American Culture

Cutting across traditional boundaries between the human and social sciences, volumes in the American Culture series study the multiplicity of cultural practices from theoretical, historical, and ethnographic perspectives by examining culture’s production, circulation, and consumption.

Edited by Stanley Aronowitz, Nancy Fraser, and George Lipsitz

7. Maria Damon, The Dark End of the Street: Margins in American Vanguard Poetry
6. Virginia Carmichael, Framing History: The Rosenberg Story and the Cold War
5. Elayne Rapping, Movie of the Week: Private Stories/Public Events
4. George Lipsitz, Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture
3. Alice Echols, Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1965-75
2. Nancy Walker, A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture
1. Henry Giroux, Schooling and the Struggle for Private Life

the dark end of the street

Margins in American Vanguard Poetry

Maria Damon

American Culture 7

University of Minnesota Press
Minneapolis
London
Contents

Pre-Monitions: Definitions, Explanations, Acknowledgments vii

1. Introductions and Interdictions 1

2. "Unmeaning Jargon" / Uncanonized Beatitude: Bob Kaufman, Poet 32


4. Dirty Jokes and Angels: Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan Writing the Gay Community 142

5. Gertrude Stein's Doggerel "Yiddish": Women, Dogs, and Jews 202

Afterword: Closer than Close 236

Notes 243

Bibliography 279

Index 292
trefying body cries out from the baobab trunk. Maybe this is why the founder of Beatitude, written off as a maudit or a beatnik burnout, has yet to be canonized. His body is the world's body, scarred and mediating the Word of creation.


The melodious child dead in me long before the ax chops off my head...

Jean-Paul Sartre quoting Jean Genet

Mixing Unmixables

In his essay "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other," Andreas Huyssen outlines and criticizes the division readily apprehensible from his title, familiar at this point to conscientious critics of mass culture and high art alike. In this scheme, mass-cultural consumption plays the passive, undifferentiated, exploitable, and conservative woman to the masculinist production of high art by sharply individuated and individual, iconoclastic, free-thinking men. In a myth of self-parthenogenesis, the modernist canon would define itself in clear outline against the swampy, womblike backdrop of mass-cultural anonymity.²

Any essay that proposes to treat both Robert Lowell and three unknown teenage women writing from the D Street Housing Projects of South Boston must account for itself somehow—must acknowledge the disparity between the two bodies of work it addresses. The attempt here to "mix unmixables" must be more than simply an elucidation of all-too-apparent differences in intent, self-understanding and aesthetic execution on the writers' parts. The task falls too neatly into Huyssen's delineations; it is tempting to stop, for instance, at an exploration of the two radically different Bostons the works portray: the girls' everyday experience with urban poverty and violence, Low-
ell’s frustrated and decaying “hardly passionate” Marlborough Street aristocracy.

Foucault’s useful question “What is an author?” can serve as a lever to dislodge these two loci of artistic endeavor and set them in orbit around each other, for each to illuminate and shade the other. Along with its necessary corollaries, “What is a self?” or “What is a subject?,” the question underlies my teasing out the similarities and differences among them. Clearly Lowell’s sense of his own authorship is heavy with the weight of historical responsibility; as an American aristocrat who chose poetry as a vocation he saw his task as mediating and witnessing history in the form of critical events: the crisis of World War II, the crisis of Vietnam. Accompanying these were his personal crises: mental illness intermittently challenged and cruelly interrupted any intact sense of historical selfhood; marital strife called into question the possibility of intimate union. All of these events become, in his work, public matter: the drive toward aesthetic self-disclosure puts a performative spin on an impulse to shed the rigid casing of individualism of the writing, authorial self. The poetry both challenges and refines the atomized self as public personality.

For the girls, any sense of subjectivity must be inextricably bound up with economic and sexual subjection. Though recognition is not unimportant to them, the selves that write these poems do not write with an eye toward publication or publicity in the same sense that Lowell does. The heavy rhymes and conservative meter, the formulaic language and relative absence of “intimate” detail and personal address point the girls’ poems away from the lyric, high culture’s favored poetic mode since the early nineteenth century, and toward the generic, mass-produced poetry of rock lyrics and newspaper verse. Shocking as the subject matter may be to the middle-class reader, it captures, in formulaic language, a set of standard pictures of urban poverty through the filter of female teen experience. Far from drawing attention to the subjectivity of the individual writer, most of their poems confirm for us the tableaux of project life that we have already constructed from media images. We know, for example, that not all of the poems are autobiographical, for the simple reason that in some, the protagonist, who speaks in the first person, dies. Since the lyric “I” is not generally considered a transparent reference to the author’s person, this alone does not disqualify the poems from the lyric’s purview; but given modernist lyric’s conventions of free

verse and heightened subjectivity, whether expressed in the first person or projected atmospherically onto landscapes or objects, these poems, with several notable exceptions, seem only remotely kin to Lowell’s.

The two subjects of this chapter offer a perfectly neat contrast, apparently, for engendering mass culture/high art differences. Couples such as:

Now I’m in a home for unwed mothers
But why should you care if you have all the others?

underscore the resentment bred by this engendered and internalized hierarchy. “I—female” am relegated to an anachronistic, mythological place for “people like me,” the “home for unwed mothers,” while “you—male” get to “have all the others—female.” You get to play, a single, differentiated male, against a backdrop of indistinguishable “others”—with all the connotations of that word in contemporary theoretical terms. You and your art (“the baby”) will live—“I” will die unrecognized. The resentment itself, mediated by the stock rhyme “mothers/others,” is formulaic. “You—male” could be Lowell, in his capacity as representative of the high-cultural privilege of identity and free expression.

Moreover, the burden of my titular and epigraphic “dead child” is always necessarily doubled for the girls. For them, the dead child is not only, as for Lowell and Genet, the “inner child” of current psychotherapy; the innocent whose experience is as yet unmarred by censorious adult expectations or insidiously self-destructive social conditioning. In addition to the dead weight of their own thwarted creative possibilities, which the “child within” metaphorically represents, a literal meaning of the term weighs them down as well. As women (potential childbearers) and as members of housing-project culture, Charlotte, Cheryl, and Susan forever risk reminding their own dead children externalized, immanently realized, through the scenarios described in their poetry: abortions, manslaughter by child abuse, and simply introducing real babies into the exigencies of exhausting conditions.

I am unwilling, however, to simply use the canonical poet’s endeavor as a foil for that of the others—for instance, to criticize Lowell’s strident sense of authorial responsibility by discussing the girls’ problematic appropriation and subversion of the right to say “I” in
their work, their practice of group composition, and their works' mediation of a multiplicity of popularly available, mass-cultural verbal genres. Recent critical tendency has fostered a healthy mistrust of neat dichotomies, especially those arranged in hierarchy. One might call into question one of the most profoundly rooted of these divisions—that is, the easy demarcation of privileged and oppressed, of perpetrator and victim. Useful as Lowell may be to set off against a valorization of mass and popular art, or as an example of the reified "author" whose hegemonic control over the representation of Bostonian culture is intermittently threatened or broken through by outbursts from the undifferentiated female (or feminized) masses on the other side of town, this division would obscure some of the more interesting questions about the poetry. Both bodies of work pulsate with the anger of violated expectations, both bear witness to the devastations attendant upon a life within the claustrophobic strictures of a rigid cultural conditioning. Albeit with radically different intent and effect, the wounded child cries out in Lowell's work as the violated girl does in the South Boston poems. Lowell's anomalous prose piece about his childhood, "91 Revere Street," functions as his poetic "adolescence," cutting him loose from both of his constraining "families," a literary patriarchy and a reproductive and ostensible matrixy: the former was the conservative Southern Agrarian poets under whose tutelage he came of age as a poet; the latter his biological parents, whose recent deaths made the self-disclosures of "91 Revere Street" possible. The prose piece appears in the center of Life Studies, a volume of verse, as a liminal formlessness that temporarily breaks and permanently changes the conventions of Lowell's verse. For the women, on the other hand, the structure of poetry creates a safe arena in which their anger can be aesthetically framed.

Herewith follows that poetry:


D Street

The brick buildings without any hope.

The bars on the corners smoking dope.

The old ladies quiver with grief.

Of all the kids drinking beer.

Just hugging around in a stolen car.

The cops are no help, but they try very far.

Vandalism, robberies, Bés's look.

Six bars on the papers on the D.

Everybody on a team basketball, baseball are the season.

But don't forget snow will be hockey season.

Murders, rapers and thieves there are.

So my advice to you is stay very far.

If you value your life, carry a knife.

If you don't care I still may get you.

The fuck out of there!

Charlotte

D St. Benches

Sitting on the Benches

Staring at the fences

The church bells are ringing

I feel like singing

All is quite

I wish there was a riot

It looks like no institution

Is there any solutions

Who will cut the grass

We need someone to sweep the glass

Dogs always shifting

These old benches aren't made for sit.

By Charlotte
A Night in the Hallway

Standing in the hall,
trying not to fall.
Hope there's away,
to get some money for a job.

People always cutting through,
Even the fucking cop to.
Belling some nightly joke,
anybody got any smokes?

We've got to be quite,
so we can start no riots.
Bang bang each other out with little digs,
Oh shit! I think someone called the cops.

Dope vome, false alarm.
no one that can do us any harm.
We've just did our last birdy
Oh shit. It's 12:30.

Charlotte
1979

A Tortured Mind

An adult mind trapped in a body years younger.
A place of soul & mind for which is hungers.
Being torn apart by a family I can't please.
Then well this tortured mind be as ease.

Fed up by many, and loved by none
The weight I bare so more than a ton.
A stone; tortured mind that wants to be free.
Always wondering if there can see.

For around my friends I try to hide
Those haunting words "I wish I died."
But to die by my own hand would be a sin.
Because there always the thought of
What could have been.

I am so if I'm happy to be me.
Only because I don't want people to see
She been this way for just awhile
A tortured mind behind a smile
Charlotte
Remember Me,
Remember the fun we had, the trouble we got into for being bad.
Remember our summer sunshine days when we waded knee-deep wading and swam by the bay.
Remember when we broke up we couldn't stand it we we made up.
Remember the times we used to share those were the times you really cared.
Remember the night we dined all the way down in the one who has to pay.
(‘m in a home for unwed mothers, but why should you care you have all the others)
Today I’m fighting the pain, I’m keeping the baby she needs a name.
The doctor came in a few hours ago.
He said there’s trouble but he didn’t know.
I found out later it wasn’t a lie the nurse had to tell me I was gonna die. The baby, she said would be alright.
But I’d probably go someday tonight before I go there one last thing I loved you and that was a good thing.

Charlotte
12/17/77

I never could stand it when they cry.
At all started out as a normal day.
Until I went the side out to play.
Then the phone started ringing.
Would the radio ever stop singing?

I felt my heart start to pound.
My ears were filled with the sound.
The boy started to boil over.
Someone had to hit and hour.

My five year old daughter came in the door.
I’d left her there and she started to fuse.
I yelled at her and she started to cry.

Without a warning I gave her a wake.
I saw her fall and heard a crack.
I never could stand it when they called.
I couldn’t stand the fear in her eyes.

Her hair looked like mud that’s until I noticed it was blood.
I walked over, and got on my knees.
She squeezed in the corner, “Don’t hurt me more please!”

our
I turned in disorder and grabbed the broom. My son began to cry from his room and written on every page of the book was an uncontrollable rage.

I fed him; I changed him. It didn't help. The little bastard began to yell. I picked him up and shook him around. Then suddenly, I dropped him to the ground.

Oh lord, what have I done.
Yes, it's true. I killed my baby boy.
I don't remember the rest of the day. I knew it was bad, because they took the kids away.

They say there's no hope you see. For everyday with them I plea. Bring my daughter even though in a mess.

I only want to ask for forgiveness.

Charlotte

In Heaven or Another Place

He acted as if it were a game, going all the way I should have known I was the one who'd have to pay. It was the first time I saw him and the last time too. He doesn't even know about the baby. Oh what am I to do.

Abortion was the only route, because you see there was no other way out. The Clinic, "they'll tell on you." My friends made jokes. Of course I thought they'd tell my folks.

My friend had a pimp, she said he could do it quick. But to pay him we have to turn a trick. He brought me into a room with a bright light. Then I saw the cord tanger I'd get if I got it right.

My mind began to race. Especially after I seen the look on his face. It's first. It wasn't really so bad. As I started to think about his dad.
Suddenly the pain became so fierce
I had to cry. Little did I know I was
going to die. I finally did, at quarter
past seven. Am not sure what time
it was when I got to heaven.

When I got to the gate, I was
told to wait. I knew there was
something wrong and spoke with fear.

"Tis me, Joe, my child," I yelled, "Is
he here? If I could let you see him
I would my dear.

"Bid for what you've done you'll have
to pay. I'm afraid your going the
other way. No!" I started to yell.

When I stopped crying and opened my
eyes. I was standing at the gates of
Hell!

By Charlotte
"1980"

---

Friendship
2-2-81
We are best of friends
hope it never ends
While I'll burn
You always come around

Our friendship is one of a kind
That you don't often find.
We fell secrets of all kinds
And have fond memories behind

We've had our fights
But they turn out all right
When I think of you at night
I know everything will be alright

I like when your around
Because no one can bring me down
Because you will set me up
And pick me right up.

By Cheryl M.
Tell Them About Us

Being a working-class woman with a working-class voice—speaking out of the experiences of ordinary people and not a literary tradition [has] kept me out of plenty of libraries. But other channels open up. We’re not dependent on our censors. My life has always been outside of “the standard,” and it will always be. We have tons of worlds that stay volatile and alive by finding their own way.

Judy Grahn

When I took off for California, Susan teased me about my retreat back into academia, then conceded, “At least you’ll be teaching.” Yes, but it’s different. Stanford is a private college. “Oh, Rich kids. Well listen, if they give you any trouble just tell them about us.”

The poems presented here were written by three young women students at City Roots, a GED (General Equivalency Diploma) program in the D Street Projects in South Boston, where I taught English and mathematics for six months before entering graduate school. Some of them appear here as they did in the notebook from which I first copied them in the summer of 1981: startled, scrawled in ballpoint pen. Others, notably Charlotte’s, have been rewritten for the publication. I brought them with me to Stanford for sentimental reasons, assuming that the texts I would be writing about would not resemble these. In the intervening years, however, in spite of my geographic and social distance from the D Street Projects, I continued to experience the poems in the context of my new studies, trying to find a critical language for them in an academic context. Studying the poems has been a self-reflexive as well as a critical enterprise; and thus personal narrative seems the most appropriate way to initiate an analysis of them.

Almost two decades ago South Boston was the scene of intense racial violence stemming from the busing crisis that followed judicial attempts to integrate the Boston school system. South Boston has a history of standoffishness toward the rest of Boston. As a peninsula, it is geographically and socially isolated, and as long ago as 1847, its officials complained of Boston’s taxation of South Boston, claiming that “South Boston has no natural connection with, much less any necessary dependence upon the City of Boston.”

The rest of Boston, in turn, shows “Southie” the full range of treatment accorded an outsider in their midst, from violent disgust to a certain patronizing ad-
miration, an arm’s-length tolerance that contributes to the myth of Southie’s turbulent autonomy. The following passage from a book on recent Boston politics epitomizes the latter condescending attitude.

Southie has a bad name, partly of its own choosing, as a rough and strident place where the natives would prefer to give a stranger a fat lip instead of the right time of day... It has a certain mucker’s insouciant charm, a grinning bravado, which asserts that anyone who comes from Southie is superior to anyone who comes from any other place, simply by reason of that geographical accident, the strut and the defiant braggadocio that are adopted to console the swaggerer who doesn’t have a damned thing in the world except his youth and strength, both of which are dwindling before his very eyes.

In the busing days of the 1970s, Southie’s continued undercurrent of irritation erupted into violent resistance as its citizens collectively perceived that their community was being colonized and “made an example of” by remote Boston officials. The title of the organization formed to rally the opposition—R.O.A.R. (Restore Our Alienated Rights)—spoke both to the outrage of South Boston residents and to their assumption of the role of animalistic “Other” in relation to “Boston proper.” Since that time, Southie has been a fiercely all-white neighborhood, composed of Irish Catholics and Italians with a sprinkling of Poles and Ukrainians. But sociologists have argued that South Boston has constituted its own ethnic identity—the Southie community. “Southie identity” draws most heavily on its own reinvented version of Irishness: in Boston the use of the shamrock, instead of the initials KKK or the swastika, as the white power symbol originated in South Boston. In fact, a rumor on the left arose in 1980 (suggested by David Duke’s visiting Boston) that Southie’s vigilante group, the South Boston Marshalls, had entered into discussions with the Klan about a possible alliance and the relocation in South Boston of the Ku Klux Klan’s headquarters. At the same time, support for the IRA ran strong and fierce in South Boston; several City Roots students wore Bobby Sands t-shirts during his hunger strike and after his death. Although each ethnic group—Ukrainian, Polish, and so on—has its own social club, there is one social club for each Irish county. A further crucial factor in the South Boston identity is the Catholic church, which plays such a major part in everyday life that until recently, when Southie residents met even outside of Southie, they
identified themselves to each other by parish, which, again, divided up in accordance with the rural Irish parish system: "Where are you from?" "Saint Monica's, Saint Augustine's." Although the church's influence diminished markedly when it took a stand in favor of busing and integration in the 1970s, a strong Catholic influence permeates some of the poems. Boston being the parochial, class-bound, and ethnically divided city that it is, I had never been to South Boston before my interview for the job at City Roots, although I'd lived my whole life in the Boston area. Familiar only with Southie's recent but legendary violence, I expected armed checkpoints at the borders and barbed-wire fences to let me know I was really there. I felt that I was going into a war zone in which I would be personally unsafe—a feeling that turned out to be well-founded when I was assaulted one morning by a woman waiting to see her drug counselor, who worked in the same building that housed the school.

Some of the students in the GED program had been casualties of the turbulent period in the mid-seventies—either their parents had pulled them out of school because of racism or fear for their safety, or they had simply gotten lost in the chaos and had quietly dropped out. Now, years later, they wanted to come back and get their high-school equivalency certificates and the part-time state-subsidized jobs made available through the program. This was a courageous step. Some would speak of mothers pressuring them to get full-time work or else to help at home with younger siblings. Their own embarrassment at being seventeen or eighteen years old and unable to read or multiply or divide, and the constant subliminal encouragement to despair about their abilities and opportunities made it more difficult for them to be in school. Unfortunately their sense of the tight and discriminatory job market was fairly realistic. However, for these students, the appeal of the alternatives—which included "selling drugs to little kids," sitting around smoking, drinking, doing Valium, Quaaludes, or angel dust, or playing basketball all day—had eventually worn thin.

However, other students, such as Charlotte, had had excellent schooling elsewhere and needed only to graduate. Some had come to City Roots when other alternative state- or city-funded schools had been closed down for economic or other civic reasons. Many (again, Charlotte among these) had no first-hand experience of harder drugs, though they were a part of everyday life in that time and place. The range of worldliness, academic preparation and personal circumstances blended well into a highly motivated group of students who were determined to get their degrees and, for the most part, succeeded in doing so.

Just as Southie perceived and identified itself as separate from Boston proper, the projects were an insular world within Southie. Charlotte recently wrote, "I never lived in D Street projects. When I first started to go down to D Street I was treated like an outsider even though I was a life-long resident of South Boston." While the school itself was clean, light and pleasant on the interior—as were many individual apartment units in the projects—the overall exterior impression of the projects was not.

They were marked by fire-gutted buildings, broken glass, broken everything. During the summer, one of the toilets in the school, which was housed in a converted apartment unit in one of the buildings, stopped flushing; at the same time the hot water faucet of the bathtub couldn't be turned off, so there was a urinary steambath effect at school for about a month. Project life was marked by paranoia and poverty, depression, violence, illness, and premature death. Teaching the Great Depression was a delicate proposition at City Roots: how can you cite a 35 percent national unemployment rate for dramatic effect when that's the norm for the D? When I taught John Lennon's "Working-Class Hero," I asked the class what a working-class hero was; someone answered, "That's easy. If you're working, you've got a lot of class, so you're a hero." In Charlotte's "A Night in the Hallway," the lighthearted tone barely conceals anxiety and tension: one night of partying stretches into a lifetime of stagnant unemployment and paranoia; likewise in her "D Street," the baseball, basketball, and hockey teams organized by various youth services and sponsored by local businesses stand as attempts to prevent, and function as daytime analogues to, murders, rapes, and B & E (breaking and entering). In both poems, the police constitute a ubiquitous but menacing presence: they harass, rather than protect. I constantly heard, and heard talk of, firearms, though I never saw any—during morning classes I'd hear explosions of target practice in the abandoned building next door. Spraying bullets with aerosol cans to make them explode was a popular pastime that spring. However, one can't control the trajectory of the bullet: one of my students had almost blown his thumb off. Fires in dumpsters were an almost daily
event. By the time I taught there, D Street had been surpassed by the Charlestown projects as the worst white projects in terms of poverty, internal violence, and racial violence. But a friend who'd grown up there pointed out the distinct advantages of project life: the rent is cheap, utilities included, and if you just keep flushing the toilet when you want to take a bath, you'll never run out of hot water.

*Style Wars*, a hip-hop era television movie about New York subway artists, made much of the fact that these artists refer to themselves as "writers" because they write their names. They play on what the word generally means in the straight world: a prestigious claim to individual literary creativity with all the attendant safeguards for that individual endeavor—a mystique around authorship and authority protected by copyright laws that assure ownership and recognition. The graffiti writers' appropriation of the term both underscores the literal "self-expression" of elaborating on one's name in a public arena, and undercuts the glory of individual ownership of the finished artifact, which is often collectively conceived and executed, mobile and vulnerable to defacement. Studies of disenfranchised youth subcultures by primarily British cultural critics have shown how these subcultures appropriate and reshape for their own use certain commodities and art forms of the dominant culture. Until recently, most of this work focused on boys and young men and created analytic paradigms that tended to equate "youth culture" with "street culture" with male culture; Angela McRobbie's early work on girls, while it redressed a glaring absence, tended to compensate for the male (sociologists and their subjects) monopoly of the public sphere (publications and street life) by examining girls specifically as inhabitants of the domestic sphere; her work on fan clubs and consumption of records and "fanzines" located girls' culture in the bedroom and the kitchen. McRobbie's later studies as well as those of Valerie Walker, Barbara Hudson, Mica Nava and Leslie Roman have acknowledged women as active participants in public dance scenes and interactions at school, continuing to emphasize how institutions such as family, school, and the social work system construct these girls as gendered beings. I want to add to the discussion of working-class girls' culture by showing how the girls themselves generate meaning not only by participating in institutional constructions of their subjectivities but by self-consciously creating artifacts that are subversive through their very imaginativeness and through their active engagement with the public—writing—realm. For although the modern activity of writing typically takes place in solitude, this is not entirely the case with these poems, indicating both pre- and postmodern elements in their process. Furthermore, writing is a public act of self-empowerment, especially when that writing articulates the process of social construction.

The writers of these South Boston poems are writers in several senses: they composed the poems individually and with each other, they wrote their own and each other's poems in their notebooks; these notebooks also contained poems out of teen magazines and other high schools' anthologies. Some of the poems I saw in Cheryl's notebook are wholly original, some anonymous, some (not included here) falsely attributed, some appeared to be pastiches of copied-out clichés and original lines. All of this indicates a participation in the full range of activities offered by poetic production, without the self-interested anxiety of influence, ownership, or recognition. They appropriate and redefine poetry and the creative process in the context of their own community.

With the exception of Susan's two poems, photocopied out of the City Roots newsletter where they, along with Charlotte's "Tortured Mind," had been anonymously printed, these poems were selectively copied out of Cheryl's notebook with her consent. According to my interests at the time, I copied out poems that I believed to be original, omitting those obviously copied from elsewhere (from magazines or newspapers), or those that didn't excite me aesthetically. At the time, I gathered from remarks made by the head teacher that Cheryl, Cheryl and Susan (or at least the former two) spent afternoons together writing poetry, inventing it together or separately and copying it into each other's notebooks; more recently, Charlotte has told me that her compositions were produced individually and then copied by Cheryl into Cheryl's notebook. Charlotte writes of the process: "some of the poems were written for the benefit of my friends who at the time thought it was cool. Because I could take a pencil and a gum wrapper and write a poem." The collaborative and public nature of this activity recalls the lyric's origins: Sappho and her girls on their island, conducting community rituals in which different arts—music and dance, poetry and friendship—necessarily implied and involved each other. In generating their poetry, these
high-school women recreate poetry as it first appeared—as a verbal healing art. I must also point out that the girls did not write these for a class, mine or any other teacher's; they composed the poems on their own time, unsolicited, for their own purposes. I did not have any special rapport with these particular students, which would make access to the poems a privileged and rare entry into their world. Likewise, the following descriptions of the writers are limited and impressionistic, and should be understood as incomplete profiles.

All three women were older students—Charlotte, the author of “Tortured Mind,” “D Street,” “A Night in the Hallway,” “Remember Me,” and the two longer ballads, was nineteen years old, unemployed, separated from her siblings on the death of her mother and reared by her grandmother. Having gone through the eleventh grade in Catholic school, she had more formal education than many of the other students, scored highest on the GED test and reluctantly became the graduation speaker. She'd been to Blaine Hairdressing School and often cut people's hair at school after hours, but felt uncomfortable taking money for it. She insisted that “Tortured Mind” be printed anonymously in the City Roots newsletter; consequently many students thought it was written by Susan, who was more overtly “different.” When I encountered the poem in Cheryl's handwriting, one telling slip in her spelling of Charlotte's title (“Torched” for “tortured”) indicated a phonetically accurate rendering, caused by a Boston accent, with its tendency to make a separate syllable of the “ed” at the end of a word (i.e., “tawched,” as in “wretched”). But it has further significance as well, pointing toward the economic context of the speaker's psychic suffering. One of the sources of income for young people in the projects, especially the boys, was to be commissioned to “torch” a car for its owner, who wanted to collect insurance on it. Thus “torched” stands in metonymically for everyday strategies for material survival, even as it illuminates the speaker’s psychic suffering. In a sense, although Charlotte did not live in the projects and has had no direct experience of drugs or of dependency on government assistance, her position as an insider/outside gives her a perceptive edge in her poetic descriptions of project life. This is evident in “D Street,” “D Street Benches,” and “A Night in the Hallway,” as well as in the brilliantly deft revision of “tortured” to “torched” by Cheryl, who did live in the projects. Charlotte also wrote in free verse and nonrhyming poetry, but I did not have access to these poems.

Susan, author of “Portrait of a Dropout” and “The Epitome of Courage,” shared Charlotte's aversion to publicity, but was a conscious nonconformist, as her dress and her intellectual tastes reflected. She was actively fascinated rather than frightened by “the sixties,” “liberals,” and antiauthoritarian ideas. Her experience in the army had given her a relatively wider view of the world than the average project dweller. In 1988, when I first contacted the women for permission to publish their poems, Cheryl referred to her as a “free spirit” (no one had seen her for several years). Susan was frustrated by the parochial and paranoid atmosphere of the projects, and was aware of the vicious cycle of oppression and reactive defensiveness that kept people from getting out. She also realized that she was a victim of that phenomenon. One of three students who enrolled in the University of Massachusetts basic skills program, she expressed some fears that she might be “trying to be better than she really was.” Her English teacher there responded to a long and exhilaratingly sophisticated paper she wrote about the projects for an assignment to “describe a place you know”; “Susan, this isn't just a paper, this is art.” He wanted to talk to her, help her revise it, “do something” with it, and as a result she nearly dropped out to hitch to Florida. Several years later, the piece won a community-wide writing award; significantly, it was submitted not by Susan, but by Barbara Machtinger, then City Roots' director. Susan's poem, “Portrait of a Dropout,” contains unusual lines for a South Boston project resident, because they assert a commonality that threatens the tight, oppositional ethnicity that is such a potent issue in South Boston: “He had blond hair. He had black hair. / He looked like me. He looked like you.” That is, the subtext might read something like: “He had white skin. He had black skin. / He looked like me. He looked like you.” Her style is also familiar to us as modernist poetry: that is, free verse, with abstract words like “epitome” and “courage,” concrete metaphor and metonymic details, and philosophical implications that self-consciously go beyond the words on the page.

Cheryl, the third woman, had graduated earlier. She earned money primarily through babysitting. Her family has been a mainstay in the D Street community for many years, playing a leading role in tenant organizations and other activities on behalf of communal wellbeing. She was the archivist I relied on, borrowing her notebook to copy the poems. The most open of the three about sharing her writing, she
is the author of the friendship poem, which is characteristically generous in sentiment.

If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way?

*Thomas Higginson quoting Emily Dickinson*

For love—I would
split open your head and put
a candle in
behind the eyes.

Love is dead in us
if we forget
the virtues of an amulet
and quick surprise.

*Robert Creeley, “The Warning”*

In his work on British biker boys and hippies of the 1970s, Paul Willis offers a spirited rationale for the study of popular cultures as a tonic to an enervated, scholarly “humanism”:

The sheer surprise of a living culture is a slap to reverie. Real, bustling, startling cultures move. They exist. They are something in the world. They suddenly leave behind—empty, exposed, ugly—ideas of poverty, deprivation, existence and culture. Real events can save us much philosophy.16

What comes as a surprise in the South Boston poems is the terrifying, vital, compelling way in which the girls create their own worlds out of the artistic forms of language use available to them—street aphorisms, ballads, tabloid journalese, teen-magazine verse. Surprise, in the face of any creative burst of spirit and liveliness, is what Emily Dickinson calls “feeling physically as if the top of my head were taken off”—her visceral index, her only index, for gauging “poetry.” Art is imperative in the projects, and surprise is our charged receptivity to it. As William Burroughs is fond of pointing out, “All warm-blooded animals have to dream. If they can’t dream they die. It’s a logical extension to suppose that without art, people can’t exist.”17 These poems become warnings—amulets against the deadening possibilities of life at the bottom of the hierarchies of class, age, and gender.

However, these artifacts do not transcend their context, like fragments of free-floating human spirit or lyrical trees growing in Brooklyn, independent from either mass culture or the history of deprivation that has shaped these girls’ experience. The power of the poems lies in their understanding, acknowledgment, and retelling of this history. The poems of love gone wrong, “I Never Could Stand It When They Cry,” “In Heaven at Quarter Past Seven,” and “Remember Me,” exemplify most pointedly this borrowing and subversion of mass, popular, and high-cultural genres in the interest of telling their own stories of psychic suffering. Here, “telling their own stories” does not mean autobiography, but rather virtual history: “It didn’t happen, but could have, and it feels like it did.” The poems’ structure and tone participate in that anonymous popular art form, the ballad, with deadpan, affectless narrative style, straight description of dramatic event involving a minimum of subjective commentary, awareness of community judgment, and rigorous adherence to rhyme and coupllets. The two longer poems, especially, focus on events that have civic and religious repercussions, and articulate the writers’ entrenchment in those institutional values that so deeply inform the “Southie identity.” And they recall the tabloid journalism one can read in the Boston Herald Tribune, the newspaper which the girls are most likely to have read. (“I Never Could Stand It . . .,” for instance, is reminiscent of a story that made headlines when I was a teenager, about the single mother who went to the grocery store while she was gone, her starving German Shepherd ate her starving baby.)

The opening lines of the poems often resonate with the claying rhymes of mass-produced verse for teenagers, recalling Gertrude Stein’s extended plays on her favorite piece of popular sentimentality, “When this you see, remember me.” “Remember Me,” in fact, has the flavor of a pastiche, in which Charlotte makes use of commercial and mass-cultural sources to undermine the ideology of blissful first love. For instance, parts of the poem make no sense in the context of the whole: “Today I’m fighting the pain. / I’m keeping the baby she needs a name”—when we know that in the end of the poem, which is otherwise written in the past tense, the narrator is about to die. The opening verses appear to derive from one of these mass-produced sources. They pin every romantic cliché into place, down to horseback riding by the “bay” (Boston Harbor? Not likely). But then the
poem reverts into the familiar, hard-driving D-Street Blues: "The nurse had to tell me I was going to die." In Cheryls's notebook, even the handwriting changes as the teenaged version of the American dream disintegrates and reforms into another, more painful, virtual truth of urban life. Although the phrase "homes for unwed mothers" strikes us as anachronistic and hence almost amusing, and death in childbirth even less likely, the fatalistic message that you can't win, as well as a consistent affinity for the worst-case scenario, indicate this bleak version of youthful romance as possibly more true to the poet's own experience than the familiar scenario promised in the saccharine opening lines.

In "Remember Me," the writer enjoins us to remember her as her social and material conditions dismember her, while she herself dismembers an inauthentic, prefabricated version of her experience—the teen-magazine poem— and with it, a conventional notion of authorship. She re-members, by piecing together shreds of these other versions, her own horrific understanding of these mythic experiences. In these rememberings, in turn, the dismemberment of the protagonists' bodies represents the violence of their fear: the poems' narrators die in childbirth, or, as in "In Heaven at Quarter Past Seven," in a botched abortion.

Paradoxically, a characteristic usually associated with high culture becomes a disruptive and riveting aspect of the poems: the use of the first-person pronoun, one of the trademarks of the modern lyric, cuts across and counters the impersonal discourse that has traditionally objectified and imprisoned these women. When the object says "I"—"I am the woman that died in childbirth," "I'm that woman you read about in the paper, who killed her baby," "I'm the woman who died from a coat-hanger abortion"—she collapses the distance between reader and writer. Although these poems show the protagonist in all the positions most thrown in the faces of working-class teenage women abusive, unfit mothers tawdry, sexually irresponsible delinquents—we can't maintain the comfortable, voyeuristic detachment offered us by journalism, or the case histories of sociology or psychology. The first person singular makes judgment inappropriate—the reader becomes "her.

Just as "Remember Me" sets up and then destroys the myths of teenage romance offered us by the media, the first stanza of "I Never Could Stand It ... " parodies our media-constructed expectation of middle-class family life, as all the accoutrements of modern suburban life, complete with Rover the dog, mutiny into an equally parodic tale of child abuse, manslaughter, and loss of custody. The amusing, sitcom chaos of a middle-class mother's unmanageable day flips into its underside—the nightmare of poverty-stricken, raggedy-nerved single-parenthood conducted under the steady gaze of the Welfare Department and the criminal-justice system. This conscious address of the gaze of authority casts further light on the first-person strategy. John Berger has pointed out that women internalize the sense of always being watched as objects of desire, and Tania Modleski has demonstrated how this plays into mass-cultural narrative strategy in, for instance, Harlequin romances, a genre for and about women, in which the third-person narrative nonetheless takes the heroine's point of view. First-person cannot be used because at key points the protagonist must be presented as an object: "she had no idea how lovely she looked," etc. These poems, however, unsettlingly combine the effects of third- and first-person narrative to describe heartrendingly pathetic scenes of humiliation and despair with an almost schizoid flatness, heightened and rendered ironic by the singsong regularity of the long-line couplets. Along with Arthur Rimbaud, the quintessential teenage poet, the writers say, "Je est un[e] autre." The effect of this elision is that there is no background or foreground—the gaze as well as the subject's drama becomes foreground. The girls' use of "I" to close distance and unsettle the reader has the effect of filling in, with faces and features we think we know, perhaps with our own, the sprawling outlines of the victims of urban violence spray-painted on sidewalks. The moment of shock when we apprehend this familiarity sends us into the realm of "antidiscourse," which has been designated as the pure subjectivity of the lyric. The moment of defamiliarization depends upon the moment of recognition.

Interestingly, the two poems that do address the subjects' "looks" (that is, what they look like to others), "Tortured Mind" and "Portrait of a Dropout" most approximate, in different ways, what we consider the modern lyric, with its emphasis on interiority and private interpersonal communication. And both do so with an emphasis on the "otherness" of their looks:

Always wondering if others can see
For around my friends I try to hide
Those haunting words "I wish I died"...
I act as if I'm happy to be me
Only because I don't want people to see
That I've been this way for quite a while
A tortured mind behind a smile.

And very differently, Susan describes a distanced third-person subject, the delinquent everyboy, identified through metonymic hair color, in modernist free verse to assert a commonality through difference, an underlyingly common experience of overt alienation. Here, the third-person subject is brought close by other intimate techniques: the conversational free verse, the sympathetic and simple tone, the straightforward, autobiographical details. (Susan, in fact, had dark hair bleached blond.)

I am not trying to domesticate these poems; I don't mean to imply that using the first person saves these poems from consignment to some putative mass-or popular-cultural damnation, or that this strategy expresses an essential "truth" obscured by the other discourses. The poems interweave all these forms, strategically playing them off against each other. Each discourse interrupts another: the stark tabloid scenarios undermine the saccharine opening verses they follow; they in turn are deconstructed by the use of the subjective "I," which in turn associates itself inextricably with the discourses it disturbs. The aherarchic organization of discourses within the poems again reminds us that the lyric had its origins in communal activity that blended artistic modes.

However, the parodic element in these poems deserves further exploration, because it partially accounts for the odd sense of distance, as well as the pastiche of styles and sensibilities at work in the texts. The poems should not be accepted at their shock-effective face value as transparent documents of lives of the young female poor—to do so would overlook their complexity. Some terms from contemporary critical theory can clarify the parody and pastiche of these poems, tentatively positing a relationship between this oeuvre's unsettling tone and youth culture in general.

In an essay on Baudelaire, Fredric Jameson articulates the difference between modernist and postmodernist poetry and then goes on to claim Baudelaire’s place under both rubrics. The distinction Jameson draws concerns the disappearance, in postmodernism, of any emotional referent or pathos—modernism’s objective correla-
tive correlates to nothing as easily apprehensible as feeling. The postmodern becomes a kind of "camp," in which surface is everything, and meaning is created not syntagmatically by reaching back or "beneath" the text, behind an objective correlative to the veiled but crucially foundational feeling it "expresses"; but synchronically, by the juxtaposition of different elements of surface, all of which could have referential echoes; which in turn are constantly undermined, denied, played with, canceled out.

In discussions of poetry, the terms "modernism" and “postmodernism” are typically invoked in high-art contexts to refer to different historical avant-gardes. Charlotte's, Susan’s, and Cheryl's poems are far removed from the “language poems” often used as examples of literary postmodernism, and it may strike the reader as ludicrous to apply such unabashedly academic terms to poems whose initial appeal seems to be their raw “naturalism,” their startling, palpable sense of outrage. But these poems are not so straightforward; they are not crude and naive artifacts of a more “natural” Other. Exploration of the poems' affect or lack thereof, if not an explicit attempt to fix them on a modernist/postmodernist continuum, can prove useful as a way of beginning to talk about the iconic roles of youth and poverty to the middle-class culture.

If teenagedom, especially as constituted by the creation of a postwar “youth culture,” is a point at which both assimilation and resistance are stretched to their extreme points and articulated at extreme pitch, one way out of the impasse represented by these two incompatible imperatives is to leap into another level of apprehension, into the giddiness of artifice that simultaneously has the depth of emotional engagement. Teenage culture in general is self-parodic and simultaneously tremendously moving—as if the only way to survive the horror of contemporary adolescent experience is through removal into the hyperreality of self-dramatization or “terminal uniqueness.” The poems show both defiance of and adaptation to the gender and class roles assigned their authors. In “D Street,” for example, the drastic portrait of a violent housing project is letter-perfect. The girls describe the “lumpen” scene accurately, but also with deliberate sensationalism: “look out for all the rapers in the D.” The author's outrage about this situation takes an aesthetic leap into the hyperreal as she addresses an imaginary and internalized (remember, the poems were copied out of a private notebook) middle-
class observer: “We know this is how you talk about us in your media—and we can give it right back to you, with a twist; we’re the scary kids drinking beer—and we’re scared too. We’re watching ourselves watching us; we look at ourselves through you.’ The literate middle-class years after this presumably raw material, which takes on the aura of authenticity associated with being “less than”: kids say the darnest things, the experiences of the poor are “more real” than those of the well-off, women are “more intuitive,” Black music is “more emotional.”

Whatever motivates the combination of fascinated indignation and wistful nostalgia that accompany reminders that the poor are always with us, reportage on the poor—and especially on the young poor—is a genre well-entrenched in American letters and media. The D Street writers had not read Ken Auletta’s series on the “underclass,” which appeared in the New Yorker several months after I left Boston; and they were probably unaware of Janet Cooke’s Pulitzer Prize-winning “Jimmy’s World,” an expose of a heroin-addicted child, or the scandal that ensued when that piece, published in the Washington Post, was itself exposed as imaginative fiction rather than investigatory expose; nor, probably, Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, or any other canonical classics of muckraking journalism or naturalistic fiction. But the poets do watch television, and their self-reportage eerily echoes the tough and poignant human-interest tales of local poverty and injustice, in which the talking head’s voice thrills with indignation, but in which the object of indignation is not quite clear. Is it the nerve of those people for being poor? the viewers who watch television when they could be “doing something” to help? the system? fate? Since these stories are rarely accompanied by analysis, functioning as avenues for emotional discharge rather than as exemplary local cases of the same political dynamics at work in other news stories, these broadcasts serve as occasions for experiencing unproblematic and depoliticized pathos felt as reaction to others’ pain and authenticity.

Although the poems lack explicit analysis and partake of the fatalism inextricable from pathos, the D Street poets are aware of the middle class’s need to see them in objectified terms, and they parody these terms even as they expose, more authentically than these media or literary events (because they are the speaking subjects as well as the objects of inquiry), the extent and the reality of their own im-

poverishment. The writers’ real-life contexts constantly deconstruct naturalistic drama. The girls’ own narratives deconstruct Crane’s Maggie and other discursive events that would represent the young poor. Their outrage is organic rather than reactive, and the lack of affect that Jameson calls “postmodern” indicates how bad things really are: since we all live in the shadow of the bomb, we all live in a world where it may be impossible to have an unproblematic emotional referent behind our utterances. This is especially true for teenage women in a housing project, for whom every possible self-description is always already mediated by demeaning, objectifying institutional discourse. If it is true that the historical circumstances and physical events of poverty dislocate the drama, the converse is true as well—the theatricality of available discourse deconstructs a priori the real-life scenario. In the ten center next to the classrooms of the school, one girl broke off a conversation with friends to challenge me (obviously not a local) as I walked through: “I’m on welfare, I’m not ashamed to say it; what do you think of that?” There was a kind of giddiness and defiant exhilaration in her voice, and her friends were embarrassed for her.

Defiance and assimilation are inextricable in D Street. “We are exactly what you say we are—and worse,” the poets say, like Genet living up to and surpassing the picture “respectable” people form of the experience of violence and poverty. At the same time, they protest that picture: “It’s an outrage that we should have to live this way, and that you see us this way.” Once I assigned a class to describe a familiar setting in a written paragraph. One girl described a view of the projects from her bedroom window, and ended with a single sentence set off from the rest: “Would you like to live hear?” The final couplet of “D Street,” “If you value your life carry a knife and if you don’t care get the fuck out of there,” has the ring of a well-worn street aphorism (like “if you can’t do the time, don’t do the crime,” which also reveals this defiance/assimilation complex: the saying ignores the many motivations people might have for various criminal activities, whereby other needs could outweigh considerations of imprisonment, and is most often used by those who have themselves committed petty crimes). Read “straight,” the lines make no sense if one assumes that the object of “care” is “your life”—that is, if you care about your life, carry a knife, and if you don’t care about your life, leave. Why would one leave if one didn’t regard one’s life highly?
In a community whose primary identity consists of a sense of place, whose legitimacy rests on the geopolitics of civic and neighborhood borders, to leave is to die, so if you don’t care, you get the fuck out of there.\textsuperscript{23} The imperative in the primary clause, though, is emphatic enough to suggest a third alternative reading of Charlotte’s couplet for the outsider/reader to take to heart: “If you don’t care about this situation, you have no business reading this. Don’t come in here just to gawk at the project, at our poems, or at us.”

Whence the dizziness of the middle-class reader reading these poems? After all, it was I, and not the young girl in the teen center, who identified her challenge as “dizzy and exhilarated”; what did I think of her for being on welfare? Is it the histrionic indignation of the anchorwoman aiming her story at well-off Americans, unmindful (that is, unaware and unconcerned) that the objects of the story may be watching as well? Susan Stewart, in \textit{On Longing}, speaks of the exotic artifact as reflecting the imperialist collector/tourist’s desire to be perceived as worldly and exotic: What does a literary critic stand to gain by presenting herself as impresario, as curator of these poems, as the mediator between the world of the D and her own world?\textsuperscript{24} Wary of domesticating the poems for safe consumption, the cultural critic turns to self-reflexivity, possibly to affirm a wishful status as a “different kind of critic.” The exhilaration of reading these poems is both what Emily Dickinson would approve as a right response to authentic poetry (or the same idea in Jamesonian language: “the sense of some new, unnameable, ungeneralizable private bodily sensation—something that must necessarily resist all language but which language lives by designating”);\textsuperscript{25} and the emotionally deprived “high” Jameson attributes to the self-battering and jaded postmodern aesthetic. Is the former (the Dickinsonian response) “authentic” and the other metaphysically impoverished? If so, how is it possible to experience both in response to the same stimulus? Jean-François Lyotard offers a helpful explanation of the mechanics whereby apprehension of the sublime intersects with its simulacrum, the postmodern high: aesthetic response to the sublime becomes suspect through its very overwhelmingness, through the inadequacy of conventional aesthetic and emotional terms to contain it.\textsuperscript{26} Jameson also tries to articulate this problem through a discussion of the sublime and Edmund Burke’s attempt to

find some explanation—not for our aesthetic pleasure in the pleasurable, in “beauty,” … but rather for our aesthetic delight in spectacles which would seem symbolically to crush human life and to dramatize everything which reduces the individual human being and the individual subject to powerlessness and nothingness. Burke’s solution was to detect, within this peculiar aesthetic experience … astonishment, stupor, terror.\textsuperscript{27}

The giddiness and “aesthetic delight” is not simply shallowness but an acknowledgement that standard interpretative or appreciative attempts to assess this art fall short of the mark. However, a Platonic analysis (that, unable to fully apprehend or express our “authentic”—ideal—responses, we fall perforce into a derivative, superficial—immanent—mode) solves nothing. The complex of “astonishment, stupor, terror” that these poems elicit is appropriate response to the murderous conditions the poems enumerate; this response attests also to the thrill of acknowledging the self-expressive energy embedded in these enumerations. The experience of reading these poems, the conjunction of pleasure and pain they elicit, forces one to a new level of reception, but one made up of tatters and remnants of feelings and interpretations that look familiar, just as the poems are patchwork pastiches of different discourses that are not only familiar, but impoverished clichés in themselves. The poems are a trick mirror of what we think we know.

If the postmodern high is also the high of trying simultaneously to hold together and to resist the contradictions of modern culture, then youth is the postmodern age par excellence, in which, according to cliché, thrill is everything, experience is felt at an elevated pitch, and experimentation in extreme expressions of style and emotion is unmatched in other stages of life. To face these straining contradictions under conditions that in effect impose a continued youth—\textsuperscript{28}—that is, continued oppression as poor women, without social dignity or power—puts these writers in a position, vis-à-vis their everyday oppression, analogous to the one Jameson describes for the artist living in the shadow of the bomb and other contemporary tyrannies: subject to “force[s] which, enormous and systematized, [reduce] the individual to helplessness or to that ontological marginalization which structuralism and poststructuralism have described as a ‘decentering’ where the ego becomes little more than an ‘effect of
structure. The art that results from this centering is camp, or, in Susan Sontag’s words, permeated with the “hysterical sublime.” Being a teenager is this dizziness, this self-parody. It is a dumping ground for excess, for the exaggeration of the roles into which young people have to grow. And adults remember our youth with nostalgia and horror—we were more “real” then but we’d never want to go through it again—like newscasters with their bracing scenes of the lives of the poor.

“91 Revere Street” and the Case of Robert Lowell

Always inside me is the child who died
Always inside me is his will to die—
Robert Lowell, “Night Sweat”

The conditioning of both groups, the target group and the non-target group of any given oppression, takes place through a specific form of oppression, the oppression of young people. In a society in which there is oppression, all young people will be the targets of this systematic mistreatment.

Ricky Sherover-Marcuse

Nostalgia

The word “nostalgia” has continually resurfaced in this complex of ideas: modernism/postmodernism, youth and youth culture (the nostalgia behind adults’ impetus to name and study youth subcultures), emotion, aesthetics, empathy. From all accounts nostalgia has passed in meaning from a term coined specifically for the symptoms of homesickness evinced by mercenary combatants in seventeenth-century Europe, to a sense of spurious and deluded bathos, an inauthentic longing for something that never existed: an unproblematic love affair; a vacation isle or exotic continent purged not only of the “modernity” of everyday Western life but also of its own indigenous and independent past; or, of primary concern in this essay on Robert Lowell’s confessional prose, a happy childhood. The original medical term—from nostos (return) and algia (pain)—referred to a disease: the pathological longing to return home—of which longing the Odyssey has become the literary embodiment.

But the ambiguous etymological juncture of “return” and “pain” lends itself equally to intimations of painful returns: the pain of knowing return is impossible (viz. Thomas Wolfe’s titles), the pain of knowing the idyll is a lie anyway, the pain of holding desire and the knowledge of its futility in equilibrium. Blake’s Songs of Innocence and Experience, for example, sets up and deconstructs myths of the child and the golden state of childhood; the songs stand in juxtaposition to Wordsworth’s less ambiguous deification of “the child” and “his” blessed, prophetic realm. In some of the contemporary analyses of nostalgia, one can find the same range and combination of critical and sympathetic responses. Richard Louv joins “home” and “pain” in examining the integral role of nostalgia in the modern American life condition of transience and uncertainty—nostalgia for a TV-fabricated “simpler way of life” that the longers have actually never experienced, and Renato Rosaldo points out the deplorable and psychologically necessary role of “imperialist nostalgia” in maintaining the denial system of dominant cultures—that is, participants in the colonial or imperialist project mourn the passage of the indigenous culture and reinvoke it in movies about the decline of empire: Gandhi, A Passage to India, The Jewel in the Crown.

Some feminists have associated nostalgia with the backlash against the women’s movement, while it seems clear that nostalgia for a whiter shade of male is fueling the current agitation to return to or maintain a cor(ps)e curriculum of predominantly white-male-authored, tautologically determined “classics.” James Houghan, on the other hand, writing with early-1970s optimism and a now dated enthusiasm for a strategically deployed fiction of authenticity, points to the possibility of an activist “radical nostalgia” in the service of recuperating and empowering endangered cultures; Native American occupations of Wounded Knee and Alcatraz furnish his primary examples. Susan Stewart posits nostalgia as a product of industrial and consumerist capitalism, in which objects (consumer fetishes, tourist art, postcards) mediate between the subject’s experience and the desired experience; alienation necessarily becomes a term in this discussion.

If one wanted to pursue the idea that members of marginal subcultures or sociologically disempowered groups experience alienation from a dominant culture, one could point to elements of what seem to be nostalgia in their work—the consistent presence, for example, of “nature,” powerful goddess-figures, or Africa, as distant if
not wholly lost ideals recuperable through some kind of spiritual or social revolution, or to the possibility of a realm of disembodied spirituality where bodies could not be targets of abuse. Emphasizing the alienation of nondominant groups, however, presupposes a rigid binarism of dominant/nondominant that enables "majority" members to impute to subcultural members an envious desire to emulate them (that is, "they all want to be like us."). One recent student paper on Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s, The Signifying Monkey expressed—by attributing to Gates—the opinion that it would be a shame if all black children had to grow up as little Eshus, having to straddle two cultures; the writer completely missed the affirmative tone of Gates’s book and the reality of multiculturalism as a fact of everybody's everyday contemporary life. Stressing alienation contributes to the construction of a putative mentality of resentment among subcultural members. Without underestimating the pain of cultural abuse suffered by the socially dispossessed, I want to reject an ethnocentric analysis that foregrounds the "lack" of subcultures and that presumes an impoverishment on all levels of cultural participation, in favor of a far more interpermeable model that acknowledges and affirms the metaphoricity of these apparently nostalgic tropes—the homeland, outer space, goddess culture—as contingent and tactical performances.

I would argue that outsider groups do not long for a gilded past, and that the evocations of nature, goddess-imagery, animal figures, and mythic homelands of which the writer has had no direct experience constitute presences rather than absences; these are not lost Edenic states to be mourned and romanticized but are consciously constructed as ongoing, informing sources of strength and creativity. As George Yeats told her husband through her automatic writing, "We bring you metaphors for poetry," not metaphysical, empirical, or imperial truths. Understood as tools rather than as master narratives, "retro-tropes" can be recuperated for a politics of liberation not based on essentialism but on guerrilla aesthetics, or, at the most, on "strategic essentialism." Africa, in the poems of Audre Lorde, for example, becomes the Africa within, which permeates everyday life ("125th Street and Abomey," "For Assata," "Sahara," and so on).

I would not call this nostalgia; it is making use of a tradition—renewing it—by remaking it in the present. (This is particularly true for immigrant or ethnic subcultural literature—Cynthia Ozick's and Maxine Hong Kingston's fiction come to mind as examples.)

If this is nostalgia at all, it would seem to fall into the category of Hougan’s "radical, activist nostalgia": a proactive creation of collective experience, rather than a nostalgia in Rosaldo's or Stewart's sense, in which a fogy mystique attached to derivative artifacts helps to deny and stave off the experience of real pain and loss.

To return to the Odyssey and its current cultural significance, the more probable site of nostalgia lies with those who "lack the lack"—that is, with those who are presumed to "have" privilege and dominance, those who not only long for the chimerical place of grace assumed by the world to be their birthright but suffer the double pain of suspecting their own longings to be unfounded or nothing more than the guilt of privilege. Their literature forms the acknowledged cornerstone of canonical Western culture. The Western literary canon is delicately structured around the protection of a lie. Neo-Freudians formulate this idea around the concept of the Phallus, the illusory conferrer of real social power, which is control over Logos, the impossible appropriation of which allows the subject participation in the socially ordering discourses of public authority—access to what Audre Lorde calls "the master's house." As much as this phallic order of mastery and authority is a lie, so is the other side of the dichotomy: the golden idyll of a graced childhood, a youth still touched by traces of presymbolic bounty and unboundred freedom. Nobody knows better than the emperors that they are tremulously naked, but nobody has more at stake than they in believing in the illusion of the golden cloth. This double pain of belief and denial, of obsession and horror, is most poignantly articulated by those who inhabit what might be considered a place of privilege. The lie is the lie of privilege—the lie that some of us actually have, at the expense of others, access to a state of grace and fearlessness. (Those of us who have not had this access contribute to the lie by believing that "their" imagined access is responsible for "our" imagined alienation.)

The nostalgia of the communally written epic Odyssey evolved, in high poetry's development in Western Europe, into Romantic, lyric nostalgia, for homeland (in the case of Novalis), or for private experience of childhood and nature (in the case of Wordsworth). This development paralleled the rise of individualism and that of the middle class, which preceded and reached its full flower in the era of industrial capitalism. The lyric, with its insistent focus on the subject and articulation of personal experience, came into favor once again after
a period of obscurity, to give voice to the private experience now deemed worthy of public expression. ⁴⁹ However, even as individualism became the nominally privileged ideology of the modern industrial West, the variety of human experience continued to be codified, organized along official institutional norms for behavior and expression; religious, philosophical, medical, legal, and economic discourses determined what could be considered appropriate self-presentation. And accordingly, even as the lyric continued to be nominally overvalued to such an extent that it is now practically synonymous with poetry in contemporary Western culture, it has become both a privileged/trivialized poetic genre and a forum for representing what continues to be inadmissible in public discourse—“private experience” that defies the norms it was created in conjunction with and named as Other to. While emphasis on privatized nuclear family relations and the “developmental years” spent in character formation found celebratory expression chiefly in the prose of the bildungsroman, they appeared also in Romantic poetry, particularly Wordsworth’s, whose deification of childhood and assertion of its strong intrinsic identification with and love of nature verge on the hyperbolic:

Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie
Thy soul’s immensity,
Thou best philosopher . .
Mighty Prophet! Seer Blest!
On whom those truths do rest,
Which we are toiling all our lives to find,
In darkness lost . .
Thou little Child, yet glorious in the might
Of heaven-born freedom on thy being’s height . .
Delight and liberty, the simple creed
Of Childhood . . ⁴⁶

However, behind the creation, the standardization, and the celebration of innocent and untroubled childhood lay not only the actual harshness of child-labor practices introduced by industrialism (which Blake protested in his Songs of Experience, and which Wordsworth also implicitly criticizes here) but also the varieties of felt experiences of children in families. ⁴¹ As the tyranny of child labor was tamed by reform and the role of childhood reconstructed as a period of happy, idle exploration of natural and personal resources, a different kind of tyranny came into play, with which we are all somewhat familiar—that is, the tyranny of having one’s experience defined a priori as happy, idle, loving, innocent. Wordsworth’s and Blake’s prescriptions have been culturally rewritten as descriptions, silencing expression of experience contrary to the happy idyll. And as this picture of exuberant bliss has increasingly become the norm for contemporary childhood, the lyric, because of its acknowledged creation and articulation of private and inadmissible experience, has paradoxically become the form most able to explore and challenge this myth. Most recently, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has posited a connection between the shamefulness of a fat girlhood, female anal eroticism via spanking as familial punishment, and the disciplining of the lyrical subject. ⁴² The privileged site of a golden childhood is also a treasure chest of shame and self-consciousness—the “family crucible”; the lyric is a vessel of containment and artistic display of family secrets. She associates the dramatic epic, by contrast, with breaking those secrets hitherto kept in check by the corseting formalism of lyric.

The Marginalization of Childhood

Against the blurry, yearning mystification of nostalgia for childhood, classical psychoanalysis, a pragmatic social philosophy, and the contemporary pop-psychotherapeutic recovery movement propose to remind us of the pain of powerlessness and humiliation we actually suffered as children (granted, as we know from Philippe Ariès and others, “childhood” and “adolescence” are not fixed categories but change according to historical developments). ⁴³ I will address youth as a marginal state in the industrial and postindustrial West, with its mystification and subjection of the child. Much has been written about this phenomenon of mystification/subjection with respect to women and “nature,” and it is easy to see the same pattern vis-à-vis children. The various approaches that inform my perspective—those of Alice Miller, Ricky Sherover-Marcuse, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Louis Althusser—point to the subtle and overt tyranny of adults over children in the family life of the modern West.

Alice Miller comes out of a classical Freudian perspective, but believes (along with Jeffrey Masson and others) that when threatened with unbearable professional and personal consequences, Freud ceded his seduction theory (the seduction or sexual assault of chil-
dren by their parents) for the safer concept of “wish fulfillment” (the child as desiring seducer/agent of sexual fulfillment with the parent) and thereby abandoned countless victims of child sexual abuse to further victimization. Much of the sense of urgent revelation in Miller’s project comes from the belief that childhood should be the untroubled idyll of Wordsworth’s “Ode” — or was, before the parents’ violations — and the outrage that this is rarely, if ever, anyone’s actual experience:

1. Every child comes into the world in order to grow, to develop himself, to live, to love and to articulate his needs and his feeling for self-preservation.

2. In order to be able to develop themselves, children need the help of adults who are aware of their needs, who protect them, respect them, take them seriously, love them, and honestly help them to orientate themselves.44

More often than not, however, “these vital needs of the child are frustrated and the child . . . is abused for the needs of the adult.” This abuse can take any number of subtle or crude forms, from physical abuse to ridicule or denial of emotional expression. Ironically, though, the child depends entirely and without recourse upon her or his parents, and must deny her or his resulting anger, repressing even the memory of pain, and “idealiz[ing] her or his aggressor.” The negative feelings, suppressed, become “disconnected from their original cause,” and result in “destructive actions against others (criminal behavior or mass murder) or against oneself (drug addiction, prostitution, psychic disorders, and suicide)”.45 The victim chooses the easiest target for destructive outlet — namely, her or his own children — perpetuating the cycle of psychic violence.

One problem with Alice Miller’s theories is her insistence on the term “the child’s true feelings” to refer to the pain of subordination and humiliation, which cannot be expressed for fear of losing the parent’s approval and hence one’s life, and which consequently become repressed or forgotten. Suppression of painful memories does not make these memories any more real than others that do not threaten parental hegemony — except that these repressed feelings and memories are determinant in the child’s life into adulthood. Just as the socially “less than” are cast as more authentic, the invisible power of silenced feelings makes them seem “more real” when “discovered.” Much of this analysis has passed into popular psychology: the concept of the “inner child” has become reified into a “thing,” a fixed reference point around which a narrative is developed. The adult therapy client “discovers” this thing/child/static reference point “inside” her/himself; once discovered, this inner child must be taken care of by, for example, buying teddy bears, “journaling” and reading daily affirmations, reentering the world of childhood pleasures and exorcising the world of childhood shame. I wonder, however, if the flurry of activity around this recently discovered inner child isn’t analogous to Columbus’ discovery of “unclaimed,” “virgin” land (albeit already populated by flourishing cultures) or to the late nineteenth-century (re)”discovery” of sexuality. The silence surrounding the rediscovery stage, as Foucault has pointed out about the latter phenomenon of sexuality, is not silence at all; it is a thundering obsession, manifest in an overproliferation of controlling and defining devices which evince not unawaresness but hyperawareness.

My use of Miller and Sherover-Marcuse focuses attention on the micropractices of oppressive family dynamics inflicted by, but not of lesser subject-formative influence than, the apparently larger social situations of economics, ethnicity, and gender. With its historical roots inextricably entwined with economic, ethnic, and masculinist fear, traditional Freudianism, the only broad theoretical system to address the injustices of age difference and the familial institution, has provided an inadequate model for my exploration of the child (and the subsequent metaphor “child within”) as outsider. So although I am sympathetic to critiques of the level of generality and the proselytizing tone of the two pragmatists I cite extensively, their analyses — to some extent because of their flat-footed and partisan simplicity — have engendered an extremely useful and compelling reading of Lowell’s oeuvre, one that goes against the grain of the profiles created for it both by partisans of the confessional school and by their more formally oriented opponents.

Without Miller’s strategically prescriptive tendency toward psychic essentialism, Ricky Sherover-Marcuse’s formulations politicize the former’s psychoanalytic findings in short, declarative assertions:

People hurt others because they themselves have been hurt. In this society we have all experienced systematic mistreatment as young people — often through physical violence, but also through the
invalidation of our intelligence, the disregard of our feelings, the
discounting of our abilities. All of us are oppressed as children,
through the inevitably harmful pedagogical practices characteristic of
oppressive societies. As a result of these experiences, we tend both
to internalize this mistreatment by accepting it as "the way things are,"
and to externalize it by mistreating others. Part of the process
of unlearning (oppression) involves becoming aware of how this
cycle of mistreatment is perpetuated in day to day encounters and
interactions.46

Children's social and familial induction into prejudicial thinking viol-
ates them as much as, if more subtly than, physical and emotional
abuse, neglect, or humiliation. It hurts those indoctrinated into privilege
as much as those assimilated into lives of deprivation or subordina-
tion. To use Althusserian vocabulary, all children are interpellated
into the socius via the ideological state apparatus of the family. More-
over, according to Sherover-Marcuse,

people who are the non-targets (as well as targets) of any particular
oppression have resisted and attempted to resist their socialization
into the oppressive role. The fact that this resistance is not generally
recognized is also a feature of the oppression. (emphasis is Sherover-
Marcuse's)47

However,

all people come from traditions which have a history of resistance to
injustice, and every person has their own individual history of
resistance to [oppressive] conditioning. This history deserves to be
recalled and celebrated. Reclaiming one's own history of resistance is
centrally to the project of acquiring an accurate account of one's own
heritage. When people act from a sense of informed pride in
themselves and their own traditions they will be effective in all
struggles for justice.48

Both Miller and Sherover-Marcuse help to illuminate the lie behind
the golden myth, and offer evidence for why children, even though
some of them grow up to be straight white wealthy men, could be
included in the lower ranks of the infamous Chain of Being. This
point needs explicit articulation, because many ex-children, parents
and non-parents alike, object to this aspect of my project, defending
their own childhoods ("the happiest, least alienated period of my
life") or their current treatment of their own children. I do not pro-
pose to deny the validity of happy memories, or to make struggling
parents even more self-conscious. "Blame" is not at issue here. The
problem is structural and societal.

Perhaps most persuasive on the subject of self-destructive socializa-
tion and the liberating possibilities offered by its recognition and
appropriation is Sartre, whose masterpieces, arguably, were not the
early philosophical tracts but his later psychobiographical portraits
of Genet and Flaubert.49 Sartre's exhaustive attention to the child's
visceral experience of interpellation locates that moment as inexora-
ably and incomparably formative: in Genet's case, the "dizzying word
thief" came to define his subjectivity in all its various relations to the
world; in Flaubert's case, the name of "family idiot" (because he was
late in learning his alphabet) relegated him, in his own estimation, to
the realm of the subhuman. Like the child in Countee Cullen's poem,
who from an entire summer spent in Baltimore remembers only the
word "nigger" coming at him from the mouth of another child,50
Sartre's subjects, though one is the ultrabourgeois "father of mod-
ernism" and the other an icon of countercultural subversion, are both
initiated into the social world by adults' withering circumscrip-
tion of their potential.51

Sherover-Marcuse points out that shared oppression of children
gives us a common experience on which to form emancipatory
alliances: if we have suffered belittlement, then we can better under-
stand and accept each other's need for freedom. Since even the privi-
ileged share the common, though unlegitimated, pain of childhood,
they can participate in emancipatory activity; everyone stands to gain
by each other's freedom. For the socially privileged, childhood thus
becomes a charged concept, a site for the attempt to break through
not only the feeling of deadness and isolation of adulthood, but the
social alienation that often accompanies privilege, a condition so pal-
pably obvious to the less privileged. Again, we have only to look at
the work of Wordsworth, the grandfather, through Emerson, of Ame-
rican Romantic and post-Romantic poetry, for evidence of the power
of the concept of youth, surfacing again in the work of the twentieth-
century confessional poets and in that of others such as Dylan Tho-
mas (whose influence in America was enormous) and Theodore
Roethke, who claimed his greatest influences to be Freud and
Mother Goose. Childhood experiences become larger than life; they
throb with mystical potency and inchoate potential. This privileging of childhood, through psychoanalytic interest in early formation of subjectivity through language acquisition, continues to permeate contemporary continental poetry and poetics. The comprehensive poetic theories of Julia Kristeva, for example, draw on myths of an idyllic, pre-Oedipal and presymbolic state of consciousness characterized by nonlinear, playful, anarchic use of language.52

In this literature, then, childhood becomes the locus of relationship and harmony, a time when all was possible. Since we share with others the experience of childhood oppression, memories of youth can indeed be a powerful basis on which to connect with them. But concentration on and defilement of a condition called youth does not inevitably elicit the feeling of fellowship and commonality with others to which Sherover-Marcuse points. On the contrary, it can lock one into isolation and mistrust, solipsistic resentment and suspicion that others have wrested away the lost Eden. The catch, according to Miller,53 Sherover-Marcuse, and standard psychoanalytic folk wisdom, is that the subject must remember and acknowledge the pain of childhood through a willing act of consciousness-raising before such fertile alliance and fulfillment can take place. Experience must be brought not only to personal consciousness, but to social consciousness; “only experience confirmed and corroborated through discussion and coped with as collective experience can be said to be truly experienced.”54 The pain of childhood, however, is often so acute that, repressed, it is transformed into nostalgia, which makes this social processing difficult; so difficult, in fact, that in spite of repeated theoretical and pragmatic attempts to bridge the perceived gap, commitment to psychotherapy (micropraxis) and to radical social activism (macropraxis) continue to be crudely cast as incompatible.

Childhood’s pain, prior to a willing commitment to recognize it, is experienced as nostalgia for childhood (the pain of return—of inescapability, in fact—disguised as the desire to return). The development of socially repressed pain and resistance parallels the rise of the “individual” subject within the nuclear family, as it has been articulated by capitalism. (With respect to imperialist nostalgia, we keep ourselves enslaved by repressing the unpleasant memories of our own internal colonization, of the conditioning by which we were assimilated into the hierarchy of our culture, just as we repress, in acts and artifacts of imperialist nostalgia, the painful destruction of indigen-

enous cultures in the history of colonialism.) This relationship between the articulation of the subject and the memory of pain (the creation of nostalgia) could intimate, as Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests, that Romantic and post-Romantic lyric poetry depends in some sense on intimacy, repression, shame, and the keeping of family and social secrets—it is the genre of familial discipline and punishment.55 The lyric attempts to speak the forbidden, the variety of human experience outside the norm, in diminutive, distanced, and acceptable formulas, as disciplined and self-protective as the subject who produces it. Just as the novel domesticates secrets by compulsively blabbing them in overblown kitsch form, the modern lyric domesticates secrets through compulsively oblique and controlled utterance, dramatic because of its “compression,” its anal virtue. Like the tourist-art version of a sacredly charged fetish, it disarms and wards off, but also expresses, unnameable experience through distance and miniaturism.56 Unlike and like the South Boston poems, whose amulet qualities, as in Creeley’s “The Warning,” slash through everyday inertia with vibrant and violent color, high art’s modernist, tightly controlled and “beautifully articulated” poems are homeopathic amulets against their own explosive subject matter, warding off their own consequences by the intensity of highly wrought artistry.

For the New Critics at least, the tension of the famous and questionable form/content dialectic, the element of threat “mastered” through skill, gave a poem credibly. Especially in the era of the objective correlative, springing as it did from Eliot’s self-denial and “abnormal reticence,”57 poetry had to do with sitting on a secret, with maintaining a harrowing balance between self-disclosure and self-protection. The poets and critics most influenced by Eliot’s closeted and unnameable desire became, in turn, the most academically influential school of the twentieth century.58 It was this group, the Southern Agrarians and the New Critics, under whose tutelage Robert Lowell came of age as a poet.

Robert Lowell perhaps most strikingly exemplifies modern American post-Romantic subjectivity at its crudest and most accessible—the tormented self, history’s favorite son and history’s victim. Scion of an illustrious literary and historical Boston family (Amy Lowell and James Russell Lowell were his literary ancestors), Lowell was the “leading national poet” from the postwar 1940s until his death in 1977. Powerful academic critics as well as fellow poets acknowl-

tended to the purest; every major university press has a “life and art” book on him. He became the most respected member of the alcoholic, psychiatrally preoccupied confessional school (a term coined in a review of Life Studies), which included Ginsberg (a crossover figure in multiple arenas) Berryman, and Lowell’s own students Plath, Sexton, and Snodgrass, among others. What interests me in the context of this study is Lowell’s nostalgia—the pain of return, the repetition compulsion of his themes of backward trajectory (family life, childhood, ancestral New England history)—which writes a Boston at once radically other and but analogous to that of Charlotte, Susan, and Cheryl, his unfamilars in almost every respect. Also Bostonian, their contemporary but not their coeval, Lowell writes a patrician but no less oppressive city. Like theirs, his nostalgia is the outrage of violated expectations. His honesty in looking head-on at that violation, intertwined with the unbearable longing to alter that complex of disappointments, is akin to theirs. But there is nothing remotely postmodern about Lowell’s opus. His work is drenched in personal emotion at the same time as it is highly wrought, aspiring consciously to take its place among the best that has been written, said, and done. Lowell does not engage a sense of play, distance himself, or radically question selfhood and authority. Any questioning of Robert Lowell as an author must be supplied by the reader.

I have not avoided, nor wanted altogether to avoid, the “life and art” template from which so much work on Lowell has been written. It is not a useless enterprise to include biographical information as part of the conditions of production; Lowell’s confessional thrust (all connotations herein included) almost demands some detailed biographical attention. I have been more circumspect about the girls’ biographies not because they are still living, but because the difference in power held by my subjects compels discretion and respect (this awareness begs the question “Why is Lowell’s biography more important than those of the girls?”). In a book whose primary audience I assume to be academic humanists, revelations about Lowell provide the poignant anecdotes of teaching-anthology headnotes; analogous revelations about the girls, on the other hand, unless specifically authorized by them, may luridly reinscribe them as stereotypical objects. Empathetic as my reading of Lowell may be on a personal level, I hope to emphasize his poetry and personal conduct as social practice—privileged white male poet(ry) in crisis, as it were. Su-
which his work attempts to constitute an identity both other than and continuous with his former familial and poetic histories. This era reflects a sharp change in his style, represented especially in the prose piece "91 Revere Street"; indeed, Marjorie Perloff has referred to the publication of Life Studies not only as "Lowell's central achievement" † but as a "turning point in the history of twentieth-century poetry," with specific reference to the fusion, in "91 Revere Street," of the "romantic poetry of experience" with the innovations of nineteenth-century realist prose. I discuss the transition indicated by that particular prose piece in its environment of original poems and translations—in particular, the Rimbaud translations in Imitations and "The Neo-Classical Urn" from For the Union Dead.

For Lowell, individual poems became salutary mirrors in which he could experience and represent himself as unified; even his writings about his manic-depressive episodes and periods of extreme psychic fragmentation became unified aesthetic objects. Lowell's work is in fact as fragmented, behind its apparent coherence, as that of the girls, although theirs seems to have the unity of essentialism, and his the unity of the highly wrought, autonomous work of art. The artistry of the girls' poetry shatters myths of mass-cultural passivity as much as the relatively unstructured prose of "91 Revere Street" shatters myths of lyrical autonomy. (Granted, Lowell chose, as his model for prose writing, Flaubert, the protomodern stylist par excellence who both invented and gave the lie to modernist "realism"; questions about the factuality of Lowell's confessions arise in the "realistic" "91 Revere Street." ) Although "91 Revere Street" can't be taken as unmediated diaristic recollection or unselfconscious prose, the choice to write this material in prose rather than verse indicates an association of personal disclosure with relaxing boundaries formally as well as thematically. In that the poems' formal unity allow Lowell to say "I," the prose represents a step toward allowing fluidity into the concept of "I," even as the subject of his prose is autobiographical pain and psychic suffocation. After "91 Revere Street," the prose continues to be highly stylized and the verse relaxes, as Lowell finds a way to write about his psychic disorders in which any sense of unity cracks apart. The subject becomes division, the object absence: the dead parents, the dying child inside him, whose efforts at emergence are manifest and reified in writing.

Lowell Imitates Rimbaud

Lowell translated Rimbaud the adolescent, who tried to shatter the lyric and whose subject matter often involved orphaned children. Lowell initiates the Rimbaud translations in Imitations, with "Mémoire," which Lowell translates as "Nostalgia" and to which he appends a note telling the reader that the poem is autobiographical:

(An autobiographical poem. Rimbaud remembers the small boy in a rowboat under the old walls of Charleville. His mother and sisters are on the bank: his father has just deserted them.) ("Nostalgia," 174; the italics are Lowell's)

In it, a young boy escapes his family, comprising his arch-rigid mother (Rimbaud's epithet for his mother was "la bouche d'ombre") and sisters (their alcoholic father has deserted them), and daydreams in a moored boat on the river. In a later, more famous poem, the one with which Rimbaud made his entry into Paris and the favors of the homosocial and homosexual Parnassian patriarchy, the boy himself becomes "le bateau ivre," tearing loose from his moorings, bursting through the strictures of traditional lyric as he bathes himself in the tempestuous "Poème de la mer." ²⁶⁸

Lowell identifies—perhaps overidentifies—with the more oppressive aspects of Rimbaud's childhood, although he takes liberties and wide leeway in translation, appropriating the adolescent symbolist's memories of childhood as his own. Significantly, however, his translation of "Le Bateau Ivre" loudly omits the poetically self-reflexive phrase "je me suis baigné dans le Poème / De la Mer..." ²⁶⁹ (Lowell's poetry does not engage, for the most part, the question of writing itself apart from the agency of a writing personality. In his own words, the point of the Imitations was to "do what my authors might have done if they were writing their poems now and in America..." — that is, what they might have done had they been Robert Lowell. "Les Poètes de Sept Ans," which Lowell renders in the singular, becomes his own self-portrait—the child-poet matches Lowell's autobiographical sketches in Life Studies and For the Union Dead. Compare the following portraits:

his lumpy forehead knotted
with turmoil, his soul returned to its vomit.

All day he would sweat obedience.

124

125
He was very intelligent, but wrung, and every now and then a sudden jerk showed dark hypocrisies at work. 
... As for compassion, the only children he could speak to were creepy abstracted boys... 
... His Mother was terrified, she thought they were losing caste. This was good—she had the true blue look that lied. 
("The Poet at Seven," FUD 47)

I rub my head and find a turtle shell stuck on a pole, each hair electrical with charges, and the juice alive with ferment. Bubbles drive the motor, always purposeful... Poor head! 
("The Neo-Classical Urn," FUD 47)

my mind always blanked and seemed to fill with a clammy hollowness when Mother asked prying questions. Like other tongue-tied, difficult children, I dreamed I was a master of cool, stoical repartée. 
("9 Revere Street" LS 20)

and the final lines of "Child's Song":

Help, saw me in two, put me on the shelf! 
Sometimes the little muddler can't stand itself! 
(FUD, 22)

These unflattering self-portraits dwell on physical discomfort and awkwardness. In direct contrast to Wordsworthian harmony, Lowell's child "muddler" is disproportioned—head overlarge, a gooey, seething ooze encased in hard bulkiness. The turtle in its shell imagistically governs "The Neo-Classical Urn"; the subject "I" of the poem tortured turtles as a child, and is a turtle, captured and claustrophobic in his own self-protection. After the opening just cited, this poem savagely twists the Wordsworthian code of blissful boyhood. It shows a boy, ostensibly blissful, or at the very least, boyishly energetic.

I sprinted down the colonnade of bleaching pines...
... Rest!
I could not rest. At full run on the curve, I left the caste stone statue of a nymph...

It then undermines our assumptions about that poetic code: far from expressing a natural jole de vivre, the boy is frantically torturing animals, cramming an ornamental garden urn with painted turtles, who inevitably die.

the turtles rose, and popped up dead on the stale scummed surface—limp wrinkled heads and legs withdrawn in pain. What pain? A turtle's nothing. No grace, no cerebration, less free will than the mosquito I must kill—nothings! Turtles! I rub my skull, that turtle shell, and breathe their dying smell, still watch their crippled last survivors pass, and hobble humpbacked through the grizzled grass.

The boyish energy turns out to be self-hate compulsively turned on other small creatures. As the poem's title indicates, Wordsworth is not the only Romantic poet whom Lowell takes on here. He likewise savages the Keatsian strain of his Romantic heritage, and through oblique reference to the New Critical manifesto The Well-Wrought Urn, he defies the idea of aesthetic self-containment represented by the well-wrought urn. Rather than on a lover trapped in mid-passion on the outside of an urn, rather than on an autonomous work of art transcending personality and history, Lowell focuses on the all-too-historically specific "I" trapped inside the urn of his own body and consciousness, and trapped as well in the constraints of conventional lyric production. The masturbatory opening images, in which the head/mind is the only sex organ, indicate that he can relate to no one but himself. The subjectivity of lyric becomes obsessive self-hatred. The stasis of solipsism reproduces a split, cerebral self that mocks Keats's vision of beauty and art by showing us one of its possible endpoints: the history of Romantic lyric as a family history terminating in degenerative, inbred deformity of consciousness.

The poet's psyche breaks against the rigidity of near dichotomies—
hard/soft, inside/outside—and then blurs in the confusion of subject/object, self/other: the boy tormenting the turtles is himself a tormented turtle. Like them, he is sluggish and vulnerable, hard and ungracefully inaccessible, loath to acknowledge the depths of his pain. The grown poet’s pain in the opening and closing passages is not, as Marjorie Perloff suggests, remorse at acts impulsively and unconsciously committed in a carefree youth, and sudden and mature recognition of creaturely kinship. Rather, it reflects pain continued from childhood and now brought to articulate consciousness. The opening lines suggest that science and psychiatry have mutilated the speaker/poet through electroshock treatment, as the wanton child mutilated the turtles. But beyond that, he acknowledges that even in childhood, this sense of victimization underwrote all activity. Although there are no adults in the poem and no explicit mention of oppressive authorities, the ordered, suffocating claustrophobia of the parental garden with its ominous

caste stone statue of a nymph
her soaring armpit and her one bare breast
gray from the rain and graying in the shade

and the “two seins of moss” the boy ‘swerves’ between, suggest that the boy is trapped inside his parents’, especially his mother’s, body, just as later the man feels trapped inside his own head/mind and the poet inside generic constrictions. The landscape, the projected world of his parents’ passions in which the boy feels “drenched” (“91 Revere Street,” LS 19), is both wet and sterile, oppressively sensuous and infertile, like an incestuous or otherwise inappropriately undifferentiated affective relationship; and the boy imprisons the turtles as he feels imprisoned—only violence can break him out of himself (“Help, saw me in two . . .”). He cannot understand relationship except in terms of domination and possession.

Here the monolithic and static female figure parallels neatly “la bouche d’ombre” as she is described in “Nostalgia,” though Lowell does not grant the softness of grief and abandonment to his female overseer. Lowell outdoes even Rimbaud in his refusal of a golden childhood. Rimbaud, whose popularity was growing in the United States in the wake of several lurid, pathos-drenched biographies and the popularity (especially among the Beats of the fifties and sixties) of vagabonding pretensions and the maudite tradition in literary production, wrote some stunning poems in the golden vein—“Ma Bohème,” for example, or many of the pieces in Illuminations. The substitution, in “The Poet at Seven,” of “naked, red / Hawaiian girls dancing”—for “des Espagnoles . . . et des Italiennes” further Americanizes, updates, and Lowellizes Rimbaud’s lines. The other Rimbaud poems Lowell includes are also typically Lowellian, or rendered thus, in subject matter: childhood, in “Les Poètes de sept ans” and “Les Chercheuses de poux”; and the historical interest of his series Eighteen Seventy, which includes “L’Éclatante victoire,” “Rages de Cæsars”—which Lowell entitles “Napoleon After Sedan”—and so on.

In identifying with Rimbaud, in creating through translation a family of poets, as he did through early apprenticeship to the distinctly anti-Bostonian but equally patrician (in aspiration if not in literal genealogy) and even more conservative Agrarians and New Critics, who often explicitly functioned “in loco parentis,” Lowell is both replicating and repudiating the (for him) unbearable sociohistorical visibility of his biological family and its decline. When Lowell first committed himself to being a poet, and demonstrated that commitment by leaving Harvard for Kenyon College to study under John Crowe Ransom, a patriarchy of high art, of poesy, replaced the oppressive matriarchy of the Winslow-Lowell heritage embodied by his overbearingly caste-conscious (“stone caste”) mother. However, the new family had much in common with his nuclear family, especially through the linking character of Merrill Moore, Agrarian sonneteer and both Charlotte Lowell’s and her son Robert’s psychiatrist—and possibly Mrs. Lowell’s lover. The work produced during Lowell’s early Tate/Ransom-influenced years, while it constituted a breakaway from his family in that writing poetry was itself a heretical activity for the son of a naval lineage, did not especially embody values in conflict with the conservative and genteel tenets of American aristocracy—especially in a family that ambivalently boasted James Russell Lowell and Amy Lowell as members. Lowell simply exchanged Northern for Southern aristocratic values, and his poetry followed the ethics and aesthetics of the latter.

If Imitations represented Lowell’s attempt to place himself in a transnational and transhistorical poetic family extending beyond both biological and New Critical families, Life Studies and For the Union Dead represent a stylistic and thematic breakthrough. By com-
mon consensus, *Life Studies* constitutes the turning point in Lowell's career, in which the "cooked" aspect of his style—its highly wrought, "difficult," self-conscious poeticity—and the grandeur and public historical interest of his subject matter, gives way to the influence of the "raw", the spontaneity and unmanipulated truth of the Beats; the relaxation, following his mother's death in 1954, of strictures against close scrutiny and public utterance of his own family secrets—most notably his suffering as a child; the aftermath of devastating manic attacks, the most recent of which had led to a three-month internment in McLean's, Boston's famous private and exclusive psychiatric hospital. *Life Studies* is Lowell's descent, after bouts of "enthusiasm" for Catholicism and manic madness, for various "girls" (his manic episodes were usually signaled by obsessive attachments to clearly inappropriate women: young women he barely knew, the lesbian Elizabeth Bishop, Delmore Schwartz's wife, the widowed Jackie Kennedy, et al.), into simple family history, both public and private. Lowell studies his own life through that of his family, which he takes, through its social prominence and decline, as a kind of representative family. But he is not, like Whitman, the poet as Emerson's Representative Man, though the poetic establishment worked hard to accord him that status. He does not contain multitudes; unlike Whitman's self-proclaimed heir, his contemporary Beat complement Allen Ginsberg, his reach is not gargantuanly democratic. His focus is him-Self, which atomic unit becomes as mythically large as he felt dominated by it; and his democracy consists not in claiming every man's voice as his own, but in giving a voice to his own most oppressed self, his stifled and stifling patrician childhood. As representatives, Whitman is diffusion; Lowell, distillation and then violent, rending explosion.

And within *Life Studies*, "91 Revere Street" is the explosive piece of the collection. Dismissed by some of Lowell's former mentors as distasteful and inappropriate for public readership, heralded by other critics as a welcome turn in the poet's development, it is a series of autobiographical vignettes from Lowell's childhood. Here, Lowell introduces themes of his own boyhood that become crucial in subsequent work. Though this was the only prose piece he ever published in a book of verse, the break that it creates in the flow of his opus allows the raw pain of childhood to be reexposed and articulated as a recuperative process (though this latter claim can be challenged by evidence of Lowell's continued mental and emotional difficulties). It is not a question of glorifying a childhood "essence" or of identifying a monolithic, if unstable, subject through psychobiography. The social creates the subject through cruelty and indoctrination. Lowell, whose parents married in order to join together two illustrious Boston names, not two people with affinities and inclinations or disinclinations, indoctrinated him into Winslow and Lowelldom. This meant that, no less than for the South Boston poets trapped in D Street, Lowell's self-imagining was forcibly bound within Revere Street and Marlborough Street parameters, to exclusive private schools, to certain class conceptions about himself. But something, perhaps the marital disharmony of the two households, gave the lie to these lessons; young Lowell started rebelling early. One of the peculiar characteristics of the oppression of children is the double bind of a parent's insisting on a child's powerlessness ("I own you; I decide where you will go to school, etc."); and simultaneously insisting that the child assume adult emotional responsibilities. In other words, the categories "child" and "adult" are defined and enforced by adults, who blur and alter these already arbitrary distinctions according to their own needs. Bobby Lowell, as a child in a world where being a "mama's boy" paradoxically meant husbanding and fathering his own needy and powerful mother, resisted this oppression though stubborn counterdefinition:

"A penny for your thoughts, Schopenhauer," my mother would say. "I am thinking about pennies," I'd answer. "When I was a child I used to love telling Maman everything I had done," Mother would say. "But you're not a child," I would answer. ("91 Revere Street," IS 20)

The boy's retort, in fact a non sequitur, attempts to establish difference and boundary in an experience of emotional claustrophobia. He throws his mother's seductive, mercantile, disguised plea for intimacy back in her face, by reading the request at face value. He may in fact have been thinking about pennies, but since this is not the kind of response Mother wants, she takes it, probably correctly, as a denial of access. He claims private space by denying her the right to use her now-defunct childhood as a bargaining chip—he rejects her attempt to tell him how to be a child. "I don't want to be the kind of child you were," he indicates to the reader through his brilliantly deft and distancing placement of the accent in her "Maman," summing up
in a kind of doubly deceptive "Benito Cereno" scenario (Lowell adapted Melville's story for the stage). This is a subtle kind of slavery that partakes of the illusion of the Chain of Being—although children, as slaves, in fact support the master, although the "higher" elements of the Chain literally depend upon the "lower," the self-protective polemic of the system portrays women, children, slaves as "dependents" and the privileged man as the "provider." And boys, as Lowell attests, are under tremendous pressure to adapt their experience to this illusion. What could be more flattering and terrifying than this seductive invasion of one's bedroom, this appeal to oneself as savior? Despite the lack of overt violence, growing up like this is like growing up with a knife to one's throat.

Common psychoanalytic wisdom has it that every child does dream of replacing one parent as the other's partner. This theory, formulated by adults to interpret other adults' ambivalent feelings about their childhoods and their parents, is accepted by some of these adults as a fair analysis that names their early confusion. While it is important to acknowledge the possibility of gratification at being, momentarily, a preferred object of desire, and though modern psychoanalysis has done a great deal to acknowledge heretofore silenced rivalries and desires within the family and the participation of children in these dramas, one needs to beware of "blaming the victim" in child-adult relations. The seductive elements of incest may win out as adult memories over the sense of being terrorized and physically possessed, surrounded by the parent's body as Bobby Lowell is surrounded by his mother's. Both the terror and the gratification are submerged, forgotten and socially denied. According to Miller and Sherover-Marcuse, the submerged pain continues to control the survivor's life in adulthood; according to adherents of classical Freudian theory, the submerged desire governs the subsequent course of the subject's life.

Related to this complex of problems and controversies is the problem of language and its relation to infant or child sexuality/physicality. Individuation, or differentiation, has emerged as a central problematic for several contemporary literary and psychoanalytic theorists. Kristeva in particular posits a relationship between imaginative and energetic play with language—poetry—and the pre-Oedipal (and even pre-mirror) stage, in which the child experiences no identity separate from the mother. Traces of this stage break through
predict a transition from childhood indignation to adult misogyny. Lowell, after all, is a grown man, a father himself, when he writes the scene. One of the dangers of unacknowledged and unrepressed child oppression is that the adult subject will forever act unconsciously out of that feeling of victimization, even when the power dynamic is in fact very different. “She ran into my bedroom. She hugged me.” “She” is the subject of all but the first and last sentences of the passage (“panic” and “I” fulfill that function in the other two sentences, respectively). The air is heavy with passivity and blame, as if the adult Lowell were still skulking resentfully on his bed, protesting his own innocence. The adult Lowell exhibits little overt sympathy for his mother, an intelligent and driven woman who believed too much in her social role to give creative expression to her intelligence, instead living her life begrudgingly and resentfully through the men in the family; but he leaves room for the reader to extrapolate from his text her frustration and sense of powerlessness. The stunning misogyny of the portrait is shot through with evidence for us to read it somewhat differently: as Lowell’s own sympathetic identification with his mother’s stunted and self-limiting life.

The poles of assimilation and defiance, Heaven and Hell, innocence and experience, that characterize adolescence, and on which we can look back with the pleasure/pain of nostalgia, work themselves permanently and horrifyingly into Lowell’s life in the manic-depression of mental illness, and less dramatically into his work as an attempt to negotiate the controlled decorum of the old-world, patriarchal New Critics and his new Confessional mode. Life Studies and to a lesser extent For the Union Dead mark Lowell’s poetic adolescence, in that he emerges semiautonomous and self-conscious from under the influence of both biological family and poetic family: he views his parents and ancestors with detached pathos that cuts them down to size, even as he finally acknowledges their crushing power over his psyche, and he declares independence from the New Critics and Agrarians with his new relaxed style and personal subject matter.

Revealing family secrets allows Lowell to break the formal rigidity that fueled hyperdramatic, manically religious earlier poems whose praise from New Critical quarters had brought him instant fame. “Colloquy in Black Rock,” the Jonathan Edwards poems, and “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket” especially exemplify Lowell’s early cryptic and overwrought style. “91 Revere Street” opens with
Lowell's public announcement of a Jewish ancestor, Major Mordecai Myers, a jibe at the sanitized reference to him as "M. Myers" in a cousin's "Biographical Sketches" (LS 11). Lowell goes beyond simply broadcasting this family secret—he identifies with and romanticizes his forefather, who, after a distinguished career in the military, "sponsored an enlightened law exempting Quakers from military service"; thus, the poet could imagine, this heroic man might have sanctioned Lowell's own defiant conscientious objector position in World War II. Mocking his own romantic illusions in the text, Lowell confesses that he was also yearningly certain that "Major Mordecai had lived in a more ritualistic, gaudy and animal world than twentieth century Boston." This reference to the Major's Jewishness demonstrates the extent to which Lowell starved for the mystique he projects onto Jews, the Mediterranean mystical ambience so lacking in his own family experience; his own earlier movement toward Catholicism had attempted to fill the sterile void of Boston Protestantism. At the same time, he hopes to discover family antecedents, still trying to construct a "legitimate" biological subfamily, an alternative undercurrent that would be the "hidden truth" to the overt coldness of his lived experience. Especially important is Myers's place in his father's family line, as Lowell attempts to counterbalance his mother's power with a dynamic and interesting forefather, and the stultifying Lowell/Winslow scenario with subcultural ethnic warmth. (Lowell did not explore the actual Jewish communities of Boston or New York; rather, he sought to undermine the family structure from within, re-enacting his ambivalence about moving out of the family into a world of others.)

Lowell's description of Myers's portrait, and the feelings and fantasies it elicited from him, constitute a modified instance of a technical convention of the modern lyric: that of Eliot's objective correlatives, the projection outward of private emotions onto a presumably corresponding object, and the corollary introjection of these external objects. "Modified" here in that Mordecai's quality of Jewishness, rather than a bounded object, serves to externally anchor Lowell's desire for warmth and liveliness. The constant projection of inner experience onto what Marjorie Perloff has termed, in Lowell's words, the "unforgivable landscape" of modern decay and detritus is mitigated in these confessional poems, especially, again, in "91 Revere Street"; here, finally, Lowell implicitly acknowledges that his perception of the "earth choking its tears" has its analogue in his own childhood asthma, dismissed by female relatives as "growing pains" (LS 41). This disease is increasingly understood in contemporary medical circles as internal crying. The mitigation is never complete; Lowell's externals are never freed from emotional coloring, and they continue to play an integral part in setting the psychological atmosphere of each poem. But the poet loosens the strict and repressive (imperialistic, even, and born of self-abnegation) insistence on objective correlate, not requiring natural objects, or anything outside the poet's psyche, to bear the entire burden of conveying emotional content. The attempt to "own" Mordecai's imagined "Jewish" qualities by placing these qualities within Lowell's own genealogy brings the correlative closer to its emotional referent. Furthermore, Lowell himself figures prominently in the passage as the child full of fantasies—Lowell shows the process of splitting off and projecting particular qualities onto an absent person/object, rather than presenting the correlative as a fait accompli. In this sense, the slightly pejorative term "confessional" can be understood as the poet's taking responsibility for his presence in the poem, for his agency in appropriating objects for self-representative purposes.

Again, the hoary Self raises its problematic unwieldy head. Confessional poetry has, like any other poetic genre, its conventions. Especially in the context of modern debates about voice and presence, the confession can be accorded no special status as truth-telling. But with the heavy emphasis in the 1950s on psychotherapy as a way of "getting to" a "true self," rather than constructing one through narrative, the re-membering or invention of the past was seen as a liberating move, one designed to promote rather contradictory ideas: both an autonomous "healthy" ego and a successful social unit—that is, someone who is able to conform to social norms with a minimal degree of discomfort. The psychotherapeutic practices of the 1950s and early 1960s (including, for instance, prescription of addictive pharmaceuticals in combination with a talking cure, or, in a different vein, Merrill Moore's intimate relations with the Lowell family and his plan to collaborate with Mrs. Lowell on a biography of Lowell's early years) seem fraught with fallacies, unprofessional conduct, and double binds impossible for the client to negotiate with any sense of empowerment. Contemporary psychoanalytic revisionists have
refined and clarified the process: while one does not engage the process of verbal self-invention/exploration to posit a “true self,” the trying out of various possibilities, the telling of family secrets, the acknowledgment of pain and the retrieval of memories does, inevitably, allow one to see oneself differently. As for the “trueness” of Miller’s “true self;” psychoanalytic narratives are powerful as long as their utterance, like Barfield’s “poetic diction,” effects a “felt change of consciousness” in the reader/listener, who here is also, and crucially, the speaker. Narrative’s truth is contingent and provisional—“true” for as long as its undomesticated, defamiliarizing insights enable change. One does not, at best, “confess to” a fixed and monolithic set of experiences of which there is only one real interpretation. But this is not clear to the person confessing until those taboos have been broken and those memories retrieved and articulated. In other words, the “self” does not acquire transparency until one acknowledges and releases one’s illusions, attachments and beliefs about that “self.” Herein lies the value of Lowell’s confessional poetry; this is why Life Studies indicates such a shift in his style and content. The style, especially, becomes more fluid and inclusive because he understands himself differently. I want to acknowledge the provisional nature of the subject “Robert Lowell” as the poet understands it in Life Studies and passing into For the Union Dead, and address the later ramifications of those revelations of oppressed childhood.

In a sweeping and flattering statement, Miller proclaims that “it is not the psychologists but the literary writers who are ahead of their time.” Lowell’s writings accurately reflect the psychotherapeutic practices of his time, which tended toward the pharmaceutical and the Freudian, although he claimed to mistrust the “talking cure,” submitting to it only because he had to, regarding visits to his therapist as “necessary chores.” Read against the grain of his intentions, however, his self-disclosures anticipate by several decades the findings of primarily feminist philosophers and therapists, who see the subtle cruelty of childrearing in the modern family as inevitably perpetrating both socially and personally destructive and self-destructive behavior—resulting in the obvious and endless family merry-go-round of physical and emotional violence and neglect.

Radical Nostalgia?

What then of the possible fertile alliance Sherover-Marcuse speaks of between the socially privileged and the world of others? What of the confirmation and corroboration of collective experience—the empathy—that indicates “authentic” (in Sartrean terms) experience? Did Lowell find or does his poetry enact, through acknowledging the pain of childhood, an empathetic participation in emancipatory activities? Lowell’s politics and those of his poetry have been much discussed. An explicitly political poet, a self-appointed “witness to his age,” he took well-publicized stands on a number of political issues throughout his life; in his “day” he was the leading national poet of the United States. Having served time in prison as a conscientious objector during World War II (his grounds for objection being the Allied bombing of Germany, and of Dresden in particular), he later opposed the Vietnam War in the March on the Pentagon, declined President Johnson’s invitation to read at the White House, campaigned for Senator Eugene McCarthy on the latter’s antiwar platform, and supported the student movement of the sixties. In each of these instances, he used his standing as an American aristocrat and premier national poet to draw attention to the position he took.

However, his poems show no sympathy for a structural critique of social injustice; as with his preoccupation with writers rather than writing, his interest in history lay in personalities—military or political leaders’ integrity or lack thereof (and his “efforts to psychologize” the latter), and the poignancy of the down-and-out in prisons and mental institutions. As Alan Williamson argues in Pity the Monsters: The Political Vision of Robert Lowell, Lowell’s personal and “public” political poetry became increasingly interdependent. Some of his best poems play with an identification with or alienation from his socially outcast “monsters”: “Memories of West Street and Lepke,” “Waking in the Blue,” and the prose piece “Near the Unbalanced Aquarium” show the poet as one among the world’s outcasts, one among the criminal and the insane. (During manic episodes, even such “monsters” as Hitler and Stalin took on a sympathetic glamor for Lowell.) But there is a bemusement in these pieces, as if Lowell were wondering, “What am I, a Boston Lowell, doing here? I feel kinship with these people because we are all alien from the re-
spectable world; I feel alien from them because of my investment in the respectable world":

> I was a fire-breathing Catholic C.O.,
> and made my manic statement
> ... and then
> sat waiting sentence in the bull pen
> beside a Negro boy with curlicues
> of marijuana in his hair.

... Flabby, bald, lobotomized,
[Lepeke, the underworld czar] drifted in a sheepish calm,
where no agonizing reappraisal
jarring his concentration on the electric chair—
hanging like an oasis in his air
of lost connections...

("Memories of West Street and Lepeke," LS 85)

Lowell's bemused irony and the gentle, self-conscious sense of noblesse oblige behind these desperate empathies differs from the self-consciousness of the South Boston girls and other writers from across the tracks—Walt Whitman, for example, or Etheridge Knight (compare "West Street," for instance, with Knight's "Hard Rock Returns to Prison from the Hospital for the Criminally Insane"). Divided against itself, Lowell's sense of inside/outside, participant/alien symmetrically complements these other writers' feelings of community/exclusion—but it has a different internal logic; their concerns were not his. One senses that in order to preserve the integrity of his psychic struggle, Lowell has to preserve "Otherness," like a sensitive and vulnerable version of the hypothetical newscasters covering the lives of Southie's poor. The creative and emotional catharsis Lowell gets from his acts of empathy depend upon structural inequity.

Lowell conducted his act of "consciousness-raising"—writing—in a community of writers presumably more interested in the craft and integrity of their art than the benefits of psychotherapy or social change. The prose piece "Near the Unbalanced Aquarium" offers a poignant, almost scathing instance of ineffectual "art therapy," in which Lowell competes with a fellow inmate of the Payne-Whitney Clinic in making imitations of Klee and Pollock—the use of ekphrasis barely wards off painful questions about the psychic utility of his pre-

ferred craft. Lowell's writing did not take place in conditions designed to help loosen the tight grasp he tried to maintain on selfhood, on authorship and authority. His compulsive "desire to confess" was not necessarily matched with a desire to let go of the secrets he was confessing—at least not to the extent of relinquishing to a collectivity the control and identity that self and secrets appear to offer. While Lowell could take pacifist, antiviolent positions in the public arena; and while his obsessive stranglehold on form, language, and personal information relaxed with the relatively colloquial syntax and open forms of Life Studies initiated by "Revere Street," he continued to suffer psychic and emotional inner violence which never entirely abated, and he continued to inflict psychic and physical violence on those close to him.

Without wishing to detract from Lowell's achievement, Robert von Hallberg has called him a quintessential liberal, unusual for postwar America in his insistence on the personal and his distaste for systematic social change; for von Hallberg, the weight of Lowell's political/historical opus demonstrates that "American liberalism has had... major imaginative embodiment in the last thirty-five years." Given its consistency with notions of individuality and personal experience, Lowell's preferred but embattled genre, the lyric, could be called the exemplary liberal literary form. But further, the term "liberal," with its roots in liber, freedom, and its emphasis on tolerance rather than change, points toward Lowell's own need, once again projected onto the landscape of history and the political arena, to be free and tolerated rather than changed—his task, perhaps, was not to change himself or to effect change in others but simply to learn to find the world and himself tolerable. If a radical nostalgia impelled him outward, he was also, perforce, tremendously preoccupied with simply maintaining a clear sense of who "he" was—which maintenance, according to the desperate faith in self he had learned from the world of privilege and from self-defense against the chaos of mental illness, meant pushing others away, making sure he, and they, recognized their otherness. Lowell ripped away the sham nostalgia of the golden childhood, thus permitting himself the possibility of identification with others. But it remained an empathy based on shared pain and deprivation, an empathy tinged with a constant sense of superiority-run-against, rather than an active building toward a new way of conceiving relations from which a new meaning of "Robert Lowell" could emerge.
Louis Gates, Jr., remarked upon the black and white antecedents of African-American texts in a workshop on Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God in February 1986 at Stanford University.


53. See Crane’s “Voyages,” Complete Poems, p. 36. Reviewing Closing Time Till Dawn (San Francisco: The Bob Kaufman Collective, 1986), Kaufman’s posthumously published collaboration with Janice Blue, Tom Clark explicitly proposes Crane as Kaufman’s main literary forebear: “Kaufman survived to the age of 61 [actually 60], well beyond the span of many self-consuming poet-visionaries—including Hart Crane, the poet whose work Kaufman’s probably has most in common with. Kaufman’s poems resemble Crane’s in their rhetorical locations, their leaps between elliptical, daring images, and (to use Crane’s own phrases) their ‘emotional dynamics’ and reliance on a ‘logic of metaphor.’” Kaufman’s best poems, though, have something extra—a quality of gentleness and compassion, a radiating of hope and light that relieves the brokenness of experience. In these ‘metaphysical designs of want and care,’ as Kaufman once called his poems, things often seem to be hovering at the brink of some ecstatic transformation—a transfiguration of the personal realm into eternal dimensions” (Tom Clark’s “A Hipper Poet’s Nocturnal Muse,” San Francisco Chronicle Book Review, August 3, 1986, p. 3).


56. Yingling, Hart Crane, p. 78.

57. Crane, “Voyages II,” 1, 22, Complete Poems, p. 35.


59. Kaufman’s survival of four shipwrecks is mentioned by D. W. Winnin’s biographical sketch in Dictionary of Literary Biography, vol. 16, p. 275.

60. See Du Bois, Souls; Stephen Henderson, New Black Poetry; Hughes, Selected Poems; LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Blues People; Nicolle Starge, “a kin a solo a poetic possibility a poetic imperative,” Nigger Edges (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1978), pp. 2-12; Baker, Blues. This list is only partial, and could be infinitely expanded.

61. Jones/Baraka, Blues People, pp. 188-89. For a detailed comparison of Charlie Parker’s music and Kaufman’s poetry, see Charles Nilon.


64. John Birks Gillespie with Al Fraser, To Be or Not to Bop: Memoirs of Dizzy Gillespie (New York: Da Capo, 1979), p. 281.


66. One could further postulate on the “masculinism” of these ejaculations. Joel Fineman, using as his sources Roman Jakobson, Morris Halle, and Freud, has written of “b,” “p,” and “d” words that indicate a paternal orientation (“papa”) etc.) and the “m” and “n” words that indicate a maternal affiliation. Both the “b,” “p,” “d” sounds and the “m,” “n” sounds are among the earliest, if not the earliest, acquired in childhood. One connection he does not make is, by extension, that of fatherhood to elimination or “below the waist” activities (poo-poo, doo-doo, pis, petting), and motherhood to oral functions (nursing, mammaries, mm, yummy, may-naye, necking). Does this mean that “Sha-ra-ra” and the classic cartoon opera singer’s “minnini” indicate certain pseudo-dowoppers and tenors are maternally fixed? This is altogether too silly for serious subjects like bebop. What could it mean here? It’s a stretch, but in such a context, the deployment of infantile references to elimination and sexual release in a highly intellectual and aesthetic structure indicates a consummate tricksterism. See Joel Fineman, “The Structure of Allegorical Desire,” Allegory and Representation, ed. Stephen J. Greenblatt (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), pp. 26-60, esp. pp. 54-55, 34n and 39n.


68. Hughes, Selected Poems, p. 87.


70. Ibid., pp. 47-48.

71. Ibid, p. 49.

72. Davis with Troupe, Miles, p. 397.


4. I would like to acknowledge the assistance, encouragement and inspiration of Barbara Machtlinger, who was my colleague and “boss” at City Roots; Renato Rosaldo, in whose seminar I initially realized that I was “allowed to” write about texts that moved me and in which I had a personal stake; and particularly Cheryl Mellen, Charlotte Osborne, and Susan Johnson, whose writing in the face of adversity sustained me for many years, and who have given me permission to share their work.


8. See, for example, "South Boston and Ethnic Identity," presented at the American Sociological Association, 1982, p. 10. The title page was missing from the manuscript copy I was given. Much of the information presented here about South Boston is drawn from this article.

9. Ibid., p. 10.

10. Charlotte Osborne, letter to author, December 26, 1991: "Vallums, Qualaludes, and angel dust were never part of my life."

11. Ibid.


14. Ibid. Charlotte writes that her brother has since obtained his adoption papers and they had a joyful reunion after twenty-seven years of separation. Included in this update is the information that she is now (1991) thirty years old, happily married, and since September 1991 the mother of a beautiful baby girl named Miriah. She teaches ceramics to adults and children, but more importantly, she writes, "I teach my daughter what love is."

15. Tortured
A torched mind
An adult mind trapped in a body years younger
A peace of soul mind for which i hunger
Living apart by a family I can't please
When will this tormented mind be at ease

16. Willis, Profane Culture, p. 3.

17. Paraphrased from a lecture on film script writing, Naropa Institute, July 1977. The same notion appears frequently in Burroughs' interviews and essays.


21. For a comprehensive overview of the development of the term "youth culture," see Graham Murdock and Robin McClernon, "Youth and Class: The Career of a Confusion," in Mungham and Pearson, pp. 10-26. Murdock and McClernon are especially careful to expose the fallacy that "youth culture" is a cross-class phenomenon, and that the term "youth culture" has itself been used to obscure class differences. What is most often referred to as "youth culture," they argue, is actually working-class youth culture as defined by the market economy. This is because as members of the wage-earning work force, the working-class youth, especially in the relative economic expansion after World War II, became mass-market consumers, and the products geared toward them became metonymic embodiments of "youth" and its values. The relevance here of their critique of the notion of a classless "youth culture" lies in the ease with which
Notes to pages 106-113

"youth" as an idea can be manipulated to represent any number of threatening or consolidating ideas of rebellion, grace, physicality, intensity.

25. This interpretation of "a community of place" was offered by George Lipsitz.
30. As in other forms of the marginalization of youth, which will be further discussed in the section of this chapter that treats Robert Lowell, this "continued youth" imposed by the middle class on the poor is ambiguous. The reverse is also true; the middle class expects the poor to "parent" them just as adults expect their children, or men expect women, to parent them by serving their needs, by undergoing sacrifices for the middle class's benefit, by enduring what they themselves could not. Thers is the power of definition, so their actual economic and social dependency on the poor can be masked as its opposite, as in the rhetoric surrounding the "welfare state" concept. I thank Mary Wood for bringing this point to my attention.
38. Andre Lorde, *The Black Unicorn: Poems* (New York: Norton, 1978). Even a poem with as different a perspective on the pan-African predicament as Countee Cullen's "Heritage" looks on Africa as a dream-puzzle; what must it or can it mean to twentieth-century Black Americans? Cullen evokes exotic images ("spicy grove, cinnamon tree / What is Africa to me?") to question them and acknowledge the ambiguity of his felt connection—not to assert these images as truth.
43. That poetry critical of the cruelty of child labor can be read as a fable—a denial of the truth and the perpetuation of a myth of bliss—points to the complicated debates surrounding the role of poetry in society. Some theorists have argued that poetry acts as almost a photographic negative of contemporaneous social, historical, economic events—that is, in the progress of industrial capitalism. The two—poetry and society—are interdependent but symmetrically opposed: complementary, perhaps. See Theodor Adorno, "The lyric in Society," *Telos* 20 (1974), pp. 56-71, and Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.
47. Ibid., p. 284.
50. Sherover/Marcuse, "Toward a Perspective," #12.
53. Miller, Sherover/Marcuse, Sartre, Althusser all occupy relatively privileged social positions (except that the former two are women and Sherover/Marcuse is Jewish, a significant distinction to be made within contemporary "whiteness") as bourgeois intellectuals and professionals. In my urgency to establish a place for children in the roster of out-casts am I perversely blind to the inequities of race and class? Am I indulging in a disingenuous "me-too-ism"—after all, I fit the formulaic and sketchy description I just applied to my informing theorists—designed to place me in the company of Kaufman, Osborne, Genet? In writing about Lowell it is perhaps tautological to invoke the names and ideas of those who share his social position, his concerns with his individual psychopathology, his sense of the tremendous spiritual and emotional
Notes to pages 120-22

impeachment of worldly privilege and the psychic battering that conditioned him to conceal personal shame and inadequacy behind social standing. However, I think not. Recent African-American art and theory coming from the economic as well as ethnic/racial margin is as much concerned with the early lessons of childhood as these older, European models. Michele Wallace's introduction to the new edition of her Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman (New York: Verso, 1990), pp. xv-xxxvii, bell hooks's most recent musings on the Black family (public lecture, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 1991), David Murray's writings about pornography as a "male grief" (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 1987), and the spate of films coming from young African-American men—particularly Straight Out of Brooklyn and Boyz N the Hood—as well as Richard Pryor's solo work through Jojo Dancer, combine an awareness of social trauma with a sensitivity to the trauma of childhood interpretation. The exquisitely painful honesty of much of this work moves it beyond the self-dramatizing confines of a confessional mode and into the realm of social urgency in a way that Robert Lowell's work, for all its empathetic accessibility, did not achieve.


53. Miller specifically mentions the memory of a strong love of and identification
with nature as a characteristic of a sensitive and abused/neglected child (The Drama of the Gifted Child [New York: Basic Books, 1981]). This observation has tremendous possibilities for rereading Wordsworth, Roethke, and the German Romantics—the latter especially because Miller's evidence for "poisonous" or abusive pedagogy is drawn primarily from German child-rearing manuals of the last three centuries.


55. Sedgwick, "A Poem Is Being Written."


58. In a lecture on gay poetic history given at Naropa Institute in July 1980, Harold Norse, a gay North Beach Beat poet, has explicitly connected the "objective correlatives" with Eliot's need to keep his homoerotic feelings in the closet. Denying himself direct expression of his love for Jean Verdenal, Eliot built his poems around displacement and the substitution of objects for expression of feeling. This very poignant and provocative hypothesis implies that the whole of academically legitimated poetics of twentieth-century America is founded on the pain of gay emotional self-denial. See chapter 4, "Dirty Jokes and Angels: Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan Writing the Gay Community." note 7.


63. Ibid., p. 239.


65. Ibid., p. 99.

66. Ibid.


68. Perloff, "The Limits of Imitation: Robert Lowell's Rimbaud," Robert Lowell, pp. 59-75, for a thorough discussion of "Nostalgia" and other critics' responses to it as autobiography. She argues for a nonbiographical reading of the poem in which "elle" is the river, and "lui" is the sun. See also the biographies of Rimbaud published in the fifties and sixties, which are enrapured with Rimbaud's painful childhood, in particular Erlande-Branger's Arthur Rimbaud (New York: New Directions, 1961) and Elisabeth Hanson's My Poor Arthur (New York: Henry Holt, 1959). One might speculate on women biographers' attraction to Rimbaud and the primacy they place on his relationship with his overhearing, and tyrannical mother.


70. Imitations, xi.


72. Hamilton, Robert Lowell, quoting a letter from Merrill Moore to Lowell's father, p. 65, also Lowell to Ransom, p. 57. On Tate's involvement in Lowell's bouts with psychiatric and police confinement, concluding in his complaint to Mrs. Lowell about being a substitute consort, pp. 156-60.

73. Ibid., p. 67.


75. See Hamilton, Robert Lowell, p. 237, for Tate's letter to Lowell: "All the poems about your family, including the one about you and Elizabeth, are definitely bad. I do not think you ought to publish them. . . . Quite bluntly, these details, presented in caustic and at random, are of interest only to you. They are, of course, of great interest to me because I am one of your oldest friends. But they have no public or literary interest" (The italics are Tate's). Tate subsequently changed his mind, after the poems' publication. See Hamilton, pp. 268-73, for other critical responses, both American and British, including warm praise from William Carlos Williams and A. Alvarez, and mixed reviews, from the cautious to the vicious, from M. L. Rosenthal in The Nation, P. W. Dupee in Partisan Review, Joseph Bennett for the Hudson Review, and Thom Gunn in the Yale Review, etc.
Notes to pages 131-41

76. Miller stresses that most children repress their negative memories of childhood; remembering and speaking about it to a sympathetic interlocutor can literally save a person's life. Though Lowell does not seem to have had a difficult childhood, he was unusually aware of his own feelings; perhaps this is what saved him from the suicide that overtook so many of his contemporaries: Plath, Sexton, Berryman, et al. One could also argue that Lowell's confessions came too late, and his self-destructive compulsions were tantamount to suicide; Lowell certainly had no greater claim to mental health than his peers, and the severity of his mental and emotional illness may indicate that simple utterance—confession—is not enough. Miller, For Your Own Good, p. 284.

77. See, for example, Louise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach, Understanding Women: Feminist Psychotherapy (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1985), p. 38. While this work focuses exclusively on women's upbringing and self-deny in the interest of others, this paradigm could be expanded and accommodated to apply to boys and men. It is a psychotherapeutic truism, especially initiated by the currently popular concept of the "adult child."


80. Lowell's attitude toward actual Jews was awkward, embarrassed and ambivalently well-intentioned. In spite of his indignation about the Jews' treatment in Europe and the Soviet Union, his shaky friendship with Delmore Schwartz (which broke decisively after Lowell's liaison with Schwartz's ex-wife, Gertrude Buckman) foun
dered after a dinner at Lowell's parents', during which Schwartz was constantly re

81. Lowell quoted by Perloff, Robert Lowell, pp. 3-4.


84. Miller, p. 278.


86. von Hallberg, American Poetry, p. 173.


89. Heymann, American Aristocracy, p. 365.


4. Dirty Jokes and Angels: Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan Writing the Gay Community


6. Gertrude Stein plays an analogous role in lesbian American literary history, drawing together themes of national identity (The Making of Americans), language and same-sex desire (Lifting Dolly and Tender Buttons), the constitution of identity and community through erotic partnership (The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas).


10. Ibid., pp. 1-8. See also Ed Cohen's "Writing Gone Wilde: Homoerotic Desire in the Closet of Representation," PMLA (October 1987), pp. 801-13, for a demonstration of how an ostensibly "straight" text both conceals and offers a homoerotic subversion of "normative standards of male same-sex behavior" (PMLA, p. 760).

11. Robert Duncan explained his theory of cymology in a lecture at Stanford University, May 1984. Duncan is literally second-sighted, following an accident in his third year which left him permanently cross-eyed, seeing everything double—that is, always seeing two separate and overlapping images where the normal-sighted person would see only one; this difference in vision lends authority to his claims that the physical is inextricably interwoven with the spiritual. For a detailed account of Duncan's physical eyesight and its relation to his aesthetic vision, see Elbert Faas's Young Robert Duncan: Portrait of the Poet as Homosexual in Society (San Diego: Black Sparrow Press, 1988), pp. 18-20.


