

Principal investigator: Dr. Grzegorz Kość

Title: Robert Lowell's Financial Problems and the Crisis of Modernism

DESCRIPTION FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC

The project will develop, in three separate articles and a book proposal, an economic biography of American poet Robert Lowell (1917-1977). Such a biography will also help trace the economic forces facilitating the evolution of American poetic styles from modernist to post-modernist. Lowell's imagination and poetics will be shown to have been affected by his experience of his worsening economic situation and of money itself, most dramatically by his switching, from 1970 on, to the British pound after his move to England. These experiences made him reflect on how problematic late-modernist confessionalism is economically and, through that, envision a postmodern poetics.

Ultimately, it will be suggested that the modernist tradition of the self-expressive subject in poetry came to a crisis due to—among other things—the increasingly apparent invalidity of self-expression as commodity, the sense of its uselessness for others, and due to the changes in consciousness caused by the remodeling of the international monetary system. As the late Lowell meditated on poetry as regular commodity and as he envisioned fiat-money poetic language, he points to a style divorced from the truth principle and positing new values.

This is a qualitative research project based on library research, archival research in particular. It provides for three research sessions at three libraries: the New York Public Library which holds the archives of Lowell's publisher, the Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 2) the Libraries of Stanford University which is the stronghold of research into "lironomics," i.e., connections of literature and economics; and 3) and the Houghton Library, Harvard, holding the drafts of his early poems showing Lowell influenced by Ezra Pound's radical money theories.

The study will provide a missing link between literary criticism about the economies of modernism and the accounts of the economies of subsequent postmodern poetic styles. The economy of the transition from modernism to language-centered postmodern writing is poorly understood. What is missing is a more detailed account of how modernist economy of poetry morphed into the postmodernist one. With Lowell famously straddling the two paradigms, and suffering financial difficulties at this crucial juncture, in the early 1970s, his case is very useful for such an inquiry. The preliminary research of his archival materials of the 1970s has demonstrated that the economy of poetry was his central concern at the time.