

The Return of Robert Lowell

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--Tamed by *Miltown*, we lie on mother's bed;
the rising sun in war paint dyes us red;
in broad daylight her gilded bed-posts shine,
abandoned, almost Dionysian.

--"Man and Wife"

Who can forget the shock waves generated by these lines, appearing in a slim book called *Life Studies* in 1959? For me, the memory is very much alive: 1959 was the year my second daughter was born and I was having a hard time of it. Two children under the age of three, very little help, a physician husband who was rarely home, endless Gerber meals to serve, piles of baby clothes to take down to the building's laundry room, and—perhaps worst of all—the conversations with Other Mothers in the playground that revolved around things like the parsley sale at the Giant supermarket. I never seemed to get enough sleep and on rare occasions I even took one of the then-new tranquilizers like Equanil, whose trade name was Miltown. Thus, in the rare moments snatched for "serious" reading, it seemed amazing to come across a poem so "authentically" depicting the poet and his wife, not as lovers but as a sedated pair, lying, not even on their own bed but, incongruously, on "mother's"—a bed where the only Dionysian "abandon" is that of the gilded bedposts. What a fitting emblem

of what the neighboring poem, "Memories of West Street and Lepke," called "the tranquillized *Fifties*"!

I was marking time waiting to go back to graduate school, and modern poetry was my subject. By 1959, Frank O'Hara had published *Meditations in an Emergency*, John Ashbery, *Some Trees*, Allen Ginsberg, *Howl!*, and Lorine Niedecker, *New Goose*, but I was familiar with none of them. At Catholic University in Washington, where I was studying, indeed on the academic scene in general, contemporary poetry meant Richard Wilbur and Howard Nemerov, Randall Jarrell and Babette Deutsch. No wonder, then, that those devastating portraits of Lowell's relatives and fellow mental hospital inmates, written in casual diction and free verse, seemed so striking:

I was so out of things, I'd never heard
of the Jehovah's Witnesses.
"Are you a C.O.?" I asked a fellow jailbird.
"No," he answered, "I'm a J.W."
He taught me the "hospital tuck."

Could poetry really be this off-hand? This self-deprecating and humorous? I was hooked.

Lord Weary's Castle (1946), Lowell's second book, ¹which I turned to next, had many of the same traits, despite the heavy overlay of liturgical and Biblical imagery and self-conscious literary allusion. Take the opening of "Colloquy at Black Rock," written when Lowell was serving out his work-time as a conscientious objector in World War II:

Here the jack-hammer jabs into the ocean;
My heart, you race and stagger and demand
More blood-gangs for your nigger-brass percussions,
Till I the stunned machine of your devotion,
Clanging upon this cymbal of a hand,
Am rattled screw and footloose. All discussions

End in the mud-flat detritus of death.

The daring metaphor in this stanza equates the jackhammer's grinding of rock to pulp and mud on the coast at Black Rock with the overcharged heart's threatening to explode the "stunned machine" of the human body. But what made this scene of dissolution, leading up to the anticipation of apocalypse, seem so remarkable to a reader of the late fifties was the stanza's sound structure, specifically, the way the caesura, seven syllables into the sixth line throws heavy emphasis on the rhyme "percussions"/ "discussions," the hiss of "discussions" thus pushing the enjambed line across the stanza break, so that attention is forced on the awful realization that all such discussions "End in the mud-flat detritus of death." According to Bidart and Gewanter's Notes, "T. S. Eliot (Lowell's editor at Faber) was bothered by 'detritus,' which makes this a four-beat line," but I found --and continue to find--the sound structure perfect: the repetition of stops-- voiced in the *d*'s in *end* and *mud* and voiceless in the harsh *t*'s of "flat detritus"-- enact phonemically the very transformation of "*detritus*" into its sound echo, "*death*." And further, the verb that opens the line becomes noun: the *end*, it seems, is inevitable.

Given such amazing aural and syntactic skill, one didn't worry too much about what the lines actually *said*, or that the poet's apocalyptic vision (Lowell became a Catholic in 1942 and left the Church in 1948) often seemed more willed than felt. Then, too, one tried to ignore such embarrassing locutions as "More blood-gangs for your nigger-brass percussions"--a line that not only exploits the tired conjunction of brass bands with black jazz musicians but also personifies the blood circulating through the heart as black chain gangs. Lowell seems to have derived such baroque locutions from one of his masters, Hart Crane,² but they add nothing to the metaphor of the self as "stunned machine of your devotion."

Rhetoric, however, carried the day. Look at the last four lines of "The Quaker Graveyard at Nantucket:

When the Lord God formed man from the sea's slime

And breathed into his face the breath of life,
And blue-lung'd combers lumbered to the kill.
The Lord survives the rainbow of His will.

No sooner has the world been created than violence and destruction hover in the wings. Those "blue-lung'd combers"—literally the waves beating on the Nantucket shore, but also the fish washed up by the waves and perhaps a reference to beachcombers, "lumber[ing] to the kill" of innocent victims-- come across as deeply sinister, especially given the ugly soundscape—or more properly soundscape-- of *b's, l's, and u's* in "*blúe-lûng'd cómbers lúmbered.*" In the light of such menace, the apocalyptic conclusion is triumphant. Its measured iambic pentameter-- "The Lórd survíves the ráinbow ófhis wíll"—culminates in the clinching rhyme "kill"/"will," which seems to provide perfect closure for Lowell's elegy.

Or does it? The poem's last line does not withstand much scrutiny: of course God survives his willed Covenant with Noah. How could it be otherwise, and what comfort can we take in the notion that God "survives" man's suffering and hopes? But one reads (and especially hears) these iambic pentameters without asking too many questions. It is their rhetoric that counts: the move here from the familiarity of the creation myth— "When the Lord God formed man from the sea's slime / And breathed into his face the breath of life"—to the ominous tone of "And blue-lung'd combers lumbered to the kill," and the authoritative conclusion. After the horrors of World War II, as seen through the lens of *Moby-Dick*, *Paradise Lost*, and *The Book of Revelation*, after the inscrutable and remote transcendence of "Our Lady of Walsingham," it seems, in the elegy's final lines, as if somehow the death of Warren Winslow, dead at sea in World War II, has been atoned for.

Rereading *Lord Weary's Castle* in the new monumental *Collected Poems* thus remains a distinct pleasure, however clotted the volume's imagery and mixed its metaphors. Today, when "poetry" generally means slack free verse, its lineation arbitrary and its diction flat and often

redundant, even the lesser poems in *Lord Weary's Castle* look impressive. "The Exile's Return," for example, which is the first poem in the volume, arranges its dense images, drawn from Thomas Mann's great short story "Tonio Kröger," in a tightly orchestrated sound structure:

There mounts in squalls a sort of rusty mire,
Not ice, nor snow, to leaguer the Hôtel
de Ville, where braced pig-iron dragons grip
The blizzard to their rigor mortis

Lowell's use of the pathetic fallacy, here and elsewhere, is perhaps too heavy-handed: mental anguish is always figured as rusty mire, blizzards, mudflats, detritus—the "unforgivable landscape," as Lowell calls it in the last line of a later poem, "The Mouth of the Hudson." But the sophistication of his technique still makes me marvel: take, for example, the ending of "The Exile's Return," which moves seamlessly from the colloquial interjection, "Pleasant enough," to the inscription over the Gate of Hell in Dante's *Inferno*, warning "Voi ch'entrate" to abandon all hope, followed by the reminder that "your life is in your hands."

The corollary to Lowell's early rhetorical brilliance—and it persists through *For the Union Dead* (1964)—is *memorability*. Lowell is one of the few poets of the postwar period whose verses are easy to memorize. The combination of insistent iambic pentameter with elaborate rhyme scheme, the lines locked together by harsh, guttural sounds and various internal dissonances, ensures memorability even when the meaning of a given passage is elusive. "Beyond the Alps,"³ for example, begins on an informal note:

Reading how even the Swiss had thrown the sponge
in once again, and Everest was still
unscaled, I watched our Paris Pullman lunge,
mooning across the fallow Alpine snow—

Even here, all lines but the first are fairly regular iambic pentameters, and the stanza has an intricate rhyme scheme and internal rhyme, as in

"fallow"/"Alpine." But caesurae and enjambment break what would otherwise be a sing-song pattern, carrying us along to the poem's striking conclusion:

Now Paris, our black classic, breaking up
Like killer kings on an Etruscan cup.

This final couplet is puzzling: why is Paris "our black classic" and what does it have in common with the shards of black-figure pottery found in Etruscan tombs? Has Paris also fallen to pieces? Is its secular "black" a contrast to the priestly "red" of Rome? No one, so far as I know, has given a satisfactory explanation of the phrase "black classic," but it really doesn't matter, for the couplet makes for a wonderfully ominous ending to a poem that announces the poet's difficult turn from Rome and his youthful Catholicism to the new uneasy secularism represented by Paris. The odd seven-fold repetition of the *k* phoneme ("black classic" "killer kings," "Etruscan cup"), coupled with the ugly rhyme "up"/"cup," has the force of total assertion: here, the poem seems to say, is the way it is, the way it is now going to be. And one recites the lines with pleasure.

In the later *Life Studies* poems, where rhymes are often introduced, as in the opening stanza of "Commander Lowell" ("There were no undesirables or girls in my set, / when I was a boy at Mattapoisett"), only to be dropped further along, the insistent iambic pentameter acts as mnemonic device:

/ / /
Whenever he left a job,
/ / /
He bought a smarter car—

These "writings as an aid to memory," to use Lyn Hejinian's phrase, were as alien to Lowell's contemporaries as they were to later poets. Williams, whom Lowell revered, studiously avoided such closural effects, and Pound, in the *Pisan Cantos*, roughly contemporary with *Lord Weary's Castle*, invented

a music more dissonant and dislocated, even as visual prosody was central to his enterprise. In contemporary poetry, the emphasis on layout and page design—witness Susan Howe’s complex configurations--or on purposely “prosaic” irregular rhythms, as in Jorie Graham or John Ashbery, has produced a poetry that all but defies memorization: try to memorize Ashbery’s “Houseboat Days” or “Clepsydra” and you’ll see what I mean.

But for Lowell mnemonics *mattered*, his memorable passages often culminating in the telling, revelatory image, as in “The corpse / was wrapped in *panettone* like Italian tinfoil,” or “We are all old timers, / each of us holds a locked razor.” The *frisson* attendant on such “authenticity” ensured Lowell’s standing with a larger public than most of his fellow poets could claim. The only comparable poet of witness was Allen Ginsberg, whose long, clotted lines were similarly quoted in the press and could be committed to memory, as in the the opening of “Howl”:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving
hysterical naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an
angry fix. . . .

But then Ginsberg’s affiliations—gay, Jewish, Beat, politically radical—could never match Lowell’s when it came to the audience of, say, *Time* magazine, which ran a cover story on the poet in 1967. Lowell’s glamorous trajectory—Mayflower descendant and Boston blueblood turned “fire-breathing Catholic C.O.,” mental patient, and prophetic witness to the March of Events-- earned him the epithet “outstanding American poet of his generation” (see Ian Hamilton’s biography), even as the period was dubbed, “The Age of Lowell” in a 1965 essay by Irvin Ehrenpreis. And although recent critics, reviewing the monumental *Collected Poems*, have noted that after Lowell’s death in 1977 his reputation faded for a time, they have continued to use epithets similar to Hamilton’s. Thus, in his review of the *Collected Poems* for *TLS*, Adam Kirsch goes so far as to open his essay with

the declaration that "Robert Lowell was one of the three or four greatest American poets of the twentieth century." "Lowell," writes Helen Vendler in *The New Republic* (28 July-August 4, 2003), "is the only one of our postwar poets to sustain a lifelong critique of America as a political and military nation."⁴ And in the press, Lowell is now frequently referred to as "our last great public poet."

The issue is less whether these judgments are accurate than why Lowell's work seems to prompt such sweeping assertions. Can we really designate any one poet as "the outstanding poet of his generation"? One of the three or four greatest American poets of the century? The only poet who has consistently produced a "critique of America as a political and military nation"? In a post-canonical age, like ours, when the most diverse communities compete for public attention, such large claims do not seem the best way to speak of poets or of artists or intellectuals in general--the age belonging to no one person or even one group.

Indeed, Lowell's oeuvre raises the issue of public versus private in a particularly compelling way, the paradox being that a poet originally labeled the *chef d'école* of confessional poets came to be praised as the foremost public one, only to lose his appeal on both fronts as a very different conception of poetry took center stage. Was it Lowell's poetry that changed or was it the poetry-reading public? And can the original enthusiasm for that poetry be recaptured today?

Beyond Rhetoric

In his brief afterword to the *Collected Poems*, Frank Bidart writes:

Because Robert Lowell is widely, perhaps indelibly associated with the term "confessional," it seems appropriate and even necessary to discuss how "confessional" poetry is not confession. How Lowell's candor is an illusion created by art. He always insisted that his so-called confessional poems were in significant ways invented. The power aimed at in *Life Studies* is the result not of accuracy but the illusion of accuracy, the result of arrangement and invention.

Here Bidart is merely following Lowell's own in his well-known 1961 *Paris Review* interview, cited in the afterword itself, in which the poet insists that, "There's a good deal of tinkering with fact . . . and the whole balance of the poem was something invented," but "the reader was to believe he was getting the *real* Robert Lowell."

There is something curiously beside the point in Bidart's apology for the confessional mode, taking up, as it does, the bulk of the afterword to such an enormous volume of poems. For surely, in 2003, the turning of autobiography into art seems merely standard practice. From the "personism" of Frank O'Hara, whose poems often document specific lovers' quarrels or ecstatic reunions, to Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*, Rae Armantrout's *The Pretext*, or Susan Howe's recent *The Midnight*, an elegy for her mother Mary Manning written as a complex memory collage, poets and artists have been showing that "the illusion of accuracy" is "the result of arrangement and invention."

Indeed, it is not the confessional mode that is Lowell's problem; on the contrary, he is at his best in the small personal poems like "Terminal Days at Beverly Farms" or "Night Sweat." In "Eye and Tooth," for example, Lowell assumes the role of Rimaldian *voyant*, regarding his own actions from the perspective of "*Je est un autre*." The poem takes as its subject a common enough injury: a scratched cornea. Lowell's momentary blindness triggers a set of memories of seeing and not-seeing, of voyeurism and incomprehension, and the cut eye becomes a symbol of his much more serious pain, which is mental. In the end, however, he knows he must distance himself:

Nothing! No oil
For the eye, nothing to pour
On those waters or flames.
I am tired. Everyone's tired of my turmoil.

That last sentence is a kind of Lowell signature: the moment of wry self-recognition (as in "I'm the one who's being a pain!), capped by the brilliant paragrammatic rhyme "oil"/ "turmoil."

In such instances, the poet charms us by his refusal to indulge in self-pity. But there are other moments—and they became increasingly frequent in the course of his career—when Lowell wanted more than autobiography, wanted to write a poetry of witness, of cultural commentary and political assessment. Unfortunately, this aspiration was fueled by his growing contact with the rich and famous—with people able to respond to his savvy political one-liners. As early as *Life Studies*, he wrote a poem called "Inauguration Day: January 1953," which pronounces that "Our wheels no longer move," that "the fixed stars all just alike / as lack-land atoms, split apart" (a reference, of course, to the threat of nuclear warfare). Having referred, earlier in the poem, to Grant's Tomb, Lowell concludes that "the Republic summons Ike, / the mausoleum in the heart." There is no meaningful comparison made between the two generals-turned-presidents, nor does the poem provide any sort of assessment of Dwight D. Eisenhower. No, the mere mention of *Ike* is evidently calculated to arouse "our" contempt—"we" being those who voted for Adlai Stevenson. Fifty years later, when Eisenhower is generally viewed as one of the US's most popular presidents, and most young people don't even know who Stevenson was, the denigration of "Ike" here seems like an empty gesture, a nod to Insiders.

Even "Skunk Hour," probably Lowell's most famous poem and the one Bidart singles out as paradigmatic of the confessional mode, displays an uneasy relationship between public and private. "Skunk Hour," Bidart claims, "dramatizes perhaps for the first time in the history of the lyric, the moment when the mind sees, acknowledges its insanity: 'My mind's not right'." Given this condition, the "mother skunk" who "will not scare" stands for "the poet's "consciousness [that] has not 'scared' before experience,

before events in the poet's life that poetry traditionally has found impossible to handle as fact, as autobiography. Like the skunks, the poet surveys, is kept alive by, feeds on the fallen world that he is and has found."

The first claim is wholly unfounded: the history of the lyric is full of poems that anticipate the Lowellian "moment when the mind sees . . . its insanity," from William Cowper's "The Cast-away" and Hölderlin's "Hälfte des Lebens" ("Half of Life") to Emily Dickinson's "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" and Georg Trakl's "Untergang" ("Decline"). More important: to read "Skunk Hour" as the mind's process of acknowledging its madness is to ignore the first half of the poem, in which Lowell describes, in logical sequence, three persons emblematic of the blight on the decaying Maine village—a blight that is revealed, in the poem's second half, to pervade his entire world and that is summed up in the line: "A red fox stain covers Blue Hill."

Lowell readers will remember the famous discussion of "Skunk Hour" in Anthony Ostroff's *The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic*,⁵ a set of eight symposia in each of which three poets discuss a short poem by a fourth, who then responds briefly to their analyses. In the case of "Skunk Hour," the three were Richard Wilbur, John Frederick Nims, and John Berryman, and, despite some argument about the significance of the skunks, their readings mostly concur with one another as well as with Lowell's own account of the poem. The first four stanzas, it is argued, constitute a unit that sets the stage for the poet's own Dark Night: the three characters—"hermit/heiress," "summer millionaire," and "fairy decorator"--symbolize three related aspects of the decline of the Maine village, which was once a thriving and elegant little New England seaport. The heiress, who "buys up all / the eyesores facing her shore, / and lets them fall," represents the town's recent past; "her behavior," writes Wilbur, "is anti-social, selfish, regressive, and life-denying." The "summer millionaire," a "conspicuous consumer who looked, when alive, like a sporting-goods dummy, and whose

death is a blow to the summer resort's economy and distinction," is an equally absurd figure. And finally (stanza 4), we have, according to Wilbur, the contemporary scene, "where fishnet, bench and awl are denatured and trivialized by a homosexual decorator, who represents the town's new economy." So inauthentic is this "fairy" that he wants to marry for money, thus betraying his proclivities (pp. 85-86).

Nims and Berryman provide similar interpretations. In his response, Lowell endorses all three, although he tries to endow the stanzas with a less sinister air: "The first four stanzas are meant to give a dawdling, more or less amiable picture of a declining Maine sea town. I move from the ocean inland. Sterility howls through the scenery, but I try to give a tone of tolerance, humor, and randomness to the sad prospect" (107). But it is notable that the three poet-readers say nothing about this purported "tolerance" and "humor." "The three figures," says Berryman, "on their descending scale, are fruitless. The useful put just to decoration (fishnet), deprived of function, looks on to the poet's fear. . . . Outworn, gone, queer; analogous figures, tangential all—the first *having been* central, the second having mattered to local revenue. . . . their quiet, insistent mustering of the *facts* of an extant world opens toward the danger of its being swept away, into delirium" (102-03). And so the stage is set for the poet's "one dark night." Like Wilbur and Nims, Berryman praises the brilliant rhetoric of these stanzas, with their decisive line breaks (e.g. "hermit/heiress"), their telling rhymes ("cottage", "village", "dotage"), their economical description ("Thirsting for/ the hierarchic privacy / of Queen Victoria's century") and their muted irony ("there is no money in his work, / he'd rather marry").

The care Lowell's fellow poets lavish on their analyses of his lines is remarkable: who today would expend such effort? But what none of the three poets seems to notice is the undertone of elitism, snobbery, and homophobia in the passage. Lowell, it is argued, begins in a low key,

cataloguing the absurd, meaningless activities of others before he can zero in on his own malaise. But what others? The “hermit / heiress” who is “in her dotage” represents Old Money—money no longer useful to the community. “Her son’s a bishop,” which evidently means that she has no grandchildren who might inherit those “eyesores” she “buys up.” The “summer millionaire” is of course an outsider in the community; he does not *belong* here but only comes for short holidays, a parvenu, looked down upon by the Maine gentry. As for the decorator, it is not only assumed that decorators are “fairies,” but further that being gay is synonymous with sterility and absurdity. The fairy perverts life by turning the fisherman’s net and the cobbler’s bench into mere trinkets.

Nowhere in the second half of the poem does Lowell imply that this jaundiced picture of eccentric old ladies, nouveau riche summer visitors, and gay decorators, should be qualified.⁶ Indeed, the repeated use of the first-person plural suggests that the poet regards his neighbors with the bemusement that comes with a feeling of natural superiority. The heiress’s farmer is “first selectman in *our* village,” “we’ve lost *our* summer millionaire,” even as “*our* fairy / decorator brightens his shop for fall.” In the poem’s last stanza, the “I” stands “on top / of *our* back steps.” The little Maine town, it seems, belongs to *us* and is being destroyed by *them*, thus hastening the poet’s descent into madness. And who are we? Evidently those who have inherited property here but avoid ostentation, those who are “normal” sexually and live with their families in old houses in villages still dominated by “the chalk-dry and spar spire / of the Trinitarian Church” at their center. But now the skunks are taking over the “back steps” and “will not scare.” It is a frightening prospect.

Later critical discussion of “Skunk Hour” has concentrated chiefly on the skunks themselves—is their symbolism positive or negative or both?—and hence little attention has been paid to the condescending tone of

the poem's first half. It took a playful Frank O'Hara to remark, as he did in a 1965 interview, that "Lowell has . . . a confessional manner which [lets him] get away with things that are really just plain bad but you're supposed to be interested because he's supposed to be so upset." And he continues, now referring to "Skunk Hour,"

I don't think that anyone has to get themselves to go and watch lovers in a parking lot [see stanzas 5 and 6] necking in order to write a poem, and I don't see why it's admirable if they feel guilty about it. They should feel guilty. Why are they snooping? What's so wonderful about a Peeping Tom? And then if you liken them to skunks putting their noses into garbage pails, you've just done something perfectly revolting. No matter what the metrics are. And the metrics aren't all that unusual. Every other person in any university in the United States could put that thing into metrics.⁷

O'Hara is purposely playing the Bad Boy here, thumbing his nose at the Famous Poet from the vantage point of his own marginalized position in the early sixties. But despite the clowning (and the mistaken denigration of Lowell's metrics), O'Hara is on to something important. Lowell's worst tendency, he implies--and I would concur--is to generalize from the particular, to find universal "meaning" in situations that are quite moving enough in their own right. The bulk of *Life Studies*, with its self-and family portraits, is funny, warm, Chekhovian in its use of detail, and intimately self-deprecating: "Cured, I am frizzled, stale, and small." But when, as in "Skunk Hour," Lowell tries to make his own malaise representative of the larger condition of an America in decline, a civilization run down and given to capitalist greed, he falters.

The situation is exacerbated in such public poems as "For the Union Dead."⁸ Again, this is, at one level, a perfect New Critical Poem, with every word and phrase carefully chosen to set up tensions and complex ironies. Thus the "dark downward and vegetating kingdom / of the fish and reptile" of the child's pre-rational universe has given way to "yellow dinosaur steamshovels . . . grunting / as they cropped up tons of mush and grass / to

gouge their underworld garage." The "airy" fish tank of the old South Boston Aquarium has been replaced by a more sinister enclosure: the "cage" made by the "new barbed and galvanized / fence" around the Boston Common. Again, to carry on the animal metaphor, Colonel Shaw, the emblem of a bygone New England heroism, "has an angry wrenlike vigilance, / a greyhound's gentle tautness." The mindless fish swimming aimlessly in their tank are contrasted to St. Gaudens' monument to Shaw, which "sticks like a fishbone / in the city's throat," but because its lessons are ignored, the poem's final vision is of Boston as a new Inferno, where "giant finned cars nose forward like fish." Even the New England pumpkins have been replaced by "A girdle of orange, Puritan-pumpkin colored girders / [that] brace the tingling Statehouse." And so on.

Lowell's interweaving of these images is masterly in its indictment of the debased present, where the "sparse, sincere rebellion" of the "old white churches" of New England has been wholly put down. The present is all crass commercialism and mechanized destruction. Indeed, the "ditch" where Shaw's body lay unceremoniously "with his 'niggers'" has become much more ominous. Here is the poem's climax:

The ditch is nearer.
There are no statues for the last war here;
on Boyston Street, a commercial photograph
shows Hiroshima boiling

over a Mosler Safe, the "Rock of Ages"
that survived the blast.

For at least a decade after its publication, "For the Union Dead" was hailed by critics as a major public poem, dramatizing the evils of Cold War America. Instead of the St. Gaudens monument or even the Boston State House, our only "Rock of Ages" is the Mosler Safe, the emblem of capitalist avarice and the commercial concerns that have replaced Shaw's heroism and St.

Gauden's art. And of course the Mosler Safe is not really "safe," since "Hiroshima boiling," mindlessly displayed in the commercial photograph above it, is a threat to all of us who live in the nuclear age. Hence Shaw is "out of bounds now" and "the ditch is nearer." The poem concludes:

The Aquarium is gone. Everywhere,
giant finned cars nose forward like fish;
a savage servility
slides by on grease.

Here again are those perfect ironies Lowell mastered in his earlier volumes: fish versus giant finned cars, service (like Colonel's Shaw's) versus servility, life-giving water versus grease. What an indictment of our postwar culture with its building booms and bulldozers! The only hopeful note comes from the "Negro school-children," whose "drained faces" as seen by the poet, "crouch[ing]" in front of his television set, "rise like balloons" (a reference to the Civil Rights Movement then in its inception); their future at least might be brighter than those of the poor "niggers" who served in Colonel Shaw's regiment. But how or why even these children will escape the "garage's earthquake" that threatens an entire society is not made clear.

In California, where I have been teaching since the late seventies, "For the Union Dead" never quite caught on. Here, after all, the automobile is a simple necessity of life. Innocent students are likely to ask, "Why does Lowell disapprove of those who drive cars? Why is theirs a "savage servility"? And this inevitably leads to such further questions as "Why is it a sign of moral decay to build an underground garage beneath the Boston Common? How *were* the members of the then growing work force, many of whom faced a long commute, to get to work downtown?"

Such questions, naïve as they may sound, raise important issues. "The ditch is nearer" is one of those lines that sounds profound, but what does it really mean? Was the ditch really nearer for the millions freed from the Nazis at the end of World War II? Or was their future just beginning?

Again, the declaration that “There are no statues for the last war here” is questionable. The monuments for the last war, most people would now say, are the concentration camps themselves—Dachau and Buchenwald, Auschwitz and Belsen. Or the Holocaust museums around the world like Daniel Libeskind’s new Jewish Museum in Berlin. Or the Holocaust narratives like Primo Levi’s *The Drowned and the Saved* and Marcel Ophuls’s great film *The Sorrow and the Pity*. It turns out, moreover, that there were many “heroes” of World War II at least as notable as Colonel Shaw: for example, Samuel Beckett, who could have easily sat out the war in his native neutral Ireland but instead risked his life every day, fighting in the French Resistance.

“Everywhere / giant finned cars nose forward like fish”: these gorgeously alliterating lines, which virtually hiss out their harsh fricatives, have been deservedly praised. But it is a metaphor that won’t withstand much scrutiny, for, beyond its surface rhetoric, it embodies no more than the familiar Luddite complaint against the very notion of industrial and technological progress. The poem thus asks us to accept as public truth something that is perhaps more accurately understood as its author’s private phantasmagoria. The “unforgivable landscape” is not that of postwar Boston; it is Lowell’s own.

Visions and Revisions

What, then, of Frank Bidart’s new edition? The *Collected Poems* weighs in at three pounds and 1186 pages. If we subtract the 180 or so pages of notes, glossary, chronology, bibliography, and index, the volume has 1,000 pages of poems. These include two appendices that contain the following: *Land of Unlikeness* (1944), Lowell’s first book of poems which he never wished to reprint (many of the poems appear in revised form in *Lord Weary’s Castle*), translations from Anna Akhmatova and Osip Mandelstam,

magazine versions of selected poems like "Beyond the Alps" and "Waking Early Sunday Morning," two sequences of sonnets from *Notebook 1967-68*, which is omitted in the *Collected* in favor of the revised versions of these sonnets found in *History, For Lizzie and Harriet*, and *The Dolphin*, uncollected poems, and poems in manuscript. If we subtract the appendices, over 800 pages of poems drawn from Lowell's individual volumes of poetry remain. The Lowell oeuvre, by these figures, is larger than that of Yeats or Stevens, whose *Collected Poems* run to roughly 700 and 500 pages respectively. Like Lowell, Yeats was a compulsive reviser, but even the Yeats *Variorium* has some 850 pages compared to Lowell's nearly 1200.

I cite these figures to indicate what a monster the editors have given us. Since Lowell died suddenly of a heart attack in a New York taxi, it is impossible to be sure what he might or might not have wanted to preserve. Bidart worked closely with Lowell for years and knows his wishes better than anyone. And yet this volume does not, to my mind, serve the poet well. His best volumes—*Lord Weary's Castle*, *Life Studies*, *For the Union Dead*, and the final volume, the deeply moving *Day by Day*, which I have discussed elsewhere⁹-- constitute only about a third of the total 800. *Imitations*, Lowell's sizable volume of translations, seems even less successful to me than when I wrote about the book in 1973.¹⁰ Lowell's curious Introduction to this collection pinpoints the problem, which has refused to go away. "This book," he announces airily, "is partly self-sufficient and separate from its sources, and should be first read as a sequence, one voice running through many personalities, contrasts and repetitions." And he adds, "I have been reckless with literal meaning, and labored hard to get the tone. Most often this has been a tone, for *the* tone is something that will always more or less escape transference to another language and cultural moment. I have tried

to write alive English and to do what my authors might have if they were writing their poems now and in America.”

What does this rather grandiose pronouncement really mean? Obviously the authors in question-- Western greats from Homer and Sappho to Villon, Leopardi, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Montale, and Pasternak—cannot readily make the transfer into an American idiom, much less into the modern American consciousness, and so a loss of “literal meaning” too often goes hand in hand with a loss of “tone.” Consider what happens to Rilke, a poet closer in sensibility to Lowell than many of those he imitates here. The opening lines of Rilke’s “Selbstbildnis aus dem Jahre 1906,” for example--

Des alten lange adligen Geschlechtes
Feststehendes im Augenbogenbau --

translates literally as “The lasting imprint of the old, long aristocratic race in the curve of the eyebrow,” although the reader should be aware that the prepositional phrase “Des alten. . .” (“Of the old”) precedes the noun phrase it modifies, producing an air of suspension impossible to duplicate in English syntax. Lowell renders the lines as follows:

The bone-build of the eyebrows has a mule’s
Or Pole’s noble and narrow steadfastness

The interpretation here is not only far from literal; it directly undermines Rilke’s own meaning. The German poet, then thirty-one, is remarking on how the very curve of an eyebrow can reveal one’s aristocratic lineage: his own face, as seen in 1906—the face of the already accomplished and successful author of *Das Buch der Bilder* (*The Book of Images*)—still bears the imprint of his “aristocratic” genealogy—a genealogy largely invented by Rilke’s mother, who was, in fact, like his father, thoroughly middle-class. Lowell instead has Rilke’s physiognomy evince the mulish and narrow-minded tenacity of the Poles—a distinct put-down, since Poles, even those of

the nobility, “nobles”—were considered a lesser breed by the citizens of the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary.

Why should Lowell want to put down the German poet, especially since Rilke’s “Self-Portrait” is itself nothing if not self-critical? Lowell renders lines 4-5 as follows: “And there’s a kind of weakness, not a fool’s / yet womanish—the gaze of one who serves.” But Rilke’s “Self-Portrait” says nothing of fools; on the contrary, it discriminates carefully between the humility (*Demut*) of the servant (*Knecht*), which is not at all the poet’s, and of the servile (*eines Dienenden*), a humility one thinks of as a feminine trait. The distinction between *Knecht* and *Dienender* is lost in Lowell’s imitation, and there seems to be nothing to replace it.

When Lowell, evidently unsatisfied with this imitation, took a second stab at the Rilke sonnet in the later *History*, he rendered the first two lines as follows:

An old, long-noble people’s unregressing
knack of holding is the build of the eyebrow

This is more literal but even less satisfying than the first try. In German, the diction and syntax of the lines are those of normal speech; in translation, the reference to a “long-noble people’s unregressing / knack” sounds like pidgin English: no one, of course, speaks this way. And when, in the next lines, the child’s gaze is described as “humble like a woman’s / not servile . . . on occasion glad to serve,” Lowell loses yet again the delicate discrimination between *Diener* and *Dienender*, servant and servile. The phrase “on occasion glad to serve” adds nothing to the picture.

Here and elsewhere, then, the “imitation” does little more than flatten out the complexities of the original. Indeed, *Imitations*, together with the Akhmatova and Mandelstam translations originally included in Olga Carlisle’s *Poems on Street Corners*, might more profitably have been published as a separate volume—a volume of obvious interest to Lowell scholars, who can learn much about their poet’s psychology and ideology from his translation

choices and habits, but oddly out of place here. The example of Yeats is apposite: his poetic prose—for example, *Per Amica Silentiae Lunae*-- has never been included in editions of his *Collected Poems*.

The sonnets of Lowell's last decade, however, obviously had to be included, although many reviewers of the *Collected Poems* have already objected that they would have preferred the *Notebook* versions to those in the three published volumes. *Notebook* has an air of candor and self-assessment that recalls *Life Studies* and redeems many of its loose unrhymed sonnets from triviality and bathos. The two sequences that Bidart fortunately does include recall *Life Studies* in their sardonic anatomy of failure. "Long Summer," for example, begins with an image of marriage, not yet dissolved, but gone wholly sour:

At dawn, the crisp goodbye of friends, at night,
Enemies reunited, who tread, unmoving,
Like circus poodles dancing on a ball—

And the next sonnet presents the insomniac poet contemplating the "moon's mildew" on a pile of lobster-shells:

the hollow foreclaw, cracked, sucked dry,
flung on the ash-heap of a soggy carton—
two burnt-out, pinhead, black and popping eyes.

Such lines, excised from the subsequent sonnet volumes, testify to Lowell's continuing ability to find *le mot juste*, the precise image of a particular mood or feeling.

But *History*? Arranged in chronological order according to their subject, these nearly 400 unrhymed sonnets comprise Lowell's commonplace book, where, between tennis games and drinks, he jotted down whatever thoughts occurred to him in 14-line iambic pentameter units. The book takes us from Adam and Eve, Judith, Cassandra, and Cleopatra to Che Guevara and Stalin, to John Berryman and Robert Kennedy, including, along the way, more private ruminations on the dreary view from the windows of

his West 67th St. apartment building or on the sorrows of impotence, an unfortunate side effect of the drugs he was taking for manic-depression.

Indeed, much of *History* was evidently written after Lowell was put on a regimen of lithium, the then newly discovered wonder drug for bipolar disorder. Lowell's sufferings were so extreme, his illness so debilitating, his ups and downs so excruciating for his wife and friends, that one marvels he could write poetry at all. To read *History* as an index to the daily thoughts, speculations, and memories of Robert Lowell is thus an often riveting experience. But just as alcoholics (and Lowell was close to being an alcoholic as well as a mental patient) can be good drunks or bad ones, so manic-depressives can be admirable and endearing or otherwise, and the Lowell of the sonnets emerges all too often as merely trivial and catty. Here, for example, is Lowell on taxi drivers:

The taxi drivers always hold the floor;
born with directions, crackling rolls of bills,
only wanting more juice to burn—unslowing
hacks condemned to keep in step with snails
how many voyagers have they talked to death— (“Taxi Drivers”)

On professors:

In ivy-league colleges,
Men breathe, and study darkens their small panes.
A professor has students to prime his pump
And wattles like a turkey on his grant. . . . (“Dissenting Academy”)

Or on the words of the dentist drilling the poet's teeth:

“Thinking burns out nerve;
That's why cub professors calcify.
You got brains, why do you smoke? I stopped smoking, drinking
not pussy . . . it's not vice. I drill here 8 to 5,
make New York at sunrise—I've got nerves.” (“Under the Dentist”)

At Oberlin College in the fifties, one of my English professors had the class do those I. A. Richards exercises where one takes two poems, without knowing their authors, and has to decide which is the better one and why. I thought of this exercise while rereading *History* (which contains a number of sonnets for and about I. A. Richards) and wondered whether anyone would take the above sonnets seriously if they weren't by Robert Lowell. But triviality is not the sonnets' only fault: there is also, especially in the portraits of historical figures, some very questionable taste. Here is "Munich 1938: John Crowe Ransom":

Hitler, Mussolini, Daladier, Chamberlain,
that historic confrontation of the great—
vulnerable on one thing, they hated war—
each lost there pushing the war ahead twelve months.
Was it worse to choke on the puke of prudence,
Or blow up Europe for a point of honor?
John Crowe Ransom, Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio,
Looking at primitive African art on loan:
gleam-bottomed warriors of oiled brown wood,
waving broom-straws in their hands for spears;
far from the bearded, bronze ur-Nordic hoplites
of Athens and Sparta, not distant from their gods,
John said, "Well, they may not have been good neighbors,
But they haven't troubled the rest of the world."¹¹

This poem, like many of the *History* sonnets, was cobbled together from two originally separate stanzas: the first about the Munich conference where Daladier and Chamberlain bought time from Hitler only to find that they had actually hastened the coming of war; the second, a vignette based on a later meeting in the hinterlands of Gambier, Ohio between Lowell and his beloved poet-mentor John Crowe Ransom. The contrast between the two sections is evidently designed to measure the follies of the great, whose ambitions are here called into question by Ransom's wry and chuckling comment.

But the intended irony can hardly stand, given the question in lines 5-6. Which is worse, Lowell asks, here with no apparent irony: “the puke of prudence” (Chamberlain’s desperate groveling to Hitler so as to obtain “peace in our time”) or the wish to “blow up Europe for a point of honor”—this last, evidently a dig at Churchill, who took England to war in the wake of Chamberlain’s failure. Does Lowell really think the war was fought “for a point of honor”? The moral equivalence he ascribes to here is deeply troubling. Then, too, the condescension displayed by Ransom and Lowell toward those wood figures of “primitive” African warriors, who have only broom-straws for spears, is in dubious taste. Ah yes, the lines imply, those primitive peoples (whom one is only too glad not to have known!) must have been hell-raisers among themselves, but at least “they haven’t troubled the rest of the world,” as did a Hitler or a Mussolini.

Witty? Charming? Or, given the circumstances, just a shade nasty? Lowell’s earlier pacifist stance, which kept him out of World War II, was at least serious, but the racist bemusement of “Munich 1938” can only be troubling. It is the same bemusement that characterizes the sonnet “Churchill 1970 Retrospective,” which speaks of Churchill’s “stock still falling through the Christmas boom” and allows that “If he stumbled as a statesman, at least he could write.” The sonnet ends with the lines “Icon still lighted by the fires of Dresden, / a worm like other writers, though a glow-worm.” Here the ascription of blame for the fire-bombing of Dresden, thrown out by Lowell as if Churchill’s guilt is some sort of fact, has a coy air, exacerbated by the cute touch of the worm that is at least a glow-worm. Again, it is the condescension that irritates: oh that foxy Lowell, the reader is meant to conclude, he never takes anything on faith, does he? *He’s* not going to be impressed by Winston Churchill—or at least not by anything but his writings! And again, “we” the readers are to smile in agreement.

One can take just so much of this form of facetious historic caricature, unredeemed, for the most part, by Lowell's former artistry and wit. But then public statement has always been a problem for Lowell, whose "liberalism" could never mask his deeper sense of himself as a *LOWELL*, the descendant of the scions of New England and hence a *superior* being. In *History*, this is the self that emerges most fully, a self that compromises the appealing "I" of the earlier Lowell, first a "fire-breathing Catholic C.O.," and then the charming, unpretentious poet of *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead*.



In the general euphoria that has greeted the *Collected Poems*, reviewers have failed to ask what remains a nagging question: even if Lowell is now poised to experience a major revival, why is it that his star plummeted in the decades following his death? I don't think it will do to say that the age demanded a more casual poetry than Lowell's or that he was just temporarily displaced by minority and women poets on the one hand, deconstructionist Language poets on the other. Rather—and here the *Collected Poems* is welcome in pinpointing the issues---it may well be that the poetry community recognized that, despite his undeniable place in postwar America, Lowell's poetry was, in the end, flawed. Far from being too confessional, he became, to my mind, too glibly public. Poets do not, of course, need to be nice people or have the "right" political opinions—witness Ezra Pound—but I believe readers assume that, whatever their quirks, they should load every rift with ore, avoiding sarcasm, easy caricature, and "clever" one-liners. Once Lowell had become famous, he seems to have fallen in love with his own public persona and, all too often, allowed that persona simply to indulge itself

In his introduction to the *Collected Poems*, Bidart argues that Lowell was "an audacious maker," by which he means that Lowell endlessly rewrote his poems, adding and subtracting stanzas and often publishing poems in

two or three versions—hence the necessary size and scope of the volume, and hence Bidart’s preference for *History* over the earlier *Notebooks*. But revision is not necessarily a sign of great “making”; it may just as well be a sign of the awareness of failure. Lowell’s revisions, as Bidart himself notes, were by no means always improvements; on the contrary, he sometimes, as in the case of the Rilke sonnet discussed above, bungled the exercise beyond repair.

In the sonnets of his last decade, in any case, Lowell kept revising and revising, desperately hoping to turn straw into gold. But for a brief moment, in the newly devised free verse of his last book, *Day by Day*, it all came back: the searing, matter-of-fact, startlingly candid images of the daily—(and especially nightly)—life of the man without a future, a man whose only solace is in routine--

Shaving’s the one time I see my face,
I see it aslant as a carpenter’s problem—
though I have gaunted a little,
always the same face
follows my hand with thirsty eyes--

--and who recognizes that his suicide wish is less powerful than his lack of nerve:

I go to the window,
and even open it wide—
five floors down, the trees are bushes and weeds,
too contemptible and small
to delay a sparrow’s fall.

The anaphora and rhyme of those last lines show the poet still struggling to invent sound structures to contain his feelings. But in the face of death, the pretensions and postures that so often trivialized the sonnet cycles give way to an obsessive desire, no doubt reminiscent of his Puritan forebears, to tell the Truth:

Insomnia finds a hundred justifications
for the inexcusable phrase.
After many lives in marriage,
bedrooms blood-temperature,
my joy in making this room arctic—
a solitary barrenness
finds the cold spots in the bed,
and cherishes their expiring chill. (“Art of the Possible”)

Perhaps, these poems suggest, Lowell will be best remembered, not as “our last great public poet,” pronouncing on Ike or the Vietnam War, but as a poet who understood, as have few others, the nature of the Big Chill—the private one that keeps us awake at night. In the end, Lowell’s great insight was that “solitary barrenness” inevitably cast a shadow, not only on his life but also on the poetry he was producing so expertly.

Notes

¹Lowell never allowed his first book *Land of Unlikeness* (1944) to be reprinted; he regarded it as a failure and reworked many of its poems for inclusion in *Lord Weary's Castle*. Bidart and Gewanter include it for the first time since its original publication as Appendix I.

²Part II of "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen," whose setting is a roof garden nightclub, contains the lines, "Know Olympians, we are breathless / While nigger cupids scour the stars." See *The Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose of Hart Crane* (New York: Anchor, 1966), p. 30.

³"Beyond the Alps," the opening poem of *Life Studies*, is reprinted in *For the Union Dead*, where Lowell adds a stanza, drawing on his original seven-stanza version in the *Kenyon Review* (1957): see CP, 113-14, 364-65, 927-29).

⁴ See Ian Hamilton, *Robert Lowell. A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1982), dustjacket; Irvin Ehrenpreis, "The Age of Lowell" (1965), in *Robert Lowell: A Portrait of the Artist in his Time*, ed. Michael London and Robert Boyers (New York: David Lewis, 1970), pp. 155-86; Adam Kirsch, "Illegible Bronze," *TLS*, 13 June 2003, pp. 7-8; Helen Vendler, "The Hurt Soul," *The New Republic*, 28 July-4 August, 2003, p. .

⁵Anthony Ostroff (ed.), *The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic* (Boston: Little Brown, 1964).

⁶The Maine town in question was Castine, where Lowell's cousin Harriet Winslow had long owned a house that became his in 1955; Lowell and his wife Elizabeth Hardwick were to spend many summers there. According to Hardwick, the inhabitants described in "Skunk Hour" were based on actual people who "were living, more or less as [Lowell] sees them, in Castine that summer. The details, not the feeling, were rather alarmingly precise, I

thought. But fortunately it was not read in town for some time, and then only by 'people like us'" (see Hamilton, *Robert Lowell* p. 267).

This note undercuts, I think, recent attempts to argue that Lowell himself understood that the characterizations in the first four stanzas were the product of a mind that's "not right," that the poet did not share the tics and prejudices of his narrator. Certainly such as fine an analyst of irony as Berryman, who was also a personal friend, did not read "Skunk Hour" this way.

⁷ Edward Lucie-Smith, "An Interview with Frank O'Hara," in Frank O'Hara, *Standing Still and Walking in New York*, ed. Donald Allen (Bollinas: Grey Fox Press, 1975), p. 13.

⁸ The poem, originally titled "Colonel Shaw and the Massachusetts' 54th" originally appeared as the final poem in the first paperback edition of *Life Studies* (Vintage, 1960). It then served as the title poem for *For the Union Dead* (1964).

⁹ See my "Robert Lowell: 'Fearlessly Holding Back Nothing,'" *Washington Post Book World*, 25 September 1977, p. H1; rpt. in William Bedford (ed.), *Agenda: Robert Lowell Special Issue* 18 (Autumn 1980): 104-113, and in *The Critical Response to Robert Lowell*, ed. Steven Gould Axelrod (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), pp. 214-19.

¹⁰ See Perloff, *The Poetic Art of Robert Lowell* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1973). Pp. 55-79.

¹¹There is a misprint in Bidart's edition (p. 524): in line 2, "historic" is spelled "histotic."