

Writing as a Way of Existence: Existentialism in Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*

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Abstract

This article takes Robert Lowell's first confessional book of poems, *Life Studies* as the object of study, and instead of focusing primarily on the oft-discussed autobiographical and historical factors, concentrates upon the philosophical pursuit—existentialism conveyed in this work. The article shall contextualize Lowell's continual artistic creation for renewed existence as part of the process of realizing “being-for-itself” that is central to the existentialist school, to provide a new perspective for understanding Lowell's writing and life. Lowell's poetry reveals the condition of human existence in a lonely and hollow state and under the restrictions imposed by the others. The way to transcend this predicament, as the poet in *Life Studies* shows, is to realize “being-for-itself” through writing, enabling the poet to become more open-eyed and to revive his existence. The ceaseless improvement of the poet's comprehension of self and the other in the process of composition indicates a typical existential life in which the individual revives by free choices and decisions.

Keywords

Robert Lowell, *Life Studies*, Existentialism, Writing and Life

1. Introduction

In a poem in memory of Robert Lowell soon after his death, Elizabeth Bishop once passionately recalled the poet who had always been devoting himself to the endless revision and rethinking of poetry and life: “Nature repeats herself, or almost does: repeat, repeat, repeat; revise, revise, revise.../You left North Haven, anchored in its rock, afloat in mystic blue...And now—you've left/for good. You can't derange, or re-arrange, your poems again” (Bishop, 2011: pp. 210-211). Bishop's portrait reveals the ever-changeable and renewing feature of Lowell's

writing that closely conforms to the general idea of existentialism: individual in ceaseless attempts to investigate, discover and revive the personal existence. Similar statements related to existentialism are claimed by Lowell himself. He argues that poetic writing is based upon the individual's state of existence so that "your poem ends up with an *existentialist* account of your experience" (Lowell, 1988: p. 72). We cannot define Lowell as an "existentialist" like Heidegger, Sartre or Camus because his reception of their works is hard to clarify¹, but it is justifiable to argue, that Lowell's artistic practices in many aspects are coherent to the existential philosophy which "informed and inspired a whole generation of American writers and artists in the 1950s and 1960s" (Tong, 2008: p. 278).

While the interrelatedness between Lowell's poetry and experience has been immediately noticed and frequently discussed by scholars, most studies have only centered upon the autobiographical myth, historical background and the confessional voice in his poetry. There have been few attempts at viewing Lowell's poetry and life from the philosophic perspective of existentialism. In fact, as early as in 1963, after pointing out the possibilities of literary criticism under the light of the existentialist philosophy, R. J. Calhoun at the end of his article mentioned particularly Sartre's theory of art object as bringing together "two disparate consciousnesses" (Calhoun, 1963: p. 7) can be applied to "recent personal poetry in the school of Robert Lowell, which stresses the importance of objects from the past as they present themselves 'now' to a consciousness (Calhoun, 1963: p. 7). Calhoun's proposal of relating Lowell to existentialists, however, was not fully put into practice by critics. S. G. Axelrod in his influential study defined Lowell's poetry as "radically experiential and existential" (Axelrod, 1978: p. 9), but he did not proceed to investigate Lowell and the existentialist school. This article, therefore, by analyzing Lowell's influential confessional book of poems, *Life Studies* (1959), attempts to examine the existentialism revealed in Lowell's poetry. I shall highlight that Lowell, like Sartre, sees art as a way of existence by which the poet can be free and creative against the human condition of loneliness and limit. Through the arduous and even painful process of writing, the poet strives to recollect the past, contemplate upon self, and discover something new about life, leading to a revived being-for-itself.

2. Individuals in Loneliness and Hollowness

From the very beginning to the end of *Life Studies*, the contemplation upon human existence remains the central theme. One of the most important topics throughout the book is the position of man in the world—whether one is fixedly related to some pre-established larger system, for instance, the Chain of Being decreed by God, or individuals are rather accidentally thrown into the world, independent in separate specific situations. To Lowell, an apparent deviation

¹According to the biography by Ian Hamilton, Lowell himself had mentioned Sartre and Camus in his comment of "Skunk Hour", the closing poem in *Life Studies*: "My night is not gracious, but secular, puritan and agnostical. An Existential night. Somewhere in my mind was a passage from Sartre or Camus about reaching some point of final darkness where the one free act is suicide" (Hamilton, 1982: p. 267). So it is certain that Lowell at least knows well about the existentialists.

from tradition and religious belief to particular and personal experience is presented in *Life Studies*. In the first poem of the book, “Beyond the Alps”, loss of the sense of belonging is expressed through the transition between two landscapes—Rome and Paris: “...I watched our Paris pullman lunge/mooning across the fallow Alpine snow. O bella Roma! ... Life changed to landscape. Much against my will/I left the City of God where it belongs” (Lowell, 1964: p. 3). By leaving Rome the city of Christianity for Paris the secular city of art, the poet loses his faith in melancholy. The moving train continues to convey the symbolic meaning in the latter part of the poem, “Our mountain-climbing train had come to earth” (4), indicating that the poet’s mind has descended to the earthly matters in human life instead of the eternal divine dogmas. The waning faith is also strengthened by the poet’s mock of the “holy father” whose “electric razor purred, his pet canary chirped on his left hand” (4). The absurd image of the holy father and “the monstrous human crush” (4) embody a sense of absurdity and horror of losing faith.

Lowell’s transition to a more personal concern—as implied in the metaphor of the journey from Rome to Paris—draws on the general ideological atmosphere of atheistic existentialism in the mid-twentieth century. Sartre once claimed the denial of God by quoting Dostoyevsky’s words: “God does not exist, everything is permissible. This is the starting point of existentialism...man is consequently abandoned, for he cannot find anything to rely on—neither within nor without” (Sartre, 2007: pp. 28-29). It would be arbitrary to assert that Lowell completely abandoned his belief like Sartre, but his movement from a close attachment to tradition to a more private, specific experience proves to be clear in his literary criticism. He once told the interviewer that “A lot of poetry seems good in the tradition but just doesn’t move me very much because it doesn’t have personal vibrance to it” (Lowell, 1988: p. 72). When he composes *Life Studies* he had forced himself “into a revolutionary style” which allowed him to depart from traditional forms and express freely personal feelings (Axelrod, 1978: p. 86).

Under the horror of losing faith and tradition, Lowell in the last lines of “Beyond the Alps” proposes to seek “the blear-eyed ego kicking in my berth” (4), conveying the idea that the individual’s existence is a moving, unstable state separate from the others. In existentialist terms, each individual man’s “real person as an isolated molecule is separated from all others by an absolute vacuum and his personality-matter, as the object that he is, is subjected to the shifting laws of exteriority, as a perverse and demoniac interiority” (Sartre, 2004: p. 199). In the world which by itself is purposeless and thus absurd, man is easily inclined into a state of loneliness and hollowness. In *Life Studies*, “hollow” frequently appears to depict the poet’s feeling when interacting with parents and friends. In part two of *Life Studies*, an autobiographical prose titled “91 Revere Street”, Lowell recalls his experience in childhood, among which the depiction of his parents’ disastrous marriage covers the most significant length. Strategies of using sounds enhance the effect of the prose, generating a noisy, troublesome but lonely atmosphere:

“Weelawaugh, we-ee-eelawaugh, weelawaugh,” shrilled Mother’s high voice. “But-and, but-and, but-and!” Father’s low mumble would drone in answer. Though I couldn’t be sure that I had caught the meaning of the words, I followed the sounds as though they were a movie. I felt drenched in my parents’ passions (19).

The misunderstanding among family members suggests the lonely nature of human condition. Unable to comprehend his parents’ quarrels, the child, who is supposed to be integrated into the family unit, sees the others from the perspective of an absolute outsider as if they were a movie. Lowell describes the feeling most of the time during childhood as “majestic, hollow boredom” and 91 Revere Street as “the setting for those arthritic spiritual pains” (19). The child feels so lonely and uneasy with his parents that he “felt at home” (21) in the house of his closest friend Eric Burckhard, the son of a professor at Harvard. His affinity with the Burckhards was even “intensified” when he discovered his mother was “always ill at ease with them” (21).

The child’s close relationship with his best friend Eric Burckhard, however, also ends up with a breaking up and a sense of hollowness. Out of the eager to be attractive among his fellows, “I” made fun of Eric when he caught whooping cough. While knowing that Eric was afraid of infecting others, “I” intentionally brought some girls to come near him, so that “Eric flushed, grew white, bent double with coughing. He began to cry, and had to be led away from the Public Garden” (22). Eric’s embarrassment let “me” become “a center of interest” (22) among children for several days but “my” friendship with Eric also comes to an end. Lowell seems to express the separate nature of individuals through the reaction of children: “The breach was so unspoken and intense that our classmates were actually horrified” (22). The bullying, although an unimportant and even common case among boys, points to the evil nature of man and fragile relationship between friends: “We crossed our hearts, mixed spit, mixed blood. The reconciliation was *hollow*” (22). The sense of belonging found by “me” in the relationship with the Burckhards was lost again by “my” own offensive behavior. Indeed, this hollow feeling is repeatedly expressed in Lowell’s other poems: in “New York”, for instance, the poet wakes “to the hollow of loneliness”². Lowell’s emphasis of loneliness is exactly the existential explanation of human condition.

3. The Self within Restrictions by the Other

The individual in loneliness, although being thrown into a certain environment accidentally and independently, does not avoid the interaction with the others. Rather, in existentialist opinion, to discover the true self, one must pay careful attention to his relationship with the others. This is why Lowell is always recalling and reexamining his experience with his family and friends. Sartre emphasizes the interrelatedness between I and the other: “The Other does not appear to me as a being who is constituted first so as to encounter me later; he appears as a

²See stanza four, line eleven of “New York”, collected in *For Lizzie and Harriet* (1973).

being who arises in an original relation of being with me and whose indubitability and factual necessity are those of my own consciousness" (Sartre, 1993: p. 275). The fact of the other, for an individual, is incontestable and it makes effect by compacting a feeling of uneasiness, thereby situating the individual "perpetually in danger in a world" (Sartre, 1993: p. 275). Heidegger, tracing the origin of human existence to an ancient fable in which the goddess Care created human beings, also points out that "'being-in-the-world' has the character of being of 'Care'" (Heidegger, 1996: p. 185). "Care", the anxiety and anguish caused by the other, is in company with human beings in the whole life: "...since 'Care' first shaped this creature, she shall possess it as long as it lives" (Heidegger, 1996: p. 184). To be more definite, Sartre exclaims in his play *No Exit*: "Hell is—other people!" (Sartre, 1989: p. 45). When one is under the discernment and judgment of the other, he becomes a slave to "the Other": "Being-seen constitutes me as a defenseless being for a freedom which is not my freedom" (Sartre, 1993: p. 267).

In *Life Studies*, Lowell presents to the reader how individuals are restricted and controlled by "the other". At his home everyone is suffered from "the other", either in the form of spiritual torture or social pressure. To Lowell's mother, Charlotte Winslow Lowell, the uneasiness and anguish came from a cultural taste so disparate with her own that she kept trying to get rid of it. Born and brought up in a Boston Brahmin family, Mrs. Lowell had a luxurious taste for furniture and artifacts: "She kept a middle-of-the-road position, and much admired Italian pottery with its fresh peasant colors and puritanical, clean-cut lines" (34). Unfortunately, she marries a navy commander who had to live a dull, unstable naval life. She hated the inebriated sailors who littered her doorstep "with the dregs of Scollay Square" (24) and complained about Mr. Lowell's instant returns to the Navy Yard at his superior's command on Christmas Eve. To fight against and distinguish from the naval life, she bought a large house with "its own flagpole and screen porches on three levels", only to be harshly criticized by Mr. Lowell's superior, Admiral De Stahl. "Whatever pomp or distinction its possession might have had for us was destroyed by an eccentric humiliation" and it was accused of being "flaunting private fortunes in the face of naval tradition" (23). The irreconcilable conflict between Mrs. Lowell and the naval life is caused by her strong insistence on keeping a good taste, which had been an integrated characteristic of self. Mrs. Lowell's precarious and neurotic personality proves to be the outcome under the cultural and spiritual restrictions imposed by the "other".

Most explicitly and painfully, Lowell shows the state of being limited and controlled through the failure of his father, Commander Robert Traill Spence Lowell III. At first, Mr. Lowell was a navy officer who had to frequently move household to fulfill the tasks assigned by his superior. His wife, Mrs. Lowell, tired of the instability and unsatisfied with the salary in the navy, kept persuading him to resign from the army to start a business instead. Lowell seems to use an ironic tone when his mother said: "A man must make up his own mind", which just

gives a contrast meaning—one is unable to make his own decision in face of the pressure from the “other”. Lowell uses horrible words to describe the pressure exerted by his mother:

Mother had violently set her heart on the resignation. She was hysterical even in her calm, but like a patient and forbearing strategist, she tried to pretend her neutrality. One night she said with murderous coolness, “Bobby and I are leaving for Papá’s.” This was an ultimatum to force Father to sign a deed placing the Revere Street house in Mother’s name (19).

The words “violently”, “murderous” and “ultimatum” vividly disclose the overwhelming and even fatal power upon the frail self of his father, which finally submitted to the other’s requirement. Lowell records their quarrels from the perspective of a child: “I would awake with rapture to the rhythm of my parents arguing, arguing one another to exhaustion” (19). The child, who should have been cared and loved by his parents, is also under his mother’s control and reacts in a negative way as his father does. When Mrs. Lowell desires to know everything about her son and asks “prying questions”, the child’s mind “always blanked and seemed to fill with clammy hollowness” in order to save himself from “emotional exhaustion”.

Besides the limit set by the other people is the rules of the society. If Mr. Lowell’s is forced by the other individual at home, his failure in business is the result of social pressure. After his resignation from the navy, Mr. Lowell “never had a civilian *career*; he instead had merely twenty-two years of the civilian *life*”. Like a fish out of water, he “survived to drift from job to job, to be displaced” (18). As a member of Boston Brahmin family Mr. Lowell was well-educated, but he had such little business talent that he spent more money than earned. The financial crisis also reveals the external social conditions as torture for the individuals.

4. Writing as a Way of “Being-for-Itself”

Having realized loneliness and torture to be common for human beings, as discussed above, how does the poet rise above this situation and realize an authentic existence? Van Meter Ames has argued that a poet lives in an existentialist way:

He is born at a certain time and place, subject to the surrounding conditions and influences, to his own temptations and frailties. But to be an artist...He can never be satisfied with himself, because he can only be on the way to what he would be, in a ceaseless becoming; which always threatens to lapse into a repetition, a parody of creative activity (Ames, 1951: p. 252).

The “ceaseless becoming” defines human existence as a changing process and the mission of a poet is to renew his being through writing poetry. Sartre suggests that the freedom of making one’s own decisions is an indispensable part of existence: “It is therefore the positing of my ultimate ends which characterizes my being and which is identical with the sudden thrust of the freedom which is

mine” (Sartre, 1993: 443). The existentialists believe that only the artists are completely free when they are creating or composing because they manage to rescue themselves from the regulations and limits from the “other”: “The existentialist ideal is to live as if nothing were settled, in perpetual doubt. The hero is the artist who shakes off habits, teachings and achievements, in continual revolt against whatever would confine or control him” (Ames, 1951: p. 252).

Lowell, like the existentialists, considers writing as a form of existence and believes that the process of creating art is at same time the recognition and renewing of his own life: “The artist’s existence becomes his art. He is reborn in it, and he hardly exists without it” (Lowell, 1988: p. 108). The title “Life Studies” itself implies poetry as a way of examining the poet’s own life. Katharine Wallingford points out that “the study of a life is a process; as the poem makes clear, it is the life of Robert Lowell—the experiencing self—that is being studied” (Wallingford, 1988: p. 16). This reveals Lowell’s existentialist pursuit of a “being-for-itself” acquired by one’s own efforts and improvements. Sartre claims that “man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself” (Sartre, 2007: p. 22). Holding that “existence precedes essence” (Sartre, 2007: p. 20), Sartre divides self into two types, the material and unconscious “being-in-itself” and the “being-for-itself” defined and shaped according to one’s own will. The latter one, as the authentic self sought by the existentialists, is historic. What Lowell means by “reborn” in art is exactly the improvement of this historic self, referring to the reshaping of self through recollection of the previous experience.

In part four of the book, the poet often reflects upon self and comes to new conclusions by connecting past and present, undergoing an intensely personal experience. In “During Fever”, Lowell brings his father’s habits back to his present life through his daughter’s words: “my daughter in fever/flounders in her chicken-colored sleeping bag. ‘sorry,’ she mumbles like her dim-bulb father” (79). It is the poet’s own daughter’s mumbling that reminds of the father in “91 Revere Street” who is characterized as “a mumblor” (16). Here Lowell confesses that he is also a mumblor like his father and comes to realize the difficulty and responsibility of an adult. The discovery after Lowell himself has become a parent implies his sympathy and reconciliation with his father. In the last lines Lowell also shows sympathy of his mother: “Terrible that old life of decency/without unseemly intimacy/or quarrels, when the unemancipated woman/still had her Freudian papa and maids” (80).

Lowell’s display of attitudes to his wife and their marriage, as another important portion of *Life Studies*, also indicates the movement between past and present that finally comes to a new insight into the poet’s relationship with his family. In “Man and Wife”, the first lines depict a desperate life which the man and wife are trying to deny: “All night I’ve held your hand, as if you had/a fourth time faced the kingdom of the mad—its hackneyed speech, its homicidal eye—and dragged me home alive” (87). To defend themselves against the “mad”, “homi-

cidal” and “murderous” external world, the couple lies down on bed in a rather peaceful mood. The following lines, however, suddenly move to the poet’s memory of their youth: “you were in your twenties, and I, once hand on glass and heart in mouth, outdrank the Rahvs in the heat/of Greenwich Village, fainting at your feet—too boiled and shy” (87). The couple in their twenties had been passionate to each other and the romantic scenes make strong contrast with their relationship at present. The last stanza returns to the present by pointing out the exact time “now twelve years later”, when the wife has turned back against her husband, making the poet suffer “merciless” attack (87), but the end is rather optimistic by saying the wife’s angry speech “breaks like the Atlantic Ocean on my head” (87). The exchange among three times vividly implies the poet’s highly intense experience. Indeed, the poet in the last lines has become more open-eyed and enlightened, as what Lowell calls “reborn” in the poem. In a peaceful, lamented and lifeless mood the poet recalls their enthusiastic youth, and later is dragged back to the present by his wife’s “tirade”, finally coming to realize that his wife’s censorious language, although harsh and “old-fashioned”, is exactly what brings him back to life like the nurturing water.

The epiphany about marriage that the partner in some way animates the desperate life exemplifies Lowell’s existentialist way of realizing “Being-for-itself” through composing poetry. In *Life Studies*, the poet always revives his condition by portraying something curious and active enough to animate his sleepy soul. In “Skunk Hour”, the poet at first situates himself within a dull and dead atmosphere, imagining the cars to be bodies in the graveyard: “One dark night, my Tudor Ford climbed the hill’s skull; I watched for love-cars. Lights turned down, they lay together, hull to hull, where the graveyard shelves on the town.... My mind’s not right” (90). Lowell himself describes the scene as “an Existential night”, in which the poet has in his mind “a passage from Sartre or Camus about reaching some point of final darkness where the one free act is suicide” (Hamilton, 1982: p. 267). Immersed in a lifeless imagination, the poet suddenly notices a mother skunk with her kittens, who are swilling the garbage pail. The skunks show a rather active and energetic spirit: “She jabs her wedge-head in a cup/of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail, and will not scare” (90). Compared with the poet in fear of reality and willing to commit suicide, the messy and ugly animals strive to make a living. Ian Hamilton argues that “The poet who feels lower than a skunk finds both comedy and renewal in the beasts’ quixotically defiant march up Main Street” (Hamilton, 1982: p. 268). In fact, the beasts, absurd as they are, delight the poet and prevent him from going to the final darkness. The last lines indicate that the poet manages to undergo a spiritual transformation.

5. Conclusion

Lowell’s poetry is closely related to his existence, and particularly in *Life Studies*, the poet provides possibilities of renewing self in the poems. As Philip Cooper argues, Lowell’s poems “manage to reanimate reality” (Cooper, 1970: p. 60). The

poet often starts from an existential reflection upon man's predicament in life, referring to the sense of hollow loneliness or the restrictions imposed by the other. But with the development of narration and the recollection of the previous experiences, the poet manages to acquire a new insight or understanding of life. Therefore, the process of writing is a kind of revival, a rather existential, authentic renewal of "being-for-itself" by connecting past and present. Axelrod clearly points out that Lowell's poems "embody a complex process of clarifying and thus culminating his experience; and then, since poems are themselves real, they take their rightful place within experience, leaving author and reader alike altered" (Axelrod, 1978: p. 12). Indeed, Lowell views writing and life as inseparable because as soon as the art is created, the life of the author also changes with it. Claiming that "the artist finds new life in his art and almost sheds his other life" (Lowell, 1988: p. 108), Lowell hopes to reveal the existential value of poetry and continuously complete his being-for-itself through artistic creation.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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