

ROBERT LOWELL: A PICTURE WITH A DEMOTIC TOUCH

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Abstract: Description is a relevant form in Lowell's poetry, at least in the volume *Life Studies* discussed in this paper. It constructs the texture and, in some instances, the structure of the poems. At the same time, it reflects Lowell's aesthetic principle that the poem must create life-like images that are expressive enough to indirectly state the main themes and ideas of the poem. By depicting the external, outward characteristics of the agents involved in the poetic experience using matter-of-fact and objective language, Lowell's descriptions create the photographic effect of a "single-surfaced" replication of reality. As we shall see in the analyses, this "surface" description technique, when combined with expressive diction and effective rhetorical maneuvers, produces the indirect statements and understatements of the narrator, ventriloquising the poetic voice. In addition to producing the texture of the poems, description is often the structure in numerous poems, such as "Father's Bedroom" and "For Sale". This paper will consider how some rhetoricians define objective and subjective descriptions before proceeding to analyze description itself as both a texture and structure generating form. According to Thomas S. Kane: "[i]n *objective description* the writer sets aside those aspects of the perception unique to himself and concentrates on describing the percept (that is, what is perceived) in itself. In *subjective* (also called *impressionistic*) *description* a writer projects his or her feelings into the percept" (351-2). Thus, Lowell constantly plays with the notion of objective portrayal of characters by primarily describing some practical matters, such as: the objects they use, their daily rituals, interests, tones of voice, surroundings and other demotic details. He projects the artistic illusion that the narrator is concentrating solely on the percepts, that is, on the things in-themselves rather than on the narrator's actual perspective. Thus, the characters are objectively portrayed through their external, surface characteristics as seen in photographic representations. The narrator generally refrains from "entering into" and describing the characters' inner psychological states as an omniscient narrator would do. Similarly, he refrains from describing his own feelings, thoughts and judgments regarding the observed and described agents or events in the poems. In spite of this, however, the narrator's emotive and evaluative responses are still discernible, as they are embodied and embedded in the described details and in the angle of perspective of some scenes. The narrator's points of view, indirect statements and numerous understatements are "read into" his actual selection and description of the details.

Keywords: Robert Lowell, description, objective, subjective, things-in-themselves, demotic details

Description is another relevant form in Robert Lowell's poetry, at least in the volume, *Life Studies*, discussed in this paper. It constructs the texture and, in some instances, the structure of the poems. At the same time, it reflects Lowell's aesthetic principle that the poem must create life-like images that are expressive enough to indirectly state the main themes and ideas of the poem. In a later interview with Ian Hamilton in 1971, Lowell compares *Life Studies* to a photography: "I hoped in *Life Studies*—it was a limitation—that each poem might seem as open and single-surfaced as a photograph" (CP 272). By depicting the external, outward characteristics of the agents involved in the poetic experience using matter-of-fact and objective language, Lowell's descriptions create the photographic effect of a "single-surfaced" replication of reality. As we shall see in the following analyses, this "surface" description technique, when combined with expressive diction and effective rhetorical maneuvers, produces the indirect statements and understatements of the narrator, ventriloquising the poetic voice. However, in addition to producing the texture of the poems, description is often the structure in numerous poems, such as "Father's Bedroom" and "For Sale". It is worth considering how rhetoricians define objective and subjective descriptions before proceeding to analyze description itself as both a texture and structure generating form:

In *objective description* the writer sets aside those aspects of the perception unique to himself and concentrates on describing the percept (that is, what is perceived) in itself. In *subjective* (also called *impressionistic*) *description* a writer projects his or her feelings into the percept. Objective description says, "This is how the thing is"; subjective, "This is how the thing seems to one particular consciousness". . . .

The truth of objective description lies in its relationship to fact; that of subjective in relationship to feeling or evaluation. . . . Subjective description . . . is "true" because it presents a valuable response, not because it makes an accurate report. (Kane 351-2)

I would argue that Lowell constantly plays with the notion of objective portrayal of characters by primarily describing the objects they use, their daily rituals, interests, tones of voice, surroundings and other demotic details. He projects the artistic illusion that the narrator is concentrating solely on the percepts, that is, on the things in-themselves rather than on the narrator's actual perspective. The characters are objectively portrayed through their external, surface characteristics as seen in photographic representations. The narrator generally

refrains from “entering into” and describing the characters’ inner psychological states as an omniscient narrator would do. Similarly, he refrains from describing his own feelings, thoughts and judgments regarding the observed and described agents or events in the poems. In spite of this, however, the narrator’s emotive and evaluative responses are still discernible, as they are embodied and embedded in the described details and in the angle of perspective of some scenes. The narrator’s points of view, indirect statements and numerous understatements are “read into” his actual selection and description of the details.

Description in “Father’s Bedroom” generates both the structure and the texture of the poem. The poem describes neither actions or events nor the traits of the Father’s personality and character. Instead, there is only description of the selected objects in his bedroom. The narrator lets the percepts represent the Father’s character. It becomes clear that the narrator’s feelings and his attitude towards his Father determine the organization and selection of the details in this description. The described objects become the only means of analyzing and evaluating the poetic experience. For example, by concentrating on the “blue” in Father’s bedroom, the narrator sets the general emotional tone of the scene and indirectly expresses his attitude towards Father:

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.
The broad-planked floor
had a sandpapered neatness.
The clear glass bed-lamp
with a white doily shade
was still raised a few
inches by resting on volume two
of Lafcadio Hearn’s
Glimpses of unfamiliar Japan.
Its warped olive cover
was punished like a rhinoceros hide.
In the flyleaf:
“Robbie from Mother.”
Years later in the same hand:
“This book has had hard usage
on the Yangtze River, China.
It was left under an open
porthole in a storm.” (LS 75)

The poem does not “hide” the fact that it is a “catalogue” or “inventory” of objects. Instead, it emphasizes this by the colon in the first line of the poem. By combining rhetorical and psychoanalytic reading of *Life Studies*, Lawrence Kramer describes Lowell’s “inventories” as intended to reveal a general disconnectedness and estrangement in the human relationships between the agents in the poems:

Clipped, short-breathed, discontinuous, [the inventories] isolate the objects they supposedly conjoin, expose the gaps between individual perceptions, feelings, memories. The catalogues of *Life Studies* are haunted by pathos or futility, as delineated by objects that ironically betray those who possess them: Uncle Devereux’s spruce clothing, Commander Lowell’s chinoiserie, Charlotte Lowell’s “proper putti.” (94)

To illustrate the value of this acute observation, I want to begin by considering how the objects in this room depict the character and life of their owner as inscribed upon them. This statement comes in the form of the simile-based image in the second and the third lines:

blue threads as thin
as pen-writing on the bedspread, (LS 75)

The owner’s life is inscribed upon the objects as a permanent “signature” visible as “pen-writing” upon the “the bed spread”. As mentioned earlier, it is worth noting that the narrator emphasizes the minute blue details and describes the planked floor as a ship’s deck. His eye also catches the details connected to the Far East and sailing. We are made to assume that these details were vitally important to the Father as they color his entire life. We know from the other poems which depict the Father that he was often fired and consequently changed many jobs after he left the Navy, as in “Commander Lowell”. Every time this happened, he would buy a “smarter car” and grow “inattentive” by indulging in useless ship calculations, as in “Terminal Days at Beverly Farms”. Is the narrator’s insistence on the blue details a message that some things were disproportionate in his Father’s life? Do

the selected detailed descriptions reveal the narrator's point of view and his judgmental attitude towards his Father? It is as if he is saying that the Father remained a defiant and careless 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, or in Kramer's words, "the gaps between individual perceptions, feelings, memories".

"For Sale" is also structured as a description, and it similarly arouses poignant feelings as the narrator ascribes human characteristics, feelings and thoughts to the house and its objects. The house itself is a "Poor sheepish plaything", a dollhouse in which the people played a simulacrum of life.

Poor sheepish plaything,
organized with prodigal animosity,
lived in just a year—
my Father's cottage at Beverly Farms
was on the market the month he died.
Empty, open, intimate
its town-house furniture
had an on tiptoe air
of waiting for the mover
on the heels of the undertaker.
Ready, afraid
of living alone till eighty,
Mother mooned in the window,
as if she had stayed on a train
one stop past her destination. (LS 76)

It is the "furniture" that is impatient here, as it waits for the "mover" to come right after "the undertaker". It is noticeable how references to the human characters are entirely absent, since the house is "organized with prodigal animosity" rather than by the people who organized it. The mother is like "town-house furniture" in a farmhouse; she does not belong there and is impatient to move out and move on: "As if she had stayed on a train / one stop past her destination". All the inanimate objects become animated by the descriptions and are made "restless". Stylistically this displacement of human feelings on the objects is a metonymic process, since the whole is represented by the parts. That is, the people are represented by their personal belongings. This results in poignant feelings being produced by the metonymic suppression of direct feelings. In this description, the truth lies in the feelings and evaluations which the narrator produces, rather than in the facts he describes.

The well-known and oft-quoted "Waking in the Blue" is structured by "external" descriptions too. There is some action of course, but nothing of significance happens in the day at the mental hospital. The poem simply describes the daily rituals of the characters, their social backgrounds, past affiliations, clubs, clothes, and physical appearance. Lowell sets up the scene of the poetic experience on his usual condensed descriptions:

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 grow tense
as though a harpoon were sparring for the kill.
(This is the house for the "mentally ill.") (LS 81)

The use of the expressive, metaphorical noun phrase "mare's nest" denotes complicated, tricky and delusive situations from which the "night attendant" is waking up. The lines invoke the idea of the human psyche remaining incomprehensible, tricky and deceptive as a "mare's nest". It also introduces the setting, the place where the "mare's nests" of human beings are dealt with. The book on which the attendant's head is propped, C.K. Ogden's and I. A. Richards' *The Meaning of Meaning* is hardly a randomly chosen detail since the stanza continues searching for meaning, or anything that might make sense in "the[se] bleak" surroundings. However, the narrator does not say that his state of mind is bleak and agonized. Instead, it is his window that is bleak and agonized: "makes my agonized window bleaker". Similarly, it is the "fairway" outside that "is petrified". The displacement technique evokes the bleakness, agony and fear the narrator projects on his surroundings. By analyzing this dominant realistic technique of *Life Studies* and tracing it back to the masters of realist prose, Perloff also sees it as a stylistic restatement of one of Lowell's overarching themes in *Life Studies*:

By presenting his parents in terms of a metonymic series of objects, Robert Lowell creates a devastating image of a tradition gone sour. Father's "rhino" chair and Mothers' monogrammed hot water bottle stand metonymically for the materialistic debasement of the American dream, the dream of the Mayflower Lowells and Winslows. (*The Poetic Art* 98)

This critical observation acknowledges the idea that Lowell's poetry almost exclusively captures its ideas and the state of mind of his characters through objects, places and temporal references, or as Lawrence Kramer says, by "Lowell's deadly accurate representation of the props and detritus of three intertwined life histories" (85).

Similarly, the characters of the other inmates are portrayed by descriptions of their external appearances. Stanley, once a famous footballer, a "Harvard all-American fullback", now "hoards" his body like a treasure. To complete the portrait of an individual manically obsessed with his body, the narrator "places" him in a bath tub where he looks like a "ramrod" while his muscles appear like "seals":

still hording the build of a boy in the twenties,
as he soaks, a ramrod
with the muscle of seal
in his long tub,
vaguely urinous from the Victorian plumbing.
A kingly granite profile in a crimson golf-cap,
worn all day, all night,
he thinks only of his figure,
of slimming on sherbet and ginger ale—
more cut off from words than a seal. (*LS* 81)

With the explicit connotations of killing, tension and physical force invoked by "ramrod" and "seal-like" muscles, Stanley speaks and articulates himself only through the physical aspect of his being. He is literally "more cut off from words than a seal". The portrayal of the other inmate employs the same technique of "surface" description to reveal the aberrations of the character:

the hooded night lights bring out "Bobbie,"
Porcellian '29,
a replica of Louis XVI
without the wig—
redolent and roly-poly as a sperm whale,
as he swashbuckles about in his birthday suit
and horses at chairs. (*LS* 82)

The vocabulary of this comical description plays an important role in the portrayal of the character. The narrator resorts to a comic comparison of the character's porcine looks with the similar appearance of Louis XVI. Socially, he is referred to as "Bobbie", with a figure like a "sperm whale" and as a "Porcellian", since he belongs to the traditional, epicurean student club at Harvard whose emblem and symbol was a "pig". The tragicomic irony is produced by the use of the uncommon word "swashbuckle" in the sense of a "reckless adventurer" to describe a person who is "redolent" of massive and rounded animals such as whales and pigs. The bitter irony with which the narrator imbues both portraits in the psychiatric ward is summed up in the line: "These victorious figures of bravado ossified young". Even in this concluding line, their mental condition is described with the word "ossified", which denotes hardening and fossilization of substance as in bones or minerals. Here, however, it implies mental retardation, the rigidity and incapacity of these people evolve or grow. At the end of the poem, we have the narrator's self-portrait:

After a hearty New England breakfast,
I weigh two hundred pounds
this morning. Cock of the walk,
I strut in my turtle-necked French sailor's jersey
before the metal shaving mirrors,
and see the shaky future grow familiar
in the pinched, indigenous faces
of those thoroughbred mental cases,
twice my age and half my weight.
We are all old-timers,
each of us holds a locked razor. (*LS* 82)

Just like the two previous portraits, this self-portrait is presented through the physical characteristics and objects surrounding the character—the heaviness of his body induced by the medications, his walk, clothes, and finally, the "metal mirrors" and "locked razors". These objects are carefully selected in the description and loom as symbols of the sick, abnormal and edgy atmosphere of both the mental hospital and the narrator's mind. The

narrator does not tell us he is terrified and afraid for his future; his feelings are projected and fixed on the faces of the other patients and the objects around him. He can see his “shaky future” on the concrete faces of the other inmates reflected in the metal mirrors. Here Lowell conveys an abstract concept, the former, through a physical object, the latter. This constant verbal suppression and postponement of direct emotional expression reinforces and intensifies the emotional effect to the degree of almost haunting poignancy.

Despite the numerous instances of metonymic displacement, this poem does provide one direct description of the narrator’s state of mind in an expertly condensed simile-based image in the first stanza: “My heart grows tense / as though a harpoon were sparring for the kill”. In both, his personal accounts and in the poems about his bouts of manic depression, he talks about a steadily growing tension and nonsensical, verbal aggression: “its hackneyed speech, its homicidal eye” (“Man and Wife” 87). The metaphoric image of his “heart” as tense as a “sparring harpoon” captures this state succinctly through the use of the verb “spar”, which suggests a physical fight or a verbal dispute.

The mastery of Lowell’s descriptive techniques is also evident in “The Memories of West Street and Lepke” (LS 87). In this poem, the memorable portraits belong to another institution, the prison. Since this poem’s content and ideas have been analyzed extensively by numerous critics, I will concentrate instead on how the descriptions bring to life the characters. Talking about his life and personal circumstances at forty, the narrator describes his nine-month old daughter: “Like the sun she rises in her flame-flamingo infants’ wear”. The alliterative compound adjective “flame-flamingo” to describe the baby’s clothes reinforces the sensory perception of brightness and fire, and by extension light, warmth and life, all consistent with the attributes of the sun. His daughter is therefore indirectly compared to the sun. She looks like the rising sun in her clothes. There is a metonymic displacement in the comparison: it is more the baby’s clothes that look like the sun than his daughter. One way of interpreting this shift is that it enables the poem to preserve a thin realistic veneer. Lowell avoids the explicit metaphor “daughter—sun—life”, which presupposes an artistic change of reality, a substitution of one concept for another.

Another relevant characteristic of this poem is the ideational and societal contribution of the diction or the lexis of the condensed, descriptive lines. The period during which *Life Studies* was written is often referred to using Lowell’s phrase “the tranquilized Fifties”. The line, “These are the tranquilized Fifties”, achieves a generalization of the mentality of the decade that is synonymous with the “culture of containment”, a policy not only aimed at controlling the spread of communism, but preserving and containing the old values and the status quo of American culture too. The single descriptive word “tranquilized” is a socially encoded word and becomes the key signifier of the decade. The short, precise description of the African-American boy’s hair in the prison, where the narrator is serving a sentence as a Catholic conscientious objector, is another highly condensed signifier for broader social and cultural strata of American society, one that includes drugs, youth, class and race:

sat waiting sentence in the bull pen
beside a Negro boy with curlicues
of marijuana in his hair. (LS 85)

The descriptions of the other inmates are equally expressive, as their respective ideologies and cultures become discernible through their speech patterns, clothing, rituals, interests and social affiliations:

Strolling, I yammered metaphysics with Abramowitz,
A jaundice-yellow (“it’s really a tan”)
and fly-weight pacifist,
so vegetarian,
he wore rope shoes and preferred fallen fruit.
He tried to convert Bioff and Brown,
the Hollywood pimps, to his diet.
Hairy, muscular, suburban,
wearing chocolate double-breasted suits,
they blew their tops and beat him black and blue. (LS 86)

Two extremely opposed ideologies of the society are embodied in the descriptions of the physical characteristics of the characters. On the one hand, there is the non-violent, intellectual group represented by the pacifist and vegan Abramowitz, whose “jaundice-yellow” face and “fly-weight” stature suggest physical weakness. On the other hand, the aggressive cultural group which is at the bottom of the social scale of values, the pimps. They are represented by color. Their “double-breasted suits” are “chocolate”, a strong, earthy color, which might refer to Italian mobsters, and they are portrayed as physically proficient, “hairy, muscular and suburban”. The condensation of description is achieved by the use of highly specific registers and professional jargon: “fly-weight” associated with boxing and “chocolate double-breasted” to stylish clothing. Thus, the external, surface descriptions of the characters becomes a main means of exposing their mental state and ideology. As in previous descriptions, the selection of particular details and the choice of words are even more important.

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