

Bipartisan Poetry in the 1950s: A Response to Frank J. Kearful's "Signs of Life in Robert Lowell's 'Skunk Hour'"^{*}

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Frank J. Kearful's "Signs of Life in Robert Lowell's 'Skunk Hour'" lends a virtuoso's ear to one of Lowell's most overplayed poems. Kearful's sensitivity to the phonological nuances of Lowell's craft has a stethoscopic effect, detecting a pulse in a poem that has been analysed almost to death.¹ The fact that Kearful's analysis resuscitates Lowell's poem by practicing a textual criticism that has frequently (and too easily) been dismissed as outmoded in an era of critical theory, testifies both to Kearful's skill as an exegete, and to Lowell's expert use of poetic sound and cadence. Kearful adds new layers to discussions of the poem's preoccupation with mental illness by demonstrating how Lowell's predominant images—of a season that is "ill," where the speaker's "mind's not right" and his "ill-spirit sob[s]"—are connected both literally and aurally by the "phoneme cluster ill" (317), which "infiltrates the entire poem, creating an acoustic chamber of *ill-ness*" (317).

However, Kearful's formalist reading of "Skunk Hour," while rigorous and perceptive, is also somewhat ironic. "Skunk Hour" was the final, and arguably most influential, poem published in Lowell's 1959 book *Life Studies*, a collection notable for its attempt to steer away from the New Critical influence that had earned Lowell both a Pulitzer Prize in 1947 for *Lord Weary's Castle*, and a reputation as one of the United States' most important younger poets. *Life Studies* has more frequently been analysed for its relinquishment of the taut,

*Reference: Frank Kearful, "Signs of Life in Robert Lowell's 'Skunk Hour,'" *Connotations* 23.2 (2013/2014): 317-35. For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debkearful0232.htm>>.

formalist virtues that typified Lowell's earlier work.² His focus on the personality of the poet in *Life Studies* inspired the "confessional school" of poetry which was more driven by explorations of the "lyric I" and the personal and cultural contexts that influenced that ego. Kearful's identification of Lowell's "acoustic chamber of ill-ness," however, demonstrates the extent to which a residual formalism lingered in Lowell's confessional moment. By emphasising how these phoneme clusters toll in the minds of both speaker and reader, Kearful aligns the formalist and cultural readings of "Skunk Hour," showing that Lowell's New Critical breeding allowed him to control the poem's affect in a manner that heightens the anxiety and desperation confessed by its speaker. While perhaps unintentionally confirming criticisms of Lowell as a poet who could never fully relinquish the control offered by formalism,³ Kearful's article invigorates formalist analyses by demonstrating how they collude with the cultural readings courted by Lowell's confessional poems. Kearful's argument strengthens the case for Lowell's status as a master stylist; yet, exploring the reciprocal relationship between Lowell's formalism and his trope of illness as a metaphor for a sick postwar culture contains the possibility of reading him as a bipartisan poet, one whose work flourished in the no-man's-land that divided the academic poets from the emergent American avant-garde during the mid-century anthology wars.

Early critical discussions of *Life Studies* expressed both shock and dismay that Lowell could abandon his formalist skill set in favour of affecting the posture of a maudlin *poète maudit*. As M. L. Rosenthal claims in an early review, Lowell's *Life Studies* is "hard not to think of [...] as a series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal" (64). While Rosenthal asserts that his "first impression while reading *Life Studies* was that it is impure art, magnificently stated but unpleasantly egocentric," he finds comfort in the fact that beneath the confessional sensibility "Lowell is still the wonderful poet of the 'Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket,' the poet of power and passion whose driving aesthetic of anguish belies the 'frizzled, stale and small' condition he attributes to himself" (64). For

Rosenthal, Lowell's confessional turn was a movement away from what he did best—the strained formalism of *Lord Weary's Castle*—where, as Louise Bogan observed, “Lowell’s technical competence is remarkable [...]. The impact of the other poems in the book is often so shocking and overwhelming, because of the violent, tightly packed, and allusive style and the frequent effects of nightmare horror” (29). The fact that Lowell was grappling with the tension between formalist and a more private, confessional verse was clear in his 1960 National Book Award acceptance speech. Lowell, who had won the award for *Life Studies*, used the speech to reflect on the state of American poetry in 1960, where he saw two poetries “competing, a cooked and a raw. The cooked, marvellously expert, often seems laboriously concocted to be tasted and digested by a graduate seminar. The raw, huge blood-dripping gobbets of unseasoned experience are dished up for midnight listeners” (“Robert Lowell, Winner of the 1960 Poetry Award for *Life Studies*”).

Lowell’s description of polarities in American poetry anticipates the anthology wars that arose between the followers of Donald Hall, Robert Pack and Louis Simpson’s conservative *New Poets of England and America* (1957), and Donald Allen’s more radical *New American Poetry* (1960). While Lowell publicly admired, for instance, the ability of Beat poets such as Allen Ginsberg to serve up “raw, huge blood dripping gobbets of unseasoned experience,” his private correspondence suggests he remained skeptical about their lack of technical acumen. In a 1959 letter to Ginsberg, Lowell attempts to praise *Kaddish*, before delivering some rather sharp criticisms: “I enjoy *Kaddish* [...]. It’s really melodious, nostalgic, moving, liturgical. Maybe it ought to be shorter—the manner sometimes almost writes itself—probably there’s too much Whitman. And I do find it a bit too conventional, eloquent and liturgical” (*Letters* 345). In a 1957 letter to Randall Jarrell, Lowell describes how he felt torn between his allegiance to formalist verse, and his desire to express coarser emotional fragility in a less tethered idiom: “I’ve been working like a skunk, doggedly and happily since mid-August and have seven or eight poems finished (?) some quite long and all very direct and personal. They are mostly written in a

sort of free verse that takes off from the irregularities of my Ford poem [...]. I'll be very sad if you don't like them" (298). The trepidation Lowell expresses about these new "direct and personal" and "free verse" poems clearly had not subsided even after they had earned him the National Book Award. Indeed, at the end of that acceptance speech, Lowell declares himself caught between technical virtue and emotional honesty: "When I finished *Life Studies*, I was left hanging on a question mark. I don't know whether it is a death-rope or a life-line."

While Kearful's article demonstrates the importance of paying continued attention to the nuances of Lowell's prosody, other contemporary critics⁴ have used that question mark to hang Lowell. His median position between formalism and the emergent American avant-garde has been read as a form of equivocation rooted in his desire to be loyal to his New Critical benefactors, such as Tate and Ransom, while simultaneously remaining a relevant voice at a time when the Beats, the Black Mountain Poets, and the New York School were unsettling the American modernist tradition. As Jed Rasula notes, even in the immediate aftermath of important anthologies such as Hall, Pack and Simpson's *New Poets of England and America*, and Cecil and Tate's *Modern Verse in English 1900-1950*, it was becoming apparent that American formalist poets were "proving themselves all too clearly abstemious of criticism or theory and [...] the new wave of articulated poetics was emanating from other quarters, reactivating the significant provocations of Pound, Williams, and Stein, among others" (224). The popularity of Donald Allen's *New American Poetry*, which featured Black Mountain poets such as Olson, Levertov, and Creeley; Beats such as Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, and Corso; New York poets such as Ashbery, Koch, and O'Hara; and San Francisco poets such as Duncan, Spicer, and Blaser, led many critics to regard the poets anthologized by Hall/Pack/Simpson and Cecil/Tate as out of touch with contemporary poetic trends. Lowell, as both the 1960 National Book Award winner, and a prominent figure in American verse, was an easy target for critics eager to herald in a new era of American writing. Published in both Hall/Pack/Simpson's and

Cecil/Tate's anthologies, Lowell was conspicuously absent from the *New American Poetry* in spite of *Life Studies'* attempt to revitalize a poetics of personality in American verse. Jed Rasula, in the *American Poetry Wax Museum*, claims that Lowell "was the poet prepared, golem-like, by the founders of New Criticism, programmed as it were to produce the poems that would confirm for a contemporary audience that their tastes (as honed by the curriculum of *Understanding Poetry*) could handle the new poetry as readily as the old" (248).

While there is little doubt that Lowell was supported by friends who promoted the New Critical agenda, reading his work solely as the product of that agenda is a polemical (and polarizing) gesture. Indeed, it reflects the currents of the anthology wars that have perpetuated a with-us-or-against-us mentality in American poetry. Articles such as Kearful's serve to remind us that Lowell's poetry, especially from *Life Studies* onward, cannot be dismissed as the wrong side of that polarity. Rather, Kearful's meticulous examination indicates that Lowell was a bipartisan poet, less hanging on a question mark than thriving in-between the raw and the cooked. Kearful's formalist analysis, by detecting a link between Lowell's painstaking sound patterns, shows that the poet was interested in using his craft to infect his audience with the feeling of illness he was so familiar with. The poem therefore marries the impersonal formalism of the New Critical poem with the anxious atmosphere of Lowell's confessional voice. As Kearful points out, the "theme of the poem [...] might be summarized as *ill all fall*, which also encapsulates the doctrine of original sin, that congenital spiritual 'illness' which we all inherit" (319). By explicating Lowell's phonological repetition of the "ill all fall" sounds over the course of the poem, Kearful shows that this spiritual inheritance is equally entrenched in the politics of 1950s America, which means that "'Skunk Hour' needs to be read against the foil of Cold War cultural, political, and legal issues that merged in major Supreme Court decisions regarding privacy" (319).

By focusing primarily on the poem's phonological attributes, however, Kearful makes no attempt to name who, or what, is behind this *ill will*. While Lowell also refrains from directly naming the cause of

his “illness,” the poem’s trajectory suggests a loss of traditional hierarchies in favour of a modern, capitalist world bereft of value and meaning. For instance, “Nautilus Island’s hermit / heiress” (“Skunk Hour” ll. 1-2), we are told, is “Thirsting for / the hierarchic privacy / of Queen Victoria’s century” (ll. 7-9). However, instead of fighting to maintain the values of the old world, she uses her privilege to buy “the eyesores facing her shore, and lets them fall” (ll. 11-12). The corruption of her desire implies a pernicious lack of social conscience on behalf of the privileged who, in this case, would prefer to watch the community suffer before assuming civic or class responsibility. We are also told that the “summer millionaire” has been “lost” (l. 14), and “[h]is nine-knot yawl / was auctioned off to lobstermen” (ll. 16-17), while the “fairy / decorator brightens his shop for fall; / his fishnets filled with orange cork” (ll. 19-21). In these lines, a reversal of traditional class distinction emerges—the lobstermen, not the millionaire, now sail the yawl, while fishnets are filled with kitschy decorations used to please tourists rather than the fish that would have conventionally brought sustenance to the town. Against this loss of conventional hierarchies the speaker finds himself alone in a world of empty values. His dark night of the soul is linked to his distaste for the sins of the modern capitalist world, where he drives a “Tudor Ford” (l. 26) and watches for “love-cars. Lights turned down, / they lay together, hull to hull, / where the graveyard shelves on the town” (ll. 27-29). This scene of casual affairs watched while safely contained within his own “Ford,” itself a symbol of the modern, capitalist world, leads the speaker to conclude that his “mind’s not right” (l. 30). Yet it is the feeling of being contained within this era of corrupted values—while confronted by the shallow lyrics of the popular songs emanating from the radio—that leaves the speaker feeling “ill” (l. 33) and alone.

Kearful’s article demonstrates how Lowell’s use of phoneme clusters increases the sound of tension in the poem, but it does not fully consider how Lowell uses this repetition of “ill”—sounds to position the speaker as subject to the torments of a postwar society where traditional values have dried up like the “chalk-dry and spar spire /

of the Trinitarian Church" (ll. 41-42). The "sound-chamber" of illness echoes persistently both in the mind of the speaker and reader, demonstrating that the speaker's "mind's not right" (l. 30). The reverberations created by Lowell's echoes of illness not only heighten the poem's sense of hostility, they also induce a palpable anxiety, one that mirrors the speaker's obsessive psychological behavior. The strained and choppy shift between rhyme and off-rhyme creates the sense that the poem itself, like the mind of the speaker, is threatening to collapse under the weight of its burden.

The early Cold War era from which Lowell emerged as a poet represents a particularly vibrant example of the incorporation of judicial and political institutions into social apparatuses administering human lives. A genealogical analysis of the Cold War reveals it as a network of power relations involving political, juridical, technological, cultural, medical, psychiatric, and other institutional practices aimed at regulating and normalizing the lives of citizens. Examples of these regulatory practices abound; from the juridical perspective, initiatives such as the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) threatened sanctions against those who held subversive or dissenting views. These sanctions became powerful social motivators in the wake of high profile cases such as those against Alger Hiss, Klaus Fuchs, the Hollywood Ten, and the Rosenbergs.⁵ In light of such threats, an overlap between the juridical, political, and cultural took shape, a feat more easily accomplished because of the elusive nature of communist evil. In the cultural sphere, as Stephen J. Whitfield argues, "[t]he values and perceptions, the forms of expression, the symbolic patterns, the beliefs and myths that enabled Americans to make sense of reality—these constituents of culture were contaminated by an unseemly political interest in their roots and consequences. The struggle against domestic Communism encouraged an interpenetration of the two networks of politics and culture, resulting in a philistine inspection of artistic works not for their content but for the *politique des auteurs*" (10). Fear that a subversive double-talk may have entered the cultural realm led to an even greater administration of the Cold War citizen. Containment practices, which Alan Nadel has defined as

the attempt to regulate and contain anxiety, dissent, paranoia, and other unruly feelings by investing popular culture with narratives that work to normalise political measures, infiltrated popular discourse. Thus film and television were imbued with narratives of domestic happiness and wholesome values in programmes such as *Leave to Beaver*, or taught families to be suspicious of abnormal neighbours, in popular film and television like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *The Munsters*. Radio programmes, including *This is Your FBI*, reminded the public it could trust (or fear) the arm of the law, while women's magazines provided blueprints for household management, a skill set necessary for keeping busy breadwinners happy. Fallout shelter advertisements promised safety from the apocalypse, while the fear of atomic obliteration was naturalised by the application of the word "atomic" to all manner of sundry goods, from children's toys to facial cleansers. Even the New Criticism, as Terry Eagleton has argued, functioned as a well-wrought urn for containing dissent in literature: According to him, New Criticism was "a recipe for political inertia, and thus for submission to the political status quo" (Eagleton 43).

Against this cultural backdrop, Lowell's subjects, as in "Skunk Hour," frequently find themselves in exile, caught between the abyss of mental turmoil and the technologies of power aimed at managing behaviour according to the prevailing political and cultural norms of Cold War America. His poetics of personality, by focusing on illness and breakdown, question the political rationality that encourages citizens to be individuals, so long as their individuality is integrated into the political, economic, and cultural schema of the postwar American state.

From a cultural perspective, what is perhaps most relevant to Kearful's discussion of "Skunk Hour" is the relationship between New Criticism and containment. In the poem, the anxiety created by the cultural atmosphere (enhanced by the phonological tropes noted by Kearful), and the existential notion that suicide offers the only escape from torment, positions the speaker as a subject of the Cold War practices aimed at objectifying corporeal bodies that helped consolidate consensus in a containment strategy directed at domesticating

dissent by inuring the public against perverse acts of violence. If, as Michel Foucault argues, biopower is “a set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power” (16), the illness experienced in “Skunk Hour” may be the result of an invisible, yet potent, shift in the political management of United States citizens, one intended to control the subject at the level of biological being. Illness thus results in the speaker’s realization that his body both biologically and psychologically refuses to conform to the false sense of wellness promoted by the political and cultural rhetoric that proliferated discourses of domesticity and bourgeois liberalism as means of asserting American values against the threat of the communist Other. For an academic poet such as Lowell, vocalising overt critiques of state policy and practice in an era of communist hysteria, blacklisting, and HUAC inquisitions may have led to tangible repercussions. Indeed, Lowell had placed himself on the government radar with his conscientious objection to WWII (and he would again in 1965 with his open letter to Lyndon Johnson). In poems such as “Skunk Hour,” where the form itself seems threatened by the poem’s overwrought textual and phonological burdens, Lowell is self-reflexively commenting on the inability to formally contain the strain of Cold War anxiety. Unlike the New American poets, whose experimental verse was predicated upon an outright rejection of formalism, Lowell utilized his New Critical training to enact the pressures placed upon the Cold War subject.

New Critical containment therefore appears to metonymically reflect cultural containment in Lowell’s poetic ethos. One element of this New Critical inertia was its infection of academic discourse, inducing a paralysis that sometimes removed “signs of life” from American poetry. America’s new political desire to assert its dominance in matters of foreign policy meant that it had to invest in research and development strategies that would help it achieve its goals. For this reason, funding for scientific, economic, and social research increased dramatically in the postwar years and led to the expansion of academic institutions. This expansion filtered into

disciplines such as English, creating collusion between Cold War politics and the institutionalisation of literary studies. While it is difficult to argue that New Critics overtly recognised their contribution to Cold War cultural discourses, Lowell does appear to have understood the consequences of a poetics that attempts to contain cultural ambiguities, paradoxes, and ironies, leaving the postwar artist alienated and lost. New Criticism's status as an instrument of liberal education therefore amounts to a failure that is at once poetic *and* political. As Lowell realised, such a pursuit within the institutionalised literary academy afforded only the illusion of intellectual autonomy while divorcing art from criticism of a sociocultural environment that saw unprecedented incursions upon privacy and civil liberties.

Poems such as "Skunk Hour" thus ironically used formalist techniques to convey a sense of confinement within an indifferent aesthetic and cultural paradigm. Formalist verse, burdened and strained within its phonological "chamber of illness," as Kearful shows, also becomes a metaphor of the speaker's desire to leave that sound-chamber and enter into a space free from its anxiety-inducing echoes. As a poet Lowell therefore seems to thrive in the interstitial space between the emergent avant-garde and the formalist poetry on which he cut his teeth. Rather than feeling loyal to his formalist lineage, he turns the techniques he inherited against the New Critical institution, which was complicit in drowning out poetry's social voice and restraining it from the "breakthrough back into life" ("An Interview with Frederick Seidel" 244) that Lowell's confessional poems sought to achieve.

Kearful's formalist reading, by emphasising the relationship between Lowell's phonological tropes and the poem's epistemological condition of illness, foregrounds the bipartisan nature of Lowell's aesthetic. Indeed, it indicates the productive working relationship between formalist and cultural/constructivist criticisms, one that Lowell recognised at the time of *Life Studies*. The skunks in "Skunk Hour," when considered from the perspective of Lowell's desire to break free from the formalist echo chamber that comprises the

majority of the poem, therefore seem to symbolise a willingness to embrace a less rigorous poetic praxis. As Kearful points out, by the time the poem turns its focus to the titular skunks, the “phoneme cluster *ill* which has spread through the poem like a virus is, finally, swilled by a trope of hunger, food, and eating when the mother skunk with her column of kittens ‘swills the garbage pail’” (326). Therefore, “[t]hanks to a family of skunks, Lowell as an adult can now stand and live, breathing ‘the rich air’” (327). From the perspective of Lowell’s bipartisan poetics, the skunks symbolise a resilient desire to make meaning through whatever means necessary. Just as the mother skunk “jabs her wedge-head in a cup / of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail, / and will not scare” (90), Lowell takes advantage of the poetic detritus at his disposal, combining formalist poetics with personal history in order to move beyond his “dark night of the soul,” and to find a way to thrive within the illness of his cultural paradigm. Frank J. Kearful’s fastidious reading of Lowell’s investment in phonological structures serves as a reminder of the poet’s ability to transcend the polarities of the raw and the cooked in order to serve a poignant critique of American Cold War culture.

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NOTES

¹“Skunk Hour” has featured prominently in several scholarly works on Robert Lowell. See, for example, Steven Gould Axelrod’s *Robert Lowell: Life and Art*; Thomas Travisano’s *Midcentury Quartet*; Jeffrey Meyer’s edited collection *Robert Lowell*; Paul Breslin’s *The Psycho-Political Muse*; William Doreski’s *Robert Lowell’s Shifting Colors*; Henry Hart’s *Robert Lowell and the Sublime*; and Alan Williamson’s *Pity the Monsters*.

²Steven Gould Axelrod, for instance, claims that in *Life Studies* “we find an opaque and playful language use, a fissured subject and voice, contingent and

shifting meanings, and an ironic and subversive relation to dominant culture" ("Lowell's Postmodernity" 251). Alan Williamson claims that *Life Studies* sought to break with formalism "by the infusion of apparently arbitrary personal detail, suggestive but less reducible than traditional symbolism, and by the elevation of private honesty to an aesthetic criterion, not the opposite but the creative contrary of craft" (59-60). Adam Kirsch observes that "[b]y the time of *Life Studies* [...] he had invented a style which the most private experience could be written about convincingly" (15).

³In *The American Poetry Wax Museum*, for example, Jed Rasula challenges Lowell's authority as a pivotal mid-century poet (248). Rasula also cites similar arguments by Karl Shapiro, who saw Lowell as "'pliable in the hands of the New Critics'" (248), and Thomas Parkinson, who regarded Lowell as "something we reacted to and against" (247).

⁴See, for example, Jed Rasula's *The American Poetry Wax Museum*; Karl Shapiro's *To Abolish Children, and Other Essays*; Thomas Parkinson's *Poets, Poems, Movements*; and David Antin's "Modernism and Postmodernism."

⁵For a history of the relationship between early Cold War politics and American culture see, for instance, Stephen J. Whitfield's *The Culture of the Cold War*, and Elaine Schrecker's *The Age of McCarthyism*.

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