

Robert Lowell's "Skunk Hour" and the Predicament of the Age

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Abstract:

As a poet, Robert Lowell believes that he has the responsibility of the artist to preserve culture from decline. He believes that the poet is a person who embodies the issues of cultural crisis in the crisis of his own life, and that the political theme is subordinate to the personal because the personal is symbolic of the national and cultural. In his "confessional" poems, included in *Life Studies* (1959), he creates the myth of an American whose history and the predicament of the age are embodied in his family's history and predicament, as epitomised in his own psychological experience.

The research paper views Lowell's concern for the predicament of the modern age through his poem "Skunk Hour," the last poem of *Life Studies*, which shows the world totally broken up in all cultural levels – religious, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic.

Key Words: Robert Lowell, "Skunk Hour" , confessional poetry *Life Studies*

قصيدة "ساعة الظربان" لروبرت لويل ومأزق العصر الحديث

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المستخلص :

يعتقد روبرت لويل كشاعر أن عليه مسؤولية الأديب في الحفاظ على الثقافة من الانحطاط والتدهور، وهو يرى أن الشاعر الإنسان يجسد قضايا أزمة الثقافة وأزمة حياته الخاصة، وأن القضية السياسية تخضع للقضية الشخصية لأن القضية الشخصية هي رمز للقضية الوطنية والثقافية. وقد اوجد لويل في قصائده الاعترافية التي ضمنها في مجموعته الشعرية "دراسات في الحياة" (1959) أسطورة ذلك الفرد الأميركي الذي يتجسد تاريخ عصره ومأزقه في تاريخ عائلته ومأزقها ويتمثل في تجربته العاطفية الخاصة به.

يروم البحث الى كشف الاهتمام بأزمة الثقافة في العصر الحديث من خلال قصيدة "ساعة الظربان" وهي اخر قصيدة في مجموعته الشعرية تلك والتي تظهر العالم الحديث وقد تهاوى كليا في جوانب الثقافة الدينية والأخلاقية والفكرية والفنية.

**The time is out of joint. O cursed spite
That ever I was born to set it right!**

Hamlet, Act 1, scene 5, 189 – 190

I. Background

Robert Lowell (1917 – 1977) lived in a time when American culture was at stake. The American democracy and ideals of equality and freedom that were put forward by the first settlers were probed concerning their credibility and validity. The rise of aristocracy and imperialism contradicted those ideals and that contradiction caused a decline in American culture.

During the 1950s, Lowell was in an artistic and psychological crisis. He recollected his private experience and projected it upon contemporary American culture. He extended his mental breakdown to American life of his age. He created the myth of "an American (and a contemporary civilisation generally) whose history and present predicament are embodied in those of his own family and epitomised in his own psychological experience."¹ Lowell sought his self that was lost within time by recalling memories embedded in his childhood, and transposed them to a national level.

Lowell's political attitude is demonstrated in his rejection of war. Although he is aware of the record of his family's participation in previous wars, he comes out against the American intervention in World War II and American war in Vietnam. His point of view is that war is a horror and that nobody could recognise the true horror of being ruthlessly overpowered are only those who have experienced repression.² His opinion on modern wars is that they are "subversive to democracies," and they open the way to totalitarian slavery.³ He refuses to participate in a war which constitutes a betrayal of American ideal of democracy, and insists that the war is no longer constitutional and that the "American legislators have the mental set and moral courage of cockroaches."⁴ With this attitude to war,

Lowell develops an awareness of the real situation in America that threatens its culture.

Lowell's reaction to this situation was to explore the deepest and most extreme experiences of private being and to read in his own personal experience the lesson of the age generally, so that his mental breakdown became the breakdown of contemporary American civilisation.⁵

It was during the 1950s that Lowell first suffered from manic attacks which lasted throughout the rest of his life. In August 1952, he was taken to an Army hospital in Munich because of a manic attack. The manic attack in April of 1954 was severer than the previous one. After that, Lowell was diagnosed as schizophrenic. His volume of poems, *Life Studies*, emerged from his psychiatric treatment. In a letter to Elizabeth Bishop of an earlier date, Lowell said that "psycho-therapy is rather amazing – something like stirring the bottom of an aquarium-chunks of the past coming up at unfamiliar angles, distinct and then indistinct."⁶

In *Life Studies*, Lowell peered into his personal past and connected his own vulnerability with a cultural condition. Rosenthal in "Poetry as Confession" has commented on the nature of confessional poetry by saying:

"Lowell's 'Skunk Hour' and Sylvia Plath's 'Lady Lazarus' were true examples [of confessional verse] because they put the speaker himself at the centre of the poem in such a way as to make his psychological vulnerability and shame an embodiment of his civilization"⁷

In the last poem of the volume, "Skunk Hour," Lowell shows that the world is totally broken up in all its cultural aspects, religious, moral, intellectual and aesthetic. The poem is an appropriate conclusion to the volume because it draws together the motifs of the previous poems. It is all about solitude and depression. As Lowell suffered from manic depression, so, he might share some of the same feelings as the speaker in this poem – darting around from one subject to the next, followed by feelings of extreme loneliness and sadness the whole way.

II. "Skunk Hour"

"Skunk Hour" begins with the speaker reflecting on a coastal village in Maine. His observations of the village begin with an elderly woman who seems to have inherited a huge property, but who is quite alone in her old years, "she's in her dotage" (l. 6). Then he starts to describe the things that have begun to go wrong with the place – the millionaire who lived there for the summer is gone, the village decorator seems depressed and poor, and the whole place is looking quite sad for autumn.

The speaker then shifts the focus to himself. He remembers a drive he took through the village one night and what he saw as well as how he felt. It all seems gloomy, and he admits to being depressed and feeling kind of crazy. What he observes after he lets his mental state known to the reader seems to be affected by how he is feeling, and as the poem progresses it gets pretty bleak.

The setting of the poem is a declining sea village. It is declining in all of its cultural aspects – the heritage of the past has been destroyed; the rich yacht of the millionaire is auctioned to lobstermen who will not use it for luxury time as the millionaire used to do; the decorator's business is not successful; the lovers make love in the graveyard; the graveyard shelves the village; the hill is stained; and the song is like bleating of sheep. Against this decline the poet feels sick and insane.

The final lines of the poem move to a quite different scene where there are no humans only skunks, stinky and repulsive animals, but here they seem very nice, pleasant, "and will not scare" (l. 48).

This decline actually reflects the declining American culture in the modern age for which Lowell feels sad yet resentful. The poem is meant to sum up the themes and tone of *Life Studies* and suggest some sort of resolution. The poem opens with an ironic and symbolic description of a village but turns on itself to become an agonised exploration of the speaker's mind.⁸ It is a tormented soliloquy that overlays deep despair with comedy.⁹

In the first four stanzas of "Skunk Hour" Lowell gives the sense of a village that is slowly declining. The poem begins with the "hermit/heirress" (ll. 1 – 2) who longs for "Queen Victoria's century" (l. 9) and is "in her dotage." The word dotage clearly

suggests that the condition of Maine sea village is in its declining years.¹⁰

This heiress who should be a leader in the society, especially that "Her son's a bishop"(l. 4), isolates herself "Thirsting for ... privacy"(ll. 7 – 8) and her main activity is buying up the houses near her to ensure her seclusion and isolation:

she buys up all
the eyesores facing her shore,
and lets them fall.

(ll. 10 – 12)

She contributes to the decay rather than overcoming it by her wealth and position. She "lets them fall" expressing no actual desire to rescue the past by restoring it. As Paula Hayes puts it, she does not force the past on the present, she simply "lets" the natural condition of the past live itself out by "falling" just as she is letting her own existence naturally "fall" away.¹¹

The cultural disintegration is seen in all its aspects in the dotage of the old heiress, and in the falling of the buildings which suggests the inadequacy of traditional attitudes, as well as those of the modern world itself.

The social success represented in "the summer millionaire" (l. 14) is also past its time, and his name has leapt from L. L. Bean catalogue. The death of the millionaire indicates the death of the trendy present that dies out before the old heiress, i.e. before the past. It is the vogue man, not the hermit woman, who passes first. What is fresh and new has become old. Thus New England culture that was once lively, has its material prosperity degraded, his "nine-knot yawl/was auctioned off to lobstermen"(ll. 15 – 16), the traditional devices and tools of that culture are now only items displayed by an interior decorator to attract tourists:¹²

his fishnet's filled with orange cork,
orange, his cobbler's bench and awl;

(ll. 21 – 22)

The poet uses a sinister language of illness "The season's ill—" (l. 13) and contamination "A red fox stain covers Blue Hill"(l. 18). Nature itself has grown frightening; and this line implies that nature is stained and will continue to be stained in the future.¹³

The alienation of the individual is another indication of the this cultural breakdown, represented not only by the "hermit/heiress"(ll.

1 – 2) or the millionaire who seems to have committed suicide by "leap[ing]" into the sea, but also in the figure of the "fairy/decorator"(ll. 19 – 20) who would rather marry to live on his wife's earnings because his business gives no money. His work is futile and there may be more monetary gain in marriage than in his craft.¹⁴ That decorator is described as "fairy" which could be a derogatory way of describing the man – that he's somehow girly, which is another indication of the unhealthiness of culture.

The poet/speaker moves to talk about his own experience in that village. He is driving "One dark night,/my Tudor Ford climbed the hill's skull;"(ll. 25 – 26) or is rather being driven by his car. The "hill's skull" gives us that same uncomfortable feeling that "red stain" did. He sees "love-cars" where lovers "lay together,"(l. 28) which makes the poet confess: "My mind's not right"(l. 30). What makes him ill is that the lovers meet "where the graveyard shelves on the town"(l. 29). The fact that those lovers make love in the graveyard suggests the decline in human values. Love is also sick. There is the spiritual death indicated in the dark night, in the skull and the graveyard, a death that leads not to resurrection, but yields nothing.¹⁵ The lovers are even as isolated as the other characters of the poem, though they are engaged with life and physical activity, but that is only biological, "they lay together, hull to hull,"(l. 28) as artificial as the bleating radio.¹⁶ The love song is "bleat[ing]" from the car radio, not a pleasant sound for a song, and the speaker hears not the song but:

"I hear
my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,
as if my hand were at its throat. . . ."

(ll. 32 – 34)

He is mad, and this madness reverberate the suicide of the millionaire, as suicide and madness are associated with one another.

This stanza takes the reader into the poet/speaker's inside. The speaker feels isolated and sick towards all this disintegration. He links the breakdown of community and tradition to his own illness, his lack of mental stability, and his loneliness.¹⁷ The various figures of illness – the heiress, the dead millionaire, the decorator, and the lovers – suggest the various aspects of the poet/speaker's illness. Lowell, whose spirit is ill, embodies that disease of the world represented in the love scene that takes place in the cars near the

graveyard. As he embodies his ailing civilisation, so that town and its inhabitants prefigure Lowell himself who is as insane as the doting heiress, as fallen as the ruined millionaire, and as a failure as the decorator.¹⁸ The ill season suggests that the season of human residence on earth is decadent and debased. Thus "nobody's here – /only skunks"(ll. 36 – 37).

Into this desolate wasteland the poet/speaker introduces other figures, but not humans. They are skunks, stinky and disgusting animals. They, perhaps, seem a representation of the disgusting situation of modern culture, but they are lively and searching for food. Thus the skunks stand opposite the other human figures in the poem, and do not represent them.

The skunks search "for a bite to eat"(l. 38), i. e. survival, in the trash, and "swill" sour cream from the "garbage pail"(ll. 45 – 46) under the "chalk-dry and spar spire/of the Trinitarian Church"(ll. 41 – 42). This is a hint at the religious sterility, which is a clear indication of the cultural disintegration of the modern world. William Doresky suggests:

“[t]he ‘chalk-dry’ aspirations of religious faith are nothing to these primordial beasts who, with their ‘moonstruck eyes’ red fire,’ have a little of the devil in them. Too practical to worry over their souls, they ‘march on their soles up Main Street’ and head directly to the speaker’s garbage pail, finding their nourishment in the refuse of his life.”¹⁹

In addition, the skunks themselves are stinking animals, and their search for food in the trash intensifies the stinky situation.²⁰ This manifests the persistence of life in corrupt, disintegrating, ordinary world:

She jabs her wedge-head in a cup
of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail,
and would not scare.

(ll. 46 – 48)

Human life has turned into trash and garbage pails in which people seek survival and lose the will to change. The skunks feed freely without any fear, they are not afraid of the emptiness of the world; they search for food and eat in the darkness.²¹

However, the image of the mother skunks followed by her kittens in the moonlight is pleasant. It shows a sense of maternal love,

togetherness, and vigour, which is opposite to the isolated doting hermit/mother who does not want others to share her the place and longs for privacy. It seems as if Lowell is able to find some sort of resolution, perhaps hope, but ironically not in humans, or even more ironically, in disgusting animals.

There are varying views concerning the skunks and their function in the poem. One is that the spiritual depravation is reflected in the skunks' physical hunger.²² Their stink reflects the stinky situation of the modern world that is disintegrating. The skunks, though, stand in contrast to humans in the poem. Charles Altieri sees that they suggest a solution to the poet's despair, but it is a solution that does not incorporate human and religious terms that made the despair. He thinks that "the solution lies in the search for values and self-definition when all other possibilities fail."²³

In a way, Lowell is trying to say that the skunks are positive models for a better world. The poem shows that Lowell is moving from a decadent human world to individual revitalization. He is seeking salvation though he has lost faith.²⁴ Lowell shows admiration for these animals and for the potential freedom they represent. He depicts them as creatures that embody everything in nature – order, ruthlessness of purpose, disregard of inessentials, independence, and a determination to survive.²⁵

While James E. B. Breslin notes that strength and meaning are to be found not in the decadent civilization of the first four stanzas, but within one's self and in other forms of nature represented in the skunks. He points out:

The skunks, swilling sour cream from a garbage pail, manifest the persistence of a fiery life in a corrupt, disintegrating, ordinary world. Lowell includes, but does not tame, them.²⁶

Lowell has earlier described "Skunk Hour" as follows:

"The first four stanzas are meant to give a dawdling more or less amiable picture of a declining Maine sea town. I move from the ocean inland. Sterility howls through the scenery, but I try to give a tone of tolerance, humor, and randomness to the sad prospect. The composition drifts, its direction sinks out of sight

into the casual, chancy arrangements of nature and decay."²⁷

III. Conclusion

In *Life Studies*, Lowell explores his lost self by remembering his personal past. He situates his self-examination in the context of American culture. He recollects his personal past in such a way as to transform it into American cultural memory. Lowell's private memory is presented as part of the broad American cultural situation.

"Skunk Hour" which depicts a man at a moment of crisis, includes all the levels of cultural disintegration that have been revealed in *life Studies*.

The structure of "Skunk Hour" is highly symmetrical: two stanzas devoted to a matriarchal figure; two to a society in crisis; two to an individual – the poet – in crisis; and two to a society led by an alternative matriarchal figure that represents a potential resolution to Lowell's dilemma.

The Maine seacoast village serves as a symbol of a decaying social cultural structure. However, not only does Lowell describe the Maine village that is slowly declining but he also describes an entire social culture. As he embodies his ailing civilisation, so that town and its inhabitants prefigure Lowell himself, isolated and insane as they are.

The skunks are symbol of the human race. They represent the persistence of life in a corrupt disintegrating, ordinary world. The poet is as if indicating that if humans could find their way in a corrupt world as the skunks, they too would not be afraid. In some way, Lowell is trying to say that the skunks are positive models for a better world.

"Skunk Hour" is a conclusion to the spiritual journey which ends in the resolution that this world is irredeemable. The skunks suggest a solution to the poem's despair, but a solution that lies in the search for values and self-definition when all other possibilities fail. Ironically, the search is in the "garbage pail" of one's own past which one must have the determination to explore and the courage to endure because it is full of "sour cream."

Notes

- ¹ M. L. Rosenthal, *The Modern Poets*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1969), p. 61.
- ² C. David Heymann, *American Aristocracy: the Lives and Times of James Russell Lowell, Amy Lowell, and Robert Lowell*, (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1980), pp. 317 – 320.
- ³ Heymann, p. 328.
- ⁴ Heymann, p. 329.
- ⁵ Gye-Yu Kang, *Robert Lowell's Life-Writing and Memory*, A Thesis, <www.etd.lsu.edu/docs/available/.../unrestricted/Kang_thesis.pdf>, pp. 17 – 18.
- ⁶ Kang, pp. 18 – 19.
- ⁷ M. L. Rosenthal, "Poetry as Confession", in *Critics on Robert Lowell*, ed. by Jonathan Price, (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1974), p. 79.
- ⁸ William Doreski, *Years Of Our Friendship: Robert Lowell And Allen Tate*, (n.p.: University Press of Mississippi, 1990) eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), p. 128.
- ⁹ Cliffsnotes.<http://www.cliffsnotes.com/study_guide/literature/american-poets/poets/robert-lowell-1917-1977.html>
- ¹⁰ Hamlet Pericles, *Poetry analysis: Skunk Hour, by Robert Lowell*, <<http://www.www.helium.com/items/845833-poetry-analysis-skunk-hour-by-robert-lowell>>
- ¹¹ Paula Hayes, *Poetry analysis: Skunk Hour, by Robert Lowell*, <<http://www.helium.com/items/1122355-robert-lowell>>
- ¹² Steven Gould Axelrod, *Robert Lowell: Life and Art*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978), p. 1.
- ¹³ Paul Breslin, *The Psycho-Political Muse: American Poetry Since the Fifties*, (Chicago: university of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 68.
- ¹⁴ Pericles.
- ¹⁵ Charles Altieri, *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry During the 1960s*, (New York: Associated University Press, 1979), pp. 4 – 5.
- ¹⁶ <<http://www.helium.com/items/1122355-robert-lowell>>
- ¹⁷ Doreski, pp. 128 – 129.
- ¹⁸ Fatima Falih Ahmed Al-Badrani, *The Poet and the Crisis of Culture*, unpublished Ph. D. Dissertation, (Baghdad: University of Baghdad, 2001), p. 233.
- ¹⁹ Doreski, p. 129.

- ²⁰ Al-Badrani, p. 234.
²¹ Al-Badrani.
²² Axelrod, p. 2.
²³ Altieri, pp. 4 – 5.
²⁴ Pericles.
²⁵ Doreski, p. 130.
²⁶ James E. B. Breslin, *From Modern to Contemporary: American Poetry 1945-1965*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 139.
²⁷ <<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5960>>

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