Un-Masking the Self:

A Study of Robert Lowell's “Confessional” Poetry

A thesis submitted to the department of English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English Literature (Poetry)

Submitted by

Mariam Ahmad Al-Nasser Al-Ghamdi
Teaching Assistant in the Department of English

Supervised by

Dr. Nawal Mohammad Mursi
Associate Professor of English Literature
Princess Nora Bint Abdul-Rahman University
Faculty of Arts

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Abstract

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In 1959, with the publication of Robert Lowell’s sequence Life Studies, a new kind of poetry, labeled as “confessional,” appeared. This study attempts a re-reading of the poems in Lowell’s Life Studies using a pluralistic approach. It reveals that labeling the poetry as “confessional” is misleading and is considered a misnomer. This study also traces the ingenious use of the “mask” questioning whether the “self” is actually revealed/“un-masked” or not. Finally, the poems are analyzed to reveal those aspects that characterize the sequence as postmodern rather than modern. This thesis is divided into four chapters followed by a conclusion. Chapter One introduces a profile of the poet’s private life, the development of his style, as well as a variety of definitions of “confessional” poetry. Chapter Two, “The Historical Dimension,” analyses the poems of cultural and political disintegration. Chapter Three, “The Elegiac Note,” reveals how the poet advances the traditional elegy into a new form that elegizes the loss of childhood innocence and the loss of protective parental figures. His elegy situates the individual amidst the disintegrating society of mid-century America. “The Quest for the Self,” which is the final chapter, reveals how the fragmented “self” suffers from an inability to connect its inner identity to the social roles dictated by society. The conclusion reveals that the “life” presented in the poems is both personal and symbolic at the same time. Lowell uses his personal life not for self-revelation but for self-exploration. His aim is to remove the mask off society to reveal the religious despair, alienation of the individual, and the inadequacy of conformity. Excavating all the hidden layers of complexity reveals his position as public poet and his engagement with social, political, and cultural history, a position often neglected in earlier studies.

Submitted by: Mariam Ahmad Al-Ghamdi Supervised by: Dr. Nawal Mohammad Mursi

Dean of the College of Arts and Administrative Sciences:

Dr. Anjab Ghulam Naby Qutb Addin
ملخص الرسالة

كشف القفاعة عن النفس: دراسة لشعر روبرت لويل "الاعترافي".

رسالة مقدمة لقسم اللغة الإنجليزية من الطالبة مريم أحمد آل ناصر العامدي ضمن متطلبات الحصول على درجة الماجستير في الأدب الإنجليزي

(قصص شعر)

في عام 1959م، ظهرت مجموعة روبرت لويل الشعرية (دراسات في الحياة)، والتي تتمركز من خلالها أسلوبًا جديدًا في الشعر يسمى باستكشاف "النفس البشرية". تقوم هذه الرسالة بدراسة خططات لويل "الاعترافي" المعتمدة في ذلك منهجًا تفاعليًا حيث قصد هدف هذه الرسالة إلى تقديم قراءة حديثة للكتاب (دراسات في الحياة). تثبت أن تنسيق شعر لويل "الاعترافي" نسبيًا خاطئًا أو ممتلئًا، تتبعت الرسالة كذلك عناصر لويل في استخدامه إحدى التقنيات البلاعمية وهو النفض، متساويًا على حقيقة المتحدث في القصائد: هل كان هو لويل؟ أم أنه استخدم حياته الخاصة قناعًا يستخدم من خلاله؟ و (?, أخيرًا تقوم الرسالة بالبحث عن خصائص ما بعد الحذاء وإبرازها.

تتم مناقشة الرسالة إلى أربعة قصص وحيدة. يقدم الفصل الأول من الرسالة لحالة حياة لويل الخاصة، وتطور أسلوبه الشعري، كما يقدم مجموعة من التصنيفات لتحليل النفوذ للنشر المتضمن بأنه "الاعترافي"، ويبنيه ظهوره وتطوره. أما الفصل الثاني: (البعد التاريخي) فيفصل عدة قصائد عن النظم الثقافي والسياسي، والتي تجعل من لويل شاعرًا تاريخيًا. وفي ذلك الفصل الثالث: ( وجهة نظر وراء) حيث يطور الشاعر قصيدة الرغبة التقليدية لتصبح شكلًا جديدًا، يبرهن من خلالها قدرة لويل على ردة الطموح. أما الفصل الأخير فإنه يكتب (رحلة البحث عن الذات)، ويكشف عن عدم قدرة الإنسان على المواقف بين رغباته الخاصة وبين المتطلبات والأدوار التي يĩnhب عليه معيق

تكشف الدراسة في طبيعة المظهر عن أن "الحياة" في القصائد قد تكون شخصيًا ورمزًا على حد سواء، فالفراغة المتعمة للنصوص تجعلنا ندرك أن الشعر لا يقوم على الوجه الذئبي، وإنما على استكشاف الذات. إن لويل يتوصل الفارئ إلى أطر إنجابية من خلال إظهار عيوب الفرد والأشياء والمجتمع الأمريكي الذي يعيش وفقًا للمشاعر الاجتماعية فقط، إنه يظهر ما يعنيه مجتمعه من فراق ديني وهكذا للفن والشعر، وإن لويل شاعر اجتماعي مرتبط بالتاريخ الاجتماعي والسياسي والتقاليدي، وهذا ما تجاهله العديد من الدراسات السابقة.

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Preface

The term “confessional” is used to describe a mode in writing that started in the 1950s and 60s. For more than any other type of poetry, “confessionalism” as a revolutionary step in literary writing, opposes the modern “impersonal” theories. “Depersonalization” or the detachment of the author from his work was argued by artists at the early decades of the twentieth century namely T.S. Eliot in his informative essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” However, time changed and autobiography became bestselling and “confessional” poetry was quite welcomed. Poets sought in poetry a means of expression which earlier modes failed to convey. Through lyricism, they addressed the reader fashioning their identity and improvising a state of confession for which the critic M.L. Rosenthal selected the term “confessional” poetry (“Poetry as Confession” 64).

The term bears both legal and religious connotations that may inflect poetic reading. However, even if the term is a misnomer or misleading, the underlying assumptions that are closely related to the paradigm have to be reconsidered. There is also another path that will be trodden in the discussion of “confessionalism” related to the form.

During the above-mentioned period, the fifties and sixties, a group of American poets have vividly constructed a discourse into which they inscribed, by their hands, those around them. Amongst the group, there were Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, W.D. Snodgrass, John Berryman, and Anne Sexton. These poets responded to materialistic and social changes of the time. They were
dissatisfied with the cold war mentality of leaders, the pressures of living under threat of nuclear annihilation, besides dissatisfaction with the increasing regimentation in American life. These trends influenced poets towards a reconsideration of their aesthetic writings.

The focus in the present study is on Robert Lowell (1917–77) who is considered the most honored poet of his generation. In fact, he stands out as the influential American poet of the second half of the twentieth century because of his startling alternations of style and perspective. His new poetry involves an abandonment or derangement of traditional meter and device and an emphasis on individual feelings. It invariably crosses the boundaries between the literary persona and the shaping of his identity. The mind that is sad, worried, fearful, and buckling under a strain echoes in his poems. His skill in projecting a combination of fact and fiction poses the greatness and seriousness in his texts.

Lowell published his first book of verse *Lord Weary's Castle* in 1946, which won him the Pulitzer Prize. In 1959, his second sequence *Life Studies* appeared marking an embarkment on a new dramatic style whose subject matter is mainly an artistic use of autobiographical material and thus chosen as a major focus in the present study. Critics have made the point that *Life Studies* is the best of his works and that it has reclaimed to poetry some of the territory it had lost to the novel. In his critical essay “Poetry as Confession,” Rosenthal explains its different themes:

Lowell removes the mask. His speaker is unequivocally himself and it is hard not to think of *Life Studies* as a series of personal
confidences….About half of the book…is essentially a public
discrediting of his father’s manliness and character, as well as of
the family and social milieu of his childhood…he cannot breathe
without these confessions. (64-65)

Jack Anders states that the poems included in *Life Studies* “reveal his
tortured personal life and ‘confess’ dark personal secrets” (8). He also adds that
the power of the volume comes from the tension between the disorderly
personal content and the well-ordered and controlled form. In 1969, another
collection, *Notebook 1967-68*, was published. The same personal note extended
to this volume focusing on marriage and separation. Moreover, *Day by Day*,
which is the last collection published in 1977, included other personal poems
projecting childhood difficulties. It should be noted that his artistic talent
extended to the theatre and to translations, which highlight diverse
contributions. The interest of this study, however, lies in the discourse of his
“confessional” poetic expressions.

In answer to all earlier critiques, this study proposes a thorough
re-reading of *Life Studies*, tracing the ingenious use of the “mask” questioning
whether the “self” is actually revealed/ “un-masked” or not. Accepting literature
as a part of the system of signs that constitutes a given culture, New Historicist
Stephen Greenblatt claims that literary texts function within this system in three
interlocking ways:

. . . as a manifestation of the concrete behavior of its particular
author, as itself the expression of the codes by which behavior is
shaped and as a reflection upon these codes . . . [or] as the
expression of social rules and instructions . . . [or] is seen as a
detached reflection upon the behavioral codes, a view from a safe
distance. . . . (Renaissance Self-Fashioning 4)

The interpretive practice in this research will concern itself with all three
of these functions. In order to achieve this, the study attempts to answer the
following questions: What is the right definition of “confessional” poetry, when
did it appear, and why? What are the major themes in Lowell’s so-called
“confessional” poems? Are there other motives and implied meanings in those
texts? Who is the “I”/persona speaking in his poems, does it identify with the
poet, and to what degree? If Lowell is indeed masking himself behind his
personae, then should his poems still be considered "confessional"? How far are
these poems rooted in the American culture of the time? How far does the
interweaving of personal reminiscences, literary references, and political
commentary in a highly stylized structure make the poems a panorama not only
of the speaker's psyche but also of the country's cultural dislocations?

In an attempt to answer the above questions, the researcher will adopt a
pluralistic approach that includes New Historicist and Psychoanalytic theories.
Besides, the analytical method of “close reading” adopted by the New Critics
will be the major tool. The pluralism adopted seeks to relate to the kind of
inquiry each critic has engaged in. It will examine the critics’ chosen questions,
the critical language employed, and the way of seeking evidence. More than one
mode emerges at the end intact, irrefutable, and irreducible to one other mode.
A final resolution of conflicting conclusions will hopefully help in constructing a sound conclusion.

New Historicists established the interconnections between literature and the general culture of the period. They make it clear that the “past can never be available to us in pure form, but always in form of ‘representations.’” They also add that “there is no single ‘history,’” therefore literary texts should be regarded as “texts among other texts” not as sublime expressions of human spirit (Selden 188-189). In their introduction to the book *Practicing New Historicism*, Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt observe that though we have an “entire range of diverse expressions by which a culture makes itself manifest, . . . but in a given instance it has a shape, a complex individuality by which we come to identify the peoples who live together in a particular time and place” (13). They declare that history is only one of many discourses or ways of seeing and thinking about the world. Other theorists also emphasize the importance of the same relation, in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, the postcolonial critic Edward Said states:

‘Textuality’ is the somewhat mystical and disinfected subject matter of literary theory. . . As it is practiced in the American academy today, literary theory has for the most part isolated textuality from the circumstances, the events, the physical senses that made it possible and render it intelligible as the result of human work. (221)