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Canadian Review of American Studies, Volume 40, Number 1, 2010, pp. 95-116
(Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/crv.0.0058>



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Learning to Love the Bomb: Robert Lowell's Pathological Poetics

Adam Beardsworth

Abstract: This paper repositions Robert Lowell's confessional poetry as a form of resistance in Cold War America. It argues that in several of Lowell's key poems the figurative absence at the hypo-centre of atomic culture finds its symbolic equivalent in the depressive trying to recover a lost core of selfhood.

Keywords: Robert Lowell, American poetry, Cold War, nuclearism, madness, containment, confessional poetry

Résumé : Le présent article replace la poésie confessionnelle de Robert Lowell dans une forme de résistance en Amérique pendant la guerre froide. Il fait valoir que, dans plusieurs des principaux poèmes de Lowell, l'absence figurative à l'hypo-centre de la culture atomique trouve son équivalent symbolique dans le dépressif qui tente de récupérer l'âme perdue de l'individualisme.

Mots clés : Robert Lowell, poésie américaine, guerre froide, nucléarisme, folie, endiguement, poésie confessionnelle

On 13 October 1943, Robert Lowell was "arraigned before the U.S. District Court in New York and sentenced to prison for one year and one day" (*Collected Prose* 367). His sentencing came just over a month after he posted a letter to President Roosevelt refusing participation in the armed forces. Attached to the letter was Lowell's "Declaration of Personal Responsibility," copies of which, as he told the president, were also sent "to a select number of friends and relatives, to the heads of the Washington press bureaus, and to a few responsible citizens who, no more than yourself, can be suspected of subversive activities" (*Collected Prose* 367). The declaration, which was composed during an era of post-Pearl Harbor patriotism, was based on Lowell's recognition of fundamental

hypocrisies in America's strategic policies. Asserting that historically in the United States "we glory in the conviction that our wars are won not by irrational valor but through the exercise of moral responsibility," Lowell claimed that rumours of "staggering civilian casualties," including those that took place during "the razing of Hamburg, where 200,000 noncombatants are reported dead, after an almost apocalyptic series of all-out air-raids" (369), caused a foundational shift in his judgment of America's wartime motives. Written from a perspective of moral, political, and patriotic responsibility at a time when he considered himself "a fire-breathing Catholic C.O." (*Life Studies and For the Union Dead* 85), the declaration, for Lowell, was an integral means of continuing an American tradition of critical dissent that has roots in the writings of Henry David Thoreau and Herman Melville.¹ Today, the letter illuminates the division between Lowell's outspoken public persona and the subjective, confessional² style that came to define his poetics in the 1950s.

At first glance, Lowell's confessional style appears to ignore the pressing public concerns of Cold War containment culture. At a time in American history when unprecedented incursions of state surveillance placed sanctions upon individual autonomy, and when millions of Americans lived daily beneath the spectre of nuclear oblivion, Lowell turned to what many have criticized as an insular, even narcissistic aesthetic. The postwar climate was beleaguered by a pervasive anxiety that exploded into American consciousness with the detonation of nuclear bombs over Japan. Government-sanctioned policies of containment sought to alleviate postwar anxiety by encouraging individuals to conform to state-sanctioned discourses of domestic security. Individual citizens were caught between a confrontation with the epistemological absence at the hypo-centre of atomic America, and coercions to conform to the hegemony of American capitalist ideology in the face of the communist menace. At this contentious historical juncture, Lowell's poetics of personal breakdown appear to apotheosize an aesthetic disavowal of the political.

However, a more rigorous analysis of several of Lowell's key confessional poems reveals that he sought expression of atomic anxiety through the figure of the abject pathological self. While his incarceration as a conscientious objector taught him the consequences of outspoken political defiance, his subjective autobiographic style allowed him to express an implicit dissent that evaded the surveil-

lance of increasingly repressive state policies. In an era of suspicion and anxiety, McCarthyism, Loyalty Oath Programs, and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) emerged as legislative and juridical manifestations of a containment ideology that was simultaneously using popular media to advocate for secure domestic lifestyles. These political and cultural tactics sought to contain the reverberations of postwar trauma and the concurrent emergence of existential anxiety at the dawn of the nuclear age. Lacking a referent to adequately describe the absence at the core of atomic culture, Lowell instead approaches its representation through a process of sublimation that traces the experience of nothingness through the experience of madness. In Lowell's pathological poetics, the melancholic's inability to recover the lost object symbolizes American culture's inability to recover the sense of tradition and conventional values displaced by witnessing the traumas of the Holocaust and nuclear conflict. By emphasizing the volatility of the subjective ego in atomic culture, Lowell attests to the impossibility of containing nuclear anxiety and refigures Cold War culture as inherently pathological. His confessional aesthetic therefore actualizes a covert, yet highly volatile, form of political dissent: by accepting nothingness as the primary cultural referent, he deconstructs conventional notions of political and cultural orthodoxy and posits the pathological ego as the locus for the reclamation of identity in a repressive Cold War society.

In late March 1949, a "very nearly psychotic" (Mariani 181) Robert Lowell arrived uninvited from Boston at the Chicago home of his friend and mentor Allen Tate and Tate's partner Caroline Gordon. After exhausting and terrifying his hosts with Catholic fundamentalist rhetoric for the first twenty-four hours of his visit, Lowell began to sense that he had become something of a burden. He decided to lighten the mood by presenting Gordon with a list of the lovers her husband confided he had been with during their marriage. When his antics confused and infuriated Tate, Lowell became incensed and insisted that Tate repent for his sins. Tate, by this point beside himself with rage, refused and demanded that his guest leave. The tall, athletically built Lowell responded by grabbing his short and gaunt mentor, carrying him to a second-story window, and holding him out over the street below while reciting Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead" in the cartoon voice of a childhood imaginary friend. The police were summoned and it took several officers to wrestle Lowell into submission.

After a night in the psychiatric ward at a Chicago hospital, Lowell concluded that he had overstayed his welcome with the Tates and he boarded a train for Bloomington, Indiana, where he met his friend Peter Taylor for dinner at the University of Indiana's Faculty Club. Once seated, Lowell informed Taylor that he was positive he could smell brimstone. He then began looking frantically around the restaurant "trying to locate the devil" whom he soon spotted "behind a large potted fern" (Mariani 183). A frightened and confused Taylor managed to calm Lowell and escorted him back to his room for the night. A few hours later, however, Taylor got a call from the club manager claiming that Lowell "had run through the kitchen terrorizing the cooks, and then run out into the streets" (Mariani 183). Recalling the episode later, Lowell claimed that he believed he "could stop cars and paralyze their forces by merely standing in the middle of the highway with arms outspread" (Mariani 183). Police were summoned once again and Lowell, now foaming at the mouth, was wrestled into a straitjacket. He would spend the next months of his life undergoing treatment at the Baldpate psychiatric institution in Massachusetts.

These details, which are recorded in *Lost Puritan*, Paul Mariani's biography of Lowell, describe one of Lowell's first major psychotic episodes. They are evidence of the insular, atomized self split apart by a volatile physical and psychological reaction. For Lowell, such episodes of psychological fission would be a regular, almost annual occurrence until he began lithium treatments in the late 1960s. These treatments nearly crippled him intellectually and seriously exacerbated his personal turmoil. His experience of madness also informed much of his best poetry, a relationship few critics have failed to comment on. Much of this criticism has focused on the tragic and maudlin elements of his confessional aesthetic.³

What is perhaps more important to an understanding of Lowell's poetics of madness is the manner in which the pathological self in his poetry is affected by a profound sense of irretrievable loss. In the intensely subjective lyrics that comprise Lowell's autobiographic style, he compares a loss of faith in traditional cultural values and political hierarchies to the onset of psychological instability. In "Beyond the Alps," which opens his groundbreaking confessional collection *Life Studies and For the Union Dead*, Lowell signposts the transition from a bygone era of tradition and value to a postwar era of epistemological incertitude. The poem recalls a long, slow train ride down through the Alps from Rome to Paris. In

an era when "even the Swiss had thrown the sponge / in once again and Everest was still / unscaled" (3), the literal descent from peak to landscape symbolizes a loss of traditional, even heroic, cultural and political values and indicates a fall to a less transcendent vantage point. The lack of Swiss heroism on the summit of Everest leads the first-person, autobiographic narrator to contemplate

Life changed to landscape. Much against my will
I left the City of God where it belongs.
There the skirt-mad Mussolini unfurled
the eagle of Caesar. (3)

The poem's tension between notions of ideological hierarchies and the postwar absence of these ideals is signified by the line "Life changed to landscape." "Landscape," for Lowell, evokes the intellectual and psychological levelling of a culture once rich with the tradition from which humanistic value was derived. The descent from the Alps into this vertical landscape "dramatizes Lowell's sense of the only models of meaning left when an essentially vertical symbolic order grounded by the doctrine of incarnation gives way to a primarily vertical secular one . . . Landscape reveals no hierarchy, nothing valuable in itself" (Altieri 85). This new vertical, secular setting is the backdrop for Lowell's vision of postwar reality. The loss of values once grounded in religious and historical tradition give way to a bleak, existentially empty landscape. Lowell's speaker's reluctance to depart the Augustinian "City of God" suggests his reluctance to enter the emptiness of the new psychic landscape. However, Mussolini's presence in the "City of God" signifies that the mid-century world's adherence to conventional ideological doctrine for the purpose of withholding tradition is complicated by "skirt-mad," murderous dictators. The reference to Mussolini's madness anticipates Lowell's metaphorical formulation of mid-century culture as inherently pathological in later poems.

By introducing Mussolini into the poem, Lowell explicitly connects the sense of "Life changed to landscape" to the atrocities of the Second World War. In a land where "The Duce's lynched, bare, booted skull still spoke" and "God herded his people to the *coup de grace*," Lowell realizes that the "mountain-climbing train had come to earth" and that now "There were no tickets for that altitude / once held by Hellas." Rather, in the existentially bleak postwar environment, the loss of humanistic tradition signified by Hellenic ideals reveals for the speaker a tangible sense of his own

insignificance within an early Cold War culture governed by chaos and the will to power. Lowell's speaker "has now joined the other society, the City of Man, which has its own, if lesser, values. Faithless, Lowell belongs to the 'monstrous human crush' in the fragmented region he once contemptuously termed, echoing Augustine, the land of unlikeness" (Axelrod 103). The speaker's inability to reconcile himself with the legacy of hierarchic orthodoxy suggests a recognition that in the face of atrocities such as those perpetrated during the Second World War, the tradition of speculative metaphysics is no longer capable of allowing individuals to comprehend their position within the postwar dialectic of containment and anxiety. In the absence of metaphysical discourse, individuals are forced to reconcile their identities against a backdrop of absence and loss, rather than one of faith and history. For Lowell, this postwar failure of metaphysics—or perhaps more accurately this postwar recognition of metaphysics as linked to flawed ideological discourse—is the source of a profound sense of alienation.

By positioning the search for identity against a backdrop of metaphysical alienation, Lowell reveals the nuclear element in his poetics. While "Life changed to landscape" most explicitly refers to a failure of tradition caused by dictators such as Mussolini, it also has connotations that suggest the more literal obliteration of human structure and endeavour that follows nuclear detonation. Hiroshima, in the nuclear aftermath, was quite literally "changed to landscape" by the bomb's massive force, and by the fires that it ignited in the surrounding area. However, as survivors and commentators have attested, it also rendered a tangible sense of psychic loss.

Robert J. Lifton has described the "numbing" effect that encounters with trauma on the scale of Hiroshima and Auschwitz have on immediate victims and also on those who live beneath the spectre of oblivion in the postwar world. This sense of "numbing," according to Lifton, is due in part to an inability to reconcile oneself not only to the bomb's disclosure of nothingness at the core of experience, but also to the realization that humans are responsible for the creation and implementation of such dehumanizing power. While defining *psychic numbing* as a "useful defense mechanism, preventing the mind from being overwhelmed and perhaps destroyed by the unmanageable images confronting it" (*Hiroshima in America* 339), Lifton argues that its presence "is bound to be greatest in Americans, where numbing serves the additional purpose of

warding off potential feelings of guilt" (*Hiroshima in America* 338). Numbing, from the perspective of Cold War containment politics, also had a useful function; as Lifton explains, it was "transmitted as official policy, throughout American society. One was supposed to be numbed to Hiroshima. It became politically correct . . . in the deepest sense to remain numbed toward Hiroshima—politically suspect if one was troubled or inclined to make a fuss about it" (*Hiroshima in America* 338). Containing the guilt and anxiety endemic to postwar society was politically expedient. It helped to maintain a sense of psychic stability while divorcing the atrocities of American military activity from public consciousness.

In poems such as "Inauguration Day: January 1953," Lowell explicitly engages this numbed relationship between atomic nothingness and American containment. Written in a stark, clear tone, the poem begins with a bleak vision of a New York where "The snow had buried Stuyvesant" (*Life Studies and For the Union Dead* 7).⁴ The fact that the statue of Peter Stuyvesant, an influential seventeenth-century colonial administrator who helped to build and develop New York into a prosperous colony and city, is "buried in snow" signifies a whitewashing of the values that belied the democratic vision of early America. The snowy landscape also has connotations both of a "numbing" psychological perspective, and of a nuclear winter, in which the principles of American democratic ideology no longer hold meaning against a backdrop of atomic oblivion. The image of the buried Stuyvesant, when considered in relation to the poem's title, "also subtly hints that a similar fate may await the new president" (Smith 292). This allusion to Eisenhower's fate, however, is double-edged: on one level it points to his inefficiency as a low-brow, mass-cultural president; on another level it attests to the potentially devastating nuclear consequences of installing a war-minded general as president in an era of mutually assured destruction.

As the stanza progresses, the political and psychological stasis symbolized by the snow is mirrored by the "Cyclonic zero of the word" (7). This figurative zero is evocative of the literal hypo-centre of an atomic explosion. The reference has several important implications. First, the actual figure of the zero evokes the epistemological absence at the centre of the American cultural psyche, a nothingness directly linked to a loss of faith in the hierarchic authority responsible for the American use of atomic weapons. Second, it signifies the "suspended and continually postponed moment of nuclear annihilation"

lation," a moment that, because of its persistence, "affects all the moments of our lives in ways we are not fully aware of, and cannot be, never having known any other mode of existence" (Schwenger 3). The anxiety generated by the postponed moment of annihilation is located not only in the fear of annihilation, but also in the recognition of nothingness that the potential for nuclear annihilation exposes at the core of Cold War consciousness, beyond the discourses of a psychologically "numbed" containment culture.

However, as the "cyclonic zero of the word" suggests, in atomic society, finding a referent capable of representing that nothingness is itself an impossibility. The "cyclonic" nature of "the word" indicates that it swirls around an absence without ever touching the nothingness at the core, or without ever grounding itself in stable, unified meaning. The violent connotations of the word *cyclone* also evoke the inherent danger of attempting to confront such absence, of attempting to write the unthinkable. Peter Schwenger finds an analogy for this problem of writing absence in the problem of representing the ground zero of an atomic blast:

The visual form of that symbol is significant, for it is of course a circle around an emptiness. Ground zero, then, the center of the nuclear circle, recapitulates in its sign the problem of the whole—whether the nuclear blast can be said to have a center, if by center we mean a point at which its presence originated . . . In any variation or version, the center point of a circle, even while posing a problem in representation, may represent another problem, that of the origin. (26)

The literal zero figure made by the nuclear hypo-centre symbolizes the absence at the centre of nuclear consciousness. To confront that madness is to be made aware of one's own displaced origins, both as an alienated subject within Cold War culture and as an ego that recognizes the impossibility of reclaiming a unified sense of self in the knowledge of such trauma. For the postwar individual, the trauma of the nuclear hypo-centre reveals an incommensurable absence at the core of experience, one that defies the possibility of reclaiming a stable, centred subjectivity.

The nothingness that the bomb signified in the American consciousness, and the loss of faith in originary discourse that accompanied it, is evoked by Lowell in the final stanza of "Inauguration Day":

Ice, Ice, Our wheels no longer move.
Look, the fixed stars, all just alike
as lack-land atoms, split apart,
and the Republic summons Ike,
the mausoleum in her heart. (7)

Returning to an image of winter, Lowell evinces the notion that America has been numbed into stasis. The “fixed stars, all just alike” evoke the patterned stars of the American flag. While their “likeness” connotes a sense of containment and conformity in post-war American culture, the simile’s tenor reveals that such containment merely conceals the fact that beneath they are as “lack-land atoms, split apart.” This explicit reference to the split atom of nuclear physics indicates that for Lowell the American values once signified by the flag have been torn asunder in the atomic landscape. The stars, with their iconography of navigation, are now incapable of providing guidance towards a safe and prosperous climate; instead they lead to a static, conformist state threatened by nuclear oblivion. No longer is America a land founded upon democratic cultural prosperity; rather it is a “lack-land,” a land that has been deprived of something essential. The reference to split atoms signifies that American culture and democracy have undergone a process of fission and are now faced with the emptiness, the “lack” that is the result of that fission.

In an overtly rhetorical gesture, Lowell then implies that “Ike,” the common nickname for Dwight Eisenhower, is the last alternative, the poor choice of a nation whose sense of value has been compromised by its confrontation with nothingness. Eisenhower, as a president whose campaign stressed the importance of domestic security and suburban values, symbolizes the need for the mediation of nothingness at the core of American beliefs. In Lowell’s terms, Eisenhower has been sworn in to oversee the administration of a republic with a “mausoleum in her heart,” an image that again conveys the emptiness at the heart of American consciousness. Lowell’s evocation of the “mausoleum,” which is a literal container of death, conjures the figurative manner in which Eisenhower’s Republican government sought to contain the spectre of oblivion.

While poems such as “Inauguration Day: January 1953” use suggestive nuclear symbols to confront the epistemological incertitude of nuclear society, they also reveal a problem of signification attached to the act of nuclear representation. As Jacques Derrida

asserts in his influential essay on nuclearism "No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)," the absence of veritable nuclear war means the absence of a referent capable of adequately describing its effects. According to Derrida, the concept of nuclear war is "*fabulously textual*, through and through . . . to the extent that, for the moment, a nuclear war has not taken place: one can only talk and write about it" (23). Derrida's distinction here, as Schwenger points out, asserts that the bombs dropped on Japan ended a "'classical' war rather than setting off a nuclear one. And if it has not taken place one can *only* talk or write about it" (Schwenger xv). This means that "the terrifying reality of the nuclear conflict can only be the signified referent, never the real referent (present or past) of a discourse or text" (Derrida 23). Thus the representation of nuclear annihilation exists in an endless state of deferral, a deferral that circles the absence represented by the hypo-centre without being able to recover that absence.

The "*fabulously textual*" nature of nuclear representation recapitulates itself in the desire for the recovery of displaced, or absent, origins at the core of American consciousness. Lacking the ability to recover its lost origins in a "Lack-land split apart" by the spectre of oblivion, language can only circle the absence that now sits where the displaced origin once, hypothetically, existed. In other words, beneath the spectre of nuclear oblivion, the impossibility of expressing a stable originary meaning is exposed by the traumatic encounter with the nothingness of the hypo-centre. Thinking the nuclear hypo-centre means thinking "the unthinkable" itself. The "play" of elements within the structure, now devoid of an organizing principle, is subject to a "fission and fusion" (Schwenger 29) that resembles the stable atom's dismantling in an atomic reaction. Thus the problem of nuclear representation is thoroughly grounded in the problem of linguistic representation itself; language, devoid of an originary referent, is pulled out of balance and threatened by fission and disintegration. This loss of representation is mediated into the cultural realm in the form of a loss of epistemological certitude. Language void of signification refracts the notion of stable identity into a condition of infinite regress, one from which, lacking a central referent, stability cannot be wholly recovered.

While poems such as "Inauguration Day: January 1953" respond to atomic anxiety by conveying a sense of profound loss on the cultural and political levels, Lowell's personal or confessional poetics of madness enact a more rigorous engagement of the unnameable

by finding correlations between the irretrievable hypo-centre and psychological dissolution. While recognizing that madness, like the nuclear hypo-centre, is devoid of a stable referent, Lowell nevertheless has something to draw on when writing madness that he lacks when writing the bomb: a direct and personal experience of madness as a confrontation with the abyss. Lowell draws on his experience of the essential Otherness of madness in order to convey the empty space of disaster. As Schwenger notes, when we attempt to write the nothingness of the disaster, “[o]ur apprehension of the abyss explodes only in a closed chamber, a structure of the restraint which intensifies all that force that is beyond restraint and beyond structure. Only under such circumstances can such force be evoked” (121). From within the “closed chamber” of individual consciousness, such a volatile reaction signifies severe psychological instability.

Lowell evokes the volatile intensity of madness in some of his most introspective poems, such as “Waking in the Blue,” where he recounts a stay at McLean’s psychiatric hospital in Boston:

The night attendant, a B.U. sophomore, rouses from the
mare’s-nest of his drowsy head
propped on the *Meaning of Meaning*.
He catwalks down our corridor.
Azure day
makes my agonized blue window bleaker.
Crows maunder on the petrified fairway.
Absence! My heart grows tense
as though a harpoon were sparring for the kill.
(This is the house for the “mentally ill.”) (*Life Studies and For the
Union Dead* 81)

Lowell’s description of the inside of the institution points to a loss of structure and authority. The sole figure of authority present is the “night attendant” who is only a “B.U. sophomore.” The attendant’s lack of authority is reflected in his inability to remain awake while reading I.A. Richards and C.K. Ogden’s *The Meaning of Meaning*. Lowell plays with the weighty title; the fact that the sophomore dozes while trying to discern the “meaning” of “meaning” conveys the idea that within the confines of the institution a breakdown has occurred at the level of signification itself. The sophomoric authority figure is in no position to offer a sense of psychological or epistemological stability to the patients. From within

this space of breakdown Lowell's subject watches the world grow "bleaker" through his "agonized blue window." By associating bleakness and agony with his vision, Lowell indicates that his ill subject is staring into a wasteland where, in terms that resemble those of Eliot, "Crows mander on the petrified fairway." This vision of absence and loss is juxtaposed with the persona's exclamatory revelation "Absence! My heart grows tense." Inverting the familiar proverb "absence makes the heart grow fonder," Lowell here reveals that it is not the physical absence of the comforts of the outside world that makes his heart tense within the institution; rather, it is the confrontation with the essential absence at the core of experience. On one level, the subject's feeling of absence foregrounds his madness by alluding to his place in "the house for the 'mentally ill.'" It connotes that to encounter madness is to encounter an essential, irretrievable absence. However, the blankness that exists beyond his window indicates that absence extends beyond the institution into the world at large. The institution is a microcosm of a cultural absence that is more pervasive. While, as a cultural institution, the asylum attempts to contain "madness" and absence, both still exist in the bleakness beyond the thin windows. The institution therefore becomes a symbol for the convergence of individual psychological illness and a pathological Cold War culture that is ultimately incapable of containing a pervasive and endemic anxiety.

The institution also functions as a symbol of a fallen social order. Fixtures such as the tub have grown "Vaguely urinous from the Victorian plumbing," which indicates that its once stately Victorian elements are now in a state of disrepair and ruin. The inmates include "Stanley," a former "Harvard all-American fullback" who is now "more cut off from words than a seal" (81), and "'Bobbie,' / Porcellian '29, / a replica of Louis XVI" (82). The two patients represent a fall from a higher social order into a state of madness that is conveyed in terms that conjure nuclear oblivion. The verb *ossified* connotes both an entropic sense of stasis and a violent, quick death. Ossification evokes a literal turning to bone; the violence of this image recalls the effects of exposure to a nuclear attack, where, as survivors have recalled in gruesome detail, the heat and force of the blast literally peeled skin from bone. This conjuring of nuclear imagery works to symbolize the process of psychological entropy that the inmates have endured and does so in terms showing its effects on the human body. It also tacitly links their madness to the

madness of nuclearism, which is ironically rendered in the MAD acronym for mutually assured destruction, and the nothingness that its spectre of oblivion exposes. Forced to contend with the lost origins of their younger lives, the inmates, including Lowell's persona, are now "all old-timers, / each of us holds a locked razor" (82). The locked razor conveys a thwarted desire to break out of their state of ossification, to get beyond the bleakness of a mad existence. Incapable of committing an act violent enough to reinvigorate the flow of blood, or worse, to transcend the ossified world through suicide, the inmates have no choice but to linger in perpetual alienation. This image of paralysis suggests that they are contained not only by the mental institution, but also by their madness, a madness exacerbated by the pervasive anxieties of Cold War culture.

By focusing on madness within its institutional setting, Lowell attempts to channel and intensify the experience of confronting nothingness. As the speaker asserts in "Home after Three Months Away," a poem about returning to his family after a lengthy institutionalization, "I keep no rank nor station / Cured, I am frizzled, stale and small" (*Life Studies and For the Union Dead* 84). Here the speaker implies that wellness requires conformity. It also indicates that such an existence within what Lowell elsewhere refers to as "the tranquillized *Fifties*" (85) is itself a form of false consciousness: it conceals the disaster at the core of postwar epistemology. While consistent with governmental policies of containment, such concealment, according to Lowell's poetics, evades confrontation with a pervasive cultural trauma.

Lowell confronts that cultural trauma in his recognition that the dehumanizing nature of nuclear consciousness finds its symptomatic correlation in depression. While on the cultural level the spectre of oblivion problematizes consciousness by signalling absence as the empty presence upon which culture is founded, on the psychological level the depressive is burdened by a desire to reclaim a sense of wholeness and stability that is irretrievable at the core of selfhood. As a manic depressive Lowell was familiar with this sense of alienation. It is for this reason that he uses depression as a symbol of the larger crisis in cultural epistemology: as a means of attempting to name the unnameable, or think the unthinkable, depression becomes an ideal signifier for quotidian encounters with oblivion.

This, for Lowell, is where an engaged political poetry begins. The challenge becomes not one of poetically seeking the meaning of despair, a task grounded in the very metaphysical speculation that has been destroyed by the bomb, but in acknowledging that meaning can be found *only* in despair. As Julia Kristeva argues, "The depressed person has the impression of having been deprived of an unnameable, supreme good, of something unrepresentable, or an *invocation* might point out, but no word could signify" (13). Contemplating depression, like contemplating annihilation, involves a crisis of signification, one that makes palatable a sense of *insignificance* related to the deprivation at the core of the self. At stake here is the ability to come to terms with the sense of existential oblivion that characterizes nuclear experience, a process that demands coming to terms with a language incapable of signifying that experience. In the oblivion of madness and depression, Lowell locates a metaphor for the existential anxiety instigated by the spectre of nuclear oblivion.

For the depressive, controlling this sense of loss is linked specifically to using despair and loss as means through which to construct a more positive figure of identity. As Kristeva explains,

The melancholy Thing interrupts desiring metonymy, just as it prevents working out the loss within the psyche. How can one approach the place I have referred to? Sublimation is an attempt to do so: through melody, rhythm, semantic polyvalency, the so-called poetic form, which decomposes and recomposes signs, is the sole "container" seemingly able to secure an uncertain but adequate hold over the Thing. (14)

Thus for Lowell, confronting the encounter with nothingness that is the experience of madness is a means of attempting to contain, and re-appropriate, the despair that it is responsible for. It also metonymically functions as a means of attempting to reconstruct identity, however negatively, against the backdrop of nuclear annihilation. From this perspective, identity is intrinsically pathological: it is a negation of logic, or of rational thought signified by a conventional literary and linguistic style. By reformulating identity from a perspective of pathos and loss, Lowell deconstructs the logic of Cold War cultural ideology and exposes it as little more than a thin vessel of containment. Lowell posits a pathological poetics as a counter-discursive force capable of exposing the damaging singularity of hegemonic conceptions of identity grounded in containment ideology.

Lowell demonstrates this deconstructive practice in his most anthologized poem, "Skunk Hour." Described by Lowell as his dark night of the soul poem,⁵ where his night "is not gracious, but secular, puritan, and agnostical," the poem begins with a vision of a seaside community where "Nautilus Island's hermit / heiress," now in her "dotage" but still "thirsting for / the hierarchic privacy / of Queen Victoria's century" does so by buying "up all / the eyesores facing her shore, / and lets them fall" (*Life Studies and For the Union Dead* 89). Allowing the "hierarchic" "Victorian" structures to fall once again signifies the loss of structure and tradition in postwar society, a process of disintegration that leads Lowell's speaker to the conclusion "The season's ill." While on one level alluding to the "ill" look of the fall colours where "A red fox stain covers Blue Hill," Lowell's reference to illness also conveys a more pervasive cultural illness linked to the loss of origins. From this point of loss, Lowell's speaker emerges to detail an encounter with madness and the nothingness that it reveals:

One dark night,
my Tudor Ford climbed the hill's skull;
I watched for love-cars. Lights turned down,
they lay together, hull to hull,
where the graveyard shelves on the town ...
My mind's not right.

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—(*Life Studies and For the Union Dead* 90)

The poem's trajectory here moves from an objective analysis of the socio-historical environment to a subjective examination of the self's status within that climate of loss. Philip Metres argues that this movement in Lowell's poetics "functions as an analogue to the analytic relation; the poem allows Lowell to speak about himself as both subject and object" (675). While Metres refers specifically to "Memories of West Street and Lepke," a similar pattern takes place in "Skunk Hour." By enacting such a division between subjectivity and objectivity, Lowell's speaker submits himself to an analysis that dramatizes the search for the lost object, which in this case is the loss of a coherent selfhood and subjectivity. The "dark night" conveys simultaneously the environmental and psychic atmosphere

of the poem as Lowell's subject stares into the abyss at the core of his interior. Invoking the mechanization of postwar mass culture with his reference to the "Tudor Ford," Lowell links that image to a sense of alienation and loss that results from his objectivization within its corresponding conformist mass. The word *Tudor*, with its air of monarchy, is equated with *Ford*, a family name associated with mass production and consumption, which even further implies the devaluation of traditional hierarchic values as they are re-inscribed as signifiers of product quality in commodity culture.

As the speaker drives up the "hill's skull" to watch for the "love-cars" that "lay together, hull to hull" he revisits the conventional "lookout" scene common to discourses of illicit sexuality and re-inscribes it in wasteland imagery. The fact that it is the cars that seem to be engaged in sexual acts rather than the occupants dehumanizes the scene further and alienates the speaker by confronting him with a world of easy love that defies conventional courtship. This lack of integration leads to the conclusion "My mind's not right," which at once suggests his madness and the madness of the world devoid of signifiers of traditional ethical values.

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This loss of conventional values echoes in the lyrics "Love, O careless Love" that "bleat" from the car radios. The song becomes a signifier of the postwar capitalist mass culture that Lowell here implicates with the levelling of conventional Victorian hierarchies in the postwar landscape.⁶ Ironically, the love of which it sings can no longer be a "careless" innocence as the cars lying together "hull to hull" signify the illicit lovemaking that is taking place within their contained sanctuaries. The banality of the song causes the speaker to hear his "ill-spirit sob in each blood cell," which indicates a direct correlation between his spiritual malaise and a vacuous postwar mass culture.

Immediately juxtaposed with this moment of cultural criticism is the assertion "I myself am hell; / nobody's here" (*Life Studies and For the Union Dead* 90). The lines recall Satan's proclamation in Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "Which way I fly is Hell; myself am hell" (4.75.173). By making a connection between his speaker and Milton's Satan, Lowell establishes his speaker as an adversarial character. The word *Satan* has its etymological root in the Hebraic "adversary." For Lowell, these stark lines, on one level, indicate the speaker's (like Satan's) exile from tradition and community and register his adversarial relationship to a bleak social and spiri-

tual landscape; on another level, the lines reveal his realization that the reclamation of identity within the postwar landscape begins in the recognition of that identity's essential insignificance. In Kristevan terms, Lowell's dark night functions as a form of poetic sublimation, a means of attempting to reclaim the self from its encounter with the nothingness that exists both in his own psyche and in the wider socio-historical landscape. His journey to an existential brink acts as a poetic deferral, one that allows him to ground his encounter with madness and nothingness in more practical and culturally recognizable imagery.

This proximity to essential nothingness is, as Lowell recognizes, available only through the negation of cultural norms. By containing the profound sense of madness and alienation within the vessel of his lyric poetry, Lowell insulates it against the forces of cultural containment that attempt to integrate such mad impulses into harmonious discourses of postwar capitalist ideology. Lowell's aesthetic negation is accomplished specifically through his encounter with madness. Such an encounter demands, as Shoshanna Felman (following Foucault) argues, a rigorous unspeaking of logo-centric ideals responsible for the maintenance of ideological discourse, and a replacement of those ideals with a pathos, or a pathological metaphor "of the radical metaphoricality which corrodes concepts in their essence" (54). According to Felman, "Madness ... is for Foucault (like pathos) a notion which does not *elucidate* what it connotes, but rather, *participates* in it: the term madness is itself pathos, not logos" (52). In Lowell's poetics, the participation of madness in Cold War culture extends his encounter with nothingness beyond an analysis of the poles of presence and absence and towards an ethical recovery of identity. It does so by defining identity as essentially pathological rather than logical.

For Lowell, identity participates in the madness of a neurotic and anxious cultural sphere. It cannot be contained and defined as logical by the ideologies of Cold War culture. Within the Cold War dialectic, the reclamation of autonomous identity, however compromised, must therefore be recovered through the negation of logical, rational reality. As "Skunk Hour" concludes, the skunks become a symbol of a negative dialectical methodology that embraces pathos rather than logos as the requisite attribute for the reclamation of identity. In Lowell's dark night, "Nobody's here" except

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.

I stand on top
 of our back steps and breathe the rich air—
 a mother skunk with her column of kittens swills the garbage
 pail.
 She jabs her wedge-head in a cup
 of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail,
 and will not scare. (90)

In the skunk, as a nocturnal scavenger, pest, and undesirably scented creature, Lowell finds the ideal symbol for praxis in the face of nothingness. Alone in the abyss of postwar culture his speaker sees only the skunks, who carry on and survive not in spite of the bleakness of culture, but because of it. As scavengers, they participate in its pathos; they are in fact figures of a negative praxis built from the residue of thought in a culture of ideological conformity. The skunks march up "Main Street," a signifier of the cultural locus of the American town, which indicates that the vibrant democracy it once stood for has vacated, just as the "spar spire / of the Trinitarian Church" has become "chalk-dry." However, in Lowell's vision, the skunks' reclamation of this domain is a positive gesture. It demonstrates not merely perseverance, but a means of finding usefulness in cultural nothingness.

As the speaker watches the skunks, he breathes "the rich air," indicating that in their actions (and foul odour) he finds a sense of redemption, even within his own hell. Finding richness in the air in the presence of skunks reveals that the richness he finds is in something conventionally conceived of as rank, depraved, and unwanted. However, the fact that the skunks comprise "a mother skunk with her column of kittens" connotes that there is something inherently regenerative about their relationship to the waste of contemporary culture. They "swill" the garbage, finding nourishment in refuse. As the mother skunk "jabs her wedge-head in a cup," she "will not scare," indicating her intensity and resolve to stake a claim within the bleak landscape.

This rigour signifies for Lowell the resolve required to reclaim a sense of identity within a culture of waste. The skunk, as a scaven-

ger that survives by its repugnance, symbolizes a renunciation of the norms of domestic reality. Moreover, its status as a nocturnal creature posits it as a symbol of irrationality, of the pathos of night rather than the logos of day. For Lowell, the determination of the skunks to establish existence through negation symbolizes the determination of the mind to act in the face of absence. This, in itself, is a thoroughly mad gesture: it privileges a pathological carrying-on in the face of nothingness, which is indicative of the absence of reason in a mad, atomic culture. Madness, itself the negation of reason, functions as a metaphor for that negation.

However, the impossibility of speaking madness, or of making meaning beyond reason, means that Lowell's pathological metaphor, rather than insisting upon madness as a new mode of Being, attests specifically to the impossibility of positing a stable ethos of Being at the centre of a culture fractured by nothingness. As Lowell recognizes, the decentralizing capabilities of his metaphors of madness displace the urge to contain anxiety in postwar culture; because of madness' essential lack of meaning, metaphors of madness are incapable of simply attempting to create a new logo-centric, stable cultural signifier at the core of postwar culture. Rather, since madness, by its nature, is *pathological* rather than logical, its metaphors can signify only the essentially displaced nature of signifiers of cultural stability. Lowell's metaphors of madness therefore attest to postwar atomic culture's inherently destabilized and pathological nature and to the fragmentary nature of selfhood within that cultural paradigm.

While the perseverance in the face of epistemological absence that characterizes Lowell's poetics of madness is fundamentally premised upon uncertainty, it is the embrace of uncertainty that reveals its primary element of political engagement. By emphasizing the instability of the ego in an age of anxiety, Lowell submits both the self and the concept of certainty to negation. While such a negation leads to a paradoxical emptiness within the self, it also repositions the ego as inherently decentred, unstable, and evolving. The notion of a unified ego, like the notion of a stable, logo-centric cultural referent, is exposed as an empty container subject to the same volatile chain reaction and free play of signifiers that comprise the relationship between the casing of the bomb and the unstable atoms inside. Lowell evokes the empty, atomic self as the locus for renegotiating the containment and conformity characteristic of the early Cold War era. By representing the volatile pathos

implicit in a confrontation with nothingness, Lowell posits the self as the locus for a charged reaction against the conformity of Cold War ideology.

Notes

1. For example, works such as Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" and *Walden*, and Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" and *Moby Dick* critique the impact of expansive American capitalism on, among other things, the individual subject and the environment.
2. M.L. Rosenthal famously coined the term *confessional* in a 1959 review of Lowell's *Life Studies* entitled "Poetry as Confession" that critiqued Lowell's uncensored portrayal of family intimacies. While Rosenthal later qualified his usage of the term in his book-length study *The New Poets* (1967), it has nevertheless occasionally taken on derogatory connotations, often signifying a cathartic and narcissistic poetic style. Several of Lowell's contemporaries, including W.D. Snodgrass, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, and Sylvia Plath, have styles that have been considered "confessional."
3. Lowell's psychological illness has caused many critics to make causal connections among his poetry, his personality, and notions of the doomed poet-hero. In *Manic Power*, for example, Jeffery Meyers egregiously claims that the mid-century poets "followed the emotionally stable and long-lived generation of Frost, Williams and Eliot" (1) and exemplified an era when "[i]f the best contemporary poetry was the record of the most intense suffering" then the poets' "lives must inevitably lead to mania and suicide" (21). In a more rigorous but equally misleading claim, Marjorie Perloff argues that Lowell and Berryman are genteel *poètes maudits*:

Baudelaire, Nerval, Rimbaud—those archetypal *poètes maudits* did not have to *ask* to be so obsessed; they simply were. But for Lowell and Berryman and their poet friends, the obsession was less with writing for its own sake (something you do because you have to, nevermind the circumstances or rewards, as in the case of Joyce or Pound or Stevens) than for what Berryman called, in the title of his last published book, *Love & Fame*. (100)

Such readings engage the poetry on the level of passive biographic reference while simultaneously exalting modernism as a stable, unified, and somehow more purely motivated aesthetic force. In some cases, glaring errors and oversights suggest a lack of engagement with the poems. For instance, Perloff mistakenly calls *Love & Fame* Berryman's last book when it was in fact his second-last (before *Delusions, etc.*) and also appears to miss the title's ironic reference to the final couplet of Keats's sonnet "When I have fears that I may cease to be," which reads, "Of the wide world I stand alone, and think / Till love and fame to nothingness do sink" (220).

4. Peter Stuyvesant (c. 1612–72) served as the last Dutch director-general of New Amsterdam, which later became New York. His policies were influential in the development of the colony and city.
5. Recalling Lowell's words, Axelrod notes that he "has written of his stanzas 'This is the dark night. I hoped my readers would remember John of the Cross's poem. My night is not gracious, but secular, puritan and agnostical. An Existential night'" (127). Lowell's reference to existentialism suggests that the poem is undermined by a pervasive sense of nothingness. It represents his speaker's recognition of his loneliness as an individual, and of the concrete relationship between his choices and his existence.
6. The version of "Love Oh Careless Love" to which Lowell refers was likely that recorded by Big Joe Turner in 1951. Turner was a prominent African-American blues performer whose 1954 hit "Shake, Rattle and Roll" helped redefine popular music.

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