

## **“My Eyes Have Seen What My Hand Did”: Lowell, Bishop, and Confessional Poetry**

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### **Abstract**

Confessional poetry—an intensely personal form of literature—arose in the 1950s, due largely to poet Robert Lowell’s unique style and unapologetic use of his own experience. Lowell’s pioneering work in this literary genre expanded art’s purview to allow for a broader exploration of personal vulnerability. His legacy continues to shape literary practice and shift the perception of what art should encompass—carving out a space for the artist’s own voice within their work. Throughout Lowell’s life, he wrestled with the idea presented in the Latin aphorism “Ars longa vita brevis,” which translates to “Art is long, life is short.” He spent his career trying to portray life transcendently through poetry. Across his works, one can trace a thread of confessed experience; the degree of interpretative liberty heightens as Lowell increasingly subjects life to art, fact to fiction. This increase parallels the intensified criticism he received from those who thought that confessional poetry was morally suspect, callous, and selfish. Yet, despite gentle rebuke from Lowell’s closest friend, Elizabeth Bishop, and intense criticism from the press, he haltingly continued down the road paved out for himself. He accepted the consequences of a muddled fact and fiction pairing if it meant art that went beyond his own experience. Thus, Lowell meticulously crafted and revised, publishing works that were confessional in nature and controversial in style. He expanded art’s scope to make space for his ethically questionable work and decided that despite Bishop’s caution—art was worth quite a lot. Juxtaposing Lowell’s evolved interpretation of artistic practice with the criticism of his contemporaries serves to illuminate his influence and legacy, allowing for further insight into confessional poetry’s cultural impact and the ripples it effected in what is now considered appropriate in art.

**Keywords: Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, Confessional Poetry**

### **1. Introduction**

Confessional poetry—an intensely personal form of literature—arose in the 1950s due largely to poet Robert Lowell’s unique style and unapologetic use of his own experience. There have been many literary movements of varying importance along the historical timeline. Those with little impact quickly fade from collective memory, while those with recognized value dazzle the world. Confessional poetry sits somewhere in-between, with a legacy that is often too subtle to make its origins known. Yet, Lowell and his pioneering work in this literary genre expanded art’s purview to include a broader exploration of personal vulnerability.<sup>1</sup> His legacy continues to shape modern literary practice and shift the perception of what art should encompass—carving out a space for the artist’s personal voice and experience within their work.

Throughout Lowell’s life, he wrestled with the idea presented in the Latin aphorism “Ars longa vita brevis,” which translates to “Art is long, life is short.”<sup>2</sup> Lowell spent his career trying to portray life transcendently through his poetry. Across his works, one can trace a thread of confessed experience, but the degree of interpretative liberty shifts as

Lowell increasingly accepts his style and subjects his life to his art, fact to fiction. This increase parallels the heightened criticism that he received from those who thought that confessional poetry was morally suspect, callous, and selfish.<sup>3</sup> Yet, despite the gentle rebuke from Lowell's closest friend Elizabeth Bishop, who remarked that "art just isn't worth that much" in response to his work *The Dolphin*, and the more intense criticism from the press, Lowell haltingly continued down the road paved out for himself.<sup>4</sup> He accepted the consequences of a muddled fact and fiction pairing if it meant an art that was "heightened from life."<sup>5</sup> Lowell meticulously crafted and revised his art, publishing impactful works that were confessional in nature and controversial in style. He uniquely fused fact and fiction, expanding art's scope to make space for his ethically questionable work and deciding that despite Bishop's caution—art really was worth quite a lot.

## 2. Lowell in Context

Academic Robert Hahn notes that "in the case of Lowell the story should be the poetry," but as Lowell pulled heavily from personal experience, a snapshot of his life serves to expand comprehension of the criticism which follows his later works.<sup>6</sup> However, modern scholarly attempts at understanding Lowell's life often go too far, leading some to attribute his genius to the result of his medications or mental illness.<sup>7</sup> This practice discredits Lowell's talent and dedication to his craft. For the majority of his life, Lowell struggled with manic depression, bipolarism, mental illness, and alcoholism.<sup>8</sup> These impacted his three failed marriages, erratic friendships, two children, and frequent moves, as Lowell was frequently in and out of the hospital.<sup>9</sup> But, he always returned to art and revision of that art, regardless of his circumstances.

Despite his life's shaky foundation, poetry and his friendship with Elizabeth Bishop were two steady constants in Lowell's life. His poetry ebbed and flowed during the time he spent as a patient, lecturer, and traveler—through the joyous moments and the somber reflections. As Lowell wrote, "It's miraculous...how often writing takes the pain away, takes time away."<sup>10</sup> He used poetry as a space in which to craft experience into art, a practice that culminated in the confessional poetic style. To Lowell, manipulating experience meant shifting how he portrayed what actually happened by melding reality with imagination, fact with fiction. This practice of making reality's boundaries hazy is what gave Lowell the most trouble in the press, as several of the peers that reviewed his work considered his behavior unethical. But throughout Lowell's varying levels of public approval, his friendship with fellow poet Elizabeth Bishop was a constant. Their interaction slowly cemented itself within his regular routine as an epistolary exchange that lasted for decades. Lowell saw Bishop infrequently, but their genuine, committed, gentle friendship of mutual respect served as an avenue to both disconnect with reality and engage with it more fully, depending on the season of life they were in.<sup>11</sup>

Lowell published several collections, practicing constant revision and republication, but his most influential works are: *Lord Weary's Castle*, one of his initial works; *Life Studies*, viewed as initializing the confessional poetry movement;<sup>12</sup> *the Dolphin*, Lowell's most criticized work; and his last work,<sup>13</sup> *Day by Day*, in which his interpretation of experience as art reaches its full maturity.<sup>14</sup> Each work is a furtherance of the confessional melding of fact with fiction and "altogether, these books assure Lowell's place as a major writer who remains readable and important; and they provide the best evidence for those who seek to rank him among the last century's great poets."<sup>15</sup> This greatness stems from his unique style which pushed art's historically traditional boundaries.

Prior to Lowell, poets avoided explicitly personal, colloquially voiced experience. Thus, in early works such as *Lord Weary's Castle*, Lowell subjected his experience to poetic form, writing within formal meter and rhyme structures.<sup>16</sup> Published a couple decades later, *Life Studies* features Lowell's attempts at furthering his own style by creating poetic photographs of his experience—quick captures. He tries to have "each poem seem as open and single-surfaced as a photograph" yet found that "it's severe to be confined to rendering appearances."<sup>17</sup> He viewed the responsibility to explicitly say what really happened as stifling. Thus, as time went on, Lowell progressed dramatically in his style and conviction to crafted art. His later works became more and more a "fusion of the truth of heart and mind."<sup>18</sup> He was devoted to a cross-hatching of what once was, what is, and what one imagines to be; Lowell sought to mesh what happened with one's impression of what happened because "he conceived of his life as being in service to the poetic idea, as needing to be depersonalized and transformed into art."<sup>19</sup>

Lowell's practice of transforming reality into art had massive implications for those close to him, as his work left fuzzy what was true to life and what was not. For example, when reading *The Dolphin*, one cannot easily tell Lowell's voice apart from the words taken from his ex-wife's letters—thus while Lowell knows how he has elevated and shaped reality, his intended audience does not. This kind of subtle interpretive practice is controversial in academia due to the ethical concerns it raises. Carol Gluck, an American academic, notes broadly of artistic practice that "if the past is all

there is to cling to, it had better be anchored, solid, not melting into air. It had better, in a word, be true, or 'real,' at least in the sense of not being invented."<sup>20</sup> Gluck holds that one is to be faithful to the past when retelling it. She goes on to quote writer Thomas Hardy's sentiment, which is often cited in critiques of Lowell: "The mixing of fact and fiction in unknown proportions would be infinite mischief... If any statements in the dress of fiction are covertly hinted to be fact, all must be fact, and nothing else but fact."<sup>21</sup> Lowell, however, believed that art was to be different—and that rather than be a straight retelling of experience, it had the capacity to be transcendent. Thus, the central considerations are whether or not art falls under academia's scope and whether or not fact must be explicit when it is housed in art. Elizabeth Bishop, who wrote to Lowell "I can't tell a lie even for art, apparently; it takes an awful effort or a sudden jolt to make me alter facts," held that facts are not to be altered, even for one's artistic practice.<sup>22</sup>

Robert Lowell met poetic powerhouse Elizabeth Bishop after the publishing of his second poetry book, *Lord Weary's Castle*. They quickly struck up a friendship which resulted in a regular correspondence in which "nothing was off limits" for over thirty years.<sup>23</sup> In this epistolary context, both were their "highest selves," as Bishop would later write. They discussed current events, politics, personal life, poetry, struggles, and everything in between. Lowell went so far as to write later in his life that the one "might have been" in his life was proposing marriage to Bishop.<sup>24</sup> But, the place that they did hold in each other's lives was enough to allow for both to serve as comfort and critic to each other throughout every season. Poetry united them, but mutual respect allowed for their sustained connection. A testament to their friendship, Bishop devoted "North Haven," "Armadillo," and other poems to Lowell.<sup>25</sup> In turn, Lowell wrote "Skunk Hour" and many Connecticut-themed poems for her because of the time they spent there together.<sup>26</sup>

### 3. Lowell in Confessionalism

The term, confessional poetry, was coined by journalist M. L. Rosenthal in his review of *Life Studies*, soon after the work's publication.<sup>27</sup> Most poets who would come to be categorized as part of the confessional school of poetics scorned the term, yet it has remained the categorizing phrase because it reflects the genre's intensely personal nature. Rosenthal remarks that in *Life Studies*, "Lowell removes the mask. His speaker is unequivocally himself, and it is hard not to think of *Life Studies* as a series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal."<sup>28</sup> The work was regularly criticized as beyond the scope of proper art. Another popular review of *Life Studies* by sociologist John Thompson said, "For these poems, the question of propriety no longer exists. They have made a conquest: what they have won is a major expansion of the territory of poetry."<sup>29</sup> But, Lowell's aim in writing poetry was to craft a reality more accurate than what is beheld, one which incorporates what is seen, what is felt, and what could be. To Lowell, that goal necessitated honesty to the fullness of his own experience, reminiscent of a relative truth. In one of his last poems, "Epilogue," he writes that the vision of the artist "*is not a lens, it trembles to caress the light*," meaning that art is not meant to directly reflect what has happened, but rather is to haltingly discern and then portray: truth.<sup>30</sup> Scholar Steven Axelrod expounds that the kind of art Lowell propagates "tries to possess life... actively, imaginatively, lovingly. [It] is ultimately passion for existence" in which "the artist... strives for the 'grace of accuracy' that makes consciousness momentarily coextensive with reality."<sup>31</sup>

In his most innovative work, Lowell unapologetically utilizes letters from his correspondents for poems in *The Dolphin*. His decision to go through with publishing, despite criticism, is complex, as just two years prior to *The Dolphin*, Lowell initiated, wrote, and apologized to Bishop for using her letter as part of a poem's verse. Yet, when she confronted him about a very similar situation in 1973, he refused to back down and used his estranged wife's and daughter's words to weave into his pieces.<sup>32</sup> Further, he manipulates diction and phrasing, skewing the outside quotations he presents as concrete. And so, while his decision to publish is seemingly erratic, "we should remind ourselves that there was always a degree of something that might be called the rational within Lowell's poetry, confessional or otherwise. Lowell's realism was revolutionary enough to push forward while revisiting the past."<sup>33</sup> Thus, he consciously decided when his work demanded an expanded scope and made his own moral judgments that did not often lend to ethical standards of the day. To Lowell, his poetry was worth the pain his confessional style might have caused, although he later expressed halting regret at having published *The Dolphin*, arguably his most confessional work.<sup>34</sup>

Upon reading an advance copy of *The Dolphin*, Elizabeth Bishop famously declared in a letter to Lowell that "One can use one's life as material—one does, anyway—but these letters—aren't you violating a trust? IF you were given permission—IF you hadn't changed them ... etc. But *art just isn't worth that much*... In general, I deplore the "confessional"—however, when you wrote LIFE STUDIES perhaps it was a necessary movement, and it helped make poetry more real, fresh and immediate. But now—ye gods—anything goes."<sup>35</sup> Unlike the academic query as to whether

fact and fiction should be mixed together, Bishop took the most issue with Lowell changing the words from the letters and presenting them as fact by italicizing them or surrounding them with quotation marks. Lowell viewed his adjustments as grace to his subjects and to himself.<sup>36</sup> To him, if the narrative was enough altered from what had actually happened, then the work rose above himself and those he wrote about, taking on a character of its own—but this view was not widely accepted.

Adrienne Rich, Lowell's former friend and a fellow poet, had similar criticisms of *The Dolphin*. In her popular review, she wrote "What does one say about a poet who, having left his wife and daughter for another marriage... goes on to appropriate his ex-wife's letters written under the stress and pain of desertion, into a book of poems nominally addressed to the new wife? ... I think this bullshit eloquence a poor excuse for a cruel and shallow book."<sup>37</sup> Lowell's book was generally reviewed poorly, primarily due to ethical concerns regarding his right to appropriate private letters, his close knitting of fact and fiction, and the fairness reasonably due to an artist's subject. The harsh public reaction to his work prompted Lowell to write Bishop regarding her early recommendation to reassess *The Dolphin*'s use of source material. He writes "your old letter of warning – I never solved the problem of the letters, and there and elsewhere of fact and fiction...my sin (mistake?) was publishing."<sup>38</sup> Thus in later poems and his work in *Day by Day*, there is a tinge of regret and a maturing of his view towards art from life, one which is less reckless than earlier publications. Lowell eventually writes:

I have sat and listened to too many / words of the collaborating muse, / and plotted perhaps too freely with  
my life, / not avoiding injury to others, / not avoiding injury to myself— / to ask compassion . . . this book,  
half fiction, / an eelnet made by man for the eel fighting // my eyes have seen what my hand did.<sup>39</sup>

In this way, Lowell acknowledges the damage and hurt caused by his relentless pursuit of a transcendent art that was so often simply "heightened from life, / yet paralyzed by fact."<sup>40</sup>

#### 4. Lowell in Contemporary Poetry

Regardless of the later critical view of his works and personal life, Lowell had a significant impact on his contemporaries, as he pioneered the way in expanding art's space to include experience that is "imagined, not recalled."<sup>41</sup> Sylvia Plath, a renowned American poet who studied under Lowell, held that he significantly increased poetry's scope and inspired the next generation of writers. In an interview, she remarked that *Life Studies* excited her, as its publication was a "intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal emotional experience which I feel has been partly taboo."<sup>42</sup> Thus, Lowell led the way for a new confessional genre in poetry in which a fuller range of emotion could be expressed. Scholar Robert Hahn wrote that after *Life Studies*, "there were countless poems written in emulation of a stanza such as [one] from 'Skunk Hour'..."<sup>43</sup> But, despite inspiring a new wave of poets, Lowell stands at the forefront because of his masterful manipulation of "realistic convention" that broke down formal literary traditions, or at least paved the way beyond them.<sup>44</sup>

Lowell is central to the confessional poetry movement, as one of the first to actively attempt "discovering, altering, and creating the conditions of his existence."<sup>45</sup> Lowell's persistent desire to manipulate personal experience has withstood time, criticism, and tradition, making his legacy one which encourages artists to explore the limits of vulnerability in their craft.<sup>46</sup> To his peers, Lowell overstepped his artistic space, yet this perceived overreach allows for other artists to experiment within the steps he took. Although Bishop's gentle rebuke and Lowell's own conviction eventually led to a maturing in how he approached the juxtaposition of other's experience with his own, Lowell never departed from a kind of meticulous re-imagining of the reality in which he lived. Thus, "for a reader in the twenty-first century, Robert Lowell may be the poet whose combination of steel and suppleness best exemplifies the way one can at least try to navigate the treacherous straits of the creative life."<sup>47</sup> Modernly, from the rise of the confessional Instagram poet to the popularity of art that engages with intense vulnerability, Lowell's subtly powerful legacy can be traced on from *Life Studies*—a paved path for poetic experimentation and innovation.

#### 5. Conclusion

"Art is long, life is short" and so Robert Lowell attempted to manipulate his life experience into art, initiating the confessional poetry movement of the 1950s; he melded fact and fiction, purposefully broadened art's scope despite widespread criticism, and wrestled with what art is really worth. Consistent practices like crafting poetry and

conversing with Elizabeth Bishop paralleled Lowell's engagement with how far he would go to create the kind of experience he imagined: a question he would explore throughout his career. In many ways, Lowell and his overshadowing persona were larger than life, a role he actually intended for his art. Yet, "distractions of the persona...aside" his work includes "splendid poems, which should continue to attract and sustain, to stimulate and reward their readers."<sup>48</sup> Lowell's lasting impact and legacy in the modern arts makes him worthy of study, even as his questionable ethics compel a deeper query into how one is to reconcile fact with fiction and truth with beauty—questions that Lowell and Bishop spent a lifetime's correspondence engaging with.

## 6. Acknowledgements

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