is the response of the other" (see p. 2).

my house is empty. In our yard, the grass stragglles

I stand face to face with lost Love--my breath
is life, the rough, the smooth, the bright, the drear.

The title of this poem is "No Hearing."
NOTES


5Terrence Doody says that "confession has a deliberate, formal intention which includes the confessor in the nature of the act." A confession is "the deliberate, self-conscious attempt of an individual to explain his nature to the audience who represents the kind of community he needs to exist in and to confirm him." *Confession and Community in the Novel* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), pp. 4-5.

6Lacan, p. 86.


20. Robert Lowell, letter to Alan Williamson dated September 23, 1974, used with Mr. Williamson's permission. For a summary of Lowell's experiences with psychoanalytically inclined psycho-therapists, see the introductory chapter, p. 13).


23. For a discussion of the Narcissus myth from a perspective relevant to issues raised in this chapter, see John Brenkman, "Narcissus in the Text," The Georgia Review 30 (Summer 1976), pp. 293-327.


27. Fein, p. 48.


30. Staples, p. 60.


34. Leavy, Dialogue, pp. 79-80.


39 See also "Those Before Us," FTUD 16.

40 For a discussion of Lowell's fascination with Edwards, see the introductory chapter, pp. 4-5).

41 Blair Clark has written that students of Lowell's life and work "have noted, but not sufficiently, the way in which he systematically apprenticed himself to older writers. It began at school with Richard G. Eberhardt [sic] ... Then there was Ford Madox Ford, the only novelist in the list of mentors. ... Pre-eminently, there were Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom. ... Later there were Pound, Eliot, William Carlos Williams and Santayana, among others at whose feet he sat." "On Robert Lowell," The Harvard Advocate: Commemorative to Robert Lowell 113 (November 1979), p. 10.


45 Martin, p. 24.

46 When he revised the poem for History (100), Lowell changed it significantly: the self forging its identity becomes a passive object threatened by "something unassailable" which is "hidden in accidents and stray things."

47 Williamson, pp. 199-207.

48 Williamson, p. 208.

49 Williamson, p. 209.

50 Williamson, p. 211.


52 Peter Taylor, discussing Lowell's penchant for holding two contradictory opinions at the same time, says that, "[i]n a sense, he was a Roman Catholic to the end, and would say so, though he would almost simultaneously declare that he was in no sense a believer." See the Introduction, p. 30.

53 Richard Tillinghast, in an unpublished essay entitled "Robert Lowell: The Persistence of Belief," makes this same point. I am grateful to him for showing me this essay.


AFTERWORD

THE LANGUAGE OF THE SELF

Whether answers to the great questions of life are to be found within the individual is a matter to be addressed by religion and philosophy, but Robert Lowell, like the Puritans, knew that no matter where truth may lie, the search for it must be conducted within the self. Lowell's unrelenting search for his self, as it comes to us through his poetry, was conducted partially by means of techniques used in psychoanalysis. And to what avail was this painful process?

Lowell's commitment to a psychiatric concept of health, though genuine, is limited (like Freud's) by a tragic view of life. . . . There is no universally accepted answer—indeed, there is heated dispute—on the question of whether analysis can lead only to a livable compromise between the individual and his background, or the reality principle. . . . or whether it can produce a truly free man.

There is some evidence to show that Lowell's life was easier to bear in his later years. In a letter to Steven Axelrod, Lowell told him that "the overriding theme" of Day by Day is "the power of the individual, despite age and illness, to bear his life, to learn to understand and even prize it." Alan Williamson tells of the "serenity and ease" which seemed to radiate from Lowell the last time the two were together, and Day by Day, despite occasional moments of depression and even despair, reflects a sense of that serenity and ease.
M. L. Rosenthal says that "one implication of what writers like Robert Lowell are doing [is] that their individual lives have profound meaning and worth," and surely this is one lesson that Lowell passes on to us through his poetry.

Speaking to an interviewer in 1961 about his "last poems"—presumably those in *Life Studies*, and some in *For the Union Dead*—Lowell had this to say:

My last poems don't use religious imagery, they don't use symbolism. In many ways they seem to me more religious than the early ones, which are full of symbols and references to Christ and God. . . . Yet I don't feel my experience changed very much. It seems to me it's clearer to me now than it was then, but it's very much the same sort of thing that went into the religious poems—the same sort of struggle, light and darkness, the flux of experience. The morality seems much the same.

Lowell would have been most uncomfortable in the role of law-giver or moral example, and we must be careful not to cast him in such a limited and limiting part, but when he refers to the "morality" of his poems, I think we should pay attention. When Blair Clark spoke of the "moral function" of Lowell's prep school "mini-phalanx," of their commitment to "unmerciful self-scrutiny" (see p. 1 ), he unknowingly repeated the argument of Philip Rieff's *Freud: The Mind of the Moralist*: that "knowing . . . is itself a primary ethical act." In the preface to the first edition of his book, Rieff says that "I have tried to show the mind of Freud . . . as it derives lessons on the right conduct of life from the misery of living it," and readers of Lowell's
poetry find that he, too, by the example of his life and writing, proposes certain moral imperatives which, not coincidentally, are implicit in the process of psychoanalysis. Herbert Leibowitz quotes Perry Miller as saying that Jonathan Edwards "was a Puritan who would not permit mankind to evade the unending ordeal and the continuing agony of liberty," and Leibowitz adds, "[s]o is Lowell." But Lowell did not ask of humankind any more than he demanded of himself, in "this life too long for comfort and too brief for perfection" (N 31). In a letter to Pound, he wrote:

I suppose all young men get up the nerve to start moving by wrapping themselves like mummies from nose to toe in colored cloths, veils, dreams, etc. After a while shedding one's costume, one's fancy dress, is like being flayed. I've just been doing a little piece of Why I live in Boston. I made it impersonal and said nothing about what I was looking for here—the pain and jolt of seeing things as they are.⁹

Rieff, quoting Freud, tells us that honesty is "'the fundamental rule of the psychoanalytic technique.' But what appears as a rule of therapy is actually a general cultural recommendation."¹⁰ Lowell demands of himself honesty—that he not evade or cover up or shrink from "the pain and jolt of seeing things as they are."¹¹

And he demands discipline, and attention to duty. Elizabeth Hardwick describes his routine shortly after his return from one period of hospitalization:

Cal was not the sort of poet, if there are any, for whom beautiful things come drifting down in a snowfall of gift, the labor was merciless.
The discipline, the dedication, the endless adding to his store, by reading and studying—all of this had, in my view, much that was heroic about it.\footnote{12} Lowell demands this kind of heroism, and the "courage that takes whatever comes" ("The Vanity of Human Wishes," after Juvenal, NTO 51). And always he demands of himself that he question, that he search, explore, that he ferret out the secrets of life:

especially this is how he must always be remembered, one moment playful to the point of violent provocation, the next in profound contemplation of the great mystery: What does life mean? What is it all about? Or, in retrospect and more accurately for him it is but one moment. As poet, as man, he approaches the great mystery playfully and seriously at the same time.\footnote{13}

Readers of Lowell's poems may wish that a little more of the playfulness had entered the poetry—in his "Afterthought" to Notebook, Lowell says that "[i]n truth, I seem to have felt mostly the joys of living; in remembering, in recording, thanks to the gift of the Muse, it is the pain." But even through the pain, an occasional lightness creeps in. While writing his autobiographical sketches in the middle fifties, Hamilton tells us, Lowell "learned how to give voice to a wide range of what might be called the moderate emotions: affection, regret, nostalgia, embarrassment, and so on";\footnote{14} and some of the Life Studies poems in particular reflect these "moderate emotions." But, for the most part, it is the serious and "profound contemplation of the great mystery" that we encounter in Lowell's poems, and that we admire.
In *Freud and Man's Soul*, Bruno Bettelheim argues that the English translators of Freud misrepresent his work when they translate the German *die Seele* as "mind" rather than "soul." Although *die Seele* had for Freud no religious connotations, says Bettelheim, the founder of psychoanalysis intended by the term "man's essence—that which is most spiritual and worthy in man," and psychoanalysis teaches us how we may discover that essence: "this demanding and potentially dangerous voyage of self-discovery will result in our becoming more fully human, so that we may no longer be enslaved without knowing it to the dark forces that reside in us."¹⁵ Gabriel Pearson believes that Lowell's poetic career "imitates" such a voyage:

Lowell's poetic career imitates—in an Aristotelian sense—the progress of self-therapy and thereby proposes itself as a case of an ultimately viable existence. It becomes exemplary as a measure of the depth and intensity of the forces that batter the self from within and without, and describes the forms that resistance to these can assume.¹⁶

The form that Lowell's resistance to the dark forces assumed was poetic form, was language transformed. He loved words—he posited as our common ancestor "Orpheus in Genesis" (Ω 26), who "hacked words from brute sound, and taught men English"—and he was a prodigal user of language. He talked a lot, he taught his students, he wrote loving letters to his family and friends, he wrote plays, and always, incessantly, he wrote poetry. He wrote, rewrote, revised, revised again, poem after poem. And in a more self-conscious
way than any of our other great poets, he sought to discover himself in his poetry.

The line must terminate,
Yet my heart rises, I know I've gladdened a lifetime knotting, undoing a fishnet of tarred rope;
the net will hang on the wall when the fish are eaten,
nailed like illegible bronze on the futureless future.
("Fishnet," D 15)

If we borrow from Robert Graves and J. Hillis Miller the metaphor of the web of language, we can see that Lowell did indeed spend a lifetime "knotting" and "undoing" the fishnet of language, in which he was able to capture and examine aspects of his self.

"Fishnet," the first poem in The Dolphin, begins with the words, "[a]ny clear thing that blinds us with surprise," and Lowell was able, through his poetry, to reach the occasional "moments of surprise" that Meredith Skura calls "the characteristic marks of a good analysis":

Like this, like this, as the great clock clangs round,
I see me—a green hunter who leaps from turn to turn,
a new brass bugle slung on his invisible baldric;
he is groping for trout in the private river,
wherever it opens, wherever it happens to open.
("The Serpent," N 99; D 18)

Lowell reveled in his moments of surprise, but much of his life had to be spent in the intervals between those moments, examining his self, living his life, using the methods of the psychoanalytic process to write his poetry. He found in the process no absolutes or certainty, but tentative, day-by-day answers to the questions of our common existence: "How will the hands be strong? How will the heart endure?" ("Mr. Edwards and the Spider," LWC 64).
NOTES


7 Rieff, p. ix.


10 Rieff, p. 316.

11 Compare Perry Miller: "Puritanism . . . demanded that the individual confront existence directly on all sides at once, that he test all things by the touchstone of absolute truth, that no allowance be made for circumstances

12 Hamilton, p. 258.


14 Hamilton, p. 232.


19 Meredith Skura has pointed out to me the Shakespearean echoes in this passage. Benedick, in Much Ado About Nothing (I.ii.240-242) uses "hang my bugle in an invisible baldrick" as a reference to cuckoldry; Pompey, the clown in Measure for Measure (I.ii.90), uses "groping for trouts in a peculiar river" as a reference to sexual intercourse.
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