THE POETICS OF IMMANENCE AND EXPERIENCE - THE CASE OF ROBERT LOWELL

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ABSTRACT

The paper demonstrates the inception of a poetic model I define as the poetics of immanence and experience in Lowell's poetry written during the late 1950s, which I argue marked American poetry's shift away from Modernism and its prevalent metaphoric and symbolic patterns. An analysis of a poem by W.B. Yeats ("The Second Coming") and one of Lowell's "life studies" ("Commander Lowell"), make the contrast between these two poetic models visible. I further define the concept of immanence as a structure-generating principle which presupposes the presence of a human consciousness as an individuated and immanent "I" in the poem, pointing at two essential forms of immanence in Lowell's poetry: (i) the immanence of a lived experience, which occurs when the poet presents the full structure of an experience with precise and concrete details through the voice in the poem and (ii) the narrator's immanence, which occurs when the narrator narrates himself through the selections of material and becomes the agent of the experience. Thus, the concept of immanence, this paper argues, materializes and produces an artistic effect, a simulacrum of a lived experience and a concrete, personalized immanent narrator.

Keywords: Robert Lowell, *Life Studies*, immanence, experience.

The concept of immanence to be examined in this paper through a couple of poems by Robert Lowell's 1959 collection *Life Studies,* is approached as a structure-generating principle and one which determines the stance of the poet toward depiction of reality and experience, that is, the world "outside" the poem. The idea of *immanence* is developed by the critic, Charles Altieri in his *Enlarging the Temple* (1979) in reference to American poetry which emerged in the late 1950s and 1960s. He sees the shift in American poetry towards the immanentist model as an effect of a general disenchantment in culture and in a man-made civilization after World War II during the McCarthy years, the Cold war and the Vietnam era. Altieri bases his observations on the Wordsworthian poetic stance where the poetic consciousness puts its trust in "the order of nature" to discover "the otherness", i.e. the objective world outside of it and its active part in it. On the other hand, the opposed modernist stance which he finds originating in Coleridge's symbolist poetics, places its trust in culture and in man-made civilization, and so is opposed to nature. Thus, the first model with its trust in the orders of the natural world presents the experience in the poem "as it appears" in nature, that is, outside the poem, while the second model, with its trust in human culture and imagination, restructures and conceptualizes the experience symbolically. Hence, the immanentist mode of poetic thought emerging after the symbolist mode of poetic thought, that is, after Modernism. This is how he explains his model:

> I call the alternative logical model represented by early Wordsworth an essentially *immanentist* vision of the role of poetry. Here poetic creation is conceived more as the discovery and the disclosure of numinous relationships within nature than as the creation of containing and structuring forms. Hence its basic commitment is to recovering familiar realities in such a way that they appear dynamically present and invigorate the mind with a sense of powers and objective values available to it. Where the symbolist poet seeks to transform nature into satisfying human structures, the immanentist poet stresses the ways an imagination attentive to common and casual experience can

> transform the mind and provide satisfying resting traces in an otherwise endless dialectical pursuit by the mind of its own essences and of the Transcendental realities. (p. 17)

I use Altieri's idea derivatively, identifying and developing an additional informative concept of this poetics - "experience" which I understand culturally and view it as part of the aesthetics of immanence and a deeply embedded one in American value systems and a key epistemological principle in American philosophical thought (namely, as "praxis" in Pragmatism). A point of departure from Altieri's concept of the poetics of immanence is his application of the concept to content-related issues, while I am primarily interested in the rhetorical effects. Thus, I define this poetry as the "poetics of immanence and experience", arguing that poems reveal the presence of a concrete human consciousness, often aesthetically "incarnated" in the first person(s) "I" or "we" and the second person "you". The use of confession does not imply the poet confessing his autobiography in the poems. Confession is approached here as a convention, a form the voice uses to talk about his experience. When mapping out the most frequent forms of American poetry in the postmodern period, Jonathan Holden (1986) says that "poets have increasingly turned to nonliterary analogues such as conversation, confession, dream, and other kinds of discourse as substitutes for the ousted "fixed forms", which he categorizes under one general term "convention" (*Style and Authenticity,* p. 11).

The poem is structured on the basis of immanence when the poet chooses to present the experience through a poetic voice which is fully present. This voice is immanent in the poem but only as a particularized and concretized agent, for example a speaker, narrator or confessant. Thus, we can speak about (i) the immanence of a lived experience, which occurs when the poet presents the full structure of an experience with precise and concrete descriptions through the voice of the poem and (ii) the narrator's immanence, which occurs when the narrator narrates himself through the selections of material and becomes the agent of the experience. Since my critical methodology is primarily stylistic, I analyze the poetic language as a speech act and the terms voice, speaker, narrator, and confessant are accordingly interchangeable. Since the voice in these poems is explicitly gender-determined as male, I refer to it with the masculine pronoun and possessive adjective.

The immanence of a lived experience and the narrator's immanence in the poem cannot be examined and explicated as separate forms of immanence, since one cannot exist without the other. The presence/immanence of a lived experience in a poem is impossible without a narrator, a human consciousness that narrates the experience. Similarly, the presence/immanence of a concrete, particularized narrator in the poem is impossible if he does not narrate a "lived" experience. In other words, if the poem does not create the illusion that what is presented "really" happened and the narrator is a "real" individual, the poem will not be immanentist and experiential but a different kind of poem, symbolic and aesthetically conceptual. I would argue that the primary aim of the symbolic poem is to depict and present a concept, or concepts, such as death, fear, courage, being, nothingness or fragmentation of culture. The story, the images and the structure of the symbolic poem, is put in service of this goal. This type of poem may even use a realistically presented story but only as a symbol of the concepts or ideas it depicts. The symbolic poem artistically re-creates the experience in order to present it. It does not create a simulation of an experience transferred to the poem as it happened in real life. Any poem of high Modernism might be seen to contrast with Lowell's experiential and immanentist aesthetics. For example, W. B. Yeats' "The Second Coming" (1994) consists of images that are each subordinated to Yeats' notion of the cyclical movements of civilizations and the crumbling of the present one, in this case Christian civilization and its culture. The poem begins:

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre
> The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born. (pp. 158-9)

The image of the "falcon and falconer" and the vision of the half-lion, half-man figure, serve only a symbolic function to further explicate Yeats' main idea and concept. The second line of the poem, "The falcon cannot hear the falconer", is a symbolic representation of the idea expressed in the first line: "Turning and turning in the widening gyre", that is, the notion of the circular progression of civilizations as one is created, reaches its peak and destroys itself for a new one to be born. The vision of "a shape with lion body and the head of a man" symbolizes Yeats' grim vision and skepticism of any future redemption of the present, Christian civilization. The poem is an act that artistically and symbolically re-creates reality in order to depict and present a particular concept or notion of reality.

In Lowell's experiential poetry, the whole poem is subordinated to the presentation of a complete, realistically structured experience. Symbols, ideas, or concepts are presented only as intrinsic parts of the experiential structure rather than being the final goal. Consider the first stanza of "Commander Lowell":

There were no undesirables or girls in my set,
when I was a boy at Mattapoisett—
only Mother, still her Father's daughter.
Her voice was still electric
with a hysterical, unmarried panic,
when she read to me from the Napoleon book.
Long-nosed Marie Louise
Habsburg in the frontispiece
had a downright Boston bashfulness,
where she grovelled to Bonaparte, who scratched his navel,
and bolted his food—just my seven years tall!
And I, bristling and manic,
skulked in the attic,
and got two hundred French generals by name,
from A to V—from Augereau to Vandamme.
I used to dope myself asleep,
naming those unpronounceables like sheep. (p. 70)

The voice here is an agent/participant of a past experience and a confessant/narrator at the same time. Playing this "multitasking" role, he is inevitably present in the experience of the poem. However, what makes the voice immanent in the context of the poetics of immanence and experience is how he, the voice, presents the experience and himself as part of it. We find in this poem the whole structure of an experience, the portrait of an insecure Father overpowered by an overbearing Mother drawn by carefully selected "scenes from life". The second and the third stanzas continue:

> Having a naval officer
> for my Father was nothing to shout
> about to the summer colony at "Matt."
> He wasn't at all "serious,"
> when he showed up on the golf course,
> wearing a blue serge jacket and numbly cut
> white ducks he'd bought
> at a Pearl Harbor commissariat. . . .
> and took four shots with his putter to sink his putt.
> "Bob," they said, "golf's a game you really ought to know how to play,
> if you play at all."
> They wrote him off as "naval,"
> naturally supposed his sport was sailing.
> Poor Father, his training was engineering!
> Cheerful and cowed
> among the seadogs at the Sunday yacht club,
> he was never one of the crowd.
>
> "Anchors aweigh," Daddy boomed in his bathtub,
> "Anchors aweigh,
> when Lever Brothers offered to pay
> him double what the Navy paid.
> I nagged for his dress sword with gold braid,
> and cringed because Mother, new
> caps on all her teeth, was born anew
> at forty. With seamanlike celerity,
> Father left the Navy,
> and deeded Mother his property. (pp. 70-1)

This full structure of experience built by scenes which are concrete and precisely documented creates the effect of the immanence of a lived experience: it is summer in the vacationing town "Matt" (Mattapoisett) on the Atlantic Ocean, where Father plays golf with the upper class, starts working for the "Lever Brothers" company, but still "booming" ship commands "in his bathtub". At the same time, we have a picture of the narrator's character by his selection of the episodes with his father. Selecting the scene of him shunning his mother's disquieting voice speaks of the narrator's attitude towards her too. The golf scene speaks of his embarrassment with his father's ineptitude at fitting into the society, while the comic "bath tub scene" speaks of the narrator's contempt for his Father yielding to the pressures of his ambitious Mother. His immanence as a character is even more visible in his descriptions. The Mother's voice, "electric with a hysterical, unmarried panic", is not just a description, as it reflects his implied criticism and judgment. The Father's "numbly cut white ducks", which he bought in a navy shop, suggest the narrator's criticism and deep "numbing" sense of his lack of self-confidence and self-assertiveness, while his resignation from the Navy is described using sailing and navigation connotations to convey the narrator's description with irony. His Mother's aggressive ambition and pushiness echo in "new caps on all her teeth, was born anew at forty", and the statement: "Father left the Navy / and deeded Mother his property" further suggests the narrator's

contempt toward his Father's emasculated personality. The voice becomes immanent in the poem through his narration and his descriptions in addition to being a participant in the experience. The artistic effect created is of a voice that is immanent in the poem as (i) an agent and a particular person with a point of view and an attitude towards the narrated experience, and (ii) as a narrator of the immanent experience who also narrates himself.

If, on the other hand, the voice resorted to speculations about the Father, entered into interior, fragmented monologues or used symbolic forms to talk about the character of the Father and the attendant Father-Mother relationship, the poem would lose the effect of immanent experience, since it would interrupt the fully realistic story of the experience. In the case of a symbolic poetic structure, the poem loses its effect of immanence, because the original experience goes through artistic and symbolic re-creation, that is, it is not presented "as it really happened". In addition, the whole structure of the symbolically presented experience would essentially rule out the immanence of a particular, concretized narrator, since it is solely aimed at presenting a concept or idea.

The poetic voice is immanent in a poem even when it is not an agent in a past or present experience, but is instead only a narrator or observer. In the first two stanzas of the four-stanza poem "Terminal Days at Beverly Farms", the narrator narrates himself by describing his parents' garden, the location of their house, his father's daily rituals, objects, heart attacks ("coronaries"), and finally, his "unprotesting death". The narrator is immanent in the poem through the selections made in his descriptions and the manner in which they are made. His emotive stance and general disposition toward what he describes is "heard" and "felt" in the poem and can be decoded as deeply ingrained in his descriptions.

> At Beverly Farms, a portly, uncomfortable boulder
> bulked in the garden's center—
> an irregular Japanese touch.
> After his Bourbon "old fashioned", Father,
> bronzed, breezy, a shade too ruddy,
> swayed as if on deck-duty
> under his six pointed star-lantern—
> last July's birthday present.
> He smiled his oval Lowell smile,
> he wore his cream gabardine dinner-jacket,
> and indigo cummerbund.
> His head was efficient and hairless,
> his newly dieted figure was vitally trim.
>
> Father and Mother moved to Beverly Farms
> to be a two minute walk from the station,
> half an hour by train from the Boston doctors.
> They had no sea-view,
> but sky-blue tracks of the commuters' railroad shone
> like a double-barrelled shotgun
> through the scarlet late August sumac,
> multiplying like cancer
> at their garden's border. (p. 73)

If we consider the narrator's descriptions in the first stanza, we immediately find they contain more than just descriptions. If we decode them, his emotive stance towards his parents' relationship and the effects it has had upon him can be identified. It is at the very beginning that his vision is blocked by a "portly uncomfortable boulder" at the center of their garden; "bulked" there forever it resembles their "heavy"

relationship, estranged forever. The "boulder" is described with the adjective "uncomfortable" which usually is collocated with "uncomfortable chair", "uncomfortable feeling", etc. This lexical deviation emphasizes the modifier "uncomfortable". Similarly, "the irregular Japanese touch" does not escape his perception and suggests the awkwardness whenever his parents' relationship is portrayed in the poems. The rest is a description of the Father's daily rituals, his clothes and facial features. The last two lines of this stanza summarize the narrator's attitude towards his father that constantly lurks behind the descriptions: "his head was efficient and hairless / his newly dieted figure was vitally trim". The description of Father's head as "efficient" but "hairless" implies the opposite of what is said, bearing in mind that he is an unsuccessful navy commander who sways after a drink as if on a ship deck. Again, the lexical deviation in collocating "head" with "efficient" instead of "efficient" with "mind", further reveals the narrator's ironic and emotive stance. The Father's figure is not "vital" and "trim", but "vitally trim". The use of the adjectival phrase "vitally trim" implies the sense of "vitally important" rather than "healthy" or "animated". It seems as if the narrator is saying that it is vitally important for Father to think he is "vital", even though he evidently is not. The narrator's irony becomes audible as his complicated feelings towards his parents can hardly "stand still" behind the matter-of-fact, realistic and seemingly neutral descriptions.

In the second stanza, the voice describes the location of the parent's house and its surroundings with carefully selected material, whose detail becomes indicative of his attitudes towards them. His matter-of-fact language and the spatial references are combined with the colors of the surroundings which bear significance upon the whole experience. Knowing from the last three stanzas of this poem, and from the cycle of poems about his parents, that Father loses his identity and "grip" on life ("inattentive and beaming" [74]) and was constantly fired from a series of jobs, we hear an echo of the narrator's judgment passed on him in the lines: "They had no sea-view / but sky-blue tracks of the commuter's railroad shone / like a double-barrelled shotgun". The blue color implied in "sea-view" and "sky-blue tracks" brings back associations with the Navy and connotations of his failure. It also brings to mind associations of health with the "sea-view" which his parents do not have any more. They can only see the blue shiny reflection of the cold, metal railroad tracks, which, when compared with a loaded weapon, become fatal. The narrator's description becomes a projection of his own feelings of contempt toward, and judgment upon, his parents' plight and their seemingly "pragmatic" decision "to be a two minute walk from the station".

The last five lines of the description provide an image that is heavily saturated with the narrator's emotions. The red, berry-like fruit of the "sumac" bush which turns "scarlet" in late August resonates with the previous descriptions of his Father's face as "a shade too ruddy", commonly the color of rotting fruit in autumn. The sumac bushes, which "multiply like cancer / at their garden's border", are like the plight of his parents' terminal days. However, under the rhetorical "pretense" of a deictic device, this last line actually circumscribes and closes the life circle of this household by indicating the exact location where the "sumac multiplies". Outside this garden there is constant movement and life evoked by "the commuters' railroad". Even though the narrator is not a direct agent of the experience here, he becomes immanent in the poem through his generally ironic and emotional disposition toward the other agents in the experience, reified by his seemingly matter-of-fact descriptions. Although he does not pass direct judgments, or express his feelings openly towards the other agents, his descriptions summarize his points of view and his emotional stance and attitude.

The confessant narrates himself through the "action" of the poem by powerful descriptions of the main characters via the objects that surround them. His point of view and attitudes toward the experience are immanent in his descriptions. The result of these forms of immanence, is an artistic illusion of what is presented/confessed is what has been experienced as such, and the poem becomes a testimony of that experience without any artistic manipulations of fact.

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