

## “I was a stuffed toucan”: Poetic Self-Positioning in Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies*

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay addresses identity construction in Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies*. It argues that references to family, history and other poets indirectly inform the presented self-image and call this process poetic self-positioning. In contrast to earlier psychoanalytical and biographical readings, this interpretation is based on the notion of narrative identity. Additionally, it stresses the relevance of the concept of ‘emotion’ to identity constructions.

**KEYWORDS:** Robert Lowell; *Life Studies*; Narrative Identity; Self; Positioning; Emotion

### 1. Introduction

Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* (1959) was the first book of poems on which the term *confessional* was pinned. The term that designates a whole mode—confessional poetry—draws back to M.L. Rosenthal’s review of *Life Studies* entitled “Poetry as Confession” (1959). On the one hand Rosenthal calls *Life Studies* “unpleasantly egocentric” and “self-therapeutic” (64); on the other hand he agrees with Lowell in approaching American culture from a perspective of psychic breakdown and particularly praises its first part as “poems of violent contradiction, a historical overture to define the disintegration of a world” (66). What Rosenthal calls “unpleasantly egocentric” and “self-therapeutic” hints at the taboo-breaking qualities of the volume. Besides the autobiographical perspective and the treatment of topics such as mental illness, the extended representation of emotions in *Life Studies* was new again after modernism.<sup>1</sup> Many contemporaries remember it as an important moment when they read *Life Studies* for the first time. Sylvia Plath describes its crucial change in poetic style, stating that “I’ve been very excited by what I feel is the new breakthrough that came with, say, Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies*. This intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal emotional experience, which I feel has been partly taboo” (qtd. in Alvarez 20).

Given such reception, one could think *Life Studies* is a book full of self-references similar to Anne Sexton’s *Live or Die* (1966), where they are presented explicitly and all over the place.

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<sup>1</sup> Marjorie Perloff reads “Man and Wife” from “Life Studies” as “a reaction against the autonomous, ‘impersonal’ symbolist mode of Eliot, Pound, Stevens, the early Auden, and of the Robert Lowell of *Lord Weary’s castle*—the mode that dominated the first half of our century” (72). She further argues Lowell tries to combine the romantic self-experiencing I with the realism of Tschechov and Tolstoi (75).

However, in Lowell's case self-references are fewer, more cryptic, and combined with portraits and commentary on history, politics, and society. In *Life Studies* the personal and interpersonal modes constantly overlap. The references to history, politics, and family traditions all add to the speaker's self-image, whereas the personal (emotional) experience is at the same time understood as universal, as the title *Life Studies* implicates. However, when questions of the self or identity are raised in context of Lowell most scholarly approaches are biographical or psychoanalytical.<sup>2</sup> In this essay, I want to address identity construction in *Life Studies* particularly with the concept of narrative identity in mind. In doing so, I aim to define the represented identity process as a poetic act of self-positioning and will furthermore stress the relevance of investigating the concept of emotion with regard to narrative identity.

## 2. Narrative Identity in the Realm of Confessional Poetry and Autobiography

The last three decades saw the rise of the concept of narrative identity which is linked to the so called 'narrative turn' within social sciences and literary and cultural studies.<sup>3</sup> Some scholars even speak of an "inflationary paradigm," a "narrative imperialism," or just a "narrative boom" (Bamberg 1). However, the concept of narrative identity allows clarifying the often-times only vaguely used term 'identity.' It helps to understand how processes of identity construction function and also how representations of identity can be likewise deconstructed. Narrative identity in this sense can be understood as the 'final destination' of a longer voyage of the self from a realist context towards one where the self is seen as a construction. While earlier views addressed the self "as if self were a substance or an essence that preexisted our effort to describe it, as if all one had to do was to inspect it in order to discover its nature" (Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* 99), later approaches to the self highlight its constructed character. Sometimes the terms *self* and *identity* are used as synonyms. One has to be careful here: they overlap, but they do not signify the same thing. *Self* can just refer to subjectivity or oneself as the agent of an action whereas *identity* implies a sense-making interpretation that refers to a longer period of time. Paul Ricoeur (1991) distinguishes be-

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<sup>2</sup> Examples for rather biographical or psychoanalytical discussions of self or identity in Lowell can be found in Ramakrishnan or Meyers.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the 'narrative turn' see e.g. Meuter or Kreiswirth.

tween two usages of personal identity: “identity as sameness (Latin *idem*; English same; German *gleich*) and identity as self (Latin *ipse*; English self; German *selbst*)” (73). According to Ricoeur, both notions of identity entail a different interpretation of “permanence over time,” which leads to problems in the discussion, but “the notion of narrative identity offers a solution to the aporias concerning personal identity” (76).

Regarding the narratological fundaments of narrative identity, there has been surprisingly little dialogue between philosophical and psychological elaborations and literary perspectives; the attention by literary critics just started in the last decade, whereas in the fields of philosophy and psychology narrative identity has been discussed for about 40 years now.<sup>4</sup> Since the 1980s, mainly philosophers and psychologists such as Ricoeur, Jerome Bruner, Jens Brockmeier, or Wolfgang Kraus have strongly contributed to a notion of identity as a process in which identity is constructed through narration, shaped by traditional stories and plots. All of the authors stress that there are multiple possible concepts of self and that the constructed identity depends on the interpretation of the moment, which means that one always tells a different version of oneself depending on the situation. Narrative identity is also closely linked to autobiography and memory, since when we tell our lives we tend to represent them as a coherent story. Moreover, autobiographies are typically written in teleological form and in retrospective, namely from a beginning to an end, (Brockmeier). Thus, in autobiographical prose (fictional or non-fictional) there mostly is one narrative situation, one moment from which memories are told and interpreted to form one coherent story with closure. In this regard autobiographical poetry is different, since every single poem contains its own narrative situation, i.e. a possibly actualized narrative identity. Additionally, the whole volume of poetry can be read as one narrative. However, confessional poetry overlaps with common constructions of narrative identity in the mode of autobiography, whereas autobiographically influenced poetry is, of course, different from autobiographic prose, e.g. in being crafted for primary aesthetic motives, as Adam Kirsch writes in regard to Lowell and other poets (x). Besides the specific aesthetic goals of poetry, the general constructedness of each autobiographical text should be kept in mind, which is particularly stressed by the no-

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<sup>4</sup> Such problems of doing interdisciplinary work in the context of narrative and identity are also addressed Birgit Neumann's and Ansgar Nünning's chapter. See Neumann and Nünning (4).

tion of narrative identity. As an additional starting point, the narrativity of lyric poetry must also be acknowledged.<sup>5</sup>

The term *confessional poetry* and the autobiographic dimension of the works thus labeled often lead to a reading that looks for authenticity or a “true self” (Kośc 38–39). Kirsch for instance criticizes the term *confessional*: “the usefulness of criticism depends on its metaphors, and in confession it found a bad metaphor for what the most gifted of these poets were doing” (x). Readings of the confessional can be complicated—while keeping the term—by the concept of narrative identity, which denies the possibility of a single true self. According to Ricoeur, “the self, narratively interpreted, is itself a figured self—a self which figures itself as this or that” (80). Thus, besides being multiply constructed, a self is always to some extent fictive. This approach brings different levels to a reading; one has to distinguish between a literary representation of an identity process and what autobiographical writing does to the identity process itself, but there are no longer concepts like the “true” or “false” biographic self.

On the other hand literary autobiographies are often treated by narrative identity theorists as examples of broader narrative identity constructions and are said to influence the way identities are told in general. Bruner for instance uses the example of literary autobiographies to argue that self-making is a “narrative art” (*Making Stories* 65). He states that literature can shape new images of selfhood and describes how literary self-construction in autobiographies from Augustine to Beckett designs fundamentally different but always innovative self-images (*Making Stories* 78). By bringing new impulses to how identities are narrated and thus are produced, literature becomes an important source to the general identity process.

### **3. Poetic Self-Positioning in *Life Studies***

*Life Studies* is Lowell’s fourth book-length publication and mostly still considered his best, although several followed during the remaining eighteen years of his life. It consists of four parts, the second one being a piece of prose called “91 Revere Street,” in which Lowell re-

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<sup>5</sup> For a narratological discussion of lyric poetry see e.g. Müller-Zettelmann.

members parts of his childhood when his family used to live at this address. This personal history follows the first part that contains four poems with broadly chosen historical motifs including the dogma of Mary's bodily assumption into heaven, the story of Marie de Medici, Inauguration Day 1953, and the story of a mad African-American soldier stationed in Munich. Part Three consists of four poems again. There are also references that go beyond his own person but are connected to him. Lowell refers to earlier poets in "Ford Madox Fox" and "Words for Hart Crane" as well as to contemporaries in "For George Santayana" and to "To Delmore Schwartz." The fourth part is subtitled "Life Studies," which marks it as the volume's core piece, and is split into two groups again. It begins with memories of his grandparents and parents and continues with his more recent life and his own small family. All four parts contribute to the represented identity like pieces of a puzzle. Next to explicit self-descriptions, it is the relation of the self to history, poetry, and family members that defines Lowell's identity in the book. It is particularly significant which events and figures Lowell chooses to describe or not to describe, and how he interprets them. The identity process entailed in *Life Studies* is therefore a steady negotiation between identification and rejection in order to find the self's own position.

To illustrate this multi-layered process I want to turn to positioning theory, a field to which particularly Gabriele Lucius-Hoene and Arnulf Deppermann have contributed significantly. They define positioning as a research tool to analyze narrative identities in oral autobiographical discourse and as an empiric method for narrative interviews. Positioning is about narrative attitudes and perspectives that are performed in the interaction of a dialogue; how the speaker behaves towards the listener, how the speaker refers to herself as object of narration, how she presents others in her story, which attributes somebody gives to her- or himself, which attitudes or motifs are presented, or how one relates to the listener therefore mark the individual social position. Moreover, most attitudes are not directly apparent, and even clear self-references hint at further moral backgrounds or assumptions that characterize the person than those explicitly expressed (Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann 172). Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann distinguish between the narrated self of the past and the narrating self of the presence, whereas both of these positional layers help to reconstruct facets of narrative identities. A communicative act of positioning can include personal characteristics (e.g. creativity, independency), social identities (e.g. teacher, soccer fan), rights due to the

roles (e.g. authority, involvement), and moral attributes (e.g. honesty, authenticity) (171). Every part of the speech act can entail more or less relevant parts for the positioning, as Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann stress. Whereas they identify these different narrative constellations in order to analyze oral interviews systematically, looking at the process of positioning can also help to specify identity constructions in written and literary texts, as I will show in the following.<sup>6</sup>

The choice of persons and events that Lowell recalls in *Life Studies*, the way how he does it and how he situates himself within the text are therefore acts of poetic positioning. But Lowell's self-positioning is inherently contradictory; he varies between power and greatness on the one hand and a rebellious outsider role and desperation on the other. He is the sophisticated only child from a traditional powerful New England family—to which he refers continuously—who displays his education by using Latin, French and German expressions, but he is also the rude husband in “To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage,” the prisoner in “Memories of West Street and Lepke,” and the lonely madman in the famous “Skunk Hour.” Since those single accounts on self-presentation are collected in one volume and a speaker who is marked as Lowell himself appears explicitly here and there, readers seek a connection between all poems and the prose part. Drawing this connection leads to a reading that interprets all parts of the volume in the light of self-reflection, and positioning can help to find relevant information in those parts which do not refer explicitly to the speaker, for instance in regard to the described social roles or moral attributes.

Now I want to look at a stanza of a poem in detail that entails a direct self-description which is representative for the contradictitious fashion of the whole volume. In this brief part of eleven lines just a little scene along a main motif (a little boy regarding his mirror image) is told. But the way it is presented turns it into a little narrative identity construction. The remembered scene of the past and its present mode of remembering indicate a connection between the narrated self of the child with ambivalent feelings and the present speaker:

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<sup>6</sup> Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann write that positioning is also relevant to monologue forms like autobiographical writing and that there even might be further possibilities of positioning (172). Another concept that stresses the relation between the self and others is Paul John Eakin's term *relational self*, which he employs particularly in regard to autobiographical writing.

II.

I was five and a half.  
My formal pearl gray shorts  
had been worn for three minutes.  
My perfection was the Olympian  
poise of my models in the imperishable autumn  
display windows  
of Rogers Peet's boys' store below the State House  
in Boston. Distorting drops of water  
pinpricked my face in the basin's mirror.  
I was a stuffed toucan  
with a bibulous, multicolored beak. (Lowell 164)

The poems in the beginning of the fourth part that include these lines are a lyric variation of the prose part describing childhood memories and family members. In the poems he focuses more on his grandparents and stresses his closeness to them, which is presented less ambiguously than the relation to his parents. This episode is from a long poem called "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow." This uncle died at the age of 29 during a trip to Europe, as we learn. The whole poem includes some self-descriptions, but this one is awkwardly separated and presented in the one stanza that forms the second part of the poem, whereas all other parts consist of several stanzas. Due to its separated formal appearance, this stanza demands special attention. Two opposing images are found here. From line 1 to 10 a fresh, clean, Bostonian upper-class child is presented who knows how to fill this role, described through words that connote competition, strength, and success like "perfection," "Olympian," and "imperishable." In line 8 the atmosphere changes and distortion enters the text. The boy is described as a "toucan" (l.10) which compared to the previous scene implies alienation and presents him as exotic. Being stuffed means being dead and passive, degraded to an object. The adjective "bibulous" can be associated with weakness and excess; this attribute stands for the self's character that is represented through the motif of the toucan and in more detail its beak, which is described as bibulous. The presented scene is an interpretation in hindsight, formed by the knowledge of the present self. Thus, there is a narrating and a narrated self, which is the same constellation Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann describe as positioning in narrative interviews. How the narrating self presents the narrated self provides insight into identity facets of the speaker. Besides the description of discomfort—and failure to hold on to perfection—the toucan motif is self-ironic. The toucan with its massive beak has unbalanced proportions, and the same is said about Lowell's head

in relation to his body (Tillinghast 11). The emotional atmosphere changes with the two images. The emotional attributes affect the presented self and define its interpretation. The main impression switches from the noble innocent sublime of the “pearl grey shorts” in line 2 to the “multicolored beak” in line 11. The multicolored identity could be preferred to pearl perfection by the speaker but is actually shaped by some negative feelings evoked through the words “distorting,” “pinpricked” and “bibulous.” The dominating impression is that of a child that feels self-alienated, artificial and almost afraid of its own mirror image. Although the whole stanza is written in the past tense, the self-description seems to be meaningful for the identity of the adult speaker; otherwise it would not be remembered and presented in the context of the whole volume at all. The identity information we get is about the social position (being Bostonian upper-class) and the emotional constitution (feeling self-alienated and wrong). While the emotional atmosphere of a poem is of course not generally limited to the topic of self-reflection, in *Life Studies* the emotional constitution is one of the most prominently described aspects of identity. In narrative identity theories emotions are often listed as one of the aspects that influence personal identity, but this is not elaborated on in those theories. In the concept of positioning that I introduced above, emotions are not discussed although they probably affect the other categories like personal characteristics at least indirectly.

Since aspects of emotion are of special importance for narrative identity constructions in poetry, I want to introduce some sub-categories of emotion that are closely linked to identity in particular, namely ‘self-referential’ emotions and ‘existential background’ feelings. Alexandra Zinck argues that “[s]elf-referential emotions, in particular, can be thought of being *genuinely* about the subject herself: they constitute an essential emotional self-representation and -evaluation” (496). Being complex cognition-based emotions, these emotions depend on social and cultural values, which influence the evaluations one makes, “and also upon whether the identity of the individual is construed as independent or interdependent” (Zinck 497). Self-referential emotions help to compare actual behaviour to self-concepts and identity goals leading to behaviour regulation. But the emotional experience is also part of processes involved in the self-concept itself (Zinck 499). Jan Slaby and Achim Stephan describe emotions that are part of personal identities and self-consciousness as well; they deal with existential background feelings. Slaby and Stephan claim an affective intentionality—

which means the “content” of an emotional state or relating to something in the world—that is different from other ways of relating to the world, and they argue that “a proper consideration of affective intentionality has important implications for an account of human self-consciousness” (506). Although they avoid the usage of the term *self*,<sup>7</sup> the analyzed background feelings are described as significant to one person over a longer time-period; and thus might influence personal identity constructions. Slaby and Stephan finally name this connection in their concluding claims: “These feelings are, besides being candidates for what makes up our identity as persons, peculiar forms if being conscious about ourselves” (512). They are particularly interested in how “your being the person that you are” (513) feels in a particular moment. However, these moments always intermingle with stable tendencies of feeling yourself in a certain way.

In the previously discussed poem the speaker does a self-evaluation in front of the mirror—a motif typical for self-reflection—that leads to ambivalent feelings because he sees himself with the critical eyes of his family or the whole society. The first impression of the noble, perfect boy is corrected by the second image which is evaluated as negative. In presenting the negative feeling of this particular moment so prominently, an existential background-feeling (of a certain self-alienation) is made explicit and indicates a stable tendency of feeling this way. The poem I want to quote in full length now also describes self-referential emotions and existential background-feelings but is less explicitly self-reflexive and presents the adult Lowell instead of the child:

To Delmore Schwartz  
(Cambridge 1946)

We couldn't even keep the furnace lit!  
Even when we had disconnected it,

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<sup>7</sup> Slaby and Stephan claim that the substantive “the self” should be completely avoided since “[i]ts grammar suggests an entity, and we certainly do not want to claim, that there is such a *thing* as ‘a self,’ apart from the organism or person whose self-consciousness is in question. [...] This pattern of meaningful relations, more than anything else, seems to be what people mainly refer to when employ the substantial notion of ‘self’: a pattern of states and processes through which an embodied agent relates to the world and to ‘himself’ in perception, cognition, evaluation, action, and feeling. We could call this process ‘personal existence’ or simply ‘existence’” (507). Even though I admit that there are some philosophical difficulties in the usage of the term “self” they do not seem overtly relevant for me in the context of this essay. Thus I stick to the concept since the alternatives suggested above are too general, unspecific and not very intelligible.

the antiquated  
 refrigerator gurgled mustard gas  
 through your mustard-yellow house,  
 and spoiled our long maneuvered visit  
 from T. S. Eliot's brother, Henry Ware....

Your stuffed duck craned toward Harvard from my trunk:  
 its bill was a black whistle, and its brow  
 was high and thinner than a baby's thumb;  
 its webs were tough as toenails on its bough.  
 It was your first kill; you had rushed home,  
 pickled in a tin wastebasket of rum –  
 it looked through us, as if it died dead drunk.  
 You must have propped its eyelids with a nail,  
 And yet it lived with us and met our stare,  
 Rabelaisian, lubricious, drugged. And there,  
 Perched on my trunk and typing-table,  
 it cooled our universal  
*Angst* a moment, Delmore. We drank and eyed  
 The chicken-hearted shadows of the world.  
 Underseas fellows, nobly mad,  
 We talked away our friends. "Let Joyce and Freud,  
 The Masters of Joy,  
 Be our guests here," you said. The room was filled  
 With cigarette smoke circling the paranoid,  
 inert gaze of Coleridge, back  
 from Malta—his eyes lost in flesh, lips baked and black.  
 Your tiger kitten, *Oranges*,  
 cartwheeled for joy in a ball of snarls.  
 You said:  
*"We poets in our youth begin in sadness;*  
*thereof in the end come despondency and madness;*  
 Stalin has had two cerebral hemorrhages!  
 The Charles  
 River was turning silver. In the ebb-  
 light of the morning, we stuck  
 the duck  
 's web-  
 foot, like a candle, in a quart of gin we'd killed. (Lowell 157/158)

This poem describes a sequence of events in an exactly defined setting with several protagonists. Lowell and Schwartz are presented as friends who become almost one person in this poem. They have visitors, Schwartz has hunted a duck, which the speaker Lowell has to help handling, and the evening turns into a long night of talking and drinking. In contrast to the previously discussed passage, this poem tells a story that does not include explicit self-reflec-

tion, but there is some implicit positioning. The speaker, however, is marked clearly as Lowell again, whereas this is not the case in many other poems in *Life Studies*. In line 1 to 7 Schwartz, as a representative poet who is part of the poem's "we", is described as poor, owning an "antiquated refrigerator." At the same time there are some references like "Harvard" in line 8 or "Joyce and Freud" in line 23 through which Lowell presents themselves as intellectuals. The other significant aspect of identity here is madness. Through the quotation of Schwartz's statement in line 32/33 poets are generally marked as mad. But madness and illness are no contradiction to success or power here; therefore aspects of sickness regarding Coleridge and Stalin are integrated (ll. 26-28, 34). The sentence about Stalin—which seems awkward in being a loose and provocative association—illustrates the emotional atmosphere of this poem. The most explicit self-referential emotion of this poem is "universal angst" (ll. 19-20). The existential background feeling of this particular evening is generally rather intense than specific; there is joy (ll. 24, 30) next to paranoia (l. 26). These intense and ambiguous feelings hint at a general intensiveness of feeling that can be also associated with creativity as part of the represented identity. An anarchic sense is embedded in the scenes of companionship, a feeling of being mad and an outsider but in good company because of it. This feeling of anarchic strength is transferred by the motifs of the killed duck and the excessive drinking which are intertwined in the last line. The whole atmosphere oscillates between desperation and power. Such a wide range is typical for the identity construction in *Life Studies* as a whole. Many parts of this mostly indirect construction can only be interpreted as relevant aspects of identity through the notion of positioning, which turns the focus to less obvious narrated facets of identity and the relation to others.

#### 4. Conclusion

The discussion of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* against the backdrop of narrative identity has proved a fruitful alternative to biographic or psychoanalytical approaches in order to address aspects of self and identity within the realm of confessional poetry. Since there is a childhood speaker next to the adult Lowell and other speakers who are not Lowell, the identity construction in *Life Studies* is diverse and complex. The manifold process of identification with and rejection of other persons (such as family members, friends, other writers, and historical figures), which is implicit, can be interpreted as relevant to the identity process by

applying the notion of positioning. Instead of the persons in dialogue between which the positioning is performed normally, in Lowell's poetry the positioning happens between the main speaker and the other presented figures. The identity process can be better described as poetic self-positioning than as a more direct literary form of narrative identity such as in the poetry of Anne Sexton or many autobiographical prose texts. Additionally, such an analysis shows that Lowell describes different emotional states in detail, and that these emotions are part of the presented identity. To stress the importance of emotion to identity the concepts of self-referential emotions and existential background feelings seem helpful. This relation is central for *Life Studies*, and it will prove useful for other readings of confessional poetry in general.

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