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HOMENAGEM A  
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# THE EDGE OF ONE OF MANY CIRCLES

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**THE CONFESSIONS OF AN  
EX- CON: ROBERT LOWELL  
REMEMBERS WEST STREET, LOIS LEPKE,  
AND A SKUNK IN MAINE**

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**Resumo:** As recordações da sua experiência na prisão durante a Segunda Grande Guerra (o poeta esteve preso por ser objetor de consciência e se opor à guerra) surgem no inovador volume *Life Studies*, de Robert Lowell, e enformam dois dos poemas canônicos dessa obra, “Memories of West Street and Lepke” e (de forma menos direta) “Skunk Hour”.

**Palavras-chave:** Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies*; a década de 1950; poesia; pacifismo.

**Abstract:** Robert Lowell’s memories of his experience in prison during World War II (he was incarcerated for being a conscientious objector in opposition to the war) surface in his break-through volume *Life Studies* and inform two of that volume’s canonical poems, “Memories of West Street and Lepke” and (less directly) “Skunk Hour.”

**Keywords:** Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies*; 1950s; poetry; pacifism.

As his readers, reviewers, and critics were quick to note, with *Life Studies* at the end of the 1950s Robert Lowell (1917-1977) had succeeded in remaking his poetic self.<sup>1</sup> His poems struck a new, quieter note. For a decade he had been known as the precocious writer of brilliant poems, intricate in design, difficult to decipher, and insistently taking on the larger themes. When his first important book, *Lord Weary's Castle*, appeared in 1946, the poems were called in a private journal, by his friend, the critic Alfred Kazin, a case of the “triumph of talent over confusion” (2011: 97). Now, at the end of the so-called “tranquilized” decade, *Life Studies* struck Lowell’s friends as a welcome harbinger of the demise of what Elizabeth Bishop called Lowell’s “familiar trumpet-notes” (2008: 707). It marked the end of his tendency, as he himself put it, to beat “the big drum too much” (in Travisano 230). Indeed, in the more personal poems of *Life Studies*, Lowell had abandoned what he called the “medieval armor” of his earlier poems in favor of the quieter virtues of a “small voice” (idem 239), one that drew on the Lowell and Winslow family annals for the purpose of revealing the elusive secrets of self and selves. Preying on biography and autobiography, these subdued poems introduce the reader to a plain-speaking poet telling all in the often drone-like tone of his own “very direct and personal” voice. As Kazin wrote, speaking for many, “Lowell, redeemed by suffering from his overdeveloped early style, found his true self and his best material in the irreducible self he portrayed in *Life Studies*” (1978: 255). The breakthrough poems in *Life Studies* – those drawing on his distinct reactions to personal experience – reflect the thoughts of one whose life is at mid-point, the memories of a life gone wrong and sour. This is notably so in “Memories of West Street and Lepke” and “Skunk Hour.” In those poems Lowell draws on memories

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations from *Life Studies* are from the edition in Works Cited, and subsequently identified by *LS* and the page number provided in parenthesis.

emanating from a burned-out brain. Lowell had been a “conscientious objector,” one who refused to report for induction to the United States Army but had reported to a federal district attorney. He was sentenced to a year and a day in federal prison. For a few days he was held in the West Street Jail and then relocated to the federal prison in Danbury, Connecticut. Although he spent the bulk of his prison time in Danbury, it is his observations and experiences in the New York jail that make up “Memories of West Street and Lepke.”

Scion of a patrician family that features poets such as James Russell Lowell and Amy Lowell, Robert Lowell meets a variety of human specimens in the “bullpen” and holding cells of the West Street Jail, which has its Hudson River view obstructed by “sooty clothesline entanglements and bleaching khaki tenements” (*LS* 80). (This “bleaching khaki” reminds us of the army “khaki” rejected by the convicted Conscientious Objector [C.O.] when, in his own grandiose way he detailed his complaint in a letter to President Franklin D. Roosevelt. He had told off the state, had he not, as decades later, now middle-aged, he would spurn overtures from another President waging war.)

Published at the end of the decade Lowell himself characterized sadly and somewhat disdainfully as the “tranquillized” 1950s, “Memories of West Street and Lepke” works through a series of contrasts to measure the distance between those fifties years and the wartime forties. If his fifties scavenger self also picks over the trash in back-alley cans of a “hardly passionate Marlborough Street”, the poet rummages through bins of prison memory, picking out the riff-raff comprised of birds-of-a-feather thrown together in the West Street jail – pacifists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Hollywood pimps, the kingpin of Murder, Inc., and young poets who plead their consciences. They are all “fellow jailbirds.”

Now employed by a university, the older poet is required to teach but one day a week. Other days he “hogs” a whole house to

himself, putting on “pajamas fresh from the washer each morning” (LS 79). It will be recalled that Louis “Lepke” Buchalter piled towels in the laundry. In the fifties the poet “book-worms”; in the forties the head of a murder syndicate “dawdle[s]” along. The C. O. would not fight in his country’s war; but the convicted murderer decorates his cell with “two toy American flags,” pinned with a Christian’s “Easter palm.” The poet is “tranquilized”; the murderer has been “lobotomized.” Like his fellow prisoner, the C.O. is incarcerated over questions of “killing.” “Lowell was in a cell next to Lepke, you know, Murder Incorporated,” recalled another inmate, “and Lepke says to him: ‘I’m in for killing. What are you in for?’ ‘Oh, I’m in for refusing to kill.’ And Lepke burst out laughing. It was kind of ironic” (Hamilton 91).

Lowell’s poem ends with his recollection of Lepke absorbed in concentration. It is not a time for “agonizing reappraisal,” for the prospect of the electric chair has focused his “lost connections,” his lobotomized attention. It is not far-fetched to equate Lowell’s memories here with the “filth” scavenged in back alleys, but there is one telling difference. If the biographical subtext of “Memories of West Street and Lepke” is that the poet has suffered a mental breakdown, leading to shock treatments and their aftermath, that was foreshadowed in Lepke’s shock treatments and electrocution, the point is that memories, even in the so-called tranquilized fifties, are not so easily got rid of, not even when they have become the grist for poems.

Turning now to “Skunk Hour,” a poem that seems not to be directly connected to Lowell’s memories of his incarceration. Here Lowell is still looking for clues into his personality, character, and mental and spiritual condition. He localizes the time and names persons and places. He even fixes on the specifics of animal behavior in his quest for signs. Thus the skunk stands in for the poet who searches through garbage cans. But the skunk with her

column of kits is unlike Lowell in that she will not scare. What scares the poet is that his mind is that he knows his mind is not right. It is not only that things are out of joint – they are: the old woman on the hill is dotty, the first selectman, rather than being a patrician worthy to lead, is a tenant farmer on the dotty old woman’s property, she buys up eye-sore property only to let it fall down (creating even worse eyesores?), the “fairy” who runs the antiques shop paints everything orange, inappropriately, and wants to marry (to better his financial situation) – but that the poet is himself out of joint.

If Christopher Marlowe’s Mephistophilis in *Doctor Faustus* says “why this is hell, nor am I out of it” (II, 171), Lowell declares, in all but words, “I myself am hell.” The twentieth-century poet would spy on lovers but there are no lovers there (he says). Fearing an even more grievous bout of insanity, perhaps, he dares not contemplate inviting someone (in the words of Marlowe’s lyric) to “come live with me and be my love” (II, 536). More in kind he would be the maternal skunk boldly supping on cream that has soured, for that would sum up what the best of *Life Studies* is about – draining the memories of a sour life. And yet, if the night-preying skunk nosing into garbage is an image of what he has become – “I’m a skunk in the poem,” as Lowell confided to Bishop (in Travisano 239) – he, too, will continue his night prowling, seeking out things that should be private, borrowing into his and other people’s garbage. What is most egregious, however, is that he takes heart from the skunk that will not scare. Having discovered this vein of material – the annals of the self and family – he will continue to compose his seemingly naked personal poems, skunk that he had become by the late fifties and would continue to be to the end of his life. “So lust, thought to a radiant angel link’d,” says Hamlet, “will sate itself in a celestial bed, and prey on garbage” (I, v, 55-58). Of course, Lowell’s so-called confessional poems may be looked at

in another way, preferably as instances in which the traumatized poet depends on his art for insight rather than giving to pathology to explain his condition.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Edmund Wilson offers a similar modern psychological interpretation, using the story in the *Iliad* of the mythological Philoctetes' wound as his starting point. See "Philoctetes" (1941).