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Oostdijk, Diederik

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CHAPTER 20

Painting

Diederik Oostdijk

Robert Lowell was passionate about painting and immersed his life in visual arts. One of his best friends, Frank Parker, was an artist; the poet he felt closest to, Elizabeth Bishop, also painted, and allusions to visual works of art abound in Lowell's oeuvre. More than fifty poems in his *Collected Poems* refer directly or indirectly to photography, painting, or sculpture. Some of these are ekphrastic and evoke actual works of art in words, while others refer to visual arts or artists more obliquely. The bulk of these were published in later volumes, especially *Notebook 1967–68* (1969) and *History* (1973). Yet Lowell already wrote in an ekphrastic mode much earlier. In his first volumes – *Land of Unlikeness* (1944) and *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946) – he vividly evokes religious shrines and New England cemeteries. And ten years before that, just before entering Harvard, Lowell published two short articles in his school's literary journal, *The Vindex*, and penned his first poems on visual art, on Constable, Rembrandt, Titian, and Vermeer.[1] These juvenilia poems were never published, but they survive in Lowell's archives and are valuable. Not only do they confirm his early passion for painting in connection to writing poetry; some can be regarded as drafts for poems published decades later.

The last poem of the last volume that Lowell published during his lifetime, "Epilogue" in *Day by Day* (1977), was famously an ode to the Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer. "Pray for the grace of accuracy / Vermeer gave to the sun's illumination," Lowell muses in "Epilogue" with an almost religious admiration for the Old Master. Yet the poem also doubles up as a reprimand to the poet himself who initially struggles to transcend his verbal matter of fact, which resembles only a "snapshot" (*CP* 838). This chapter examines Lowell's obsession with visual arts, which is characterized by a reverence for classic European painting but also a mistrust of photography and abstract art. "After literature, his passion was history," Elizabeth Hardwick once observed, but "his love" for

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painting was likewise "detailed, thoughtful and very strong" (*DL* 474). What do Lowell's predilections for visual art reveal about his poetry?

The juxtaposition of painting and photography in "Epilogue" is not coincidental. In several other poems, including "Cranach's Man-Hunt" and "Marriage," Lowell consciously compares and contrasts these visual media, and he appears to plainly favor painting. In a commemorative piece about John Crowe Ransom, Lowell explained his conviction that painting is the superior art form. We do not revisit "a photograph for aesthetic pleasure, no matter how colorful and dramatic," Lowell argues, whereas we do return to painting because we can sense "the artist's mothering work of hand and mind" (*CPr* 27). To prove his essentialist point, Lowell quotes Walker Evans, to whom he talked about Vermeer's *View of Delft*. The American photographer reputedly stated that "art demands the intelligent pain or care behind each speck of brick, each spot of paint." Lowell sought to write poetry with the same eye for detail as Vermeer had for painting.

Lowell's lifelong obsession with painting started at St. Mark's School in Southborough, Massachusetts, in the early 1930s. Lowell has reminisced how he spent "an entire term's allowance on a copious, bake-finish Medici print of the Syndics"[2] by Rembrandt and copied photographs of great works of art on tracing paper. Yet he left actual painting to Parker, whom he met at that prep school and who went on to illustrate the covers and frontispieces of all of Lowell's American volumes of poetry, for which Lowell granted Parker virtual carte blanche. Using various techniques ranging from ink and pencil drawings to etchings,[3] Parker created iconic images that set the visual tone for Lowell's verbal narratives. Some inventively illustrate the volumes' themes, such as Parker's scratchboard image for *Life Studies* of a haunted room with the McLean lion in front, hinting at Lowell's childhood introspection and mental breakdown. Others interpret Lowell's poems more directly, for instance the downward spiral for *The Dolphin* – which Parker also created on scratchboard with some pen and ink additions[4] – in which a woman is ominously descending. Lowell and Parker had already divided up the sister arts at St. Mark's, realizing respectively: "'I want to write.' 'I want to paint,'" as Lowell wrote in his poem "To Frank Parker" (*CP* 802).

There are three basic models that explain how poets engage with the visual arts, and they are all relevant for understanding the role of painting in Lowell's work. The most famous is *ut pictura poesis*, coined by the Latin author Horace whom Lowell had studied at Kenyon College (*L* 82). It suggests that the enterprise of the poet and painter is essentially the

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same. A second theory, developed by W. J. T. Mitchell, holds that the relationship between word and image, and poetry and painting, is paragonal, fraught with strife and tension. A third, more recent reading has been advanced by Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux. Building on Mitchell's work and James A. W. Heffernan's *Museum of Words*, she posits that ekphrasis is "inherently dialogic." Poems about visual art open "the lyric into a network of social engagements within and across the boundaries of the poem."[5] When evoking classic European art, Lowell most often follows Horace's adage of "as is painting, so is poetry," but he adopts the paragonal mode more when referring to photography and abstract art. Yet above all, Lowell writes about art to engage in conversations with artists across time, or with friends and family members. This may seem odd, considering that Lowell is often categorized as one of the confessional poets, who are intent on exploring their own psyches. Lowell's visual arts poems, especially those in *Notebook*, *History*, and *The Dolphin*, nevertheless show an intense interest to reach out and understand others.

"Epilogue" eloquently encompasses all three ekphrastic modes. It matches *ut pictura poesis* because the speaker "affirms a sense of similarity to Vermeer" and comments on "the painter's reciprocal interplay in design" and "his visual acuity," as Helen Deese has indicated.[6] Yet "Epilogue" is likewise paragonal in the sense that Lowell's speaker also envies Vermeer's mastery, while he is toiling with his traditional techniques of "plot and rhyme" (*CP* 838). So, Lowell mixes "iconophilia" (love of images) with "iconophobia" (dislike of images) in a single poem, to use W. J. T. Mitchell's terminology.[7] Reena Sastri has shown how "Epilogue" establishes social relationships inside and outside of the poem. By borrowing a line from Hardwick – "[w]hy not say what happened?" (*CP* 802) – by speaking to Vermeer across time, and by addressing us as readers, Lowell is "enacting a dialogue" through which "intimacy emerges," and that makes intersubjectivity and "intergenerational dependence" possible, as Sastri argues.[8]

"Each Figure in the Photograph"

While "Epilogue" has become a much-anthologized and canonized poem, Lowell's visual art poems from *Notebook 1967–68* and *History* have often been disregarded, ignored, or even berated. The speed at which Lowell produced these poems, the sheer volume of his poetic production, and the constant revision of his poems have raised suspicions about their quality, questions as to how to regard and interpret them.[9] After he was first prescribed lithium in the

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spring of 1967, Lowell's "mind continued to create at a fast, submanic pace," as Kay Redfield Jamison has argued.[10] Despite the haste with which Lowell wrote during this time, poems such as "Cranach's Man-Hunt" and "Misanthrope and Painter" offer the same complex mix of intertextual references and ambivalent attitudes toward the visual arts as "Epilogue." To understand Lowell's attitude to painting, it is crucial to study them more seriously. Not only will they reveal both iconophilia and iconophobia but also Lowell's intense will to understand others through painting.

"Cranach's Man-Hunt" from *History* is one of the poems in which Lowell refers to both photography and painting. Yet here he is not disparaging the photographic potential as in "Epilogue." In the first four lines, Lowell ekphrastically describes an undisclosed photograph in which a group of men is depicted, with their arms around one another's shoulders showing unity and affinity:

> Composed, you will say, for our forever friendship,
> almost one arm around our many shoulders,
> a cloud darkens the stream of the photograph,
> friends bound by birth and faith . . . one German outing.
> (*CP* 460)

The first word of the poem – "Composed" – reflects that it is not a spontaneous snapshot but designed specifically for a purpose, which is not immediately obvious to the reader. By using this word in initial position, Lowell draws our attention to how his poem, too, is a composite of multiple elements that he has yoked together, in this case two visual texts that are to the eye unrelated but which Lowell forces us to consider together. These are the unknown photograph and the better-known *The Stag Hunt of Elector Frederick the Wise* (1529) by the German painter Lucas Cranach the Elder, to which Lowell's title alludes.

The ellipsis midway through the fourth line signals the moment when Lowell starts to zoom into the painting in his double exposure. Like the men in the photograph, the characters in Cranach's hunting scene are connected by ancestry and religion, although their "German outing" is of an altogether different kind. Deese has suggested that Lowell was describing a print of this scene.[11] It is more likely that Lowell had the actual painting in mind, as the "choppy, lavender stream" of the river in Cranach the Elder's painting is coated in a faint purple invisible in the black-and-white print. Moreover, the painting features four figures toward the bottom of the frame, which are essential to our understanding of Cranach's painting and Lowell's poem. Cranach pictured Frederick the

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Wise (1463–1525) and Emperor Maximilian (1459–1519) in central position at the bottom of the painting. Both are hiding behind trees and being handed arrows by their servants, getting ready to shoot at the deer that are trying to swim across the Elbe. Both leaders of the Holy Roman Empire had died by the time Cranach painted this scene. Frederick the Wise had been succeeded by his brother John the Steadfast (1468–1532), who maintained the Lutheran orthodoxy, as his nickname suggests, and he is pictured on the far right. Three years after Cranach completed his canvas, John the Steadfast died too, and was succeeded by John Frederick I (1503–1554), featured on the far left. Cranach's painting is about their "forever friendship," too.

Lowell significantly changed Cranach's title from "*Stag Hunt*" to "Man-Hunt," which is one of the sparse clues Lowell offers to comprehend the curious juxtaposition of the photograph and the painting. Jeffrey Meyers has rightfully concluded that the photograph ekphrastically described in the opening lines must hint "at the Nazi extermination of Jewish victims."[12] Deese assumes that Lowell's speaker must have been "looking at a real photograph of real people, people who are about to die."[13] Using prosopopoeia, Lowell indeed adopts the voice of one of the photographed men, as he utters the ominous words that they "are game for the deer hunt." The figures in the photograph are "aged five to ninety," and yet, "seniority [is] no key to who will die" (*CP* 460). Unlike the leaders of the Holy Roman Empire figured on the bottom of Cranach's painting, there is no predictable order in the photograph as to who will live or die. Deese's comment that "the Holocaust had a significant source in Luther's exhortations that Jews be hunted out from the German communities"[14] further exemplifies why the seemingly odd yoking together of the photograph and painting is starting to make sense. In *History*, "Cranach's Man-Hunt" is grouped together with other poems about early modern violence, but the poem also resonates with poems about World War II, such as "Munich 1938, John Crowe Ransom" and "Deutschland über Alles," which appear later in the volume.

Drafts for this poem at Harvard confirm Deese's and Meyers's conjecture that Lowell uses the Cranach painting to address the Holocaust. The first draft consists of just seven lines, which are roughly similar to the opening of the published version. The first draft tells of a "dimming photograph" rather than "a cloud" that "darkens the stream of the photograph." The drafts suggest that the photograph that Lowell was looking at was literally smudgy, and we can see how Lowell tries to make that fact symbolically meaningful. What is fascinating is how Lowell eradicates

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potentially sentimental phrases throughout the revision process. In the second draft, Lowell had included the rhetorical question: "[W]ho'll join these people time and space has sundered?" Similarly, he deletes the sarcastically sounding German definite article of "der Kaiser Maximilian."[15] Yet he retains the ironically sounding adjective in "the wise Saxon Elector" (*CP* 460). The patron of Lucas Cranach and Martin Luther may have had progressive ideas of art and religion, but his cruel treatment of animals augurs the Holocaust, Lowell suggests ever so faintly.

This analysis of "Cranach's Man-Hunt" reveals intriguing insights about Lowell's engagement with the visual arts. For one, it shows that Lowell does not always value painting over photography. In "Epilogue," Lowell praises Vermeer for his imaginative recreation of life while deploring photography's unimaginative matter-of-factness. "Cranach's Man-Hunt" does the opposite, as Lowell exposes the moral brutality of an Old Master's canvas, while showing instead how a photograph can allow us to imagine the Holocaust, the most unimaginable event in modern history. What the poems share, though – a second discernment – is that Lowell tends to use visual arts as a means to reflect on his own vocation as a poet. As that opening word of "Cranach's Man-Hunt" suggests – "Composed" – Lowell is fixated on how a painting and a photograph are constructed media, and how they convey meaning in different yet overlapping ways from poetry. Thirdly, and perhaps most remarkably, we see how Lowell experiments with voice in "Cranach's Man-Hunt." Almost imperceptibly, Lowell adopts the voice of a Holocaust victim, as his friend Randall Jarrell had done decades earlier, for instance in "Protocols."

"The Noise of My Own Voice"

Lowell adopted another person's voice more fully in "Misanthrope and Painter." This poem, too, has a curious chronology. Originally published in *Notebook 1967–68* as "The Misanthrope and the Painter," it was reprinted in the revised and expanded edition of *Notebook* (1970) and again in *History* (1973), both times in subtly different versions. Ian Hamilton singled out the *Notebook 1967–68* poem for critique, disparaging its densely autobiographical and impenetrable content. After interviewing Sidney Nolan – Lowell's Australian painter friend who was present at the meeting between Lowell and a female painter in Boston who features in this poem – Hamilton judges harshly that "Lowell's opacity" appears "mischievous or vain."[16]

Yet, like "Cranach's Man-Hunt," "Misanthrope and Painter" is revealing about how Lowell began to write in a dialogic ekphrastic mode in the

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1960s. Nolan, who was to illustrate many of Lowell's English volumes of poetry for Faber as well as *The Voyage and Other Versions of Poems by Baudelaire* and *Near the Ocean* for Farrar, Straus and Giroux, recalled how the unnamed painter had exclaimed: "When I'm in the room, the Rothko disappears."[17] Other phrases uttered by the painter also made it into the *Notebook* poem, as do the words of a male interlocutor, either Lowell or Nolan. Neither Hamilton nor Nolan, though, can make rhyme or reason of why Lowell elevates some of these phrases to poetic lines. Nolan can "explain" the story "but not illuminate" it, as Hamilton admits frustratingly. The biographer concludes that "The Misanthrope and the Painter" remains "elusive – or if not that, then trifling or self-indulgent."[18]

It is tempting to agree with Hamilton's frustration, but the revision process of "Misanthrope and Painter" actually allows us access to Lowell's vision of painting. In his last version, Lowell has painted over "The Misanthrope and the Painter," yet, like a pentimento in painting, the earlier lines are still visible, which makes us see Lowell's poetic mastery at work. The most apparent shift is that Lowell changes the narrative from one of his "gnomic dialogues between we-know-not-whom"[19] – in Hamilton's words – to an extraordinary dramatic monologue spoken by a female speaker. "Misanthrope and Painter" allows us to construct a composite character of the speaker as she reveals herself, to us and the implied listeners.

The speaker of *History*'s "Misanthrope and Painter" declares herself as an assertive and even arrogant painter, who does not want to be judged as a female painter: "I am a painter, not a woman painter," she claims vigorously. Yet she is disparaging about a fellow female painter who is called "Helen" in *History* (and "Sue" in *Notebook*). "The only way Helen can fix her lyric palette / would be to throw herself under a truck," Lowell writes with a violent metaphorical quip of punchline finality. It is possible that the object of ridicule was Helen Frankenthaler, like Rothko an abstract artist, but one with a lighter and more optimistic brush. The speaker's haughtiness is most apparent in the penultimate line of the poem: "Rothko is invisible when I'm in the room" (*CP* 560). In "The Misanthrope and the Painter," Lowell had the female painter say: "When I am in a room, Wyeth is invisible."[20] According to Nolan, the Australian painter had told Lowell that the line was not "fair to Rothko."[21] Lowell must have accepted this argument as he changed the name to "Wyeth" in *Notebook*; only to change it back again to "Rothko" in the *History* version.

How can we make sense of these changes, and how can we make them rhyme with Lowell's vision of poetry and painting? Although Rothko and

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Wyeth were both famous American painters, they were also diametrically opposed in terms of style. Wyeth was a regional and realist painter, while Rothko was the decade's most foremost abstract painter. Perhaps Lowell changed it back to be accurate, or because he needed his female speaker to show her superiority over the most famous American painter at the time. It is also possible that Rothko formed the best alliterative contrast to Rembrandt. While the Dutch painter is presented as the epitome of painterly perfection, Rothko is unceremoniously dismissed as a regrettable exponent of contemporary painting. The abstract painter Robert Motherwell, Frankenthaler's husband, recalled "a drunken argument with Robert Lowell at the house of Stanley Kunitz before a painting by Mark Rothko, which Lowell was putting down." Motherwell goes on to bemoan Lowell's "conservative tendencies" and concludes that Lowell "was more provincial as an artist than Rothko."[22] Lowell certainly had conservative proclivities regarding art, but Motherwell's putdown is just as unfair as the Rothko one-liner.

What we see at work in the revision process of "Misanthrope and Painter" is Lowell trying to reckon with the rise of abstract art as well as feminism; two contemporary phenomena Lowell did not entirely seem to grasp but is intrigued by. Like a Petrarchan sonnet, Lowell's fourteen lines are divided into two arguments. In the octave, the painter rails against gendered patterns in society, while she takes on painting in the sestet. Painting, according to her, is not an unleashing of one's personality, but about translating one's experience to express something universal. What she – but also Lowell – fails to understand was that this was as much Rothko's aim as Rembrandt's, despite their divergent methods. Both painters invite their viewers' imagination to be activated when they gaze at their intensely colored canvases.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed only a sample of Lowell's poems on visual arts. A more comprehensive overview would also have to consider Lowell's exceptional poems on monuments, of which the iconic "For the Union Dead" about Augustus Saint-Gaudens's bas-relief sculpture is just one. Memorials offered Lowell uneasy models of masculinity through which he could gauge his own personality. To understand Lowell's indebtedness to art and artists, it is also paramount to analyze his relationships with Parker and Nolan more intensely, and to assess the role that art and visual objects played in his friendships. Sophie Baldock's study of miniature portraits in Lowell's epistolary exchange with Bishop offers a revealing start.[23]

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Yet the poems that were discussed in this chapter reflect that all three ekphrastic tangents are present in Lowell's work. In this sense, his visual art poems can be described as "meta-ekphrastic," as Sally Connolly has characterized the way in which Lowell's "photographic portraits and painted portraits illuminate and inform a fundamental issue at the heart of realism and representation in his verse."[24] Lowell both admires and seeks to emulate Old Masters (*ut pictura poesis*), but he also criticizes them (*paragone*). Although he plainly favors Renaissance art over photography and contemporary art, he is intrigued by those forms of art, too. Teasing out the relationship between art and poetry was a lifelong preoccupation for Lowell, as we have seen, but it significantly culminated in a fierce, "submanic" production of visual art poems toward the end of his career.

What is remarkable about these late visual art poems is that Lowell's experimentation with poetic voice takes full flight. In all three – "Cranach's Man-Hunt," "Epilogue," and "Misanthrope and Painter" – he adopts phrases by other people, as if to prove that he too can "pick up lines from nothing," like the female artists says in the first version of the latter poem.[25] Lowell appropriated other people's voices elsewhere in his poetry as well, most notoriously Hardwick's in *The Dolphin* poems. Yet with his visual art poems he takes this a step further by introducing speakers who are far removed from his own experience, in time or gender. It suggests that for Lowell there is a relationship between painting and prosopopoeia. This fits with Loizeaux's more general argument that ekphrasis is "driven by its negotiation with others of various kinds."[26] Yet speaking for others is an even more radical move than engaging with others – across time, across gender, and across one's chosen medium – through your own voice. Painting allowed Lowell to temporarily move away from "the noise of my own voice," as he put it in "Epilogue" (*CP* 838). It opened up a canvas large enough for him to write on for over half a century, to ponder transience and permanence, poetry and painting, and himself and the other.

Notes

1 Robert Lowell "Diego Velasquez," *Vindex* 59, no. 5 (March 1935): 130; "True Light: A Drawing by Francis Parker," *Vindex* 59, no. 5 (March 1935): 129.
2 Quoted in Ian Hamilton, *Robert Lowell: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 175.
3 Diantha Parker, email to author, June 17, 2021.

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4 Diantha Parker, June 29, 2021.
5 Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux, *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 5, 1.
6 Helen Deese, "Lowell and the Visual Arts," in *Robert Lowell: Essays on the Poetry*, ed. Steven Gould Axelrod and Helen Deese (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 185.
7 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 15.
8 Reena Sastri, "Intimacy and Agency in Robert Lowell's *Day by Day*," *Contemporary Literature* 50, no. 3 (2009): 490, 463, 489.
9 Steven Gould Axelrod, "Introduction," in *The Critical Response to Robert Lowell*, ed. Steven Gould Axelrod (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1999), 12–14.
10 Kay Redfield Jamison, *Robert Lowell, Setting the River on Fire: A Study of Genius, Mania, and Character* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), 181.
11 Deese, "Lowell and the Visual Arts," 183.
12 Jeffrey Meyers, "Robert Lowell: The Paintings in the Poems," *Papers on Language and Literature* 23, no. 2 (1987): 229.
13 Deese, "Lowell and the Visual Arts," 183.
14 Deese, "Lowell and the Visual Arts," 183.
15 Lowell, "Cranach's Man-Hunt," 1968, bMS Am 1905, box 23 (2522), Robert Lowell Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.
16 Hamilton, *Robert Lowell*, 388.
17 Hamilton, *Robert Lowell*, 387.
18 Hamilton, *Robert Lowell*, 388.
19 Hamilton, *Robert Lowell*, 387.
20 Robert Lowell, *Notebook 1967–68* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 92.
21 Hamilton, *Robert Lowell*, 387.
22 Robert Motherwell, *The Writings of Robert Motherwell*, ed. Dore Ashton and Joan Banach (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 280.
23 Sophie Baldock, "'Our Looks, Two Looks': Miniature Portraits in the Letters of Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell," *Review of English Studies* 71, no. 300 (2020): 528–53.
24 Sally Connolly, "'The Threadbare Art of my Eye': Robert Lowell's Poems about Portraits of Caroline Blackwood," *Literary Imagination* 21, no. 1 (2019): 95.
25 Lowell, *Notebook 1967–68*, 92.
26 Loizeaux, *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*, 24.

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