

“Fire-Breathing Catholic C.O.”: Robert Lowell, Poet and Conscientious Objector

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“Dear Mr. President, 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.”¹ So wrote Robert Lowell in a letter to Franklin Delano Roosevelt in September of 1943. He went on to acknowledge “how painful” he found the decision as “an American whose family traditions” like the president’s, had “always found their fulfillment in maintaining, through responsible participation in both the civil and the military services, our country’s freedom and honor.”² Along with the letter he included a Declaration of Personal Responsibility outlining his reasons for declining service. What makes his decision especially surprising is that he had tried to enlist twice since the outbreak of war and both times had been refused on medical grounds. It is likely if he had shown up at the induction center, that he would have been refused again. Rather than pursuing that option, however, he remained steadfast in declining the president’s offer. As a result on October 13th he was sentenced to prison for a year and a day (the extra day making him a felon).³

What led this Boston Brahmin, descendant of prominent families, to turn his back on the example of his forebears and refuse military service? The simplest answer is his religion. In a poem written a decade after these events, Lowell describes his younger self as a “fire-breathing Catholic C.O. [conscientious objector]” who “made my manic statement / telling off the state.”⁴ To understand how he became a Catholic CO, we need to trace his conversion to Catholicism

¹ Robert Lowell, *The Letters of Robert Lowell*, ed. Saskia Hamilton (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 37.

² Lowell, *Letters*, 38.

³ Paul Mariani, *Lost Puritan, A Life of Robert Lowell* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), 108.

⁴ Robert Lowell, *Collected Poems*, eds. Frank Bidart and David Gewanter (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 187.

and the way that his understanding of Church teaching informed his view of society and, in particular, of the war. In doing so, we will also see how his story is part of a larger story about conscription and conscientious objection, about the challenge of preserving freedom of conscience in a time of national crisis.

Conversion

Robert Lowell's background provided no precedent for refusing military service or for Catholicism. After all he was the son of a retired naval officer, and as he makes clear in his Declaration, the members of his "family had served in all our wars since the Declaration of Independence...."⁵ As for Catholicism, he had once quipped to a friend that it "was the religion of Irish servant girls."⁶ Clearly that sentiment had changed by the time Lowell converted, and it was largely his conversion that led to his critique of the war and his eventual refusal to serve.

Nothing, however, was further from his mind in the summer of 1940 when he and his wife, Jean Stafford, moved to Baton Rouge where he began graduate studies. He expected that he was embarking on an intellectual life, though he realized that the war might interrupt it. As he wrote to his grandmother, "The war and our coming draft are 'leveling.' ... If war comes and they want me, I'll gladly go; if not, I'll continue in this peaceful and sedentary occupation of university work. I suppose writing is something of a career, something that steadily grows more secure and substantial."⁷ But his situation began to change that fall when Robert Penn Warren, one of his professors, invited a Father Schexnayder to speak to his class. Lowell was so taken with Schexnayder that he "followed him out into the hall afterwards and asked for instruction in

⁵ Lowell, *Letters*, 38.

⁶ Mariani, *Lost*, 93.

⁷ Lowell, *Letters*, 30.

Catholicism.”⁸ By February of 1941, Lowell was “‘becoming a Catholic,’” Stafford wrote a friend, “‘a real one with all the trimmings, the fish on Friday and the observance of fasts and confessions and grace before meals and prayers before bed.’”⁹ On March 29, 1941, he was baptized and received into the church. With the zeal of a new convert Lowell devoted himself to religious observances—early morning Mass, praying the rosary, spiritual retreats—and he confined his reading to “nothing but religious books—and only those with the imprimatur—and would see only movies approved by the Censor.”¹⁰ Such zeal would continue for a number of years so that, even during his imprisonment, his wife, concerned that Lowell might be suffering from religious mania, wrote to a priest friend who agreed with her “conviction” that Lowell was “‘being more Catholic than the church.’”¹¹

Conscription

That same fall in which Lowell began his graduate studies and his journey toward Catholicism, the United States Congress, recognizing that the nation must be prepared for war, passed the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940. Besides laying out a plan for state-mandated military service, this act included a section (5g) for handling conscientious objectors. It begins, “Nothing contained in this act shall be construed to require any person to be subject to combatant training and service in the land or naval forces of the United States who, by reason of religious training and belief, is conscientiously opposed to participation in war in any form.”¹²

⁸ Mariani, *Lost*, 92.

⁹ Mariani, *Lost*, 93.

¹⁰ Mariani, *Lost*, 94.

¹¹ Mariani, *Lost*, 113.

¹² Mulford Q. Sibley and Philip E. Jacob, *Conscription and Conscience: The American State and the Conscientious Objector, 1940-1947* (Ithica, NY: Cornell UP, 1952), 487.

The significance of this clause is best understood in context. While opposition to war by individuals and some churches had a long history, such opposition became especially acute in cases of state-mandated (as opposed to voluntary) service, a situation increased by the large-scale wars of the twentieth century. Although the term “conscientious objector” was coined in the 1890s for people who refused to comply with mandatory vaccinations, by the twentieth century it had come to apply to those who refused participation in the war effort on the grounds of conscience. The problem of how the state should handle conscientious objectors had arisen in World War I, and the U.S. had found itself ill-prepared to meet the challenges. With the approach of another war, officials (and other interested parties) wanted to do better, to be able to raise the necessary troops while still preserving freedom of conscience and protecting those who exercised that freedom. In January of 1940, as it became clear the U.S. was moving into a prewar period, talks began about adopting a conscription plan prepared by the Army War College.¹³ Representatives of the historic peace churches (Mennonites, Quakers, and Brethren) wrote to the president desiring to discuss “procedures for handling conscientious objectors and types of service which might be provided.”¹⁴ Over the course of the year, representatives from these churches, as well as other groups, met with the president, members of congress, and members of the Department of Justice to discuss how to protect conscientious objectors.

The result of their labors was the section on conscientious objectors in the Selective Training and Service Act. That section, to be developed by further legislation and executive orders, acknowledged the legitimacy of conscientious objection, outlined a system of review boards for evaluating individual claims of conscience, and suggested several ways of handling objectors. Some might serve the military in non-combatant positions; others, whose consciences

¹³ Sibley and Jacob, *Conscription*, 45.

¹⁴ Sibley and Jacob, *Conscription*, 486.

prevented any involvement with the war effort, might provide other service of “national importance under civilian direction.”¹⁵ In a memorandum to President Roosevelt (December 20, 1940), C. K. Dykstra, the head of Selective Service, outlined a plan for handling the latter cases, which he figured would be about half of the CO’s. They would be assigned to “civilian camps for soil conservation and reforestation work.”¹⁶ The War Department would provide cots, bedding, and equipment; the Departments of Agriculture and Interior would provide “technical supervision” for the projects; and the National Council for Conscientious Objectors (composed largely of the historic peace churches) would provide, at least temporarily, financing and “day-to-day supervision and control of the camps.”¹⁷

During the fall of 1940, Lowell was certainly aware of the increasing likelihood of war and of the passage of the Selective Training and Service Act, and he fully expected to serve should the need arise. In October he closed a letter to his parents by stating that he was going “to register for the draft,” though he assured them that “of course, no students will be taken for a while yet.”¹⁸ Despite his willingness to serve, Lowell’s remarks about the war in a number of letters around this time suggest that he was thinking about it in moral, and increasingly, in explicitly Christian, terms. Writing to his friend and fellow writer, Peter Taylor, in 1941, he outlined two “morally plausible” attitudes toward the war: “a tempered isolationism or a tempered defeat [of] fascism.” He quotes Middleton Murry, who had said that “‘England can’t win a Christian victory because she is not Christian.’” He then wonders “whether any other victory can be worth the frightful carnage and hooley.” Later in the letter, he says, we must

¹⁵Sibley and Jacob, *Conscription*, 487.

¹⁶Sibley and Jacob, *Conscription*, 494.

¹⁷Sibley and Jacob, *Conscription*, 494-5.

¹⁸Lowell, *Letters*, 32.

“remember the Germans are human and that no more comes out of a war than goes in.”¹⁹ Despite concerns about the direction of the war and the possibility of U.S. involvement, he was still complying with the nation’s preparations, though as he wrote to Taylor in July, “I am exempted on account of my eyes.”²⁰

Lowell’s willingness to serve continued. By the time the attack on Pearl Harbor came, he and his wife had left Louisiana (due to Stafford’s health) and were living in New York City where he was working for Catholic publisher Sheed & Ward. Three months later he tried to enlist in the Navy but was rejected because of his eyesight.²¹ In August of 1942, after friends had warned him that “considering how the war was going,” he would soon be drafted, he tried to enroll in the Army Officers Training School only to be rejected once again because of his eyesight.²²

Critique

Throughout the fall of 1942 and into 1943, Lowell was writing poetry again, producing many of the poems that would appear in his first book, *Land of Unlikeness* (to be published in 1944). These poems, he later explained to his mother, are “cries for us to recover our ancient freedom and dignity, to be Christians and build a Christian society.”²³ That these poems were written in the midst of a world at war is clear from the many images of blood and references to Mars. They are explicitly Christian in much of their imagery and often particularly Catholic. As Allen Tate points out in his introduction to the volume, “the Christian symbolism is

¹⁹ Lowell, *Letters*, 32.

²⁰ Lowell, *Letters*, 33.

²¹ Mariani, *Lost*, 98.

²² Mariani, *Lost*, 100.

²³ Lowell, *Letters*, 36-37.

intellectualized and frequently given a savage satirical direction; it points to the disappearance of the Christian experience from the modern world.”²⁴

For Lowell the war-torn modern world is clearly at odds with Christian principles and practices. This view is especially clear in three poems associated with Church holy days. In the first of these, “The Wood of Life,” subtitled “(Good Friday, 1942),” Lowell offers a Christian view of redemption. As he meditates on the cross, he links it to Old Testament sacrifice and sees it as the solution to the problem of the fall: “Here are scales whose Reckoning-weight / Outweighs the apple’s fell dejection.”²⁵ He ends the poem by acknowledging the power of the cross:

Christ Crucified is all our reason
And most in this dark hour
We will invoke, O Cross, your power,
Our prime, at best, is Passion’s season.

The dark hour referred to is, certainly, the dark hour of the crucifixion on Good Friday, and yet one suspects it also suggests the dark hour of the war-torn world in which Lowell is writing.

While that poem sees Christian redemption as our only hope in a dark world, another amplifies the way that Christianity, especially as represented by Mary, is at odds with the violence of war. “On the Eve of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception (1942)” begins by addressing Mary, the “Mother of God, whose burly love / Turns swords to plowshares,” an image clearly linking her to Old Testament visions of the peaceable kingdom. The speaker then asks her to “improve / On the big wars / And make this holiday with Mars” her “Feast Day.”²⁶ While Lowell acknowledges Allied successes, saying that “Freedom and Eisenhower have won / Significant laurels” against their war-serving opponents, the “Hun / And Roman” who “kneel /

²⁴ Lowell, *Poems*, 859.

²⁵ Lowell, *Poems*, 882.

²⁶ Lowell, *Poems*, 866.

To lick the dust from Mars' bootheel / Like foppish bloodhounds," he finds that Mary remains uninvolved, sleeping "out our distemper's evil day." What he hopes, ultimately, is that soldiers would begin to "mind" Mary, who is the source by which "Christ's bread and beauty came" and who, when Christ died, "shook a sword / From his torn side." Clearly, Mary stands for a peaceful kingdom opposed to a world at war. While Lowell wishes, perhaps, that Mary would take a more active role in curbing Mars, he sees her as a figure connected with the ultimate defeat of Satan. His final lines, "Man eats the Dead / From pole to pole," acknowledge the continuing violence of war and at the same time recognize the continued, world-wide celebration of Mary on this feast day with its celebration of Eucharist.

The tension between the Church's peaceful vision and a society given to greed and violence becomes even more acute in "Christmas Eve in the Time of War." As the subtitle makes clear the speaker is not Lowell but a persona, a "Capitalist" who is meditating by a "Civil War Monument."²⁷ In the midst of a blackout, he stares at the snow piling up on the statue of a Civil War general and on the cannons and cannon balls that form part of the memorial. Though the snow whitens his surroundings, it merely whitewashes, rather than cleanses, the evils of war:

A blizzard soaps our dirty linen, all
The crowfoot feathers mossaing Mars' brass hat
Whiten to angels' wings, but the War's snowfall
Has coffered the good-humored plutocrat
Who rattled down his brass like cannon balls
To keep the puppets dancing for the state.
Tonight the ventry of capital
Hangs the bare Christ-child on a tree of gold,
Tomorrow Mars will break his bones.

Society, rather than being truly washed so that it is whiter than snow, has merely been whitewashed by the snow fall, which fails to cover the true nature of war. It cannot turn Mars' hat into angel wings. In fact, the War's snowfall (its dead) ultimately enriches the plutocrat.

²⁷ Lowell, *Poems*, 887.

Here the state, Mars, and gold are mixed in an unholy alliance. Their hostility to Christ is clear in the way that they join together to crucify him and break his bones.

By the end of the poem, the blackout has become a figure for the moral darkness engulfing the world: “Tonight in Europe and America / All lights are out.”²⁸ In this darkened world, the leaders pursue their own non-spiritual and anti-Christian pursuits: “our ruler follows his own Star,” the speaker says, and “Pretorians shake the Magi’s Star for gold.” In the final stanza, the speaker acknowledges his personal loss: “My child is dead upon the field of honor: / His blood has made the golden idol glimmer.” Clearly his values conflict since the very war that lines his coffers as a capitalist has cost him his child. Such conflicting values pervade this volume of poems. While Lowell acknowledges that the human propensity for violence is age old, he finds it intensified by the present war. Such violence, which is fueled by and feeds capitalistic greed, runs counter to the ideals of a Christian society that Lowell espouses.

Conscientious Objection

When Lowell finally received a letter from the draft board sometime in the summer of 1943, he seemed ready to comply. He wrote to his mother that he expected “to be examined (the 7th time) sometime in the next ten days. The chances are that I will be rejected on account of vision. However, there is no telling.”²⁹ That examination never came to pass. In another letter to her in August, he expected to be “inducted on September 8th.”³⁰ But, rather than reporting for induction, he wrote the president declining his offer to serve. He also wrote his mother to explain

²⁸ Lowell, *Poems*, 888.

²⁹ Lowell, *Letters*, 36.

³⁰ Lowell, *Letters*, 37.

that he does not ask her “to support or even in any way concern” herself with his ideas and to assure her that he has “taken the only course that was honorable for me.”³¹

In the Declaration of Personal Responsibility he sent to the president, Lowell explains his reasons for opposing the war and the principles that justify his refusal to participate in it. He begins by offering a rationale for making such a declaration: “Because we glory in the conviction that our wars are not won by irrational valor but through the exercise of moral responsibility, it is fitting for me to make the following declaration, which is also a decision.”³² He goes on to lay out several reasons for opposing the war.

Lowell’s primary objection is that since the war is no longer defensive, it is no longer a just war. Lowell makes it clear that he is not a pacifist, opposed to all war on principle. After Pearl Harbor, he explains, he felt the country was threatened, and he was willing to come to its aid (twice attempting to enlist); he was even willing to countenance what would “formerly have been termed atrocities” because he “judged that savagery was unavoidable in our nation’s struggle for its life against diabolic adversaries.”³³ What shifted Lowell’s attitude was the success of the Allied war effort; it had been so successful, in fact, that in his view the war was no longer defensive: “Today these adversaries are being rolled back on all fronts and the crisis of the war is past.”³⁴ Instead of these successes leading to peace, however, he says they are leading to further casualties: “In June we heard rumors of the staggering civilian casualties that had resulted from the mining of the Ruhr Dams. Three weeks ago we read of the razing of Hamburg, where 200,000 non-combatants are reported dead, after an almost apocalyptic series of all-out air

³¹ Lowell, *Letters*, 40.

³² Lowell, *Letters*, 38.

³³ Lowell, *Letters*, 38.

³⁴ Lowell, *Letters*, 38.

raids.”³⁵ He then adds that “this, in a world still nominally Christian, is *news*.”³⁶ Had these events been “isolated acts of military expediency,” Lowell might have countenanced them. Instead, they seem to mark the “inauguration of a new long-term strategy, endorsed and coordinated by our Chief Executive.”³⁷ This shift in military policy is what Lowell can no longer support because such actions “can by no possible extension of the meaning of the words be called defensive.”³⁸ In no longer being defensive, the war is no longer just, according to the teachings of the Catholic Church.

Catholic just-war theory provides a set of principles for determining whether the use of force is morally justified. The criteria fall into two broad categories: reasons for going to war (*ius ad bellum*) and guidelines for conducting war (*ius in bellum*). The theory provides six criteria for determining if going to war is morally justified: “They are: (1) just cause, (2) competent authority, (3) right intention, (4) last resort, (5) probability of success, and (6) proportionality.”³⁹ Throughout much of the twentieth century, including during World War II, the Church viewed the “sole justification for war” to be “defense against aggression.” Given these criteria, one can see why Lowell supported the war effort initially: The cause was just (defense of the nation after an attack), it was declared by a competent authority (the U.S.), and it was pursued with a “right intention” (the defense of its citizens and a restoration of peace). For Lowell, however, by 1943 the right intention had changed, since the war was no longer defensive.

If the U.S. no longer had just reasons for waging war, Lowell also believed its means of conducting the war violated just-war guidelines. One of these guidelines was that a just war must

³⁵ Lowell, *Letters*, 38-39.

³⁶ Lowell, *Letters*, 39.

³⁷ Lowell, *Letters*, 39.

³⁸ Lowell, *Letters*, 39.

³⁹ R. A. McCormick and D. Christiansen, *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “War, Morality of.”

be “waged by methods capable of making distinctions between combatants and noncombatants,”⁴⁰ which was clearly not the case in the examples Lowell cites of civilian casualties. A second guideline was that to be just, a war must give “reasonable promise of creating a situation morally better after the war than before the war.”⁴¹ In Lowell’s view that had ceased to be the case. The war, he claims, has entered a new and “unforeseen phase” reflecting a policy of unconditional surrender which he believes will cause irrevocable damage: “By demanding an unconditional surrender we reveal our complete confidence in the outcome, and declare that we are prepared to wage a war without quarter or principles, to the permanent destruction of Germany and Japan.”⁴² As to the long-term effects of such a military strategy, America could not “plead ignorance,” since “our Southern States three quarters of a century after their terrible battering down and occupation, are still far from having recovered even their material prosperity.”⁴³ This understanding of the South was likely reinforced by the influence of his southern-born grandmother to whom he wrote: “You know more about American history than I do and can certainly judge whether our recent actions in this war are justifiable. I think only a Southerner can realize the horrors of a merciless conquest.”⁴⁴

Lowell argues further that such a policy is bad for the future of the U.S. and the world. To him, a program of complete destruction of Germany and Japan would result in a worsened geo-political situation. The destruction would “demonstrate to the world our Machiavellian contempt for the laws of justice and charity between nations,”⁴⁵ and it would “leave China and Europe, the two natural power centers of the future, to the mercy of the USSR, a totalitarian

⁴⁰ Sibley and Jacob, *Conscription*, 30.

⁴¹ Sibley and Jacob, *Conscription*, 30.

⁴² Sibley and Jacob, *Conscription*, 39.

⁴³ Sibley and Jacob, *Conscription*, 39.

⁴⁴ Lowell, *Letters*, 41.

⁴⁵ Lowell, *Letters*, 39-40.

tyranny committed to world revolution and total global domination through propaganda and violence.”⁴⁶ While the war may have begun as a just defense of the nation against the “lawless aggressions of a totalitarian league,” it has ceased being so and has, instead, become an act of collaboration with “the most unscrupulous and powerful of totalitarian dictators to destroy law, freedom, democracy, and above all, our continued national sovereignty.”⁴⁷

While Lowell states his objections clearly, one may wonder why he believes it falls on him as an individual to judge the war effort. Here he is guided by Church teaching and patriotic duty. In the Church’s view the “individual Roman Catholic was to interpret in each instance whether any particular war was ‘just.’”⁴⁸ Further, as Lowell explains in his Declaration, evaluating the morality of the war effort is not only his right but also his duty as a citizen. The “fundamental principle” that distinguishes “our American Democracy” from the “demagoguery and herd hypnosis of totalitarian tyrannies,” he writes, is that “each individual citizen is called upon to make voluntary and responsible decisions on issues which concern the national welfare.” Consequently, Lowell finds himself “under the heavy obligation of assenting to the prudence and justice of our present objectives before I have a right to accept service in our armed forces.” While it might be “expedient” to “entrust” his “moral responsibility to the State,” Lowell concludes that such an action is “not permissible under a form of government which derives its sanctions from the rational assent of the governed.”⁴⁹ Having determined, then, that a policy that would result in the permanent destruction of Germany and Japan is not only unjust but also against the national welfare, Lowell exercises his duty as a citizen by withholding his assent to the current war effort. In fact, he sees his dissent as a patriotic duty and concludes, “I cannot

⁴⁶ Lowell, *Letters*, 40.

⁴⁷ Lowell, *Letters*, 40.

⁴⁸ Sibley and Jacob, *Conscription*, 30.

⁴⁹ Sibley and Jacob, *Conscription*, 39.

honorably participate in a war whose prosecution, as far as I can judge, constitutes a betrayal of my country.”⁵⁰

Prison and Parole

Having decided not to serve, Lowell did not show up at the induction center and as a result was arraigned a month later on October 11, 1943. That afternoon he wrote to his friend Peter Taylor explaining that for the past month he had been “treated with a most alarming courtesy. No one has questioned my sincerity. Bail has been waived.”⁵¹ After his sentencing he figured he would “certainly go to jail, but possibly for a very short time, a matter of weeks. Or maybe it will be longer; I really don’t know what’s up.”⁵² To his grandmother he wrote that he had been talking to his priest in New York and to the priest who baptized him: “They are both very shrewd and experienced men. They are also very good men. They have told me to *follow my conscience and trust in God*. I have prayed for light and tried to persuade myself I was mistaken; I cannot.”⁵³ He knows he will have to go to jail, but adds that “there is good reason to hope that in a short time I shall be transferred to the medical corps or to an objectors’ camp.”⁵⁴ Lowell did not end up in the medical corps or an objectors’ camp; instead, after ten days in the West Street jail, he was transferred to the Federal Correctional Center in Danforth, Connecticut.

It is valuable to see Lowell’s imprisonment in context of conscientious objection throughout the war. Of the roughly ten million men ordered to report for the draft, only about

⁵⁰ Sibley and Jacob, *Conscription*, 40.

⁵¹ Lowell, *Letters*, 42.

⁵² Lowell, *Letters*, 42.

⁵³ Lowell, *Letters*, 43.

⁵⁴ Lowell, *Letters*, 43.

43,000 were CO's (less than half of one percent).⁵⁵ What happened to these men depended on their actions and the nature of their convictions. About 25,000 joined the military but only to serve in non-combatant positions. Another 12,000, those who opposed any form of military service, performed "alternative service," mainly with the Civilian Public Service, which had 150 camps throughout the U.S., or in hospitals, especially mental institutions. Some 6,000 individuals went to prison; these were generally individuals who had refused to report for induction.⁵⁶ Lowell was one of 3,585 selective service violators received into federal prisons in the fiscal year ending June 30, 1944. Of these 251 were conscientious objectors, 1,735 were Jehovah's Witnesses, and 1,599 were listed as Other (most of these were willful violators of the law, seeking to evade the draft as opposed to those governed by reasons of conscience).⁵⁷ For Lowell's year, the numbers were split between those imprisoned for reasons of religious belief and conscience and those evading the draft. Over the course of the war, according to cases reviewed by the President's Amnesty Board, nearly two thirds of those convicted were "willful violators"⁵⁸ seeking to evade the draft.

Lowell's fellow prisoners included all types. The conscientious objectors were mostly members of the historic peace churches along with some who belonged to other denominations (including a small number of Catholics) and some for political and ethical reasons. Lowell recalls meeting one such individual during his brief stay at West Street jail. Named Abramowitz, this inmate was a "fly-weight pacifist" and "so vegetarian" he "wore rope shoes and preferred fallen fruit."⁵⁹ When he tried to convert other inmates to his diet, he was beaten "black and blue."

⁵⁵ Patricia McNeal, "Catholic Conscientious Objection during World War II," *The Catholic Historical Review* 61:2 (April 1975): 232. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25019675> (accessed November 25, 2013).

⁵⁶ McNeal, "Catholic," 231-232.

⁵⁷ Sibley and Jacob, *Conscription*, 498.

⁵⁸ Sibley and Jacob, *Conscription*, 507.

⁵⁹ Lowell, *Poems*, 187.

Lowell also met a Jehovah's Witness, a "J.W.," though he admits to being "so out of things" he had "never heard / of the Jehovah's Witnesses."⁶⁰ While not pacifists strictly speaking, the Jehovah's Witnesses refused to recognize the sovereignty of the state or to support state-sponsored war. They made up the largest percentage of prisoners of conscience.

While some have estimated that as many as one sixth of the prisoners during World War II were prisoners of conscience,⁶¹ that left plenty of ordinary criminals. A fellow CO recalls Lowell meeting one such prisoner, Louis Lepke a czar of Murder Incorporated. When introduced to Lowell, Lepke allegedly said, "I'm in for killing. What are you in for?" to which Lowell replied, "Oh, I'm in for refusing to kill."⁶²

Many of those imprisoned were released early on parole. Such was the case for Lowell. After five months at Danforth he was paroled to a "tiny old nun' at St. Vincent's Hospital in Bridgeport."⁶³ He and Stafford rented an apartment in Black Rock and each morning he reported by 7:00 a.m. to the Army cadet nurses' dormitory where he mopped floors.⁶⁴ He continued in this work until he completed his sentence on October 15, 1944. In November, he was "classified as 'limited service'" because of his eyesight, which meant that he would be called to serve only in the event of a "great catastrophe" and that he "would not have to go back to prison, or even have to serve as a non-combatant in the medical corps."⁶⁵

In the years after the war, Lowell eventually left the Church and was also diagnosed as being bi-polar. These experiences stand behind his ironic assessment of his war-time self and actions: "I was a fire-breathing Catholic C.O., / and made my manic statement / telling off the

⁶⁰ Lowell, *Poems*, 188.

⁶¹ McNeal, "Catholic," 232.

⁶² Mariani, *Lost*, 109.

⁶³ Mariani, *Lost*, 114.

⁶⁴ Mariani, *Lost*, 114.

⁶⁵ Mariani, *Lost*, 120.

state and the president.”⁶⁶ Despite his fear that his religious zeal may have been a symptom of his illness, he remained firm that his reasons for refusing service were related to Church teaching. In a 1969 interview with the novelist, V.S. Naipaul, Lowell explained, “I was a Roman Catholic at the time, and we had a very complicated idea of what was called the “unjust war.””⁶⁷

Robert Lowell stands as an example of the right and responsibility of the individual citizen to follow the dictates of conscience, in his case a conscience informed by religious principle. Certainly, he was not alone in this struggle. While his views may have differed from those of other conscientious objectors, he shared their struggle to preserve liberty. Nor were they the only ones engaged in that struggle. If World War II was fought in large part to preserve the United States from external threats to its freedom, the United States also had to fight to preserve freedom at home: the freedom of the individual conscience, informed by religious belief, to grant or withhold its consent to the state.

⁶⁶ Lowell, *Poems*, 187.

⁶⁷ Mariani, *Lost*, 106.