“Cured, I Am Frizzled, Stale, and Small”

Jungian Individuation Realized in Robert Lowell’s Life Studies

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Abstract

Robert Lowell's Life Studies won the National Book Award for Poetry in 1960 and is credited with initiating the confessional poetry movement, which included followers and students of Lowell such as Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. In Life Studies, Lowell channeled his 1950s experiences with bipolar disorder and mental health hospitalizations into poems such as "Man and Wife", "Waking in the Blue", and "Home After Three Months Away". Lowell's hard-won Life Studies triumph, though most recently analyzed through socioeconomic and "divine madness" lenses, can also be understood through Carl Jung's individuation concept which posits that self-realization can be attained through the reconciliation of one's own conscious and unconscious mental processes. This article argues that Lowell's Life Studies poems, when examined through Jungian individuation, enabled Lowell to achieve self-realization, and paved the way for mentally ill individuals to learn how to achieve psychological wholeness through art.

Keywords:

Robert Lowell; Carl Jung; individuation; confessional poetry; analytical psychology

1. Introduction

Twentieth-century American poetry's shift away from impersonal to personal poetics can arguably best be seen in Robert Lowell's career trajectory. Lowell began his career as an adherent of New Criticism, a movement "characterized by close attention to the verbal nuances of lyric poems, considered as self-sufficient objects detached from their biographical and historical origins" (New Criticism 2024). Despite being awarded the 1947 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for the New Critic-inspired Lord Weary's Castle, Lowell would later fashion a much different poetic style that included personal details of his own mental illness and institutionalizations. Many critics have argued that W.D. Snodgrass's Heart's Needle (to Snodgrass's great regret) is the progenitor of the confessional poetry movement, with its "autobiographical, emotionally raw style of poetry" (Holladay) predating Lowell's Life Studies release by a few months. Lowell, along with his former student Snodgrass and later students such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, embraced the chaotic aspects of the poet's own inner being, as well as the similarly fraught, publicly known realities of mental breakdowns, divorces, and suicide attempts (Snodgrass 2009). In contrast to impersonal New Criticism, what came to be known as confessional poetry sought to explore the reality and poetry of troubled inner worlds, not unlike Carl Jung's analytical psychology, which Jung initiated after a troubled personal period in his life. Jungian individuation, composed hierarchically of Jungian ideas such as the transcendent function and active imagination, has long provided an effective framework for understanding mentally ill artists and their work. I argue in this paper that Lowell's breakthrough Life Studies achievement is a prime example of Jungian individuation.

The "confessional" linking of Lowell's artistic achievements and personal hardships would seem to support readings of Life Studies that attribute both the highs and lows to a foundational pathology. The most prominent proponent of this approach toward Lowell's Life Studies has been Kay Redfield Jamison, in works such as Touched with Fire (Redfield Jamison 1993) and Setting the River on Fire (2017), the latter a specific examination of Lowell. In her earlier volume, Redfield Jamison writes "not all writers and artists are depressed, suicidal, and manic..." but "... the manic-depressive and artistic temperaments are, in many ways, overlapping ones; and that the two temperaments are causally related to each other" (Redfield Jamison 1993) (emphasis and ellipses mine). Redfield Jamison's description of causally related temperaments evokes compulsive images of Lowell's bipolar disorder that suggest his personal and professional metamorphoses were inevitable, and that no imaginative mythmaking was involved in the making of Lowell the individual. Redfield Jamison's work is persuasive and accomplished but short shrift is given to what Lowell himself thought the psychospiritual purpose of his work and life was to be.

More recently, scholar Astrid Franke, in opposition to Redfield Jamison's influential viewpoint, has argued for a historical model of the mind and creativity (Franke 2019, p. 14). Franke disagrees with the chemistry-over-culture viewpoint of Lowell's poetics and argues for a perspective that can include social constructions subject to history (Franke 2019, p. 15). Franke even goes so far as to argue that the mental hospital(s) referenced in various Life Studies poems "suggests a world apart, and given the turmoil in the world outside, the order of the mental hospital does not seem so bad, but rather suggests care and protection" (Franke 2019, p. 19). Franke sees Lowell as the scion of social–cultural and hereditary forces that speak to his personal privilege and opportunities; both Lowell's illness and poetry take a backseat with this viewpoint. However, like Redfield Jamison, Franke also shortchanges the individual path Lowell trod in realizing Life Studies. Franke's approach is reductive, partly because she refers to Lowell's mental hospital stays as somehow being a refuge. Lowell's mental institution stays were far from vacations; these were internments that often proved humiliating and sidetracked Lowell from both the man and artist he aspired to be. Lowell instead found in his institutionalizations a psychological terrain that spurred him to individuation.

Both approaches to Lowell, though valuable in their own ways, tend to shortchange Lowell's navigation of the nebulous region between the conscious and the unconscious contents of his own mind, especially as presented in Life Studies; the inner Lowell is overlooked when one focuses on the outer manifestations of his illness and his family lineage. In contrast, Jungian individuation values the individual as he or she traverses his or her own inner world of the mind, or soul. Recent research supporting this idea of "soul" states that "for Jung, the soul carries creativity and grants meaning; it links us to the divine and represents all we could be if wholeness were possible" ("From Shamanism to Jung") (emphasis mine) (Lee et al. 2023). For Lowell, the realities of his bipolar disorder, his upbringing, his aesthetic aims helped fashion his external reality as a great poet; however, these externalities could not account for the selfhood he was

working toward in Life Studies. Lowell's psychological journeys through his inner world helped him create lasting, influential works that not only gave the confessional poetry movement its first exemplar but perhaps more importantly enabled him to achieve a state of individuation. An examination of Jung's life and work after his 1910s mental breakdown provides several keys to understanding Lowell's Life Studies.

2. Breaking Free of Influence: The First Step in Individuation

After years of analyzing mentally ill patients, Jung himself experienced psychosis during the 1910s. Owing to his analytical nature, Jung sought to understand these mental experiences as objectively as possible. However, he came to realize his scientific training was no match for the mental imagery besieging him. Instead, by using his imagination to enter a "conversation" with madness, Jung learned how to construct fictional dialogues to deal with his fractured psyche. Jung began composing what came to be known as his "Black Books", journals documenting his mental processes of that time; these journals were later compiled into The Red Book. Sonu Shamdasani writes in his introduction to The Red Book, "From December 1913 onward, he [Jung] carried on in the same procedure: deliberately evoking a fantasy in a waking state, and then entering into it as a drama" (Shamdasani 2009b). Jung biographer Deirdre Bair writes of Jung's journals during this period, "he duly recorded all these cleared thoughts into the black notebooks every evening and soon discovered that the descriptions required drawings to enhance them, both of representational objects and of symbols" (Bair 2003). Bair extrapolates that "in the process of performing this evening ritual, a "mythology" (as he called it for want of a better word at the time) was emerging. He began to use it on his patients to "listen for the personal mythology" when he treated them" (Bair 2003). The inevitability of psychoanalytic answers that Jung had long adhered to was proving insufficient in solving both his and his patients' psychological issues; the individual was being neglected in a story not his or her own. Jung himself wrote of narrative-making, "clinical diagnoses are important since they give the doctor a certain orientation; but they do not help the patient. The crucial thing is the story. For it alone shows the human background and the human suffering, and only at that point can the doctor, therapy begin to operate" (Jung et al. 1962). The focus on the patient's story—that is, the personal narrative of a life—came to be the focus of Jung's career. In later works such as Answer to Job, Jung positioned the individual in a cosmic drama where the individual's true self had to be won from the grasp of a fundamentalist God-conception; in other words, a rigid narrative imposed from without on the individual within.

Jung's famous break with mentor Sigmund Freud coincided with Jung's psychological breakdown; it was during his mental depths that Jung began to formulate what he would later call analytical psychology when he began to see Freud's psychoanalysis

as too narrow in its application to account for the great diversity in all individual human psyches. As scholar D.J. Moore writes, "quite unlike Freud, Jung was not a strict determinist who believed that consciousness is merely an effect of subterranean, psychic forces. [Jung] championed the importance of individuality, or ego, and recognized its causal power to assist one through the individuation process..." (Moore 2020). Similarly, author Robert Smith writes that "psychoanalysis and analytical psychology have made very different assumptions about the world. One method assumes that behind the chaos, an underlying intelligibility exists. The other assumes that the world is essentially mysterious and in need of mythmaking" (Smith 1996). An examination of the mysteries of his mind prompted Jung to turn inward to search for the language and imagery that would enable him to tell his own psychological story. In his Two Essays on Analytical Psychology, written a decade after his mental illness episodes, Jung wrote that "individuation means to become a single, discrete being...", and that "it also includes the idea of becoming one's own real self. Hence individuation could also be translated as 'coming to selfhood,' or 'self-realization.'" (Jung 2014) (emphasis and ellipses mine). It was this difficult but necessary period of individuation that enabled Jung to survive his breakdown.

For mentally ill artists such as Lowell, similar attempts at surviving mental breakdowns involve attempts at resolving the chaotic contents of their minds with the reality, however tenuous, they still reside in. These artists often experience their reality as overdetermined by "truths" and conventions unresponsive to the artist's mental worlds. In the 1950s, Lowell endured an uncharacteristically fallow creative period, while also being ravaged by his bipolar disorder. Lowell's break with New Critic mentors such as John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren caused him both personal and professional difficulties but also set him on the road to self-realization. In an April 1953 letter to Allen Tate, Lowell, hinting at his growing dissatisfaction with his place as heir of New Criticism, writes "I'd like to make the proposal that art and religion per se have nothing to do with each other, but that in this imperfect world they are always colliding..." Then, to assure Tate of his sincerity and good wishes, Lowell writes that "Father Tate was a joke..." (Lowell 2005). Rather than a Freudian slip, here is an instance of the burgeoning Jungian individuation threatening to come to the fore. Lowell has obviously mulled over in his mind his break from "Father Tate", but his loyalty to Tate, both as a friend and a follower of similar aesthetics, is acknowledged. Lowell is mindful of all that Tate has contributed to Lowell's life; however, Lowell knows that he must become his true self and cannot accomplish this in Tate's shadow. In another letter written to Tate five years later, as Lowell has embarked on his individuation through his Life Studies poems, Lowell begs Tate, "let's not have a fight about my poems", and later writes, "anyhow, even if I have betrayed the persona you know you have of me, I hope you won't cut us when you come here in March" (Lowell 2005) (italics mine). Lowell uses tongue-in-cheek humor in his request that Tate not "cut" when he appears before him in person, a way to defuse their growing rift. Lowell knows the new self being born is not the old New Critic protégé, and that a deft navi-

gation of these new psychological and aesthetic pursuits is necessary for his growth as an individual. His individuation process is underway.

During periods of significant psychological uncertainty, both Jung and Lowell exited the comfortable professional milieus they had long inhabited for what were essentially career unknowns. These career moves promised neither man a guarantee of individual success, rather, it was just the opposite. The personas both men had once gladly worn had become cumbersome. Personal growth was to be paramount over professional security. In Two Essays, Jung writes that "... individuation, therefore, can only mean a psychological evolutionary process that fulfills the given individual dispositions. In other words, it is a process by which man can create himself that definite, unique being that he feels himself, at bottom, to be" (Jung 2014) (ellipses mine). Lowell knew this "bottom" Jung references in Two Essays. Through his burgeoning individuation process, Lowell realized his true self was not the New Critic heir, nor was the poetry he was writing to be in the same vein. In an earlier letter to Tate, Lowell references his new style: "I think I'm going into a new country, and will not be repeating my old tricks; at least I'm full of stuff I had no notion of saying before" (Lowell 2005). What was later to become confessional poetry was born in Lowell. Just as the buttoned-down 1950s would soon give way to the tumultuous 1960s, poetry was to do the same. By the end of the decade, Lowell would influence the first generation of confessional poets, those who comprised a movement that proved to be a sharp rebuke to the New Critics and Eliotian devotees then dominating critical thought.

Unlike the groups that prized impersonality above other poetic considerations, Confessional poets have been described as "... looking inward and making the whole iceberg of their self visible by nurturing demoniacal and taboo topics by baring the veins and marrows of their being in mode of a sincere religious confession" (Mukherjee 2023) (italics and ellipses mine). Another critic writes of the confessional aspect of this movement: "mania is both a part of this psyche and a target of confession" (Racz 2020). These ideas were anathemas to Lowell's New Critic forebears such as Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. In their influential textbook Understanding Poetry, Brooks and Warren, in examining irony in poetry, argue that "to judge the acceptable limits of response for any situation we must come back, on the one hand, to our own common-sense experience of the world, and on the other hand, to the context in the poem or other literary work that we are discussing" (Brooks and Warren 1960, p. 397). For the New Critics, it was context and common sense, not confessionalism, that guided their aesthetics. A poet's personal examination of mental illness, unless hidden by a mask or persona, was verboten to Lowell's teachers. It is perhaps difficult today to accept an artistic movement that looks to "judge the acceptable limits of response" but this purview guided Lowell for the first half of his career. The title of Brooks' and Warren's book alone suggests not only that poetry can be "understood" but also that each element of any individual poem can be subjected to a dissection not unlike that of a specimen in a laboratory. For Lowell, as he found himself professionally and personally adrift in the 1950s, subject to mental elements beyond his conscious control, such a stratagem had

outlived its usefulness. Lowell, in both his conscious and unconscious states, was much too unruly to be contained. Through Life Studies, he needed to confess, to overcome the aesthetic lineage that had largely determined his course.

In the staid America of the 1950s, where seemingly every aspect of public life (not excluding American letters) was conformist, overly formal, and taboo topics were successfully sidelined, what could have been more outrageous than to publicly admit one's own mental illness, and interject these personal experiences into one's work? There were artists who pushed back against archaic notions of mental illness as demonic, and more contemporary ideas suggesting that a weak mind was synonymous with a weak will. Many of these same artists claimed a religious mantle uniquely their own. Chief among these artists were the confessional poets. This connection between religious confessionalism and mental illness is key to understanding the shared experiences that prompted Lowell and his fellow confessional poets to write such personal, uninhibited poetry. Jung's individuation concept provides the perfect lens through which to view how Lowell and his fellow confessional poets used this artistic mode both to pioneer a new way of writing poetry and to achieve their respective individuation. Lowell himself writes in his famous Life Studies poem "Skunk Hour":

> A car radio bleats,
> "Love, O careless Love..." I hear
> my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,
> as if my hand were at its throat...
> I myself am hell;
> nobody's here ——
>
> (Lowell, lines 31–36)

Lowell notably invokes Milton's Paradise Lost in lines 35–36. In Lowell's self-identified hell "nobody's here/only skunks, that search/in the moonlight for a bite to eat" (36–38), whereas Milton's Satan says the following (Milton 2024):

> Me miserable! which way shall I flie
> Infinite wrauth, and infinite despaire?
> Which way I flie is Hell; my self am Hell;
> And in the lowest deep a lower deep
> Still threatening to devour me opens wide,
> To which the Hell I suffer seems a Heav'n
>
> (Milton, lines 74–79)

Like Lowell, Milton's Satan offers a religious confession full of the knowledge that one cannot escape the difficult self-realization that awaits those who come to consciousness. Just as Lowell's speaker knows that his future self is to be one of sickness, one small and insignificant, unable even to alarm the skunks, Milton's Satan is aware that

no matter where he goes, hell—the absence of God, the eternal reaping of what he has sowed—is to be a part of him, no matter the unknown depths he may fall to. There is a sense, when considering these two conceptions of hell, that no matter the evolutions one is to undergo, there is still a darkness, a self-knowledge that one must forever contend with.

Perhaps most interestingly, this connection between Lowell and Milton echoes the pained Jung's decades-long Red Book experience. Jung wrote his journals in secret, fearful of the scorn he might face if their contents were known, and though he apparently considered publication, he long ensured only those closest to him had access to these visionary writings. Long after Jung died, The Red Book remained a curious, largely unreleased work in Jung's corpus. Unlike Lowell's Life Studies, which was published and became an immediate success, Jung's journals were kept hidden. When The Red Book was finally published in 2009, its mysterious contents were finally revealed and shown to have been the spark that lit Jung's post-breakdown individuation (and subsequent books). Editor Sonu Shamdasani states that this work "formed the bedrock of his subsequent Collected Works, whose genesis couldn't be fully grasped without studying it" (Shamdasani 2009a). Jung's subsequent groundbreaking work on religious archetypes and the reconciliation of good and evil started with his mental illness experiences. In one of his most memorable Red Book passages, Jung writes, "to journey to Hell means to become Hell oneself" (Jung 2009). Jung is aware that his life is to be marked by this confrontation with mental illness, and that no longer will the unconscious be sublimated. The same is true for Lowell and Milton's Satan. The esteem and influence that each speaker has experienced and enjoyed is now a thing of the past. What is to become of the new being who has been hell and back, who "is" (and will remain) hell?

Lowell, in just a few lines of "Skunk Hour", evokes images of madness, suicide, and nihilism. His use of "I" in two different lines removes the barrier between poet and audience, especially for those readers, both then and now, who know Lowell's history of bipolar disorder and institutionalizations. With such vulnerability laid bare in these anguished expressions, both Lowell and Jung leave themselves and their readers nowhere to hide from the harsh truths they have realized; there is also, in contrast to New Critics and Freudians, no disembodied, ghostly echo of a personage lost to the ravages of the modern world. Here are men, artists, both ravaged by their own minds and bold enough to render it poetically, without fear of judgment or reprisal of any kind. In his lines, Lowell is presenting himself in the process of experiencing the loss of God, the loss of sanity, the fear that he may never return to what he once was. Lowell, the "I" of his poem, is crying out to readers for understanding, much as one would make a confession in the context of his or her religion. Along with his personal correspondence and other confessional poems, Lowell's "I" in this poem offers another religious confession that speaks to the burgeoning individuation of Life Studies.

In a 1957 letter to fellow poet William Empson, Lowell writes "I rather enjoy Church, hymns, communion and all; but intellectually so many Christians are almost paranoid

about everyone else. The number of beliefs and non-beliefs that will work well enough in practice must be infinite..." (Lowell 2005) (ellipsis mine). Lowell suggests that the psychological need underlying his Protestant upbringing can be met in any number of different ways, and despite his enjoyment of certain rituals, he has made a complete psychological break from the religious conceptions of old. Lowell continues in "Skunk Hour" (Skunk Hour 1967):

> Only skunks, that search
> In the moonlight for a bite to eat.
> They march on their soles up Main Street:
> White stripes, moonstruck eyes red fire
> Under the chalk-dry and spar spire
> Of the Trinitarian Church.
> (Lowell, lines 37–42)

Lowell contrasts the "moonstruck eyes red fire" of the living, ravenous skunks with the "chalk-dry and spar spire of the Trinitarian Church". Lowell is suggesting that the living, ravenous skunks are more alive, more themselves, than the dry, dead, unmoving spire of the Trinitarian Church, i.e., the traditional Protestant trilogy of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Lowell has returned from his mentally ill underworld and now sees the old religious beliefs as dead, dry, and ineffectual in the face of a devastating mental illness it has no answers for. The skunks in the poem are unfailingly pursuing what is most necessary to their individual selves, unconcerned with the tumult surrounding human theological concepts. In viewing Lowell's break from Protestantism through a Jungian lens, it is important to consider how psychological right and wrong are to be seen, and what this means for individuation. Robert Nicrasto writes that "... Jung evolves his principle of individuation from the standpoint of good and evil as an equivalent and indispensable pair of opposites—a method that encompasses both experiential feeling assessments and universal human value judgments" (Nicrasto 2021) (ellipsis mine). Much as the bipolar sufferer is aware of the varying degrees of his or her moods, the Jungian striving for individuation comes to understand that both good and evil co-exist in the same psyche. This understanding is not to be feared, or in Protestant parlance, repented of, but rather incorporated into one's daily life. Lowell was tasked with the hard incorporation back into "real life" each time he returned from a hospitalization or from a manic episode.

Lowell's evolving religious views have certainly not evaded the critical view of many of his esteemed critics, including Redfield Jamison in Setting the River on Fire. Redfield Jamison writes that "religious conviction was at times a sedating influence on Lowell; at others, it was a symptom of his mania or a propellant to it" (Redfield Jamison 2017). Redfield Jamison again evokes sickly, pathological imagery by using words such as sedating and symptom, as the Lowell of her work is arguably a pitiable figure at the mercy or direction of the psychological or pharmacological winds directing him at any

moment in his life. Lowell's agency—be it moral, psychological, or professional—is lost in the foreground against the backdrop of religion and psychology writ large. Redfield Jamison later writes of Lowell's brief religious foray away from his familial Protestantism, "Catholicism lived in history; its coinage was sin and redemption, the promise of rebirth. It was a metaphysical system uniquely able to hold and give language to Lowell's imagination and the involutions of his mind" (85). Not unlike Franke's view of Lowell, Redfield Jamison's view again subsumes Lowell the individual in yet another "system". The view that a temporary conversion to Catholicism (or any other organized, hierarchal religion) could speak to the inner terrain needed for Lowell's personal and artistic growth is not borne out by the progression seen in Lowell's poetry. In contrast to Redfield Jamison, Edward Short writes, "the sane, not the mad, laureate is the true laureate in Lowell..." (Short 2017) (ellipsis mine).

When looked at through a Jungian lens, Lowell's break from "professional fathers" and organized religion results from a transition from an unconscious view of life to a conscious one, and from one half of life to the other. Lowell's evolution from New Critic to confessional poet was no "midlife crisis", as understood by the term's common cultural usage. Lowell did not embody stereotypical American male midlife crises of virility and masculinity; for Lowell, his own mental crises provided sufficient mental material for examination, regardless of his age. To use a popular Protestant phrase, Lowell, by turning inward, "died to himself", much as Jung did decades earlier. In The Red Book, Jung writes that "from the middle of life, only he who is willing to die with life remains living. Since what takes place in the secret hour of life's midday is the reversal of the parabola, the birth of death..." (Jung 2009) (ellipsis mine). Jung and Lowell, though their respective artistic expressions may have differed, both rendered this "birth of death" in ways that proved innovative and personally transformative. For all the acclaim Lowell received up until the "middle" of his own life—the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and appointment as Consultant to the Library of Congress, among others—it was not until his own Jung-like "birth of death" during the 1950s that he achieved self-realization. Lowell only became himself by breaking with the professional and personal influences that shaped the first half of his life.

3. The Transcendent Function: Necessary Bipolarities

An important aspect of Jungian individuation involves what Jung deemed the "transcendent function". In contrast to Freud's ideas concerning formative childhood events that determine later psychic life, Jung's individuation concept pointed in the opposite direction. Jung suggested a lifelong dialectical journey operative in each individual person's psyche. Jung's transcendent function suggests an ever-evolving process, a mind directed to action. As Jungian analyst Jeffery C. Miller writes, "He [Jung] felt that

every idea, attitude, or image in consciousness was opposed or compensated for by another in the unconscious and that that the two struggled with each other in a kind of polarized dance. If these opposites were held in swaying tension, he posited, a new, third thing would emerge that was not a mixture of the two but quantitively different. This mechanism he called the "transcendent function" (Miller 2004). Jung clearly differentiated his transcendent function from Freudian psychoanalysis in his 1916 essay, "The Transcendent Function", later revised in 1958. Jung writes that "Freud's hope that the unconscious could be "exhausted" has not been fulfilled. Dream-life and intrusions from the unconscious continue—mutatis mutandis—unimpeded" (Miller 2004). Jung's use of the word "intrusions" is important as it shows that despite Freudian efforts to treat unconscious mental contents through analysis, intrusive thoughts and troublesome psychological realities remain for many patients, especially for those with more serious mental illnesses. Unlike the portrait painted by Franke, Lowell was not some wealthy aesthete bored with life, afflicted with ennui; Lowell was seriously ill. Lowell was one of many bipolar sufferers who, despite their appreciation for many Freudian theories, had unrelenting mental contents that required daily confrontations with the unconscious. These were contents that required "a mind directed to action".

Along with Jung's description of "intrusions", Miller's description of "swaying tension" aptly describes the mental chaos Lowell endured for decades. Even at his most stable and healthy, Lowell still lived with the nightmarish memories of his mental breakdowns, the damage caused to those around him, and the very real possibility of relapse. Difficult as these mental states were for Lowell, he could not have written Life Studies and kicked off a new movement without them. As Jung himself writes in his 1958 essay revision, "we must now make clear what is required to produce the transcendent function. First and foremost, we need the unconscious material" (Miller 2004). The stark reality of daily bipolar life reminded Lowell of the psychological precipice he constantly navigated. In a September 1957 letter to William Carlos Williams, Lowell outlines his Life Studies in a description that evokes the Jungian transcendent function: "I've been writing poems like a house on fire... I've been experimenting with mixing loose and free meters with strict in order to get the accuracy, naturalness, and multiplicity of prose..." Later, Lowell ends his letter with, "there's no ideal form that does for any two of us, I think..." (Lowell 2005) (ellipses mine). At this point in his life and career, Lowell's aesthetic interests were moving away from the New Critics and toward poets such as Williams, as well as Williams' acolytes such as the Beats and the Black Mountain Poets. Lowell's tumultuous 1950s, compounded by the loss of his mother, a divorce, and several hospitalizations, represents a movement toward self-realization out of the ashes of what once had been. Lowell acknowledges his debt to Williams and thoroughly describes his process of working with both loose and free meters to create something new that he knows must be captured in poetry to provide a personal release, namely, his own individuation.

The trajectory of Lowell's transcendent function begins with his early work. Lowell's poem "The Fat Man in the Mirror", published as part of his pre-Confessional The Mills

of the Kavanaughs, provides a stark contrast to his later Life Studies poems (The Fat Man in the Mirror 1951). This poem features not only a traditional rhyme scheme but a decidedly non-confessional voice. Lowell's speaker is far from the confessing realist of Life Studies; rather, this earlier speaker is just the opposite: someone unwilling to face what literally is staring back at him. Lowell's speaker begins the poem by asking "What's filling up the mirror?" The speaker cannot bear what he sees, and says, "O, it is not I" (line 1) (emphasis mine). Later, the speaker closes the poem by saying the following:

> While Nurse and I were swinging in the Old One's eye...
>
> Only a fat man with his beaver on his eye
> Only a fat man,
> Only a fat man
>
> Bursts the mirror. O, it is not I!".
>
> (Lowell, lines 26–30)

As seen in this poem, the Robert Lowell of 1950 is very different from the Robert Lowell of 1960. The younger poet, good, obedient student that he is, is still adhering to the calculated approach of the New Critics. In this earlier poem, there is still distance, perhaps even slight detachment, between the man writing the poem and the "I" presented therein. The reader can postulate connections between these two poles but apart they shall remain until the Life Studies era. The speaker evokes a sense of evasion, an intimation that the unconscious shall remain just that, unconscious. The inner, authentic man ready to confess will remain hidden. Poetry shorn of adornment and artifice will go unrealized. The speaker is clear that it is "not I" seen in the mirror, and the reader believes him. The tug of war in the individual psyche highlighting the transcendent function is nowhere to be found here. The bipolarities in Lowell's art had yet to come to the surface in "The Fat Man in the Mirror". A Jungian comparison of this poem and Life Studies poems such as "Skunk Hour" displays the changes that took place in the inner Lowell, the transition from the "not I" to the later, confessional "I".Lowell's Life Studies poems are a prime example of the results achieved from realization of the aforementioned "new, third thing", Lowell's transcendent function. The bipolar disorder Lowell suffered from, with its manic highs and depressive lows, quite literally shows how Jungian individuation occurred. The outer Lowell—acclaimed poet, generational spokesperson, link between Modernist and Postmodernist poetry—and the inner Lowell—turbulent, subject to incessant mental instability, at risk of losing his sanity—needed a stabilizing "third thing". In other words, he needed an avenue wherein all sides of his selfhood could be realized. Through Life Studies, he found it in his confessional poems. In his poem "Man and Wife, Lowell writes, as detailed below (Man and Wife 1967):

Tamed by Miltown, we lie on Mother's bed;
The rising sun in war paint dyes us red;
In broad daylight her gilded bed-posts shine,
Abandoned, almost Dionysian.

(Lowell, lines 1–4)

The poem's speaker, Lowell's "I", and his wife, have both been tamed by Miltown, the brand name for meprobamate, a popular anxiolytic tranquilizer drug of the 1950s. Both "man and wife" of the poem have been made pharmacologically calm, and together they lie on Lowell's mother's bed, with its shining, "gilded bed-posts" suggestive of the Freudian psychology Lowell was so long enamored with. Lowell, even after Life Studies, would describe Freud as "the man who moves me most..." (Martin 1970) (ellipsis mine). However, seeing mother's bed "in broad daylight" suggests that Lowell views his own psyche differently. Both in this individual poem, with its pharmacological remedy in full view, and more broadly in his burgeoning confessional poetics, Lowell realizes the selfhood being born is revealing a new world of possibilities.

The married couple's calmness is offset by the red dyeing "war paint", which portends a new life, a new experience. The shining, gilded bedposts are then described as "abandoned, almost Dionysian". Lowell's imagery here suggests that the confrontation between the man and wife's drugged stupor (their shared unconsciousness) and the rising sun that covers them both (their consciousness of the new day) results in a "third", the shining bed posts, "almost Dionysian". The shining bed posts suggest any number of possibilities that the new day presents; here, man and wife can continue in their drugged stupor, they can consummate the marital bed moment, or a deep, psychological understanding can be realized. The scene suggests that both man and wife are actively confronting their collective unconsciousness, and together by activating their shared transcendent function they can confront the rising consciousness to create something new. Lowell's Dionysian reference suggests something transcendent, with its echoes of Nietzsche's preference for the freeing Dionysian over the restrictive Apollonian seen in his The Birth of Tragedy. Jung writes in his 1958 essay revision of "The Transcendent Function" that "... the life of the unconscious goes on and continually produces problematical situations. There is no need for pessimism... there is no change that is unconstitutionally valid over a long period of time. Life has always to be tackled anew" (Miller 2004) (ellipses mine). Lowell shares this view, as daily he tackled mentally ill (unconscious) psychological material that often disoriented and threatened to engulf him. Overly determined viewpoints, be they Freudian, or those of Redfield Jamison and Franke—focused on divine madness and socio-economics—are insufficient paradigms to understand the new Lowell as revealed in his Life Studies poems.

Lowell's transcendent function as revealed in "Man and Wife" also suggests the divine in how the complex bipolarities of life can be reconciled through another third thing—the divine state of mind. Lowell writes later in "Man and Wife",

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...

(Lowell, lines 8–12)

Lowell's then-wife Elizabeth Hardwick represents the divine for Lowell. Only Elizabeth can face "the kingdom of the mad", with its "homicidal eye". Again, in the mode of a religious confession, Lowell is offering praise to his wife for delivering him from his own mind. We see here the confrontation between the conscious (the marital bed, the critical moment between man and wife) and the unconscious (the kingdom of the mad) that results in his deliverance from madness and breakdowns ("dragged me home alive"). The confessional act of putting pen to paper and accessing the active imagination leads to the transcendent function, all with individuation soon within Lowell's grasp. Here is a mad artist who, despite the oscillations of his illness and amidst his burgeoning new poetry, is articulating a realization of his true self. Jungian scholar Murray Stein writes that "the unconscious provides the necessary symbols for maintaining a sense of life's meaning, and the transcendent function provides the ethical guidance of a self-tuned conscience" (Stein 1986). For Lowell, he found meaning during his difficult 1950s through his wife and daughter and through his work. In writing his Life Studies poems, Lowell was forcing resolution of the unconscious and conscious contents of his own mind. It was Lowell's own reconciliation of the opposites in his life that enabled him to endure the hard road he had to tread not only to survive but also to become the artist and man he was destined to be. Both Jung and Lowell emphasize the spirit, the soul, the inner individual who can only be found through the reconciliation of opposites: sanity/insanity, health/sickness, or artistic innovation/artistic tradition.

4. The Dramatized Thinking of Active Imagination

In her introduction to the collection Jung on Active Imagination, scholar Joan Chodorow writes of Jung's breakdown that "he turned his curiosity toward the inner world of the imagination (Jung 1997). His scientific interest kept him alert and attentive. The process led to an enormous release of energy as well as insights that gave him a new orientation" (Chodorow 1997). This "new orientation" was to lead Jung towards a more artistic approach to life, and later, to both his own individuation and the larger individuation concept within his new psychology. Jung's break with his earlier life also led to the transcendent function concept, an important component in individuation affected by what Jung called active imagination. As Shamdasani writes in his Red Book introduction, "... he [Jung] depicted the method of eliciting and developing fantasies

that he later termed active imagination and explained it in therapeutic rationale... active imagination would thus be one form of inner dialogue, a type of dramatized thinking" (Jung 2009) (ellipses mine). Jung was aware that many of his detractors saw active imagination as indulging the unconscious processes, and for some time he was reluctant to make this concept public knowledge. It was through his post-breakdown individuation that Jung was able to demonstrate how he used his active imagination. Miller writes that "active imagination is used to coax material from the unconscious to the threshold of consciousness and, in a sense, catalyze the transcendent function" (Miller 2004). Common in Jungian research are variations in images and art that show the psyche as containing a wide gulf between the conscious and the unconscious, and the catalyst that is the transcendent function being stoked or fired by active imagination to do its necessary reconciliation work. Jung undoubtedly would have approved of such constructions, as he himself used similar imaginative processes to help heal not only his own mind but also those of his patients and readers. In this vein, one scholar has written of the use of active imagination, "... Jung recommends that the experience be recorded either in writing or drawing. This allows for the full expression of both lived experience and felt emotion, as an attempt is made both to tangibly and symbolically shape the content that has emerged, making it, in some way, accessible to consciousness" (Pinilla Pineda 2022) (ellipsis mine).

In Lowell's case, he needed not only to understand his own selfhood and poetry on an intellectual level but also on how such a recognition could be put into practice through his active imagination. Lowell grasped that latent within his psyche was the capacity for a new kind of poem, a new type of poetics. In another letter to William Carlos Williams, this one written in late 1958 when Life Studies was all but finished, Lowell wrote, "I suppose the book is terrible, however, there was great pleasure in the writing, in the quick flashes and the hundreds of re-writings. Dropping rhyme does seem to get rid of a thick soapy cloth of artificiality..." (Lowell 2005) (ellipsis mine). Though some of Lowell's rhyme schemes in early-1950s poems such as "Beyond the Alps" would find their way into what would become the four-part Life Studies, later poems belonging to this collection largely eschew the formalist stratagems of Lowell's work in favor of an aesthetically freer exploration of psychological realism.

Lowell's mention of "quick flashes" and "hundreds of re-writings" in his letter to Williams suggests the hard individuation work he was able to realize using his active imagination. Lowell, like Jung, understood the revisioning that happens both in life and in art to be both the highest of artistic highs and the lowest of psychological lows; in short, to contain all the qualities found also in the individual psyche. In his Life Studies poem "Waking in the Blue" (Waking in the Blue 1967), Lowell exhibits how the transcendent function can be used to advance individuation through active imagination. Lowell begins this stanza with the conscious part of his experience, the visualized, the "real". Lowell writes the following:

> Azure day

makes my agonized blue window bleaker.
Crows maunder on the petrified fairway

(Lowell, lines 5–7)

The bright blue day, with all its beauty and wondrous color, further dissociates his prisonous, windowed confinement. Lowell acknowledges the opposites obsessing him during his institutionalization. The azure day, the crows, the fairway, are all out there, full of life; in here, that is, inside his room, the blue window only serves to remind him of his ill life locked away from the world. Stripped of his freedom, all Lowell has in this moment is his imagination; all he can do to regain some measure of psychological wholeness is to dream, to write. The window, the crows, the fairway will remain what they are in reality; in Lowell's active imagination, even these tokens of imprisonment and horror can be rendered into something poignant, and suggestive of the individual locked away. Lowell ends his stanza by expressing his anxiety at the unconsciousness he feels psychologically at again being institutionalized because of his mental illness. He writes,

Absence! My heart grows tense
as though a harpoon were sparring for the kill.
(This is the house for the "mentally ill".)

(Lowell, lines 8–10)

Here, Lowell speaks of the "heart", a trusty poetic conceit. Lowell uses this word to suggest a largely unconscious feeling that is connected to absence—his absence from his family, his career, and his sanity. The inner Lowell is greatly wounded, and this pain can only be articulated through poetry. Lowell's transcendent function is creating (and will create) the third thing, a new reality, by the deft usage of active imagination. Set off by the parenthesis, this new thing—the house for the "mentally ill"—is thrown into stark relief by the dawning reality of this new day for Lowell. As if seeing the mental institution for the first time, Lowell evokes his own inner psychological terrain and the outer psychological terrain belonging to him and his fellow patients. Upon "waking" and seeing "the blue", Lowell uses his active imagination and descriptive power to see the individual he is in the process of becoming. The man that will one day return to his wife and child will be different from the one who entered the hospital.

Lowell's use of active imagination, in not only expressing the absence he feels but also in rendering what he imagines what the outside world sees when it looks "in" on him, places the term "mentally ill" in a parenthesis and in scare quotes. Lowell poetically gives his readers a glimpse of all the ugliness and judgment he imagines resides in the minds of all those who see the denizens of a mental hospital, whether patients or employees, as somehow non-human, as unpredictable beings whose activities are rightly closed off from the world. Lowell repeatedly likens the inhabitants of this world to animals. Lowell writes that the night attendant "catwalks down our corridor" (4),

that patient Stanley is "more cut off from words than a seal" (23), and that another patient is

> redolent and roly-poly as a sperm whale,
> as he swashbuckles about in his birthday suit
> and horses at chairs.
>
> (Lowell, lines 29–31).

Much as Jung used active imagination to bring his inner conflicts to light, Lowell does the same in using his imaginative powers to see his institutionalized world as full of personified characters (or caricatures), a colorful cast of "Mayflower screwballs" (37–38). Lowell recognizes the troubled psychological developments that lie ahead, intuits that these fellow patients may portend doom, but through active imagination he constructs his own version of Jung's "inner dialogue" to evolve his true, artistic self, and in some small way, find healing. Lowell, later in "Waking in the Blue", describes himself as follows:

> Cock of the walk,
> I strut in in my turtle-necked French sailor's jersey
> before the metal shaving mirrors,
> and see the shaky future grow familiar
> in the pinched, indigenous faces
> of these thoroughbred mental cases
>
> (lines 42–47)

Lowell's burgeoning individuation as rendered in "Waking in the Blue" stands in stark contrast to Franke's reductive descriptions of Lowell's hospital stays. In arguing for her preference for Thomas Mann's sanitorium world as found in The Magic Mountain, Franke writes that "...in the hands of Lowell, the mental hospital becomes a symbolic space recording pacification and diminishing hierarchies, a slow process of liberalization, growing wealth, and education" (18) (ellipsis mine). Franke focuses almost solely on the Lowell the Protestant scion, an echo of the younger, much feted poetic persona, who, by the time of midlife hospitalizations and traumas, had been long since shuttered. More recently, literary critic Jeremy Noel-Tod, in an echo of Franke's assessment of Lowell, writes "by making his subject so much himself, Lowell left much of the otherness of American life out" (Noel-Tod n.d.). Again, Lowell the individual is overshadowed. These critiques suggest that the artist's subjectivity is somehow not his or her own, and that the poet's art is duty-bound to perform a collective service, even if this task subsumes the poet's personal experiences made new through imagination and made universal through art. This through-line linking artist with art with audience is an aesthetically and psychologically true connection, and that which links us to Jung's collective unconscious. Jungian analyst Chiara Tozzi writes of active imagination that

"in all of Jung's writings, the engagement with images from the unconscious leads to a greater knowledge of oneself and consequently to greater reflection regarding the value of objects and choices that all individuals have to face throughout their lives" (Tozzi 2021). Lowell's survey of patients in his "Waking in the Blue" is the same "survey" all human beings are constantly making as each of us assesses where we stand in relation to one another, and in relation to where we ourselves have stood previously and where we will in the future. Lowell's "I", his self-described "cock of the walk", is the same subjective experience we all are constantly living, whether we admit it or not. Human beings are continuously in dialogue with one another, with our inner selves; this dialogue can take many forms, art being arguably one of the most impactful and long-lasting. History is replete with artists who, in using imagination to bare their innermost selves, have enabled their audiences to feel more connected with humanity. When viewed through Jung's active imagination concept, Lowell's Life Studies poems can correctly be viewed as inspiration, not illness.

In a June 1958 letter to friend and fellow poet Elizabeth Bishop, Lowell shares his ambivalent thoughts about the completion of Life Studies: "... I have about enough for a book, and feel half-happy to let it rest in a drawer until the next awakening. I like the language of my new poems, but feel fatigued by their fierceness, my old serpent in the perfect garden" (Lowell 2005) (italics and ellipsis mine). Through his active imagination, Lowell uses his bipolar mood swings, his "fierceness", to allude to the biblical story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, to original sin. Lowell suggests that at the base of his individuation resides the knowledge that his bipolar disorder is his "original sin" in the sense that he must bear this burden for the rest of his life, and that both the pain and the passion resulting from this burden will mark his selfhood. It is this myth of Adam and Eve cast out of the eternal garden that explains the hard road of individuation that both Lowell and other sufferers like him must continually traverse, as their attempts to survive their mental illnesses represent their personal narratives, their myths. Life Studies is a book of self-realization, of mythmaking amid heightened mental trauma. Near the end of his life, Jung writes of mankind's mythmaking propensity in Memories, Dreams, Reflections: "though such [mythopoetic] imagination is present everywhere, it is both tabooed and dreaded, so that it even appears to be a risky experiment or a questionable adventure... it is considered the path of error..." (Jung and Jaffe 1989) (ellipsis mine). Lowell knew this stark truth as well as any ill artist of his or any other epoch. During Life Studies' long gestation, Lowell wrestled with both the professional and personal fallout from his mental illness. His numerous letters attest to the fact that he knew he was on uncertain aesthetic footing. Until the poems were complete, Lowell did not know if this footing would give way. Lowell understood Jung's "path of error" acutely, as his individuation empowered his Life Studies achievement but also provided the imposing counterweight of the potential destruction of his personal and professional lives. Lowell's Life Studies individuation, spurred by his active imagination and continuing for the rest of his life,

bears the enduring marks of revealed religion and personal myth, of death and rebirth. Life Studies is a religious confession.

5. Conclusions

In his poem "Home After Three Months Away", Lowell writes, "Recuperating, I neither spin nor toil" (Lowell, line 30) (Lowell 1967). Lowell alludes to the Gospel of Luke, in words attributed to Jesus. Jesus addresses his disciples in the Lukan story and reminds them to "consider the lilies how they grow: they toil not, they spin not; and yet I say unto you, that Solomon in all glory was not arrayed like one of these" (King James Version n.d., LK 12:27). The Lukan allusion to Solomon's riches suggests that God will provide for humankind, regardless of one's stature. Lowell, through his individuation, himself suggests that although his life appears bleak upon his return home, he will endure. He has endured a difficult decade of illness and of grasping for a new expression of poetry to articulate his selfhood. Lowell concludes the poem, "I keep no rank nor station. Cured, I am frizzled, stale, and small" (Lowell, line 40). Now that he is "cured", Lowell sees that the individuation achieved through Life Studies is to continue. The road ahead for Lowell in this poem is hard but essential to both the individual and the artist. The opposites of the ill man and the acclaimed artist have been roughly reconciled.

Lowell's increasing sense of self-realization, as evident in many of the letters he wrote to friends while composing what would become Life Studies, should also be seen for its own remarkable psychological accomplishment. Though Lowell's family background, cultural heritage, and bipolar disorder are important, Lowell's sense of a developing self should not be ignored. Lowell came to shape his life through his poetry, and perhaps without meaning to, changed the way American poetry would be read and written. Twentieth-century literature, with all its undulations from impersonal to personal artistry, cannot be fully understood without Lowell's significant contributions. Additionally, Lowell's contributions must be understood within the self-realization he achieved during the 1950s. In considering how Lowell was able to navigate the psychological terrain that provided him not only with individuation but gave rise to the confessional poetry movement, perhaps it is best to consider how Jung summarized his own individuation in his Two Essays book: "Only what is really oneself has the power to heal" (Jung 2014).

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