

Lowell Had Been Misspelled *Lovel*

Arthur Oberg

The evening of June 6, 1971, the Mermaid Theatre in London. Robert Lowell was to read from his poetry. He read only from *Notebook* (1970), and seven poems in all—four loving poems for his daughter, Harriet, a poem for Robert Frost, a poem ostensibly about a go-go dancer but really about “western marriage,” and a bad but revealing poem about an older, rejected woman poet who accused Lowell of having no human concern for unestablished writers. But before reading his own poems, Lowell read poems of other important moderns: Randall Jarrell, Allen Tate, Elizabeth Bishop, Ezra Pound. They were his own poems as well. He also talked before, and in between, his readings. The things which occupied him were various, but what never varied was the passionate care expended in talking about them. He talked about Wallace Stevens’ last poems and about their particular music as it is shaped by that poet’s sense of aging and mortality. He talked about Frost as perhaps the only sane man in a mad, tragic family. By the time that audience questions were over, Lowell had rejected a request to read beyond the two hours he had already been reading and talking. And he had to endure, under the guise of a question, abuse from a young man about how unwitty, unimportant, and overrated a poet he was. By that time, Lowell’s anecdote, told earlier in the evening, about his daughter and the poems of *Notebook*—“Daddy, they’re all footmarks”—took on an even more complicated context than Lowell must have intended in telling it in the first place.

I begin with the personal and the anecdotal. Not because Lowell himself so often relies upon these as major strategies in his poems from *Life Studies* (1959) and the books which follow, but because that evening at the Mermaid brought together for me some of the major problems and pleasures that attended Lowell and his poetry then, and that attend him, perhaps even more, now.

The difficulties of the public and private art and life. The unending need for, and demanding weight of a tradition and homage to poets alive and dead. The awareness of the poet aging, and so “moved into position to die.” The reputation which a poet may gain or suffer or have change, once or more in a lifetime. The need for love and fame, and the nagging doubt not only of whether they will arrive but whether they can be joined. The question whether love and marriage ever were meant to go together at all. The problems of writing the long poem. Explicitly, and by dolphin-like implication, these were the matters which surfaced that evening. To these and to some related matters, I wish to turn in the course of this essay.

Robert Lowell has been writing for over thirty years, and he has been conscious of development, reputation, and the non-linear way that the poet proceeds in the world. The matter of reputations has dogged Lowell with each successive

book, and with his excursions into other genres and literatures, into new styles and old styles brought complexly back. Lowell has continued to be the one English speaking and writing poet whom critics, and poet-critics in particular, have seen as *the* poet, or vehemently, *not* the poet, of the last ten or fifteen years.

The poetry which Lowell wrote and published before *Life Studies* recorded an able, sometimes precocious poet in search of materials for an art as well as a style to manage that art. If Lowell later rejected much of what he felt this earlier work represented to him as art and in life, he also has gone back to parts of it in successive volumes—reworking some of the poems, including others in new contexts, and showing the same respect for craft and language and intelligence which marked his work from the very beginning. And some of the earlier poems from *Land of Unlikeness* (1944), *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946), and *The Mills of the Kavanaghs* (1951) have settled into familiar anthology pieces which, to those critics who have disliked Lowell's later departures, are representative Lowell.

But to determine what is representative in a poet's work proves problematic both for the writer and the critic. The poet learns that others may mistake what he wants to do or to depart from. If he lives long enough, as Lowell already has even past fifty-five, each new book of his raises the question of his status as a major or major-minor poet. In one of the poems from *History* (1973), Lowell records with both passion and distance:

Ah the swift vanishing of my older
generation—the deaths, suicide, madness
of Roethke, Berryman, Jarrell and Lowell,
“the last the most discouraging of all
surviving to dissipate *Lord Weary's Castle*
and nine subsequent useful poems
in the seedy grandiloquence of *Notebook*.”¹

As an updated *Howl*, this passage takes its swipe at unfavorable criticism while reaching out to assume the savage indignation of the mad, unmad talents of Allen Ginsberg and Jonathan Swift. It is not sheer *reportage* or quotation, any more than it would have been in the anecdotal context of any poem from *Life Studies*. It is clear that Lowell does not agree with this adverse judgment upon his development, or descent, as a poet. But he places this disagreement in the larger context of those other kindred-spirit poets, and by implication in the con-

¹ Robert Lowell, “Last Night,” *History* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), p. 204. Hereafter, references to poems in this volume (*H*) will be included in the text. The criticism of Lowell included in this poem is that of Donald Hall. Lowell's quoting is very close to Hall's actual words and phrasing in “The State of Poetry—A Symposium,” *The Review*, nos. 29-30 (Spring-Summer, 1972), 40.

text of the critical reception which greeted each new work by them in their lifetimes or after. Where Lowell separates himself from them is in the fact that he remains alive; his work, non-posthumous; himself, not just Robert Lowell, but *a* Lowell, whom the critic at times has thought it his right to address even more demanding—a Lowell of Boston “where the Lowells talk to the Cabots/ And the Cabots talk only to God.”

To talk about Lowell is immediately to address contradiction. He can be medieval in his obsession with last things, Renaissance in his admiration for the infinitely gifted man, classical or Augustan in his judgment and taste, Romantic and Victorian and Modern by turn. And it may be in his position as Modern that he tries to hold together what in any other age either never would have had to be reconciled, or would have been so overwhelming as to lead to madness or death. Since Yeats, we have not had a poet who has taken such extensive stock of who he is, where he is, and what he takes poetry to be.

The form which Lowell's stock-taking discovers is close to the “agonizing reappraisal” which separates Lowell in “Memories of West Street and Lepke” both from the lobotomized, hence unthinking Louis Lepke, “*Murder Incorporated's* Czar,” and from John Foster Dulles who originated the phrase.² Lowell's violence is likely to be verbal rather than physical, just as his policy of brinkmanship is likely to be some level of irony within a poem rather than within international policy and politics. But such strategies exist only for establishing or confirming a human context. At worst, Lowell's stock-taking can reduce him to writing about Lowell reading Lowell or about reading critics reading Lowell and writing on Lowell. On such occasions we are not very far from Krapp listening to Krapp listening to Krapp, or from Portnoy on himself.

At best, stock-taking involves Lowell in focusing upon the ways in which the public and private man so steadily inform and contradict one another. For Lowell, this proves part of that search for style which takes the poet into considerations of where and how style can turn into stylization, or stylelessness. *Life Studies* remains a seminal book because in it the poet is concerned with “ton,” “ambiance,” “éclat,” “décor,” “air,” “atmosphere.” This book showed Lowell distinguishing between false styles and true styles, styles that concealed and styles that defined. Later work of his extends this concern, and in the *Notebook* poems—which include those from *Notebook 1967-68* (1969); *Notebook* (revised and expanded edition, 1970); *History, For Lizzie and Harriet*, and *The Dolphin* (1973)—Lowell at times turns to consider the history of style, playfully and devastatingly creating labels as hybrid as “wrecked gingerbread Gothic” and “suburbia-proletarian.”

The background against which Lowell in *Life Studies* takes stock, addresses questions of style, and reveals or hides from us his sensibility, frequently is that of his parents and grandparents. It is a world in this century and the nineteenth,

² Robert Lowell, *Life Studies* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1959), p. 86. Hereafter, references to poems in this volume (*LS*) will be included in the text.

and it shares much with the eighteenth-century concern with decorum. It is a world of men and a society of women, although Lowell—like Henry James in his novels, like Eliot in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” and like Pound in “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley”—is aware of the ways in which these depart from and reverse that distinction, both as improvement and as deterioration. A society of men and a world of women, after all, would create its own losses and problems. What has happened to feeling and thought in these worlds and societies—since they are plural in complexity and fact—determines much of what we take Robert Lowell to be.

The *Life Studies* prose section, “91 Revere Street,” shows how problematic feeling has become, and it details a situation which the rest of the book bears out. As different as Lowell’s parents are, they share, in his portraits of them in “91 Revere Street,” problems in feeling. They risk feeling too little or too much. Lowell, in turn, both as child and as adult, saves himself from emotional exhaustion through wit which exposes discrepancies and insists upon saving discriminations. Yet no one more than Lowell is aware that distinction-making is not an inevitable good; to his mind, the Christian Scientist whose special language and religion insist that “asthma” simply is “‘growing-pains’” (*LS*, 41) comes in for as much criticism in “91 Revere Street” as the social, racial, upper-Bostonian shock at the naval officers’ talk of “‘grade-A’” and “‘grade-B wops’” (*LS*, 16). These Brahmins are shocked more by the language than the division, and are perhaps more guilty than the naval officers on that account. But there are other distinctions which exist and which are available to Lowell as poet and man—what it meant to be a *boy*, rather than a girl, at Brimmer; what it meant for a school to have *ton*; what it meant at home to be a *boy* rather than a man; what it meant to have a civilian *life* as opposed to a civilian *career*; what it meant to be a *cit* rather than a professional navy man. The words, and the distinctions they carry, continually resonate in “91 Revere Street” for Lowell: *boy*, *ton*, *life*, *career*, *cit*. They explode in the manner that words exploded for Stephen Dedalus and Joyce: “belt,” “suck,” “hot,” “cold,” “kiss,” “*Tower of Ivory*,” “Dolan.” The release of such words, for Joyce and for Lowell, is epiphanic, painful and discomforting with the discoveries each word brings.

In miniature and on its own large scale, “91 Revere Street” shows Lowell endlessly distinguishing, complicating irony by irony. Behind the piece are the most overarching ironies of all—this house is the house which Lowell’s father as naval officer was not supposed to have; and, since Lowell’s father has to be away from it so much of the time, it explains metaphorically, if not literally, “why Young Bob is an only child” (*LS*, 46). The ironies of “91 Revere Street” touch every other section of *Life Studies* and prove typical of the books which followed.

Lowell’s ironies succeed in conveying the impression that we are in the presence of a man and poet concerned with remaking the language and taking on nothing less than the whole literary and intellectual establishment, even modernism itself—outwitting, going beyond Sir James Frazer and Carl Jung, Sigmund Freud and Joyce, Friedrich Nietzsche and William Empson; letting ambiguity

and ambivalence (notably in his young daughter's "sky-blue corduroy" in "Home After Three Months Away," *LS*, 83) come as close to one another, and to the poet and reader, as they are ever likely to do; committing and mocking every critical fallacy ever formulated; knowing that there are the moderns and the classical moderns, and the classics. In two lines which follow upon one another in "Fall 1961" from *For the Union Dead*—"Nature holds up a mirror./One swallow makes a summer"³—Lowell tilts with Cervantes and John Heywood, M. H. Abrams and Aristotle. And it is typical of the man.

In the case of Lowell and Freud, there is the continuing suspicion that Lowell wishes to have it both ways. He is both beyond Freud and not beyond Freud. If he complains in his poem, "Eloise and Abelard" (*H*, 55), that Eloise cannot be understood by means of orthodox analysis, he does not dismiss the possibility that she, like Abelard and Lowell, can *also* be understood in psychological terms. The many moments back in *Life Studies*—whose title suggests aesthetic as well as psychological meanings—where he playfully dealt with Freudian motifs were never totally transcended, nor were they meant to be:

Terrible that old life of decency
without unseemly intimacy
or quarrels, when the unemancipated woman
still had her Freudian papá and maids!
(*"During Fever," LS, 80*)

Tamed by *Miltown*, we lie on Mother's bed;
the rising sun in war paint dyes us red;
in broad daylight her gilded bed-posts shine,
abandoned, almost Dionysian.
(*"Man and Wife," LS, 87*)

In the mornings I cuddled like a paramour
in my Grandfather's bed,
while he scouted about the chattering greenwood stove.
(*"Dunbarton," LS, 67*)

Each passage shows how emancipated and unemancipated, how aware and yet dependent and helpless Lowell in fact is. And this is so in spite of the devices which he uses and which seek to make him all-seeing, all-knowing, and free.

Lowell does, however, separate himself from the less aware figures who people his poems. He possesses an ability to confront what for lesser sensibilities would only be impasse. Lowell renders the impasse or dilemma and then attempts

³ Robert Lowell, *For the Union Dead* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964), p. 12. Hereafter, references to poems in this volume (*FUD*) will be included in the text.

to have us see it as an irony which, if it cannot be put aside, can be worried over, approached, and enjoyed. Metaphorically, it is the "portly, uncomfortable boulder" of "Terminal Days at Beverly Farms" (*LS*, 73), the "'unhistoric' soul" of Lowell's cemetery father in "Sailing Home from Rapallo" (*LS*, 78), and the "fishbone" which sticks in the throat of Boston in "For the Union Dead" (*FUD*, 71). The first image, that of the "portly, uncomfortable boulder," Lowell goes on to individuate in "Terminal Days at Beverly Farms"; the boulder "bulked in the garden's center—/an irregular Japanese touch." By the time the poem ends, this boulder has been associated not just with Lowell's father's "Bourbon 'old fashioned,'" but with the father himself, and by extension, with the craft and person of Robert Lowell. The boulder, which first "bulked," becomes a mark of graceful, subtle beauty, "an irregular Japanese touch." It proves one of those telling, perfectly right details which show us the presence of a poet who is major, and who painstakingly yet obliquely wishes to be sure that we see and understand his intentions on the smallest and largest scale.

Lowell's concern with being major, and with possessing genius, runs through the poems particularly in and after *Life Studies*, as if that book was for Lowell the kind of breakthrough book which confirmed talent while it indicated Lowell coming into and standing on his own. If *History, For Lizzie and Harriet*, and *The Dolphin* at times annoyingly push the question of fame and genius to the foreground, they do so with the same relentlessness with which Lowell's "boulder" is put in our path and shown to be part of Lowell's very particular design or garden.

Lowell's relentless, exacting sense of himself and of his art is evident throughout his work. In "Home After Three Months Away," Lowell asks, "Is Richard now himself again?" (*LS*, 83). Both the histrionic, pathetic Richard II and the loveless, self-locked Richard III are recalled by Lowell and by his readers in order to underline what exist as problems in definition and fulfillment in the poet. These problems go far beyond the limited context of the return from hospitalization for mental difficulties; even in times of health, they are very much in Lowell's thoughts. In one of the recent poems included in *The Dolphin*, Lowell's "*I am, I am, I am*" asserts what it risks denying.⁴ And it echoes Sylvia Plath's same words from both her novel, *The Bell Jar*, and from her poem, "Suicide Off Egg Rock" from *The Colossus*.⁵ Although Lowell's "*I am, I am, I am*" refers in context to Caroline Blackwood, now Lowell's third wife, Lowell's own sense of self is equally, if not more, at stake. Unlike Sylvia Plath, however, Lowell is intent on establishing loving sanity in the midst of madness and loss,

⁴ Robert Lowell, "The New," *The Dolphin* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), p. 65. Hereafter, references to poems in this volume (*D*) will be included in the text.

⁵ Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 178, 274; Sylvia Plath, "Suicide Off Egg Rock." *The Colossus and Other Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), p. 35.

just as he is unable to talk about self except in its relationship to his life's work or art. If Lowell is more public a poet than Sylvia Plath, this puts even more demands upon him in living, and writing about, the private details of a life.

When Lowell in discussion talked of "the monotony of the sublime," he did so against a larger American background in which "art is always done with both your hands."⁶ In this paradoxical and difficult phrase about the sublime, Lowell seems to be talking less about the art of rising or sinking in poetry—for which he deserves both blame and praise—than about a situation, peculiarly American but also contemporary British, where every artist, minor and major, is in search of a style for an art and a life. Against a background of preferences—for a literature of silence or understatement or impersonality—which the modern poet at times picks up without even knowing it, there emerges that kind of poem and vision which threatens to end in flatness and uncertainty, but which in the process of getting written always manages a fair measure of competence and even excellence. It becomes what I would call a poetry which parodies paradigm, a paradigm of what we take the modern poem to be—that multi-leveled poem with its slide-off ending balanced enough to make us debate whether its closure provides us with some felt, thoughtful stance, or mere mannerism which seeks to mask its non-commitment. Familiar endings of familiar Lowell poems—"his last words to Mother were:/'I feel awful,'" ("Terminal Days at Beverly Farms," *LS*, 74); "Then morning comes,/saying, 'This was a night,'" ("Myopia: a Night," *FUD*, 33); "a ghost/orbiting forever lost/in our monotonous sublime," ("Waking Early Sunday Morning," *NO*, 24); "bright sky, bright sky, carbon scarred with ciphers" ("End of a Year," *H*, 207)—come to stand for what we think of as Lowell, and Lowellian to the extent that poets after Lowell have taken over the devices involved, if often without the painstaking procedures by which Lowell got there.

But more than closure is involved. What Lowell does in ending a poem extends to the entire body of a poem, and to how he brings a book together or decides to publish it. The ways in which Lowell builds his ironies, adjusting things as we have known two other New Englanders, Emily Dickinson and Frost, to do; the ways in which the publication of a single volume or several at the same time (the tri-publication of *History, For Lizzie and Harriet*, and *The Dolphin*, for example, seeks not just to establish 1973 as Lowell's *annus mirabilis*, but to affect how we read every poem and every volume)—all these strategies are very close to what we take Lowell and his poetry to be. And such strategies relate to our task of locating the poet, and the poet as man, in the poem.

⁶ Robert Lowell, "The Problems of the Artist," *Under Pressure*, ed. A. Alvarez (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965), pp. 163-64; see also Robert Lowell's "our monotonous sublime" in "Waking Early Sunday Morning," *Near the Ocean* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967), p. 24. Hereafter, references to poems in this volume (*NO*) will be included in the text.

With figures like John Berryman and Robert Lowell, the whole concept of a *persona* has become so complicated that it has been removed from what was once an essentially literary matter—a means of helping define the modernism of Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Frost, Stevens, and W. C. Williams—to a matter which often challenges the very criteria and terminology of art. Sometimes the line between person and *persona* is so fine that the two become indistinguishable. In order to deal with this, the reader must become a connoisseur of an art of gradations.

When Lowell asked in “Waking in the Blue”—“What use is my sense of humor?” (*LS*, 81)—he was not, as the critic John Bayley suggested, abandoning irony,⁷ but depending upon some ideal reader, ironist *par excellence*. This moment in “Waking in the Blue” is analogous to others in “Skunk Hour” when Lowell announces, through a complexly modern *persona*, “My mind’s not right” or “nobody’s here” (*LS*, 90). His mind is both not right and better than right; nobody’s here, and everybody who cares about poetry is here. More problematic, but still related to these instances, is the moment in “Eye and Tooth” when he ventures, “Everyone’s tired of my turmoil” (*FUD*, 19). At worst, Lowell is forestalling or disarming his critics. At best, Lowell hopes that his art will leave us with other assessments of what is nonetheless burdensome and wearing.

I can think of no other modern American poet who spends so much time and energy not only in creating and complicating his ironies, but in being sure that we are aware of his strategies. Here are the concluding stanzas of “The Old Flame”:

Poor ghost, old love, speak
with your old voice
of flaming insight
that kept us awake all night.
In one bed and apart,

we heard the plow
groaning up hill—
a red light, then a blue,
as it tossed off the snow
to the side of the road.

(*FUD*, 6)

Lowell is able to turn an old cliché, “my old flame,” into a phrase that will make that cliché take on new, metaphoric resonance. It proves, in the course of the poem, useful and precise for the kind of nostalgia which the poet wishes to record. In these two concluding stanzas, everything from red stop-lights to

⁷ John Bayley, “Robert Lowell: The Poetry of Cancellation,” *Robert Lowell: A Portrait of the Artist in His Time*, ed. Michael London and Robert Boyers (New York: David Lewis, 1970), p. 191.

red-light districts to blue movies and blue jokes crosses a reader's mind. The "groaning" and "the snow" are implicitly, if not explicitly, sexual. But they are sexual in the same ironic light which presents the situation of being "awake all night" not in the context of love or love-making, but of memory of insight which has long since gone and been replaced by insight of another kind. The phrase, "one bed and apart" defines the scene as precisely as the poem's title. In the face of the sentimentality which Lowell allows himself in the next to last stanza, the action of the snow plow is important in creating needed distancing. Yet the poem does not have a slide off ending or "tossed off" ending because Lowell has not moved from feeling to undercutting feeling. Instead, he has kept that delicate balance of admitting and controlling feeling throughout. In the last stanza, Lowell is able to call our attention not only to his meanings but to the devices whereby those meanings are achieved.

Over and over, Lowell wants to be sure that we are onto what he goes about and intends. He portrayed his grandfather in his poem, "Grandparents," as "dipping sugar for us both," and seen "to walk there, chalk our cues,/insist on shooting for us both" (*LS*, 68-69). Lowell's criticism is loving and tender; the overbearing nature of the grandfather disappears in the affection with which he is called back. I can recall being annoyed and even offended by these moments. My quarrel lay with my inability to separate the grandfather's tactics from those of Lowell. I no longer read the poem in that way, but see the very real humor with which Lowell calls attention to the bittersweet meanings and strategies of his verse. There is criticism of the grandfather, surely, on Lowell's part. But the grandfather and Lowell also offer comfort and security and love, in the situation of a life and in the medium of an art. The two realms come together, at the same time that they remain separate for us and for Lowell.

One of the greatest pleasures and frustrations with Lowell and his poetry is that we are never done with them. There is always one more complication, one more edge to get by but never blunt or destroy. In a way reminiscent of Wallace Stevens' poems, Lowell's poems commonly circle back at their conclusion: to their titles, to their beginnings, and to the complications developed throughout the bodies of the poems.

To think of Lowell and Stevens is revealing in other regards. Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" could have gone on *ad infinitum*, at least in one sense, and that is part of the meaning of the poem. So could the men and the metaphors and the bridges in "Metaphors of a Magnifico." What is in store for the reader of Stevens comes close to what awaits the reader of Lowell. There arises the confrontation of one more image, one more perspective, one more circling, circular irony. Two passages of Stevens particularly come forth when I think of Lowell's verse. The first is one of his *Adagia*; the second, part of a piece which he did on W. C. Williams' work:

Poetry is a response to the daily necessity of getting the world right.

If a man writes a little every day, as Williams does, or used to do, it may be that he is merely practicing in order to make perfect. On the other hand, he may be practicing in order to get at his subject.

Is not Williams in a sense a literary pietist chastening himself, incessantly, along the Passaic?⁸

In both passages, I see a defining modernism which Lowell is heir to. It is not some poetry of cancellation or absence or silence, but a poetry which must make and remake itself, again and over again, in order, like the perpetual lover, to get the world right. Stevens and Williams, however different from one another and from Lowell, prefigure Lowell's unending habit of refining and revising, metaphoric and actual, in order to get things right. And it was in *Life Studies* that Lowell first grappled with where he might stand in relation to some of the major moderns and to the traditional modernism which preceded him and of which he would become a part.

Life Studies makes explicit by its complexly analytic and psychological title the kind of book Lowell intended. Poem by poem, section by section—and the endless italics, quotations, and quotation marks, parenthetical and foreign words and phrases—make us aware how the effort of the entire book is to get things right. In “91 Revere Street,” as we saw earlier in part, Lowell worries over the meaning of every sound, word, and sentence. This is suited to the rite of initiation which the section records. Yet “91 Revere Street” is not just about a modern-day Stephen Dedalus. Beyond that, and more importantly for the larger body of Lowell's work, it presents the figure of the poet who must learn what comprise style and sensibility, and how to distinguish (as Lowell's relative, the poet Amy Lowell, was unable to do) between “poetry” and “chinoiserie” (LS, 38). If, in the course of reading *Life Studies*, we find ourselves judging some of the weaker poems, in particular “Father's Bedroom” and “For Sale,” as *chinoiserie*, Lowell should understand why, even though he may not agree with us.

“91 Revere Street,” a tour de force as precocious as what it mocks, risks turning into a linguistic comedy, and, at times, tragedy. If this prose section of *Life Studies* is about anything, it concerns how and why Lowell is, and what it means to be, an only, lonely child; although Lowell presents this in the form of a crude, pathetic joke at the end of “91 Revere Street,” its implications touch everything else in that section and in the rest of the book. The first 364 of *The Dream Songs*, Berryman said, are about the death of his father.⁹ *Life Studies* is about a modern-day Aeneas who lovingly must learn to carry not just his father on his back, but to carry and carry back the body of his mother as well, as the

⁸ Wallace Stevens, *Adagia* and “Rubbings of Reality,” *Opus Posthumous* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), pp. 176, 257-59.

⁹ William Meredith, “In Loving Memory of the Late Author of *The Dream Songs*,” *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, 49 (Winter, 1973), 77.

metaphor in "Sailing Home from Rapallo" indicates.¹⁰ "In the grandiloquent lettering on Mother's coffin, Lowell had been misspelled LOVEL" (*LS*, 78). In their lives and deaths, Lowell's mother and father help him reexamine the possibilities of bridging language and love.

Instead of the literary, loveless marriage and figure of Anne Kavanaugh which Lowell gave us in *The Mills of the Kavanaghs*, *Life Studies* chronicles the bad, loveless marriage of his parents. His father's two coronaries (complicated in one of the *Notebook* poems by his "invisible coronary" for which Lowell as son is guilty), the family history of heart trouble, the poem for Hart Crane which is probably the best of the poems in the section of homage poems—all these point to what is central in *Life Studies*, or as Lowell encourages us to say, what is at heart.

If older members of Lowell's family at times suggest to Lowell the loving possibilities and options which his parents never provided, it is his own attempts in *Life Studies* to see and to locate himself as son, husband, father, and lyrical poet which offer him a way out of the impasse of being an only child, and only a child. That the figures he singles out for the homage poems all possessed lyrical gifts relates as much to loving as to literary matters. Only in the creation of loving relationships could Lowell hope to satisfy want, or what Berryman calls, in his dream song for Theodore Roethke, "overneeds."

For Berryman, "Father" was "the loneliest word in the one language."¹¹ For Plath, daddy always waited to haul her in to death. For Lowell, his absentee father causes him to write one of the most curious three-line poems in the midst of the fourteen-line *Notebook* poems:

To Daddy

I think, though I didn't believe it, you were my airhole,
and resigned perhaps from the Navy to be an airhole—
that Mother not warn me to put my socks on before my shoes.

(*H*, 116)

Unlike Sylvia Plath's poem, "Daddy," but like Berryman's many poems for his father in *The Dream Songs*, Lowell's "To Daddy" is a love poem. Lowell acknowledges the playful, irreverent humor and possibility of his father *as asshole* in the first two lines, but by the time the next and last line has concluded,

¹⁰ For other important comparisons between Lowell's poetry and the *Aeneid*, see Thomas Vogler, "Robert Lowell: Payment Gat He Nane," *The Iowa Review*, 2 (Summer, 1971), 64-95.

¹¹ John Berryman, *The Dream Songs* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), no. 241, p. 260. Hereafter, references to this volume (*DS*) will be given in the text and by dream song number.

Lowell's father has become the affectionate subject and object of a poem that is neither inverted nor perverse. It is a real love poem, granted a small and minor one. On the other hand, Lowell, and again joining Berryman, is more likely to discover love in his poetry not through a recovered father but through loving friends who happen to be, or to have been when alive, writers. And, almost always, lyrical talents: Ford Madox Ford, George Santayana, Delmore Schwartz, and Hart Crane.

The poem for Hart Crane in *Life Studies* is more important to the book and to later work of Lowell than might first be apparent. In it Lowell is able to take advantage of, but never abuse, the ready pun offered to him in Hart Crane's first name. The poem is as much about the possibility of heart or love as about the history and tradition of the lyric. Catullus, Shelley, Walt Whitman, Hart Crane, and Robert Lowell all prominently enter into it. In the figures of Whitman and Crane, Lowell draws our attention to Crane's loveless life and to what Crane shares with the pathetic Whitman whose voyeuristic looking, in old age, upon lovers, Lowell intended to recall in one of the stanzas in his poem "Skunk Hour."¹² In one of the later *Notebook* poems, it is also Whitman whom Lowell imagines becoming (as Whitman himself became all men) and rivaling in this long poem, his own variant of *Leaves of Grass*. By the time of the *Notebook* poems, Crane's urban and historical long poem, *The Bridge*—in search of connection, completion, and loving—also is on Lowell's mind.

Lowell moves in his *Life Studies* poem on Crane beyond the situation of Whitman and Crane (note the painful puns in "lay" and "board") and against those who would be *bored* by Crane's story to the only rightful relationship which Lowell as poet and we as readers can assume—the lover who will give what love was denied to Crane in his lifetime. And it is at this juncture that love and fame become explicitly connected. That this poem happens to be written as a sonnet strategically joins it to all those unrhymed and often rhymed sonnets of loving homage, and about love and fame, which occupy so large a space in the *Notebook* poems.

Lowell sympathizes with and yet rejects the voyeurism and inversion of love in Whitman and Crane. But these things also concerned him in "91 Revere Street." One of the crudest moments in all of Lowell precedes the ending of this prose piece which tells why Lowell is an only child. Billy Harkness, a naval acquaintance of Lowell's father, pretends to be Admiral De Stahl ("the Man") commanding Lowell's father ("Bobby"):

'Bobby me boy,' the Man says, 'henceforth I will that you sleep wifeless. You're to push your beauteous mug into me boudoir each night at ten-thirty and each morn at six. And don't mind me laying to alongside the

¹² Robert Lowell, "On 'Skunk Hour,'" *A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Thomas Parkinson, *Twentieth-Century Views*, (Englewood, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 133.

Missus De Stahl,' the old boy squeaks; 'we're just two oldsters as weak as babies.'

(LS, 46)

This moment returns to another, earlier in the piece, about Amy Lowell's migraine headaches caused by listening to the sounds of honeymooners in the next room (LS, 38).

Both instances concern not just voyeurism, but the reduction of language to something less than communication, specifically communication as a form of love. Like his distant cousin Amy, Robert Lowell hears his parents' arguments not as words but as sounds. And he feels "drenched" in their "passions" (LS, 19). Since, in a very important sense, his parents lacked loving passions, Lowell is drowned rather than renewed in them. Language again records something other than love. The major force of *Life Studies* becomes the struggle to reverse that direction.

The achievement of *Life Studies* aspires toward permanence. It does so with the awareness that no art is beyond the dangers of neglect, desecration, and change. This is evidenced in the poems and the very title of *For the Union Dead*; the sensibility and strategies behind this book, despite the more formal look of some of the poems, are close to those of *Life Studies*. *Life Studies*, if it did not permanently settle problems of style for future poems of the poet, at least made clear to Lowell how much familial, domestic things—parents, wife, child, and house—would have to be engaged by him, lengthily and relentlessly, if he were ever to know what Lowell and love could have to do with one another.

The poems in *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead* seek to establish a loving language. This search is complicated in these books by the fact that Lowell is aging. If Lowell is fortunate enough to have escaped the fate of having a middle income, he is not so fortunate with middle age. Like Berryman, he is "stuck with middle" (DS, no. 340).

Lowell returns in his *Notebook* poems, and in their long, extended publishing history, to what the four carefully arranged sections of *Life Studies* in part aimed at—the writing of the long poem. *Life Studies* discovered Lowell considering himself in early or lower middle age. The *Notebook* poems, extending over several years, reveal Lowell looking at later middle age, steadily and at different points in time.

In some of the translations and the plays which Lowell did in between the writing of these long poems—in *Imitations* (1961), in the translations which make up a major part of *Near the Ocean*, and in the plays in *The Old Glory* (1965; revised edition, 1968)—Lowell does not so much disperse his talents as try to find ways to avoid writing tired poems in some monotonous sublime. And, during the span of years after *Life Studies* and before the publication of the *Notebook* poems, Lowell does manage to write one major long poem, "Waking Early Sunday Morning." This poem, like the earlier poems "Beyond the Alps,"

"Skunk Hour," and "For the Union Dead," moves toward some larger poetry of statement and monument.

Monuments are marks of love and fame. Yet Lowell's hope in his "Note" to his revisionist *History* that he has "cut the waste marble from the figure" is no new concern of his for a monumental art. The section of homage poems in *Life Studies*, his interest throughout all of his books in dead writers and their lasting works, and his translations, particularly those in which writers confront the graves or fates or reputations of other writers, are typical. What has happened by the time we get to *History* is that the questions of fame and age are more fully upon him. This urgency is shown in the very history of *History* which, after all, cannot be considered by itself but must be read along with, and against, *For Lizzie and Harriet* and *The Dolphin*. *History* comes out of *Notebook* which, in turn, came out of *Notebook 1967-68*. The movement from the dated to the time-conscious to the timelessly memorial is part of Lowell's intention. But it is complicated by his awareness that such easy divisions prove impossible and fallacious. As a student of history, Lowell knows how time and the timeless also can be one.

Part of the change in Lowell's involvement with fame can be indicated by comparing the role of Lowell's daughter, Harriet, in "Growth," one of the *Notebook* poems where she dramatically moves from pre-teenager to teenager, with her role in one of the *Life Studies* poems, "Home After Three Months Away" (83).¹³ In the latter poem Harriet is only a baby, or young child. Her father has just returned from spending time in a mental institution. But he is still so unfunctioning that he cannot start anything by himself. Harriet starts him shaving (in the institution he had no razor) by dipping his shaving brush in the toilet bowl. What is entrusted to her is a matter of love. She returns her father to a loving, living community. She gets him going again: shaving, and by implication, writing, talking, moving, and loving. What is entrusted to her in the other and later poem, "Growth," is also love, but love as fame. She is given in this poem words which assure Lowell that she will complete Lowell's long poem upon his death, this "*Book of the Century*." Beyond the whimsy and the love looms the consuming question of fame.

Permanence in verse—set against the ravages of time and death and change—informs the major sonnet sequences written over the centuries, and particularly those of the Renaissance. If Lowell wished to avoid in his *Notebook* poems what he called "the themes and gigantism of the sonnet," he at the same time counts upon these for forceful support.¹⁴

¹³ Robert Lowell, "Growth," *For Lizzie and Harriet* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), p. 42. Hereafter, references to poems in this volume (*FLH*) will be included in the text.

¹⁴ Robert Lowell, "Afterthought," *Notebook 1967-68* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), p. 160. Hereafter, references to poems in this volume (*Nbk 67*) will be included in the text.

Sometimes Lowell's wish for the permanence of fame gets implicated in rivalries with other poets, and in an inability to admit debts or to see how original other poets can be. In the case of Berryman, however, Lowell at least went back and admitted how much of Berryman's defining, quirky talent in *The Dream Songs* escaped him when some of these poems first came out.¹⁵

Berryman concluded one of his poems from *The Dream Songs* with the line, "(Frost being still around.)" (no. 36). There was a time when Frost *was* still around. But Frost now is dead, along with a host of other poets and poet-critics whom Berryman wrote laments for in so many of his songs. With Berryman's eventual suicide, things narrow to Lowell.

Like Berryman, Lowell makes out of the deaths and suicides of modern and earlier writers one of the most moving, agonizing centers in his work. What had been a limitedly literary *ubi sunt* motif in some of Lowell's translations assumes in the *Notebook* poems increasingly private meaning for him as a poet and as a man.

In titling the revised, enlarged edition of *Notebook, History*, Lowell intended both private and public significance for that word. "What is history? What you cannot touch" (*FLH*, 31), he wrote in a poem which first appeared in *Notebook 1967-68*. This is closer to the way in which *History*—like *For Lizzie and Harriet* and *The Dolphin*—proves historical. Lowell's sense of history, like that of Yeats and Pound, is lyric and elegiac, rather than narrowly philosophical or historical. When Lowell turns to history or to pre-history, it is biography which interests him. The figures who attract him from history and literature and legend, who were also prominent in poems which preceded the *Notebook* sonnets, frequently are pairs of sad, tragic, sometimes violent lovers. Paolo and Francesca. Lancelot and Guinevere. Dante and Beatrice. Eloise and Abelard. Sappho and Phaon. Romeo and Juliet. Antony and Cleopatra. Orpheus and Eurydice. In some cases, one of the pair is a poet, the poet as lover. And the love or loveless lives of modern writers particularly intrigue Lowell.

If Lowell attempted in *Life Studies* to understand more fully his name and self, and the nature of love, his sonnets continue and complicate those movements. As Lowell moves through the *Notebook* poems, he has to rediscover what his, and man's, nature and lot are. Although the movement is not always consistent, we can observe a changing attitude toward man. Lowell moves in the sonnets from a Marxist (man is what he makes) to an Existentialist or Nihilist-Existentialist (man is what he does) to a lyrical (man is what he loves) sense of man. "What you love you are," Lowell writes in one of his recent poems from *The Dolphin* (48).

The publication of *History, For Lizzie and Harriet*, and *The Dolphin* in 1973 addresses a question which concerns literature as much as it does a loving life. The titles, together with the fact and occasion of their publication at the same

¹⁵ Robert Lowell, "For John Berryman," *The New York Review of Books*, 17 (April 6, 1972), 4. Hereafter, references to this journal will be given as *NYRB*.

time, not only establish love and fame as central, but point to the strategies which are to be involved. *History*, the large work of the three, contains, revises upon, and adds to the poems which first appeared in the two *Notebooks*; *For Lizzie and Harriet* is a sequence of poems which Lowell creates (also from the *Notebooks*) but which he wishes to keep separate from the *History* poems; and *The Dolphin* mostly contains new poems which appear in book form for the first time. Behind this elaborate ordering and reordering lie the facts of Lowell's life. Since the publication of the revised *Notebook*, Lowell left and divorced Elizabeth (Lizzie) Hardwick, and had a son by the woman (Caroline Blackwood) who becomes his new wife, the dolphin of the one book. But things are neither so simple nor so separate. Lizzie is as present, perhaps even more present, in *The Dolphin*; Caroline cannot be confined to the pages of her book; and Lowell, and his daughter, Harriet, whom he had by Lizzie, keep denying the very structuring which part of Lowell seems to need to insist upon for his art and life. In a very basic regard, nothing at all has changed. For Lowell's seasonal cycle in the two *Notebooks* was in the end as unhelpful in approaching major meanings as the biblical-through-modern-history arching which *History* offers. Against the more superficial orderings and divisions runs the strain, "What you love you are." When people enter upon the scene whom Lowell loves, and continues to love, in different and changing ways, dilemmas are exposed and Lowell's long art is asked to float the impossible.

Lowell's revised *Notebook*, while it recorded unfaithfulness and affairs, still was a book of love for Harriet and Lizzie. Against the breathlessness of lines elsewhere in the book which recorded the passion of Lowell for some younger woman or girl, a passion which spoke more of lust than of love—"When you left, I thought of you each hour of the day,/each minute of the hour, each second of the minute"¹⁶—Lowell wrote poems like "Obit," the last, and one of the most moving in the book:

In the end it gets us, though the man know what he'd have:
 old cars, old money, old undebased pre-Lyndon
 silver, no copper rubbing through . . . old wives;
 I could live such a too long time with mine.
 In the end, every hypochondriac is his own prophet.
 Before the final coming to rest, comes the rest
 of all transcendence in a mode of being, stopping
 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 dusk and brick,
 the loved, the lover, and their fear of life,

¹⁶ Robert Lowell, from "Mexico," *Notebook*, revised and expanded edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), p. 104. Hereafter, references to poems in this volume (*Nbk*) will be included in the text.

their unconquered flux, insensate oneness, their painful 'it was . . .'
After loving you so much, can I forget
you for eternity, and have no other choice?

(*Nbk*, 261)

Lowell manages here a meditative, dramatic stock-taking which reaches toward the discovery of elegy and lyric as one. The last two lines extend and complicate the tensions which inform the entire poem, while moving from rhetorical question to some dynamic point of rest. The poem is at once private and public, and it establishes love at the expense neither of inconsistency nor of resistance to closure.

This poem is redone as the concluding poem in *For Lizzie and Harriet*. Its fourteen lines are essentially unaltered, but a new line is added. It is printed as the first and is printed separately from the other lines: "Our love will not come back on fortune's wheel—" (*FLH*, 48). This line previously appeared in another poem in the revised *Notebook* (143), and the strategy is typical of Lowell's revisions. What is more central, however, concerns what this added line does to the poem, and how it connects with larger problems in the three recently published books.

We know the reason, from Lowell's private life at least, for the inclusion of the additional line. But whether it wrecks or meaningfully complicates the earlier version of the poem proves a less simple matter. Ironically, by the inclusion of this new dimension, Lowell sacrifices an ambiguity in the concluding lines and even the carefully balanced tensions of the entire sonnet. The line, while connecting with the imagery of chance and choice which haunts the *Notebook* poems, really is part of a poetry of statement at variance with the rest of the poem. The finality of the earlier poem derived from everything which challenged it. In the new version, the finality diminishes the rich, meaningful ambiguity of the earlier poem.

What I see happening in the new version of "Obit" relates to problems Lowell has in bringing his *Notebook* poems into alignment with changes in an ongoing life. To live is to change; to live is to love; therefore, to love is to change—this is one of the syllogisms operative in the sonnets. Such a syllogism, when joined to games of what constitutes fact, fiction, and reputation, places upon Lowell's art a strain which that art may find impossible to bear. If we were not tired of an earlier Lowell and his turmoil, Lowell may now sound too much like the poet playing out his guilt, and trying to cheer himself up.

It is easy to be unfair to Lowell, particularly when Lowell has been so magnanimous a poet before. No one more than he knows the nature of the undertaking which he began, part consciously and unconsciously, in the first *Notebook*. After *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead*, after work in translation or in genres other than poetry, and after the writing of a string of extended major poems, Lowell began the *Notebook* poems with more expectations upon him than even he likely wished.

The sensibility of the man behind the earlier poems continues to stand behind and to permeate the new, long poem. The Lowell who, in "91 Revere Street," spoke of his father as "grimly and literally that old cliché, a fish out of water" (*LS*, 18), addresses the same questions of cliché, and of metaphor and fact, in the *Notebook* poems. He concludes his revised *Notebook* poem on Pound, "To begin with a swelled head and end with swelled feet" (120). Metaphor becomes fact, along with the fact of Lowell's prosodic and physical own. Such a moment is reminiscent of the last lines from "Home After Three Months Away," "I keep no rank nor station./Cured, I am frizzled, stale and small" (*LS*, 84). What has escalated in the *Notebook* poems is the seriousness with which Lowell playfully continues to hold every word and phrase and idiom up to the light. When he writes in *History*, "Old age is all right, but it has no future" (64), the wit is even graver than it once had been.

The particularly American problem of early or late literary reputations is reshaped in the *Notebook* poems into a volitional speeding up of the vision of laurels after the grave, and after fame. If love and fame are part of the major meanings of Lowell's sonnets, the emphasis on fame threatens to become disproportionate. In part, Lowell wishes to have it both ways—to have fame both in and after this life, and to keep the love of both Lizzie and Caroline.

Lowell has to believe he has the love of Harriet, and of his second and third wives. He has to believe he has gladdened his own lifetime, the lives of those closest to him, and the lives of his artful readers. He has to believe he has written the American long poem with the old, novel plot (one man, two women) and with the prose richness of the lyrical novel, a substitute and remedy for the still unwritten great, long American novel. At least if we read the history of the American novel in that way. But need is not quite belief. Belief is not quite fact. Lowell has his dolphin, and he is Arion and Apollo. But what he offers, "an eelnet made by man for the eel fighting" (*D*, 78), suggests intricacy and cunning and strength as much as it calls into question whether the net will hold, the big fish stay, the work survive. Lowell is as playful as the dolphin. He is caught, caught up, and tries in the seemingly unending sonnets to have love, in his net of language, catch and catch on.

But however much Lowell, in his particular use of the sonnet in *The Dolphin* and the two other recent books, refuses to falsify experience and art, the resultant impression too often is of self-generating sonnets desperately trying to keep and ensure love. Lowell's repeated device of using three adjectives—from the poems in *Life Studies* to the *Notebook* poems—may at base be related to quintessentially lyric, three-note utterances ("How do I love thee?"; "The moon slides west"),¹⁷ but it may also become mere mannerism.¹⁸ Similarly, the sonnet is

¹⁷ Josephine Miles does not consider Robert Lowell, but for a discussion of the three-note cry of quintessential lyric utterance, see Josephine Miles, "Styles in Lyric," *Style*, 5 (Fall, 1971), 226-27.

¹⁸ Marjorie Perloff does not connect Lowell's use of three adjectives with quintessential lyric. But for a discussion of the debasement of the device, see Marjorie G. Perloff, *The Poetic Art of Robert Lowell* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), pp. 126-27.

ideally a form for some quintessential love poem, but it may easily descend to a parody of that form and intention. And this is the unfortunate situation with many of Lowell's *Notebook* poems.

Poems from *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead* occasionally were so successful in the creation of ironic distances that the poet at times risked being read out of his poems. The danger with Lowell's latest work is that he has to depend upon being there so often and so much. Lowell's attempts at assigning *Notebook* lines and poems to other people, at turning some of them into poems for voices, usually conclude by sounding like more poems by Robert Lowell, except that variety has been replaced by monotony and humorlessness.

Even the revisions are tedious, making most of the poems slightly better, losing some good one-liners in the process, but serving more as deflections of what the poems' intentions and meanings really are. Lowell's habits of revising, from comments of critics-poets-friends and of his own, are legendary. What is objectionable in the poems which lead to *History* and the two other volumes is that too much of the conspicuous waste proves just waste. Whether Flaubert's "mania for phrases dried his heart" (*Nbk*, 38) or "mania for phrases enlarged his heart" (*H*, 104) is sheer quibbling. The quibble centers about *which* ambiguity, not *whether* ambiguity, is preferable. What never proves in doubt is how both versions relate to Lowell's own strategy as poet-lover, and implicit criticism of that strategy, in these poems.

References in the *Notebook* poems to Aztec heart sacrifices only more dramatically point to Lowell's concern with the metaphoric significance of a family history of heart trouble and of his father's "invisible coronary."

Lowell's three new books are most moving and successful when they reveal the poet anatomizing his own and other hearts in the way which we have known him to do before. If Lowell understands with Yeats that images break hearts, he understands with Stalin "an unusual lust to break the icon" (*H*, 143). When in *Life Studies* he wrote of Joyce and Freud as "the Masters of Joy" (53), he did so not only ironically, but on a non-ironic level as well. Importantly, these two men were humanists, two essentially poetic, metaphoric minds, breakers and makers of images. By the time of the *Notebook* poems, Lowell has moved toward a position which announces the death of a Symbolist and even post-Symbolist past. "We were kind of religious, we thought in images," Lowell concludes one of the poems gathered most lately in *For Lizzie and Harriet* (46). Behind the nostalgia and the wish still to think and write in loving images, there is a toughness and a reservation about the redeeming value of literature itself. Such toughness and reservation inform all of the best work which we take to be Lowell's.

In the poems included in *For Lizzie and Harriet* and *The Dolphin*—specifically those domestic poems where Lowell is lyric, elegiac historian, and thus writes on his own home grounds whether actually living in America or England—the question of whether Lowell has brought joy to himself and to others is most

fully upon him, and finally answered contradictorily. Either Lowell does not know, or it is too soon for him to know, or not for him to tell.

This contradictory sense, when it derives not from uncertainty but from "that grandeur of imperfection" and from an "open ending," insisted upon for a life and an art, connects with an earlier, and for me, a more representative and definitive Robert Lowell. But I would not stress connection and continuity of sensibility and style at the expense of what is innovative in these three books. If Lowell is original in anything here, it is in his ability to apply what he did in books like *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead*—holding every word, phrase, and idiom up for scrutiny and still further scrutiny—to the situation of an aging life.

Lowell is an important and cunning enough poet for us to venture to understand the intentions and strategies behind these *Notebook* poems. But Lowell cannot be exonerated of all. I would not agree with those early reviews of these books which faulted Lowell's portraits of himself, his daughter, and his wives. For one thing, it is easy to feel with each successive reading the reverse of what we felt before. But, more importantly, the matter rests less with the outrageousness or bad taste of the material or Lowell's handling of it, than with the sense of our having been inundated by an enormous complex of feelings in the poems and then having to sort out what those feelings, ours and Lowell's, are. "The lines string out from nowhere, stretch to sorrow" (*Nbk*, 177); I connected this sense of the poems, before, with their capacity to seem self-generating, more than 500 attempts by Lowell at getting things right. What I would stress at this time relates to that flood of sorrow which the poems proceed from and move toward, dangerously so.

Tellingly, Lowell refers in one of *The Dolphin* poems to Ford's *Saddest Story* (72), the title by which Ford hoped to call the novel which we know as *The Good Soldier*. The connections which Lowell intends to make between Ford's novel and his sad, novelistic, triangularly plotted poem are clear. But whereas Ford's lyrical novel, with its infinitely complicated, questionable narrator, is one of those works by which we have come to know and help define modernism, Lowell's achievement in *The Dolphin*, as in *History* and *For Lizzie and Harriet*, belongs to a very different order. Repeatedly, Lowell's sonnets lack the distance, the variety, and the masterly ambiguity which consistently mark Ford's novel, "the best" (and I would add, *short*) "French novel in the language" (*LS*, 49). They were the qualities which marked, and again consistently, the best poems of *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead*.

What he could count on from his reader in the textured, linguistically complex poems of *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead* may not be present or forthcoming with the publication and event of Lowell's saddest story. Even *History*, while it siphons off the very personal poems into the other two volumes, has to depend upon what has happened in Lowell's own life to supply the motivating force for the book, and to work against or stand behind what would otherwise often be abstract, dry poems.

Lowell lacks in the making and accumulation of all these sonnets the saving irony which would allow the reader enough distance from the poems, enough let-up from Lowell's escalating turmoil and obsession with love and fame. When Lowell had asked in *Life Studies*, "What use is my sense of humor?", we could answer, *everything*, largely because we saw good evidence of it. Lowell hopes for the same advantages with these newer poems. Here is Lowell listening with Harriet and talking with her of Anton Webern, and by extension, himself: "What is it like? Rugged: if you can like this/you can like anything" (*FLH*, 40). But we are more likely to feel that Lowell is begging the question. And straining the comparison. The music in too many of the sonnets is not rugged or difficult at all. Earlier poems in earlier books showed Lowell helping us penetrate and appreciate the genuinely difficult. Here, the strategy is reduced to having Lowell supply us with heavy, irresistible ammunition to gun him down.

For Sylvia Plath, in Lowell's reading of her and her art, the poems tell that the life is not worth it.¹⁹ Lowell's *Notebook* poems tell that the life and the art are out of control. Repeatedly, it is the upheaval and confusion which Lowell has to insist upon. If we are encouraged to turn and return to Lowell's life, this is not only because of what he supplies. I think also of the incisive, critical pieces of Elizabeth Hardwick which are more than cool literary endeavors and which read more like thinly disguised chapters in a life: her understanding consideration of Sylvia Plath, her meditative, sadly nostalgic impressions of Maine, her essays on seduction and betrayal in literature, her pieces on women amateurs who were great men's sisters or wives.²⁰ Elizabeth Hardwick has nothing of the amateur about her; the title of a collection of her essays was *A View of My Own* (1962). Yet in the complex way in which she defines women "amateurs" like Dorothy Wordsworth and Jane Carlyle, we can see a fearfully prophetic connection between them and her, and we make some important link:

A sort of insatiability seems to infect our feelings when we look back on women, particularly on those who are highly interesting and yet whose effort at self-definition through works is fitful, casual, that of an amateur. We are inclined to think they could have done more, that we can make retroactive demands upon them for a greater degree of independence and authenticity.²¹

Or here is the opening of her piece on Jane Carlyle:

Jane Carlyle died suddenly one day, in her carriage. She was sixty-five

¹⁹ Robert Lowell, "Foreword" to *Ariel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. xi.

²⁰ Elizabeth Hardwick, "On Sylvia Plath," *NYRB*, 17 (August 12, 1971), 3-6; "In Maine," *NYRB*, 17 (October 7, 1971), 3-6; "Amateurs: Dorothy Wordsworth & Jane Carlyle," *NYRB*, 19 (November 30, 1972), 3-4; "Amateurs: Jane Carlyle," *NYRB*, 19 (December 14, 1972) 32-36; "Seduction and Betrayal: I," *NYRB*, 20 (May 31, 1973), 3-6; "Seduction and Betrayal II," *NYRB*, 20 (June 14, 1973), 6-10.

²¹ Hardwick, "Amateurs: Dorothy Wordsworth & Jane Carlyle," 3.

years old and had been married to Thomas Carlyle for forty years. It seems, as we look back on it, that at the moment of her death the idea was born that she had somehow been the victim of Carlyle's neglect. He thought as much and set out upon a large remorse, something like the "penance" of Dr. Johnson, although without the consolation of religion. The domestic torment the Carlyles endured in their long marriage is of a particular opacity because of the naturalness of so much of it, its origin in the mere strains of living. The conflicts were not of a remarkable kind, and domestic discontent was always complicated by other problems of temperament and by the unnerving immensity of Carlyle's literary undertakings.²²

Phrases, turns of thought, and varied moods oddly complement some of those found in the poems of Lowell in *For Lizzie and Harriet* and *The Dolphin*. Elizabeth Hardwick's pieces on Dorothy Wordsworth and Jane Carlyle, and on seduction and betrayal in literature, create a passionate rhetoric which must make us connect it with the force and direction, the facts and circumstances of her own and Lowell's lives. Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Hardwick are too prominent as public, literary and intellectual figures for us to compartmentalize his poems and her criticism.

As readers, in coming to Lowell's poems, we fill in and surround his *Notebook* poems with much that is outside and beyond literature. As Lowell's life and art risk going more and more out of control, the gaps (evident in the ellipses, printed and unprinted, in the sonnets; in those grounded fourteenth lines; and in those sonnets or non-sonnets of more than, or less than, fourteen lines) increasingly matter. Almost in parody of some company of moderns, Lowell courts *failure*—to love, to write *the* long poem, to ensure himself of lasting fame, to stave off old age and dying—as *meaning*.

If Lowell's two *Notebooks* gave evidence of an awareness of Berryman's ongoing long poem, it is the gathering of *History*, *For Lizzie and Harriet*, and *The Dolphin* that ensures Lowell of an inevitable comparison of his long poem with *The Dream Songs*. For Lowell, I fear this comparison will prove unfavorable and misleading. But I am less concerned at this point with a judgment than with illuminating some things in these poems which relate to my hopes and fears for Lowell's future as a poet.

The Dream Songs hardly come out of a life which is in control. Yet through the voices of Henry and Mr. Bones they attempt to evolve the means for managing what the life cannot. Lowell is not unskilled in the same art. But Berryman in *The Dream Songs* writes in a lyric-elegiac style which has already given up on some of the things in this life and which anticipates the stylelessness of some of the poems in *Delusions, Etc.* like "He Resigns" and "Henry's Understanding."²³ Unlike Berryman, Lowell still holds so tightly to the confusions and impossibles

²² Hardwick, "Amateurs: Jane Carlyle," 32.

²³ John Berryman, *Delusions, Etc.* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), pp. 40, 53.

of his and this life that his art has not yet had time to catch up with that life in order to find an appropriate or adequate style.

When Berryman concluded his last of the 77 *Dream Songs* (1964), the first of the two volumes which make up *The Dream Songs*, he wrote of Henry, "with in each hand/one of his own mad books and all," "he's making ready to move on." And Berryman did, to a more direct style which brought its own pleasures and disappointments. More important, however, is that as *The Dream Songs* changed, they came in their most telling moments to be informed by a perspective which seems almost beyond the reaches of a life and an art. Here is Berryman in one of the late poems (no. 379) from *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* (1968), the second volume of *The Dream Songs*:

Fresh toils the lightning over the Liffey, wild
and the avenues, like Paris's, are rain
and Henry is here for a while
of many months, along with the squalls of a child,
thirty years later. I will not come again
or not come with this style.

In retrospect, the lines seem prophetic. But even without Berryman's supporting suicide, they carry an authority which accounts for much of the power and originality of Berryman's long poem. They are stylized and styleless at the same time.

And here is a passage from Lowell's poem, "Reading Myself":

Like thousands, I took just pride and more than just,
struck matches that brought my blood to a boil;
I memorized the tricks to set the river on fire—
somehow never wrote something to go back to.

(H, 194)

It is similar to the Berryman passage in its assessment of the restless need to move on. Lowell is not gainsaying his practice of revision, a process which is central to the meaning if not the final achievement of his long work. At some deeper level, it is part of what Lowell has done in each succeeding book. In the poems of *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead*, or in some of the single but major poems from volumes as early as *Lord Weary's Castle* or as late as *Near the Ocean*, Lowell created the impression of using the language as if he made it. However, in what began as the *Notebooks* and what culminates in the three recent books, Lowell seems unable to maintain or manage all that he wants or intends. What I like best about this long work are those passages which flatten out style to accommodate a more traditional elegiac lyricism which revision cannot help or add to significantly. Here are two versions of one such passage:

To summer on skidding summer, the rude spring rain
hurries the ambitious, flowers and youth;
the crackling flash-tone's held an hour, then we
too follow nature, imperceptibly
change from mouse-brown to the white lion's mane,
to thin white, to the freckled, knuckled skull,
bronzed by decay, by many, many suns . . .

(*Nbk* 67, 4)

Spring moved to summer—the rude cold rain
hurries the ambitious, flowers and youth;
our flash-tones crackle for an hour, and then
we too follow nature, imperceptibly
change our mouse-brown to white lion's mane,
thin white fading to a freckled, knuckled skull,
bronzed by decay, by many, many suns . . .

(*FLH*, 15)

Achieved stylelessness is resistant to much, or to significant, revision. When, in contrast, Lowell seeks an individuated or less styleless style for all those *Note-book* poems which must confront a changing, private life, he is less fortunate. Repeatedly, that life seems too unsettled and unsettling for the poet to write well about it at all. Within the sonnet form, no style emerges to meet or to resist the life which has dramatically moved on.

"I see I have declined, changed, grown in recent years"—they were Lowell's words in a 1970 symposium on the arts, and they expressed his complex sense of how unlinear a line artists' lives and works follow.²⁴ It is in this complex sense that I would like to regard Lowell's latest work in order to remove it from the more obvious questions of success and failure, development and reputation. My hope is that Lowell, having also "declined," will not return to this sonnet sequence but explore other forms which might also, sometimes better, help him discover a language for lyric and for love.

²⁴ Robert Lowell, "Symposium: The Writer's Situation," *New American Review*, 9 (1970), 86.