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"I Myself is a Hell": Self-Criticism in the Poetry of Robert Lowell

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Abstract

Self-Criticism as a 'process of looking and judging [one's] faults and weaknesses' is a highly recommended and laudable practice that aims at self-improvement and self-betterment. In his poetry, Robert Lowell, is engaged in a life-long process of criticizing and digging de ep into his actions and behaviors. This paper is an exploration of self-criticism as a value and practice in selected poems by Lowell. It argues that although Lowell's engagement in this practice does not result in overcoming his personal sense of frustration and betterment, it does contribute to maturing his poetic output.

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"أنا نفسي جحيمُ: النقد الذاتي في قصائد مختارة روبرت لويل

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المستخلص

النقد الذاتي بوصفه 'عملية النظر في أخطاء الفرد ومساءلتها' هو احدى الممارسات المحمودة الجديرة بالثناء التي ترمي إلى التطوير والتحسين الذاتيين. وقد انشغل الشاعر الامريكي روبرت لويل، مثلما يتبين في شعره بعامة بعملية طويلة الأمد من نقد أفعاله وسلوكاته وتأملها. ترمي هذه الورقة البحثية إلى جلاء النقد الذاتي بوصفه قيمةً وممارسةً في قصائد مختارة للشاعر لويل. وتجادل الورقة أنه على الرغم من أن انشغال لويل بهذه الممارسة لم تسفر عن التغلب على إحساسه الشخصي بالاحباط والمرارة، إلا أنها أسهمت في تطوير منجزه الشعري وإنضاجه.

1-Self-Criticism: A Conceptual Background: The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2012) defines self-criticism as "the process of looking and judging your faults and weaknesses."(1377) *Collins English Dictionary* (2009) also defines the term as "unfavorable or severe judgment of oneself, one's abilities, one's actions, etc."(604) Self-critical person, then, is the person who is "critical of oneself or one's actions in a self-aware or unduly disapproving manner."(Oxford, 1377)

Self-criticism is virtually used in all contexts. Spiritually, it means seeking and discovering one's inner and spiritual depth, and exerting the necessary spiritual and intellectual effort to acquire true human values and to develop the sentiments that would encourage and nourish them. Believers think that honest self-criticism plays a vital role in purifying their souls and to guide them in the path of blissful success. The Bible is replete with stories and parables of prophets who "criticize their own actions and decisions."(Lazarus-Yafeh,2000, 99) The prophets introduced an unprecedented self-critical awareness in both the political and religious spheres. They stood up to

kings and priests alike to proclaim that without morality and social justice, religion itself is meaningless.

Even though self-criticism is not synonymous with Confession, they both aim at the same end. McCartin (2010) states that Confession is a ritual of self-scrutiny and self-criticism.(67) Although it is not as difficult as the public Confessing of the mundane wrongdoing, confessing sin to the priest requires much moral courage. Moreover, like self-criticism, Confession is the acknowledgment of sins or wrongs. It is made to the person wronged and also to God, and is part of a reconciliation process. Self-criticism, therefore, is as a spiritual as it is mundane practice.(Flinn, 2007, 541)

In psychology, self-criticism is defined as the "ability to scrutinize and evaluate own behavior and to recognize personal weaknesses, errors and shortcomings." (Corsini, 2002, 876) It also involves highlighting the weakness and negative traits in one's self and to criticize one's own self by comparing with others."(ibid.) It has two forms: the negative (or pathological) self-criticism is the dwelling on minor existing, or non-existing, flaws accompanied with feelings of worthlessness. It is a kind of self-punishment or negative self-evaluation. (Gilbert and Irons, 2005, 263-64) This type is associated with a lifetime risk of depression and *is* its major symptom. Beck (1979) asserts that "negative views of the self reflect a core symptom of depression."(90) And Murphy et al. (2002) assert that "[unrelenting] self-criticism often goes hand in hand with depression and anxiety."(17)

Many approaches to psychotherapy have addressed the pervasive problems of negative self-criticism, and the difficulties in helping people develop a warmer and more accepting orientation of the self. Like any other psychological disorder, pathological self-criticism can be healed or soothed. It could be treated first by helping the depressed self-critical person to look objectively at his flaws and\or mistakes (if any) (Beck, 1979: 190). This could be achieved when a depressed person is taught not to accept self-criticism as being true, but to regard it as hypothetical proposition and, with the aid of the therapist, to examine the evidence for the validity of such faults and shortcomings in their life or behavior (DeRubeis et al., 1990, 481).

Positive self-criticism, on the other hand, is the one that leads to self-enhancement and self-development. It aims at restoring a sense of equilibrium and well-being. It is practiced with the person's complete satisfaction. It is like an effective strategy for motivating the individual and is a primary tool for staying motivated and productive. Positive self-critical people stand in the middle between the negative, depressed self-critics who view everything they perform as faulty and unworthy and narcissists who "cannot be wrong in their own eyes."(Chang et al., 2008, 96)

Thus, self-criticism is essentially a universal human trait that everyone is liable to experience. But for some, it requires much courage to admit their flaws and faults publically. This depends on the person's willingness to achieve the highest level of perfect achievement and also on how the society and the culture in which one lives

define that practice. Therefore, it is a sociological, as well as a psychological and a cultural phenomenon.

II. **"I Myself is a Hell": Robert Lowell's Life-infused Poetry:**

Being a highly autobiographical poet, Lowell's art and life were inseparably intertwined, and the study of his biographical information is an entry that is crucial in understanding his poetry. Almost every detail, however insignificant it may seem, is reflected in his poetry. Hamilton (1982) states that Lowell "invested his life and work with an unflagging sense of the momentous. Nothing insignificant happened to this author, or so he believed." (238)

There are certain events which shaped the poetry of Robert Lowell. The first and the most important thing which had happened to him even before he was born into this life was his lineage. Lowell was born into a distinguished New England family, who includes among its earlier generations the poets James Russell Lowell (1819-1891) and Amy Lowell (1874-1925) from his father's side while his mother was a descendant of William Samuel Johnson (1727–1819), a signer of the United States Constitution; Jonathan Edwards, the Calvinist theologian. But, as reading his poetry reveals, he has always been interested more with the "unknown of unsung members of his family than in his literary or culturally prominent forbears." (Fein, 1970, 1)

The other important factor, which again is closely related to his family, is Lowell's conversion to Catholicism. Because of his increasing dissatisfaction with the heritage he had received from his Puritan forefathers, Lowell was converted to Catholicism in 1940 (from which he would deconverse in the late 1940s). The conversion, Fein (1970) maintains, was "another means of testing himself against his family patterns he was supposed to inherit…"(4) This conversion exercised an effect on Lowell's early poetry, which was "characterized by its Christian motifs and symbolism, historical references, and intricate formalism."(Hunter, 2000, (p. 252).The influence of Christianity in general, even after his deconversion, continues to "exert an irresistible tug on his imagination." (Hart, 1995, 133).

The manifestation of Lowell's repudiation of his family tradition rests on the fact that he was a conscientious objector of both World War II and the Vietnam War. That was against the family tradition as his ancestors, from both paternal and maternal sides, were active participants in the American Civil War. Lowell's objection to serve in WWII caused him to serve five months (out of the twelve he was supposed to serve) , while he protested the Vietnam War by publicly declining President Lyndon Johnson's invitation to a White House arts festival ("Lowell." *American national biography Online*).

Another important biographical fact that has affected Robert Lowell so deeply was his failure marriages to Jean Stafford and Elizabeth Hardwick, both women were writers in the beginning of their career, in 1938 and 1948 respectively. This failure to have a female companion would leave a permanent scar in him. His marriages

foundered because of various reasons, infidelities, depression, and alcoholism, among many others. The numerous emotional breakdowns and three failed marriages have rendered him mentally ill. Lowell suffered "full-blown" manic depression and was admitted to mental hospital and took medications for the rest of life. This ailment burdened him until his death in 1977 (MacGowan, 2004, 161).

In spite of Lowell's love and identification with New England, his poetry contains more criticism than it contains praise. The history of New England was central to Lowell's earlier poetry. New England was, Spivack (2012) claims, 'in his bones'(116). On one hand New England provides for him a good point of contrast to compare a debased present with a shinier and more glorious past, on the other hand Lowell rejected New England, past and present, and was aware of its disadvantages. Closely related to New England, Puritans and Puritanism were also a center of Lowell's attention in his poetry. He explored the dark side of America's Puritan legacy with sharp and critical eyes. Lowell criticizes his Puritan ancestors although he at times identify with them.

III. Self-criticism in Lowell's Poetry:

As far as self-criticism is concerned, Lowell's poetry can be divided into many divisions. The first division includes those poems concerned with the criticism of the poet's ancestors as themselves and as representatives of the Puritans, and sometimes, as representatives of America with all its 'crimes' committed in the past and present times. Part of this criticism is addressed to the present-day Bostonians for their attempts to embrace modernity at the expense of their heritage. The Brahmins of Boston (of whom Lowell is part) are also subject of Lowell's criticism. Criticism, in the other poems, is directed towards the poet's self; failure, weakness, limitations, etc. Part of Lowell's criticism of himself is also directed to his poetic achievement and the futility of his oeuvre; it is a criticism of Lowell the poet.

Lowell's "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket" stands as an example of the first type of Lowell's self-criticism, the criticism of the poet's ancestors. The poem appeared in his second book of poetry and the Pulitzer Prize winner *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946). Lowell, in fact, includes certain incidents and references to his early personal life, family and especially his ancestors. The book contains many poems about Lowell's ancestors (like Jonathan Edwards) and also a reference to New England. "New England", Fein (1970) remarks, "is important to Lowell's poetry, especially in *Lord Weary's Castle*"(7). New England, metonymized in Boston, has become his material to praise and also to criticize.

In series of elegies written for Lowell's Winslow ancestors, this poem, Ramazani (1994) states, is the "first major elegy" (227). The best-known poem from *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946) takes much of its material from New England past and present. Lowell's poem is an elegy in which he is lamenting the death of his cousin, Warren Winslow, who was killed in action during WWII. The poem is more than an elegy as

it intertwines with a literary allusion (Melville's *Moby Dick*), religious allusion (the Bible), and mythical allusion (Posedion), and even the use of cryptic creatures (IS). The poem registers Lowell total discontent with and his rejection of his Puritan heritage. Perloff, (1967) notes that it is "an elegy ... in which the Puritan tradition of the New England is totally rejected" (116).

Lowell sets on to criticize the Puritans from the very beginning of the poem. The Epigraph from the Book of Genesis which reads "*Let man have dominion over the fishes of the sea and the fowls of the air and the beasts of the whole earth, and every creeping creature that moveth upon the earth*" (Robert Lowell, *The Poems,* 2004) indicates the ironic tone in which is treating this serious matter (the death of his cousin). It is ironic because man who is supposed to have domination over Nature and the natural beings is in fact helpless and overwhelmed by the vast nature. Thus, the promised domination is ironic and, Holder (1980) affirms, "the relationship of man to Nature ...is one of antagonism and brutal exploitation" (260). The Epigraph, according to Perloff (1967), is "an ironic commentary on the awful abuse of this privilege by the Quaker whalers and their Godless modern descendants" (126).

The poem moves back and forth in time; from the naval forces in WW II to the Quaker sailors in the early colonial times reaching up to Jonas Messias. Fein (1970) states that "the poem strives to unite the past and the present, the beginning and the end, the origin of sorrow and its present forms" (30).The juxtaposition of the present, the past and the mythological is not to compare and contrast, but to express Lowell's belief that the current war and violence has its roots in the long history of the human greed.

Lowell links the cause of this war to greed and materialism which had their roots back to the times of the Puritans and their hypocritical abuse of the natural world. The juxtaposition of the army and whale hunting indicates that human greed and violence are inseparable. A pacifist and a Conscientious Objector, it is not surprising to know that Lowell equates the lives of sea creatures with that of human beings and even to Christ. While they should be the first defenders of these sacred lives of God's creature, the Puritans massacred the whales for purely commercial gains.

In the "Quaker Graveyard," Lowell criticizes his Puritan ancestors, including the elegized Warren and above all himself, for their pretense of spirituality. He exposed their commercialism and self-righteousness to the extent of committing the cruel act of whale massacring. This poem of self-criticism, although published in the period of World War II, sheds light on the past as the seeds of the present corruption and materialism.

In the same vein, the short poem "Children of Light," published in *Lord's Weary Castle*, has Lowell's critical viewpoint of his Puritan ancestors and the violent story of the expansion of America as its main themes. The poet goes back in time to what he believes as the origin of human sinister behavior from Cain onwards is all included in

the poem. In writing that, the Puritans "fenced their gardens with the red man's bones"(*Selected Poems*, L.2). Lowell believes that they have abused the God-given power just like their persecutors in their homelands.

The title 'The Children of Light' has a biblical reference to the verse "Ephesians 5:8" (for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light). It means when the sinner repents and believes in Jesus Christ, the darkness inside goes and they become the children of obedience, from whom God's wrath is turned away. But as is seen in the poem, the biblical reference is ironic, because the Puritan 'children of light' become the corrupted, evil children of 'night' (darkness). The use of words like 'formerly' and before it 'no more' indicates a change that was never realized. They are planters of the "*Serpent's seeds of light*"(L.5). The 'Serpent' is a metaphor of the evil which those supposedly pious Puritan have planted. Lowell may have in mind the fresh memories of the World War II which can be the fruit of these seeds.

Lowell criticizes the Puritan hypocrisy and their double standards in dealing with their own plight and that of the other. While they had travelled across the ocean from Holland and Geneva to the New World in order to escape persecution in their homeland "*Embarking from the Nether Land of Holland, Pilgrims unhouseled by Geneva's night*"(ll.3-4), those hypocrite Pilgrims denied the Indians the very freedom they had sought after. The false feeling of self-righteousness is yet another sin which Lowell finds in his Puritan ancestor. For him, it is ironic they used the name of God to justify their taking the land of the Amerindians.

The second type of Lowell's self-criticism is directed to the biological historical figure named "Robert Lowell." In the poem with this type, Lowell points out to his weaknesses and limitations. This kind of autobiographical poetry is especially found in Lowell's groundbreaking and his most important book of poetry *Life Studies* (1959) more than any collection of poems published before and after it.

Although *Life Studies* (1959) has been praised as "one of the most acclaimed and influential single books in American poetry"(Matterson, 2001, 481), it was also criticized as being overtly scandalous. Rosenthal, who wrote a review of the book, said it was "rather shameful"(1991; 147) to reveal personal family history; while Lowell's friend poetess Elizabeth Bishop said that the poems of *Life Studies* were of "more than social importance," and that they tell more about "the state of society"(Ibid.,147). Lowell was aware of what he was doing; he knew that it was something new and daring that could either lead to the praise or disapproval of its receivers. Lowell said in an interview in 1960 "When I finished *Life Studies*, I was left hanging on a question mark. I am still hanging there. I don't know whether it is a death-rope or a lifeline" (Quoted in Matterson, p. 488).

This shift is not surprising for the inquirer in the life of Lowell. Much has happened since the writing of his last collection of poetry on the personal and

professional levels. Lowell deconverted from Catholicism, and this deconversion, according to Hamilton (1969), "… has a great influence on Lowell's poetry and it brought about the radical change of style that characterises most of the poems written after his deconversion" (38). The death of his father (1950) and his mother (1954) have also had a great psychological impact on him. Matterson (2001) thinks that "much of [*Life Studies'*] sense of disengagement, displacement and potentially destructive self-analysis has its starting point in the death of [Lowell's] parents, with whom Lowell had a troubled relationship"(488).

Lowell's poem "Beyond the Alps" in the first part of the collection can explain what has been said above about the poet's desire to explore and criticize himself to arrive at the true solution for his many problems. The poem functions as a kind of a prologue (Kim, 1984, 29) or a guide to *Life Studies* (Kang, 1986, 21). It falls, thematically speaking, in the mid-way between Lowell's earlier poetry which was under the direct influence of the New Critics and Formalists and the autographical subjective themes of *Life* Studies.

The poem's title was inspired by another poem by Lowell, called "Falling Asleep over the Aeneid" from *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* (1946):

> Turms of Numidian horse unsling their bows,
> The flaming turkey-feathered arrows swarm
> BEYOND THE ALPS.
> (*Poems*, Ll. 59-6)

The poem, "Falling Asleep", is about an old man who falls asleep while reading Virgil's *Aeneid*. It is about moving from the past into the present in which, Fein states, "one helps the other to endure"(151). The reference here is to Aeneas who mourns his dead friend Pallas. But it also refers to Lowell's position in life and his search for his identity away from his ancestors. The choice of the title is apt, as both poems, "Beyond the Alps" and "Falling Asleep over the *Aeneid*", are about passage and movement. In case of the latter, it "marks a highly significant passage from literature to life, from epic to autobiography, from heroes to relatives" (Gardini, 2002, 14); while the poem, "Beyond the Alps,' paints a rather allegorical movement from what Lowell believes to be the source of all problems, failure.

The setting of "Beyond the Alps" (a train from Rome to Paris) was inspired by an actual trip to Europe that Lowell took with his wife Elizabeth. It documents their journey, by train from Rome (stands for Religion in general) to Paris (stands for art) in 1950, across the mountain chains of the Alps. It captures Lowell's feelings towards his waning faith in Catholicism and, by extension, the whole religion. Matterson (2001) affirms that:

> 'Beyond the Alps' is about renunciation of a former world view. It is a post-Christian poem involving an imaginative

> rebirth of the self into a human secular, natural landscape and initiating an endeavour to see humans as figures belonging to that landscape (484).

The main theme of the poem, however, is not simply Lowell's decision to leave religion to art, but it is going up and down, changing places, speed and positions. The poem is mainly about failure and loss in all forms. In fact, Lowell's mentioning of his deconversion from Catholicism is an explicit example of this failure, i.e. failure to find his position in life. According to Kim (1980);

> Lowell turns inward to himself without losing connection with the world. And conversely, he has left Rome and crossed the secular border of the Alps; yet he could look into himself.(141)

Searching inside the self is only possible when one holds the light of self-criticism to conquer its darkness.

In fact, the very first image of the poem is that of Swiss climbers whose mission to climb Mountain Everest was a failure one. Lowell had read in the newspaper that the Swiss climbers: "*had thrown the sponge/in once again and Everest was still/ unscaled,..'* (Lowell, *Poems*, Ll. 1-3), i.e. they have given up trying to scale Mountain Everest. Lowell's reference is to a failed expedition in 1952 but it paved the way to another successful expedition by Sir John Hunt in 1953. Lowell's experience with Catholicism –and the whole religion-- is also another example of failure. But his courageous admission of failure is his savior here. Like the failure Swiss mission that paved the way to a successful one, he implies that the root of success is found in failure.

Lowell's self-critical admittance of failure in his experience with Catholicism is courageous enough to set the poem apart and above all the poetry he had previously written. However, the most shockingly daring poems in the collections were Lowell's poems in which he describes his sojourn in a mental hospital and the breakup of his marriage. The kind of poem in which he records his experience in Mclean Mental Hospital in Boston during his illness is usually called 'the marriage poems'.

Lowell was admitted to the asylum after seizures of manic depression (alternating bouts of depression and mania known today as bipolar disorder)(Hamilton, 111). There his psychiatrists encouraged him to write poetry as a means of getting over his illness. His experience in the hospital was well documented in his poetry.

The poems do not, as one may expect, express what a patient feels in a place like the mental hospital. But, Lowell meant it to be a reflection on the poet's self. Lowell was not confessing anything to anybody. After all he has not done anything wrong. Therefore, the label 'confessional' may not be as appropriate as other labels like 'exposal' or 'self-critical' poems. When he applied the term 'confessional' to the poems in *Life Studies*, Rosenthal may have in mind the experience of a patient with

psychoanalysts who encourage confessing, so to speak, the thoughts and emotions even those regarded as taboos. Being a taboo is exactly what critics and Lowell's contemporaries have said of these poems. In an interview made in 1966, the poet Sylvia Plath stated:

> I've been very excited by what I feel is the new breakthrough that came with, say, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies,* this intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal, emotional experience which I feel has been partly taboo. Robert Lowell's poems about his experience in a mental hospital, for example, interested me very much. These peculiar, private and taboo subjects, I feel, have *not* been explored in recent American poetry (Interviews, 1966, my emphasis).

The theme of Lowell's courageous criticism of his failure continues in his other poems in *Life Studies.* In the poem, "Waking in the Blue", which is in Part Four of the collection, Lowell sheds light on important manifestation of this failure. By being in a mental hospital, he concedes that he fails to cope with the life outside the asylum and the life inside is the only life suitable for him.

Among all the 'autobiographical' poems in *Life Studies,* this poem (with the rest of the so-called mental hospital poems) is the most daring because it includes Lowell's most forthright admissions that he had serious mental problems which was a serious social taboo and, as Hamilton puts it, "a terminus and a sort of confession of life-long failure…." (ibid). The title of the poem refers to Lowell's experience in the mental hospital when he awakens at dawn and looks throughout the window to see "*Azure day/ makes my agonized blue window bleaker*" (ll.5-6). Lowell imagines himself and his fellow patients as sea creatures swimming in the "agonized blue" of the institution.

The sense of failure begins from the very first line of the poem. The night attendant who is a "B.U. is at loss reading I.A Richards' book *The Meaning of Meaning* trying to find the meaning behind his life and the whole existence. Vereen M. Bell (1983) asserts that

> *The Meaning of Meaning* is put before us to begin with as a model of the brave human effort to achieve rational understanding of the relation between the mind and the wordless world. (620)

Lowell plays with the weighty title; the fact that the sophomore dozes while trying to discern the "meaning of meaning" conveys the fact that within the confines of the institution a breakdown has occurred at the level of signification itself (Beardsworth, 2008,p.96). Thus, the people inside the mental hospital– including Lowell- are looking for meaning, however, they –obviously- fail. What remains is to admit it and self-criticize and acknowledge this failure.

The milieu is surreal with clear Eliotic wasteland-like scene where "*Crows maunder on the petrified fairway*" (l.7) and "*as though a harpoon were sparring for the kill*"(l.9) and the residents of the hospital are described '*ossified youth'*(l.35). But it is only a reflection of a more horrific internal petrification and ossification that Lowell feels inside. "*Absence! My heart grows tense*"(l.10), i.e. growing tense with inactivity.

Even though Lowell is only in the first week in the hospital while the other may have spent many years, he is not isolated from them or gives the impression that he is above or below them. He belongs here just as surely as Stanley and Bobbie do, and failure brings them all together.

The time goes by and nothing happens:

> *hours and hours go by under the crew haircuts*
> *and slightly too little nonsensical bachelor twinkle*
> *of the Roman Catholic attendants*
> *(There are no Mayflower*
> *screwballs in the Catholic Church.)* (ll. 37-41)

Lowell has been once a Catholic who escaped his New England Puritan heritage, but he failed to find consolation in that. The poem marks among many other things Lowell's failure as a Catholic convert to form a character free from the 'inglorious' legacy of his ancestors. It shows his continuing his reductive reference to the pretensions of his class.

In the same collection of poems, *Life Studies*, there are another sub-group of poems which collectively known as the 'marriage poems.' They deal with Lowell's failure experience with his marriage. These poems include very intimate details of the wife-husband normal affairs so much so that his second wife, Elizabeth, complained that "Lowell has opened the curtain and let everyone look in…"(Quoted in Hamilton, 262)

The importance of Lowell's 'marriage poems' does not come from their high autobiographical details and their description of the poet's innermost private experiences to the public; they are rather examples of a man struggling to come to terms with himself. All he is trying to do is to find solution to his strife in marriage by the method of self-criticism. Al-Zwelef (2013) remarks that:

> Lowell's confessional poetry appealed to readers either for being a fresh enterprise of self-criticism, or because a poet has exposed his most embarrassing events. But because readers could identify with these experiences (12).

Two poems, "Man and Wife" and "To Speak of Woe That is in Marriage", stand out among many other to represent such kind of self-exposure and criticism. The two poems could be taken as a good example of Lowell's treatment of his failing marriage through self-criticism and self-exposure. Lowell reflects on his troubled marriage and

shares with us grotesque glimpses of that ordeal. The poem opens with the poet and his wife lying on the husband's 'Mother's bed'('Man and Wife', *Selected Poems,* l.1). The reference to his mother's bed is not without significance. His parent's marriage has been failure because they were also separated spiritually. He is in a state of confusion in the realm between consciousness and unconscious for taking a tranquilizer 'Tamed by Miltown,' (l.1). Maybe the tranquilizers are the only things that can make life bearable for him after sleepless hours of argument, hysteria, and anxiety. He is lying inactive doing nothing imprisoned in his own failure. He is, according to Perloff (1973) "in the diseased imagination of the poet who fears passion and vitality, an Indian savage in "war paint" who "dyes us red," the pun on "dyes" intensifying the death-in-life existence of the couple"(90).

The scene then shifts from the neurotic atmosphere in the room into the outside landscape where; "*our magnolia ignite/ the morning with their murderous five day's white*" (ll.6-7). The image of the 'magnolia' as 'murderous' and violent is contrasted to its traditional symbol of feminine sweetness and beauty. Indeed, nothing is normal in the atmosphere both inside and outside. There is no normal husband-wife relationship and understanding in the poem. Like the contrasted scenery inside and outside the bedroom, their bodies and souls are repelling no hope of understanding could be reached. The whole atmosphere is of disintegration, chaos and failure.

Lowell then makes reference to his confinement in McLean Hospital and the West Street jail when he sees himself as having been "dragged ... home alive" from "the kingdom of the mad" by his wife. Dragging him home can be taken as an echo of his mother's being dragged to bed alone" –the very bed Lowell and his wife are lying on now- after his father's death. (*Selected Poems,* "Commander Lowell", l.52). This is an indication that their break-up is not only possible, but eminent. Lowell gives a glance back on a better time when his wife was;

in your twenties, and I,
once hand on glass
and heart in mouth
(ll. 15-17)

Their relationship was characterized by mutual love and respect and above all it was a simple one. Now, their relation is deteriorating;

Now twelve years later, you turn your back.
Sleepless, you hold
your pillow to your hollows like a child,
your old-fashioned tirade -
loving, rapid, merciless -
breaks like the Atlantic Ocean on my head.
(ll.23-28)

The marital tension has begun ever since and the couple's break-up became inevitable. However, the physical separation is not the only kind of 'break up' that took place on that bed but emotional separation is the kind of separation that matters. Lowell admits his failure to connect with his wife emotionally. His self-criticism in the poem, like in all the poems discussed above, is to find out a way out of this disintegration. He speaks frankly and makes no restrictions in front of him. Lowell sees the acknowledgement of the problem and failure is step one towards the final dissolution.

"To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage" is on the same vein as far as Lowell's criticism of his failure marriage is concerned. The title is taken from the Prologue to the 'Wife of Bath's Tale' in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. It is in origin a translation of the Roman Catullus' (84-54 BC) poem in Latin. Lowell says that "[the poem] couldn't have been written without the Catullus" (Quoted in Meyers , 1988, 63). The poem was published in *Life Studies* after "Man and Wife" and should be read in conjunction with it.

The poem, similarly, speaks about marital tension from the perspective of a wife who is complaining from her husband's treachery and misbehaviors. The use of his wife's voice instead of his own is a very interesting choice on Lowell's part. Instead of seeking his reader's sympathies or trying to defend his choices, Lowell tells his wife's version of the story. In fact, he was able to empathize with his wife's feelings so much so that he could write a poem about his vices without ever defending himself.

Self-criticism in this case is loud, told from the perspective of another person. Lowell chooses to use the dramatic monologue technique to add to the credibility and honesty of his self-criticism. This criticism is totally objective without personal subjectivity and free from the poetic voice. The use of an outsider voice to speak of one's own fault and failure adds a touch of unequaled authenticity.

The woman in the poem is suffering from an abusive and careless husband and from the very first line; the husband-wife antagonism is indicated: "*The hot night makes us keep our bedroom windows open*" ('To Speak of Owe" *Selected Poems,* l.1). The wife tells us the story of her "*...hopped up husband drops his home disputes*," (l.3). He is betraying his matrimonial vows of loyalty and in the words of Harris "....betrays her with the meanness of his lust" (2003, 27). Her husband is running away from his marriage problems; he goes to look for sex somewhere else. He is "*whiskey-blind, swaggering home at five*" (l.9).

The husband is not only abusive but also dangerous and a psychopath. He is mentally unbalanced and has just been discharged from the mental hospital. As such, the possibility of violence is not excluded: "'*This screwball might kill his wife, then take the pledge.*'" Fein (1970) observes that "Her own febrile temperament, as well as

her husband's tortured mind, is implied in her conception of his moonlighting: "'free-lancing out along the razor's edge.'"(73).

Third type of self-criticism is concerned with poetic achievement and the futility of his oeuvre; it is a criticism of Lowell the poet. This is not to be confused with the general practice of the poets' usual review of their own work which is also called self-criticism. In this type, self-criticism is directed to Robert Lowell, the artist. He either criticized something he has written or something he has not written.

This type of self-criticism occurs more in the later poetry of Lowell, just before the final close of his professional life. In these poems, he takes a meditative stance to reflect on the achievement he has made so far. From the title of "Reading Myself," which was published in the collection of poetry entitled *Notebook* in 1970, it can be inferred that this poem is about Lowell looking inside into his 'self'. It is a meditative poem about Lowell's writing described through the extended metaphor of a beehive; the poem as the honeycomb and the poet as the bee. The poem's main theme is the poet's urgent need to self-critically review his past achievement.

Lowell begins the poem by explaining that he, along with many others, took pride in bringing on some kind of necessary personal suffering:

> *Like millions, I took just pride and more than just,*
> *first striking matches that brought my blood to boiling.*
> (Lowell, *Notebook*, ll. 1-2)

The poet takes pride in the artists' effort and altruism to make art that pleases others. He makes it clear that the whole poem is about the poet's process of production. But soon this celebration of himself as a poet is followed by self-criticism, as he

> *memorized tricks that set the river on fire*
> *somehow never wrote something to go back to.*
> *Even suppose I had finished with wax flowers*
> *and earned a pass on the minor slopes of Parnassus . . . . (ll. 3-6)*

Lowell's criticism of his artificiality is indicated in the use of "flowers" style and the "tricks" that come with it. His lack of genuineness is what he is lamenting and censuring here. Lowell's confessional statement that he has not written anything he can go back to indicates that his poems of the past are not suitable for the present or the future. He is criticizing his weakness as a poet. He also questions the validity of his art and whether it can endure the change of time. The allusion to Parnassus, or Mount Parnassus, (a mythical home of poetry and literature) highlights Lowell's willingness to produce poetry that is meaningful and enduring.

The comparison of poetry-writing to honey-making is an interesting one and it strikes cord in the issue of writing an immortalized kind of poetry. The bee adds "*circle to circle, cell to cell*" just at the poet adds lines and stanzas in order to create the final honeycomb or poem. When the poet explains that the "*corpse of the insect*

lives embalmed in honey" (l.8) it is an allusion to how a bee's soul and life are manifested in his work just as the soul of a poet should be manifested in his poetry. In this case the poem would be imperishable and immortal.

Like the bee which "*prays that its perishable work live long/enough for the sweet-tooth bear to desecrate,*" (ll. 12-13) the poet hopes that his poetry will remain forever. But Lowell is aware that the work of art cannot be immortalized unless the poet puts much of himself in what he writes. Then, the poet has to become identified with his own work and accept it as his fate just like the bee which dies. The words "*Lives embalmed*" is clearly an oxymoronic phrase that parallels life and death. Although the bee is now dead, its work is living forever.

Self-criticism, it appears, is a driving force and an important component of Lowell's progress as a poet. Standing in the middle of the way with one eye looking back at the past achievement and the other eye looking forwards to the future is what Lowell stressing in his poetry. It is almost a landmark of his poetry to learn from the 'mistakes' he has made. Neil (2001) affirms that "One of the most satisfactory things about Lowell's poetry is the way in which it seems continually to be learning from itself"(89).

This self-critical tone that appeared especially in Lowell's later poems continues until his very last collection. His exposing himself bare before the reader is not meant to downgrade his poetic achievement or to undermine his talent. Contrary, he wants to attain as perfect poetic works as possible through self-criticizing his fault and errors.

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