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Wallace Stevens's Modernist Poetry in Robert Lowell Confessional Poetry: Reading and Misreading the Master

Farid Benmezal (University of Boumerdes)
f.benmezal@univ-boumerdes.dz

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This article argues that Robert Lowell's response to Wallace Stevens's modernism provides grounds for the creation of his confessional poetry. Owing to the nature of this study, this article relies on Harold Bloom's theory of influence and Mikhail Bakhtin concept of hidden polemic. This methodology highlights that while Lowell is attracted to Stevens' urban aesthetics, he does not simply, and blindly, follow the master's poetic principles. Unlike Stevens who seeks to create a secular poetry which he offers as a substitute for religion to fill the spiritual vacuum caused by the absence of religion, Lowell develops a viable modern Christian poetics to overcome the difficulty in defining his role as a Christian poet in a secular world and finding the proper place for religion in his work. Lowell's new confessional poetry with its concern with the poet's individual experience to address social and political issues also marks his departure from Stevens' influence.

Benmezal Farid

University of Boumerdes, Algeria
f.benmezal@univ-boumerdes.dz

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KEYWORDS: commitment; confessional; impersonality; Christianity; urbanization

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to investigate Robert Lowell's confessional poetry as an intertextual response to Wallace Stevens' modernism. Stevens' poetry, in its turn, came in response to the romantic failure to solve the problem of the split between man and his existential reality. Though aware of man's alienation from his environment, due to the moral crisis and the disintegration of the social bond following the Industrial Revolution, the romantics failed to cope with the new circumstances. Instead of facing their new realities, they turned to nature and their self to seek refuge. The solitude of the self in its dealings with the world and the return to nature as a means of escaping reality which were crucial to the thought of the romantics were addressed in Stevens' own poetry.

While the romantics celebrated their own experiences of beauty in the natural world, Stevens attempted to understand the world around him objectively by achieving a balance between reality and the imagination. As a secular poet, Stevens attempted to develop an urban poetics reflecting a desire to create a balance between the imagination and reality. Aware of the complexities of the nature of modern life and the perplexities of the intellectual scene caused by the loss of faith, he proposed poetry as an alternative to traditional religion to fill the spiritual vacuum. Stevens' objective urban secular poetry made his poetry a major source of influence on contemporary poets. From Lowell's perspective, thinking about what should be respected and what should be corrected in Stevens' modernism provided grounds for the creation of his confessional poetry.

To examine the nature of Lowell's connectedness to Stevens, this study operates from Harold Bloom's theory of influence and Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of hidden polemic. According to Bloom, a strong poet learns to appreciate poetry through the irresistible work of precursors. To make his new voice, a strong poet misreads precursors. Yet, he cannot escape the awareness that his imaginative vision is born out of the very achievements of the past poets. The defensive mechanism the belated poet uses against his precursor is "poetic misreading or misprision" (Bloom, 1973, 14) which is a process through which he sublimates his precursor's influence: "poetic influence – when it involves two strong, authentic poets, - always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, as an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation" (ibid., 30). Bloom identifies six distortive processes through which a belated poet operates in reading his precursor. He calls them revisionary ratios and means them to represent the developmental stage of the ephebe. This article takes its methodological bearings

from Bloom's first ratio that he calls clinamen. According to him, clinamen is "poetic misreading or misprision" (ibid., 14) in which there is an implication that "the precursor poet went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved precisely in the direction the new poem moves" (ibid., 14) .

In addition, the Bakhtinian concept of hidden polemic shall support Lowell's intertextual response to Stevens. The internal hidden polemic is among the active form of dialogism. It is constructed in the confrontation with the words of others that are imposed upon the author, demanding modifications in the structure and in the trajectory of the text. The author's language is ambivalent as it maintains both its own presence and that of the other. Precisely, "the other's words are treated antagonistically, and this antagonism, no less than the very topic being discussed, is what determines the author's discourse. . . . Such discourse cannot be fundamentally or fully understood if one takes into consideration only its direct referential meaning" (Bakhtin, 1984, 93).

2. Romantic failure to face man's alienation

One achievement of romanticism, a movement that preceded modernism, was its awareness of the disunity between man and his world. This was the reason behind the romantic failure to achieve a union between reality and the imagination. Throughout many of their poems, one side dominates the other. William Wordsworth, in "At the crossing of the Alps," attempts to fulfil his desire for a marriage between the imagination and nature, but this desire is only attained with the usurpation of reality by the imagination. The imagination takes over reality, and the poet finds himself cherishing the fallacious "invisible world" (Wordsworth, 2008, 310) of pure imagination in which reality disappears. The supremacy of the imagination over reality ends up with a world of dreams and fantasies that denies reality.

On the other hand, the defeat of the imagination by reality leads to the sense of alienation from reality. The following lines from Wordsworth's *Prelude* describe the effects of reality prevailing over the imagination:

> That day we first
> Beheld the summit of Mount Blanc, and grieved
> 'lb have a soulless image on the eye
> Which had usurped upon a living thought

That never more could be. (ibid., 379)

The speaker is exhaustively overwhelmed by the dreary image of Mont Blanc. His imagination is not able to press back against the pressure exerted by this mountain. The world of the absolute fact without the projection of human imagination becomes chaotic.

Rather than striving for reconciliation, the romantics attempted to create an ideal world through art that focused on the self and offered a purely imagined nature as a refuge against the real world from which they felt alienated. William Wordsworth's poem, "I Wandered Lonely as A Cloud," describes the speaker's loneliness and the repetition of the first person pronoun which is even the first word of the poem "I wandered" (ibid., 202) makes of the poem a narrative of the speaker's individual experience of nature. Individuality is further supported by the fact that the speaker is wandering lonely and thus detached from the rest of society as a way of cultivating his emotion through a deep communion with nature. After describing the daffodils, the poem shifts to concentrate on the mind of the speaker: "A poet could not but be gay, / In such a jocund company" (ibid., 202). Later, while alone in his room, the memory of the daffodils revives and fulfils the psychological vacancy of his self, and now his heart "dances with the daffodils" (ibid., 203). This representation of nature reflects the romantic belief that the self is the only certain part of reality, and reality is only a product of the self's awareness. Wordsworth's daffodils are only the product of the poet's self's awareness. From here, it is obvious that "the poet does not merely describe objects of nature, but projects his own subjective state onto natural objects and then describes not the object itself but his own state" (Moores, 2006, 58).

However, with the early 20th century changes, the romantic solipsism and escapism to nature became the subject to attack. The urbanization, the horror of the war, and the loss of spirituality increased the modernist sense of alienation from reality and engendered awareness that the romantic escapist approach to reality is no longer adequate to reflect these changing circumstances. The romantics, though living in the middle of such chaos, could not create art in the condition of the present. They remained devoted to nature and ignored the conditions where they lived. This return to nature was a form of escapism from the harsh realities that resulted from the radical changes that came in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In addition, the radical new theories elaborated by Marx, Darwin and Freud questioned man's secure place at the center of the universe and revealed his

dependence on laws and structures outside his control. Darwin's conception of evolution situated humanity as no more than the latest product of "the very process of natural selection" (Darwin, 1998, 360). Marxian material determinism argued that it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. Marx believed that the "mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life" (Marx, 1973, 5). Freud's theory of the unconscious revealed that "the powers motivating men and women are mainly and normally unconscious" (Murfin, 1969, 114). Freud believed that man is driven by the same basic instincts as animals. These theories prompted the modernist to challenge the romantic subjectivity and individualism and to find new methods to get rid of them.

3. Stevens' reality as an urban environment

Stevens attempted to cure poetry from romantic subjectivity and escapism to nature. While the romantics celebrated their own experiences of beauty in the natural world, Stevens sought to understand the world around him objectively. This objectification of poetry is possible only if the poet is able to reach a balance between reality and the imagination. For Stevens, "the imagination is not a free agent. It is not a faculty that functions without reference" (1966, 677).The reference is reality or the physical world. The second section of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" affirms that the imagination loses its solidity when the houses as imagined objects do not belong to the physical world. If the houses existed only in the operations of the mind and "composed of ourselves," they would be without substance, "impalpable" and "transparent":

> Suppose these houses are composed of ourselves,
> So that they become an impalpable town, full of
> Impalpable bell, transparencies of sound,
> Sounding in transparent dwellings of the self,
> Impalpable habitations that seem to move
> In the movement of the colors of the mind. (Stevens, 1997, 397)

Consequently, the mind becomes "uncertain" (ibid), "indefinite" (ibid), and "confused" (ibid) in its transformations of even the clearest fact, such as "the clearest bells" (ibid).

Despite his belief that poetry must start with the reality where the poet lives, Stevens is aware that this reality is not always good to apprehend, especially when it is not embellished by the imagination. In "Gubbinal," the person to whom the speaker is speaking contents himself with bare reality. He is aware that "The world is ugly / And the people are sad" (ibid., 69), and one finds himself in the position of "intelligent men / at the center of the unintelligible" (ibid., 422) and consequently alienated from this very reality where he lives.

What Stevens means by reality is not the beautiful romantic nature of the poet's imagination but the gloomy urban environment that he translates into poetry. The necessity of accepting this urban environment is the main idea of "The Comedian as the Letter C," a poem which describes Crispin's journey from romanticism to realism. When Crispin is nearing his poetic home of Carolina, he, like a romantic, finds refuge in an imaginative Carolina instead of facing the harshness of the environment of the real Carolina. This kind of conception may seem attractive, but it is not sufficiently productive. His mere imagination or "legendary moonlight" (ibid., 27) succeeds only in distorting reality. Thus, Crispin has to face the real urban Carolina with its polluted river exhaling disgusting smells in an industrial town:

> A river bore
> The vessel inward. Tilting up his nose,
> He inhaled the rancid rosin, burly smells
> Of dampened lumber, emanations blown
> From warehouse doors, the gustiness of ropes,
> Decays of sacks, and all the arrant stinks
> That helped him round his rude aesthetic out.
> He savored rankness like a sensualist.
> He marked the marshy ground around the dock,
> The crawling railroad spur, the rotten fence,
> Curriculum for the marvellous sophomore. (ibid., 29)

These circumstances of daily life in urban settings are the central subject of much of Stevens's poetry. For example, the poem "The Man with the Blue Guitar" brings the poet in front of the reality of the city where the beautiful images of nature that the romantics celebrate are useless in the present chaos of the urban life:

> There is no place,

> Here, for the lark fixed in the mind,
> In the museum of the sky. The cock
> Will claw sleep. Morning is not sun,
> It is this posture of the nerves. (ibid., 150)

According to Elean Cook, the lark is a reference to Shelley's "To skylark" in which Shelley seeks the aesthetic enjoyment of nature (2007, 128). However, in the urban environment there is no place for an absolute and idyllic conception of nature. It is an environment which rejects the presence of the morning sun because "morning is a posture of the nerves in which a poet blunted by business civilization desperately grasps the nuances of poetry" (Sukenick, 1967, 101). This romantic natural world which is "detached from the thing-in- itself relegated to the museum of the past" (Tompsett, 2012, 59) will no longer serve in the present chaos.

What is seen is an arid flat urban industrial land. Stevens now has to face an earth "which is not earth, but a stone" (Stevens, 1997, 142) and no longer a "mother but an oppressor" (ibid., 142). To put it in Stevens' words: "It has been easy to say in recent times that everything tends to become real, or, rather, that everything moves in the direction of reality, that is to say, in the direction of fact. We leave fact and come back to it, come back to what we wanted fact to be, not to what it was, not to what it has too often remained. The poetry of a work of the imagination constantly illustrates the fundamental and endless struggle with fact" (ibid., 251)

The quotation above paraphrases Stevens' famous motto: "violence within that protects us from violence without. It is the imagination pressing against the pressure of reality" (ibid., 665). This idea that the poet is at war against the urban environment is evoked in the following passage:

> To create is "to live at war,
> To chop the sullen psaltery,
> To improve the sewers in Jerusalem,
> To electrify the nimbuses." (ibid., 142)

Thus, the world the poet has to face is no longer the green world, but the urban industrial waste land of "sewers" and "electrif[ied] nimbuses." Given this environment, urbanization (the sewers) intrudes upon the spirituality of " "Jerusalem" so that no consolations offered by traditional religion are possible. However, Stevens does not condemn the loss of spirituality in modern life

because it would allow to free the poet's imagination from the ancient religious hindrances and to represent the urban world transformed by the imagination yet still recognizable as part of the here and now.

Stevens wants to concentrate on a world "without [the] shadows" (ibid., 144) of the metaphysical additions of traditional religion. This world, which is also very different from the idealized nature found in romantic poetry, is made of such every day common elements as "The flesh, the bone, the dirt, and the stone" (ibid). He calls this world "Oxidia" (ibid., 149). It is a suburban environment whose banal values are expressed in monetary terms and whose communication has been reduced to electronic messages transmitted over telephone poles:

> From this I shall evolve a man.
> This is his essence: the old fantoche
> Hanging his shawl upon the wind,
> Like something on the stage, puffed out,
> His strutting studied through centuries.
> At last, in spite of his manner, his eye
> A-cock at the cross piece on a pole
> Supporting heavy cables, slung
> Through Oxidia, banal suburb,
> One-half of all its installments paid. (ibid., 149)

Despite the ugly nature of Oxidia, the poet is ready to accept it and to live beyond it. In other words, he relies on his imagination to transform mundane objects, such as the "heavy cables" that sail over the suburb into the subject of poetry. Thus, the imagination sanctifies everyday reality and lifts it to the level of the myth of Olympia:

> Ecce, Oxidia is the seed
> Dropped out of this amber-ember pod,
> Oxidia is the soot of fire,
> Oxidia is Olympia. (ibid., 149)

4. Stevens's imagination as a secular redemptive force

Reality can only be redeemed by the agency of imagination free from all that comes from the traditional religion. The redemption of the present should be

accomplished by the loss of the past. Stevens' secular poetics attempts to convince people to consider the world as their only home despite its evil and pain. This is what Stevens means when he says that "the imperfect is our paradise" (ibid., 179). Being conscious of the presence of chaos, Stevens offers poetry, rather than religion, to confront it. "Poetry," Stevens writes in his "Adagia," "is a purging of the world's poverty and change and evil and death" (ibid., 906). In the opening lines of "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," the title character is directly addressed by an unidentified narrator, who proposes poetry as the "supreme fiction." The narrator informs her that if she devotes herself to Christianity by taking "the moral law" and practicing the Christian worship in "the nave" of the church, the heaven she will go is only a "haunted heaven":

> POETRY is the supreme fiction, madame.
> Take the moral law and make a nave of it
> And from the nave build haunted heaven. (ibid., 47)

One argument to justify his desire to substitute poetry for religion as a means to reinvigorate people's sense of the world as their home has to do with obsoleteness. Christianity is undesirable because it suffers stasis. As a symbol of belief, it has failed to resist the pressure of new reality and is consequently being doubted incredible. The obsoleteness of Christianity is well described in the second section of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" entitled "It Must Change," in which images of budding sexuality, fecundity and fruition are juxtaposed with worn-out, withering and decaying images related to Christianity. "Italian girls" (ibid., 337) with "jonquils in their hair" (ibid) are watched by an "old seraph" (ibid), once an angel symbol of the worn-out Christian religion and a fossil shell. The narrator speaks of "the distaste we feel for this withered scene" (ibid). These images recur through this section to emphasize an essential renewal and his rejection of all that is obsolete. The necessity of the cycle of change is reaffirmed in the tenth canto:

> The freshness of transformation is
> The freshness of a world. It is our own,
> It is ourselves, the freshness of ourselves,
> And that necessity and that presentation
> Are rubbings of a glass in which we peer. (ibid., 344)

It is indeed the poet's way of arguing for the necessity of a poetic change so as to be in accordance with the changing reality. No faith is absolute; beliefs are tenable for particular periods. As such, art is final for a moment in the sense that poetic truth is final since it brings about agreement with reality believed to be true for a time, that is, until a constant change of reality calls for a new imaginative adjustment.

5. Stevens' poetry and irrelevance

Stevens' poetry is an attempt to cure poetry from romantic principles such as the solitude of the self in its dealings with the world and the return to nature as a means of escaping reality. This could happen when human intelligence denies appeal to the supernatural in creating a balance between reality and the imagination. However, this poetic ambition forces him to confront the inevitable failure of such a project. In his aesthetics, the problem of romantic escapism is not solved but replaced by other forms of refuge. Despite the focus of his poetry on modern urban milieu, the new reality that he creates through his imaginative constructions is also solipsistic, for it has no authentic existence outside the imagination. This raises the important question about the commitment of his poetry. Stevens is the poet who believes that poetry is the "violence within" an aesthetic designed to resist the "violence without" under the form of social unrest and actual war, a belief that may be to the detriment of its commitment to the social, economic and political matters. Indeed, many critics have attacked Steven's poetry for its irrelevance to what is going on the world.

Stanley Burnshaw, Randall Jarrell and Fredric Jameson consider Stevens as a hedonist who retreats from reality. Burnshaw has criticized Stevens for irrelevance to political and social issues. He has called the poet "a man who, having lost his footing, now scrambles to stand up and keep his balance" (2002, 355). Jarrell has faulted Stevens for the "weakness, a terrible one for a poet, a steadily increasing one in Stevens, of thinking of particulars as primarily illustrations of general truths, or else as aesthetic, abstracted objects, simply there to be contemplated" (1951, 339). He has criticizes Stevens for "insufficient interest in the things of this world; Stevens's error is to view sensory life as an illustration" (ibid) of the mind's abstract processes. Jarrell, too, has regarded the imagination as an agent of creative change, a faculty through which the familiar materials of human experience may be transformed into art, but Stevens was reluctant to allow that transformation

to proceed beyond the world of represented reality. Fredric Jameson, a Marxist critic, also argued that Stevens' poems are too abstract and are "about nothing beyond themselves" (as cited in Quinn, 2002, 39).

6. Lowell's confessional poetry as committed urban aesthetics

Like Stevens, Lowell incorporates the sordid aspects of the modern metropolis into his poetry. However, unlike Stevens whose poetry is abstract and indifferent to the wretched plight of modern man, Lowell's city is the locus of religious, historical, economic, moral predicaments. Lowell's poem "Skunk Hour" depicts three characters who suffer from the moral and spiritual emptiness. The words "hermit / heiress" (Lowell, 1966, 71) used to describe the old woman suggest wealth and seclusion stressing that wealth leads only to alienation. As an illustration between wealth and alienation is the idle land that she bought to find refuge in. The millionaire can be regard as a real possibility of economic flourishing, yet his death has directed the village to poverty. The imposter "who'd rather marry" (ibid) for wealth as he is poor himself incarnates the departure from moral values and practices. To represent this sterility of modern culture, Lowell presents the image of stinky and disgusting skunks searching for food in the trash. In this spiritually depraved society, Lowell finds value only in an animal associated with garbage and noxious odor:

> under the chalk-dry and spar spire
> of the Trinitarian Church.
> a mother skunk with her column of kittens swills the garbage pail.
> She jabs her wedge-head into a cup
> of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail,
> and will not scare. (ibid)

Charles Altieri explains the symbolic meaning of the skunks: "As the skunk makes her way beneath the 'chalk-dry church spire' reminding the reader of the dead vertical world, she embodies whatever possibilities Lowell can find for restoring a context of value within secular and biological necessity" (cited in Beach, 2003, 158).

In addition to this image of the animal, Lowell employs the images of the car and bones to support his distressed feeling with the indecent love scene that he witnesses:

> One dark night,
> my Tudor Ford climbed the hill's skull;
> I watched for love-cars. Lights turned down,
> they lay together, hull to hull,
> where the graveyard shelves on the town. . . .
> My mind's not right. (Lowell, 1966, 71)

The scene that depicts two lovers making love in the graveyard near the "hill's skull" epitomizes the decline in human values. Being in the car with its mechanical connotation and lying together "hull to hull" is an indication that their love is only physical and has no spiritual meaning.

7. Lowell's committed personal impersonal poetry against Stevens' abstract aesthetics

In confessional poetry, the poet represents his private psychological problems and makes them an embodiment of his civilization: "The poems were presented in the first-person voice with little apparent distance between the speaker and the poet; they were highly emotional in tone, autobiographical in content, and narrative in structure" (Beach, 2003, 155). The use of the autobiographical self was a departure from impersonal and abstract aesthetics of Stevens. In his confessional poetry, Lowell uses his personal experiences to address social and political issues. The poet's protests against the Second World War and the Vietnam War contributed to the rise of confessional poetry. During the Second World War, he was imprisoned for being a conscientious objector (Lowell, 1988, 1). He also protested against the war in Vietnam. In 1967, Robert Lowell participated with famous intellectuals in a march on the Pentagon to protest the Vietnam War (Lowell, 1988, 1). In 1965, he wrote a letter to Lyndon Johnson turning down an invitation to be part of a gathering of artists at the White House. In the letter, he expressed his disenchantment with the President's and his administration's war policies and deplored that he "could only follow [their] present foreign policy with the greatest dismay and distrust" (cited in Unger, 1994, 18).

In the following passage from "Memories of West Street and Lepke," Lowell resorts to his personal experience to depict his situation as an active participant in the American political scene:

> These are the tranquilized *Fifties*,
> and I am forty. Ought I to regret my seedtime?
> I was a fire-breathing Catholic C.O.,
> and made my manic statement,
> telling off the state and president, and then
> sat waiting sentence in the bull pen
> beside a Negro boy with curlicues
> of marijuana in his hair. (Lowell, 1966, 67).

The passage bears both personal and historical ideas. On the one hand, the poet describes himself in prison as a conscientious objector with "a Negro boy." On the other hand, he challenges the idea of American war policy followed by "the state and president."

Lowell also combines his collection of personal experiences with some historical figures to express his disillusionment with politics. In "The March 1," he describes the march on the Pentagon in October against the War in Vietnam in October, 1967. He describes the march from his personal perspective by focusing on his bored self in his attempt "to keep [his] wet glasses from slipping" (Lowell, 2003, 545) while he sees "the cigarette match quaking in [his] fingers" (ibid). However, to give the march a sense of legitimacy, Lowell associates the march's demand to stop the war with the ideas of original American independence and freedom by invoking Abraham Lincoln and George Washington: "Under the too white marmoreal Lincoln Memorial, / the too tall marmoreal Washington Obelisk" (ibid).

Lowell also combines his personal experience with historical events to discuss the failure of marriage in modern age, an issue that Stevens would have never bothered to address. He juxtaposes the picture of unstable marriage of his parents and the marriage breakdown of Marie de Medici and King Henry IV of France. In "Revere Street," he presents his mother who urges his father to leave the naval and forces him to deed his property to her. Lowell overtly states that his "parent's confidences and quarrels stopped each night at ten or eleven o'clock, when my father would hang up his tuxedo, put on his commander's uniform, and take a trolley to the Naval Yard at Charlestown" (Lowell, 1967, 22). Though this passage relies on his personal experience with his parents' marital relation to describe the failure of marriage, it is foreshadowed by the marriage failure of Marie de Medici and King Henry IV in "The Banker's Daughter." This marriage represents a lashing marriage because Marie de Medici is twenty years older than her husband (ibid., 5). Their marriage, like Lowell's parents', is full of hatred and is doomed to failure.

8. Lowell's Christian orthodoxy against Stevens' secular imagination

In Lowell's poetry, there is the same Stevensian awareness of the spiritual vacuum due to the loss of religious faith. Many Lowell's poems manifest the worst effects of the fall: "the waste / Of the great garden rotten to its roots" (Lowell, 1966, 29). In "The Dead in Europe," he laments "O Mary, marry earth, sea, air, and fire; / our sacred earth in our day is our curse" (ibid., 49). However, Lowell rejects Stevens's idea that poetry should be a secular substitute to religion to bestow meaning upon the godless world. Though he traces the chaos of modern world back to religious reasons, Lowell at first does not offer redemption in the Christian sense as the only possible way to restore order. Because of the secular nature of his society and his doubt about the relevance of Christianity to the modern world, he tries out art as a substitute for religion to redeem the modern world. In "The Bomber," Lowell uses religious images to depict the violent modern warfare. Death caused by blasting by the Bomber is juxtaposed with Christ sacrificing his life. The bomber causes "the bloody sweat" from Christ's brow and his crucifixion on the cross. However, in the violent modern warfare, there is no promise of redemption and what remains from Christ's sacrifice is darkness over the earth as Christ hung on the cross in the garden of Gethsemane:

> O godly Bomber, and most
> A god when cascading tons
> Baptized the infidel Huns
> For the Holy Ghost,
> Did you know the name of flight
> When you blasted the bloody sweat
> And made the noonday night:
> When God and Satan met
> And Christ gave up the ghost? (Lowell, 2003, 871)

In "Beyond the Alps," the opening poem of *Life Studies*, he aligns himself with Stevens, but against his will, when he replaces Rome the "City of God" by Paris the city of art as Christianity is irrelevant to a modern secular world: "Life changed to landscape. Much against my will / I left the City of God where it belongs" (Lowell, 1966, 57). His abandonment of Roman Catholicism and breaking up with religion is provoked by the abuses of the highest political and spiritual authorities. Rome is now ruled by the imperialistic tyrant Mussolini whose lustful or "skirt-mad" attitudes leads to the recreation of ancient Rome under fascism: "There the skirt-mad Mussolini unfurled / the eagle of Caesar"

(ibid). Like Mussolini, the Pope is also corrupt:

> When the Vatican made Mary's Assumption dogma,
> the crowds at San Pietro screamed Papa.
> The Holy Father dropped his shaving glass,
> and listened. His electric razor purred,
> his pet canary chirped on his left hand. (ibid)

The Pope appeals to the irrational passions of the crowd who cannot see "the lights of science" (ibid) that may bring them closer to Mary. The fact that they call the Pope "Papa" is symptomatic of their child-like dependence.

Unable to find satisfaction in religion, he turns to the city of art Paris to seek solace. However, when he arrives in Paris, he discovers that art has been misused: "Now Paris, our black classic, breaking up / like killer kings on an Etruscan cup" (ibid). These two lines imply that Paris is "pagan, sinister, and mysterious" (Staple, 1962, 72) and that the poet "has returned to the twentieth century, Etruscan in its remoteness-a buried world" (ibid).

Lowell sees Christianity at odds with the violence of war and asserts that Christianity forces one to engage with the present and to share Christian revelation to redeem the violent modern world. Realizing that contemporary man's redemption is denied through art, opposing what Stevens once suggested, he decides again to turn to religion. In "The Wood of Life," Lowell offers a Christian view of redemption. As he meditates on the cross, he links it to Old Testament sacrifice and sees it as the solution to the problem of the fall: "Here are scales whose Reckoning-weight / Outweighs the apple's fell dejection" (Lowell, 2003, 57). He ends the poem by acknowledging the power of the cross:

> Christ Crucified is all our reason
> And most in this dark hour
> We will invoke, O Cross, your power,
> Our prime, at best, is Passion's season. (ibid)

9. Conclusion

This article has discussed Robert Lowell's connectedness with Wallace Stevens. Both poets shared the desire to free poetry from the romantic escapism to nature and developed new poetry that focuses on immediate urban conditions. However, Lowell

was not a slavish follower of his predecessor and could create, thanks to his individual talent, confessional poetry with qualities quite different from Stevens' modernism. Lowell's confessional poetry has executed Harold Bloom's revisionary ratio of clinamen and Mikhael Bakhtin's hidden polemic to misread the master. It is therefore more religious, more personal and more socially and politically committed than Stevens' modernist poetry.

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