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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words "the catharsis and consolation of great poetry." If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact media@poetryfoundation.org for the correct version.)

LIFE STUDIES

After early success, Robert Lowell strove for a new style—and revolutionized American letters.

By Adam Kirsch

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Even before Robert Lowell published *Life Studies*, his masterpiece, in 1959, he was widely regarded as the best American poet of his generation. In his debut volume, the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946), his combination of relentless rhythmic force and apocalyptic moral vision had issued in poems worthy of comparison with Milton, such as "The Quaker Graveyard at Nantucket":

> When the whale's viscera go and the roll
> Of its corruption overruns this world
> Beyond tree-swept Nantucket and Woods Hole
> And Martha's Vineyard, Sailor, will your sword
> Whistle and fall and sink into the fat?
> In the great ashpit of Jehoshaphat
> The bones cry for the blood of the white whale,
> The fat flukes arch and whack about its ears ...

The book is in every sense a virtuoso performance; even today, its ferocity is mesmerizing. Yet after *Lord Weary's Castle*, Lowell found himself increasingly unsatisfied with the style he had forged. The very strengths of Lowell's early style—its elevation, density, rigor, and symbolism—prevented him from writing about ordinary subjects and everyday life. "It's hell finding a new style," he complained, "or rather finding that your old style won't say any of the things that you want to."

What Lowell discovered, in the mid-1950s, was what all the great poets of his generation —Berryman, Bishop, Roethke—eventually had to confront: the limitations of poetic modernism. The modernists had triumphed through what T.S. Eliot called "impersonality," a rigorous separation of the language of art from the language of everyday life. The man that suffers, Eliot proclaimed, was entirely separate from the mind that creates.

It was a revolutionary moment in American poetry, then, when Lowell began to question all these modernist dicta, and stripped off the "armor" of impersonality. Under the influence of psychoanalysis, he began to think about his early childhood, trying to locate the sources of his increasingly serious manic depression. In the midst of all this poetic and psychological ferment, Lowell's writer's block began to thaw. But the poems he was writing now were unlike anything he had produced before. When he showed them to Allen Tate, once his most important father figure, the older poet was horrified: "All the poems about your family . . . are definitely bad," he wrote Lowell. "I do not think you ought to publish them . . . ."

But in 1959, when those poems appeared as the heart of *Life Studies*, readers did not share Tate's qualms. On the contrary, Lowell's first book in eight years not only confirmed his place at the head of his poetic generation, it made him one of the most influential poets—one of the most influential writers—of the 20th century in America. And it was exactly the things that Tate the modernist objected to—the intimacy, the autobiographical detail, the conversational tone—that made *Life Studies* a triumph.

The first line of the first poem in the *Life Studies* group, "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow," reads: "I won't go with you! I want to stay with Grandpa!" It is a child's guileless cry, which could never have been accommodated in the style of *Lord Weary's Castle*. But it is also a hint of the defiance to come. For it is the poet's own voice we are hearing, and his preference for his grandfather over his parents is a symptom of domestic misery.

The nature of that misery is made clear in poems such as "Commander Lowell," an acid character study of the poet's weak-willed, unworldly father. Lowell senior earns his wife's and his son's contempt: "Cheerful and cowed / among the seadogs at the Sunday yacht club, / he was never one of the crowd." This portrait is elaborated in successive poems such as "Father's Bedroom," in which Lowell allows us to deduce a whole thwarted biography from a collection of objects.

But the satire and bitter nostalgia of the sequence takes an abrupt turn in "Sailing Home from Rapallo," where we see Lowell, now an adult, escorting his mother's coffin back to America: "The corpse / was wrapped like panetone in Italian tinfoil." This trauma seems to provoke the harrowing mental collapse dramatized in "Waking in the Blue," perhaps the most famous poem in the book. Set in a psychiatric hospital populated by Brahmin psychotics, it transposes the apocalyptic New England vision of *Lord Weary's Castle* into a desperately realistic key:

After a hearty New England breakfast,
I weigh two hundred pounds
this morning. Cock of the walk,
I strut in my turtle-necked French sailor's jersey
before the metal shaving mirrors,
and see the shaky future grow familiar
in the pinched, indigenous faces
of these thoroughbred mental cases,
twice my age and half my weight.
We are all old-timers,
each of us holds a locked razor.

The ominous last line, which leaves the threat of suicide to echo in the silence, shows how much of the power of *Life Studies* is owed to indirection and implication. Equally important is the unmistakably Lowellian music of the verse—not the overpowering music of "Quaker Graveyard," now, but a subtler, suppler richness.

It is especially necessary to dwell on the artistry of *Life Studies* now that an artless literature of trauma and recovery has become so popular. The critic M.L. Rosenthal, in a review of "Life Studies," coined the phrase "confessional poetry," and for the next several decades, confession became the standard idiom of American poets. Just as Marx was not a Marxist, so Lowell was not really a confessional poet, and Rosenthal's metaphor conceals more than it discloses about *Life Studies.* In the confession booth, all that matters is honesty and sincerity. In a poem, even the most heartfelt recital remains inert if it is not brought to life with cunning artistry. And nothing could be more artful than the way Lowell, in his masterpiece, turns the pain and risk of his own life into the catharsis and consolation of great poetry.

Adam Kirsch is a senior editor at *The New Republic*. This article originally appeared in *The New York Sun*. Distributed by the Poetry Foundation. Read more about Robert Lowell, and his poetry, at www.poetryfoundation.org

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