Robert Lowell's Life Studies as a Modern Miniature Epic: The Synthesis of the Confessional and the Epic Genre

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Abstract

Robert Lowell is one of the most influential poets of the 1950s and 60s. His pioneering work, *Life Studies*, was the catalyst that stimulated the sudden blooming of a new literary movement, which was termed "The Confessional Poetry." M. L. Rosenthal first applied the term *Confessional* to Robert Lowell's work. The new *Confessional* poems remove the mask that poets had been hiding behind and provided an insight into the private life of the poets.

The secret of Lowell's success lies in his power of giving *Life Studies* the depth and profundity of a miniature epic. What is immediately striking is the exact contemporaneous ironies of American history, deterioration of the New England tradition, and an air of reality. In modern times the miniature epic has become a suitable form in the hands of serious poets. The later poems of Eliot, of Edith Sitwell and many Cantos of Pound are little epics of modern times.

Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* is a synthesis of the confessional and the epic genre. It is a miniature epic that encompasses the inner world of the poet and paints every landscape of his mind in epic proportions.

Keywords: confessional poetry, miniature epic, new literary movement, insight of the private life of poets,

Introduction

"The Myth that Lowell creates is that of… America" remarks M. L. Rosenthal in his book *The New Poets*.[1] The secret of Lowell's success lies in his power of giving *Life Studies* the depth and profundity of a miniature epic. What is immediately striking is the exact contemporaneous ironies of American history, deterioration of the New England tradition, and an air of reality. In modern times the miniature epic has become a suitable form in the hands of serious poets. According to Northrop Frye, "the later poems of Eliot, of Edith Sitwell and many Cantos of Pound"[2] are little epics of modern times. *Life Studies* in this way can be called a miniature epic, which takes in its fold the cultural, historical and social aspects of mighty American civilization. In this way Lowell follows the tradition of the great moderns and *Life Studies* can be placed in the category of *The Waste Land*, *Cantos*, *Paterson* and *The Bridge*. In *The Waste Land*, T. S. Eliot projects a complete view of civilization, of human history and human failure and of the perennial quest for salvation. Here we find an anguished concern to register a sick world. In *The Cantos*, Pound as a voyager in the stream of history from the classical past to the present develops a personal view of a process of deepening cultural decay. He takes us to the

classical age of Greece and Rome with their high cultures down to the modern age with its horrors of world wars. *The Bridge* of Hart Crane presents the machine culture, so many other poets have deplored. In *Paterson,* William Carlos Williams presents Paterson, New Jersey, in its historical and contemporary aspects, both as an American industrial city with Passaic River providing power for its industries and as a city of man seen in its mean and trivial actualities. The only difference between these classical works and *Life Studies* is that the contemporary American civilization and its, to complete the quotation of Rosenthal, "history and predicament are embodies in those of its own family and epitomizes in his own psychological experience."[3]

Robert Lowell is one of the most influential poets of the 1950s and 60s. His pioneering work, *Life Studies,* was the catalyst that stimulated the sudden blooming of a new literary movement, which was termed "The Confessional Poetry." M. L. Rosenthal first applied the term *Confessional* to Robert Lowell's work. The new *Confessional* poems remove the mask that poets had been hiding behind and provided an insight into the private life of the poets. The label "Confessional Poetry" in many critics' view over-simplifies and undervalues the nature of the poetry of Lowell, and other confessional poets as Sylvia Plath and Anne sexton.

Every age finds an expression through its representative poets. Milton tries to justify the ways of God to Men and William Wordsworth propounded his philosophy of Nature through his poetry. The confessional poets represent the modern age of alienation and instability. Despite being extremely private their poetry reflects the larger discords of the emotional landscape of the western conscience. By expressing their deep turmoil of contemporary soul, their poetry gains universal appeal.

The book *Life Studies* is divided into four sections. The second and fourth sections are directly confessional. The second section of *Life Studies* is subtitled "91 Revere Street". It is a superb prose autobiographical piece. The fourth section sutitled "Life Studies" contains intensely confessional poems. However, the first section of *Life Studies* which is not directly confessional is discussed in this paper. The poems which are not directly confessional are important as they present the background for Lowell's confessional poems. In the context of the first section of *Life Studies*, we perceive *Life Studies* not merely as a "collection of small moment-by moment victories over hysteria and self-concealment." The four sections of the book have the impact of "four intensifying waves of movement that smash at the reader's feelings and break repeatedly over his mind. The poems that make up the opening movement are not personal in the sense of the rest of the book. They are poems of violent contradiction, a historical overture to define the disintegration of the world." [4]

The first section of *Life Studies* consists of four poems, namely 'Beyond the Alps,' 'The Banker's Daughter,' 'Inauguration Day' and 'The Mad Negro Soldier Confined in Munich.' The third section of the book has four poems about four writers with whom the poet identifies himself in some way. These four writers are Ford Madox Ford, George Santayana, Delmore Schwartz and Hart Crane. These two sections of the book *Life Studies* are discussed in this chapter.

The first section of *Life Studies* is reminiscent of Lowell's first phase of poetry writing. The quartet of poems in this section were published earlier in 1953-54, therefore, the style and theme of these poems point both forward and backward. These poems could easily fit into Lowell's earlier volume like *Land of Unlikeness* or *Lord Weary's Castle.* In

these poems Lowell has not yet thrown off the robes of a preacher, which he ultimately does in the later three sections of the book. Without being directly critical of the society, he presents a picture of a civilization that has lost its dignity. We may view the first section as a bridge between the impersonal and objective poetry of the earlier phase and the personal and subjective poetry of the later phase.

This section forms the background against which the poet's personal history unfolds in the last section. The four poems in this section sum up the cultural and historical context of the poet's life and times. The first two poems, 'Beyond the Alps' and 'The Banker's Daughter' epitomize the failure of the European tradition out of which our classical humanistic ideals were born. The third poem is a severe satire on Eisenhower and the fourth 'The Mad Negro Soldier Confined in Munich' culminates in the tragedy of an individual, which is indeed the result of social, cultural and political degradation. In this section the movement of the theme is from the general to the particular and individual. How the tragedy of an individual is related to the social and cultural values of the time, seems to be the major concern of this section. As M. L. Rosenthal has argued; the poem in this section move from the general critical summing up of the state of the civilization – similar in conception though not in style or the specifics of political attitude to that made familiar to us by Pound and Eliot – to an equal harsh comment on the state of the Republic and then to a close up of the effect of the last war on one Negro soldier. The final poem of the group shifts our attention from the madness of society to its embodiment in one man.

'Beyond the Alps' describes a symbolic train journey from the city of priest (Rome) to the city of artists (Paris). The poet speaks directly to the reader, discarding the mask of the dramatic monologue, so often used in his earlier poems. The journey is both real and symbolic; it is both through time and space. The consciousness of the poet encompasses the whole gamut of European history from the classical culture to Rome and Greece to the Europe of 1950s. The poem is full of topical illusions. In the 1950s, the Swiss had failed to scale the Everest. The same year, the Catholic Church had proclaimed that the Virgin Mary was physically assumed into heaven. Lowell finds such dogmas disgusting in an age of science. He presents a striking caricature of the Pope:

> When the Vatican made Mary's Assumption dogma,
> the crowds at San Pietro screamed *papa,*
> The Holy Father dropped his shaving glass,
> And listened. His electric razor purred,
> His pet canary chirped on his left hand.

In these lines the Pope's attempt to deal even handily with science and religion is parodied.

The dense symbolism of the poem imparts a literal as well as figurative meaning to the train journey from Rome to Paris. The mountains – Alps, Everest or the Acropolis are symbols of human aspirations and religious ideals. The poet contrasts the inadequacies of human achievement with the perfection of human ideals. The snobbish Victorian culture of the nineteenth century with its materialistic values has brought about the spiritual crisis of the twentieth century.

The Victorians accepted the world without questioning it, but Lowell is forced to question every set of values – religious, social and cultural. The dogma of Mary's

assumption is used by Lowell as "the emblem of vulgar human credulity – the decay of imagination into superstition – a principle embodied in the Pope"[5]

In the first stanza of the poem, the poet establishes the scheme of his poetic framework, which is the journey from Rome to Paris. With the phrase "man changed to landscape" he begins his personal meditation about religion, history and culture:

Much against my will,
I left the city of God where it belongs.

Besides the literal meaning, this line may well express Lowell's valediction to Roman Catholicism. Philip Hobsbaum says, Lowell's valediction to Roman Catholicism is "expressed in terms of a railway journey away from Rome, the city of God, over the Alps and on to Paris, the city of art."[6]

Lowell turns from religion to history in the course of his personal meditation. Traversing through the past, Lowell realizes that the past is as violent and murderous as the present. The ravages of the Greek and Roman empires were no less terrible than the ruinous state of post world war Europe. Mussolini and Caesar both shared extreme lust for power. In the line, "He was one of us/ only prose." Lowell implies that all human beings share a lust for power. History is full of power hungry rulers from Caesar to Mussolini. Power and corruption go hand in hand in politics.

The second stanza expresses the poet's dissatisfaction with the modern religious values. Faith has given way to superstition. In the age of science, people still kiss "Saint Peter's brazen sandal" and the "Deuce's lynched, bare, booted skull still spoke." Corruption in the name of religion is disgusting. In the line,

The light of science cannot hold a candle
to Mary risen –

the figurative meaning is quite clear. Science has failed to illuminate the human vision. People after twenty years of Christianity, have not understood the real meaning of Christian faith. They are still idolaters of power, worshippers of mere fetishes, whether religious, like St. Peter's brazen sandals or secular, like the martyred Mussolini's relics.

The struggle of the poet's consciousness continues through out the night of his train journey. When the train reaches Paris, it is dawn, with the morning comes hope and a sense of rebirth. "Turning towards the intellect and the arts – towards Athens and Apollo – he rejects Mary and Pius."[7] Lowell advocates a unified sensibility, which could make reason, faith and the creative imagination work together. Minerva was the Goddess of both arts and war. In the ideals of the Goddess Minerva there is a unification of creative and destructive powers. Lowell implies that literature thrives on destruction. He also implies that a truly balanced world should have a proper unification of creation as well as destruction. But in the twentieth century there is "no ticket for that altitude/ once held by Hellas" "Only Paris is left, the black classic city" of our disintegrating culture; "for our age seems unable to give direction and purpose to the primeval, irrational violence of human nature."[8]

'Beyond the Alps' consists of a rush of different images suggestive of rapid passing landscape viewed from a train window. The poem consists of three sonnets with slightly irregular rhyme scheme, the last of the three ending in a couplet. The rhyme scheme is different for each of the three stanzas, while the final couplet is detached. It is apparent that Lowell has got away from the very rigid formal pattern of his earlier verse, but he is not yet willing to abandon rhyme completely. The poem is enriched by the use of alliteration, assonance and internal rhyme. It is also rich in puns and witticisms. The wit and mild irony is evident in the following lines:

I envy the conspicuous
Waste of our grandparents on their grand tours-
Long haired Victorian sages accepted the universe,
while breezing on their trust funds through the world.

The next poem, 'The Banker's Daughter' reveals "the welter of grossly sensual, mindlessly grasping egotism that attended the birth of the modern age. Marie de Medici, 'the banker's daughter' soliloquizes about 'blood and pastime,' the struggle between monarchy and the 'pilfering pillaging democracies,' the assassination of her husband."[9]

The poem presents a debased picture of French politics, where relationships are reduced to mere greed and calculation. Marie de Medici, daughter of Frances Co de Medici is married to Henry IV, who is twenty years older than her. The poem gives details of the marriage of this mismatched pair. Both husband and wife are unfaithful to each other, and both manipulate their relationship to their advantage. The queen fabricates lies to rob the king of his purse. Her extravagant spending on clothes and jewelry has made the exchequer bankrupt. The King lives in fear of being murdered and the queen takes up a lover. The queen justifies her conduct by reminding us that the King had adulteries during his lifetime. The king's "nightmare son" is growing older day by day. The poem ends with the following lines:

…if you ever took
unfair advantage by right of birth.
Pardon the easy virtue of the earth.

The poem does not give full details of the historic events. According to a note attached to the poem by Lowell, the queen was exiled to a house lent her by the painter Rubens. Lowell omits the fact that the son Louis XIII later commanded the assassination of the queen's lover. Lowell does not emphasise the historical details since his aim is not to write a political poem. The discords in the personal relationships of political figures are his main concern. He presents a picture of an unstable marriage, full of distrust, financial manipulation, adultery hatred and even murder. The poem has highly personal undertone. It prepares the reader for the very personal prose account '91 Revere Street' in which Lowell describes with ruthless frankness, his parents' marital relationships – the mother slowly but steadily pressurizing Lowell's father to resign from the Navy and deed her, his property. In the poem 'Unwanted,' in his last book of poems *Day by Day*, Lowell also confesses his suspicion that his mother perhaps had a lover – the psychiatrist Merrill

Moore. The poem, 'The Banker's Daughter' is a preface to the two marriage poems – 'Man and Wife' and 'To Speak of the Woe that is in Marriage.'

The third poem of this section, 'Inauguration Day: January 1953' is a grim and satiric commemoration of the inauguration of Dwight Eisenhower, whom he succeeded to the presidency of the United States of America in 1953. The subway journey through frozen Washington is the central event of the poem. The ice image present through out the poem represents the death of the spirit and the degradation of the American heritage. Stuyvesant and Grant were military heroes whose leadership had led American history into violence and bloodshed. General Eisenhower's coming to power reminds Lowell of these two military heroes. He fears for the future of America. The grim realities of the military rule are figuratively conveyed in the poem by the death like stillness of the predominant imagery. The statue of Stuyvesant, the founder of New York, is covered with snow. Grant's statue is equally lifeless. Ulysses Grant was a military general during the civil wars and his presidential term was particularly unpleasant. He is remembered for his victory at Cold Harbour, at the close of the Civil War and his presidential term was particularly unpleasant. He is remembered for his victory at Cold Harbour, at the close of the civil war. By presenting the snow covered, lifeless statues of these military heroes, Lowell tries to imply the rigidity of the military rule:

The snow had buried Stuyvesant
The subways drummed the vaults…

Ice symbolizes lethargy and inertia. Through the ice imagery, Lowell tries to establish the militarism in the Presidency is a doom for any country:

Ice, ice. Our wheels no longer move.
Look, the fixed stars, all just alike
As lack-land atoms, split apart
And the Republic summons like
The mausoleum in her heart.

In the last poem of the section, 'A Mad Negro Soldier Confined in Munich' the disintegration of the world is shown through the window of psychological breakdown of an individual, a black soldier. The recurrence of blacks in Lowell's works, as in Faulkner's is a constant reminder to the Whites of their original sin. The monologue of the black soldier is a transparent mask for Lowell's personal utterance. The monologue is self-centred, creating a first person universe. Jonathan Raban says, "The clear finality of every statement is both the price and prize of madness; and only in madness can such images of surreal exactitude be framed."[10] The speech of the mad soldier is frenetic and rhetorical. Through this monologue we can feel the void of isolation experienced by the speaker. The soulless mechanical existence is governed by clocks and roll-calls:

O mama, mama, like a trolley – pole
Sparking at contact, her electric shock –
The power house! ...The doctor calls our rolls

No knives, no forks. We file before the clock,
And fancy minnows, slaves of habit, shoot
Like starlight through their air-conditioned bowl.
Its time for feeding. Each subnormal boot –
Black heart is pulsing to its ant-egg dole.

Philip Hobsbaum opines that this sympathetic portrait in the poem may be based on one of Lowell's fellow inmates in the Munich Military hospital where the poet was confined in August 1952.

M. L. Rosenthal comments about this poem:

> Here the wit, the audacious intimacy, the acutely bizarre tragic sense of Lowell's language takes on jet speed. In this monologue the collapse of traditional meaning and cultural distinctions is dramatized in the frenzy of one contemporary figure. Thus Lowell begins to zero in on his main target, himself as the damned speaking sensibility of his world. The humiliated, homicidal fury of the Negro soldier throws its premonitory shadow over the disturbed "comedy" of "91 Revere Street" which follows. It helps us to see, beneath the "Jamaican" nuances of relationship in a society of ritual pretensions but no centre of gravity. How anguished is this prose section's murderous dissection of the poet's parents and its complaint against a childhood gone awry. In this way it prepares us for the personal horrors with which the book closes.[11]

In the book *Life Studies*, every poem and prose piece, is a piece of art in its own right, but the book when read as a whole, transports the reader into the psychological world of the writer. Each poem supplements the other, making it full of hidden and unspoken meaning. The prose piece, "91 Revere Street" is particularly significant, for the deep understanding of the poet's confessional poems.

Life Studies became a controversial book when it was published in 1959. Most of the critics who had praised Lowell's earlier works, failed to appreciate this book as its style and subject were entirely divorced from the style and subject of his earlier works. Joseph Bennett, in *The Hudson Review* for Autumn, 1959, says that Lowell has used "off-hand journalistic technique." It is carelessly written. Frank Kermode, in September (1 May 1959) claimed that the poet was now so sure of his power that he ignored the danger of lapsing into superior doggerel. Donald Davie complained of confusion between Lowell's public role as a poet and his private life. Allen Tate, too, undermined the book's worth. In a letter to Lowell, he said that the poems about the family were bad. He termed them "scattered items of experience," and categorically advised against publication. Tate felt that the poems were inferior, because they lacked the imaginative thrust towards a symbolic order.

A. Alvarez in Great Britain and M. L. Rosenthal in the United States were the tow critics who visualised Lowell's *Life Studies* as an influential work. A. Alvarez wrote in the *Observer* (12th April, 1959):

> Instead of contorting his conflicts into a baroque theology, Lowell exposes their beginnings in a series of ironic and often tender reminiscences about the family figures that loomed large in his childhood.

M. L. Rosenthal wrote a book review for *The Nation* on September 19, 1959, in which he claimed that violence and imbalance were the raw material of these poems. He compares the book with *Mauberley* and *The Bridge*. Today the comparison does not seem exaggerated. William Carlos Williams, in two letters, wrote to the poet, "You have a new field. You needed that break, rhyme could not contain you any longer, you have too much to say for that." In the second letter he wrote, "...there is no lying permitted to a man who writes that way."[12]

In *Life Studies* Lowell liberates himself of his earlier manner and matter. Along with Elizabeth Bishop, for Lowell too, we may say that, "Everything and anything suddenly seemed material for poetry – or not material, seemed to be poetry." And "life itself right for the time being." It is not easy to over praise *Life Studies*. Most people writing personal poems risk the danger of posturing and sentimentality. Lowell avoids both these dangers successfully. Lowell's most personal and confessional poems bestowed with a kind of agility. His comical irony and humour, balanced with the emotions of anger, hysteria and disgust present a new perspective, which is fascinating to the reader. It avoids that simple pathos, which is most common in the confessional verse of lesser poets. He presents the banalities of life without straining to moralize. The poems do not begin and end with the self – they have a wider range. The book, taken as a whole, presents a miniature epic saga of modern American civilization. The story of the degradation of his family is the story of the post war America. To present the story of the "self" with such psychological depth, nostalgia and bitterness required a balanced and artistic approach, which Lowell achieves by a mixture of love and loathing, humour and horror. Lowell has, in this manner, depersonalized his personal life and endowed it with a wider approach. The two non-confessional sections included in this confessional book, emphasise the wide approach of the poet. Lowell does not begin and end with the "self." Lowell's approach is saturated with a sense of objective reality, which saves the book from being merely a self-analytic case history and elevates it to the level of a miniature epic saga.

Irvin Ehrenpreis says:

> Lowell seems determined to maintain his intellectual distinction, his subtlety, his rigorous complexity of form. What appears most astonishing about the recent work (*Life Studies*) is the very old motifs persist in new transformations with deepening significance. There are the city gardens, the parallels of beast with man, the bitter pathos of memory working on the fixed character. But in the new poems of private recollection Lowell inclines to emphasize the hold that history has on the present, the powerlessness of the self to resist the determination of open or hidden memories. The insatiable consciousness of the poets comments sardonically on the very self-censuring auto-analysis that produced *Life Studies.*[13]

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