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Razor's Edge: Robert Lowell Shaving

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Abstract: Poetic evocations of bathrooms and especially of the act of shaving allowed Robert Lowell to explore certain manifestations of his manic-depressive illness in daily life. Particularly prominent in *Life Studies* but present throughout Lowell's work, references to shaving are linked to psychological turmoil, while bathrooms are explored as heterotopic spaces (Foucault). Confessional poetry finds a hitherto unexamined field in this poetic work.

> …
> if I in my north room
> dance naked, grotesquely
> before my mirror
> waving my shirt round my head
> and singing softly to myself
> …
> Who shall say I am not
> the happy genius of my household?
>
> William Carlos Williams, "Danse Russe" [1917]

While William Carlos Williams pioneered the use of a mirror in an early modernist poem about the poetic self, modestly set in a "north room" and published in the year of Robert Lowell's birth, his disciple Lowell fully explored the implications of a man looking at himself in private. I argue in this essay that bathrooms and their appurtenances served poet Robert Lowell as a setting that allowed him to explore certain manifestations of his manic-depressive illness in daily life. Heretofore unnoticed in the otherwise rich discussion of confessional poets' practice of invading private spaces and revealing private secrets as well as psychological turmoil, bathrooms are particularly prominent in *Life Studies*, Lowell's epoch-making 1959 volume. *Life Studies* has long been recognized as the volume that marks Lowell's shift of poetic allegiance from Allen Tate to William Carlos Williams, with Allen Ginsberg serving as midwife.[1] In this and subsequent work, Lowell links bathrooms and their features closely to his evocations of mental illness. He experiments with the poetic possibilities of bathrooms as private enclosures of the self on the one hand and spaces of family communication on the other hand. The act of shaving, in particular, becomes key for Lowell in interrogating mental health.

A close associative connection between indoor plumbing and mental health dates back to the 19th century when "water cures" at fashionable spas all over

Europe were customarily prescribed for mood disorders. A century before, Samuel Richardson's physician had prescribed "emetic ipecac" as a remedy for depression (Shorter 12-13). While modern psychiatry has left the "water cure" behind, the activities of bathing, using the toilet, and grooming remain daily necessities that easily become sites of routine providing some degree of stability for an otherwise unstable or psychically challenged person. In clinical practice today, these daily tasks often become the organizational signposts around which a therapy intended to restore balance and a small degree of self-determination is constructed, whether in infirm elderly persons or in psychiatric patients. At the same time, bathrooms in modern Western culture are among the last vestiges of private space, along with doctors' offices and priests' confessionals. For confessional poets whose aesthetic consisted precisely in violating previously private sanctuaries, such as the bedroom or the psychiatrist's office, the bathroom offers another site of investigation into the self. Yet Lowell seems to have been the only one of his generation to explore this topic poetically.

We must distinguish between private and public bathrooms, of course: Lowell's bathrooms are not public but they can be shared—by fellow asylum inmates or by family members—and the fact that he is a male poet thinking about bathrooms adds a remarkable gender component to the discussion. Women and bathrooms, especially public bathrooms, are a staple of popular culture, and attention to bathroom matters by a woman writer would possibly seem less noticeable. In "Memoirs of a Bathroom Stall: The Women's Lavatory as Crying Room, Confessional, & Sanctuary," Melissa Ames rehearses the social function of women's bathrooms in public places, especially in restaurants, where they are often named "lounges" that feature couches and do more justice to the euphemism "rest room" than men's bathrooms tend to do. According to cultural codes governing our lives in the present-day United States, men do not convene or communicate in a comparable manner in the bathroom. By invoking some of the key terms of the confessional revolution in poetry, especially "memoir" and "confessional," in her title and subtitle, Ames suggests that privacy and confidentiality, sisterhood and community, are at stake in conversations in women's bathrooms. Ames employs the term "confessional" in its originally Catholic sense of a place to communicate about one's own transgressions.[2] Our understanding of confessional poetry, especially Robert Lowell's, shaped by M.L. Rosenthal, is open to an expanded meaning of "confession" in a juridical sense, as in Michel Foucault, or an autobiographical sense, as used by St. Augustine and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.[3] Lowell's description of bathrooms is further complicated by the notion of heterotopias developed by Foucault in his essay "Of Other Spaces."

My title, "Razor's Edge: Robert Lowell Shaving," deliberately eschews a focus on the toilet, another prominent feature of bathrooms in Western societies. Motivated perhaps by aristocratic reserve, Lowell does not discuss bodily waste. Potty-training, that favorite American parents' topic and Freudian staple of discussion, has almost no relevance in either his poems or his prose.[4] I want to draw attention to Lowell's interest in the bathroom as a room and in its specific appurtenances; namely, the bathtub, the mirror, and the sink, and by extension the washing machine. The mirror might offer rich possibilities for interpretation if studied as a pre-romantic tool of investigation into the self—an idea fully explored by M.H. Abrams—but Lowell tends to see the mirror mostly matter-of-factly as an instrument used in shaving. It is up to us, the readers, to activate such additional significance as may arise when we consider Jacques Lacan's celebrated "mirror stage" in the development of the infant.[5] In a set of poems that are searchingly autobiographical, that are informed by psychoanalysis and the concern over the poet's psychic instability, that thematize the "blear-eyed ego" (*LS* 4) along with incestual fantasies ("Tamed by *Miltown*, we lie on Mother's bed," *LS* 87), and that feature a bumbling, ineffectual father (at the heart of the prose section "91 Revere Street"), Lacan's 1949 essay "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I" can gently guide the critic in the proper direction.

Lowell's poetic and thematic shift in *Life Studies* (1959) took him away from Catholic orthodoxy and his famed knotty imagery. In their place, he adopted a voice that would lead critic Irvin Ehrenpreis, in 1965, to postulate that "The Age of Lowell" had arrived. Lowell's new outlook on life and poetry opened up several different kinds of interior spaces for the inspection of the reader, spaces which are literally domestic and rendered with physical specificity. In their domesticity alone, these spaces differ from Lowell's earlier work, where poems tended to evoke cityscapes (war-torn Lübeck in "The Exile's Return"), landscapes and seascapes ("The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket"), or sacred spaces ("Between the Porch and the Altar"), with perhaps the occasional book-lined study in "Falling Asleep Over the Aeneid." In *Life Studies,* by contrast, there is a prominent *prose* memoir, itself a sort of generic violation of eminent proportions in a volume of poetry in the late 1950s which demands attention. Moreover, the memoir centers around the contentious family dinner table at the residence located at "91 Revere Street," an explicitly domestic setting. In the three sections of poems in *Life Studies*, indoor settings predominate. In approximately half of these, a bathroom—or at least an image of water—is directly associated with madness or aberrant behavior. Beds and baths are the focus of Lowell's domestic spaces. From the sleeping berth in the transalpine train housing a "blear-eyed ego" to the madhouse cell in Munich in which the "mad negro soldier" recalls his canoe trips in the *Englischer Garten*, from

George Santayana's monastic cell in Rome to "Father's Bedroom" which features a book ruined by rain water, from the "whole house" on Marlborough Street equipped with a washing machine to the New York West Street Jail where convicts pile towels on racks ("Memories of West Street and Lepke"), from Bowditch Hall at McLean's mental hospital where Victorian bathtubs and locked razors dominate the scene to the marital bed in "Man and Wife" and "To Speak of Woe," bedrooms and bathrooms are evoked as domestic sites of madness. "During Fever" features Mother's "master-bedroom"—slyly insinuating who is master in the house—and measures its size by claiming that "the nuptial bed / was as big as a bathroom" (80). "Skunk Hour," the most celebrated poem in the volume, associates "love-cars" and the back steps of a house with a speaker who admits that his "mind's not right." Perhaps *Life Studies* is not only revolutionary in its more relaxed meter, colloquial diction, and thematic openness to private life. What is truly amazing is the pathology of the private life that is revealed in its domestic and watery settings.[6]

The prominence of water and especially bathrooms in these poems offer us fresh opportunities for limning Lowell's psychic state. Bathrooms were just beginning to be featured in several places in public culture in the years around 1959, perhaps no more famously so than in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), at essentially the same historical moment, with its grisly, now iconic murder scene in the shower.[7] To stage the climax of a work titled "Psycho" in the bathroom cements the close association of psychic disturbance with bathrooms and especially with gushing water. Two years later, we see the bathroom as a place of private indulgence in psychologically disturbed behavior:

> In 1962, "Lolita" brought about the signature "bathrooms are evil" scene that would resonate throughout Kubrick's film career. In a key scene, Humbert Humbert (James Mason) is in the bathtub when he is told that Lolita's mother has died. It is alone, in the bathroom, that Humbert decides to take his nymphet fantasy out of his mind and onto the road. (Morgan)

In film, then, the time was apparently ripe for peeking into the bathroom.

Of immediate interest to Lowell the "haptic" poet—as Randall Jarrell (25) described him with one of the most fortuitous adjectives ever chosen to characterize Lowell—are what I would like to call the existential, pragmatic, and performative features of life in the bathroom. Among the existential features I count partially or fully naked bodies, especially one's own, and an occasion for a man to look at himself, as evoked by W.C. Williams in the epigraph chosen for this essay.[8] Among the pragmatic features I count a sizable body of water in the bathtub, interesting because it is indoor water as opposed to the outdoor water of the "Quaker Graveyard" or *Near the Ocean*. The performative features are constituted by certain bathroom implements. Lowell's interest is not primarily in the comb or the toothbrush, although he

writes about teeth elsewhere as we'll see in a moment. His interest is, almost obsessively, in the razor and the haptic act of shaving.

The bathroom is a clearly defined external space, a physical location rather than a space within the mind. As such, it qualifies as a "heterotopic" space (Foucault 23), one that has "the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect" (24). While Foucault mentions bedrooms, asylums, prisons, brothels, and boats, among other examples, as candidates for heterotopias, he neglects the bathroom. And yet, Lowell grasps the peculiar heterotopic quality of the bathroom as a site for encountering the self, as he stages the physical activity of shaving which requires close self-observation and sustained attention to the skin which separates the human body from the world.

A characteristic of the bathroom is that one locks oneself in it. This will become important in Lowell as a workable analogy to his sequestered existence in mental hospital wards; the "locked ward" is, after all, the place where psychiatric patients are, or used to be, kept isolated from the outside world but—and this is important!—in company with each other, forming their own world. The bathroom is a metonymic mental ward: just as inmates of mental asylums are allowed to perform transgressive acts or antics there, so the bathroom gives us the privacy to do things we cannot do in public. By locking the door, we separate ourselves from the world. A lock implies a key, and a key implies a keyhole: Lowell's obsession with bathrooms comes full circle in the highly complex image he evokes in "Eye and Tooth:"

> No ease for the boy at the keyhole,
> his telescope,
> when the women's white bodies flashed
> in the bathroom. Young, my eyes began to fail. (*FUD* 19)

The instruments of vision are quite incongruous: a telescope does not help with looking through a keyhole. The lines suggest two different kinds of looking; one from close up, another from far away. Both glances come from the wrong distance. Neither is socially appropriate or visually satisfying, both are somehow forbidden. Both seek to catch women in the bathroom as their "white bodies" "flashed"—i.e., show up in brilliant light for a brief moment but provide neither visual nor erotic ease.

Thematizing the notion of pain perceived and ease denied, the poem takes us through a complete autobiography from "the house with my first tooth" to adolescent peeping at keyholes, to the present moment of "turmoil." Its controlling image is the oldest homophone in the English language, "I" and "eye"; when the poet begins with "*My whole eye* was sunset red" (emphasis

added), his self as much as his organ of sight is under discussion. The speaker is "tired" (stanza 9) but cannot sleep (stanza 2). Chain-smoking offers no satisfaction but teaches the smoker how to "flinch," summer rain is a "simmer of rot and renewal" (*summer* and *simmer* are a suggestive minimal pair as they evoke stagnation), and the foreshortened clause "young, my eyes began to fail"[9] suggests an early disintegration of the integral self. Poor vision stands metonymically for a deteriorating "I." "Nothing can dislodge" whatever obstacle the poet is to himself, whatever rots, or what should be extracted like the tooth of the adolescent.

By the time he composed *Life Studies*, Lowell had long since left behind his conventional Catholicism but not his scriptural knowledge, available for acerbic wit. Thus, he sees "things darkly, / as through an unwashed goldfish globe," troping on St. Paul's famous passage in 1 Corinthians about adolescence as a metaphor for growth in faith and love, and smartly suggesting the distorted fish-eye view of both the sufferer from myopia and the person trying to look through a keyhole. The next image in the poem, a hawk pictured in a book and seen in connection with the Old Testament adage, "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," seems incongruous in the sequence, as the book with the hawk has not been introduced before and is brought in by sheer association. It is linked to the boy's remembrance of a tooth extracted with the help of a doorknob; i.e., by slamming the door shut after having tied a string between it and the tooth. Lowell must have been thinking of the New Testament's powerful injunction, meant to trump the Mosaic law, to tear out the bodily parts that incite to sin: "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one of your body parts than to have your whole body thrown into hell."[10] Peeping at naked bodies may not be terribly sinful but it is certainly socially unacceptable. Lowell clearly had the biblical injunction about tearing out one's eye present to mind. In his autobiographical sketch "Near the Unbalanced Aquarium," Lowell reports that he quoted this precise biblical line to a fellow inmate at the Payne-Whitney clinic (*Collected Prose* 352). He next performs the socially unacceptable act of tripping his fellow inmate, Roger, and promptly feels "eased" (352), providing yet another verbal echo of the poem. In "Eye and Tooth," then, the speaker has not even entered the bathroom, but the existential drama he has played out in front of its locked door has taken us into the abysses of his autobiography, his scriptural knowledge, and his remembered erotic fantasies. If the keyhole can be so powerfully suggestive, the bathroom itself promises to be even more so.

Our first look at the bathroom and its psychological implications has taken us right to the center of *For the Union Dead* and its predecessor volume, *Life Studies*, the two books long recognized as the hinge on which Lowell's style

and his public self turned. These two books are the poetic record of his transition from formal Catholic to free-verse post-Catholic: the journey from religion to art—from Rome to Paris—in "Beyond the Alps" and the transformation of the "fire-breathing Catholic C.O." who "was telling off the state and president" (*LS* 85) into the elegist for Colonel Shaw, as Lowell became the reluctant poet of empire. The dualities invoked here parallel two others; "insane/sane" and "soiled/clean," though the pairs don't always match up neatly. The poetic self that emerges from the pages of these volumes is peculiarly concerned with cleanliness, hygiene, privacy, and plumbing. Shaving takes center stage.

In "Beyond the Alps," which opens *Life Studies*, "The Holy Father dropped his shaving glass, / and listened. His electric razor purred" (4). This look at a private moment in the Pope's life is not as transgressive as Sharon Olds's poem, "The Pope's Penis" (1987), but in 1950, even thinking about the Pope's private hygiene would be calling attention to itself. The electric razor highlights the incongruousness between modern convenience and ancient mystery, especially one as arcane as the bodily assumption of Mary. This figure in a pensive state who holds a razor and looks at a mirror is ironically echoed by the poet himself in "Waking in the Blue," an account of McLean's "house for the 'mentally ill'" (81). The latter poem ends hauntingly on the assertion, "We are all old-timers, / each of us holds a locked razor" (82) and, a few lines up, "before the metal shaving mirrors." On one level, the locked razor merely confirms expectations; of course mental inmates should be protected from doing harm to themselves. Razors can serve as a tool to commit suicide, but in fact these razors are just a small part of the hygienic inventory that seems to control the poem: "Stanley … once a Harvard all-American fullback … soaks … in his long tub … vaguely urinous from the Victorian plumbing." Another lovingly described inmate is "Bobbie," "Porcellian '29," who "swashbuckles about in his birthday suit." The three inmate characters, then, Stanley, Bobbie, and the poet, are all described in association with bathroom-related activities: soaking in a tub, parading fully naked, and holding a razor.[11] Reading "Waking in the Blue" together with "Beyond the Alps," one could claim that the mad poet holding razor and mirror has taken the pope's place; the poet's pronouncements may be as incomprehensible to the world as the pope's. Alternatively—and even more transgressively—the pope in this image joins the other madmen in McLean's holding razors. Ever since the loss of the papal states in the process of Italian unification in 1870—the time of Pope Pius IX—popes for several generations referred to themselves as "prisoners in the Vatican." As a lapsed Catholic, temporarily imprisoned in Bowditch Hall, Lowell illustrates mental activity as reduced to mere grooming. Stanley and Bobbie both have a Harvard pedigree, as does the

poet—within limitations, as he did not graduate—but a comprehensible explanation of the world will not be offered by these "thoroughbred mental cases" from America's premier institution of higher learning. The task of reading the overdetermined *The Meaning of Meaning*, we learn as the poem opens, is given instead to B.U. sophomores. Acerbic wit, again, defuses the scene.

The poem immediately following "Waking in the Blue," "Home After Three Months Away," again focuses on shaving. The private family moment takes place, significantly, in the apartment's bathroom and is shared between father and infant daughter, as the daughter invites the father to shave by dabbing her own cheeks. In this instance, the heterotopic space of the bathroom permits company; another reason why the toilet and the shower don't enter the picture in any obtrusive way. The poem rests on a layer of metaphors that limn the difference between "above" and "below": the apartment is three floors up, but the poet "keep[s] no rank nor station." Yet, he refers to himself as "Richard" ("is Richard now himself again"?) as if he were a Plantagenet King. Clearly, the man is up and the child is down, but the infant daughter "holds her levee in the tub" as if she, not he, were royalty. Again, the bathtub is the focus. At least six lines in the poem are given to shaving. The daughter proceeds to play havoc with the shaving implements: "When / we dress her in the sky-blue corduroy (an anticipation of the "flame-flamingo infants' wear" of "Memories of West Street and Lepke"?), "/ she changes to a boy, / and floats my shaving brush / and washcloth in the flush …. / Dearest, I cannot loiter here / in lather like a polar bear." Father and daughter enact a play in front of the mirror that would have intrigued Lacan. As the father tries to become "himself" again in overcoming the manic-depressive episode that sent him away from home, so the daughter sees herself in relation to the father, comically suggesting a shave.

It's a sweet scene, but the madhouse is not far. In a matter of two pages in *Life Studies*, we have moved from locked razors to playfully floating the shaving brush. The next poem in the collection extends the idea of bathroom and madness in eerie suggestiveness: *Murder Incorporated*'s Czar Lepke, clearly a madman and now lobotomized, is seen "piling *towels* on a rack / or dawdling off to his little segregated cell" (my emphasis, 86). These are clean towels, obviously, as one does not "pile" dirty towels on a rack. Lepke is either in the bathroom, the laundry room, or in his own cell; perhaps the three are interchangeable. The poet meanwhile, not lobotomized but certainly "tranquillized," as he states in stanza two, wears "*pajamas* fresh from the washer each morning" (my emphasis 85). We might have expected "dryer" not "washer"--commercial dryers had entered middle-class American households by the late fifties. But the poet insists on "washer."

Are pajamas fresh every morning excessive? I see the side-by-side of insistent hygiene on one side and separation from society on the other, subtle but intended, as connecting indicators. The poem is about life in prison, and even now the poet "hog[s] a whole house on Boston's 'hardly passionate Marlborough Street'," a larger version of prison (*LS* 85). In these sequestered settings, attention to grooming and freshness barely holds the disorder of mania at bay. Does the literal meaning of "hog"ging the house more directly suggest filth that needs to be controlled? The inmates of Bowditch Hall, the poet shaving, Czar Lepke, and the Pope are all connected through the semantic field "bathroom," both to suggest their isolation from the surrounding world and to intimate their madness—madness most generally defined as a state of being out of tune with the rest of the world. And, since "Memories of West Street" recalls the poet's time as conscientious objector, we quickly see the analogy of prison and mental hospital confirmed: both, after all, have *inmates*.

Lowell's well-documented rivalry with his father, as narrated in "91 Revere Street" and elsewhere, is played out, unsurprisingly, in another bathroom setting. Lowell senior—the most important foil against which the poet defines himself[12]—upon resigning from the Navy, took a job with Lever Brothers' *Soap* (my emphasis, *LS* 15):

> "Anchors aweigh," Daddy boomed in his bathtub,
> "Anchors aweigh,"
> when Lever Brothers offered to pay
> him double what the Navy paid. ("Commander Lowell," LS 71)

Lowell senior enjoys the privacy of the bathroom to perform some mild antics in singing the Navy Hymn, but the setting makes him ridicules as he produces soap bubbles in the bathtub instead of commanding a battleship.

References to bathrooms, water, and shaving implements are prominent in other poems in *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead*, but they serve mostly as local illustrations instead of providing large frames of meaning as they did in the poems discussed above. In "Words for Hart Crane," for instance, surely one of Lowell's earliest irregular sonnets, the poet ventriloquizes Crane who has "flushed [his] dry mouth [ ] out with soap" (*LS* 55). The poet in "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow" who sees his five-and-a-half year-old self as a "stuffed toucan," notices that "distorting drops of water / pinpricked my face in the basin's mirror." The child instinctively realizes that his absurd formal dress does not measure up to the "display window / of Roger Peet's boys' store" (*LS* 61). Water, a mirror, and a mirroring display window form a triadic unit of meaning that mirror the child back to itself. In "During Fever," the poet evokes the generations from his daughter through himself back to his mother and yet further back to his maternal grandfather.

Lowell's mother, Charlotte Winslow, is the center of the poem's attention; her "nuptial bed," curiously devoid of a husband, "[is] as big as a bathroom" (*LS* 80). The comparison is unusual, to say the least, yet a bed (and conceivably a bathroom) can be a heterotopic space according to Foucault who includes bedrooms among his "semi-closed sites of rest" (24). But we must forego interpreting the metaphorical line, "free-lancing out along the razor's edge," from "To Speak of Woe…" (*LS* 88) as if it were a real razor—it is not. Nonetheless, the literal "razor's edge" is too prominent a feature in Lowell's poetry to remain ignored.

A number of poems in *For the Union Dead* continue the theme, though less insistently than *Life Studies*, so that we need to rely on information gleaned from *Words in Air*, the collected letters exchanged between Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop, to establish an interpretive context proving how often the topics of water and shaving entered into their correspondence. In 1947, Bishop wrote from Key West about her amazement at the illuminated pool in Hemingway's house and the pleasure of swimming in it (Bishop # 13, p. 13); Lowell responded immediately with an anecdote about his weak swimming skills (# 14, p.15). Together with an earlier reference to sea-sickness (# 4, p. 7), I wonder how "waterproof" Lowell really was—he is, after all, the poet of "The Quaker Graveyard" and the son of a naval officer. At the Cosmos Club in Washington in 1948, again writing to Bishop, Lowell reported that he "startled an ancient man wrapped in a sheet making for the shower" (# 36, p. 43). In December of the same year, he wrote a "before-breakfast" letter from Yaddo and ended it with the remarkable line, "Now to breakfast, just in the nick of time and unshaven" (# 63, p. 70). Not to shave seems to be somehow daring to Lowell at this time. Writing from Castine in 1957, Lowell apologizes to Bishop for his manic behavior during an earlier visit and reports dutifully, "I am taking my anti-manic pills—75 mgs of sparine.[13]" He describes spending the day as follows: "Yesterday was mostly bed, sparine and letting my beard grow" (# 157, p. 213f). Again, we see Lowell's concern with facial hair, this time in direct connection with the chemical controlling of madness. The *topoi* of shaving, madness, and imprisonment regularly cluster together in Lowell's work. In "Near the Unbalanced Aquarium," Lowell recalls some of his fellow inmates at Danbury, the black Israelites, who wished to grow ritual beards but were forced by prison regulations to shave (*CP* 362).

Such apparently fugitive lines in Lowell's prose are given additional weight when read in connection with *For the Union Dead*, the volume which contains "Eye and Tooth," discussed earlier. In "The Drinker," razor blades appear as a sign of disorder and dishevelment:

> The cheese wilts in the rat-trap,
> the milk turns to junket in the cornflakes bowl,

> car keys and razor blades
> shine in an ashtray (*FUD* 37).

In continuation of the bathroom theme, we learn in "Soft Wood," an elegy to Harriet Winslow's house in Maine:

> The green juniper berry spills crystal-clear gin,
> and even the hot water in the bathtub
> is more than water,
> and rich with the scouring effervescence
> of something healing,
> the illimitable salt.

The "bathtub" and the "gin" in adjacent lines seem to me to be incongruous—we are probably not talking about moonshine here—but the poem's theme is transition and return, elegiac sentiment and the persistence of natural rhythms. The haunting recognition, "This is the season / when our friends may and will die daily" leads to the conclusion that "each drug that numbs alerts another nerve to pain" (*FUD* 64).

Lowell stays true to his construction of bathrooms as heterotopic spaces in his dramatic adaptation of Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno."[14] The place where Captain Cereno is shaved by Babo is not properly a bathroom but serves many different domestic functions. It appears to Delano, in words taken almost verbatim from Melville, like "a sort of dormitory, sitting-room, / sail-loft, chapel, armory, and private bedroom all together" (184).[15] The confusion of categories mirrors Delano's confusion concerning the hierarchies on board. The act of shaving itself mutates from grooming to wounding and results, offstage, in Cereno's attempt to wound Babo in turn. He who holds the razor is temporarily master of the ship, but the deceptive appearances—which form the epistemological burden of the tale—are only heightened by the potential use of the razor as a weapon in hand-to-hand combat. Lowell's dramatization of the shaving scene shows us not so much a scene of madness, a scene of a man divided in himself, as it shows us a scene of indeterminacy.

Lowell's last volume of poems published in his lifetime, the 1977 *Day by Day*, suggests itself as the poet's final pronouncement, by default, on many topics and concerns that agitated him throughout the preceding decades. Fittingly, it is a "domestic" volume in many senses of the word, obliquely chronicling Lowell's life in England and his periodic returns to the United States. Mediations on marriage and relationships are scattered throughout—the first poem is entitled "Ulysses and Circe" and seeks to define the nature of what is "uxorious (line 13)—and in the third subsection of Part Three, Lowell returns once more to shaving:

> Shaving's the one time I see my face,
> I see it aslant as a carpenter's problem-- (*Day by Day* 102)

In the small space of twenty lines, "Shaving" will touch upon "thirsty eyes" and the separation between the self, perceived in the mirror, and the speaking self. The speaker apostrophizes himself as "monomaniacal" and darkly alludes to the guilt of children, "their blurting third-degree." The entire poem echoes "Eye and Tooth"; the chronologically later one nearly incomprehensible without the former. Even the graphically separate stanza, "For me, / a stone is as inflammable as a paper match" recalls the "flinch[ing]" of the speaker in the earlier poem when lighting a match to continue his chain-smoking. Though part of a series of lyrics that address Caroline Blackwood, the poem titled "Shaving" may more accurately be a self-address: when the speaker addresses a face—his face?—in the concluding line, "We are lucky to have done things as one," he acknowledges that his physical body and his mental self have not separated schizophrenically at last but have remained "as one." The valedictory mood of the line is of a piece with many similar lines in *Day by Day*, of which "I thank God for being alive / a way of writing I once thought heartless" ("Logan Airport, Boston" 75) is perhaps best known.

More associations—somewhat tenuous perhaps—of madness and beards can be found in the Lowell corpus. In February 1965 Lowell reports to Bishop "I am back from a month in the sanitarium. It was a quiet stay this time." Less than ten lines later, he evokes Randall Jarrell (this is roughly seven months before Jarrell would die) in saying: "One can talk more easily of Randall, now that he has shaved and walks the same earth as we do. Gone the noble air of pained, aloof nobility" (Bishop # 316, p. 570). All well-known pictures of Randall Jarrell show him with a full beard. I recognize that it is Lowell's madness and Jarrell's beard that are juxtaposed here, but the topical combination is nonetheless haunting. In Lowell's mind, Jarrell's beard was one of his characteristic possessions, like his "white sporting Mercedes Benz." Later that year, towards the conclusion of his 1965 memorial article about Jarrell, as he raises the pitch of recollected friendship from eulogy to elegy, Lowell visualizes Jarrell: "Poor modern-minded exile from the forests of Grimm, I see him … bearded, with a beard we at first wished to reach out our hands to and pluck off, but which later became him" (Lowell, "Randall" 6-7). The impulse to pluck can be both affectionate and an act of torture or humiliation (compare Isaiah 50:6); for Lowell, Jarrell's beard was something like the objective correlative to his demeanor, which he repeatedly called "noble," even as the essay ends with Jarrell's "noble, difficult, and beautiful soul" (7). We will never know whether Jarrell's death was accidental or occurred in a moment of mental instability. Lowell, in any case, can claim Jarrell's poetic kinship effectively by associating him with his beard.

Robert Lowell was not the only poet obsessed with shaving. A final, curious, fugitive reference to shaving occurs in a letter written by Elizabeth

Bishop in February 1976. Bishop was staying at the Cosmopolitan Club in New York, getting ready to hear some of her poems performed that evening, as set to music by Elliott Carter. Writes Bishop: "Frank [Bidart] is coming over for this big event … & we just had a long conversation about whether he can *shave* in the men's room *here* (I don't know but shd. think so!), & if it's all right to wear a *sports jacket* and not a suit…" (# 448, italics in original). I cannot ascertain if Frank Bidart was more fastidious than other people in the 1970s, but the reference suffices to suggest that a cultural history of beards and American poets—not just from Whitman to Ginsberg, but also from James Russell Lowell to Robert Lowell—is yet to be written.

In *Life Studies* and elsewhere, Robert Lowell poetically opened the door to the bathroom. He did this, not with a scatological interest, but to create an opportunity to think about the fairly intimate activities of cleaning, grooming, and especially shaving in relation to the self. Lowell's willingness to tread new ground in his *materia poetica* extends not just to the disclosure of mental troubles and family secrets, then, but to the private world of the bathroom. In Lowell's work, the bathroom thus loses some of its private character and becomes at times a staging area for thinking about madness, at other times a locale that is no longer just a space but a heterotopia, in Foucault's terminology. William Carlos Williams may have prepared the way with "Danse Russe," but T.S. Eliot, another distant mentor of Lowell's, surely played a role as well, since it is, after all, in the privacy of the bathroom that we conventionally "prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet" (Eliot 4). Alexander Pope wrote the as yet unsurpassed scene of "cosmetic armament" in Canto II of "The Rape of the Lock" for his heroine Belinda, but Robert Lowell was probably the first poet to exploit shaving in detail for the making of meaning. Lowell constructs the bathroom as a space of communication with his infant daughter but also as a space of isolation, deeply troubled and akin to the locked ward of McLean's Hospital. Water, perhaps the most important of the four traditional elements in Lowell's universe (with "air" running a close second) is domesticized in the bathroom: the bathroom emerges as a liminal space, where a man with a razor confronts his body and his self, and where Robert Lowell discovers a rich source of poetic imagery.

Notes

I would like to thank my anonymous reviewers at *Pacific Coast Philology* for their generous and helpful suggestions.

1. This brief sentence hardly does justice to the enormity of the shift in Lowell's life and poetry, but critics from Steven Axelrod (who subtitles a chapter "Starting Over: Learning from Williams") to Paul Mariani (Ch. 10, "Breakthrough 1956-1957) have chronicled it in comparable terms. Mariani quotes an early draft of "Man and Wife," in which the key term in

my own title bears a racial instead of the sexual connotation it would later acquire: "I can hear the South End, / The razor's edge / Of Boston's negro culture" (251).

2. Ames comments in her first paragraph that this sense is "perhaps the result of leftover baggage from being raised a 'good' Catholic girl".

3. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975) comes to mind. See also Chloë Taylor for a rewarding historical study of the concept of confession.

4. The two notable exceptions are (1) the four-year-old Bobbie (young Lowell), in Philadelphia, swallowing an ivory elephant which reappeared in the chamber pot ("Antebellum Boston" *Collected Prose* 308), and (2) the episode of Elie Norton, the girl who sat next to Lowell in the Brimmer lower school and who had "an accident" in her seat (LS & FUD 29, 30). The limitations of Lowell's willingness to break taboos obviously lie exactly in the area of excretion of bodily wastes, a topic he does not investigate in his work.

5. Lowell opens "At the Unbalanced Aquarium," a prose memoir written around 1957 (*Collected Prose* 363), with the telling description of his attempt "to get my picture of myself straight." Just as Lacan analyzes the mirror-stage in the infant as pre-social (see 1289; its end "inaugurates … the dialectic that will henceforth link the *I* to socially elaborated situations"), the poet's renewed evocation of the mirror stage suggests latency in his social functions—exemplified in my discussion below by the extreme situations of prison, asylum, and illness.

6. My thoughts about the bathroom as private space complement the observations made by Deborah Nelson in *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* (2001). Whereas Nelson approaches her subject through the discourse of Constitutional law and focuses on Lowell's construction of the "hierarchic privacy / of Queen Victoria's century" ("Skunk Hour" *LS 89*), I offer additional textual evidence about shaving to read some key poems anew as I circle in on Lowell's bathroom activities in *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead*.

7. I owe the reference to *Psycho* to Michael Trask, endnote 24.

8. Since the kind of shaving discussed in this article is limited to the shaving of facial hair, my pronouns are at times intentionally masculine. Lowell's shaving scenes all concern men. Conventionally, women check their appearance throughout the day, while men may only look at themselves twice a day.

9. Grammatically, „young" modifies „my eyes," but the intended meaning is more likely, „[already] when I was young, my eyes began to fail."

10. International Standard Version. The passage comes from the "Sermon on the Mount," a central passage about Christian ethics.

11. Stanley, Bobbie, the poet—all described with reference to their body shape or weight ("a ramrod with the muscle of a seal", "he thinks only of his figure", "I weigh two hundred pounds"—could easily be poetic relatives of "stately, plump Buck Mulligan" who opens James Joyce's *Ulysses* clad in a "dressing gown, ungirdled," as he enters "bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed" (1). Lowell may well intend a sly reference to one of his few Modernist precursors who prominently discusses shaving.

12. For Lowell's self-definition against the image of his father, compare his dismissive comments about the senior Lowell's ineffectiveness as officer and as husband, his repeated use of the adjective "sheepish" in connection with him, as well as the traumatic episode of Lowell striking his father down; an episode he revisits many times in prose and poetry. "91 Revere Street," though seemingly beginning and ending *in medias res*, is in fact shrewdly structured. It ends with Commander Harkness's damning comment confirming Lowell Sr.'s emasculation: "I know why Young Bob is an only child."

13. "Sparine" was a registered trademark for an anti-psychotic medication in the chlorpromazine class: "Chlorpromazine hydrochloride, a neuroleptic drug that stabilizes the autonomic nervous system during stress by blocking dopamine neuroreceptors and is effective in reducing psychotic symptoms, originally developed in 1950 as the first of the phenothiazines." ("Chlorpromazine")

14. Originallywritten in 1964. My text is the 1968 r*evised edition* of *The Old Glory*.

15. Melville has "private closet" (70) where Lowell modernizes to "private bedroom"

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