A New Oral Poetry: Improvisation and Performance in Robert Lowell's Poetry Readings

Madelyn Taylor

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studentpub_uht

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studentpub_uht/143

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
A NEW ORAL POETRY: IMPROVISATION AND PERFORMANCE
IN ROBERT LOWELL’S POETRY READINGS

by

Madelyn Taylor

Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment
of graduation requirements for University Honors

English Department
Brigham Young University
June 2020

Advisor: Trent Hickman
Honors Coordinator: John Talbot
This thesis examines elements of improvisation and performance in the poetry readings of Robert Lowell from 1955 to 1977 by analyzing audio recordings of Lowell’s readings and comparing them to his early drafts and published work. As a poet known for incessantly editing his poetry, Robert Lowell uses poetry readings as a venue for experimenting with his poetry before publication, for catering his work to specific audiences, and for memorializing his life in prose. The time period this thesis is concerned with correlates with a rise in New Oral Poetry in the U.S., which created popular new venues for poetry performance and emphasized the extra-textual elements of a poem read aloud for a live audience. Robert Lowell’s readings are contextualized by this larger movement in American poetry and raise questions concerning the finality of his poetry and his collected works as a complete canon.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. New Oral Poetry in Contemporary Media Conversations</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Lowell’s Readings as Imperfect Translations</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Lowell’s Readings as Drafting Board</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Lowell’s Readings as Narrative Tools for Memorialization</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. Conclusion</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A New Oral Poetry:

Improvisation and Performance in Robert Lowell’s Poetry Readings

On February 23, 1977, a crowd of 500 filled St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery. The New York Times reported, "another hundred lined outside the high-spired chapel" (Bernard). Though the Poetry Project in the Lower East Side of New York City was used to large crowds, this event, with its "odd-couple" double reading of Robert Lowell and Allen Ginsberg, drew more attendants than they'd anticipated. Ginsberg, the Beat poet who, at the time, was making a transition from counterculture icon to distinguished professor, read first, ending his set on his homoerotic "I Lay Love On My Knee" (Pettet). As a sign of respect typical to poetry readings, Robert Lowell was invited to end the event with a half-hour of his own, Pulitzer Prize-winning poetry. "There's a notice in the New York Times," Lowell began, "that said Ginsberg and I were as opposite as poets could be" (V 0:01-0:09).¹ The notice Lowell referenced was an advertisement for that very night's reading, and it expressed what many at the time, and even today, believed about Robert Lowell's relationship to the Beats and the raucous poetry readings that had taken New York by storm. As a Bostonian poet from a well-known New England family who emulated formalists like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, and who impressed prominent New Critics, like John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Randall Jarrell, Robert Lowell represented for many, the staunch, formal poetry of New Criticism and academia (Perkins 405). While this is true of much of Lowell's early career, the whole body of Lowell's

¹ For clarity, in-text citations of Lowell’s readings are distinguished by Roman numerals. Some readings (VII, VIII, XI) transcribed during archival research are only available onsite and do not have corresponding time stamps.
work is rife with experimentation, driven by a fascination with poetry's potential to memorialize the dead, including his future self. Lowell's *Life Studies* inspired the confessional poetry of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, and Lowell himself was known to appear, and occasionally read, at national protests. "We're not really so opposite as all that," Lowell continued at St. Mark's before starting his own set (V 0:17-0:20). But while Lowell's unique relationship with Beat poetry—always critical but never condemning—has long been documented by scholars, his reading at St. Mark's in 1977 shines a light on another feature of Lowell's journey as a poet which is often overlooked: the substantial impact that poetry readings and the "new oral poetry" of the 1950s had on Lowell's transformation as a writer.

The Poetry Project that Robert Lowell and Allen Ginsberg participated in at St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery was established in 1966 as an extension of the various reading series flooding the Lower East Side of Manhattan at the time, and today remains a haven for poets and poetry workshops inspired by the oral poetry movement which gained traction in the 1950s-1970s U.S. (Champion). In his 1975 essay "Some Notes Towards Finding a View of the New Oral Poetry," George Economou, a poet and translator known to frequent readings on New York's Lower East side, coined the term "new oral poetry" to describe what many poets and critics considered "one of the chief definitive qualities" of the previous twenty years of contemporary American poetry. Namely, "poetic work made specifically… with an awareness of a live audience to whom that work can be read aloud, or of a reader-audience who can interpret that poetry in print in such a way as to approximate in the mind's ear an oral performance of it." (653). What distinguishes Economou's new oral poetry from America's pre-existing tradition of poetry
readings is not only the intention of performance written into the poetry itself but the
sheer number and popularity of poetry reading series that began to emerge across
American cities in the 1950s and that, when Economou wrote his essay, "was still
happening, rather, had just begun to happen" (654). In a 1999 interview with Daniel
Kane, John Ashbery recalled the sudden popularity of readings in 1963 New York after
spending five years in Paris:

When I left, poetry readings were solemn and official events given by
elder statespersons of poetry, like Auden or Eliot and Marianne Moore.
Then the “Beat revolution” happened to take place while I was away, and
when I got back …everyone was giving poetry readings everywhere.

(Kane xvii)

By 1978, this "flowering of spoken poetry" in New York City had grown so abundant
that the New York Times reported, "In a given month there might be over 300 [poetry
readings] at 70 sites" (Lingeman). In 1977 a group of poets in New York headed by Bob
Holman, instead of starting a literary magazine, released their first copy of "NYC Poetry
Calendar," simply to document all the various readings available in the city (Lingeman).

Robert Lowell's relationship to this new oral poetry is an interesting topic of study
for several reasons, not the least of which is Lowell's legacy as a poet. Featured on the
cover of Time magazine in 1967 as "the best American poet of his generation," and
lauded in the Washington Examiner as both America's "last public poet," and "last poet of
high seriousness," Lowell was an active writer during a great period of change in
American poetry (The Poets; Bottum). His public life and penchant for socializing with
writers from multiple schools of poetic thought make him an ideal candidate for tracking
these shifts from the 1950s to the 1970s. What marks Lowell's experimentation with new oral poetry as different from his foray into other emerging poetic styles of the time, however, is the attention oral poetry puts on the extratextual elements of poetry's consumption. While Lowell's work in the confessional style may test the limits of new criticism's separation of art and artist (depending on how autobiographical we interpret his confessional work to be), by consciously incorporating elements of performance into his poetry, Lowell's work with orality directly challenges new criticism's approach to texts as closed objects. Lowell is experimenting not only with the content and style of his poetry but with the limitations of poetry itself as a medium.

In order to analyze Robert Lowell's relationship to new oral poetry, and to his public readings, I will be referencing personal archival research covering eleven of Robert Lowell's poetry readings from 1948 to the 1977 reading at St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery. Many of the quotes you will see used were directly transcribed from audio recordings held at the Library of Congress, the Poetry Center Digital Archives, or the individual institutions that invited Lowell to read. This essay will attempt to show how Lowell's interaction with oral poetry—as an imperfect mirror of his published work, as a drawing board for writing and editing his poems, and as a tool for narrating his growth as a writer—becomes just as much a part of his poetic legacy as the print collections he left behind. These poetry readings are also artifacts of a time in American history that was fascinated by the limitations and allowances of new media, and as such, I will begin by grounding new oral poetry within a national conversation on media and technology that inspired the new oral poetry movement.
New Oral Poetry in Contemporary Media Conversations

In the 1950s to the 1980s, when much of Lowell's public work was being published, America saw explosive advances in technological communication and storytelling. The television had become ubiquitous in American homes and in 1954 the pocket-sized transistor radio made radio programming portable and affordable for the masses. As Wollensak, Ampex, and Sony released reel-to-reel and, later, cassette audio recording equipment for domestic use, consumers were able to record and reproduce audio at home. Scholars such as Alfred M. Lee and Wilbur Schramm spent much of the 1950s developing the post-WWII propaganda theories that established communications as a field of study in the U.S. while Jackson Pollock and John Cage developed action-painting and the Fluxus movement that broke down the categorical boundaries between art mediums. Scholars were interested not only in the content of new media, but it’s delivery, pushed forward by the work of influential media theorists like Marshall McLuhan, who coined the famous phrase, “the medium is the message,” in 1964. These new conversations had two important impacts on the writing of American poets like Robert Lowell: they encouraged experimentation with the dimensional limits of media, and they re-defined orality as an aesthetic and not simply as a convenient mode of communication.

The art world was calling for multimedial work and often reached out to poetry communities in an attempt to add new dimensions to old ideas. In 1967, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago held its "Pictures to be Read/Poetry to be Seen," exhibit,

---

2 See Curnalia’s “A Retrospective on Early Studies of Propaganda”
3 1964 is when McLuhan’s Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man was published, though McLuhan used the phrase in lectures prior to this publication and his influence as a media theorist was well established years earlier.
which invited prominent artists to examine the liminal spaces between artistic mediums and emphasized the visual components of written poetry (MCA). Concrete poetry reached the height of its popularity in the 1960s and many poets in the New York School, including John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara, wrote poetry directly responding to the Abstract Expressionism of the period's experimental artists (Poets.org; Perkins 530). What Ezra Pound dubbed "phanopoeia," or "a casting of images upon the visual imagination," has always been a key element of poetry, but post-war poets were experimenting more with the visual experience of reading a poem and the effect that physical context—whether a poem was featured in a book, in an illustrated magazine, or in a museum exhibit—had on reader's encounter with the poem itself (Pound 25). Poetry readings became one such way to push poetry into multiple physical dimensions, curating a poetic encounter as one might curate an art exhibit. When Robert Lowell was invited to read at the Guggenheim Museum in 1963, he began by commenting, "it's rather an awe inspiring place to speak from, and if I seem disorganized, it's due to the architecture" (VI 0:36-0:40).

The popularity of radio and television and the growing accessibility of recording equipment also shaped American poetry. These advances drew media theorists to a new appreciation of sound, what McLuhan called the "new physics" of contemporary rhetoric (37). In his 1960 essay "Wired for Sound: Teaching, Communications, and Technological Culture," Walter J. Ong wrote that the "new age" of media was not marked by a shift from print to visual literacy, as many scholars argue, but that a "shift from sight-emphasis to increased sound-exploration spans this entire area from the diffusion of the word to the exploration of one's surroundings" (225). For McLuhan and Ong, the ability to capture
and recreate sound was not only a matter of creating a "secondary orality" but making a sense of place portable. Though the readings of new oral poetry focused on their live audiences, and what audio record we have of these events were generally due to the individual efforts of reading enthusiasts like Paul Blackburn, the potential for an oral performance to be made permanent and reach wider audiences in recording lent new legitimacy to sound as the purpose, and not the side-effect, of a poetic performance (Champion). The new oral poetry that exploded in the second half of the twentieth century, with an emphasis on live audience and atmosphere, is an almost predictable outgrowth of these two shifts in American poetry.

Many critics, including Economou, place the beginning of new oral poetry as a movement along a similar timeline as these media conversations, in the mid to late 1950s. Specifically, at the 1955 debut of Allen Ginsberg's Howl, which the poet first read at Six Gallery in San Francisco. Though some argue that Howl's origin as a for-performance poem is a myth perpetuated by Lawrence Ferlinghetti as a defense during Howl's obscenity trial in 1957, Howl is unquestionably a poem designed with orality in mind (Iorio). "Ideally, each line of 'Howl' is a single breath unit," Ginsberg wrote in an essay that accompanied his first commercial recording of the poem. "That's the measure, one physical-mental inspiration of thought contained in the elastic of a breath" (Ginsberg). When Robert Lowell first came in contact with Ginsberg's poetry while on a trip to the West Coast in 1957, he remarked at a University of California, Berkeley reading that he had "listened, I didn't read, the controversial Ginsberg on tape recording" (III 9:15-9:30). Lowell's comment proves that a complete recording of the poem was available on tape, to at least a limited audience, very soon after Howl first appeared in print in 1956.
(Sederberg). The existence, and possible sale, of such recordings so soon after its publication in print implies, if not an intentional priority placed on the poem in performance, a deep appreciation of the poem's relationship to the human voice.

The designation of breath length as a new form of meter that Ginsberg emphasizes in Howl is echoed by multiple other new oral poets and can lead us to the movement's roots in poetic theory predating the Beats. Charles Olson's landmark essay "Projective Verse," was first published in 1950 in Poetry New York, coining the term "kinetics" in reference to poetic structures and building off of William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pounds commentary on imagism and free verse. Like Ginsberg years later, the manifesto pleads for poetry's return to the human voice as the inspiration for form. In his book All Poet's Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960s, Daniel Kane credits "Projective Verse" as "a kind of theoretical foundation for the readings" populating New York City (29). In its discussion of Olson's "objectism," "Projective Verse" also shows us how the extra-textual elements of performance in new oral poetry strain against the New Critical ideals that defined American poetry for the first half of the twentieth century. New Critics tended to view texts as autonomous, "closed" objects whose meaning and value can be divorced from its context and creator. Olson, however, insisted that "man is himself an object," undermining the separation of art and artist and foreshadowing Marshall McLuhan's 1964 thesis that all media is an extension of man.

---

4 Wollensak was an American manufacturer known in the 1950s and 1960s for their reel-to-reel tape recorders portable enough to be lugged to multiple readings by organizers and enthusiasts like Paul Blackburn. It's likely, then, that the recording Lowell heard was taken on-site at one of Ginsberg’s various readings since Ginsberg didn’t advertise explicitly commercial recordings of the poem until 1959, two years after Lowell’s comment.

5 William Carlos Williams also quoted from "Projective Verse" extensively in his autobiography, making the essay known not only to oral poets but to formal poets, like Lowell, who admired Williams' work (Olson).
"What we have suffered from," writes Olson, "is manuscript, press, the removal of verse from its producer and its reproducer, the voice" (6). By characterizing the printed word as a technology that separates the artist from the art, Olson's essay encouraged poets to not only recognize and return to the human voice as the most basic form of poetry but to take full advantage of their physical presence as both creator and part of the object being created. The power of performance for the new poetry readings of the Beats and other oral poetry groups was not only in hearing a poem read aloud but in seeing the poet themselves as characters, interacting with the venue or audience while performing.⁶

The way a poet chose to dress, where the poet chose to perform, and how they chose to deliver their poem, all implied different things about the poet's relationship to their audience, to their venue, and to their poetry.⁷ These alternative poetry readings encouraged active, collaborative crowd response typically seen at jazz performances, embracing the unpredictability of live performance. Popular New York reading series for new oral poets, such as Les Deux Mégots, Le Metro, and the St. Mark's Poetry Project, traded stages and podiums for a single microphone (if one was available) and on-the-floor seating to blur the traditional distinctions between speaker and listener (Champion).⁸ The 92Y series, in contrast, featured mostly established formal poets who read "from a raised stage, to an audience seated in rows" (Kane 16). Because so many features of new oral poetry consciously challenged New Critical ideals for separation of artist and art, Lowell's willingness to engage with the rhetorical potential of poetry

---
⁶ As Kane writes, glorifying performance also “served to romanticize and ennoble the lack of conventional publishing opportunities many of the San Francisco, Beat, and Lower East Side poets initially faced” (29).
⁷ Despite living in New York, it was popular for poets of Lower East Manhattan to dress up as cowboys or read cowboy themed poetry to emphasize the outsider identity they felt represented their work (Kane 17).
⁸ Not to be confused with the French café Les Deux Magots (The Two Hoards), Les Deux Mégots (The Two Butts) was one of the first coffee houses in the Lower East side of Manhattan and a popular venue for poetry readings.
readings inspired by new oral poetry can be interpreted as another deviation from his New Critical reputation.

As a poet whose public career took place mostly in the thirty years between 1950 and 1980, Robert Lowell's body of poetry also shows the direct influence these contemporary media conversations had on his writing. Lowell's last collection, Day by Day, features several ekphrastic poems that wrestle with photography and painting as a motif for the difficulty of capturing the "grace of accuracy" in any single medium (Collected Poems 838). David Perkins writes that "until the publication of Life Studies in 1959, Lowell was and saw himself as a strict formalist in the New Critical mode" (407). The book that shifted Lowell's writing was shaped, according to Lowell, by the experience of reading his poems aloud. When considering the "odd couple" reading of Ginsberg and Lowell at St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery, it does not seem out of character for Lowell, who was already engaging in many of the same conversations that shaped the new oral poetry, to share a stage with Ginsberg at a reading series dedicated to oral poetry. Both poets were invested in exploring the limitations of poetry as a medium, and both, to varying degrees, found poetry readings a productive place to explore.

Lowell’s Readings as Imperfect Translations

In his oft-quoted acceptance speech for the 1960 National Book Awards, Robert Lowell described the poetry scene of America as "two poetries now competing, a cooked and a raw" ("Acceptance Speech"). Critics like Tina Crane interpret Lowell’s cooked

---

9 Some scholars claim that Lowell was referencing Claude Lévi-Strauss's volume on Amerindian mythology titled Le Cru et le Cuit. However, the book wasn't published until 1964. While Lowell may have read Lévi-Strauss's early work while translating French poetry for Imitations, it's unlikely he was quoting Le Cru et le Cuit directly.
and raw poetic camps to represent the differences between the Beats and the poetic academics of the time. But while Lowell does not shy from naming “the beat writers” directly, his comments are pre-occupied not only with the genre or style of raw vs. cooked poetry, but the way that poetry is presented and consumed. The audience of “the cooked” are grad students, but the audience of “the raw” are “listeners”. The difference between the two camps are “a poetry that can only be studied, and a poetry that can only be declaimed” (“Acceptance Speech”). Orality, as much as content, was at the heart of the divide Lowell saw in American poetry. Though Lowell’s speech was critical of “the beat writers… as inarticulate as our statesmen,” he frequently teased even those poets he admired in similar ways.10 Lowell sided with neither "the cooked" nor "the raw" poetry he described, instead "hanging on a question mark," between the two ("Acceptance Speech").

Though Lowell's relationship with the new oral poetry movement was not nearly as dramatic as the Beats and other contemporary oral poets, the growing popularity of readings still had a profound impact on the trajectory of his work. In a 1961 interview with Frederick Seidel of The Paris Review, Lowell recalls:

By the time I came to Life Studies... I’d been doing a lot of reading aloud.
I went on a trip to the West Coast and read at least once a day and
sometimes twice for fourteen days, and more and more I found that I was
simplifying my poems. If I had a Latin quotation, I’d translate it into
English. If adding a couple of syllables in a line made it clearer, I’d add

10 “I’m really glad to be introduced by my dear friend Frank Bidart. He’s placed more terrible things in poems than I have. Necrophiliac. I wouldn’t touch that” (X 0:57-1:16).
them, and I’d make little changes impromptu as I read. (“The Art of
Poetry”)

The West Coast trip that Lowell talks about was, in fact, the same trip in which he read at
Berkeley, where he facetiously mentioned meeting "the poets [who] teach in the speech
department," including, "the controversial Ginsberg" (III 8:30-8:35). As a new critical
poet who had once wanted his "formal patterns to seem a hardship," while working on his
first book, Lowell's choice to simplify his poems to the point of breaking meter for clarity
on his trip to the West Coast thirteen years later is not an insignificant shift, however
subtle in comparison to his performative contemporaries (Lowell, "The Art of Poetry").

In understanding Robert Lowell's relationship to the new poetic orality of
America in the late twentieth century, it is important to acknowledge the moments where
Lowell seems to reject the concept of oral poetry entirely. Even after years of presenting
his work to live audiences, Lowell admitted to a 1977 crowd that "I think no poetry
comes over to an audience, really," (IV 33:32-33:40). And to a degree, Lowell was
correct—without a system for translating the subtleties of grammar directly into speech,
an em dash read aloud at the end of a line sounds identical to a comma, a colon, or a
period, even if the different marks indicate different relationships between ideas for
someone reading the poem on paper. The uniquely enjambed ending of "To Delmore
Schwartz" ("River was turning silver. In the ebb- / light of morning, we struck / the duck
/-'s web- / foot, like a candle, in a quart of gin we'd killed") loses its distinction from
prose when read aloud (Collected Poems 158). "For the Union Dead," one of Lowell's
most popular poems at readings, poses a particular challenge in the line, "where his son's
body was thrown /and lost with his "niggers."") (Collected Poems 376). By the early
1950s, use of the n-word was considered a socially unacceptable slur in most of America, but as there was no way to indicate Lowell's use of quotation marks without interrupting the flow of the text, there was no way for Lowell to verbally attribute the word's use to "Shaw's father" instead of the autobiographical narrator. Occasionally while reading "For the Union Dead," Lowell would offer a mumbled explanation of the word's use, as in his 1960 reading at Coolidge Auditorium, but more often, he would hurry through the line without comment.

These moments of flawed or failed translation inherent in adapting any work to a new medium, however, are also what inspired most of the accommodations Lowell made when reading his poetry to live audiences, and therefore, most of the differences between his published poems and their oral twins. "My way of delivering got a jolt when I went to call on Yvor Winters [poet and influential New Critic]," Lowell told a 1957 audience, "he said the ideal way to read is that the reader should be like a pane of glass… But he read with such hypnotic intensity that his voice has been ringing in my ear ever since" (III 18:02-18:26). Like Winters, Lowell may have believed that the ideal way to read ones poetry is to get in the way of the poem as little as possible, to allow the poem to stand as the self-referential object; but in his effort to make the poetry as comprehensible, or true-to-form, as possible, Lowell created a new dimension to his poetry that didn't exist in its print form. In his readings, Lowell prioritized his audience's understanding of a poem over loyalty to the poem as a printed text. In the published version of "Ford Madox Ford," for example, Lowell toggles between "Ford" and Ford's given name "Hueffer". At readings, however, he standardized all references to "Ford" to avoid confusion, despite the poem's official print publication reading differently. While some of the changes
Lowell made for audiences lean the expressive nature of performance—"if you had waited" read aloud becomes "if you had ever waited," most changes—"dying / at Boulder" becomes "dying / at Boulder, Colorado" and "all just alike / as lack-land atoms" becomes "itinerant / as lack-land atoms"—are made to prioritize clarity over accuracy to the print text (IV 46:40-46:44; XI; III 39:04-39:08).

In the recordings of Robert Lowell reading his own work, the most obvious of Lowell's accommodations for live audiences, with surprising consistency, are his long introductions, explaining the entire plot of a poem or defining regional references in an effort to make as much of the poem accessible to his audience as possible. If a poem was originally written in multiple parts, Lowell would explain each part as he reached it. Lowell frequently interrupted himself mid-poem to explain an allusion or make a witty aside. "Astor's a rich man, not a flower," Lowell would inject during "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow;" "The duck is not a symbol. It was there," during "To Delmore Schwartz" (IV 9:04 – 9:11). Lowell's habit of explaining his poetry, or, only tangentially related to the poem he was reading, lamenting how Boston has all become parking lots, was so incessant that he recalled "the one protest I've gotten every bull session after these readings is 'why the devil do you talk so much instead of reading your poems?'" (III 10:52-11:03).

For Lowell, the necessity of explicating his poetry as he read does not seem to be tied to oration in general, but to the specific impermanence of reading for a live audience. While serving as the Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress in 1947, Lowell started a tradition in which Poetry Consultants recorded themselves reciting their work for the archives (Lib. of Cong.). Of the recordings I have studied, Lowell's 1948 reading
for the Library of Congress is the only audio I have found without Lowell's characteristic explanations of his poems. It is also the only audio I have found without a live audience. While this might be explained by the recording's timing—1948 pre-dates Lowell's influential visit to the West Coast—the correlation between audience and explication is likely because of who Lowell imagined his audience to be in both scenarios. A patron of the Library of Congress has the luxury of listening over recordings multiple times to appreciate a poem more fully, in the same way a reader can revisit specific lines or stanzas at will. An audience member at a live poetry reading has no such luxury. A recording can act as a New Critical object, self-contained and meaningful without context whereas a poem in performance exists only in the time and space of its performance. It cannot be perfectly self-referential because it cannot be perfectly referenced. Like Olson's "objectism" suggests, a performed poem is an extension of a larger experience, of all the extra-textual elements that are inaccessible in a privately recorded tape. The impermanence of performing for a live audience makes poetry readings a flexible space for reviewing drafts or creating new versions of poems but not for creating self-contained objects. Lowell's explanations and interrupting comments were modifications added explicitly to benefit his live audiences.

In addition to these modifications, Lowell was also aware and responsive to the specific audiences for whom he was invited to read. When in a good mood, Lowell would take requests from the audience, but on some occasions he'd choose his poems based on the specific time or place of his reading.11 "There's one I don't dare read very often,"

---

11 When an audience member requested "Reading Myself" at a 1976 92Y, Lowell jokingly responded, "Oh, I thought you'd forgotten that one… I have two nice 30 page poems," but followed with the requested poem.
Lowell told his audience at Berkeley, "but I'll read it here" (III 35:06-35:11). The poem was "Inauguration Day: January 1953," a political poem criticizing President Eisenhower's election that Lowell avoided reciting at Washington. While the print version of the poem compares Eisenhower to Ulysses S. Grant explicitly, Lowell reads references to "Ike" as "Grant," for his college audience, presumably to remove the direct in-text comparisons, toning down the explicitly political message. In contrast, Lowell actively politicizes the poem "Fall 1961," a general lament of Cold War anxiety, by presenting it at a 1967 Read-in for Peace in Vietnam. The implied violence in the lines "A father's no shield / for his child," which in print can be interpreted as the violence of passing time, is reinterpreted as military violence in Vietnam by the context the poem is presented in (Collected Poems 329). As new oral poetry was gaining popularity in the U.S., poetry readings came to be expected from public American poets like Lowell. Lowell's appearances at readings may simply a necessity for his career, but these "little changes, impromptu" that Lowell makes as he reads for live audiences implies that Lowell genuinely cared for his listeners' experiences of the poems he shared and that he tailored his readings to suit them ("The Art of Poetry").

Lowell’s Readings as Drafting Board

Though the rhetoric of any writer's reading style can be an interesting entry point to their work, these small changes that Lowell made to his poetry for live audiences may seem insignificant in the long run if they didn't also affect his poetry in publication. When pressed by an interviewer to give an example of changes he made to his poems after performing them, Lowell insisted, "I didn't change the printed text. It was just done
for the moment." ("The Art of Poetry"). For the most part, this is true of the poems Lowell read which have already been published, however, on the numerous occasions where Lowell presented poems which had not yet been made "permanent" in print, these oral versions of his poems varied, sometimes drastically, from their eventual published copies. Of the eleven recordings of Robert Lowell I've studied between 1948 and 1977, approximately 20% of the poems Lowell read were unpublished, and 75% of those unpublished poems were different from their final printed versions. These poems, in various unfinished states, give us the clearest insights into Lowell's use of poetry readings as a place to test and edit his poems before publication. Unlike the changes Lowell made while presenting his published works, the differences between unpublished poems read aloud and their final copies sometimes significantly changed the meaning of a poem.

When presenting "Phillips House Revisited" at St. Mark's, Lowell referenced his dying grandfather in the line "He was more encouraged to survive than I," (V 10:02-10:06). When the poem was published later that year, however, the line is changed to "He needed more to live than I" (Collected Poems 799). The difference between these two, a passive inclination towards life and an almost desperate will to live, is central to the poem's thematic meaning and proof that at the time of Lowell's 1977 presentation, the line, if not the poem itself, was not yet in its final form.

Many of the drafts Lowell delivered at readings had far more drastic changes than the above example from "Phillips House Revisited." The poem which saw the greatest transformation between reading and print was "Fall 1961," which Lowell presented at the end of his set at John Hopkins, prefacing with "It's not a poem, it's notes for a poem, something that might become a poem" (XI). Indeed, the only line from Lowell's 1961
reading that makes it to the poem's publication three years later, is the fragment "tick off the minutes, / but the clockhand sticks" (Collected Poems 329). While many of the themes (an autumn evening expecting nuclear fallout) and linguistic motifs ("round and round" becomes the repetitive "back and forth" in print) remain the same, the poem as a whole went through extensive edits from the "almost prose" version Lowell read live (XI). Lowell's willingness to share what he acknowledged were rough notes for his poetry at live readings shows that he did not consider poetry readings as much an alternative form of final publication as a space where his poems could exist publicly without the pressure of permanence. Whether or not the edits Lowell made between reading a poem and publishing it were directly influenced by his audiences' response to his work, the oral versions of his unfinished poems were in many cases more ambiguous than his published poems. Readings allowed him to grapple with the ambiguity before an audience, making his editing process public.

One common difference between Lowell's unpublished readings and their later published texts that highlights this oral ambiguity is the order of his stanzas within a poem, specifically when it comes to the pacing of the poem's thesis. In the poem "For John Berryman," Lowell remembers his close friend, directly addressing him in the couplet "Do you wake dazed like me, / and find your lost glasses in a shoe?" (Collected Poems 737). After a long stanza recalling their life together on earth, this couplet questions how similar life after death is to his reality, the unanswerable question propelling the poem forward. When "For John Berryman" was published in Day by Day shortly before Lowell's death, these two lines appear as their own second stanza, but when Lowell read "For John Berryman" at Stony Brook University months prior to
publication, these two lines were the last of the poem. By positioning the question at the end of the poem when read aloud, the line "I pray to not for you, / think of you not myself, / smile and fall asleep" acts as a transition to, "do you wake dazed…?" Sleep followed by waking. When the poem ends on "smile and fall asleep" in print, the line operates more as a contented end to the day and to Lowell's contemplation, waking followed by sleep, in a more closed ending.

Similarly, the thesis of Lowell's poem "Jean Stafford, A Letter" is the stanza "Tortoise and hare / cross the same finishing line— / we learn the spirit is very willing to give up, / but the body is not weak and will not die"; Lowell compares himself to his ailing ex-wife Jean Stafford. The two, despite their differences, seem to be arriving at death at the same time (Collected Poems 739). When reading "Jean Stafford, A Letter" at the 92Y in 1976, this stanza is at the end of the poem. Like "For John Berryman," however, this last stanza is moved earlier in the poem for print publication, where the poem ends on the past tense, "I have forgotten / or never heard, being a man." instead of the future tense, "and will not die." Since both poems were published in Day by Day, one after the other, it's possible that the edits which repositioned the poems' endings happened at the same time. Whether this is true, both poems in their oral formats ended on open questions concerning the nature of death that seemed to wait, expectantly, for an answer while their print versions prioritize a clean end to the poem's narrative arc.

12 Lowell was not expecting the audience to respond so well to "Jean Stafford, A Letter" when he first read it. When the line "your confessions had such a vocabulary / you were congratulated by the priests—" received loud laughter, he responded, "I didn't know this'd be such a hit" (X 10:13-10:25). Of the numerous changes to the poem Lowell made before publication, these lines were untouched.

13 The poem "Ulysses and Circe," which Lowell read at St. Mark's in 1977, was also missing important stanzas published in the middle of the poem which may have originally been planned to end the poem when read aloud, similar to the above examples. We may, unfortunately, never know if this is the case since Lowell's reading was interrupted by a drunk Gregory Corso, after which the audio of the night's reading cuts short (V).
Perhaps the perceived permanence of print asks for closure within a poem that doesn't feel as necessary at a reading.

The space for impermanent ambiguity at readings is what allows Lowell to experiment and improvise with his poems in ways he wouldn't publicly attempt in print, but the physicality of readings also presses questions that print doesn't ask. At a 1968 reading with Adrienne Rich at the 92Y, Lowell read an early version of "Summer," which would be published in his collection *Notebook 1967-68* in 1969 and republished in *For Lizzie and Harriet* in 1973. In his essay on Lowell's writing process while composing *Notebook 1967-68*, Alex Calder writes that "Lowell as a revising poet is literally inseparable from a study of the genesis and continuation of the *Notebook* project" (Calder 120). It's no surprise, then, that the version of "Summer" Lowell read at the 92Y is different from both renditions of "Summer" he published. But it also differs from every other process manuscript of "Summer" Calder was able to collect, keeping the general shape of the poem while playing with details. The first draft of "Summer" is written with an autobiographical "I" as narrator, which changed to "we" in later drafts, then again to "I" in the 1968 reading, and "we" in publication (Calder 121). "For the hundredth time, I slice the fog," reads Lowell at the 92Y, "as if I were the first philosopher. As if I were trying to pick up a car key" (IX). The version of the poem Lowell read in 1968 acts as a stepping stone between Lowell's early drafts "As if we were the first philosophers," and his print version, "like the first philosopher… trying to find a car key" (Calder 121; *Collected Poems* 607). The version of "Summer" Lowell reads in 1968 also seems to be the first draft where Lowell compares God to "a queen with forty servants," a line which
makes it into his published version but which appears in drafts prior to 1968 as "a man with a hundred servants" (IX 54:20-1:03:09; Calder 121).

The next four sections of the poem that Lowell read feature similar variations, omitting the fourth section entirely, but most of the changes Lowell toyed with at his 1968 reading center on where Lowell himself stands in the poem. In print, the line "you gave up," could refer to Harriet, Lowell, or God giving up on trying to understand divinity/trying to be understood. When Lowell read the poem aloud, however, he removed himself from "giving up" by attributing it to Harriet specifically, "she gave up," and designated driving around the village to "I" instead of "we". In both oral and print versions Lowell compares his own search for meaning with his daughters, but it's this back-and-forth when placing himself in the poem that becomes an interesting entry point for viewing Lowell's work through the lens of oral performance. Many of Lowell's poems walk the line between autobiographical fact and fiction, inspired by life while attempting to capture an emotional truth inaccessible through complete accuracy to the event or person who inspired it. As Lowell announced at Stony Brook University, "everything about this poetry is true, though inaccurate" (IV 9:02 – 9:06). The question of whether Lowell is an autobiographical narrator or detached author of his poetry is unavoidable at readings where the act of physically giving voice to his poems implies narrative ownership that may not exist in print, forcing Lowell to clarify that a poem reflects a character version of himself or allow his "I" narrated poems to be assumed entirely true to life.

Lowell's approach to presenting himself as a narrator in his poetry seems to shift over the twenty years of performance that I've focused on. While Lowell is careful to
describe a poem's narrative with "he" or "him" in many of his readings in the early 1960s, by his 1968 reading with Adrienne Rich, Lowell prefaced his set by explaining that the poems we would present were "all in the first person, and the first person is me and not an imaginary me" (IX 35:28-36:01). Lowell was working on *Notebook 1967-1968*, which contains mostly autobiographical poetry, so the change is due, in part, to the specific poems he was reading. But even when prefacing the same poems, Lowell's explications shift. In 1961, Lowell introduced the narrator of his poem "Skunk Hour" as a character separate from himself while in 1976 he introduces the same poem with an autobiographical "I". By 1976, the conventions and traditions of new oral poetry readings were fairly common practice and Lowell's choice to present "Skunk Hour" as autobiographical when he would not in 1961 may be an appeal to the new emphasis that public readings placed on performative authorship. But the choice may also reflect a larger shift in Lowell's work that coincided with new oral poetry's rise to mainstream popularity—an exploration of poetry's ability and inability to memorialize the dead.

**Lowell’s Readings as Narrative Tools for Memorialization**

These individual changes in Lowell's poetry at readings contribute to an overall shift in his writing style beginning with the publication of *Life Studies*. While Lowell found himself simplifying his more complicated poems to "get it over" to an audience at readings, the poems he was writing for publication were also taking on a "simpler style," focused more on specific narratives and events than abstract concepts (V 11:46-11:55). This could be because many of Lowell's *Life Studies* poems were intended for a prose autobiography that he abandoned; they take on the characteristics of prose, which Lowell
believed was "very diffuse" and "less cut off from life than poetry is" ("The Art of Poetry"). But he also frequently expressed frustration with the "bombastic and difficult" poetry of his early career while reading for live audiences (IV 33:20-33:25). "When I began to write I was always abstract and symbolical," Lowell told an audience in 1960, "and I've always tried to be less so since then" (VIII). In 1966, after reading "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket" from Lord Weary's Castle, he commented, "Well I was never that lofty again, or that hard to understand. The other poems from here on will be simpler" (II 38:07 – 38:20). Lowell explicitly links his stylistic shift towards simplicity with his poetry readings in 1977, when he told Stony Brook University, "I'm not reading any of my two older books… The surface is too bombastic and difficult… the kind of poetry I read in the beginning was almost designed not to [come over to an audience]" (IV 33:16-33:40). The poet even admits, at a reading in San Francisco, that his West Coast tour in 1957 "might have something to do with" this stylistic shift: "I found a rather ornate, symbolic poem, with very regular meter, some that didn't express what I wanted to say at all and, um, I had a sort of ideal… that a poem should sound more or less like language used in conversation and should be intelligible to someone read for the first time" (II 38:52 – 39:19).

Lowell's awareness of a live audience to whom he may eventually read his work not only overlaps perfectly with Economou's definition of new oral poetry, but it also highlights an important change in how Lowell perceived his own purpose in writing. Prior to Life Studies, Lowell found fulfillment in making poetry seem "a hardship" to both him and his readers, but in 1960, he criticized this approach of writing poetry simply for the mastery of poetry. "It's become too much something specialized that can't handle
much experience," Lowell said in an interview, "It's become a craft, purely a craft, and there must be some breakthrough back into life" ("The Art of Poetry"). The middle ground that Lowell takes when talking about "the raw and the cooked" poetry of twentieth-century America mirrors the space between poetry written for poetry's sake, too removed, as Lowell worries, from the life that inspires it, and poetry that is too inattentive to craft to effectively communicate the emotional truths of the life with which it is so concerned. When the goal of his writing is no longer pure mastery of the craft, Lowell turns to poetry as a way of memorializing himself, his life, and his historical influences in text. It is less common for Lowell's poetry to be inspired by pure fiction or mythology in his later career than it was in his first completed books, and when Lowell does dwell on mythology in his poems, as he does in "Ulysses and Circe," they become allegories for himself. "I'm speaking, not Ulysses," Lowell tells St. Mark's (V).

We can see Lowell's appreciation of poetry as a tool for memorialization in "Reading Myself," which expresses the same frustration with his early work that he mentions at his readings. "I memorized the tricks to set the river on fire—" Lowell writes, "somehow never wrote something to go back to." (Collected Poems 591). Despite New Criticism's insistence that a successful poem is one which can stand divorced of its author, he continues, "No honeycomb is built without a bee… this round dome proves its maker is alive." Lowell expects his poetry to outlive him and relies on it to prove his existence after he is faced with the eventual death that haunts his work. But his poetry cannot be "something to go back to," unless there is something substantial within the craft "for the sweet-tooth bear to desecrate—" (Collected Poems 591). The give and take between life and craft that Lowell's poetry attempts to balance, and that he contemplates
in this and other poems, is the same that confuses his autobiographical and fictionalized 'confessionalism'—he continually reworks this poetry until it is a reflection of emotional truth, though not entirely accurate to the events that inspired it, the appearance of simplicity covering a mastery of his craft. Speaking of his poem "Man and Wife" in 1977, Lowell recalls "It's the first poem I wrote in a simpler style, and it wasn't simple for me at all" (V 11:40-11:55).

Lowell's quest for memorialization in his poetry can perhaps explain why he is so prone to interrupting and explaining his writing when invited to present at poetry readings. Increasingly, these readings become a place not just for Lowell to present his finished work, but a place for him to narrate his trajectory as a poet. Like his poetry, his readings become a record of his life, and Lowell orders specific poems to highlight his personal and poetic progress when seen as a whole unit. "I believe in chronology," Lowell told the 92Y series in 1976, explaining the order of the night's poems (X 1:49-1:59). As such, his readings are almost always ordered with his oldest work first. This gives Lowell the space to explain the changes in his style between two poems, to explain where he was living or major life events. The few times Lowell breaks the chronology of his readings, as he does immediately after expressing his belief in it, it is to contextualize a new poem with an old poem on the same theme, creating new narratives by placing the poems in conversation with each other. At the 92Y series mentioned above, Lowell reads "The Exile's Return," the first poem of Lord Weary's Castle, and follows with a "much later sort of homecoming poem," from Day by Day (X 5:21-5:25). Placed next to each other, the two poems, "The Exile's Return" and "Homecoming," call attention to significant changes in Lowell's poetry between their publication dates in 1946 and 1977. The first metered lines of "The Exile's Return" seem to be a different poet entirely from
the one who wrote "Homecoming," yet both poems are Lowell musing on homecomings. Reading "The Exile's Return," becomes, in the context of the reading, a kind of return for Lowell himself, a tribute to his poetic roots in formal, metered verse.

The Exile's Return

There mounts in squalls a sort of rusty mire,

Not ice, not snow, to leaguer the Hotel

De Ville, where braced pig-iron dragons grip

The blizzard to their rigor mortis. A bell

(Collected Poems 9)

Homecoming

What was is… since 1930;

the boys in my old gang

are senior partners. They start up

bald like baby birds

to embrace retirement

(Collected Poems 720)

Lowell reads similar pairings on at least three occasions. He reads "two poems to my first wife Jean Stafford" at the 92Y, "The Old Flame" and "Jean Stafford, a Letter" back to back; he reads two poems written upon visiting the same hospital, published 31 years apart, "In Memory of Arthur Winslow" and "Phillips House Revisited" (X 9:31-9:41; 5). The pairing of "Man and Wife" and "To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage" is particularly interesting because, while the two poems inspired by Jean Stafford were published together in Life Studies, Lowell reads them at St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery, 37 years after he married Jean Stafford in the same chapel, bringing his physical surroundings into the story he's telling for his audience (Hamilton). Lowell often ends his readings on one of his most recently written poems or a work in progress, and so readings become another tool for narrating his life and development as a writer, carefully curating his listeners' experience of an oral poem as he would his readers experience of a printed work.
Conclusion

For Robert Lowell, the versions of the poems he presented at his readings were, in theory, temporary, and therefore wouldn't impact the way we read a poem once it was finalized in publication. Lowell and other oral poets rarely seemed to expect their readings to be recorded for future audiences when performed live, and so much of what allowed Lowell the freedom to experiment with his oral poems was their feeling of impermanence. As scholars today, however, we still have access to recordings of many of Lowell's readings, even after his death, and so there comes a practical question of which version of these poems are canon, or if, when approaching Lowell's collected works, we can pinpoint any one version of a poem as final. The standard response to these questions is to prioritize whichever version of a poem is made permanent in print, but this is complicated both by the existence of multiple print drafts and publications, and by the important new meanings that a poem's context can create in a poem. By implying that the changes Lowell makes to suit his audiences, timing, and venue are invalid next to his published collections is to ignore the fact that with any of Lowell's poems, there exist multiple versions. "Look as his work with any closeness," writes Frank Bidart, "and you discover that rethinking work, reimagining it, rewriting it was fundamental to him from the very beginning, and pervasive until the end" (*Collected Poems* vii). In his introduction to Lowell's complete works, Bidart recalls trying to help Lowell choose between two versions of "Waking Early Sunday Morning," one published in the New York Review of Books and one in *Near the Ocean*. After neither poet could decide which version was better, Lowell responded, "but they both exist," and so Bidart includes both versions in Lowell's posthumous collection (*Collected Poems* xii).
I believe the same can be said when considering Lowell's oral versions of his poetry compared to their print. Both versions can exist simultaneously, whether one considers the different versions in conversation with each other or not. In 1963, Lowell read "Beyond the Alps" at a reading with John Berryman. "I'm reading it tonight because the third stanza in it is one I took out," Lowell said, "and, uh, Mr. Berryman told me I was absolutely insane to do that, it was the best stanza in the poem, so I've tried putting it back" (VI 11:54-12:20). When *For The Union Dead* was published the next year, Lowell included this new version of "Beyond the Alps," which he'd prepared, with its extra stanza and minor edits that he'd made specifically for his reading with Berryman. Despite his insistence that his orality never affected the print versions of his poetry, we have this example, at least, of Lowell allowing the impermanent, oral version of his poem to shape what he saw as a more permanent in text version, as valid an addition to his collected works as its previous printing. As for the rest of Lowell's oral collection, if Ong and McLuhan were right about an audio recordings ability to carry the weight of place and context with them, then the recordings we have of Lowell's readings are not just another version of Lowell's poems, but their existence in a specific time and place. A poem read aloud is all context; it is as much a verbal text as it is visual, as much an interaction with audience as an authorial presentation, and so it completely inverts the New Critical ideal of a closed text by existing, almost entirely, in the extra-textual rhetoric of performance.

When we consider Lowell's orality as an equally valid portion of the poetic legacy he left behind, we're able to see his work as a quest to memorialize himself, to find the perfect balance between craft and accuracy when representing life. Lowell was responsive to the media conversations occurring around him, and who was willing to
experiment with and curate the extra-textual elements of his poetry to find new meanings. In the impermanence of his readings, Lowell was able to explore the ambiguity of his poetry, to negotiate his own relationship to his poems and the characters in them, and to shine new interpretations into printed poems by considering his venue and audience while sharing his work. Lowell's legacy is interesting in part because it seems so contradictory. While he used New Criticism as a method for evaluating the quality of his work and the work of those around him, he was also willing to publish multiple versions of a poem, lending validity to their multiple faces and contexts.

In studying Lowell's orality we're also able to validate oral poetry as a legitimate way to experiment and push the limitations of medium. New oral poetry gave poets without the same access to publication that Lowell had a place to share their work and create poetic communities. With every medium that allows new voices a platform to join poetic conversations, it becomes more difficult to view a text as divorced from its context and curation, and there is responsive effort to invalidate these platforms as legitimate spaces for poetic experimentation. Widely celebrated for his contributions to American poetry, Robert Lowell was able to engage new mediums and genuinely consider their advantages without sacrificing his own standards for the art form he dedicated his life to. His response to the new oral poetry gaining popularity in U.S. while he was writing may be an example to modern poets and critics engaging with the new medias that push the limits of poetry and ask us to reassess the limitations of poetry as a medium.
Works Cited


Bottum, J. “The Last Public Poet.” Washington Examiner, 25 July 2003, 


Champion, Miles. “Insane Podium: A Short History.” The Poetry Project, 2012, 
www.poetryproject.org/about/history/.


Economou, George. “Some Notes Towards Finding a View of the New Oral Poetry.” 


Library of Congress. *Spoken Recordings available on lp records and cassette tapes.*


<writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Lowell.php>.


<lcn.loc.gov/r55000627>.


University of Toronto Press, 1962.


Ong, Walter J. “Wired for Sound: Teaching, Communications, and Technological Culture.” *The Barbarian Within and Other Fugitive Essays and Studies*.


“Pictures to Be Read/Poetry to Be Seen.” *MCA*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, <mcachicago.org/Exhibitions/1967/Pictures-To-Be-Read-Poetry-To-Be-Seen>.


