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Monumentalizing a Political Candidacy: Robert Lowell and Eugene McCarthy's History

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MONUMENTALIZING A POLITICAL CANDIDACY: ROBERT LOWELL AND EUGENE
MCCARTHY'S HISTORY

By

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Abstract

History (1973) remains Robert Lowell's most criticized collection of poetry.¹ This was largely because of the critical consensus that Lowell, the most well-known confessional poet, had moved too far away from the elements of the genre in his later works. This reception, coupled with his public mental health episodes, highly publicized divorce from Elizabeth Hardwick in 1972, and personal politics, had a negative impact on the legacy of the author.

In revisiting this work, I argue that Lowell's *History* is just as confessional as his earlier collections but presents the confessional mode in a different way. In doing so, Lowell challenges both the reader and the author as he attempts to convey the personal "I" through new poetic forms. Lowell also monumentalizes himself and his contemporaries by creating a space of legacy for them, allowing for multiple avenues of interpretations through his confession and his relationships. In doing so, *History* becomes both a revision and reflection of Lowell's life and interpretation of important events. The massive volume of poetry offers an expansive look at history through the confessional lens and at the aging poet himself. My examination focuses particularly on forms of confession revealed through the political poems written during the 1968 anti-war campaign against Vietnam, Lowell's friendship with Presidential candidate Eugene McCarthy, and his involvement in the political sphere. Lowell's anti-war position, personal involvement, and intention in creating the collection are best read alongside the larger social context.

¹ For more on negative criticism of Lowell, see Jeffery Meyers' ("Robert Lowell as Critic" page 140).

This context allows us to better understand the relationships between Lowell and McCarthy, which will be defined in chapter 3, as well as understand how they functioned for one another and why Lowell chose to write about the campaign in the way that he did. Robert Lowell's biographer, Ian Hamilton, notes that Lowell spoke for McCarthy at several fundraising events in New York in 1968. Eugene McCarthy, who was also friends with Lowell's contemporaries, Allen Tate and J. F. Powers, stated that Lowell "sort of showed up" (McCarthy 116). Their friendship grew out of mutual respect and admiration for one another. Lowell was struck by McCarthy's wit and McCarthy "enjoyed both the weight of Lowell's prestige and the relief of his company (I. Hamilton 66). Their relationship would not only influence Lowell's political poems in *History* but also McCarthy's own poetry, which he published decades later.

I also argue that the critical disregard for *History* has not allowed the collection to be interpreted for its cultural work.² Reading this collection alongside the historical context allows us to understand the societal influence on the text as well view the text as a reflection of the time in which it was composed. *History* should be regarded with the same level of literary importance as *Life Studies* (1959) in terms of understanding the genre and Lowell himself. In doing so, we can examine this collection as representative of the political atmosphere of the late 1960s. Lowell carves a place for himself, his contemporaries, and those from whom he drew inspiration from or found conflict with in *History*. He monumentalizes his subjects by elevating them, confessing through them, and allowing the reader to interpret these moments as emblematic of both the author and as records of historical permanence. In revisiting Lowell's *History*, I attempt to renew interest in Lowell's late poetry by offering a rereading of his least positively received collection.

² For more on the critical disregard for *History*, see J.D. McClatchy (238-239).

This paper is dedicated to all those who still hope to find themselves in poetry. To many sleepless nights, my loving parents, and dreams of cold Virginia air. To my dog Happy, my lone companion, and to myself for seeing it through.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....iii

Chapter 1: Robert Lowell in the 1960s.....1

Chapter 2: The Antiwar Campaign of 1968.....9

Chapter 3: History.....29

References:45

Curriculum Vitae:49

Chapter 1: Robert Lowell in the 1960s

The complicated reception around Lowell's catalog and legacy began in the decade prior to the 1960s. The 1950s, also known as the "tranquilized fifties," was filled with poetry that was largely apolitical. Saskia Hamilton writes that the author was "struggling to find a new form for his poems, [and] Lowell experimented with autobiographical verse" (141). An example of this could be seen in the prosaic poem "91 Revere Street" included in the Pulitzer prize-winning *Life Studies* published in 1959. Following the publication, Lowell began to shift from being a poet concerned with the intimate self to one actively engaged in the public sphere. In many ways this change in public persona and political priorities began to be reflected in his poetry, and I argue that this is why *History* had the poor reception that it did upon its release. Stephen C. Moore described this change in Lowell's writing as the self-suffering poet now becoming the "poet of public horror" (223). Lowell's attempt at capturing the contemporary political climate of the 1960s is one of the strongest sections of *History*. In revisiting his later poetry, one can see that Lowell's work began to reflect the changes of the decades. Lowell, especially in his overtly political poems, no longer reminisced about moments of personal conflict and Catholic guilt but wrote bold statements about powerful political figures and contemporary American culture. E. Lucas Meyers criticized the poetry of the decade as leaving "a sense of dissatisfaction, just as living through the decade did" (212). Meyers goes on to claim that this was largely caused by the lack of innovation in poetic form from the generation of poets before. This lack of innovation inhibited the poets of the new generation in creating literature that was relevant to the confessional mode while also acknowledging the social impact on their writing. To me, this change in accepted trends is precisely why Lowell's *History* departed from his signature style the way that it did. In his 1961 *Paris Review* interview, he criticized the writers of his time by

saying:

Poets of my generation, particularly younger ones have gotten terribly proficient [at] these forms. They write a very musical, difficult poem with tremendous skill. Yet the writing seems divorced from culture somehow. It's become a craft, purely a craft, and there must be some breakthrough back into life. (qtd. in Moore 224)

Lowell was not only criticizing his work, but also setting into motion the inevitable change in his style and writing. I argue that the departure from his earlier works was more in relation to the structure and subject of his poems and less about the conventions of confessionalism itself. This is even more apparent when you consider the large breadth of subjects Lowell chose to address in *History*, everyone from contemporaries and friends to political figures. The classical conventions restricted his ability to accurately reflect the events of the fifties, and thus Lowell made a change.

By the late 1960s, Robert Lowell was regarded as a monumental figure in American poetry but was plagued by a number of public mental health issues, which were frequently the lenses through which critics disparaged his later works.³ J.D. Mc Clatchy states that the popular view among Lowell scholars was that the author's literary prowess had passed "a dozen of more years before his death," prior to the creation of any of the poems contained in the volume (1). This notion has, no doubt, had an effect on the legacy and reception of *History* and its status in the canon of American poetry. Changes in critical opinion are also partly due to Lowell's turn away from the classically religious themes that were frequently present in his earlier collections. Lowell turned away from Catholicism around the time of the publication of the famed *Life*

³ Many of Lowell's mental health episodes contributed to the negative reception of his later work. For more on Robert Lowell's history with mental health, see Kay Redfield Jamison's *Robert Lowell's: Setting the River on Fire* (2017).

Studies (1959) collection, meaning that many of the religious themes present in his early works are absent in *History* (Jamison 30). While this change was seen by many scholars as a weakness in Lowell's canon, Herbert Leibowitz argues that the later Lowell "now lives courageously without the aid of Christianity or myth" (41). This difference from earlier collections makes the enigmatic *History* all the more difficult to decipher. Without a thematic thread, the conventionally consistent Lowell seemingly presented a collection of fragmented and disjointed pieces with no easily identifiable common element between them. *History* is atemporal, addressing figures across time, standing in its own opaque space on Lowell's literary canvas. However, *History* is still confessional poetry with new conventional rules. The collection operates in the same confines of authoritative vulnerability, offering Lowell the same control of his voice as earlier works, while moving towards a more temporal space that rejects the spiritual to address earthly affairs. The departure from Catholicism grounds his poems in realism while maintaining the same confessional mode. Lowell is repositioning the lens through which the viewer is forced to look, and *History* represents a different way of achieving the rhetorical goals of the confessional mode. However, it is still very much the same hand moving the object.

Lowell's political and public persona of the 1960s further complicated the reception of his later work. Lowell quickly found himself "a sensation: an American celebrity and figure of political influence" (Flanzbaum 44). While Lowell began to shift from the private self to a poet concerned with the public sphere and political atmosphere of the 1960s, including the Cold War, the divisive anti-war campaign, and growing national protests, his reception quickly became complicated due to his public perception. The contradictory, sometimes hypocritical Lowell found himself occupying the same ambiguous space in the 1960s that *History* does in its critical legacy. *History* suffered from what critic David Kalstone described as a "more rigorous and

removed context for feelings” (qtd. in McClatchy 239). There is an intimacy woven into Lowell’s historical poems in this collection, one that is present without the veil of religious allusions or metaphors, but there is a stark difference in tone as well as subject in *History*, often making it hard to compare with Lowell’s earlier works.

Confusion about how to read and interpret the dedicatory letter poems in *History*, sonnets composed of personal letters from Lowell’s correspondence with family members and contemporaries, also played into the negative reception of the work. To what extent was Lowell creating a narrative in which, instead of a purview of the poet’s experience, the reader found themselves unknowingly reading a deceptively crafted message? Lowell very famously used the letters of his former wife and contemporaries in his final collections of poetry, often changing and reframing his image through their words. The way Lowell is exposing the sensibilities of others raises some serious ethical concerns. If there is any discomfort to the audience and critics when reading *History*, and more broadly his later works, it stems from the lack of traditional elements of confessionalism, the feeling of vulnerability commonly associated with the genre, and the exploitative nature of the letter poems. Lowell places himself in conversation with a tailored version of his subject through these observational sonnet poems.

In order to give more context to the complicated reception of Lowell’s work in the 1960s, it is important to talk about the political atmosphere and when critical reception began to turn against Lowell. Lowell was described as having taken a “brave political stance in wartime during the Cold War” (J. Meyers, “Lowell’s Politics: Ambivalence and Commitment” 179). As a documented conscientious objector of World War II, Lowell’s interest in war has long existed in his poetry. He was also “terrified of Communism” and his often complicated politics emerged

quite publically during the decade of the 1960s (Johnson 230).⁴ The once steadfastly devout Catholic now referred to himself as a “Christian Atheist” with a complicated blend of traditional conservative and progressive and humanitarian values, referring to liberalism as “a form of death” (S. Hamilton 499). The public reaction to his manic episodes and divorces only further eroded his reputation.

His complicated political identity stems from a perceived lack of political awareness of what was happening during the middle of the decade, and critics began to read his poems the same way. This was attributed to Lowell’s ambivalent stance on public political issues. Critic John Bayley claimed that Lowell could not “speak on behalf of other people” and that he was too far removed from the common American experience of the 1960s (77). Henry Hart described Lowell as having “no moral values and worshipped brute force” (qtd. in J. Meyers, “Lowell’s Politics: Ambivalence and Commitment” 182). Critic Selim Sarwar describes Lowell’s poetic voice as capturing the “violence, crisis, and horror or current history” (114). E.W. Kenworthy, a *New York Times* reporter, stated that “his knowledge of politics extends no further than the Guelphs and Ghibellines in 14th-century Florence,” painting Lowell as a dated, out of touch poet (qtd. in Meyers 181). Critics saw and read Lowell not as a passive optimist but as an inactive relic. One could deduce that even if *History* had the same thematic structure of his earlier works, his political persona as well as the events of the 60s could have still led to his critical downfall.

A particular public event that Lowell responded to in his poetry furthered his complicated public standing. His political views began to contradict the deeply conservative values he held. *History* acknowledges this event in a poem titled “The Pacification of Columbia,” which reads as a message of solidarity to the Columbia University student body protesting the building of a

⁴ For more on Cold War paranoia during the 1960s, refer to W. R. Johnson (230).

nearby segregated gymnasium and the Vietnam war (149). The poem's first five lines describe a jigsaw puzzle of the Mosque of Mecca, in which Lowell admits "the puzzle had no message" (149). Lowell follows this by writing, "the destructive element emaciates / Columbia this Mayday afternoon," before mentioning the nervous tension among the gathered police, intent on clearing out the student protestors (149). The specific word choice of "mayday" functioning against the irony of the "pacification" in the title really reveals Lowell's position. Using mayday, a word associated with distress, against the pacification draws a parallel to peace protest and violent police response. The beginning describes the campus architecture as barren and open before the ensuing violence. While Lowell may not have had an outwardly liberal response criticizing the event, he certainly did acknowledge it in a way that was critical of the police, who he also described as having horses that were "higher artistic types than their masters" (149). Lowell was very clearly critical of the response to the student protests in this poem.

Lowell's mix of liberalism and conservatism were quickly criticized, however. Liberal activist and cultural critic Diana Trilling referred to Lowell as a white tourist whose gaze exploited the tense protests for personal gain. Due to his lack of clear political affiliation and flippant views, she saw Lowell as one of many influential "celebrities" who saw an opportunity to raise their public standing by being indirectly involved in the Columbia Student Protests in some way. The now public Lowell was criticized for not speaking out publicly against the violence during the protests and for his ambiguous answer of being "temperamentally conservative but morally outraged by contemporary politics" (J. Meyers, "Lowell's Politics: Ambivalence and Commitment" 180). He went on to confirm that while he did not condone the response to the student protests, he himself had never been "New Left, Old Left, or liberal" (J. Meyers, "Lowell's Politics: Ambivalence and Commitment" 180). Lowell very openly criticized

what he felt was a public injustice without compromising his political stance or affiliation. Lowell saw both himself and his work as a reflection of American society, and true to thematic elements of his earlier collections, he made a statement that foresaw an apocalyptic future by linking the current political climate to literary references. In an interview with poet and essayist A. Alvarez in 1965, Lowell wrote:

I'm very conscious of belonging to the country I do, which is a very powerful country and if I have an image of it, it would be one taken from Melville's *Moby Dick*: the fanatical idealist who brings the world down in ruins through some sort of simplicity of mind. I believe that's in our character and in my own personal character." (qtd in Axelrod 348)⁵

In this case, Lowell is referencing Melville's epic as an allegory for American fanaticism and possible ruin during the Vietnam War. He saw this in the world around him and the larger international political climate, as well as in himself. This notion is entirely familiar to Lowell's work, especially when one considers his writing in earlier collections.

Lowell's self-contradictory viewpoints as well as his refusal to take a clear stand on political matters led to his less than favorable reception. Critics and journalists found themselves "frustrated at Lowell's inability to know what he means or to take a committed stand when addressing matters of pressing public concern" (Axelrod 112). The fact that Lowell found himself deeply engulfed in Eugene McCarthy's political campaign was uncharacteristic of the poet. Stephen James writes that Lowell "was not, in any straightforward sense, a political poet," so the discomfort is not at all surprising (111). A man as skeptical and indecisive as Lowell could only associate himself with a candidate that he truly idolized. The companionship they were

⁵ For the full interview, please refer to chapter 5 of *Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs*, by Robert Lowell and edited by Jeffrey Meyers.

offering to one another was exactly what the two demoralized men needed, McCarthy watching his chances at presidency fade and Lowell becoming the ambivalent and prominent American poet of the 1960s. Rich Gilman wrote in the *New York Times* of their relationship that “Lowell was there simply to as human contact, to give McCarthy that kind of support” and added that the men McCarthy was usually around were “lacking in wit and humor” (189). J.F. Powers also spoke about their relationship calling it, “comradely...one of equals who really liked each other for what they were as well as for what they’d done” (qtd. in J. Meyers, “Lowell’s Politics: Ambivalence and Commitment” 191). Much like his Catholicism in his early days, Lowell would have had to support a candidate he fully believed in, someone who he not only developed a deeply committed relationship to but whose friendship is remembered in the poems he dedicated to him.

Chapter 2: The Anti-war Campaign of 1968

In order to contextualize the overtly political section of poems in *History*, we need to first look at the growing anti-Vietnam War sentiment and how Lowell's complicated politics and the paranoia of the late 1960s shaped his work. In *History*, which has had a generally negative reception, the collection of poems around the anti-war campaign and his relationship with Eugene McCarthy stand out. In my opinion, this is some of Lowell's most concise writing that mixes the confessional with his complicated public persona. Literary critic John Peale Bishop called politics the "besetting sin of poets and one which has done them and their craft more harm than all forms of drunkenness and debauchery put together" (qtd. in Moore 76). In Lowell's specific case and the context of this collection, I disagree. In terms of criticism, this section covering the events of McCarthy's presidential campaign seem like the one section that has been overlooked and can really allow the reader to view Lowell as a part of American literary history and his involvement in politics. A major source of criticism of Lowell and his personal politics relates back to his political flippancy and often lack of commitment to a political stance in the 1960s. His perceived moral ambiguity and statements that indicated that his political affiliation wavered between deep conservatism and liberalism based on a specific issue did not inspire confidence.⁶ Stephen C. Moore writes that "the 'right' feelings can produce some very bad verse," referring to the interjection of politics into poetry (220). He mentions that a handful of poets like Alfred Hayes, Willard Maas, and others prior to Lowell had tried and ultimately hurt their reputations by doing so. Lowell took a risk in changing his style and tone by incorporating politics, but unlike the poets that seemingly failed, I believe his work benefitted from this new level of transparency.

⁶ For more on Lowell's ambiguity, refer to "Robert Lowell and the Cold War" by Steven Gould Axelrod.

In the beginning of the 1960s, Lowell's mentor and long-time friend Robert Frost, delivered a speech in which he recited his poem "The Gift Outright" during John F. Kennedy's inauguration on January 1, 1961. The historical poem was originally written and read two decades prior to the political event. Moore affirmed the validity of this moment and its long-lasting effect on American poets, writing "is it possible that Robert Frost reading one of his poems at the inauguration for John F. Kennedy produced some kind of galvanic response...that a President of the United States would take a poet seriously enough, even as a public relations gesture, to have him read at the inauguration?" (224). Frost, at the time and in the decades preceding, was a more influential poet, not only on the national stage but to Lowell himself. The reading at the inauguration validated the influence poets had on American society, particularly their place in politics. Robert Frost was the first inaugural poet and this moment was particularly affecting for Lowell. Frost recited "The Gift Outright" by heart, warning of what Ian Crouch writes, the "dangers of lurching and darker qualities of Manifest Destiny, and plants doubt about the supposed purity of the American experiment" (Crouch). This reading of an overtly American poem spoke to the politically disaffected Lowell. During the beginning of the 1960s, Lowell had yet to emerge as the prominent American poet, and having had the strong critical reception he did leading up to the beginning of the decade, he certainly did not need a presidential endorsement. I assert that his lack of political commitment throughout the 1950s and 1960s reflects this notion. The anti-war poems of *History* become political almost by happenstance. Just like Lowell, the poems occupy an ambiguous space. They land between historical and politically equivocal, revealing how he felt about a specific moment.

In order to understand how Lowell became directly involved in politics and what led to the creation and subsequent inclusion of the anti-war poems in *History*, we first need to look at

the campaign years of the 1960s. Following the assassination of John F. Kennedy, his brother Robert F. Kennedy ran for and won a senate seat in New York in 1964. During this time, former Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson held office before running for and winning the nomination in the same year as Robert's senate seat win and following John F. Kennedy's assassination. 1964 is also the year in which Eugene McCarthy entered the political scene. According to Stephen B. Young, 1964 began the year of the grudge between Hubert Humphrey and Eugene McCarthy. Humphrey became Johnson's Vice Presidential pick, which was announced at the last minute. Young notes that according to Justice Lawrence R. Yetka of Minnesota, "McCarthy looked down on Humphrey intellectually" and questioned why McCarthy believed he would be chosen as Johnson's running mate to begin with (2). Johnson himself apparently led McCarthy into believing that the Vice Presidential nomination was a possibility, floating the strategy of picking a "Northern Catholic to balance the party ticket" (2). McCarthy would begin his own bid for president in the fall of 1967, using the Vietnam War as his springboard. The anti-war campaign against the Vietnam War would become the connective tissue between his relationship with Lowell and his campaign ambitions.

In order to understand critics' skepticism around Lowell's inclusion in the anti-war campaign of 1968, one first needs to look back at his public politics beginning in the 1930s. In 1935, Lowell published an essay in *Vindex* magazine titled "War: A Justification." In it, he advocates for the benefits of war in a pro-Germany piece. Of his many outrageous statements, Lowell called war a "blessing" and stated that the "benefits of war are so great that [its] temporary misfortunes and horrors, important as they are, can be forgotten" (qtd. in Axelrod 341). Prior to the second World War, Lowell believed that the good that comes from war "far outweighs the evil, but also they are essential for the preservation of life in its highest forms"

(qtd. in J. Meyers, "Robert Lowell as Critic" 141). A younger Lowell certainly had a political stance in favor of war, but politics would largely be absent from his poetry until the late 1950s.

Lowell served time in prison for being a conscientious objector to World War II in 1943. In a letter addressed to President Franklin Roosevelt, 110 copies of which were distributed among his family and contemporaries, Lowell wrote, "I very much regret that I must refuse the opportunity you offer me in your communication of August 6, 1943, for service in the armed forces" (qtd. in Muldoon 123). In the letter Lowell said, "you will understand how painful such a decision is for an American whose family traditions, like your own, have always found their fulfillment in maintaining through responsible participation in both the civil and military services, our country's freedom and honor" (J. Meyers, "Lowell's Politics: Ambivalence and Commitment" 184). Lowell wrote two poems about his imprisonment, "In the Cage," from the 1946 collection titled *Lord Weary's Castle*, and "Memories of West Street and Lepke," in 1959's *Life Studies*. One of Lowell's most well-known overtly political poems, the second stanza of "Memories of West Street and Lepke" begins with "These are the tranquilized *Fifties* / and I am forty. Ought I to regret my seedtime? / I was a fire breathing Catholic C.O." (Lowell 129). The last line is probably the most affecting and well-known of the poem. Here, Lowell not only signals his turn away from Catholicism but also acknowledges himself as a conscientious objector. His presence in the "tranquilized Fifties" is without meaning. At this point, he is no longer "fire breathing" but immobilized, numb because of the melancholy of the decade.

The poem is also classically associated with the memory of being in the cell next to mafia member Lepke Buchalter. This moment captures the famous exchange between the two in which Lowell claims Lepke said, "I'm in for killing, what are you in for?" to which he Lowell responded, "I'm in for refusing to kill" (Metres 661), a witty response from the author that was

clearly demonstrating a change in his politics. He was arrested on September 7, 1943, and was given a sentence of a year and a day, of which he only served four months. According to an FBI file, Lowell felt that “the war was no longer justified” and that he believed “America was attempting to form another totalitarian kind of civil authority to substitute for the Dictator regimes in Germany and Italy” (J. Meyers, “Lowell’s Politics: Ambivalence and Commitment” 184). This is a remarkably different tone than the one he took in “War: A Justification,” published just seven years prior.

This comment was particularly surprising, not for Lowell’s apparent hubris but for its departure from his past statements. The pro-war Lowell had said in 1942, just a year prior to his arrest, that “if the war comes and they want me. I’ll gladly go” (J. Meyers, “Lowell’s Politics: Ambivalence and Commitment” 183). This was not his only mention of the military and personal involvement as Lowell also attempted to enlist twice before, both in the Army and Navy. Lowell’s pro-war sentiments followed his conversion to Catholicism in 1941, which many scholars believe lead to his “agonizing struggle with guilt and fear,” one which would be reflected in both his politics and his poetry (J. Meyers, “Lowell’s Politics: Ambivalence and Commitment” 183). I agree with the critical consensus that Lowell’s Catholicism played a major role in shaping his early publications as well as his situational liberalism. He could not rationalize the violence that would unfold on the global scale, and this would become much more apparent as he increased his engagement in politics during the Vietnam War.

Lowell was mostly quiet about politics until the presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower in the 1950s, the decade for which Lowell coined the phrase “the tranquilized *Fifties*” as well (E. Meyers, 129). In a letter to Allen Tate on November 5, 1952, Lowell described Eisenhower with some particularly unflattering imagery: “We’re feeling blue about the election. [Dwight] is a sort

of symbol to me of America's unintelligent side—all fitness, muscle, smiles, and banality...we too feel too hurt to laugh” (qtd. in Hamilton 193). In a postcard to Elizabeth Hardwick, Lowell recounts a conversation he had with a cab driver. He states that the drivers said “we wouldn't see another Republican president in our life-times (sanguine man!)” (Hamilton 203), an ironic message following Eisenhower's 1953 win. Lowell was indicating that even the general consensus around Eisenhower was that he was not a stellar candidate. The events of the decade would slowly increase Lowell's and the general public's paranoia around the Cold War. He did later agree with a post-presidency Eisenhower on the fears of military presence overseas. Lowell stated, “we've seen war twice in one century, and it's impossible to see that very much has been done to prevent a third” (qtd. in J. Meyers, “Lowell's Politics: Ambivalence and Commitment” 185). Lowell very clearly had very little faith in President Eisenhower during the 1950s, and this was exasperated by the general malaise of post-war America.

Jeffery Meyers credits Lowell's change in politics and his prison sentence for being a conscientious objector as the catalyst of his anti-war activism. The anti-war movement, which would begin in the 1960s, gained national attention due to Lowell's status as an American literary figure. Meyers notes that “His prescient protest sparked the anti-war movement years before it became a popular cause, and he soon became one of its most eloquent and effective spokesmen” (J. Meyers, “Lowell's Politics: Ambivalence and Commitment” 186). The specific event that led to Lowell's role as a major figure in the movement followed the Battle of Ia Drang Valley in 1965, the first major battle of Vietnam. Eugene McCarthy's presidential campaign manager and Lowell's school colleague was Blair Clark. Lowell and Clark had attended St. Marks Episcopal School where Lowell published his pro-war “War: A Justification” in *Vindex*,” and both attended Harvard. Clark stated that Lowell was “so anti-Communist in one

way, and yet he had this moral thing about the bombing” (qtd. in J. Meyers, “Lowell’s Politics: Ambivalence and Commitment” 186). Lowell’s protest following the La Drang Valley battle would only grow louder, but it was clear that his contemporaries were not sure on which side of the political spectrum he fell. Before this battle, in the 1962 edition of the *Partisan Review* magazine, Lowell indicated his stance by harshly criticizing American Violence:

No nation should possess, use or retaliate with its bombs. I believe we should die rather than drop our own bombs. Every man belongs to his nation and to the world.... Yet the sovereign nations, despite their feverish last minute existence, are really obsolete. They imperil the lives that were credited to protect. (qtd. in Axelrod 352)

Lowell, like the general public, became increasingly paranoid over the use of powerful weapons as a means of force. He quickly became horrified by the loss of life in the Vietnam War, and this fueled his political engagement.

Another major moment in Lowell’s political awakening, and in my opinion a much more damning one, was his refusal to appear at President Lyndon Johnson’s White House Festival of the Arts in June, 1965. Part of his letter of refusal read:

[I] can only follow our present foreign policy with the greatest dismay and distrust.

What we will do and what we ought to do as a sovereign nation facing other sovereign nations seem now to hang in the balance between the better and the worse possibilities.

We are in danger of becoming an explosively and suddenly chauvinistic nation, and may even be drifting on our way to the last nuclear ruin...I feel I am serving you and our

country best by not taking part in the White House Festival or the Arts. (Sheppard)

This outright denunciation of the festival was sent to the President and *The New York Times* and was run on the front page of the paper June 3, 1965, the week prior to the event. Not only did this

solidify Lowell's stance on the war but, it exposed the true intentions behind the festival as a publicity stunt to quell the negative response to the Vietnam War. Lowell went on to say that "every serious artist knows that he cannot enjoy public celebration without making subtle public commitments" (qtd. in J. Meyers, "Lowell's Politics: Ambivalence and Commitment" 186). As is well-documented, Lowell was willing to take a stance on an individual issue, like the Vietnam War, without committing to or compromising his political affiliation. It is important to note that Lowell did agree to speaking at the festival prior to cancelling his appearance, claiming that he had done so "rapidly and greedily" (Wissler). The private letter was not all that exceptional given Lowell's fame and his history dealing with Presidents, but it running on the front page was.

Eric Goldman served as the organizer for The White House Festival of the Arts as well as the assistant to Johnson during the event. As rumors circulated the week of the letter's publication in *The New York Times*, presidential advisor Richard Goodwin attempted to curtail its release, calling Lowell "completely erratic" and a "very poor figure for public events" (Palm 714). Donald Palm notes that "Lowell's letter provoked responses, *pros* and *cons*, from many of the festival guests, and petitions against the war were circulated throughout the day" (716). Goldman also instructed other guests and performers to tame their anti-war rhetoric in response to Lowell's letter. Johnson attempted to distance himself from the festival, stating that the protestors were "not only 'sonsofbitches' but they were 'fools,' and they were close to traitors" (qtd. in J. Meyers, "Lowell's Politics: Ambivalence and Commitment" 187). Blair Clark called the White House Festival of Arts an "unmitigated disaster" (qtd. in I. Hamilton 323). As of 1965, there was still a general consensus of support for the Vietnam War, but the response to Lowell's letter and rejection of the festival would sow the seeds for the anti-war movement to gain a foothold in 1968 that could not be ignored by the nation.

Lowell very clearly understood the impact of his rhetoric and his status as a literary figure. Steven Axelrod refers to Lowell's poetic voice and politics as becoming "increasingly prophetic," and when it came to the profound loss of the Vietnam War, he is correct (353). Lowell's prize-winning work allowed him to make statements in spaces and to individuals that many of his contemporaries could not. Once more, his disengagement from political affiliation feels more strategic in hindsight. Instead of the popular critical notion that many of Lowell's problematic statements were fits of mania, I believe that the author, often called a "pacifist" by Axelrod, attempted to toe the line the best he could by maintaining political neutrality.⁷ For someone whose poetry is centered heavily on grief and internal conflict, Lowell's flippant political history makes sense. Viewing his adjacency to war as a citizen, objector, and poet, he tried to make sense of his complicity. This paralysis became his conflict, and his involvement in the anti-war movement and writing of political poems that would be included in *History* became his action.

The final event which would lead to Lowell's active involvement in McCarthy's anti-war presidential campaign of 1968 is the march on the Pentagon. On October 21, 1967, Lowell, along with Norman Mailer and many others, was a featured speaker at the anti-war event. The crowd of an estimated fifty-thousand young people was referred to as "one of the most important and well publicized events of the anti-war movement" (J. Meyers, "Lowell's Politics: Ambivalence and Commitment" 187). The event itself was retold in Mailer's novel, *Armies of the Night* (1968), which Lowell referred to as "one of the best things ever written about me" (qtd. in I. Hamilton). Following Lowell's public rejection of Johnson's festival, this was a major demonstration, not just for his personal politics but for the American public. Lowell was not one of the estimated

⁷ For more on Lowell's neutrality, refer to "Robert Lowell and the Cold War" by Steven Gould Axelrod.

700 arrested that day, but his presence had made an impact. In the November 23, 1967, issue of *The New York Review of Books*, Lowell published two poems about this experience. The first of the pair titled “The March I” is dedicated to social critic and *Partisan Review* editor Dwight MacDonald. In it, Lowell describes the monuments and surrounding area of the Pentagon before building up to a tense confrontation between the “Union Army” and “the other army, the Martian, the ape, the hero,” describing the locked armed protestors. “The March II” poem describes Lowell sitting in “their Bastille / their Pentagon,” watching as military police walk by:

nursing leg and arch-cramps, my cowardly,
foolhardy heart; and heard, alas, more speeches,
though the words took heart now to show how weak
we were, and right.

The descriptions of feeling weak and powerless are striking. Lowell’s encapsulates this feeling of helplessness, a larger reflection of the youth and political atmosphere of the time. The second poem, “II,” departs from the “fear, glory, chaos, rout” and turns towards a much more hopeful description. Lowell is looking hopefully to the youth to carry on a fight he feels he is not admittedly brave enough to continue. The poem closes with a series of well wishes that follow the rhetorical structure of a prayer: “health to those who held / health to the green steel head...to the king hands / to help me stagger to my feet and flee.”⁸ The focus on these commendations in the face of aggression ground Lowell as a pacifist. Despite the differences between the American and Vietnamese forces, Lowell is hoping for peace on both sides. The “kind hands” that helped Lowell escape seem to be same military police that hauled off many others like Mailer and other protestors that day. Mailer, in his novel, described Lowell’s equivocal actions of that day,

⁸ While part first and second half of “The March” are quoted from the 1967 publication of *The New York Review*, they also appear in the 1973 edition of *History* on pages 148 and 149.

echoing the same confessional sentiment from “The March I” and “The March II.” Still, Lowell’s poems and his reflections on these experiences are just as important as his appearance, especially when one looks back at *History* and its creation.

1968 would be the year Lowell found himself fully entrenched in a political climate. This year not only shaped Lowell’s political poems but would be the year he accompanied senator Eugene McCarthy along his presidential campaign. Again, it is important to track the complicated history of the campaign and how Lowell became involved. It is my opinion that this not only gives the necessary context to understanding this often overlooked section of *History* that is the campaign poems but also allows the reader to discern the intersection between confessionalism and history. The following events were shaped and exasperated by the Tet Offensive which lasted from January to September of 1968.

On November 30, 1967, McCarthy announced his official bid for presidency. Running on the “Dump Johnson” movement, McCarthy saw his opportunity in the divided Democratic party. The party needed a candidate that would oppose the Vietnam War and McCarthy rose to the occasion. McCarthy aimed at voters with the catchy “Get Clean for Gene” slogan to encourage youths to be politically active. The student union posters often featured a pair of scissors encouraging young adults to reject the counter culture of the 1960s by cutting their long hair and shaving their beards for a more presentable appearance. This message resonated with college students who showed up in droves to volunteer with the campaign. Just like Lowell’s optimism, McCarthy’s hopes ran with the youth.

Lowell, for his part, would publish a “Day of Mourning” in *The New York Review of Books* on February 4, 1968. The powerful but brief message read:

We should have a national day of mourning, or better our own day of mourning, for

the people we have sent into misery, desperation—that we have sent out of life; for our own soldiers, for the pro-American Vietnamese, and for the anti-American Vietnamese, those who have fought with unequalled ferocity, and probably hopeless courage, because they preferred annihilation to the despair of an American conquest.

This proposed day of memorializing the dead is striking for several reasons. Lowell is actively placing the blame on the American government for their conquest and its role in this war. The proposed day was to also remember the “people we have sent out of life,” which included American soldiers fighting a conflict that Lowell has only grown in disagreement with. The letter itself has a rhetorical turn in the middle, shifting from the “pro-American” to the “Anti-American Vietnamese” describing the resistance of the troops amidst impossible odds. These soldiers, which Lowell calls “heroic,” would rather die senselessly than succumb to imperialism. Lowell’s important message empathizes with the loss of both sides in a pivotal year for changing the collective consciousness about the war. The message was sincere and reflected the youthful rhetoric of the movement.

The next month, the 1968 Democratic Primary held in New Hampshire on March 12 shocked the nation. McCarthy won 42% of the votes and became a serious presidential candidate. Comparatively, Johnson had only pulled 50% of the votes in the primary. This showed that the anti-war campaign was a serious threat to his reelection. Following the primary, McCarthy went on to win the majority of primary votes in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Oregon, New Jersey, and Illinois. The “Dump Johnson” slogan and anti-war movement had begun to work, and had it not been for an unexpected opponent in the primaries, McCarthy’s campaign would have most likely lasted longer. Robert F. Kennedy entered the race just four days after McCarthy’s New Hampshire win on March 16, 1968. Some accused Kennedy

of being opportunistic, especially when considering the fact that he had been previously approached in August and October of 1967 to run as an anti-war candidate, declining both times. McCarthy's win weakened Johnson's chances and Kennedy knew his name was not only more powerful in the political arena but he could also generate the kind of money McCarthy could not. Kennedy's entry immediately splintered McCarthy's young voter base, and McCarthy was accused of not adjusting his campaign to account for this.

Things only became more difficult when President Johnson announced that he would not seek reelection on March 31, 1968. Between this and Kennedy's entry, McCarthy's chances were quickly diminishing. McCarthy was under the impression that Kennedy would not enter the race although that proved ultimately to not be true (Greenberg). Staffers and campaigners left to join Kennedy's campaign, and McCarthy had little fight in him. After large wins in the D.C. and Indiana primaries, Kennedy splintered the Democratic votes throughout electoral season. On June, 6, 1968, following a narrow win over McCarthy in the California primary, Robert F. Kennedy was killed. Political writer Todd Gitlin states that "with Kennedy dead, the life went out of McCarthy," and so did the campaign (311). Lowell, who once wrote that being in Robert Kennedy's presence made him feel like "a patriot for the first time in his life," penned a letter to Jacqueline Kennedy following the assassination (S. Hamilton 378). On June 10, 1968, Lowell offered his condolences, writing "I hope you won't hold against my business in McCarthy's campaign against me...I think I was perhaps one of the few people in either part who wanted either your Brother-in-law or McCarthy" (S. Hamilton 503). Lowell remained consistent in his ambivalence, even in Kennedy's death.

McCarthy was not as opportunistic as his former opponent and did not make an effort to bring in Kennedy's base. His "Dump Johnson" campaign turned "anti-Kennedy" now fell apart

(Nelson 98). With his hopes at an all time low, McCarthy approached Humphrey in private. He went seeking an excuse to drop out of the campaign over a mutual policy change. The remaining campaign volunteers “looked on disgusted as their hero took leave of his own campaign” (Gitlin 311). McCarthy also refused to publically endorse Humphrey, waiting up until the last moment to announce he would vote for him and nothing more. So called “Humphrey loyalist” Justice Yetka believed McCarthy was to blame for the election results (Young 2). Hubert Humphrey ultimately received the nomination from the Democratic party, which would result in a narrow loss to Richard Nixon. Eugene McCarthy would go on to run multiple campaign attempts from 1972 through 1992, but he never again found the popularity he once had.

A troubled, indecisive Lowell found himself disillusioned by the political climate, and this is where the intimate bond he shared with McCarthy became all the more important. Lowell was certainly not without friends, but their friendship in part relied on the fact that both were at the end of their respective ropes in respect to their own occupations and both heavily believed in the anti war movement. With his constant uncertainties, and sometimes absurd political comments, Lowell’s lack of professionalism offered a refreshing escape for McCarthy. But the campaign trail continued to be a space which many critics believed Lowell was unfit to occupy because of his flippancy and complicated public persona. Published in the *New Republic* in 1968, Lowell wrote honestly of McCarthy:

“My Heart, such as it is, will have to be with McCarthy, to the end, personally, & because he is much the better candidate as far as I can judge, and then (this means almost as much) because he hoped and dared, when there was no hope...McCarthy is favorable first for his negative qualities: lack of excessive charisma, driving ambition, machine-like drive, and too great a wish to be President. But I am for him most for what

he possesses, his variable, tolerant, and courageous mind” (192).

Even Lowell’s language in his letter after McCarthy’s defeat is telling of how Lowell views him: as an emblematic object of political hope in a time of fear and great uncertainty. Even the tongue-in-cheek comments made to contrast McCarthy and Robert Kennedy, which were explored in *History*, show his admiration for the man. Lowell was wholly committed to McCarthy, regardless of the fact that neither of them cared for campaigning and both “took a kind of ghoulish pleasure in their hopeless enterprise” (J. Meyers, “Lowell’s Politics: Ambivalence and Commitment” 192). Instead of one man clinging desperately to a sinking ship, Lowell now found himself on the ship of another—McCarthy’s sinking ship, although McCarthy seemed too comfortable with demise. *History* is as much about acceptance of death as about Lowell’s attitudes towards McCarthy’s campaign. The aging poet, sinking with his reception, still saw as much value in his work as he did in his candidate and friend.

In letters, Lowell referenced McCarthy many times on the campaign trail, not just in correspondence directly addressed to him but also to his contemporaries like Anne Sexton, Elizabeth Bishop, and Adrienne Rich. In a letter to Elizabeth Bishop from March 16, 1968, Lowell relayed a story about a campaign stop in New Hampshire. The two found themselves appearing at a series of local factories and shops. Lowell joked that “if [he] spoke, [McCarthy] would lose the few votes he had” (Hamilton 497). He wondered how a campaign he described as sleep-inducing was even working. To Bishop, Lowell complimented both McCarthy’s personality and skills as a writer: “His freshest side is mostly off the record—dead-pan Jim Powers Irish Jokes. It’s hard to imagine anyone less like a literary man, and more like a good writer” (S. Hamilton 497). Of the mentions that Lowell would make in his letters to others about McCarthy, there are two noticeable points. One is the lack of in-depth details about the campaign

stops. This would support the claim that Lowell, like McCarthy, found them entirely uninteresting and thus felt it unnecessary to expound on them. The details Lowell chooses to share are the moments of intimacy not displayed to the public. “My heart, such as it is, will have to be with McCarthy until the end,” Lowell writes affectionately to Elizabeth Bishop (qtd. in S. Hamilton 497). In a second letter to Bishop on September 5 of that same year, Lowell describes another trip on the campaign trail, this time in McCarthy’s apartment. He states that he spent his time “chatting, watching him throw an orange to his brother,” before describing a violent incident involving political protestors at their staff headquarters (S. Hamilton 506). Yet despite these pleasant moments, Lowell admits that “nothing bores [him] more than McCarthy campaign rhetoric—or anyone else’s” in a letter to Donald Junkins in 1968, even revealing that Kennedy and McCarthy were “very ugly on each other long before they were running against” (qtd. in S. Hamilton 506). Lowell does not shy away from any uncomfortable or ugly part of his observations about McCarthy.

Lowell was known to be an explosive and volatile figure, and some of his personal letters would later become published in either full print newspapers or used as fragments in poems in his later volumes. McCarthy’s friendship with Lowell was viewed as a political liability given Lowell’s politics and public standing. This presents a complicated ethical issue, one that McCarthy should have considered when taking Lowell on his campaign trail. What happens to the work of the confessional poet if the framing is on the subject and no longer the self? What is and is not shareable as an observer? Despite the risks, McCarthy clearly demonstrated his commitment to Lowell, as a confidant and believer of his cause.

In relation to Lowell being a liability for McCarthy’s campaign, there was serious opposition from his contemporaries over the construction of his letter poems which would appear

in his final three collections of poetry. In a letter dated to Elizabeth Bishop on March 28, 1972, Lowell speaks of the potential damage these letter poems might have on his then wife Elizabeth Hardwick. In the letter, Lowell writes:

Now Lizzie's letters? I did not see them as slander, but as sympathetic, tho necessarily awful for her to read. She is the poignance of the book tho that hardly makes it kinder to her. I could say the letters are cut, doctored part fiction; I thought of it (I attribute things to Lizzie I made up or that were said by someone else. I comb out abuse, hysteria, repetition.[]) The trouble is the letters make the book, I think, at least they make Lizzie real beyond my invention. I took out the the worst things written against me, so as not to give myself a case and seem self-pitying. Or maybe I didn't want to author them. I promise ill do what I can to answer your piercing ~~objections~~ thoughts. (qtd. in S. Hamilton 590)

He even referred to *For Harriet and Lizzie* (1973) and *The Dolphin* (1973) alongside the publication of *History* (1973) as “one heap, one binding, so to speak, though not one book” (qtd. in S. Hamilton 591). The technique and approach to the letter poems is present in all three collections even though the theme of each is different. These issues would later damage Lowell's image after publishing the three collections because of these shared elements. *Dolphin* (1973) specifically was considered a violation of “the privacy of those nearest to him” (James 110). Many of these violations were directly linked to Elizabeth Hardwick. In a letter written to her dated September 24, 1971, Lowell responded to what Hardwick felt were “recent shocks,” hearing news of the soon to be released collection (qtd. in S. Hamilton 577). The poems were to be partly compromised by the letters Lowell had received from close friends and family. He goes on to explain it as “both a composition and alas, a rather grinding autobiography...one neither

does or should tell the ultimate or literal truth” (qtd. in S. Hamilton 577). He calls them “poetry lies,” and assures her, “you won’t feel betrayed or exploited but I can’t imagine you’ll want to scrape through the sadness and breakage now” (qtd. in S. Hamilton 577). Lowell’s admission to arguably unethical behavior would understandably lead anyone to be careful around him. For Lowell, his correspondence with the poem’s subject creates his new form of confession, but it creates an ethical dilemma.

Even Bishop, fellow confessional poet and contemporary, took issue with Lowell’s later work. In response to altering the letters of his previous wife for poems in *Notebook*, which were later included in *History*, Lowell informed her that “my version of [Harriet’s] letters are true enough. The original is heartbreaking, but interminable” (qtd. in S. Hamilton 591). Given the very public knowledge of the letter controversy, it is surprising that McCarthy was not wary of Lowell, but McCarthy placed as much trust in Lowell as Lowell placed in him. He described his presence as “never intrusive, not a political advisor, not a speech writer” (qtd. in McCarthy “Robert Lowell and the Politics of 1968” 116). Perhaps the reason that Lowell found himself at certain campaign stops and inside McCarthy’s apartment at other campaign events, was to eliminate the possibility of costing the campaign votes, just as he previously mentioned to Bishop.

Lowell was not always positively received by McCarthy’s staffers. At times, they viewed the poet and his amusing interactions with the candidate as a distraction that pulled focus from “serious political responsibilities” (J. Meyers, “Lowell’s Politics: Ambivalence and Commitment” 179). This became an ongoing issue for the staff, as the poet with a volatile history was now in a position to derail the campaign. One staffer went so far as to remark that they would “try to keep Lowell from McCarthy at very crucial times because we always thought

he took the edge off. Every time Lowell and McCarthy would get together, Lowell, or so we thought, would convince McCarthy that he really was above all this” (J. Meyers, “Lowell’s Politics: Ambivalence and Commitment” 193). Their relationship almost resembled two troublemaking school children, intent on not paying attention and giggling to themselves about a joke only they knew. Ironically, a historian by the name of Max Hastings, who covered the 1968 campaign, asserts that Lowell’s faith was never really justified and that McCarthy was always destined to lose. Lowell was even quoted as saying, “What on earth are we doing here?...You haven’t got a chance, you know that, don’t you?” to McCarthy (Larner 187). Lowell’s ever-present prophetic voice foresaw the end before McCarthy and with it but still stood by him until the end of his campaign.

McCarthy himself was wholly uninterested in campaigning. In an interview with Jeffery Meyers, Lowell goes into detail about McCarthy’s disinterest. He speaks about the type of conversations the two would have, which would often avoid what he called, “heavy politics” (J. Meyers, “Lowell’s Politics: Ambivalence and Commitment” 193). He speaks of a man who would use parables and satire to describe the current events happening around him. In an interview, Lowell paints the picture of a disadvantaged man, having to face what he refers to as terrible things:

“[T]he headless crowds, the reflex applause, the ghost written speech, the boiled eulogies. He wasn’t much interested in the vote-getting abstractions, which probably someone else had written for him; such things are always written by someone else, and for someone else.” (qtd. in J. Meyers, “Lowell’s Politics: Ambivalence and Commitment” 193)

Even though he describes McCarthy as a candidate who never really cared about his campaign, he does end his letter in his defense: “If he had been elected one would have felt a human being was in the White House, flaws and flair, but someone. He was something to trust” (J. Meyers, “Lowell’s Politics: Ambivalence and Commitment” 193). Through *History*, Lowell is able to challenge his own place in and understanding of history. His relationship with McCarthy, alongside the context of the anti-war campaign, allows for a unique reading of the confessional mode. At the end, McCarthy had very few loyalists but Lowell still believed in him. The importance of Lowell’s faith in McCarthy and the anti-war campaign in *History* is better understood when contextualized with the events of the 1960s leading up to their composition.

Chapter 3: *History*

One way to better appreciate and examine the collection is to explore the relationship and dedicatory poems between Lowell and McCarthy. McCarthy saw in Lowell a nuanced poet whose talent critics believed had long passed, and Lowell idolized and monumentalized McCarthy as a figure representative of the idealized American identity in the 1960s. Examining how Lowell and McCarthy both observed and wrote about one another are key to understanding their relationship and the importance in revisiting *History*. Due to conventional misreadings of *History*, I refocus the conversation around this collection, arguing that it should be read as a redefining of confessional poetry and not falling outside of the conventional rules. The way in which we should read *History* is that of a work of a memorialist. By monumentalizing the figure outside of the poet, Lowell continues the tradition of confessional poets while still bending and reshaping the traditional ways in which we read and interpret these poems.

Of the many issues critics and casual readers of Lowell faced when reading *History*, one was the size of the collection itself. The sonnet collection totaled a massive 368 poems in the 1973 final print. This edition consisted of revisions from Lowell's *Notebook*, which was released six years' prior, featuring heavy revisions as acknowledged in the collection's opening. This vastly outnumbered Lowell's earlier collections in terms of volume, even with the eighty additional poems that had not appeared anywhere before. Not only the size but the subjects introduced and written about led to the negative critical consensus. Johnathn Veitch wrote that "what must startle the reader at first are the innumerable kings, nomads, revolutionaries, generals, prophets, and sages that people Lowell's imagination" (458). Veitch makes the claim that *History* seems to be telling the "same kind of story" with each poem, stripping away layers as it progresses (458). William Doreski describes the collection as imitating "criticism, the

autobiography of our reading, rather than conventional linear history” (47). Lowell makes sense of his struggles and that of the later 60s by drawing on these ancestral voices.

In revisiting *History*, my goal is to emphasize the familiar conventions it employs while exploring these sections that move from the political to the personal. It is also worth considering the collection as a graveyard of these historical figures to Lowell and an attempt to monumentalize himself in his own work. Part of what Lowell accomplishes by placing himself alongside anyone from Alexander the Great to Robert Frost is the ability to confess through them. This is a writer exploring a change in personal relationships, politics, and poetics. The collection itself feels like a jigsaw puzzle with the confessional mode being the connective tissue. Lowell is at his most relatable and transparent, but accessing the confessional mode in *History* requires a more sobering context of historical events and subjects.

In *History*, there are mentions of many figures Lowell both had correspondence with and many others who existed long before he did, from King David to Randal Jarrell. Lowell also mentions in his opening note that “all the poems have been changed, some heavily...I hope this jumble or jungle is cleared— that I have cut the waste from the figure” (8). Saskia Hamilton noted that “as a poet, [Lowell] was an intrepid and compulsive reviser” (141), and it is clear that in *History*, he aimed to create a collection that departed from strict metrical form as well as a more comprehensive sonnet sequence. In a review written in *The Washington Post*, writer John Bart Gerald described *History* by writing, “for literary addicts it’s grade A dope, uncut, preposterous, feline and ruthless in its beauty” (Gerald 10). The largely positive newspaper review explores the many fascinating elements of the behemoth collection. Lowell was an overt political voice and Americanist and exercised these qualities brilliantly. Gerald also stated that Lowell “masterfully covers so much, dips into so many different sensibilities, worlds, and —

through translation — languages, that his voice claims its place before. Behind, above, below and all around” (Gerald 10). In a letter to Seamus Heaney on October 4, 1973, Lowell thanked Lowell for a positive review, welcoming it as a “generous piece at a terribly blue time” (qtd. in S. Hamilton 617). He admits that they were more often negative, writing “in America a month or two have passed...and [reviews] were often bad” (qtd. in S. Hamilton 617). The all-encompassing confessional voice now found itself transcending more than just his cotemporaries by addressing, and ultimately placing himself in conversation with, figures long dead to create a truly exhilarating read.

Robert B. Shaw predicted in a 1982 essay that “[*History*] will come to rank high among Lowell’s works not only for the audacity of its design but also for the solid and subtle craftsmanship that shaped its many facets” (520). While he was wrong about the critical reception of *History*, I believe that his point still stands. While the revisions, complicated composition, and massive subject matter may feel like a distraction to a Lowell traditionalist, the collection’s departure from the familiar is exactly why it is worth scrutinizing. The revisions add a distance that was not present in *Notebook* and allow for the confessional voice of Lowell to occupy in its presence. The alterations removed the diaristic element from his poems, allowing for discussions of contemporary events. Lowell’s *History* was a varied attempt at understanding these figures, his society, his politics, and himself. Lowell was able to broaden the themes in relation to his confessions through the expanse of his collection.

In this context, we can see how *History* begins to shape its critical and popular discomfort. Instead of asking why Lowell addresses specific individuals, we should question the accuracy of these portrayals. This change in rhetoric offered Lowell, the creator-God of his own prolific canon, a new sense of control instead of one that had been steered by his reception. The

absence of direct references to Catholicism and traumatic life events presented Lowell with the opportunity to exploit the experiences of others. Clapp argues that “Lowell invites his reader to experience the letter poems as factual representation precisely because of, rather than despite, the fact that Lowell has editorial control over them” (Clapp 21). This editorial control still relies on a relationship with the audience, however, and Lowell understands his confession cannot translate without their trust.

There are two ways in which *History* has been misread: the idea that the author is not present as subject in the poems and the danger of misreading his work by misinterpretation. By looking for the classical constraints of the confessional genre when reading *History* and the expectation of Lowell’s earlier works, his lack of presence and the construction of the conversations in his collection might feel misleading. Steven Axelrod responded to Helen Vendler’s criticism in *The New York Review of Books*, who referred to the later works of Lowell, including *History*, as “desultory and uncomposed...exempt from the tyranny of the well-made” (qtd. in Axelrod 2). Vendler, like many scholars during the publication of *History* and the years following, viewed the collection as a fragmented mess. The collection was simply too unfamiliar and addressed too many subjects to accomplish or capture the personality of his work. Axelrod called *History* abstract but stated that “Lowell’s middle and later poems bear a more overt relationship to the facts of his personal life than do the early poems” (2). Lowell’s relationships and personal politics play a major role in his revision and in the sonnets. *History* is Lowell’s cultural work at its best. Lowell even said of his critics that, “all the reviewers nearly point out the unevenness of my sonnets,” and “instead of a collection of anthology pieces, I have a notebook” (qtd. in S. Hamilton 506). A carefully cautious, although familiar reader, would be understandably apprehensive of this new Lowell.

Lowell is not only using history through reference to figures that include his contemporaries and those he admired, but he is also monumentalizing both groups. The misreading that has become popular among Lowell scholars ignores the cultural work of the collection itself, the ability to monumentalize these events, the individuals, and Lowell's place amongst them. Defining Lowell's entire body of work by the constraints of classical conventions, like the poetic form of his earlier poems, is overlooking the value of his later works, like *History*. Vendler described *History* in a review for the *Atlantic* as "indigestible fragments of experience, unprelaced by explanation, unexplained by cause or result; sudden soliloquies of figures ranging from Biblical times to contemporary history; translations; diary jottings; stately imitations of known forms" (Vendler, "The Difficult Grandeur of Robert Lowell"). In my opinion, that's what makes *History* brilliant. There is so much to discuss and consider, and Lowell manages to keep an unwavering presence in each of these sonnets by maintain his voice through confession. There are no restrictions and nothing is off limits in his collection. He is unbound, and thus removed from religious the shame and guilt that shackled and narrowed his early work. Lowell offers the reader many avenues to interpret his elements of confessionalism through all of these experiences. In place of distancing the social from the self, Lowell inverts his method, merging the personal and the social in *History*, making the collection just as confessional as his earlier works.

The political poems of *History* that follow the 1968 McCarthy campaign manage to reflect the title and some of the collection's most poignant work. The poems surrounding the pieces dedicated directly to McCarthy retell in part the complicated events of the campaign of 1968. The uncertainty, the tension, and optimism are on full display. Jeffery Meyers writes that the "best political poems perceptively comment on contemporary events," and it is my opinion

that Lowell accomplishes just that (“Lowell’s Politics: Ambivalence and Commitment” 197). In revisiting what has been considered Lowell’s weaker works by critical standards, one can see blending of elements that resulted in some of his most personally affecting and overtly political poems towards the end of his career.

This section in *History* begins with two elegiac poems dedicated to Robert Kennedy titled “For Robert Kennedy 1925-8,” and “For Robert Kennedy 2.” The poems, composed shortly following Kennedy’s assassination, indicated in the title, describe his fated life. Lowell openly confesses that he misses Kennedy. Lowell refers to the “doom” that was “woven in your nerves, your shirt, / woven in the great clan” (174), no less a reference to John F. Kennedy’s assassination just five years prior. The following poem describes the rows of guests at his funeral. Lowell reflects fondly on Kennedy’s charisma, which McCarthy notably lacked, before addressing asking, “who will judge this killer” (174). The following poem directed towards Kennedy’s assassin loosely describes the plot of *Les Enfants du Paradis*. The 1945 drama film, also known as “The Children of Paradise,” has literary parallels with Shakespeare’s *Othello*. The film features a scene in which a character referred to as “the Count” is killed off screen by Lacenaire whose inspiration was drawn from French criminal and murderer Pierre Lacenaire. Lowell describes the “fear which isn’t screened,” which is parallel to the events of Kennedy’s death as he apparently avoided busy ballrooms by leaving through a small kitchen (175). The Count, much like Kennedy, dies an unexpected and unseen death from a patient assassin. French critic Marcel Carné notes that “*paradis*” in French commonly referred to the balcony in theaters in which audience viewed plays (filmreference). Lowell is connection his identity as an American, someone close to Robert Kennedy, and the world stage witnessing the assassination of an American presidential candidate. His very public death even left Lowell in fear. Lowell

writes, “*if anyone really wants to kill anyone... / He waits. I wait. I am a writer not a leader. / But even a paranoid can have enemies...*” (175). In these few brief lines, Lowell manages to capture the paranoia of the Cold War era coupled with his public political persona.

Lowell begins to set up his subsequent dedicatory poems to McCarthy by framing them against the departed Kennedy. He writes about losing them both, although one much more permanently. Introducing the death of Robert Kennedy before the failure of McCarthy’s campaign gives us a timeline of events as well as some personally affecting poetry. Lowell’s confession about a personal loss in Kennedy moves to another with a larger, societal impact with McCarthy. Lowell is able to frame the fading anti-war campaign through the death of Kennedy and now opens the door to examine his relationship with McCarthy. Dedicating the poems to both candidates reflects Lowell’s ambivalence and allows room to explore the trauma of the decade. In doing so, he highlights that the relationship he lost with McCarthy was larger than just the two of them.

Lowell’s first poem dedicated to McCarthy was written in July 1968, several months after the end of his presidential campaign. The poem, appropriately titled “For Eugene McCarthy,” begins, “I love you so...gone? Who will swear you wouldn’t / have done good to the country” (175). There is a weight to the word “love” and where it is positioned in this poem. Placing “love” in this opening line followed by an ellipsis or pause and a question allows it to be read in two ways. On one hand, this line is representative as the failed campaign as a whole. This signifies the end, the departure of the would-be presidency of Eugene McCarthy, and thus leaves Lowell reconciling with this fact. The other, less obvious way to read it is as a loss of love, not for the campaign, the stops, or the rhetoric, but for the space which Lowell and McCarthy occupied together. In not completing the phrase “I love you so” and leaving it to a question,

Lowell suggests an undeterminable future in which he, now without candidate and friend, has truly lost a love. This love displayed the admiration a politically disillusioned Lowell had for McCarthy.

Later in the poem, Lowell positions McCarthy as a would-be underdog candidate and hero. “Picking a quarrel / with you is like picking the petals of the daisy,” Lowell states, framing McCarthy as the unfavorable political candidate, a disinterested, anti-war candidate who found himself against an opponent who was more interested in winning and had more financial means to make it happen (175). Lowell creates an ode to his friend’s fading candidacy, writing, “the game, the passing crowds, the rapid young / still brand your hand with sunflecks... coldly willing / to smash the ball past those who bought the park” (175). The baseball imagery here feels uniquely American. An author as important to the literary canon bonding his presidential candidate to an innately American reference emphasizes how Lowell viewed McCarthy’s importance as an element of America’s identity. McCarthy’s campaign closes out, in a sense, with a walk-off of a baseball player, triumphantly hitting the ball right literally out of the park. The imagery of the youth, leaving their “sunflecks,” resembles a hope from a younger generation that McCarthy took with him. The end of the poem implies that he was always playing a game on someone else’s field, but he was still willing to play, and that is why his campaign mattered.

The somber follow-up poem, titled “Election night,” speaks more about Lowell’s relationship to McCarthy and their inevitable separation. The beginning opens like a meditation on a lonely Lowell: “Election night, last night’s Election Night, / without drinks, television or my friend—” opens the poem (178). There is no cause for celebration or even a reason to turn on the television and watch the events unfold. Lowell is, for the first time since he joined McCarthy’s forlorn campaign, all alone. “Today, I wore my blue knitted tie to class / No one understood that

blue meant black,” Lowell says of the outfit he wore that day (178). The fact that no one understood that to Lowell, “blue meant black,” raises the question whether McCarthy would be the only one to understand his choice of tie. This physical display of sadness is now reflected in how he dresses and presents himself. The blue tie seems not only an inside joke but also a mark of death, representative of not only the campaign but also their relationship.

The next section of the poem redirects the focus from McCarthy to a conversation with Lowell’s daughter:

My daughter telephones me from New York
she talks *New Statesmen*, “Then you are a cop-out. Isn’t
not voting Humphrey a vote for Nixon and Wallace?”
And I, “Not Voting Nixon is my vote for Humphrey.”
It’s funny awkward; I don’t come off too well; (178)

It is important to note that Lowell chooses to include the location of his daughter. It does not matter where she is but that she is not where he is. Even the “funny awkward” joke Lowell makes does not land. This uncomfortable moment is indicative of their relationship. Detailing this uncomfortable conversation juxtaposes his relationship with his daughter against the loss of his intimate friendship with McCarthy. Even his daughter does not understand his commitment to McCarthy’s campaign and the anti-war movement. The lines that follow turn into Lowell’s rallying cry for the defeated campaign and its supporters. “*We must rouse our broken forces and save the country: / I even said this in public,*” he writes (178). Lowell echoed a similar sentiment in the two poems he wrote about the Democratic Convention in Chicago in August of 1968, “Flaw (Flying to Chicago), and “After the Democratic Convention.” The poem opens with a steamroller crushing a flower in a field, unable to sustain the pressure. Lowell himself laments,

“After five nights of Chicago: police and mob, / I am so tired and had, clichés are wisdom, / the clichés of paranoia...Home in Maine” (177). Here, Lowell captures the pure exhaustion at the hands of the violent response. Lowell recalled the violent police response to Elizabeth Bishop as seeing “boys with bloodied heads” and police raids over imaginary beer cans tossed from the windows (qtd. in J. Meyers, “Lowell’s Politics: Ambivalence and Commitment” 189). As he was “prominently *the* American writer engage in politics,” his commitment outlived McCarthy’s presidential run (Moore 228). This poem however, largely signaled the end of the campaign. Among the poems in *History*, it precedes “Election Night,” the poem in which Lowell finds himself alone without McCarthy and without hope. These poems help the reader contextualize the mode of the political with the confessional by blending elements of the two. Lowell is incredibly candid in detailing the things he witnessed and offering his individual involvement in the anti-war campaign of 1968.

Lowell begins to sound like someone who is willing to continue a fight that McCarthy does not. Regardless of McCarthy’s campaign success, it would seem that Lowell hoped to continue to occupy an adjacent physical presence around him. While it was more than apparent that McCarthy was willing to accept defeat, Lowell’s refusal speaks to what he wanted to save. The idealized identity was just as important as the campaign. This suggests why McCarthy is included in *History* and why McCarthy’s collection of poems is dedicated to Lowell: their bond and friendship left lasting impressions and feelings, through which both authors communicated through their writing. Lowell finishes his poem with “The beaten player / opens his wounds and hungers for the blood-feud / hidden like contraband and loved like whisky” (178). The “beaten player” could be read as referring to both McCarthy and Lowell. The beaten player refers back to “For Eugene McCarthy,” and the baseball metaphor that closes out the poem represents the

candidate. On the other hand, this could be Lowell's rallying cry. His last desperate attempt to show hope to continue on, emblematic of a movement bigger than Lowell or McCarthy.

There are multiple poems in *History* in which we can see the collections cultural work by engaging with society like, "For Eugene McCarthy." The forms of these poems usually become musings and deep meditations on both victory and defeat. For example, in "Israel 3," Lowell talks about the waning "morale and teamsoul" to describe Israel and his difficulty to persevere as a Catholic in a place he calls "the best and worst of countries" (31). In his retelling of Horace's ode titled, "Nunc Est Bibendum, Cleopatra's Death," Lowell describes Cleopatra's suicide as a charitable death. The title which translates to "now is the time for drinking" is a celebratory ode, cheering on the "private woman much humbled" for exercising her agency and escaping Caesar's rule (47). Her death speaks to political resilience even at the extreme cost of her own life. In "Poor Alexander, poor Diogenes," Lowell reframes the philosophical anecdote by describing Diogenes as an angry and defiant dog "growling at Alexander" (40). In it, Diogenes is the only man willing to speak out against Alexander's imperialist rule as he is the only person that remains untouched by Alexander's influence. Lowell borrows a line verbatim from the original anecdote and follows it with Diogenes's resilience: "'You can only do one thing for me, stand out of my sun' / When the school boys stole his drinking cup, / he learned to lap up water in his hands—" (40). In this rejection of Alexander's ideology and power, Diogenes the defiant becomes the free. In turn, this freedom monumentalizes Diogenes, with Lowell saying, "this is a dog who justified his statue," a slight to idolization of the undeserving (40). Diogenes's act of defiance both earned and deserved memorialization in the same way McCarthy earned his. Lowell is able to confess through all of these various locations and people engaging in both the confessional mode and cultural history.

To Lowell, McCarthy's walk-off at the end of "For Eugene McCarthy," speaks to the success his presence had just by being a candidate. Daring to stand against the other candidates running against him, McCarthy's loss was just as important as his campaign to Lowell. When we have returned to the "beaten-player," referenced seven poems after the McCarthy dedication, the volta at the end of the poem could speak to Lowell's unwillingness to concede. In the same sense that Lowell knew the loss meant losing his candidate, he also knew he would lose the physical space he occupied with his friend. The "blood-feud" is with the government, and the "contraband...loved like whisky" is his idealized president. Framing the defeat in this way makes Lowell's refusal to submit all the more appealing. Likening this fight to hard alcohol makes it seem addicting and dangerous. There is a Lowell with hope at the end of this poem, still willing and still hopeful for a fulfilling political candidate.

McCarthy went on to write to and about Robert Lowell as well. In his book of selected poems, he opens with a short passage underneath the phrase, "Terra Terribilia." He defines the phrase as a term mapmakers would use to "identify what was beyond their knowledge" of the earth" (McCarthy, "Selected Poems" 3). Beyond all of the known places are where "the poets and the inventors of fables dwell," McCarthy writes (3). Below this is a short dedicatory note that introduces the collection as "a tribute to American poets" (McCarthy, "Selected Poems" 3). Lowell is the first in a list of other poets who have gone into the "'terra terribilia' in the search for the truth," as described by McCarthy (3). While Lowell's is not the only name present, it is interesting that he is the first. It is arguable that although he was the most well known on this list, he certainly had the least amount of political affiliation or contribution. Others on the list, such as William Stafford, Reed Whittemore, and Robert Bly, were all, in some way or fashion, politically involved whether it be through their activism or their writing. Again, Lowell and

McCarthy's unconventional relationship is on display. Perhaps Lowell, as a person and a poet, served as an inspiration for McCarthy's poetry or perhaps this is a bit of favoritism towards his old friend. What is apparent is that in the same way that McCarthy provided a figure outside of Lowell's realm of expertise to which he could admire and elevate, McCarthy looked to Lowell's poems to strengthen his poetry.

McCarthy's dedicatory poem to Lowell is a seventeen-line ode to the late poet and his former campaign companion. McCarthy's writing offers both complexity and accessibility to readers unfamiliar with Lowell's poetry. To an unfamiliar reader, the simple rhyme scheme and lack of any convoluted allusions or metaphors makes this poem easier to read than Lowell's work. In fact, what McCarthy demonstrates well here is his understanding of Lowell as a person and not just his writing. The first three lines paint Lowell as a saint-like figure, extreme in his virtue and frugality. "Poet of purity and parsimony / using one sense at a time, sparingly. / Salt-bleaching white the white of light," McCarthy begins (74). He focuses on Lowell's ability to discern exact details through his writing and poetry. Gifting him the title, "poet of purity," feels like an act of kindness given Lowell's dwindling critical reception. The following lines of the first stanza give the imagery of physical interaction with objects in which Lowell is constructing his poetic truth. "Straining the hemp, not nylon line, / scraping the wood to bare the silk grain," describes Lowell as a poet who would be engaging ever so carefully with these elements, only to take what is absolutely necessary (74). Lowell is as meticulous as McCarthy's poet as he is in the construction of his own writing. Lowell is a moving figure to McCarthy, actively searching for a hidden truth by "slaving shards of scraps / ...parts of dead poets / pieces of gods" (74). Much like the composition of Lowell's earlier works, here we see the poet Lowell gathering resources that he deems necessary to craft his truth. This idealized version, the "double agent of doubt,

smuggler of truth,” is intent on completing this quest (74). In the last stanza, McCarthy referring to Lowell as a both a poet and priest, elevating the poet to a position where he is occupying two planes. Referring to the sacrament as “bitter” was most likely a gesture towards Lowell’s well-documented turn away from Catholicism, both in his personal life as well as through his work (74). In the same sense that this line references the loss of his religion, the line also feels like a reference to the loss of their relationship as well.

McCarthy, much in the same way as Lowell, monumentalized his dear friend. He not only speaks to his character but also to his ability as a writer. His rhetoric lifted the image of a poet who he had met and spent time with when he had fallen far from public or critical notice. McCarthy may have met Lowell at one of, if not the, lowest points in his literary career. While their dedications to one another are different, they are both confessional, offering their own respective truths and vulnerability through their poetry. Lowell’s conventionally complex poem, positioning the campaign and sports allusions at the front of of his poem, compliments McCarthy’s description of Lowell as the larger-than-life idyllic Poet-Priest.

By ignoring and writing off Lowell’s later works simply because they have changed in tone, we are doing him a disservice. Scholars have routinely overlooked this collection of poetry without examining Lowell’s rhetoric and questioning the importance of who he is addressing. *History* cannot be defined by the same rules under which other collections of confessional poems exist. There is a notable absence of Lowell’s inner thoughts as the focal point of the collection. Instead, these are replaced by witnessing what Lowell witnessed, thus causing the reader to question the accuracy of the relayed information. The dedicatory letters, carried over from *Notebook*, raise their own questions of authorial control and ethics. As Bishop took issue with Lowell, the reader is now engaging with portions of personal letters that may have been altered.

The sonnets themselves range from addressing family members to historical figures with whom Lowell had no correspondence. The distance forces the audience to read themselves into the blanks. While it is tempting to read all of his works by the same rules, doing so discredits and overlooks Lowell's intended purpose and does not take into consideration the biographical and historical context. Much like repositioning the lens, the reader can only engage the truth of the confessional poet through this distance. Instead of having everything laid bare, we are now forced to question everything about these poems in order to understand what Lowell is confessing. Lowell elevates his subjects instead of himself but forces us to question the importance of his subjects and who he is addressing and the information he is willing to show. It is important to examine homosocial spaces and interactions, such as Lowell and McCarthy's, in his later collections. In doing so, we are given a unique way to read and value his work. Lowell's affection paints an endearing image of his candidate that he wanted all of us, himself included, to have had the time to enjoy. Robert Lowell is still very much the hand and voice in *History* with an added layer of purposeful difficulty. There is an unwillingness to give the reader everything up front. An older Lowell, disillusioned and alone, feels guarded and can only welcome in his audience by first turning them away. The reader is outside of the booth. We are no longer listening to Lowell but listening to what he has surveilled and is willing to disclose. The questions that arise from the collection, the people he addresses, the letters, and every feature considered hostile creates a new level of difficulty, but one that does not make the work less valuable. Instead, the resistance becomes a new challenge. The challenging construction, like the contraband and whiskey from "Election Night," becomes an addiction. Lowell is very much still here but he wants us to fight for him. He could only be revealed by incorporating, questioning, and challenging his history with McCarthy. What makes *History* another strong element in

Lowell's canon is not only the work that went into it but also the work it takes to accurately read and interpret it. Lowell has expertly re-defined not only his own work but what we can consider as confessional poetry.

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Curriculum Vitae

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M.A. University of Nevada, Las Vegas, English Literature. Masters Thesis:

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Research Interests:

Mid-twentieth century American literature with an emphasis on the New York School of Poets, Confessional Poetry, and the writings of Robert Lowell. Early American literature and post-secular scholarship.

Academic Positions:

Graduate Assistant Director, College Teaching in Language and Literature Fall 2020 (1 section, enrollment 23)

Served as a TA for the course designed to introduce graduate assistants to theory, classroom management, pedagogy necessary for instructing at the University level.

Teaching Assistant, ENG 232 World Literature II (2 sections, enrollment 47)

Served as a TA for the course designed to introduce students to text from the mid-seventeenth century to the present

Instructor, Composition 101 Fall 2020 (1 section, enrollment 24)

Introductory course to college writing and rhetorical devices aimed at developing student's foundational knowledge of composition.

Instructor, Composition 101 Fall 2019 (1 section, enrollment 21)

Introductory course to college writing and rhetorical devices aimed at developing student's foundational knowledge of composition.

Instructor, Composition 102 Spring 2020 (2 sections, enrollment 42)

Introduction to college level research, continuation of foundational methods, and

incorporation of academic scholarship and literary journals in student's writing.

Relevant Work Experience:

Graduate Assistant Director: Fall 2020-Spring 2021

Graduate Assistant Director with the Composition Department. Role required administrative work, co-teaching a graduate level English course, as well as mentoring and training new graduate assistants.

Writing Center Consultant: August 2019-December 2019

On campus writing resource open to all students who need help developing, organizing, and understanding college level writing assignments.

Witness Literary Magazine: Fall 2019-

Fiction submission reader for UNLV's on campus publication and literary magazine.

Substitute Teacher, CCSD: May 2018-May 2019

Substitute teacher for the Clark County School District in Nevada. Worked both

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Wells Fargo, Bank Teller: April 2012-November 2013

Responsible for our drawers and counting money on hand. Opening and closing store procedures, providing superior customer service, and identifying solutions for our customers.

Dicks Sporting Goods, Cashier: February 2012 - June 2012

Task included making sure the store and products were neatly folded and in their correct areas. Offering promotions and services to customers, being responsible for the drawer as well as completing the transaction effectively and providing good customer service.

Conference Papers:

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