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“Un-American Confessions”: Translation as Subversion in Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* (1959)

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- 1 In a 1969 letter to Richard Tillinghast, Robert Lowell acknowledged the influence of European poems upon his widely celebrated “confessional” volume, *Life Studies* (1959):

I began ‘Skunk Hour’ as a loose rendering of Hölderlin’s ‘Brot,’ [sic] and heaping on Maine scenery. I think no Hölderlin is left. Then (roughly, I was working on five or six things at once) ‘Commander Lowell,’ drawn from Rimbaud’s ‘Poètes des Sept Ans’...‘Crane’ revised ...‘To Speak’ (from a late bitter poem of Catullus, but maybe nothing’s left of that). (Lowell, *Letters* 522)

- 2 Lowell’s admission that “maybe nothing’s left” of Hölderlin, Rimbaud, and Catullus lends credence to Stanley Kunitz’s suggestion that he—Lowell—regarded translation as a “springboard” for his own poetic interests (qtd. in Weissbort 111). While a more comprehensive discussion of Lowell’s imitations is beyond the scope or the intention of this paper, I nevertheless hope to demonstrate that his belated acknowledgement of *Life Studies*’ indebtedness to foreign textual sources stands in instructive counterpoint to the broader political background informing the volume’s composition. The interests to which Lowell directed his *Life Studies* imitations are keyed-in to mid-twentieth century American preoccupations and anxieties broadly associated with cold war “containment” ideology. In particular, Lowell’s investment in (and imitative erasure of) foreign inter-texts during the composition of *Life Studies* represents a telling instance of the pressures brought to bear upon his work by the virulent force of containment ideology’s McCarthyist manifestation. By “burying the evidence” of his collusion with foreign poetic sources via the medium of poetic imitation, in other words, Lowell’s *Life Studies* imitations represent a poetic analogy for the concealment of potentially subversive agencies during McCarthyism. Lowell’s *Life Studies* imitations thus offer implicit testimony, rather than outright confession, to the peculiarly virulent climate of suspicion, paranoia, and anxiety broadly mobilized by containment ideology, and his covert collusion with European

poetic sources presents a potentially subversive challenge to the House of Un-American Activities (HUAC) and McCarthyism's more specific interest in securing mid-century America's domestic sphere against the presumable infiltration of communism or, more generally, contamination by foreign or "Un-American" influences.

- 3 Lowell's acknowledgement of translational sources, while frequently scattershot and cavalier rather than precise, is almost entirely absent in *Life Studies*.ⁱ Thus, while his "career-long imitations venture" (James, "On Second Thoughts" 200) has been recognized, and if significant critical attention has been devoted to collections in which he offers clear acknowledgement of his translational sources, the impact of translation upon the *Life Studies* poems has rarely been addressed in great detail.ⁱⁱ Lowell's preference for the liberal form of translation known as "imitation" also lends support to Peter Robinson's suggestion that his translations are little more than "a symptom of Cold War [sic] cultural politics" (35). By contrast, I argue that Lowell's covert collusion with foreign poetic sources throughout *Life Studies* signals a more complicated, and potentially subversive, engagement with cold war cultural politics. Though "buried" beneath (or "contained" within) "confessional" poetic surfaces, the Derridean traces—what Gayatri Spivak calls "the track" or "the spoor" (qtd. in Derrida xvii)—of Lowell's translational praxis in *Life Studies* attest to a degree of poetic excess that haunts and troubles the ostensibly personal and domestic concerns of the *Life Studies* poems. The *Life Studies* imitations thus emerge as peculiar symptoms of a very specific aspect of mid-twentieth century America's broader cold war cultural background. By surreptitiously situating the foreign at the heart of the American home, the "buried translations" in *Life Studies* arguably allow Lowell to lobby an implicit or covert critique of the "cult of domesticity," and its concomitant "demand for domestic security" (Nadel ix), prompted by containment culture in cold war America.

1. Containment, Concealment, and Leakage

- 4 Officially sanctioned by George F. Kennan and the State Department in 1947, containment was "the name of a privileged American narrative during the cold war" (Nadel 2) dedicated to securing the American home front against "the power of the Soviet Union" (Tyler May 16). As Alan Nadel suggests, however, "the duality...concealed by containment" (4) meant that the policy also affected the domestic sphere of "American life in numerous venues and under sundry rubrics during that period" (2). By "equating containment of communism with containment of atomic secrets, of sexual license, of gender roles, of nuclear energy, and of artistic expression" (5), in other words, "America in the 1950s practiced the cult of domesticity as a form of political and social containment for the sexual energies of post-World War II teenagers and young adults, congruent to and commensurate with the American foreign and domestic policy of containing communism" (Nadel 117). Nadel's observations reflect Elaine Tyler-May's account of "[d]omestic anticommunism... another manifestation of containment" according to which "subversive individuals could be contained and prevented from spreading their poisonous influence through the body politic" (16). By situating the cultural impact of containment ideology securely within the American home, domestic containment described "the way in which public policy, personal behavior, and even political values were focused on the home" (16). From this perspective, containment implied a parochial

attempt to secure the American home against foreign or presumably un-American others via a "cult of domesticity and the fetishizing of domestic security" (Nadel 3).

- 5 Translation and imitation are, arguably, apposite literary extensions of containment ideology. As Lawrence Venuti suggests, translation inevitably domesticates the potentially disturbing otherness of foreign texts. This is precisely because the translator "negotiates the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text by reducing them and supplying another set of differences, basically domestic, drawn from the receiving language and culture to enable the foreign text to be received there" (468). By submitting foreign inter-texts to erasure via the practice of poetic imitation, then, Lowell participates in a similarly domesticating impulse. As Peter Robinson claims with reference to *Imitations* (1961), Lowell's translational stance is consequently "a symptom of Cold War [sic] cultural politics" whereby "European poetry is to be saved from the Communist threat by being rendered into the style of the free world" (35). Yet to accept this is to ignore the possibility that translation, like containment ideology, is governed by a troubling duality.ⁱⁱⁱ If Nadel's observation that "the duality... concealed by containment" (5) attests to its paradoxical failure to "facilitate a coherent social narrative" (34), in other words, it is equally arguable that Lowell's foreign sources, despite their erasure, disturb the coherence of narratives designed to cast him, reductively, as another "American cold warrior" (Tyler May 160). Instead, Lowell's foreign sources haunt his work in potentially productive ways, investing purportedly personal "confessions" with the traces of cold war cultural politics. Lowell's *Life Studies* imitations accordingly emerge as covert signals or coded inscriptions by which potentially subversive "foreign" dispatches might be "leaked" into the American home.^{iv}

2. Domesticating Europe

- 6 Lowell's translational procedures participate in a broader praxis of poetic revision and rewriting (James, "Revision" 44) initiated by his March 1957 reading tour of the West Coast. In an interview with Frederick Seidel, Lowell admitted his "growing disrespect for tight forms," adding that he introduced "little changes" to make his work "easier" for both himself and his American audience (Seidel, "Interview").^v If translation and imitation form part of Lowell's revisionary compositional methods, they also provided him with access to readymade and, significantly, *foreign* poetic forms and content from which to depart and to which he could return at will.^{vi} As a comparative glance at *Life Studies*' "Words for Hart Crane" (Lowell, *Collected Poems* 159) and "Epitaph for a Fallen Poet" (1037n) suggests, Lowell directs the compulsive "automatism" (James, "Revision" 28) that drove his revisionary procedures towards a project of translational domestication:

<p>Epitaph to a Fallen Poet When England gives the laurel to some dope Or screw who scrubs Catullus' tongue with soap Perhaps he will consider why I took This crooked turn, instead of Uncle Sam's Good offices that only health can buy. Because I knew my classics like a book, Stranger from England, tell the British: I <i>Catullus Redivivus</i>, once the rage Of Rome and Paris, used to play your role Of homosexual wolfing the stray lambs Who hunger by the Place de la Concorde. My profit was a pocket with a hole. Who asks for X, the Shelley of the age, Must pay pound sterling for his bed and board.</p>	<p>Words for Hart Crane "When the Pulitzers showered on some dope or screw who flushed our dry mouths out with soap, few people would consider why I took to stalking sailors, and scattered Uncle Sam's phoney gold-plated laurels to the birds. Because I knew my Whitman like a book, stranger in America, tell my country: I, <i>Catullus redivivus</i>, once the rage of the Village and Paris, used to play my role of homosexual, wolfing the stray lambs who hungered by the Place de la Concorde. My profit was a pocket with a hole. Who asks for me, the Shelley of my age, must lay his heart out for my bed and board."</p>
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- 7 By replacing "Epitaph to a Fallen Poet's" references to "England," "Rome," "the Classics," and "Catullus' tongue" with more typically American analogies such as "the Pulitzers," "the Village," "Whitman," and "our dry mouths," "Words for Hart Crane" demonstrates Lowell's interest in domesticating or containing foreign, and potentially un-American, sources of influence. Yet these substitutions also serve to locate forms of poetic and sexual expression inimical to containment culture's dominant poetic and political assumptions before re-situating them at the heart of the American home. By casting Crane in the "role / of homosexual," for instance, Lowell portrays a figure marginalized to the point of erasure by containment's assumptions about gender and sexuality. Not only does Crane's homosexuality attest to Tyler May's identification of "the explicit manifestations of anticommunist hysteria such as the 'red' and 'lavender' scares" (13), his representation as a destitute vagabond resonates poignantly with her observation that "the persecution of homosexuals was the most blatant form of sexual paranoia linking 'perversion' to national weakness" in McCarthy-era America (92).
- 8 Since he does not fit the profile demanded by normative psychosexual discourses mobilized by the State Department during the Cold War, and reaching fever pitch during McCarthyism, Crane represents a significant poetic presence that is nonetheless rendered invisible by America's commitment to containment ideology. As a metonymic substitute for a line of "queer" American poetics—initiated by Whitman and maintained by openly homosexual figures, such as Allen Ginsberg, Crane troubles containment's assumptions about American poetic history and its own contemporary moment. His sexual alignment with a poetic lineage that is both traditionally "centrist" (Whitman) and counter-culturally "queer" (Ginsberg) reveals the contingent nature of containment culture's attempts to claim cultural, political and, sexual probity on behalf of the nation. If Lowell domesticates the foreign textures of "Epitaph for a Fallen Poet," therefore, he does so in order to shed light on the more marginal and covert poetic and political activities taking place within the American home.

- 9 Similar principles of imitative approximation and departure (and their potentially subversive encounter with narratives of psychosexual containment) may be seen in "Skunk Hour" (Lowell, *Collected Poems* 191-192). Lowell's belated disclosure in 1964 that "Skunk Hour" began as a "loose rendering" of Hölderlin's "Brod und Wein," and that it was also indebted to Annette von Droste-Hülshoff's "Am letzten Tage des Jahres," offers an opportunity to investigate the nature and significance of his collusion with a European poetic traditions more carefully (*Collected Prose* 228). Lowell's remarks concerning the influence of Von Droste-Hülshoff's poem upon his own are, despite his opening acknowledgment, surprisingly evasive. While he initially admits that any trace of "Am letzten Tage des Jahres" is "probably undetectable" in the final version of "Skunk Hour," he concedes that both poems "have the same shudders and situation" (228). It is worth noting, however, that Lowell executes a significant departure from the "situation" presented in Von Droste-Hülshoff's poem and that he does so at the precise point that he closes in on its formal "shudders":

<p>Am letzten Tage des Jahres 's ist tiefe Nacht! Ob wohl ein Auge offen noch? In diesen Mauern ruttelt dein Verrinnen, Zeit! Mir schaudert; doch Es will die letzte Stunde sein Einsam durchwacht.</p>	<p>Skunk Hour And now our fairy decorator brightens his shop for fall; his fishnet's filled with orange cork; orange, his cobbler's bench and awl; there is no money in his work, he'd rather marry.</p>
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- 10 Lowell's employment of iambic tetrameter patterned on an *a b c b c a* rhyme-scheme in the fourth and fifth stanzas of "Skunk Hour" perfectly replicates Von Droste-Hülshoff's formal model.^{vii} Yet the technical and formal similarity of these sonic "shudders" belie significant and obvious differences between the respective poems' content: the relative "brightness" of Lowell's imagery, set alongside relatively quotidian concerns with advertising, work, and money, presents a striking contrast to the existential anxieties encapsulated by Von Droste-Hülshoff's preoccupation with "tiefe Nacht" (deep Night), time ("letzte Stunde" ("last hour") and lonely watchfulness ("Einsam durchwacht").
- 11 If such moments of paradoxical connection and departure attest to imitation's frequently puzzling relation to its source materials, it is worth noting that Lowell's poem enacts a more definite digression from containment culture's ideas about sexuality, marriage and morality. Lowell's "fairy decorator," as Lawrence Kramer has suggested, announces "the incompatibility between... homosexuality and his thoughts of marriage" (Kramer 90) and subsequently embodies the contained sexualities of homosexuals who, like communists, lived covert lives under a veil of suspicion: "There is no question [writes Tyler May] that the social pressure to appear mature, responsible, 'normal,' and patriotic contributed to the rush into marriage. Even gay men and lesbians used marriage as a cover during these years to escape stigma and persecution" (91-92). Like Crane, then, the fairy decorator is implicated in containment culture's production of narratives of suspicion and paranoia. In this case, the hysteria associated with "red" or "lavender" scares that "targeted citizens whose political views or personal identities raised questions about their loyalty or patriotism" (Tyler May 221), compels the fairy decorator to "cover up" his homosexuality by retreating into a heterosexual marriage of convenience.
- 12 In addition to its value as personal or autobiographical confession, "Skunk Hour" also displays Lowell's investment in a social world in which "personal-historical" (Kramer 96)

materials are meshed with political, sexual, and economic values familiar to mid-twentieth-century America. Indeed, the poem persistently enacts Lowell's interest in setting local or domestic values within potentially disruptive foreign circuits of transatlantic influence and exchange. Lowell's "Tudor Ford," for example, superimposes the name of a prestigious, peculiarly uxoricidal and, significantly, *foreign* dynasty onto a quintessentially American product. Lowell's Tudor Ford passes ironic commentary on containment's attempts to curtail foreign intrusion into the American home. As Lowell suggests, such intrusion has not only already happened, but is in fact driven by America's burgeoning transatlantic commercial interests.

- 13 Lowell's interest in the psycho-political implications of America's post-war economic boom are apparent in "Art and Evil," an unfinished 1956 prose manuscript:

[J]ust as we had labelled our times the Age of Anxiety, and had managed to point out an ample redeeming shadow of darkness in just about every writer who had ever lived—just at this point we suddenly found we were midway in a second solid, sensible, wealthy, optimistic, child-bearing era, one not unlike the times of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. Out of the black earth of our evil authors and evil visions, we have somehow rebuilt our own booming [18]70s, '80s, and '90s, complete with their dynasties of Republican presidents. (*Collected Prose* 130)

- 14 These remarks anticipate Lowell's description in "Memories of West Street and Lepke" of "the tranquilized Fifties," but they also recall the "blend of complacency and anxiety" that informs Irving Howe's 1954 diagnosis of "This Age of Conformity" (Howe 35). Challenging Joseph Schumpeter's argument that "capitalism inevitably... creates, educates and subsidizes a vested interest in social unrest," Howe points out that it has in fact encouraged "a return to the bosom of the nation" rather than "desperate 'opposition'" (26). This return, writes Howe, is marked by a steady and all-encompassing submission to the seductive pleasures of mass or commodity culture and a complacent retreat into "suburbs, country homes, and college towns" (29).

- 15 "Skunk Hour's" fairy decorator, like "Nautilus Island's hermit heiress," the widowed woman who, at the outset of the poem, "buys up all the eyesores facing her shore" (Lowell, *Collected Poems* 192) are, in different ways, susceptible to the curious admixture of acquisitiveness and complacency identified by Howe. Like the fairy decorator, Lowell's hermit heiress betrays a desire to retreat into the "hierarchic privacy" promised by domesticity. Despite her acquisitive impulses, however, she fails to match Howe's identification and critique of Veblenesque forms of conspicuous consumption undergirding mid-century America's culture of conformity (Howe 36). Though she "buys up all the eyesores facing her shore," the hermit heiress also "lets them fall"—perhaps to ruin—in a manner that belies the spectacular consumerism conceptualized by Veblen. Rather, as Deborah Nelson has observed, her acquisitive spirit is driven by a "hierarchic thirst for privacy" premised upon the outmoded belief that "spatial privacy... can as private property be restricted by ownership" (54). As Nelson demonstrates, mid-twentieth century American debates concerning the effect of surveillance technologies upon privacy had, since *Olmstead v U.S.* (1928), increasingly begun to recognize that "the zone of privacy—the home—[had moved] from the tangible realm of property rights to the abstractions of sacred domesticity" (94). Like the hermit heiress, Lowell's fairy decorator is similarly deluded by containment-era America's commitment to an anachronistic conflation of property and privacy. Resigned to the concealment of his homosexuality in marriage, the fairy decorator proceeds to "[brighten] his shop for Fall," seemingly oblivious to the irony that "there is no money in his work." Lowell thus

suggests that the desire for privacy and security that underpins containment culture's domestic ideal is ironically marked by ruinous privation.

- 16 "Skunk Hour's" prurient wanderer presents a telling counterpoint to the complacent acquisitiveness that underpins the hermit heiress's solitude and the contained sexuality of the fairy decorator. By leaving the home to "[watch] for love-cars," Lowell's wandering night-watchman enacts a subversive contravention of nationally mandated narratives prioritizing domestic security, privacy, and sexual and political containment. By seeking out presumably private and potentially "perverse" spaces beyond the home, Lowell's wanderer reveals containment culture's paradoxical preoccupation with what Nadel calls its "repressed duality" (xi). For Lowell, in other words, the sanctity of marriage and the security and privacy of the domestic sphere does not give way so much as provoke the presumable "perversity" of "careless love" publicly played out in darkened "love-cars" that "lay together, hull to hull, / where the graveyard shelves on the town" (Lowell, *Collected Poems* 191). Yet Lowell does not simply suggest that secretive or private spaces may be found beyond, rather than within, the confines of the home. Rather, the wanderer's surveillant gaze subjects even public "secrets" to scrutiny. Lowell's wanderer, in other words, does not collapse the distinction between private and public spheres of life so much as shatter the "myth... of privacy" (Nelson 49) upon which containment's cult of domesticity depends.
- 17 Sexual rather than acquisitive manifestations of containment, consumption, and privation, inform Lowell's treatment of foreign sources in "To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage" (Lowell, *Collected Poems* 190). Unlike other poems collected in *Life Studies*, "To Speak" openly displays its allusive reliance on "foreign" texts. The title, which derives from the prologue to the Wife of Bath's entry in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1478), and the subtitle, which redacts elements drawn from Arthur Schopenhauer's essay on "The Metaphysics of the Love of the Sexes" (1884), both allude to foreign texts that offer scathing demystifications of love, sexuality and marriage. Chaucer and Schopenhauer thus offer spirited counter-narratives to containment culture's assumption that "marriage was considered the appropriate container for the unwieldy American libido" (Tyler May 97).^{viii} On the one hand, as Catherine S. Cox suggests, The Wife of Bath, "calls attention to her... desire to consume, be it sexually, textually, or otherwise... she consumes both partners and texts, appropriating them for her own use and deriving from them whatever satisfaction she can find" (Cox 23). Schopenhauer, in turn, regards "all love, however ethereally it may bear itself, [to be] rooted in the sexual impulse alone, nay it absolutely is only a more definitely determined, specialized and indeed in the strictest sense individualized sexual impulse" ("Metaphysics").
- 18 Chaucer's and Schopenhauer's demystified portrayals of love, marriage, and sexuality inform the disturbing scenario that plays out in the bedroom that acts as both the setting for Lowell's poem and the inner-sanctum of containment culture's domestic ideal. As Lowell's nightmarish depiction of marital "life" suggests, any attempt to repress or "contain" sexuality is far more liable to result in "home disputes," adultery, and potentially murderous violence:
- The hot night makes us keep our bedroom windows open.
Our magnolia blossoms. Life begins to happen.
My hopped up husband drops his home disputes,
and hits the streets to cruise for prostitutes
free-lancing out along the razor's edge.
This screwball might kill his wife, then take the pledge. (Lowell, *Collected Poems* 190)

- 19 As the poetic speaker's representation of her husband as a "screwball" who might "kill his wife, then take the pledge" implies, domestic turmoil does not simply stand in ironic counterpoint to popular or political national narratives trumpeting the value of marital and domestic security. For Lowell, rather, violence is in fact sanctioned by the State Department's sanctification of marriage via policies of containment mobilized in the interests of domestic security. The idea that "[m]arriage was... the appropriate container for the unwieldy American libido" is shown to be not only false but potentially deadly (Tyler May 97). Lowell's representation of "woe in marriage" thus presents a darkly Kinseyan contrast to the political "pledges" mobilized by containment policy.
- 20 Lowell's investment in the subversive possibilities to be gained by inflecting familiar scenes of mid-century American domesticity with the potentially disturbing impress of the foreign is offset by a complementary willingness to situate—or, perhaps, to contain—the familiar within foreign settings. "A Mad Negro Soldier Confined at Munich," for example, focuses on the incarceration, in a Munich prison, of a mentally-ill African American soldier, a figure presumably representative of those Lowell might have encountered during his own detention in the securely "locked ward... of disturbed military personnel" (Lowell, *Collected Poems* 118) at an American hospital in Munich following his own mental breakdown in 1952 (Hamilton 190). In this way, "A Mad Negro Soldier Confined at Munich" encapsulates Lowell's interest in finding impersonal, but also powerfully political, analogies for his personal experience of displacement, confinement, and estrangement.
- 21 Yet it is perhaps similarly crucial to point out that Lowell's interest in a displaced and marginalized African American soldier within foreign contexts also represents a particularly troubling prospect for containment culture's normative racial and psychosexual assumptions. As Stephen Yenser has observed, Lowell's soldier speaks an "earthy American vernacular" which attests to his lamentable isolation within the foreign environment of the Munich prison, and his alienation is exacerbated "not only by his confinement following WWII, and not only by his color, but also and most poignantly by the drubbing given to him by two other African American inmates" (155). Beyond this, however, Lowell's soldier typifies Nadel's suggestion that "containment... continued to accommodate and validate growing male (hetero)sexual license at the expense of... black 'manhood'" (226), even as he embodies containment-era fears that "returning veterans would be unable to resume their positions as responsible citizens and family men" (Tyler May 64). The soldier's affair with the "Fräulein" who stitches "outing shirts/in the black forest of the coloured wards" (Lowell, *Collected Poems* 118) thus represents a particularly potent critique of containment's assumptions about national, sexual, and racial allegiance. Despite his distant confinement within a Munich prison, Lowell's soldier embodies forms of promiscuity that transect and transgress both the "blonde sexuality" that dominated mid-century America's racially "separate" sexual contexts (Nadel 227) as well as parochially bounded notions of nationality or domesticity valorized by containment ideology.

3. Darkness Visible

- 22 Lowell's interest in inflecting the familiar with the foreign recurs in more general and subtle ways throughout *Life Studies*. In "Sailing Home from Rapallo," for instance, he compares his mother's coffin to "Napoleon's at the Invalides" (Lowell, *Collected Poems* 179;

my italics); he describes a recognizably "Porcellian" inmate at McLean's mental institution as "a replica of *Louis XVI*" (183; my italics) and, in the same poem, he clothes his own autobiographical persona in a "*French sailor's jersey*" (184; my italics). "Home After Three Months Away" concludes with a recollection of flowers—"pedigreed / imported *Dutchmen*"—which have gone to seed (186; my italics), and, in "Terminal Days at Beverly Farms," Lowell picks out "a portly, uncomfortable boulder / bulked in the garden's center" only to note the "irregular *Japanese touch*" of its ornamental and orientalized design (175; my italics). Similar traces of orientalized otherness are scrawled across, if not quite woven into, the very fabric of "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.

...

Lafcadio Hearn's
Glimpses of unfamiliar Japan. (175-176; my italics)

- 23 If these examples attest to Lowell's sustained interest in situating the foreign at the heart of domestic American life throughout *Life Studies*, his recourse to imitative forms of translation acts as the means by which he mines the canon of a Western-European literary tradition so as to remind a complacent postwar American audience of their emergence from and complicity with a diabolical European literary heritage.
- 24 Lowell addressed this complicity in "Art and Evil," where Europe's portrayal as the "rich, deep, dark Old World" shattered by "social upheavals, revolutions, and two world wars" acts as a counterbalance to the patina of security and conformity so characteristic of his own "solid, sensible, wealthy, optimistic, child-bearing era" (129-130). In certain ways, Lowell's approach to Europe here recalls Philip Rahv's suggestion that Henry James regarded Europe as a gateway to a "cult of experience" that he found both terrifying and compelling (Rahv 19-37). As Rahv explains, Europe offered James a shocking alternative to "the prohibitive American past and the longstanding habit of playing hide-and seek with experience" (22). For Rahv, the intricate formalities of Jamesian style emerge from the tension between James's sense of the predicament of inhibited American "innocence" and vital, but also diabolical, European "experience." "James's tendency is to resolve this drama of entanglement," writes Rahv, "by finally accepting what Europe offers on condition that it cleanse itself of its taint of evil through an alliance with New World virtue" (22).
- 25 A similar conceptualization of the relationship between America and Europe is apparent in Lowell's remarks about the anesthetizing effects of "New World virtue" upon justifiable anxieties confronting his own contemporary American moment:
- During the last twenty years [1936-1956], the earth's surface seems to have sagged and cracked. These have been the years of Hitler, Stalin's purges, Buchenwald, the atomic bomb, the threat of nuclear war. During this period our graver and more high-powered critics have had to attempt a massive reappraisal; they have pretty well agreed that writers can be too healthy for their own good. Today we are looking for darkness visible, and we know that a realistic awe of evil is a mighty valuable thing for a writer to have. (Lowell, *Collected Prose* 129-30)
- 26 Lowell's supposition that American poets were looking for "darkness visible" reflects his own imitative concealment of European "darkness" within *Life Studies*, and his interest in setting assumptions about such "darkness" against the complacent domesticity cultivated

by containment ideology. This is particularly apparent in "Commander Lowell," a poem that departs from the "original skeleton" (Lowell, *Collected Poems* 1039n) of Arthur Rimbaud's "Poètes des Sept Ans," and which includes a misquotation of a line from Stéphane Mallarmé's "Brise Marine" (Lowell *Collected Poems* 172-174). Norman Cameron's "The Seven Year Old Poet" (Cameron 27-29), a more "faithful" translation of "Poetes des Sept Ans," provides a useful comparative foil against which Lowell's approximation of, and departures from, Rimbaud's poem may be seen:

<p>The Seven Year Old Poet And so the Mother, shutting up the duty-book, Went, proud and satisfied. She did not see the look In the blue eyes, or how with secret loathing wild, Beneath the prominent brow, a soul raged in her child.</p>	<p>Commander Lowell There were no undesirables or girls in my set, when I was a boy at Mattapoissett— only Mother, still her Father's daughter. Her voice was still electric with a hysterical, unmarried panic, when she read to me from the Napoleon book.</p>
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- 27 As this comparison suggests, Lowell's imitative method foreshadows his later admission, in the introduction to *Imitations* (1961), that he "dropped lines, moved lines, moved stanzas, changed images and altered meter and intent" in the course of translating or imitating the works of foreign poets (Lowell, *Collected Poems* 196). A similar practice informs Lowell's treatment of Rimbaud's "Poètes des Sept Ans": if "Mother" shuts "the duty-book" book in Cameron's translation, for example, she opens "the Napoleon book" to read to her "boy" in Lowell's. For the purposes of the present argument, however, it is worth noting that, in Lowell's poem, both Mother and boy are rendered "hysterical" and "manic" by virtue of their respective encounters with European imperial or military history. If "Mother" is "proud and satisfied" after reading from the duty-book in Rimbaud's poem, she is "electric / with a hysterical, unmarried panic" as she reads from "the *Napoleon* book [my italics]" in Lowell's. The phrase, "hysterical, unmarried panic," is particularly trenchant within the context of containment ideology's prioritization of marriage as a site of security and stability in an otherwise threatening cold war world. As Lowell suggests, "Mother's" "hysterical *unmarried* panic [my italics]" does not simply belie the fact of her marriage to Commander Lowell, it also disproves the idea that the pride and satisfaction found in Rimbaud might also be accessible via the containment of sexuality in marriage (Tyler May 97; Nadel 117-154). Lowell proceeds to forge further analogies between European "darkness" and domestic American tyranny. His observation that Bonaparte was "just my seven years tall," though comical, implies a troubling association between his own American childhood and a European tyrant. According to Lowell's analogy, "Mother" is pressed into the service of her tyrannical child in the same way that "long-nosed Marie Louise / Hapsburg [sic]... grovelled to Bonaparte." At the same time, however, the analogy undermines Napoleon's authority with the suggestion that the tyrant is little more than a petulant child.
- 28 Lowell introduces a similarly radical (and tyrannical) departure with respect to Rimbaud's child, who finds solace from his overbearing mother in forms of imaginative escape provided by novels of adventure and discovery. Lowell, by contrast, recalls how he used to "dope [him]self to sleep" by reciting a litany of European military figures:

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, *Collected Poems* 172)

- 29 Lowell's childhood obsession with European "generals" suggests that European "darkness" is already inscribed into the textures of domestic American literary life and language. The alphabet of European militarism that runs from Augereau to Vandamme, moreover, prompts a sustained and unflattering reflection of the poem's eponymous subject: the father-figure whose largely uneventful term with the merchant navy belies his title as "Commander Lowell." "Having a naval officer / for my Father was nothing to shout / about," writes Lowell, adding that Commander Lowell's golfing friends "naturally supposed his sport was sailing" before they dismissively "wrote him off as 'naval'" (Lowell, *Collected Poems* 172). Lowell proceeds to expose the absurdity of his father's nostalgic longing for his days as an officer in the merchant navy by portraying him as an absurdly domesticated figure: "Anchors aweigh,' Daddy boomed in his *bathtub*" (my italics). Yet Commander Lowell's failure goes beyond his depiction as a washed-up Proteus—an "old man of the sea" ironically reduced to childish attempts to replay the days of his naval service in the bathtub of his home. As Lowell suggests, his father's nostalgia also encourages him to invest in forms of financial speculation that lead to financial ruin:

Night after night,
 à la clarté déserte de sa lampe,
 He slid his ivory Annapolis slide rule
 Across a pad of graphs—
 Piker speculations! In three years
 He squandered sixty thousand dollars. (Lowell, *Collected Poems* 173)

- 30 Commander Lowell's "Annapolis slide rule," by recalling the U.S. Naval Academy located in Annapolis, Maryland, betrays his nostalgia for former glories, but it also displays his incompetent mis-application of naval tools to incompatible economic purposes. Commander Lowell fails to recognize that the light by which he attends to his "Piker speculations" consigns him, "Night after night, / à la clarté déserte de sa lampe" (in the desert clarity of his lamp), to financial ruin, isolation and self-delusion—the pitiful consequences of domestic containment itself.
- 31 Lowell inscribes Commander Lowell's misapprehension of his plight into the textures of his poem at the very point at which he deploys his allusion to another foreign source. The line, "à la clarté déserte de sa lampe," misquotes Stéphane Mallarmé's original "ni la clarté déserte de ma lampe," which, in "Brise Marine," suggests that nothing other than the departure afforded by travel is able to console the "heart which dips itself into the sea":

O nights! Nor the desert brightness of my lamp
 On the empty paper which the whiteness defends
 And neither the young woman nursing her child.
 I shall depart! Steamer balancing thy masts,
 Weigh anchor for an exotic nature!
 A Boredom, desolated by the cruel hopes,
 Believes still in the supreme farewell of handkerchiefs! (Mallarmé in Woolley
 208-209)

- 32 Commander Lowell's misapprehension of his own plight, therefore, is poetically re-enacted at the level of Lowell's imitative misrepresentation of Mallarmé's pessimistic

words. His tragedy, in other words, stems from his failure to recognize and learn from the foreign "darkness" represented by Mallarmé's instructive comparison between the pessimistic ennui of domestic life and the more optimistic promise of travel.

4. Conclusion

33 As I have suggested, Lowell's appeal to imitative forms of translation in *Life Studies* allows him to conceal, but also to capitalize on, the subversive potential of his covert collusion with foreign sources at a time when McCarthyism rendered suspicious, and threatened to foreclose, encounters with presumably "un-American" agencies. Lowell's *Life Studies* imitations are surreptitiously opposed to the climate of insecurity that characterized McCarthyist America which, following Nadel, represented another symptom of containment's "darker" manifestations by virtue of its description of "the growing fear of subversion and the extreme measures to counter it, that developed and heightened from the end of World War II to the early 1950s" (Nadel, 72). Lowell's susceptibility to the climate of suspicion that characterized McCarthyist America was sadly apparent during his tangential involvement in a case concerning Agnes Smedley, a woman incorrectly identified in the 1949 McArthur report as one of the American contacts for a Soviet spy ring. Though Smedley was cleared of all charges, the scandal shed light on her relationship with Elizabeth Ames, the executive director of Yaddo, a writer's colony where Lowell was stationed at the time. Following revelations that Yaddo had been the site of a longstanding FBI investigation, Lowell leveled an impassioned though largely unsubstantiated attack on Ames, accusing her of involvement with Smedley's allegedly subversive political activities and calling for her immediate expulsion from the colony. As Ian Hamilton reports, Lowell described Yaddo as a "body" and referred to Ames as

a diseased organ chronically poisoning the whole system, sometimes more, sometimes less, sometimes almost imperceptibly, sometimes, as now, fatally.... This may be impertinent but I think that the board cannot evade its moral responsibility because of any attachments or fear of any kind. I think of the Trasks [the founders of Yaddo] and I think it showed a touching innocent faith in the arts that they should have endowed Yaddo, and this faith has suffered hideous perversion. (145-146)

34 As this extract suggests, Lowell was clearly prone to rhetorical "qualities of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy" that Richard Hofstadter calls the "paranoid style" of mid-twentieth century American politics (3). By the same token, Lowell's employment of metaphors suffused with somatic affect such as "diseased organ" and sexually-loaded terms such as "perversion" and "moral responsibility" reflects containment culture's rhetoric of domestic anticommunism and validates Tyler May's observation that "in the post-war years...moral weakness was associated with sexual degeneracy, which allegedly led to communism" (Tyler May 98). Lowell, therefore, participated in a broader culture of domestic containment that "mirrored the logic of U.S. foreign policy in a domestic form of hypervigilance" and generated "an entire poetics of masculinity and homophobia developed in response to the apparent dangers of enemy 'penetration,' 'thought-control,' and subversion" (Melley 23). In this way, he embodies and verbalizes a climate of suspicion and paranoia generated by Cold War containment culture: The House of Un-American Activities had already begun to intensify its investigations into communist subversion within American national borders, while the curiously conspiratorial nature of claims leveled against putative Communist subversives,

such as Alger Hiss, entrenched the hysteria and paranoia that would characterize full-blown McCarthyism in the early 1950s would culminate in the execution of the Rosenbergs in 1961.

- 35 It is worth remembering, however, that the fortification of McCarthyism coincided with Lowell's departure from America for a two-year spell in Europe.^{ix} Given the political turmoil on the American home front, it is surprising to note that he chose to settle in what Hamilton has called "Communist Florence" (170) before visiting George Santayana in Rome, traveling to France, Greece and Turkey, and settling at last in Amsterdam, Holland. One of the more fascinating consequences of Lowell's encounter with European places, as Hamilton reports, was his habit of searching for "an American parallel for each new European marvel" (170). Florence represented Boston, Rome was New York, and Italy was "like America—a slightly older America" (170). He described Amsterdam, similarly, as "outwardly a sort [of] eighteenth century Boston... worldly, protestant," and he justified his desire to move to the Netherlands because it seemed closer to his own "Protestant New England background" (176).
- 36 If Lowell's willingness to see Europe as "a slightly older America" hints at his preoccupation with domesticating his encounters with foreign places, a similar (if more subversive) principle appears to animate his approach to translation and imitation. Lowell's interest in forging analogies between Europe and America runs parallel to my discussion of the subversive ways in which translational, imitative and revisionary forms of composition function in *Life Studies*. As I have shown, the translational aura of Lowell's *Life Studies* imitations invests the volume with a subversive charge that "gnaws away at the containment structures... of normative sexuality, mood, and language" (Axelrod, "Between Modernism and Postmodernism" 2) in a way that is covert as much as it is confessional.
- 37 In "Florence," a poem published in *For the Union Dead* (1964) more than a decade after his European sojourn, Lowell expresses his desire to return to the days of his "European spring":

I long for the black ink,
cuttlefish, April, Communists
and brothels of Florence—
everything, even the British
fairies who haunted the hills,
even the chills and fever
that came once a month
and forced me to think. (Lowell, *Collected Poems* 330)

- 38 Lowell's reference to "Communists" recalls not only the ease with which he and Hardwick settled in "Communist Florence" but also their uncomfortable recognition of the seriousness with which domestic America regarded the Communist "threat" during the early 1950s, and his own disturbing identification with Alger Hiss, who was accused of being a Soviet spy and subsequently convicted of perjury in 1950, during his Munich incarceration (Hamilton 190-193).^x As Hamilton reports, Lowell's response to a televised broadcast of the Hiss trial led him to claim that "Hiss is innocent... his testimony was mostly a joke; full of a peculiar kind of wit like mine!" (193). Within the context of *For the Union Dead*, a volume appearing in the wake of Lyndon Johnson's statement that "the battle against communism... must be joined... with strength and determination" (Karnow 339), Lowell's sympathetic identification with Hiss, along with his nostalgia for "cuttlefish, April, Communists," is both poignant and potentially seditious. "Florence"

thus stands as a poem in which Lowell acknowledges the worth of his own complex experiences with presumably un-American forms of otherness at a time when such otherness threatened to be cast as something entirely separate from and inimical to national interests. In this respect, it is worth noticing that forms of otherness encountered in "Florence," whether they are as puzzling as "cuttlefish," purportedly "threatening" as "communists," or presumably "perverted" as homosexual "British fairies," are all parenthetically enclosed by rhyming phrases associated with writing ("the black ink") and meditation ("forced me to think"). If, as Lowell suggests, an encounter with otherness excites thought, thought about or in relation to otherness inspires poetic creativity.

- 39 Lowell's *Life Studies* imitations, though dimly visible or entirely concealed, represent sites at which the foreign emerges as mid-century America's diabolical yet curiously desirable other at a moment when forms of diabolical otherness were increasingly demonized as "un-American." Lowell's America, figured as a space in which the familiar and the foreign are drawn into uncanny resemblances with each other, responds to an experience that Arjun Appadurai has called "modernity at large." Identifying and anticipating what Appadurai has described as "the relationships of... various flows to one another as they constellate into particular events and social forms," Lowell's imitations display "the tension between global and local that drives cultural production" under the sign of a rapidly globalizing modernity (63). They are, by this reckoning, covert sites at which "glocal" and, within the parochial contexts of containment-era America, potentially seditious literary-political imaginaries conspire.^{xi} By foregrounding the largely covert translational or imitative provenance of certain poems collected in *Life Studies* I hope to have shed light on their potentially subversive intersection with nationally mandated narratives of cultural and political containment.

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NOTES

i. Lowell openly announces his recourse to translation and imitation more clearly in volumes such as *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946), *Imitations* (1961), and *Near the Ocean* (1967), while his translations of Mandelstam, Akhmatova, and Baudelaire are clearly marked in Olga Carlisle's *Poets on Street Corners* (1968) and *The Voyage and other versions of poems by Baudelaire* (1969) respectively. Lowell also translated dramatic works such as *Phaedra* (1961) and *The Oresteia of Aeshylus* (1978).

ii. A number of scholars have considered Lowell's work as a translator and imitator. Axelrod's "Baudelaire and the Poetry of Robert Lowell" considers the broader influence of Baudelaire's work upon Lowell's poetry (257-274) while Yenser (165-199) has offered a foundational discussion of Lowell's *Imitations*. Stephen James has read Lowell's imitations in relation to his revisionary compositional practice ("Revision" 28-51), Hallie Smith has considered Lowell's translations in a broader study of translation's place in mid-twentieth century American poetry, and Peter Robinson, focusing largely on *Imitations*, has argued that Lowell's translations are cultural extensions of U.S. containment policy (Robinson 23-47). This paper depends upon and develops these discussions by paying attention to the unacknowledged sources concealed by the imitative procedures undergirding Lowell's translational practice in *Life Studies*, and by reading that volume against its celebrated confessional or autobiographical grain.

- iii. Nadel announces his interest in containment's "duality" (4) and, in a telling example of the imbrication between the personal and the political, or the private and public spheres of American life under the sign of containment, Tyler May notes that Alfred Kinsey's research led to accusations that he was "aiding world communism" (97, n.23).
- iv. As a form of covert poetics, Lowell's translational practice recalls, but also inverts, Tim Melley's recent conceptualization of the "covert sphere": a "cultural imaginary shaped by both institutional secrecy and public fascination with the secret work of the state...a theatre for the deliberation of clandestine policy from the Cold War to the present... an array of discursive forms and cultural institutions through which the public can... fantasize the clandestine dimensions of the state... a cultural apparatus for resolving the internal contradictions of democracy in an age of heightened sovereignty" (5). By contrast, the clandestine workings of Lowell's imitations suggest a retreat from (but also a potentially subversive critique of) officially sanctioned (and aggressively policed) versions of state policy.
- v. If Lowell's revisions were prompted by a desire to simplify his work, they also betray what Stephen James has identified as "the compulsive element in Lowell's character which manifested itself in such compositional procedures" ("Revision" 28).
- vi. In response to Frederick Seidel's question, "Do you revise a very great deal," for instance, Lowell replied, "Endlessly" (Seidel, *Interview*).
- vii. This prosodic arrangement is repeated in the fourth and fifth stanzas of the poem.
- viii. That Alfred Kinsey's "documentation of widespread premarital intercourse, homosexual experiences, masturbation, and extramarital sex among American men and women" (May 97) attests to Nadel's fascination with containment's "repressed duality" (xi).
- ix. Lowell's European tour recalls Robert Von Hallberg's observation that more Americans travelled to Europe during the post-war Boom years than at any stage in the nation's history (134-135).
- x. Lowell's Italian translator and lifelong friend, Rolando Anzilotti, suggests that "Florence" offers a nostalgic recollection of Lowell and Hardwick's three months in Florence (59-69).
- xi. Andreas Huyssen uses the term "glocal" to describe the "obvious intermingling of the global and the local" (10).
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ABSTRACTS

This article argues that Robert Lowell's employment of techniques of poetic "imitation" - a liberal form of translation - during the composition of the *Life Studies* poems allows him to simultaneously stage and to conceal his reliance upon foreign poetic sources. Lowell's *Life Studies* imitations thus represent an attempt to "cover-up" poetic collusions with foreign sources at a time when cold war "containment culture" and the specter of McCarthyism threatened to render any such collusion increasingly suspect, if not entirely "Un-American." The *Life Studies* imitations, by this account, offer furtive testimony to Lowell's potentially subversive poetic preoccupation and engagement with cold war cultural anxieties circulating around terms such as containment, conspiracy, domesticity, paranoia, security, secrecy.

INDEX

Keywords: American poetry, cold war, confession, containment, covert sphere, imitation, Life Studies, Robert Lowell, translation