
ROBERT LOWELL - CONFESSING THE ART OF POETRY

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Abstract: The paper analyzes the structure and texture of some of Robert Lowell's confessional poems from his seminal 1950' collection, *Life Studies*, as essential realist forms in which the use of the first-person pronoun is seen primarily as a rhetorical convention. Narration is examined as a form which structures the poetic experience, primarily employing associative memory links and techniques of montage and editing. Description is approached as a form which textures the poetic experience by applying metonymic displacement as a technique which uses objects, physical characteristics and surroundings to depict the emotions and ideational position of the agents in the poetic experience. In the majority of descriptions and narrations, the poetic "I" does not describe the inner state of the mind of the other agents or of his own as a narrator. His narrations and descriptions appear as precise, matter-of-fact accounts of facts, whether external features, actions or objects that surround the characters. In addition, this poetry does not resort to internal or fragmented monologues, speculations or meditations. That is not to say, the narrations and descriptions are always chronologically structured or appear as cause-and-effect sequences. The scenes in these poems are juxtaposed in such a way to produce symbolic, metaphoric meanings. The structure of some of the poems is reminiscent of realistic documentaries, in which the actual sequencing or juxtaposing of scenes involved in the process of poetic montage produces the symbolism and metaphors. As an exemplary poem to illustrate this poetic model, the paper analyzes the narrative structure of the longer poem "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow" which rests on the associative links which the main protagonist's memory provides. It is a childhood memory that is fully recollected following the utterance of the protagonist as a child. It gradually develops into a narration of several scenes, an afternoon at the grandfather's farm. No prominent events occur in the poem except the description of the characters and their environment, as well as a growing sense of imminent death in the family which the narrator as a small boy tries to comprehend.

Keywords: Robert Lowell, *Life Studies*, confessional, first-person pronoun

I examine in this paper the structure and texture of Robert Lowell's confessional poems from his seminal 1950s collection, *Life Studies*, as essential realist forms in which the use of the first-person pronoun is seen primarily as a rhetorical convention. Namely, narration is examined as a form which structures the poetic experience, primarily employing associative memory links and techniques of montage and editing. Description is approached as a form which textures the poetic experience by applying metonymic displacement as a technique which uses objects, physical characteristics and surroundings to depict the emotions and ideational position of the agents in the poetic experience. In the majority of the descriptions and narrations, the poetic "I" does not describe the inner state of the mind of the other agents or of his own as a narrator. As we can see in the examples, his narrations and descriptions appear as precise, matter-of-fact accounts of facts, whether external features, actions or objects that surround the characters. In addition, this poetry does not resort to internal or fragmented monologues, speculations or meditations. That is not to say that the narrations and descriptions are always chronologically structured or appear as cause-and-effect sequences. As can be easily seen in "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow", the scenes are juxtaposed in such a way to produce symbolic, metaphoric meanings. The structure of some of the poems is reminiscent of realistic documentaries, in which the actual sequencing or juxtaposing of scenes involved in the process of poetic montage produces the symbolism and metaphors.

The narrative structure of "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow" rests on the associative links which the main protagonist's memory provides. It is a childhood memory that is fully recollected following the utterance of the protagonist as a child. It gradually develops into a narration of several scenes, an afternoon at the grandfather's farm. No prominent events occur in the poem except the description of the characters and their environment, as well as a growing sense of imminent death in the family which the narrator as a small boy tries to comprehend. The first scene of the first section (1) begins:

"I won't go with you. I want to stay with Grandpa!"
That's how I threw cold water
on my Mother and Father's
watery martini pipe dreams at Sunday dinner.
. . . Fontainebleau, Mattapoisett, Puget Sound. . .

Nowhere was anywhere after a summer
at my Grandfather's farm. (LS 59)

In the second scene, the boy is sitting on the porch of the farm house before this scene changes to a little "construction site" on the farm. One wonders about the transition between them, since there is only a tentative link which the sounds of the ticking clock provide:

One afternoon in 1922,
I sat on the stone porch, looking through
screens as black-grained as drifting coal.
Tockytack, tockytack
clumped our Alpine, Edwardian cuckoo clock,
slung with strangled, wooden game.
Our farmer was cementing a root-house under the hill.
One of my hands was cool on a pile
of black earth, the other warm
on a pile of lime. All about me
were the works of my Grandfather's hands: (LS 59-60)

Focusing on the minute details described by the matter-of-fact, objective language of the narrator, reveals that the associative leap of the memory seems to be the 3rd line, "screens as black-grained as drifting coal". Thus, the visual perspective of the narrator's memory focuses on the screen door of the porch, blackened with residue like "drifting coal". This black dust then transports him to the memory and the sensation of the "black earth" and the "lime" in the scene of the farmer "cementing a root-house". The next associative link in this structure leads from the boys' *hands* on the piles of "earth" and "lime" to the details and objects that surround him—the reminders that his grandfather produced everything with his own *hands*: "All about me / were the works of my Grandfather's hands".

Another succinct example of an associative memory link is the scene at the beginning of section IV. The memory of the narrator focuses on another minute detail, "the anchor" on his "sailor blouse" as a boy, which provides the link to the next scene, the boy's fantasy of "floating" and "sailing" in the air over the lakes where his dying uncle had a hunting cabin:

I picked with a clean finger nail at the blue anchor
on my sailor blouse washed white as a spinnaker.
What in the world was I wishing?
. . . A sail-colored horse in the bulrushes . . .
A fluff of the west wind puffing
my blouse, kiting me over our even chimneys,
troubling the waters. . .
As small as sapphires were the ponds: *Quittacus, Snippituit,*
and *Assawompset*, halved by "the Island,"
where my Uncle's duck blind
floated in a barrage of smoke-clouds. (LS 62)

The scenes, therefore, move forward through verbal and visual associations provided by the memory of the narrator. We have seen how the memory of "black-grained screens" brings us to the piles of "cold black earth" and "white warm lime". These scenes become metaphorically important at the end of the poem, when they are repeated and juxtaposed to the scene of his dying uncle. The concrete piles become the boy's medium for materialization and reification of the abstract concept of death as the only way for him to understand it:

While I sat on the tiles,
and dug at the anchor on my sailor blouse,
Uncle Devereux stood behind me.
He was brushed as Bayard, our riding horse.
His face was putty.

.....

He was dying of the incurable Hodgkin's disease. . . .
My hands were warm, then cool, on the piles
of earth and lime,
a black pile and a white pile. . . . (LS 64)

The cold black “pile of earth” becomes the metaphor for death and the warm white “pile of lime” the metaphor for death-in-life, that is, for disease, since the face of the dying uncle is “putty”, the color of earth and lime mixed together. Thus, the poet uses the inherent symbolism of “cold earth” as “death”, and juxtaposes the scenes, to generate this symbolism. This poetic montage restates the main theme of the child’s first perception and attempt to comprehend death.

Another similar restatement of the poem’s theme by means of its structural organization, or more precisely, by sequencing of its scenes, is the following juxtaposition:

Double-barreled shotguns
stuck out like bundles of baby crow-bars.
A single sculler in a camouflaged kayak
was quacking to the decoys. . . . (LS 62)

.....

Daylight from the doorway riddled his student posters,
tacked helter-skelter on walls as raw as a board-walk.
Mr. Punch, a water melon in hockey tights,
was tossing off a decanter of Scotch.
La Belle France in a red, white and blue toga
was accepting the arm of her “protector,”
the ingenu and porcine Edward VII.
The pre-war music hall belles
had goose necks, glorious signatures, beauty-moles,
and coils of hair like rooster tails. (LS 63)

Here, the grotesque scene (“quacking to the decoys”) of gun-smoke, shotguns and the whole game of hunting, surviving, killing and dying, is juxtaposed to the description of the interior of the dying uncle’s cabin, which speaks of his hopes, passions, culture, taste in women, his whole personal ideology. Also, this description of the hunter’s cabin and his student posters on the walls, are interspersed by understatements about his imminent death: “Uncle Devereux was *closing* camp for the winter” and “Daylight from his doorway *riddled* his student posters” (my emphasis). In combination, these understatements and the juxtaposition of the cabin scene to the hunting scene, reinforce the irony of the situation: the hunter is being hunted by death.

Selection of details in narrative poetry is another way of stating the main theme. In the previously quoted passage from his Paris interview, Lowell clearly states that the artistry of the poem is in careful selection from the “flux of life”. All the physical details in the scene with Great Aunt Sarah (in the same poem) bear the same symbolism of the idea of death-in-life:

Up in the air
by the lakeview window in the billiards-room,
lurid by the doldrums of the sunset hour
my Great Aunt Sarah
was learning *Samson and Delilah*. (LS 61)

She is “up in the air”, both physically, being in an upstairs room, and mentally, having withdrawn to a life that is a replica of her real life. She is playing a dummy piano after failing to establish a career as a pianist in her youth:

Each morning she practiced
on the great piano at Symphony Hall,
deathlike in the off-season summer—
its naked Greek statues draped with purple
like the saints in Holy Week. . . .
On the recital day, she failed to appear. (LS 62)

The condensed expressiveness of the line “lurid by the doldrums of the sunset hour”, summarize her present life: still lured to what once meant life for her—her music—and withdrawn from an active career, she is forever “in the doldrums of the sunset hour”, that is, her old age.

As a childhood memory, the narration is naturally presented from the point of view of the narrator as both a young boy and as a grown-up man. Although these perspectives are sometimes intertwined, they remain

distinctly discernible through the grammatical and stylistic features of the poetic language. It is obvious that the lines which follow the direct speech of the first line of the poem are the words of the narrator as an adult:

That's how I threw cold water
on my Mother and Father's
watery martini pipe dreams at Sunday dinner. (LS 59)

The signs of the adult language are visible in the use of idioms and complex grammatical structures, as in the phrase "watery martini pipe dreams". The more common construction would be "pipe dreams and/over/caused by watery martini", or similar. Instead, the noun phrase "watery martini" is in an adjectival position, modifying another, idiomatic phrase, "pipe dreams". This skillful rhetorical maneuver produces a masterfully condensed description and more than that. It is, at the same time, an evaluative statement of the adult narrator about his parents.

Although the whole memory is primarily narrated from the adult's perspective it is interesting to see how it merges with that of the boy. One such example is the final statement at the end of the section I:

The farm, entitled *Char-de-sa*
in the Social Register,
was named for my Grandfather's children:
Charlotte, Devereux, and Sarah.
No one had died there in my lifetime . . . (LS 60)

Although the complex grammatical structure of the line, the past perfect tense, implies that it is the voice of the adult narrator, its abruptness speaks of an innocent, child-like spontaneity, as it interrupts the seemingly unrelated exposition of the farm's legal name. This line is typical of what G. Genette's theory of narratology defines as "focalization", basically "the one who perceives is not necessarily the one who tells, and vice versa" (Guillemette, online source). The one who perceives here is the boy, while the one who tells is the adult narrator. Another similar example of focalization is the description of the scene when the boy dips his face in the basin and compares his distorted image to a bird: "I was a stuffed toucan / with a bibulous, multicolored beak". In addition to meaning "highly absorbent", "bibulous" also means "fond of alcoholic beverages" (*Merriam Webster Dictionary*), a language definitely pertaining to an adult. The focalization reveals a two-way process: the boy trying to understand the world of adults and the adult narrator trying to understand his childhood. The humorous irony of the narrator's description of himself as a self-conscious boy in an imitative search for self-identity reveals the same process:

My perfection was the Olympian
poise of my models in the imperishable autumn
display windows
of Rogers Peet's boys' store below the State House (LS 61)

The overlapping perspective of the child and the adult narrator also appears in the hunting scene:

where my Uncle's duck blind
floated in a barrage of smoke-clouds.
Double-barrelled shotguns
stuck out like bundles of baby crow-bars. (LS 62)

The image results from both perspectives intersecting. The register used is adult-like in its precision and specificity—"shotguns", "barrage", "crow-bar", while the resultant visual effects are somewhat childlike—"the bundles of baby crow-bars" resemble thin birds' legs, sticking out from white "smoke-clouds" as baby diapers. The image is not seen by the one who describes it—the adult narrator—but instead by the small boy.

Whenever we have the child's focalization, the language is more figurative. The following lines tell how the boy perceives the physical appearance of his dying uncle:

His blue coat and white trousers
grew sharper and straighter.
His coat was a blue jay's tail,
his trousers were solid cream from the top of the bottle.
He was animated, hierarchical,
like a ginger snap man in a clothes-press. (LS 64)

In the boy's world, abstract thought is replaced by concrete, physical images. The use of figurative language comes naturally, since tropes, after all, are concrete and physical words used for abstract concepts and ideas. There is a weak metaphor in "His coat was a blue jay's tail", as the sharp figure of the sick uncle in cream trousers appears like a "bottle of cream" to the boy; he is flat and pressed like a "ginger snap man". In other words, the boy's perceptions of the phenomena of life, disease and death are through concrete, material elements such as "earth", "lime" and "putty", and their respective colors and sensations—black and cold for death, white

and warm for life, and putty for disease. At the end of the poem, the boy merges them all in one explanation: "Come winter, / Uncle Devereux would blend to the one color".

I have analyzed description as an important realist form Lowell uses, that is, as a structuring and texturing tool which reveals Lowell's poetic credo in life-like images. The analysis of the poem has shown how the narrative structure produces metaphoric messages through associative memory links and poetic montage which restate the main themes of the poem. Identifying the different perspectives of the narrative voice, the focalizations, has highlighted the structural patterns and nuances in the depicted experience.

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