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Not for an Age? Robert Lowell's Historical Moment

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Abstract: Literary periodization is still a useful practice, but in constant need of revision. As we approach the centenary of Robert Lowell's birth in 2017, a critical reexamination of the contested concept of an 'age of Lowell' is required, both because of its unwarranted, apparently magisterial claim and its untapped potential. This essay recalls the historical circumstances of Irvin Ehrenpreis's coining of that term and its fraught reception history. Three arguments remain significant: Lowell's historical position and his own, strongly historicizing poetry changed the poetic discourse of the 1960s and beyond; Lowell participated in and helped shape the 'identitarian' turn of the 1960s, and Lowell's 1973 volume *History* marked the conclusion of his age-crafting and personal myth-making project. The essay concludes with a brief look at Lowell's biological age, heretofore rarely considered in Lowell studies. The 'age of Lowell' deserves a fresh interpretation.

Each age is a pigeon-hole.
(Wallace Stevens, *Adagia*, 900)

Robert Lowell's life and poetry are an ideal subject for a critical reconsideration of ingrained habits of thought in relation to literary history. A poet with a deeply rooted historical consciousness connected with his New England ancestors, Lowell wrote at a time when the assessment of literary merit was to undergo decisive changes. At the height of Lowell's career, in the period from about 1959 to 1977, the doors to the American literary canon were opening to welcome new categories of writers and texts that were now valued for their authenticity and their freshness, an assessment based in large part on autobiographical and identitarian parameters. As Lowell, patrician scion of Boston's old elite, began writing openly autobiographical poems at precisely this time, he helped legitimize a practice of writing that would quickly become generalized. A hundred years after his birth and forty years after his death, Lowell now appears to mark, not only the end of a particular kind of late modernist sensibility, but also the beginning of an abiding

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prominence of writing rooted in personal identity and doubt. A critical re-appreciation – though surely not a restitution – of the frequently misunderstood concept of the ‘age of Lowell’ is key to understanding Lowell’s role in shaping literary history.

The phrase “The Age of Lowell”, coined by Irvin Ehrenpreis in 1965, has led a spectral existence in critical discourse, sometimes as a convenient target of attack and once in a while as a useful chronological tool. Marjorie Perloff reasonably called for a “reassessment” of the term in the *American Poetry Review* in 1983. Her call gained an extended readership when it was republished in 1986 in a volume of critical essays on Lowell.¹ At that moment, Ehrenpreis’s coining of the term lay nearly twenty years in the past, but the difference between 1983 and 1986 is significant because Ehrenpreis died in July of 1985 and would now clearly not perform the reassessment himself. From Perloff’s 1983 vantage point, Lowell, Berryman, and their generation needed to yield pride of place to the High Modernists for their greater innovation, to the Objectivists for their greater influence on contemporary writers, and to the theorists of the early nineteen-eighties for producing work more likely to arouse “passionate interest” (Perloff 1986: 116) than a poet like Lowell. True to the critical spirit of the early eighties, when ‘Theory’ with a capital ‘T’ was claiming center stage in literary discourse, Perloff enthusiastically – and alliteratively – awaited “the new Derrida or De Man or Guy Davenport” (1986: 116) with more eager anticipation than a new volume of poetry. Yet Perloff’s cautionary approach to any canonization of Lowell remains appropriate. The concept of an ‘age of Lowell’ cannot be taken at face value and is indeed in need of repeated reassessment.

The degree to which some readers felt vexed by the phrase, however, seems unwarranted. Even the judicious Steven Axelrod faulted Ehrenpreis for his “rash 1965 characterization of the whole of mid-century poetry as the ‘Age of Lowell’” (Axelrod 2007: 691). How extensive was Ehrenpreis’s claim and why would he have made such a statement? By training, temperament, and fame, Ehrenpreis was a scholar of eighteenth-century British Literature first but almost equally well versed in contemporary American poetry. He is best remembered for his monumental three-volume biography of Jonathan Swift (published, respectively, in 1962, 1967, and 1983) tellingly titled *Swift: The Man, his Works, and the Age*. Ehrenpreis perceived Swift in the context of his time and called that time an “age”, just as he and scholars of his generation would refer unselfconsciously to

¹ Perloff writes: “For the term ‘The Age of Lowell’, coined by Irvin Ehrenpreis in 1965, is surely in need of reassessment” (1986: 116). Grzegorz Kosci makes a similar observation, emphasizing like Perloff that Lowell, the epigone, may have marked the end of an era rather than the beginning of a new one (Kosci 2005: 4 and *passim*).

‘the Augustan Age’ in lectures and seminars. The omnibus title for the three Swift volumes was already part of the first, 1962, volume. Implied in the term ‘age’, if I read Ehrenpreis correctly, was not a hagiographic instinct, but a convenient heuristic. In other words, calling a time period an ‘age’ was to him a useful shorthand term roughly equivalent to what Pierre Bourdieu (1993) might call a ‘field’ – a structured social space with particular regnant opinions and values – though Bourdieu’s terminology had, of course, not yet gained academic currency when Ehrenpreis was writing.

Ehrenpreis’s claim deserves to be appreciated in the context of his writing about the age of Swift if one critiques his use of “[a]ge” in connection with Lowell. The complete phrase, “The Age of Lowell”, appears only in the essay’s title (Ehrenpreis 1970: 155) and nowhere else in the entire text. However, Ehrenpreis opens with a psychological diagnosis of the moment of his writing, again using “age” to describe it. Exchange some of the dated topical reference to the sixties, and you have a description of our own historical moment:

For an age of world wars and prison states, when the Faustian myth of science produces the grotesquerie of fall-out shelters, the decorous emotion seems a fascinated disgust. After outrage has exhausted itself in contempt, after the mind has got the habit of Dallas and South Africa, the shudder of curiosity remains. Every morning we think, something new and insufferable is about to happen: what is it? Among living poets writing in English nobody has expressed this emotion with the force and subtlety of Robert Lowell. (1970: 155)

With variables like ‘war on terror’, ‘9/11’, and ‘North Korea’, it would be easy to update this paragraph, yet we seem currently not to have a poet like Lowell who has as yet gathered these emotions into her work. By beginning with the psychological diagnosis and mentioning the poet later, Ehrenpreis gives primacy to the age, not the poet, suggesting that a poet is always historically contingent. Far from claiming the age to be Lowell’s in any proprietary sense, he situates the poet within the age that happens to accommodate his life-span. When Ehrenpreis finally sums up Lowell’s promise of future significance, seen from the vantage point of 1965, he does not offer the kind of historicizing assessment he gives of Swift’s time. Rather, he makes a proleptic claim about Lowell:

From a glance at Lowell’s most recent work, coming out in periodicals, one can prophesy that his next book will establish his name as that normally thought of for ‘the’ American poet. It will be a wide shift from the frame of Robert Frost, whom so many non-readers of poetry were able to admire along with the literary audience. (1970: 182)

Examined closely, this turns out to be a careful statement: “one can prophesy” and “normally thought of” considerably qualify the assessment. Ehrenpreis is not proffering a judgment but, in good Swiftian terms, a modest proposal.

Jed Rasula, in titling a section of his 1996 study *The American Poetry Wax Museum* “~~The Age of Lowell~~”, striking out the words “[t]he [a]ge of”, was more critical and explained why:

The poet who personified the postwar American bard was Robert Lowell. He was the poet whose actions set the pace and dramatized the Puritan backdrop into the bargain. But was he indicative? Was it really, after the Age of Auden, the Age of Lowell? Thomas Parkinson admits “It makes me uneasy to hear the period from c. 1945 to the present referred to as ‘the Age of Lowell’ – the phrase has a tinny fabricated sound. Lowell was something we reacted to and against but there was never a sense of coziness about the whole thing.” (Rasula 1999: 283–284)

As we saw above, Ehrenpreis never made such a wide-ranging claim. In his proleptic prophesy, he sees Lowell as the successor to Frost; Auden is nowhere mentioned. Nowhere does Ehrenpreis make a period claim “from c. 1945 to the present” which, for Parkinson, at the time he made the statement quoted by Rasula, would have to extend to 1987, exceeding Lowell’s lifetime by ten years.²

Yet Rasula and Parkinson are, of course, correct, in warning us against the use of ‘age’ in connection with a single person. Valid historical and epistemological reasons, along with our present critical temperament, suggest the inappropriateness of singling out a white, male, privileged poet in this manner. Nonetheless, our present moment in time, at the threshold of the 100th anniversary of Lowell’s birth in 2017, prompts us urgently to reexamine Lowell’s historical and poetic significance once again. Without wanting to give an outdated notion a new lease on life, I propose to circumscribe the chronological space of the age of Lowell afresh. While I will need to clear away some cobwebs, the moment for an act of literary dusting on the occasion of the centenary is auspicious. Forty years have passed since Lowell’s death, fifty perhaps since his moment of greatest fame. Surely we don’t need to be quite as reticent as Zhou Enlai, who allegedly said to President Nixon that it was too early to judge the impact of the French Revolution. What are some of the key parameters of Lowell’s poetic and historical space right now, seen from 2016? David Wojahn’s excellent recent account of Lowell’s historical position already emphasizes as one of his major achievements his lasting influence on subsequent generations, acknowledging that “*Life Studies*

² For additional observations about this claim, see my 2015 essay “Confess – Disclose – Proclaim” in which I have previously discussed Rasula’s argument.

[] gave several generations of American poets permission to write an overtly autobiographical poetry that appeared to derive directly from experience” (Wojahn 2015: 751).

It is helpful to distinguish Lowell’s own sense of history from his potential poetic-historical significance. Predisposed by his Boston Brahmin origins, Lowell was a poet strongly conscious of his family’s history intertwining with New England’s history. He began his poetic career by contemplating the role of his ancestors – metonymically representing Europeans arriving in the New World in general – in the settling of New England. His early poems published in the 1946 volume *Lord Weary’s Castle*, such as “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket” and “Children of Light” are already tinged with an awareness of colonial guilt, as they variously bemoan commercial activities of seamen in the North Atlantic – including whaling – and the rapacious takeover of the land by Cain-like figures (Lowell 2003/2007: 14–18, 31). Lowell eventually fossilized his own personal and political observations of the late 1960s, originally published in *Notebook*, into a volume he called *History*, signaling the representative status he claimed as a chronicler. His reactions to the circumstances in which he found himself, exemplified among other things in his overzealous youthful conversion to Catholicism and his respective letters to Presidents Roosevelt and Johnson, on different occasions, betoken a poet who seeks critical distance from his inheritance even while reluctantly donning the mantle of spokesperson that has been bequeathed to him by his parentage.

Lowell lived completely in his age before anyone ever considered seeing him as representative of it. Albert Gelpi sees Lowell himself as a poet of prophecy. Using the term “period” in addition to “age”, he briefly considers the ‘Age of Lowell’ from its other chronological end; that is, he asks himself how such an appellation might have come about:

There has been something fabulous about Robert Lowell’s career from the outset – in part because it was deeply expressive and symptomatic of its period. [...] *Lord Weary’s Castle* (1946) brought Lowell the Pulitzer Prize before the age of thirty for his first commercially published volume of verse. Two decades later Irvin Ehrenpreis was able to speak plausibly of “The Age of Lowell.” (Gelpi 1986: 51)

In citing *Lord Weary’s Castle* as evidence of Lowell’s career being “deeply expressive and symptomatic” of its period, Gelpi remarkably suggests that the nineteen-forties were, already, part of the ‘age of Lowell’ before it had been so named. His insight surely tempers later criticism of the term. Gelpi then notably uses the term ‘age’ in “age of thirty” to reference the poet’s biological age, not a dynastic age. In claiming that Lowell’s career was “symptomatic of its period”, moreover, Gelpi carefully restores the correct polarities to the entire concept: the “[a]ge of Lowell”

is not a possessive in that the poet shapes or owns it; rather, he happens to be the poet who crystallizes many of its features, though it would have had those features – perhaps less apparently so – without him. A great deal of critical umbrage is deflated here: the chronological period of Lowell's lifetime is now available for other appellations as well. The times of Robert Lowell are also potentially the age of Martin Luther King, Jr., of Frank Sinatra, of the height of the Cold War, of African decolonization, of the triumph of rock 'n' roll – any one of these terms captures a significant aspect of the same historical period.

In his time in the public eye, from about 1943/46 to 1977, Lowell made so many issues and debates his own that these three decades encompass the thinking of a generation; a generation that critics like Bawer, Axelrod, Travisano, Ferguson, Haralson, and others have called “the middle generation” or “poets of the cold war”.³ Lowell made this age poetically his own, not by appropriating it but by responding to its particular agonies through his own agonies. He did not just agonize over the contemporary political heritage of his Puritan ancestors, he embodied many of the contradictions the country was experiencing. He suffered from bipolar disorder at a time when medical understanding of the disease first separated it clearly from schizophrenia and paranoia while decisively changing pharmaceutical interventions towards lithium therapy. Lowell experienced those medical transformations on his own body; he embodied them in the literal sense.⁴ With consummate irony, yes, but also with a real sense of entitlement for playing historian, Lowell stylized his birth in imitation of Henry Adams in his prose memoirs, claiming like Adams the freedom to comment on politics without holding political office himself. In the second sentence of his autobiographical sketch “Antebellum Boston”, situating his infant self in history, he does not refer to his parents but instead to the role of American foreign policy in the epochal year of the United States' entry into World War One, although a newborn clearly has as yet no political role to play:

I, too, was born under the shadow of the Boston State House, and under Pisces, the Fish, on the first of March 1917. America was entering the First World War and was about to play her part in the downfall of four empires. (Lowell 1987: 291)

³ See Bawer (1986); Travisano (1999); Axelrod (1999); Ferguson (2003) and Haralson (2006).

⁴ Judging by papers delivered at recent conferences, Kay Redfield Jamison's *Robert Lowell, Setting the River on Fire: A Study of Genius, Mania, and Character*, announced for publication in early 2017, will profoundly change our views on the place of mental illness in Lowell's life and work.

Lowell embodied in his person the Vietnam conflict – witness his march on the Pentagon, memorialized in Norman Mailer’s *The Armies of the Night* (1968) – and the question of the use of art for politics when he refused President Johnson’s invitation to the White House. References to the Civil Rights struggles, along with Cuba and the threat of nuclear annihilation, found their way into his work, most notably in *For the Union Dead*. As this list of well-known features of those three decades demonstrates, Lowell participated in his age and expressed some of its aspects without necessarily dominating it exclusively. The age of Lowell is thus above all, in a straightforward appellation, the time period in which Lowell was a public figure, culminating in his portrait on the cover of *TIME* magazine on June 2, 1967.⁵

Lowell’s stylized bust as a Roman poet on the cover of *TIME* notwithstanding, any dynastic meaning of ‘age’ in terms of poetic dominance is clearly inappropriate, as suggested above. However, Lowell’s contextualization with those who preceded and those who would follow him is significant. Lowell sought out many poetic masters from whom he could learn piecemeal and with considerable contradictions: Milton for the grand style, Pound for classical sourcing, Williams for looser meter after 1954, Tate and Ransom for monumentality paired with irony, Ginsberg for intimacy, Bishop for detail. Yet Lowell did not displace any one of these, though much has been made of a supposedly “dynastic gesture” (Kunitz 1967: 22) by which T. S. Eliot once requested – when introduced by him at a reading – that Lowell should remain seated on stage during the entire program. Hugh Kenner declared a significant portion of Modernism as the “Pound Era” in 1971: this was no competition to Lowell but an exercise in dynastification at a moment when such a practice was already beginning to be suspect.

Lowell’s lasting influence, I suggest, gains momentum after *Life Studies* (1959). We can see now that it truly originates in a decade that put the politics and poetics of identity front and center in unprecedented ways. Lowell’s role in gathering like-minded poets around himself is well documented. Kathleen Spivack writes in her delightful memoir, “Lowell encouraged an unusually large number of poets: his contemporaries as well as younger students [...] and shared his poetry journey with them” (Spivack 2012: 3). But Lowell’s contribution to ushering in a new age of writing that would firmly foreground the first person singular has perhaps not yet been sufficiently appreciated. Even before the sixties began, and learning from Ginsberg,⁶ Lowell had embraced the “I” in the personae

⁵ *Time*, 2 June 1967: <<http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19670602,00.html>> [accessed 14 August 2016]

⁶ I am, of course, respectfully echoing Axelrod’s chapter titles “Learning from Tate” and “Learning from Williams” from his seminal 1978 study *Robert Lowell: Life and Art*.

of *Life Studies*. The dramatic changes to the American canon that gathered speed in the sixties are contemporaneous with Lowell's private revelations. Lowell's own memoiristic writings, published posthumously in *Collected Prose* and currently being re-edited, perform many of the unsparing gestures of self-examination that were shocking and new in the sixties but would become commonplace in the 'memoir boom' of the late eighties and beyond.

Moreover, *Life Studies* itself licensed the prose memoir, "91 Revere Street", that Lowell inserted as "Part Two" into the American edition.⁷ It was a revolutionary act on Lowell's part to invite, as it were, the reader into his home by mentioning his street address. The poems in *Life Studies* don't yet cross too many boundaries of privacy. They are crafted; they are works of art that obey aesthetic principles. But the prose memoir breaks the generic boundaries that normally define the expectations for a volume of verse and in this way creates space for new forms of the lyrical self. My claim is then that "91 Revere Street" should be considered as one of the authorizing gestures of confessional prose. It's not just the local Boston flavor that made it more suitable for the American than for the British edition of *Life Studies* – from which it was excluded – it is also its American artlessness in the best sense of that term. Forty years later, prose memoirists, especially religious seekers, would still take up Lowell's example and consider themselves licensed to disclose private matter that mixes, not only memory and desire, but the vagaries of erotic and spiritual maturation.⁸

In retrospect, even Lowell's early poetical work is strongly autobiographical, though presented through masks or personae. Thus, who is Lord Weary but Lowell? What are the Mary and Arthur Winslow poems, the "Mother and Son" section of "Between the Porch and the Altar", and the "Quaker Graveyard" about if not Boston, Lowell, and his ancestors (Lowell 2003/2007: 7, 23–25, 28, 44, 14–18)? And the poems in *The Mills of the Kavanaghs*, knotty and forbidding though they may be, easily let Lowell and Jean Stafford appear behind their verbal screens (Lowell 2003/2007: 73–107). The old man falling asleep over the Aeneid is only the first of Lowell's many evocations of near-sleep poetic experiences (Lowell 2003/2007: 91). With *Life Studies*, the form became somewhat looser, but the content changed only marginally. The confessional poem changed the practice of poetry largely in the manner of negotiating personal experience, less in its subject matter. In other words: it inaugurated a different way of saying 'I'. But Lowell had

⁷ Originally published in *Life Studies* (1959), now also accessible in the 2007 *Collected Poems*, 121–150.

⁸ Kathleen Norris (*Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* and *The Cloister Walk*) and Mary Karr (*The Liars' Club* and *Lit: A Memoir*) are prominent inheritors of this practice of modern spiritual self-examination.

been saying ‘I’ all along. And when Lowell said ‘I’, he often meant ‘America’, thus rendering the ‘I’ immediately political. Lowell never asked for permission to speak for America, he just did it. Other confessional poets such as Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton or W. D. Snodgrass revealed the self, but Lowell claimed representative value. In both prose and poetry, then, Lowell clearly practiced a form of identitarian⁹ writing – a writing about a self constituted by its non-standard, non-normative particularities – that was to become the dominant model of writing for some time. While Lowell’s quasi-aristocratic identity was of course not normative in any social sense, it nonetheless gave him a vantage point.

By foregrounding self-disclosure, then, Lowell helped pioneer a lyrical mode that was becoming more prominent in another genre, in fiction, during his lifetime. The *TIME* editors got it right in 1967 when they inserted a banner over Lowell’s head reading “Poetry in an Age of Prose”.¹⁰ When the American canon opened in the sixties and brought the writings of minorities, persons with privileged viewpoints, or previously silenced voices to our attention, self-disclosure became a standard utterance. Readers of Lowell always have to tease out the extent to which they want to consider his writings, whether in poetry or in prose, as authentically autobiographical or as poetic invention. In memoirs that followed upon the sixties, unless they are factually untrue, readers in general willingly enter into the ‘autobiographical pact’¹¹ and assume that writers’ pronouncements are genuinely based in experience.

A display of self that may have seemed scandalous in Whitman – “I celebrate myself and sing myself” – has led in Lowell’s generation and thereafter to a conflation of writer and lyrical persona that left behind traditional distinctions between the ‘lyrical I’ and the ‘personal I’. Self-assured pronouncements of

⁹ Marianne DeKoven uses the term “identitarian” in *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern* in a discussion of postmodern performativity which, DeKoven asserts, “contests [...] identitarian essentialism” (255). With a different emphasis, I use “identitarian” to suggest that the writers and poets I extol very much embrace their essential selves through their identities, however constituted. They may even ‘perform’ their identities with a focus on such qualities, but they are decisively **not** “[p]ostmodern” in the sense of DeKoven’s title. Rather than addressing confessional poetry in connection with postmodernism, I draw together confession and identity as rhetorical positions in work done by and after Lowell. My own position, which is that “identitarian qualities contribute to, but do not exhaust, a writer’s character” (Austenfeld 2013: 75) is explained more fully in my essay, “Louise Erdrich in Company: The American Writer and Her Communities”. This footnote appears in slightly altered form in my 2015 essay “Confess – Disclose – Proclaim”.

¹⁰ The term “[a]ge” even made it onto *TIME*’s title page (*Time* 1967: cover page).

¹¹ The term ‘autobiographical pact’ is generally credited to Philippe Lejeune (1989). For an example of a factually untrue memoir, see James Frey’s fabricated 2003 *A Million Little Pieces*.

identity by writers such as Rita Dove and Kim Addonizio have become commonplace in the past thirty years. Bernadette Mayer and A. E. Stallings have turned motherhood into a beautifully productive topic of poetry.¹² Together with the uninhibited use of biography as subject matter, they signify to me the normalization of a practice that seemed remarkable in Lowell but is so no longer. Lowell's memoiristic prose and his privileging of biographical material as the subject of his poetry have become mainstream practice: in this special sense, the age of Lowell has borne lasting fruit. We have travelled from *Life Studies*, Lowell's 1959 book, to life-writing, a literary practice now democratically established. Removed from its original patrician context in Lowell, the contemporary prevalence of life writing is one of the most important legacies of the confessional moment in American poetry as much as in prose.

Poetic history after the sixties took a detour of sorts: the LANGUAGE poetry of the seventies foregrounds the poet's instrument, not her personal disposition, but many LANGUAGE poets eventually acknowledged autobiographical material as inspirational and admitted it to their works. Remarkable poetic memoirs resulted: more hermetically in John Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (yet what could be more identitarian than a self-portrait?), more chronologically in Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* and *My Life in the Nineties*, two outstanding examples of a poetry that has turned the political into the personal. In their seeming randomness, the sections and sentences of Hejinian's wholly original work owe more to Lowell's loose sonnets than they do to Sidney's or Shakespeare's sonnet sequences. To put it provocatively: The LANGUAGE school has decidedly turned confessional in Hejinian's work, memoir poetry has turned historical. Acknowledged or unacknowledged, aspects of Lowell's poetic practice are prominently with us. It is in keeping with this assertion that recent scholars have rediscovered the public and political qualities of confessional poetry by showing how it is not just an unblinkered exploration of the poet's psyche but also a form of address to readers.¹³

In view of these identitarian ruminations, we may be able to re-appreciate Lowell's most opaque book of poems, the sizeable 1973 *History*. Its title makes a stronger claim to lasting pronouncements than any other book by Lowell. Yet more than 40 years after its publication, *History* looks quite different from the way

¹² See, for example, Rita Dove's volumes *Mother Love* and *Grace Notes*, Kim Addonizio's "What Do Women Want?", Bernadette Mayer's *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters*, or A. E. Stallings's "The Mother's Loathing of Balloons".

¹³ The remarkable argument that confessional poetry always has an addressee has lately been foregrounded especially by Adam Beardsworth, "Cold War Confessions: Autobiographic Poetry in the Age of Anxiety" (2008). Note that Beardsworth uses the term 'age' in his title.

it did when it first showed up on the bookshelves.¹⁴ Then, it was the third iteration of what had originally been called *Notebook*, while *For Lizzie and Harriett* and *The Dolphin* seemed complete in themselves. Some readers considered *History* a grab-bag, arranged in haphazard chronological order in order to impose sense.¹⁵ The 1969 *Notebook*, by contrast, had been read as a less successful continuation of *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead*; that is, as a development – or stagnation – of Lowell’s confessional voice.¹⁶ In other words: Lowell’s earlier work and his presumed trajectory of future development informed the critical approach. When critics commented on the loose sonnet form that Lowell employed in *Notebook*, they did so generally by emphasizing its looseness, not its sonnet qualities. Given that all versions of the book, whether it was the original *Notebook 1967/1968*, the revised *Notebook*, or the later *History*, were both copious and thematically wide-ranging volumes, it seemed difficult to offer lasting judgment on them.¹⁷ Meg Tyler more recently suggested that Lowell was drawn to the ironic power of the sonnet, “a form that daunted and taunted him” (Tyler 2010: 377) with the simultaneity of its constriction and its vast openness. *History* is sufficiently challenging to evade critical consensus.

I would therefore like to call attention instead to the volume’s most prominent aesthetic attribute. Seen from the distance of our present moment, the formal features of the poems push themselves into the foreground, both in a prosodic and in a typographical sense. Lowell’s topical observations about the intense political season of 1967/68, his reminiscences about youthful and mid-life love interests, and his sparks of insight about historical figures delivered in near-anecdotal fashion all subsume themselves under the relentless march of sonnet after sonnet, page after page, four sonnets on two facing pages, some of them hanging together uneasily with their neighbors, while others shift the scene

14 In commenting on the 2003 publication of Lowell’s *Collected Poems* which assembled Lowell’s “slim volumes” in a “pedestal”-like tome, Steven Axelrod observed that “Certainly, the poems look different” (Axelrod 2004: 293). My point, that the original volume itself looks different, in large part because printing conventions have changed, is related but not the same: if a reader picks up the 1973 *History* today, it will produce far different impressions from those generated by its initial context which was determined by the sheer feat of Lowell’s publishing three separate volumes in the same year.

15 Jonathan Veitch suggests that each poem in *History* tells “the same kind of story” that presents us with “a series of frozen moments” (Veitch 1992: 458, 459). In a generous interpretation, Nicholas Ruddick takes Lowell’s historiographic self-conception to be a genuinely Augustinian historiography, “universal”, “providential”, and “apocalyptic” (Ruddick 1985: 6–7).

16 See, for example, Alex Calder’s 1986 minute analysis.

17 William Doreski makes an elegant argument about Lowell’s continuing struggle to “reconcile the terms of life and art” (Doreski 1987: 251).

abruptly. A reader approaching *History* today is far more likely than a reader of the sixties or seventies to be struck by the solidity of the printed page, the blocks of letters, and the unceasing continuation of the pages. It is virtually impossible to read the book without falling into a kind of reader's trance, mechanically turning the pages, leaving one witty insight only to be thrown into a new context almost immediately. At the same time, the need to refocus one's attention every fourteen lines on a new topic is more reminiscent of today's typical reading predicaments, when information comes to us in snippets, tweets, headlines, and single paragraphs as well as short text messages and single-topic emails that bear little or no resemblance to the epistolary culture of times past. Sonnets are still too long to be tweeted, but the difference between the "Quaker Graveyard" and a Lowell sonnet of the nineteen-sixties is somewhat analogous to the difference between a letter and an extended tweet.

If my observations are correct, we can surmise that Lowell's gathering of this sheath of poems into a *History* is a more deliberate act of personal myth-making and age-crafting than we have recognized to date. The massive, near-simultaneous publication of *History*, *For Lizzie and Harriet*, and *The Dolphin* in 1973 suggests a monumental, yet modest, conclusion to Lowell's age-crafting and sonneteering project. The blending of personal story and human history does not imply that Lowell's life is exemplary. It's just that the presentation of personal story as national history is as natural as breathing to Lowell. It applies literally to all phases of his poetic production and to all of the voices he ever adopted. It is present in the "Arthur Winslow" of *Land of Unlikeness* (Lowell 2003/2007: 862; "In Memory of Arthur Winslow") just as much as in the "our fathers" who "wring their bread from stocks and stones" (Lowell 2003/2007: 31; "Children of Light") of *Lord Weary's Castle*. It will still be present in the very Lowellian Ulysses of "Ulysses and Circe" (Lowell 2003/2007: 713) in *Day by Day* and, in the same volume, in the yet-unborn Robert Lowell who imagines his mother on a Staten Island beach in "Unwanted" (Lowell 2003/2007: 831), although the poems in *Day by Day* are not sonnets and are generally more private in their subject matter. In *History*, Lowell connects himself with his historical moment and with his sense of moral entanglement with the time in which he lives.¹⁸ In this sense, Lowell exists forever in the "Age of Lowell". *History* captures his age. The compilation as such places all poems in contexts that

18 Wai Chee Dimock (2002) effectively employed her characteristic argument about 'deep time' to a reading of Lowell's *History* that emphasizes how the discontinuity and the simultaneity of Roman history and Lowell's personal history are exploited by the poet as he collapses time. The slightly revised chapter, titled "Nonstandard Time: Robert Lowell, Latin Translations, Vietnam War", read in the context of the book in which it appears (Dimock 2006), places Lowell in an unusual but suggestive chronology running from Thoreau and Emerson through Margaret Fuller

are created in large measure by their juxtaposition, themselves as ragged as life's ups and downs. As time passes and *History* recedes into nearly a half-century of history, however, the fissures between the poems become smaller and smaller. "Fear not the new generalization", said Emerson in "Circles" (1841/1983: 405): well, forty years after *History*, we are more likely to accept the claim of the volume's coherence, expressed by its title, than its contemporary readers were willing to do. *History's* rough edges and contextual leaps are less important to us now. History itself, the forward march of time, has turned *History* into a historical document.

It has become clear, I think, that we should not employ the term "The Age of Lowell" in a dynastic sense, as if poets were rulers of a literary universe who either hand over their scepters to their successors or are elected by popular acclamation. The 'age' attribute, even where it seems to have relevance, never refers to poetry alone, in any case. It must include a form of intellectual presence that is recognized in society, as Lowell's was because of his background and his political gestures. Even those who speak with confidence of the 'age of Eliot' imagine Eliot the poet along with Eliot the critic and arbiter of taste. Nonetheless, Lowell's temperament and his biography inclined him probably to think of 'age' as a viable category. Playing with French toy soldiers in his childhood, likening contemporary Boston to Renaissance Florence and political Washington to imperial Rome, recognizing and critiquing the imperial qualities of the United States both in World War II and in the Vietnam war, seeking and exploring historical parallels, living in a world his ancestors had directly helped to bring about – all these mental activities of ordering and comparing were second nature to Lowell. He was certain that he lived in an 'age' with distinguishing characteristics. He demonstrates his awareness of his own historical placement and the necessity – as well as the transitoriness – of memory in his rarely discussed poem "The Lesson", in which both place ("landscape") and time ("age") seem to be subject to an identical process of decay:

All that landscape, one likes to think it died
or slept with us, that we ourselves died
or slept then in the age and second of our habitation. (Lowell 2003/2007: 332)

This appropriately titled didactic poem in *For the Union Dead* directly follows the better-known "Florence" with its ringing exhortation "Pity the monsters!" (Lowell 2003/2007: 330) and is followed in turn by "Those Before Us", a neglected allegory of cutting revered ancestors down to size. As a group, the three poems

and Henry James to Ezra Pound. In effect, Dimock views Lowell in the role of supreme interpreter of the decade of the sixties.

explore the limitations of learning from the past and contemplate the evidence that a past age leaves for the present observer. In “Florence”, it’s the statues of famous decapitators that form a *memento mori*. In “Those Before Us”, the speaker evokes a spectral image of unnamed ancestors sitting “in stocking feet” during “vacations”, and only a dilapidated house remains to tell of their former presence. “They never were”, (Lowell 2003/2007: 333) declares the poet in the first stanza. This confident assertion is in marked contrast to the recollection of, presumably, adolescence in “The Lesson” with its “child’s boat” and a scene of outdoor reading and reverie: even if the phrase “age and second of our habitation” has a musty smell, it speaks of the comfort of the King James Bible which has 77 instances of “habitation”!¹⁹ The speaker confidently and stubbornly declares, “we are where we were. We were!” (Lowell 2003/2007: 333). Lowell is a historical fact. Whether the habitation he has in our poetic history lasts for an age or for a second is ultimately in the eye of the beholder.

Gelpi (1986: 51) had called attention to the connection between Lowell’s biological age and the age in which he lived. Have we paid sufficient attention to Lowell’s early death? Dead at sixty, before reaching conventional retirement age, Lowell was not granted the opportunity to do what William Butler Yeats, or Richard Wilbur, or Donald Hall have done to develop a new voice in old age, a voice for the ages to come. At sixty, Lowell squeezed his legacy-to-come into the final poems of *Day by Day*, a volume that in form and content had already moved firmly beyond the sonnet form. Had Lowell lived another fifteen years, he would probably have fulfilled the promise that this volume makes: speaking in a voice of age and wisdom, post-confession and past confession, would have enabled him to “make / something imagined, not recalled” as he pleads in the opening lines of “Epilogue” (Lowell 2003/2007: 838). If we now measure the ‘age of Lowell’ retrospectively, something that Ehrenpreis could not yet do in 1965, we may grant it its appropriate honorific title after the fact. Ehrenpreis’s claim has turned out not only to be provocative but also, in the best sense, productive of new interpretations. In personal, political, and lyrical terms, Robert Lowell changed the way American poetry was to be written henceforth.

Literary periodization is an inexact science; neither authors nor the heuristic titles of periods are stable categories. The prevalence of life writing in recent decades, however, can remind us of the biological patterns and temporal sequences that have always organized our histories and our sense of self. Lowell’s attitude in the face of his own historical experience is often more baffled than

¹⁹ *The Bible: King James Version*. See <<http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/habitation/>> [accessed 14 August 2016].

triumphant, but the record of his life and poetry suggest that each person can be the nucleus of an age. As a rule, Americans have readily embraced biological analogies in their historiography, as Abraham Lincoln's invocation of a "new birth of freedom" in the Gettysburg Address exemplifies. Lowell's personal and health-related crises notwithstanding, his poetic project inscribes itself into this American tradition.

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