

The Truth of Fiction: Robert Lowell's *Imitations* and the Logic of Translation

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ABSTRACT This article argues that Robert Lowell's collection, *Imitations*, offers a distinctive logic of translation that enables him to incorporate personal history into his rendering of other poets' work. In doing so, he posits a radical challenge to mainstream theories of literary translation by weaving an autobiographical narrative with the original poems, re-presenting the words of the original poets in his own voice. Using the work of Lowell's friend Hannah Arendt, to whom the final poem is dedicated, the article demonstrates how Lowell's aesthetic project responded to the longstanding problem of fidelity in translation. Ultimately, *Imitations* performs Lowell's response to problems of agency and determinism, authorship, and objectivity in translation and the writing of history.

KEYWORDS Robert Lowell, translation, *Imitations*, Arendt, manic depression

I.

Robert Lowell paused when, in a 1961 interview, Frederick Seidel asked him about the process of writing *Life Studies*. "There's this thing:" he said,

if a poem is autobiographical – and this is true of any kind of autobiographical writing and of historical writing – you want the reader to say, This is true. In something like Macaulay's *History of England*, you think you're really getting William III. That's as good as a good plot in a novel. And so there was always that standard of truth which you wouldn't ordinarily have in poetry [. . .]. (Lowell, *Collected Prose* 246–247)

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Lowell had no scruples when it came to inventing ‘facts.’ Yet his poetry is a poetry of history: autobiographical, Classical and, via translation, literary history. In his autobiographical and historical poems, his license with ‘fact’ rarely violates the reader’s sense of truth; somehow, his unconventional conception of truth is justified by his artistic project. Does any serious reader of *Life Studies* balk at possible errors of fact, or does she take the “confessional” nature of Lowell’s poetry as incidental to a more wide-ranging project? Lowell was a poet (“our last public poet,” as he is often called), but he also made himself a historian, and as a historian, especially of literature, he invokes the immanent “standard of truth” which it is incumbent upon history to provide.¹

This essay focuses on Lowell’s collection of translations, *Imitations*, as an exercise in translation, an exercise in literary history, and as an exercise in autobiographical narrative. Above all, I am concerned with the nexus between these three perspectives as a distinctive aesthetic and moral project. While many critics have disparaged Lowell’s efforts as a translator,² those who have praised his efforts in *Imitations* have largely focused on aspects of individual poems or on the project’s scope and ambition.³ I aim to show that Lowell’s aesthetic project succeeds in articulating a sophisticated response to the core dilemma of translation by appealing to an Arendtian notion of objectivity. To read *Imitations* is to encounter an example of an alternative conception of translation and of a logic based on the tractable and particularizing impulses of language. The collection radically undermines traditional approaches to translation by positing a method of translation derived from the contingent, experiential nature of language and texts, rather than from any objective status of the text *qua* text.⁴ Beyond the rendering of individual poems, the collection is at once a history of European verse and a personal narrative representing Lowell’s experiences of manic depression. It also involves the radical entanglement of those two histories—as the narrator recounts the history of the European canon, the canon enacts the individual history of the narrator. In what follows, I first contrast traditional approaches to literary translation with Lowell’s, centering on his conception of objectivity. The second half of the essay provides an extended analysis of the text of *Imitations* in light of this approach, and emphasizes the moral, aesthetic, and philosophic significance of his project. I argue that, apart from the purely formal success of *Imitations*, as a work *sui generis* it succeeds in questioning and

offering a possible alternative to the dominant cultural logic of translation and authorship.

Translators are in more than one sense historians. A translator reconstructs a historical artifact, filtering a text through the apparatus of historical analysis. This approach to translation—weighing contextual variables particular to a text, considering the relative importance of words and sounds within that historical-linguistic ambit—reflects a “scientific” approach to the interpretation and re-presentation of texts. Central to that reconstruction, for the translator, are the notions of literalism and fidelity to fact. Hannah Arendt argues in her essay, “The Concept of History,” that “the fundamental fact about the modern concept of history is that it arose in the same sixteenth and seventeenth centuries which ushered in the gigantic development of the natural sciences” (53). As suggested in numerous histories of translation, such as George Steiner’s *After Babel* (1998) and *The Oxford History of Literary Translation* (2006), much translation theory since the late eighteenth century shares the assumption and logic of the natural sciences that proper method can uncover an ‘objective’ truth, without the interference of the investigator. For instance, in his overview of Anglophone translation norms of the nineteenth century, Matthew Reynolds remarks that “[p]rominent journals [. . .] habitually prized ‘fidelity’ and ‘accuracy’ in the many translations they discussed” (61). Though the precise meaning of “literalness” called forth numerous and varied treatments across the long nineteenth century, it remained the lodestar of good translation.⁵ Such an understanding of translation—developed in the post-Enlightenment period during what Steiner describes as an era of translation marked by “theory and hermeneutic inquiry” (249), in which texts are interrogated within “a general model of meaning”—found its exposition in the work of many of Lowell’s models, such as Matthew Arnold’s (discussed below) and Ezra Pound’s. Although the upheavals of twentieth-century textual analysis might have offered a challenge to this model of translation, the model of meaning remained rooted in the tension between the literal and the literary. In this analysis, this tension—between fidelity and license—underlies the debates over translation dating to antiquity.

What is this logic that Lowell rejects? The first of the two most salient assumptions underpinning the literal-versus-literary framework regards the supposedly objective nature of texts. A text is an object in and of

itself, the attributes of which and meaning are immanent to the text itself. Thus, in the practice of translation, an impartial observer aims to identify and represent an objective meaning from the original. “Meaning,” understood generally in this logical framework, emerges as an intangible essence that bridges the realms of sound and sense. Matthew Arnold is eminently clear about the objective nature of a text: “Pope composes with his eye on his style, into which he translates his object, whatever it is. That, therefore, which Homer conveys to us immediately, Pope conveys to us through a medium” (21). Underlying this statement is a profound belief in the concreteness, and perhaps universality, of “that which Homer conveys to us.” Arnold goes on to specify Homer’s attributes as though they were definitive: “I hope to place in still clearer light those four cardinal truths which I pronounce essential for him who would have a right conception of Homer; that Homer is rapid, that he is plain and direct in word and style, that he is plain and direct in his ideas, and that he is noble” (37–38). Arnold, in responding to Newman’s translation of Homer, replaces Newman’s four qualitative descriptors of Homer’s work with four of his own, yet he changes neither the form nor the underlying assumptions of the criticism. Nobility—or any of these “cardinal truths”—is hardly definable in an objective sense, and highly contingent upon circumstance. Arnold may describe his own conception of nobility, but that too requires a translation into the ideas of our own time, and we require a translation yet again when we read Homer in light of Arnold’s interpretation; in Steiner’s words, “[e]ach successive version is a rewrite” (465). Put otherwise: Arnold’s explication of the *Iliad* may augment our understanding of certain facets of the text, but it will bring us no closer to the ‘essence’ that he and others so ardently wish to find and transmit. According to this logic, texts whose attributes are inherent and not contingent on circumstance and historical judgment must have some objective essence to which we, as readers, have access.

This first assertion regarding the objective nature of a text brings us to the second assumption, which concerns the nature of objectivity. In the same essay, Arendt dissects the modern concept of objectivity:

Objectivity, the ‘extinction of the self’ as the condition of ‘pure vision’ (*das reine Sehen der Dinge* – Ranke) meant the historian’s abstention from bestowing either praise or blame, together with an

attitude of perfect distance with which he would follow the course of events as they were revealed in his documentary sources [. . .]. Objectivity, in other words, meant noninterference as well as non-discrimination. (49)

Noninterference requires that a translator minimize his mark on the text so as to preserve the essence of the poem. The historian assumes, like Arnold, that these “documentary sources,” have a meaningful essence in and of themselves. Thus, objectivity with noninterference is necessary to understand history or an attribute of a poem (e.g., Homer’s nobility or rapidity). Underlying this contention is the idea that a poem’s ‘essence’ must therefore be concrete, inherent, and discoverable. However, these two entwined assumptions—that texts are objects and that objectivity demands noninterference—together form the basis of a cultural logic that cannot resolve the kinds of problems with which Arnold and others struggle; this is because what Arnold identifies as “objective” reflects his own cultural assumptions and readings rather than anything immanent to the original text.

Within the limits of this logic, the problem of translation will forever be the same, and will remain intractable. Steiner’s pithy formulation of the problems of translation reduces them to one basic question:

It can be argued that all theories of translation – formal, pragmatic, chronological – are only variants of a single, inescapable question. In what ways can or ought fidelity to be achieved? What is the optimal correlation between the A text in the source-language and the B text in the receptor-language? [. . .] Almost invariably we are presented with an argument from and for compromise. (275–276)

Nowhere in this basic question does the inescapable role of the translator figure because the problem situates text against text, language against language, and epoch against epoch. Compromise and approximation seem the only solution, yet they leave behind the sense that a method for achieving truth and essence is just out of reach. If only there could be an absolute compromise: Steiner later asks, “[t]he question is: how? How may this ideal of mediation be achieved and, if possible, methodized?” (281). So certain is the belief in objective methodizing and successful compromise that

questioning the merits of that method never becomes part of the dialogue, but no amount of oscillation between a literal approach and a liberal approach will segue into harmony.

This is the theoretical question to which Lowell's *Imitations* provides a radical response. The logic that underpins his approach is based on his friend Arendt's understanding of history, objectivity, and impartiality, an understanding she illustrates with Homer: "Impartiality, and with it all true historiography, came into the world when Homer decided to sing the deeds of the Trojans no less than those of the Achaeans. This Homeric impartiality [. . .] is still the highest type of objectivity we know" (51). "Objectivity" here refers to the multiplicity of perspectives that an author uses to convey an event, rather than the absence of any perspective. Unlike a scientific objectivity of noninterference, Homer's version takes into account the immanent perspectivism of human experience. He tells his history as it was experienced on each side rather than according to a mere sequential catalogue of events devoid of individual human perspective. However, though he does not rely on chronological history for his sense of time, he nonetheless provides a temporal context through which meaning is conferred. Homer paints his characters within a narrative context using imagined time, rather than chronological time, *kairos*, not *chronos*, so that the importance of an action derives its meaning from the action itself and not from an external temporal framework chosen by custom.⁶ *Kairos*, which refers to an appropriate or hinge moment, confers meaning on that which precedes and follows it. In both modern, historical time (*chronos*) and Homeric narrative time (*kairos*), an event becomes meaningful only when understood in a greater temporal context; only in the latter, however, does that temporal context admit and elevate the subjectivity of human experience.

Arendt develops this distinction between kinds of objectivity strictly as part of a concept of history. But to the degree that translation is a kind of historical reconstruction, the problem of objectivity plagues the translator and the poet as well. Rather than engaging in a futile struggle for compromise between source-language and target-language, Lowell's own struggle for compromise lies between subjectivity and objectivity. He turns the subjectivity of reading a poem into a facet of the creative process itself, and he supports his decisions—and herein lies the brilliance of his project—with an extended logic that stems from his rejection of the two assumptions

discussed above. Throughout his career as a poet, Lowell repeatedly conflates the writing of poetry with the writing of history; *Life Studies*, *Imitations*, and *History* (the most explicit in its project) each proffer an account of history as a narrative project, but *Imitations*, which reconstructs history through translation, presents a particularly apposite instance from which to extrapolate Lowell's logic. This logic circumvents the fundamental problem of compromise between languages to which Steiner refers.

Though Lowell acknowledges the tradition of translation and even nods to Dryden in the Introduction to *Imitations*, he does so not by articulating his methodological approach at length (as many of his predecessors do), but rather by advancing a coherent vision of meaning through poetic and narrative form. Insofar as *Imitations* is something like an anthology of translations organized chronologically, it claims to present a history of European verse. Lowell's efforts are almost recklessly ambitious: he attempts to translate not merely a single author, a single language, or even, for that matter, languages that he has mastered, but also poems from languages unknown to him, and so to attempt a "small anthology of European poetry" (Lowell, *Imitations* xi). Yet Lowell readily admits to his most egregious transgressions as a translator by signaling his use of a single voice and of certain "modifying strands," and also by avowing that "my licenses have been many" (xii).⁷

Indeed, critics of *Imitations* who evaluate his work with rigid conceptions of what a translator's goals should be—fidelity, literalism—will fail to find value in his project. Marjorie Perloff, for instance, rails against *Imitations* in her 2003 review of Lowell's *Collected Poems*, writing that the book

seems even less successful to me than when I wrote about it in 1973. Lowell's curious introduction to the collection pinpoints the problem, which has refused to go away: "This book," he announces airily, "is partly self-sufficient and separate from its sources, and should be read first as a sequence [. . .]." (Perloff 92)

Perloff concludes her brief treatment of the collection by writing that "distinctions [between originals and translation are] lost in Lowell's imitation, and there seems to be nothing to replace it" (93). This "problem" to which Perloff refers remains a problem only if the translator's goal is to

achieve historical accuracy and objectivity as articulated by Arnold and so many others. Perloff asks, rhetorically, “[w]hy should Lowell want to put down the German poet [Rilke]?” (92). Her comments reveal that she seeks a “true” Rilke who can be discovered through proper poetic interpretation, and that Lowell’s interpretation violates this truth. Yet, imagining that there is such an essence embodied in a human being or in a poem is at odds with the contingent nature of human experience, for there is no longer a living being to be the recipient of criticism. In other words, the memory which a translation might violate exists only in the minds of the living, not in Rilke himself. As he makes clear in his “Introduction,” Lowell recognizes that a translation is never more than a considered personal encounter with a poem that was originally a subjective creation.

II.

So how does *Imitations* delineate this radical challenge to translation theory while developing a personal narrative throughout the volume? *Prima facie*, the narrative traces the speaker’s descent into hell and subsequent rebirth. I take as a starting point the 1975 analysis by Stephen Yenser, who details the narrative structure of the collection by following the passage of the “voice” through a traditional epic descent to and ascent from hell (a spiritual crisis). From poem to poem, the reader follows the speaker’s journey from a manic killing (“The Killing of Lykaon”) down to the chasm of death and self-annihilation (“The Abyss”), and finally back to the “all-being” of life, “multiplied by its mania to return” (“Pigeons”). In his account, Yenser traces the passage of time through the speaker’s tour, to the loss of the self as he descends into hell, and back into the cyclicity of time as he returns with the force of life. He also emphasizes the development of the main ‘character’ (the voice or speaker, who travels behind each poem), and the strict parallel structure of the narrative.

This broader form of the collection enables Lowell to construct and entwine his parallel histories: the history of European poetry and his own personal history. Using motifs such as rebirth, the role of the poet, and individual will, Lowell provides subtle arrows that point to people and ideas in such a way as to weave the fabric of the narrative both formally and thematically. He gestures toward Thèophile Gautier, the founder of the *Parnassiens* and the champion of form and “art for art’s sake,”

and shapes the narrative as a traditional epic. Beyond the inclusion of renditions of two of Victor Hugo's poems, Lowell follows the structure of *Les Contemplations*, Hugo's V-shaped narrative of poems that mirrors the shape of Lowell's speaker's descent into hell. Lowell also dedicates poems to fellow writers, as though speaking to them or with them: William Carlos Williams, Stanley Kunitz, T.S. Eliot, and Hannah Arendt, among others. Their own writings, though far less than the voices of the original poets, resonate in the background of Lowell's own version. In this way, we see Lowell's construction of the European canon. But Lowell's relationship with this canon, writ broadly, was also personal. As noted by Stennett, and Meyers, Lowell "imitated" Dryden's method with his statement that he "tried to write alive English and to do what my authors might have done if they were writing their poems now and in America" (Lowell, *Imitations* 2). Whereas Stennett interprets this aspect of Lowell's project as a political act of Cold War-era positioning, Meyers instead emphasizes the poet's lifelong attachment to the Classics, beginning with his early immersion in the Classical canon as an adolescent and his insistence that classical writers were amongst his favorites: "[T]o read Homer fluently, what a happiness that would be!" Lowell wrote in a letter to George Santayana (quoted in Meyers 175). The authors who comprise *Imitations* are not only "a literary in-club of Lowell's canonical influences" (57), as Stennett argues: they also serve as his friends and muses, his inspirations, and his imagined community. The inclusion of Williams, Kunitz, and Eliot alongside Homer, Sappho, and Der Wilde Alexander illustrates Meyers's argument that Lowell adopted T.S. Eliot's attitude towards his literary forebears, recalling Eliot's statement that "the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" (quoted in Meyers 175).

But we also see what is still more personal for Lowell: a reconstruction and mythologizing of his recurring manic-depressive cycles.⁸ From the frenzied killing of the opening poem to the descent into the drunken hell of depression, and finally to the gradual reawakening to new life, Lowell exposes the reader to the moral and aesthetic dimensions of his psychological landscape. In Lowell's unfinished autobiography, he describes a manic episode and its aftermath, writing, "[f]or two years I have been cooling off from three months of pathological enthusiasm," and hopes that his efforts

in writing his memoirs “will supply me with my swaddling clothes,” that this creative enterprise will grant him new life (*Memoirs* 191). The shape of the narrative in *Imitations* mimics closely his more general description of his manic-depressive cycles: “I suffer from periodic wild manic explosions,” Lowell wrote, “that are followed by long hangovers of formless self-pity” (186). Placing the “Drunken Boat” at the center of his depressive crisis evokes the “hangover” that follows the depression of *Imitations*’ narrator, and makes all the more significant the structuring seasonality that slowly replaces his “formless self-pity.”

But to demonstrate how this poetic project and its attendant narratives respond to the dilemma of translation, let’s return to the idea of rebirth: rebirth as the fundamental event of the narrative, rebirth through the experience of literature, rebirth as a commentary on the act of translation. It is in the experience of rebirth that we first encounter violence as a redemptive act, a prerequisite for the creation of new life; the process through which the speaker springs forth into life once again is a process emblemized by all-consuming, but electrifying, fire. Rebirth also transforms the first realization of the speaker’s anxiety—the struggle against time—into its post-death manifestation, the struggle for will. If death means submission to the control of time (and ultimately, utter self-annihilation at its hands), then the process of rebirth involves strengthening the individual will against countervailing temporal determination and cyclicity.

The moment of rebirth occurs precisely at the physical center of the narrative, following the speaker’s death. The first half has been dominated by a fear of impending death in any form it might take: the loss of love, the loss of innocence, or the loss of the self. Leading up to the moment of rebirth, the speaker voices his intensifying anxiety over the relentless passage of time. This anxiety begins in the second poem (the first, “The Killing of Lykaon,” functions as a prologue), “Three Letters to Anaktoria,” in which the speaker laments the evanescence of love as Anaktoria’s love passes to another man:

How easily a woman is led astray!
 She remembers nothing of what is nearest at hand:
 her loom, her household, her helots . . .
 Anaktoria, did you cherish my love,
 when the Bridegroom was with you? (Lowell, *Imitations* 4)

He shows no rage toward the new object of her love; rather, he “set[s] that man above the gods and heroes” and instructs her to “pray / for his magnificence I once pined to share.” Moreover, the speaker believes that “to have lived is better than to live,” implying that his own death is preferable to the unhappiness of either Anaktoria or her new lover. The final line—“the time is gone –/ I lie alone!”—voices his suffering in the most elemental terms as the passage of time (3–4).

Both the imagery and the overt themes of the following poems—“Children” and the multiple poems from Villon’s “The Great Testament”—follow the precedent established in “Three Letters to Anaktoria.” In “Children,” the speaker recalls his youth, when “we ran dancing rounds, / we wore new green wreaths.” But immediately after this memory comes the verdict, “So time passes”; and finally, the poem ends with five virgins being raped of their childhood (6). “The Great Testament” poems similarly lament the ebbing of youth (“Where are those gallant men / I ran with in my youth?”) (8) and the passing of time: “How quickly my youth went;” “Ah God, the days I lost! [. . .] Old age came limping on” (10, 12).

Following these is Leopardi’s “The Infinite,” in which the speaker utters the first explicit death wish. The speaker daydreams of infinite non-being: “It’s sweet to destroy my mind / and go down/ and wreck in this sea where I drown.” But Lowell also introduces the motif of rhythmic control into his comparison of the infinite and the immediate. The moment of imagined peace is marked by a suspension of the rhythmic: “Here for a little while my heart is quiet inside me.” And again: “I think about the eternal, the dead seasons” as opposed to “things here at hand and alive” (25). Even if death is the only possible escape, non-being is preferable to the deadening control exercised by unbreakable rhythm and cyclicity. Though explicit concern over the passage of time is the primary expression of the speaker’s sense of impotence in the first half of the narrative, it recurs throughout as throbbing repetition. Achilles, for example, launches the narrative with a promise that his listener “must die, / and die and die and die,” with the throbbing “die” creating a deadening effect merely through its heavy sound (2). “The Ballad for the Dead Ladies” then repeats the lament “Oh where is last year’s snow?” as its refrain, thus relating an anxiety over the passage of time to the act of repetition (15–16).

However, this lack of individual agency is also repeatedly represented by a game-master or puppeteer at odds with the speaker. In “Three Letters

to Anaktoria,” the speaker’s rival is compared to a cardplayer. As the narrative approaches its crisis, Lowell inserts his version of Baudelaire’s “Le jeu,” in which the speaker can hardly act. He prefers to describe himself from afar (“I see myself withdrawn and lecherous” [64]) as an unwilling participant in a game that dictates his activities:

my hang-dog shadow joining in the queue,
as fixtures holding fifty candles light
the profiles of great men who used to write,
and here gasp out their ulcerous guts to screw;

crowding this gameboard, faces without lips,
lips white as teeth, false uppers without jaws
bone fingers running through the youthful grips
still fumbling empty pockets and false bras . . .

Even the creative process, writing, is manipulated from above, and the essence of the poet is false and has no substance; he finds no true life in the hands of youthful poets, merely players in a crowded game. Time, with its accompanying anxiety, is so oppressive in its control that it leads the speaker to paralysis. Indeed, the speaker is ushered away from the fear of death toward an intensifying death wish; in other words, the fear of death becomes so overwhelming that only death itself can relieve the speaker of his anxiety. Time transforms his fear of death into death itself.

“Nostalgia” is the last poem of the epic’s descent into hell, and in it the speaker finds himself alone in a riverboat. The scene is lifeless, as the boy’s eyes are “blinded by the white walls,” and the water, the murky symbol of death, has no beginning or end (74). His only actions are stunted—“Oh too short arms! I could not touch / one or the other flower”—and fail in their attempts to connect him to the web of life (75). He is located just out of reach of beauty and life, and his impotence dooms him to a static existence in a lifeless world. “My boat stuck fast; its anchor dug for bottom; / the lidless eye, still water, filled with mud” (76). The speaker’s eye drowns in the muddy stasis around him.

Directly following this is “The Poet at Seven,” most nearly the centerpiece of the narrative. As Yenser notes, Lowell strategically places the word “mania”—not the most precise translation of the French *écroulements*—in the last stanza, and he also mentions “mania” in the first and

last lines of the collection to endow the narrative with a symmetric structure. This mania, in contradistinction to the two manias framing the work as a whole, is the mania of confusion and oblivion; the speaker has lost all will and is controlled by his dizziness and the negation of his world. The speaker sits “in his bare bedroom, where he could close / the shutters and lose / his world for hundreds of hours” (79–80). Here, he inhabits a chaotic world that is “endlessly expanding with jaundiced skies, / drowned vegetation, and carnations / that flashed like raw flesh / in the underwater green / of the jungle starred with flowers—/ dizziness, mania, revulsions, pity!” (80) No longer the speaker, but rather the main character, he remains the passive object of description, as each stanza begins with such lines as “what he feared most,” “what he liked best were dark things” (79). Action by the speaker exists only in the past (“At seven he was making novels”); otherwise, action is the object of the speaker’s gaze:

He felt clean
 when he filled his lungs with the smell—
 half hay fever, half iodine—
 of the wheat,
 he watched its pubic golden tassels swell
 and steam in the heat,
 then sink back calm. (79)

Moreover, he is resigned not only to passive observation, but also to the ever-deadening throbbing of nature: swell, steam, and sink. He finds purity in the stupefying, rhythmical inhalation of a smell that, to him, is of hay fever and iodine. In another event from the past, the speaker’s desire to connect with another human being is punished:

Wallowing below
 her once, he bit her crotch—
 she never wore bloomers—
 kicked and scratched, he carried back
 the taste of her buttocks to his bedroom. (79)

Here he gains only the lingering unpleasantness of the present. However, the “mania” discussed above marks the watershed of the narrative: from the depths of this ‘hell,’ the speaker performs his first individual act.

“[H]e lay alone on pieces of unbleached canvas, / violently breaking into sail” (80). This is as sudden and violent in its style as in its action; until the last line, there is no indication that the speaker will rescue himself from the poem’s opening statement that “his soul returned to its vomit” (77), echoing the admonition in Proverbs 26:11 against returning to sin.⁹

This act of violence is significant not only because it leads into motion away from the self, but also because it is initiated by the speaker; at last, through violence, through an act of his own free will, he has broken the omnipotent control of his mania. The first line of the next poem, “The Drunken Boat,” continues as though part of the same monologue:

I felt my guides no longer carried me—
as we sailed down the virgin Amazon,
the redskins nailed them to their painted stakes
naked, as targets for their archery. (81)

The speaker, for the first time, has reversed roles with the guides who led him hell-bound; the guides have lost their agency and now must suffer consequences. The speaker, on the other hand, is suddenly able to narrate his own actions. But the question of who is in charge of the speaker’s fate is directly connected to the problem of determinism. In the silence between these two poems, “The Poet at Seven” and “The Drunken Boat,” Lowell’s speaker wins a momentous battle, for he has overcome his forced placement in time through his individual action of setting sail out from himself; even the title, “The Poet at Seven,” indicates that the poet is controlled by time, the very thing that “guided” him into the grave. But from his age, from his static boat, he sets sail, finally in control of his “guides.”

These poems also lead us to the idea of the speaker as narrator, for he hints more than once that he is a poet. Lowell calls attention to the role of the poet throughout *Imitations*; he splits Villon’s “Le grand testament” into multiple poems that refer back to Villon himself (e.g., “Villon’s Prayer for His Mother” and “Villon’s Epitaph”), again using quotation marks to place distance between the speaker of this poem and the speaker of the narrative as a whole. In “Heine Dying in Paris,” the narrator refers to the original author, Heine, but he also translates Heine’s own words. Other poems, such as the two “At Gautier’s Grave” poems, address themselves to a poet, and still others address themselves to the reader (namely, “To the Reader,”

after Baudelaire's "Au lecteur"). "The Poet at Seven" reminds the reader that both the speaker of the poem and the speaker of the narrative are poets; "Hamlet in Russia, A Soliloquy" layers Lowell on top of Pasternak on top of Shakespeare.

Lowell crafts this dual narrative perspective from the beginning of *Imitations*. The introductory poem, "The Killing of Lykaon," merges passages from two books of the *Iliad*. The first passage (the incantation of the muse) places *Imitations* within the epic tradition and establishes the voice as a poet's voice, but the second passage is framed within quotation marks, a decision that intimates the narrator's distinction between his own voice and that of the original poet. When he relates the second passage in quotes, he seems to acknowledge suddenly that he is recounting someone else's story. In other words, he both reads a poem and transmits his experience of that poem as a part of an overarching narrative. However, for all the self-reflexivity of the speaker, his role is not ambiguous; insofar as he reads an original poem and then writes his own version, he is both reader and poet. Thus, he experiences the fullness of the narrative from the perspective of both the reader and the poet, and makes sure that the reader understands his position in relation to the text. His experience of literature encompasses both extremes of the experience of art and thus momentarily bridges the gap between art as imitation of reality and as reality itself. For all the potential for failure in his task, the translator aspires to the privileged position between the creator and the receiver of a world. Lowell seems to suggest that rebirth, in any of the registers it occupies, is possible only through the experience of literature.

This dual perspective serves as Lowell's response to the potential charge of subjectivity in the 'science' of translation: he has resurrected the objectivity of Homer, via Arendt. The objective voice he tenders emerges from multiple voices that Lowell understands rather than from an 'objectively' imagined poetic essence that each translator wants to find anew. Indeed, he recognizes that the audience's context for interpretation might be radically different from the context in which the original text was written; if "meaning" is the translator's holy grail, the fundamental tension comes from the irreconcilable distance between intended meaning (known only to the original poet) and received meaning (known to the audience). Lowell rejects the claim that this essence might invoke the same experience in the audience as in the original author. In *Imitations*, when he

describes an event, he embraces the inherent perspectivism of transmission and makes productive what is usually troublesome to translators. Just as Homer accounts for both the Trojan and the Greek sides of the Peloponnesian war, Lowell's objective rendering accounts for both sides of the aesthetic tension between the perspective of the author and the perspective of the reader. Despite the seemingly partial voice of the speaker (the subjective voice), Lowell achieves a kind of objectivity simply because that subjective voice represents both the author's and the reader's perspective. Precisely because Lowell exploits this inherent tension so successfully, he affords himself the opportunity to create poetic meaning (however violent) at the intersection of original and imitation.

III.

Emerging from hell, our speaker has not yet reached more agreeable surroundings, but he has attained, at the very least, hope: "Do not think I raise this empty cup / and insane toast to nothingness, because / the non-existent corridor gives hope" (92). The second "At Gautier's Grave" poem (from Mallarmé's "Toast funèbre"), which is positioned to close the hellish, central section, transforms the morbidity of the first "At Gautier's Grave" into the potential for life. Whereas in the first, the speaker says that "night fills my troubled eye" (45), in the second, he tells his audience that "no shade / darkens our métier's artificial fire" (92).

The second half of Lowell's narrative is punctuated by increasingly frequent markers of cyclicity, namely references to the seasons and to days. "The Magnolia's Shadow" describes the tensions of the world in precisely these terms. For example, the speaker plants the tree in terms of its place within the yearly cycle:

The shadow of the dwarf magnolia
is a scarecrow now that the turkey-wattle
blossoms are blown. (111)

The tree itself is merely part of the greater pattern of nature, also evident in the lines, "like something wired, the cicada vibrates at timed intervals." In both the comparison to a scarecrow and to "something wired," the patterns of nature assume a profound capacity for rendering empty

what should be full of life, and for mechanical control. The speaker also comments on the difficulty of the constant undulation between life and death, noting that “it was more facile to expend one’s self / and die at the first wing-flutter, at the first / hectic rumbling from the adversary—a nursery game.” If only death were simple and final, rather than cyclical and recurring. The only survivors of this world are those who internalize the violence of opposing forces, those “to whom zenith, nadir, Capricorn / and cancer rush together, so that the war may be / inside you.”

In the poems “Winter Noon,” “Day and Night,” and “Hitlerian Spring,” and on to “Black Spring,” “September,” and “The Seasons,” the speaker continues to describe the world in terms of calendrical circularity. The “nearing summer liberates / the thaw and chill” (“Hitlerian Spring,” 113) but later, in “September”:

Summer keeps mumbling, “I am only a few months old.
A lifetime of looking back, what shall I do with it?

“I’ve so many mind-bruises, I should give up playing.” (131)

Though the season offers salvation from one hell, it faces its own ineluctable death at the hands of time. However, the seasons are not the only manifestation of the external control that the speaker experiences. In the line above from “September,” “I should give up playing,” Lowell couples his own motif of seasonal control with the motif of game-like control. He often uses game-playing imagery, at times only in passing, as he does in “The Coastguard House” (“the compass, a pin-head, spins at random; / the dizzy dice screw up the odds,” [115]), but also more extensively, as in “The Chess Player,” in which a chess game represents the world, and its pieces “are terrified” (121). The speaker asks if reason exists behind the “torture and formulae” of the game: “For a time, I doubted if you yourself even / made any sense of the game” (120). But far from being a benign power, the chess player has the capacity to kill and to make the chessmen, “like snowmen, [. . .] melt in your mind’s white glare” (121). This post-death section transmutes what for the speaker was once a simple fear of imminent death, into an anxiety about the life-death cycle; he knows there is the possibility of life-after-death because he has just lived it. No longer does the fact of his death bother him: what concerns him is that he has no say in his own death

and rebirth; he has no agency in a world he understands to be driven by a time indifferent to his struggles. He longs to impose *kairos* upon *chronos*.

The themes of individual will and human agency, especially in relation to the passage of time, bring the discussion back to the dilemmas of the translator. If subjective experience must be filtered through the objectivity of historical analysis, how can an individual interact meaningfully with, and be an active agent in, the course of history? In the case of *Imitations*, only because Lowell allows his own voice to speak through the words of the past does he become an active agent in history and, consequently, create new poetic meaning; had he tried to suppress his voice in the act of translation (which he recognizes is impossible), he would have failed in his attempt and moreover denied himself the opportunity to be anything but an epiphenomenon of history: a voiceless being, determined by history and his own psychological tumult, one who is no more than a vessel for the transmission of others' poems. An objectivity devoid of and blind to human input robs human beings of their ability to affect and create their world. When Lowell invents "facts," he betrays the abstract notion of absolute truth, but he does not violate the truth of his own experience. Underlying *Imitations* is the belief that human agency can exist only in a world that accepts subjectivity as part of its overall truth, that action—per Arendt—and imagination make History.

Kay Redfield Jamison, in her biographical account of Lowell's struggles with manic depression, quotes Lowell's friend Helen Vendler in describing the importance Lowell attached to History, broadly speaking, as a framework through which he understood his own mental illness. "History gave Lowell an intellectual structure, Vendler [wrote], "a frame into which everything could be put [. . .] an independent vantage point from which to write as soon as he drew back from the moment and contemplated life and the world more largely" (16). It was this structure that pulled Lowell away from the personal and into history, and in so doing, granted him agency over his own life and illness.

IV.

It is fitting that the form of a rebirth narrative should be an anthology of translations since the act of translation is a life-giving act in itself,

one that resuscitates a work from the death it suffers at the hands of time and language. However, (re)birth is violent, and if the rebirth of translation carries with it the implied death of the text, its new incarnation will necessarily involve the double violence of re-presentation and birth. The violence of translation has always unnerved translators (and would-be translators), and Lowell certainly does enact a kind of poetic violence on the texts he selects. Dryden's formulation of the violence of translation is illustrative: his theoretical scheme comprises a spectrum of fidelity ranging from Metaphrase ("turning an Authour word by word, and Line by Line, from one Language into another") on the one hand, to Imitation ("where the Translator [. . .] assumes the liberty not only to vary from the words and sence, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion" [Venuti 38]) on the other hand. He advocates a middle road, which he calls "Paraphrase," an effort to bridge a literal translation that does violence to the sense, with an "imitation" that does violence to the author's words and sounds. Despite Dryden's recognition of this form of translation, he remained skeptical about its legitimacy.

In this sense, creativity becomes violent when used in relation to another poet's work. How can this violence done to the text be made productive rather than wholly destructive? And to what degree can poetry host violence and transmute it in such a way as to make the act of writing an act of redemption? Again, Lowell offers a possible answer to this question through his use of form and through his distinctive understanding of objectivity. To revisit two poems discussed above: surrounding the speaker's murky hell in *Imitations* are arrows pointing to Théophile Gautier. The two poems titled "At Gautier's Grave" frame the central-most group of poems in the collection. Of the original titles, only the first, by Victor Hugo, used Gautier's name ("A Théophile Gautier"); the second, by Mallarmé, was originally entitled "Toast funèbre." The two poems provide a frame for the poems that come between. This central-most section—by far the largest group of poems by single authors—comprises a hefty selection of poems from Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal* and by Rimbaud. It is not insignificant that Baudelaire dedicated his masterpiece, *Les fleurs du mal*, "[a]u Poète impeccable / Au parfait magicien ès lettres françaises / À mon très-cher et très-vénéré / Maître et ami / Théophile Gautier" (1). The spiritual journey the speaker undergoes in this lengthy middle section is

no doubt through hell, but its formal placement implies that art—in itself, and because of its form—can be redemptive, and is thus capable of effecting positive rebirth.

V.

I am content to play the one part I was born for . . .
quite another play is running now . . .
take me off the hooks tonight!

The sequence of scenes was well thought out;
the last bow is in the cards, or the stars—
but I am alone, and there is none . . . (Lowell, *Imitations* 148)

Thus Lowell nearly ends his translation narrative with these lines taken from a Boris Pasternak original that Lowell has entitled, “Hamlet in Russia, A Soliloquy.” The speaker, the once-impotent actor, sheds his costume in preparation for his final, Prospero-like epilogue, “Pigeons.” Just as Hamlet is out of place in Russia, Lowell is out of place playing parts and being controlled. The speaker never entirely overcomes the control of cyclical time. Repetition of individual words occurs almost identically in the first poem, “Killing,” (“die, / and die and die and die,” [2]) and in the third-to-last poem (“he wanted to sleep and sleep and sleep;” “again again again, / the song of the broken accordion,” [145]), so that it reminds the reader of how powerful time can be. Throbbing, too, haunts the speaker in “Hamlet,” as his “heart throbbed like a boat on the water” (147).

Yet woven among these markers of monotony are sharp breakers. “You must die [. . .] *until* the blood / of Hellas and Patroklos is avenged” (“Killing” 2; italics added). Then suddenly, as Hamlet prepares to enter the stage, “The boat stops throbbing on the water. . . / The clapping stops. I walk into the lights” (“Hamlet” 148). It is a curious way of invoking *kairos*, the epic time Homer used to give meaning to an era, and the means by which he conferred meaning on an event in relation to what came before and after it. If a single event has the power to stop time, then perhaps the speaker might overcome the relentless ticking of the clock.

And if an event can stop time merely because of its vast human importance, then the unforgiving march of chronological time—as Kermode puts it, “one damn thing after another” (47)—does not determine what a human life is. So long as *kairos* is an elemental attribute of narrative, mediating human struggles through narrative form will allow us to surmount history as meaningless series of events. In other words, in order for human beings to enact their own agency, they must be able to believe in a kind of *kairos* capable of superseding the essential determinism of a chronological view of History.

Until this point in the narrative, Lowell has not strayed from the chronology of the texts’ dates of publication. Yet with “Pigeons,” the epilogue, he upsets the pattern of chronological time. The very layout of the collection dramatizes how an individual can overcome a determined history to write his own, to seize agency from the manic-depressive cyclicity that so controlled Lowell’s life. Thus, with this break in the *chronos* of the collection, the speaker can at last reflect on the pattern of his story and wrest meaning from its pauses and throbs. The poem begins by acknowledging the hegemony of cyclical time:

The same old flights, the same old homecomings,
dozens of each per day,
but at last the pigeon gets clear of the pigeon-house . . .
What is home but a feeling of homesickness
for the flight’s lost moment of fluttering terror?

Back in the dovecote, there’s another bird,
by all odds the most beautiful,
one that never flew out, and can know nothing of gentleness . . .
Still, only by suffering the rat-race in the arena
can the heart learn to beat. (*Imitations* 149)

The speaker—the poet—referring to the same cycles that have tormented him throughout the narrative, finally makes peace with his suffering, without which one “can know nothing of gentleness,” or even learn to live. As Frank Kearful notes, Lowell infuses Rilke’s original poem, “Die Tauben,” with tropes of his own—touch, exile and return—and layers his very personal struggles with manic depression through his creative manipulation

of the original poem. Then Lowell adds the following stanza to Rilke's original:

Think of Leonidas perhaps and the hoplites,
glittering with liberation,
as they combed one another's golden Botticellian hair
at Thermopylae, friends and lovers, the bride and the
bridegroom—
and moved into position to die. (149)

In the face of destruction, at the hands of either time or the enemy, the individual must stand alone, as did Leonidas, and take full responsibility for his defense, however impossible the task. The task of the poet, to heed the call to create, despite his knowledge that the act of representing reality will invariably do irreparable violence to the represented; the task of the human, to see in the mundane throbbing of his days the potential for liberation and beauty: in each, the moral choice is to make the effort, to exert the will, and to take responsibility for that action. The final stanza Lowell renders as:

Over non-existence arches the all-being—
thence the ball thrown almost out of bounds
stings the hand with the momentum of its drop—
body and gravity,
miraculously multiplied by its mania to return. (149)

The speaker returns once again, but this time with the weight and force of life.¹⁰ Kearful, who reads "Pigeons" both through the prism of Lowell's illness and in light of his correspondence with Arendt, emphasizes these themes by underscoring Lowell's "stubborn faith in the power of his art to transmute and transcend his illness" (131). *Imitations* epitomizes this faith and practice.

VI.

My arguments in this essay contrast two cultural logics of translation. I began by explaining their primary assumptions, and then followed these

assumptions to their logical aesthetic, philosophical, and moral conclusions. The first, prevailing logic rests on the assumptions that a text is an object, and that objectivity precludes subjectivity or interference. It leads to a conception of time as *chronos* and to a belief in an absolute description of an event or text, and ultimately, to a deterministic view of human experience.¹¹ The second logic, inspired by Arendt and developed by Lowell, assumes that a text or event cannot be known in an objectively detached way, but can only be experienced and that therefore true objectivity must be inclusive of subjective experience. Time can be conceived of as *kairos*, and moreover, humans are beings with agency and are therefore responsible for their actions. My aim in highlighting the two logics is twofold: first, to argue that this second logic is necessary to appreciate and understand Lowell's project in *Imitations*; and second, to argue that, by using this logic, Lowell challenges established norms of translation in a subtle yet profound way, but that he does so without categorically renouncing tradition.

If we approach *Imitations* from the perspective of the first, more conventional logic, we are bound to understand *Imitations* only as a collection of translations that does violence to the original poems. But approaching from the second perspective, we can see that Lowell is able to play with the immanent narrative capacities of anthologizing in such a way that individual poems come to be experienced as single events within the broader context of a narrative, both a narrative of the European canon and of his autobiography. In his creation, he fuses the drama of the original poems with the drama of his own psychological landscape. Beyond his narratives, the poetic work that replaces the original lines, images, stanzas, and tones is not only a newly articulated imitation of the original poems, but also points to an overall conception of what translation can be and of what questions a translator can attempt to answer. History, according to Lowell's logic, is a story that accounts for essential elements of human perspective. As a historian, Lowell uses this logic to address larger problems of objectivity that are common to translation and history.

Lowell's vision of translation in *Imitations* is not far from the vision championed 15 years later by Steiner in the afterword to his encyclopedic survey of translation theory, *After Babel*:

I believe that the communication of information, of ostensive and verifiable "facts", constitutes only one part, and perhaps a secondary

part, of human discourse. The potentials of fiction, and counter-factuality, of undecidable futurity profoundly characterize both the origins and nature of speech [. . .]. They determine the unique, often ambiguous tenor of human consciousness and make the relations of that consciousness to “reality” creative. Through language, so much of which is focused inward to our private selves, we reject the empirical inevitability of the world. Through language, we construct what I have called “alternatives of being”. (497)

Steiner concludes that there is no methodological holy grail in translation; instead, he finds that the roots of both translation’s fundamental problems and its potential solutions stem from our capacity to imagine and invent. Fiction—the same fiction that gives Lowell so much trouble in the eyes of his more literal-minded critics—is precisely what resolves the problems of compromise. Lowell’s conception of translation and, more broadly, of poetic meaning, provides a context in which a work like *Imitations* can be meaningful as poetry in its own right and as a moral and aesthetic project. Lowell dedicates the final poem to Hannah Arendt, for she was, perhaps, an inspiration for the kind of narrative he chose to give shape and meaning to his collection. For Arendt, using narrative as a mode of recounting history was the only moral choice: in the conclusion of her essay, she describes history as the “one over-all process which originally was conceived in order to give meaning [. . .] and to act, so to speak, as the eternal time-space into which [men] could flow and thus be rid of their mutual conflicts and exclusiveness” (Arendt 89). This is a reminder that whether we choose to conceive of time as *chronos* or as *kairos*, whether we choose to conceive of ourselves as determined or as active agents, we nonetheless imagine these things as ways to confer meaning on our lives.

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NOTES

1. Of his later collection, *History*, Lowell wrote to Peter Taylor, “I expect it to be a school text—an entirely old-fashioned history only considering Wars, Heroes, women, and myself” (*Collected Letters* 589).

2. See, among others, Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetic Art of Robert Lowell*, Cornell University Press, 1973, 55–59, and “The Return of Robert Lowell,” *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* 27.1/2 (2003): 76–102; Belitt: 44–56; John Simon, “Abuse of Privilege: Lowell as Translator,” *The Hudson Review* 20.4 (1967): 543–562; Peter Robinson, *Poetry & Translation: The Art of the Impossible*, Liverpool University Press, 2010, 26–47. These criticisms were not lost on Lowell: in a letter to A. Alvarez (November 7, 1961), Lowell writes: “*Time Magazine* in a longish panning review says half my poems bear the smudge of translation and the other half seem to have been written by some talented foreigner. Dudley Fitts in the *New York Times* says they should be read in a salt mine, with a grain of salt, and three hysterical Frenchmen writing to *Encounter* say my Rimbaud is an insane slaughter and hopeless trash” (*Collected Letters* 390).

3. For instance, see: Gargaillio 191–209; Kearful, 131–144. While not declaring it an unqualified success, Tom Stennett recognizes and assesses the importance of Lowell’s larger project in *Imitations* in “Drinking in the Dark”: 57–79. Finally, Stephen Yenser’s “Many Personalities, One Voice,” discussed further below, outlines Lowell’s ambitious narrative project in *Imitations*.

4. Though I further clarify the meaning of ‘objectivity’ below, by ‘objective status,’ I mean the belief that a text is fundamentally an object whose attributes exist independently of any observation.

5. There is a long tradition of “imitations” in verse, noted by Florian Gargaillio in relation to Lowell’s own volume, and described by Dryden below. Although such imitations bear the mantle of tradition, Gargaillio observes that even Dryden harbors reservations about the violence done to the originals by this genre (192, note 4).

6. I am using the terms *kairos* and *chronos* as Frank Kermode uses them in *The Sense of an Ending* (1967). He borrows his own discussion of these terms from Oscar Cullman and John Marsh, who distinguish the two senses of time in theological terms. Writes Kermode, “[*chronos* is ‘passing time’ or ‘waiting time’ – that which, according to Revelation, ‘shall be no more’ – and *kairos* is the season, a point in time filled with significance, charged with a meaning derived from its relation to the end. You can see that this is a very radical distinction. The Greeks [. . .] thought that even the gods could not change the past; but Christ did change it, rewrote it, and in a new way fulfilled it. In the same way the End changes all, and produces, in what relation to it is the past, these seasons, *kairoi*, historical moments of intemporal significance” (47). This distinction, insofar as Lowell brings translation into the realm of narrative, will become significant later in the discussion of his stylistic choices and the overall logic he uses to justify his conception of translation.

7. Here one might recall Lowell’s comment regarding his confessional poems, that “they’re not always factually true. There’s a good deal of tinkering with fact. Your actual experience is a complete flux. I’ve invented facts and changed things” (*Collected Prose* 246). Yet he does not renounce the “truth” of his story.

8. Kay Redfield Jamison’s 2017 biography of Lowell, discussed further below, reads his oeuvre through the lens of his diagnosis of, and experience with, manic depression.

9. “As a dog returneth to his vomit, so a fool returneth to his folly” (*The Bible*, Proverbs 26:11).

10. The “weight and force of life” in this case was a doubled-edged sword: Kearful observes that the writing of “Pigeons” shortly preceded a manic episode for which Lowell was hospitalised (132).

11. It is worth noting one other aspect of this first logic. Many critics’ distaste for an imitative “translation” stems from the culturally-created sanctity of an author’s work: the text, first and foremost, is the property of the author; only secondarily is it available for public consumption. Because a text is an object, it is someone’s property. From this perspective, the primary concern of an author becomes originality, so that one does not violate another author’s work. It may not be a coincidence that the “anxiety of influence” Bloom describes—really the anxious desire to be original—developed at the same time artists began to sign their paintings. But it is precisely this insistence on artistic property as a value over and above the substance of the text that dictates the limits of translation. When the text to be translated is seen as an object to be owned or stolen, it follows that it has an immanent essence that is capable of being stolen.

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