

# Lowell's Dolphin : shame, guilt, and the fate of confessional poetry

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# Lowell's *Dolphin*: Shame, Guilt, and the Fate of Confessional Poetry

Thomas Austenfeld

The *Dolphin* controversy is more than a footnote in American literary history: it focalizes a major post-war poet, Robert Lowell, in the nexus between the acceptable disclosures of confessional poetry and the legitimate need for privacy; it asks whether the principles of art justify violating privacy rights; and it finally calls upon us to distinguish carefully between shame and guilt. Shame is best analyzed sociologically; guilt, personally. I read *The Dolphin* in this essay as a confession of guilt and therefore approach the volume under the auspices of ethics more than aesthetics. If we look carefully at the trajectory of Lowell's books from his 1959 *Life Studies*, which opened the confessional movement, via the closure of that epoch with *The Dolphin* roughly 15 years later in 1973, and beyond to his final volume *Day by Day*, we discover Lowell returning to the rhetorical practices of his self-chosen Catholic roots. Put differently: Confessional poetry returns to the confessional booth.

Investigating *The Dolphin* as an exercise in ethical thinking means paying attention to its subject matter, its publication history, and the controversy that surrounds its afterlife. I therefore intend to tease out the ethical position adopted by the poet-speaker, trace the publication and reception history of the book, and conclude with some considerations about the usefulness of ethical inquiry as it pertains to confessional poetry. At the end of this process we return, surprisingly, to a place where confessions started: the confessional booth, where the penitent asks for forgiveness from God through a mediator known as a confessor. In *The*

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*Dolphin*, Lowell returns to the rhetorical practices of his self-chosen Catholic roots while closing a literary epoch. Lowell's "confessions" in poetry are not to be mistaken for what Frank Bidart rightfully derides as "talk therapy," of course (997). They are poetry, first and last. But Lowell chose a form and a diction for his work that invites readers to trace its origins back to the years in which the poet's mind was steeped in Catholic thinking and Catholic ritual. Lowell's religious temperament remains the measure of his poetic voice.

The *Dolphin* controversy – the debate over the appropriateness of disclosing private agony in published poetry, especially by using letters from one's estranged wife – is more than a footnote in American literary history: it situates a major post-war poet, Robert Lowell, in the nexus between the acceptable disclosures of confessional poetry and the legitimate need for privacy; it raises the question whether the principles of art justify violating privacy rights; and it finally calls upon us to distinguish carefully between shame and guilt. The key to unraveling the *Dolphin* mystery is therefore not primarily aesthetics but ethics.

Published in 1973, *The Dolphin* can be said to mark the end of the first generation of confessional poetry which had begun roughly fifteen years before with Lowell's own 1959 *Life Studies*. Confessional poetry, so named by M. L. Rosenthal in his groundbreaking review of Lowell's 1959 volume, is usually associated with the work of Lowell himself, W. D. Snodgrass, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and other students of Lowell. Rosenthal uses "confession" initially in the therapeutic sense of the term as we know it from the Freudian talking cure (64). "Confessional" temporarily became associated with its Catholic sacramental sense (Lowell had left the Catholic church behind only a few years before and *Life Studies* could be understood as his liberation from doctrinal Catholic thinking) but more fully with the long juridical history of "confession" which Michel Foucault has documented, for example, in his *History of Sexuality*.<sup>1</sup> Some of Rosenthal's sentences fairly brim with a strongly moralizing vocabulary that appeals to a sense of propriety presumably shared with the readership:

The use of poetry for the most *naked* kind of confession grows apace in our day. [. . .] Whitman took poetry to the very edge of the confessional in his *Calamus* poems [. . .] Eliot and Pound brought us into *the forbidden realm* itself, yet even in their work a certain indirection masks the poet's actual face

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<sup>1</sup> See Chloë Taylor's study, *The Culture of Confession* for a cogent analysis of confessional practices from late antiquity through the Romantic age to a critical engagement with Foucault.

and psyche from greedy eyes. Lowell removes the mask. His speaker is *unequivocally himself*, and it is hard not to think of *Life Studies* as a series of personal confidences, *rather shameful*, that one is *honor-bound* not to reveal. (64; my emphases)

The notion of shame, raised here by Rosenthal, has been discussed only in passing in the many studies of confessional poetry. Shame implies a certain community standard that the poems might violate, though doing away with such largely hypocritical standards was precisely one of the goals of the liberatory thinking and artistic practice that characterized the nineteen-sixties. Yet it is crucial to distinguish between the shame that drives psychoanalytical patients to their analyst's couch and the guilt that drives sinners to confession. The *Encyclopedia of Ethics* makes clear that "guilt is felt over wrongdoings, shame over shortcomings" ("Guilt and Shame" 427). We sense guilt when we transgress rules we have accepted as objective or quasi-objective; often, these are rules we trace back to a deity or other morally normative instances. We sense shame when we perceive ourselves, before a witnessing audience, to fall visibly short of our own expectations, expectations that have mostly been set up by our environment and that are subject to change. Guilt may be accompanied by shame, but guilt tends to last while shame dissipates. Shame can have guilt as a consequence, but it can also be limited to itself and never mutate into guilt. If Rosenthal is right in mixing shame and guilt – the "rather shameful" and the "forbidden realm" – as motivations behind *Life Studies*, then confessional poetry from the beginning must be seen as an enterprise to dismantle false shame. Yet it did not stop there.

By 1973, looked at in these terms, *The Dolphin* emerges as a hinge-volume in Lowell's career: it closes the confessional phase that is associated with freely breaking decorum and taboos and exposing societally induced shame as sham. His next and last volume after *The Dolphin*, titled *Day by Day*, will be a summing up of his life and relationships, no longer in free sonnet form as his work of the seven or eight preceding years, but in longer ruminations that circle around the myths of Adam and Eve, Ulysses with Circe and Penelope, and filled to the brim with conventional religious references: "the light of the world," "faith" (7), "Afterlife" (21, 23), "the Psalmist's glass mosaic shepherd" (24), "Roman mass" (29), "Devil" (30), "belief" (43), "Immortal" (50), culminating in the astounding line "I thank God for being alive – / a way of writing I once thought heartless" (75). The dominant tone of *Day by Day* is that of a penitent who has completed and moved beyond the process

of confession, absolution, and restitution, but it is no longer a confessional book on its own terms.

The arc that *The Dolphin* concludes is the one in which Lowell made himself the practically exclusive subject of his poetry, as confessional poetry requires. *Life Studies* had broken with taboos both in content and form. Its meter and form differed radically from Lowell's earlier baroque poetic density influenced by Allen Tate; *Life Studies* instead showed William Carlos Williams and Allen Ginsberg as liberating influences. *Life Studies* took us into a poet's private agonies, marital discord, Freudian scenarios in mother's bedroom as well as psychological breakdowns, and added a prose memoir that skewered Lowell's family's pretensions to the pseudo-aristocracy of Boston Brahmin identity. Diane Middlebrook argued retrospectively in her 1993 essay, "What Was Confessional Poetry?" that the movement was essentially anti-high-modernist "by reinstating an insistently autobiographical first person engaged in resistance to the pressure to conform" (635), and that the

principal themes are divorce, sexual infidelity, childhood neglect, and [. . .] mental disorders. [. . .] A confessional poem [. . .] always *seems* to refer to a real person in whose actual life real episodes have occurred that cause actual pain, all represented in the poem. (636; my emphasis)

Lowell's poetry meets all these requirements but additional ones as well. Yet Middlebrook's analysis is so firmly rooted in established literary history and, at the same time, steeped in three decades of pop psychology and self-help therapy that she loses sight of the "guilt" context of confession, whether in its religious or its juridical sense.

Shame, governed by society's ever-changing standards, can morph quickly, and the decade of the sixties thankfully finished off a lot of societal hang-ups that were falsely correlated with shame. The phenomenon of shame is best analyzed sociologically. Guilt is another matter, and generally far more difficult to analyze. *The Dolphin* offers disclosures that can no longer be explained as tossing overboard a false sense of shame. Lowell's friends and critics, as we shall see, were at a loss to explain what he had done here. Lowell's practice of mingling quotation and invention in *The Dolphin* invites us to look at another aspect of changing discourses in the nineteen-sixties.

The sixties, as well as the years leading up to them and the early seventies at the long decade's conclusion, were not only the heyday of confessional poetry but in general resonate with writing that turns fact and fiction into a potent broth. Fiction was dressed up as if it had become fact, suggesting an authenticity that was in itself a fictional product. The

sixties are the moment in which *Life* magazine documents daily American life in *seemingly* objective image and text. Gore Vidal, Truman Capote, and later Joan Didion write on the borderline between fiction and fact. The sixties are the decade of a televised war in Vietnam and finally the moment in which Norman Mailer claimed to have created a new textual genre in his 1968 *The Armies of the Night*, subtitled *History as a Novel, the Novel as History*. Remarkably, it is in this narrative of the October 1967 March on the Pentagon that Mailer describes his fellow marcher Robert Lowell in exclusively *ethical* terms: "Lowell gave off at times the unwilling haunted saintliness of a man who was repaying the moral debts of ten generations of ancestors" (83). Looking back, it seems that the major political events of the nineteen-sixties, that is, the Cuban missile crisis, the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War, and the sense that "murder became an accepted form of political discourse" (Garrow qtd. in Monteith 1n2) galvanized ethical concerns in all forms of literature. Confessional poets were not the only ones sensing this, by a long shot. Lowell, however, would turn out to be one of the few who seriously endeavored to separate the dross of false shame from the gold of genuine guilt. When Bidart insists that Lowell's confessional poems "were in significant ways invented" (997), he deflects too strongly from Lowell's autobiographical impulse. There is no question that Lowell draws on his own experience and on his knowledge when he "confesses." Significantly, though, he instinctively knows the difference between shame and guilt and creates a work of art that negotiates genuinely ethical subject matter.

The 1973 *Dolphin* goes much further than earlier confessional poetry in its degree of intimacy revealed, but it wraps it in the wisdom of advanced age and signals a belated conclusion to the entire enterprise of the first generation of confessional poets. Lowell's moral alertness as a poet has never been questioned, as Mailer's account makes abundantly clear; whether his actions as a poet and a man were ethical is another question. Before attempting a judgment, let me gauge the moral relevance of emotions in general.

Lyric poetry has traditionally been a vehicle for expressing strong emotions; often, the semi-private character of lyric poetry has provided the necessary shelter under which strong emotions could be aired and, by strictures of form, contained. Emotions are ethically highly relevant since they are far more than simply conditioned responses one could dismiss as mechanical. Psychologically speaking, emotions have both ontological and evaluative functions. An emotion we feel displays, first of all, our beliefs about what *matters*. Emotions situate us in relation to



an event or a perception. But emotions are also judgments of value about the good or evil that is inherent in the situation which we observe or in which we find ourselves.<sup>2</sup>

What emotions or judgments are foregrounded in *The Dolphin*? The story told in the sixty-some pages of loose sonnets that make up *The Dolphin* is easily summarized: “one man, two women, the common novel plot” (48). This line is often glossed as referring both to the stuff of fiction (“novel”), suggesting that the poet’s real-life experiences have been plotted so as to render raw experience in story form, and equally to the feeling that it is nonetheless new (“novel”) every time it happens. Lowell patterns his own life into a familiar narrative. David Laskin even thinks that “beneath this radical, daringly amoral narrative ploy, the book is deeply conventional” (269).<sup>3</sup> Lowell gives us repeated glimpses at the fraught relationships he has with his former wife Elizabeth Hardwick and his new wife Caroline Blackwood. Along the way, his ruminations about his daughter Harriett (with Hardwick) and the impending birth of his son Sheridan (with Blackwood) intervene to complicate the transatlantic transitoriness of his existence. If he left it at that, Lowell’s line about the “common novel plot” would sound merely self-indulgent. But Lowell engages his material ethically in what follows, as the poem’s title, “Exorcism,” has already suggested.

The ethical center of the book lies in the next line in which Lowell makes an ontological claim with respect to emotions: “what you love you are” (48). The poet quotes this line from an italicized line in the preceding poem, probably quoting one of Hardwick’s letters (it is obviously *her* voice in the conclusion of the second poem), that postulates “*What we love we are*” as a fact (48). In the middle of that first poem occurs the change of perspective, referencing Hardwick as “you”: “You point your finger: *What you love you are.*” Pointing a finger accompanies the making of a normative statement. The same line twice on the same page, and a third instance with a different personal pronoun: clearly, the poet is agonizingly conjuring with that phrase. No other line in the entire volume is similarly attended to. Printed on the facing page of the two “Exorcism” poems is “Plotted,” in which the speaker graphs his aimless peregrinations in obsessive polyptotons, alliterations, and asso-

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<sup>2</sup> The preceding five sentences are strongly indebted to Christopher Bennett’s summary of Martha Nussbaum’s concepts, described in his article “Blame, Remorse, Mercy, Forgiveness” (575).

<sup>3</sup> In a different context from mine, Laskin also argues, as I do, that *Dolphin* “marked the end of an era, not only for [Lowell] and Hardwick, but in a sense for their generation” (269).

nances, suggesting that he is under duress to act out a playscript, somewhat like Hamlet:

Planes arc like arrows through the highest sky,  
 ducks ✓ the ducklings across a puckered pond;  
 [. . .]  
 I roam from bookstore to bookstore browsing books  
 [. . .]  
 as I execute my written plot.  
 I feel how Hamlet, stuck with the Revenge Play  
 his father wrote him, went scatological  
 under this clotted London sky. (49)

The only hold for the poet is that fateful line, “what you love you are.” It suggests a conflation of emotion and ontology, of sentiment and existence. As an ethical category, “sentiment” implies a subjective state controlled by feeling. It concerns present existence (rather than metaphysical essence) that gives moral agency to psychological states. But the sentence “What you love you are” makes a bigger claim: it takes us from existence to essence. In this, it goes far beyond its conventional alternative, “do what you love” or even its Augustinian complement, “love, and do what you will.” Augustine, of course, assumes that the love of God and neighbor will guide our ethical decisions, so the one who loves cannot go wrong. But the connection between loving and doing is not at stake here; in fact, the poet-speaker *does* very little in these poems, and what he does is scripted, prescribed, pre-scribed. Rather, in “what you love you are,” the “are,” a form of the verb “to be,” makes a reality claim beyond the transitory performing of an action. It suggests that love does more than make us do things: it turns us into a state of being. Lizzie’s pained accusation at the end, “Do you really *know* what you’ve done?” (48), is implicitly answered, “yes.”

Since the “plot” of the book here involves no criminal action but instead such interpersonal relationships as adultery, divorce, remarriage, the birth of a child, and the fraught relationship with an existing daughter from the previous marriage, the issues of guilt and shame will be transacted not primarily as objective conditions that are defined by a legal framework, according to which guilt would merit punishment and shame would result in dishonor and ridicule (“Guilt and Shame” 426), but as subjective states, in which “guilt is felt over wrongdoings, shame over shortcomings” (427), as I argued at the outset. Such “objective” conditions can be decided by a society that gives itself a moral law. The poet’s “confession” of either his guilt or his shame, or both, is rendered



infinitely more complex by the likelihood that the act of public confession that constitutes the book will result in additional harm; namely, further emotional distress to Elizabeth Hardwick and daughter Harriett. We are past confession, past shame, here: by invoking existential questions that rise to the level of essentiality, Lowell takes us firmly into the realm of guilt and responsibility.

Confessional poetry had originally been seen as related to the act of confession one performs in a confessional booth, or as analogous to a public confession before a judge, but it was quickly diverted into the realm of shame. Lowell – practically alone among the confessional poets – grappled with issues of guilt and religious normativity, though increasingly less visibly. However, few seem to have thought through the rest of what is essentially a metaphor, “confessing,” to the necessary next step: where is the judgment, the punishment imposed, or the absolution given by the priest? Lowell casts himself in the role of penitent, to be sure, but who is the confessor to whom he confesses? To complete the circle of the practice of confessional poetry, then: if “confession” is only the first step in the process that takes us from blame via remorse to forgiveness, we may start to see *The Dolphin* as an enactment of a penitential practice. Lowell’s act of confession began with *Life Studies* fifteen years earlier, but now the time for mere confessing is past. The frame of reference has shifted from shame to guilt. Now, the poet-speaker performs his own punishment, in public, by exposing his Hamlet-like indecision. At the conclusion of his confessional phase, Lowell apparently returns to his adopted Catholic heritage of the late forties and early fifties in publicly undergoing self-flagellation. *The Dolphin* may indeed be read as a self-punishment that begins the eventual atonement that Lowell would reach in his next, again totally different and final volume, *Day by Day*. How is this possible? Let us take a closer look at the controversy surrounding *The Dolphin*.

*The Dolphin* is one of three books of poetry Lowell published in 1973. The large *History* was the final, heavily revised print form of his earlier volumes, *Notebook 1967-68* and *Notebook*, now with a larger reach to encompass personal, familial, New England, and world history. The two smaller volumes, *For Lizzie and Harriett* and *The Dolphin*, are, respectively, addressed to his former wife and their daughter in common (i.e., Elizabeth Hardwick and daughter Harriett) and to Caroline Blackwood in England. The subtitles of sections in *The Dolphin*, taken together, transport a great deal of anxiety. Sections like “Doubt,” “During a Transatlantic Call,” “Exorcism,” “Plotted,” “Leaving America for England,” and “Flight to New York” (yes, he is talking about a plane ticket

here but the overtone of “escape” in *flight* is too strong to miss) lend a fragmented air to this volume in comparison to the largely nostalgic, dreamy, even majestically celebratory *For Lizzie and Harriett*. In *The Dolphin*, airplanes jet back and forth across the Atlantic; the final sequence, “Flight to New York,” eerily anticipates Lowell’s 1977 flight back to Elizabeth Hardwick which ends with his death. The poem, “With Caroline at the Air-Terminal,” also darkly suggests more than the journey itself: “terminal” in Lowell is a loaded word ever since his earlier poem, “Terminal Days at Beverly Farms,” in which the young Lowell satirically recounts his father’s death. The two shorter volumes are different in character, in poetic coherence, and in focus from *History*: in contrast to its encyclopedic sweep and dizzying quantity of sonnets, the shorter volumes display thematic coherence and, as Elizabeth Bishop noted about the *Dolphin*: “every 14 lines have some marvel of image and expression, and also they are all much clearer” (*Words in Air* 707).

Bishop is my transition to what is generally known as the *Dolphin* controversy. The seventh edition of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* contains a cluster of so-called “Postmodern Manifestos” in which we find, surprisingly, excerpts from Elizabeth Bishop’s letter to Robert Lowell, 21 March 1972 (E: 2497-98).<sup>4</sup> Bishop takes her friend to task, in no uncertain terms, for violating his former wife Elizabeth Hardwick’s trust, by quoting from, and changing, Hardwick’s accusatory letters to Lowell on the occasion of their separation and divorce. Bishop’s critique is focused on four issues: 1. She feels she cannot trust the writer (Lowell) because he has mixed “fact and fiction in unknown proportions.” 2. She deplores that he was not given permission, and that he changed the letters. 3. She accuses Lowell of cruelty and of not being a gentleman – she quotes Gerard Manley Hopkins as saying that a gentleman is higher even than a Christian. And 4. She feels personally betrayed, because with Lowell, she cares: “I DO give a damn about what you write!” In the middle of her list of complaints is an italicized statement that alone might warrant the inclusion of this letter in the “post-modern manifestos”: “*art just isn’t worth that much*” (*Words in Air* 707-08).

This is hardly a postmodern manifesto, properly speaking. In the context of Bishop’s letter, however, one detects her complaint that while the confessional style of *Life Studies* may have been “a necessary

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<sup>4</sup> The anthology’s eighth edition maintains the letter and, charmingly but incongruously, adds a picture of Lowell and Bishop at the beach in Brazil in 1962 (412-14)! For the full text of the letter, consult *Words in Air*.

movement, and it helped make poetry more real, fresh and immediate, [. . .] now [. . .] anything goes, and I'm so sick of poems about the students' mothers & fathers and sex-lives and so on." As I do in this essay, so Bishop reads *The Dolphin* in comparison with *Life Studies*, but unlike me, she finds the present volume wanting. To Bishop, the liberating force of Lowell's 1959 breakthrough volume seems exhausted, having resulted in 1972 in a free-for-all shamelessness. Note that Bishop is reacting to a *pre-publication* 1972 version of the book! I read Bishop's "I'm so sick of" as an expression of embarrassment rather than shame, embarrassment being the kind of emotion that is occasioned in us by an encounter with other people or in a public situation. Either they behave in a manner which violates our standard of shame (let us assume we unintentionally witness sex on the beach) or they call attention to our falling short of appropriate behavior in public (let us assume we are being observed having sex on the beach). Note, though, that the public setting is required for this reaction. Bishop feels here that Lowell, for all practical purposes, is having sex on the beach: he has disclosed altogether too much of his breakup with Lizzie. She uneasily captures her own sense of violated shame in what is essentially an aesthetic argument, "*art just isn't worth that much*" (708). But Bishop, sensitive to a fault about her friend's self-exposure, yet not a religious person, misses the point – the point being "guilt."

I do not believe that shame is at stake for Lowell in *The Dolphin*. Standards of shame that describe deviations from current social norms vary considerably with place and time, so our feelings of shame are likely to vary throughout our lifetimes. Society adjusts to new norms subtly, or less subtly, all the time. Narrative fiction is among the best tools we have to diagnose the changes in standards of shame over time: just think of what is socially unacceptable in Jane Austen versus Charlotte Brontë, or in Henry James versus William Burroughs.<sup>5</sup> Lyric poetry has traditionally been the province of self-contemplation and private utterance and has therefore been somewhat exempt from being measured by shifting societal standards of shame.

However, as Ian Hamilton correctly observes, Bishop is reacting to the "first version" (422) of the *Dolphin*, the one that existed after Frank Bidart had worked with Lowell in England for a couple of weeks and finally left in February 1972. For example, the published version of a

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<sup>5</sup> On this topic, see Ulrich Greiner's excellent book with reference to the German-speaking literary tradition, *Schamverlust*.

poem called “Voices” (Hospital II) will eventually read as follows, in Lizzie’s voice:

“What a record year, even for us –  
last March, I knew you’d manage by yourself,  
you were the true you; now finally  
your clowning makes visitors want to call a taxi” (*The Dolphin* 23)

Bishop, however, saw a version that read:

“What a record year, even for us –  
last March, we hoped you’d manage by yourself,  
you were the true you; now finally  
your clowning makes us want to vomit – you bore,  
bore, bore the friends who wished to save your image  
from this genteel, disgraceful hospital” (*Words in Air* 708n1)

Lizzie’s voice and her deep sense of being hurt are clear in this earlier version. And the principals in the controversy would “hear” those original words no matter how much Lowell might have toned down the poems eventually.

In an attempt not to ruin things with Lowell, Bishop concludes her 21 March 1972 letter with a passage not reprinted in the “manifesto”: “DOLPHIN is marvelous – no doubt about it – I’ll write you all the things I like sometime! – I hope all goes well with you, and Caroline, and the little daughters, and the infant son – With much love, Elizabeth” (709).

Adrienne Rich, Lowell’s former student at Boston University, showed less forbearance. In the *American Poetry Review* she made short shrift of Lowell, now commenting on the actually printed volume: beginning with a diagnosis of “aggrandized and merciless masculinity at work [. . .] symptomatic of the dead-end destructiveness that masculine privilege has built for itself into all institutions, including poetry,” she winds up with this salvo, “the inclusion of the letter-poems stands as one of the most vindictive and mean-spirited acts in the history of poetry, one for which I can think of no precedent” (186-87). A few months later, Diane Wakoski responded, upbraiding Rich for her “maniacal” view of literature. Wakoski says that “[the poems] present a man who is living as he feels he has to live, even when he knows he has no justification for it, but his own passions. He does not ask for pity. He asks one thing, I think, of the reader. Belief in the poems” (187). The

starkly controversial judgments on *The Dolphin* are well illustrated by these diametrically opposed pronouncements.

How can *The Dolphin* episode serve as a test case for the ethical implications that inhere in confessional poetry? We need to acknowledge that Lowell also appropriated Blackwood's letters and her voice. At this point in time, he recognized that he had responsibilities to both women simultaneously. I disagree therefore with Stephen Yenser's critique of *The Dolphin* as "more gossip [. . .] than gospel": "Lowell's sequence is relentlessly documented [. . .] [so] that the pattern of experience cannot emerge" (qtd. in Hamilton 432). In this sentence, the stress must be laid on "pattern." Yenser demands that even confessional poetry should be *patterned*: only then has it passed through the cauldron of the writer's mind and has become art. In contrast, I believe that Lowell's "pattern-ing" at the time consisted of a reorientation of his spiritual health along with his poetic craft. Today, when all of the adults involved in *The Dolphin* are dead, we can see that Lowell was not out to create a sensational revelation. The "common novel plot" of "one man, two women" is the beginning of a process of self-healing by way of admitting guilt. The pattern that Yenser sought emerges, perhaps, only with difficulty in *The Dolphin* itself, but it becomes totally clear in the sequence of Lowell's volumes both before and after *The Dolphin*. Reaching the end of his version of confessional poetry, Lowell did not leave off in exhaustion or join the camp of the newly emerging LANGUAGE poets. No, he re-patterned his thinking back into ethical modes of reasoning, those in which emotions are valid expressions of being and can make valid and true statements about moral essence, and in which being-in-the-world is a category that admits the judging of guilt but that also opens the door to atonement. Seen in its historical moment, that is, closing off the fifteen-year period of confessional poetry since *Life Studies* but serving as the gate to the calm, collected, post-confessional *Day by Day*, *The Dolphin* is both Lowell's last confession and his first atonement. "What you love you are" is a statement that betokens ethical reasoning. Now, it is no longer the silly question of beef soup on Fridays (allegedly his bone of contention with Jean Stafford when he was a convert around 1949, see Hamilton 79);<sup>6</sup> rather, it is Lowell's achievement of a semantic framework in which to articulate the guilt – not the shame! – that he feels he needs to express.

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<sup>6</sup> Hamilton's narrative is here based on an interview with Robert Giroux (480; notes).



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