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"MARITAL METAPHORS IN ROBERT LOWELL'S *LIFE STUDIES*"

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ABSTRCT: *This paper will examine Robert Lowell's creative process of exposing his private experiences in his autobiographical poetry, particularly in one of his best volumes; Life Styles, through which he intended to fictionalize his self in the process of creating a retrospective truth of his life.*

Lowell utilized his recollected memories, not only to explore his lost self and others' as part of his psychotherapy, but to employ such reminiscences to recreate a modified self located at the center of the cultural framework. By following such a poetic style, that represented a new sensibility, Lowell achieved a significant breakthrough in American poetry, that M.L. Rosenthal branded as "confessional [(1)], while B. Shaw labeled as "poetry of revolt." [(2)]

However, the most interesting feature in his confessional poetry is the use of 'marital metaphors'; specifically those of 'separation', 'breaking up' and 'divorce'. Lowell adapted this style to launch a procession of alienated figures whose calamities examine, shed light and link the poet's private embarrassments, painful memories and psychological traumas with so many seemingly unrelated topics such as American materialistic traditions, estrangement of the artist from culture, religious false verifications and war.

KEYWORDS: Confessional poetry, Mortification, Alienation, Family pressure, Marital metaphors that indicate collapse and parting.

INTRODUCTION

The American poet Robert Traill Spence Lowell 4th (1917-1977) was born in Boston, Massachusetts to a renowned Brahman family that included the famous poets Amy Lowell and James Russell Lowell. His mother, Charlotte Winslow, was a descendant of William Samuel Johnson; a signer of the United States Constitution, Jonathan Edwards; the famed Calvinist theologian, Anne Hutchinson; the Puritan preacher and healer, Robert Livingston the Elder, Thomas Dudley; the second governor of Massachusetts, clergy men, university presidents, judges, civil war generals and Mayflower passengers. [(3)]
However, upon discovering his ancestors' dishonorable history, Lowell began to feel shame, disdain, guilt and a deep moral burden. The prevailing matters of inconsistency, separation, failure and death inside that family were intensified by his own mental breakdowns and failed marriages; that culminated in writing subjective and personal revolutionary confessional poems; breaking thus irretrievably with Eliot's principles of objectivity and dissociation.

At the beginning of his poetic career, Lowell's style, or what Geoffrey Thurley calls the "Grand Manner" [(4)], demonstrated the same formal characteristics of the impressive traditional poets whom Lowell strove to satisfy. Under their influence he was writing

successful metrical, muscular poems loaded with metaphors and similes that won him a Pulitzer Prize in 1947 for his *Lord Weary's Castle*. However, his style witnessed a dynamic change as beginning with the publication of *Life Studies* in 1959; which struck the readers by its intimate, vulnerable, autobiographical free verse loosely lyrical style. He moved from 'cooked' to 'raw' poetry- according to his own classification of American poetry during that period [(5)]. Contemplating at his personal predicaments, as reflections of the dilemma befalling American culture, he interpreted his life's dilemmas as signs of the drifting apart of the corrupt modern communities. Nevertheless, this self-exploration and exposition mode was not exclusively triggered by his distressing personal experiences; but by some impelling professional instances as well, that compelled him to assess his life and literary style.

Lowell became aware of the ongoing evolution of American poetry before publishing his volume *Life Studies*; when he recognized the new expressively frank poetry written by Allen Ginsberg and W. D. Snodgrass. *Heart's Needle*, by Lowell*'s* student Snodgrass, did not only win the Pulitzer Prize in 1959, but earned Lowell's admiration of the new emotionally sensitive autobiographical style, that motivated Lowell to adjust his own artistic voice. This shift proved to serve Lowell's purposes significantly; for he found his poetic identity when he adopted this style in his autobiographical volume *Life Studies*. In 1960, *Life Studies* won the National Book Award for Poetry, and was regarded by his contemporary poet Stanley Kunitz as "perhaps the most influential book of modern verse since [T. S. Eliot's] *The Waste Land*." [(6)]

In his confessional poems, Lowell reflected on his favourite themes and overwhelming notions of cultural collapse, the agony of doubt, the breech between the ideal and the existing, the contradictory ethical codes, the conflict between order and chaos and the separation between social systems and life's philosophies. Such overwhelming notions were decoded in these poems by releasing the poet's agonizing private memories out of the depths of his soul and mind, to release and project such recollections into his confessional poems in a magnificent mode.

These poems are usually coloured by senses of disdain and contempt, yet, not self-pitying. Such perceptions of bereavement over his personal history and psychological depression seem reflective of the fear and anxiety of his times[(7)]. After all, and as Irvin Ehrenpreis puts it, "he now found it possible not only to treat himself as part of history but to treat history as part of himself. The course of his life became the analogue of the life of his era"[(8)]. He found in his and the nation's past, the incentives of the present's degeneration.

Life Studies

During the 1950s, Lowell underwent distressing psychological crises and impelling artistic experiences that compelled him to assess his life and literary style. His parents died during that decade, his marriage was undergoing difficulties and he suffered from manic attacks, which lasted throughout the rest of his life.

Life Studies (1959) contains three verse parts and a prose autobiographical account of Lowell's childhood among family elders. The poems contained are of intricately confessional nature, dramatic and anchored in studies of the self and individual family members during a particular moment in time and place. Although reactions of his contemporary poets varied from welcoming to condemning, yet, *Life Studies* was a great success [(9).] Lowell began to be widely praised by many of his fellow poets and critics as the greatest American poet of the

mid-century, "the most celebrated poet in English of his generation" [(10)], and in Elizabeth Bishop's words "a magnificent poet." [(11)]

With the writing of *Life Studies*, Lowell turned away from the formal and densely metrical poetry of his early work, to the open and highly autobiographical style that characterized this volume of verse and prose [(12).]
Feelings of dissatisfaction, alienation and despair, together with topics of family stress, dying faith, loss of the soul, suffering and distrust could be traced in most of this volume's poems in which he employs the marital metaphors to nail these issues.

The Marital Metaphors in *Life Studies*

Marriage has been one of the most scrutinized human institutions throughout history. However, during the modern age, poetry brooded mostly over the negative side of marriage; on the estrangement of unhappy couples and on the wretchedness caused by 'divorce'. Moreover, marriage was frequently depicted metaphorically in literature to portray some apparently unrelated topics; just as in Lowell's poetry. Naturally, 'Separation', 'breaking up' and 'divorce' could be at times literally anticipated consequences of marriage. Nevertheless, Lowell applied these terms to a number of major concerns, aiming at contemplating at all sorts of collapsing bonds in life. 'Divorce' for him could signify the separation of man from his self in mental illness, of the artist from society, of the private from the public, and most crucial is the twentieth century historical disintegration of the old cultural structures in the religious, moral and political fields.
Such a crack displays itself in the breakdown of the natural love ties and the destruction of family relationships that culminates logically in isolating the individual and damaging the whole system of values. Even the word 'Life' in the title of the volume could be used ironically; because the volume is actually a study of decay, destruction, ruin, depressing past history and memories, diminished dreams and death, rather than life.
In each part of *Life Studies*, a specific phase of the theme of 'separation', 'breaking up' or 'divorce' is utilized to comment ironically on rank, ethnic groups, gender, sexuality or American nationality.

Marital Metaphors implying Cultural and Political disintegration

In many of his confessional poems, Lowell intended more than documenting his life history or presenting himself in various poses; he wanted his poetry to serve as a cultural commentary and a political assessment of his age. Throughout the following group of poems, marital metaphors are employed to present, analyze and comment on the cultural and political break up the period had witnessed.

"Beyond the Alps"

This is the opening poem of *Life Studies*, in which Lowell reluctantly trades the "City of God" and its solaces for the "City of Art". He replaces Rome by Paris because of the failure of all his aspirations, and for his inability to comprehend the present effect of religious dogmas. Although announcing his unwillingness to abandon Rome and his early Catholicism to endorse the new edgy secularism of Paris, this experience exemplifies an obvious instant of 'divorce':

> Life changed to landscape. Much against my will
> I left the City of God where it belongs.

(ll.7-8)
His abandonment of Roman Catholicism and breaking up with religion [13] was provoked by the abuses of the highest spiritual authority; the Pope who was splitting up with true religious dogma and humble Christian practices:

> The Holy Father dropping his shaving glass,
> And listened. His electric razor purred,
> His pet canary chirped on his left hand.
> The lights of science couldn't hold a candle,
> To Mary.

(ll.17-21)
Since nostalgia to the past and religious values has proved its sterility, therefore, he turns to 'art' as the only refuge left. However, to his surprise, he discovers that art has been misused and "Now Paris, our black classic breaking up"(l.41), and its cultural significance has been distorted. His frustration reaches its peak; for this is a second occasion of 'divorce' in the poem; which might suggest that contemporary man's redemption is denied not only through religion, but also through art.

Playing like background music, the continuous ascending and descending throughout the trip in the Alps evokes life's constant fluctuations, and alludes to the hectic nature of life's journey. The poem introduces the intellectuals' dilemma in an age that aborts even the most fruitful ideas they conceive: "Pure mind and murder at the scything prow-/ Minerva, the miscarriage of the brain"(ll.39-40). It is “an account of savage descant on the inability of civilizations to escape a round of violence and deceit”, as John Crick describes it [14].

"The Banker's Daughter"
The marriage breakdown of Marie de Medici and King Henry IV of France is the theme of this poem. Marie ascribes their separation to her:

> ……..……brutal girlish mood-swings drove
> My husband, wrenched and giddy, from the Louvre,
> To sleep in single lodgings on the town.

(ll.14-16)
The poem maintains that failure of marriages leads not only to the estrangement of the couple as individuals, but also to the disintegration of society; since the family is the basic social unit. On the long run, this eventually will cause the collapse and decay of the European tradition out of which the Classical humanistic ideals were born [15]. However, since this is a royal marriage, the allusions to religious and political corruption are amalgamated into the poem as well.

"A Mad Negro Soldier Confined at Munich"
In such a poem one cannot rule out the idea of Lowell's commenting on his ancestor's crimes towards the Indians [16]. The poem relates the story of a black soldier in confinement at the end of Second World War. He acts as a typical alienated, violent modern man blown apart by the tantalizing distortion of cultural values, political treachery and fear of insanity. It seemed convenient to Lowell that while relating his and his family's decline, he would seize the

opportunity to comment satirically on America's past and present negative aspects as if they are personifications of his own psychological predicament.

"Ford Madox Ford"

This poem highlights the cultural dilemma of the artist in isolation. The poet, novelist and critic Ford Madox Ford is compared to 'Jonah' who was swallowed by the whale and disappeared in its "fat"; hence 'divorced' from his public and his world:

> You emerged in your "worn uniform
> Gilt dragons on the reverse of the tunic,"
> A Jonah-O divorced, divorced
> From the whale-fat of post-war London.
>
> (ll. 19-22)

Ford epitomizes the abandoned artist who is discarded by a public who welcomes only "filthy art, Sir, filthy art!"(l.6). Isolation and separation of such a gifted artist for lack of understanding and appreciation might culminate in loss, madness or even the death of the artist; which leads ultimately to the dissolution of culture.

"For George Santayana"

'Divorce' in the case of the American philosopher George Santayana is twofold; once as he is alienated from both religious belief and his public, and the other of his estrangement from his identity. He was a "Free-thinking Catholic infidel" (l.6) who died at the age of ninety "unbelieving, unconfessed and unreceived"(l.26). Although an American, his 'separation' from America is alluded to by his Spanish origin; a trait that accompanied him to the next world [(17)].

Other poems in *Life Studies,* such as "To Delmore Schwartz" and "Words to Hart Crane", expose the plight of these legislators of culture who feel defeated, estranged, and neglected:

> Because I knew my Whitman like a book,
> Stranger in America, tell my country: I,
> *Cataullus redivivus*, once the rage
> Of the Village and Paris, used to play my role
> ---
> My profit was a pocket with a hole.
> ("Words to Hart Crane",ll.6-9 & 12)

Marital Metaphors employed to mourn parting with innocence

Once embracing the 'confessional' mode, Lowell turns permanently to his life and personal experiences. Using such raw material for his writings; he starts to discuss matters such as the loss of childhood's innocence and the 'separation' from the protective parental figures, and the role of such a breakup in the mid twentieth century social disintegration. In his insightful article, "The Growth of a Poet", Irvin Ehrenpreis confirms that "in the new poems of private recollection Lowell inclines to emphasise the hold that history has on the present, the powerlessness of the self to resist the determination of open or hidden memories" [(18)] . This frustration and breakdown is demonstrated in the following poems from *Life Studies*.

"My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow"

As a child, Lowell seems to have felt the need of such an ideal parental image of 'Grandpa' that could function as a reliable source of power and tranquility, to lean on at times of need that might affirm his uniqueness and value. Although this poem opens with the threat of 'separation' from 'Grandpa', but proceeds to introduce striking examples of spiritual bankruptcy and death. Many of Lowell's Winslow relatives appear in this poem. With all the kindness and the great material achievements of his grandfather Arthur Winslow, nevertheless, he is portrayed as:

> Like my grandfather, the décor
> Was manly, comfortable,
> Overbearing, disproportional.
>
> (1.ll. 34-36)

While trying to maintain the old glorious tradition in the face of the corrupt present world, Lowell becomes disillusioned in the process. His old innocent belief in the perfectibility and grandeur of the Winslow's vanishes, and he becomes conscious of the spiritual hollowness and ruin of his ancestor's supposedly glorious heritage. Their fall incarnates for him the loss of the protective parental figures and ultimately the disintegration of the mid twentieth century social order and consequently culture.

Disappointed by his inability to absorb the ideal into his life and feeling the impossibility to redeem the past, he endorses all the ironies of his plight in this poem; uniting and 'separating' the bonds between past and present and exploring the breakdown of his childhood's dreams and society, from which he remained an exile.

“Commander Lowell”

In this anti-elegy to his father, Robert Lowell was not approving his old man's academic interest in ships, or praising his ditching naval life at Pearl Harbor for a position with a local firm. In fact, Lowell almost blamed his father for his scarred personality, and accused him of being weak, indecisive, immature and ridiculous at times. However, we have to keep in mind that personal history released in poems like this, is not intended exclusively to expose the family's intimate facts, and does never obstruct or confine the poem's interpretation. On the contrary; such revelations sometimes are more extended in social matters and broadly diffused through historical time. Ehrenpreis explains that Lowell not only tried to treat:

> himself as part of history but to treat history as part of himself. The course of his life became the analogue of the life of the era; the sufferings of the poet became a mirror of the sufferings of whole classes….Lowell gave himself the status of a craftsman who reveals life in general by the rendering of his own life. (19)

The dual concept of 'separation' in these two poems reflects on moments when the reader senses Lowell's devastating emotional and psychological 'separation' from his childhood's innocence, followed by those distressing instances of the change of generations and the physical 'separation' of his ancestors from this world. He approximates such intense experiences and formative memories with an analytical eye, tying these childhood

reminiscences into his critical adulthood perceptions to expose more than fragments of his early life; he actually utilizes metaphorically the process of 'separation' and 'divorce', in an endavour to reconstruct his adult wounded identity.

Marital Metaphors Employed in the Quest for the Lost Self

This part deals with the struggle to maintain identity in an environment of sweeping disintegration. The poems under consideration are painfully frank in their self-exposure; especially when Lowell turns inward to ‘speak of the woe' that his fragmented self has suffered; unmasking thus his vulnerable self that acts as a symbol of his age. The 'separation' between the private identity and the public roles assigned by society, created a gap and a predicament for Lowell as a poet and a modern man. Striving to ascertain the wholeness of his self by bridging this breach, Lowell descended to his unconscious depths, reviving those painful hours of sadness, madness and breakdowns, solely to recover his lost self. Poems such as "Walking in the Blue", "Memories of West Street and Lepke", "To Speak of the Woe That Is In Marriage", "Man and Wife" and "Skunk Hour" could all convey this split- self theme.

"Waking in the Blue"

This poem sketches the internal plight of an intelligent man in "the house of the 'mentally ill'"(l.10), and traces the actual and spiritual breakdown, grimness, depression and loss of dignity the situation imposes on such elite:

> What use is my sense of humor?
> I grin at Stanley, now sunk in his sixties,
> Once a Harvard all-American fullback.
>
> (ll.11-13)

When gifted men who once made a difference in life, like Lowell and his fellow mental patient Stanley, are ripped of their sanity, nothing else could connect these people to normal healthy life any more. However, such a 'separation' could present a threat not only to "These victorious figures of bravado ossified young"(l.33) or the old "thoroughbred mental cases"(l. 47) who reside in Boston Mental Hospital; but to human welfare and safety as well; because each of these, including the poet, "holds a locked razor"(l.50) and symbolizes a time bomb. This manifests Lowell's obsession "equally by his own crack-ups and by the symptoms of crack-up in the society around him" [(20)].

"Man and Wife"

This poem depicts a 'divorce' of soul and body between a married couple. Lowell reflects on his troubled marriage and shares with us grotesque glimpses of that ordeal. What is noteworthy here is that he and his wife were lying on his parents' bed! Since his parents' relationship ended on this bed with the "Mother dragged to bed alone ("Commander Lowell", l.52), one can anticipate the imminent discordance of Lowell's own marriage. At the beginning of their marriage, his love and desire for his wife used to cause his "fainting at her [your] feet-" (l.18), when she was sweet and innocent. Now the early idealized romantic relationship has gone sour and cold, and he feels abandoned:

> Now twelve years later, you turn your back.

Sleepless, you hold
Your pillow to your hollows like a child;
Your old-fashioned tirade-
Loving, rapid, merciless-
Breaks like the Atlantic Ocean on my head.

(ll.23-28)

The marital tension was accumulating, the couple was drifting apart, and the 'break-up' of their marriage became inevitable. However, the emotional and physical 'separation' was not the only kind of 'break up' that took place on that bed. His mental condition and the drugs prescribed for his manic depression concluded in dissociating him from his vigilant self, delivering him thus into a world of unconsciousness; which could be the most alarming kind of 'separation'.

"To Speak of Woe That is in Marriage"

This poem presents a common old marriage relationship, when love retreats and lust thrives. The poem is narrated from the wife's point of view, who explains that her lecherous husband "hits the streets to cruise for prostitutes"(l.4) leaving her alone. Their emotional 'divorce' is not only made public, but intimidating as well; for "This screwball might kill his wife, then take a pledge" (l.6). Here is another foolish husband on the verge of 'separating' from his wife, or 'separating' her from this life. Marriage; that religious and legal bond has dissolved into a loveless connection, and love; that sublime emotion has degenerated into "monotonous … lust" (l.7). The wife complains:

It's the injustice … he is so unjust-
Whiskey-blind, swaggering home at five.
My only thought is how to keep alive
What makes him tick? Each night now I tie
Ten dollars and his car key to my thigh….

(ll. 8-12)

What a dehumanizing and humiliating relationship they are leading! 'Divorce' or 'separation' could be predicted in such a degrading relationship when marriage hits the bottom like this. It was the risky revelation of intimately self-belittling chapters of Lowell's marriage story that made this poem one of his best pieces.

"Skunk Hour"

Lowell's reputation as an autobiographical poet rests chiefly on this poem, in which he presents an 'ill-spirited' "I" dwelling in a disintegrated social environment. As in the other poems of *Life Studies*, Lowell risks so much of himself in this poem and goes to the extreme point of describing himself as 'hell'. Surveying in the first part of the poem America's religious, historical, economic, sexual and moral predicaments, he diminishes all boundaries between himself as a poet and his character as the speaker of this poem in the second part; by stressing his private injuries that he considers as reflections of the mad world around him. The first part of the poem, that consists of four stanzas, deals with all sorts of 'separation', 'break-ups', corruption and perversion in his society represented by the three characters of the weird "hermit /heiress", the ambiguous "summer millionaire," and the homosexual "Fairy decorator". These three symbolize three interrelated phases of the breaking down of the Maine village, which was once a prosperous and graceful New England coast city. In a ruthless attempt to keep things unchanged, yet unpreserved, the heiress:

...……..buys up all

the eyesores facing her shore,
and lets them fall,

(ll.10-12)

She is taking the deliberate risk of detaching herself from present reality by perusing an inexplicable hunch that might ultimately jeopardize life's natural progress. Even on a material level she is going to be shut down soon and her lineage will extinguish; because “Her son’s a bishop” (l.4). To attain her privacy and seclusion, she takes refuge in material possessions despite their inability to bring her the desired tranquility. This heiress has the money, but not the vision to maintain her celebrated past adequately. Lowell seems here to mourn the breach between past and present and the absence of the true means of cultural continuity.

Lowell then goes on reviewing another modern scene of sterility, estrangement and economic failure. He presents a prominent “summer millionaire” whose death has deprived Maine village of its most valuable resources, and directed a blow to the summer season and the city's economic thriving. The summer millionaire's 'separation' from the city is three fold; by being just a tourist, by his future absence and by being taken from life. The poem does not specify whether he was another "Richard Cory" like Robinson's; who has lost contact with his inner self and happiness, or he is a modern man who has just lost his material possessions and fled somewhere else to swallow his pride and put an end to his crises! Anyway, this is an ultimate example of private and public failure and breaking up with significant things.

In the last stanza of part one, we have another imposter; a homosexual decorator who further intensifies the idea of 'separation' from sound values and healthy practices. Since he earns no money, this degenerate settles on improving his economic condition by preying on a woman and the speaker suggests, "he'd rather marry"(l.24).

The alienation of the individual from himself and society, the dissolution of all logical and adequate approaches to sustain tradition, in addition to the disappearance of all the chivalrous practices, are all causes and symptoms of the overall cultural breakdown. However, Lowell was aware that the confessional poet's role is not to moralize or fix existing wrong practices; but to strive to identify the negative elements of life, violating social, moral and religious (in particular) rules. Confession has never been the exploration of excitement, joy, of fun but that of the common elements of the existence. (21)

Inhabiting the same sick space with its infected characters, ailing society and declining culture, no one could possibly remain immune to the ruin. Documenting all the bizarre and insincere actions of the representatives of his society in the first four stanzas, throws Lowell back into his own loneliness and culminates in hastening his descent into the abyss of his soul in the second part of the poem, to view his own malaise, spotlight the corruption within himself and announce it without any disguise. After all, this poem epitomizes a decaying culture, a rotting social structure and a suffering self, where the breakdown of the outer world is associated with that of the inner self. John Crick finds this shift of focus to the self as most important because “the poet-protagonist has moved to the centre of the stage: the culture of the self created by the rest of the book produces its hero.” (22)

The atmosphere in these last four stanzas is contaminated by a dim, sick and malignant stain. The dark night of his soul takes over; yet, the poet neither holds back nor indulges in self-pity; but declares openly "My mind's not right"(l.30). Lowell explains:

> The first four stanzas are meant to give a dawdling more or less amiable picture of a declining Maine sea town. I move from the ocean inland. Sterility howls through the scenery, but I try to give a tone of tolerance, humor, and randomness to the sad prospect. The composition drifts, its direction sinks out of sight into the casual, chancy arrangements of nature and decay. Then all comes alive in stanzas V and VI. This is the dark night. I hoped my readers would remember St. John of the Cross's poem. My night is not gracious, but secular, puritan, and agnostical. An Existentialist night. (23)

Notes of anxiety, dissatisfaction, alienation, 'separation' and death-in-life prevail this part. The lovers' path that was supposed to be romantic and blissful turns to be an immoral bleak landscape. The graveyard where they were having an affair might even carry the symbolic connotation of being the burial ground of these lovers' morality and future aspirations. Physicality reigns high and spirituality recoils conquered. The poet does not spare himself; but confesses the dishonest action of spying he committed on the lusty couple! When the poet realizes the wickedness of human existence, his suffering reaches its peak in "I myself am hell"(l. 35). He then conveys his horrifying sense of isolation in an unsheltered world when he announces, "nobody's here"(l. 36). As a sensitive modern poet, Lowell is aware of man's dilemma of dissociation between his actions and objectives, and the disintegration between his mind and soul. Such a 'separation' has wrecked modern man's life and turned it into a nightmare.

As a counterpart to this world of pain, restrains, fragmentation, alienation and life's moral landscape, Lowell introduces in the last three stanzas of this part, the healthy world of the skunks. They do not fear the darkness or the bareness of the world; but proceed eating freely. Ironically, these stinky repellent animals might have the key to the world's crisis. Lowell introduces these animals as free, positive, daring, lively, purposeful, fertile, enduring, creative and most important, at accord with their world that there is no clash or separation between their needs and actions:

> Only skunks, that search
> In the moonlight for a bite to eat.
> They march on their soles up Main Street:
> White stripes, moonstruck eyes' red fire.
> (ll. 37-40)

Although modern poets do not offer solutions, but could Lowell be suggesting that if man could only possess the skunks' creative qualities, he could have the persistence for life that drives him to face the corrupt world, realize his potentials, change the way he views life and utilize such new perception to revitalize his inner energy and pull his shattered self together! Lowell does not hide his fascination by these skunks; on the contrary, he esteems their meaningful life and associates their stinky smell with the life-enhancing air that he enjoys breathing; affirming "I stand on top/of our back steps and breathe the rich air-"(ll.43-44). Their frank conduct, carefree life approach and spontaneous attitude packed the atmosphere with fertility and won Lowell's palpable admiration. The poem that began with a rhythm of despair closes now with a tone of promise. At least the appearance of the skunks could be an allusion to potential freedom and a sign of survival and possible continuity of life at that city;

hence hope in a secular emancipation at least. Such a positive anticipation testifies for Lowell's willingness to embrace life and the world.

"Skunk Hour" encompassed all sorts of 'divorce' metaphors referred to before in *Life Studies*. It opened with the cultural breakdown and moved to state striking examples of economic failure, social collapse, moral degeneration, spiritual hollowness, self-persecution and human debasement that are all forms of 'parting' with the standard healthy life style they are supposed to lead.

In addition, there is another special case of the 'divorce' metaphor in *Life Studies*; that of the of poet's fundamental 'split ego'. In his thesis, Gye-Yu Kang observes that:

> There exist two selves in Life Studies: that of the remembered past and that of the remembering present. Their relation is the same as that of the patient and the analyst in a psychoanalytic process. While the remembered past self recounts fragment of his past memories, the present self plays the role of the analyst watching the process of remembering.(24)

This is an apparent indication that Lowell was intentionally separating these two parts of his self, to supervise and scrutinize his poetic creation.

Fact or fiction

Many readers review *Life Studies* as merely a sarcastic investigation of failure, where Lowell honestly reveals his family history, his relationships with his wives and his recurrent fits of depression and madness; to write of common experiences of alienation, separation and loss. However, we have to keep in mind that autobiographical literature could sometimes have a fictional foundation, meddle with facts, or even blend reality with imagination. Frank Bidart affirms in his brief afterword to Lowell's *Collected Poems* that:

> "Confessional" poetry is not confession. How Lowell's candor is an illusion created by art. He always insisted that his so-called confessional poems were in significant ways invented. The power aimed at in *Life Studies* is the result not of accuracy but the illusion of accuracy, the result of arrangement and invention. (25)

Paulina Korzeniewska examines what she calls "forging biography", in her article "the-artifice-of-honesty", and quotes the autobiographical poetess and Lowell's student Anne Sexton, as commenting:

> Each poem has its own truth. The poetic truth is not necessarily autobiographical…. I do not adhere to literal facts all the time; I make them up whenever needed. … It's a difficult label, confessional, because I often confess to things that never happened. (26)

Likewise, Lowell confessed when interviewed by Frederick Seidel that the poems of *Life Studies* "are not always factually true. There's a good deal of tinkering with fact….I've invented facts and changed things, and the whole balance of the poem was something invented. So there's a lot of artistry." (27)

It becomes perceptible that what many have considered a record of Lowell's most intimate recollections could very likely be just an artistic method of recapturing, selecting and reshaping the real experiences entrenched in the poet's memory, and blending them with imaginatively constructed episodes that enhance and sustain the poem.

Lowell believed also that "real poetry came, not from fierce confessions, but form something almost meaningless but imagined" [(28)]. Reading *Life Studies* proves that truthfulness and privacy of the allusion do not make better poetry. Treating Lowell by many of his contemporary poets and critics as "the poet-historian of our time" and "the last of [America's] influential public poets" [(29)], did not arise from the facsimile of his experiences mentioned in his poems. Valuing his poetry was, in fact, due to his artistic command, comprehensible style, attentive contemplations on the self, brilliance of detail and the innovative mechanisms he demonstrated.

Lowell's confessional poetry appealed to readers either for being a fresh enterprise of self-exposition, or because readers could identify with these experiences. Yet, to add a new major incentive for the public admiration, this research demonstrated that Lowell has created a new reality by using the 'divorce' metaphor; not just as a descriptive tool, but also as a forceful sensory quality that explores the concepts of self-awareness and conveys Lowell's thoughts and feelings towards so many private and public contemporary concerns. Such compelling metaphors of 'parting', 'separation' and 'divorce' became mental representatives of the sensory experience in Lowell's *Life Studies*.

CONCLUSION

During the later phase of Lowell's writing, that began with the publication of *Life Studies* in (1959), his perspective of composition demonstrated an extreme abandonment and a 'break up' with all his early formal poetic techniques, forms, tones, topics, directions, mentality and idioms he used to employ. Under the persistent urge to renovate his style, he chose to become the speaking sensibility of his age by embracing a frank and highly autobiographical style; or what came to be widely known as "confessional". By exposing his private life and embarrassing intimacies, criticizing his family cruel history, speaking of the despair in his marriage relationships and commenting on his frequent fits of insanity, he managed to turn his confessional poetry into a sincere testimony and critique of the militant, bestial, materialistic, ruined modern world.

Whether Lowell was adhering, in *Life Studies*, strictly to his personalized memories and authentically confessing actual experiences, or just relating recollections transformed creatively into art, *Life Studies* remains one of the most genuine depictions of real life experiences. Lowell should be appreciated for the artistry in adopting the fresh and honest mode of exploring and reflecting on the self, the remarkable technical skill, the provocative attitude he adopts to expose in a satirical tone his self's depths and his relationships and definitely for having the guts to move away from Eliot's impersonal style. Yet, we should credit him; in particular, for his suggestive language and his vibrant metaphors that brilliantly invoke a wealth of hints.

The poems of *Life Studies* represent a process of breakdown that progresses from the worldly to the self and from specific historical events to more personal localized assertions. The poems portray a relentless Journey in modern wastelands of actual life and of the self. Lowell depicts in these poems the theme of physical, spiritual and psychological disintegration. Since 'divorce' was one of the most intensive and recurrent experiences in Lowell's life, he utilized some of the familiar 'marital metaphors' such as 'divorce', 'break up', 'parting' and 'separation' as a medium to release his inward psychological and spiritual turmoil and reflect on historical and local cultural crises; that could manifest a universal condition.

Writing *Life Studies* was by itself a proclamation of 'divorce' between Lowell and his early poetic voice and sensibility. Lowell took it a step further when he mixed three sections of poetry with a prose section; 'breaking' and 'divorcing' thus, the volume from old rigid metrical structures. A 'divorce' between Lowell and Roman Catholicism had to follow; not only because religious beliefs seemed inappropriate to such a novel kind of expression, but also incompatible to the modern spiritual and intellectual flux and wasteland. Another crucial case of 'divorce' ensued when he approached his memorable family past, only to realize his ancestors' dishonorable history. All the senses of honour he cherished as a child, turned into disdain, repulse and contempt upon discovering the sham of that myth. Such negative feelings of guilt for his ancestral deceptions 'divorced' him from childhood innocence. The poet had to go through another excruciating experience of 'divorce'; which had to be this time not the metaphoric but the actual. Three episodes of painful divorces resulted in enormous pressure on Lowell's life and poetry; which is referred to recurrently in *Life Studies*. However, most important of all, was Lowell's stripping off the psychological pretense to declare his insanity. In what could be observed clinically as a therapeutic tactic to restore his mental health and the sense of his wholeness, Lowell used his fractured self to compose some of the most memorable poems in English literature. It is so inspirational that a grotesque experience of 'divorce' from sane life, would turn into a tempest of poetic creativity; instead of tearing down the poet.

Lowell's creativity displays itself in both; the merging of such rich personal experiences to public themes, and in the employment of first hand 'divorce' experiences in shaping and commenting on these themes.

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