Robert Lowell's Confessional Poems and Linda Hutcheon's Parody: American Modernism's Shift towards Postmodernism

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Abstract

The great modernist tradition fosters impersonality and objectivity in art and life. Though being a modern American poet, Robert Lowell seems to avoid this high modernist tradition by introducing autobiographical details in his collection of confessional poems: *Life Studies*. Confessional poems connect the past with present observations; they reproduce memories of family and childhood as well as deal with sensitive issues like mental illness. Above all, they use the first person pronoun "I" to create life-like images. In addition to that, these poems share some features with Linda Hutcheon's concept of parody, discussed in her essay "The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History". According to Hutcheon, parodies are central to postmodernism; they transgress and question authority that controls. However, postmodernism negates modernism; it does not reject it. Unlike modernism, it integrates the past and the repressed history of forms in literature. On the other hand, though Robert Lowell is conscious of the limitations of modernism, his poems are objective and impersonal. Nonetheless, unlike the modern poetic persona, he presents the incongruities of his society not merely as meaningless and helpless ramblings; rather, he connects them with hope. He joins art with life and culture; narrates his contemporary American society in vernacular, and he bridges the gap between the private with the public. By keeping Hutcheon's idea of Parody in mind, this paper discusses Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* as a collection of poems that criticizes modernism, and adopts certain traits of postmodernism to mark American modernism's shift towards postmodernism.

Keywords: Postmodernism, parody, modernism, confessional poems

During the 1920s and '30s, great American modern poets like Eliot, Pound, Stevens, and Moore explored the idea of impersonality. While reading their poems, the readers knew little about their personal life.T. S. Eliot in his essay "Tradition and Individual Talent" asserts, "The emotion of art is impersonal" (Eliot 42). To be a perfect artist, the artist has to undergo the process of depersonalization (Eliot 39). In other words, the poet must be separated from the man within him; the poet and "the man who suffers and the mind which creates" (Eliot 40) are two separate entities. The poet works with the emotions and feelings around him, but he remains uninvolved with them. In this way, in his poems, the private life of the poet was not disclosed to the readers. Through the use of symbols and ambiguity, the modern poet hides his personal affairs.

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However, when Robert Lowell was writing in the 1950s, he was not blindly following his predecessors.Lowell showed that the private life of authors can also be a matter of interest in great poetry.By adopting apsychoanalytical lens, he displayed the most intimate parts of his life: his childhood miseries, his family, and his mental illness.He manipulated his memory by using the everyday colloquial language to examine American society in his time. Adam Kirsch in hisreview of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* states that Robert Lowell departed from American Modernism's symbols, ambiguity and superficiality by discovering its limitations. A deeper investigation of his poems shows that he never really departed from the modern tradition of depersonalization.

Like other modernist poets, Lowell was impersonal, but he was against the tyranny of modernism. Modern art alienates the artist from the surrounding world, but in *Life Studies*, Robert Lowell shows that art is also the means through which this alienation can be overcome (DeJong 45). In general, his poems, emerging as his confessions share some attributes with Linda Hutcheon's concept of postmodern parodies. Besides,Lowell's artistry marks a shift from modernism to postmodernism as he combines the elements of modern poetry and postmodern parodies in his poems.

Before we start the main discussion, it is important to know the main features of postmodernism. It is not clear exactly when postmodernism begins (Rezaei 19). Nonetheless, postmodern features in American literature were started to be treated much more systematically after the Civil Rights Movement in the USA and in the 1960's protests for ethnic, sexual and minority rights (Rezaei 16). At the same time, American literature depicted a growing awareness of the negative effects of industrialization and commercialization of public life that led to the ecological crisis and consumerism (Rezaei 17). Therefore, criticism of consumerism and appreciation of freedom and spontaneity became an integral part of postmodernism; besides, understanding of art and its form was also changed (Rezaei 17). Art started to be seen not as separate, but a part of reality and experience; art became closer to the public and was often presented in the form of show, happening or performance (Rezaei 17). Like other branches of art, postmodern poetry bears these features of postmodernism.

Postmodern poetry shows a crisis of ethnic, sexual, social, and cultural identity of a human being and his struggle for legitimization in a hypocritical society (Rezaei 16). The most important postmodern feature is indeterminacy and uncertainty due to a sense of fragmentation. In a fragmented society, the traditional values are flouted; the culture is de- canonized, and art is trivialized (Rezaei 17). Furthermore, in a postmodern literary text, the idea of originality and authenticity is undermined and parodied (Rezaei 18). Thus, another important aspect of postmodern poetry is the use of postmodern parody.

The postmodern parody was theorized especially by Linda Hutcheon, Margaret A. Rose, and partly by Fredric Jameson (Rezaei 18). Unlike traditional parody, the main aim of postmodern parody is not to mock the author or his style, rather it uses irony to emphasize a difference between the past forms of art and creates a distance between the past and present (Rezaei 18). In Linda Hutcheon's view, Parody can be used as a self-reflexive technique that points to art as art, but also to art as inescapably bound to its aesthetic and even social past (Hutcheon 231). Postmodern parody gives an alternative vision of reality and history; this alternative is not aimed to be an official alternative to

real history, but a playful and artistic reconsideration of it (Rezaei 19). That is also the reason why postmodern authors often parody histories and biographies of authors (Rezaei 19). This particular feature of postmodernism will be discussed thoroughly in this paper.

Frederick Jameson introduces a similar term like a parody. According to Jameson, traditionally, authors create parodies by mechanically imitating other works of art, styles, or ways of writing (Rezaei 19). However, in postmodern literature and its interpretation, this term has rather a positive meaning; here, the older works of art, styles, and authors are imitated, but through the use of irony, they are transformed and placed in a different linguistic context (Rezaei 19). Jameson calls it pastiche. He suggests that pastiche can be loosely called a blank parody (Rezaei 19). Since postmodernism rejects strict definitions, parody and pastiche often overlap, and they are rather inseparable (Rezaei 19). Linda Hutcheon in her article "The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History" discusses parody as the key concept of postmodernism, and postmodern poetry shares various features of postmodern parody.

Hutcheon contends that parody is the formal correspondent to the dialogue of past and present that silently but unavoidably goes on at a social level (Hutcheon 184).Alimited definition of parody relates it towit and ridiculing imitation, (Hutcheon 203) but in modern poetry, it is a form that self-consciously re-reads the past(Hutcheon 180).However, memory is central in this linking of the past (Hutcheon 189) to create an awareness of what *exists* in the present. Moreover, postmodernist parody signals that self-reflexive discourse,like memory, is always bound to social discourse (Hutcheon 206).Also, by removing the distinctions between reality and fiction (Hutcheon 22), parody paradoxically promotes a confrontation between the aesthetic to an external world (Hutcheon 179-80). Though it employs and evaluates social facts, it teaches that social"reality" is discursive when it is used as the referent of art (Hutcheon 182).Therefore, parody bridges the gap between the past and the present while disconcerting traditional ideologies and social belief systems.

In this regard, confessional poetry is similar to parody because it consists of personal, intimate subject-matter (Davidovska24) that links the past and the present together. Since the voice in the poem uses the first-person pronoun, its story, narration, and presentation inevitably become a confession of an individual (Davidovska 29). Lowell's poems in *Life Studies* bear this mark. For example, lines 12 to 17, of the first stanza of Lowell's "Commander Lowell" introduce us with a voice that is an agent/participant of experience and, also a narrator of the present time:

> 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. (Lowell 70)

In this poem, the readers find the whole structure of an experience, the portrait of a young boy drawn carefully by selected "scenes from life" (Davidovska 32): his strugglesof memorizing difficult names.The artistic effect, created with the confessant "I", belongs to

a voice who already knows about this narrated experience and the narrator who narrates himself (Davidovska32). Furthermore, American poetry in the postmodern period increasingly turned to non-literary analogues such as conversation, confession, and dream, deviating from the "fixed forms" of poetry (Davidovska 28), and Lowell's confessional model displays these life-like images rather than craft-driven formsof modern poems (Davidovska 37).Therefore, unlike modern poems, Lowell uses confessions to speak about his private life.

However, the use of confession does not imply that the poet is giving us his factual autobiography in verse; it is rather a strategy to attract the readers. The personalized voice or the "I" creates an artistic illusion of a "true confession" which does not correspond and coincide with the poet's life. Confessions in *Life Studies* often coincide with Lowell's real life, but these are not exclusively the facts of his or of other people's lives, but an "illusion of autobiography" (Davidovska 36). There is a lot of fabrication and imagination in*Life Studies*;he invents facts and changes things. However, the feeling of getting the real story or the experience is the main effect produced by the confessional mode.

Moreover, in his poems, Lowell constantly plays with the notion of objective portrayals of characters by primarily describing the objects they use. The speaker here is also an observer who describes an experience without directly participating in it (Davidovska 36). However, he generally refrains from entering into the characters' inner psychological state (Davidovska 46)as an omniscient narrator would do; despite this, the narrator's emotive and evaluative responses are still discernible, as they are embodied and embedded in the described details (Davidovska 48). For example,his poem "Father's Bedroom" generates neither actions nor traits of the Father's character. Instead, there is the only description of selected objects in his bedroom, and the readers determine an attitude towards his Father through this description. By concentrating on the "blue" in Father's bedroom, in the first six lines of the poem, a general emotional tone is set:

In my Father's bedroom:

> blue threads as thin
> as pen-writing on the bedspread,
> blue dots on the curtains,
> a blue kimono,
> Chinese sandals with blue plush straps. (Lowell 75)

Inanimate objects become animated by this description, and father is represented here by his attachments. The truth lies in the evaluationof the details (Davidovska 49) which connotes that the Father remained defiant and careless towards his child all his life. The catalogue of blue objects from his father's room displays the son's ironic stance and indirect disapproval, as well as his alienation from him (Davidovska 48). Though the father's own thoughts are unknown, the readers acknowledge the father's personathrough the objective portrayal of his possessions.Therefore, Lowell does not disregard the modernist tradition of impersonality, but he singularly returns to memory and past to survive the tyranny of high modernism.

Modernism paternalistically claims a position over and above other forms of art; this notion was elitist since it was a view adopted by the enlightened businessmen who controlled society (Hutcheon 187). This attitude was also paternalistic, and some modernists even perceived themselves as the "life conditioners" (Hutcheon 188). This commodification and uniformisationof mass culture are the totalizing forces of Modernism. The lessons of the past were rejected by modernism, in the name of the new brand of liberal elitism (Hutcheon 188). The odd combination of the empirical and the rational in a modernist theory introduced scientific determinism that combats all that had been inherited from the past (Hutcheon 188). However, in postmodernism, we find recurring references to history and the past.

Here, it has to be mentioned that literary history of a different era, shows that forms and models survive the type of power that produce them, and their meaning changes in time, according to their social use (Hutcheon 188). Nevertheless, what we should not forget is that postmodernism emphasizes that the act of designing and building is always a gesture in a social context, and this is one of how formal parody meets social history (Hutcheon 188). In this way, in postmodernism, we find recurring references to history and the past.

Therefore, postmodernism differs from modernism because it attempts to be historically aware; it is hybrid and inclusive, and it replaces the prophetic, prescriptive posture of the great masters of modernism (Hutcheon 193). Unlike modernism that disregards the collective memory of the human race, and preaches the myth of social reform through the purity of structure (Hutcheon 192), postmodernism incorporates and modifies the past and gives it a new life and meaning. With none of modernism's iconoclasm, this parodic project of postmodernism shows both its critical awareness and its love of history by giving new meaning to old forms (Hutcheon 194). The pluralist and provisional nature of the postmodern enterprise challenges, not just the modernist aesthetic unities, but also homogenizing social notions of the (Hutcheon 183) monolithic (male, Anglo, white, Western) in culture through parody.

Moreover, postmodernism reacts against the mass culture of late capitalism (Hutcheon 184) as it fosters an aristocratic viewpoint of elitist romantic/modernist originality. The social failure of the great modernists and the inevitable economic association of "heroic" modernism with large corporations combined to create a demand for new forms that would reflect a changed and changing social awareness (Hutcheon 184). These new forms were not, by any means, monolithic. Therefore, postmodernism adopts forms as the vernacular (Hutcheon 184) which was once rejected by modernism. In addition to that, the parodic project of postmodernism shows both its critical awareness and its love of history by giving new meanings to old forms. Sometimes, even structures are refashioned and functioned by it (Hutcheon 194). It conveys meaning through language and convention. Also, it enlarges the available forms of vocabulary.On the other hand, modernist tradition makes a rigorous distinction between the languages of art and the vernacular.

Nevertheless, Lowell’s plain syntax and short lines captured American English as it is spoken. Lowell desires to appeal to a wider audience. His colloquial tone invites the appreciation of all readers and not merely the cultured ones. The simplifying of his poetic language makes the tone of his poems consonant with their settings (DeJong 48). More

generally, it reflects that art must be responsible not only to the grand narratives of its time but also to the seemingly insignificant lives and moments that equally reflect the complexities of an era (DeJong 49). Thus, Lowell effectively brings the anxiety and uncertainty present within American history in his time.

Life Studies is a poetry collection that cannot be read without a general knowledge of American culture in Lowell's time since these poems are saturated by references to American culture of the 1950s. This culturally encoded quality of Lowell's poetic language is often used in telling stories about his family members and the American history connected to his family history. Through their diction and setting, his poems establish similarities and connections between the speaker and the audience (DeJong 49). More generally, they reflect the notion that art must be responsible not only to the (DeJong 48) grand narratives of its time but to the seemingly insignificant lives and moments that equally reflect the complexities of an era (DeJong 49). Therefore, by reading Lowell's *Life Studies*, readers gather knowledge of American society in his time.

This culturally encoded quality of Lowell's poetic language is often used in telling stories about his family members and the American history connected to his family history (Davidovska59). For example, the third section of the long poem "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow" depicts Great Aunt Sarah: "Aunt Sarah, risen like the phoenix /from her bed of troublesome snacks and Tauchnitz classics"(Line: 75-76, *Life Studies*). These lines reveal more of her general portrait, foregrounding the objects of her personal use: most significantly the type of books, called "Tauchnitz". These objects describe the psychological profile of a depressed woman, who spends most of her time in bed.

Aunt Sarah rises from bed as somebody restored back to life after death. She takes her solace in "snacks" which are "troublesome" and in German books, "Tauchnitz classics (Davidovska 59). These were British and American classics for the tastes and requirements of Anglophone travellers in Europe during the second half of the nineteenth century. They were precursors to the popular paperbacks of the twentieth century, often smuggled to the UK and US as forbidden imports. This implies that Aunt Sarah lives in the past more than the present since she is surrounded by objects that function as markers of the previous century, probably the century of her youth. Through Lowell's portrayal of Aunt Sarah, one of his family members, along with her habits and belongings, readers get an insight into the contemporary time.

Besides, Lowell also discusses the discomforts in mainstream American culture in his *Life Studies*. He reconsiders sensitive issues like malaise and madness. In 'Waking in the Blue' he introduces McLean which is the home of wealthy, upper-class mental patients (DeJong 53). The poem gains great pathos from its quietly detailed hopelessness. The line, 'What use is my sense of humour?' (Line 11) is a personal expression. Behind the rhetorical question, the poet is staring in defeat at the mess of his life. There is seemingly nothing that can cure the poet of his manic attacks (Roberts 30). At one level it is a self-deprecating image of the poet, stripped by humiliation and harassed by his illness (Roberts 31). The primary symptom of mental illness lies in communication disorder". It marks the speaker's inability to identify with others. This lack of identification operates not only on a linguistic but on a psychological level.

The speaker's admission to the McLean hospital separates him from his surroundings. It is also the speaker's imprisonment within his own psyche(DeJong 55). In the poem, the mental hospital ironically functions as a segment of the American culture, in which difficult or troublesome individuals were isolated from others in his society. However, the poem's final lines: "We are all oldtimers, / Each of us holds a locked razor" (Line 49-50), marks the use of the first-person plural enacting as a mode of solidarity. This "we" refers explicitly the mental patients: the social misfits who are excluded from society to prevent them from self-inflicted violence. But in a deeper sense, this final "we" also implicates the reader of the poem, and by extension, the American culture Lowell observed so keenly. The locked razor is suggestive of impending but restrained violence: the Cold War and the possibility of nuclear annihilation(DeJong 57). As the *oldtimers*described in the poem, contemporary Americans knew the pain and confusion of these *locked razors* that caused their frustrations and disappointments, but very few of them revealed their true feelings.

In other words, Lowell's criticisms of contemporary culture in these lines also remain sharply effective; the abdication of shared feeling and the refusal to respond honestly and sympathetically to those considered "different" are also subject matters of Lowell's poetry (Dejong 57). His *Life Studies* is not only a poetic investigation of art's potential to provide a coherent dimension to experience but also an aesthetically and politically conscious response to the problems of American society in Lowell's own time (Dejong 45). Lowell's confessional poems portray the troubles, dilemmas, and difficulties in contemporary American society, and he resorts to art for resolutions.

Nonetheless, the emotional texture of *Life Studies* is dark: the poems are mostly melancholic, sometimes deeply sad, sometimes disturbingly bitter and alienated, and these feelings are only occasionally leavened by brief spurts of contentment or hope. This thread of hope, rests less in the alleviation of painful emotion than in identification with others, with the world outside the speaker's mind (DeJong 45). In 'Skunk Hour' (Lowell 89-90), the last and best-known poem of the book: the speaker's deep loneliness meets no external response (DeJong 49) back through the pages of *Life Studies*, and as a closing poem it constitutes a startlingly bleak summation of the speaker's mental and emotional state (DeJong 50). The speaker here has lost coherent selfhood and subjectivity. The mechanization of the post war mass culture produces a sense of alienation and a devaluation of traditional hierarchical values (Breadsworth 94). The poem describes a landscape where the speaker tries to connect and commune:

> Nautilus Island's hermit
> heiress still lives through winter in her Spartan cottage;
> her sheep still graze above the sea.
> Her son's a bishop. Her farmer
> is first selectman in our village;
> she's in her dotage (Line 1-6)

Here, Lowell "displays his careful reckoning of social status; wealth here is a symptom of deep societal dysfunction. It only breeds isolation and class resentment. The words "hermit/heiress" combine unimaginable wealth with unreasonable seclusion. The

selfishness of the heiress in buying unused land and letting it go to waste is linked to nostalgia for a past that cannot be restored:

> Thirsting for
> the hierarchic privacy
> of Queen Victoria's century,
> she buys up all. (Line 7-10)

These lines embody a concomitant rejection of all that such a longing for the past stands for: its corroded class structures, its love of money and of privacy, and its outmoded religious values. Romantic love also offers no hope, since it has become another pawn to be traded for wealth and status (DeJong 50).The banal song,"Love, O careless Love. . . ." (Line 32) is a signifier of the post war capitalist conformist mass culture. It directly correlates with his spiritual malaise (Breadsworth 110). He spies on the "love-cars" parked together at the town's edge, suggesting that the paired lovers in this incongruous setting are merely enacting a crude replica of the diversions of the upper class. They are surrounded not only figuratively but also in a textual sense, between the "skull" of the hill and the "graveyard" with its bones,as the spectre of death looms over both the speaker and the love-cars on which he spies(Dejong 50). The whole surrounding seems bleak and dreadful.

However, with the line: "My mind's not right" (Line 30), the poem begins its climactic movement. The speaker's self-awareness, his recognition of his instability, seems to invite a reading of this line as a plea for recognition and assistance, but no response comes from within the landscape of the poem, and this fact takes the speaker to the darkest moment, perhaps, in the whole of *Life Studies* (Dejong 5): the exclamation that "I myself am hell; (Line 35). He is on an exile from his community like Satan (Breadsworth 110), and his narcissistic reverie is interrupted by small night-time foragersor the skunks: "only skunks, that search / in the moonlight for a bite to eat" (37-38). A mother skunk with her column of kittens swills the garbage pail. Their animal indifference is the catalyst for the speaker's return to the outside world: they provide him a meaning of life(Dejong 52). The mother skunk is defined by her refusal to be intimidated; she is in search of food for herself and her kittens.

Moreover, she embodies the determination and self-concern of all living beings. She feels nothing for the speaker except, mild indignation, but because of the self-preservation and maternal care it represents, that indignation functions as a form of sympathy (Dejong 53). Lowell adds:

> She jabs her wedge-head in a cup
> of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail,
> and will not scare. (Line 46-48)

The skunk is a nocturnal scavenger, pest, and undesirably scented creature. Lowell finds solace in nothingness, in this abyss they survive not despite the bleakness of culture, but because of it- the culture of ideological conformity (Breadsworth 111). Mother skunk and kittens – inherently regenerative among this waste of contemporary culture. They are intensely resolved to stake a claim within the bleak landscape (Breadsworth 112). In skunk hour, his fear of madness, a problem that is peculiarly his, is disclosed. His mind is

not right because he identifies himself as an absence, a positive lack of normal sensibility (Doreski 96). In this way, Lowell blends both the trends of modernism and the features of postmodern parodies in his confessional poems.

Postmodernism is inseparable from modernism; it is often interpreted as a necessary and even affectionate "dialogue with a father" (Hutcheon 193). Postmodernism is not a total rejection of modernism. Postmodernism is especially aware of modernism's material and technological advances, but it wants to integrate the immediate past and repressed history of forms (Hutcheon 189) through parodies. Postmodernism critically reviews the glories and errors of modernism. Modernism's dogmatic reductionism, its inability to deal with ambiguity and irony, and its denial of the validity of the past are the issues that are seriously examined it postmodernism (Hutcheon 197). Therefore, postmodernism serves as an extension to modernism.

Lowell's poems debate against the modernist assertion of impersonality. They employ irony as a strategy to activate readers' awareness. Like parodies, they mark both continuity and change as well as both authority and transgression. They become "the mode of the marginalized against a dominant ideology" (Hutcheon 206). His confessional poems are more of a personal lyric that embraces the psychological conditions of contemporary culture. It is used to situate the poet's place in the universe and help him escape a titular influence of modernism that is perceived as threatening (Davidovska 36), but this is the framing tension in him, as he connects them with art. Though modern art makes the artist impersonal and alienates him from his surrounding world, Lowell uses art as a means through which he overcomes this alienation. His Life Studies explores art's potential to provide a coherent dimension to the communal experience and makes him a respondent to the problems of American society in his time (DeJong 45). Lowell's poems also discuss memories, family heritage, and customs as well as his national and geographical history; these are all combined in the postmodern concept of the parody.

Thus, keeping Hutcheon's observation in mind, it canbe inferred that Robert Lowell's confessional poems share certain features of Hutcheon's parodies. Moreover, though Lowell's poetic mode was labelled "Confessional poetry" by the critic L.M. Rosenthal in 1959 (Davidovska 24), according to Harold Bloom, this term is superficial and vacuous, and as a label, it limits the poetic craft of the poet. Lowell's poems reform the modernist assertion of impersonality. He employs irony as a strategy to activate readers' awareness. Like parodies, his poems mark both continuity and change, both authority and transgression. They become "the mode of the marginalized against a dominant ideology" (Hutcheon 206). These similarities with parodies make Lowell's poems more postmodern than modern.

Therefore, Robert Lowell's confessional poems in *Life Studies* are close to life and culture. They are also connected to art. Though modernism evokes art as a means of alienating the artist from his surrounding, in his poems, Lowell shows that art can also be used to overcome this alienation. His poems are a response to the problems of American society in his own time. Similar to Linda Hutcheon's parodic project of postmodernism, they connect the past and the present as well as the private and the public, and they associate the individual with his nation. Therefore, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* signifies a shift from modernism to postmodernism.

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